# Dragons of Ice and Fire

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

## Summary

There are things hidden in the far north, secrets buried under ice. Jon Snow faces the white walkers early, and stumbles upon a power that could change the world. It forges a new path for him and everyone around him - and a new journey south, a journey as a dragon.

The world begins to change - with steel and snow, fire and blood...
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Ok, new fic. I've been thinking about this one for a while, actually, finally had a chance to write it.

I do not own ASOIAF/Game of Thrones. Not even slightly.

Rated M because, well, come on - it's Game of Thrones.

Haven't decided on any release schedule yet, but it will still likely be written faster than Winds of Winter, haha... ha... ha... you know, I'm laughing but crying a bit too...

Story starts around Jon I and Jon II during a Storm of Swords - when Jon is with Mance's wildlings camped at the Frostfangs, alongside Ygritte, after Qhorin ordered him to join them as a spy. Bit of a divergence that led to Mance delaying moving the wildings south...

BOOK ONE: ICE
Table of Contents:

Part 1 - Beyond the Wall, chapters 1 - 20,

Part 2 - The North, chapters 21 - 36,

Part 3 - The Convergence, chapters 37 - 50,

Epilogue and Appendix, chapter 51.

Book 2: Fire starts chapter 52.
Chapter 1

Jon

The world was frozen. A land of eternal winter stretched outwards as the white wolf ran across the frozen tundra.

This was a different world. These northern lands were wild and untamed. They were thick and rich, but also cold and barren at the same time. There were no trees, no foliage – nothing but rocks, ice and snow.

For a heartbeat, it felt like this was where he belonged.

Here, he was a hunter, a predator. Game was sparse and life was hard, but that just made the struggle all the more rewarding. Here, the direwolf reigned supreme.

The wolf was alone at the edge of the world. For the last few weeks he had consistently ventured further and further north, past the mountains. Few other predators would ever be able to survive this far north. It was as exhilarating as it was dangerous. He had grown lean, skinny but strong by the constant hunt.

The white wolf prowled the wasteland, nigh invisible in the frozen dusk. The sun was only just setting, and it was a good time for the lone wolf to hunt.

There had been a pack once. Briefly, at least. The white wolf remembered his brothers and sisters well. They had been a pack once. Someday, maybe they could be a pack once more - but the runt had never really been part of the group. The others used to howl and hunt together, but there had always been some distance between the runt and the rest of the litter.

The wolf didn't mind. Sometimes, solitude was what made the lone wolf strong. The wolf was strong now. He was a runt no more. His body was wiry and fast, his muscles were strong, and his teeth were sharp.

There were smells in the distance. He could pick up the thick, musky scent of humans - along with their horses, beasts and livestock. The gathering was so large and so thick that even miles away the smell was pungent on the cold wind. The wolf was comfortable among men, he had been raised amidst men, but being among thousands upon thousands huddled together was too pungent for the beast.

Still, the wolf's other half lived amongst those men. The white wolf couldn't ever leave his human brother behind. He made a note of their progress as the men slowly travelled south.

There was another smell, fainter, barely discernible. The smell of an elk that had been scared north by the human host. It was faint, but fresh. The wolf's stomach growled hungrily as it set off to hunt.

The wolf bounded across the thick snow with practiced ease. The scent was getting thicker now. It was heading further north, further up through the mountains and towards a large glacier. He could see the white icy spikes in the distance. The air was cold even under thick fur, but the wolf
hungered. It would be a large elk - probably weakened and hungry itself. It would be good prey, worth the hunt.

The landscape cracked into rolling valleys and frozen rivers across the rocky, snow covered ground. The glacier was thick in the distance, looming over the world like a blue and black wall of solid, serrated ice. Only the toughest soldier pines trees stood amidst this mountainous ground. The elk’s smell became sharper, more vivid on the fierce wind. The scent was stronger than expected. It wasn't a weakened elk; it smelt more like a young buck. A strong beast, one hardy enough to survive the cold. It would be a more difficult hunt, then, but still a worthwhile one.

The wolf approached the glacier slowly. The temperature dropped further. That caused the wolf to pause. The air was thick with an unnatural cold. The wolf hesitated. His every hair was suddenly on edge.

The wolf felt the warning in the wind. The wind howled through the canyons, a low shriek emanating through the world.

The wolf felt the darkness in the air before it smelt the scent. The scent of death. Without warning, the wolf turned and ran.

The direwolf wasn't easily scared, but he felt fear now.

The cold was creeping over the mountains. It was heading south.

The smell of death followed.

The sound of howling whistled in the wind, echoing over the mountains…

…

Jon's eyes opened suddenly. A wolf was howling in the distance.

His heart was beating furiously. His blood felt cold. *I'm scared*, Jon realised in shock. He had only just woken up.

No. It's not my fear.

The thought of his direwolf shot into his mind. Ghost.

He could feel his wolf. He could feel the phantom sensation of snow under his paws as he ran through a biting wind. Ghost was more than just a companion, Ghost was part of him.

And right now, the Ghost was scared. The direwolf didn't scare easily.

It was night, but the wildling camp was never really quiet. All around him, sleeping bodies littered the clearing under heavy cloaks, but across the distance there were sounds of people moving and livestock moving freely over the sprawling camp. The large campfires dotted the rocky hills.

Next to him, Ygritte moaned quietly, her eyes flickering as she slept. They had been huddled together as they slept, with Ygritte's ginger hair brushing against Jon's face.

A hundred thousand wildlings camped together. They were peaceful, protected. Jon was in the centre of a great army. They were camped at the edge of the Frostfangs, following the Milkwater. The wildling army had been camped for weeks now, pulling in more and more free folk from across the Thenns and Frozen Shore – preparing to march south.
It is safe, he tried to tell himself. But Jon knew it wouldn't last.

Somehow, he wasn't quite sure how, he could feel the cold. He knew in his bones that it was no ordinary cold. His heart was beating furiously. \textit{I can feel them coming.}

“… Wake up,” Jon whispered, dragging himself to his feet. It was so cold that he had been sleeping still dressed in furs. He kept Longclaw at his side constantly. “We've got to wake.”

Ygritte stirred as he lumbered up rough, yanking up his cloak. “Ygritte!” Jon hissed, as he stared around urgently. \textit{Tormund}, he thought with panic. \textit{I've got to warn Tormund.}

“What's going on?” Ygritte murmured with a tired yawn.

Jon grimaced, instantly uncertain. He recognised Tormund Giantsbane snoozing by the dying campfire, under thick bearskin furs. \textit{We need all the fighters right now.}

“Tormund!” Jon bellowed, causing the other sleeping raiders to stir. “Tormund!”

“What in blazes is going on?” Tormund stammered in irritation, pulling himself up. Other raiders were doing the same. Tormund was already clutching a heavy stone maul, growling angrily.

“Tormund… Everyone…” Jon stammered. They were staring at him. “We need to ready our men, right now! They're coming for the camp!”

“Crows?” Tormund growled.

Jon shook his head. He could still feel the cold. “No. Worse.”

“By the gods, what are you talking about, lad?” A free folk grumbled. He was already attracting attention. It was the middle of the night, things had been so quiet, but Jon just knew…

\textit{They're coming!} He hissed. “We need to get the people to safety.” Some of them were staring at him like he was mad. Jon flinched, flexing his burnt hand. “Don't ask me how I know, I just…”

In the distance, there was another howl. It was barely even audible over the backdrop of the wind whooshing through mountains.

Ygritte stared at him. She had her dagger in hand. “… Jon…” She said slowly. “… Where's your wolf at?”

There was a pause. Jon stared at Tormund, his eyes pleading. The raider looked back at him, frowning. He made the decision quickly.

“Find me Mance!” Tormund bellowed. In an instant, people were moving. “Now!”

There were more grumbles as people started to move. Free folk didn't follow orders easily. Still, they were quickly armed. All around, there were men clutching spears or notching bows.

\textit{They need more discipline}, Jon swore. \textit{They need defensive locations, battlements, better positions.} It would be on them soon, he could feel it.

“What is going on here?” A loud voice cursed. The commotion was gaining attention. The camps were starting to move. There was a rattle of bones as a man pushed his way through the crowd, flanking by two large dogs.

“The turncoat says we're under attack,” a wildling sneered, staring at Jon.
Underneath his skull helm, the Lord of Bones' mouth twisted into a vicious sneer. “Aww, did the little crow have a bad dream?” He mocked.

“They're coming for us!” Jon snapped. His body was trembling, and not just from the cold. Somewhere, somehow, Ghost was panicked. The direwolf was running for its life. “I felt them coming from north. We need to get the women and children out of here!”

“Quiet, boy!” Rattleshirt grunted. “Who is coming?”

“They!” Jon hissed. He floundered slightly. He felt scared to even say the words 'white walkers', in case that might make them real. “… I don't know, they're just… they're coming.”

There were a few taunting laughs from the growing crowd. The wildling were sneering at him. Next to him, Tormund wasn't laughing.

“The boy is a warg, Rattleshirt,” Tormund warned, clutching his maul tightly.

“The boy is fool. And a craven,” said Rattleshirt. “I've had enough of this nonsense. Get out of here.”

The stubborn bastard, Jon thought with a growl. By the time they knew he was right it would be too late. “Everybody!” Jon shouted, turning from Rattleshirt to the gathered wildlings. “Grab your weapons! They're coming from the glacier, we must–”


“Will somebody just shut him up already?” Rattleshirt ordered. His dogs were barking. “Or maybe I'll just let the hounds–”

Heavy footsteps approached. “What the hell is this ruckus?!” A stern voice demanded. “Stand down or I'll put you down.”

Jon could have sighed as he saw Mance Rayder approaching, flanked by three men with Styr, Magnar of Thenn, approaching from behind. Even despite the quiet night, more and more were gathering. Jon could even see Varamyr Sixskins prowling from the distance, on the edge of the camp. The scene looked like a brawl was breaking out, and the King-Beyond-the-Wall dealt with brawls and riots in his camp on a daily basis.

Still, Mance isn't a fool like Rattleshirt, Jon thought. He could feel his heart pounding in frantic fear. Mance would listen.

“The turncoat is crazed,” Rattleshirt scoffed, but lowering his spear as the King-Beyond-the-Wall looked between him and Jon. “He's rambling nonsense.”

“Your Gra – Mance,” Jon stammered. “We've got to get the women and children to safety. They're coming for us.”

Mance stared at him darkly. “You know what is out there,” Jon begged. He could feel it getting closer. It was like his direwolf was howling in his mind for Jon to move. Ghost was begging Jon to run as well. “Please.”

The King-Beyond-the-Wall paused. The sound of the wind was still humming in the distance, but the night was quiet. It was a chilly night. Perhaps Mance noticed the cold too – it was a cold that
had an edge to it.

Mance's brow flickered. “Lord of Bones,” Mance said after a brief pause. “Go check on our watchers.”

“What?” Rattleshirt exclaimed. “We have scouts all along the valleys, there's naught out there.”

“Then check on them,” Mance ordered. The king's voice was firm. He paused for the briefest of moments, before turning.

“Varamyr!” Mance shouted, calling to the skinchanger watching in the distance. “Get your eagle into the air! Let's see if what the boy is saying is true.”

There were mutters around the camp. Rattleshirt glowered and stomped off, cursing turncoats and bastards as he bellowed orders around. Jon was clutching Longclaw tightly. If he was wrong, they would see him as a fool.

But no, he thought with a quiet sinking feeling, I'm not wrong.

The Lord of Bones snatched up a large horn, blowing it deeply three times. The whole camp was stirring now. There was a long, moment of silence as they waited for the scouts to return the call. That was the signal – when the scouts heard three horn blows from the camp, they were supposed to reply one by one.

No reply came. “They're not replying,” Rattleshirt said with a frown. He sounded confused. The watchers around the camp should have returned the horn blast. “… How could four dozen men not reply?”

There was a long moment of quiet. Mance's expression turned dark. Tormund clutched his maul to his chest. For one heartbeat, there was absolutely nothing except the wind. And the cold.

Jon could feel the dread in the air. The others started to feel it too. It rippled through the camp…

“Gather the fighters!” Mance bellowed suddenly. “All clans, now! Get Mag the Mighty here now!” He stared up at the surrounding valleys. “And light those fires! I want as many fires lit as soon as possible!”

Tormund took up the roar. “You heard the man, you lazy geezers!” He roared. “Get moving and grab a weapon already! What the hell are you doing standing around, move!”

Jon's breathing was deep. He could feel the panic spreading around him, the whole camp rippling around him. More people were shouting, screaming, or running.

He saw the fires being lit, but somehow it couldn't stop the cold.

Around him, every raider and spearwife were riled into a frenzy. The Thenns shouted for blood, followed by the dull roars of giants even from the other side of camp. The whole camp became an orchestra of clanging and shouting.

And then, the air was split by the screams. The bloodcurdling screams of dying men.

They were cradled in the Frostfang Mountains; it was a defendable valley around the Milkwater. Any army would have to march up Skirling Pass to meet them, where the free folk could fight them on equal ground. It was hard to defend such a large, sprawling camp, but Mance had done his best. Their position was as good as it could ever be.
But these foes weren’t living men. The dead weren’t funnelled into the valley; instead the dead could simply clamber over the mountains themselves. The dead could attack from all sides.

Jon felt his breath freeze as he watched the dark shapes lumber over the black rocky hills. It was a perilous route – even a sure climber would struggle to traverse the icy, rocky cliffs, but the wights didn’t care.

The dead were falling from the cliffs. They must have clambered over the peaks to charge suicidally down onto the camp. Jon glimpsed the falling bodies raining in the dark.

They were everywhere, from all sides. For a moment, Jon thought that the fall must have surely killed them, but then he heard the shouts.

The sound of hacking blades filled the air.

In the distance, a lone wolf howled.

“Jon!” Ygritte screamed. There was so much panic from all sides that Jon could barely even hear her. “Jon!”

The world blurred as Jon grabbed pulled his sword and followed the fighting. Yet the fighting was everywhere, Jon didn't even knew where to go.

Jon saw Tormund roar as he swung two mauls at once. He saw burning arrows lighting up the air. He saw shadows of raging giants as scrambling bodies threw themselves in berserk rages. He saw Mance at the centre of the camp, desperately trying to set up barricades while tents caught fire.

They needed more fires and there was no time to clamber for firewood. They were just setting the tents on fire for more heat as quickly as possible.

Something cold hit Jon's nose. One by one, he watched snowflakes fall to the ground.

*It's snowing.*

The snows fell softly at first, but then all at once. The sight of fighting and battle was obscured by the thick whirling flakes. Bodies were falling, and then the snow was falling too. Ygritte grabbed his arm, trying to pull him to one side. Jon had his sword in his hand, but in the dark and in the snow all of the thrashing bodies looked the same…

The shouting and screaming filled the air.

*Too disorderly, not enough discipline,* Jon thought with panic. Every raider fought by himself, every clan kept to their own. They were all running blind while the enemy attacked from all sides.

“*Fight you cravens!*” Tormund howled through the storm. “*Fight!*”

Ygritte was in front of him, with Longspear Ryk firmly by her side. Ygritte cursed in the storm and dropped her bow, pulling out a short bronze sword instead. Between the snow, the dark and the chaos, any bowmen were useless – no free folk could get a clean shot.

But the wights had no such hesitation. There were dull thuds as arrows cut down three men around Jon. A barbed arrow bit into the ground next to his foot. Longspear cursed violently as another arrow clipped his arm.

*There are undead archers on the cliffs,* Jon realised with a jolt. They shot arrows randomly into the
camp and probably hit their own forces as much as they hit the free folk, but that didn't matter. A wight could easily walk off an arrow, even one through the brain, while a living man couldn't.

Jon reacted on pure instinct as he glimpsed a blue-eyed creature come shambling at him. Longclaw cleaved straight through its skull, but the thing kept on trying to claw at him. He wrestled with the creature, frantically trying to push it away, until raider dragged the wight away and split it in two.

He saw another wight – one missing the lower half of its body – clawing on the ground desperately towards them. Jon kicked it in the head and its neck cracked, but it still kept on coming.

The wights were vicious creatures. The more recently deceased, the nearly intact ones, they wielded swords or mauls and fought with berserk rage. Still, even the decaying wights – the creatures with rotting bones and flesh – they would still charge in with bare hands.

There was no self-preservation instinct. No restraint.

We can still win this, Jon thought with a gulp. They needed to rally the clans, get people fighting together. We take a stand at the edge of the Milkwater, and fight together…

The free folk outnumbered the wights. The wights fought hard, but they fell quickly too. If only they could stop the chaos then this would be a short fight…

“Come…!” Ygritte shouted. “… We need to run!”

Jon grimaced, and shook his head. “No! We can beat them!” He shouted. “Gather whoever you can and stick together! We can win this, I know it!”

Her eyes were wide. Her face was pale. “You know nothing, Jon Snow.”

Jon felt the shiver go down his spine. She must have realised before he did. The wights were charging in madly. This is only the first wave of an assault.

The temperature dropped.

It was the like the quiet oozed slowly over the battlefield. In the darkness, men were screaming, and then the screaming stopped. The breath froze in their lungs, their shrieks failed to carry through the air, and something shivered in the world itself.

It was them.

They moved with an unnatural grace, gliding over the snows, leaving no footprints in their wake and clutching blades that shimmered with an icy luminescence – swords so cold that the air crackled around them. The white walkers were deadly ghosts amongst the chaos of battlefield. With every step they took, men died.

Jon saw bright blue eyes glittering in the dark, while the snows swirled and danced around them.

First, they sent in the dead first to create panic. Now, the masters themselves take to the field.

Jon watched the campfires flicker and die as they passed. The air was so cold it hurt to breathe. Every breath felt like a knife in his chest.

They were coming from the north. The creatures cut through the camp with ease, flanked by wights off all shapes and sizes. Jon saw undead wolves, hogs, bears, and shadowcats – decaying animals with bright blue eyes. There were dark shadows looming over the rocks – resurrected
rotten giants lumbering into the battle.

The army of the free folk – the greatest, largest gathering the far north had ever known – was being torn to pieces from all sides.

Ygritte was dragging him, pleading desperately. The air was so cold that her tears froze on her cheek. She was shouting something, but Jon couldn't hear over the sound of the screams.

Jon had no choice. He turned and ran.

Skill meant nothing when life or death was just a gamble. Arrows were flying randomly through the air, swords were hacking. Every moment more men were dying, and it was pure chance whether or not Jon would be one of them.

Dark, spindly shapes broke off of the group. They moved so fast and so graceful that Jon could barely make them out, but then there were men falling to the ground screaming.

The spiders were as large as hounds, ice-white with long, gangly legs. The ice spiders tore into men as they tried to flee, clicking and biting as they dragged men bodily across the ground.

The white walkers turned and watched their spiders, as a harsh crackling sound filled the air.

Laughter. They're laughing.

Even in the middle of the battle, they laughed at their spiders like huntsmen watching hounds bring down their quarry.

This isn't a battle, it's a slaughter. Like it's all just a sport to the Others.

Jon's hands were trembling so badly that he could barely hold his sword.

There were more people screaming in terror than shouting in defiance now. The host was being broken into pieces, with men scattered to the mountains. The clans broke, each one fighting or running by himself.

The wildling army – the one that the sworn brothers had come to fight – was sent running for the hills.

I'm a fool, he thought quietly. He didn't stop running. Ygritte was still holding his hand. Lord Commander Mormont was a fool. Qhorin Halfhand had been a fool. The Night's Watch was comprised of fools.

All of this time, they had been fighting against wildlings, trying to stop wildlings.

The Night's Watch. The shield that guards the realm of men. They had been trying to shield against the wrong foe.

And now the Others had come for them all.

…

“Run,” Ygritte hissed in his ear, panting for breath. It was the only word she had said for so many desperate hours. “Run!”

The word echoed in Jon's head until it lost all meaning, echoing like the cawing of a raven. Run, run, run…
Jon could barely run any longer. He could feel himself weakening with every step, each breath getting hoarser than the last. With every frantic step, he stumbled a bit more. Sooner or later, he would fall, and he didn’t... he couldn’t imagine how he would be able to stand again.

The mountains were harsh and uneven. The Frostfangs earned their name. Between the snows and the rocks, it was hard travelling.

Still, they couldn't stop. Jon couldn't see those that pursued them, but he knew they were out there. He could feel them, like the ice in his lungs.

When the wildling horde broke, the free folk scattered in every direction. Most of them tried to flee by following the Milkwater down the pass, but it proved a folly. The Others had come prepared – they had barely made it a mile before they saw the lumbering shadows blockading the pass. A group of wight giants brought up the rear – cutting off any escape through the valley.

The fleeing free folk had been trapped between the giants, all the while those ice spiders hounded their rear relentlessly. There could be no fighting either foe – the giants were so large, strong and resilient that they seemed indestructible, while the ice spiders were even worse. The spiders were silent and ruthless assassins, invisible in the snowstorm as they cut down men one by one, from all directions. Perhaps an organised defence and formation could have beaten them, but there was no hope in the panicked chaos of the fleeing wildlings.

Instead, there had been no choice except to escape over the valley cliffs, trying to climb the rocky outcrop through the Frostfangs to escape the undead.

It hadn't been an honourable retreat or an easy escape. The thought left a bitter taste in Jon's mouth. He knew fine well that the only reason they had survived was because the ice spiders had been too busy killing all other runners like him. They had been one of the few lucky enough to make it out of the valley, simply because the Others couldn't kill them all quickly enough.

Like rolling the dice. Nothing but chance that separated living men from the dead.

It had been a close thing too. Ygritte was a swift climber, but Jon had been struggling clambering up after her up a cliff wall when an ice spider had skittered up after him. He had barely even seen it before suddenly vicious, hooked fangs bit into his leg.

The spider had been as big as a small dog, but its bite was deadly cold and sharp, and it had very nearly pulled Jon straight off the cliff. If it hadn't have been for Longspear Ryk catching the beast with an arrow, then it probably would have killed Jon too.

He didn't know where Ryk was now. They had lost sight of each other somewhere in the chaos, the screaming and the running.

It was just him and Ygritte now, running through ice cold barren terrain.

There had been others who had escaped the cliffs like they had, but no one stuck together. All of the free folk had ran their individual ways, running blindly into the mountains. A large group was a bigger target. Right now, their only hope was to run and pray that the Others picked somebody else to chase.

It was instinctive. There had been no hesitation in that moment, just pure, life-or-death survival.

"Jon," Ygritte gasped, half-dragging him over the snow. Her arm was wrapped around their shoulder. "Run, Jon, run."
He was getting slower with every step. He couldn't feel his leg anymore. It just felt cold. Somehow, that numbness felt more terrifying than the pain had. The blood felt frozen in his leg.

*Did the spiders have venom in their fangs?* He thought with a panic. Or maybe it was just blood loss, or cold. Either way, his leg was becoming more and more stiff. It was a wonder he had lasted this long, but he wouldn't be able to run much longer.

All around them, the snows didn't stop.

The Frostfangs were perilous. The wildling host had been camped by the Milkwater for weeks, but they still hadn't mapped the mountains fully. Right now, Jon's and Ygritte's only chance was to keep on running along whatever route they could and hope that they might stumble onto some pass out of the mountains.

He had no idea where he was going. It was only when he glimpsed a shape in the distance – the silhouette of a looming mound over horizon – that Jon recognised the landscape.

“… Ygritte…” he gasped, his throat raw. That was the glacier over in that direction. “We're heading north.”

“What choice do we have?” She grunted, staggering over the rocks. “There's no pass through the mountains here, and they'll kill us if we turn back. They're blocking the south. We have to just keep going, maybe we can slip by them. Maybe some of the other clans survived.”

Jon gasped weakly as he struggled over an outcrop. “We can slip around to the Frozen Shore,” Ygritte continued. “… Maybe find a crossing over the Bay of Ice. We cross the sea and we go south – as far south as south goes. It's our only chance.”

No, Jon almost argued. They should be trying to make through Skirling Pass or down the Giant's Stairs. If they could get to the Fist of the First Men, then maybe they had a chance. The Night's Watch might be their only hope.

Still, Jon hadn't told anybody about the ranging camped at the Fist of the First Men. He had kept that secret from Mance and all of the others. Just like Qhorin ordered him too – Jon had been a good, little, dumb soldier.

“We've got to head towards the glacier. There are passages there we could slip through,” Ygritte muttered, her whole body shivering. “I know those rocks – there are tunnels all under the ice. Old tombs buried for a thousand years. Hells, we must have opened half a hundred of those tombs under there searching for a bloody legend…”

She was mumbling under her breath. “Dammit Mance,” she cursed, ranting through panic. “We should have left the mountains *weeks* ago. He was the one that insisted in lingering a few weeks longer, searching for that bloody horn…”

The Horn of Winter. Mance had believed it was in the Frostfangs, and Qhorin had ordered Jon to join the wildlings searching for it. All of this time in the wildling host, and Jon had only ever heard mutterings. All Jon knew was that the free folk had been searching for the horn, and that Mance had held off the journey south as they searched…

Jon staggered, stopping for breath. Ygritte had to pull him to stop him collapsing. “Come on, Jon Snow,” she ordered. “Now is no time to kneel.”

“… Can't keep on running…” He wheezed.
“Course we can. We can always run. We can run all the way south.” Her voice was as hard as iron.
“We go south and you got to show me all those fancy, stone castles of yours. Let's go and drink southern wine and see the blooming forests, and search for the lands of eternal summer. We'll cross the sea and keep on going until the end of the world, just you and me.”

Despite the pain, he smiled softly. “I promised you I'd show you a proper castle,” he muttered. His head felt woozy.

“Aye. You did. You still owe me a castle. Don't go making a liar out of yourself now.”

_Not a liar. A fool._

The cliffs of ice stretched out in front of them. It was a labyrinth of winding sheets of ice – like a world of ice surrounding. The path became thinner, more perilous. They were walking on a shelf of ice that was cracking apart.

Even despite the danger, the snows, the pain, it was still beautiful. A weird, unearthly beauty. They were on top of a glacier, staring out at the very edge of the world. The Lands of Always Winter stretched out before them.

It looked as beautiful as it did cold.

“… I really wanted to show you a castle,” Jon admitted weakly. The route was getting harder now. The cracks in the ice were deeper – large crevasses surrounding them like the ice had been shredded by a giant knife. Icy cliffs like serrated thorns.

Ahead of them, the path cracked away into nothingness. They were at the very edge of the glacier, where the ice fell away in a sharp vertical cliff. Ygritte cursed silently, trying to find another route down. Maybe it was climbable, but the ice was as sharp as blades and as tall as a castle wall.

There was no route down, not easily.

Around them, the snow churned. Jon could feel the cold and death approaching them. He felt their presence chill his bones.

He saw the ghostly outlines moving towards them in the snow.

_They must have been following for a while now_, he realised slowly. They hunted with unnatural patience. The Others could have attacked any time that they wanted, but they didn't. Instead, they just waited and followed.

_The cold and the dead never hurried. They know there's never any escape._

He heard Ygritte curse in the Old Tongue. She had lost her spear as they ran, she only had a bone dagger. Jon kept Longclaw at his side. He could barely make out the figures, but there were a few of them. They were shapes gliding over the snow towards them.

The cliffs of ice stretched out behind them. The ranger and the spearwife huddled together facing demons of ice atop of a frozen glacier.

The white walkers took their time. They always took their time. They were as patient as ice.

Ygritte clutched her dagger tightly. Jon kept both hands on the pommel of his sword. _I can't run_, he thought quietly. His leg felt lame. Even if he could scale the cliff, he wouldn't be able to outrun them.
Jon stared at Ygritte. If he died, she would die with him.

“… Go find those castles, Ygritte,” Jon muttered, taking a deep breath. “Run. I'll hold them off.”

Her eyes blazed with fear. “Like hell you will. They'll kill you. They'll kill you and then they'll raise you again.”

“Yes,” said Jon. “But you might be able to survive. You can still run, I can't.”

She gulped, but shook her head. “I'll never run fast enough. All men must die, Snow, but I'm not leaving you to face those things alone.”

“Ygritte, you have to run!” he snapped.

“Bugger that.” Her face was pale, but her eyes were pure defiance. “I'm a free folk, I don't follow orders.”

Jon's hands clenched. It took the last slivers of strength he had left to pull himself up straight.

Ygritte looked ready to charge against those things armed with only a dagger. “I won't let you die here.”

The Others were coming. He saw three figures approach from the storm; they were gliding over the snow towards them, but slowly. So slow it was mocking.

“You don't get to choose how I die!” Ygritte snapped. Her free arm wrapped around his, huddled together. “And I'm not leaving. There is absolutely no way that I will leave you to face these things alone, Jon Snow, you know that.”

“No,” he growled, feeling his heart pounding. With a deep breath, he grabbed Ygritte by the back of the head, pulling her towards him. Their lips slammed together in a sudden kiss. She tasted like fire. She tasted warm.

The last thing he saw was her eyes widen in surprise, her red hair flickering over his face. The kiss was fleeting, but deep, intense and passionate.

“… I know nothing.”

Without out another word, his hands pushed against her chest. The shove took her completely by surprise.

One second they were kissing, and then the next Jon was pushing her backwards straight over the cliff.

There wasn't enough time for her to even curse him before she fell.

*It was maybe a twelve-foot drop*, he thought, feeling hollow. Maybe more, but hopefully the snow would cushion the landing. Hopefully she would miss the blades ice. Hopefully.

For all he knew, he might have just pushed Ygritte to her death.

Still, maybe down there she had a small chance of survival. If she had stayed up here, she would have had none.

He drew Longclaw, clutching the sword with both hands. The Valyrian steel blade hummed in the night. Jon glared at the white walkers.
“Come!” Jon shouted, holding his sword firmly. His hands weren't shivering anymore. It was too cold to shiver. He charged with all the speed his lame leg would give him, limping furiously at the Others, swinging the bastard sword with all the strength he could muster. “Come!”

One final charge. Outnumbered, outmatched, and wounded.

He knew he was going to die.

*Still, I'm not going to make it easy for them.*

*Every second that I'm still breathing is another second that Ygritte has to live.*

The Other jumped backwards with all the grace of a cat. Up close, it was tall and gaunt with flesh pale as milk, with cold eyes as bright as blue stars. It had weird, graceful beauty – a frozen elegance like a statue. Its skin rippled with every shade of ice – somewhere between icy blue and brilliant white, rippling so softly it was hard to even create track of its movements, even when it was less than three feet away.

Its speed was unnatural. It wielded a white blade finer than steel, but sharper and colder than any Jon had ever seen. Jon slashed again, but it dodged without even parrying. There was a sound like the crackling of ice.

*Laughter,* he realised. *They are laughing at me.*

The three white walkers surrounded him. Jon swung wide and fast in wild arcs, but they danced around his blade. They seemed to take turns to swipe at him with fine blades of their own, causing him to stumble, but none of them pressed on with the attack.

Instead, it was more like an eerie, childlike fascination. They swiped at him only to watch him stumble, and laughed at him as they danced around his strokes.

*Toying with me. Like a game to them.*

Jon's jaw clenched. The blades glittered and sparkled in the storm like moonlight.

“… I am the sword in the darkness…” Jon growled, slashing upwards as he charged forward.

Blue eyes shone at him tauntingly. “I am the watcher on the walls…”

Their blades buzzed with cold. He felt the edge graze against his back softly, but the pain still shot through his body. He knew that even a single cut would cause frostbite. Ice so cold it burned.

“… I am the fire that burns against the cold!” he snarled, grunting against the burning pain in his back.

Their blades flashed together, time and time again. Jon met them stroke for stroke, right up until the moment the one behind him idly kicked out his remaining leg.

Jon collapsed to the ground. The Other's gaze was taunting as it brought its sword down in an executioner's arc.

His sword-hand worked on instinct. Longclaw shot through the air.

The icy blade struck firmly against with Valyrian steel. The sound rung out like delicate glass chiming
For a moment, the Other even seemed surprised.

“… *the light that brings the dawn!*” Jon bellowed, striking upwards with renewed strength. He felt a blade strike against his back, but the Other in front was wide open. The creature didn't react in time as Longclaw plunged firmly into its chest.

Suddenly, the figure cracked and splintered into a thousand glittering specks of ice. The Other disintegrated under his sword.

Jon howled triumphantly, swinging at the Other behind him.

“The horn that wakes the sleepers!” Jon screamed. Their swords clashed together, each stroke ringing like a crystal chiming.

Briefly, he thought he might, somehow, be able to overpower the white walker.

That lasted right up until the third Other swung his blade at the same time.

Jon saw the attack coming. He knew he couldn't dodge it. His body didn't even twitch.

The icy blade plunged straight into Jon's chest.

The cold made the wound feel more numb more than painful.

Jon's body sagged but he didn't drop. The sword was still sticking out of his chest, with the white walker holding the blade. His fingers groped weakly at the Other's cold hand.

“… The shield that guards the realm of man…” he whispered.

He could feel his body turning cold. He looked down, staring at the blood weeping out of his chest. The white walkers were above him, staring down, watching him in unnatural silence.

*I took one down*, he thought. *I killed one of them.*

In the distance, a lone wolf howled.

For some reason he couldn't quiet explain, Jon felt a small smile come to his lips. He was smiling softly. He felt his body deaden slowly, like ice was flowing through his veins. It didn't hurt, it just felt so… numb.

*So cold I can't even feel it.*

The Other pulled its blade out of his chest. Jon Snow dropped to his knees.

“… And now my watch has ended.” The words were as soft as the snow falling on his face.

With that, he collapsed.

The white walkers paused, picking up Jon's sword off the ground, holding it gingerly, before turning and walking away.

Jon was left lying on the snow, staring upwards into the glowing night's sky. He had never seen the stars so close.

There was something cold on his face, running down his cheeks. Tears.
I'm crying, he thought softly. Such a strange thought.

The last thing he saw was his own blood pouring out around him. The red wept out of the hole in his chest, soaking into the white around him. As his warm blood hit the cold snow, the snow evaporated in a quiet hiss of steam around him. Jon could see the faint tendrils of steam dance around his fading eyes like the smoke from a fire.

And then everything went black.

…

He had a weird dream. It was a dream as vivid as a forgotten memory.

He dreamt of giant roots weaving through the ground beneath of them, threading through the earth, but slowly forgotten by time.

He dreamt of river frozen solid, of bodies trapped in the still current, unable to move on.

He dreamt of grand structure of white stone so fine that it glittered, but abandoned and decaying; a castle so ancient that slowly, like the movement of the world, it was swallowed by a creeping wall of ice.

He dreamt of mountains rising and falling. Of summers and winters so fast that they flickered in the blink of eye. So many cycles that the earth itself rose, fell, and froze.

He dreamt of blistering heat and scalding cold. A heart of fire and a heart of cold, at opposite sides of the world. The heart of fire had burnt, raged and smoked for hundreds of years – an inferno that sucked the life and the magic out of the world – all the while the heart of cold slept and waited under the ground.

He dreamt of ice and fire, dancing around each other to the sound of harps.

He dreamt of a woman with dark brown hair and grey eyes, sleeping as soundly as the dead on a bed of pale blue roses.

And he dreamt of enormous white wings, smashing through ice and snow with a crack like thunder…
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Waking up, and coming back to life.

Chapter 2

The Ice Dragon

He had been asleep for so long.

No, asleep is the wrong word. Rather, *imprisoned*.

Imprisoned by a cage of ice. A mountain of ice and snow pressing onto him, so heavy he couldn't even move. The weight of a mountain pressed above him. A mountain accumulated over centuries, the ice becoming heavier and stronger with each decade.

It had become so hard to breathe, so hard to move. He had fled north to escape the doom – to escape the fires that had sucked the sorcery out of the world. He tried to take refuge in the lands as far north as north would go, the lands so thick with old power that not even the doom itself could burn through them.

Still, the ice and the cold had proved just as perilous as the fire.

The cold crept up on him, sucking his strength. One day, he had stopped to land and then, the next, the ice was so thick he couldn't get up again.

He had already been weakened after flying for so long. His body had grown large and heavy, too large to easily support itself. He needed to feed on more than just meat – he needed the magic, but he could feel the magic in the world slowly draining away. It starved him.

It felt like the magic of the world was dying.

He had turned to the cold as his salvation, and then the cold had become his prison.

He had once been so strong, but the cold had sapped that strength bit by bit. Slowly, he had felt the ice start to blanket him until he couldn't move. Before long, the ice became a cage. It froze him to the bone.

As his eyes closed, he felt himself dying.

The last of a dying breed.

Frozen. Buried. Turned to stone.

He had been dead to the world for so, so long.

…

That was until he felt the blood drip slowly against his brow. It was first thing that had touched
him in over four hundred years.

This blood was special. This blood could melt the snow and remain warm. This blood refused to freeze.

This blood had power in it.

This blood caused frozen eyes to flicker. The earth began to rumble.

It wasn't much blood, but it was enough. Enough to cause a frozen heart to beat again. Enough for muscles to tremble and to stir. It was enough for him to take a long, deep frozen breath. It was enough for him to wake, and to remember when he had been strong.

His body twitched, and stirred.

He wasn't just cold anymore. He had become the cold.

Slowly, carefully – like the glacial shift of continents – powerful wings began to unfurl.

The prison of ice protested. The weight of the mountain tried to keep him buried. The struggle was hard, but he thrashed and persevered. He longed to be free.

He roared with all the force of four hundred years of caged fury.

The mountain cracked.

The sky broke.

When his wings broke through the surface, they pounded with all the force of a storm. The air cracked with the sound of thunder. Boulders of ice the size of mammoths shattered everywhere.

And suddenly he was lifting upwards again. He was flying. He was rising up and up into the sky…

…

Jon gasped suddenly, clutching his chest. His lungs felt frozen. It took him a while to realise that his heart was beating – slowly, uncertainly.

His head was spinning, struggling to move. He felt cold. So, so cold. Colder than any living man had a right to be.

*I should be dead*, he thought, still gasping breath. *I felt myself die.*

*Am I dead?*

He clutched at his chest in shock. His fingers could feel the wound in the very centre of his chest, just under his ribcage. The white walker's blade had gone straight through his chest and out of the other side. The freezing cold had cauterised the wound, leaving nothing but an ugly scar two inches thick.

Briefly, Jon wondered whether or not his eyes had turned blue. He remembered the white walker's blade plunging into his chest. He shouldn't have survived a stab like that.

*But I can feel my heart beating*, he told himself. It was slow, laborious, but it was beating. *I can’t be a wight. Can I?*
What is going on?

Every breath felt sore, laboured. He was struggling to breathe. He couldn't see anything. It took him a while to realise that he was buried under a few inches of snow.

He tried weakly to pull himself up. The pain in his chest was so intense he couldn't even scream.

I can't be dead. Dead people surely couldn't feel this much pain?

Strangely, he heard the voice of Dolorous Edd echoing in his head at that moment. "The dead are likely dull fellows," Edd's ghostly voice mused. "Full of tedious complaints—the ground is too cold, my gravestone should be larger, why does he get more worms than I do?"

The sudden thought was so surreal it made him laugh. His chuckle turned to pain, his scar throbbing. He could only moan, rolling weakly in the snow as he prayed for the pain to go away.

What happened? Jon eventually thought with confusion. The last I remember, I was bleeding out in the snow…

He paused, struggling as a weirder memory hit him. No, he thought slowly. That's not true. I remember something else…

Jon remembered the sensation of waking up. He remembered a centuries-long sleep coming to an end. He remembered moving limbs that had long since been frozen. He remembered thrashing and dragging himself out of the earth in a tremendous crash of power.

Jon remembered the feeling of beating wings, and flying through the night's sky.

Those aren't my memories, he realised. Normally, when Jon had dreams that weren't his own, they were dreams of being a wolf. He had never had a dream like that before.

Jon stared at his hands. He was still wearing his furs and cloak, but they were stained in blood and shredded. He was lying in the snow, and the wind was so far below freezing. By rights, he should have frozen to death a thousand times by now.

His skin was pale, but he wasn't trembling. There was hoarfrost clinging to his skin.

Why didn't the cold kill me?

It was hard to focus. His eyes were struggling to process anything but the snow and the dark. Something pale whipped across his eyes. At first, he thought it was more snow, until he wiped at his head.

“My hair,” he realised with shock. The light was faint, but his dark black, overgrown locks were gone. Instead, he was left clutching at hair as white as bone. The cold had frozen his hair to a white the color of ash or bone.

His heart pounded. His senses started to return through the fog of disorientation, panic and pain. I need a fire, he thought. I'm suffering severe shock, hypothermia, and probably frostbite. I'm in shock and I can't feel it. I need heat. I need a fire.

Where the hell am I?

Jon managed to prop himself up. He wasn't on the glacier anymore. He had no idea where he was. He could see absolutely nothing but snow-swept plains illuminated in the dark. The only light was
from the dancing aurora borealis weaving in the moonlit sky above him – a shimmering green and red that illuminated the sky. It took his eyes a while to adjust. He had never seen the northern lights so bright before.

He wasn’t in the Frostfangs before. He could see the constellations above him – but the Stallion had never been so high in the sky, nor had the Sword in the Morning ever seemed so low. He couldn’t even see the Galley or the Sow, and the Moonmaid had never seemed so lost.

He was in the frozen wastes far north of the mountains. He was so far north that the very stars in the sky had changed.

Realisation twanged. *I'm north,* he realised. *I'm further north than I've ever been before. I must be far off the edge of the maps – no ranging has ever gone this far north.*

*How?*

*Why didn't the cold kill me?*

His heart started to pound. *The white walkers. Did the white walkers bring me with them after they stabbed me? Am I their captive, or worse…?*

Slowly, more memories started to return. Surreal, weird visions. Visions of breaking free. Visions of blue eyes. Visions of flying. He tried to drag himself upwards, still staring entranced by the aurora above him.

*No…* Jon thought, still clutching at his chest. *The white walkers didn't do this…*

He felt the impact before he heard it. It was a dull beat like the banging of a drum that reverberated into his heart, dull and consistent. The beat of wings.

Jon was still staring upwards as he watched the dark shadow pass over the northern lights. The shadow was so large it could have blocked out the sun.

Jon stared dumbfounded as the ice dragon roared.

…

Panic.

Confusion.

Those moments were a blur.

The dragon was beyond enormous. It was at least a hundred foot long from tail to shout, and then wider from each wingtip. Its whole body was deep white but with red veins tracing down its side and across its wings. The wings were sinewy, but with powerful, muscular upper arms and clawed legs that hung backwards as it weaved through the sky.

Its body itself was scaled and spiked, with spiny red crests running all the way down its back to its tail. The tail whipped around the air, while each beat of powerful wings caused the air to shudder slightly.

The roar was like the howl of a hurricane. Jon's ears were still ringing, his head splitting open in pain.

He watched as the dragon circled around him three times, before disappearing into the night with
two beats of its powerful wings.

Jon was already running. He didn't know where to. His leg felt stiff and lame, but he was still limping over the heavy snowdrifts.

*A dragon.*

*A dragon.*

They were supposed to be extinct.

*Do dragons still live Beyond-the-Wall? Could that dragon have lived all this time up at the furthest north?*

*No…* Jon thought slowly. His memories were still jumbled and blurred, but they slowly came into focus. He remembered a sleep of eons, he remembered waking up. He remembered flying.

*I woke it up.* He didn't… he didn't know how he knew that, but he knew it was true. He had been bleeding out on the glacier and the dragon had been buried beneath him. *My blood woke the dragon.*

*Is that how I'm still alive?*

The dragon must have carried him here, to this place so far away from the Frostfangs. *Why? How? Why didn't the cold kill me?*

Jon's body shivered. There was no sign of life on the frozen plains. His body was still deathly weak. The adrenaline kept him moving, but his strength was failing quickly.

His leg was lame. His chest hurt to breathe. He was in the middle of the uncharted wilderness and there was a dragon stalking above him.

*And how the hell am I going to survive?*

There was no shelter, no way to light a fire.

Jon managed five steps, before finally collapsing face first into the snow.

...

He felt himself falling through the world.

He saw snapshots of a different life. A different perspective, he was staring down through reptilian eyes as he hovered over a frozen wasteland.

His body was weak. Hungry. Everything was different. He was lost, and his muscles screamed in pain. He needed to eat. He needed to heal.

After being caged for so long he was left scrawny, weak and hungry.

And all around him, he could feel the demons. The creatures of dark ice and death. He could feel their eyes on him, stalking him hungrily from the ground.

The cold and death longed to hunt him.
*Let them come.* He had been dead to the world for so long.

He would never die again.

He roared in fury, and the sound of his cry splitting through the storm.

…

Jon woke up woozily. He felt heat. He felt the cold draining away slowly.

His eyes flickered. There was a fire. He was in front of a fire. A campfire. Jon blinked, trying to process what was happening. They were in a cave. There was a figure dragging him, dropping him over into a small hollow as a fire crackled in front of him.

He felt his ruined furs being stripped off him, he felt warm rags being pressed against his wounds. Strangely, the feeling of warmth felt almost alien.

Jon groaned weakly. “Easy,” a hoarse voice muttered. The voice was as dry and as rough as sandpaper, almost a rasp. “You are very weak.”

Jon didn't object. He could feel cold hands tending to his wounds, pressing poultice up against his injuries. Somebody was tending to him. He didn't know who and he didn't know why, but they were trying to heal him.

For the life of him, Jon wasn't even strong enough to focus on the figure. He could see nothing but blurry outlines and flickering light.

*Still, I'm alive.*

He hadn't expected to ever be alive again. Jon groaned as he slowly dropped back into a wounded slumber. The world went black.

He woke later as he felt someone press a skin of water to his lips. His throat was painfully dry. When the water hit his throat he nearly gagged.

The cold and numbness was fading away. Instead, Jon just felt pain.

“Drink,” the hoarse voice said. “You must drink.”


Jon's eyes slowly managed to focus. He was in a small cave, with a campfire burning less than a few feet away from him. The air smelled of rot and old humus, and the walls of the cavern were coated in ice. A man in black was standing over him, features inscrutable under a dark hood. The figure was wearing nothing but black; black furs, black boots, black hood. Was this man a brother of the Night's Watch?

There was a rustle of feathers and cawing. All around the cave, Jon saw half a dozen ravens rustling around him. They flapped everywhere, one even landing on the figure’s shoulder. He did nothing to brush the bird off.

Jon could smell something else too, a pungent tone to the cave’s air. Dried meat and blood.

Jon tried to speak. His throat was so weak he could barely even breathe.
“Easy. You are lucky to be alive,” the stranger said. “There are not many strong enough to resist the power of the Others. There are even fewer who can drag themselves back to life afterwards.”

“… What?” Jon gasped. His voice was so weak.

“You were touched by the Others. Their power freezes the living but doesn't quite kill; it creates a stasis between life and death. An undeath. Once frozen, their power will consume you until you are nothing more than a thrall.” The voice was low. “But their influence can be shattered. Before you fully lose yourself, it's possible to break free. If you are very recently dead, resuscitation can even be possible. You were in the hold of the white walkers yet swiped out of their grip.”

Jon blinked, struggling to understand. The pain in his chest was agonising. The stranger's face was still hidden in the depths of his hood, obscured under a thick scarf. “… In a sense,” the man continued, in his deep, sombre voice. “Their power may have even saved your life. It was only while you were frozen on the brink of undeath that the cold couldn't kill you, and your injuries didn’t cause you to bleed out. Their power preserved your body despite the cold, it sealed your wounds and gave you time – long enough for me to find you.”

Jon could only stare. The hooded figure’s head tilted slightly, examining him. “… But be careful…” he continued. “Those who have felt the white walker's touch can never truly be free of it. You will feel their chill on your soul for the rest of your days.”

Jon coughed slowly. His body felt so weak. “… How do you know?” he muttered after a long silence.

For a while, there was no reply. Then, the stranger leaned in closely and placed his hand on Jon's shoulder. “Because I feel it on mine.”

His hands were cold. Jon stared down and realised suddenly the stranger wasn't wearing gloves. His hands were black. Black and cold.

Jon flinched suddenly. He jerked so hard that the pain shot through his chest, and he erupted into a coughing fit. There was blood in his mouth.

“Easy,” the stranger warned. Around him, the ravens echoed the word, cawing “Easy, easy, easy,” into the distance.

“You're a wight,” Jon gasped weakly.

His head tilted. “Yes.”

Jon's stared. He had no sword, and he was in no condition to fight, but his body still flinched. He was in a cave being healed by a dead man.

The wight slowly lowered his hood back, only slightly, but enough to reveal his upper face. His skin was deathly pale, clung to the bones of his face like something desiccated. His eyes were pitch black, though, not blue. “I was in the grip of the Others as well, once. Like you, I broke free... but not before my body was well and truly dead. My heart stopped beating a long time ago, and it will never beat again.”

Jon’s eyes were wide. “If I wanted you dead, I would have left you where I found you. You were very close to dying again before I found you, Jon Snow.”

*He knows my name.* “How did you find me? Why?”
“I have a companion that directed me to you.” The ravens fluttered around him. “And I saved you for the same reason that I myself was saved a long time ago…”

He threw another log onto the fire. It crackled. “…Because our war is not done with us yet,” muttered the stranger. “Sleep now and heal, brother, your fight has only begun.”

Jon stayed in that cave for days, cradled by the fire. The cave was hidden in a hill of the frozen wastes, and every so often he could hear the howl of the winds outside, a thin shriek in the tunnels. For days Jon could only slip in and out of a vague consciousness as he recovered. Aside from him and the stranger, and the many ravens, they were alone.

“…Why didn't the cold kill me?” Jon eventually asked, staring at the stranger. “And how did my blood wake the dragon?”

The stranger simply shook his head. “I have no answers to give you, brother. You ask things that are beyond me.”

“Then who can I ask?” Jon demanded.

“I will bring you to him, when you are well,” the stranger promised, and said no more.

It took four more days before Jon was strong enough to stand. Another four before he could walk. The stranger watched and guarded him with all the patience of the dead. Sometimes, the dead man went out and to hunt for food, riding on an enormous elk that inexplicably seemed to obey. Otherwise the dead man guarded Jon in silence, and continued to guard Jon as his strength slowly returned.

Even when the stranger was away, the ravens would always linger in the cave. The birds would caw and flutter – some would leave and others would arrive, but they would always watch him. The ravens were guarding him too. Nothing about them felt natural.

Every time the stranger came back, Jon would always ask more questions. Trying to find answers.

“That dragon… was it buried underneath the glacier?” Jon asked one day.

The stranger nodded. “Yes, buried for a long time.”

Jon paused, gave it a long moment’s thought. “There are old tombs in the mountains. Tombs beneath that glacier,” he muttered, almost to himself. “Mance was searching for the Horn of Joramun. He said it could break the Wall. Mance kept saying there was forgotten power in the Frostfangs…”

The stranger glanced at him. “…Sometimes old legends get muddled up.”

The stranger didn't speak any more after that, and Jon had too much to think on.

*All that time Mance was searching for the Horn of Winter, could he have actually been searching for a buried ice dragon?*

The Horn of Winter was supposed to be a power that could destroy the Wall and wake the giants. Jon wondered just how much a giant dragon would qualify.

Jon's strength returned slowly. His body still felt frail and weak. He had trouble breathing, and the pain in his chest was nothing short of agony. His hands felt numb, and he felt like he had lost some of the movement in his fingers.
His left leg was the worst, though. It was stiff and weak. Jon struggled to move it below the knee. There were ugly gouges on his leg of where the ice spider's fangs had stripped the muscles near his upper thigh.

Jon had also lost three toes; two on his left foot, and one on the right. The frostbite had bit them clean off. On his left hand, he had also lost his little finger.

Jon spent hours lying in the cave, staring at his mutilated hand. He saw the burns on pale flesh, the scars from where he had once thrown the lantern to save the Lord Commander. With only four fingers, he scarcely could recognise his own hand any more.

He remembered that when he’d first left Winterfell so long ago, he had scarcely had any scars at all.

Still more days passed. Slowly, Jon started to walk again.

The stranger had done all he could. He had proven a talented healer; treating Jon with herbs and poultices that Jon couldn't even recognise. He had tended to Jon's wounds diligently; slowly easing the ice out of the wounds made by Other's sword. He had smeared strange white paste onto the wounds; a paste that dripped red sap, a paste that had stung so badly that it made Jon gasp, but would eventually cause his skin to tingle strangely. Whatever it was, it worked – it helped to heal wounds that should have been debilitating.

Jon felt his face with his hand. He had no mirror, but his features felt pale and gaunt, like his skin was stretched tight over the bones of his face. It felt rougher, like it had been burned by the cold. He had lost weight, he had lost muscle. He had seen men who had been exposed to the winter before; they always had carried with them that haunted look in their eyes.

The cold would always leave its mark. Now, Jon knew what that mark felt like. Between his gauntness and his hair that been frozen white, Jon doubted if he was even recognisable anymore.

The stranger returned late one night. This far north, there were barely any days or nights – instead the world just lingered in a state of perpetual dusk.

"Are you strong enough to move?" the dead man asked. Jon glanced to the stranger. His clothes were a bit more ragged, and there was dried, rotten blood on his sword.

Jon nodded. “Yes,” he said firmly, wishing that he believed it.

“Good. We must leave now. They have been looking for us for some time now.”

Jon didn't need to ask who 'they' were. “I heard that dragon again when you were out,” said Jon. “I heard it roaring in the distance.”

“Yes. The beast has been circling the northern wastes. I saw it bring down a mammoth the other day.” The dead man’s voice was emotionless. “But the dragon is being hunted too.”

“The Others.” Jon frowned. “What do they want with the dragon?”

“Perhaps they seek to kill it and raise it as part of their army. Perhaps worse.”

Jon couldn't think of many things that would be worse than that, but he stayed quiet. The stranger was slowly carefully packing up the camp. “When do we leave?” Jon asked with a gulp.

“Now. We must hurry.”
Jon nodded, grimacing as he tried to stand up. “Where are we heading?”

“South, through the mountains. To the Haunted Forest.” The stranger summoned his elk. The ravens perched across the elk’s horns. “There is a man there that has been waiting to speak to you.”

Jon frowned, but he knew better than to ask. The stranger had always been elusive about the one he worked for. “Is the route safe?”

“No.” He helped pull Jon to his feet. Jon limped in pain, wrapping his arm around the stranger's shoulder to support him. “But it is perhaps safer than it might be. The enemy has been chasing after the dragon in strength. Its presence is perhaps the only reason we have been able to linger here for so long.”

Jon had dreamt about the dragon sometimes. They were weird, surreal dreams. He had dreamt of being larger than mountains, but everywhere he went the storm followed. He dreamt about the dead rising and pursuing him at every turn, all the while creatures with cold blue eyes stalked from the shadows.

They were frightening dreams. The dragon was in danger too. Jon knew that the beast was still too weak to fly for sustained periods, and the storms would threaten it too. Every time it was on the ground – and it had to land frequently – it was in peril. The Others were harrying it constantly.

Sometimes, Jon had other dreams too. The wolf dreams were calm and reassuring compared to the chaos of the dragon dreams. Jon dreamt that Ghost was caught to the south, trapped on the other side of the Frostfangs. He dreamt of the wolf prowling restlessly over the mountains, avoiding the lingering dead that still roamed.

Occasionally, Ghost glimpsed free folk running as well. There had been some that had survived the collapse of Mance Rayder's army. The wildlings were scattered and broken, but Ghost frequently saw them. None of them had fire-kissed hair or a smell like summer, though.

“Did you see a girl when you found me?” Jon had asked the stranger one day. “She had bright red hair, short, skinny. She was wearing grey furs.”

The stranger shook his head. “I saw no one. It was the dragon that carried you to the northern wasteland after it shattered the glacier. I followed, and I found you.”

Jon's stomach had twisted at the thought. He had no idea if Ygritte had survived or not. For all he knew, the white walkers might have cut her down as soon as they had him. It was a bitter thought, one that brought only pain.

They set off within the hour. Jon was carried on the elk, while the stranger walked alongside. The elk stood two metres tall with huge antlers nearly as wide – it had no saddle but it was big enough for Jon to be draped across its back. The stranger didn't stopped or paused, he walked tirelessly and matched the giant elk's pace. The elk was a strong and hardy beast – it didn't gallop, but it made good progress through rough snows and rarely stopped.

The elk was a strange mount. It wore no harness and it waited for no instructions. Instead, Jon collapsed onto its back while it carried him.

The ravens circled above. Occasionally, the stranger would change direction to follow the birds with no warning given. It took Jon a while to realise that the birds were somehow acting as scouts, or as guides. He didn't understand how.

The landscape was totally foreign. Jon knew their location only broadly – he knew that the Valley
of Thenn must be somewhere to the southeast, while the Frozen Shores were to the far south and west. They were deep in the Lands of Always Winter, deeper than he had ever heard of a man to go. These bleak lands were a frozen wasteland that stretched for as far as the eye could see.

Still, they made good time. Jon was unconscious for most of it, but the elk moved constantly even as Jon slept on its back. During the nights, the stranger would set up a warm campfire for Jon alone. Slowly, Jon began to make out the craggy heights of the Frostfang Mountains in the furthest distance south.

Jon stared from atop the elk. The perilous mountains weren't that much more of an improvement, but it was in the right direction. He was watching the mountains take shape, right up until he heard a bellowing cry from the west.

Jon turned. In the distance, he could see the outline of a storm swirling over the horizon. The dragon was trapped in another storm, and the dead would attack at night. The beast raged and thrashed, but Jon knew that it couldn't fight forever.

*The Others are hunting it,* Jon thought with a twinge of sadness. *It is fighting the cold and the dead.*

“That dragon is going to die up here,” he said slowly.

“Perhaps.” That was the only reply the stranger gave.

It took them a week to reach the mountains. It took another to cross through a mountainous pass, and finally reach a frozen stream, a headwater that would later run into the Milkwater. The stranger moved confidently and surely through the lands, and the elk was a sturdy mount. The surrounding rocks slowly became speckled by dead pine trees; broken trunks jutting out of the ground like jagged spikes.

They passed a few abandoned Thenn camps throughout the journey, but they were cold and deserted. There were some signs of battle, but no corpses.

All of the surviving free folk had run south. Even the Thenns and the mountain clans had fled.

*The Others are creeping over the world from the north,* Jon found himself thinking, as they passed through another abandoned mountain camp. The Others were heading south piece by piece, and they left no survivors. Their armies weren't fast, but they were very thorough.

*How long until they reached the Wall?* Jon knew that however it would it take, it wouldn't be long enough. *Winter is coming, and we are all so, so unprepared.*

The ravens cawed around, flocking upwards from the elk's horns. The stranger didn't say a word, but the elk changed direction slightly.

Jon thought that they would be heading through the forest, but they didn't. Instead, the stranger led them west, to a small hilly outcrop overlooking the frozen river. There was a towering tree hanging over the rocks, its roots dangling downwards over the rock.

*A dead weirwood,* Jon realised. It took him a while to recognise it; the tree was leafless, and the bark had decayed into black like stone.

Jon stared at the rocks and the hill. Once, thousands of years ago, this might have been a place of worship to the Old Gods – a sprawling heart tree atop a hill. It was hard to see it now; the weirwood was dead and the hill was just a barren cluster of frozen rocks.
Still, the stranger stopped just short of the hill. The dark man paused at the boundary. “This is where I must leave you. You must go on alone.”

“What?” Jon gasped weakly, clutching at his chest. He was stronger now, but two weeks of being carried had left his muscles feeling like mush.

“I cannot pass the boundary. There are old spells woven into this land. Dead songs, but their echo remains.”

“Where am I going? There's naught but a dead tree on that hill.”

“Look in the roots,” said the stranger. “There is a cave hidden under the tree. There are tunnels crisscrossing beneath the forests throughout the north. Enter the tunnel and follow the path. It will be a long journey, but there will be somebody there to meet you.”

Jon stared. “What will I find in there?”

The stranger looked at him. “What are you looking for?”

“A way home. A way to stop the Others.”

“Then go.” The stranger paused. “I wish you luck, brother.”

Jon's face flickered, uncertainly, but he had nowhere else to go. The stranger had saved his life, and he had no choice except to trust him. He wouldn't survive a week out in the wilderness by himself, much less make it back to the Wall.

It took the stranger's help to dismount the elk, but Jon still nearly collapsed when he tried to make the first step. His legs felt like jelly, and the snow was treacherous.

It was barely fifty feet up a gentle incline, but each step still felt gruelling. Jon was gasping weakly before he was even halfway up. Behind him, the stranger watched solemnly. The elk pawed at the snow.

Finally, Jon reached the top. He could see the rotten weirwood roots dangling over the outcrop above. He didn't see the cave at first, but then slowly he made out the gloom hidden behind the roots. It was a cave barely big enough for a child. Jon cursed, but limped forward.

He barely even saw the figure until he was three metres away. The figure seemed to blend into the mud and routes. It was slight outline; at first he thought it was a child.

Then, Jon's eyes made out nut-brown skin, dappled like a deer's with paler spots, along with large ears and large gold and green eyes. Those strange eyes were slit like those of a cat, glowing softly in the darkness.

He stared in stunned amazement. The child of the forest cocked its head. Jon nearly collapsed in exhaustion, but it made no move to help him. They both looked at each for a long, painful moment.

“The hour is late, King Snow,” it said finally. “The last greenseer awaits.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Battles fought, and those left behind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 3

Samwell

It was a glum grey day spent staring from the top of the Wall. The wind was nothing to speak of, yet it still felt bitingly cold as Sam stared down from the ledge in anticipation.

From so high up, the ground looked like a blanket of white. The men were black dots like a swarm of ants skittering over the snow. There were a lot of men. Almost more than Sam had expected to return, he thought with a gulp. The weeks of fearful panicking had made him half-convinced that they were all doomed.

Sam watched intently, listening as the single long horn blew triumphantly. The rangers returning. A single blast that sounded more like a victory call than anything – they had seen them coming for miles. Two hundred and fifty men of the Night’s Watch heading back to the Wall.

They had been three hundred when they left, and yet the Night’s Watch had still lost more to desertion than they had to battle.

“Oi,” Pyp called cheerfully. “Looks like the Old Bear is finally back.”

“Do you think they won?” Sam asked, his voice nervous.

“I doubt there’d be so many of them left if they didn’t,” Pyp noted. The young man looked ready to skip for joy. “I was half-fearing I’d never see any of them again.”

I was the same. But everything’s alright now, isn’t it? They’re all coming back?

The few ravens they had received had been vague. They only mentioned a battle, that the ranging would be returning soon. “Do you think Jon’s alright?” Sam asked nervously.

“Let’s go and find out. Come on, now, we can leave the patrol for a moment. It’ll be an half an hour before they get to the gate.”

Sam shook his head. Technically, Sam should still be excused from the rotas due to his injury, but Thorne had still assigned him patrol duty. Short numbers, Sam remembered the knight insisting. More likely, Thorne simply enjoyed sending Sam up here to freeze. “We can’t,” Sam muttered. “Ser Alliser will scream at us if we leave our posts.”

“It’s a bright day, there are two hundred men down there and clearly no wildlings around.” Pyp grinned. “Come on, Killer, let Thorne scream for once.”
Sam grimaced. Every man in black received a nickname eventually, and Sam supposed that ‘Killer’ was better than ‘Lady Piggy’, but it still made him squirm. His feet shuffled, glancing down at bandages covering his chest up to his shoulder. His left arm was still in a sling over his chest.

Killer. They had started calling Sam ‘Killer’ ever since he killed a man.

It was at the Fist of the First Men that the deserters struck. It had been a cold night when fourteen men of the black murdered the men on watch, tried to kill the Lord Commander, and tried to burn down the camp before running off. Sam had also been one of the traitor’s targets.

Sam still didn’t understand it. All of the others targets made some sense, at least. The deserters killed the men standing watch, they tried to kill the officers too, they released the dogs and set fire to the tents. They did whatever they could to ensure they would be able to run away, and that the rangers would be too disorganised to give chase.

And then they also tried to kill Sam. Sam had just been minding his own business with the ravens when an ugly man with boils named Chett came out of nowhere and tried to gut him with a knife. The only reason Sam could think of was maybe the man just hated him that much.

The memory sent shivers down. He could still feel the knife as it sliced downward, cutting across his arm as he tried to block and then into his chest. He felt his skin split open. It was so sudden there hadn’t even been much pain, just… shock. The pain came later.

And then Chett had stopped, pausing with the knife. He could have killed Sam quickly, but he didn’t. Sam still remembered the way Chett had grinned, savouring the moment.

Honestly, Sam had been as surprised as anyone when he threw a birdcage at Chett’s head. It hadn’t been a deliberate move, his hand had just flinched, and then suddenly there was squawking, frantic raven flying into Chett’s face.

They scrambled. Sam screamed. Chett pushed him to the ground, bloody knife in hand, and Sam’s arms had just thrashed. Sam vaguely remembered grabbing the closest object he could find in desperation.

And then there was a knife sticking out of Chett’s eye. Sam wasn’t sure how it happened. The same knife Sam used for sharpening quills. The man gagged, blood pouring down his face and over his boils. Chett had hovered upright for a good ten heartbeats before he finally dropped. Chett died with a look of absolute amazement on his face.

I still hear it sometimes. I still hear how his eyeball splattered…

That was how Sam earned his ‘Killer’ moniker. The sworn brothers had found Sam, bloodied, standing over a corpse with a knife in his eye, repeating over and over to himself ‘I killed him, I killed him’.

The deserters died quickly that night. There was confusion and panic, and twelve good men had died when the fighting broke out, but the uprising had failed. Lord Commander Mormont overpowered the three men sent to assassinate him. Four of the deserters managed to run, but they were chased down and killed.

After that, Sam had been left bloody and injured from Chett’s knife. Some thought he would lose the use of his arm altogether. Mormont sent Sam back to the Wall along with Grenn and a few other wounded. Sam had been unconscious for most of the journey. It took Maester Aemon’s skill to stitch him up, but he was still in bandages.
Now, the rest of the Great Ranging had returned too. Sam, along with Pyp, Grenn and Toad, watched with bated breath as the men finally returned and the gate was hoisted up.

When they came through the gate, Sam saw weary, rugged men, but there were also grins in the crowd.

“We killed them!” Thoren Smallwood announced proudly, riding through the gate. “Savages never knew what hit them. They ran straight into our trap.”

Sam’s heart leapt. He looked for familiar faces in the crowd. He recognised Dolorous Edd’s grey hair among those funnelling through the gate.

“There was a battle?” Sam asked eagerly. Edd looked even wearier than most, walking alongside Dywen.

“Oh aye, several in fact.” Edd paused. “Although I’m not sure if you can technically call it a battle it the other side didn’t have a chance to fight back. The wildlings barely had any fight left in them.”

The story came out quickly. After the desertion, the Old Bear proceeded with their plan to ambush the wildlings. The rangers had split into multiple commands, and headed deeper into the mountains to wait for their opportunity. The man mass of their forces under the Lord Commander had went ahead to break the wildlings ranks, all the while smaller groups stationed themselves across the valley and lay in wait. The ambush had turned out to be more successful than anybody had ever imagined.

They had expected to face a horde - a massive, yet disorganized and brittle tide of wildlings. Instead, they had encountered nothing but scattered groups already fleeing from battle, weakened and panicked.

Most of the wildlings had been running, fleeing. *Infighting*, Edd had called it. Most likely there had been some schism or disagreement in their camp – some challenge to Mance Rayder’s rule, perhaps – and mass fighting must have broken out. The wildlings had scattered, and those fleeing down the Milkwater had been met by well-prepared, fortified, and well-hidden men of the Night’s Watch.

It had been a slaughter. “Well, several slaughters, in fact,” Edd explained dourly. “One after another, in very short procession, actually.”

The Night’s Watch had ambushed the wildlings. Then they had chased them through the mountains, circled around the pass, and ambushed them again. The wildlings had been so disorganised that they hadn’t stood a chance.

There had even been giants riding mammoths scattered in the battle, as Sam listened with bated breath. He could barely believe the tales of giants, but there were too many brothers telling them to lie. Soon, there was a group formed of rangers reciting the tale eagerly. The rangers killed the giants with arrows fired from the cliffs, and then fired burning arrows at the mammoths, sending the beasts wild and stampeding through the wildlings’ own men.

There were some casualties, but far, far fewer than expected considering the numbers faced. Ottyn Wythers and ten other men were torn apart by a giant with white fur, but that was the only one of the raid groups that had been totally lost.

“What about Jon?” Sam asked, eager. “How did he fare?”

The mood went quiet. Edd’s expression darkened grimly. “We never saw him. Qhorin Halfhand’s
scouting party didn’t make it back.” He grimaced. “Nobody has seen him since he left.”

Sam blinked, mouth dropping open. There was a long moment of dead silence. Jon, the first and best friend who had really looked after him. Sam hadn’t truly believed that Jon would die. Couldn’t die. Jon had always seemed so strong, so sure, so in control…

_He can’t be dead_, Sam thought, ignoring the sinking feeling in his gut. _Jon’s with the Halfhand, he can’t be dead._

The mood went dark. There were brothers glancing at him, but Sam didn’t say a word. “Why are you back then?” Pyp demanded. “Why not wait for the rangers to return? What about Benjen Stark, or Royce’s group? The Old Bear said he was going to find them—”

“We couldn’t wait. Buckwell’s group barely arrived back in time, but there was no word from the Halfhand,” Dywen protested, his wooden teeth clattering as he spoke. “We could have killed three thousand wildlings, but there were still plenty more. We caught them unprepared at the Milkwater, but let’s not push our luck.”

Sam’s hand trembled. The wound over his chest ached. “… We did it though?” Grenn said after a long pause. “We won. We broke the wildling army.”

It sounded a lot like the wildling army had already been broken and the Night’s Watch just swept up the pieces, but Sam stayed quiet. The face of Jon lingered in his mind.

“Oh aye, we won,” Edd glanced behind him. “And we brought prisoners.”

Sam turned. Everyone in Castle Black was watching as the last of the rangers filtered through the gate. They walked double file through the tunnel, but then there were men wearing chains. There were ragged men wearing bloody furs, with haunted expressions and their hands bound.

A mutterer spread through the crowd. Everyone was watching, like it was a procession. Behind Sam, Donal Noye grunted as he watched.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the one-armed armourer announced. “Now _that’s_ Mance Rayder. King-Beyond-the-Wall himself.”

Sam heard the ripples go through the crowd. The men’s chains rattled in the cold air as they walked.

There were two dozen captured wildlings in total. The men pointed as Mance Rayder walked at the front of the prisoner’s line like some prize. He was a broad-shouldered, but lean man, middle-aged with a worn face. His face was bruised and bloody, but his features were otherwise unremarkable and plain. He looked beaten and weak, but Sam noticed his sharp eyes.

Mance Rayder might have once called himself a king, but now he was nothing but a beaten and injured prisoner.

Still, the oathbreaker and wildling king glared at all them with a sharpness that made Sam pause. The other wildlings looked beaten, or resigned, or loudly and defiantly angry. Mance Rayder was different; he was silent and observant, there was something in his eyes that put Sam on edge.

Sam looked past the former King-Beyond-the-Wall, eyes flickering over all the other wildlings.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the one-armed armourer announced. “Now _that’s_ Mance Rayder. King-Beyond-the-Wall himself.”

Sam heard the ripples go through the crowd. The men’s chains rattled in the cold air as they walked.

There were two dozen captured wildlings in total. The men pointed as Mance Rayder walked at the front of the prisoner’s line like some prize. He was a broad-shouldered, but lean man, middle-aged with a worn face. His face was bruised and bloody, but his features were otherwise unremarkable and plain. He looked beaten and weak, but Sam noticed his sharp eyes.

Mance Rayder might have once called himself a king, but now he was nothing but a beaten and injured prisoner.

Still, the oathbreaker and wildling king glared at all them with a sharpness that made Sam pause. The other wildlings looked beaten, or resigned, or loudly and defiantly angry. Mance Rayder was different; he was silent and observant, there was something in his eyes that put Sam on edge.

Sam looked past the former King-Beyond-the-Wall, eyes flickering over all the other wildlings.

“Who are the rest?” Sam asked, lowering his voice.

“Raiders. Wildling leaders. Clan chiefs. Chieftain’s sons.” There were three women in chains too –
spearwives who looked every bit as tough as the men. “And a couple of daughters of clan chiefs.”

Dywen pointed to a broad man with scruffy white hair. He was snarling as a sworn brother stabbed at him to walk. “And that’s Tormund Giantsbane. We lost three men trying to take him down. We got his daughter, too.”

Most of the wildlings were injured in some way or the other. One of the men looked so bloody he could barely walk. He was a tall, earless man, with a thick bandage around his eye. He limped so badly that the brother escorting him had half-drag him. His face was deathly pale.

“And that’s Styr, Magnar of Thenn,” Dywen explained. “I tracked that bastard myself. He took four arrows, one of them in his eye. We thought he was a corpse, but he still jumped up and tore Garth’s ear off.”

The group was still muttering, but Sam barely heard it. It was still Mance Rayder who Sam stared at. The King-Beyond-the-Wall was infamous to the black brothers. Sam hadn’t expected the dreaded leader of the wildlings to let himself be taken alive. “… How did you even catch the King-Beyond-the-Wall?”

“We didn’t,” Dywen admitted. “Mance surrendered himself. He made the Lord Commander promise to let his pregnant wife walk free in return for his surrender.”

“Pregnant wife?” Sam’s face paled. “There were women and children there too?”

“We let most of the women and children walk.” That word ‘most’ hung in the air. It made Sam’s skin crawl. “If we had tried to take them all, there would have been more prisoners than we had chains. We only brought back the ones of value.”

“Why not just kill them?” asked Grenn, still staring entranced at the wildlings. The one called Tormund struggled like a chained bear, as if he could snap his restraints.

Dywen shook his head. “Most likely will do, eventually.” The ranger paused, then glanced at Mance Rayder. Sam knew that the King-Beyond-the-Wall was a Night’s Watch deserter, and that meant certain death. “But first the Old Bear wants to question them. He wants to know the wildling’s numbers, the biggest clans, their leaders. He wants to know what Rayder did with our missing scouts.”

“You think he was the one that took them?”

“He does seem the likely suspect, doesn’t he?” Edd sniffed. “We’ll ask the other wildlings the same questions too, I expect. Some we could use as hostages against their clans, but I imagine most of them will end up hanging beside Mance.”

Sam squirmed as the sworn brothers talked amongst themselves. By the tell of it, the Watch would hang the wildling chieftains over the edge of the Wall – just like the old glory days of the Night’s Watch. Sam expected that the Lord Commander would be pleased. Not so long ago, some had said the Great Ranging was folly, and yet now the Old Bear had returned triumphant.

The rest of the day was hectic. It was like every man had a story to tell and a wound to patch up. Sam had never known Castle Black to be such a bustle. Thorne was so busy tending to the arrivals that he didn’t even have time to berate Sam.

The steward watched as a few of the younger recruits threw stones at Mance and the other wildlings as they were dragged into the ice cells.
This is a victory, Sam told himself. *They defeated the wildling army and came back victorious. The King-Beyond-the-Wall is beaten, we have won. They protected the realm.*

If that army had hit the Wall, then they all might have been in trouble. The Watch didn’t have the men to defend against a coordinated force like that, and the wildlings had a whole culture based around raping and murdering. The Old Bear did the right thing – hit them by surprise and break them before they had a chance to hit the Wall.

**So why am I still so scared?**

**And why isn’t Jon here?**

Sam tried to distract himself by returning to his duties. There were letters to write and ravens to send. Clydas helped Sam with most of them while Maester Aemon tended to the wounded. Sam caught glimpses of information from the ravens that came in and out.

Ser Denys Mallister reported extremely fierce storms north of the Frozen Shore, and put out a warning in case the storms were to move south. Jarmen Buckwell and Blane were still out Beyond-the-Wall, tracking the movements of stragglers from the wilding host. There had been raiders that had attacked and hounded the rangers as they retreated, so Ser Mallador Locke and some men lingered behind as a rearguard.

The most interesting ones were the ravens from the south. News came in patchily to the Wall, but Sam still clung to every mention from the War of the Five Kings. A raven from White Harbour reported Stannis Baratheon’s defeat at the Blackwater, and that King Joffrey ruled in King’s Landing. Those letters went straight to the Lord Commander. It was a hectic day.

It was nearly dusk by the time the ravens started to clear. Clydas retreated to his quarters, but Sam was still too worried to rest. Instead, Sam returned to the rookery, to Maester Aemon’s quarters and the pile of unsorted books resting on a desk.

There were old tomes that Sam had brought from the library that needed cataloguing and sorting. The books were his solace, his refuge. He tried to distract himself into his task, but he couldn’t help feel a nagging sensation in the back of his mind that something was wrong. That they had made a mistake.

Sam remembered the look in Mance Rayder’s eyes as they marched him through the courtyard. It hadn’t been angry, or vengeful, more… pitying.

Sam heard footsteps marching into the tower. He jumped up quickly, causing his wounds to sting. Sam’s heart skipped as he saw Ser Alliser Thorne stomp into the rookery. The knight’s face was dark as he looked at Sam.

“Maester Aemon is asleep,” Sam said, his voice almost a squeal. “Hold on, ser, I’ll go wake him—”

“Don’t bother, piggy.” The others might call him Killer now, but to Thorne he would always be piggy. “I’m here for you.”

Sam’s eyes were nervous. “Me, ser? I don’t… I haven’t…”

Thorne stepped closer, a vicious sneer on his face. He stared at Sam’s bandages.

“I guess the piggy had some meat cut out of him,” he grunted. “Did that hurt, boy?”

Sam gulped, nodding. He was always scared around Thorne. The knight reminded him of Sam’s
You got one taste of real battle and you came back squealing to the Wall,” Thorne spat. “Even the Lord Commander is too soft on your wimpy behind. Make no mistake, they might laugh and call you ‘Killer’ now, but they’re not laughing with you.”

Sam quivered and shrunk into himself. Thorne turned and walked away. “Now come on,” he ordered. “With me, now. The Lord Commander wants to see you. Bring quills, ink and parchment.”

Hesitantly, Sam followed. It was already dusk. Thorne didn’t even glance back at him. Sam thought he would take him to the King’s Tower, but instead he headed straight towards the tunnels, down into the wormwalks that led under the castle, and towards the ice cells. Sam was shivering, and not just from the cold.

For a fearful moment, he thought Thorne was planning on ambushing him in the tunnels or worse, but then Sam saw figures standing ahead. Mormont was ahead, waiting with four brothers standing outside of the ice cells.

Along with the Lord Commander, there was another new arrival. Janos Slynt, formerly of the City Watch – Janos had been close to Thorne ever since his arrival at Castle Black a week ago, helping to fill in the vacuum left by Mormont’s absence. Gone from the gold cloak to the black, he had heard the man jape.

Before the Great Ranging had returned, there had been whispers floating about that the Lord Commander might have fallen. It had seemed ludicrous at first, but Janos Slynt had even been pushing to be the next Lord Commander. Janos had been totting around telling everyone that the king himself recommended him for the position.

But now that the Lord Commander Mormont was back, both Janos and Thorne looked unhappy. A stopper had been put on Janos’ ambitions, and Thorne lost the power he had been wielding in Mormont’s absence. What Sam knew for a certainty was that he was glad that Lord Commander Mormont had returned; Janos looked at Sam with nearly just as much disdain as Thorne did.

“Tarly.” Lord Mormont just nodded at Sam distractedly. “Good. Come.”

On his shoulder, Mormont’s raven cawed, “Come, come.”

Sam blinked, confusedly, glancing between Thorne and Mormont. Thorne’s face was bitter. “Um… why am I here, my lord?”

“We’re questioning Mance Rayder. I think he’s finally ready to talk,” he said curtly. “You are to act as our scribe. Write down everything that Mance says – take note of any numbers and names he gives us – but sit in the corner and be quiet.”

An interrogation. Sam felt his heart pound, but he managed a nervous nod, clutching at his parchment. Even with a wounded arm, Sam could still read and write better than most; he was Maester Aemon’s steward and the maester was old. Of course they would ask for him to scribe.

Fortunately, Mormont and the other men went in first. The door opened with a large crunch. Sam hesitated at the boundary, but Thorne was behind him, shoving him forward.

The ice cell was freezing, even under Sam’s furs. Mance Rayder wasn’t wearing any furs. He wore only his smallclothes, which did little against the cold of the tunnels. The King-Beyond-the-Wall was shivering badly. Rayder looked frail, pale and gaunt, with painful welts and bruises across his
body. His arms were chained to the ice walls. He stared upwards with dark, bitter eyes.

*His fingers,* Sam noticed with a gulp. Mance’s fingers were all twisted and mangled. They must have broken his fingers one by one. Sam wondered briefly what they had broken when he ran out of fingers.

*He’s ready to talk,* the Lord Commander had said.

Sam’s hands were trembling so much he struggled to hold the quill. Mormont watched him fumble with the paper with a heavy, disapproving frown, before turning back to Mance.

“Understand this, Mance,” Mormont said firmly. “You are a dead man. We will kill you for forsaking your vows. The only question is the manner of your passing. You can either face an executioner’s axe with dignity.” He paused, stepping closer. “… Or we can hang you off the Wall, alive, and let the cold do its job.”

There was a long pause. The oathbreaker’s voice was quiet. A broken man. “I’ll talk…” he wheezed, body shivering.

“Good. You will tell us everything we want to know, and we will give you a clean death.” Mormont glanced at Thorne. “Firstly, troops. How many clans united under you? How many leaders remain —”

“You are a fool, Mormont,” he said quietly. There was a gasping sound. Mance Rayder was laughing, chuckling – or trying to, at least. “An old fool.”

Sam was left suddenly unsure whether he should write that down. Mormont only frowned. “*Fool,*” cried his raven. “*Fool, fool.*”

“You haven’t won.” Mance gasped, glaring. “You haven’t won a goddamn thing. That ‘battle’ was just crows picking up after the dead.”

“Enough. Tell me about your troops.”

“Gone. Dead. Worse. I don’t know.” Mance’s eyes were vicious. “You killed a lot of men, women and children, Old Bear.”

Thorne scoffed. “We killed murderers, rapists and savages.”

“I let your women and children walk free,” Mormont said curtly, ignoring Thorne.

Mance’s chuckle was bitter. “Oh aye. You left them to die, alone, hungry on a deserted mountainside. How noble.”

“Would you have preferred I had put them to death along with your warriors?”

“At the very least, I would have preferred you had burnt the bodies.” Mance Rayder spat blood. “The only thing you’ve done is made our true enemy even stronger.”

No one replied. Sam blinked. “Do you know why they attacked us?” the wildling king challenged. “For *them,* that was a recruitment drive. Forty thousand dead free folk – forty thousand more corpses for their army. When you killed us, you just did their work for them – made *their* army a little bit bigger. That’s your victory right there, Mormont.”

“Enough of this,” Mormont growled in warning.
Mance stared at him critically. “You know, don’t you?” There was a pause. “I think you know. I think you’ve seen the dead walk too.” Mance’s grinned, causing Sam to shiver. “You are a fool, Mormont. I almost pity you when you have to face all of the dead you killed, walking again.”

There was a moment of silence. Mormont and Thorne shared an uneasy glance. The memory of the undead corpses with blue eyes that they brought over the Wall lingered in the room. Sam remembered with a gulp the bodies of Othor and Jafer, who had started moving again when they were brought across the Wall, and tried to murder living men. Janos Slynt just scoffed. “Savage superstition!” Janos proclaimed. “The man is a fool and a craven.”

“And you are a tw–”

“Enough!” Mormont bellowed. He glared at Mance Rayder. “There are things that I need from you, turncoat. What did you do to our rangers?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Mormont.”

“Willem Royce led a party of four six moons ago. They vanished. What happened to them?”

Mance shook his head. “Never even heard of them.”

“Benjen Stark and a party of six three moons ago. Where are they?”

“Now Benjen I did hear about.” Mance nodded. “Last I heard was from the free folk in the forest, Benjen was heading out past the Antler. He was asking about some nearby heart tree, I believe.”

Mormont frowned. Sam nervously made notes.

“What did you do to him?” Thorne demanded.

“I never touched him. We both know Benjen was far too good to fall to wildlings.”


This time, Mance smiled. “Oh, I know about Qhorin. He was caught up the Skirling Pass.”

Mormont’s gaze turned dark. “You killed him.”

“Well, not me.” Mance’s face twisted. “It was Rattleshirt’s band that caught him. Mind, even the Lord of Bones would have brought Qhorin in alive – Qhorin was an old friend of mine, I would have rather traded or ransomed him than killed him.” Mance paused, glancing at the Lord Commander. “It was actually one of his own men that turned on him. Jon Snow killed the Halfhand.”

Sam dropped his quill. Mormont’s eyes flashed. “You lie.”

“I do no such thing. Rattleshirt trapped Qhorin in a cave, and then Jon Snow turned on the man. That wolf of his tore Qhorin’s leg open, while Jon took the Halfhand’s head. I met Jon afterwards - the boy dropped his black coat. He was with us at the Milkwater.”

Mormont’s face was stone. Thorne’s eyes gleamed. Sam stared in horror. “No,” Sam exclaimed. He knew he was supposed to stay quiet, but he couldn’t. “He’s lying. He’s lying. Jon would never betray the Night’s Watch, he wouldn’t.”

“Tarly, be quiet,” Mormont snapped. From over the Lord Commander’s shoulder, Thorne just
looked at Sam, smirking sickly-sweet.

“But he’s lying!” Sam shouted. “Jon isn’t a turncoat, he’s lying!”

“Lying,” Mormont’s raven echoed from the Lord’s Commander’s shoulder. “Lying, lying.”

“Like hell I am,” Mance scoffed. “Last I saw, Jon stole a spearwife for himself and he was getting real comfortable – cute girl, red hair, hell of a fire in her too.” Mance stared at Mormont with a smirk. It was a little victory for him that one of the crows had deserted the Watch. “What’s the matter, Old Bear? Maybe your rangers just aren’t as dedicated as you would like to believe.”

“Where is Jon now?” Mormont growled. Sam could barely believe his ears. They were actually listening to the oathbreaker.

Mance Rayder shrugged. “Dead, most like. I don’t think he escaped the Frostfangs.”

Sam gaped at the former king, dropping his paper onto the ice. “He’s lying,” Sam shouted. “Jon would never betray the Watch, he’s not dead – it’s not – he can’t be –!”

“Alliser, get rid of the boy,” Mormont ordered.

Thorne grunted, grabbing Sam by the collar and dragging him out. For once, Thorne didn’t say a word, but his eyes spoke volumes. Sam struggled weakly, even as Thorne pushed him roughly out of the cell.

“Get rid of the piggy,” Thorne ordered to the guards, slamming the cell door shut behind him. The two guards grabbed Sam roughly, manhandling him as he shambled away.

Sam’s head was in a daze. He wanted to go back and protest, he even squirmed against their grip. Why is the Lord Commander even listening to that man?

He was pushed out into the courtyard, stumbling over the stairs. One of the guards said something, but Sam didn’t hear it.

Jon isn’t dead. Jon couldn’t be dead. He couldn’t be a traitor and he couldn’t be dead.

Sam didn’t even know what he would do with himself without Jon. The thought of Jon lying in a ditch somewhere made his knees weak.

Mance Rayder is lying, Sam thought firmly. He is a liar and he is lying. That oathbreaker is just trying to spread discord in the Night’s Watch with a petty little lie.

… Still, another part of Sam whispered treacherously. It is an awfully specific lie to tell…

Sam spent four hours standing in that courtyard, waiting for the Lord Commander to come out of the wormwalks. It was pitch black by the time he did, but Sam knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep.

“My lord!” Sam called, as soon as the door opened again. Jeor Mormont’s face was grim. Thorne was next to him, his eyes widening as soon as he saw Sam. “I’m sorry, my lord, I’m sorry for how I acted, but Jon is my friend and I couldn’t let…”

His voice trailed off. Thorne had that look in his eye when he was ready to explode. Mormont raised a hand.

Sam gulped, and nodded.

Mormont’s eyes flickered. “We spoke to the other prisoners, Tarly,” he said after a brief pause. “They all said exactly the same thing. That Jon Snow came to the camp as Qhorin Halfhand’s killer, looking to defect.”

Sam blinked. “Then they’re lying! They –”

“What, all of them?” Thorne sneered. “You think they all got together beforehand and fabricated the exact same lie to tell, in case they were captured? Why would they even bother?”

Sam couldn’t answer that. They had questioned each prisoner separately. Even if Mance Rayder had made up the story for some reason, then how could the others know the same story?

Sam looked up at Mormont pleadingly. The Old Bear’s face was hard, but he still looked disturbed. Mormont had been grooming Jon for command one day.

“Face it, piggy,” Thorne continued. “Lord Snow was a weak, spoilt, little bastard. The first time things got difficult, he took the coward’s way out and killed a good ranger just so he could turn tail and defect.” Thorne smirked triumphantly. “I knew it from the first time I saw him. He was an arrogant puffed up little snot from the beginning.”

“Bastards are treacherous by nature,” Janos agreed. “And treason runs in his blood. Even his lord father was a traitor and liar of the highest order, and clearly his bastard child was no better.”

Mormont looked fuming. Mormont entrusted Jon with his family’s sword, Sam pleaded quietly. Mormont couldn’t give up on Jon now…

“If he should return, he will be given a fair trial. We will listen to his side of events and we will make judgement accordingly,” Mormont said in a growl. Thorne scoffed, not quite under his breath. The Lord Commander stared at Sam, his voice hard. “But send a raven to Eastwatch and the Shadow Tower. From now on, the Night’s Watch has no choice but to consider Jon Snow a traitor and a deserter.”

“… But…” Sam stammered. “… But… you can’t…”

“Tarly,” Mormont said, his voice firm as steel. “Enough.”

“Enough,” the raven crowed. “Enough, enough.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a note about the timeline: you know, I’ve never realized how horribly difficult it was to chronically order of events in ASOIAF until I started writing this fic. The chapters in the books are organized by PoV, not time, which is fine for the novels, but when writing a divergence story it makes it very awkward to actually figure out what happened when and who knew what at what moment.

So, this is just a shoutout to a really precise timeline that I have found on the internet - a really impressively detailed Google doc where a group of fans have tried to chronologically place every PoV chapter by date. So, cheers - the chronology of this fic is based on that excel sheet.
I have a copy of that sheet on my computer and I'm using it to match the timing of my divergence story against the timing in canon, because, yes, I really am that pedantic...
Chapter 4

Jon

A year ago, Jon would have listened to Old Nan’s stories and laughed. He would have laughed at all the fanciful tales of grumpkins and snarks, giants and children, Others and ice dragons. As a child, he would have listened entranced, but he was adult now. He knew that tales of magic and monsters were nothing more than just bits of superstition, clouded by forgotten history.

Not for the first time, Jon realised that he knew nothing.

In the last month alone, everything had changed.

He had ridden with wildlings. He had seen giants and mammoths. He had seen the dead rise again. He had seen the army of the dead, and the ice spiders that hounded the living. He had seen the Others themselves, and even killed one with his own blade.

He had seen an ice dragon burst from a glacier. He had seen the children of the forest in the flesh, and he had seen a tunnel so old and deep it felt like they were walking in the bones of the earth itself.

_The Old Gods are heavy here_, Jon thought, staring around the roots of the weirwood trees. It was like he could feel the history in the air – an ancient power that made his skin tingle.

The tunnels twisted everywhere, for miles and miles. It had taken two days to cross through them, running alongside underground streams. It was dark, but his guide led the way. The child of the forest was swift and soft of foot, while Jon limped, gasped and struggled. He made slow progress. The child of the forest was quiet, but never impatient. She brought nuts, herbs, milk and occasionally chewy meat to eat as they journeyed. The food was bitter, but it was healthy and the exercise was good. Jon grew stronger every day.

He occasionally saw others of her ilk in the tunnels. They were scrawny things, ragged and wild, wearing dappled brown rags with vines, twigs and withered flowers woven in their hair. They talked in a tongue that Jon couldn’t even recognise. Their voices were high-pitched, fluid and almost singsong.

Sometimes, the child of the forest that led him would talk as they walked, telling him stories of their history. “We have been down here for millennia, and we have still not explored all of the tunnels,” she explained in her high and sweet voice. “They have been our sanctuary and our home, for longer than men have walked these shores.”

“How could you have possibly mined something this large?” Jon gasped, stumbling over another rock. The tunnels were beyond anything he’d ever imagined. _They must be all under all the_
“We did not. We sung. We sung to the earth and the earth danced for us. Over generations, these tunnels were formed.”

The tunnels were not always the same. The way he had arrived was scarcely large enough for a child, and sometimes the path narrowed further. But at other times, the caverns expanded. He had seen tunnels as high as castles, vestibules under the earth as large as Winterfell itself. A giant could have walked comfortably through most of the passageway.

“And the man you’re taking me to see?“ Jon demanded. “This greenseer.”

“The greenseer came later. He was a man once, like you, but he took shelter alongside us and he joined with our song. He is the last of the humans that cared to learn our song – the last greenseer for centuries.”

Jon frowned. “I don’t understand.”

The child of the forest gave him a sidelong glance. “Yes, King Snow,” she agreed.

There was a pause. She didn’t stop walking, and Jon didn’t stop limping after her. The silence was deafening for a few steps.

“Why do you call me that?” Jon asked. She had said the same when they first met at the mouth of cave. “Why do you call me King Snow?”

“That is your name.”

Jon shook his head. “No, my name is Jon Snow,” said Jon. “I’m no king.”

“Then perhaps it is a mistranslation on our part,” she replied. “Your tongue is so rough and cumbersome compared to the True Tongue.”

It took Jon a good long time before he frowned, and realised that that was not quite an answer.

He had to watch his footing. They were heading for another junction in the tunnels, a cavern as large as large as the great hall of Winterfell, with stone teeth hanging from the ceiling.

There were bones underfoot of every size; animal bones, human bones, bones that he had never seen before. He was starting to see the children more frequently, all flitting about and staring at him unblinkingly.

Eventually he made it to the centre of the tunnels, where the weirwood roots were thickest. The white roots were threaded all through the earth around him, denser and thicker than anywhere else. Then the route descended, and descended. Eventually he started to hear the rippling flow of water, the low roar of a distant waterfall.

The path brought them a great cavernous opening over a black abyss, with rushing water echoing below in the darkness. The river looked at least six hundred feet below them, swift and black, flowing down to a sunless sea. It made Jon gape just staring at it.

Near a natural bridge across the abyss there was a throne of woven roots. The man waiting in it looked so decayed that, at first, Jon thought it was a corpse. The corpse of a pale lord in ebony finery. Then, the corpse shuddered. Slowly, one eye opened.
It was alive. A pale, skeletal man in rotted black clothing on a weirwood throne of tangled roots. What little skin remained was white and gaunt, stretched like white leather over old bone, aside from a scarred red blotch on the side of his neck and cheek. There were leaves sprouting from his skull, mushrooms growing across his body, and dirt and dust thick in his hair. An ancient lord that had half-morphed into the weirwood roots that surrounded him.

The old man had withered, white hair long enough to reach the earthen floor. He was missing one eye, while the other was blood red. Weirwood roots surrounded the man, twisting around and through him, snaking out of his leg and his empty eye socket.

When he spoke, his voice was slow and dry, as if he had forgotten how to speak.

“… And so it seems that even after a hundred years and with a thousand eyes, a man can still be surprised…” The pale lord murmured through a dry, hoarse throat. Jon could only stare in stunned horror. “Welcome, Jon Snow. The hour is late and you were not expected.”

Jon felt his breath grow shallow. The children of the forest flickered away into the darkness. The cavern was eerily quiet. “You know who I am?”

The single red eye was unfocused, but somehow Jon knew the man was staring intently.

“Yes.”

“How?” Jon demanded.

“The weirwood’s roots run deep. The greensight runs deeper. I watched you with a thousand eyes and one. I saw you in my dreams; your place, your past, maybe even your future. Who knows?”

“You are the last greenseer,” Jon said breathlessly. Everything he had ever heard Maester Luwin say on greensight came rushing back. Those tales, they had always seemed nothing more than legends.

“I am. I had a name once, and I’ve had many names since. For now, call me…” he seemed to pause, thoughtful. “…the three-eyed crow.”

“You don’t look like a crow to me.”

Was there a flicker of smile on sunken lips? “I can look like many things.”

Jon took a deep breath. His was head was spinning. “It was you. You were the one controlling the ravens, you were the one who guided the stranger to me.”

There was a soft nod. “Why? How?” Jon demanded. “I don’t understand…”

“Yes,” the three-eyed crow said, sounding sympathetic. “Ask your questions, Jon Snow. I will answer what I can.”

For a moment, Jon struggled to speak. “… The dragon,” he said finally. “Tell me about the dragon.”

“The dragon is a remnant of an age long gone. One of the dragons of Old Valyria. A different time, before the Doom.”

The statement didn’t make sense. “What was it doing here? It was buried under the glacier!”

“Yes. Buried for over four hundred years. Four hundred years ago, the dragon fled the Valyrian...
Doom. There were many that did, but that dragon escaped further than most.” His red eye focused on Jon. “You must understand, after the Doom, after the great cataclysm, the whole world changed. It was more than just an explosion; ever since the Doom, the old ways of sorcery and magic began to dwindle. It was a slow decline, but gradually the magic started to fade from the world.

“Dragons are creatures of magic. They live and breathe it. Their existence is tied to the movement of the world. Once the magic started to fade, the dragons did too. It was gradual, and it was inexorable.” The three-eyed crow’s voice was a dry rasp, the laboured voice of an old man. A voice that hadn’t been used in many years. “But this dragon attempted to take refuge, long ago. It fled from the fire into the ice.”

Jon must have looked confused. “The Wall is more than a mere physical barrier, far more. It was built to keep magic out, but it also served to keep magic in,” the three-eyed crow explained. “After the Doom, the lands Beyond-the-Wall became one of the few remaining havens of magic in this world. That was why the dragon took shelter here, that was how it survived the bane that would eventually kill every other dragon in the world.”

“But it was buried.”

“Yes. The ice proved just as dangerous as the fire. The dragon was weakened and it collapsed, to be buried underneath the ice for four hundred years.”

The old man paused, taking a wheezy breath. His voice was a low rasp. “I knew of the dragon that was buried there. I saw it occasionally in my dreams. A thing of faded power, such things tend to attract the sight. I thought it was dead, though – its body may as well have turned to stone,” the greenseer mused. “I did not believe that anything could wake it, yet I suppose that dragons have always had a way of defying the normal laws.”

“Yet it’s alive now.” Jon’s hand touched the scar under his furs gingerly. “It was my blood, wasn’t it? I was bleeding. My blood woke it?”

The greenseer gave a quiet nod. “But it was buried there for four hundred years?” Jon demanded. “Surely someone else must have bled on that glacier in all that time? Why did my blood cause the dragon to wake?”

“Now isn’t that the question?” The three-eyed crow said. “I’ve been musing on that myself for a while now. Tell me, Jon Snow, do you have Targaryen blood running through your veins?”

“Targaryen?!” The thought was so outlandish he could barely process it. He knew his history. The Starks were descended from the blood of the First Men, about the furthest lineage from Targaryens possible. “Of course not – my father was Eddard Stark of Winterfell.”

Was he imagining it, or did a faint expression of doubt pass over the old man’s face? “And your mother?” the greenseer asked.


“You have the blood of Old Valyria inside of you, Jon Snow. Powerful blood, too – from a thick line. The dragon responded to it.”

He didn’t know how to respond to that. Targaryen? Could Ned Stark have birthed me on a Targaryen? It hardly seemed possible – his father had been fighting Targaryens at the time. Who could possibly have…?

Enough. This is meaningless. Jon had spent his childhood guessing at his mother, and didn’t care
to continue now.

“The Others,” Jon demanded, changing the subject. They were the enemy that he was sworn to fight. “Can you help me stop the white walkers?”

“Help? I can do what I can.” The voice was solemn. “But that is not enough.”

Jon’s hands clenched. “The children have magic that can keep the Others out!” he said. “You can free wights from the Other’s control! We need that power, you could–”

“The power is dead, Jon,” the greenseer said in sadness. “The children that you see here are the last of their kind – barely threescore left. They no longer have the strength to match the cold. Make no mistake – this place, this refuge is where the children have come to die. They are the last of the last. The only songs they can sing now are songs of mourning.”

“You’re not dead yet!” Jon nearly shouted. “If the Others hit the Wall then everyone will die!”

“Yes,” he agreed. “It might be in one year or a hundred years, but sooner or later the Wall will fail. The Long Night will return to the world, and winter will rule. And this time there will be no children left to fight against it.”

Arya. Robb. Bran. Sansa. Rickon. His mind swam with the faces of all the people he had to protect. “Then why are you sitting there?” Jon shouted angrily. “We need to fight! How do we stop it?”

The three-eyed crow didn’t reply. Jon could have shouted all he wanted, but the silence seemed to reign in the large cavern. It was so cavernous and ancient that Jon could have shouted at the top of his lungs, but he would never be able to fill it.

There was a long moment of quiet. Jon shuffled slightly. “…Can it be stopped?” Jon asked.

“It was stopped once before,” the three-eyed crow said with a soft sigh. “Perhaps it can be stopped again. And you are right; we all must do our part.”

Jon stared, his eyes hopeful. “The only role that I have left to provide is guidance,” the three-eyed crow said. “I am old, older than any man has a right to be, but I will stay and I will teach. I can spread my teachings and maybe I can give the next generation a chance.”

“A chance is all that we need,” said Jon, wishing that he believed it.

The old man shook his head. Dirt sprinkled from the roots in his hair. “No. We need dragons.”

Jon stared. “You can feel it, can’t you?” the greenseer rasped. “You are no greenseer, but you have a power in your own right. You can feel the ice dragon.”

Jon hesitated. “Yes,” he said after a pause. Jon didn’t understand how, but he knew what he felt. “The dragon is in trouble. The Others are going to kill it.”

“Worse. The Others are going to enslave it. They’re going to harness its power for themselves,” said the crow. “With the might of the dragon at their side, they could destroy the Wall so much faster. You may well have doomed the world when you woke that beast.”

Jon was about to object, but his protests fell short. Some part of him knew that the greenseer spoke the truth.

“We can’t allow that to happen.”
“No. We cannot,” said the crow. “And you must stop it from happening.”

Jon could only stare. “You want me to kill the dragon?”

“No. I need you to save it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I have been trying to connect to the dragon,” the three-eyed crow explained. “But it is beyond me. The dragon is lost, angry, and frightened. It will not respond to my power.” His head tilted. “But it may listen to you. Your blood woke it; perhaps you have power over it. You must free it from the Other’s grasp and bring it to safety.”

*Bring it to safety?* Jon felt more and more lost every moment. *It’s a dragon.*

There was a whole army of dead and worse hunting it. Jon wouldn’t be able to get close, and in all likelihood the dragon itself would kill him if he did.

The three-eyed crow stared at him as if he was reading his mind. “The dragon saved your life once,” he said. “It carried you from the glacier. Now, it is time for you to return the debt.”

“But how?” Jon gasped, a stammer. “How am I supposed to…?”

His voice trailed off. *Supposed to what? Supposed to fight through an army of white walkers? Carry a dragon to safety? Not get eaten?*

“I can teach you some, the rest you must figure out on your own,” said the three-eyed crow. “We have little time and much to do.”

He hesitated. “I don’t know if I can.” Jon let out a breath, silently remembering his vows. “I should head back to Castle Black. I need to warn the brothers. We could mount a ranging, maybe make peace with the wildlings.”

“No.” The hoarse voice was firm. “Your warnings will only fall on deaf ears, you know they will. This task is more important.”

The three-eyed crows face was as stern as stone. “This is your task now. You must rescue the dragon. You must learn to control it. You must keep it out of the Others’ grasp at all costs, and then the dragon will become your route home,” the crow ordered. “Only then can you go south – to warn the people and unite them against a common foe. If all goes well then maybe, *maybe*, there is chance to throw back the Long Night once more.”

Jon’s eyes flickered. “The people will not follow a man of the Night’s Watch, Jon Snow,” said the greenseer, stressing his surname. “But they will follow a dragon. A dragon might unite the realm.”

The silence surrounded them. Jon knew that the children of the forest were watching from the shadows, silent as ghosts.

He took a deep breath, struggling to process it all. His hand instinctively went to the scar on his chest.

*I gave up my life for duty once,* he thought, clenching his fists. There was no choice but to do it again, it seemed.

His throat was suddenly dry. “This dragon,” Jon croaked. “Does it have a name?”
“Once, perhaps. The name has been lost to time.”

He didn’t reply. *It needs to have a name*, he thought quietly.

Jon knew that he was weak and injured. His leg was half-lame and his body struggled to move, let alone fight. He knew fine and well that it would be suicide to go back out there even if he were healthy.

Still, I must go. There is nobody else who can.

“I’ll do it,” Jon said, closing his eyes and taking a deep, painful breath.

The three-eyed crow simply nodded. Jon glanced around the cavern. “How does this work then?” Jon asked after a long quiet. “I just walk out there to meet a dragon?”

“Not yet,” said the crow. “A warrior needs a sword.”

Jon blinked. “I have no sword. They took my sword.” His heart pained slightly with the thought of the Others walking away with Longclaw.

“Hm,” the greenseer grunted. “Well then, take mine instead. I have long since had no use for it.”

The crow motioned at the shadows weakly, and a child of the forest disappeared into the darkness.

“I don’t know if any other sword would be as good as my old one,” Jon admitted. The Valyrian blade of House Mormont had been the finest sword Jon had ever wielded, and it had been lost in the white walker’s grasp.

“Really?” The old man snorted, with a harsh, throaty sound. A laugh, Jon realised a heartbeat later. The greenseer’s laugh was so dry and quiet that he didn’t realise what it was at first. “I’ll let you be the judge of that.”

Jon was about to ask, when the child of the forest reappeared, unnervingly quickly. The child was carrying a blade almost as long as a longsword, but half as wide. It was a long, slender, black sword, the edge of which glimmered even in the faint light of the tunnels. There was a ruby embedded into the pommel, with dark swirls in the metal of the blade, lapping across the sharp edge.

The sword was all black metal, unadorned but elegant, perfectly crafted and balanced, with a wicked gleam to the blade that seemed to ripple like dark water. The tunnels were gloomy, but when the blade hit the light, the edge shimmered like nothing he’d ever seen before.

It was a sword of Valyrian steel.

Jon’s breath had caught in his throat. He couldn’t look away from the sword. The greenseer’s lips twisted upwards slightly.

“… Her name is Dark Sister,” said the three-eyed crow softly. “I believe she’s been waiting for you.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Learning how to swing a sword.

Chapter 5

Jon

“You move slow,” the child said in her strangely singsong voice. “Too slow.”

You are too fast, Jon almost replied, but it was taking all of his concentration just to follow her movements. The child of the forest, Acorn, moved so fluidly that Jon could scarcely believe she was a creature of flesh and blood. Her footwork was beyond perfect, it was like she was flowing through the air.

In Jon’s hand, Dark Sister slashed outwards, cutting low and then high with wicked grace, yet Acorn flowed between his slashes with inhuman ease. Dark Sister was easily the best blade that Jon had ever held. It was a weirdly long and thin sword, as light and as fluid as Arya’s Needle, but somehow stronger than it had any right to be. A normal blade that size should have shattered at the first impact, but somehow Jon didn’t think he could have broken Dark Sister even if he tried.

Dark Sister, the greenseer had said. Jon knew the name – Dark Sister was a blade that had shaped Westeros. The blade of Visenya Targaryen herself, the sister-wife and right hand of Aegon the Conqueror. From her it had passed to Maegor the Cruel, then Daemon Targaryen, and from him to Aemon Targaryen, the Dragonknight himself. No sword save for Blackfyre itself had done more to build the Seven Kingdoms.

For days, Jon had been left wondering on how the greenseer could have such a weapon.

The blade was all Valyrian steel, swirling grey and black metal and a leather-wrapped grip that seemed strangely unadorned despite the sword’s grace. It was an ancient, formidable blade, with an edge sharper and more bloodthirsty than any he’d known – something about the sword sang for blood.

Despite his sword though, Jon was still horribly outmatched.

At first, he thought the child of the forest had been jesting when she had offered him a duel. As it happened, Acorn was easily the best fighter Jon had ever seen.

She might be over a thousand years old, Jon thought, as he slashed downwards in a long arc. Acorn could have had more battle experience than every man in the Night’s Watch combined.

The children of the forest were short, scrawny and skinny, long of limb with a strangely deerlike aspect to their features, but they were most certainly not weak. They moved with a cat-like grace that no human could match, and their reflexes easily put Jon’s to shame. Acorn’s natural speed, combined with a flawless style and talent, meant that Jon was not even able to catch her.

Jon had no doubt he could have beaten easily her in an arm wrestle. Still, he knew as well that
Acorn could have sliced open his guts just as easily if she had really tried.

The child of the forest wielded a long spear instead of a sword. A weirwood spear tipped with an obsidian blade. It was a brittle weapon, but sharp enough to cleave through any armour. Right now, Acorn was barely using it as she dodged around Jon’s sword. When she did attack, she used the butt of her spear, and her jabs would always hit despite his defence.

_They might be no bigger than children, but they’re still predators_, he thought. He was suddenly reminded that the children of the forest had claws instead of fingers.

“Keep your legs apart, and your shoulders down,” said Acorn. “Your trunk is still too weak. You topple too easily if you try to stand up straight.”

Jon grimaced. _Keep your centre low_, he told himself, facing off against her. His left leg was better, but still sore and limp. He was going to have trouble riding a horse, let alone fighting. He had needed a walking stick even to move around recently.

Jon slashed down, but he overreached himself. Almost chidingly, the blunt end of Acorn’s spear tapped against his thigh. “You slow as giant, but with none of the strength.”

Jon gasped before lowering his weapon. He felt exhausted. The last time anybody had beaten him so soundly in a duel, he had been seven. “Enough. I yield.”

“Yield?” Acorn shook her head, but she still lowered her spear. “We practice fighting, you shouldn’t practice yielding. Yield against the cold and the cold will take you. Nature doesn’t fight until yield, King Snow.”

_**King Snow**_, Jon noted. All of the children of the forest called him that. Jon still hadn’t figured out why.

Jon sighed, trying to catch his breath. “Where did you learn to fight like that?”

“We call it the wood dance. Once we used it to hunt, then we had use it to fight. I practiced my dance fighting men centuries ago, but it still was never enough.”

“I can’t imagine anybody could have beaten you in a battle.”

“They couldn’t.” Despite her delicate features, Acorn’s eyes were hard. “But they killed my brother when he slept. They couldn’t kill me, so they poisoned the ground against us instead. They couldn’t fight us, so they burned our forests. They killed babes, my children, and then killed fighters before they ever had a chance to fight. You men don’t fight fair; you lack the giant’s strength, but you could always make up for it with cunning and viciousness.”

Jon blinked. “Um… I see.” There was a moment of silence. Jon felt the need to say something. “I am sorry about your loss.”

“Don’t be,” Acorn said simply. “That song is over. I dance the wood dance now in tribute to cycles long past, as I will be soon.”

She turned and walked away without another word. Jon blinked. They were queer creatures, the children of the forest. They hadn’t treated Jon with anything other than kindness, but there was a strange sadness to them as well.

They talked about everything they had lost, and they lived in sadness. _Men wouldn’t be sad_, Jon thought to himself, _men would be angry_. Men would hate and swear vengeance, while the children...
The children sang for their losses, while men would fight and kill for them. Jon took a deep breath, limping as he returned to the throne room. The greenseer was in one of his sleeps, still as the dead. “You return,” he muttered, his eye slowly opening as Jon approached. “How goes your practice?” “Sorely. The children are strong fighters,” Jon said with a quiet grimace. “No,” the greenseer said sadly. “The children of the forest were never fighters. There were some that were forced to fight, some that even became consumed by the fighting, but in their hearts the children were never meant to wield a weapon.” Jon’s eyes narrowed. He paused, holding out his blade. “Dark Sister,” he said. “Where did you get this sword?” “I had a life before I came here, once. Dark Sister was entrusted to me long ago.” Jon hesitated, struggling to recall his history lessons. “Dark Sister is the ancestral sword of House Targaryen. The same one that Queen Visenya wielded.” The gaunt man gave a slight nod. “She has a history too. She has long been a bloodthirsty blade, and truthfully I have neglected her for too long.” A blade that dated back to Aegon the Conqueror. How did he ever get such a thing? “Are you a Targaryen?” Jon demanded. There was the faintest wisp of a smile. “No. I was never a Targaryen.” “Then who were you?” “I wore many names when I was quick, but name my mother gave me was Brynden,” the greenseer said in a quiet voice. “But that name is dead now. I gave up the name when I gave my vows.” There were so many things that Jon wanted to ask. Brynden, he thought, struggling to remember Maester Luwin’s lessons. There was something nagging at him in the back of his mind. “You were a sworn brother?” “Once.” Realisation clicked. “Bloodraven,” Jon said, breathlessly. Brynden Rivers. Bastard son of Aegon the Unworthy. Former Hand of the King. A former Lord Commander. One of the Great Targaryen Bastards. “… You’re Bloodraven.” “Once.” That was all he said. Jon’s head spun, staring at the greenseer in the weirwood tree. “Then you must be over a hundred years old. You were Lord Commander.” The blood red eye just looked at him passively. Bloodraven was the bastard son of Aegon the Fourth, he recalled. A legitimised bastard. Jon averted his gaze, staring down at Dark Sister. So many questions spun through Jon’s head, but there was one above all others that demanded answers. “Why did you give this sword to me?” “Because I hope you can use it.” The voice was so quiet Jon had to strain to listen. “I swore to return it to my family when my watch was ended, but now, my watch will never end. Enough
questions for now. We have much to do and little time.”

“The ice dragon,” he said.

“The Frostfangs are wracked by storms,” the greenseer rasped. Jon didn’t know how Bloodraven knew, but he didn’t doubt the greenseer’s words. “As soon as they clear you will have to move out, and quickly. You have less than a week here, and much to learn in that time.”

Jon shook his head. “I can barely walk, I’m not strong enough…”

“This place will heal you quickly. The children sing their songs well.”

“And when I find the dragon?” Jon demanded. “It’s a dragon. How am I ever supposed to control it?”

“In centuries past, the Valyrians used their magics of blood and fire to bind dragons to their will. Those arts have been lost, but perhaps they can be relearnt.” There was a pause. “I know little of the ancient Valyrian sorceries, but I can teach what I do know. I must teach you how to open your third eye, Jon.”

“… You want me to warg with the dragon?”

“Yes. That is one word for it.”

Warging, the free folk had called it. Tormund had placed the title on him, but Jon hadn’t been comfortable with it. He hadn’t accepted that power easily. He knew that he could dream through Ghost’s eyes, and he knew that he sometimes it felt like he and Ghost were bonded in a way he couldn’t explain.

The three-eyed crow could explain it to him. He called it skinchanging, the power to wear the bodies of other creatures and see through their eyes. It was a weird power that Jon was hesitant to accept, but he had no choice.

Jon took a deep breath, but there was no choice. The world needed a dragon, and Jon needed to provide one.

*Whatever it takes*, Jon thought. He thought of his family, his brothers, his sisters, his friends. His sworn brothers, the men he fought with. Ygritte. Tormund. Even Mance. *For the living.*

“How do I learn?”

“Close your eyes,” the greenseer said softly. “Breathe deep… Take in the scent of the roots… Listen to the river… Listen to the trees…. It is less a matter of learning, and more a matter of feeling…”

The three-eyed crow was a patient teacher. He spent hours sitting over Jon, slowly instructing him how to focus. “Your wolf,” the three-eyed crow instructed. “Think of your wolf – focus on him. The distance is meaningless, focus…”

Jon spent all day in their trying to meditate. Jon had to meditate to connect with Ghost. Apparently the power of the weirwoods made skinchanging easier in the cave, but it had still taken nearly a full day of concentration. Then, Jon felt his vision fade. At first he thought he was falling asleep from exhaustion, feeling himself fall…

And then he felt himself fall into another skin. Suddenly, Jon was running over snowy outcrops,
sniffing through the cold. He saw wolf’s paws underfoot. Ghost. Staring through Ghost’s eyes, feeling the cold frost on Ghost’s fur.

The feeling was overwhelming. The wolf dreams had never been so vivid – it was like he was in control of the wolf’s body.

No, it was more like direwolf and man were sharing the same body, side by side. His mind blurred, overwhelmed by the sharps scents and feelings of a wolf.

If it hadn’t been for the greenseer next to him, pulling Jon out and returning him to his body, then Jon might have forgotten himself in his second skin.

Jon gasped, dropping back to the cave. The children of the forest brought him fresh goat’s milk and pale fish baked in butter. “Careful,” the greenseer instructed. “It is a dangerous power, even when moving to a comfortable skin. Go too long and you lose yourself.”

“Then how can I use it?” Jon gasped.

“With practice. Rest and eat, Jon, you have much to learn.”

There was nothing else for it. He had to use whatever time he had in this place. The three-eyed crow said that normally it would take years to learn the skills Jon needed. He had a week.

The greenseer taught him how to focus himself – a chant that he could repeat to keep himself grounded. Jon could repeat the names of his brothers and sisters, even the vows of the Night’s Watch, to keep himself focused.

Go too deep into the mind of another and you may lose yourself, the three-eyed crow had warned, but he had to press on anyways.

“Ghost is your familiar. You are bonded. Your wolf will accept you, and you will accept him. That helps greatly,” the greenseer said. “With other creatures, it will not be so easy.”

“You mean… possessing them?” Jon asked. Possessing a dragon.

“You can dominate another skin. if you choose. If you are strong enough can forcefully bend another body to your will,” he replied. “But that is a crude and dangerous power. The best partnerships are forged when the two minds can come to terms, to a share a body.” His voice became hard. “Not every creature will accept a partner willingly. If you cannot share, you will need to overpower with brute will.”

…I really don’t like the idea of trying to fight a dragon in a battle of wills, Jon thought with a gulp.

The next day, the three-eyed crow instructed him to shift into the body of a raven. It was a raven that was well-used to taking passengers and been warged into many times – like a well-worn shoe, the crow had even said. Still, it had been one of the hardest things that Jon ever had to do.

The bird’s mind was totally different from a wolf’s. A wolf was focused and intense, a predator with a mind not so dissimilar from a man’s. The raven’s mind felt fluttery and fleeting. It felt like prey. Even when Jon finally managed to feel its presence, he still couldn’t slip into its body. It was like trying to balance on a coin, or squeeze his entire body into a hand glove.

He could feel the three-eyed crow’s disappointment, but the lessons continued nevertheless. Jon’s progress was slow.
“As a warg, you are fairly powerful,” the crow murmured one day. “But you are no greenseer. You will never fly, you will not feel the greensight, or embrace the trees. I had hoped to introduce you to the weirwood paste, but I fear that power would consume you.”

Jon gasped. Somehow, the lessons meditating with greenseer were more exhausting than any spar. “Then what can I do?”

“Keep practicing. Learn. Learn how to use your gifts.”

It gave his body time to heal, though. Between the lessons sitting at the weirwood throne, Jon found time to exercise and spar. He practiced with Acorn as regularly as he could, forcing himself to recover. He tried to learn how to mimic her movements, desperately trying to keep up with her speed.

_The Others moved that fast too_, Jon recalled. The thought drove him harder and harder to heal and train.

The children of the forest sustained themselves on mushrooms, nuts and berries, milk and cheese from the goats they kept in their caverns, even blind white fish from the underground river. It was a healthy diet that gave him strength.

One time, Jon woke to find a child of the forest standing over him, singing a slow, tender song to nurse his wounds. Jon’s leg would never be the same, but it had been getting better every day. The songs of children seemed to help heal, they give him strength.

The dreams were stronger too. Down here, by the roots of the weirwood, the dreams felt stronger than they had ever been. Ever since the greenseer had started the lessons, Jon’s dreams had fully become warg-dreams, visions from other bodies.

Sometimes, Jon dreamt he was a direwolf. Those dreams were cool, focused and reassuring, like dreaming of an old friend. He dreamt of running through the woods, of hunting, of pacing over worlds of snow and ice.

Other times, the dreams were chaotic and intense. Dreams of fury – dreams of fire and ice, dreams of flight and storms. They were dreams that caused him to wake up panting and sweating. The dreams were so blurred and ferocious that he could remember nothing but shadows and chaos.

The wolf dreams were calm and sound. The dragon dreams felt like a force of nature.

After one such dream, Jon panted as he shot awake. He had been clutching Dark Sister as he slept on the uncomfortable roots near the throne. The greenseer was looking down at him, almost curiously. Jon rubbed his eyes, trying to focus. Jon kept on clutching Dark Sister, the sword just felt so comfortable in his grasp.

Jon hesitated, staring at the ruby on the pommel. There had been something that had been nagging at him for a while. “You believe that I am a Targaryen, don’t you?” Jon said suddenly, his voice quiet in the constant gloom.

The three-eyed crow just nodded. “I believe you have Targaryen blood.”

Jon took a deep breath, trying to process it. _He gave me a priceless Targaryen sword_, Jon thought to himself. Jon’s hand instinctively went to his overgrown hair – now shoulder length. He was growing a white beard too. White was not his natural hair colour, but still, just that colour…

“How’s that possible?” Jon said. “That means that Ned Stark must have birthed me on a Targaryen
– he was at war with the Targaryens when I was born.”

“I do not know,” the old man replied in his low voice, but strangely Jon didn’t quite believe him. Sometimes, it seemed like the greenseer knew everything.

Jon was quiet as he thought of his mother. There was no Targaryen blood in the Starks, that meant his mother must have given him it.

Could my father really have had an affair with some Targaryen princess? How many Targaryen women were even alive during the Rebellion?

Jon spent the rest of the day practicing with Acorn, trying to distract himself from those infuriating thoughts of his parentage. Acorn was a good teacher. Jon could feel his movements getting sharper, learning how to follow the wood dance.

“It is time,” the three-eyed crow said after the seventh day, when he awoke from one of his many slumbers. His voice was grim. “You are not ready, but there is no choice. A darkness approaches. The dragon does not have long left.”

Jon’s hands clenched. “And the storm?”

“It is waning, but the journey will still be perilous.”

“I will need a mount.”

“That has been arranged. There is a great elk in the forest waiting for you. I will direct it for as long as I can. My ravens will join you also,” the three-eyed crow said in his dry, laboured voice.

The thought of going back out there scared him. He still remembered the feeling of the icy blade cutting through his chest.

Fear cuts deeper than swords, Jon tried to tell himself, but it was hard to imagine anything cutting deeper than the White Walker’s sword had.

“Am I to go alone?” Jon asked after a pause.

“Yes. I have no more aid to give you,” the three-eyed crow said with a gentle sigh.

“What about the stranger – the dead man that works for you?” He tried to stop himself from sounding craven, but the thought of travelling to such lands without any company…

“He has gone south to the Wall. There is an urgent errand he must see to there.”

“And the children?”

“They cannot leave the caverns. The lingering magic that protects this place relies on it.” He sounded sad.

Jon took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. He knew that Ghost was getting closer to him every day; they would probably meet up again during the journey.

Still, only one man and a direwolf, off to face a dragon.

“Then there is something that I want of you,” Jon said. “I left a woman behind. Her name is Ygritte – she has red hair, round face, blue grey eyes. She’s around eighteen years of age. I… I don’t know what happened to her when I left her.” His eyes were hard. “I want you to find her for me. I want
you to look after her, guide her south.”

The greenseer sounded disapproving. “You cannot afford to distract yourself with such things, Jon,” he warned. “The journey you are on leaves no space for love – you have a duty.”

“I have a duty to her too. Protect her.”

He paused. “Then I would take a vow from you too, Jon,” the three-eyed crow said, keeping his voice slow. “You must do anything and everything in your power to fight against the Long Night. No matter how distasteful, no matter the cost – you will do what you must to fight for the dawn. I want you to swear it, Jon Snow. In return for my aid, you must swear it.”

Jon took a deep breath. “Yes,” he said. “I promise it.”

“Good. You are a warg,” the three-eyed crow said softly. “Use that power. You must embrace it. Embrace who you are and use it.”

Jon’s face twitched slightly. “I was once told that that sorcery is like a sword without a hilt. There is no safe way to grasp it.”

“Would you rather have no sword at all?” the greenseer replied. “Yes, it will hurt. Men like us must endure the pain so that nobody else will have to. And if you don’t swing it, if you don’t feel its grip, then it becomes all the more painful when you finally have to.”

The single red eye focused on him. “Swing the sword, Jon Snow,” he whispered. “Swing the sword and swing it true.”

Jon left very early morning. The sun was barely a reddish sliver over the horizon. He wanted a full day of travelling before nightfall.

When he limped out of the cave, he saw the sun for the first time in a week. He felt almost like a different person to the one that had staggered into there.

The children stitched up his ruined leathers with earthy fibres woven from trees. They gave him furs made from a hide that Jon could not place, but he half-suspected it was giant hide. He wore riding leathers, leather boots and belt that still had the musky smell of the cave, with saddle bags filled with rations and supplies for a long journey. Everything from his leathers to his furs felt strange and alien – well-built and sturdy, but also queer and inhuman, crafted in a way he hadn’t seen before, from materials that men rarely used.

Jon spent a long time staring at his cloak. They gave him a black cloak that might have belonged to a ranger of the Night’s Watch, once, but it had been patched and stitched up with brown threads made from roots. Black with motley brown patches.

He carried a wooden staff in one arm, to help him walk with his bad leg. Jon kept Dark Sister on his hip. The children of the forest had also provided a small weirwood short bow, more a hunting bow than a longbow, as well as twenty arrows fletched with dragonglass tips.

“Use dragonglass or dragonsteel on the Others,” he remembered three eyed crow had instructed. “And fire on the wights. Follow the ravens for as long as you can – I will guide you through them.”

True to the greenseer’s word, there was a great elk grazing in the snow at the foot of the hill when Jon left. The elk stared at him with black eyes, and a knowing gaze. As he approached, the elk even lowered its body to help Jon pull himself onto its broad back, lifting him two metres off the ground. There was something of the greenseer in the elk, Jon realised. The greenseer used his own
warg to guide the creature.

The sound of cawing burst from the dead weirwood tree. A flock of ravens flew into the air, circling around in the sky. Some of them stopped to perch on the elk’s antlers, while the others flew off into the distance.

*It took two weeks for the stranger to carry me to the cave from the northern wastes*, he thought with a sigh. *This time, I’m going to have to make better time.*

He kicked in his heels gently, and the elk set off in a quick trot. Back towards the mountains, and beyond.

Jon met up with Ghost on the second day. Watching the giant direwolf lumber towards him from over the horizon was like seeing his best friend again. Ghost was a powerful predator, but for a moment he panted and whined and jumped towards Jon like he was a pup again.

They rode hard through the forests and they were already heading through the mountain pass – in what used to be Thenn territory. Jon rode constantly through the first night, but on the second night he had to stop to give the elk time to rest.

He camped at an old ruin half-buried into the mountain. The stones looked ancient, slabs of rock that had been smoothed by age, similar to the structures he had seen at the Fist of the First Men. An old ruin from the Dawn Age, Jon eventually decided, although it was hard to imagine any structure ever being built this far north.

*There is much history Beyond-The-Wall,* Jon thought with something almost approaching sorrow. It was a hard land, but rich in its own ways. There was a history here going back thousands of years, history that that the rest of the world had never known.

And, if the Others had their way, all these lands would be lost, and their people forgotten.

The evening was a time of quiet. The sky was obscured by thin, icy clouds, but he could still see the glimmer of the northern lights, bright and translucent in the darkness. Jon cradled into the ruins, staring out over the mountains as he kept watch. He knew that he needed to sleep, but it was hard to even close his eyes. His mind, his body, it all felt so tense. Alone in a forsaken, abandoned wilderness that only the dead now walked.

Ghost slumbered quietly, draped across his legs. Jon was half an hour into his watch when he felt the hairs on the back of his head prickle. Above him, one of the ravens cawed in the sky.

His hand instinctively went to Dark Sister, but it was a different type of threat. Not the Others. Ghost woke quickly, the direwolf growling as he paced in the snows.

Another growl answered the direwolf. A deep, low, throaty growl, almost a snarl that cut through the air.

Jon stared upwards at the rocks above him. There were yellow eyes in the dark, reflecting in the black. Unblinkingly, they stared at him from the darkness.

The shadowcat prowled on the rocks above him. It must have been trying to ambush them before the ravens cawed in alarm. It moved without a sound, flowing down the mountainside like liquid smoke.

The cat was lean, dark and muscled. Its fur was pitch-black, with white stripes that seemed to blend into the shadows easily. Its bright yellow eyes stared at Jon, and they hungered.
Most shadowcats tended to avoid men, but Jon supposed that a lone human and an elk must have seemed a tempting prize. Ghost snarled at the cat, which paused its descent from the rocks. Perhaps the shadowcat was starving, Jon wondered, or maybe it was just braver than most.

Jon stared at the beast for a few heartbeats, slowly moving his hand away from Dark Sister.

*Swing the sword,* the three-eyed crow had said.

Jon needed to learn how to use that power. He had seen the army of the undead, and he knew that he would need every weapon he could find to beat them. With barely a moment of doubt, Jon closed his eyes, focused on the shadowcat, and extended his mind.

He felt himself touch the shadowcat’s presence. At once, it recoiled and yelped.

Pain hit Jon, shooting through his head. Like he had just tried grab a cat and the cat had clawed him. Jon grunted, but he tried to focus and kept pushing.

The shadowcat yowled in pain and shock, its eyes suddenly crazed. It was back on its haunches, twitching and yowling. It took all of Jon’s concentration while it protested, thrashed and snarled.

The shadowcat felt so different than Ghost. It felt sharp and barbed like a wicked dagger. It felt cruel, proud and vain. It felt angry. Hateful.

It felt like Jon was stepping on the cat’s most precious territory. The shadowcat didn’t want to share its body, it felt too fiercely independent. Instead, it scratched and it fought with every fibre of its being.

Jon grimaced. Maybe he should have retreated, but instead he needed to push onwards. It was like sparring; it hurt, but he needed to overcome it. *If I can’t warg with a cat, then how am I ever supposed to handle a dragon?*

The shadowcat almost howled with rage. It body tensed and it was about to lunge at Jon physically, but then suddenly the ravens darted from the sky. The birds pecked at its eyes, disorientating it enough that Jon could push just a bit harder.

Jon felt the shadowcat’s will snap. Suddenly, his world changed.

He was inside the shadowcat’s skin, looking down at himself through the cat’s eyes. Through its night vision, there was no colour, but the shadows were gone and everything was a distinct, sharply contrasting white and black. Jon could feel the pain on its face as the ravens pecked at him, but then, as Jon’s control strengthened, they scattered. The ravens flew away, retreating to the nearby trees.

The shadowcat stared at Jon. He could see, even smell his own body through the cat’s senses. He looked like a human – weak, pungent, vulnerable, and yet, dangerous.

*Kill, attack, run.* Jon could feel its instincts screaming orders – so intense that its body twitched – but Jon squashed those orders. Instead, almost hesitantly, Jon raised a paw, feeling his new body. He had to rule the shadowcat’s body with an iron will – anything less than complete control and the cat would squirm free.

The shadowcat felt lean and strong. Smaller than Ghost, but so much faster. Sharp claws dug into the rock. *Her,* Jon realised suddenly. *The shadowcat is female.*

With an easy flex, the shadowcat jumped down to the ground. Ghost was still growling. The
shadowcat wanted to run, to hide, but instead Jon ordered her body to sit. The shadowcat fought him every step of the way. He could feel her anger, her fear, all her emotions through the warg-sense. It was so intense that it hurt.

To be here – on the ground, exposed in front of a human and a wolf – it caused every instinct she had to scream. It was so totally against her nature that she was trembling, yellow eyes wide.

Slowly, gingerly, Jon pulled himself back into his own body. He nearly collapsed as he felt himself standing on two legs. Still, Jon couldn’t afford to totally let go off the connection to the shadowcat. He wasn’t staring directly through her eyes, but it was like he still had her on a leash. As if I’m in two bodies at the same time, Jon thought with a pained breath.

It was exhausting. Jon remembered Varamyr Sixskins, with his six different bodies. Damn, how did Varamyr ever manage them all?

Varamyr must have been very skilled and powerful enough to warg with six bodies at once. Still, from what Jon could tell, the three-eyed crow was capable of wraging with at least two dozen creatures over a scale of distant miles. Jon was starting to realise that the three-eyed crow had a power on a totally different scale to anything he could imagine.

Ghost was still growling and snapping. “Down, Ghost,” Jon soothed, all the while keeping his eyes firmly on the shadowcat. Her yellow eyes looked absolutely hateful.

Ghost backed down uncertainly. Jon approached the shadowcat, hand extended.

“Easy girl, easy,” he muttered, reaching out to touch her fur. Instinctively, she wanted to bite, but Jon squashed that response. “I’m not going to hurt you, I’m not going to hurt you…”

Her whole body recoiled at the feel of his touch. It took all of Jon’s strength to force her to stay still. The shadowcat’s black and white fur was thick and soft.

For a while, Jon paused. The shadowcat was still trying to fight and snap back, but Jon was well and truly under her skin. The cat won’t be as easy to control as the wolf, he decided. Ghost could accept him, but he knew instinctively that the shadowcat would always have to be forced.

Jon stared into the shining yellow eyes, wondering what to do next. For a long moment, he debated walking the cat away and releasing her. He had no doubt that she would flee as soon as she could.

No, Jon decided. That’s useless.

He needed to learn control, and the shadowcat was good practice. She forced Jon to exert his powers, and Jon needed to learn more about warging. He needed to learn how long he could maintain his powers, how long the connection lasted. There was too much he needed to learn, and he could only learn through practice.

Jon wouldn’t be able to practice like this on Ghost. The direwolf was a part of him, just as he was for Ghost; they were so close that there was no difficulty, no need for restraint or struggle.

Besides, Jon thought quietly, the shadowcat is useful. He couldn’t think of any animal that could scout out the rocky mountain path half so well.

“I’m sorry, girl,” he whispered. “I’m going to have to use you a bit longer…”

Slowly, Jon moved into position. He leaned down onto the ground, resting against the rocks, but he kept eye contact with the shadowcat at all times. He made sure to not break the link, as if there was
an invisible, fragile connection running between them.

There was one thing that bugged him. *The cat doesn’t have a name,* Jon thought. *If I’m going to use her, she deserves a name.*

He spent barely a moment thinking about it before one came to him. Black fur, nearly invisible in the night. “*Ghost,*” Jon announced in a whisper. “… Meet Phantom.”

With that, Jon’s body slumped as he finally let himself sleep. Phantom pulled herself off the ground and quickly leapt away. Jon spent the rest of the night sleeping, while his mind roamed the mountainside in the body of a shadowcat.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Trapped in places of death, with dreams and dark omens...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Bran**

“We shouldn’t be here,” Bran whispered, tentative, afraid to break the silence.

The Nightfort was an abandoned, silent ruin of a castle. The silence was a darkness of its own, as thick and calm and heavy as any fog. A horrible place, thick with the residue of old, forgotten crimes.

“We don’t have anywhere else to go,” Jojen replied, his legs crossed and his eyes closed.

“That doesn’t mean we should stay here,” Bran hissed. The ten-year-old lay on the cold kitchen floor, covered in rags of blankets. “This isn’t where we’re supposed to be.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Jojen replied in his solemn voice, as if that was the end of it.

Bran grimaced, but it was impossible to argue with Jojen. The other boy didn’t argue at all really; Jojen just always knew he was right. Bran wished Meera was here, not that it would really help. Meera would probably agree with Bran, but she wouldn’t argue with Jojen.

They had been at the Nightfort for four days now, and Bran hadn’t yet gotten a good night’s sleep. For a deserted castle, it was never truly quiet. The walls had a way of creaking, the wind would sometimes groan, whispering through the corridors.

More than once, Bran had been scared awake by the sound of footsteps moving just around the corner. Meera didn’t believe him, but Bran knew he had heard them.

There were ghosts in this place. Old, long forgotten ghosts that lingered in the shadows. Bran could feel them.

They made camp in the kitchen, sleeping on the floor near the bottomless well. The kitchens were huge, looming rooms of stone and decaying fireplaces that once might have served a small army. It was one of the few rooms that hadn’t completely broken into complete disrepair, and could still give some shelter from the wind. A weirwood tree grew through a hole in the kitchen’s ceiling, breaking through the stones. They had set up camp in a corner of the room, taking shelter in the cavernous indent of what used to be a giant stone fireplace.

They weren’t meant to stay here so long. The three-eyed crow was waiting for Bran beyond the Wall, but they couldn’t even get through it. Jojen had promised them a way through – he said he saw it in his dreams – but the gate was sealed and the Wall loomed over them.

*Meera could have probably climbed down the Wall by now,* he thought. Meera was agile and
strong, and resourceful enough to do so. Maybe Bran could have joined her, once, back when he had been whole.

As it was, there was no way that Bran the cripple or Hodor the simple-minded stable boy could survive that descent.

Meera was gone now – she left the previous morning to scout out the surroundings, and to hunt for game. Bran already missed her. Jojen was poor company, while Hodor seemed uneasy and terrified in the looming, constant gloom of the Nightfort.

The made an odd company. One crippled lord, one swamp boy, one dim-witted giant, and a direwolf all camping in the ruins of a haunted castle.

It was a long, miserable night. They slept on the floor of the kitchen, alongside the rats. Bran thought constantly about the Rat’s Cook, Mad Axe, and all the other stories Old Nan had ever told him.

Later that night, Bran glimpsed faint torchlight at the top of Wall. Men of the Night’s Watch patrolling the Wall. For a moment, Bran was severely tempted to signal them. He remembered the men hunting them after Winterfell, though, and he didn’t.

Finally, Bran did fall asleep. He dreamt of snow storms, raging winds and howling, and flickering shadows. The dreams caused him to wake up, gasping.

“How much longer do we have to stay here?” Bran asked later, in the morning. The dawn was still cold, and the shadows always lingered.

The crannogman paused. “I don’t know,” Jojen admitted. “I had a green dream last night. A vivid one. I saw a black figure waiting for us on the other side of the Wall, but he couldn’t reach us and we can’t reach him. I think the three-eyed crow knows that we are here, but he’s searching for someone to let us pass.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” Jojen said again. It was rare for him to ever sound so unsure. “All we can do is wait. The three-eyed crow will open the way for us as soon as he can.”

It was a miserable answer. Bran was left lying on the kitchen floor, a cripple. It was only Summer that stopped him from going insane.

The direwolf barely even reacted as Bran reached out and slipped into his skin. It was so easy now, like pulling on a well-worn, comfortable cloak. Summer was soft and warm and calming. Bran could feel the direwolf around him, even as his vision blurred and reshaped until he was staring out at the world from the wolf’s eyes.

Jojen had his green dreams, yet Bran had Summer. Bran knew which he preferred.

Summer didn’t like the Nightfort either. Still, lately the direwolf had started staying by Bran’s side at night, standing over him protectively. A fierce wolf by his side to protect against the ghosts. Bran had never loved Summer more than he did then.

Through Summer, Bran roamed the castle. Through Summer, Bran felt whole.

The Nightfort was full of broken towers and a maze of tunnels connecting its vaults and dungeons. Bran spent the days searching it – sometimes on Hodor’s back, sometimes in Summer – yet he
could still constantly find new nooks and crannies. The tunnels, the wormwalks underneath the
courtyard, all leading down to the dungeons were sprawling mazes twisting around each other.

Bran had once heard from Maester Aemon, or maybe from Benjen, that the Nightfort had been
rebuilt many times over the passing of thousands of years. Only the stone vaults and lower levels
remained from its original form.

Many of the entrances had collapsed with age. The walls were crumbling, but the foundations were
solid. Tree roots twisted through the stone. Summer chased rats down through the decaying stone
passages, but the direwolf had to squeeze through an overgrown root to fit into a breaking tunnel.

The wolf’s nose sniffed at the air. It was dark place, but Bran pushed him onwards carefully. There
was the smell of rats in the air, so Summer followed.

In the tunnel, the roots from the forest that had taken over the yard twisted down from the ceiling.
The rocks were dusty – the entire tunnel untouched by man since whenever the castle was
abandoned.

The wolf sniffed, shaking through cobwebs and dirt. Perhaps this was once a well-used tunnel
under the main keep, before it collapsed into disrepair. Most of the doors had collapsed, but one of
them stood ajar, the wooden door broken and rotten off its hinges. The large direwolf struggled to
squeeze through. The smell of rot and age was thick.

Inside the room, there were broken objects and decayed furniture. It was probably a steward’s
quarters at once point – mostly likely an important steward, considering the size of the room. There
was an old bed with a broken leg against the corner of the wall, the mattress long since devoured
by bugs. There was a mirror turned black with time over a rotten vanity.

The strangest object was one sitting in the centre of the far wall, surrounded by decayed drapes.
Summer sniffed at a wooden frame, and blackened fabric.

*A cot*, Bran realised suddenly. *A baby’s cot*.

For some reason Bran couldn’t quite explain, the thought sent shivers down his spine. Bran slipped
out of Summer’s skin and returned to his own.

Jojen was cooking breakfast. Hodor helped carry Bran towards the campfire while the crannogman
gently sizzled fish.

“You were in Summer again,” Jojen said. It wasn’t a question.

Bran nodded. “Yes. We were exploring the lower tunnels.”

Jojen just nodded, thoughtfully. “This castle is a strange place,” he said. “It’s not a place I’d be
comfortable staying for a long time, but… there’s a strange fascination here too. I see the shadows
in my dreams, but I can’t figure out what they mean.”

“What do you see?”

“Very little in focus. Mostly just shadows; I see shadowy figures moving in the darkness, but they
can say nothing because they have no tongues. I don’t think they’re hostile, though, they’re just…”
His voice trailed off. Jojen frowned and shook his head. “Sometimes I feel like they’re trying to tell
me something, but… I can’t figure out what they want. The green dreams haven’t been making
much sense recently.”
“How many green dreams do you have?” Bran asked.

“More than ever, actually.” Jojen looked at him curiously. “Can you feel it? It’s like everything is so much stronger? The greensight has never felt so vivid.”

Bran didn’t reply. Jojen had been sleeping or meditating a lot recently – withdrawing back into himself. The little grandfather leaned forward, cradling his head on his hands, looking so much older than he truly was.

“Perhaps it’s just this place,” Jojen murmured, so quiet Bran could barely understand him. “But I can feel the trees rippling, and the wind… Can’t you feel it? There’s something in the wind that wasn’t there a week ago… It’s like the world is waking up, something has changed.”

Bran didn’t know how to reply to that. Later that night, Bran was wide awake, staring upwards at the weirwood tree growing through the floor.

He spent a long time staring upwards, listening to the leaves rustle. The sound of distant cawing of ravens echoed around the castle.

Jojen has always been sensitive to far more than anyone else, Bran thought. He hadn’t seen the crannogman look so… distant, thoughtful before.

The next morning, Bran explored more of the castle through Summer’s eyes. The Nightfort was a great lumbering castle, as large as Winterfell itself, but with so many more dark corners and crumbling ruins.

Summer paced through the bell tower, skirting over the collapsed floor to the library. The library was old, damp and rotten – the bookcases had long since rotten away, and any books had been removed. Summer sniffed at the wood, watching bugs and beetles skitter across the blackened wood. Summer caught one of them – a large black beetle – and ate it curiously. Bran felt the way the insect crunched beneath Summer’s teeth.

In the library, though, there was a passageway leading downwards into the tunnels. Summer followed curiously. The direwolf’s nose twitched, detecting a scent that he couldn’t quite place.

The tunnels were a maze. During winter, when the snow was thick on the surface, and the courtyard became impassable, then these tunnels would have been the only way between the Nightfort’s buildings. The walls were crumbling, but Summer sniffed across the floor, tracing stones that hadn’t been stepped on for hundreds of years.

The passageway was eerie quiet and dark. The wolf headed downwards, towards the lower levels, where even more and more tunnels and vaults stretched outwards.

Layers upon layers, Bran thought. As big as the Nightfort was on the surface, there was even more in the vaults underneath.

Summer passed vaults and rotten storerooms, locked doors, broken walls, even what looked like rusted prison cells. Hundreds upon hundreds of rooms, scattered in the maze of tunnels underneath the Nightfort. Enough to store supplies for five thousand men to last all winter, or to imprison thousands of men.

The deeper down he went, the fewer storerooms and the more prison cells that appeared. The stone floors were half-flooded, breaking down into the sewers. There was water seeping down the sides from the nearby well. Summer was not afraid of the dark, but some of the tunnels were so black that even the wolf had to step gingerly through the gloom and damp.
The direwolf tried to avoid those tunnels, sticking to the ones where faint cracks let through small tendrils of light. Still the shadows were so thick at every turn.

Summer wouldn’t be done here, if it weren’t for Bran’s gentle presence in his skin. *Go forward*, Bran pushed softly. *Please. I want to see what’s down here.*

The direwolf whined, but obeyed. Bran was in Summer’s body, moving the wolf’s legs himself…

Near the flooded tunnels, Summer saw a row of cells with thick metal bars over them. Rows upon rows of iron cells; a prison wing. On one of cells, the metal had been bent out of shape – as if someone had bent the bars apart. Summer sniffed at the metal curiously, taking in the thick tang of rust and age.

The metal bars were three inches thick. No human could have ever bent metal apart like that.

Bran hesitated, feeling Summer whine uncomfortably in the dark. There were a lot of prisons cells. The floor was blackened, and the old stone felt rough, charred. The edges of the stone bricks were deformed. It was as if hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago, somebody had tried to set this prison on fire. Perhaps they had poured oil over the floor, and tried to set the cells alight…

Something about the place sent shivers down the direwolf’s spine, in a way Bran couldn’t quite explain.

Like there were some acts that could stain a place for all time.

Bran’s grip softened. Summer turned and sprinted out of the tunnels, soft paws racing over stone. The tunnels were so winding that Summer emerged out of a different tunnel from the one he entered, up a blackened stairway and out through a rotten stairwell. It took the direwolf a while to find his bearings.

Summer emerged into the dungeons underneath one of the collapsed broken towers of the Nightfort. There was barely a tower left, just the ruins of decaying stone foundations. The entire dungeon was tilted to one side, collapsing and slowly drooping into the ground.

Summer had to scramble through the cracks in broken stones walls to get free. The direwolf was light and agile on his paws, but the stones still groaned slightly underfoot.

Still, the direwolf paused as his fur started to rise. Bran stared through the wolf’s eyes as he saw an old rusted metal door, built into the far side of the room. The direwolf moaned quietly, but Bran was in its body, gently pushing his wolf forward.

Shadows in the darkness, Jojen had said. Bran was done being scared of this place; he wanted to see.

The door was locked, and rusted shut besides, but the stone walls were crumbling. Even when the tower above had been pulled down, this dungeon remained, nestled in to the broken foundations. Summer had to squeeze through a gap in the bricks. Yellow eyes blinked, trying to adjust for the darkness.

The shadows fluttered. Summer jumped, a sharp growl bursting from his throat. *Bats*, Bran thought softly, trying to reassure his friend. *There must be bats nesting in ruins.*

It was so dark in the room – a darkness that might not have seen the light in hundreds of years.
Summer stepped forward cautiously. The direwolf could smell metal, dust, and so, so much age.

In the centre of the room, there was a figure. At first glance, Summer jumped so hard that Bran nearly lost his grip, but the figure wasn’t moving. It stood as still as stone, standing upright. The figure was wearing metal.

An armour stand, Bran realised with quiet awe. Summer sniffed at black metal breastplate. It was a fine set, and Bran stared between the pauldrons and vambraces, stiff barbed gauntlets and greeves, a solid thick cuirass, complete with rondels, couters, tassets and gorget. All of it dull black metal; unadorned but with a presence that made him shiver.

A full suit of armour, so old that it was probably fused to stand by now.

Bran stared with quiet fascination – he had rarely seen armour like it, not even when the king came to Winterfell. The finest knights would wear sparkling sets designed for jousting more than war, so extravagant they bordered on impractical, but this armour had a simple, dull sleekness and quality to it that seemed to belong on battlefield.

Even his father only used to have a coat of a chainmail and steel cuirass, but Lord Stark preferred light mail and hard leathers rather than full steel. His father had always said that wearing full plate armour was too easily like wearing a coffin into battle.

But still… solid plate armour. That was something that a knight would wear…

*Full plate armour is very expensive,* Bran thought quietly. *High quality plate armour even more so. Why would anyone ever leave a suit of armour like this behind?*

Summer glanced upwards, at the full metal greathelm atop the armour. The black helm was pronged, like a crown.

In darkness, the shadows were still rustling. Summer barked, turning to leave.

Bran gasped as he returned to his body. With a jolt, he realised that he it was already nearly dusk.

*I’ve been in Summer the whole day.* Bran blinked, staring at his hands like they were unfamiliar. For a moment, he expected to see paws.

There were footsteps approaching him. Jojen sat down on the floor, handing Bran a dish of fish-leftover stew.

“Eat,” Jojen insisted. “You missed dinner. I didn’t want to wake you.”

Bran took a deep breath. His hands were shaking. He hadn’t spent so long in the warg before. Warging was always difficult – it felt merging yourself with something else.

Still, this time had felt different. It felt like there had been more of Bran in the wolf. *Perhaps I am getting stronger? The warg is stronger, I’m keeping more of my identity.*

“Why not?” Bran asked, his hands still shaking. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You looked like you were in too deep,” Jojen admitted. “I wasn’t sure what would happen if I tried to force you out of it.”

He stared. “Is that a danger?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Sometimes in the green dreams – the really, really intense green dreams – I
become… disconnected. My father always said it was better to let the dreams run their course, and that trying to force someone awake can sever the link even more. I suspect that your warg works a similar way.”

Bran didn’t reply. His stomach was rumbling. The fish stew was cold, but the fire had already burnt out. “Be careful with this power of yours,” Jojen warned. “Your third eye is wide open, but I fear you might fall through it. Do not get lost in another body, Bran.”

What if I like my other body more than I like this one? Bran thought quietly, but he didn’t reply, staring at the floor. His broken legs were wrapped up in old socks and worn boots. It had been weeks since he washed. His toes might be rotting on his feet, for all Bran knew. They were nothing more than dead weights hanging from his hip.

“If I learn to control it,” Bran said. “Then what will happen? What will I be able to do?”

Jojen paused, sitting down opposite him. The dusty kitchen was quiet. “I don’t know,” he replied. “I have the green dreams, but I’m not a skinchanger, Bran. That is why we need the three-eyed crow.”

The three-eyed crow promised that I could fly. “But will I be ever able stand again?”

“There are different ways of standing, Bran,” Jojen said softly.

Bran scowled dejectedly. “You mean no.” For so long Bran had been clinging onto the hope that he might be healed, but being in this place seemed to suck the hope away… “I’m going to be a cripple for life.”

“You are more capable than most full-bodied men,” Jojen said. He was trying to be sympathetic, but the crannogman wasn’t very good at it. Jojen’s hands hovered, as if unsure if he should approach to comfort Bran or not.

Bran felt miserable. The only time he felt whole was when he was in someone else’s body. Every day was making him more and more depressed – trapped behind a Wall he couldn’t climb.

“I found a suit of armour today…” Bran said. “It was an old suit of armour buried in the dungeon of a broken tower.”

“Hee, I thought the Night’s Watch cleared the castle out.”

He nodded. “It was in a collapsed dungeon. They must have missed it. It looked really old. Probably not even wearable anymore.”

“Huh.”

“It was full plate armour too; really good armour.” The type a knight would wear. “And I’m never going to be able to wear armour like that, am I?”

“Bran, you can’t torture yourself like this…”

“Why not?” Bran muttered sourly, his arms folded. “I’m never going to be able to wear armour, or mount a horse, or climb a horse, or… or…” Or kiss a girl.

“You can do more than that,” Jojen insisted. “The greenseers are said to have many gifts. They could see through trees, possess bodies of the beasts, even power over the land itself.”
Bran didn’t reply. “You could learn how to wear the skins of any animal. You could have a freedom that no man could match.”

He shook his head. “No… I can’t even control it.” Bran murmured. “It only happens easily in my dreams, and I can’t take any other body but Summer’s…”

“Well, skinchanging is like any other skill,” Jojen said with a gentle smile. “It will get easier with practice.”

There was a long silence. Bran frowned, but didn’t reply. Jojen hesitated, but he didn’t push the issue.

They ate their fish in silence. Bran winced slightly, trying to twist himself over while dragging his useless legs. It was impossible to find a comfortable position on the floor. Strangely, his legs bothered him the most when he was doing nothing except trying to get comfortable. It felt like they were numb, dead weights hanging off his hip.

Bran sat awake for a long time. Could I really take the body of any creature? Summer was the only body that felt comfortable too him, but…

I’ve never really practiced before, Bran thought, staring up the broken ceiling. Not really practiced.

Curiously, Bran glanced at Hodor.

Later that evening, after thinking a long time, Bran closed his eyes and reached out to Hodor. He felt the giant tremble and convulse.

Slipping into Hodor’s skin was not like Summer. Bran could slide into the wolf’s skin so smoothly it felt natural, but pushing into Hodor felt like trying to squeeze into something that didn’t fit.

It felt like trying to drag Hodor open, as if Bran had to stretch him apart. The stable boy would always tremble and panic fearfully. He didn’t know what was happening.

The first time Bran had done it, he had reached out instinctively into Hodor during the lightning storms – just to get Hodor to calm down. It had been almost accidental. Now, Bran had time to practice – time to experiment.

He felt Hodor twitch. The stable boy didn’t make a noise except for a faint gagging, but Bran could feel the convulsions. Bran took a deep breath, pushing in gently. It felt violent, painful; so bad that Bran’s stomach clenched with the thought.

He could feel Hodor shivering and trembling. He was a large, grown man, but he felt like a boy. Bran didn’t want to hurt him, he stretched the warg outwards as gently as he could.

Jojen was right. It did get easier with practice.

It’s alright, Bran soothed. He could feel Hodor whimpering as he touched him. I’m not going to hurt you. It’s alright.

Later that night, Bran dropped the warg. Hodor clutched to the far corner of the room. He seemed shaken, keeping his distance from Bran. “Hodor,” the large man whimpered uncertainly. “Hodor…”

Bran took a deep breath, trying to concentrate. He had never felt a warg like it.
It felt wrong to try and steal Hodor’s body. It made him twinge in guilt, but at the same time…

Sooner or later, Bran would probably have to take Hodor’s skin. It would be the only way to control Hodor sometimes, or the only way to force Hodor to fight. It would be easier for both of them if they were comfortable warging with each other. Their lives might depend on Bran controlling Hodor’s body at some point, so surely that was worth it?

Maybe Hodor could come to accept Bran in the same way Summer did?

Maybe I need to try again, Bran thought. Maybe it’s just a matter of practice. Maybe Hodor can learn to accept me…

Bran was wide awake by the time morning came, staring at the ceiling. Hodor was awake too, pacing restlessly outside of the kitchens.

Jojen was sleeping quietly. He slept most of the day, trying to search in his green dreams. Bran watched as the boy shivered silently, as if a bad dream.

“What’s wrong?” Bran asked, as the boy opened his eyes. Jojen’s deep green eyes blinked repeatedly. “What did you dream of?”

Jojen took deep breath. “I dreamt of pigs,” he said.

“Pigs?”

He simply nodded. “Yes. I saw small pigs, large hogs, dead pigs and butchered pigs. I saw a butcher that was a pig, a huntsman that wanted to be a pig, a large hog that thought himself wounded piglet. I heard the oinking.” Jojen voice was tired. “I think I even saw a flying pig.”

Bran looked confused. “Are all of your green dreams that confusing?”

Jojen smiled wearily. “Some more than others. The greensight is thicker here, close to the Wall. The green dreams have been more frequent than ever.”

There was a moment of pause. Jojen rarely shared half of the things he saw, but they were alone here. The air was quiet and soft; it made Jojen talk more than he normally would. “What else have you seen?”

“More than I can understand. It’s not easy, it’s always… vivid. Like feeling something rather than seeing it. You can hardly make sense of the images, but you always know what it feels like,” he said. “… One of the most frequent dreams is of the earth. I dream of things buried – sometimes buried under stone, sometimes ice, occasionally in the water and sometimes in the roots of ancient trees.

“I dream of things stirring underneath them, and slowly realising they are becoming strong enough to leave. It feels like ancients things are waking up again.” He paused. “No… it feels like changing of seasons.”

Bran listened raptly. Jojen’s voice sounded distant. “Last night, I dreamt of a frozen ocean. I saw coins and swords spilling over the ice. I saw a man made of stone trying and failing to hack against the ice, but only breaking himself apart more and more with every swing. Eventually, he hacked so hard that his own hand broke clean off.”

In his mind’s eye, Bran imagined trying to hack through the Wall itself. “Is that about us?”
Jojen shook his head. “I don’t think so. Normally the dreams feel different when I’m dreaming about myself, or someone I’m close to.”

There was a pause. Jojen glanced around the room. Hodor was missing. The stable boy was outside, still disturbed. Hodor was muttering wordlessly under his breath, like a scared boy. Jojen blinked, realising what was different.

“You warged with Hodor again, didn’t you? Just like you did at Queenscrown.”


“Not enough, it appears.” Jojen frowned disapprovingly. “Did it hurt Hodor?”

“He was so scared. I don’t think he understood.”

“Then why did you do it?”

Bran hesitated for a while. The cold floor felt numb on his dead legs. He looked at the embers of the campfire burning in the middle of the old kitchen. “Because pretty soon we’re going to run out of firewood,” Bran muttered. “Somebody will need to chop some more, but look at Hodor. He’s a baby, he struggles to even swing an axe.” Bran frowned. “What if we come under attack? We might need Hodor to fight, but he won’t be able to fight by himself – he’s as gentle as a kitten.”

“And also because you wanted to feel what it’s like to walk again.”

Bran grimaced. He couldn’t deny it. “Yes. That too.”

“Take care, Bran,” Jojen said solemnly. “It’s a dangerous power that you have there, and you use it recklessly. Be careful, treat it with more respect.”

“I want to learn how to use it.”

“I know.” Jojen sighed. “The three-eyed crow will come for us soon.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Jojen didn’t reply. His green eyes flickered.

It was a cold night. Bran could hear the ghosts stirring around him as he finally dozed off on the stone kitchen floors.

Before he fell asleep, Bran thought of that suit of armour. That old black armour lingering down there in the dungeons.

_**I want to be able to wear armour. I want to be a knight**, he thought. **I want to stand, to walk…**

…

The night was howling.

Summer could feel the howl in the air. The sound was lonely, echoing through the Nightfort.

In Bran’s dreams, he dreamt of sad singing and flashing blades. Of a woman wailing, of an old man’s laughter. He dreamt of a man so young he could still be called a boy, falling to the stones.

The wolves were howling. Crying in the night.
When he woke up, there were tears dripping from Bran’s eyes. He stared at the darkness quietly, feeling the tears drip onto the floor.

He caught one of them in his hand. The teardrop glistened on his palm.

“… Oh,” Bran muttered, listening to Summer howling. The direwolf was scratching and whining, pacing across the empty kitchens restlessly.

Bran pulled himself up to stare at Jojen. The quiet boy was wide awake too, his green eyes bright. There was a long moment of silence. Bran could feel the quiet in the air. They could all feel it.

Summer knew it before any of them. The wolf was still howling. Bran felt it like a dagger to his heart.

Far to the south, his litter-mate had just died. Summer could feel the mourning echoing through the world like a howl.

Jojen’s solemn face looked at him. “I’m sorry, Bran.”

It was a long time before Bran replied. “I think my brother has just died.”

It was a grim and gloomy day. When morning came, it wasn’t much better.

Bran spent most of his time asleep.

He could feel the sadness in Summer too. Bran still hid inside Summer because then he didn’t need to face his own pain. When he was inside the direwolf, he felt strong, powerful and brave, but in his own body Bran was nothing but a weak and crippled little boy.

The direwolf could feel the death in the way that Bran couldn’t quite understand or even explain.

Once there had been six in the litter. Now, there were only four – four wolves scattered in the wind.

His black brother was growing angry and vicious, heading further and further west every day. He was alone and lost, and that loneliness made him angrier and angrier every passing day. He was growing large and savage.

The wild sister was to the south, lost in unfamiliar lands. She was hunted and challenged every day, out of her element and away from her pack, but she learned how to survive and adapt. Those lands were making her sharp and vicious.

The final brother, the quiet one, the one that didn’t howl – he was north; further north than anyone else. Summer could barely feel his quiet brother anymore, but the only glimpses he received were of a predator growing lean and strong.

Bran stayed in Summer’s skin for most of the day. He lost sense of himself as Summer explored the lower levels of the Nightfort. He sniffed through the darkness, following the mould and dust. The Nightfort seemed solemn, gloomy. The whole place felt like a castle for the dead, an immense crypt for ghosts.

Only the scent of Meera finally returning to the castle brought Bran back to his own body. Summer scuffled through the overgrown yards, and Bran’s heart skipped softly as he heard the girl’s voice.

She was outside the kitchen, talking to Jojen in the broken corridor, but it was quiet enough that
Bran could make out the words.

“You sure?” Meera said with a breathless gasp.

“I dreamt it,” Jojen replied. “I dreamt of a pack of rodents chewing on a wolf’s body. An old weasel took the wolf’s head as a crown, while a skeletal rat stripped the wolf’s skin and paraded around in its furs. I’ve had that dream before, but I never said anything. But, last night…” Jojen grimaced. “Bran saw it at the same time I did. I think his brother Robb died yesterday.”

“But that means…”

“That the north isn’t safe for any Stark anymore,” said Jojen. “We need to take shelter somewhere quickly.”

“I don’t think we can cross the Wall,” Meera said. “I know you said that the three-eyed crow is waiting for him on the other side, but we can’t get there. I went as far as Deep Lake – all the gates are sealed. The nearest way through would be Castle Black –”

“No,” Jojen said. “Castle Black is not a safe place to be for anyone.”

“Then we’ve got nowhere else to go.”

The words made him miserable. Bran escaped into Summer again without a second thought. The direwolf prowled towards the lower vaults, stalking through tunnels that had been abandoned for centuries. The blackness was so dark that even the wolf’s eyes were useless.

Summer could hear movement deeper down the tunnels. Fluttering. _Bats_, Bran tried to tell himself, but Summer turned and bolted. The direwolf ran straight back out towards the surface.

By the time Bran returned to his own body again, it was already getting dark. The shadows seemed to be whispering.

Meera and Jojen had left to gather firewood, and probably to talk without him, leaving Bran alone in the deserted stone ruins. Just a broken little boy in a place haunted by nightmares, with nowhere else to go.

Bran took a deep breath, staring upwards at the weirwood tree bursting out of the kitchen floor. _The prince of the Nightfort_, he thought bitterly.

He couldn’t go any further north, and there was nothing left for him in the south. The three-eyed crow had promised him that he would fly, but he wouldn’t be able to fly over the Wall. Why wasn’t the crow helping them?

_Robb is dead_, Bran thought. _That makes me the heir to Winterfell. They’re going to be hunting me now, the eldest son of Eddard Stark._

_I didn’t want to be heir and I didn’t ask for any of this._

_But there’s nothing I can do, nothing but be carried around. Like a useless, broken toy…_

Off in the distance somewhere, a raven cawed. Bran paused.

When the Reeds came back, Bran was still staring upwards at the weirwood tree. The red leaves were rippling in the gentle wind.
“Jojen,” he said slowly. “I think I might know how we could reach the three-eyed crow.”

The green-eyed boy looked at him quietly. “I think I know how I could stop being a cripple,” he muttered. “People are looking for Bran Stark the Broken – the cripple – but maybe I don’t have to be that anymore…”

Maybe I could be something else. Someone else. I don’t want to be me anymore…

“Bran…”

Bran kept his voice low, so quiet that Meera couldn’t hear. “… Do you think it would be possible for me to take another body?”

---

**Daenerys**

She gasped. She woke up gasping for breath, clutching at her chest frantically. The halls outside her bedchamber exploded with noise.

_That was a mistake_, Dany realised in an instant.

Dany was alone in her apartments except for her handmaidens, but it was still so soon after the sack. Her reign over Meereen was mere days old, and her guards were on high alert. Her captains had all been paranoid about the possibility of assassination, and the Unsullied took their guard duty as seriously as they took everything else. They didn’t let any citizens of Meereen into Dany’s chambers, not even servants; not without an armed guard present.

Even at night, there were Unsullied guards right outside her door at all times, and even more guards down the corridor.

All it had taken was one bad dream, one strangled gasp as she shot awake, and then suddenly those guards were bursting through her doors.

Grey Worm. He was the first inside, it had taken him only heartbeats. Perhaps he hadn’t slept. A part of Dany wondered if he slept at all.

It was the middle of the night, and now her chambers were filled with wary-eyed guards, looking over every nook and corner and shadow in search of some presumed attacker.

Missandei – sweet, poor, little Missandei – screamed when they broke through. Which, of course, had only attracted more and more guards. Daenerys already wished that she just could go back to sleep.

It took nearly half an hour for Dany to explain, for some reason explaining just once wasn’t enough for her guardsmen. “I’m quite alright. I’m all right. I just had a bad dream, that’s all.”

It was about midnight, Dany guessed. She knew the guards were only being protective, and Grey Worm apologised so profusely that she couldn’t remain angry. Something about the general of her Unsullied suggested that he still half-expected to be whipped for his mistake. Dany didn’t doubt his loyalty, or his dedication, and it was understandable for him to be so cautious in a pyramid that they had only just captured.

Still, Dany was only a queen when she was wearing silks and gems, astride a horse or flanked by
her children. Right now, in the middle of the night with her hair a mess and in her bedclothes in disarray, she felt like nothing but a very irritated and sleep-deprived girl.

The guardsmen returned to their duties. Missandei still looked shaken. Dany invited the girl to share her bed for the rest of the night. The girl’s eyes lit up, snuggling up next to Dany on the thick cushions, as the queen sighed and stroked the girl’s hair softly.

Dany didn’t like sleeping alone. Occasionally Irri or Jhiqui would share the bed with her, but none of them of them were as good company at night as Missandei. The girl was so soft and fragile, sweet and innocent, and Dany still loved the way the former slave had relaxed and softened around her queen.

“Your Grace? You said you had a bad dream,” Missandei purred, closing her eyes while Dany stayed wide awake. “What did you dream about?”

Her eyes flickered. Missandei was always a considerate girl. “… I dreamt of the funeral pyre,” Dany said, although the dream had been so blurred she could barely make it out. She rubbed the centre of her chest absentmindedly. “It felt like it was the funeral pyre. It felt like I walking into the fire again.”

The memory was still the most intense she had ever had. Dany would never, ever forget how it felt to walk into the flames. The vision was lost to the haze of the emotions, but the memory of the feelings felt razor sharp.

“The pyre?” Missandei asked. “That’s how you got your name? The Unburnt?”

“Yes. The fire didn’t hurt me.” Dany had felt the heat, but it didn’t burn. She paused, thinking back to the dream. “Except in my dream, this fire felt cold. It still didn’t freeze, though… it just…”

Her voice trailed off. She didn’t quite know how to explain it. “It sounds scary,” Missandei muttered, while Dany tightened her arms around the girl softly.

No, she thought. Not the word I would use.

In her arms, Missandei fell asleep quickly. Dany didn’t sleep, she barely closed her eyes. She doubted she would be able to sleep soundly again. I can’t sleep easily in this place.

The Great Pyramid of Meereen was awash with wealth, filled with silk tapestries, marble floors, gems and imported curiosities both from east and west. The wealth she was surrounded by was old as the city itself, the legacy of past empires and faded glories. Her chambers were at the apex of the pyramid, almost a three thousand feet above the city’s streets – a set of lavish apartments and terraces filled with greenery and fragrant pools, brick parapets and mosaics, fine sculptures and thick drapes. The air was always warm and humid, and but the smell of gentle perfumes and scented candles tingled in the rooms, and the continuous gentle wind kept it all clean and crisp.

Still, somehow, all the perfumes and breezes in the world couldn’t mask that pungent, coppery undertone still lingering in the air. The smell of blood.

She lay on the bed wide awake, swaddled in pillows with Missandei curled into her side sound asleep. And yet still, Daenerys felt cold. She found herself staring through the moonlit dark at her large, emperor-sized four poster bed. It was a bed fit for a king, built of finely carved mahogany and set with the fullest mattress Dany had ever seen. It had so many drapes and cushions that she thought she might be smothered in it all. Everything about the bed screamed luxury, wealth, and decadent comfort.
And yet, less than a week ago, the previous occupant of this bed, a corpulent and obese figure
without peer, had used it to fuck half a dozen little slave girls. At once. That knowledge alone was
enough to make Dany want to sleep on the floor.

She had stripped as much of the apartments bare as she could, but somehow its past occupants still
lingered, almost as though the stones themselves remembered them. The memories and feelings
lingered like ghosts.

*Maybe I shouldn’t be here,* she thought, biting her lip. Everything about these apartments reminded
her of what Meereen had once been.

Dany knew that if the apartments seemed empty now, that was because of how large they truly
were. Once they had been filled with at least two dozen slaves that would fan the master to keep
him cool as he slept. Slaves to pour him wine, slaves to wash his back, slaves to feed him, slaves be
ordered about at a thousand different tasks. And always, always, bed-slaves kept near at hand,
exotic beauties from every corner of the world worth naming.

She knew that the terraces were overgrowing and the fragrant pools were stewing because they
suddenly lacked the slaves that used to maintain them constantly. And she knew that that
everything in the luxury apartments had been bought with several hundred lifetimes’ worth of slave
money.

She also knew that the foul smell in the air was the stench of rotting bodies that still littered the
plaza of Meereen. Somehow, that stench could find her even up here, atop the Great Pyramid.
Some days, it seemed like that stench followed her around.

The man that used to take residence in her apartment had been the master of slaves to Meereen’s
richest families, commander of the corrupt city guard – a man that owned seemingly half of the
city, an aging man so fat it he could hardly walk. Apparently, the master, in all his life, had rarely
ever left the Great Pyramid.

And now, that master was rotting on a spike in Meereen’s central plaza, right beneath the golden
statue of the harpy itself. One of the many, many masters that Dany had crucified as her price for
peace.

For the life her, she couldn’t even remember the master’s name. After a while, the strange names
of these strange lands all tended to blur together.

Right outside, just down the corridor, there had been fighting during the sack. A group of slaves in
the Great Pyramid had revolted while Dany’s soldiers stormed the plaza. The master had been
dragged naked out of his luxury apartment, and then the master’s daughters had all been raped and
murdered by their former slaves. By the time the Unsullied had actually taken the Great Pyramid of
Meereen, the corpses had already lain thick on the pyramid’s marble floors.

Dany kept on replaying the sack in her mind, just trying to make some sense out of it. She wanted
to find some meaning to such acts of death. She hadn’t seen the battle, but she had seen the
aftermath. She had seen hundreds upon hundreds of corpses, and it still disturbed her how many of
them had been young, old or innocent.

Four days ago, she had taken Meereen and freed its people. Already, she was starting to question
that decision more and more.

Breaking Meereen had been easy. It hadn’t seemed an easy the time, but in hindsight it had been
nice and simple. Slavery bad, freedom good. She had the forces, she knew the enemy, she knew
the objective.

Ruling Meereen wasn’t easy, though. She had only just declared herself queen, and already it seemed like the city was crumbling around her. She had freed a lot of people, she had broken the old order, but for some reason the fighting and the heartache didn’t end when the battle did. Riots in the streets, murders, rapes, and so many more savageries. Starvation, disease, war. Some days, she could stare out over the city and watch the problems pile up with her naked eye. And yet still, Dany had taken it upon herself to rule this place. It would have been so easy to pillage and burn this place and keep moving west…

Why is it so much easier to break something than build something new?

A part of her wondered why her ancestors had chosen those words. Blood and Fire. You could not build out of blood, you could not preserve with fire. Blood and Fire. Was that really all that her family was good for, all that they could bring to the world?

Dany sighed. She had taken the finest and highest apartments in Meereen for her own, she was not so naive as to neglect the importance of symbols. Her new monarchy demanded nothing less, and from here, the entire city knew that she was in charge now.

And yet now, staring at this monstrous bed of hers, she was starting to regret that decision.

I could order them to bring me a new bed, Dany thought quietly, but her gut wrenched at the thought. All of the servants had been too busy washing up blood and clearing corpses for what seemed like such a petty demand.

Outside, the moon shone bright in the sky. She faintly heard a cry in the distance. Drogon, she guessed. Her black dragon was probably hunting by moonlight over the bay, as was his habit.

Missandei was already dozing off. Dany’s arm was starting to cramp, so she gingerly pulled it out from the girl’s grasp. Missandei stirred, but didn’t awake.

Slowly, the feel of the pillows and sheets weighed ever more on her. Eventually it all seemed strangling to Daenerys, so she sighed and delicately pulled herself out of the bed, taking care not to wake Missandei. She walked barefoot over the stone floor, out onto the terrace. She breathed of the night air, and found staring upwards at the black sky and stars.

She could see shapes stirring, flying before the stars. For a heartbeat, one made a shadow of the moon. My children are restless too, she thought. All three dragons were flying tonight. That was rare – Drogon enjoyed his evening hunts, but normally Viserion and Rhaegal preferred to slumber.

Dany leaned over a stone parapet, staring upwards idly. Behind the clouds, the moon was fat and luminous, spilling moonlight out over the terrace.

There was a soft rustle behind, and Daenerys turned. She could see nothing in the darkness of her apartments. “Missandei?” she softly called. “Irri? Jhiqui?”

“They sleep,” came the answer.

A woman stood under the persimmon tree, clad in a hooded robe that brushed the grass. Beneath the hood, her face seemed hard and shiny. She is wearing a mask, Dany realized, a wooden mask. She recognized that dark red lacquer. The last time she’d seen this woman had been on the Balerion, when they had first come to Astapor. “Quaithe? Am I still dreaming?”

The shadowbinder’s head turned, stepping through the moonlight. “You do not dream.”
“How are you here? How did you get past my guards?”

“I came another way. Your guards never saw me.”

“If I call out, they will kill you.”

“They will swear to you that I’m not here.”

“Are you here?”

“No.” The word was simple, definite. “Hear me, Daenerys Targaryen. The cold winds are blowing. A new song has been sung, and the Old Ones are stirring. Remember the Undying. The stone men will be breaking soon, and then the earthen beast will rise. The kraken will take flight soon after. The kneeling man will stand. Beware the mummer’s charade, and trust none of them. Beware the five horns.”

Dany blinked. Her skin was tingling from the cool air. “If you have some warning, then speak plainly. For once, no riddles. What are you talking about?”

“There will be two of them,” Quaithe replied. “One dark, one bright – one true, and one false. They will both come to you for aid against the other. Both of them will claim your love. Choose wisely, Daenerys. Remember the Undying. Remember who you are.”

Far above, the dragon’s cries were like wind echoing over sand. Dany’s gaze flickered. “I know who I am, but who are you talking about, I don’t understa–”

“Him. He needs your help. You must save the boy, Daenerys. Save the boy.” There was an edge to her voice. Daenerys barely caught the words. “The doom has been awakened, winter is moving again.”

“Winter? How could winter be…?”

There was a cry in the distance. Drogon roared, closer than Dany expected. She flinched, and then Quaithe was gone. The masked woman seemed to disappear into darkness like a rippling shadow fading out of existence. It was like someone just extinguished a candle, and then Quaithe was gone.

The night was dark. Strangely, there was a chill in the air. Dany stood for a long time, staring around the terrace.

In the skies, her children soared and cried. They weren’t normally this agitated at night. All of the dragons were restless.

Dany didn’t have a wink of sleep afterwards. She spent the night obsessing over what had just happened, replaying every word in her head. Prophecies, she thought. I hate prophecies.

She was in a foul, tired mood come morning. The day didn’t help either.

The next morning, Dany toured Meereen with her armed guards. She wanted to see the city that so many had died for. She wanted to see the markets, the homes, the trader’s stalls and the places of business. She wanted to see the people she had saved. Instead, all she saw were corpses. The hundred and sixty-three corpses in the plaza were all ripe and rotting from where Dany had hung them. The flies were everywhere.

By noon, an envoy arrived that made her mood drop even further. An envoy from the so-called ‘King Cleon the Great’ – the butcher king of Astapor. The envoy brought her some dainty little
shoes and an offer of marriage, and somehow Dany was expected to smile and nod when she heard that Astapor had fallen to a bloody dictator not days after she left it, that the council of wise men she’d left behind had been butchered by this very ‘Cleon.’ A butcher. Part of her wanted to kill the weasel of an envoy and be done with it, while the rest of her despaired.

The city that she had tried to save had ended up worse than before.

All my victories turn to dross in my hands. Whatever I do, all I make is death and horror.

Dany sat uncomfortably when she talked to a captain of trader’s ships. A merchant of some renown, who had once had dozens of captains in his employ under the old regime. The merchant-captain wept as he described the slaughter and needless bloodshed in Astapor. Dany shifted in her seat as she realised that the same thing would probably happen in Meereen when she left.

Then Daario stood forward and admitted that many of the Meereenese citizens were begging to be taken back at slaves. I gave them freedom, and they beg for slavery again. Dany ordered that only willing men could sell themselves, but it still irritated her to no end.

By evening, she half-wanted to just walk away, but she couldn’t. A queen could never quit, and there was one more judgement to carry out. Two more prisoners waiting in the lower pyramid – not quite imprisoned, but kept close all the same – and Dany needed them.

“Tell Belwas to bring my knights,” Dany commanded, before she could change her mind. “My good knights.”

Strong Belwas was panting as he marched them through the door. Ser Barristan walked with his head held high, while Ser Jorah stared at the marble floor as his feet traipsed across the ground. One proud, one guilty.

They had both risked their lives to help win the city. They had each saved her on multiple occasions. Dany so longed for her knights, but she forced herself to be stern.

Still, when Jorah muttered “… Khaleesi…” so forlornly, Dany’s posture nearly cracked.

“You helped win this city,” she said loudly, her voice filling the great hall. “And you served me well in the past. Ser Barristan saved me from the Titan’s Bastard, and from the Sorrowful Man in Qarth. Ser Jorah saved me from the poisoner in Vaes Dothrak and again from Drogo’s blood-riders after my sun-and-stars died.” So many people wanted her dead that she couldn’t even remember them all, there had been so many close calls. “And yet you lied. Deceived me. Betrayed me.”

She turned to them one by one. Ser Barristan held his head up high, he met her gaze, and Dany found herself believing the old knight when he spoke. He admitted to serving the Usurper after her father’s death, he admitted everything – but he was a good knight who had served her family for generations. Most importantly of all, he freely admitted that he’d been wrong, and asked only for a chance to redeem himself.

He served on my grandfather’s kingsguard, Dany thought, feeling her heart soften. Barristan the Bold. Even across the narrow sea, she’d heard tales of the greatest of the living kingsguard, the knight without peer.

Dany pardoned Ser Barristan easily. He refused to accept a sword except for one that was offered by her, which surprised her, but after it was done, Dany found herself liking the old knight even more than before.

And yet… and yet while Ser Barristan the Bold had been the very image of grace and humility, Ser
Jorah Mormont was the opposite. His was a visage of stubbornness and insolence. Her bear was a harder one to forgive.

Jorah Mormont’s face was red, whether from anger or shame she wasn’t sure. He didn’t back down, he argued everything. He excused everyone else, stayed defensive, insistent that he had committed no crime.

Their voices became more and more heated. Nobody in the hall met her gaze. Jorah squirmed and dodged her questions.

“No… no … You have to forgive me,” Jorah snapped eventually, shaking his head. Those words caused her to bristle.

“Have to?” Dany saw Jorah’s eyes. They were proud, stubborn and possessive. It’s too late, she realised quietly. She had wanted to pardon him, oh, how she had wanted to forgive him – she had been all ready to forgive him and welcome him back into her service – but just like that she realised that she couldn’t.

He sees me as his, she thought hollowly. Like I belong to him. Like I should belong to him. Like I am still that lost little girl, and he’s the big knight who must protect me from everyone but himself…

Dany couldn’t rule a man like that. She would rather take hatred, greed or evil any day, rather than that sort of love.

She shook her head. “I can’t forgive you,” she said. “I can’t.”

“You forgave the old man…” Jorah snapped.

“He lied to me about his name. You sold my secrets to the men who killed my father and stole my brother’s throne.”

“I protected you. I fought for you. Killed for you,” Jorah’s voice was heated. “I went down into the sewers like a rat. For you.” His hands clenched. His face was so pained. Dany couldn’t help but think, it might have been kinder for them both if he had died down in those sewers. “… Daenerys… I have loved you.”

Right then, it felt like her heart turned to stone. Her face lost all expression, and in the moment, she couldn’t say if she felt more angry, or more disappointed. Seconds stretched into minutes, and there was nothing but silence in the throne room as she stared at Ser Jorah.

I can’t keep him by my side, she thought. He can’t stay next to me, not like this. Her heart twisted at the thought of him dying, but she couldn’t keep him…

She hesitated. Ser Jorah stepped forward, and then the whole room seemed to tense. Her advisors, her guards, her commanders. They were all waiting on her command…

“The good queen struggles to say the words,” Daario purred, stepping forward from the hall. His hands caressed the hilts of his two blades, but his eyes sharp. “But you need not say them, my radiance. Only give the tiniest nod, and your Daario can do the rest.”

Jorah’s eyes glared furiously, his face red. Any moment now, he might snap, or her guards might overreact. I don’t want him to die, Dany realised. He shouldn’t die for loving me…

And suddenly Quaithe’s words came back to her. Two will claim your love, the shadowbinder had
Dany found her voice quickly. The idea formed even as she started speaking.

“Enough,” Dany said sharply. “The gods do nothing without a purpose, they say. You did not die in battle, so you will not die here. But you will not stay near me.”

“No…” His eyes were wide. Jorah reached for her, yet her guards intervened. Both Strong Belwas and Ser Barristan moved to stop him. “Daenerys, please, hear me…”

“I have made my decision. You are banished, ser.” I must be iron. The words looked like they hit Jorah like a punch to the gut. There was a pause. “… However, in light of your service, I will give you one chance to redeem your queen’s trust.”

The room froze. His eyes were pleading. She forced herself to meet his gaze and did not flinch. “You betrayed and informed on me to my enemies.” She held up her hand as he tried to object. “If you want my forgiveness, then you must balance the scales.”

“Anything,” Ser Jorah choked.

“Then return to Westeros, ser,” she said coolly. Ser Barristan looked surprised. Ser Jorah blinked. “You know the lands, you know the customs, and you have friends and family there. I need information on the Seven Kingdoms, and you must give it to me. To prepare for my arrival.”

He twitched. “I am exiled.”

“I declare your exile over. You must be my scout, my spy – my envoy even. Whatever it takes.”

He can still fight for me, I just can’t have him next to me.

“They will kill me if I return.”

“I will kill you if you stay. Believe that. If you choose not to, then fine – you must still leave by daybreak. You will not stay by my side.”

It was a chance, it was a choice. Daenerys felt guilty hanging such a cruel choice in front of him, but she already knew he would take it, and in truth she didn’t know what else to do with him. In any case, she needed information he could provide. She needed someone in Westeros, someone who could stay informed about events to the west. Somebody who she could trust, who would be driven to serve her even across great distances. She needed allies, ready for the day her homecoming eventually arrived.

It felt wrong to use him, to manipulate a man who loved her, but… No, Dany thought. I am a queen; love can have naught to do it with it. He is a knight and this is his duty.

The thought of Quaithe lingered, of all those riddles and vague statements. Danys hated being in the dark, she hated not knowing.

Exiling Jorah brought her nothing, and killing him would give her only heartbreak; offering him a chance to redeem himself in her cause felt like the right thing to do.

He stared down at the marble steps. “If I do so…” he choked. “How long, and when can I…?”

Her eyes narrowed. Too insolent, even when he was a hair’s breadth away from being banished from her side for good. “Until I take the Iron Throne, ser,” she replied. “And until I choose to
welcome you again to my court.”

Jorah’s form trembled, and his hands clenched. He let out a breath, and closed his eyes. When they opened, his eyes were harder, his former anger and panic chilled to ice. “I would go to the ends of the earth for you, Daenerys. I swear it,” he promised. “I would sail off the edge of the Sunset Sea, or walk through the darkness of Sothoryos alone in your name. I will even return home for you.”

Chapter End Notes

Just to clarify, the story will probably be leading towards a Jon/Dany pairing - yet, well, it's not going to happen instantly, since they're on opposite sides of the planet and all. Other pairings could appear, though; right now I've got a lot of the main ideas fixed, but a lot of the story is fairly fluid.

I'm planning divergences for a lot of the story, but for now anything that isn't otherwise stated you can assume to be happening the exact same way as canon. Any other POVs not related to stuff happening at the Wall are mostly going the same way for now, they'll be coming in later. How I've been writing it is that at the beginning the story focuses mainly on the far north, because that's where the main ripples are happening, but then it travels south as more of the realm starts to get involved. After all, giant dragons do generally cause a pretty big splash...
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

How to rescue a dragon...

Jon

Phantom prowled down the rocky ledge. She could smell the scent of death in the air. Dead flesh, dried blood and the tang of rot.

There were four of them. Four wights shambling through the rocks, their limbs and ragged pelts sheeted with frost. Their movements were cumbersome and the terrain was rough, but such obstacles were nothing to the dead. Every time one of the wights stumbled over a rock, it just pulled itself up again and kept on shambling forwards.

They all had pale skin, black hands, and cold blue eyes. Three of them were male – formerly Thenn warriors, the other was female. One of the males was completely naked, while all the others were clad in ragged furs. Another of the males had a severely broken leg, and it was falling behind the others as it limped on regardless.


No, Jon pushed. Stay. Watch.

The shadowcat fought him every step of the way, but he was the one in control of her body. She could feel him inside of her skin.

The wights were heading west. There had been others heading in the same direction earlier. Something was calling them to the west. All of the ones the shadowcat had encountered were stragglers – wights that had been left behind by the main mass of their army, left to flounder in the snow.

She dropped down onto a lower ledge, her lean body prowling in the dark. Previously, she had tried to avoid the wights, but these ones were in their path. They had to be taken care of.

Kill, Jon ordered, moving her legs. Kill, hunt.

No. Dangerous, she protested. Flee.

Kill, Jon insisted, squashing her response so forcefully the shadowcat could do nothing but keep prowling forward. It was like he was gripping her by the spine, so tightly she couldn’t even twitch in a direction he did not allow.

There were some periods when she had more control than others. Sometimes Phantom was left to move freely, with nothing but the faint voice of the human in her head. Then, the other times, like now, Jon took total control, moving her limbs as if they were his own.

The shadowcat dropped down a bit further, stalking slightly in the night. She went for the crippled one first.
The wight didn’t react at first as she leapt on it from behind, her teeth biting into the back of its neck. The flesh tasted cold and foul. It thrashed and struggled weakly, but then she was cleaving open the spine. The wight dropped to the ground. Its limbs were still twitching and moving, but with the spine and the back of the head ripped open, it could barely do anything but thrash disjointedly in the snow. It lost all muscle control and fell, dead limbs twisting madly. She felt her teeth cleave through cold bone.

It was bad meat, but still, normally she would have stopped to eat, or to drag the body away to a safer place before eating. There was no time for that now. Instead, she just let the ruined wight to thrash while the shadowcat leapt away.

*The other three*, Jon ordered. *Kill.*

Phantom suppressed a growl as her body moved after the others.

The first one, the biggest, was the only one clutching a weapon. A long stone axe. It had once been a man wearing thick leathers. This one would be the most difficult, she knew. Normally, Phantom would have fled from such a foe, perhaps tried to strike later from a better place or while the prey slept. Still, her body moved into position. This time, these three were closer together – she wouldn’t be able to take out one without alerting the others.

Wights were difficult prey to ambush. They didn’t feel pain, and you had to disable them quickly to stop them. It required very precise strikes at the areas they were most vulnerable.

She lunged at the wight from the side. It had slow reflexes – that was the only saving grace. The shadowcat slammed onto it, paws wrapping around its body, forcing it to the ground while sharp teeth tore at its head. It struggled, but Phantom was ripping off its face before it could even use that axe.

The other wight, the naked one, charged towards her with outstretched hands. Phantom reacted smoothly, lunging with a vicious claw under its swing. Sharp claws scratched across its eyes, splitting that blue gaze straight out. The wound oozed black blood slowly.

After a single swipe, Phantom darted away. Both of those wights were still moving – one of them with a mutilated face, and the other one with its eyes clawed out. Still, they were both blind, and that meant they were shambling around helplessly now. She would let them shamble around blindly, and the steep mountain cliffs would do the rest. One bad step and legs would shatter. Blind foes could be taken down at will.

It wasn’t a shadowcat way of killing, but it was an effective one. Phantom had killed more frequently and more brazenly under the control of Jon than she had ever done by herself.

There was only one left now. The girl. She stared at the shadowcat with an empty impassive face and blue eyes glowing softly. She used to be young, slender, with dark raven hair that was now white with frost. For a moment, an image flashed in her eyes; of another girl with dark hair, about the same age as the wight had been. A long face and wild eyes.

The shadowcat paused. It wasn’t her memory, but it still made her hesitate. The wight stared at the shadowcat with bright blue eyes. Jon felt himself shiver.

*She can see me,* Jon knew instinctively. *She’s not looking just at the shadowcat, she can see me.* Jon never knew how, but he suddenly could tell that the wight could see more than just a shadowcat in front of it.
Kill, Jon ordered after a heartbeat.

Phantom growled. She lunged.

Jon sighed, as he slowly pulled himself back to his own body. He was slumped over the great elk, still riding through the mountains. They had made good progress.

I can handle, at most, two bodies at once, he thought quietly. The hard part about warging was being present in multiple skins at once. Ghost was easy – Ghost would follow his commands even without him, but Phantom required near constant supervision. Whenever Jon had to control Phantom’s body directly, his own body would collapse as if unconscious. It most certainly made things dangerous. He could only do it now because he trusted the great elk to carry him, but he became vulnerable each time he warged. It was hard enough controlling the shadowcat and keeping himself on the elk at the same time.

Still, it did feel like it was getting easier. Phantom placated noticeably after feeding, and she been eating well with the wights that they had been picking off.

Jon was learning how to fight wights, picking them off one by one with Phantom. The normal rules were useless against wights; if you severed an arm, that arm would still move. Jon had always been taught to strike for the throat or the chest in battle, but those were the worst place to strike against wights. Instead, the best targets were at the eyes, or the joints; not to try and kill them, instead just disable them.

Jon closed his eyes, focusing on Ghost this time. His direwolf accepted him smoothly, without hesitation. He gave the order for Ghost to head towards Phantom – they could both share in eating the bodies of the wights. Both animals needed to eat. After that, he pushed Phantom again. His command was softer this time, ordering the shadowcat to head further north. Jon used Phantom as his forward scout, while he generally kept Ghost closer to him for immediate protection.

He sighed. His head was already pounding. Warging and constantly split his attention like this was exhausting.

Occasionally, Jon mused about taking more bodies. It was definitely tempting, in any case. Maybe a hawk or an owl to scout out from the air? Jon mused. Or even just a horse would be so useful – some mount that could carry me, that I control with my mind. If I really wanted to, I could even pick a snow bear – a great beast that could fight for me. Not for the first time, Jon remembered Varamyr’s six different bodies. It was a moot point, however; right now Jon wasn’t skilled enough to handle much more than he had.

Jon stared at the ravens circling around him, and at the elk carrying him. The elk trundled on through the clifffy path with sure footing. He knew that the three-eyed crow must be warged into, at the very least, a dozen ravens and an elk all at the same time. He had no idea how the greenseer managed it.

Jon paused slightly as he remembered the wight Phantom killed. The dead girl had looked straight at him with blue eyes. It knew.

… I think the Others are using the same skill as well, Jon thought. I think that’s how the white walkers control their wights; they warg into them.

He had been thinking about it for a while now. Perhaps it wasn’t the exact same as skinchanging, but Jon suspected that was the same power used in different ways. Jon used it to possess animals, while the white walkers used it to possess dead bodies. The wight saw me. Wargs can always
recognise other wargs. That wight saw me because there was an Other inside of it, controlling that body. It saw me through its third eye.

It made sense. Jon had never seen the Others give any verbal orders or visible instructions, but the wights still moved like perfect soldiers. It also explained why the Others needed touch (or at least close proximity) to create wights from corpses – they would possess them.

Jon thought of the stranger, the resurrected person who didn’t follow the Others. The greenseer is a skinchanger too; if the greenseer had somehow blocked the white walkers from possessing the stranger, then that might explain how the stranger retained his sentience when all other wights do not.

Jon never knew what to do with the theory, but it did make him feel slightly better about the foe. It meant for every wight there was an Other controlling it. Perhaps the Others also have a limit on the number of bodies each one could control? Perhaps the number of wights is limited by the number of white walkers to command them? And maybe if I kill a white walker, I also stop all of the wights that it is controlling.

Of course, it also meant that everything a wight saw or heard, then a white walker sees too. They were commanders that could control their army perfectly across any distance, through mental instructions. If the white walkers weren’t limited in range when raising wights, then perhaps they never needed to approach the front lines at all.

It’s quite possibly the perfect army, he thought with a twinge of dread. Cheap, perfectly controlled and infinitely replaceable soldiers.

It means they might already know that I am here. It would make surprise difficult. The number of wights had been getting thicker lately. Jon suspected that the Others were summoning reinforcements from the wights that they had left behind in Thenn territory. Still, the thought was reassuring; it was a bit more that he could infer about the tactics of his enemy. If you had soldiers that could stay preserved indefinitely and act autonomously, then it made sense to leave some scattered behind, maybe buried under snow, just so you had bodies everywhere in case something happened. In many ways, the wights made both perfect soldiers and perfect scouts.

Yet it meant that Jon would have to fight through more and more wights answering their master’s call the closer he got.

They were already nearly out of the Frostfangs now, and heading towards the frozen wastes. He knew the ice dragon was getting close, and he knew he had to hurry. Jon was pushing the elk as hard as he dared to go.

Jon closed his eyes and tried to focus. In his mind’s eye, he could still visualise the scene. Not in details, more feeling. He felt the sensation of being surrounded, of being trapped and hounded, weakened and injured. Jon’s dreams had become more vivid than ever. The ice dragon was in trouble.

After weeks of being hounded and fleeing, the Others had finally had it trapped. The dragon had been starving, and the Others had come at it with great bows and arrows made of ice. The icy arrows had pierced straight through one of dragon’s leathery wings. They were targeting the wings. Wights had dropped onto its wings with blades and axes, creating gashes across its wings that had stopped the dragon from flying. As soon the dragon became grounded, it became vulnerable.

It was trapped now. It had finally stopped moving, staying stationary. It had taken refuge on a small hilly outcrop at the northern end of the Frostfangs. A dragon perched on a hilltop – a last
resort for a beast that couldn’t fly. The Others assaulted it constantly with wights, but so far the
dragon’s breath had made short work of them all.

Still, the Others were patient and the dragon was starving. It couldn’t hold out forever. Sooner or
later the dragon would fall. The dragon was a great beast. Hundreds of years old and perhaps as
large as Balerion the Black Dread, if not larger, but it wasn’t invincible.

Jon had seen all of this in his dreams. In his dreams, the dragon was panicked and frenzied; furious
but also desperate.

He had to hurry. He was close enough that he could hear the dragon’s roars in the distance
sometimes. They sounded like thunder rolls. Underneath the aurora, he could make out the outline
of the hill where he knew that dragon was entrapped. And the wights kept getting thicker.

He felt the alert coming from Phantom. A stab of fear. Jon instantly slunk into her skin, staring out
of her eyes. She was watching the path ahead of him, where the mountains disappeared into rock
and snowy drifts.

There was a bear at the mouth of pass. A great snow bear – one that could stand thirteen feet tall,
with a thick, muscled body. Its fur must have been white once, but now it was rotten with huge
chunks of meat missing from its body. The animal had been savaged before it died, with half of its
head sloughed away to reveal the skull beneath. The undead bear was a lumbering, massive beast.
It was heading towards the dragon too.

{}Phantom won’t be able to bring down a bear,{} Jon cursed. He didn’t like Ghost’s chances either.
Perhaps together they might have a chance, but it would be dangerous and more likely to draw the
attention of the Others.

Above him, the ravens cawed. The flock flickered around him. There are more wights heading
towards him from the east, Jon realised from the warning, must be a group of wights. With a rustle
of wings, the ravens parted – the birds would distract the wights, try to lead them away.

So far, his only shot was remaining unnoticed. There was a whole army that he had to get through.
The Others were here in force and Jon was trying to sneak between them. If even a single wight
sees me…

The dragon was close. Another day’s ride, if that. He slipped into Phantom’s skin, creeping around
the cliffs to get a better view. He slipped past the bear and onwards. He could see there were more
figures in the snow, all lumbering towards the hill. There were at least three hundred wights spread
across the plains, with scattered shapes that weren’t all human. Phantom could smell the scent of
undead wolves, bears, even a couple of bulking shapes of giants.

He knew that the undead were just the pawns, though, scattered around the field. The Others
themselves would be at the hill, overseeing the siege against the dragon. It was only just dusk. Jon
knew that the assault against the dragon would be starting soon. They always attacked at night.

Jon set up camp early that night. He found a hidden enclave on the cliffs that gave him view of the
hill, carefully out of sight from the wights. Ghost prowled next to him, on guard, while Jon’s body
slumped as he crept into Phantom’s skin once more.

The shadowcat was scared. Terrified, in fact. So many dead littered across the snow plains. Still,
Jon forced her forward, creeping dangerously into the midst of the wights. Close enough to get a
view.
He felt the world tremble suddenly. The roar was so loud it shook the earth.

He saw the dragon. It was every bit as brilliant as he remembered, even if this time its hide was littered with wounds. The dragon was gloriously white and crested with red, with dark eyes that shone in the night. Its body was crouched, wrapped around itself and tight while its long neck coiled almost serpentine. Its claws dug into the stone. It looked like pure fury given flesh. Its tall whipping furiously as its head snapped back to front. Sharp teeth flashed in its mouth.

The sense of scale sent tremors down Jon’s back. It was hard to imagine a creature that big, even when staring from a distance. The whole hill itself looked like some tiny mount with the dragon perched on top of it. The hill wasn’t so high, but it was wide and littered in rocky, snow covered outcrops. Even a good climber would have difficulty getting up there.

Phantom crept closer, and she saw wights charging in from all directions, shambling up the rocky incline. The dragon was alert, coiled into the rocks as it saw the wights climbing upwards. The dragons took a deep breath, and Jon could see the surrounding air hazing.

Brilliant white fire scorched from the dragon’s mouth in a pure, magnificent stream. It was so powerful it scorched the rocks clean, tearing the wights into pieces.

The dragon roared in a continuous stream for a several heartbeats, twisting around itself to burn the hill clear. The wights burnt into nothing under its power, like ants disintegrating in a fire. The white fire burned the rocks clean. But then more and more wights started broke out of the plains. Another wave attacked as soon as the first was vaporised. The dragon roared in fury.

It can’t breathe dragonfire continuously, Jon realised. With every break in its breath, it became vulnerable. The wights were pushing the dragon constantly, hounding it until it weakened.

The dragon’s scales were solid like armour. Jon saw wights clutching bows trying to take shots, but the dragon was well and truly fortified. It took shelter clutching to the large rocks of its perched, keeping its head down, and the few arrows that did hit bounced off its scales uselessly.

The wights charged up towards it, shambling with surprising speed. The dragon’s tail swiped powerful wicked swings, but more and more wights filled in the gaps. The wights leapt physically at the dragon, clutching onto hard scales and striking with whatever weapons they had, or even just uselessly trying to attack with bare hands. The dragon was over a hundred-foot-long, and the wights were like insects to it. The beast roared and tried to thrash them off, but they never stopped. They came from every side relentlessly, even as they squashed by the dozens. Dozens of wights crushed or mutilated with every swipe of teeth and claws.

No, Jon thought, watching the battle. The Others didn’t waste troops like this. There was always a calculated intelligence behind their attacks.

Then, Phantom saw it. The wights were just distractions. The true threat came from the ice spiders.

The ice spiders were subtle. While the wights charged blindly in numbers, the ice spiders crept in between them, nearly invisible in the snow. While the dragon was trying to brush the wights off, the ice spiders were skittering up the rocks. These ice spiders were big. Bigger than the ones Jon saw at the battle in the Frostfangs – these spiders looked as large as small ponies. Their beady eyes were frighteningly remorseless as they skittered to the dragon.

The ice dragon roared. The ice spiders made it right up to the dragon’s feet before they lunged, diving at the dragon’s soft underbelly. The dragon’s claws tore a dozen of them to pieces, but the other spiders grappled and clicked and bit. Their fangs were sharp enough to bite between the
dragon’s scales and into its skin. The dragon howled, but this time in pain.

The ice spiders clutched onto its hide and jabbed their fangs into its huge body. The spiders were like ticks on a horse, and the dragon couldn’t shake them off fast enough.

*The ice spider venom*, Jon thought with quiet dread. He rubbed the thigh of his bad leg instinctively. He had been bitten by a small one, but the venom still froze the blood in his leg. The dragon was very large, but enough venom would still weaken it consistently. Jon guessed that this wasn’t the first time they had done such an attack. All the Others would have to do was keep on the pressure and wait for the venom to do its job.

The dragon howled again, breathing white fire once more to clear the ice spiders from around it. *It’s wasting dragonfire*, Jon thought. *It’s panicking, and wasting its fire breath indiscriminately.*

The dragonfire was the only thing holding the Others back from attacking with their full army. Instead, the Others had deliberately placed their undead sparsely around the surrounding field, so that the dragon would never be able to scorch all their troops at once. It was a deliberate, effective tactic.

Normally, it might take thousands of men to bring down a dragon that size, but the Others were doing it with a few hundred wights and ice spiders. *The Others are good at hunting dragons. They know what tactics to use.* It made Jon think that maybe they’ve had practice doing it before.

As soon as the dragon’s breath ran out, the next wave of wights shambled to attack. A larger force this time – the Others were free to commit more troops because the risk of the dragon’s breath had run out. There were even three undead giants in this wave; large, muscular shapes armed with huge clubs and spikes that could even do damage to the dragon’s thick hide. These wights weren’t attacking blindly either, these were more capable, less decayed wights armed with arrows and lances. First, they sent in shock troops to draw its fire. Then, they sent in ice spiders to poison it. Now, they were committing a much stronger force that could maybe subdue the dragon all together.

Jon watched in stunned silence as the dragon fought and wrath. Arrows bounced off its hide. It tore the undead giants apart in its teeth. The dragon didn’t go down easily. But the Others would never stop.

Slowly, Jon directed Phantom closer to the hill. He felt the shadowcat’s breath grow hoarse and cold as he saw the glittering cold shapes on the field of snow.

*If they see me, I’m dead*, Jon thought with a quiet stab of panic. He could feel Phantom almost roaring at him in fear.

He could pick out the shapes of the white walkers themselves, standing in a circle around the hill, but a safe distance away. The commanders directing their army. Their shapes seemed to glitter in the dusk.

There were five white walkers in total. Two of them were mounted on undead rotten horses, one of them was on a giant spider just as big. The other two were on foot. All of them had sharp, glittering swords, one clutched a white lance. They stared upwards at the dragon with unblinking blue eyes, as still as a statue.

They took positions all around the hill, like an army directing a siege. Fortunately, their attention was raptured on the dragon, Jon didn’t think they noticed the shadowcat creeping around in the shadows. Their wights were positioned sparsely enough that Phantom could creep in between them
in the darkness, as silent as a shadow. Jon watched for as long as he dared. Then, he had to pull Phantom back.

He sighed as dropped back into his skin, rubbing his head in pain. The longer he forced the warg the harder it became. Jon took a deep breath, trying to take stock of his foes.

There were about four or five hundred wights surrounding the hill, all of them positioned sparsely, but more arriving every day. There was no tight rank and file of wights – which was good because it made easier to sneak through – but also bad because it meant they spread over a much greater area.

There were also five white walkers, plus however many ice spiders. Maybe three or four undead giants.

And one dragon.

The dragon had to run. It was poisoned, starving and weakening quickly. It couldn’t fly, and it couldn’t survive a siege.

The dragon’s only chance would be if it tried to break through the Other’s forces and run. Jon supposed that moving across the ground on foot must be completely against the nature of a dragon; which was why it had holed up on its perch instead. Trying to convince a dragon to fight on the ground, where was most vulnerable, would be like trying to convince an eagle to hunt on foot. Completely against the animal’s nature and the white walkers were exploiting that. The dragon didn’t know these lands. It wouldn’t run blindly into potentially even more danger. Instead, the dragon chose to stay and fight.

The Others were summoning more and more wights to assault the dragon, they were filing through the mountains. In a few days, there could be twice as many undead.

*I need to warg with it*, Jon thought. The only chance he had was if he could warg with the dragon, and push it into doing something that no dragon would normally do.

Even on foot, the dragon was still big. Jon reckoned it could move quickly, and the Others wouldn’t be expecting a sudden change in behaviour. The dragon could push through the undead lines, used dragonfire to clear a path, to break through into the mountains. They could reach the mountain path, and they could run down the Milkwater and take shelter in the haunted forest. *The Others move slowly. You can outrun them, at least for a while.*

And, above all, he needed to do it quickly. While the dragon still had strength to fight. Jon closed his eyes and tried to concentrate. *I need to warg with the dragon…*

He tried to remember what the dragon dreams felt like. He tried to focus on the great white dragon, pushing out his mind to meet it. He sat there for a long time, his body shivering with cold, and he felt absolutely nothing.

Jon cursed. Around him, the ravens cawed quietly. He spent a long time staying at the knowing gaze of one of the ravens as it cawed. The three-eyed crow must have known what he would face.

…”It’s easier to warg with animals when up close, Jon told himself. *I might just be too far away. If I could touch it, or if I can look into its eyes, I would possibly have a better chance.*

There were so many problems with that statement he never even knew where to begin. The army of undead. The white walkers. The dragon.
While Jon had a sword, a wolf, a cat, and an elk.

He could feel the fear so intense his body trembled. Part of him wanted to just turn and run, but he knew that he couldn’t do that. He had a chance to potentially win this war, and he could never live with himself if he let that slip by.

Still, that didn’t stop his heart from pounding and his hand from trembling.

*There is no shame in fear*, his father had told him. *What matters is how we face it.*

Jon gulped, took a deep breath, and started to plan.

*I’m not going to die here*, he thought quietly. *I was ready to die once, but not this time.*

He thought of Ygritte, of his family, his sister, of his brothers and his home and he steeled himself to live. This time, he was going to absolutely everything and anything he could to live.

“… I’m going to save a dragon,” Jon whispered, staring out over the hills for a long time. In the distance, the white dragon thrashed.

The dream was vivid and intense. Jon stood atop a great mountain of ice, staring at the glowing northern lights. All around him, as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but snow and ice.

Jon blinked, staring at the dreamscape. He knew it was a dream, which was strange. He stretched his hands, inspecting his body. *I have five fingers again*, he realised suddenly as he looked at his left hand. The mutilated hand was gone. His little finger, severed by frostbite, was back on his knuckles. *This is just a dream.*

Then a bird flapped from the sky and perched on an icy outcrop. Jon turned to stare at the black crow. This crow had a third, black eye in the middle of its forehead.

“… You can communicate through dreams?” Jon asked.

“Of course,” the crow cawed. “We see more in our dreams than most realise.”

Jon smiled, but the smile was grim. “The dragon is under siege. I can’t reach it, and I’m not close enough to warg.”

“I know. There are four hundred wights surrounding it, and more coming each day. There is a larger force heading from the north, but for now there is very brief window where they might be vulnerable.”

Jon frowned. “I can’t fight through four hundred. Unless I fly to the dragon. Can you fly me?”

“I’m afraid not. But I can help even the odds. There is a clan of giants to the southeast. I have directed them towards you.”

*Giants?* Jon knew that giant clans were usually small family units and migratory, but… “You can control giants?!”

“No,” the crow cawed. “But I can control their mammoths. The giants will follow their mammoths.”

“How many giants?”

“Five giants, and three mammoths.”
Jon shook his head. “... That won’t be enough. They’ll get slaughtered.”

“Yes,” the crow agreed. “But the Others like raising giants and mammoths – they make good prizes for their army. The white walkers will split their forces and head south to kill the giant clan. That is less for you to deal with.”

He stared. “You’re going to use them as bait.”

“Distractions, rather. They will expect the dragon to be subdued after the night, right now they are simply waiting for the poison to weaken it further. They will not underestimate a giant clan, however, so they will send wights in force to deal with them. That gives you an opportunity. You will not get a better one.”

“And the giants themselves?” he said, aghast. “You’re pulling them into a battle unprepared and they’ll be killed.”

“Yes.”

The thought made him feel sick, but there was no choice but to swallow it. “How many do I have to face?”

“I suspect less than two hundred will be left behind.”

“Still too many. I’m alone here.”

The bird rustled. “No. You’re not alone. We can help with those odds.”

Jon didn’t reply. His hands clenched, glaring suspiciously. “Take the dragon and run. Warg with it. Command it,” the bird ordered. “Run east over the Frostfangs and keep going, I can distract them from following you. Get the dragon to safety.”

“And if I can’t warg with it?”

“Then you die. So do many,” the bird cawed. “Get close to the dragon, look into its eyes, and you have the best chance that anyone has.”

Jon’s jaw clenched. He paused to stare at his hands. Around him, there was a crack like thunder. The crow just rustled, wings outstrecthing. “This is your duty, Jon Snow,” the crow cawed. “And, say, do you have any corn?”

The world disappeared with a flash. Jon jolted awake suddenly. He was lying on a rocky cliff, with the elk grazing next to him. The elk stared at him knowingly.

It was barely dawn. Compared to the frenzy of last night, the plains seemed quiet. The dragon was resting from the Other’s assault, while the wights had backed off for the day to wait for reinforcements. Jon could still here the dark shapes littering the snows – the wights spread out and waiting patiently around the hill.

*I’ll charge at noon*, Jon thought with a clenched jaw. *There was no other way to do this.*

At dawn, the Others would have to retreat. They didn’t come out during the day. Likewise, Jon suspected that the ice spiders were nocturnal too. That left only the wights. Their forces were still depleted after attacking the dragon during the night, and they would be further depleted with the greenseer’s giant distraction. There could only be about two hundred undead wights standing between Jon and the dragon.
Well, not true actually. The wights were spread around the entire hill, like in a siege formation. The ones on the other side of the side probably wouldn’t be able to react in time. As soon as Jon broke cover and tried to approach the hill, he would likely only face roughly fifty or so.

That was still far too many for one person to face, but it was a better number. It was a number he could he could work to cut down further. If Jon moved quickly, he could possibly slip through most of them.

_I need a distraction_, he decided. _I need to lure them away to one side to give me a clear chance at making it. I need to use Ghost and Phantom._

The plan was simple. Jon could warg into Ghost and Phantom and direct them to the western edge of the field. The two animals would attack whatever wights they could for however long they could hold them, which would clear an opening for Jon to ride up from the southeast. The elk was fully rested, and if he timed it right they wouldn’t be expecting it. They would have slow reaction times.

With a clear field, the elk could probably make the journey to the hill in about an hour. With a good gallop, the wights might not be able to stop him. They wouldn’t see Jon coming, and they wouldn’t be expecting anyone to run into the middle of their siege.

There would still be the undead directly around the hill to deal with. There was no choice but to cut through them. There was no way to tell how many would he would have to face.

Jon’s big concern (well, bigger) was the undead giant positioned by the hill. It was a huge, rotting beast, twelve feet tall with an exposed ribcage and old spears still sticking out of its dead body. Hopefully Ghost and Phantom could lure the giant away as well. If not, Jon would have to just try to avoid it. Giants were slow, he remembered one of the children of the forest saying. An undead giant must be even slower.

Jon didn’t need to _beat_ them, he just needed to get past them.

The dragon would be weak and injured from fighting the night before. Hopefully, it would be subdued. It would make it easier for Jon to get close enough to warg.

There was no escape plan. Or, rather, the dragon was the escape plan.

Jon’s arms were twitching. He dropped anything that he didn’t desperately need. His spare furs, his blankets, even his emergency rations. The elk needed to be able to run fast.

“_I am the watcher on the wall._” Jon muttered to himself, trying to calm his nerves. A quiet chant to focus the warg, to reinforce his identity. “_I am the shield the guards the realm of men._”

The dawn was cold and hard, the sun barely visible this far north. Still, Jon just had to hope it was enough to drive the Others away.

“_I am the watcher on the wall…_” he repeated, closing his eyes as he slipped into Phantom’s skin.

The shadowcat growled and fought, but there was no gentleness from Jon this time. He pushed firmly, forcing her to obey. His body slumped as suddenly he was staring through the sharp, black and white vision of a cat. She didn’t like operating in the day, and she liked the undead even less. Jon had to force her every step of the way.

Thankfully, Ghost followed smoothly. The direwolf reacted to Jon instinctively. Every moment waiting felt agonising. Jon let the noon sun spread high into the air, before pushing the animals to
Jon stayed in Phantom’s skin. She was the one who needed the most control, while Ghost could handle himself. If need be, Jon would even sacrifice Phantom to let Ghost escape. He wasn’t about to let his best friend die.

_Run_, the shadowcat urged in panic. _Run, danger, run._

_No_, Jon pushed. _Fight._

The shadowcat was used to fighting stealthily, one on one. Jon was forcing her to do the exact opposite. He needed the distraction.

_The snow bear_, Jon thought. The undead snow bear was close to the edge. The biggest threat. A bear like that could maybe run down an elk. He needed to take the bear down first. _Attack._

She was so panicked she nearly escaped from his control. Instead, Jon pushed her harder, driving her to lunge.

The snow bear didn’t see it coming. Suddenly, the shadowcat was leaping out from the snowy rocks, straight into the snow bear’s hide. Sharp claws bit into thick muscle and hide. The snow bear didn’t even feel it. Suddenly, everything devolved into frenzied growling, and tooth and fang. The bear straightened up on two legs, trying to knock Phantom off. Jon saw a single blue eye glowing in the faint sun. She barely clung onto its back, still tearing through any flesh she could reach.

The bear twisted, large paws swinging at her. Phantom felt its claws brush at her hind legs, and then Ghost barrelled at the bear. The direwolf was smaller than the snow bear, but he was still powerful. Sharp fangs tore at its hide, barrelling into the bear and snapping at the throat.

Ghost in front and Phantom on its back. The snow bear was scrambling, but it attacked with undead fury. _Go for the eyes_, Jon pushed. He could feel the shadowcat’s panic as if were his own. The eyes, the nose, the skull. _Take down the senses first._

Ghost twisted to one side to avoid a lunge, tearing at its back. Phantom clambered up the bear’s back, hissing and growling as she dug sharp claws into the bear’s face. The bear’s movements were wild and powerful. Ghost pulled one of its hind legs out from under it, and the creature collapsed. Phantom had to pounce off before she was crushed as it fell. The bear was mad and blind, but it still swiped and raged.

Phantom’s instincts pushed her to go for the throat, to kill it by tearing out the jugular. Jon had to override them. Wights were difficult opponents to beat; the throats were useless since they didn’t breathe. If you couldn’t sever the spine, then you needed to cut it down piece by piece. _The arms._ _The legs_, Jon ordered. Strip the muscles away from the limbs. _Stop it from moving._

The bear charged. Ghost darted away, and then pounced on it from the side, meeting it with ferocity and strength. Phantom hesitated, waiting for the opportunity before lunging at the bears hind legs. Her sharp teeth gouged rotten flesh away from bone. Ghost handled the top. Phantom cut away at it from the bottom. Normally, the direwolf didn’t like the shadowcat, but at that moment their coordination was flawless.

The snow bear was struggling. Its body was being shredded. Normally, the animals would finish the job and tear it apart, but Jon intervened. _The bear is crippled. Leave it._

Phantom broke apart. Ghost snarled and retreated; a long, ringing howl breaking out of his throat.
The howl rang across the field.

The other wights were already moving. They were shambling towards the animals – at least two dozen of them. Jon knew it would happen, but he also knew that the pair were massively surrounded. *It’s alright. I don’t have to beat them, just keep them busy.* If need be, the animals could lead the wights around in a chase through the mountains. *Aim to cripple, don’t bother trying to kill.*

The snow bear was still moving. It tried to stagger after Ghost, but it didn’t have enough limbs left to even move properly.

The first wight charged, swinging a stone axe. Phantom pounced on it, claws tearing through its back while the sharp teeth gouged at its shoulder. The wight was still scratching and biting even as Phantom bit its arm clean off. *There’s barely even blood,* he noticed, *only rotten ooze.*

A second wight tried to charge at the shadowcat. Ghost barrelled into it, tearing it to pieces savagely, biting and snarling. The other wights were closing in fast. Jon forced himself to take control of Phantom’s body and his own at the same time. Trying to move and warg at the same time felt excruciatingly painful, but at the moment Jon didn’t care.

“Move!” Jon snapped, kicking at the elk. The three-eyed crow knew the plan as well. “Move! Run! Move!”

The beast broke into a gallop. Strong hooves kicked up the snow. The path was rocky, but the great elk was surefooted. Around him, the ravens erupted into the air.

It was maybe ten miles to the hill, on mostly open ground. The wights were gathered around in about a three-mile perimeter, with a few outliers. Normally they would see Jon coming straight away, but with Phantom and Ghost serving as distractions, there might be a chance. Jon’s heart was in his mouth as the elk galloped. He could only hope he had timed it properly.

Through Jon’s third eye, he saw a dozen wights charge at Ghost. They were all armed, but the direwolf met them ferociously. The direwolf fought them with strength and fury, while the shadowcat picked them off with precision and stealth.

Tooth and claw couldn’t compare to steel. The beasts would die very quickly in any straight fight against metal blades. Their only saving grace was their manoeuvrability and speed. Despite his size, Ghost darted and weaved agilely, avoiding the blades but striking fierce, powerful blows.

Still, speed could always be beaten by numbers. The more wights came after them, the worse it became.

If they had been fighting men, Jon doubted if they would have had a chance. The wights were hard to kill and powerful, but they also lacked the coordination and the reflexes of living men. It took a different type of tactic to beat them. Ghost and Phantom could exploit that.

Jon’s heart was pounding as the elk galloped. It was a strong beast, but even it would tire quickly running quickly.

Ghost and Phantom were slowly retreating backwards. Phantom had taken a graze to its rump, and it was taking all of Jon’s concentration to force the shadowcat not to turn and flee all together. *As soon as I start fighting, I’m going to lose control of Phantom completely,* he thought with a grimace. Still, there was nothing for it. Jon wouldn’t be able to fight properly in two bodies at once.
The animals were being forced backwards, but circling around the wights. So many wights had had their legs torn out that the dead bodies tried to drag themselves across the snow. The wights shambled over themselves to chase after the direwolf. *Careful, Jon pushed, just keep them busy.*

Jon was approaching the hill. He could see with his own eyes the fields that he had only previously seen through Phantom’s. There were black spots dotted across the snowfields ahead. *More wights,* Jon thought angrily. Not all of them had been distracted by Ghost and Phantom.

Dark shapes fluttered around him. The ravens shot through the air either side of him, swarming on the nearest wights. The ravens went for the eyes, pecking and scratching viciously. The ravens kept the closest wights distracted, while the elk ran straight by.

He was nearly halfway there. He could feel the elk panting for breath, but it was still galloping hard. Jon charged straight into the perimeter that the Others had set up. A dark shadow loomed in the distance. The undead giant was still in its position. Jon cursed, but there was no choice to turn back. He would have to just try and slip by the giant.

It was open fields now. He could see the enemy coming and they could see him. Jon counted at least two dozen shambling corpses rushing to meet him.

*My father had always said that one mounted man was worth a dozen infantry,* Jon thought, kicking the elk a bit harder. He saw undead raiders and clansmen with bronze axes shambling to meet him.

Jon’s whole body was burning as the elk rode straight into their midst.

*Battle fury,* he thought. It was a term he once heard the Greatjon use. The drive, the anger, that kicked in during battle. Jon had been in fights before, but he had never once charged against a foe like this.

Jon didn’t feel his wounds then, or the cold on his hands, or the sweat down his brow. He wasn’t thinking, he wasn’t feeling, it was like time just stopped around him. There was only the fight, the enemy in front of him, and the next, and the next and then next…

Dark Sister was in his hand.

The first wight fell as Dark Sister cleaved his skull clean open. The second stroke took down another, and then the elk’s antlers knocked two of them straight to the ground. One of the elk’s antlers cracked and its whole body jerked with the impact, but it didn’t stop. He saw another wight slash with a heavy maul, but suddenly it was like everything was moving so slowly.

*It's like dancing,* he thought strangely. Dancing with a sword in his hand. It seemed so slow that Jon could have danced through them laughing.

*These men are dead, but I'm not.*

The wights fell under him. Dark Sister slashed left and right, the fine blade knowing no equal.

Arrows flew through the arrow, stabbing the ground around him. There were undead bowmen at the foot of the hill. He felt the arrows hiss by him. The elk took an arrow to the rump, but it kept on galloping and Jon kept on slashing. The elk whinnied in pain, while a wordless battle cry tore through Jon’s throat.

*The giant,* Jon glared. The undead giant had a heavy club, and it was stomping forward to block Jon’s path. The wights were falling and the bowmen were reloading, but the giant was still in his path. *I can slip around him; it's slow I can slip by…*
Then, Jon’s eyes picked up movement. Movement on the white snow. His heart nearly skipped a beat.

*The ice spiders,* he cursed. There were ice spiders skittering towards him. The spiders were in all different shapes; the smallest the size of hounds while the largest the size of ponies.

“Run!” Jon roared. The giant raised its club. The ice spiders skittered at him, long legs twitching. “Run, run, run!”

The elk responded beautifully. It darted to the side just as the giant’s club smashed downwards. The impact was so heavy it caused the ground to shudder. An ice spider lunged, but then Jon’s sword sliced through two of its legs. The spider crunched around his blade. The spider bled cold, unnatural pale blood.

Another spider, one of the largest, charged into the elk. The elk neighed in panic and nearly fell, but then Jon’s sword cut downwards. His stroke was true, piercing straight in the centre of all the spider’s black beady eyes. The creature clicked and screeched in pain; a high-pitched cry like nails scraping against bone. The spider was still lunging at the elk with fingers and twitching legs, even while the great elk charged straight through it.

Jon barely reacted in time as the giant twisted around, extending a black hand larger than Jon’s torso. Trying to grab him, to crush him in a huge fist. Dark Sister flashed in the dim sunlight, and then three of the giant’s beefy fingers were falling severed to the ground.

The giant tried to lunge again with its other hand, but then the air turned black with rustling shapes and cawing. The ravens rallied together and swarmed out of the sky, all of them pecking and scratching at the giant’s eyes. It was enough of distraction for Jon to get clear of the giant.

Enemies all around me. There were ice spiders circling, and more wights charging in towards him. Every moment the odds stacked up against him a bit further. *Don’t give the enemy time to rally.*

“Forward!” Jon roared, kicking the elk. “Charge, forward!”

The elk was suffering badly. It had an arrow in its rump, and the ice spider’s fangs had scraped its sides open. The poor beast was nearly frantic with panic. Still, it charged. It charged beautifully.

The hill was getting closer. Barely ten metres away. If Jon could reach it, he could maybe lose the wights by climbing the rocks…

The wight bowmen knocked another shot. This time, Jon was so close that not even the dead could miss. The elk took two black arrows to the chest. Jon screamed as the beast shattered to the ground. Antlers cracked as it toppled headfirst.

There was no saddle; Jon slid straight to the ground. He gasped in pain. The snow helped cushion the landing, but the fall still hurt. His whole body trembled from the impact, but the adrenaline overpowered any shock.

Still, Dark Sister never left his grasp. He was too angry to feel any injuries at that moment. His heart was beating so fast it was like the world was moving in slow motion.

*Anger, rage – that is what keeps me alive,* Jon thought furiously. It felt like there was fire in his blood. *That’s what keeps me fighting.*

The dead and the cold could never understand that rage, that drive.
An ice spider lunged at him on the ground. He saw its fangs dripping over a grotesque mouth. Dark Sister slashed upwards, biting into the creature’s head and its hairy body slumped to the ground. Its legs were still twitching even as it died under Dark Sister.

Jon roared as he dragged himself up, limping backwards as fast his bad leg could carry him. The soft snow was a foot deep, and each effort was painful. Still, Jon could barely feel pain.

Another ice spider lunged at him – a smaller one the size of a hound. Jon’s sword cut it in half.

The ice spiders were terrifying foes against the fleeing and the unprepared. Still, fangs couldn’t match good steel. A strong soldier could fight them off.

*I count three ice spiders, four wights, and one undead giant left*, Jon counted, gasping for breath. He had to take them all down quickly, before any more arrived.

The ice spiders clicked and hissed, trying to circle around him. The wights attacked first, charging at him with axes and swords. Dark Sister parried a bronze blade, and then split open a wight’s skull. The wight was still thrashing even when Jon pulled his sword out of its skull.

*The dead are poor swordsmen*, he thought viciously, twisting to meet another wight. A second tried to ambush him from behind, but Jon spun. They hacked and slashed with axes, but their movements were so clumsy that Jon could take two of them at once.

Then the third one ambushed him from behind. Jon howled in pain as a stone maul slammed against his back. He felt something crack. The pain in his side was agony.

“… I will not die…” Jon snarled, grabbing the wight behind him and throwing him forward into the other two. “… I will not die…!”

They were strong and tough, but slow. Jon’s blade sliced the top of one’s head clean off, causing rotten brains to spill over the ground, but he still had to stagger backwards to avoid the creature’s thrashing. Even with half a head, it still didn’t fall down.

The other wight charged him. The stone axe grazed Jon’s shoulder but then Dark Sister sliced off its head. Jon had never known a blade as slender as Dark Sister capable of beheading a man before.

*Three spiders, one wight and one giant*, Jon thought with a gasp as the head bounced off the ground. The decapitated head was still blinking, blue eyes staring at him.

Jon was still staggering when one of the ice spiders lunged at him. Jon caught it with sword, but then a second ice spider lunged from the other side. Spiny legs wrapped around Jon’s shoulder, and then suddenly there were sharp fangs biting into his back.

Jon howled, struggling to throw the ice spider off. He could feel its legs wrapping around his shoulder, its teeth in his back. Jon was still thrashing while the final wight tried to split his skull open with a sword. Jon had to drop to avoid it, while the ice spider clinging to his shoulder tried to lunge at his head.

There was no time to swing his sword, so instead Jon just punched the spider with all his might. The spider crumpled around his fist.

Jon was gasping for breath. He could still feel the ice spider’s fangs in his back. The wight tried to swing another stroke, but Jon shoulder-barged into him. The wight thrashed, but then Dark Sister pierced straight through its chest, severing his spine and cutting half its torso open. The wight didn’t stop moving, but it crumpled.
He nearly collapsed. The ground was littered with bodies and black blood. *One spider and one giant left.* “… I will not die…” he muttered, blinking woozily.

The giant was struggling to pick up its club, lacking the fingers on its hand. The final ice spider, a big one the size of a pony, hissed and crackled as Jon staggered towards it.

Dark Sister was in his hand. The ice spider lunged. Jon plunged Dark Sister straight down its throat. He felt its fangs scrape against the pommel of his sword.

“… You killed me once…” he growled. “… I will not die…”

The giant finally swung its club, even despite the ravens still pecking at its face. It was a large, laborious swing. The giant was almost three times as tall as Jon. Every instinct Jon had told him to run, but instead Jon’s legs staggered forward. He clutched Dark Sister in both hands, swinging it wide as he dived between the giant’s legs.

Dark Sister slashed at the giant’s knee. The blade shimmered, but cut straight through a leg as thick as a tree trunk.

It was a hell of a blade.

The giant shuddered, suddenly missing its right leg. The monster seemed to freeze for a tense heartbeat, before toppling backwards.

The undead giant was still moving, as were many of the mutilated corpses, but Jon didn’t care to stay to finish the job. Its leg was severed and it couldn’t follow. Bulky flesh struggled to pull itself up. So long as they couldn’t follow him he didn’t care. More were already coming. Against the dead, it was more effective to try and cripple them then destroy them.

His breathing was hoarse and pained. His ribs ached and his muscles were sore. He could still feel the spider’s fangs sticking into his back, but there was no time to remove them.

*The venom, dammit,* Jon cursed. He could already feel the numbness spreading, like his blood was running cold. Soon, the ice spider venom might incapacitate him completely. He needed to move before that happened.

His leg jarred as he tried to clamber over the rocks. His body was stiff and the adrenaline was running low. It was a painful climb, trying to pull himself up the cliffs with a bad shoulder. He could hear the wights moving below him. The undead were bad climbers too, but Jon still didn’t have long. He was hobbling with his bad leg as he staggered upwards.

All around him, he saw the rocks that had been scorched clean and misshapen by the ice dragon’s breath. The air was cold.

He clambered up another rock. He could hear the dragon’s breathing now, deep and steady. One more ledge, and he could see it…

Jon felt his breath freeze as he stared upwards at the shadow that was suddenly looming above him.

Its head was outstretched from its perch, staring down at him. Jon had known how big it was, but still… to see the dragon up close… the sheer scale made his knees weak.

It was like staring at a wall of flesh. The scales were glittered in the sun as if they were made from polished marble, with red streaks like blood running through them.
The dragon’s head alone was massive. When it opened its mouth, you could have rode a horse into jaws and not been able to touch its teeth. Wicked curved horns spread backwards from its skull, with a crest of scales tipped in red along its neck. Its eyes were pitch black –they seemed so small compared to its massive head. Its mouth parted slightly, revealing white teeth like swords. Its upper jaw was curved upwards slightly, like there was grin of teeth on that wicked snout.

A deep, low growl broke forth from its jaws. That growl reminded Jon of distant thunder. It was staring at him. It was staring straight at him, perched on the rocks above and looking down. There was steam billowing from between its teeth, spilling from its mouth in sheets.

“… Holy…” Jon muttered, stepping back. He couldn’t help but gulp. He slowly raised his hands, trying to lower his body and his gaze. Hullen had once told him to never to look a predator in the eye. They took it as a challenge. “… I’m not here to hurt you… it’s alright… it’s alright…”

His breath was thin in his throat. His voice was weak. His hands were trembling. He was staring upwards at a beast that could eat him whole without even chewing, and absolutely every bit of its attention was straight on him.

It’s injured, Jon realised suddenly. The dragon didn’t look so good either. Arrows and wounds scattered across its hide. Deep, laborious breath. Everything about it seemed weary, sluggish. It’s running out of fight too…

There was movement behind him. Dead climbing.

“… Alright… easy now…” Jon gasped, slowly closing his eyes. “… I’m here to help you…”

He stretched out his mind. He had to focus on the animal in his mind, concentrate, try to slip into its skin…

Jon gasped. Suddenly, he could feel the dragon. The feeling was so intense it hurt. It felt like his mind was on fire.

The dragon shifted, and then roared. The force knocked Jon to the ground and caused his ears to ring. The world went deaf.

The dragon was like no other animal he had ever warged with. It was so powerful it felt like a lightning storm. Trying to control it felt like trying to chain a meteorite. Jon clutched his head in pain.

The dragon snarled dangerously. It felt Jon try to warg with it. It wasn’t happy. It didn’t like anyone trying to control its body.

“Easy! Easy now!” Jon gasped, dropping to his knees and averting his gaze. The dragon growled. Focus. Focus. “I’m not here to hurt you! I’m here to help! I’m here to help!”

His heart was beating harder than it ever had before. Jon gulped and tried to reach out again. Softer, this time. Don’t try to force it, just… touch it…

Jon could feel the dragon. He could see it in his third eye. It wasn’t warging, but Jon just lightly touched the dragon’s presence, trying to express himself. The very sliver of a connection sent shivers down Jon’s spine. He was gasped for breath, trying to think soothing thoughts and pass them on to the dragon. Desperately trying to gently calm it down…

The dragon didn’t stopped growling. “… I’ve seen you in my dreams!” Jon shouted. He had no idea if it could understand him, but it seemed like it was worth a shot. “You remember? I think
you’ve felt me as well. Do you remember the ice? You were trapped under the ice!”

Unblinking eyes stared at him. “I was the one that released you,” said Jon, struggling to breathe. “My blood woke you up!”

There was movement below. The wights were scrambling up after him. Jon’s attention was fixed firmly on the dragon towering over him. “… We’re going to die here,” Jon said after pause. “Both of us. We’ll both die here. They’re going to keep on coming for you, and sooner or later they’ll get you.” He raised his voice. “You’ll die if you stay here!”

The dragon didn’t even twitch. “Do you understand?” Jon shouted. “We need to run! We need to fight, and we need get away from here! They want to kill you! They want to kill you and raise you as one of theirs!”

Jon could hear the wights clambering after him. They were right below him, and nearly at the top. “We need to go!” Jon screamed, pushing the warg as far as he dared. “Come with me if you want to live!”

The dragon’s massive head cocked. There was a low, deep growl in its throat.

Jon saw the wights scramble up the ridge, swords in hand. There were four of them at the front, and far more coming from below. They were charging at him, not the dragon. Jon grasped Dark Sister tightly, raising his sword to meet them.

And then the air blurred. The dragon moved so fast it was like lightning. Instantly, the dragon’s tail snaked around and flickered. The tail whipped so close to Jon that he could feel the wind brush overhead. All four wights were flying bodily into the distance. Jon stared in shock.

Around him, the dragon was moving. The great beast was lifting itself up, supported on its coiled wings like a giant bat. Great billows of steam were wafting from its mouth, it was hissing in the cold air.

And then Jon could feel it. He could feel the dragon pressing up against his mind in a way he couldn’t quite explain.

Jon wasn’t warging with the dragon. It felt like the dragon was trying to warg with him.

“Oh,” Jon muttered, as he accepted the connection. Instantly, almost easily, Jon felt himself rising up out of his body…

The dragon’s eyes were like nothing he had ever experienced. It wasn’t normal vision. The vision was all vivid reds and blues, like the dragon was seeing a whole different world. The scents and smells were overpowering – a nose that put even Ghost’s to shame.

It felt like there was a power in his chest, just bubbling and waiting to explode…

Jon gasped, trying to process it. He wasn’t controlling the dragon, it felt like the dragon and him were standing side by side.

We need to leave, Jon thought desperately. The mountain pass. I know an escape route.

The ice dragon was clambering to life. Its claws were so large they scraped the rocks as it moved. Jon darted to one side as the dragon lowered itself down, its body coiling itself low. Its head lowered itself down…
It’s going to move, Jon realised suddenly, dropping back to his own body, and I need to go with it.

Jon stared at the dragon’s head, at the horns and the spiky frills running down its long neck. There was only one way he could keep pace with the dragon…

Jon’s heart was in his mouth as he rushed towards the dragon head and climbed up its neck so quickly he half-jumped. The dragon’s neck was coiled so low to the rocks that he could reach it easily. The scales on its crest were pointy and sharp, but they protruded enough to make good handholds.

The problem was the movement, the rocking of the dragon’s head and the shivering of its breathing threatened to shake him off, but Jon persevered in pure desperation. The adrenaline pushed him forward, ignoring all pain or weakness, as Jon pulled himself upwards.

The scales nearer the top were easier to reach, and when he reached the top he could wrap his arms around one of the dragon’s horns and hold on for dear life. The horns were like polished white ivory, as thick as large tree trunks. Jon could barely cling onto the horn. The first time the dragon tilted its head, it nearly crushed Jon. He gasped, feeling the scales dig into his back.

The dragon barely waited for him. Jon had only just got a grip on a horn when the dragon leapt from the hill. It spread its damaged wings out wide, flapping furiously as it tried to glide through the air.

When it landed, it landed with the force of an earthquake, throwing up clouds of snow.

Jon was very nearly sent flying. The impact took his breath away. He hung onto the horn with both arms, and then propped his legs up and squeezed into the space between its frills. The sharp pointy scales dug painfully into Jon’s back, but at the moment there was absolutely nothing he could do except hold on desperately.

All around him, the Others were attacking. The wights abandoned everything and charging madly at the dragon. The dragon was finally on open ground. It was more vulnerable than it had ever been. But not vulnerable enough.

Its tail cut down a dozen wights at once. Its body twisted and it breathed, and white fire scorched straight through crowds of wights. Arrows littered the air and wights hacked at its feet, but then sharp claws crushed them underfoot. Jon couldn’t see a thing, but he heard the thrashing bodies and crunching corpses.

The dragon felt clumsy and cumbersome on the ground, it didn’t have the grace that it had in the air. It moved like a bat walking on its folded wings, but it was so large that even a single awkward bound could cover great distances, moving faster than any horse.

The wights were attacking. There were ice spiders skittering up its hind legs. Beneath it, the ground was an ocean of dead, thrashing bodies all attacking and hacking, but the dragon tore through them as easily as a force of nature.

Jon could barely even process it, not when every movement caused his to jerk like a rag doll. He saw the dead bodies trying to clamber up the dragon’s legs, as if they could tear it down, but the beast shook them off. It nearly shook Jon off as well.

Jon felt its body clench, and then suddenly it was jumping. The dragon’s wings were flapping weakly to try and propel itself, and for a brief moment the great beast was flying.

And then it crashed into the rocky mountainside. The world went deaf with the impact. The dragon
snaked its head back towards the dead, unleashed a final roar, and then they were bounding away.
Jon

The ground quaked as the dragon finally came to a halt. Each step would knock the snow from the rocks and cause avalanches over the slopes. The noise of its every movement was so loud it dominated his entire world. Jon’s head was spinning, his body was trembling. He was gripping the dragon’s horn so tightly he couldn’t even feel his hands any more. There was absolutely nothing he could do but hold on for dear life as the dragon finally came to a stop.

Even through his furs, the mountain winds were bitterly cold. They were about three hundred feet off the ground, halfway up one of the smaller peaks in the Frostfangs. The beast finally stopped at a small plateau on the snow-covered mountainside.

Jon gagged, feeling the vomit burst from his mouth. The disorientation was mind-wracking. In the air, when its wings had been whole, the dragon had been graceful, but on the ground it moved with all the grace of a mammoth trying to hop.

The dragon shuddered, let out a breath, and slowly lowered itself down. The dragon was breathing deeply.

*It’s injured,* Jon realised. His eyes roamed over the dragon’s immense form. *Badly injured.*

When the dragon had left its hilltop and waded through the army of the dead, it had been vulnerable. They had escaped the legion of wights and ice spiders, but now there were even more bloody wounds along the dragon’s legs and lower hide. Its scales were tough, but not indestructible.

The scales seemed thinner along the back of the joints, along the side of the belly, he noticed. The dead had somehow known where to target.

*If they catch us again, the dragon will be in trouble,* Jon realised. A thousand pinpricks could eventually even kill a dragon.

Jon’s finally let go of the dragon’s horn. He had to shake his arms to work circulation back into them, and then he was wincing. He didn’t think that he had ever held onto anything that tightly in his entire life before. His whole body felt sore and ready to collapse into the snow, but Jon knew that he couldn’t.

*If the Others ambush us when we’re recovering…*

Jon did nothing but wince and curse as he shuffled down from the dragon’s neck. His body still screamed from the injuries he took during the fight. They were light wounds, but still painful. Jon
nearly lost his grip trying to clamber down. Even through his gloves, the dragon’s white scales were so sharp his hands were scratched and bloody. He fell downwards three feet from the ground, crumbling to the snow painfully.

The dragon curled up with a low growl while Jon limped over the snowy ground. Its eyes were focused on Jon, though.

Up close, the dragon was larger than anything Jon had ever seen before. The dragon put mammoths to shame, so large that even when coiled its body draped over the mountainside.

It made him feel weak just staring at the wall of muscle and flesh. His head was still spinning, struggling to think…

*First things first. Fire. I need fire, and I need to tend my wounds.* Qhorin Halfhand had always said that any wound that wasn’t treated quickly could fester.

Normally, Jon would have hesitated lighting a fire with so many looking for him, but he figured that the giant dragon was already enough of a giveaway. He needed the heat.

He stared around him, but there were no trees on the barren mountainside. He had no kindling.

His shoulder was still bleeding slightly, and Jon gasped as he pulled the ice spider’s fangs out of back. The fangs were wicked curved and white, but fortunately they hadn’t gone deep through his thick furs and leathers. Still, the venom was making him feel numb, and woozy.

*Fire. I need fire.*

There was no kindling in sight. He didn’t even have a flint.

Jon paused, considering it. He turned to stare at the dragon.

“Fire,” he muttered. “You can breathe fire. I need warmth. Fire.”

The dragon’s unblinking black eyes stared at him. Jon cursed. His furs were thick, but the air atop this mountain was colder than sin, and the lingering venom caused a cold sweat on his brow. Jon tried to close his eyes and concentrate on warging, like he’d done before, but it was harder. He couldn’t concentrate deeply enough; his head was aching.

*The dragon is from Old Valyria,* he remembered the three-eyed crow mentioning. It must have encountered humans before. The Valyrians had been dragon-tamers.

Jon struggled to think. *What was the Valyrian word for fire?* The only Valyrian he had ever learnt was from Maester Luwin had been the occasional word or phrase that popped up during his lessons.

“Umm… *dracatrik!*” Jon shouted, slurring his words. He knew the herb ‘dragonthorn’, which had Valyrian roots as ‘dracatrik’. *Targaryen names,* he thought, Targaryen names were based on Valyrian words. “*Draclarion… Dracagar… um… Dracaerys–*”

Suddenly, the dragon inhaled. Great plumes of steam billowed from its mouth. *Dracarys,* Jon realised. *It meant dragonfire.* The name ‘Aerys’ had roots from the word ‘fire’, and ‘draca’ was a bastard form of ‘dragon’. *Dragonfire.*

Jon saw white flames grow from the dragon’s mouth. He jumped backwards instinctively, but the dragon wasn’t aiming for him. The white stream of fire scoured over the rocks, causing
evaporation to fill the air.

No; not fire. The air hazed white and it was so intense that it looked like fire, but it wasn’t hot.

It was the first time Jon felt the dragon’s breath up close, and Jon suddenly felt the temperature plummet even further. The backdraft was so cold it scalded his skin.

The dragonfire was colder than anything he had ever imagined. It was so cold that the rocks cracked and snapped, while the frost scoured everything clean. The cold steam billowed like smoke – white mist scorching over the rocks and snow. It was so cold that the stones were still crackling.

The dragon’s breath was so cold it burnt. If he had been unwise enough to put his hand in it, he had no doubt his hand would have snapped off. The dragon’s breath was icefire, he realised, and it was beyond freezing.

Its breath had left spikes of ice as sharp as needles scattered around it, pointing away from the dragon’s jaws like sharp daggers. In an instant, it froze the moisture in the air into spikes. The rocks were still hissing and crackling from the intense, concentrated cold while the icy mist caused him to shiver.

“… You breathe cold.” The statement felt so dumb. He was trembling even more. “You breathe cold… Of course you do. Ice dragon, breathes cold.”

Despite himself, Jon felt a chuckle hit his throat. The venom was making him woozy. He was chuckling even as his hands trembled. “… You breathe cold…”

His body was trembling. Slowly, Jon moved to put his hand against the dragon’s scale, on its torso. The dragon didn’t twitch. He could feel its quiet, steady breathing.

Even through his glove, the dragon’s body felt cool. Not freezing cold, just cool.

No fire then. Not today.

Jon took a deep breath, pulling his furs up further and cocooning himself in his cloak. It would be a cold night, but there was nothing for it. He needed to rest; the adrenaline and battle fury bled away so quickly he felt ready to collapse on the spot.

The dragon needed to rest too. It was exhausted and tired – it had been fighting for days. It needed to rest and it needed to heal.

Jon stared upwards at the dragon’s wings. Its left wing was still injured. It couldn’t fly. It needed time to heal, and that meant that it needed a place of safety. There was little safety around in the north these days.

For a heartbeat, Jon debated trying to bring it to the three-eyed crow. Still, the greenseer would not want him to, and the dragon most certainly could not fit in the tunnels. Jon needed a safe place, a place where the dragon could be protected.

The Wall was an attractive option. South of it, he would not need to worry about the Others. Still – the Wall was seven hundred feet high and the dragon couldn’t fly. They would be trapped at the foot of Wall, unable to fit through the tunnels. Then there was the issue of the sworn brothers; he had no idea how to even explain all that had happened since he had first left with Qhorin. They must think I’m dead, Jon quietly thought. It had been months.
How will the Night’s Watch react if I tried to bring an injured ice dragon into the realm? Jon wasn’t too keen to find out, and he wasn’t even sure if he could stop the dragon from terrorising innocent citizens. This dragon was immense, as large as any from the stories and histories that Luwin had taught him. If it chose to hunt humans it could not be stopped. Until Jon was sure he could control it, it would be too dangerous to bring it into the north.

No, he decided. I need somewhere secluded, but safe. Somewhere I can learn how to tame the dragon. Somewhere the dragon has time to heal. Somewhere we can protect ourselves from the Others.

He could only think of one place; the most easily defendable location in the North. A place surrounded by a natural harbour, with enough seals and walruses off the coast it could even feed a dragon. It was even close enough to the Wall that they could cross around it if they had to.

“Hardhome,” Jon decided finally. “We must go to Hardhome.”

So far as he knew, the peninsula was deserted. Once, it had been the closest thing the wildlings had ever had to a true town, but then Hardhome had been razed and all its people slain. Nobody was quite sure what happened. The wildlings avoided the place now – they considered the peninsula cursed.

But Hardhome would be secluded, defendable, and close to the Wall.

They could outrun the Others through the Haunted Forest towards the coast. The wildlings had whispered that the Others’ forces came from the Lands of Always Winter, towards the northwest. Heading southeast as far as possible seemed like a plan.

The Others still hadn’t moved their forces in bulk. Even at the battle of the Frostfangs, Jon doubted if there had been any more than five hundred wights, and far fewer Others. The Haunted Forest had seen white walkers, but there couldn’t be many of them. Perhaps those were only scouts or outriders, in fact.

From Hardhome, I could go to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. Maybe I could even cross over to Skagos…

He took a deep breath, trying to focus himself. There was no shelter on the mountainside, instead he had to press up against the dragon to escape from the wind. He crawled under its wing, pressing near its chest. He was a bit scared that the dragon might shift and crush him, but the ice dragon seemed to be sound asleep. Its breaths were deep and even, sonorous in a way that reminded him of a blacksmith’s bellows.

Jon propped his head up against the dragon’s scales, letting his eyes drift out over the mountain. The sun was foggy behind the clouds, but it felt late. The dragon wasn’t warm, but it was welcome shelter.

Strangely, Jon felt better the longer he touched the dragon’s hide. He could still feel the cold, but it didn’t have the same edge to it. Like the cold didn’t hurt him in the same way.

Jon took a deep breath. He knew he should stay awake, but his eyes felt so heavy and it was hard to even concentrate.

The dragon’s snoring was a low rumble, so deep it felt like a shiver running down Jon’s spine.

“… You should have a name,” Jon said, mostly to himself. It felt like the dragon needed a name. “I don’t know what your old name was, but I suppose you need a new one.”
His head tilted backwards, thinking quietly. A great dragon of white and red, one that could breathe ice colder than any storm…

“Winter,” Jon said after a pause. *Winter is coming*, his family’s words. It was the only word that seemed appropriate. “… You are winter.”

It took him a while to remember the Valyrian word for winter. The time passed by in drowsy silence, until he eventually figured it out.

“Sonagon,” Jon said, just as his eyelids began to close. “Your name is Sonagon…”

…

Jon was woken early by a stinging pain. His eyelids flickered, he winced. After a moment, he realised that there was a raven on his shoulder, it was pecking his face.

*The greenseer*, Jon realised, slowly coming awake. He had to shake away some of his exhaustion, and then he heard the noise in the air.

The air was filled with the sounds of ravens fluttering around him. The birds cawed noisily, pecking at his cheek and Jon could only stare weakly as he gathered up the strength to move. The greenseer said that he would try to hold the Others back from giving chasing, but Jon doubted he would be able to do so for long. *We need to move.*

He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate. He found Ghost again quickly. His direwolf had survived the battle with little but a mildly injured rump, but had been forced to take a different path. The direwolf was circling around these mountains to avoid the wights, and Jon guessed they would see one another soon.

Phantom was harder to find. The shadowcat had almost managed to slip away from him whilst he slept, it had fled further than Ghost. Jon had to struggle to pull Phantom in again, but then ordered both animals to come towards him.

Jon clenched a fist, testing his chilled fingers. He let out a breath, and his body was shivering. The ravens were still cawing around him. *The dead must be close*, Jon realised, eyeing the birds. He would have to hurry.

He tried to stand, and then staggered over himself. He felt stiff, and weak. *I’m cold*. His furs were good, but not so good to last exposed to the elements. His wounds had barely swollen shut, but he still had bruises and any injuries could easily fester.

*And I’m starving*, Jon realised, listening to his stomach growl. He hadn’t eaten since the battle, and he had no rations with him. *God, so hungry…*

A raven popped onto his knee, absolutely fearlessly, staring with knowing eyes.

Jon paused. He stared at the raven. “… Sorry about this, crow,” Jon said with a sigh, before reaching out to grab the bird. The raven trembled as Jon snapped its neck. The other ravens around him didn’t seemed to mind. Jon had never eaten raw raven before, but he was hungry enough to make do. It was a bad taste, but in the moment the warmth of its blood made him gasp.

He handled his injuries as best as he could, before staggering upwards and wondering what he was supposed to do now.

Above Sonagon’s deep, throaty breath caused a mist of cold air evaporate across the ground. *The
dragon is hungry too, Jon knew. Starving, actually. Sonagon’s breath became hoarser when it was hungry.

“Easy,” Jon said cautiously, approaching Sonagon. “We’ve got to move. This direction. Come on, we can’t rest now, we’ve got to go that way.”

The dragon didn’t move. For such a large animal, it stopped to rest frequently and often. It spent most of the day coiled and resting. Jon cursed quietly.

“The Others could catch up to us any day now!” Jon ordered. “The Others. The wights. The dead. They nearly killed you once, you can’t let them catch us again. We’ve got to move now! Before nightfall – move!”

Black beady eyes stared at him. The dragon didn’t twitch. For a moment, Jon debated whether he should try to force another warg with it to get it moving, but then he heard a long, slow growl rumble in the dragon’s throat.

Jon hesitated for a brief moment, before cursing and limping away. There was a dangerous tone to the dragon’s growl.

The dragon isn’t the most vulnerable one here, Jon thought, struggling to move. I’m far more likely to die before the dragon does. Jon needed shelter and warmth more than the dragon did. There was so little of either to be had on the mountainside.

His bad leg felt stiff, causing him to stumble. Think, Jon cursed. I need to find a place to set up camp, to make a fire, to tend to my wounds. I’m not going to last long like this…

The thought of the dead elk caused him to stir. I’m not going to last on foot, he decided. Not when I’m bleeding strength. I need a mount, something to carry me.

Around him, the ravens cawed. His hands clenched, trying to focus, staring at the ravens as they circled around him. Jon half collapsed into the snow, gasping for breath as he focused on one of the birds.

The raven was well-used to warging, like a well-worn glove, but it was still difficult for Jon to pull himself into him. The bird’s senses were fluttery and wild, so flickering and Jon could barely make sense of it. The raven wasn’t grounded; it threatened to pull Jon away, as if the connection between them might snap and his consciousness could get lost.

Still, Jon was desperate enough to risk it. He used the raven’s eyes to scout out around the mountainside, sweeping over rocky cliffs, trying to find movement. Jon wasn’t so sure what he was looking for, but then he saw a shape clambering easily over the rocks. Through a raven’s blurry vision, Jon barely recognised the goat hobbling over the cliffs.

A goat. A mountain goat, Jon thought. A goat would do.

He gasped as he pulled himself back to his body. It took all of his strength to pull himself up urgently, rushing in the direction he had seen the animal moving. He left Sonagon behind him, the dragon still snoozing on the rocks.

Jon found the goat fairly quickly. It was a large mountain goat; a slightly aging male with white fur tinged with black around the neck, snow brushed into its woolly fur, and large, curved horns protruding backwards from its head. The goat stood perhaps up to his shoulder, yet it was bulky and hardy enough to survive the harsh climate. Jon saw the goat hobbling easily over the rocks, moving across the mountains. It must have seen the dragon pass, he realised. It’s fleeing from the
dragon.

He stared, feeling his legs threaten to give out. *I need a mount.*

Jon got close enough to hear it bleat as Jon reached out towards it with his mind. The goat protested, trembled and tried to instinctively run. Phantom had tried to lash out, the goat just galloped away. Jon’s hold nearly broke, but he was desperate enough to force onwards, pulling himself further into the animal’s skin.

The goat felt different. It was prey; its skin felt long and hollow. Jon was so used to the sharpness and focus of predators like Ghost and Phantom; but the goat saw the world in terms of fear and threats, as if there could be hunters hiding behind every corner. It was a way of viewing the world that was totally alien; like being scared was in its nature. Jon sagged, struggling to wrap himself around the goat’s body. The goat didn’t try to fight back, it just ran from him – making the goat’s presence feel so soft and mushy that Jon could barely hold onto it.

With Phantom, the shadowcat had fought violently, but as soon as Jon had defeated it he was in control. With the goat, it was harder, it took longer. Instead, Jon had to take the goat’s body slowly, piece by piece until there was nowhere to run. First, he worked on just holding on to it, keeping the goat in his third eye, and then slowly pulling himself into its senses, and into the animal’s limbs.

By the time Jon was finally in control, his human body had already collapsed. The goat felt easier to control than a shadowcat, but also far, far more exhausting. Still, Jon turned the goat around and back towards him, feeling the way he bounded over sharp rocks on nimble hooves. His legs were strong, his hooves flexible enough to easily clutch onto the narrowest ledge, while the goat bounded over the rocks as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Jon was gasping for breath by the time he was finally able to touch the goat. He could feel its thick, rough fur in his fingers. Through great force of will, he managed to hold the animal still as Jon levered his body over his back, clutching onto the goat’s horns to steady himself. The goat was the size of a pony, but nowhere near as docile. The goat wasn’t a trained mount; instead Jon had to constantly force the goat to behave when every instinct the goat had ordered him to throw the human off and run.

Jon felt the goat internally scream in panic as Jon’s weight dropped onto it. *The goat isn’t as strong as a horse or an elk either,* Jon thought with a gulp. The goat struggled to carry a human’s weight. Still, there was no choice.

What little consciousness he had left, Jon struggled to think of a name for the goat. For some reason he couldn’t quite explain, it felt like the goat deserved a name.

“… Hullen,” Jon decided. The hard, rugged old goat reminded him of the old master of horses back at Winterfell. Jon had good memories of Hullen – the old man had always treat him fairly, and taught him to ride his first ever steed. “I’m going to call you Hullen.”

Jon nearly collapsed on the animal’s back, still clutching the horns, while his mind took over the goat’s body and carried him through the mountainside. The goat proved unmatched at clambering over harsh terrain, even where there was no path, and Jon made good time he finally found a clearing of pines and brambles over a frozen mountain stream.

It was dusk by the time Jon finally got a fire going, nestling himself into the clearing while Hullen foraged in the hills and Jon loaded up his satchel with as much kindling, berries and fresh water he could carry. He washed his wounds out, cleaning the injuries and then cauterising the deepest of
the cuts by heating Dark Sister up over the fire, and scolding the burning blade against injured skin. It wasn’t the nicest way to treat injuries, but Jon had no time for anything else.

He spent the rest of the night sleeping, while he pulled his mind into Hullen to scout out the surroundings.

In the distance, at night, he heard Sonagon roar.

The next morning, weary but feeling stronger, Jon mounted up the goat again and he returned back along the mountain to the dragon’s side.

The giant beast had barely moved down the mountain from where Jon had left it the previous day. Sonagon’s body was still lumbering and weak. The dragon glared at Jon hungrily as he approached on his goat, those dark eyes feral and vicious.

_The dragon had been attacked by wights during the night_, Jon realised. _Not many, but a few – probably scouts sent searching the mountainside for them._ The wights must have ambushed Sonagon as it slept; and then climbed onto the dragon’s head where Sonagon struggled to shake them off.

_The wights went for Sonagon's eyes_, Jon thought, staring at the new scratches across the dragon’s snout; _the wights must have tried to gouge out its eyes._ They hadn’t succeeded, but they came close. Jon wondered what it would be like to wake up to find tiny undead, clawing monsters scrambling on your face.

_If those were scouts, then the Others know where the dragon is_, Jon thought with a grimace. _If the Others really did warg into their wights, then there is a white walker right now directing even more wights to Sonagon’s location. Anything one wight sees, they all see._

Jon stumbled as he dismounted Hullen. “Dragon!” Jon shouted, staring into its beady eyes. “We need to move! There will be more coming!”

It was watching him, but it wasn’t moving. Jon raised his voice, but it still barely echoed over the mountainside. “Do you understand?!” he shouted. “We’re both in danger here! We have to move!”

There was nothing but steady breathing. Jon cursed quietly, wondering what he was supposed to do now. For a while, Jon milled around the dragon, trying to find some way of moving it.

_I need to control it_, he decided finally. He closed his eyes and tried to warg with it, but then he heard the dragon’s breathing freeze. Jon stared at the dragon’s eye. Those eyes were sharp, threatening. _It’s alert, and angry._

After a long moment, Jon hesitated, retreated backwards and mounted Hullen to move a safe distance away.

Sonagon didn’t like it when Jon forced a warg with it. The dragon wasn’t a goat; it could quite easily kill him if Jon pushed it too far.

The rest of the day was spent in awkward uncertainty. Jon mounted Hullen, while he uncertainly reached out to Ghost and Phantom to watch for wights, but most of his time was spent struggling to figure out what to do.

Jon learnt quickly the subtle signs that kept him alive. The way the dragon would growl and snap, warning Jon to keep his distance. When the dragon was resting or tired Jon could come close, but it was safe to be cautious. The dragon was not a tame creature; even if it could be friendly – on
occasion – but it would never obey. Jon had to treat it like he would an injured bear or wolf; respect it, but always be on guard.

Sonagon moved at its own pace. It didn’t wait for Jon, and it didn’t ask permission. Ghost would stay by Jon’s side, while Sonagon always just expected Jon to stay by its.

The first time the dragon started moving again, Jon jumped as it nearly crushed him when it stood up. The dragon staggered of the ground and moved with great, earth-rumbling stamps each time it moved its legs. It didn’t even walk quickly, but its gait was so long that Jon still fell behind.

Without Hullen, Jon would never have kept up with it. The dragon was large enough to clamber over rocks and cliffs that even Hullen had to try and gingerly traverse, particularly when carrying a human. It was only because the dragon stopped to rest or sniff that Jon could keep up.

The first two days Jon was afraid he was going to lose it again – that it would go off its own way and get trapped once more. Jon tried shouting and ordering it, but Sonagon would always just dismiss him.

Only when they warged did Jon feel like he had any measure of control over the creature. Still, Sonagon wasn’t like Ghost. Jon could slip into Ghost’s skin anytime at will, but the dragon was much more selective. Sonagon would choose when and where Jon was allowed to warg with it.

It was hard work. Dangerous work. Sometimes, when Sonagon started snarling and growling, Jon would be forced to back away a safe distance. The more irritable Sonagon became, the more care Jon had to take.

Jon stuck to the goat’s back across most of the mountainside, but it was difficult. When he had to control Hullen nearly constantly, he had so little concentration left to keep the leash on Phantom. He left Phantom patrolling across a ravine in the distance, but the shadowcat was constantly slipping away and Jon struggled to bring her back.

He left Hullen to forage to regain some strength, while Jon lingered on the snow, wondering what to do. *The wights will be on us soon*, he thought. *Sonagon is getting weaker every day, I can’t control him, and I won’t be able to fight the wights off.*

Suddenly, there was cawing in distance. Ravens. Jon saw four birds circling over the cliffs, cawing to attract attention. The ravens would come and go, but Jon knew that the three-eyed crow was always working with him in the background. Jon hesitated for a long time, but he followed the ravens.

He summoned Hullen to carry him through the snow. The goat was tiring as well. They reached the bottom of the cliffside, when slowly Jon heard the trumpeting echo through the air. Behind him, Jon noticed Sonagon perk up at that sound.

The sound of a mammoth’s cry, Jon realised. Jon kept on heading in the direction, and behind him the ground shuddered as the dragon pulled himself up to follow. It was the first time Sonagon followed Jon.

They reached at a snowy basin between the mountains, where the rocks met the plains, when he saw the mammoth marching weakly across the snow. A great beast larger than any horse – standing fifteen feet off the ground, with shaggy moulted brown fur and huge, hooked tusks that draped over the snow. Compared to Sonagon the mammoth was tiny, but it was still a huge lumbering beast. Jon stared in awe at the great woolly mammoth, noticing how the mammoth limped. It was injured too – Jon saw old, rusted arrows and blades jutting out of the mammoth’s
A giant clan, Jon recalled the greenseer mentioning. The three-eyed crow took control of the giant’s mammoths to sacrifice them as a distraction against the Others.

From the looks of things, this must have been one of the mammoths that had managed to survive. It escaped the Others, but it was struggling to move. The mammoth was weak, injured, and dying.

But the three-eyed crow is still inside it, he realised. The greenseer must have directed it towards me for some reason, maybe as a mount or a–

Without warning, Sonagon snapped. Jon could barely even fall to the snow in time as the dragon bounded over him. He gasped as the great mass of white scales shot overhead. Hullen bleated in pure panic, breaking free of Jon’s control briefly. The mammoth only managed to give out a short, strangled cry.

Oh. The dragon needs feeding, he thought dumbly. The greenseer must have directed the wounded mammoth to Jon because he knew the dragon was starving.

Jon stared in shock as the dragon’s breath burst in a concentrated white blast before the mammoth could even run. Sonagon dropped onto the beast without hesitation, even as the dragonfire turned the mammoth into cracking ice. In an instant, the mammoth turned into a cracking frozen statue, and then Sonagon’s claws and teeth were crunching through it. Sharp teeth snapped through the frozen meat, swallowing chunks in huge, galloping breath.

It eats its meat frozen, Jon realised. The ice dragon uses its breath to freeze its prey before eating it. There was barely anything left of the mammoth by the time Sonagon was done. The dragon had a large appetite; a fully-grown mammoth was a good-sized meal for it.

Jon was still staring in dumb shock and faint awe at the patch of scorched ground that used to be a mammoth. The dragon growled lowly with a final gulp, before turning to lumber away.

He wondered briefly how quickly Sonagon could eat a human on a goat, but there was nothing for it except to follow.

Later that night, Sonagon was content. It still lumbered and panted, but the much needed meal helped a lot. The dragon didn’t growl as much, and Jon spent a long time inspecting the dragon closer.

It’s an animal, he thought. A huge, magnificent animal, but still just an animal. All animals need the same things; they need to be fed, they need to be kept safe, and they needed to be kept well.

That night, Jon stared upwards at the ravens cawing around him, and he started to plan. He looked at the snow-covered mountain goat, thinking about the horses at Winterfell.

Jon remembered how Hullen used had to act each time they brought in a new, temperamental stallion. Hullen used to brag that he could handle even the foulest stallion, but there was no secret to it except patience and experience. Hullen had never been forceful with his charges, but he would always be present. Hullen could wait and sit by a horse’s side for hours, calming and reassuring it with his presence. The trick to horsemanship is patience, Hullen had always said. I’ve got to be patient, Jon thought.

He gathered up all his determination, even as he was still limping on his bad leg. By morning, Jon had a plan.
He stuck by the dragon’s side for as long as he could, trying to keep pace on his goat. Every time the dragon relaxed, Jon attempted to warg with it again. Jon wasn’t forceful, always soothing. Whenever the dragon had its moods, Jon would go a safe distance and try to meditate to reach it.

Jon had no idea how the Targaryens of old would tame dragons. He had heard that Valyrians used to use sorcery, fire and whips to bind them. Jon was forced to try and tame a dragon with nothing but patience, and a power that he didn’t even understand.

The only thing that kept Jon alive was Ghost and Hullen. Without the goat, Jon would have been left behind on the mountainside to freeze, and without the direwolf Jon wouldn’t be able to survive.

He met up with Ghost four days after the fight with the wights. Jon kept Phantom away from him to watch for pursuers over the mountain and to take care of any wight strugglers, but it was Ghost that took care of Jon.

Jon started warging into the direwolf more than ever now, relying on Ghost more and more. He used Ghost to alert him about the route, even to bring Jon meat enough to eat while Jon was busy chasing after Sonagon. Ghost could catch snow hares, one a time a fox, and bring the meat back to Jon in his jaws. Still, Jon knew it couldn’t last; Ghost was getting weary too, and not even Ghost could take care of a human as well as himself forever in the harsh terrain.

On the sixth day, Sonagon stopped to rest by an icy canyon and didn’t move again for nearly ten hours. Its breathing was deep and thick, but also faster than normal. Weaker. Its strength was fading.

It was only when Jon saw the wounds across its hide and legs that he realised why. The dragon’s injuries were sapping its strength.

Sonagon needed treatment, and Jon so added dragon care onto the list of things he knew nothing about, but would have to figure out.

The first time Jon touched one of Sonagon’s wounds – an arrow embedded between its scales on its right hind leg – Sonagon hissed and flinched. It took three hours of reassurance before Jon was allowed to come near it again.

Jon pulled the arrow out as gingerly as possible, causing the dragon to hiss and snap dangerously. He was vaguely surprised to see that Sonagon’s blood was thick and coloured white like milk – so white it was barely visible on its scales and snow – and that the blood ran so cold that the wound would freeze shut. Still, Jon pulled out four more arrows, as well as the broken blade of an axe, and slowly he was allowed near the other injuries.

Many of the injuries were so high up on the dragon’s massive body that Jon had climb up the dragon’s scales to reach them. It was perilous work, particularly given Sonagon’s temperament. Jon pulled out everything from broken sword tips to ice spider fangs, and he cleaned and tended the wounds as best he could. Bandages were nearly impossible due to the dragon’s size, so Jon just had to make do.

It was long, tiring and awkward work because of Sonagon’s size. Jon spent all day working on it.

Eventually, Sonagon even unfurled its wings slightly, and Jon saw the painful gashes on its right wing that stopped the dragon from flying. There were cuts straight through leathery skin, even arrows sticking through its wings. Those were much more difficult and awkward to treat. Jon cut out the arrows and even tried to bandage what he could, but there was little he could do for the gashes through its wings.
Maybe if I had a very large needle and rope strong enough, and I was feeling very, very brave, I could try to stitch them shut, Jon thought despondently. Would the wing wounds ever heal? If a bird’s wings were clipped badly enough, then it could be grounded for life.

Still, Sonagon wasn’t a bird. Its wings were far too big to be bare skin and bone – occasionally Jon saw the wounds on the wings bleed, and there were long muscles all the way across the wing that could clench the leathery skin together. If there was blood flowing through the wings, it made Jon think that eventually the wound might close and the wings would heal.

The wings are a huge vulnerability for a dragon, Jon realised. They were big, hard to protect, and if they were damaged they would ground the dragon. Jon supposed it made sense that dragons would have some way of eventually healing from wing injuries – otherwise even slight holes on a wing could be fatal for large dragons. The muscles in the wings could contract, and the wounds would eventually close as the skin regrew. Perhaps I could find some way of clamping the skin together to help it heal? Jon mused. Some sort of bandage to help the dragon fly again?

There were exactly ninety-seven wounds scattered across the dragon’s huge body. Jon knew because he counted and inspected every single one.

He spent a long time inspecting the dragon and its injuries. Trying to learn everything about, trying to think how he could help it heal. Even as the dragon slept, Jon was still inspecting it, his head whirring.

Jon reminded how hard it had been looking after Ghost when he was pup. He remembered his father warning him how much care any animal required. Jon supposed that a fully-grown dragon would require a thousand times more care than a wolf. Jon knew in his bones how difficult that would be.

I’ve doing it wrong, Jon sighed. I’ve been trying to take control of him with skinchanging, just expecting the dragon to follow my commands.

Sonagon expected differently; you had to look after it before it would allow you to control it.

“My duty,” Jon said, to the icy silence. “My responsibility. It’s my duty to look after him.”

Firstly, food. The mammoth had helped, but the dragon had still gone hungry far too long. Jon closed his eyes and slipped into Ghost’s skin as he started to hunt.

He knew Sonagon had trouble feeding himself. Dragons simply weren’t meant to hunt on the ground – Sonagon was too large; he would scare away prey before he could hunt them. Previously, Jon suspected that Sonagon had been surviving by eating the wights, but he needed good food. The dragon was out of his element. Sonagon’s sense of smell was impressive, but he was also unfamiliar with the environment. Sonagon’s nose could smell the ocean a hundred miles away, but it couldn’t pick out the scent of prey in the trees.

However, Ghost could. Ghost was a natural tracker and hunter in the cold. Jon prowled in Ghost’s skin all night, searching for food. By morning, Jon opened his eyes again.

“This way!” Jon ordered, half-swatting Sonagon on the neck to wake him. The dragon stirred slowly. “Food. Let’s go eat. Food.”

There was a low growl from Sonagon, and Jon grimaced but retreated a safe distance. He kept on trying to stir Sonagon by reaching out with the warg. It took three hours to finally convince the dragon to stand up, and another three hours to convince him to follow Jon. Jon mounted Hullen,
careful to keep the dragon behind him.

Still, even the dragon picked up slightly when they got close enough to recognise the smell. They headed down to a snowy valley, and eventually even Jon saw the tracks leading towards a small cave hidden in the rocks.

The snow bear was a large, impressive beast. It stood thirteen feet tall when reared up, as large as the one Varamyr used to ride on. The bear should have been the top predator – it wasn’t used to ever having to hide or cower – but it had never met a dragon before.

The bear tried to take shelter in its cave as Sonagon approached, but it was useless. Sonagon didn’t even need to claw it out, the dragon just took a deep breath and breathing sub-zero air straight in to the cave. The cold breath left the rocks cracking, and the bear broke into a frozen statue while the dragon dragged it out. Jon watched in quiet amazement. The scene made Jon shiver.

It was over quickly. The snow bear was a large creature, a good meal even for Sonagon, but the dragon still gulped it quickly, crunching through icy meat. The dragon growled in satisfaction.

After that, Jon thought that maybe Sonagon started to follow him more easily. Between the mammoth and then the bear, the dragon started to realise that Jon could lead him to food.

They kept on moving, heading east over the Frostfangs for as long as Hullen could manage. Jon took care to change direction regularly, trying to throw off any pursuers.

The next day, Jon left Sonagon alone and followed a trail on his own. Ghost led him straight to a large deer foraging in the woods. Jon shot at it with his bow and wounded the deer, and Ghost eagerly chased it down. Afterwards, Jon used his sword to carve the deer, cutting off two legs – one for Jon to roast and the other for Ghost to eat – while Jon skinned the kill but left the rest of the meat alone.

This time, Sonagon came eagerly. The dragon happily responded to Jon’s warg, and then gobbled up the remainder of the deer in a single bite. Later, Sonagon rested peacefully, allowing Jon to stay close while he slept. Jon stitched the deer’s hide to create a makeshift bandage, for the deepest and worst of Sonagon’s wounds.

Later that night, the wights finally tracked them down again. Jon saw them coming through Phantom’s eyes, and he moved to ambush them. Four wights.

His sword sliced the first one’s skull open. After that, he jumped down onto the wights in the pitch black of night, with a torch in one hand and Dark Sister swinging in the other.

“My dragon is sleeping,” Jon growled. Rotten blood splashed through the air. “Please don’t disturb him.”

It was getting easier to kill the wights. Jon was learning how to fight them. They could easily take you off guard with their strength and endurance, but the trick was to go for the limbs first. Completely kill them wasn’t necessary – a good sword could sever their legs and then they would be left useless. Generally, the wights were so unguarded that they left themselves wide open for attack. The only difficulty was standing strong against their unhuman strength.

Jon tried to take out their eyes first, so the white walkers would have trouble tracking him through them.

He took care of the creatures quickly – cutting off their arms and legs and leaving their possessed bodies to squirm. Two of them were rotten black, but one of the bodies was good enough for
Phantom stripped the cold meat of the bones. The wights were foul meat that Jon refused to touch, but when hungry enough Phantom had no such qualms. The meat still wriggled slightly even as the shadowcat chewed it.

A pattern emerged. Jon could control Hullen by day to carry him, and he controlled Phantom by night to hunt down wights. The challenge was keeping the shadowcat and the goat separate. Ghost tended to Jon’s call constantly.

By day, Jon waited for Sonagon to walk, trying to learn the dragon’s habits. It was slow going out of the mountains, but they made do. The ravens still guided the way, saving Jon’s life more than once. Jon changed routes constantly, trying to throw off the wights that would be following them.

Jon scouted out the path ahead, and when the dragon was ready Jon would simply gently push him – like Jon was simply extending out an invitation for the dragon to follow.

The route of the mountains was slow, and exhausting. Jon was working on less than two hours sleep most days, with little time to rest. He was too busy tending to the dragon’s wounds, following the dragon, tracking down prey for the dragon, even protecting it from wights that tried to pursue the dragon.

“… You wouldn’t be able to survive out here by yourself, would you?” Jon muttered, glancing to the dragon. “You’re big and strong, but you wouldn’t be able to hunt or avoid the wights without me. I don’t think you would have lasted this long without me.” He took deep pants, feeling the cold ache in his bones. “… I think you need me, and I think you’re starting to realise that too.”

He took a few labouring steps, before sighing. “… Then again,” Jon conceded. “… I wouldn’t have survived out here by myself either.”

Nothing changed for the next four days. For the most part Sonagon acted as if he didn’t even notice Jon’s efforts. Like the dragon simply expected Jon to serve it.

_Dragons are worse than cats_, he thought with a grimace. _They expect servitude instinctively_.

Then, one day, when Hullen was out foraging and Jon was too exhausted to walk over the rough terrain proved too hard for his bad leg, Sonagon halted suddenly. Jon stared, but the dragon stopped moving hundred feet ahead.

_He’s waiting for me to catch up_, Jon realised. It was the very first sign that maybe the dragon appreciated his efforts too.

Later, Sonagon didn’t even object when Jon tried to climb up its neck again. It was the first time Jon tried to mount Sonagon since they escaped from the Others. The ice dragon was almost (not quite, but almost) patient as Jon clambered upwards to grip its horn. Jon’s heart was in mouth, clutching onto Sonagon’s horn as the great dragon lumbered.

That day, Jon left Hullen behind. The goat could forage for longer by the mountainside while Jon rode on Sonagon’s head.

The journey was easier, too. Sonagon walked slowly for a beast his size, and thrashed his head less. Jon’s mouth hung agape as he watched the rocky landscape drift by from the top of the dragon’s head.

He could see the mountains and rock breaking more and more into pine forests as they headed out of the Frostfangs.
The days became easier. Still rough, but more regular. Jon would scout, hunt and plan ahead as the
dragon was resting, but while when they were moving Jon was allowed to climb on as Sonagon
would carry him. He rotated between Ghost, Phantom and Hullen, using each animal whenever he
was indisposed.

*I’ve survived in the wilderness with no human contact for over a month and a half now,* Jon mused.
It was a feat that even Qhorin Halfhand would have been proud of.

The Frostfangs was not an easy terrain, and it took a direwolf, a goat and a shadowcat, and
supernatural assistance from a flock of ravens to keep Jon alive.

The days ticked by in slow, rough living and constant movement. The Others might be scouring the
land for them, but the Frostfangs were big enough to even hide a dragon.

Every time he could, at every free moment, Jon closed his eyes and tried to connect to the dragon.
Sonagon was constantly suspicious each time that Jon extended the warg, but he forced himself to
stay patient, non-threatening.

And slowly, very slowly, Sonagon let Jon slip under his skin.

Every time he did, it took his breath away.

*Sonagon sees the world on a different scale,* Jon realised. He sees colours in terms of hot and cold,
he can smell wind currents and storms miles away. The dragon was like no other beast Jon had
ever encountered.

During the dreams, they connected more and more. Jon saw visions, vague, blurry old memories,
of flying over cold seas and unfamiliar lands. One time, he even felt his skin tingle with the feeling
of immense noise, the ground rumbling and great plumes of fire rising upwards from the earth…

He shivered. *Sonagon’s memories. I can see the dragon’s memories.*

“The Doom,” Jon said aloud, to the empty night. “You were there, at the Doom of Valyria.”

There was no reply. The darkness was nearly pitch black. Jon stared at the dragon’s great hide.
*White on red.* His scales are white with red veins. Jon thought about the memories, and the visions
from Sonagon’s dreams.

“The greenseer said that dragons are creatures of magic,” he muttered. “The Valyrian dragons were
creatures of fire, and they burnt in the Doom…”

He stared at Sonagon, inspecting it. “But you weren’t always an ice dragon, were you? That’s how
you survived. You turned from fire to ice.”

He thought about it for a while. The greenseer had said that dragons feed on magic, yet they were
also shaped by it. Jon pictured Sonagon’s white dragonfire and he wondered if it had always cold.

“*Red.* You used to be a red dragon,” Jon said. He tried to picture what Sonagon would have looked
like with red scales instead of white. Absentmindedly, he touched his hair. “And then you turned to
feed of cold instead of fire – you froze, your scales became white, your fire became cold, and you
became an ice dragon.”

There was no reply. Sonagon’s eyes were like saucers of pure blackness. Jon kept on thinking
about the dragon’s memories.
Occasionally, Jon just started to talk himself. He would just talk to his dragon about his own memories.

First, Jon would talk about Winterfell, about his family and his childhood. He could describe his brothers and sisters, although it had felt like so long that he wondered if they even looked the same. He described Robb, Bran, little Rickon, and wild Arya most of all. Then, he started to talk about Ghost and proudly tell stories about the direwolf. Then, he started to talk about his black brothers and the Night’s Watch, even mentioning Ygritte and Tormund once or twice.

Later, when they camped for the night, the stories wouldn’t stop. Sonagon wouldn’t make a noise, but his black eyes were staring at Jon intently.

He’s listening, Jon thought, and the realisation sent shivers down his spine. He’s listening to what I’m saying.

Jon didn’t know how he was so sure, but he was. Sonagon was intelligent – the dragon was listening to the words. It wasn’t a human intelligence, Jon didn’t think the dragon could actually understand the stories, but something about him made Jon suspect that the dragon understood more than he might think.

The thought made him smile softly. The air was quiet and still. No campfire, no noise, nothing except a cold night. Jon bundled up in furs as he stared into the great dragon’s eyes.

Jon struggled to think of more stories to tell. Strangely, the only one that came to mind were Old Nan’s tales.

“One time, thousands and thousands of years ago,” Jon said slowly, his voice feeling strangely frail in the quiet. “A winter fell that was cold and hard and lasted beyond all memory of man. Winter came, the snows fell a hundred feet deep, and then in the Long Nights the sun hid for years. Children were born, lived, and died in darkness. That was when the white walkers moved through the woods…”

Jon had heard the tale before as a child. He had never imagined, not even in his wildest nightmares, that he would end up living it.

“… that was when the last hero set out to seek the children. He set out into the dead lands with a sword, a horse, a dog and a dozen companions, searching for the children of the forest in their secret cities…” Jon paused in a moment of quiet reflection. “… One by one his friends died, and his horse, and finally even his dog, and his sword froze so hard the blade snapped when he tried to use it. And the Others smelled the hot blood in him and came silent on his trail, stalking him with packs of pale white spiders big as hounds…”

The story had always frightened him as a child. Now, he recited Old Nan’s tale word for word, and he felt nothing. The words faded into the air like wind. Sonagon didn’t make a sound.

Jon finished the tale. The fight against the Others – of the duel between the last hero and the Other’s King, with the fate of the world in the balance. How the last hero won, how the Night’s Watch was founded, and how they defeated the night in the Battle for the Dawn. For some reason, Jon didn’t quite believe that part of the story.

Old legends get muddled up, the stranger had said.

“The last hero ended the generation-long winter and sent the Others into retreat,” Jon finished. “And then Bran the Builder raised the Wall, seven hundred feet tall, to forever protect against the
cold and the Long Night.” Jon cocked his head at Sonagon in the dark. “And that’s the part where I think history has forgotten a bit or two. Because I think I know how Bran the Builder actually built the Wall.”

Jon smiled softly, thinking about the great Wall. A wall three hundred miles long and seven hundred fight tall. It was one of the greatest mysteries of the world how any man, even a legendary one, could have ever moved enough ice to build a wall that size.

“I think that Bran the Builder must have used ice dragons to build the Wall,” he said. “I think that it must have taken the breath of an ice dragon – hell, maybe several – to make a Wall of ice that big. So, I think that for thousands of years something built by ice dragons has protected the realm of man.”

Sonagon stared unblinking with dark eyes. He has black eyes, Jon noted. In the fanciful tales Old Nan used to tell about ice dragons, the ice dragons would always have blue eyes. “… and I can’t help thinking…” Jon continued, his voice barely a whisper. “… that thousands of years ago the ice dragons might have stopped the Long Night, and, now, when the cold and the dead are rising again, the final ice dragon appears too.”

Jon stared at the dragon with a gentle smile. Sonagon is winter, he decided.

Sometimes the dragon was as fierce and as vicious as the worst winter storm, but then other times he was a soft and as mellow as the crisp winter days, where the cold and snow wrapped around you like a cloak and the air was so clear that it was like the world paused. Jon was reminded of his old memories of winter – of epic snowball battles with Robb and long treks through the snow…

Jon closed his eyes and tried to share those memories with Sonagon too.

“… I think you’re going to save the world, Sonagon,” Jon whispered.

They sat, Jon talked and Sonagon listened, for a long time before they both finally fell asleep. They both dreamt of flying.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes:

This chapter was an absolute pain to write. I’m still not sure if I got it right, but it's been written and rewritten a few times now. Let me know what you think.

Also, in case you're wondering, I did go through a Valyrian dictionary (and yep, there really are Valyrian dictionaries!) to find a name for the ice dragon. Jon decided to name the dragon the Valyrian word for ‘winter’, and ended up calling it Sonagon.

Well, bit of a tangent; but the exact word for ‘winter’ in High Valyrian is actually 'sōnar'. The suffix ‘-gon’ is typically 'to do something' (e.g. sōvegon is 'to fly'). It means that, really, 'Sonagon' would mean more 'to winter'; which, I know, doesn't really make sense - but, well, Jon doesn't actually speak Valyrian. The way I view it, Jon tried to figure out Valyrian with only a few phrases (imagine knowing some vague Latin terms and trying to make sense of the language), so yes, he ended up mistranslating because Jon doesn't know the lexicon. That's how I justify him naming the dragon Sonagon.
And Sonagon just sounds much better as a name anyways...

Also, fair warning, my update schedule is going to become a bit more irregular towards Christmas.
At night...

**The Prince of the Nightfort**

It was a cold night. In the distance, they could hear the rumbling of storms, coming from the north. When the stormy winds buffered against the Wall, sometimes it felt like the whole earth was trembling. They could hear the wind howling over the Wall, a constant, dull shriek above them. The sound made Bran shiver.

“You should eat your stew, Bran,” said Jojen.

“I’m not hungry,” Bran replied.

“You’re lying,” Jojen said. “We might not have rabbit again for a while. You should eat.”

Bran stared at the bowl of rabbit stew. Bran had watched Jojen cook it. After they stripped the good meat off the bones, everything that was leftover went into a stew. Everything from bones to brain to organs, all mashed into the same stew with turnip and a sprinkling of herbs. A beggar’s stew, Meera called it – for the times when food was so scarce that absolutely nothing could go to waste.

They were all wearing thin. The days and nights trapped at the Nightfort had not been kind. Bran had spent three days solid on the same patch of cold stone, staring upwards at the weirwood tree above him.

Meera kept busy hunting and scouting. Jojen meditated, or cooked. Even Hodor helped to clear the abandoned buildings, searching for old chunks of metal that could make ice picks, or stripping hemp that could be woven into rope. Meera had been talking for a while about crafting enough rope and a cradle to carry Bran up the Wall, and carry him down. Like he was some sort of infant that needed a crib.

Everyone kept busy, except for Bran – the useless little prince lying on the floor.

And, slowly, the thought that had turned from an idle curiosity began to loom larger and larger in his mind. He was obsessing over it, and he couldn’t stop. *Maybe I don’t have to be Bran Stark anymore…*

Jojen looked at him, as if he was reading his mind. “You can’t take another body, Bran,” he said.

“Why not?” Bran demanded. “I take Summer’s.”

“You *borrow* Summer’s body. What you’re talking about is stealing.”

Bran didn’t reply. “… I’ve been practising, you know,” he said slowly. “On rats and crows. It’s getting easier. It takes a while, but…”
“You think you could cross the Wall if you had another body.”

Bran nodded.

“And what about your current body?”

“It’s broken, isn’t it?” he snapped. He remembered how Sansa used to throw out her old dolls when they cracked.

“If you take a new body,” Jojen said slowly. “Then you wouldn’t be Bran Stark anymore.”

*Maybe I don’t want to be Bran Stark anymore,* he almost said.

“Please Bran,” Jojen continued. “You are a Stark, and that’s important. *You* are important. Leave these thoughts behind.”

Bran never did. The storm lasted for two more days. The rain scattered over the Wall, leaking through the broken roof of the Nightfort. The weather was so treacherous that they all huddled together in the dark kitchen, taking what little shelter the cracked ceiling offered.

In a way, Bran was the only one who was free. Bran could move into Summer whenever he wanted. He could even manage the rats or birds, if he really focused; but only to an extent. Those animals were difficult – they had to be forced. Squeezing himself into a rat’s skin felt almost like crushing the animal in his palm.

One night, Bran found a rat – an old grey rat that lingered by his feet long enough for him to grab its skin. For the next day and a half, almost continuously, Bran skittered around rubble and dark passages of the ruined castle. He stared through the rat’s beady, half-blind eyes, from a perspective that he hadn’t even been able to imagine.

By the time Bran finally pulled himself out of the rat, he felt the creature just keel over as soon as he left. The rat gasped for breath, twitched, and then died. It was like whatever mind it had had been crushed when Bran entered it, and when Bran left its body died too. Bran might as well have stepped on that rat when he pushed himself into its body.

Bran didn’t stop thinking about what that might be like. Whenever he went into a new body, there was always that link to his old one – the connection that pulled him back to his original skin, like a ship’s anchor. He didn’t truly become a creature; he was just partway squeezing his head and shoulders into its skin, while his feet remained grounded. *What would it be like to break that connection, to dive completely into another skin?*

It made him think of what the three-eyed crow had said about flying. *Was that* what it meant to fly? Bran supposed it would be like being reborn. It would be like dying and coming back to life again.

Some days, Bran wondered what else he might be able to do. One day, he spent twelve hours continuously staring at a spider creeping over the stones, wondering if he might be able to take the spider’s body too. He couldn’t sense the spider in his third eye, but then again, he hadn’t been able to sense the rats and the birds at first either.

Jojen noticed him, and frowned. “… I think it might be best if you try to avoid skinchanging for a while, Bran. Try to avoid using it,” Jojen said carefully, as if expecting an argument. “Until we find the three-eyed crow.”

Bran didn’t reply.
Later that day, Meera came to him, with a soft smile. “How are you, Bran?” Meera said in a low voice. “… I know things haven’t been comfortable lately, but…”

Her voice trailed off slowly. Did Jojen tell her to check on him?

“We’ve reached a decision,” Meera said. “Jojen doesn’t want to stay here any longer, he thinks this place might have a bad influence. We’ve decided to head east, to Castle Black.”

Bran’s eyes widened. “Jon…”

Meera nodded. “Yes, your brother. We’re going to try and reach him. Just Jon, though – we can’t trust the other rangers, Jojen thinks Castle Black might also be dangerous.” Of course, she would follow Jojen. “But we can try to draw out Jon individually. We’re going to try and convince Jon to escort us north to the three-eyed crow.”

Bran took a deep breath. “When?” Bran asked. The thought of seeing Jon again…

“As soon as the storm clears,” Meera promised, clutching his hand with a smile. “Couple of days.”

His skin felt warm where she touched. Bran felt his heart flutter, staring into her eyes. She was older than he was, but so pretty with brown hair and green eyes. He hadn’t thought she was that pretty at first, but she was…

… Maybe if I had legs, he thought suddenly. I could stand up and kiss her.

His eyes drooped down towards the floor.

Even after dusk, when everyone else went to sleep for the night, sheltered from the scattering rain, Bran was wide awake and thinking about how he might take a new body. A body that could stand up, that could climb. To take a brand new body… it would have to be human. Bran could borrow other skins for a time, but he couldn’t imagine living fully as anything else but human.

Not for the first time, Bran found himself staring at Hodor, and wondering.

Just like the rat, Bran strongly suspected that if he went all the way in, he would have to kill the current occupant. Hodor doesn’t deserve that, Bran thought. Hodor was kind, gentle and innocent – he protected Bran, carried him…

Still, at night, sometimes, Bran dreamt about being a large knight, standing tall and armoured in black on a battlefield…

In the distance, Bran heard the thunder roll from the north.

Everyone else was asleep, huddled by the wall against the rain. Hodor sat by the opposite side, snoring against the wall. Meera slept coiled next to him. Jojen lay in the centre, shifting and muttering restlessly in his sleep, like he was having a bad dream.

Bran was wide awake. He closed his eyes and concentrated reaching out around. In the lower floors, he found a rat – a young rat picking apart one of the rotted wooden beams of the old keep. Its body trembled and convulsed as Bran caught it. Despite the rat’s struggles, he didn’t let go. He pushed his way in furiously, squeezing forcefully into the rat’s skin.

Rats were worse than birds. They would constantly try to slip and struggle away from Bran, like it thought it could escape his grip. Bran had to hold tightly, so tightly the rat might strangle itself by struggling.
As soon as the rat’s resistance shattered, Bran was skittering down the beam on tiny, fast paws. The rat’s vision was blurry and nearly useless, but its nose was so sharp and sensitive. Bran wanted to keep on searching the deep vaults, the places so buried that only a rat could really reach them.

He spent hours crawling in the rat’s skin, through buried passageways so black that there was no light at all. The rat’s whiskers twitched, paws tracing across a chunk of metal buried in a half-collapsed tunnel.

There was no warning as suddenly sharp teeth bit into the rat’s hide, tearing through skin. The rat squealed. Bran screamed – gasping upwards as the pain hit him.

The warg shattered. Bran jumped awake, yanking himself back to his own body as he felt the rat’s life extinguish. Bran was left gasping for breath, clutching his waist and half-expecting to feel bite marks.

Around him, the others still slept soundly. Jojen squirmed restlessly in his sleep.

*It was another rat,* Bran thought, replaying that brief moment. Another rat – a larger, older rat – ambushed his rat from behind. It tore the younger rat apart and ate it. He hadn’t been able to see it, but Bran wondered if that cannibal rat might have had white fur, like the Rat Cook that Old Nan always used to tell him about.

*Perhaps that is all the Rat Cook was,* Bran wondered, *maybe he was just a man that died and warged a second life in the body of a rat? What would it be like to totally become another creature? Could the Rat Cook have then warged into another rat when the first one died? Maybe the Rat Cook became immortal, constantly switching and possessing the body of the biggest rat in the castle for five hundred years, until nothing remained of the man more than a desire for cannibalism…?*

Around him, the weirwood tree rippled in the wind and rain. The sound of the rain and the distant howl of the storm was a constant drone in the backdrop. The night was restless, and Bran’s eyes were heavy, right up until the moment he heard a voice echo in the distance.

Bran’s heart skipped. His whole body jerked. At first, he thought the shadows were speaking to him.

And then he heard a second voice. It was distant, indistinct, like the first, but it was getting closer. For a moment, there was nothing but pure panic. And then slowly, the rational part of his brain took over. *There are people in the Nightfort.*

He saw ravens burst into the sky from a nearby tower. They had been disturbed, by figures moving closer through the keep, from the north.

*Who? How? Are they after me, how could they find us, why are they here…?*

“Wake up!” Bran hissed, at Jojen and Meera. “Wake up, there’s someone here…”

They didn’t even twitch. It was late, the Nightfort had been deserted for so long, they had long since stopped keeping sentries at night. Bran dared not raise his voice. If he had legs, he would have stood up to reach Jojen, to shake him awake. Instead, Bran had to crawl over the ground awkwardly to reach the boy.

Jojen mumbled incoherently. Bran practically had to clutch his mouth, causing the crannogman to jolt awake. Bran could suddenly hear footsteps, behind the hum of the storm. Summer shot up suddenly. The direwolf would have pounced and attacked, if Bran hadn’t have held him back.
Jojen’s eyes were wide. Meera looked awake too, suddenly, while Hodor was still sleeping. None dared to make a noise, frozen solid. Meera slowly reached for her three-pronged frog spear by her bags. Bran could hear footsteps just outside of the kitchens, splashing through the puddles on the broken stones.

“… This place is a ruin,” a voice growled from outside.

“It’s a big ruin,” another replied with a snort. “The crows won’t search it. We can hide here for a while.”

“Fuck hiding,” a man snapped, stepping closer. The shadows looked like he was struggling to light a torch through in the faint rain. “We should have stuck to Mance’s old plan. Kill every fucking crow in their castle and open the gates.”

Wildlings, Bran thought with a gasp. They are wildlings…!

There was a gasp as the torch finally let, sizzling in the rain. “Oh aye? Tough guy with an ice-pick, ain’t you Sven?” A hoarse voice laughed. A woman’s voice. “You reckon you can take on a hundred crows all by yourself?”

“We lost thirty men climbing that bloody Wall,” the man snapped. He sounded like a big man. “If you had only waited for better weather—”

“We climbed during the storm because then we’re sure there won’t be any crows on the Wall, during the storm!” Another snapped. “Any other time, and maybe we would have been spotted, and none of us would have made it.”

Bran tried to count the footsteps. At least a dozen. He saw more torches being lit. A dozen men and women strong enough to climb the Wall. “You bloody…!”

“Enough!” a man snapped. He stepped into the flickering light, Jojen pulled Bran further into the shadows of the enclave of the Wall. Bran caught a glimpse of the wildling – tall, lean, with dark hair and fierce eyes. He wore boiled leather and sheepskin furs. “You say another bloody word Sven, I gut you. I don’t give a damn for your whining.”

There was a pause. “We stick to the plan,” the man continued. “We hide out here. We lower ropes for the others when they come. Maybe if we get the men we assault Castle Black, but if not we just go south ourselves.”

“If we want to get more, then we need to send people back north to fetch them, Jarl,” another complained, a woman. She clutched a spear.

“Bugger that,” the large man cursed. “I ain’t ever stepping north of that Wall again. I’ll face the sword before I face the dead again. We southerners, now.”

Bran’s heart was pounding madly. In the shadows, behind the wall, Meera had her frog spear and net, Summer’s teeth were bared, but Bran counted thirteen figures in the torch light. His lungs froze, but slowly the footsteps started to move away. They were walking away from the kitchens, towards the keep. Probably looking for shelter.

Meera met Jojen’s eyes, and then shook her head. Nobody dared make a noise, instead just listening to the free folk bicker. They are walking away, Bran realised. Maybe just a bit further, and we could slip out without them noticing.

In the clouds, the lightning cracked. Moments later, he heard the thunder rumble loudly. Suddenly,
Hodor shot awake. Meera couldn’t restrain him in time.

“Hodor!” The stable boy cried, jolting awake in fear. “Hodor!”

The single word echoed behind the thunder. Bran heard the footsteps stop. “What the hell was that?”

“Move!” Meera hissed, half-dragging Bran across the ground. “Quickly, run, move…!”

Summer was growling. Feet were racing. “Hodor!” Hodor shouted in panic. “Hodor, hodor!”

“Grab Bran!” Meera cursed, as Bran tried weakly to crawl. Meera had her hunting trident and net, even Jojen clutched a dagger, but Bran had never felt as useless as when Hodor frantically hoisted him upwards from the arms. In an instant, Bran was being thrown over Hodor’s shoulders like a sack.

There was shouting. Bran saw Summer dash forward. Hodor was cluttering across the ground, carrying Bran like a bale of hay, while Jojen ran next to him. With barely a conscience thought, Bran felt himself slip away into Summer’s skin.

The direwolf was snarling, angry, feeling the danger in the air. Bran could smell the danger, enemies clutching torches and spears running towards them. He saw flickering shadows and weapons being drawn through the light drizzle of the rain.

The first wildling barreled through the doorway, but Meera’s frog spear was ready and waiting for him. He was big man, but Meera jabbed upwards, catching him off-guard and her three-pronged spear plunged straight into his neck. The man tried to catch the lunge instinctively, but he was too slow and blood spurted everywhere. He thrashed in pain sharply, slamming physically into Meera. Even with a spear half-jutting out of his throat, however, the wildling didn’t fall down, and instead twisted around and tried desperately to yank the spear out of Meera’s hands.

Meera was skilled and fast, but the wildling was much bigger, tougher and stronger.

She shouted, half in pain and half in anger, as the man grabbed her, but Meera reacted fluidly. With her other hand, her hunting net swung forward, tangling into the next wildling through the doorway and sending him crashing to the ground. Then, Meera twisted out with both hands on the spear, trying to wrestle the man down and plunge the spear deep into his throat. He was gargling in pain, but even as he choked on his own blood he still wrestled against Meera.

More men were charging through the doorway. The chaos was immediate. Meera forced the man’s thrashing body backwards with her spear, trying to block the doorway, but then he managed to rip the weapon out of her grasp. Meera swiftly drew her hunting knife, abandoning the trident without a second thought, and screamed wordlessly as she plunged the knife into the man’s chest repeatedly. The narrow blade cut through leather and into flesh with a horrible spurting sound.

The wildlings behind him slammed forward. A wildling woman plunged at Meera with a spear, ready to skewer her like a boar, but at that moment Summer lunged into the fray of thrashing bodies.

“Direwolf!” A wildling screamed, clutching his bronze sword. Everything dissolved into tooth and claw, panic and chaos. “Bloody direwolf!”

The first man fell quickly under Summer’s teeth. The spearwife clattered to the ground with the wolf’s claws scraped across her shoulder. The man Meera wrestled with was still thrashing, but weakly as he fell to the ground and dragged her with him. Meera panted, smeared in blood,
clutching her hunting knife with trembling hands.

Two down, one injured, and one trying to disentangle himself from a net. Still, there were nine more wildlings, all ready and armed, and the element of surprise had vanished.

“Kill the bloody wolf!” The wildling – Jarl – snapped, stabbing forward with his spear. They were big men, experienced, they all knew how to hold their weapons. “Kill it!”

The first spear nearly gutted Summer. The direwolf barely managed to lunge beside the thrust, his jaws snapping, but the spears kept him back. Meera gasped as another wildling slammed forward at her, swinging a bronze sword. She barely ducked under the blow and managed to graze his shoulder with her knife, but then the man’s other arm twisted and smashed her to the ground. The blow hit Meera squarely on the nose. Bran, through Summer’s eyes, saw her blood spurt as she dropped to the floor.

Bran howled in shock. He barely avoided the lunge of another spear. *Ten against two, Bran thought. Too many, even for Summer. We need Hodor.*

Bran dropped himself out of Summer, and back into his own body. Hodor was carrying him over his shoulder as they ran through the ruined keep, towards the old library. Bran saw Jojen cry out, “Bran, don’t–!”

Bran didn’t even pause. Suddenly, he was jumping straight into Hodor’s skin, so quickly the stable boy couldn’t even protest. The struggle for control was swift and decisive. He crushed Hodor’s protests easily, seizing control of Hodor’s limbs. Bran’s own body fell out of Hodor’s arms, splashing limply onto the wet stone, yet Bran didn’t even feel himself fall. He was already in Hodor.

Suddenly, Bran felt big and strong. Hodor growled as he turned and stamped back towards the kitchen.

“Hodor!” he shouted. He had tried to shout ‘Meera!’

Hodor picked up a large stone, heaving it upwards in both hands like a club. Gods, Bran almost forgot what it felt like to have legs, to feel so strong…

Both Meera and Summer were running. Meera was gasping for breath, clutching her nose as she fled while Summer turned to try and lead them away from her, to split their forces. Three men chased after Meera, four men and a spearwife tried to corner Summer at the far end of the kitchens. That left another two wildlings running after Bran and Jojen.

Both of them had spears and swords. Hodor would have cowered and whimpered, but Bran ran straight through.

“Who the fuck are you people?!” One of the wildlings shouted at Hodor, raising his spear.

“Hodor!” Hodor bellowed, swinging the stone like a hammer. “Hodor!”

The bronze spear tip plunged into Hodor’s shoulder. Bran felt the pain cut through him, but his arms were still swinging.

The rock collided against the wildling’s head. Bran felt his skull crack like an egg.

Bran had never a killed a man before, but in Hodor’s body it just felt so easy.
The other man swung his sword. Hodor barrelled into him, but his sword still scraped against Hodor’s thigh. They both tumbled to the ground, Hodor roared in pain. Bran hadn’t felt pain like it; he felt the skin tear under the blunt metal edge, taking out Hodor’s leg from underneath him.

The raider tried to clamber upwards. Hodor’s arms seemed to work on pure instinct. Hodor grabbed the man by the collar, and dragged him to the ground with him. He thrashed and he kicked, but Hodor barely even felt the pain. Then, Hodor’s big, strong hands were wrapping around the man’s throat and choking the life out of him. Hodor had such strong hands.

Bran felt the adrenaline tear through him. He watched the man’s face turned bloated purple. He heard the man gagging, felt him thrashing, but slowly becoming weaker and weaker.

At the far side of the room, Summer tore off a man’s arm with his teeth. Still the other four wildlings plunged forward, fighting the feral wolf back desperately. Bran could see the plumes of blood scattered across Summer’s hide from where the spears had caught him. The direwolf was limping on its left hind leg, weakening with every blow. Summer was strong and vicious, but teeth and claws couldn’t compete with spears.

They’re going to kill Summer, he realised with shock. They’re going to kill Summer, and Jojen, and Meera….

Hodor tried to move, but the stable boy couldn’t stand. Hodor’s leg was oozing blood, his body shivering.

I’ve got to protect Summer.

Suddenly, Bran pushed himself outwards. He wasn’t quite sure if he’d be able to bring himself back in again, but he didn’t care anymore. He could feel the ravens flocking in the sky, the rats skittering on the ground.

The desperation forced him forward. Through his third eye, he focused on a raven and he pushed with all of his might. The raven’s will folded like paper as Bran powered through, seizing control of its body…

In an instant, there was a squawking bundle of feathers and claws bursting through a hole in the ceiling, straight for the raider’s eyes. Bran felt sharp talons and beak tearing through screaming flesh…

Bran gasped, struggling to process it. The distraction was enough for Summer to snap forward between the spears, throwing the wildlings back. Without even pausing, Bran reached out to grab another bird.

Can I control two bodies at once? He hadn’t even realised he might be able to, but in that moment he just was. He could feel both the birds pecking and squealing madly under his grip, but Bran just threw them both to attack in a suicidal charge.

The thought made him tremble. One of the birds died as a raider snapped its neck. Bran felt the crack as the bird’s life was snuffed out. It hurt – he could feel the spike of pain as its neck jolted – but there was no time to focus on it. Bran was already grabbing a third bird, and then a fourth, and then a fifth…

And then, in an instant, the kitchens were roaring with black, flapping, scratching shapes…

The feeling was incredible. It felt indescribable. It felt like Bran was everywhere. He was in a dozen bodies at once, driving them all to attack as one.
He could feel the man screaming and bleeding. He could feel their eyeballs popping under talons. He could feel the weirwood tree rippling, and the rain pounding against the stones.

And then he felt Summer’s teeth tear through the men one by one. The birds scratched out their eyes, and then the direwolf tore out their throats. The men were sent flailing in panic, and then Summer’s jaws lunged onto them. The wildlings in the kitchen were falling quickly. They died screaming and thrashing.

*Meera, Bran thought. I need to save Meera.*

Meera had ran off further into the castle, chased by four men. The swarm of birds twisted, flapping after them. Bran felt eleven bodies under his control, but they moved so fluidly it was like he only controlling one.

Bran could smell smoke. He could hear the sound of fighting, and rain hissing against flames.

Bran gasped as he dropped back into his own body. Painfully. His head spinning. He heard screaming, and squawking in the distance. Bran was on the ground, with Jojen stood over him protectively clutching a dagger.

*Meera. Meera is screaming.* He had never heard Meera scream before.

Meera must have to circle back around to Bran and Jojen, but the wildlings chased her down. They were in the old library, across from the keep, surrounded by rotten wood and dust. The wildlings dragged Meera into the corner of the room, kicked and forced her to the ground….

“Leave her alone!” Jojen bellowed, clutching his dagger with both hands. “Leave her –”

A backhanded slap took him to the ground. Bran gasped, trying desperately to concentrate as his head swam with panic.

Four wildlings. There are four wildlings left, while Summer tore through the last of the group back in the kitchen. Meera must have knocked a torch out of a man’s hand, sending one of the wooden rafters up in flames. Even despite the rain, the rotten wood was burning and crackling around them, gushing smoke and hissing sparks. Bran could feel the thick smoke sting in his throat and eyes, his head rushing madly, so madly he could barely think…

The moment froze. Bran could see Meera screaming, the ruined library burning, the black sky still spattering rain.

“The girl has fight in her!” A raider laughed, grabbing Meera’s wrists as he pinned her to the ground. “I like the fighters!”

“The boys do not,” another growled. Bran could barely gasp as suddenly the raider’s foot crunched into his chest. His head swam, struggling to concentrate. “What do you reckon? Orphans squatting out?”

Bran saw Jojen try to clamber up, but then the big man downwards smacked him. Bran wheezed weakly, struggling for breath, staring upwards the billows of smoke, the birds cawing madly…

“That little bitch killed Sven!” A wildling growled, glaring at Meera.

“Sven was a fool,” the wildling growled, still wrestling with Meera. She was a good fighter, but he was still just so much bigger and stronger than her. Bran saw her eyes wide and pale. “… But this girl is mine! I’m taking her.”
Bran could barely breathe as he watched the man tear open Meera’s tunic with his bare hands. He saw pale skin, turned red from where he gripped her. Meera tried to struggle, but the man was on top of her, pinning her to the ground while his hands…

*He’s going to rape her. He’s going to rape her right here and now, in the pouring rain with half the building on fire.*

Bran’s heart pounded. He felt something snap. It sounded like a chain breaking in his mind.

He heard the fire crackling. He heard screaming.

And he heard Summer snarling furiously, like some monster out of Old Nan’s tales, as the wolf lunged out of the darkness straight at the wildling standing over Bran. The raider went down quickly under the massive direwolf’s snapping jaws.

Two wildlings tried to raise axes, but then there were ravens and crows squawking madly down through the smoke, clawing at eyes. Tearing their faces off. Bran couldn’t even remember consciously giving the order, but the birds just followed his unconscious commands almost instinctively…

And the burning library dissolved into pure panic. All sanity disappeared and the world seemed consumed by tooth and claw, smoke and screaming, and so, so much blood.

The wildlings fell quickly. Bran had never felt Summer so bloodthirsty before.

He could hear Meera screaming. The sound was like fire in Bran’s blood.

The wildling clutching Meera was the last one standing. Meera’s shirt was torn and hanging off, revealing pale delicate flesh, skinny ribs and a flat exposed breast, her entire chest was covered in bruises and painful whelps. The wildling’s breeches were half off, but he clutched a dagger to Meera’s throat.

His eyes were wide, horrified. The birds cawed while the direwolf tore through his colleagues in an instant. His face turned pale, staring at the snarling giant wolf with blood dripping from its maw…

“Stay back!” the wildling screamed, clutching his dagger. His words were barely audible over the burning and the cawing. “Get that wolf away from me or I tear open the girl’s throat.”

Summer approached, one paw in front of the other slowly. The direwolf’s eyes shone in the darkness. The raider was screaming something, but Bran couldn’t hear it. The sound of Meera’s screams echoed in his head.

And then their eyes met. There was no thought involved, just pure rage and panic. Bran lunged. He lunged outwards like a wolf.

Bran concentrated on the raider and he pushed. He pushed harder than he had ever pushed before, with anger he hadn’t even imagined…

Bran felt the man’s mind. He felt the pain, the fear, so thick it was like smoke, but Bran didn’t care. He wrapped his power around the wildling and he *squeezed.*

He felt the man convulse, scream and thrash. It hurt, but Bran didn’t stop. Gods, Bran felt so *strong.* Like he was tearing the life out of him. It felt like he was smothering the man’s mind, crushing him in his grip…
The wildling was screaming as he dropped backwards, convulsing and shaking, fingers tearing at his own face. Bran refused to stop, he forced himself harder and further, tighter and tighter…

He felt the man’s mind scream, Bran felt it snuff out beneath his grip. The man’s spirit had burned like a raging flame, but Bran just felt him… extinguish, like squeezing a candle’s flame in his hands. Instantly, all resistance disappeared, and then Bran felt himself falling inwards….

The world blurred.

Everything changed.

All around him, the birds were cawing and flapping madly. The smoke was hissing.

Meera was gasping as she clambered to her feet, her hands clutching a broken brick from the ground. Her clothes were still torn, half her chest bare. Her face was bloody. There were tears in her eyes.

“You bastard!” Meera shrieked, smashing the stone downwards onto the wildling’s head. The man gaped in shock. “… You bastard! You bastard!”

The first blow sent the wildling’s head spinning. The second caused his vision to blur. By the third, he barely managed to raise his arms to block Meera, while the girl pushed herself on top of him, kicking and slamming into the wildling with berserk strength.

“…No… don’t…” the man gasped, struggling to stand. His legs trembled.

“You bastard!” Meera roared, trying to crack him again. “You…!”

“… No… Meera…” The wildling wheezed, collapsing to the ground, as blood dripped down from his cheeks. “… Don’t… It’s me… Bran…”
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Friends and enemies surrounding two kings; one king heading north, and the other going south...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Davos

The air was foul. Everything about their journey left a bad taste in Davos' mouth.

The weather was cold, and getting colder every minute. In front of them, the great Wall of ice loomed like a giant shadow, as tall as a mountain. It was like the horizon cut off into a solid looming blackness.

Salladhor Saan's fleet cut across the ocean. The colourful Lysene hulls were a sharp contrast against the bleak landscape. The wind was firm – a constant gust that had followed them all the way from Dragonstone. Melisandre had promised them a good wind, and she delivered on that promise. Sometimes, though, when the wind cut across the bay it sounded like Alester Florent's ghostly screams.

Davos shuddered to think of it. He would never forget the way Alester screamed and begged when his own brother tired him to the stake. The price for their wind – a man's horrifying death.

But they were here now. The Wall.

Davos could only hope he made the right decision.

Eastwatch-by-the-Sea loomed ahead. It was an old, squatting black castle against the towering shape of the Wall, cradled by the harbour and a small fishing village. There were no walls, only watch towers, and thatch cottages scattered right up towards the stone keep itself. It was a large dock, but also empty and almost decrepit. There were only six boats larger than a dinghy at the Watch's harbour. Mostly fishing vessels alongside the black brothers' patrol boats.

The twenty nine ships of Lysene fleet cut through the water. Davos sat at the prow of the Valyrian, watching the fleet closely. The Valyrian was the Salla's prized galleas flagship, five masts and three hundreds oars, but it was flanked on either side by the Bird of a Thousand Colours and the Shayala's Dance. They had sailed in tight formation towards the Fingers, but then the treacherous waters and currents towards Skagos forced the fleet into nearly single file. *Hardly ideal formation should we come under attack,* Davos thought with a grimace, *but there's nothing for it in these waters.* As it was, Davos was concerned that the ships towards the rear, the cogs Saathos Saan and Bountiful Harvest, were consistently falling behind, but to turn around and wait for them could be more dangerous.

*A fleet of this size in waters like these,* Davos thought. *Not a situation any sailor envied.* It was lucky they had such a steady wind behind them. The north was not a place for easy sailing.
Still, the men of Salladhor's Saan ships were experienced enough. Davos was more worried about Stannis' men at arms who were assisting amongst the sailors. Davos inspected the crew carefully, talked to Khorane Sathamantas, a captain, briefly about making harbour, inspected the rowers, measured the wind, depth and currents, and then checked the charts three times almost obsessively. He passed on messages to the spotters on the other ships, coordinating movements through the signaller on the crow's nest. He was the King's Hand now; he didn't have to do such grunt tasks himself, but a lifetime of sailing had ingrained them into his bones.

And Davos was panicking slightly. Focusing on the ships always help him concentrate when he was nervous.

From the coast, the bells were ringing from Eastwatch. Davos glimpsed figures moving on the harbour. Doubtless their arrival would make quite a stir.

A figure walked across the deck, while the sailors rushed ready to make port. King Stannis Baratheon's face was hard. His Grace had left his last seat of power at Dragonstone behind him to venture to the Wall, at Davos' insistence. Davos liked to think it was wise counsel; answering the plea of the Night's Watch, defending the realm, but part of him was wondering how much of the things he said had just been a last ditch attempt to save his own life.

By rights, Stannis should have executed him when Davos stole Edric Storm to safety. Maybe he still would.

They had four thousand men, twenty nine ships belonging to the Lyseni pirate, and a rapidly failing claim to the Iron Throne.

Stannis and Davos sat on Saan's flagship as it approached the dock, while he kept the Queen and his daughter on the Oledo at the rear of the fleet until he knew it was safe. Melisandre stayed by the King's side, though, her long robe sweeping over her deck as she walked easily across the boat. For a second, her red hair seemed to be the only light in the bleak world.

"I feel it…" Melisandre said breathlessly, staring at the torches on deck. "The power is thick here…"

The ship was heading into the harbour. There were already a group of men waiting on the docks.

"We left an incestuous bastard sitting on my throne to be here," Stannis said, his voice low.

"The letter from Bowen Marsh said that wildlings have amassed in the hundred thousand. That the Lord Commander may be dead and the wildlings were preparing an assault on the Wall," Davos said, trying to sound more confident he felt. "The realm must be protected. We must save the kingdom to win the throne."

Stannis said nothing. For once, Melisandre was in agreement with Davos. "Your Hand is right, Your Grace. We have both seen it in the fires. A great battle in the snow."

"Yes. Your prophecies," Stannis said. "I trust in armies and men more than I do prophecies to win my kingdom. The north is divided. The northern lords must rise up to rightful King, and the Wall will be a good place to start."

I will take my kingdom again piece by piece from the north, Stannis had said as they left, Davos recalled. There had been much dissent from the knights and lords as they left – many called it 'fleeing' to the north – but Davos had made his case well. Melisandre had been practically eager with the idea, calling it fulfilment of the prophecy – that cold and death would come from the
north, and the servants of R'hllor must stop it.

"Who commands here?" Stannis asked after a pause.

"Cotter Pyke, I believe, Your Grace."

The ironborn bastard name caused Stannis' gaze to darken. "Go ahead in my stead, Lord Seaworth," Stannis ordered. "Explain our presence here and inquire about the state of the wildling invasion."

"Yes, your grace." He bowed and turned.

Melisandre nodded towards him. "Walk with me, Onion Lord," she offered, holding out her arm as Davos stepped aware. "A word?"

"M'lady?" He hesitated as she wrapped her arm around his, walking down the deck. She felt warm.

"You seem nervous."

Davos felt nervous, terribly so. "The start of a new campaign, m'lady."

"No. This campaign has been coming for a thousand years," said Melisandre, with a gentle smile. Davos had seen few women as beautiful as she was. His wife, Marya, had been a fair woman, but Melisandre put her to shame. Sometimes Melisandre looked as beautiful as she was wicked. "Your King's conquest has been ordained long ago, by the Lord of Light."

"As you say, m'lady."

"You are a sceptic, Onion Lord?" She sounded almost amused by that. Davos never replied. "The world turns in cycles. Like winter and summer dancing around each other. Fire and ice. History repeats itself. Azor Ahai Reborn." Her hand touched her ruby gently. "There must always be a champion of the Lord of Light, to fight in the Battle for the Dawn."

"You are very sure."

"But of course. Since setting out on this path, the fires have burnt all the brighter. My visions have been sharper, my powers stronger. The further north we go, the clearer my prophecies become. Proof from R'hllor himself that we are on the right path."

Davos hesitated, glancing at the shadow of the Wall in the distance. He didn't believe in prophecy, but... "And what do your visions show you?"

"They show the great battle. Not this one, but a one fast approaching. The battle of ice and fire. And they show me the other champion as well."

He glanced at her questioningly. "Yes," Melisandre continued. "You see, the Lord of Light has his champion – Stannis Baratheon, Azor Ahai – and yet the Great Other, the enemy, he must have his champion too. The champion of cold. When they collide, the fate of the world will hang in the balance."

Davos never replied. He wasn't quite sure how to. Melisandre just smiled gently, like he was some dumb child who didn't understand the obvious.

"You don't have to believe," she said soothingly. "Not yet. You will, though. The visions have been very clear."
"Forgive me if I do not convert, m'lady," he said, keeping his face impassive.

Melisandre laughed – a loud, clear laugh that rang out over the deck. A few sailors glanced towards them.

"I have heard men say curse words in the same way you say 'm'lady'," she said, amused. "But you're a curious man, Onion Lord. I am not sure what to make of you sometimes."

"I thought you saw everything in your fires."

"Only the Lord of Light sees all. I am but his servant. He shows me what I need to know." She paused, thinking quietly. "Truth be told, I did not foresee your survival in the flames. It surprised me when you strolled back into Dragonstone after the Blackwater."

Davos stiffened. When I came to kill you. I had the dirk in my hands, ready to cut out your throat. I thought that you had my sons burned in those infernal fires. I'm still not convinced that you didn't. He didn't dare speak.

"I have seen very little of you in the fire, Onion Lord, and yet I feel like you have a role to play. I feel power from you," Melisandre's voice was low. She slowly unhooked her arm from his, sliding across him when she turned. She felt like silk and velvet. The ruby on her throat seemed to shimmer. "… Come to my chambers one night," she whispered. "Let us see if you can become a believer."

Davos froze. Her hair brushed against him as she passed. Red, so red, impossibly red. For a second, he was left staring entranced as she walked down the steps. Davos had to take a deep breath just to focus himself.

Melisandre is fire, he thought. It felt like she burned with every touch.

It took well over an hour for the Lysene ships to dock. They approached slowly, non-threateningly. Three ships came in with the Valyrian, but the rest of the fleet lingered in the bay. Bells were still ringing, but it would be obvious to the Night's Watch that they were coming in slowly – to dock rather than attack. Davos hoped it would be obvious, at least.

The Hand of King kept himself busy. Organising the men, the ropes, the anchor – seeing to every possible task to keep his mind occupied.

Davos was inspecting the rowers on the lower decks, while the helmsman started guiding the large ship in carefully, when Davos saw a man approach him with a goblet of wine in a wrinkled hand, walking easily over the gently rocking ship.

"… So this is the north, I take it?" Salladhor Saan exclaimed raising his hand. "I hear that the Wall is one of the nine great wonders built by man. But I see little wonder, I admit – it's far too dreary and cold for wonder."

Davos smiled, slightly woodenly. Salla wore white samite robes with wide dagged sleeves, sashed in green and gold. A sapphire pendant hung from his neck, with gold rings on his fingers. Even on a vessel, walking among sweaty sailors in rags, Salladhor Saan dressed like a prince. The pirate prince was smiling, almost friendlily, yet Davos recognised the sharp glint in his eye.

"His Grace means to win the war from the north," Davos said, repeating words he had told himself a thousand times. "The north is a land divided, it will rally for its rightful King."

"Oh, I'm sure!" Salla laughed cheerfully. "This land must be full of strong, loyal men eager to
supporter his grace. And who has been a more loyal supporter to King Stannis' than Salladhor Saan – His Grace's reasonable and dedicated friend through such trying times? Why, I even abandoned ripe pickings in the Narrow Sea to venture on this voyage with his grace, as his humble servant." He laughed again. "Why, so humble."

Ah. "The rewards when his grace retakes the Iron Throne will be great, my lord."

"I'm sure," Salla agreed. "I have been promised so. Many times. In fact, if promises were gold I could buy the world."

Salla was smiling, but the laughter didn't reach his eyes. He had been pushing more and more frequently for gold promised, and each additional risk made Salladhor all the more uncomfortable. *Stannis is asking much of him to risk so many of his ships venturing this far north,* Davos thought quietly. But there is nothing for it – Stannis needs his fleet.

"His Grace much appreciates your loyalty," Davos said with forced politeness, struggling to say anything else.

"But of course!" Salladhor exclaimed, holding his arms wide. His tone was jovial, but his eyes were sharp. "Why, I'd have to be loyal to venture this far, risking cold and ice, for nothing but promise after promise."

Davos smiled, but his shoulders were tense as he walked away. He had known Salladhor Saan for many years – they were even friends, to a degree, but there had always been a pit of fear in his stomach towards the flamboyant prince. Salla was the type man that could hug you as easily as he could cut your throat. It took a special type of pirate who was capable of growing old as well as successful.

*Add that onto the list to worry about,* Davos thought with a gulp. *Salla will expect his due.*

It took another scrambled forty minutes to set down the gangway and fasten the ropes. Finally, Davos walked with Ser Ormund Wylde and Ser Harys Cobb, both king's men. They flanked him either side, making an impressive and dignified pair in full armour, with the stag of Stannis emblazoned on their surcoats.

They were met by five men of the Night's Watch. Compared to the knights, the black brothers were wearing worn leathers and wool, with pitch black cloaks and hoods.

The man at front hailed them first. "Greetings, we were not expecting you." His voice was low, dour, almost even sardonic. "I am Cotter Pyke, Commander at Eastwatch, and you are…?"

"Lord Davos Seaworth, Hand to the King Stannis Baratheon, First of His Name, Rightful King of the Iron Throne," Davos announced loudly, looking at the men. They all seemed cautious. "We have come answering the plea for aid sent by the Night's Watch."

"Much obliged," Cotter Pyke replied, lowering his head fractionally. He was a tall, broad and rugged man, but lean, hard and wiry. He had small, close-set eyes, a broken nose and a pox ravaged face, as well as a widow's peak and a sparse, rough beard. His eyes were sharp, guarded.

"Stannis Baratheon…" Cotter said. "… Which king is that again?"

There was a small ripple from the knights next to him. "The Rightful King, brother of Robert Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone, King of the Seven Kingdoms," said Davos, all the while taking in their eyes. *This is wrong,* he thought slowly, *they're on guard, cautious of us.* From the urgency in the letters, Davos had half-expected the Wall to be falling by the time they got here.
Cotter nodded, but his eyes were still sharp. "You know that Night's Watch takes no part in the affairs of the realm, right?"

There was a mutter next to him, an old maester tugged Cotter's arm warningly. *He's being too bold,* Davos thought. "We've come to protect the realm," Davos replied, cautiously. Something is wrong.

"Forgive me, m'lord, I just tend to get cautious when a fleet of warships turns up at my door," Cotter said dryly. "How many men do you have?"

Davos was almost reluctant to answer. "Four thousand," said Davos, before adding, "We have come answering your own request – I understand that the Night's Watch is in dire need of men."

Cotter nodded. "Well, you are all more than welcome to take the black," he said, causing the men next to him to ripple. The maester standing beside him looked nervous. *This is going wrong,* Davos thought, *he's too hostile. We should be here as saviours, not threats.*

"The last letter we received had said that the Lord Commander was presumed dead, along with the majority of the Watch's fighting men, and that a horde of wildlings was descending on the Wall," Davos said. "Your chief steward, Bowen Marsh, seemed quite desperate."

Cotter's eyes flashed. He looked angry for a second. "... I fear Bowen Marsh may have written in haste, m'lord," he said. "Lord Commander Mormont and his expedition did return safely. He broke the wildling host at the Frostfangs and returned victorious. There is no attack against the Wall."

There was a long moment of quiet. Davos blinked.

Oh, he thought dumbly.

*Oh.*

Heading north had been Davos' last gamble. It was a gamble that he had just lost.

Cotter Pyke appeared to reach a decision. "We thank King Stannis very much for his support, m'lord," he said. "And we are happy to feed and shelter him for the night, but I'm afraid I must await the Lord Commander's orders before I am able to make any decisions on behalf of the Night's Watch."

The words were polite, but also guarded. Davos wasn't sure how else to respond except to nod. "However..." Cotter continued. "And I'm terribly sorry, but we won't have enough room at Eastwatch for all of your men." His head tilted. "...Would you mind if the rest of your men waited on their ships? Hope you understand, m'lord."

Davos forced a smile. "Of course."

Cotter Pyke forced a smile as well.

The rest of the exchange was awkward pleasantries, and inquiries to how many rooms they would need. Cotter left early with the maester, saying that he needed to send an urgent raven. The other men of the Night's Watch stayed to help Stannis' forces disembark. None of them smiled.

Davos' heart was pounding as he returned to the ship.

Stannis was wroth.

"Excuse me?" The King said in a hard, cold voice. "They don't want me here?"
Davos hadn't used those words, but Stannis picked up on the meaning pretty quickly. "I think they fear that sheltering you will make them a target."

"Remind them of their duty," Stannis growled.

"I think they already know," Davos admitted. "The Night's Watch must take no side in the affairs of the realm – they are neutral, Your Grace. They fear that harbouring you threatens that neutrality."

"We came to help them." Stannis' voice was a snarl.

_Apparently they don't need us_, Davos thought, but he stayed quiet.

The King paced his cabin - a mostly bare cabin, Stannis had never been one for luxury. "… Lord Davos," he said, his voice turning as cold as steel. "May I remind you that if we are turned away here, that we have no seat to return to?" He glared. "I need a position on which to retake the north!"

Davos took a deep breath. His heart was pounding. _My fault_. "I am sorry, Your Grace," he muttered.

Stannis looked furious. Davos stared at the ground, words failing him.

We have four thousand men, Davos almost said. If they wanted Eastwatch, they could take it easy enough. Still, they couldn't fight against the Night's Watch – that would be unforgivable. _But if the sworn brothers turned us away, where else could we go?_

White Harbour, perhaps? What if they received no warmer a welcome there? White Harbour was a strong and thriving town; it wouldn't fall easily, and Stannis would earn himself no friends trying to take it. The north was supposed to be their chance to launch a new campaign, but with nowhere to base it from…

Davos watched Stannis' jaw clenched as he stared out from the captain's cabin. He could tell Stannis was thinking the same things. If the Night's Watch asked them to leave – and they might, if they thought Stannis was a threat to them – then Stannis would have no choice to either fight and stay, or leave without any place to return to. Davos wasn't sure which one would be the worst option.

At this rate, they would either have to hope that the northern houses declared for them quickly, or they might end up on a camped on a coast somewhere, with no shelter and no protection when the Boltons came for them…

_Leaving Dragonstone might have been a grave mistake_, Davos cursed to himself. His finger stumps grasped at his neck where his luck used to be. _I hinged Stannis' only hope on nothing but an old letter and a hunch…_

"… I will not let the Night's Watch leave my men vagrant, Lord Seaworth," Stannis said after a long pause. "I need a base of operations, and Eastwatch will do. Make sure you they are aware that we are here to help them."

_Or else_. "Yes, Your Grace," Davos said, lowering his head.

"It is no fault of your Onion Lord, Your Grace," Melisandre said. Her voice was as smooth as silk as she stepped into the cabin. "He gave you good counsel. We have merely arrived too early."
Stannis glared at her. "Too early for what?" His voice was low.

"The great battle, of course." Her red lips smiled. She seemed pleased with herself. "The fires burn strong here. R'hllor has gifted me a vision clearer than any I've had before."

Her silk robes draped across the ground. The ruby on her throat seemed to glow in the flickering torchlight. "I have seen the enemy that we must defeat – the champion of the Great Other himself. He readies himself now, clad in snow and ice and darkness. When he comes for us, I've seen the sun blocked out and the seas frozen solid. He is the enemy that we are he to defeat."

"What is this enemy?" Stannis said bitterly. "Another one of your riddles?"

"No, Your Grace." Melisandre's smile widened. "The enemy appears as a young boy – about seventeen years of age. He has a solemn face, grey eyes, and bone white hair. He is the champion of winter and darkness, and the foe that you must defeat."

---

**Jon**

Eleven days later and Jon was walking through the cold pine forest. The cold never stopped, but Jon could barely feel it anymore.

Jon had heard that only the best rangers could survive beyond the Wall by themselves. It had been nearly three months since the Others attacked the wildling camp now. Jon had already travelled to the frozen wastes and back twice now.

Then again, he had never really been by himself.

He could feel Ghost prowling in the distance. He was hunting a boar over by the river, and hopefully there would be enough meat for Jon too. Game was sparse in these woods, but it was much easier than it had been in the mountains. Phantom was behind Jon, hunting near the rear and watching for pursuers.

The Haunted Forest had been a welcome sight. The forest provided cover from the white walkers, and it shelter from the storms. The Others had never stopped following them, but they could lose them more easily in the trees.

The air was cool and crisp in the morning sun. Jon walked over the fresh snow, staring at the stream dripping through the frosty woods. In a few miles, the stream would feed into the Antler River and lead towards the coast. It was the first sign that Jon was getting close.

His bad leg felt stiff. It always did in the cold mornings. He tried flexing it weakly to work up strength, but he was still limping badly as he moved over to the stream to fill up his canteen.

Jon's goat, Hullen, died five days ago. That had been unfortunate – but a goat, even a large goat, was a poor mount and unfit for carrying a man. Jon had rode him too far and too hard; pushing Hullen to the point of exhaustion and beyond until eventually the goat finally lost his footing, fell and cracked his leg. In the end, there had been little choice but to cut the animal's throat to end his misery, and then burn his body. Jon still shuddered with the thought of feeling the goat's pain like that.

It had been a week of hard travel on foot since. In the water, Jon stared at his reflection and he barely recognised himself. He was unshaven, and rapidly growing a shaggy beard of white hair. The white hair made him look ten years older. His face was still pale and gaunt. Too many restless nights on the move.
Jon took a deep breath, slowing staring at his hand. He stared at the missing little finger on his left hand often. *I'll reach Hardhome soon. There will be a chance to rest at the peninsula.*

He had been taking shelter every night at a different heart tree. The heart trees were littered all over the Beyond-the-Wall, and something about them kept the Others away. The presence of the Old Gods must still have some power to deter white walkers. It didn't block them, but they still seemed reluctant to approach the weirwoods.

Often, there had been ravens leading him to the heart trees too. There had also been ravens alerting him to any danger approaching. The ravens were always following, giving aid and guidance however they could. The three-eyed crow's assistance was one of the reasons Jon had managed to make it so far.

Jon's hands clenched. It would be the new year soon, if it hadn't already passed. Months with barely any human contact. He could only imagine how Sam, Grenn, Edd and the others were doing. Robb, Sansa, Bran, Rickon, Arya.

And Ygritte…

There was rustling in the bushes. Jon's hand instinctively went to his sword. Something approached.

*Not the Others. They never made so much sound.*

"I'm telling ya, I saw it," a voice growled. "Biggest wolf tracks I ever saw, right this way…"

He heard footsteps. Jon counted at least four. Wildlings. Free folk.

There was nowhere to hide. Jon never moved. He saw a man's face twist in surprise as he walked through the trees. They stared at each other.

"Oi," the wildling called. "Company."

*I've been in the wild for a month. My cloak is more grey than black. I don't look like a crow.*

Other wildlings walked out of the bushes. Six of them. They were all armed, but they gripped their weapons loosely. Jon saw axes and mauls as well as spears and bows. Raiders. A warband, maybe.

"Hail," one of the wildlings called to Jon. A broad man with a bushy brown beard, in a sewn sheepskin cloak, clutching a stone axe in one hand a wicker round shield in the other. "Where you coming from?"

Jon paused. His voice felt gruff. "North." That was the truth, at least.

"How far north?" He demanded.

"Too far."

Another wildling scoffed. "You look like you've seen the dead, mate."

Jon met his gaze. "Aye."

They shared glances, a dark ripple going through the group. *I need to learn what happened to the wildling army. Last he saw the Others were tearing them apart.* The clans must have scattered, but he had no idea had happened to Mance, Longspear or Tormund. Or Ygritte. *Ygritte. The three-eyed crow said he'd look after you, but…*
"… I rode with Mance Rayder's host," Jon announced after a pause.

The man nodded. "Thought so. A lot of men with empty eyes came back from there. You fled by yourself?"

Jon nodded, and then asked. "What happened to Mance?"

"Dead," he said gruffly, before shrugging. "Most likely, anyways. The host scattered. Mance ran. Last I heard, he got ambushed by the crows after the dead sent them fleeing. The 'king's' head is probably on a spike by now."

"Is there a camp nearby?" Jon asked, trying to sound desperate. He wanted to appear to be just another fleeing wildling. He didn't have to try too hard.

"Yeah, the Weeper leads a force of five hundred of us down by the Antler. We're building ships to cross the Bay of Seals," the man explained, looking at Jon critically. "You know anything about shipbuilding, mate?"

The other wildling, the one with the rough beard, held out his hand. "Hold on now," he growled. "We've already got five hundred and that's a lot of mouths to feed and a lot of boats to craft. I'm not too keen on adding an extra one, myself." He stared at Jon. "Why exactly should we take you with us?"

"I can fight."

"So can a lot of men. You got anything to pay your wage?"

"Leave it, Sten," the other wildling warned.

"Like hell I will," the wildling, Sten, snapped, before turning back to Jon. "If we're going to be the ones to recruit this traveller…” He said the word in mocking. "…into our venture, then I think it's only fair that we get a recruitment fee."

The mood turned dark. Sten hoisted up his axe dangerously. A few of the others did the same. Jon glanced around the group. Some looked more unwilling about the ransom, but none looked ready to object. "… I have nothing to pay," said Jon.

"That's a nice sword you got," Sten challenged, glancing at Dark Sister. It was too far for him to really tell how nice his sword actually was. "Good steel always rare. Nice furs, too."

"Then if I don't want to pay?"

"Mayhaps we just leave you here then." His eyes narrowed. "Or mayhaps we take payment from your corpse."

They were all clutching their weapons tightly. Six against one.

"Let's just leave it," the free folk objected, weakly. "The Weeper wanted as many men as possible."


Jon took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. His body never even twitched. It was getting easier and easier. "The sword is not for sale."

"And what's to stop me from just killing you and taking it, then?" Sten snarled. He had his axe. It
was a big axe.

Jon slowly opened his eyes. He carefully adjusted his stance. "... Well... for starters..." he said, drawing out the words. All weapons were readied. "... I think my friend would object."

"And what friend is that?"

Jon smiled.

They all heard the crash. The sound of splintering trees. The wildlings shouted, flinching backwards. The growl was so low and so deep it rolled over the clearing.

Jon never moved. He felt the cold breath on the back of his head as Sonagon's head emerged from the trees. The dragon growled, with sharp white teeth as long as swords. There was a cool mist steaming from his jaws.

The tall pine trees were barely tall enough to fit Sonagon's body. The forest's trees had reduced the dragon's manoeuvrability significantly, yet the dragon had still made good progress. The white dragon towered over them all.

The wildlings eyes widened in pure terror. He heard curses from the Old Tongue. The wildling called Sten looked ready to collapse.

There was a faint hiss of steam as one of the men pissed themselves.

"Like I said," Jon announced, drawing Dark a smooth arc. "**My friend.**"

"By the gods..." Sten gasped, staggering backwards. His axe wasn't big enough.

A wildling turned to run. "Nobody move!" Jon ordered. At that moment, Sonagon roared. The roar caused snowflakes to fly off the ground. A couple of men whimpered.

*They are big strong men, Jon thought. *They all look like veterans of many hunts, many raids and battles... and they are whimpering.*

Jon stared at Sten. Wildlings generally didn't scare easily. These men were terrified. "Now then..." Jon said. "Tell me about this camp."

Ten minutes later, when they were done babbling, Jon let the men run away. He didn't care to kill them, and in all likelihood there were others that would have heard Sonagon's roar in any case.

*I have to be careful. *Five hundred men led by Weeper. The Weeper was a sadistic bastard who never liked Jon from the beginning. Jon doubted anything would have changed there.

Sonagon watched the men run through curious, beady eyes. They were the first living men besides Jon that the dragon had seen. Jon glanced at the dragon with concern.

Right now, Sonagon was more vulnerable than he had ever been. In the Haunted Forest, on the ground, Sonagon was severely restricted. The trees were proving severe obstacles to a dragon of Sonagon's size. They stopped him moving, like a wooden bars of a cage on all sides. The dragon's size became so much more of a hindrance moving through the forest.

If Sonagon was ever attacked from all directions – by strong men who knew the terrain – then the forest could prove the dragon's doom. The dragon needed open areas to fight properly.

A grounded dragon was a vulnerable dragon. A caged dragon even more so.
The Weeper could prove a serious threat if he was so inclined to go dragon hunting. If five hundred strong wildlings attacked the dragon from all sides, using the trees to stop Sonagon from turning or moving properly, then that could be very, very dangerous.

There was no choice; Jon had to keep Sonagon safe at all costs.

But still, Jon thought with a grimace, to backtrack further through the forest could put us in even more danger. Jon had been aiming for the clear path offered by the river for some time now. He needed to get to the coast quickly.

There were five hundred free folk. They were wildlings that might endanger Sonagon, but they could also help protect him. The wights had been getting more frequently. The Others were on his trail already, likely preparing for a large assault.

Jon bit his lip. If I could convince the Weeper that he needs the dragon's aid, if I could turn a potentially dangerous enemy into a friend instead…

There were only two things that any free folk would accept: protection from the Others, and a way to cross the Wall. Sonagon could potentially offer both.

It had been something that Jon had been thinking about for some time now. The free folk might be the best chance the North had to stop the Others – but only if they worked with the Night's Watch on the right side of the Wall.

The Watch needed men to hold the Wall, and the wildlings were the largest army around that might help.

It was nigh-treason, Jon knew. Many of his sworn brothers would curse him for even suggesting it. They had fought against the wildlings for centuries, and now Jon was thinking about ways he could bring them south of the Wall.

"I took a vow," he said aloud, musing to himself. The sworn brothers might insist that he eliminate all wildlings now. The Weeper most definitely deserved death – the Weeper had killed as many rangers as Alfyn Crowkiller ever did. The Weeping Man was said to collect crow's eyes.

And yet I promised the three-eyed crow that I would do whatever it takes to stop the Others. Both the free folk and the sworn brothers are fighting the same enemy.

The true enemy are the white walkers, he thought. The enemy of all living. The problem is just getting everyone else to accept that.

There was choice between either facing wildlings or facing the Others, and that wasn't really a choice at all.

That settled it. Jon motioned to Sonagon, and the dragon was getting better and better and following his commands.

"Come on," Jon motioned, waving wildly with his arms. He knew that the dragon had fairly poor vision at short distances – any hand directions had to be greatly exaggerated.

The dragon's limbs staggered forward. For such a large creature, Sonagon's body was surprisingly serpentine and flexible, but he still had to squeeze through the narrow tree trunks.

The wood cracked and splintered as the dragon lumbered between them, hissing quietly. Jon waved his hands, motioning towards him. Sonagon hissed as he lowered his head and neck down towards
the ground. Jon grabbed a rope dangling off Sonagon's horn with both hands, placing his foot against Sonagon's scales as he heaved himself upwards.

He had to make an appearance here. Jon didn't want to be on foot when facing the Weeper. Jon had found that the top of the dragon's head, between the horns and above the crest was one of the better places to sit. It was awkward climbing and an uncomfortable seat, but Jon had even fastened an old hemp rope around one of Sonagon's horns to help him climb up. He had fastened another rope between the horns to give him something to hold on to.

Sonagon was large enough to lift Jon on his head with ease, but it was still a dangerous and uncomfortable position. Sonagon would often sway and lash his head violently, making the seat unstable and dangerous – particularly when Sonagon would bite and snap in battle. The dragon's neck was very flexible and he could move it like a whip. A safer seat place to mount was on the dragon's back, between the dragon's wings, but that was even more difficult to climb onto. It could still be difficult just to get the dragon to stay motionless for long enough to climb up.

Still, Jon suspected that Sonagon was warming too him. By nature, the dragon wasn't kind or soft, but the dragon was snapping at him less and warging more easily. Mostly, it was because Jon had saved his life several times. The dragon likely would have starved if Jon hadn't have used Ghost to find meals for him, or warned him about the Others. Jon had spent long, difficult days treating the wounds on Sonagon's body, or pulling broken arrows out of its hide.

It had been hard, long work caring for the dragon. Looking after a large, injured and starving dragon while an army wanted it dead had proved no easy feat.

*Time to for Sonagon to return the favour,* Jon thought, clutching on tightly as Sonagon started to move. The dragon's nostrils sniffed at the air. He was hungry again. Hopefully he wouldn't think of humans as food, but it still made Jon a bit more nervous.

There was no choice. He gripped on to the rope tightly as the dragon lumbered and started to move, crunching through the pine trees in the direction that the men ran. It wasn't long before Sonagon picked up on the trail of the camp.

They saw Jon long before he them. He heard the shouting first through the trees – the cries and alarms, both in the Common and Old Tongues – and then later he saw the figures moving through the trees.

The wildling camp had been built into a notch in the Antler, cradled by the river where the two fork met. The current was slow, but the river was wide. Around the camp, there were the stumps of trees and gashes through the forest. The free folk had been lumbering trees by the hundreds.

He saw movement through the trees. Jon grimaced, while Sonagon staggered forward. The great white dragon kept its head low, long neck slithering over the ground, while its legs struggled to squeeze through the foliage. There was the sound of wood crunching all around him as the smaller trees snapped and cracked under Sonagon's size. Each step was long, slow and lumbering.

It was the men Jon was more concerned about, though. The wildlings had set up sharpened spikes stabbed into the ground as palisades to defend the camp. Scattered through them, he glimpsed figures in mottled furs pulling back arrows notched on large bows.

Jon jumped up instantly. If even a single person fired, it could prompt an instant battle. If Sonagon went a wild not even Jon was sure he could stop him – the dragon had a temper. *Let's not make this bloody.*
"The first person to fire an arrow dies!" shouted Jon at the top of his lungs. He had spent enough time pulling arrows out of Sonagon, he never wanted to remove any more.

There was a ripple of hesitation. All eyes were fixed on the ice dragon prowling through the trees. "Bring me your leader!" Jon demanded. Stay strong. The free folk will only ever respect strength. "I wish to talk!"

Jon kept himself as straight at his awkward footing would allow, urging Sonagon to stay still. The dragon growled softly, but he didn't move. He could smell the hostility from the men.

There were a few minutes of frantic movement. Jon's hands were twitching as he gripped the rope tightly. Jon needed to negotiate from a position of strength, but he was also wide open. On top of Sonagon's head, he was a clear target for bowmen. A single arrow could take Jon down right now…

_They shoot me and Sonagon goes berserk_, Jon thought firmly. He just had to hope the wildlings realised that too.

After nearly three minutes, Jon saw the figures walking out of the camp. Seven figures, all of them clutching bronze swords or axes. The man at the front had a wicked curved iron scythe that swept backwards. Jon would have recognised him anywhere.

The Weeper looked exactly how Jon remembered; a short, but heavyset man with fair blond hair and a face permanently fixed into a heavy frown. He was constantly scowling, as if his face was fixed that way. He was an ugly man nearing middle-aged, with filthy hair and whiskers. He wore blackened leathers and motley animals skins piled over him, with bronze disks sewn into the tunic. His cloak bore a grotesque of a face painted red; a demonic face with a mouth of fangs and empty, weeping eyes.

The Weeper himself had weak, watery eyes that were constantly crying. The Weeper had been born crying, apparently - some kind of affliction or eye infection. He even occasionally wept blood. There had been many that had mocked him for his eyes, but a life of mocking had turned the Weeper cruel, hard and vicious. There were few raiders as feared – the Weeper kept a chain of human eyeballs from the men he had mutilated.

A favourite game for the Weeper used to be to capture rangers, Jon recalled. The Weeper would cut out the ranger's eyes, and sent them back blind. Watchers on the Wall that couldn't watch, the Weeper was said to have chuckled.

Now, the Weeper's eyes were wide and stunned as he stared upwards at Sonagon with a mixture of disbelief and horror. Even the other free folk next to him, all battle hardened warriors, looked scared.

The Weeper was at the front, clutching his scythe in both hands. ". . . What is this beast?" He demanded, his voice a roar. "And who are you?"

"This is Sonagon. A dragon," Jon shouted. There was about fifty feet between them, while Jon was twenty feet off the ground atop the dragon's head. "And he will not hurt anyone unless I tell him to."

"You control that thing?" There was just a slight quiver of uncertainty in his voice.

"He listens to me," Jon replied.

A few glances. "What is your name, boy?"
"I'm looking for refuge," Jon shouted, not answering the question. "We've come from far north; we're heading to the coast. I want to discuss terms!"

Watery eyes narrowed. "Terms of what?"

"The cost of our assistance!" Jon hesitated, the words almost catching in his throat. "... If you ever want to cross the Wall, then you will listen to what I say."

That got his attention. Those words made the whole conversation shift. The Weeper gripped his scythe a bit tighter, twisting on the wrapped leather handle. He paused, watery eyes flickering.

"... Then let's talk. Face to face," The Weeper demanded. "You leave that monster behind. Come into our camp alone. And if that monster makes a move, I will put it down!"

Jon hesitated, but there was no choice. The discussion would go poorly unless Jon treated with him face to face. Jon would have to go down there himself. Let the Weeper save face by threatening Sonagon, I need his help here, not his ire.

"Alright," Jon called. "Let's do this reasonably – I want your word on your honour that I will be granted safe passage to your camp unmolested."

"Fine, you have it."

"Good." The Old Ways were strong in the north; the free folk lived and died by their word. Still, Jon added, "... Sonagon will keep you to that promise if the Old Gods do not."

Jon scrambled awkwardly to the rope hanging off the dragon's horn. Sonagon shifted and growled slightly.

"... Easy, Sonagon," Jon soothed, clutching the rope as he started to climb down. "Just stay here. I won't be long and I'll be back soon. Stay here."

It took a few awkward minutes to clamber down. Jon's leg felt suddenly sore, limping worse than usual as he approached. The Weeper's eyes narrowed; taking in Jon's white hair and gaunt face, his bad leg.

Up close, the men were so much bigger than him. Still, they all kept their distance cautiously, staring at Jon if he were some legendary snark or grumpkin. "How do you control that thing?" Weeper demanded.

"I'm a warg," Jon said simply, his hand near his sword cautiously.

"Bah!" The Weeper grunted, spitting on forest floor. He acted as if that word explained everything.

He let Jon walk in front, while the Weeper walked behind. Two of his men stayed behind to watch the dragon, while the others flanked behind and around Jon. They all had to wait as Jon limped slowly with his poor leg.

In the camp, he was met with dozens more warriors clutching weapons, but also many women and children. They were all staring at Sonagon, and at Jon, with hushed voices and panicked eyes. The dragon was a huge white shape looming between the pine trees.

Jon saw free folk from a dozen different clans – there were hornfoots, nightrunners, cave dwellers, men from frozen shore, the lakes. Men from a hundred random clans. They had all just ended up together when Mance's army broke – all refugees who had fled with the Weeper's warband.
The boats that they were building hung by the river's edge. The free folk were poor shipwrights. The boats were barely more than barges built of large logs roped together — eight large barges and a ninth still under construction. *Five hundred men, would they try to fit fifty per barge?*

Jon supposed the ships were the best chance they had left to get so many people across the Wall now. With Mance's army broken, they lacked the men to take the Wall, and risking the Bay of Seals was the only choice. They had camped by the Antler to chop wood from the Haunted Forest, and when the boats were done they could float them down the river and out to sea, around the coast and to the south. It wasn’t even a bad plan — the sea patrols from Eastwatch were very poor of late — but Jon would still be surprised if even half of the people here made it across.

"You avoided giving me a name," Weeper noted, lowering his scythe fractionally as they ended camp. "Who are you loyal to? What clan are you from?"

"I have no clan," Jon replied, stopping in the centre of the camp. There were men gathered around him. "I am loyal to Sonagon, and he's loyal to me. As for the name... My name is Jon Snow."

The Weeper paused. Jon saw the recognition dawn in his eyes. With Jon's changed appearance, he wasn't surprised it took the Weeper so long to recognise him.

He cursed in the Old Tongue. "I know you," the Weeper growled. "You're that crow."

The very word made the men around them hoist up their weapons a little higher. "That deserter crow that Mance Rayder brought in," said the Weeper. "I should have taken your eyes when I had a chance — fucking Mance was always soft on you."

"If you had done that, you'd have nothing but a pair of eyes," said Jon. "Whereas right now I'm offering a chance to get your people across the Wall."

"And why the fuck would I trust a turncoat crow?"

"What choice do you have? You're going to sail across the Bay of Ice on barges. If you meet a storm, you'll all die. Even you don't, I imagine the cold water and wind will still take most of you. You're gambling with the patrols either way. I'm offering another choice."

The Weeper stormed forward. He wasn't a very tall man, but something about him could still tower. His eyes were wide and wild, with tears leaking down his face.

"... No, no, no..." The Weeper snarled. "I don't buy it. I never bought your fucking story. I never trusted you the minute you came into Mance's camp."

Suddenly, he gripped Jon's collar roughly, pulling Jon's face close. Every weapon twitched. Jon was suddenly staring into the man's grizzled face, noses so close they might touch.

"It's in the eyes, boy. I can see who you are in the eyes, and you've always looked like a crow to me."

Jon forced himself to stay still. The Weeper looked crazy. Jon could struggle, but that would only give the Weeper an excuse to cut his throat. "You should let go off me right now," Jon said quietly, forcing himself to stay calm. *Can't let this become a fight, stay calm..."

"Oh aye?" He growled. "Why should I?"

Sonagon chose that moment to growl — a long, dangerous growl that rumbled the earth. Jon could feel the rumble as the dragon stepped forward slowly. The Weeper's gaze flickered, but he still
didn't let go.

"... I knew you were bullshit the minute I saw you," the Weeper continued in a dangerously low voice. "I knew you weren't one of us, not really. I just never said anything cause I always figured Mance would be the one to get burned by you, not me. I don't trust any fucking crow." He nearly spat the word. "Give me one good reason why I should trust you?"

"You need me."

"No. Not even close." He looked insane. "It's that... that dragon that I could use, not you. You're totally useless to me."

"I'm the only one who can control the dragon," Jon gasped, feeling the Weeper's hands tighten, so tight he could barely breathe. Jon could go for his sword, but he would be dead before he drew it. Maybe he could have taken the Weeper alone, but the Weeper had a dozen men around him. Jon had Sonagon, but the dragon was further away.

"Maybe. Maybe not. You're not the only warg around, boy. Did you know that Varamyr Sixskins still lives? He's supposed to be the greatest skinchanger alive. Now I don't really trust him either, but I'll pick him over you any day." The Weeper's face twisted. "Now maybe I just kill you right here. Maybe I reach out to Varamyr and get him to control your dragon for me. Maybe you're totally unnecessary right now."

Sonagon was still growling, taking a few warning steps closer. Men were panicking slightly, rushing the defences with bows and spears, while the Weeper kept on gripping Jon tightly.

"Kill me and you'd be dead before I hit the ground," Jon warned. Sonagon was still rumbling closer. Men were shouting, notching bows and running with spears, but with each step the dragon took the earth rumbled...

"I think I'll be dead anyways if I listen to you," the Weeper snarled. "I think you're just trying to use us. Now why would I ever believe a crow when he says he says he's going to help us across the Wall?"

Jon hesitated. Wrong one move and the Weeper really was mad enough to kill him, dragon be damned.

"... I'm looking at your eyes, boy," the Weeper warned. "If you give me any fucking bullshit that you've abandoned your brothers, I kill you right now. Tell me, why the fuck should I trust you?"

Jon met his gaze, gasping slightly. One wrong word...

"... Because I've seen the real enemy. I've fought the real enemy." Jon's hands scrambled, pulling up his furs over his chest. The Weeper stopped, staring at the ugly red scar on Jon's chest, under his clearly visible ribcage. "... And I've felt the real enemy's blade. You're not my enemy, not anymore..." Jon shook his head. "All men must stand together against the cold."

The Weeper was silent for a long time, staring into Jon's eyes. Then, with a grunt, the Weeper let go of Jon and stepped backwards two paces.

Through the trees, Sonagon stopped growling. Jon felt himself release a breath he never even realised he was holding.

"Alright then," the Weeper said finally, dropping his scythe and folding his arms. "Let's talk. Tell us, crow, how are you going to get us across the Wall?"
"I have a dragon. My dragon has wings. Sonagon could fly us south, straight over the Wall."

The Weeper shook his head. "I can't see it fly. I don't think you'd be walking through the woods if it could fly, in fact. I do see wings – but chickens have wings too and they can't fly. Come on, let's see the dragon fly!"

"He can't," Jon admitted. "Not right now. His wings are wounded, but he's healing. As soon as his wings are healed then he could fly us across the Wall."

"Bah!" The Weeper spat. "So that's your game? You want us to wait and take care of your little dragon while its wings heal. No, I don't buy it. You approached us, crow. You want something from us."

Jon hesitated. "... We're being hunted. The white walkers have been chasing us for a while now, and sooner or later they'll catch up. I got lucky rescuing Sonagon once, but they won't make the same mistake again. We need protection." He paused. "And we need food. Sonagon is hungry – he can't fly, he can't hunt, and I can't feed him by myself. We need help."

Slowly, Weeper's face twisted into an evil sneer. "Oh yeah. That's more like it. That's perfect." He stared angrily. "Let me get this straight, crow; you want us to lay down our lives keeping you and your dragon protected and well-fed. You want free folk to bleed protecting you and your pet. And you want us to do all that on nothing more than the promise that later you will eventually fly us south of the Wall?"

"You followed Mance on the promise that he would lead you south."

"You are not Mance!" The Weeper's voice was a snarl. Around him, the wildlings shifted. The air was tense.

*Don't let him control flow of the conversation*, Jon thought with a grimace. Every free folk would make their own decision who to follow, and they would follow whoever looked the strongest.

"I can protect you!" Jon shouted, turning slightly to face the crowd of surrounding wildlings. Everyone else was silent. "We all know that the cold winds are rising! You were there at the Frostfangs when the army broke! They cut through you and their army became larger for it. A hundred thousand free folk couldn't stand up against the dead!" His eyes were hard. "... But the dragon can! The ice dragon might be the only creature left in the world the Others are afraid of! They spent weeks hunting it because they are afraid. Stand with me, and maybe we can stop the cold winds together!"

There were a few nervous glances. The free folk would not bend easily – they would only follow the man. Jon's heart was pounding as he turned, looking at each one in turn. "Follow me and I will get everyone across the Wall!" He promised, wishing that it would be so easy. "Follow me and we can leave the Others behind! Every person we save, that's one less person the Others can kill and raise. Once less body for their army! Let the Others waste their strength against the Wall, and together lets hold back the Long Night for another ten thousand years!"

Every face he stared at was hard, but Jon could feel the mummer going through the crowd. The Weeper scowled.

"Is that right?" The Weeper growled. "We both want to stop the Others, crow – aye, I believe that. That might be the only thing we've got in common. That might be the only reason I haven't killed you yet."
The Weeper took a step forward. "But let's say that I trust you," he said slowly. "Let's say you that keep your promise. Let's say that you don't just fly away and discard us as soon as you can." His face twisted. "Let me tell you, crow, as soon as me and my men arrive south, let me tell you the very first thing that I'm going to do…" His voice turned dangerously low. "… I'm going to murder every fucking crow I can find."

The statement was met by a few cheers from the crowd. Jon's stomach clenched. There was pure bloodlust in the words. *Am I making a huge mistake here? Trying to ally with wildlings…*

The Weeper was pacing, growling. "In fact, I'm going to storm Castle Black with every man, woman and child I can find. I'm going to butcher every crow in that castle, and I'm going to hoist those gates wide open. And I'm going to fight to my last fucking breath to keep them open for as long as I fucking can." Some of the free folk banged approvingly on their shields. "I'm going to open those gates and I'm going to let every living person in the north go through them. Every single free folk – I'll open the door to bring them south and I'll fight every bloody kneeler that tries to stop me!"

The crowd erupted into cheers. The free folk were banging weapons against the ground approvingly. The Weeper's grin was all teeth as he approached Jon.

"… So my question to you, crow…" The Weeper continued. "… Are you happy with that?"

There was a deathly edge to the question. Jon knew that telling the truth could likely cost him his life. Still, he did it anyways.

"No," Jon admitted. "If you tried to kill the sworn brothers of the Night's Watch, I would be forced to fight against you."

The Weeper's watery eyes flashed victoriously. "… However," said Jon, carefully. "If the men of the Night's Watch led an attack against you, then I would fight against them as well."

The Weeper shook his head. "No. You can't have it both ways, boy. It's us or them. Pick a side."

"I'm on the side of the living. Always the living," said Jon. "Never the dead."

"Bold words. Stupid, but bold."

"… I took a vow," said Jon. The three-eyed crow would hold him to that vow. "I vowed to do whatever it takes to stop the Others. To stop them, we need more south of the Wall, not north of it. When the free folk are south, the white walkers will run out of corpses for their army. Less bodies for them, more bodies to fight against them. To stop the Others, I must save the free folk." He nodded. "The sworn brothers must see that too."

He met the Weeper's gaze. "And we need the Night's Watch," he said firmly. "When Others try to go south, the Night's Watch must hold the Wall. If you are to live in the south, then you will need the Night's Watch too."

"And when the Night's Watch try to kill us?"

"I'll convince them not to," Jon said. Disbelieving silence met the statement. "We make peace with the Night's Watch. We convince them to let the free folk pass, and then together can we face back the Long Night." If Jon said it firmly enough, he might almost believe it. "There are lands south of the Wall. The Gift – they are rich lands that belong to the Night's Watch. They will let you settle on the Gift, and in return we will stand together against the Others."
His face flashed dark. "You want us to kneel?"

"I want you to survive," Jon countered. "You don't have to bend the knee, but I expect the free folk to fight. To fight against the cold that threatens us all." He met the Weeper's eyes. "You were at the Frostfangs. No army can stand against the Others alone. Only together do we have any chance."

The silence felt deadly. It was the type of silence where Jon half-expected an axe flying through the air at any moment.

Jon focused on the Weeper. The Weeper was the meanest, crueller raider around. Maybe Tormund was stronger, and Mance had been more cunning, but the Weeper was nasty. Few people ever stood against the Weeper; there were plenty of men that could kill you, but the Weeper was vicious enough to do things worse than death. The Weeper wouldn't cut your throat; he would cut out your eyes, rape your skull, and then leave you to starve.

If Jon could convince him, then the other free folk would follow.

The men of the Night's Watch had always said that the Weeper was an insane, sadistic bastard – but the man wasn't a stupid, insane, sadistic bastard…

"Where are you heading?" The Weeper demanded, his ugly face twisting in thought.

"Hardhome," Jon replied. "The peninsula is one of the most defendable locations around."

The Weeper's eyes flickered uncertainly. There was a quiet pause. Something went through the air at the mention of the place. "... I thought Hardhome was deserted," said Jon, with a frown.

"It was." The Weeper nodded. "Up until about a moon ago. Some bloody wood witch - name of Mother Mole -" He spat. "- she's been harping on about the place. She's been ranting on about some prophecy that the free folk would find their salvation there. Men have been flocking to Hardhome for weeks. Crazy, desperate bastards, following a blithering little hag."

Still, there was just a flicker in his voice at that last comment, as if maybe he wasn't so sure anymore.

"Find their salvation?" Jon said slowly. "How?"

"Who knows? Bloody wood witch."

They faced each other for a long time. In the distance, there was a long, slow growl from Sonagon. A gentle reminder that the dragon wouldn't wait forever.

The Weeper paused for a long time, before finally making a decision. "Alright then, crow," he said after a while. "Let's see how much your word is worth." The Weeper turned to the free folk. "We move out, lads! Gather up as much food as you can carry! I want those barges in the water as soon as possible!"

"But the last one isn't finished yet!" A wildling protested, pointing at the ninth, half-complete barge.

"Then you've got six hours to get it done, or you'll stay behind finish it!" The Weeper snapped. "Everyone else, move it scunners! Strike up the tents! As much food as we can carry, and everything else goes on the barges! We move out before dark!"

His voice left no room for argument, and the wildlings already rushing into movement. Jon could
feel the frenzied activity spreading around him. "Snow!" The Weeper ordered. "You bring that beast into camp, and I swear by all the gods that if you can't control that thing I'll kill you myself."

"You're going to help me, then?" said Jon.

"I help me and my own," the Weeper snapped. "But let's see how far our interests align, Snow."

The words were echoed by other free folk surrounding them. Grizzled warriors staring firmly at Jon. "I followed a former crow once," an old wildling growled. "But Mance was the best of us. The worst, too. You've got one chance to prove yourself, Snow. Only one."

The mutters of 'Snow' echoed in quiet agreement. Every face was suspicious and distrustful, staring at Jon, but they were moving, packing up camp. "... We were planning out heading out soon, anyways," The Weeper said after a pause. "We'll follow the Antler to the coast alongside the barges, and we can take you to Hardhome. After that... we'll see." His watery eyes narrowed. "If you are nothing more than the piece of dirt I suspect you might be, than I can always just kill you there and continue on to sail across the Bay of Seals like planned."

*I'll take it*, Jon thought. It meant that he had until they reached Hardhome to prove to the free folk that they should follow him and Sonagon, and not the Weeper.

Around him, Sonagon started moving slowly, sniffing at every object. The men in the camp stared at the dragon with either open astonishment or scrard distance. The dragon was lumbering towards the river, brushing snow off the pine trees with every step.

All of the free folk were staring. Some looked ready to leave the camp altogether. There was muttering in every corner. Jon had no doubt that the word would move quickly across the north. The news of the ice dragon would spread quickly.

Jon was on his way south now. First the free folk would hear of Sonagon, and then the rangers of the Night's Watch shortly afterwards. How long would it be before all the realm was talking about Jon's ice dragon?

The thought sent shivers down his spine.

"To Hardhome, then," Jon said.

"Aye," the Weeper agreed. "To Hardhome."

The free folk were rushing around, gathering everything from firewood, to furs and rope. Sonagon lingered at the edge of the camp, staring at the men scuttling around him like mice. The Weeper hesitated, before pulling up close to Jon and whispering gruffly in his ear.

"If you do mean what you say you do," the Weeper muttered, in a voice for him that was almost gentle. "Then these are your people now. Do right by them."

He stared, turning to face the raider. There was a vicious smile playing at the Weeper's lips. "... And congratulations," he hissed. "You're a wildling now."

Jon knew that the Weeper was mocking him, but still... just that phrase... it still caused knots to squirm in his stomach.

Chapter End Notes
Well, I consider this chapter to be the first of what I'm calling the second arc of the story. First arc was a lot of divergence - setting up the story, introducing the dragon, establishing some pieces - but a lot of it was also Jon lost in the wilderness somewhere, knowing nothing. Now he's heading toward civilisation, and things are going to start changing more. The dragon is heading towards the seven kingdoms, and that means people are going to take notice...

Probably means a lot of screaming, too.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

To Hardhome.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jon

"You ever seen a mammoth fuck before, Snow?" The man asked with a toothy grin, as they walked.

Jon blinked, stopping to stare. The snow was light underfoot, but the muddy terrain still made movement slow. "What?"

"A mammoth. Ever seen mammoths in heat?" The wildling asked, as others around them snickered dryly. Furs was a short, stocky man clad in a cloak of mottled fox fur, with rugged whiskers, narrow-set eyes and two missing front teeth. "You ever watched two mammoths rut?"

Jon wasn't quite sure how to reply, or if the man was mocking him. "Amazing thing, really," Furs continued. "Bull mammoths get really feisty certain times of the year. My mum always used to say - when the mountains are a-rocking, don't go mammoth knocking." The wildlings next to him snorted. "I never understood how it worked, really."

"Your mum never told you that one, eh Furs?" Another snorted. Two-Notch Haldur, Jon recalled.

"Fuck off. I just mean, well, mammoths got those tiny little legs and great bodies," Furs continued. "And great tusks too. Those are bound to get in the way. So when the bull has to mount the cow, well… how does it even reach? How does it work?"

The men sniggered. Furs looked at Jon as if expecting an answer. He never replied. "The reason I ask, is well, mammoths I can kinda picture," Furs continued, with exaggerated hand motions. "But I was just looking at that dragon of yours, and well… how does that one work?"

In the distance Sonagon snorted, blowing cool mist as the dragon waded through the river. The look on Furs face made Jon's mouth drop. The large man next to him – Hatch – was on his knees in boisterous laughter. Furs seemed genuinely curious. Furs was vicious looking man carrying a sharpened stone battle axe, with a look of confusion on his face.

"I'm serious," Furs protested, motioning at the dragon. "I mean, you've got the tail, the wings, the bloody spikes on its back… ! How does he even… you know…" He demonstrated with a series of rough actions. The wildlings howled. "So when that monster of yours meets a she-monster – there must be she-dragons, right? – What, does one have to lie on its back or something? They've got wings – do they fuck in the air you think? Maybe flying upside down or what?"

"Oh hells, now wouldn't that one be a sight!" Another roared, banging a hide shield.

Furs paused. "Wait, is your dragon a him-dragon or a she-dragon?" Furs had a perplexed look on
his face. "I never thought to check."

Jon recovered his tongue. "Umm, him-dragon," he said, still staring dumb. Jon had come to refer to Sonagon as a male, but in truth Jon wasn't sure. The genders always seemed so… alien as far Sonagon was concerned.

"Really?" Furs muttered, suspiciously. "I ain't seen no cock…"

Furs had the look of a man on a quest as he walked away. "Furs, everyone!" Hatch guffawed - a great bulk of a man clutching a bone spear. "The seeker of dragon cocks!"

Hatch the Halfgiant and Two-Notch Haldur howled. Jon pushed himself to learn the names. The Weeper's warband were all hardened fighters and raiders. He had been with them for less than two days, but he took care to try and memorise every name he heard. Someday, knowing their names might save my life.

The first night, two men tried to kill Jon. They weren't even subtle about it. Two raiders from the northern ice rivers - men with painted purple skin, bone piercings and sharpened teeth - tried to gut him open right in the middle of the camp. Jon still had no idea why they attacked him, because neither of them spoke the Common. Every other wildling just watched quietly as those men attacked him by the campfire.

After that, Jon took care to keep Ghost close, and Jon forced himself to memorise as many names as possible. He figured it would be harder for men to kill you if you knew their names.

There was Hatch the Hatchgiant, Rolf, Bone Erik, Sten, Haldur Halfwit, Rags, Mharka, Lewie, Stump, Crab Mors, Two-Notch Haldur, Furs, Left-Handed Yoldo, Shieldface, and Ulf Three Blades to name only a few. Some names were so queer that Jon wasn't sure he heard them right, and others he couldn't even pronounce. Hatch the Halfgiant was a man so great he could rival any son of Umber, while Rags walked so quiet with a bone dagger that Jon could never even hear him. Left-Handed Yoldo had only one arm (his right) but was still said to be vicious with a throwing axe, and Rolf had walked the length and width of the Haunted Forest a thousand times, while Two-Notch Haldur was a terrible marksman with a bow, yet Haldur could still notch and fire arrows faster and more continuously than any Jon had ever seen. They made a rough company, but the Weeper had plenty of seasoned and experienced warriors in his band.

They were making good time. The wildling warband spread out across the river valley, pushing along the trails running along either side of the Antler. Five hundred men and women. Running down the river, the nine barges floated in the current – laden with supplies and tents, animal hides as well as lumber, hemp rope and salted meat, berries and winter fruits.

The sails on the barges had yet to be built, so instead they let the current take them. The free folk shuffled along the wooden rafts with great poles to push them down the rocky stream. The Antlers was a wide river - not as deep as the Mander or as fast as the Trident, but long and winding as it snaked through the forest, and filled with river trout moving downstream. Chunks of ice still floated downstream from the mountains, and in the shallows the free folk would wallow in the freezing river, dragging fishing nets or pulling their barges on foot.

The wildlings had used the Antler for centuries. Apparently there were - or at least used to be - at least two dozen wildling clans across the same two mile stretch of river. The river clans had spent decades warring amongst themselves for the same short stretches of river.

Even despite the thick willow trees and rocky groves, the wildlings made good time. The men walking along the riverbank would wait for the barges to catch up the stream. The river was so
cold that Jon didn't know how they could stand it, but he still saw wildlings easily jump into the water to swim to and from the rafts, or across the width of the water.

They had no horses or mounts and few livestock. They wildlings relied on the huge barges to carry the bulk of their supplies. A few floated on the rafts, while the rest of the number – men, women, couple of children - trekked alongside in the forests.

Even when they were floating, the wildlings were still constructing their 'ships', Jon saw. The barges were crude chunks of wood, but even on the move men were tying hemp ropes or hacking on pine trees. The barges had no sails – those would have to be built before they reached the sea.

It was such a crude form of shipbuilding Jon half-expected it would cause a southern shipwright to squirm. Yet apparently the wildlings have been building boats this way for centuries, Jon thought to himself, they've even become experienced at it.

Still, no one was concerned about the barges. Not when Sonagon splashed in the water, causing great waves against the riverbanks with every swing of its tail.

Jon was a bit surprised to find the dragon quite enjoyed the river. In places, it was wide enough for the dragon to stretch out its wings, basking in the current. The dragon would waddle in the centre of the stream behind the free folk barges, occasionally snapping playfully at fish. The water was rarely deep enough for the dragon to swim, but he would splash and waddle down the centre of the river, enjoying the space away from the trees.

One night, when Sonagon wanted to rest, the dragon simply took a deep breath and exhumed a gust of cold dragonfire - freezing the water beneath him solid to create a nest of ice to curl up on. That had caused quite a stir; the ice plumed outwards so quickly that it nearly dammed the Antler, causing the water to flood outwards over the banks where the free folk were marching. Then, one of their barges had ended up caught in the fringes of the ice, and had to be hacked out with ice picks.

The Weeper had been furious. He hadn't appreciated the delay, and the ice continuously caused no end of trouble in bringing the barges downstream.

By the third day, they reached a joint where the Antlers pulled in one of its branches, and the river ran thicker and faster with more currents and gushing rapids across the stream. The barges needed ropes to the men on the riverbank to hold them steady to stop the rafts rushing off, while Sonagon seemed to enjoy either lazing on the riverbank or splashing in the rapids.

Jon might have been happy for the dragon, if not for the attitude in the warband. For every man that stared at the dragon with awe, there were another three staring with fear, suspicious or anger.

A few wildlings, like Furs, seemed happy to approach Jon, but most others glared at him from the distance.

Jon had seen the Weeper mutter quietly to his men in huddles, and Jon couldn't help but notice how the Weeper kept men with long sharp spears positioned around Sonagon at all times.

They don't trust me, he thought. I don't trust them. They wouldn't survive to Hardhome at this rate.

On the fourth day, hunters caught a boar in the forest - a great fat one. They set up camp for the night while the men skinned, cut, smoked the game with ruthless efficiency. The prime meat was salted and left aside, while the hide was stripped, the tusks and bones claimed for carving, and absolutely nothing was set aside. The wildlings served smoked boar brain and eyeballs that night.
Jon swallowed his hesitation and ate the meal, staring at the men hunched over the smokeless campfire. Even at night, the wildlings were never still. Some were trekking forward, while the ones camping now would catch up the next day.

"We'll be meeting up with Marthe of Antlers the next day, at this rate," an aging one-eyed wildling next to him commented. Rolf, Jon recalled. He forced himself to try and learn the names. "That cunt."

"Marthe of the Antlers?"

"The river lord, as he likes to call himself," Rolf explained. "Fucking bastard. Him and his clan claimed Stag's Peak for years now. He's got himself a keep and everything."

"Will he be a problem?"

Rolf just grunted. "As if," another wildling - Erik - retorted from Jon's other side. "Marthe's got thirty or so with him, and maybe half a dozen boats. The biggest clan around here, sure, but not enough to stop us. The Weeper will see him off and take his boats, I expect."

"Probably take his daughters, too," Rolf laughed. "I recall Marthe had a couple of pretty ones."

Jon never replied. It was the first he had heard about meeting a rival river clan, but from the looks of things a warband had already been assembled against Marthe. The Weeper is intentionally keeping me in the dark about the journey.

Suddenly, the sound of angry shouts and yells filled the camp, coming from the river. The wildlings were on their feet in a second. Every man and women kept a weapon by their hand at all times.

"No!" A man roared from the riverbank, shaking a stone maul. "Get back! Get away!"

There was the sound of a low growl. Jon's eyes widened as he saw Sonagon looming out of the water, his snout sniffing at one of the barges.

"Fuck off!" A wildling snapped. "That's our bloody meat!"

Dammit. The supply barges. They loaded up the carcass of the boar, along with the other salted fish and game they kept in the barges. Sonagon must have noticed. Jon tried to stop the dragon, but Sonagon was hungry and in no mood to listen. The dragon never did learn the definition of 'other people's property'.

A few men tried to fight Sonagon off, but then the dragon lunged and they all had to leap away into the river. In an instant, Sonagon's claws were tearing the barge off the water, and his great teeth were gnashing through the meat stored within. There was a snap of wood as the barge tore into chunks under enormous teeth.

Men were screaming. He saw torches and spears and arrows. Fuck.

About two weeks worth of rations, as well as a whole barge, gone in a moment.

Jon tried to run, but he couldn't reach the riverbank in time. He saw a wildling throw a spear through the cold air. Sonagon snarled as the barbed tip caught his snort.

"No!" Jon shouted, but he could barely shout loud enough over din. "Don't…!"
More people were throwing spears, even a few arrows, trying to drive the dragon away from the broken barge. Sonagon snapped - the dragon really didn't like spears or arrows. Jon saw the dragon's head pull backwards, and great gushes of cold mist rise from his throat…

"Don't!" Jon shouted, dragging the first man back, jumping into the shallows of the water and raising his arms protectively in front of the wildlings. "Don't!"

Sonagon looked about two seconds away from demolishing the riverbank in dragonfire. Only the presence of Jon caused the dragon to pause. Jon tried to ease the dragon down, but Sonagon felt too angry to listen.

A few of the wildlings behind him tried to run. "Don't move!" Jon shouted, his voice raw. *Don't do it Sonagon, please don't.* "Stick close to me, or the dragon will kill you!"

And he might kill us all anyways, Jon thought in panic. The mist didn't stop streaming from the dragon's throat, causing the night air to crackle.

"The dragon ate our meat!" A man roared, still clutching a spear, as if ready to throw.

"And now he's about to eat you!" Jon bellowed, striking the man down with a sharp fist. Strong arms grabbed at him. "Are you ready to die over a boar?"

The whole camp was in turmoil, but Jon had eyes only for Sonagon. The dragon was prickly. Sonagon didn't understand mercy, or restraint. Hurt a dragon and you die. The image of the riverbank frozen in icy spikes flashed before his mind. *Please Sonagon, Jon begged, don't do it.*

After a long pause, Sonagon snarled, lowered his head and splashed away to the water. Jon could have sighed in relief, but then the wildling was up again, on his feet, and slamming the butt of his spear into Jon's stomach.

The brawl lasted a few minutes, splashing in the cold water in the dark. It was so chaotic he couldn't even tell who he was fighting, or how many. By the time it was finally broken up, Jon had a few more bruises.

The Weeper was furious. Nobody died, but a man broke his leg against the rocks jumping into the water. The loss of a good chunk of their supplies meant that the host would be even more hurt for food.

"You said you'd keep that dragon under control!" The Weeper spat, dragging Jon against a tree trunk. His breath was foul. "You said you'd control it!"

"I can't stop him from being hungry!" Jon said with groan, struggling to move.

"And I can barely feed my own men!" The Weeper roared, his sharp fingers digging into Jon's shoulder like knives. "I got a lot of hungry mouths, and a hundred leagues to go! And your dragon eats more than the lot of them!"

Jon groaned, gasping for breath. He grit his teeth, trying to throw the man off. "I can't control Sonagon when he's hungry…" Jon growled. "And we're not feeding Sonagon enough."

Sonagon hadn't been fed enough for a long time, Jon thought with a grimace. The dragon had a lot of mass to feed, and could be very gluttonous at times. The Weeper's eyes were mad and wide. "And what do you suggest?" He growled. "You expect me to let good men starve to feed that thing? Hells, why not feed people to it direct?"
The Weeper glared, spat, and then stormed, his men casting foul stares at Jon. He was left clutching his bruises. Jon froze, and then cursed. He felt like hitting something.

What did I expect in the north? Food is scarce enough as it is, without expecting them to feed a dragon too.

The next morning, everyone kept their distance from the dragon. There were far fouler stares. The Weeper apparently sent out three times the number of hunting parties, and he gave the order that half needed to go to the dragon. Jon still wasn't sure if it would be enough to keep Sonagon placated.

Still, the Weeper also confiscated bronze and iron weapons from two dozen men in the night. There were raiders with hammers crudely smithing metal over campfires. They are crafting long metal spears or bolts, Jon realised. Weapons that may be sharp and long enough to pierce a dragon's scales and cause some damage. They are starting to think about what might happen if they need to go dragon-hunting.

It was a grim day. They set up camp early and made little progress as they waited for the hunting parties.

After dusk, the night turned frighteningly cold. They kept the camp fires and torches burning continuously, but four watchers on the edges of the camp died when their campfires froze over. Other scouts reported movement in the night. Dark shapes and rustling bodies, the smell of death and cold.

They're testing us. The Weeper was careful and kept a tight perimeter, but the Others wielded cold like a weapon. Maybe the white walkers didn't have the forces for an assault, but they still surrounded the camp at night, like a fog of deadly cold. The fires kept them at bay, but Jon knew the Others were out there. How long before they launch a full-scale assault?

Jon spent the night in Phantom's skin, stalking across the night. Jon could taste the fear, tension and distrust simmering in the camp. That sort of fear had a way of boiling over.

Towards the centre, a brawl broke out in the camp – some dispute or old grudge from the Hornfoots against the Lake Clans – and it ended up sucking half the camp into the chaos. Phantom heard the shouting. The brawl only ended when the Weeper stepped in personally.

The Weeper had little patience. The Weeper executed the man who threw the first punch by cutting off both arms with his scythe. That man lasted half an hour, screaming in the centre of the camp, before he finally bled out. Then, the Weeper picked up a severed limb and beat the second man half to death it. The Weeper was gnashing his teeth as he stormed away. The camp turned very quiet after that.

Jon could only watch in quiet horror. There were no more brawls.

Later that night, towards morning, the Weeper's men – discreetly – gathered the corpses and floated the dead bodies of all the men who had died down the river, for Sonagon to swallow. When Jon stared at him, the Weeper only grunted and said it was easier than burning corpses.

Five hundred wildlings, Jon thought. Five hundred raiders each with their own grudges and hatreds. The far north had been at war for so long.

"Furs," Jon called as they stopped the next day. His leg felt stiff. "How many clans are left in the north? How many warbands, how many villages?"
"Well what happened after Mance's collapse?" Jon pressed. "How many survived?"

"They said there were a hundred thousand with Mance," Furs mused. "Personally, I don't know who counted them. I reckon at least a third ended up dead on those mountains."

"A third?" Another grunted - a man with a long shaggy white beard. Jon suspected his name was Ulf or Wulf or something. "Try half, I'd say. Place was a slaughter."

**Fifty thousand dead in single night**, Jon thought. That number was mind-boggling.

"Not so many," an old spearwife argued. *Her name is Mo,* Jon remembered. "Lots of corpses, but the camp was large enough that the vast majority could get away. Maybe ten thousand died - the rest scattered either west or east. I reckon most survived."

"Ten thousand the first night, possibly," the other said grimly. "But how many died in the snow and cold in the weeks afterwards?"

Jon tried to remember that night. The fear and the panic. Eventually, there were just so many bodies you couldn't keep count. *How many wildlings had been in the north anyway?* He wondered. He had thought that Mance's host was huge, but it suddenly occurred to him that that might have been nearly the entire population of the far north. Every single man and woman. *How many still remained?*

It set a foul mood over the group. As they started moving again, Furs mentioned to Jon, "It ain't so grim," he said with a grunt. "The Frozen Shore always had a good number of tribes, and not even Mance could rally the ice lakes to him. They'll be clans in the mountains buried so deep not even the Others could touch them. The gorge clans will be the last to fall, too. I hear some Thenns still hold out in the north, and who knows how many men could be even further north than that?"

Jon looked at him. Furs just shrugged. "You wondering how many the Others haven't killed, aren't you?"

*That and how many they were still yet to kill.* "Where are you from, Furs?" Jon asked after a pause. It was weird to think of 'Beyond-the-Wall' as a single place, when in fact it must be as big as the north itself.

"Old Mother's Crock," he replied, and then noticed Jon's confusion. "Up by the north-eastern shores. Bunch of rocks in the coast, call them the Old Mother. Good fishing. Five bigs rocks, five different clans on each one. Did you know that my father spent fifty years fighting for that rock? The folk from Old Mother's Bale used to come down demanding our salmon. My family fought those buggers for fifty years - they lived barely a hundred yards away."

Jon blinked. "...I see."

"Meh, you put a hundred free folk in the room, and they'll be a hundred different wars in a week. Maybe that's why most don't keep to the same place, you know," Furs continued. He motioned up towards Hatch, walking in front. "You see Hatch over there? I don't think he ever lived longer than a couple of weeks in one place. Most are constantly moving – you get clans that trek halfway around the north following the elk each year. And don't ever get me started on the riverfolk; when the trout come, you get a village of three hundred pop up overnight. That village will be gone in two weeks."

"There were villages around the Wall, in the Haunted Forest," Jon said slowly. To call them
villages was an overstatement, admittedly. More like hamlets of a few old shacks in the forest.

"Oh, aye some do," Furs agreed. "You also get some clans that lock down so tight - I know folks that I doubt will ever leave a hundred yards from where they were born. But most keep moving all their lives. What's the word? Migratory. We roam like the giants."

Jon never replied. "You ever seen giants roam, Snow? The giants tribes used to herd their mammoths across the whole world. They would go as far as north goes, to hear the tales. No one ever knew how far they went because none could follow them. My grandfather used to tell me about giants and mammoth herds so big that the ground would rumble with their footsteps." There was a soft sigh. "Doubt we'll ever see the like again. Giants don't roam no more."

Jon stayed quiet. He thought back to that moment, so long ago, in the camp next to Ygritte. I am the last of the giants, they had sung at night. You know nothing, Jon Snow.

He thought about thirty thousand, or fifty thousand, or however many wildlings dead in the mountains. He tried to imagine corpses that thick in the snow. More people than I have ever met, more names than I could memorise in a lifetime. It was a scary thought.

The free folk had no government, no organisation. The south had a chance again the Others, but the wildlings had practically none. It would take strong castles and walls to defend against the Others. Fortifications and organised military. The only thing that the free folk had was Mance, and even he failed.

I might be watching the extinction of every single man, woman, and child north of the Wall, Jon thought. That was a mountain of corpses. That's scary.

In the evening, Jon watched the Weeper gather fifty men to scout ahead, to go raid Marthe of the Antlers and steal his boats. It was probably deserved as well; to hear the tales, Marthe had a nasty reputation. Besides, the Weeper did need Marthe's ships. The raiders were almost eager for the battle, for the chance of plunder.

Tens of thousands have died already, Jon thought after a long pause. I can't let anymore die.

He made the decision in a moment. Jon waddled down to Sonagon by the bank, reaching out to the dragon gently. He clambered up onto Sonagon's horn, shivering slightly from the cold water. The Weeper has to cross the bend in the Antlers to reach Marthe, Jon thought, but Sonagon can just go through the river itself.

The water crashed as Sonagon lumbered upwards, rearing to his stubby legs as his forearms reached out. The river splashed with every flick of its tail, but the dragon powered through the river with ease. Jon heard shouts from the riverbank, but Sonagon was already moving, leaving the camp behind.

In an instant, they were charging ahead. They made good time. Jon heard the shouts before he saw the small isle carved into a joint in the river. Stag's Peak 'Keep' was barely a keep at all – Jon would have called it more a cottage of thatch and pine, with river fishing sloops moored onto the muddy bank, skins covering the walls and great firepits dug into the ground. And at the sight of Sonagon lumbering down the river, Jon heard panic.

An arrow whizzed past his head and bounced into Sonagon's shoulder. The dragon roared.

He saw men running around Stag's Peak. River raiders clutching long harpoons and nets, or willow shortbows and barbed arrows. Jon saw a man who must be Marthe himself – a tall, skinny man
wearing the great skull of a stag as a helm, elk furs over his shoulders, standing barefoot in the mud. Jon never even gave them a chance.

Sonagon would have killed them all in frozen fire, but, thankfully, Jon convinced the dragon otherwise. Sonagon's tail whipped around, striking like thunder. The thatch roof of the keep crashed open, sending splinters flying. Men crashed to the ground. Jon heard a babe wailing.

*Don't give them a chance to protest. Take advantage of the confusion.* In an instant, Jon dropped off the dragon's head onto the muddy beach, Dark Sister in his hand. One wildling tried to stop him, but Jon knocked the man to the ground and swept by.

The fight was as sudden as it was decisive. Half a dozen men against one, but Jon was powering through in a furious arc. Valyrian steel slashed through wooden spears. Two men crashed to the ground, and then Jon saw the stag's skull helm in front of him.

Marthe of the Antlers was staggering to his feet when Jon grabbed onto him and pressed Dark Sister into the man's throat. Marthe garbled something sounding almost gibberish.

"There are raiders coming to take everything you own," Jon said, keeping his voice hard. He dragged Marthe down, holding his blade to his skull. An antler cracked. Other raiders were holding weapons, surrounding him, but Jon held their leader hostage and gave no quarter. "You are going to surrender your ships *peacefully*, along with half of your rations. In return, I will let you walk away with your lives."


"You surrender *now!*" Jon shouted. "The raiders will not give you this chance."

The wildlings stared at him with the fear of god in their eyes. Marthe looked at him almost babbling in terror. Jon counted twenty-six wildlings; twelve raiders, seven spearwives, two old wives, four children and one babe.

If the Weeper had attacked, the river clan would have tried to fight back and gotten killed in useless defiance. They didn't fight back against the dragon.

Jon met the Weeper's men clambering into Stag's Peak half an hour later. Jon met the man with Dark Sister in his hand. "They surrender," Jon said. "They'll give you safe passage through the river."

The Weeper's eyes looked furious. "Bugger that, you think I'll trust a stinking river scum? Marthe's a slimehole, Snow. These fuckers die."

*You're not one to judge.* "I said, they surrender. Take their boats, not their lives."

"So they can ambush us again when our backs are turned?" The Weeper snarled. "I know how these river scum work. I'll give them the same mercy they'd give me."

Jon raised his sword, pointing Dark Sister at the man. The Weeper glared, clutching his scythe as he stomped forward. "... *Oh Snow*..." He hissed. "If you raise your sword against me you'd better be damn sure you know how to use it."

*I could take the Weeper.* Jon was a better fighter now than he had ever been. Months in the wilderness had left him strong and lean, and he had fought more life and deaths battles in the last weeks than he had all his life. Jon's leg was still weaker, but he had learned how to compensate for it in a fight. *I could beat the Weeper. Probably.*
But do I want to take that chance?

"They surrender," Jon said. "And you don't have to trust them, because Marthe's coming with us. He's joining the warband."

Nostrils flared. "You let stinking Marthe into my warband!"

"Aye. Marthe wants to see Hardhome too." The man was terrified to be on the wrong side of the dragon. Jon promised him protection if he joined, and vaguely implied that he'd demolish Stag's Peak Keep if he didn't. "You need men and boats; Marthe's got boats, and men who know how to use them. They're coming with us."

The look on the Weeper's face was somewhere between fury and horror. The man's scythe twitched. Jon stepped forward, so close he could whisper. "Pick your battles, Weeper," Jon muttered, meeting the man's eyes. "He's coming with us."

The Weeper growled. "You think you know Marthe, Snow?" He lowered his voice. "You don't know a goddamn thing. You want to know how Marthe got Stag's Peak? He never built it, he took it. Previous men who used to live here was a family of fishermen."

The Weeper almost whispered in Jon's ear, snarling. "Years ago, see, Marthe was a huntsman. He came along these parts, and traded a stag's corpse in return for shelter for night, and passage across the river. Marthe feasted in those fisherman's home, shared their hearth." His voice was venomous. "… Except that stag that he sold was diseased, boy. Marthe was a huntsman – he knew it. The fisherfolk did not. He sold it anyway. Have you ever seen what greyscale does to a man?"

Jon never said a word. He stared across the isle, looking at the tall man with the stag's head crown. "… A week later, when the disease really started to kick in, old Marthe came back," the Weeper whispered. "The men were half-dead when he cut their throats. The women… well… they weren't dead enough for what Marthe did them."

The Weeper's voice turned into a growl. "Now why don't you have a real good look at the type of man you're protecting here, boy?"

Jon paused for a long moment, staring at the hatred in the Weeper's eyes. Guest right. Some things were sacred even to the free folk.

"… Doesn't matter," Jon said after a while, and hating himself slightly for it. "We need more living men, not more corpses."

"And you really think I would suffer scum like that still breathing?"

I suffer you, Jon almost said. "He lives," Jon said. "He comes with us. If he tries anything I cut his throat; but if you try anything now I cut yours."

The Weeper snarled, with a feral grunt, before lowering his scythe and shoving past Jon. "… Next time you raise your sword to me, boy, you better be damn well prepared to bleed for it."

His voice was angry. The other raiders looked uncertain. "Get these bloody boats already!" The Weeper snapped. "Move! If Marthe even looks at me, I take his bloody eyes!"

Jon took a deep breath, sheathing his blade. He turn back to stare at Stag's Peak Keep. I risked my life for half a dozen rafts, a pantry of dried fish, and two dozen wildlings.

They started moving later that day. They were about three days march from the mouth of the
Antlers, but they said that it would get faster once they left the forest and onto the coast.

They feasted at Stag's Peak that night, crammed around the firepits. Jon kept well away from the Weeper, trying to ignore the way the men from Marthe's clan stared at him. The gurgle of the rapids of the Antler was a drone in the background.

"How many river clans are still around here?" Jon asked, keeping his voice low as he thought.

Rolf shrugged, looking at him suspiciously with his single grizzled eye. "A dozen, maybe, that haven't ran yet? Marthe was the biggest of them, but you get clans of ten folk each."

"So a hundred men? Maybe more?" Jon pressed, thinking intently. Probably more.

"What you thinking Snow?"

_I'm thinking that there are free folk who are going to die if they stay, but too stubborn to run._ "I'm thinking that we could get more men to us if we try to rally the clans," Jon said. "Has the Weeper thought about recruiting them?"

Rolf snorted. "Snow, the Weeper doesn't _want_ more men," he scoffed, crunching on an old bone with grizzled teeth. "Especially not those scum."

Furs sat across the fire, sharpening a bone dagger. "You heard about Val, Snow? Mance's... what do you call it...? Sister to Mance's woman? Goodsister?" Jon shook his head. "After the host broke, that Val tried to regather it. I hear she even got quite a number to her. Maybe ten thousand or more. You want to know what they're doing now? They're starving."

"More men ain't an advantage. Only fools think that," Rolf agreed. "The more men you have, the more injuries, the more weak, the more cripples, the more delays - the slower you go and the faster you starve. That's why Mance failed – he had too many men, the host was so big it couldn't fight properly when they got hit." He shook his head. "The Weeper don't want no more, even five hundred is bigger than he normally takes."

Jon grimaced. The Weeper had been so angry when Jon offered Marthe's clan a place in the warband. "So instead the Weeper will just leave behind any who can't keep up?"

"Leave behind? Hell, the Weeper will _cut the legs off_ any who can't keep up." Furs nodded Jon's expression. "Oh aye, I know. None of us like the Weeper either. Doesn't matter – the Weeping Man doesn't care. He don't ask to be liked. At the end of the day, we're with the Weeper because the Weeper gets results."

"I used to march with Tormund, myself," said Rolf. Tormund and the Weeper had been at war for decades, Jon remembered. Their rivalry was almost as bad as Harma and Rattleshirt. "I'd still say that Tormund was the better leader, personally. Still, the crows took Tormund and the Weeper is the second best."

_That is it came down to, at the end of the day: the free folk will follow those they believe can save them._

Jon's hands clenched at the thought, tracing this misshapen stump of his little finger on hand. _The Weeper is wrong. He'd leave people behind to face the white walkers, and that's wrong._ The Weeper would keep his warband alive, rescue the strong warriors only, and leave the rest to die. It just felt wrong.

Jon looked at the firepit thoughtfully. The smoke seemed to twist and turn in the air, reminding
him of how the Antlers traced through the forest. Later, Jon stood up without another word.

He found Marthe of the Antlers quickly. The river raider stood at that back of his keep, staring at Sonagon in the water. His eyes widened as he saw Jon approach. "Marthe. You know every clan around these parts, don't you?" The man looked too speechless to do anything but nod dumbly.

"Good, gather your men, we're taking some of your boats. Quietly." Jon ordered. They were the Weeper's boats now and Jon doubted the Weeper would be keen to part with them. "We're going to rally the other clans. However many there are, they need to come with us."

I'm not leaving any behind. Marthe just hesitated, but Jon didn't feel like giving him a choice. "And take that blood stag off your head!" Jon snapped. "You don't deserve a crown."

He gathered as many free folk who might come with him. It was lucky the camp was busy and distracted as he moved. Jon gathered Furs, Hatch, Haldur, Rolf, Mo, Lewie and a dozen others and made the proposal in the middle of the night.

"I'm going to go on ahead," Jon said. "Quickly. We're going to go rally the river clans, bring more men to us. The Weeper would leave them all behind or kill them if they try to slow us down, but I won't do that."

"You want us to go against the Weeper?" A man said incredulously.

"It's the Weeper or the dragon. Which one would you rather have with you?"

Furs and Hatch agreed in an instant. Rolf and many others spat in his face. They left the camp very quickly that night – Jon, around fifty men, Ghost and Sonagon – before anyone really had time to stop them.

By morning, they were already on their way in the detour. Jon split the group up – sending Furs south and Hatch the Halfgiant north with a dozen men, while Marthe took his boats down the river. Jon rode Sonagon, crashing through the forest early dawn with a groundbreaking roar.

All of the wildlings would spread the word. I want everyone to know. Come west to Hardhome with me if you want to live. If you want the dragon to protect you.

Jon visited half a dozen river clans that day alone, touring Sonagon down the valley. He saw tiny villages of old men and women or green boys. He saw river reavers so savage they never even spoke the Common. Every single one, no matter how tough or savage, reacted the same way in front of Sonagon; fear, shock, even awe.

The wildlings spread out. The message spread like wildfire; come to Hardhome with the host. Nobody gets left behind.

On the first day, it was maybe thirty or so. The second, it was seventy. Then more men they met the faster the word spread.

The Weeper would be beyond furious. Jon stole his men and ran off by himself, but Jon didn't care. The free folk needed a dragon more than they needed another raider.

It was exhilarating. That look on their faces as they gazed upon the dragon… It sent shivers down his spine. Jon barely even needed to say anything, not when Sonagon's roar did all the work.

Marthe sent his boats ahead down the river, to meet up with the wildling raiders on the coast. Jon tried to learn the names of the wildling leaders; men with names like Alvin Whaletooth, Gavin the
By the fourth night, they had two hundred people to them. After talking to a dozen men, Jon
expected he could have over five hundred in week. They might well have over a thousand by the
time they reached Hardhome.

_There are a lot of elderly, starved and frail_, Jon admitted. Men and women that refused Mance's
call as he gathered his host, instead clinging to their own little territories around the river. The
Weeper's force had been seasoned warriors, but this force was frail, old and weak.

"You sure about this one, Snow?" Hatch asked him one night. "We march with this lot, a lot of
people are going to end up dying on the way."

Jon had to grimace, but agree. "Yet they'll die anyways if they don't run. They need to move."

"And you're going to lead them all west to Hardhome, and then south to the Wall?"

"Somebody has to."

In the distance, Sonagon splashed with his tail into the water, and then used his breath to freeze the
water into a twisted ice shape. There were gasps and screams from the ground.

"They look at that thing like he's some sort of god, you know that?" Furs commented.

Hatch just stared at him. "Are you sure it's not?"

The Weeper caught up with them by the end of the fourth day. Jon hadn't been sure if the man
would keep on going without them, but apparently he turned back to search for Jon. Jon saw watery
eyes so wide they looked mad, flanked by a dozen men stamping out of the forest. By Jon's side,
Ghost growled.

"Snow!" The Weeper snarled. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Making my own warband," Jon replied, folding his arms.

"Your warband?" The Weeper scoffed, staring around the shambles of a camp. "You call this a
warband? I call it fodder."

"I'm not leaving any behind. We can escort them to Hardhome with us."

"So I bloody hear," he snarled. "… Snow, if you really want to help these… people, then get to the
Wall, and open the gates _as quickly as possible_."

Jon shook his head. "The Others are on our tail, and everyone we leave behind is another corpse
for their army. We clear the river, spread the word – we assemble another host."

"And leave us open targets? Leave us to starve in the meantime?" He stepped forward. "Snow, we
could get to Hardhome in a _week_ – if you stop to pick up every bloody stray on the way there, how
the long is that fucking going to take?"

"However long it needs to take." He kept his voice hard. His fingers stayed close to Dark Sister,
staring at the Weeper's eyes. "I am not leaving them."

The Weeper turned to stare at the men next to him. Furs and Hatch shifted uncomfortably. "And
you're going along with this?" The Weeper spat. "Snow is green. He doesn't know these folk, he
doesn't know how slow they will move or the disease they will spread. I thought you raiders would
have more sense."

Hatch squirmed. Furs just nodded. "My vote's on the dragon, mate."

The raider's face twisted, growling at Jon. "You're a bloody fool, Snow."

"And you're a savage."

"You say that as if it's a bad thing," the man scoffed, clutching his scythe. "... How many do you have already? Three hundred?"

Two, though more are coming constantly. Jon just nodded. "I don't think your dragon is going to be able to protect them. Not all of them, not from all sides," said the Weeper. "I think you need me and my warband."

"I think we both need each other," said Jon. Unfortunately.

"Now that's what I'm wondering about. How useful are you really?" He snarled. "Why the fuck shouldn't I just kill you and be on my way?"

The Weeper had both hands on his scythe, the wicked long blade twitching.

Draw my sword, he thought quietly, fingers twitching. One quick swing. Take the Weeper's head. The Weeper only rules by fear; kill him and take them...

The other free folk were watching, but none would interfere. Wildlings wouldn't step in on another man's fight. The free folk would follow whoever survived.

I do need the men. And the Weeper is a monster...

Jon met the Weeper's eyes. The Weeper's fingers were twitching too.

Jon hesitated for a long moment. Then, he shook his head. "No," he said slowly. "I think you want me to try and fight you."

"I want you to give me a reason, Snow," the Weeper growled. He was a short man, but stocky, muscled and strong. "Give me a reason to finally take your fool's head."

That's how he solves all his problems, isn't it? Jon shook his head again. "No," he said quietly. "We're not doing it your way. Either stay here or go on by yourself, but we are not doing this butting heads anymore."

He turned and slowly walked away. Ghost hesitated, but then followed. "I'm on the side of the living, Weeper," Jon said. "Not the dead."

The Weeper looked frothing-at-the-mouth angry, his face twisted until he looked almost inhuman. Jon half-expected to hear the scythe swinging at any moment, to hear Ghost pouncing at the man, but nothing happened.

About an hour later, Jon saw the Weeper's men filing into the camp. The raiders set up perimeter and patrols, secured the area, all of the things that Jon didn't have the manpower to do.

Towards the evening, was it Jon's imagination or were the gazes staring at him just slightly less hostile?

By the time Jon finally retired for the night, his head was swimming with logistics. He had spent
hours trying to figure out food rations, the best route along the coast, how to gather enough people. All of the fastest ways to gather the host, the men they could recruit. Sonagon would have to travel – the free folk clans would need to see the dragon before they agreed to join them – but how to move them so many people together?

Right now, they were dealing with hundreds of people. By the time they reached the coast, when they brought in the fishing villages, the forest clans, all the way up to the ice raiders, they could quite easily be dealing with thousands.

But they'll come, Jon thought to himself, of course they will. They'll follow a dragon.

As he settled down for the campfire, he found something wrapped up in his furs. A gift from Furs, Jon guessed, but he honestly wasn't sure whether it was a jest or not. Jon spent a long time staring at the old, slightly shredded black cloak, woven and patched with red fibres.

It took three weeks to get to Hardhome, or at least for the vanguard. By that time the trail of free folk was spread so far that they were days apart. Less a warband and more a column of refugees.

The coast was barren, icy and rocky. Jon stood on the cold, grey sand, staring out at Storrold's Point over the horizon. There was a faint sea mist from the coast, and a bitterly cold salty breeze cut over the beach. Walking over the soft sand was murder on his poor leg.

There are three thousand free folk behind me, Jon thought with a soft sigh. Probably. Everyone who he had asked had always said 'around three thousand'. Too many they couldn't easily count them, and more were coming every day.

They had boats that were sailing to Storrold's Point right now, but a poor southeasterly wind meant that the vanguard of the column on the coast would mostly likely reach there before the ships did. Jon's first impression of Hardhome, from a distance, was that of frozen sand dunes, rocky cliffs, and barren, skeletal trees.

Three weeks of slow marching and backtracking had left him feeling worn, exhausted and weak. He could see the hunger in the eyes of everyone around him. They were relying primarily on fishing boats from the coast for food now, but it was always a coin's flip on whether they would bring back their haul in time.

Jon had spent the journey learning names – so many he couldn't even count. The names of the leaders and warriors that followed him. The word was still spreading, and more clans would be gathering to him.

Jon had seen hunters clad only in bearskins and painted with tree sap, or short coastal clansmen who carved single-man crafts out of tree trunks. There were clans so queer the warriors would cut their own ears in half, decorate their skin with piercings, and drip poison into their eyes to turn them blue. Jon had even heard there had been contact with the giants tribes of the forests – giants very territorial and suspicious, who kept to close-knit families in caves rather than the mammoth-herding giants of the mountains and plains.

They all gathered to him. The sound of the dragon howling over the plains stirred every free folk, even the ones that had refused to follow Mance.

"You know about gods, Snow?" A raider next to him, Bulilden Horn, asked. He was a tall, lean man with a scarred face, clad in horsehide furs with a long, spiral horn hanging in a pendant around his neck, and a mammoth tusk spear in his arms. Bulilden Horn is a seasoned raider, Jon recalled. A man of note. "Do you worship any gods?"
"Why do you ask?" Jon said, cursing sliently as he struggled over the sandy dunes.

"I hear southrons forsake the gods. You cut down heart trees and bow in temples of stone instead," Bullden commented, pausing as the man around him clambered upwards.

He shook his head. "That's further south than I come from. The Starks of Winterfell keep to the Old Gods."

"Old Gods?" Hatch snorted, lumbering past. "They ain't so old up here."

"Oh aye, many up here pray before a heart tree," Bullden agreed. "But how do you worship them? Do you stick to the old ways – have you ever gave blood to the gods?"

Jon frowned. "Do they demand it?"

"Gods demand a lot of things, even the quiet ones," Furs said, listening in as the band walked. "There are still some that stick to the old Old Ways – the ones that spill human entrails over the heart trees, the ones that water their weirwoods with blood."

"The nameless gods are quiet, but each man interprets their voice differently," said Bullden. "They are the gods of the roots, the earth, and the sky. There are clans in the north that give bodies to the frozen lakes to appease them. The Skagosi would bleed the corpses of their enemies to their heart trees, and consume the flesh themselves. The Nightrunners used to bind children to the weirwood roots in their caves, to leave them to starve in the dark - so that only the children the gods guide out will survive. The Rockhearts in the west stitch weirwood sinews and rocks under their skin, so that each man may be closer to the gods. The elders of Shadowsprigs clans in the eastern forest carve their own faces in the likeness of the gods."

"I didn't know the Old Gods had any faces."

"They don't," Bullden agreed. "They'd cut off their own ears, nose, and lips – to leave themselves faceless."

Jon grimaced. He had seen a few wildlings with mutilated faces, but had never known why. "That doesn't sound like the Old Gods I know."

Bullden laughed hollowly. "What, did you think those faces on the trees were nice?"

"Gods can make men do queer things," Furs said. "Whether the gods ask them to do so or not."

Jon never replied. The Old Gods were a folk religion; in the far north, there were so many different corners that each tribe could interpret what that meant. Jon stared outwards, looking out over the grey ocean. You would get fanatics in any group.

Hardhome was close. They were walking over the dunes towards on the peninsula, staring out over the great cliffs that loomed over head. A solid wall of sandy cliffs, pocked with holes. When the wind hit the peninsula, it soured over through the cliffs as if the earth itself was screaming shrilly. Skeletal trees hung around them, barren and frozen. It was a hard trek over uneven terrain - along the coast, around the rocks, and towards the settlement cradled by the cliff.

_The wind is deadly_, Jon thought with a grimace. There was no wind break - when the wind swept across the peninsula it felt so cold it could scour the rocks the clean.

Their outriders had reported a colony of thousands of starving free folk in the ruins of Hardhome, with barely a single shelter between them. Refugees taking harbour in the cliffs of Hardhome,
cradling around the ruins of the single weirwood tree that clung to the rocks.

Jon walked with fifty experienced free folk, a vanguard to secure the camp. Sonagon was out in the ocean - the dragon often went on far ahead, and enjoyed swimming and hunting fish. From the reports, Jon didn't expect any trouble from the free folk in Hardhome, but he called Sonagon back towards him in any case.

The group paused at the base of the cliffs for a moment. The screaming cliffs, the Night's Watch called them, Jon remembered.

"I ask," Bullden Horn continued, "because Mother Mole very much keeps to the old ways of worship. She has… followers."

"I thought she was a woods witch."

"Oh she is," said Bullden. "But a better term for you southerners, might be… hmm… priestess? A priestess of the Old Gods."

Jon shook his head. "The Old Gods don't have priests or priestesses."

"I heard about her," said Furs. "Loony old hag that used to live under a weirwood tree, eating dirt and roots."

"And she keeps to blood sacrifices to the heart trees," Bullden said as they walked. "Animals, mostly. Rabbits, goats and dogs. She would live in her hole, making prophecies, sacrifices, occasionally treating wounds with poultices and herbs. She had been there long enough that she had a few followers."

"Aye. And then the dead started to rise," another wildling said bitterly. "… and more and more started coming to Mother Mole. And after her sacrifices, wights would stay away from her heart tree, to hear the tales. Her few followers turned to hundreds."

After Mance's collapse, even more people came desperate enough to turn to her, Jon thought quietly. By the time she reached Hardhome, she had thousands. Thousands of men, women and children following an ancient wood witch. "So these prophecies of hers…?"

"She's made a few. Some of them have even been right."

Mother Mole promised salvation at Hardhome, Jon remembered. Looking around the peninsula, he wondered exactly what salvation she had to offer.

Jon could see the clearing that used to be Hardhome. His first impression was more of a ruin; the ancient wreckage of an old settlement, scattered across the rocks and sand. He could see people huddled by the caves; free folk wearing dirty furs, trying take cover from the wind. The stink of crowded bodies, rot and starvation seemed to linger in the air.

The air turned quiet, and grim. Jon saw eyes glaring at them as the group walked into the clearing, but no one said a word.

In the distance, he saw the spindly frame of a white tree; barren, twisted, and curled over itself like a broken man. The face carved into the heart tree was distorted and wide, like screaming in pain. Jon heard a voice speaking to a large crowd huddled around the roots of the old weirwood.
"… and the cold and the wind will burn!" An old voice croned, and the air was so quiet they strained to listen. "… The living will stiffen, and demons will walk the world again. Demons that freeze, demons that burn…!"

Jon saw an old, wizened women, bent over a gnarly staff. A short woman, so old and so pale it looked like her wrinkles were carved from bark. Mother Mole's quavering voice seemed to echo. "… Yet there will be salvation…!" She crowed. "… All holy men – all who bow, and suffer, and bleed for the gods – shall be lead to glory. The devotees shall conquer the world, and the gods will rise again! Those who deny, those who forget, those will die! The Old Ones are rising, and the gods have teeth!"

There was a murmur around the crowd. Jon walked forward, hesitantly. Red lines weaved over the branches of the weirwood. *Entrails*, Jon realised. *They scattered bloody entrails over the heart tree*. Various animal skulls were grouped around the trunk and the roots, white bone blending into bark.

"… The winter storm takes form! The white bark of gods is given flesh! It has been foretold!" Mother Mole preached. "The fury of the Old Ones will rise again, and we will be led! It is coming…"

Her voice quaked. The old woman's body trembled, turning up to stare at Jon. He saw wrinkled gums split in a grin. "... The cold will swallow the fire - the fire that would devour us..." Mother Mole muttered, limbs clicking as she shambled upwards. She was staring straight at Jon. "... Salvation comes…!"

The crowd was stirring. Jon hesitated, staring around the misty field. There was a long moment of quiet. The bloody branches stirred gently in the whirring wind.

Then, Jon heard the sound of scraping stone. The sound of something large clambering out of the water, wings flapping as heavy footsteps thudded up the coast. The sound of the footsteps sent ravens flocking upwards into the sky.

Jon called, and Sonagon came.

He heard the gasps. Mother Mole was crackling. They didn't scream or run, but instead they just clambered around, mouths open and eyes gaping. The dragon seemed to shadow over them all.

Jon was left frozen by the look on their faces. Desperate, hungry faces, with that look of pure awe, amazement, hope and devotion.

Around them, the cliffs were howling.

"Salvation…!" Mother Mole crackled, nigh hysterical. "Salvation comes…!"

The other wildlings took up the cry, hands outstretched to Jon and Sonagon. "Salvation…" They chanted. "… Salvation… Salvation…"

Jon's eyes widened as he saw the mood change. Outstretched hands groped towards him. The raiders clutched together, while the followers of Mother Mole roared around them like a tide. One by one, he saw the free folk drop to the ground.

All around him, Jon watched as the wildlings bent, bowed and kneeled.
Special thanks to Doublehex for beta'ing this chapter!
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Returning home and setting out on quests...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bran

The world roared around him, as he soared over valleys and mountains, through great gorges carved through the earth.

The earth floated above him, great hunks of rock, moss and trees levitating and twisting in a rainbow haze. There was no sky; just layers upon layers of rock, stone, and trees stacked up above him. He saw giant roots twisting and weaving through the heights like the veins of the world, and streams and rivers gushing into the clouds.

Bran gaped upwards, watching the colours thread through the sky. In the distance he could see shadows like enormous beasts flying between the stars… monsters as large as mountains…

"… Bran… where… wake…" A voice hissed in the distance.

It felt like Bran was floating upwards, like there was nothing tying him to the earth anymore. *I'm flying…*

He heard wings around him. Shadows twisting into a bird flying beside him. The three-eyed crow was as large as a cloud for a moment, before rustling into the shape of a small bird by Bran's shoulder.

"Too high, Bran," the three-eyed crow said. "Fly too high and you will never touch the ground again."

He could only gasp as he saw the earth around him shift. He stared, watching figures shimmer around him, days and nights flashing by. He saw a monster with rotting blood and stony skin, crumbling and weeping black. He saw a man with a black crown dancing with a white lady. He saw huge figures heaving stones, immense giants laying siege to a wall of ice…

In the distance, he felt something shake his shoulder. It was like a tingle in the back of his mind. "… Wake… don't… Bran…"

"Head downwards, Bran," the crow pressed. "Find your anchor."

"Am I dreaming?"

"You are beyond the dreams. Beyond the green."

Bran shifted. A tiny movement, and he saw the world blur. He saw a different time, one of thick forests and endless grassy plains. He saw small children clutching glassy spears; they would
constantly war against huge hairy giants wielding clubs, skittering everywhere. *How long ago was this, when the children of the forest walked freely in tribes and the giants roamed all the way from glaciers down to red sandy mountains?*

Bran soared over the fragmented world. Everything from blazing sands to scorching snows flickered beneath him. He could see rocky coasts and underwater cities. He saw scaly humanoid creatures with webbed feet and hands, giant fishbowl eyes, and large mouths filled with green, needle-like teeth; hunting the children of the forest by the coasts with coral blades and seaweed nets. He saw children kidnapped, dragged away to the deep or chained and bound as slaves by the fish-creatures.

Bran saw beasts that he couldn't even name; great-toothed lions as large as horses, monster lizards with mouths dripping venom, or immense serpent-like creatures that skittered on dozens of tiny legs with gaping fangs. He saw great earthen monsters clambering out of gorges in the ground, and living trees with bristling branches and giant wooden maws.

Bran gasped. It was all too overwhelming. He fell downwards, dropping out of the air and into a different time. He landed in a black grass, surrounded by stone monoliths in a black night. Men in motley robes and animal furs, all men circled around a stone altar stained in blood. He saw the shapes of wolves and bears in the forest, standing side by side with the men.

"Bran, we must leave," the crow warned. Around him, the cloaked figures were chanting. Sacrifices. The bloody bones of a small humanoid figure draped over the altar. "Find your own time. I can only guide you so far."

Bran stared in quiet amazement. They were rough men with bronze swords and leather shields. He glimpsed grey wolves in the forest, walking beside them like dogs. The cloaked figures were speaking a language he didn't understand. They shouted angrily, arguing with each other as they motioned to altar. Bran caught only a single word, 'Stark'.

*The First Men.* "Stark?" Bran called.

The scene froze. All the cloaked men turned to stare at him. It was like they looked straight through him, but they all turned. *They heard me.*

_Yet this is just a vision, isn't it? How could they hear me?*_ The crow flapped, clutching him with talons. Dragging him away, pulling him into a different time.

"Where… where am I?"

"Everywhere."

"How…?" He gasped.

"You leapt off too high. Even birds must return to the earth," the crow cawed. "Your body is an anchor. You abandoned it, and lost sight of the ground."

Above him, the layers of earth churned. It was like the whole world was an onion; layers upon layers infinitely detailed and floating on top of each other, extending outwards.

"I knew a maester once that described time as a river, flowing endlessly forward," the crow said. "But in the green, time is more like the earth itself – layers of moments in time stacked on top of each other."

Bran gasped. "How far does it go?"
"Who knows? None have ever come back from reaching the bottom. You must find yourself again, Bran, lest you become one of many lost for all time."

"You can be trapped in this place?"

"Where do you think the faces on the weirwoods come from?"

The thought made his heart pound. None of the faces on the heart tree had ever looked happy. It felt like he was falling. Tumbling through endless summers and winters, spinning around him like the world was dancing. "How do I get back?"

"Focus on the roots. Let them lead you."

*The weirwoods roots.* Bran could see the roots threading through time. *Return to my body. The Nightfort. To Meera and Jojen.*

The world blurred. He saw a great black keep, shaded by a wall of ice. He didn't recognise it at first. This wall was roughly only a hundred foot tall. The fort had strong walls and towers, fresh and strong. Bran could see some of the towers still under construction, being defended and readied for war.

*The Nightfort,* he thought, stunned. *How long ago must this be?* The Wall looked weirdly small – not as mountainous as it was in his time – and the castle was fresh and well-manned. He saw thousands of black cloaked men marching through stone courtyards. Legions of sworn brothers.

The scene blurred, like watching through a dream. He saw a tall man clad in black, staggering through the forest, clutching an icy sword. The man froze as he stared downwards at a white woman quivering beneath him. The woman had skin and hair as white as snow, eyes like blue stars in the bloody dusk, frozen in inhuman beauty. She looked inhuman… eerie… and the man stood as if about to strike her down but he paused, hesitantly.

A storm raged around the scene. It looked like a battle. Bran focused at the living man, trying to judge his expression as he stared at the inhuman woman beneath him. The warrior looked young, strong and weary, but he wasn't scared… more entranced.

*A man without fear,* Bran thought. "… The Night's King."

"Yes," the three-eyed crow said. "During the Cold Spring after the Long Night, many of the Others lingered. The cleanup after the battle lasted decades. The Night's Watch lead the drive to push them north."

Bran looked in quiet shock. He felt himself raise upwards, to stare down at the world. The land was broken, war ravaged, and starving. The white walkers had been defeated, but they didn't fall easily. The wars were bitter and vicious. For so long the Others had reigned as overlords and terrors, but even as the winter faded and they were forced backwards they stained the waning snows with blood.

Bran saw the Night's King. He was a young Lord Commander; very young – but a proven soldier who had been elected to finally win the war. He was a warrior. Instead, the Night's King tried to make peace with the white walkers, by marrying the cold as a symbol of truce.

"Yet he didn't," the crow said as the scene shifted. "Whatever intentions the man had, the king failed."

Bran saw the Nightfort at its terrible prime. Frosted in cold, with heads on spikes around the walls,
and legions marching through the gate. Living men and dead standing side by side.

Under the king, the Night's Watch scoured beyond the Wall, dragging wildlings into the cells beneath the Nightfort. Men, giants, even children – they were all captured to be jailed under the castle. Thousands and thousands placed in manacles; the Night's King terrorised the north.

"Why? Why imprison so many?"

"The queen promised them all immortality."

"Did she make them immortal?"

"In a sense."

He saw legions of dead soldiers flowing out of the gate. Rotting bodies walking, men with dead expressions, even slave soldiers wearing chains.

Bran saw the siege of Nightfort, the final battle against the Night's King after a long and gruelling war. Two armies from both sides, the King of Winter joined with the King-Beyond-the-Wall against the Night's Fort. Brandon the Breaker and Joramun, fighting from opposite sides of the Wall.

The Nightfort burned. Flying casks of flaming oil launched over the walls into the castle, lighting it up like a funeral pyre to backdrop of chaos. The sky thundered, and the Wall trembled.

And Bran saw a man in black armour, with a crowned helm, bent over on the top of the burning castle, as his queen melted away in his arms.

The scenes blurred by so quickly he could barely even make sense of them.

"… What happened to him?" Bran asked breathlessly.

"The Night's King died. He burned as the tower fell."

It felt like the crow was trying to drag him away, but he squirmed and resisted. Bran wanted to see more, and the scene shifted at his thought.

He glimpsed pale, tiny fingers clutching at a cradle in a dark room.

"There was a child?!"

"Enough." Bran jerked, as the three-eyed crow dragged him away. Bran saw the world dissolve into shadows. "We cannot linger here, Bran."

Bran fell. He tumbled downwards, dissipating through the earth.

Images flashed. He saw a hooded man surrounding by lurching, rotten bodies staggering over grassy knolls. He saw a man with bright golden hair, laughing raucously as he was thrown into a dark prison cell. He saw a man with a bright smile wearing a wreath of roses, mixing petals and fruits into a violet potion before dripping it onto a sleeping maiden's lips. He saw a broad-shouldered figure, clad in direwolf furs, blowing a long ornate bone horn over a desolate icescape and feeling the sky crack...

It was so much he could barely even process it all. Bran felt his head spin.

"… Bran… Bran…" a voice whispered. "… Wake…"
He saw a blood-soaked baby crying in a bed of winter roses. A dark-haired weeping woman begging from a high window for them to stop, screaming and weeping as men in white cloaks charged at the base of the tower. He saw a hunched white-haired figure in black armour, swinging a dark sword against a wave of blackness. Bran felt himself shiver, as a wave of cold dropped downwards from the sky, so cold he could barely breathe, like it sucked all the warmth from the world…

"Focus," the crow pressed. "Focus on who you are, pull yourself back. Your family, your home…”

My family. Home.

Winterfell.

The world hazed. He was staring downwards, at clouds of smoke and mist rising upwards. The castle burned in great gusts of flame, while snow and wind howled around him. Bran heard sounds of fighting, a battle, while the air boomed like strikes of thunder one after another…

"Bran…” a voice whispered. "… Bran, don't go…”

Meera.

He felt his body lurch, reaching out towards the sound.

It was all feeling. The feeling of Meera's voice, the rain dripping onto him. Summer's fur. Summer's howl. Bran gripped onto the feeling of the direwolf and dragged himself through the earth…

…

He gasped as the air hit him. He felt blood and rain dripping down his forehead. He throbbing pain in his skull. Suddenly he was back in the Nightfort, in the soaking rain and blood.

All around him, the night steamed and hissed, the flames scorching through the wet wood of the library. Bran only briefly saw a man in front of him lurching bloodily to the floor, gripping his skull. Bran recognised the dark-haired wildling dropping downwards limply – with blood pouring down his cheeks. He's bleeding, Bran thought in shock. He's bleeding from the eyes.

And then everything went black.

He heard the sound of pained moaning. Bran woke up feeling groggy, sore and weak. The morning was bitter and grey, the weak sun stinging his eyes. His whole body felt numb, yet at the same time just so alive. It was like he could feel everything from the birds in the sky, to the whisper of the trees.

The events of last night came rushing back to him, so intense he could barely process them.

Bran sputtered and wheezed, feeling his hands shake.

Jojen was suddenly leaning over him, placing a damp cloth to his forehead. "Bran," the crannogman whispered. "Easy, just relax."

Instinctively, Bran tried to move. He couldn't feel his legs. I was walking last night, he thought suddenly. I was standing. I possessed that wildling's body, even just for a moment.

The memory hit him. It had been over so fast. Bran had jumped into the man's body, and then the
wildling had screamed and dropped to the floor, eyes exploding and blood pouring in rivers down his cheeks. *I killed him. I forced my way into his skin and I killed him.*

Bran had possessed him, and it caused the man's mind to explode, and sent Bran flailing wildly into… that place. Beyond the green, the crow had called it.

To be back in his own broken skin after something like that… Bran's hands couldn't stop trembling.

Jojen looked at him with concern. "Where did you go, Bran?"

"I don't know…" So many visions flashed before his eyes. There was a hint of knowing in Jojen's gaze. "… That… Have you felt that too?"

Jojen shook his head. "I've only ever dreamt the greendreams. You've been there."

Across the stable, Hodor was moaning weakly as Meera tried to patch up his wounded leg. They all looked worn, injured and tired. Bran could feel Summer too – the direwolf was in the kitchens, feasting ravenously on the corpses that littered the corridors. Thirteen corpses of wildlings that had tried to cross the Wall.

*I killed them,* Bran thought with shock. The visions of last night flashed bloodily in front of his mind. *I killed them with Hodor, or with Summer, or with the ravens.*

*And the last one…* He would never forget the last dark-haired wildling. *The way the man's head popped as I crushed him with my mind.*

Thirteen strong raiders and they never stood a chance.

Bran's vision blurred and blackened. He was still trembling and gasping weakly even as he blacked out.

As he slept, he looked down upon the lands, ice and trees from a dozen ravens flying above him.

He awoke with someone tugging urgently on his collar. Bran's lurched, to watch Meera grunt with difficulty as she tried to lever his limp body onto a satchel. Her face was bruised and sore.

"We've got to go," Meera shouted as they tried to stumble down and out of the courtyard. Hodor could barely walk let alone carry Bran. "The rangers must have seen the fire last night. We've got to go."

They shambled out of the Nightfort, taking refuge in the pine forests outside the keep. They were too weak to go very far. Bran glimpsed torches on the Wall, heading down to the ice steps towards the keep. Through Summer's skin, he smelled men approaching. None of Bran's party were in any state to move quickly – they could only hope to hide in the treeline and pray that the rangers didn't search very hard for them.

"If we run now we're not going be able to cross the Wall," Meera warned, grunting as she tried to drag Bran out over the rough cold grass. His body felt like a useless sack of potatoes.

Jojen just shook his head. "We're not going to be able to cross the Wall anyway."

They set up camp in the forest that night. No campfire, in case anyone was searching for them. Bran noticed how Meera was trembling too. Meera's broken nose left her eyes bloodshot and her face bruised. The painful image of her beaten and stripped flashed before his eyes. They all
huddled together against the cold, quiet and strained.

*That was the first fight I've ever been in,* Bran thought to himself. The vision replayed in his mind. He had used to daydream about being a knight on a battlefield too. Nothing could have ever prepared him for just… the pure gore, screaming and chaos.

The night was tensely quiet. No one slept. "... What did you see, Bran?" Jojen asked quietly after a long silence, resting his head on his hands. "I saw you; you were out of your body. What did you see?"

Meera looked at him. Bran hesitated for a long time. So many visions, where could he even begin. Half of them hardly even made sense. "... I saw the past. It was like I was there, watching everything..." he said. The thought alone caused him to gulp. He hesitated, remembering one sight that struck out to him. "... And... I think saw the future too..."

"What did you see?"

"I saw Winterfell." The image of his home covered in smoke and mist. "I saw Winterfell being destroyed. I think we've got to go back."

Meera shook her head. "We can't; it's too dangerous, they'll be hunting us."

"We have to," Bran insisted. *That scene, why was it so hard to focus on it?*

"What about the three-eyed crow?"

"I don't think I need him... I..." His hands were still trembling. "... I need to think."

Nobody pushed him. Hodor started crying when his stitches split, and Meera moved over to try and help the stable boy and reapply rags for bandages.

The night was quiet. A bloated half-moon hung above in the frosted sky.

*I killed men last night,* Bran thought for the hundredth time. *I did it, I killed them. Is this how it's supposed to feel?*

*I am ten years old, yet I overpowered them.* He couldn't even twitch his legs. His body was useless, but he had been so strong last night. *I killed them...*

Slowly, Jojen shuffled over towards him. The crannogman kept his voice low. "Bran," he said in a low voice. "How are you? What are you thinking about?"

"Last night." He had been thinking about it constantly on repeat. The way the wildling had choked under Hodor's hands, or torn under Summer's claws, or burst under Bran's presence. *How are you supposed to feel after killing thirteen people? "... Those wildlings..."*

"We survived. That's what important."

He pictured the pile of thirteen corpses. Thirteen dead bodies. "... Meera killed one. She's so good with her spear but she could only kill one of them," Bran said after a long pause. "Hodor's big and strong, but he could only kill two. It was me – I killed them. I killed them in Hodor's skin, or in Summer's, or in the ravens, but *I* killed them."

Jojen never replied. His green eyes stared through him.

"... Old Nan always used to tell me stories about... about the Warg King. Or the Horned Lord.
Them that could use sorcery and skinchanging. "Bran remembered those stories well. The Warg King was a skinchanger who ruled Sea Dragon's Point, allied with the children of the forest, who fought against the ancient Kings of Winter. The Horned Lord had been an ancient King-Beyond-the-Wall thousands of years ago, who supposedly used magic to pass the Wall. Bran had seen figures of legend themselves in his vision, legends in the flesh. Magic and monsters, they were real. "… And I just realised… I'm like them. I'm a skinchanger too, I'm as powerful as they were."

Bran turned to face the crannogman. "If I had only known about that six months ago…" He shook his head. "I never needed to flee Winterfell. When Theon Greyjoy invaded, I could have chased him out… I never needed to hide when they… they burned down my home…"

I'm a wolf. A winged wolf. I had been chained, helpless. So helpless and weak when they chased after me…

"I should never have left Winterfell." He thought back to a frozen wasteland, and the builder clutching a giant horn.

His throat jammed. The tears stung his eyes, but Bran refused to cry. Crying was for little boys. He couldn't cry.

"... You're a Stark, Bran," Jojen said in his soft voice. "You did everything you could do."

There must always be a Stark in Winterfell. "And now I can do more." He shook his head. "I'm done running, Jojen. I don't to run, to hide to be… trapped anymore. I want to… I want to do something, I want to…" His eyes twitched. "… I killed those men and that was me. That was me fighting back."

The crannogman's voice flickered. "What do you want to do?"

"I need to go home," Bran admitted. "I need to see my family again."

Jojen stared at him for a long time, piercing green eyes looking straight through him. Bran never met his gaze. He can tell I'm holding something back, Bran thought to himself. "… Bran…" Jojen said in a slow voice. "What aren't you telling me?"

He hesitated for a long time. It was hard to even find the words. How do you vocalise something as intense and as vivid as a dream? It was more like feelings than images. "… I saw something…" he said, struggling quietly to remember it. "In my vision. I never understood it, and I still don't, but… I think I saw Winterfell when it was being made. I think I saw the Bran the Builder."

Jojen blinked. He looked like he was about to say something, but he didn't. "… And I've been obsessing over it in my head and…" Bran stammered. "And it's a like a feeling. We were in the crypts, remember? I know what Winterfell feels like, and it felt like… so much of Winterfell is underground. The reason Bran the Builder built the castle there…"

He was rambling. His breaths were still sharp and jagged. It sounded crazy even as he said it, but he couldn't shaking the sense of foreboding and warning that vision gave him. Winterfell had been built on top of hot springs, Bran recalled, they used it to pump warm water through the castle. There must always be a Stark in Winterfell.

His hands clenched slowly. "I think there's something buried beneath Winterfell," Bran said finally. It was the only thing that made his visions make sense. "I think he left something buried there."

Jojen never replied. He retired early for the night to dream.
The whole camp was barely a clearing in the forest. They had lost their supplies and half their equipment when they were chased out of the Nightfort. They were hungry, injured and weak. Bran could see the wariness and concern when he looked into Meera's eyes. She didn't think they would last long like this. She was probably right.

At one point, near dawn, Meera and Jojen left to one side and argued about where they should go next, keeping out of earshot from Bran. Neither of them knew what to do. Bran eavesdropped through a bird on the trees.

It was pale and early morning. In the first morning rays, he felt the forest twitch. Summer heard a party of men walking through the forest. Bran could have warned Jojen and Meera, they could have tried to run, but he didn't. Instead, he stayed still, staring at the trees as he heard a party of thirty armed men crunch through the snow.

*I'm done running*, he thought as he steeled himself. *I'm done hiding.*

He remembered that feeling of cold and endless winter descending over the world. There was no time for hiding. *There must always be a Stark in Winterfell.*

Bran expected to see rangers in black cloaks coming out of the forest. Instead, he saw gruff men in plate mail with spears. There was shouting and bellows as they came onto their camp. Summer snarled and snapped, Meera clutched her spear, but Bran didn't even twitch. Many of the men had brown giants stitched onto their surcoats, Bran noticed.

The shouting and screaming lasted a while, as the men dragged Meera's spear away and forced Summer backwards. Apparently the men had been hunting wildlings that had slipped over the Wall. Considering all the dirt and grime over them, Bran wasn't surprised that his party could be mistaken for wildlings. A man bellowed at Bran to stand up and come with them, to which Bran could only reply that he couldn't stand. That caused some of the men to stir.

Shortly afterwards, he was dragged before the old warrior leading the expedition – a stiff and gaunt man in boiled leather and chainmail, with flinty eyes, a long white beard and a face as hard as winter frost.

It took a while for Bran to recognise the man. *Hother Umber. Castellan of Last Hearth. The Whoresbane.*

---

**The Bear Knight**

"Take me," Dany purred, slipping towards him under the silken sheets. Her kiss was soft, teasing, mischievous, biting gently at his lower lip. "I command you to fuck me, ser."

"Yes, your grace," Jorah whispered huskily. His body convulsed as her slender, nubile legs wrapped around his waist.

"Take me, ser," his queen whispered in his ear. "Love me, protect me. I need you so, so much…"

"Yes, your grace," he gasped, feeling her delicate fingers move downwards, her fingertips tracing through thick chest hair and towards his–

"Land ahoy, you cunts! Get a move on already!"

Jorah shot upwards. The dream vanished in an instant. Instead of silk sheets and playful caresses, he was suddenly lying on bed-ridden, sea worn, cotton, staring at dirty, almost rotten, floorboards.
He had his knife in his hand instinctively. He very nearly fell out of the hammock.

He cursed as he thrashed. The stiffness between his legs made movement unbearable. The wooden supports creaked and groaned as he struggled to pull himself upwards. The sailor's bunkbeds were not made for a man of his size.

The floor was rocking. He could hear waves and gulls. Jorah cursed, dragging his stiff and cramped body upwards. He had slept in his armour for fear of someone stealing it, but it left his back and shoulders aching. He grabbed his longsword, fastened his belt and staggered upwards.

"You were moaning in your sleep, Westerosi," a rotten-toothed man with a wicked grin said. "Pleasant dreams?"


"Well, you are home now," the sailor said. "I'm sure she is waiting for you, yes?"

She is. But she's waiting for me half a world away. For now, I will wait for her.

He staggered out onto the deck. The cold, salty wind hit him, along with the shouts of men and movement. The galley creaked in the waves as it sailed through the Bite. He could see the misty outline of the Three Sister to starboard, the beacon's absent in the pale light, and the grey, cluttered cliffs and rocks of the coast as they headed down into the White Knife. The river was drab and meagre compared to the Rhoyne in Volantis, or grey and cold compared to the Skahazadhan of Meereen, but the entrance to the bay still had a certain misty, ancient splendor that no other could match.

Jorah could see the whitewashed stone of White Harbour coming into view, a drab sight under grey clouds. Steepily pitched roofs of dark grey hung to the coast, speckled with towers and the frames of ships. It was more than just a harbour city, it felt like the north. It had been so long Jorah half-forgotten what it looked like. Seeing it again, though, it felt like he had never left.

Years ago, he had ran to White Harbour to escape Lord Stark's justice. His last sight of the town had been crammed into a cargo hold of a stinking cog heading to Lys, trying to reassure his frantic wife.

It was funny how things changed.

"We will be docking in a few hours," the man said, shambling over creaky stairs. The men were rushing to the oars, bringing the sails in. "You'll help unload, hmm?"

He nodded, absentminded. "I'll help with your cargo."

"Good worker," he said approvingly, in broken Common. "Big, strong. You want work on ships, see the captain now. We always need strong swords in these waters."

It might be good pay, too. Working as hired goon, a sword, on some rotten ship was stable work if nothing else. Jorah shook his head. "I can't. I have business in White Harbour."

"Yes, your wife." He nodded before shambling off. "Still, offer is there. I find that woman are poor at waiting. If she is not waiting for you, then we'll be in port for three days."

Jorah's eyes were focused on White Harbour. For so long, Jorah had been the Spider's creature. He followed orders; he went where Lord Varys instructed him, he watched, he wrote reports back to the King's Landing – all in the hope of someday securing a pardon and being able to go back home.
Now, he was coming back himself to do the exact thing, but this time to send reports to Meereen, and to his queen.

Queen Daenerys Targaryen shall have no more devoted subject, Jorah promised himself. I wronged her, but I will prove myself. I shall do whatever it takes to earn my place at her side. Someday, however long it may take, we will be together; her on the Iron Throne and I by her side.

Perhaps it was impossible. Many would say it was. Jorah had no delusions; he was an aging, exiled knight from a minor house in the far north, and she was a stunningly beautiful young woman, the heir of the Targaryen legacy and destined for greatness. Still, many would have said it was impossible for him to win the tourney at Lannisport, to win Lynesse Hightower's hand in marriage. Jorah had defied the odds then, and he was prepared to do it again.

He lingered outside for as long as possible, before redrawing to his bunk. He kept a quill and sheets of goatskin parchment hidden, wrapped in his spare blanket. After a long moment, Jorah frowned and wrote in large, awkward letters:

'Nineteen war galleys in inner harbour of White Harbour. Outer harbour is crowded. Fresh construction. City preparing for war?'

An hour later, he saw the looming stone of Seal Rock over the approach to the outer harbour. The ancient, weathered ringfort stood fifty feet over the waters, grey-green in colour. Last time he passed, the ruins had been abandoned, but now he saw ships docked around the rocks, and man working and fortifying the ruins. He glimpsed scorpions and spitfires being hammered into position, and new defensive towers on the harbour that looked recent.

With a pause, he returned to his parchment and crossed out the question mark on the previous line. He added: 'Seal Rock fortified. Planning to defend harbour.'

He was here as a spy. Parchment was expensive and his penmanship was poor, but Jorah had resolved to record absolutely everything he saw that could be of use to Dany.

Jorah had abandoned his mail and surcoat – it was far too obvious. Likewise, he had sold his plate armour for worn boiled leather; worn, moulded and dressed in oil to retain flexibility around joints. He had even shaved his beard. His story was that of a sellsword returning home after fighting for mercenaries companies. A knight drew attention, but a common sellsword less so.

The trip from Meereen had been as fast as possible. The Shavepate gave him a pouchful of gold, some brief instructions to report back in vague terms, and a horse. First, Jorah had rode to Volantis, and then booked a ship back to Westeros. Volantis had been difficult – the whole city had been heaving between the Triarch elections, the Yunkai recruiting for war on Meereen and Astapor, and the Golden Company camped outside of the city.

Jorah had lingered long enough to learn as much as possible, and that was the very first report he went sent back to Meereen. Everyone had been talking about how Tyrion Lannister, the queen's deformed younger brother, had apparently hired the Golden Company in Volantis to sail back to Westeros to claim Casterly Rock for himself.

Jorah gathered as much information as he could gather and wrote three letters about the Golden Company and the mercenary companies the Yunkai hired. He didn't know how useful they'd be to Daenerys, but he wasn't about to skimp on his task.

All three of the letters ended up with the widow of the waterfront in western Volantis, who promised to see them to Meereen, and Jorah had little choice but to trust her. Jorah might have been
tempted to wait and try to sail back to Westeros along with Golden Company, but instead the widow of the waterfront recommended him passage on the smuggler ship the *Adventure* – coursed towards White Harbour and then Braavos to sell Volantis silks, lace and spices. As old and foul as the *Adventure* was, it was a lean and fast ship and they made good time.

Jorah had debated the wisdom of heading towards King's Landing instead. King's Landing would be the centre of activity; if he wanted to learn about the movements of the Usurper's ilk then the capital was the place to be. Still, King's Landing was also treacherous, unfamiliar territory for him. There would be spies everywhere, the risks were so much greater.

Instead, Jorah knew White Harbour. He knew the north. His status as the (former) Lord of Bear Island had more weight here. It had been a long decision, but the north was where he wanted to be.

He forced himself to stay calm, but he was trembling anxiously. He lingered to help the captain unload boxes down onto the pier as the portmaster approached, mostly so he could scout discreetly about the rumours in the city among the dockworkers.

Then, he was walking through the narrow cobbled streets of White Harbour, feeling his heart pound. The whole city stunk of fish.

He remembered Dany's words. He had been practicality reciting them. *I declare your exile over,* his queen had proclaimed. *You must be my scout, my spy – my envoy even. Whatever it takes.*

Not for the first time, the enormity of that task dawned on him. Dany was possibly years away from invading Westeros. She would wait until her dragons were fully grown and under control and she had a stable backing in Meereen. Jorah's service now could be the difference between success and failure when she finally did come west.

Scouting and letters are only half my duty, he thought. *I must rally the kingdom to their rightful queen. I must pave her way. I must convince the Seven Kingdoms of Daenerys' worth, and prove my own.*

His hands clenched into fists. *What I wouldn't give to even be twenty years younger again? I feel like an old man.*

His heart pounded. *My father. My father probably still lives, as the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch.* He knew it would be folly to go see Jeor Mormont again, but still…

Jorah's settled in early and hired a room, in a stinking winesink called the Lazy Eel. The whole city was overrun with refugees, and more coming every day. He retreated sullenly, to think and to plan. He tried to stay inconspicuous, but the innkeeper still called him "m'lord" when he rented a whole room for himself.

So much to do… Even trying to imagine his task made him quiver. He waved the serving girl away so he could think. *I need to gather information. I need rumours and witnesses. They said that Eddard Stark is dead, and his sons murdered, but how much of that is true I can't say.*

*I need to find some ships heading to Volantis. Set up some sort of organisation that could get my reports safely back to Meereen.* That alone was a daunting task – how to send messages half a world away in secret?

*And I will have to approach familiar noble lords, carefully.* Lords that might raise the Targaryen banner. That made him squirm with the thought. Try to convince them that the Starks were dead and the Lannisters were crazy. It would take tact, and negotiation that Jorah had little experience
with. He needed to move a kingdom with nothing more than words and promises of a distant queen. *How much are the words of an exiled knight worth? Where can I even start?*


… *It's been so long and I am finally home…*

Before long, it was nightfall and he still hadn't decided on the best course of action. He felt like a bear that had been tasked with learning to dance. He sat hunched over the writing desk, staring at the parchment and all his crude notes.

Then, the sound of heavy footsteps up the wooden stairs caused him to jump. The clang of heavy plate boots. His hand went instinctively to his longsword.

Bang, bang, bang. A heavy fist collided against the door. Jorah jumped. "Who is it?" He demanded, tensing.

"Open the door and lower the steel, otherwise we'll bring the door down and take you," the voice on the other side said grimly. "You can either walk out of here with us, or we can drag you out. I'm not too bothered which, to be honest."

Jorah growled. He fastened on his belt, his dagger, his longsword firmly in his hands. His fingers were frantic as he fastened the clasps on his armour. *How could they know? Why are they here for me, I never drew any attention…*

Still, there was little choice but to unlatch the bolt and open the door. If they wanted a fight, he would give them one. *I clearly make a poor spy, but I'm a better fighter, I promise you.*

Jorah pushed the door open and stood back. Five burly guardsmen in half-helm and iron tridents painted silver were standing in the corridor. They wore woollen blue-green dyed cloaks - the uniform of the guards of House Manderly. Big men, armoured, but in the narrow corridor Jorah would have an advantage.

The man at the front wasn't a guardsman, though; he was a tall, aging man with a deep-lined face and long brown grey hair. He wore a red surcoat, his hands on the sword on his belt. His expression was tense, dark and glowering.

Jorah stared, not lowering his sword. The last time he saw that face it had been at his wedding. It took him a while to recognise the man with a decade's worth of aging, stress and wrinkles.

"Robett?" Jorah gasped. "Robett Glover?"

"Ser Jorah." Robett Glover nodded. "So it's true. I barely believed it myself. The previous offer still stands; come with us now or we'll drag you out."

Jorah shook his head, stepping backwards. "I do not want any trouble."

"Then lower your sword."

It had been so long since Jorah saw the man. The younger brother of the Lord of Deepwater Motte. They had even been friendly, once upon a time, but the relationship soured after the death of Jorah's first wife. Jorah had heard some whispers that Robett Glover came to White Harbour recently; he had been captured and then exchanged after Robb Stark's failed conquest. The men on the docks said that Manderly had refused to rally for him, and turned Robett away. *What is he doing with the city guards?*
The man's face was hard as stone. "We were family, once," Jorah growled. "You would really march me to the hangman's noose like this?"

"Aye, we were family," Robett said darkly. "You married my niece. And then you spat on her memory when her body was barely cold."

He flustered. "I would never… Sigfryd was a lovely girl. I cared deeply for her…"

Sigfryd Glover. *My first wife*. The longest wife too; Jorah had been only seventeen when they married. Seventeen years old. *As my father instructed me to, I married her*. Sigfryd had been a plain, maybe homely girl, but polite and sweet. Their marriage had been very… respectful. Dutiful. Jorah had been fond of her.

Not for the first time, he wondered how different his life might have been if Sigfryd had given him a child instead of dying in her third miscarriage.

"Yes, I remember how much you cared for her," Robett said, his eyes still tense. "You waited a month after the funeral before going off and marrying that bitch with a pretty face."

*I was twenty-seven. The first woman I ever fell in love with*. "Lynesse." Jorah's voice was a growl.

Robett nodded. "That was her. The Hightower girl. The bitch with a pretty face. How well did that marriage work out for you?"

Jorah never replied.

At twenty-seven years old, Jorah had been a fierce fighter, a warrior proven, the Lord of Bear Island, and already widowed. Renowned as one of the best fighters in the north. Respected. He had been a man grown, but it had only just felt like he was starting to really live his life. *My father even took the black so that I could become lord. How did things go from there to here?*

"You know, if my son ever becomes entranced by a comely lass, I'll tell him about you as a warning."

"Don't," Jorah warned, raising his sword slightly.

"You sold *slaves*, Jorah." Robett glowered. "Any goodwill the north had for you evaporated with that crime. When you tried to fill your purse with blood money. But you could have stood with honour. Could have stood trial. You could have pleaded. Instead you ran like a craven."

"I will not stand here to be insulted," Jorah said. "Either move aside or I'll show you how much of a craven I am."

"I told you, you will be coming with us."

"You expect me to walk willingly to my own execution?"

"Perhaps you should be executed. Perhaps you deserve it." Robett nodded, folding his arms. "But it won't be tonight. I come on behalf of Lord Manderly of White Harbour. He wishes to talk."

Jorah's eyes narrowed. "Talk?"

"Lord Wyman Manderly will offer you guest right, if you accept it. If not, you'll be coming anyways. I have no interest in an execution, but don't push me."

Jorah glanced at the guardsmen standing in the corridor. All of them were armed and armoured. He
paused for a long time, before lowering his sword. Robett just nodded, and motioning for him to follow. The soldiers flanked him from either side, clearing the path out of the Lazy Eel. Jorah glimpsed patrons part quietly as they marched him out. Nobody said a word.

They walked quickly, almost frogmarched him out into the street and into Fishfoot Yard. It was midnight, the city felt suppressed and cloudy. Robett never looked back at him. The proud and pale silhouette of New Castle hovered over the city. Without a word, the guards were heading to the Castle Stair. Marble mermaids shimmered in the street. They're taking me to the keep.

"How did you find me?" Jorah asked. "How did you know I was here?"

"You were less inconspicuous than you might think," Robett replied. "White Harbour has been expecting spies for a long time. We've been well-prepared for the Iron Throne sending their catspaw."

"I am no catspaw." Jorah glared at him defiantly. "And I don't work for the Iron Throne."

"And yet we had men on the docks looking for any new arrivals lingering around. The guardsmen keep in touch with the innkeepers, particularly the darker hovels. We look specifically for any trying to hide. When you arrived – a mystery stranger renting a room with no meals, paying well and spotted writing messages at their desk all night – it raised flags in a city that is on high alert."

Jorah never replied. High alert indeed, to react so quickly.

They headed through the plaza, up the Castle Stair towards the New Castle. He expected them to go for the main entrance to the hall, but instead Robett took them around the back, to a servant's entrance on the far side of the keep. They were waved through by the guards without a word.

"Few people know that you came to White Harbour," Robett said. "It is better if we keep that number a few as possible."

Better for who? Jorah wondered. His body was tensed as Robett led them into a poorly lit servant's quarters. They walked into a servant's dining hall; filled with long, cramped wooden tables and stools, with cheap candles flickering in the corner of the room. Two of the guards waited outside. Another went to guard the door.

He saw two figures waiting for him. One of them was a hulking man squatting on a stool, biting into a thick fisherman's pie in a ceramic bowl. Lord Wyman Manderly had been a fat man the last time Jorah saw him, but now he looked even more bloated and obese. Dark, gaunt circles hung under Wyman's red eyes. Lord Manderly was over sixty years old now but seemed older – clad in sweaty wool and velvet, with a massive belly hanging out from an embroidered green overcoat.

"Ser Jorah," Lord Manderly greeted loudly, chunks of pastry clung to his greying whiskers. "Forgive me if I don't stand."

"Lord Manderly," Jorah said cautiously, before asking, "How did you know I was in the city?"

"You underestimate your fame. When you chose exile all those years ago, you caused quite a stir. The north remembers, ser," the lord said, scoffing down a great gulp of pie. "My cousin, Ser Marlon Manderly—" The tall man in silver-coloured armour by Lord Manderly's side. "commander of the garrison. You were identified as a likely spy entering the city, we watched, and then Marlon here recognised you from the search eight years ago. If you really were Ser Jorah Mormont of Bear Island, then I wanted to speak to hear and now, quietly, rather than throwing you in a cell."
"And what do you want?"

Lord Manderly paused. "That, ser, is a loaded question," the lord said. "Please – sit, eat. I have pie and wine." He motioned to Ser Marlon. "Although the first let the commander here relieve you of your sword and dagger, ser. Allow a fat old man his reassurances."

Jorah hesitated, but he didn't resist as Ser Marlon and the two guards took his longsword and belt away from him. He sat down woodenly opposite Lord Manderly. The guards, and Robett, all had hands near their swords.

"Robett here advised me to drive you out of my city," Lord Manderly explained. "He said that you are dishonourable, and not to be trusted. Is he correct?"

Jorah never said a word.

"… Well…" Lord Manderly continued. "… My opinion is that I have far too many enemies to be able to afford to turn away potential allies. Care for some pie, Ser Jorah?"

He paused. The room was quiet as he dragged back the oak chair and sat down. Lord Manderly cut him a large slice of pie. Ser Jorah wasn't hungry, but he ate it gingerly in any case. Eel pie; it was dry and stale but thick and meaty. Guest right required him to accept the host's food.

"Did you know that a month ago I swore myself off food?" Lord Manderly said, crunching into another slice. "I swore to starve myself until I had vengeance for my son. My poor Wendel. I wailed and I cried in grief, refused all visitors, refused to come to dinner… Two days later, and I realised that my vow was… made in haste."

No one said a word. The silence in the long hall felt as cold as ice. "Have you ever felt hatred, Ser Jorah?" He asked, almost curiously. "Have you ever felt raw, pure hatred?"

_When I saw my love with another man._ "… Aye."


The lord paused to stare down at the pie. Almost absentmindedly, Lord Manderly wiped the gravy off his whiskers. "They murdered my son, ser," he growled. "And, aye, I am fat. I am fat, and perhaps I am craven too. And because I am fat, I will eat and I will feast, and I will fill my great, fat mouth." Sausage fingers clenched into fists. Lord Manderly's eyes seemed to blaze in the gloom. "… And then, eventually, I will gorge myself on their hearts until I choke."

He took another bite of the pastry. "So… to answer your question… _that_ is what I want," Lord Manderly explained, keeping his voice level. "Perhaps Robett Glover is right and you are not to be trusted. However, no matter what ill-will or misgivings I may bear towards you – that animosity _pales_ in comparison to the hatred I bear towards the men who murdered my family. My kin. My _liege_. That is why I am hoping that we may dine together and find common ground, Ser Jorah." Blue eyes stared at him. "So, I think, a more valid question is… what do _you_ want, ser?"

Jorah took a deep breath. He hesitated, pausing for a few seconds before answering. "I want to return home."

"You have been in exile for most of a decade," Robett spoke up, glaring at him. "Why return now?"

"Because I've missed my home for years, and because I want to see my family again," Jorah replied. "Because I heard that Eddard Stark is dead."
"You think that because our liege was murdered that his judgement no longer applies?" Robett said sharply. "You were sentenced to death for your crimes of slavery, ser."

"Aye." His heart pounded. Jorah forced himself to meet their eyes. "But I have been exile for too long. Too much wandering. I wanted to see my family again, to hopefully…"

He let his voice trail off. It was mostly true, as well. He had been lost for a long, long time. Jorah just wasn't going to mention his loyalty to Queen Daenerys to them, not yet. That would only confuse matters.

"… I see," Lord Manderly mused. He and Robett shared a glance. "You have been away from Westeros for a some time. How much have you heard of the affairs in the north?"

"Bits and pieces. Rumours in Essos."

"Rumours. Words. Wind." Lord Manderly grunted. "Perhaps I should start by bringing you up to date." Beefy fingers groped under his cloak, picking out a bundle of faded yellow letters and putting them onto the table. "Words are wind, it is known," he mused. "Spoken words are fleeting and meaningless. But I've always been of the opinion that words written down become more substantial yet no less meaningful. Some letters are nothing but ink. Words are wind, yet writing is water – does that sound right to you?"

Jorah stayed quiet. When in doubt, hold your tongue; his father had always told him. "… If so," Lord Manderly grumbled, "then the writing in these letters is surely nothing more than pisswater."

"What are they?" Jorah asked. Lord Manderly unwrapped the bundle and laid them out in front of him. Some of the letters were long and cursive, filled with titles and honorifics, while others were short and direct. Several of them were written on pink paper. The Bolton's signature.

"Letters from the Iron Throne. From King's Landing. From the Twins. From the Warden of the North, Roose Bolton," Robett said in a dark tone. "First they executed Eddard Stark on a forced confession. Then they colluded against and murdered his son, Robb Stark. Now they seek to defile the Stark's legacy – they send ravens demanding that White Harbour, and all other houses in the north, bend the knee. They even blame the Red Wedding on the the Starks, and expect us all to pretend or die."

"Yet it is pisswater that I have no choice but to drink," Lord Manderly growled. "They send a galley towards me even now. To bring back the bones of my son. Can you imagine it? The murderers returning his body to me? I will have no choice but to feast and dine with those vermin – they talk even about taking my beloved granddaughter – to marry her to Frey weasels! – they expect me to bend the knee to Bolton. The men that murdered King Robb, who sacked Winterfell, who butchered my son!" His fist bounced off the wooden table. Iron cutlery rattled. "… And I have no choice but to nod and go along with it – for they still hold my other son, Wylis, captive."

Jorah blinked. "I see."

"Do you care, ser?" Robett grunted. "Or are you laughing at the fate of Eddard Stark's sons on the inside? You hated Lord Stark for driving you out, I expect."

"Yes," Jorah agreed. "I despised Eddard Stark for sentencing me, almost as much I despised myself for committing the crime." He shook his head. "Yet Eddard Stark's children did me no wrong. I am sorry."

"Indeed." He and Robett shared a long glance. It felt like Ser Marlon was staring daggers into him.
Lord Manderly took a deep breath. "Excuse us, ser, allow us a moment to confer. Enjoy the pie."

It took Robett and Ser Marlon to heave Lord Manderly to his feet. The fat lord panted and wheezed as he left the room with Robett Glover. Ser Marlon stood guard over Jorah. He could hear the faint whispers as Robett and Lord Manderly whispered between themselves outside the room.

Minutes passed. Jorah caught only a single sentence among the hushed whispers, growled in anger. "... We don't have another option!"

The discussion ended quickly. Jorah's shoulders were stiff as Lord Manderly and Robett returned to the room. "We have a proposition for you, ser," Lord Manderly said eventually, wheezing. "A means to help each other."

Jorah never replied. He kept his body still. "You are seeking a way to redeem yourself to the north. To reclaim your lordship of House Mormont," Lord Manderly continued. "A pardon. I have a means in which you may do so."

"You want to return home," Robett said. "House Mormont have been House Stark's most steadfast supporters. Bear Island – your cousins – are the only noble house still openly flying the direwolf. Under the rule of Lord Bolton as Warden of North, the Mormonts of Bear Island will surely be destroyed."

_Jorah realised. He didn't know what, but it was the only reason they were having this conversation. They're offering something, like a sale's pitch._ He held his tongue, to force them to explain. He didn't dare speak.

"I suggest that we make common cause against the Boltons. Against the murderous usurpers. You may not like House Stark, but at least respect them," Lord Manderly continued. "Respect that they are the better option."

"... I am not Lord of Bear Island anymore, my lords," Jorah said carefully. "I have no men-at-arms to raise. If you are looking to form a rebellion, I have no men or coin to offer."

"It is not men or coin that we require," Lord Manderly replied. "We can rally those ourselves. Instead, I require _you_ – you are strong warrior with nothing to lose and everything to gain. I need a single man willing to face great odds and immense peril, to bring back something that might well win this war for us."

"What?"

"Who," Lord Manderly corrected. "Right now, Lord Bolton intends to marry his bastard to Arya Stark, the youngest daughter of Eddard Stark, to verify his claim to Winterfell. If we could provide another trueborn child – one with a better claim to Winterfell – then we could rally the north behind them."

"I heard that the Stark boys are all dead." Jorah frowned. "Are you saying that they still live?"

The lord paused. Jorah noted how he didn't answer the question. "I am speaking of _Sansa Stark_," Lord Manderly said. "The eldest daughter. I want you to rescue her for us, and bring her home."

Jorah blinked in surprise.

"Sansa Stark was married to Tyrion Lannister, the Imp, but rumours say the marriage was never consummated. It could be annulled," Lord Manderly explained. "Sansa vanished in King's Landing after the death of Joffrey. She was held responsible for his murder."
"And I heard that there has been no trace of her since." The rumours of the eldest Stark girl, who had apparently poisoned the king, had been going wild through the Lazy Eel.

"That is correct," Lord Manderly admitted. "Her location is a mystery. And yet recently I have come across a curious testimony that… suggests a possibility."

Robett unravelled an old, weathered map onto the table. A sailor's map of the Bite and the Fingers. "I have been reading the letters from King's Landing with great detail," Lord Manderly said. "… And recently a fisherman off the coast of the Pebble…" He pointed on the map, tracing the route. "… he spotted a Braavosi trading galley with a crowned merman figurehead heading to a small keep on the Fingers – the seat of House Baelish in the Fingers, southwest of the Pabs. That galley is familiar enough in White Harbour to identify it as the Merling King – a ship hired from King's Landing by Petyr Baelish to return him to the Vale."

Jorah hesitated, not understanding. "Why is that significant?"

"Because it should have arrived weeks ago, ser." Lord Manderly explained. "The ravens were very clear: Petyr Baelish left for the Vale, to wed Lysa Arryn, before the wedding of King Joffrey. Why, then, did it take his ship so long to reach his family keep?"

"We checked as much as we could," Robett added. "The fisherman had no reason to lie about the date. It should have been smooth sailing."

"That is not much of a lead," Jorah said.

"It is not. Not much at all, really," Lord Manderly admitted. "But in desperate times, everyone becomes much more… attentive to minor details. I would like to present a theory, ser; that the Merling King was delayed because they lingered in King's Landing and must have only left after the Purple Wedding. Baelish – Littlefinger – lied about his location and departure to the crown to stay unbeknownst to all until roughly shortly after the wedding. The same wedding at which Sansa Stark was last sighted."

Jorah frowned, struggling to keep up. "… You think this… Littlefinger… smuggled Sansa Stark to safety?" He knew of the man Littlefinger only very broadly, by reputation. The Master of Coin, he recalled.

"I do." His arms folded. "Did you know that Petyr Baelish was a childhood friend of Sansa's mother, Catelyn Tully? Rumours say that they were very close."

Ok, Jorah admitted with a quiet nod. That's suspicious. He could see why Lord Manderly might be intrigued.

"Since leaving for the Eyrie, Littlefinger married Lysa Arryn, established himself as the Lord Protector of the Eyrie and the Vale, and then his dear wife died mere weeks after their marriage," Lord Manderly continued. "Petyr Baelish has risen himself up to remarkable heights during this war."

He was feeling more and more lost. The bloody game of thrones, Jorah cursed. Too many players and too many pieces. "… But how does… if he does have Sansa Stark, then how is she involved?"

"I received a message from Yohn Royce, in Runestone. White Harbour deals greatly with the Vale, and Lord Royce wanted to confirm our support as he established his Lords Declarant. He also mentioned something curious. He noted briefly that Petyr Baelish brought with him his natural daughter to the Eyrie. A single passing line that I found very interesting indeed."
"So?"

"I spoke to every man in White Harbour that has ever docked at King's Landing, ser. None of them knew anything about Petyr Baelish ever having a natural daughter."

Jorah paused. "... You're suggesting...?"

"Let us follow the conjecture through to its conclusion. I suspect that this natural daughter of Littlefinger may actually be Sansa Stark, sheltered at the Eyrie. If so, then Petyr Baelish took her after the murder of Joffrey, most presumably so that she could be used as some political piece to further his schemes. Whether or not she is his willing accomplice in this is unclear. The fact that he is keeping Sansa Stark, presumptive heir to Winterfell, in his pocket suggests that Baelish has intents in taking power in the north as well as the Vale, somehow."

"You've got absolute nothing to support that other than some suspicious timings and coincidences."

"I am aware."

"And what do you suggest to do about it?"

"We need Sansa Stark here – in the north – not as some piece in Littlefinger's games. If I am correct, then there's only one option available to us."

"... Which is?"

Lord Manderly looked at him in all seriousness. "I want you to kidnap Petyr Baelish's daughter."

He stared, looking for some hint that this was a joke. There was none. Jorah cursed in Bastard Valyrian. And then he swore again in Dothraki. Dothraki had some great swear words.

"If it was easy, we wouldn't need you," Robett said grimly.

"You expect me to assault the Eyrie singlehanded? You have an army of knights under you."

"An army is meaningless, ser. Littlefinger is no fool, and my knights will be outmatched by the knights of Vale. Any knight of House Manderly will not get near to Sansa Stark." Lord Manderly nodded. "... However, I suspect Littlefinger is trying to consolidate power in the north. If the exiled lord of House Mormont were to approach him, for example, why – I'd expect that Littlefinger is going to be all too eager to recruit such a man into his service. Petyr Baelish would see you as a useful man to keep beside him, another piece that he could exploit."

"You want me to get close enough to kidnap his daughter?" Jorah said in stunned disbelief. The candles flickered. They think that I have no loyalties, and therefore no reason for Baelish to distrust me.

"It is not kidnap if she's already been kidnapped," Robett noted, folding his arms. He's not happy with this plan either.

"Consider the benefits," Lord Manderly pressed. "Rescue Eddard Stark's daughter, and redeem yourself from Eddard Stark's punishment. Save the girl, bring her home, and the whole north will be cheering your name. You could be Lord of Bear Island again."

Jorah had to take a deep breath to steady himself. He could barely believe it. It was pure suicide. It was folly. And yet...
Robett and Lord Manderly shared a glance. Jorah's eyes narrowed. *There's something else going on here…*

"Why me?" He said finally. "You need the Stark girl. Why are you trusting me to bring her to you?"

"I told you, there's little choice."

"That's not what I asked. *Why would they entrust a man who hates the father to save the daughter?*

Lord Manderly paused, staring at him intently. "… I am choosing to trust you, ser, because I have no alternative in the matter." Robett nodded, and his face was just as stern. "I have no knights that stand a better chance of getting close to Petyr Baelish. You are my best option in this case, and so I am *choosing* to believe that your honour and desire to redeem yourself is earnest."

"And if I fail?"

"Then this conversation never happened. There will be nothing but the word of an exiled knight claiming I sent him after Petyr Baelish's daughter."

*Ah.* "Win and you gain everything; fail and you keep nothing," Robett said. "Those are the stakes. Those have always been the stakes."

"And I'm struggling to believe that you would bet everything on me," Jorah noted. "The Stark girl is important to you."

"She is," Lord Manderly nodded, his eyes narrowing. "But there are… options. Forgive me, ser, if I do not share my alternative plans with you. I will tell you everything that you need to know to rescue the Stark child and nothing more."

*He has a backup plan?* In case Jorah didn't succeed. In case he couldn't get the Stark girl for the north. Hells, it was quite possible, perhaps even likely, that Manderly was wrong and Baelish didn't have Sansa Stark at all. *No wonder he is committing so little.*

Jorah took a deep breath. The Eyrie was the most secure castle in the realm. *Even if I could be invited in, to try and escape out of the Vale with their ruler's daughter…*

He looked between at Robett's and Wyman's guarded eyes, drifting over to Ser Marlon's quiet gaze. *Can I trust them? Probably not, but they don't expect to trust me either.*

*And yet what choice do I have?*

The image of his beautiful, gorgeous queen flashed before his eyes. If Daenerys had commanded this of him, then he wouldn't even hesitate. *I am doing this for her.*

*Sansa Stark is the rightful Lady of Winterfell. If I rescue her in Queen Daenerys' name… it could be my best chance at rallying the north for Daenerys Targaryen.*

Even the thought of his queen caused his pulse to steady. His eyes hardened in resolution. "I'll do it."

"Excellent," Lord Manderly said, though there was little joy in his voice. "Ser Marlon will put you on a fast galley heading to Gulltown. You'll have your own cabin. Littlefinger has strong ties to Gulltown, I suspect his presence there will notice you. If not, seek out Ser Osney Kettleback – he is..."
Littlefinger's creature, he will be eager to take you to his lord."

"And remember," Robett said darkly, "should you fail--"

"None of this happened," Jorah agreed. Lord Manderly was risking absolutely nothing by sending him on the task.

"Time is short and morning comes. No others in this castle must know of this meeting. Do you have any other questions?"

"One," Jorah said. "Why are you doing this? Why go so far for the Stark girl?"

"Why? Because House Stark shall never have a more loyal ally than I. Bring back my liege lady, ser."

They nodded as he stood up. Jorah asked a few more questions about the journey and the travel, and received curt responses. Lord Manderly stayed sitting down. "Excuse me," the fat lord said, reaching out for the dish of eel pie. "I would like to finish this pie. A good pie should not go to waste."

Ser Marlon returned Jorah's weapons and belt, and led him out of the room. Leaving by a different exit, Jorah noted. The morning was coming, and doubtless nobody would be seen with him come dawn. He would likely leave very early. Another sea voyage ahead of him.

I've never been to the Vale before. I've never even seen the Eyrie. And yet, if all goes well, I'll have to flee, with a captive, through the Mountains of Moon and back to White Harbour, despite pursuers.

Dany, he thought. I am doing this for you. I will prove myself to you. I will prove myself to the realm.

As Jorah walked out down the corridor, he caught the mutter of a conversation behind him. "Are you sure about this?" Robett muttered to Lord Manderly. "… The girl…"

"Yes," the fat lord replied. Lord Manderly's voice was louder, a quiet boom in the dim. "We need the Starks. I do not believe that the time of the wolves is over, not yet. We must gather the pack."

Chapter End Notes

Happy new year :)
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The north moves, and news spreads...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Val

More people arrived every day. The camp was already eight thousand strong and growing, so large that was spilling out of the village, flooding into the forest in a sea of huddling bodies and shifting furs against the cold.

Above her, the wind caused the weirwood leaves to ripple, casting flickering shade over the centre of the camp. The small village of Whitetree, with only three shacks and a handful of goat pens, had become their camp. It had started when survivors flocked to the heart tree to find shelter with the Old Gods, running south from the Milkwater, and then more survivors flocked towards the others.

Now, the camp was already flooding far, far beyond the limits of the small village. Many refugees from the Frostfangs scattered in small group, and eventually word spread across the forest that there was aid and protection to be found at Whitetree, all underneath the looming, haunting gaze of the face carved into the heart tree.

Any protection the camp offered was flimsy at best. They had too many people to easily maintain the perimeter, too many mouths to feed, too few to keep order. Sometimes, it seemed to Val that the face of the heart tree was sneering at them.

They hadn’t had any attacks – only really scuffles between clans – but they would be easy prey when the attacks did come. Nobody was sure whether it would be the dead or the crows attacking them first. That uncertainty made a lot of people scared, and the anticipation could send men crazed.

*We’ve got too many women, children, sick and elderly,* Val thought with a flash of anger. *Not enough fighting men or spearwives left.*

Sometimes it seemed like the camp was trying to tear itself apart. For a lot of people, any hope they had of ever going south was destroyed at the Frostfangs, along with Mance's host.

The battle at the Frostfangs. It had been less a battle, and more an exercise in panic and chaos. The memory still sent a shiver down her spine. Even now, three months later and it felt like she was still trying to pick up the pieces.

Now, her sister was eight months pregnant, missing her husband, and starving and freezing in the woods.
Val thought about Dalla a lot. Dalla was the reason Val was still going. Val had to be strong for her little sister.

It was what kept her going through situations like this. The air was thick with the sound of cursing, and Val knew that one wrong move could see her killed. Another day, another petty squabble.

“You fucking bitch!” A man roared, gripping his maul as if to charge at her. “That meat is mine!”

“The meat belongs to the camp, not just to your fat ass,” Val growled. “Everyone gets a share. We feed them all.”

“I brought that elk down,” the wildling snarled, motioning to the large buck elk lying dead in the snow. He was a broad rugged man from the northern river clans. Val never even knew his name. “Me. You telling me that I can’t eat my own quarry?”

“Go out and kill another one then,” she snapped. Men around them readied weapons. “I’ve got starving bodies that need to eat. We share the meat.”

“Fuck them all,” he said. “I look after me and my own, not some weak, fucking little–”

Val’s dagger slipped out of her furs. A sharp bronze dirk that fit easily in her hand. “My camp. My rules.”

“Fuck your rules and fuck you. I came to go to war with Mance, not to get bossed around by his little lay.” His face twisted into a sneer. “I think I’ll just take my meat and leave. I’ll take my men, as well. In fact, I'll take you too – and then I'll see if you're still so bossy with my cock–”

Val snapped. The man hoisted his axe – a brutal weapon with a sharpened stone head that was almost a maul. It was so big Val doubted she would even been able to lift it. It was also totally useless.

By the time the man even raised his axe, Val's dirk was already embedded deep into his chest. The sharpened bronze blade cut straight through his furs. The blood oozed, steaming gently in the cold. The fool. Only a fool brings a maul to a knife fight, she thought with a vicious grunt. She could have stabbed him twice by the time he managed to swing a weapon that size.

She kicked the man to the ground. He was still gargling weakly on the snowy ground. All around her, she saw furred men clutching weapons. His clansmen. They looked angry.

One of them was about to charge with a spear, but then an iron blade was at his throat. “I’d think twice about that,” Garth warned in a low voice.

Val saw spearwives and fighters slip out of the treeline, surrounding the clansman without a word. Val had more allies to support her than the hunter did. Still, she thought furiously, examples must be made.

The hunter gurgled helplessly as Val twisted him over onto his back, and cut the hemline of his hide trousers. With a smooth motion, before anyone could object, she was pulling his pants down with one hand and hacking downwards with her dirk with the other.

The man spluttered something, spitting blood, that might have been some kind of plea, just as Val’s
blade cut into soft flesh. She grit her teeth at the side of his shrunken and hairy member, and then her dirk hacked in short, sharp motions. Blood splattered.

Within seconds, she was ripping his bloody member upwards. Just like skinning an elk, she thought, before clutching the man’s beard, dragging his jaw open, and thrusting the severed organ down his throat.

He was probably dead by that point, but Val hoped he lingered just long enough to taste his own bloody cock in his mouth.

Her hands were bloody as she turned, marching towards the man that Garth held a sword point. “You One-Eyed Wulf?” Val demanded. “You’re that man’s chieftain?”

The chieftain stared in shock, and then his eye narrowed. “... That man was Marv,” One-Eyed Wulf spat. “My cousin.”

“I don’t give a shit.” Val grunted. “You keep your bloody men under control. Otherwise, next time it’ll be you eating cock.”

The blood on her hands stung. The thought of blood splattering flashed before her eyes. “And get that elk skinned and cut!” Val shouted at the clansmen. They all stared with anger, but she didn’t care. She turned to look at the crowd gathered around the firepit.

“We share the food!” Val shouted at everyone watching. “We share the weapons, and we share the work! Only together can we survive!” Her eyes flashed, her blond hair blowing around her hood. “Anyone else have a problem with that?”

There were a lot of angry stares, but no outright challenges. One-Eyed Wulf backed down and glared at the snow. His clan would simmer and stew, but they wouldn’t go against her. Still, Val knew it was only a matter of time. That hunter was the fifth she had had to kill in the last seven days. It would only get worse as it got colder.

Mance had been the one who held the host together, and Mance was gone. Now, even the warbands, the raiders and clans that survived were breaking apart and going their own ways. That left Val primarily with the non-fighters; the ones that were all relying on her for support because she was the only one who still offered it. The weak, the sickly and the old.

And the pregnant, Val thought with a scared flash towards her sister.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Garth muttered to her quietly, as they walked away.

“That man had it coming,” Val growled.

“And you shoved his own dick into his mouth.”

“It shut him up, didn’t it?”

“And One-Eyed Wulf has a dozen angry clansmen under him,” Garth warned.

She didn’t reply. Val knew she had lost her temper, but she was irritated enough that she didn’t care. Four spearwives flanked her, meeting her glance. The women’s eyes were all hard.
The free folk were all fighters. She had more women than men in her camp, they all could be trusted to hold a spear and fight with the best of them. Still, she was also lacking experienced warbands, clans and leaders, and Val couldn’t afford to lose any more of them.

Every time somebody argued about the sharing policy, or the need to look after the non-fighters, or even just objected to taking orders from a woman, then it could fracture the whole camp. Val couldn’t afford to let it stand.

*All men are the same*, Val thought with an angry glare. *No man liked taking orders from a woman, especially not the dumb ones.*

There was a figure waiting for her towards the camp, a squat woman that looked even thicker under the furs. She held a spear with the dry, rotting decapitating skull of hound on it like a totem.

“Harma,” Garth said with a curt nod. “I’ll need to borrow a few of your raiders. Watch Wulf’s men a bit more closely.”

She just nodded. Harma Dogshead was an ugly woman, no question about it. She had a squashed face, a thick jaw, and beady eyes like one of her dogs, but with a toughness that could only come from a lifetime of fighting. She was a heavyset woman, renowned as one of the fiercest raiders around – Val had always respected that much.

And Harma was also one of the very few raiders that stuck with Val after the battle. Val owed Harma more than she could possibly give for that. Even now, it still made Val breathe a breath of relief to see Harma by her side.

“We’ve got two hundred Marakks coming down through the pass,” Harma reported. “Heading towards us.”

Val swore. “Marakks.” Garth frowned. “Are those them buggers that eat human flesh?”

Harma nodded. Everyone hated the Marakks – one of the ice river clans from the north of the Frozen Shore. Even Mance had been hesitant recruit the ice river clans to bring them into his army. They barely spoke even the Old Tongue. The Marakks had their own language, unique to that corner of the north. They were violent, savage with strange customs, and it was even said that they ate human flesh.

“Are they hostile?” Val asked.

“No, they’re starving,” Harma replied.

Starving for what? Val wondered. Val hesitated briefly. “Then bring them in. They get to join the camp, same as everyone.”

"You sure?"

*No. "Yes."* Val nodded. "We bring in everyone in. Old grudges don’t matter. We all stand together here, just like we did with Mance."

"Alright," Harma said. She was a woman of few words. They walked together through the mush of snow. Harma walked with a limp, one leg staggering so badly she walked lopsided, but it never seemed to slow her down. It was said that a hound had attacked Harma when she was a girl –
chewing on her leg and dragging her away. Ever since then, Harma had murdered, skinned and beheaded every dog she'd encountered.

'Just like we did with Mance', Val thought with a mental grimace. It unnerved her how many times she had to use that phrase. *Well, look at me – taking over Mance's place.* Somewhere, the bastard was probably laughing.

Val would never forget on that moment in the mountains when Mance had walked away. The free folk had been scattered and exhausted when the crows the ambushed them, cutting them down from horseback and arrows. What little remained of Mance's host had been cornered by the Night's Watch, and Mance surrendered himself to the crows, on the condition that they would let the rest of his people walk freely. Dalla had screamed and begged Mance not to go, while Mance had only smiled softly and kissed her before slipping out of her grip. Mance hummed the ‘The Dornishman’s Wife’ as he walked out of their ranks and towards the crows.

The crows walked away with an easy victory, Mance went with them to give the survivors a chance, and Dalla had wailed herself to sleep every night for weeks.

For such a large camp, the air seemed strangely hushed as they walked through it. “Food supplies are fading,” Garth said, shaking his head. "I've got people foraging the forest clean, but it won't last. Too many people. We're going to starve soon."

*Starve more, you mean.* "I know," Val said with a grimace. "We'll have to move out soon."

"There are too many people to move quickly. We're over eight thousand now." Mance had stored food, livestock and supplies for months to prepare for his great host, but it still had barely been enough. And then they had had to abandon most of their food stores in the mountains.

"I know," Val paused, calling to Harma. "What about Craster? How much food does he have?"

The name caused Harma to scowl. Craster had always been a blight even among the free folk. Craster had only survived for years in his keep by making friends with Night's Watch, using them to protect him from any chieftain that might take issue with his presence. More recently, Craster had made a darker sort of deal – allying himself with more evil creatures.

Even the free folk gave Craster's Keep a wide berth. *Still, Craster has hoarded food, livestock and supplies for years...*

Harma met her gaze, asking clearly 'are you sure?' in her eyes. Val just nodded. "Take whatever men you need and clear Craster's keep out," Val ordered. "That monster has been asking to be short a head for a long time now."

"And Craster's daughters?" Harma asked, before adding. "And wives?"

"Every free folk has gets a place here. Bring them to camp if they want to join."

They were approaching Val's tent. Harma walked in first, staring at Dalla sleeping soundly wrapped up in furs. Garth hovered by the boundary. Val's sister was heavy with child, and sleeping and weakening more with every day. The healers said that it would be a difficult childbirth.

Dalla's pregnancy had worsened ever since they took Mance. The cold and the long walk certainly hadn't helped, either. Val knew that unless Dalla recovered soon, she wouldn't survive the
childbirth.

_I will not let my sister die_, Val thought with cold determination. The whole reason Val had took command after Mance had been taken was to protect her sister.

Harma's eyes flickered with concern looking at Dalla, before back to Val. "So what's the next move?" Garth asked, lowering his voice as he stepped inside the tent. "We gather up the people, and we go where?

Val's face crinkled. "There's no next move," she admitted. "Mance was the one who promised to get everyone across the Wall, not me. I only ever promised to try and keep them alive, and I'm not even sure if I can keep that one."

"We stay here, we die," Harma said bluntly.

"Where else can we go?" Garth asked.

"South." Harma's eyes were hard. "We gather up however many fighters and climbers we can get, and we take the Wall. We take Castle Black. Just like Mance planned."

Val had been thinking the same thing, but she shook her head. "Mance had a hundred thousand men and we were still destroyed. I've got a tenth of that left. We won't survive an assault."

"Don't have a choice. Attack or die. We need to attack."

"Mance knew even with a hundred thousand it was folly. And since we couldn't even find the Horn of Joramun--"

"Fuck that bloody horn," Harma grumbled. "We wasted ourselves searching for the bloody fucking horn. We need to attack now, with what we've got left, before we give the Others another shot."

Val shook her head. "No. We need to rally to something. We need to gather up however many more we can get, enough to actually have a chance. We've got eight thousand, but how many of those could actually survive climbing the Wall? Or sieging the gate? We need to gather up what's left of the free folk."

There was a long moment of quiet consideration. Dalla shifted in her sleep.

"The Thenns are marching towards the Shadow Tower," Garth said after a pause. "Last seen at Kipler Pass. Five hundred men, I hear. Good warriors."

Val shook her head. The Bridge of Skulls at the Shadow Tower was a death-trap. Larger armies than five hundred men had failed to break it before. "They still won't stand a chance alone."

"I know. They've made Sigorn the new Magnar," said Harma. "Young boy. Fierce. He's going to try and avenge his father."

"He'll die young avenging him, it seems."

"Give him another reason to fight, then." There was an edge in Harma's voice. Val glanced at her, realising what she meant.
"Oh." Val sighed. "You mean fuck him."

Garth shifted uncomfortably. Harma shrugged. "If it gets us five hundred good men. The Thenns are always loyal to their Magnar, vicious buggers too."

"And he just decides to take me?"

"Bite his balls off," Harma suggested.

Despite herself, Val chuckled. She wondered briefly if any man had ever tried to steal Harma. She almost pitied them if they did. Harma was as hard as they came; as ugly and as fierce as a bulldog, while Val was tall, long legged and nubile with blonde hair. More men had tried to steal Val than she could even remember – it was one of the reasons Val had learned to be real good with a dagger.

Still, Val wondered what it would be like to be able to walk through a camp and have men bow their heads in fear and respect rather than lecherous stares.

Val was beautiful. She knew she was – everyone said so, ever since she was a child. She was a talented tracker, a better fighter, and beautiful enough to get attention. Even when her father had died when they were young, Val had grown up strong enough to take care of her little sister too. Many men tried to take her, and sometimes she even let them – until enough fought over her to gain a reputation for her little boy 'pets'. Eventually, she had enough of a fame that they would say she stole men, rather than other way round.

She thought of Jarl, the man that had died trying to protect her at the Frostfangs. Jarl had been sweet, young and passionate; a fierce young raider that had scaled the Wall eight times, and Val had been taken with him when they travelled together under Mance. They had never been in love, not really, but he had been good enough to her that she missed him. He hadn't deserved to die like that.

"You really think the Thenns will agree?" said Garth. "Mance had to defeat Styr three times before he agreed to support him."

Harma shook her head. "Sigorn is not his father. Val could treat with him."

"The Thenns respect warriors more than a… anything," he said, with a slightly uncomfortable glance to Val. *Heh, is he worried about me?* Val thought with a bemused stare. *How sweet. And stupid.* "… It should be Harma – or another raider – to reach out to the Thenns."

"Val leads, I fight." Harma shrugged, nodding at Val. "She needs to be the one to lead because she actually still cares. I stopped a giving a shit about the world years ago."

Val snorted. Harma's voice was so deadpan it made her laugh. "I care?" She teased. "If you don't care about anyone else, then why have you been sticking around?"

Harma shrugged. "Just because I don't give a damn doesn't mean I can't appreciate the trait in others."

"Sure," Val said with a smile. She suspected that Harma was a lot sweeter than she wanted anyone else to know. Words are wind, but actions spoke louder than anything. There had been a lot of people who wanted to leave the old and the sickly to die, and when Val had spoken out against it,
Val took a deep breath, pacing around the tent. "... So this new Magnar of Thenn?" she said after a long pause. "You say he's young? Young enough to fall for a pretty face?"

Harma nodded. Garth hesitated, before asking, "You okay with that?"

"I would fuck every single man in this camp if it meant keeping my sister safe," Val said with a shrug, casting a loving glance towards Dalla. "I would kill every single man, too. Dalla is all that's important to me to."

"Then I'll send some outriders towards the Thenns," Garth agreed, with some reluctance. "Let's see if they're interested in an alliance."

"Good." Val nodded. "Do you want to make a picture of my tits just to make sure Sigorn knows what I'm offering?"

Garth squirmed. Val just snorted in laughter. From what she heard, Val would be able to wrap this Magnar of Thenn around her little finger. Young warriors were always so easy. She already turned, pacing slightly. "Any others we might be able to rally?"

There was a flicker across Harma's face. "The Lord of Bones is to the southeast, near Deep Lake. He's been gathering up raiders too," she said distastefully. Harma Dogshead had spent a long time warring with the Lord of Bones even before Mance brought them both together for his army.

Val shuddered. Everyone hated Rattleshirt – he was almost as bad as the Weeper. "Well, him I can't fuck," Val muttered with a shiver. The Rattleshirt's disgusting fascination with corpses was well-known. "... Would he be interested in joining forces?"

Harma hesitated. Val raised an eyebrow. "Right now, working together is more important than old grudges."

"... I'll send Halleck over to treat him," said Harma, with just a touch of unwillingness. "I hear that Varamyr has joined with the Lord of Bones too. My guess is they'll have about a thousand men."

Val nodded, trying to think any who might have survived the Frostfangs. They needed all the strength they could get. It had taken Mance years to unite the clans, and now she had to do it again in a matter of months.

"What about Howd the Wanderer?" Val asked finally, sitting down cross legged around the firepit to think. "Or Morna White Mask?"

"Howd hasn't been seen after the Frostfangs," Garth said with a nod. "Morna is raising men by the East Coast, but I wouldn't trust that witch as far as I could throw her."

The free folk had no lords or kings, they would only follow the strong. Their 'leaders' were men of note; warriors strong enough to gain fame or raiders that had spilled enough blood that others would follow them. If Val could gather enough big names to ally with her, then eventually the free folk would flock to her, just like they did with Mance. It was the only hope of reforming Mance's army.

It took hours to scrape through any who might want to join forces, to gather as many as possible.
Harma had been one of the most feared wildling raiders for years, she knew every clan leader and raider in the north, and had battled and spilled blood against most of them. There were grudges in the north as old as oak trees.

Garth left to summon outriders and hunters for information, to find out where people were last spotted. Harma sent her brother, Halleck, to scout out new arrivals, while Garth brought half a dozen seasoned raiders or travellers, one after another. Men and spearwives with names like Jax, Quort, Ryk and Willow. Val promised them all guaranteed rations if they could name names and locations.


Harma had spent her life fighting them, after all, Val mused.

"It might work," Garth admitted. "We could recruit as many as possible, and they might be eager to join. The Nightrunners and Cave Dwellers have been forced from their lands, they'll be eager to join. Some of the others… maybe, but they'll expect bribes or show of strength, yet it's possible…"

"I'm sense a 'but' coming," Val said.

Garth stared at her. "But the men won't follow a Queen-Beyond-the-Wall."

She snorted. "I don't give a fuck what they'll follow," Val said with a shrug. "I've got no interest in that title – it was that title that killed Mance."

"You don't know he's dead."

"He's as good as dead." Val stared miserably at Dalla. "There are plenty of fools that will fight for that bloody title, let them."

The 'King-Beyond-the-Wall', Val thought to herself, what an empty honour – a mockery of a title, really. Many previous Kings-Beyond-the-Wall had only been named that post-mortem. There were only really two requirements for the title; you had to unite the free folk, and you had to promise to bring them south of the Wall.

No King-Beyond-the-Wall had ever truly fulfilled that promise yet, Val thought. Stupid bloody title.

Still, would the free folk even listen to her? How many would dismiss her and laugh at the pretty little 'girl' trying to play queen? Mance's legacy would only take her so far.

Her hands twiddled, playing with her dagger. "Right now, I've got the biggest host left in the north." All that remains of Mance's army, she thought. "And they'll be desperate too. They'll need something to rally at, so they'll rally here."

Harma nodded, but paused. "Second biggest, actually."

Val frowned. Harma continued. "You heard of Mother Mole? That old wood witch that used to live under the weirwood tree?"
"The crazy one?" Val snorted. "She once promised Dalla that she'd be stolen by a giant badger, unless she ate an acorn every day."

There were plenty of woods witches in the north, but Mother Mole was one of the more queer ones – a short little dwarf that never left her cave. Nobody was quite sure how old she was. Apparently Mother Mole survived by eating weirwood roots, and sacrificing rodents. "Aye. She's given a prophecy that the free folk will find their salvation at Hardhome. They've been gathering there for a month."

"How many?" Val said sharply.

Harma shrugged. "Around ten thousand, I reckon. I heard from my brother that more and more people are moving east. Everyone who never marched with Mance is fleeing to Hardhome."

Val's face twisted. The entire north was being forced to migrate one way or another. "Hardhome is a cursed place," Val mused. "But it can be defended… the cliffs alone could stop an army…"

"That might work against us too," Harma's brother, Halleck, noted. "If the Others or the Night's Watch attack, then they're all going to be trapped on the cape."

"More of a reason for us stop that from happening, then."

"So what do you want to do about it?"

"I don't know," Val admitted. "Right now, we've got gather up those in the west, not the east. Everything that was left of Mance's arm—"

There was a stir from Dalla's bedside. She was waking. Val dropped everything to rush to her, holding her hand and wiping her brow. Harma watched stoically across the tent.

"… Val?" Dalla murmured. She was sweating even in the cold.

"Easy, Dal," Val whispered, wiping her brow. "Just build your strength."

Dalla had always been a sweet little thing. Dalla was calm and level-headed while Val was fiery and tempered, but Val had worked so hard to keep her safe. When Mance first stole Dalla, it had taken two weeks for him to convince Val not to geld him for it. *Mance always had been a charmer,* Val cursed.

Dalla loved Mance. Her sister loved Mance more than Val had ever loved anyone but her.

"The baby, Val," her sister muttered. "I can feel him kicking…"

Val's hand moved to her sister's swollen chest. She couldn't feel anything. "… I had a dream," Dalla said weakly. Her voice was dazed. "I dreamed I saw a great white bird, like a mountain taking flight…"

"Save your strength," Val said softly, kissing her sister on the cheek. "I'll bring you something to eat soon. We're having smoked elk. I'll fetch you water, and a wood witch to treat your fever…"

Dalla groaned softly, and Val's eyes flashed with worry. The pregnancy was draining her strength.
and the fever was burning through her quickly. Val sat by her sister's side, even after her eyes had
clickered shut.

I'm doing this for her. Val thought quietly. Her and the babe.

I'll kill every crow on that Wall to give my sister a chance to get to safety. To find warmth again.

"Come," Val whispered to Harma and the others. "My sister needs her rest. Let's talk outside."

The walked out of the tent, and Val nodded to two spearwives, Rowan and Mo, who had offered to
guard her sister's tent. The camp wasn't so safe that Val trusted to leave Dalla unprotected. The
camp was always busy and crowded – with eight thousand wildlings cramped into an area so small
that even livestock would be cramped. They all tried to huddle together for protection for the cold.

As far as the eye could see, there was a sea of furs with smoke rising over the camp. The sight of so
many people cramped together still took Val's breath away.

They're relying on me, Val thought, and Dalla would want me to keep them all safe as well.

It should be Mance here, right now, uniting the free folk. Mance could have charmed a bear into
joining their army. Instead, Val was left desperately trying to pick up the pieces, and look after her
sister.

Val took a deep breath, taking in the thick scent of smoke and sweat in the air. 
"... Send Gerrick to
treat with Sigorn," Val said after a long pause. "Offer him reinforcements to avenge Styr's death.
Tell him that we wish to avenge Mance's too. The Thenns understand blood debts, they'll come.
Meanwhile, I need you to deal with Craster. Kill the bugger and take everything he has."

"With pleasure," Harma said in a low growl.

"I'll send Maris, Jax, Lenn and Gragg to treat with the Lord of Bones and Varamyr. I can offer them
a mammoth tusk bow, a white bearskin cloak, golden engraved bracelets and a sapphire amulet if
they came to parley," Val said with a sigh. She still had some of the treasures that various clans had
gifted to Mance in tribute – they were valuable enough to be used to bargain with the free folk
leaders. "Rattleshirt and Varamyr are both proud men. If they think I'm begging them, then they'll
come just to gloat over me."

"And when they come?"

"I'll offer them a chance to become the next King-Beyond-the-Wall," said Val. "I'll offer it to all of
the raider leaders, actually. Every one of them. In private."

"Of course." There was a small smile on Harma's lips. Proud men could be easily manipulated.

By her other side, Garth blinked. "If they think they can take the title of King-Beyond-the-Wall,
then they'll fight for it."

"Let them. So long as they wait until we're across the Wall, they can fight all they want about who
gets bragging rights."

"And then are we moving east?"
"We'll have to." Both the Shadow Tower and Castle Black were too strong; Eastwatch might be the least defensible one out of the bunch. "If there are ten thousand free folk at Hardhome, we can't leave them there to die." Val scratched bit her lip, trying to imagine the numbers. How many people survived the Frostfangs? How many would still be able to rally to her? The longer she waited, the more that number would drop. She couldn't afford to linger any longer. "... If all goes well, if we could meet up with the forces at Hardhome, we might be able to gather... hmmm... thirty thousand free folk?"

Thirty thousand free folk. Even if only a third of those were fighting bodies, then that was still a force ten thousand strong. That could be enough to take the Wall. Possibly.

"Possibly," Harma nodded. She paused, frowning slightly. "Although if we are to head towards Hardhome..."

"What is it?"

"There's another raider leader that we haven't mentioned," said Harma. "The Weeper."

Val shuddered. "Fuck that creep."

There are a lot of nasty wildlings, Val admitted. Both Rattleshirt and Varamyr are cruel, evil men. Still, the Weeper is just a whole other level of bad.

"Last I heard, the Weeper took five hundred strong men east. He was planning on building boats to cross the Bay of Seals, to come around from the south to take Eastwatch."

Val nodded. "Good. That type of fighting and raiding is what the Weeper is best at. He can bleed the Night's Watch for us."

I just don't want him in my camp, she added.

"Except it seems the Weeper's plans have changed. He's at Hardhome now."

"What?" Val blinked. "The Weeper is listening to prophecies now?"

"I was talking to two new arrivals this morning," Harma explained. Sometimes Val thought that Harma or her brother must talk to every single person in the camp. Few things happened in the north that she wasn't soon aware of. "They heard it from a hunter they met around Storrold's Point, who heard from a man fleeing Hardhome as fast as he could run. The story was... jumbled..."

Harma sounded cautious, like she wasn't quite sure about the rumours. "They say that the Weeper has joined forces – allying himself with a Jon Snow."

It took a while for the name to ring. Val frowned, before slowly remembering the young, solemn-faced boy that had been presented to Mance at the Frostfangs. The crow that killed the Halfhand, and walked around with a white direwolf. It had been quite a stir at Mance's camp.

Val blinked. The Jon Snow she remembered had been a quiet, broody man barely more than a boy, who had been desperately afraid yet trying to act like he wasn't. She tried to picture him with the Weeper, of all people, and the image just didn't seem to work.

"The crow?" Val exclaimed. Jon Snow hadn't been anywhere on her list of priorities, but she had thought he died at the Frostfangs. "Does he still have eyes or not?"
Harma grunted. "I hear strange things about that one. I met a man who spotted a white direwolf with red eyes weeks ago, but then when he tried to shoot it…" Harma paused. "The man said he heard a sound like giants marching, and he ran away. Other cave dwellers from the north have said they've heard sounds like thunder in clear skies too. I thought nothing of the tales, until they mentioned Jon Snow again, and I remembered his wolf…"

"Aye, a warg, I think," Val frowned. "But why would the Weeper ever work with him…?"

"Not with." Harma shook her head. "Work for. The men were quite clear. They say the Weeper is working for Jon Snow."

Now that was too far. The Weeper would never work for anyone but himself. "Then that tale has been jumbled into nonsense."

"Most likely," Harma agreed, but her eyes still flickered. "Yet even jumbled tales generally start somewhere. Like I said, I've been hearing strange things."

"Like?"

"I hear that the Alvin Whaletooth has joined with the Weeper too. As has Marthe of the Antler, Old Man Harwick and Bullden Horn. Even the Lord of Seals. Every clan or raider they meet seem to have flocked to him."

Val blinked, trying to link the names. Alvin Whaletooth was one of the few men who still fished around Storrold's Point, while Marthe of the Antler was a reaver from a river clan, and Old Man Harwick was the patriarch of his own clan. Bullden Horn's claim of fame was that he had ventured onto Skagos, fought the cannibals and killed a unicorn, while the Lord of Seals was a famed raider who had crossed the Bay of Seals more times than any other raider alive. All of them were respected raid leaders and clan chiefs around the peninsula and east coast.

And I know for a fact that the Lord of Seals hates the Weeper's guts. They would never, ever work together…

Harma shared her glance. "Like I said, strange things," Harma admitted. "The men said that this Jon Snow has unearthly powers, even that he has…"

Val frowned. "What?"

Harma shook her head. "… No. Like you said, the tale has been jumbled into nonsense."

"And yet you sound concerned."

"Concerning times," Harma said with a shrug. "But just something to bear in mind that Jon Snow may have ten thousand men surrounding him at Hardhome."

Val turned to stare at Harma, heads on her hip. "Wait," she said after a long pause. "You're saying that in this tale that the men told, Jon Snow is leading the free folk at Hardhome?"

"No." Harma shook her head. "In this tale, they're worshipping him."

---

Sam
The castle was panicked. It seemed that Sam couldn't even walk through the courtyard without getting in somebody's way. The Night's Watch became more and more panicked as more news kept on coming through.

Sam tried to his best to stay helpful. Ravens kept on coming and going through the rookery, and the officers never stopped marching through the tower, demanding news faster than Aemon or Clydas could provide it. Sam would bumble around fetching paper or trying to sort out the cages, but then Sam walked and crashed into Thorne, and the knight turned red as he screamed at Sam to leave.

Eddison grabbed Sam by the arm and slowly pulled him out of the way. "Let's leave the officers to their work and stay clear," Edd had soothed. "It's stressful work, I imagine, preparing for a king."

Nearby, Dareon had laughed at that, in his clear high voice – totally ignoring or perhaps not caring about the expression on Sam's face. "Which king, exactly?" Dareon laughed. "We've got a king coming from the south, a king coming from the north, and a king beneath us. It looks like kings are a dime a dozen these days!"

Thankfully, Grenn was there to shove Dareon to the ground, but Sam still felt hollow as the brothers pulled him away. The castle felt grim – had been ever since the news three days ago.

It started with a raven from Eastwatch, followed by several more. All of the letters were written in Maester Harmune's scribbled hand, but signed with Cotter Pyke's name. The letters were in quick succession; the first sent upon spotting ships on the horizon, the second upon ships approaching Eastwatch, then of recognising the banners on those ships, and then when the ships had docked at Eastwatch.

By the time the confirmation came through, the whispers were already going mad. It was official; Stannis Baratheon had arrived at the Wall. Lord Commander Mormont announced it in the meeting hall, but the news had already spread through gossip.

"King Stannis Baratheon docked at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea early this morning," Mormont had announced. "He brought with him four thousand men-at-arms and landed knights, along with his wife and court, claiming to be here to defend the Wall."

"Stannis Baratheon is no king!" Janos Slynt exclaimed in a loud voice. Next to him, Ser Glendon Hewett and Ser Alliser Thorne murmured in agreement. "The man is a traitor to the realm! We cannot have him here, the crown–!"


Janos had blustered at that. "Stannis Baratheon set siege to King's Landing! He fought against the rightful king! If we harbour him here, the crown will bring great ruin upon us!"

More murmurs of agreement. Bowen Marsh nodded. "Stannis brings men to defend us," Ser Mallador Locke objected. "We are massively undermanned, who are we to deny aid?"

"Stannis brings us no aid, only ruin!" Someone else shouted.

"We sent pleas to all five kings, and Stannis is the only one who answered," Thoren Smallwood protested. "Stannis comes ready to face off a wildling attack."
"What a shame we're not under attack, then," Thorne said with a grunt, to the sound of a few sniggers.

"And what of the wildlings amassing Beyond-the-Wall? We've seen them at Whitetree! At Hardhome?!" Thoren demanded, glaring at Thorne. "How long before they attack and we're left with only one man to defend every three miles of Wall?"

"I fear my sworn brothers may be overestimating Stannis' motivations," Othell Yarwyck spoke up, from his position at the table. The First Builder's voice was slow and lumbering. "Stannis comes under the pretence of aid, but he has no such intentions."

The room fell silent slightly at his voice. The Lord Commander still hadn't spoke, but instead watched the room with a hard face. "Stannis was defeated at the Blackwater," Othell continued. "He lost his army and his men, but he hasn't given up his rebellion. In fact, I wager that he has come here to start a new one."

"What are you talking about?" Jarmen Buckwell demanded.

"We have all heard about the events in the North. Robb Stark's defiance. The invasion of ironborn. The Sack of Winterfell. The Red Wedding." A quiet murmur went through the room. "Roose Bolton has been named Warden of the North now, but the North is still in much discontent. I expect that Stannis Baratheon has come here to take advantage of that."

There were dark whispers and mutters. Sam had stood at the back of the room, listening intently. "Stannis is here to try and incite the northern lords into rebellion against the crown. He has come to us to take advantage of our hospitality and our castles, to drag us into an affair that we should have no part in!" Othell said, slamming his hand against the table. "Mark my words, he will stay in our towers while he plots his rebellion, using us as his own shield, and then he will march south to wage war and leaving us his unwilling accomplices!"

"Stannis Baratheon threatens our neutrality," Bowen Marsh agreed. "Our future is at risk."

Septon Cellador slammed his hand on to the table too. "Stannis has declared for false gods! He consorts with witches and burns sacred objects!" Cellador preached. His voice sounded slurred by alcohol. "He will lead us all into damnation!"

"Stannis is just as much of an enemy as the wildlings!"

The conversation shifted in tone as more brothers took up the cry. Some looked unhappy, but the protesters slowly fell silent. Sam distinctly remembered how little the Lord Commander had spoken during that meeting.

After that, things started to change. Every day it was like the castle became a little bit more hectic. Mormont ordered a hundred men to go to Eastwatch, but discreetly. Around every corner there were hushed whispers and discussions. There were orders for all men, stewards and builders too, to triple archery practice.

The entire castle was preparing for a battle, and a battle on the wrong side of the Wall this time. Everyone was talking about how they were going to get rid of Stannis.

"Stannis holds Eastwatch," Jarmen Buckwell was heard saying one night. "Maybe not officially,
but his troops outnumbers Cotter Pyke's men fifteen to one. If we demand that Stannis leaves, what's to stop him giving us the demand instead?"

Donal Noye shook his head. The one-armed blacksmith didn't look happy. "I knew Stannis before the Wall," said Donal. "He's a hard man, sure, but always just. I struggle to imagine that man going against the Night's Watch." His eyes flashed. "Not unless we provoke him."

"You knew Stannis," Jarmen argued. "This Stannis is a different man. The battle of Blackwater left him bloodied, and he's desperate enough to try anything. Half-mad too – I hear he brings with him a red witch that rants about flying storms and an evil monster of cold."

Sam was quiet as he overheard the conversation, before Thorne shouted at him to rush to archery practice. Things were moving quickly. Apparently there had been some sort of disagreement at Eastwatch, and then during the night Iron Emmett had ridden to Castle Black to gather forces. During archery practice, the air was cold, but it gave Sam a chance to talk with Edd, Pyp, Grenn, Toad, Owen and Haldur.

"Are we really going to fight against Stannis Baratheon?" Sam had hissed nervously. "Isn't that taking part in the affairs of the realm?"

"Well, yes," Dolorous Edd admitted. "But if we don't get rid of him and he stays here, then that would also be taking part in affairs of man. Harbouring a rebellion and whatnot. Damned if we do, damned if don't."

"But he's king!"

"Arguable, that one," Edd mused. "But then again, what kingship isn't? Kings seem to attract argument, I've found."

"Weren't you saying that the king died?" Owen the Oaf exclaimed, a confused expression on his face as he gathered up arrows. He didn't put the arrows back in the quiver, instead just cradled them.

"No, that was Robert Baratheon, the king, who died," Toad corrected. "Stannis is his brother."

"I was sure you said…"

"So what we do we do?" said Grenn, looking to Edd.

"The Lord Commander will ask him to leave," Pyp offered.

"And if he doesn't?"

"That's why we're practicing archery, isn't it?"

The thought made Sam shiver. Against wildlings, the men of the Night's Watch tended to have an advantage, but against knights? Stannis had four thousand battle-hardened men – they could cut through the sworn brothers if they chose to.

"I heard Smallwood ranting about that the other day," Toad admitted. "He's says there's ten thousand wildlings are massing at Whitetree, walking distance from the Wall. Turning away help right now is folly."
Edd nodded. "He may have a point."

"It'll be a lot more folly when the Warden of the North march up to kill us for working with Stannis," Pyp argued.

Edd nodded again. "Also a good point."

"I thought Starks were Wardens of the North," Owen questioned, still cradling his arrows.

"Nope, they're all dead too," Toad said with a sigh, while everyone else ignored Owen. "Boltons are the Wardens now."

"We handled the wildlings ourselves once," said Pyp.

Grenn shook his head, lowering his bow. "We got *lucky* against the wildlings once," he said. "… and they still bloody reformed ten days later."

Normally, when a wildling host was smashed, the clans and raiders would dissolve, maybe for decades, until the next king united them. Beyond the Wall was not a united place; one defeat and the old grudges and feuds would return and the wildlings would break – that had been the Night's Watch go-to method for centuries.

This time, though, it seemed that the wildlings were desperate enough to stay together even without their king. *Either that or a new King-Beyond-the-Wall has already been crowned*, Sam thought nervously. The rumours about a new King-Beyond-the-Wall had been going spreading quickly. Lots of whispers and speculations.

They had all seen the ranging reports. Even in the wake of Mance's host breaking, an army had regathered at Whitetree nearly ten thousand strong, and pulling in more wildlings every day.

"We'll never be able to ambush them this time," Grenn said. "They're too close to the Wall – they've got bloody scouts watching the gate from the treeline right now. If we open up to send any rangers out, they know about it."

*It's a good plan*, Sam admitted. *They camped right outside on our doorstep to make sure we could never ambush them again.*

"What about Hardhome?" Sam asked. He had heard the place being mentioned regularly.

Edd glanced at him. "Nobody's really sure," Edd admitted. "A second wildling host, maybe. All we've got are second-hand reports."

"Smallwood is protesting, Donal Noye is deadset against it," Edd mused. "But Bowen Marsh, Othel Yarwyck and Thorne are all calling to be rid off him. At this rate, the Lord Commander will have no choice."

"Jarmen Buckwell seems to be more in the middle," Sam said.

"Still not enough."

"What about Wythers?" Owen asked, with a goofy grin. "He's second in command, right?"
Toad frowned. "Wythers? Ottyn Wythers? He's dead, Owen – he died at the Frostfangs."

"Really?" Owen definitely seemed confused. "No – but he was knocking on the gate the other day."

Edd loosed the last arrow. "Well, that's enough for me, I think," he said. "The king will be getting hungry."

"Mance?" Grenn frowned. Edd was the steward placed in charge of taking care of Mance and the other prisoners. "How is Mance?"

"Alive, not so healthy, I'm afraid." Edd admitted. "I'm not allowed to touch him except to put food into his cell."

"We should have just killed him already," said Toad.

"Hm, Lord Commander wants him alive," said Edd. "Dead, he's useless. Alive, somebody might try something stupid like rescuing him."

"Deaths kinder than spending three months in those ice cells."

"I can't say about that; I've never met death to say how nice it is. Don't really care to find out, either."

"Come on, Owen," Grenn said with a sigh. "We've got patrol duty on the Wall."

"But what about the storm?" Owen protested.

"What storm? Last storm flew by a week ago."

Owen shook his head. "No no no; I heard the storm."

"So long, Killer." Toad waved to Sam, as the group started to leave.

Sam stayed out long after everyone else had left, continuing to fire arrows at the targets. His arm was healing, but it still hurt every time he pulled back on the bowstring. *I'm still terrible at archery*, he thought grimly.

The very next day, though, things became a bit more hectic. Cotter Pyke arrived from Eastwatch with fifty men, and then Denys Mallister arrived with another hundred men from the Shadow Tower. It put the total number at Castle Black to seven hundred, still including the men that had lingered after the Great Ranging.

The whispers went wild. *They must have left Eastwatch and Shadow Tower with less than a hundred men each*, Sam realised. Everyone was talking about how the Old Bear must be putting together a force to drive Stannis out of Eastwatch.

Later, towards dusk, Thorne came and grabbed Edd and Dywen from the quarters. He paused as he stared at Sam, though, with a soft smirk. "Come with me, Tarly," Thorne ordered, the smile playing on his lips. "You should hear this too."
Those words made Sam tremble with nerves, and somehow it didn't help that Thorne was totally quiet as he led them to the King's Tower.

Inside, there were over two dozen men, all cramped into the solar before the king's quarters. A great fireplace roared while the men huddled by the front. Old, moth-eaten tapestries hung down the stone walls. Mormont was at the front, along with Denys Mallister and Cotter Pyke. The mood was grim. Most of the senior officers and rangers are here, Sam realised as he shuffled along the very back.

At the far end of the room, and it was hard to see between all the bodies, there were two figures lying on the ground. They were men with shaggy faces, bruised and bloody skin, and chains on their wrists. Wildling prisoners, Sam realised, they must have come in with the new arrivals. A Shadow Tower man, Blane, stood guard.

"What's going on?" Othell Yarwyck demanded, glancing around the room.

"Brothers," Mormont said in a grim voice. "I thought you should all hear this now. Blane?"

The ranger nodded. "I found these men along Long Barrow. A small raiding party from the east. Six of them originally, the others died during capture." Blane glared at the wildlings. "Now then, tell us what you know. Exactly what you told me."

One of the wildlings stared at the ground firmly. The other one, younger, gulped. "… An army gathering at Hardhome," he mumbled, his voice raw. "… Fifteen thousand free folk…"

There were quiet murmurs in the room. They had only heard faint whispers of Hardhome before now, but fifteen thousand wildling? Sam thought, trying to stay hidden.

"… She told us we would find salvation…" The wildling murmured, his voice delirious. "She promised us salvation at Hardhome, and there was…"

"How many boats?" Blane demanded.

"Half a hundred." A flicker of smile across the wildling's face. "He's going to bring us all south…"

"Are you sure about this?" Mormont asked Blane.

"It fits with other things that we've heard," said Blane with a nod. "We've known there have been wildlings have been heading to Hardhome for some time now."

"There still are," Thoren Smallwood said darkly. "We've seen the fires moving across the forest. The wildling host at Whitetree is moving. They're heading east. Another ten thousand."

"You think they're planning on joining together?"

"Possibly." Smallwood nodded. "Might be a conjoined assault. The wildlings at Hardhome travel by sea, across the bay, and attack Eastwatch from the south. The remainder attacks Eastwatch from the north. They break the castle and open the gates."

There were dark glances around the room. "A mass raid across the Bay of Seals…" Mormont growled.
"May I remind everyone that Eastwatch only has three ships to patrol the entire bay?" said Cotter Pyke, his arms folded. "If the wildlings try to cross, we might not even see them coming."

"Fifteen thousand wildlings…” Mormont shook his head. "It would be a gamble how many make it across. And how many we could stop…”

"There's more," Blane glanced at the Lord Commander, before turning to prisoner. "Tell us who leads at Hardhome."

"… The Weeper… Alvin Whaletooth… The Lord of Seals…” The wildling hesitated, a small defiant smirk appearing on his lips. "… And Jon Snow."

The silence dropped over the room over the room like a stone.

Sam's mouth slowly fell open. It took a long time to for the words to work their way into his head. It seemed so outlandish, so unbelievable it barely made sense.

Sam turned, and saw Alliser Thorne grinning. Blane's eyes were dark, and so were a few others. They already knew, but Mormont and the others seemed stunned. They must have talked about this beforehand, Sam thought foggily. Before coming to the Lord Commander.

Sam saw Lord Commander's eyes widen in shock. "… You lie!" Mormont snarled, pressing his dagger against the prisoner's throat.

"… Jon Snow…” the wildling gasped. "… He said he's going to lead us south… the King-Beyond-the-Wall… Jon Snow… the wood witch promised us salvation, and there he was…”

The mutters were louder now, filling the room with frenzied whispers and murmurs. On Mormont's shoulder, his raven cawed, "Snow, snow, snow." The words echoed as the torchlight flickered.

"That's ridiculous!" Mormont snarled. "You expect us to believe…?!!"

"I've heard the name Jon Snow before," Blane said, looking at Mormont. "From other wildlings. The name is spreading throughout the north. I never knew the significance of the name until I spoke with Ser Alliser here. I understand he was a ranger of yours?"

Mormont's face flinched. "A steward," he said after a pause. "My personal steward. He went missing during the ranging."

"He deserted," Thorne said coldly. "He deserted and joined Mance. Now it looks like he's trying to take Mance's place."

What are they talking about? Sam thought confusedly. Jon? King-Beyond-the-Wall?

"It's absurd," Mormont shook his head. "The boy is seventeen years old. It took Mance decades to unite the wildlings."

"Aye, I could see Jon as a traitor," Bowen Marsh said with a nod. "He was a young boy, easily led astray. But to be leading wildlings against the Wall? After being missing only four months? I have trouble accepting it."
Cotter Pyke spoke up in a gruff voice. "Aye," he agreed. "But this man is not the only one saying it. My rangers have found several with the same name on their lips. From Shadow Tower to Eastwatch, they are talking about him. One wildling was even screaming 'Jon Snow will come for you all', just before we shot three arrows into him."

Thorne laughed at that. "Let the boy come," he sneered. "Weak little thing wouldn't last a second in a real fight. I'll slice that bastard's head off."

"Perhaps you will, ser." Iron Emmett regarded Alliser coolly. "But he's a bastard with fifteen thousand wildlings gathered around him."

Mormont shook his head. "It's ridiculous," he said in a firm voice. "I cannot believe it possible. Could it be a different Jon Snow?"

"It might be," Blane admitted. "It is a fairly… common name in the north. But north of the Wall, though? Not so much."

"Everything we hear about him seems to corroborate three basic details," said Denys Mallister. The elderly commander of the Shadow Tower had a calm, lumbering voice. "One; that a man named Jon Snow is vying to be the new King-Beyond-the-Wall. Two; that Jon Snow is leading at Hardhome with fifteen thousand wildlings. And three…" He looked at Mormont. "…that this Jon Snow used to be a former crow. I believe it must be the same Jon Snow."

Mormont's face was pale, his mouth drawn. Sam just stared. What are they even talking about? He thought. It's madness. Any second now Sam expected someone to burst out laughing.

This is clearly some kind of strange, delirious joke, Sam thought.

The wildling on the floor was staring upwards at the scene with bloodshot eyes. There was a hoarse chuckle from him. "… Jon Snow will take us south…" he laughed. "… Jon Snow controls winter, he brings with him a great white beast that will destroy the Wall… I've seen it with my own eyes, larger than any ship, as big as a mountain…!"

Blane kicked him sharply in the chest. "What is that fool talking about?" Bowen asked confusedly.

"Bah! Foolish nonsense. The wildlings make up tall tales about their leaders," Thorne said with a grunt. "I've heard it before. Back when Mance was just getting started, there were wildlings that would swear on their lives that Mance could transform into a giant crow and fly over the Wall, and that he could charm any man, woman or beast with his magic lute. Like I said, nonsense."

The wildling was still laughing, coughing up blood at the same time. "Take them away," Blane ordered. "We've heard enough."

Mormont's stared at the fire for a low few seconds. "How dire is the threat beyond the Wall?" He asked finally.

"Getting more dire every day," Iron Emmett said. "We had hoped that Mance's defeat would scatter the wildlings, but… if we do nothing, we could have a horde of maybe twenty five thousand attacking any day now."

"Larger, I expect. Once the wildlings rally, more will flock to them. The whole north is desperate – every man, woman and child is stirring."
"Then we cannot allow the wildlings to organise," Thoren Smallwood said. "Let's take the fight to them. We did it once, we do it again. We break the wildlings separately before they have a chance to gather."

"We do not have any mountains to ambush them in this time, ser," Blane objected. "The force at Hardhome is fortified and secure."

"And what of the second host, the one currently moving through the Haunted Forest towards Hardhome?" Mormont demanded.

"Less secure," Blane admitted. "They're a large force and they're moving slowly. They're spread out wide."

"They're still ten thousand strong," Bowen said, his voice nervous.

"We fought similar numbers at the Frostfangs," Thoren Smallwood insisted, his chest sticking out in pride.

"We have hostages," Othell Yarwyck suggested. "Their king, Mance Rayder is still alive. We have many of their clan leaders. We could force the wildlings to disperse by ransoming them."

Iron Emmett just shook his head. "The wildlings won't care. I expect any position of power they might have held has already dissolved."

The bickering continued. Sam just stared from the back of the room, wondering quietly why nobody was freaking out over Jon. The wildlings seemed to think he is their king, for goodness sake!

Mormont never spoke. The Old Bear was silent for half a minute, staring at the wall. Sam had never see the old man look so worn and grim. "... Thoren is correct," the Lord Commander said, his low voice causing the room to fall silent. "We must break the wildlings before they have a chance to assemble. We landed a critical hit against the wildlings at the Frostfangs, and now we must finish the task."

He turned to face the room. All eyes stared warily. "We will attack both wildling hosts," Mormont announced. "We will bring a fighting force of four hundred men out from Castle Black. We will ambush the host in the forest, and we will break them again. They will be slow, vulnerable and tired, and we will cut through them."

At once, there were cries of objection coming from half a dozen men. "We can't – we just got back from one ranging – we can't risk another!" Bowen Marsh objected.

"Four hundred men, that's nearly half our strength...!"

"We don't have enough rangers, we would have to bring in the stewards and builders," Denys Mallister said.

"It's too risky!" Othel growled, shaking his head, his long beard swaying.

The Old Bear looked unmoved. "At the same time, we will strike at Hardhome by sea," Mormont continued. "We will attack Hardhome, destroy their boats, and we will kill this King-Beyond-the-
Wall."

Cotter Pyke scoffed, folding his arms. "And what fleet do you want me to do that with?"

"Stannis Baratheon's."

There was a moment of quiet. "What?" Thorne demanded.

"Stannis claims to be here to aid the Wall," said Mormont. "We will give him a chance to prove it. Stannis has brought with him a fleet of twenty-nine ships, is that correct?"

"Aye, belonging to a Lyseni pirate in Stannis' service," Cotter said with a nod.

"Good, you will assist Stannis' forces as he takes his men to Hardhome," the Old Bear ordered. "You will attack the peninsula; the wildlings will not be expecting such an attack, and we let Stannis' forces lead the assault."

Cotter blinked. "That… could work. I imagine that Stannis' knights would make quick work of the wildlings." He frowned. "But why would Stannis commit to such attack – he risks losing many men either from storm or battle."

"He claims to be here to help us. We will see how true his cause is," Mormont said.

"And if he says no?"

"Then we will take action." There was an edge in the Old Bear's voice like iron. There's cunning in the plan, Sam realised slowly. If Stannis did prove an enemy, then they could weaken him against the wildlings. If Stannis refused to go, then he lost any justification for being here.

There was an uneasy murmur in the room. Mormont turned to the group. "If it goes well, then it will be a blow that the wildlings will not recover from. They will be unable to rally against us," he said firmly. "We will ambush the group in the Haunted Forest, and then, when Stannis assaults Hardhome, our men will be waiting around the peninsula to block survivors."

There were murmurs of objections, but they seemed to die under the iron in Mormont's voice. "Cotter Pyke, return to Eastwatch at once. I must write a letter to Stannis informing him of our decision," Mormont ordered. He paused. "Ser Alliser, make arrangements to assemble the men. We will let Stannis set sail at the turn of the moon, and our ranging shall leave shortly afterwards."

Sam couldn't stay quiet any longer. "What about Jon Snow?!" Sam shouted, his voice cracking. All eyes turned to stare at him. Why the hells is no one else freaking out about this?! They are saying that Jon is leading wildlings!

The smirk on Thorne's face was vicious. Mormont's eyes were hard. "… As far as I am concerned," Mormont said after a pause. "The brother of the Night's Watch that I knew as Jon Snow died at the Frostfangs. The man at Hardhome is either a traitor or an imposter, but he is no sworn brother."
Well, I wasn't planning on posting this chapter so soon, but it was done and I'm safely ahead, so I figured I might as well. Enjoy :)

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The court of Hardhome.

Jon

“You blithering craven!” Old Man Harwick roared, slobber dripping down his mane. “I’ll gut you like a pig!”

“Come on then, you geezer!” Sweety Tyk taunted, spinning his blades in his hands. “You want to dance–!”

He arrived just in time to stop the fighting. “Enough!” Jon bellowed, glaring at the scene. “What is going on here?”

His presence caused some stirs, but nobody backed down. There was already a crowd gathering. The free folk loved a fight.

Harwick gave a wary gaze at Jon, but he didn’t lower his weapon. “This craven stole my daughter!” Old Man Harwick shouted, revealing a toothless mouth as he jabbed his staff at Tyk. “My daughter Holly, and this little thief–!”

“I took her fair and square, Old Man,” Sweety Tyk mocked. He was a lean man, slender but quick, with a bronze dirk in each hand. “Maybe if you weren’t so busy sticking your dusty little wiener into your wives you could have stopped me!”

“You little–”

Jon moved as fast as his leg would take him. His bad leg always ached and locked in the very cold mornings. Jon drew Dark Sister in a swift flourish, flashing it between the wildlings. “Enough!” Jon repeated, his eyes hard. Harwick snarled at him, while Tyk glared.

Old Man Harwick was something of a legend – he had had twenty-four wives over his life and currently still had nine (the youngest being eighteen), along with thirty-three sons, and more daughters than anyone could count. The man was a walking fossil, but even at seventy he was every bit the lecherous warmonger he’d been at twenty. The man was old, sure, but he was still in good shape and he clutched a solid oak staff supported with bronze, which he could swing as hard as any mace.

Sweety Tyk was the opposite – a cocky raider that had made his name raiding over the bay and stealing women. They laughed at him for his clean shaven and effeminate appearance, but he was lightning fast with his dirks and one of the best seamen the free folk had.

Personally, Jon didn’t really care if the two men wanted to fight it out, except it likely wouldn’t end in a single fight. Harwick had a whole clan of sons and grandsons surrounding him, all clutching
weapons, while Tyk was very popular among the shipbuilders and bay raiders. If it came to blood, Tyk’s friends would fight against Harwick’s sons, and things could turn very bloody very quickly.

Jon had seen similar situations before. Every blow, scuffle or disagreement constantly threatened to escalate.

Jon clutched Dark Sister tightly, well aware that he was standing between two groups each a few dozen strong. His sword flickered between Harwick and Tyk, trying to judge which one was the angriest, which one would back down first.

Now which one do I need in my camp the most?

Eventually, Jon turned to Tyk. “Sweety,” Jon said coldly, pointing Dark Sister at Tyk. “Where’s Harwick’s daughter now?”

Tyk shrugged. He glanced at a couple of his friends. “I don’t know,” he said, nonchalant. “Maybe we aren’t done with her.”

Yep, that did it. Jon approached Tyk with care, pointing his blade straight at the man. “Sweety,” Jon said in a low voice. “You are going to bring Harwick’s daughter back to him, and then you are going to stay well away from him and his family for the rest of your life.”

His face twisted. “And what if I don’t?”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t really want me to answer that question, do you?” He whispered. A moment of doubt passed over his face. Tyk glared, but then relented. He nodded curtly before lowering his dirks and stepping backwards.

Jon half-breathed a sigh of relief. Jon almost thought they could all walk away from it too, right up until the moment that somebody in the crowd laughed. The sound of raucous, taunting laughter filled the air.

Tyk’s eyes widened, and froze. Damn, Jon cursed. Tyk is an arrogant boy. He couldn’t stand the thought of someone laughing at him.

Just like that Tyk changed his mind. Tyk wasn’t prepared to back down any more. Instead, he snatched up his dirks, twirling them as he charged, stabbing wildly at Jon.

Jon darted backward from the strikes. Harwick roared and clutched his staff to join the fight, but Jon held up his hand to stop him. Dark Sister was in his other hand, but Jon waited to attack. He needed to see how many would side with Tyk.

Three of the other bay raiders clutched weapons and charged at him. Good. If Jon hadn't been here, if they had been fighting Harwick instead, then Jon imagined more would have joined with Tyk. Only four against one – not the worst odds I’ve faced. Take them down fast.

Tyk swiped downwards. Bronze blades sparked against Valyrian steel. Tyk cursed as one of the blades shattered in his hand, and Jon twirled to slam him from the side. Tyk plummeted as Jon shoulder barged him downwards roughly.

Another man tried to charge him, swinging a blade. Jon parried each blow. Low, high, left, right.
He could hear Dark Sister singing as it cut through the air. A second one tried to attack from the same side, yet Jon turned, deflecting the blow and letting the two men crash into each other.

Tyk was already up again, growling as he plunged forward with only remaining dirk. Another man tried to charge Jon with a heavy axe, but Jon caught the blow even as he parried Tyk, twisting the blade around.

Dark Sister struck – sudden slashes one after another. The first man dropped with his shoulder cut open. Tyk narrowly avoided the second swing, trying to aim for Jon’s weak leg in retaliation, yet Jon was already sidestepping. The two other men lunged, but one took Dark Sister across the hip, while Jon shoulder barged the second onto the ground.

Behind him, Harwick cheered in a bout of laughter, while Tyk screamed as he lunged at Jon madly. He was too slow – the back of Jon’s hand was already whacking into his throat, and Tyk went flailing backwards and stumbling down. Dark Sister plunged after him.

For a second, Jon was ready to plunge his sword into Tyk’s chest. Then, at the last moment, Jon’s blade darted to the side.

The blade bit into the snow right between Tyk’s legs. A fine tendril of blood splurted over the ground. Tyk’s scream of pain cut the air open.

“I could have killed you,” Jon muttered. “You may wish I had.”

The man’s face was ghostly pale, contorted in pain, as Jon pulled himself straight. He looked at the three other men lying across the floor, and that at the other bay raiders clutching weapons.

“Anybody else?” Jon demanded.

Nobody met his eyes. “Then take this fool to the wood witch to get him stitched up,” Jon ordered, taking a deep breath as he sheathed Dark Sister. He turned to the three men that had fought besides Tyk. “And you three – you will bring Harwick’s daughter back to him.”

Behind him, the men were laughing furiously, staring as a couple pulled Tyk away. “Har!” Harwick roared. “You are a damn good fighter Jon Snow!”

Jon panted, still trying to catch his breath. He been in more fights at Hardhome than he ever had before. Harwick seemed in good spirits. “I should curse you, I suppose, for stealing a battle from me and letting that bastard live,” Old Man Harwick mused. “But hells, it was so much fun watching you geld the son of a bitch! Ha! You have my thanks!”

Jon nodded, his mouth tight. I had to intervene, he told himself. If Harwick and Tyk had fought, it might have triggered a feud that could tear the camp apart.

Still, tomorrow it would be a different argument, different people, and Jon would have to intervene then. Damn, was this what Mance had to handle every single day? I have fifteen thousand and it’s torturous – what would it be like with a horde of a hundred thousand?

Harwick was still laughing, watching the bay raiders run. “Tell me, Snow, do you like women?” Harwick asked.

Jon blinked. “Excuse me?”
“Well, I’ve never see you with a girl.” Harwick shrugged. “No harm, of course – each to their own I always say. I dabbled a bit, but I can’t say I’m too much keen on the other side myself.”

Jon blinked, struggling how to respond to that. “If you were interested, though, I’ve got many fine young daughters,” the old man offered. “I wouldn’t object if you were inclined to steal one or two of them.”

Jon forced a smile. “Many thanks, but I have another,” he said, the image of Ygritte on his mind.

Harwick nodded knowingly. “Ah, a true love?”

“Yes.” There was a silent pain in his chest at the thought. The last he saw of Ygritte, he had been pushing her off a cliff.

“Well, take care of her, then. You only get a few of those sorts.”

“I will, ser.” Jon paused. “Although, if you’re willing to help, the stakewalls on the west side are crumbling. Do you have the men to fetch lumber to repair them?”


Jon nodded, turning to walk away. The crowd was already dispersing, but there was one figure waiting for him. The Weeper stood with his arms folded and a sneer on his lips. Hatch and Yoldo were standing behind him, and another two raiders on his right.

Jon glared. “You were the one that laughed,” he said to the Weeper, after everyone had left.

“Excuse me?” The Weeper replied with a grin.

“You laughed. When Sweety Tyk was walking away, you laughed at him from the crowd.”

“Well, it was pretty funny,” the Weeper said, his smirk widening.

“You provoked Tyk by laughing,” Jon said darkly. “I could have resolved it without bloodshed.”

The Weeper nodded. “You’re right. You could have. That’s why I laughed.”

He glowered at him. The Weeper just smirked, keeping his voice low. “If you let them walk away, Tyk would have brought back Harwick’s daughter peacefully, and they would have all hated you for it. Tyk would have resented you, Harwick would have cursed you. You would have created two dangerous enemies, both with friends who they can share their hatred with. Instead, Harwick is cheering your name, and all of Tyk’s friends now have a healthy dose of respect and fear for you.”

Jon didn't reply. “I did you a favour, Snow,” the Weeper continued. “Never let them walk away with a grudge – if you let bitterness sow, hatred grows like a weed.”

There was a moment of quiet. Jon hesitated a few seconds, but then turned and walked away. The Weeper just smirked once more and followed him.

“You should just have killed Tyk, you know,” the Weeper said. “Do you think he’ll thank you for letting him live like that?”
Jon shook his head. “I don’t care,” he said bitterly, thinking of the way Tyk had screamed. “Nobody needs to die.”

The Weeper grunted. “It’s with statements like that you prove yourself still a fool.”

Jon stopped on to of a small crest, staring out over Hardhome. *Fifteen thousand wildlings*, Jon thought with a deep breath.

The came sat on a sheltered bay by the cape, a natural harbour. The waters were thick with fish, and there were colonies of seals and sea cows around the coast. A great cliff loomed above the settlement, pocked with cave mouths, at the back of the settlement. A solid wall of rough stone, and the whole settlement was scattered around the beach and rocks leading down to the coast. The whole camp slanted slightly towards the coast, rolling from the cliffs. It was an easily defendable location, at least; the only way through was either around the coast in the west, over the rocks and cliffs, or up from the southeast.

When Jon first arrived, the wildlings had been taking shelter in the caves – named the screaming caves. Many still were, but now there were more huts and shelters to be made for all free folk. The wood was a problem; at one time Hardhome had been once rich with forests, but those trees were dead and instead they needed teams to drag lumber up from the south.

It had been a long, hard struggle with many cold nights. The settlement was plentiful, but it still received viciously cold winds sweeping across the cape from the sea.

There was virtually nothing left of the old settlement that once resided here, except for burnt out husks of decaying buildings, and the occasional rusted weapon. It had been over six hundred years since the destruction of Hardhome, but it was said that so much blood was spilled that it stained the ground, leaving it hard and barren. Before the migration, Hardhome had been a cursed place that most avoided.

Occasionally, Jon could still feel it. He felt his skin tingle at the sound of the wind blowing through the caves. There was something about the place that put him on edge. The only heart tree they had was an ancient, knotted and blackened tree, kneeling over itself like a dying man.

Jon had ordered stakewalls and fencing built across the cape, and defensive perimeters and patrols around the settlement. He even arranged night patrols, fishing boats and hunting parties, while raiders built boats and barges to take them across the sea. There were fifty-four barges now, and more coming along every day.

It was exhausting work. Managing the free folk was the most tiring task of all. Every single time Jon gave an order, he was met ‘why should I listen to you?’ After that, Jon either had to convince each one, or they would walk away. Sometimes they just had to be convinced it was worthwhile, or bribed, coerced, or threatened. Even worse were the squabbles – constant disagreements and feuds at every moment that threatened to escalate.

Still, it felt like he was making progress, as grim as it was. The camp was being slowly being fortified, and fishermen bringing in hauls to feed the people. There were still a lot of starving mouths, but not so many as there once were.

The annoying part, though, was that Jon knew he could never have done it without the Weeper.
The Weeper kept order as much as he did. There were very few that dared to challenge him. The Weeper arranged the patrols when nobody else did, he led the defensive parties. The Weeper knew everybody’s names – who was dangerous, who was influential, and who wasn’t.

Jon had never liked the man – he despised him at times, even– but he still needed the Weeper. It was even a good partnership, occasionally. Any conflict that Jon couldn’t resolve easily, the Weeper would step in. It made people all the more willing to let Jon resolve it easily. And he knew the Weeper knew it too.

“How were the attacks last night?” Jon asked finally.

The Weeper shrugged. “Probing, mostly. A dozen wights spotted from near the cliffs. Me, my men and some Hornfoots took care of it.”

“We got a couple on the east coast,” Hatch reported, motioning at Yoldo. “Shambling things, damp with seaweed. They almost slipped by us, too.”

“They are testing our defences.” Phantom had spotted those wights as well. Jon kept the shadowcat away from the camp, but didn’t let her run away either. The Others had been attacking every night for the past week, always in a different place.

“Aye,” the Weeper agreed. “We can expect a big assault any day now.”

Jon bit his lip, staring across the men. They had many good warriors, but it wasn’t strength that concerned him. It was discipline. “… We need to start training men into organised groups,” said Jon. Right now, every time they needed a force the Weeper just bellowed at the closest men to follow him. “Set up proper divisions – give each one a shield and a spear and train them how to hold the line. Otherwise, if we are attacked each men is just going to run wildly.”

The Weeper scoffed. “Boy, these men have fought more battles than you’ve had shits. You try to ‘train’ them anything, you know how that’s going go down?”

“You were at the Frostfangs,” Jon said darkly. “You know how lack of discipline could hurt us.”

For once, the Weeper didn't replied. Jon thought about it. “Let’s try the younger men, then. Not the old warriors, the green boys – the ones that will be less stubborn. Hatch, could you gather up as many untested men as possible? We build up a rank and file from them – they need the training the most, and it gives an excuse to invite more seasoned men to support them.”

“You want an army of green boys standing in a line?” Hatch asked.

“I want an army of men standing in a line. Teach them well and they won’t stay green for long.”

Hatch nodded and stomped away. Jon’s head was spinning with the thought of everything he would need. He would need commanders to support them, officers to drill them, and somebody would have to provide their shields, spears and swords. The wildlings had few enough armaments as it was; anything more than wooden spears was a luxury. More importantly, he would have to organise them – the free folk changed warbands at whim, but proper divisions would need numbers and names.

* I could offer extra rations to join up, Jon thought. *Maybe if I get enough of the clan leaders sold on the idea…*
He would have to talk to each one in turn. *Why do the free folk insist on making it all so complicated?*

The Weeper snorted. “‘Rank and file’ ain’t going to mean nothing with those fortifications the way they are,” he said with a grunt. “Those fences on the west are so weak that my granny could break through them.”

“Your granny was the scariest hag I’ve ever met,” a raider muttered.

“I’ve got Harwick getting the lumber for them,” Jon said, although even Harwick’s extended family would have trouble. “Could you assist?”

“Course I could. You want me to stop the patrols to do that, then?” The Weeper rolled his eyes.

“I’ll find someone else.”

“And those fucking Frozen Shore tribes have been stirring trouble again by the caves,” the Weeper growled, as he stomped off. “Keep them in the line or I’ll slaughter the lot of them.”

Jon headed towards his tent. There were already a group of people waiting to talk to him. *After this, I’ve got to find men to fix the stakewall, inspect the barges, convince the fishing parties to go out for another catch, before walking around the camp to make sure the patrols are doing their jobs.* Doubtless there would be another crisis along the way.

He held up his hand at the people waiting as he limped quickly into the tent. The wizened woman, not quite as short as a dwarf but close, with a gaunt, leathery face hovered over Sweet Tyk’s body.

“What did you do with this one, then?” Mother Mole asked, glancing at Tyk. The raider was unconscious and pale.

“He was a rapist,” Jon replied.

The old woman chuckled, mushing up herbs and seaweed into a bucket. The wood witch was a good healer and the people listened to her, so Jon tried to keep her close. Every time Jon had been in a fight, Mother Mole had been waiting in his tent with poultices to treat bruised knuckles and small scrapes. *She has a chain of small white stones hanging around her neck,* Jon noted. She wove a necklace out of weirwood roots, with white stones picked up by the beach.

Mother Mole was as much of a leader as anyone in the camp – not so much to the raiders, but many followed her loyally and even the clan leaders respected her. Mother Mole’s followers spread across many clans, they clung to her for wisdom. And she was one of the only ones who followed Jon without any complaints.

*She lowers her head when she talks to me,* Jon noted, *she never looks at me in the eye. Always respectful, always obedient.* Mother Mole never used any honorifics, but she still gave him the same sort of respect.

“Every man out there is a rapist, by your southron terms,” Mother Mole chuckled.

Jon grimaced. The wildling tradition of ‘taking’ women had never sat right with him. “Disrespect, then.”
“Are you sure you don’t want me to let him die? Might be kinder.”

“He doesn’t deserve to die for being an arrogant fool.”

‘Deserve’ got nothing to do with it.” Mother Mole shook her head sadly. “You should’ve killed him.”

Jon shook his head. “No, he’s a good raider and a better seaman. We need him.”

“As you wish.” Mother Mole’s wizened hands pulled a knife out of the fire – a blade so hot it was glowing. The wood witch headed towards Sweety’s bloody groin, glancing at Jon. “I would do your business outside, if I were you.”

Jon agreed. He quickly left the tent, looking around the group waiting to talk to him. Most of them looked unhappy. Jon suppressed a sigh. The court of Hardhome wanted to talk to him.

The first man stomped up to him, and Jon stared into the scowling face of the Lord of Seals. He was a large man with a beefy face, tangled beard knotted together, broad shoulders and strong arms, clad in a heavy, patchwork sealskin cloak that draped across the ground. In his youth, he had been an accomplished raider across the bay, but then he ‘retired’ to build boats for other raiders instead. He had made quite a name for himself as the closest thing the wildlings had to a shipwright; every raider who used his boats in a successful raid paid the Lord tribute.

“I hear you’ve given two of my ships away to those filthy cave dwellers,” the Lord of Seals said, double-chins wobbling. He was the best boat-builder they had; Jon had put him in charge of the construction for the camp.

He sighed. “The cave dwellers need boats too; we’re all crossing the bay together.”

“Then those bastards can build their own, they’re not touching—”

Jon turned and glared. “Those boats are mine,” he snapped. “The men that brought the wood did it for me, the men that cut it did for me, and you, who oversaw construction, did it for me.” Jon’s eyes flashed. “I brought you in for your help and I paid you very well for your help, but stop your whining otherwise I’m going to ship you out on the same boat as the cave dwellers.”

The Lord of Seals growled, his face red, but he turned and stomped away. I shouldn’t have done that, Jon thought, he is a prickly man. Still, right now Jon was too irritated to care.

The second one waiting for him was a group of scouts and outriders, staring at Jon nervously. Furs was standing behind the scout with a frown. “This scout just returned from the west,” Furs said, shoving the man forward. “Figured you should know.”

The man looked nervous. He has a white stone pinned to his furs like a brooch, Jon noticed. The scout didn’t meet Jon’s eyes, instead staring at his feet. “… We’ve got the host heading towards us now. Maybe two days away, but they’re making good time?”

Jon frowned. He had heard of the other remnants of Mance’s army gathering in the west a week ago. Now, that host was heading to Hardhome too. “How many?”

The scout shook his head. “Thousands of free folk. Too many to count. I talked with one of their
scouts, one of Rattleshirt’s men, he said they had ten thousand.”

“Then who’s leading them?”

“Who’s not leading them?” Furs laughed. “I hear they’ve got everyone from Magnar of Thenn, Lord of Bones, Varamyr and Harma vying for control.”

*All of the lords and ladies of the north, then*, Jon thought quietly. When they arrived, nearly every wildling leader and perhaps most of the population Beyond-the-Wall could be at Hardhome.

*... I wonder if any of them have red hair, cute crooked teeth and a beautiful smile.* Most of the remnants of Mance Rayder’s army were with them now; the host might be Jon’s best chance at seeing Ygritte again. If she didn’t end up with them, she must have headed to the Frozen Shore. If she had survived at all.

“Don't forget the one who brought them all together - Val,” another scout continued.

Jon remembered Val – a tall beauty who had been in Mance’s tent. He nodded. “Do you think they’re coming to fight?”

“I think they want to go south, like the rest of us,” said Furs. “Might be good to boost the perimeter guards, though. Just in case.”

Jon nodded. *Now, how the hells am I meant to organise them all?*

“Alright, then we’ll bring some men to meet them tomorrow,” Jon decided. “Let’s gather three hundred strong fighters – and I’m bringing Sonagon too.”

Furs grinned broadly, showing missing teeth. The wildling liked watching the dragon at work. *Shock and awe,* Jon decided. *Sonagon is good at that.* If he could get them to his side, then that could be over twenty-five thousand to take south. It was a lot of bodies.

*And I've got try and do it bloodlessly,* Jon thought. He wanted the Night’s Watch to open the gate and close them behind them. It was a tall order, but he knew his dragon would be there to convince them.

Jon looked at the scouts. “Rest up, gather what rations you need, and go back out there,” Jon ordered. “Make sure you watch them as they come up, see if any are readying warbands.”

The scout nodded, clutching the white stone. “O–of course,” he stammered, lowering his head as he turned quickly to walk away. Jon paused, watching him run. *He bowed to me,* Jon thought, *the boy bowed hesitantly, jerkily, like he wasn’t sure whether he should bow or not.*

The other men dispersed slowly, all with gripes and complaints of their own. A small man with pointed teeth and a painted face, from one of the cave dwellers, who only spoke broken Common, came to Jon to threaten him about his clan’s lack of food. Furs needed to translate. It could have been another fight right there when another of the free folk was there to accuse the cave dwellers of stealing chickens.

Jon very nearly lost his temper as he had to remind everyone that food was to be shared. He promised to look into the stores, even though Jon knew there wasn’t enough food to end the complaints.
Then, there was a feud between Bullden Horn and Marthe of the Antlers that came to Jon to settle. Buleden wanted vengeance after Marthe stole two of his nieces years ago, but if Jon punished for every stolen girl then he would have to punish every single man in his camp.

Instead, Jon had to press Buleden into excusing Marthe, and gave Buleden command of one of the patrols as compensation. Marthe was one of the best sailors they had, Jon couldn’t afford to lose him either. Jon would just have to try and keep the men away from each other, positioning them both at opposite sides of the camp. *My camp is not big enough if I need to place everyone with a grudge away from each other*, Jon thought sourly.

The others were easier. A Hornfoot chieftain tried to bribe Jon with a pair of bronze gauntlets to get a bigger barge, which Jon accepted – mostly because they needed another barge anyways and it made the Hornfoots more willing to work with him. There were another two tributes from clan leaders – which Jon learned to accept graciously. Tributes and gifts were the currency of the north.

The worst was an elderly man, a tanner, dragged before Jon bloody and beaten. His wife had died in the cold, but the tanner had refused to burn her body and instead tried to drag her corpse outside the perimeter so she might be resurrected as a wight. The man was in hysterics. Jon ordered the corpse burnt, but he had to fight to convince the free folk not to kill the man for his ‘treason’. The man screamed, howled and looked so heartbroken in grief that Jon wasn’t sure even sure it was a good decision. If Jon’s men hadn’t held him back, the tanner would have killed himself trying to stop them from burning his wife’s body.

*Death might be kinder*, he thought. There were days that he was just left feeling numb, and worn. Most days, in fact.

He had gone through half of those wanting to see him all when he heard the commotion from the caves. The free folk seemed to flock towards every fight. Jon cursed, grabbing Furs and half a dozen other men and rushing after them. His bad leg pained him limping over the snow.

The caves were still full of men and women huddled into the brown rock. He saw firepits and makeshift wind barriers of furs. Hundreds of men and women, mostly unarmed, trying to take shelter in the water-logged caves.

Jon recognised the Frozen Shore men; clad in wolf and reindeer furs, with walrus tusks stitched on their helms, and bone spears in their hands. There was lots of yelling. It looked like a scuffle between half a dozen men of the Frozen Shore and three times as many refugees. The refugees were in rags, and mostly unarmed, but the tribesmen looked angry.

“What’s going on here?” Jon bellowed, trying to break apart the fight. Suddenly, Ghost was by his side, snarling as the direwolf leapt into the fray. The sound of the direwolf's snapping jaws caused the men to jump backwards. “Back down!”

An elderly man gasped, clutching at a bone dagger in his waist. “… They attacked me…” The man gasped. “… These… these heathens attacked us!”

*Heathens*? He turned to the Frozen Shore men, Dark Sister ready. Jon saw a man shouting a rough, guttural language. *The men of Frozen Shore didn’t speak the Common*, Jon thought with a grimace.

He turned to Furs. The wildling blinked. “… Seems here that we have a… um… misunderstanding,” Furs translated, listening to the shouting. “… This man… Hunting Seal…”
seems to have taken offence by this crafter’s work.”

The man – Hunting Seal – looked like he was screaming bloody fury, glaring at Jon. *The men of the Frozen Shore name themselves after beasts of the region*, he recalled. “Offence? How?”

Furs motioned. The old man was begging incoherently, clutching at his wounded side. He had a white stone pinned to his furs. Jon turned, and saw a statuette carved crudely into a large white boulder sitting in the middle of the cave, shaped and cut into the likeness of a dragon, its maw open and roaring.

*Sonagon,* Jon realised. The old man had been carving a statue of Sonagon. A crude carving, but the boulder was so large that it must have taken three men to lift something that size. It was placed in the centre of the cave, a place of honour. Jon didn’t even know how they’d carve something like that with nothing but chunks of stone as chisels.

He stared around the scene. The Frozen Shore men must have attacked, but at least twenty free folk seemed to have stepped in against them. Not to protect the old man – they were trying to protect the carving. *Why would so many weak, unarmed men and women pit themselves against well-armed raiders for the sake of a carving?*


Furs translated. Hunting Seal screamed. “They call it heresy,” Furs translated. Jon guessed he was paraphrasing. “… To worship something like that monster is heresy.”

*Worship?* “I do not care what they worship,” Jon said. “They do not attack anyone in my camp. If they have a problem, they leave.”

Jon’s men slowly forced the Frozen Shore men backwards. Ghost kept by his side, still snarling quietly. Jon would hate to lose them, though – the Frozen Shore men were good warriors and he had few of them at Hardhome.

“Hunting Seal here says he needs to avenge his ancestors. They are Walrus Men, Snow.”

“Walrus Men?”

“They follow the Great Walrus. One of the Frozen Shore’s biggest tribes.” Furs explained. “Other tribes follow the Noble Elk, or the Strong Bear. These guys basically see walruses as their spirit animals, holy animals to their tribes.”

“… I see.” Hunting Seal growled a string of words, glared at Jon with hatred.

“They tell a story their tribe passed down from generations,” Furs translated. “Bladdy, blah, blah… Something about a dark night, a storm with teeth, the demons of ice and snow that slaughtered their ancestors years ago. It brought ruin to two dozen clans. Some viewed it as the wrath of the gods, but the Great Walrus declared unending vengeance on the blight.”

*Now did this happen four hundred years ago, I wonder?* Before Sonagon was frozen, Jon had little doubt that the dragon could have terrorised the north. Some grudges were old. Jon remembered the ice-river clansmen who tried to kill him his first night with the Weeper’s warband.

“Basically, he’s saying that your beast is a demon, and curses and whatnot upon all it’s followers.”
Furs sighed. Most of the Frozen Shore men looked nervous, but Hunting Seal was still screaming and spitting.

“… Well, make sure he knows that if they have that much issue with Sonagon, then they have to leave.”

It took a while for them to get the point. The Walrus Men were outnumbered and against the entire camp. Eventually, the Walrus Men backed down. Unending vengeance is all well and good, Jon mused, but having shelter and food was far more important in the short term.

Hunting Seal’s eyes widened in shock as the other Walrus Men lowered their weapons with reluctance. Jon half-hoped that Hunting Seal would have lowered his weapon too, but instead he lunged at Jon with his spear. Ghost was on him before the raiders had a chance.

The man could barely even scream as the direwolf ripped out his throat. The other Walrus Men averted their gaze. Jon’s stomach twisted. Another totally needless death.

“Make sure that they keep well away from Sonagon,” Jon ordered, standing over them as they dispersed. “… Give them patrols by the southeast.”

“Aye, will do,” said Furs. “You know, the Walrus Men might follow orders, but without the Great Walrus there’s no one to really command them.”

He frowned. “The Great Walrus is a person?”

“Oh aye, it’s the name given to their chieftain, you know. Leader of the Walrus Men is the Great Walrus, like their… holy person or whatnot,” Furs explained. “The Great Walrus agreed to join Mance’s army, but then his tribe scattered after he went missing at the Frostfangs. The Strong Bear and the Noble Elk both refused Mance; the Noble Elk chose to run from the Others, the Strong Bear resolved to fight by themselves.”

Jon nodded, mentally trying to make note of the information. The lands beyond the Wall had a wealth of different cultures and history that he was still struggling to learn. Not even the maesters knew much about the wildlings – the knowledge of most learned men ended at the Wall.

“You know there are others that worship similar tales,” Furs chatted. “Gods of snow and ice. I heard of one tribe up north that believe in ice monsters – the great beasts that formed winter. There are some that say their ice gods came from the moon. Some say they still linger in the far, far north, at the top of the world.” Furs scratched his beard. “… And that’s not to mention the old tales I once heard as a child – them of living storms, giants that carved the gorge, the beasts that once roamed…”

Jon didn’t reply. He stood over the carving of the white dragon. It was a crude carving, no doubt about it, but also a painstakingly detailed one. Jon had no idea how long it would have took to carve all the details like Sonagon’s teeth without proper tools. He had men take the old man to Mother Mole for treatment, but Jon lingered in the cave.

Now why does that carving of Sonagon, or the look in their eyes, make me so uncomfortable?

“… The dragon does not need carvings or statues,” Jon said after a long pause, turning to the crowd of refugees and speaking loud over the whistle of the wind. “Carvings and statues will not help anyone!”
Do I refuse their worship or try to exploit it? He looked around them. None met his gaze. “If you want to help, then the dragon needs protection. We need stakewalls and fortifications. The fencing on the west side of the camp is falling apart and we need men and women to repair it.”

The ground rustled with movement. A lot of them had white stones pinned as brooches on their chests.

In the end, Jon ended up with more men and women than he knew how to co-ordinate. He assigned them to taskmasters, and sent them to chase Old Man Harwick about the lumber. Jon saw free folk, even weak, starved or elderly free folk, rushing over themselves to try follow his command.

They’re not doing this for me, Jon thought, they’re doing it for Sonagon. For their salvation. Jon knew that every night Mother Mole still preached by the heart tree, and every night it seemed like she had more and more of a congregation. Mostly among the refugees, though – not the raiders and fighters.

He spent a long time staring at the white stone carving of the dragon. Despite what he said, the followers didn't abandon it. Jon thought about it, but he had no reason to demand that they got rid of it, either.

By the time he had finally managed assigning the work crews into some form of organisation, it was nearly evening. His leg felt numb. Mother Mole had some poultices that seemed to help, but it was relaxation and rest that helped the most.

As he limped back to his tent, Jon saw a man waiting patiently. He was a lean, clean-shaven man with toned arms. Alvin Whaletooth looked past middle-aged, around forty or fifty, but still hard and muscled from a life of manual labour.

“We’ve spotted a grey whale off the coast of the harbour,” Alvin said simply. No greetings, no introduction. None needed for a man like Alvin. “Big bastard too, it could feed a lot of mouths for a lot of days. I’d hunt it myself but I don’t have the men free – do you think your dragon could help us out?”

“A grey whale?” Jon asked, blinking in surprise.

“Aye. Big enough for a lot of meat. That dragon of yours could help take it down.”

Jon hesitated. “I could do it myself,” Alvin continued. “Except my boats are out. The whale could be long gone by the time I gather them. If I’ve got a dragon hunting it, mind, then maybe we could kill it quick. Figured it was worth a shot.”

Using a dragon to hunt whale, Jon thought. He wasn’t even sure if Sonagon would share the meat. “Sonagon freezes his meat before he eats it.”

Alvin shrugged. “Let him. So long as there’s enough left over for us, I’m happy thawing it.”

“I’m not sure it’d work.” He had never gone whale-hunting before, most certainly not with a dragon.

“You think it’s worth a try?”
There was a moment of indecision. On one hand, there were many tasks that Jon still had to do, but on the other hand whale would be enough meat to severely help their struggling stores. If Sonagon could be used to feed people, then Jon wanted to find out. “Alright, let’s do it.” Jon nodded. “I’ll have to come myself to direct Sonagon.”

“I’ve got a ship waiting for you, one of my fastest.” A smile flickered across his weathered face. “Heh, whale-hunting with a dragon. First time for everything.”

Jon paused to change; switching his thick giant’s fur cloak for a walrus hide skin, and leaving his heavy leathers and bronze disk plate for lighter riding leathers and wool overcoat. Not as thick, but lighter and safer at sea. He kept his iron-toe capped leather boots since they were the only ones he had, though, and he forced Furs to promise to guard his tent.

The route down to the coast was treacherous, but they had cleared crude roads to move lumber down to the icy coast. The beach was rough stone, sand and ice, but covered in men working and logs scattered across the coast. The sound of hacking lumber echoed all day and night. The shipbuilding had never stopped for days.

There had been no choice. Jon offered Sonagon to fly the wildlings south, but that just wouldn’t work. Even if Sonagon could carry a hundred people (and that was a big if), Jon had no idea how to even mount them all. Then their numbers had swollen up with so many that not even a dragon could carry them. Instead, they came with a plan; boats and barges were the only thing that could move so many people south. They would be able to sail south over the bay with Sonagon flying protection overhead. If the patrols of the Night’s Watch tried to stop them, Sonagon could convince any ships that they met that it would be a bad idea.

Already they had fifty-four large barges of timber and hemp – great, lumbering barges that might carry over fifty people each. It would be a veritable wildling fleet.

Smaller boats scattered over the crude harbour. Fishermen boats and raid vessels donated by the free folk of the coast, of all shapes and sizes from canoes to dinghies. The coast was wide, but it was still cramped along the stony beach. Alvin Whaletooth owned four boats himself – all lean fishing vessels crewed by his family. Alvin had made his name chasing down whales.

Across the coast, atop rocks protruding from the sea near the other side of the harbour, a large white shape rested over the rocks, tail hanging into the ocean. Jon saw the salt water spray against the rocks, splashing over scales. Sonagon slept most of the day, barely visible from the beach.

The coast was good for the dragon. The dragon was healthier than ever, between the protection of the free folk and the game in the ocean.

Sonagon perched on the rocks and hunted along the beaches. Jon wasn’t even sure if the dragon could even feel cold. Sonagon still couldn’t fly yet, but the dragon proved a surprisingly graceful swimmer. He would keep his wings furled while his body would slither through the ocean, using powerful legs to propel him forward.

There were schools of sea cows and walruses across the coast – all large animals that weren’t used to any predator large enough to hunt them. Sonagon had eaten well.

“The whale was spotted off the cape,” Alvin said. “We’ll take a five man crew on a small boat – get you close enough to direct your dragon. We’ll have the wind on our back dragging the carcass back – let’s see how quick we can make it. I don’t want to be out long after nightfall.”
“Good,” Jon agreed. It wouldn’t do to keep Sonagon away after nightfall. He would leave Ghost behind in the camp to watch matters, while Phantom could spy on the perimeter.

Their boat was a small fir wooden dinghy with a large sail of stitched animal hide. It wasn’t a large or fancy vessel but it was smoothed from age and well-built, oiled with whale blubber, with harpoons and rope all along the hull, and bladders of water or supplies hanging from the craft.

They were met by other hardened fishermen from Alvin’s crew. Jon nodded at them, but stopped as he stared at a tall, thin man with weathered eyes and a wispy beard. Jon felt his skin crawl as he looked at him.

He stopped. “Who are you?” Jon demanded, feeling suddenly uneasy. His hand went to Dark Sister.

The other man had stoic face. Alvin looked surprised for a moment, before realising. “Ah.” He nodded understandingly. “Snow, this is Byrn – he’ll be on the crew too.”

“He’s a skinchanger,” said Jon. Jon could feel the man as a skinchanger instinctively. Byrn just nodded.

“Aye,” Alvin explained. “Byrn wargs into a seal off the coast. I’ve used him before. He’ll help us track the whale.’’

Byrn never responded. He was a quiet man with narrow eyes. For some reason, he put Jon on edge, but Byrn walked away without a word. “Is he trustworthy?” Jon asked.

“As much as a warg can be, sure,” Alvin nodded, before hesitating. “No offence meant, of course.”

Jon didn’t reply. He was attracting a crowd on the beach. Workers dropped logs of timber to stare at him. He could see men on the ships staring at him. Many of them with white stones on their chest were gathering from the camp. Sometimes, it seemed like no matter where Jon went he attracted a crowd.

“Get that ship into the water!” Alvin roared, over the sound of wind roaring around them. “Snow, get your dragon ready.”

Jon nodded, turning towards the Sonagon in the distance. They were already drawing a crowd as Alvin readied the boat.

Even when the dragon was simply sleeping on the rocks in the distance, Jon saw the awe in the gaze of the wildlings staring. Sonagon came into the Hardhome rarely – the last time had been at Jon’s command when he had put together teams of free folk with skins to try and patch up the dragon’s wings. There had been so many free folk staring in awe, too afraid to even approach the beast.

More and more, Jon saw free folk with smooth white stones pinned to their furs like some kind of brooch, like some sort of religion, or cult. Men lowered their heads as he passed. There were many that regarded Jon with distrust, but there were also those who viewed him as a nearly-religious figure. Jon wasn’t sure which group was the majority any more. And he wasn’t sure which one disturbed him the most.
Do they see Sonagon as a god, and myself as a king? Jon wondered. The raiders and fighters were much slower to trust or follow, but some of Mother Mole’s followers… they unnerved him. Devotees, she called them.

There were men wearing white stones on the beach all around him now. They stared at him with wide eyes as Alvin Whaletooth ordered his men to push the dinghy into the water. Jon tried to block out the people staring as he closed his eyes and reached out to Sonagon.


He felt Sonagon stir. The dragon raised his head, clambering to his feet. Jon saw his wings stretch out, balancing the dragon as he reared upwards.

The free folk on the beach cheered and gaped as the dragon dived into the water with an almighty splash.

“Come on!” Alvin ordered, pushing the dinghy forward. Jon could barely keep up, yet the men dragged him upwards between the waves. The seawater was numbingly cold, but Alvin pulled Jon into the boat while two other men expertly dropped the sails. Jon fell headfirst into the cramped boat, while the seamen laughed and jumped in easily. At once, the wind hit them and they were being pushed off the beach and into the waves.

The salt water hit him, causing Jon to squint as they shot over the waves. Up ahead, there were shrill shouts as Sonagon broke through the water, twisting like some sea dragon of old. Alvin was shouting orders, but Jon’s vision blurred as he felt himself falling into Sonagon’s skin.

Suddenly, he was in the water, the cold sea as mild as bathwater, staring out through a vivid vision as his tail thrust him forward. Sonagon trusted Jon more and more, letting him warg easier than ever. Jon could feel the dragon’s presence next to him – powerful and vibrant, but it felt like an old friend the way it wrapped itself around Jon.

Follow us, Jon pushed. Food for everyone.

The dragon roared, twisting itself around with a deep breath to dive down again. The dinghy was already tacking, turning through the ocean.

“Keep your dragon back for now, Snow, we don’t want to spook it!” Alvin ordered. Jon nodded. “Byrn, you’re up. Get your seal to lead us to the whale!”

Byrn nodded and closed his eyes. Jon watched his body sag unconscious as he drifted into another skin. He’s not as gifted as I am, Jon realised. Most skinchangers fell unconscious as they warged, but Jon was able to stay in two bodies at once. Jon could even control multiple familiars, much like Varamyr Sixskins.

Twenty minutes later, a dark shape broke the surface. A large, graceful seal swam ahead, barely visible in the waves, leading the boat straight down the coast. The crew pulled the animal hide sail in and followed the shape.

It was shivering cold under wet furs, but none of the other men even seemed to feel it. Jon could only try to stay out of the way as Alvin’s crew sailed with practiced ease. It wasn’t a big boat, but the men would step over each other fluidly even as the ship shuddered. Each man clutched a rope in one hand and a harpoon in the other.
“So how big is this whale?” Jon shouted – he had to talk loudly over the waves.

“About fifty feet, forty tons, I reckon,” Alvin replied. “Good eating all around.”

Jon blinked. “Fifty feet? And you’re hunting it in a boat like this?”

There was a burst of laughter from the crew. “Our boat not big enough for you, Snow?” Alvin laughed. “We’re not some craven whalers that need a huge ass ship. I’ve been hunting off the coast for twenty years.”

Jon grinned. Alvin was a grim, rough man on land, but he came alive when he was at sea. The type of man who lived for the waves in his face. “So how would you take down a whale like that if Sonagon wasn’t here?”

“Easy, follow it close, harpoon it when it surfaces,” Alvin explained. “You tie logs or buoys to the harpoons to mark the position, and to stop it diving so easily. You need at least three boats to follow it no matter where it goes, and you keep on harpooning with more buoys until it can’t swim. Kill it, drag it back to shore.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“Oh, it takes a while, I grant you. You’ve got to bleed the whale’s strength and stay close. I’ve been out at sea for two weeks before while chasing a young bull,” Alvin chuckled. “But I was a green lad, then. I can throw a harpoon harder now.”

The waves rocked the boat. Jon held on tightly, but the sailors barely noticed.

Alvin kept a sharp eye on the sea, even as he shouted, “Grey whales aren’t even the biggest things you get around here, ain’t that right?”

“Oh aye,” one of the other sailors shouted. “You get some monsters in these waters.”

“The only monster I’ve seen is a dragon.”

“Ha! Those landlubbers in camp might stare at your dragon with awe, but I’ve seen bigger monsters,” Alvin said confidently.

“Really?”

“Oh yep. Grey whales aren’t the biggest out here, plenty of others as well – we get sperm whales about twice the size some seasons too,” Alvin said. “And that’s to say nothing about the sharks. Have you ever seen a great ice water shark? Bigger than this bloody boat!”

Jon listened intently. Alvin talked even while wrapping up rope. “But the biggest – the absolute biggest – creature you’ll ever see,” Alvin continued. “A bloody leviathan.”

There were a few murmurs of agreement. “Those monsters can grow over two hundred feet long,” Alvin explained. “They cause tidal waves when they surface. Now those are too big for any of my boats, I hear you need Ibbenese whalers to bring those down. They don’t come in close to the coast, either, but I’ve seen a few before when I’ve taken my boat too far out to sea. Bloody monsters, believe me.”
The only thing Jon knew about leviathans were from Old Nan’s tales, that the first sea dragon Nagga used to be so large it could hunt leviathans out of the ocean.

*Sea dragons*, Jon thought to himself, thinking about Maester Luwin’s lessons. Nobody was sure if sea dragons existed or not, but then again they thought the same thing about ice dragons. Sea dragons were dragons of the deep, the dragons that couldn’t fly but would grew larger than any other creature. Grey King’s Hall on Pyke was apparently made from the bones of a sea dragon.

Jon tried to visualise a dragon so big it put Sonagon to shame, and his imagination failed him.

“But do you want to know the scariest thing I’ve ever seen, Snow?” Alvin continued. “A kraken.”

“Krakens?” Jon exclaimed. Krakens were another semi-mythical creature right there. “You’ve actually seen one?”

He nodded for emphasis. “Oh yes,” Alvin explained. “Nine years ago now – I was hunting way off the coast, much further than I should have been, truthfully. There was a fierce storm, but I was riding through. There is no weather in the world that can sink one of Alvin’s ships,” he added with pride. “But right then, I saw bloody giant wave hit me from the side, and I was washing upwards on the wake as a monster rose up beside me! A kraken! It was almost as big as a leviathan, but with a lot more tentacles and a lot angrier.” Alvin shuddered. “I’ll tell you, I ruined a good pair of pants that day!”

The stories continued as the boat rocked on. Alvin Whaletooth had a story for every day he had been at sea. Jon listened raptly, all the while watching the coast drift by.

“Over there!” A man shouted eventually, spotting something large break through the waves. Jon had no idea how he spotted it through the tumbling waves. The grey whale looked just like a large stone breaking the surface for a brief second. “There she is!”

“Alright, Snow,” Alvin ordered, clutching his harpoon. “You’re up.”

Jon nodded, reaching out to Sonagon again as he visualised the grey whale. The dragon was following from behind. *Over here. Food. Hunt.*

The dragon swam in fast, darting through the sea so quickly Jon could only see the ripples. When Sonagon was less than three hundred feet away, the whale started to panic. The whale broke the surface, its tail splashing down furiously as it tried to dive, but it was too late. Sonagon was already on it.

Jon felt a stab of pride. *Soon, it would be even easier for him to hunt,* Jon thought. Soon, Sonagon would be able to fly.

The gashes on Sonagon’s wing had closed a while ago. Jon had even enlisted the help of every wood witch and healer he could find to try and help them heal. The wings were getter better, but they were still too tender for Sonagon to fly. Jon had seen the dragon practicing recently, extending and flexing his wings wide experimentally.

Even under the water, Jon heard the whale howl as Sonagon closed in. The whale must be fifty feet long from tail to snout, but the dragon was still bigger. Mind, the whale was bulky and muscled while Sonagon was leaner, and it didn’t go down easily. The whale tried to dive, and Sonagon had
to wrestle to drag it out off the water.

They collided with an almighty splash. Tails and wings splashed out of the water. On the boat, the men cheered and hollered. The boat crashed with the waves. It made one hell of a show.

Jon felt Sonagon close in and bite down hard onto the whale’s rump. The whale shuddered and thrashed madly, but then Sonagon breathed ice cold fire into its body and the struggle ended quickly.

Jon watched as the water around them froze suddenly, tendrils of ice spreading around them, only for the ice to crack as Sonagon dragged the whale upwards in an iceberg. Half of the whale’s body had been frozen solid, killing it instantly. Sonagon roared triumphantly as he snapped the frozen tail straight off the whale.

Bobs of ice floated on the waves. Sonagon still thrashed, chewing huge frozen chunks off the whale’s tail happily with sharp teeth.

_Ours?_ Jon asked, reaching out to Sonagon. _Share?_ He knew the dragon would be protective of the kill, but Jon asked cautiously, half-begging. Jon had learned he needed to be constantly respectful when reaching out to the dragon. Jon could ask Ghost to do nearly anything, while the dragon had more pride.

Sonagon paused, but then roared like thunder and swam away. He still clutched the frozen whale’s tail, dragging it away in his jaws. The rest of the carcass was left floating on the waves, steaming gently from evaporation amongst the semi-frozen sea.

Alvin was laughing. “Easiest whale hunt I’ve ever done, boys!” He exclaimed happily. “Let’s harpoon her in and drag her, we’ll be back before nightfall.”

Jon was laughing too as they gingerly approached the carcass. That was the hardest part right there, trying to attach their ropes to the carcass firmly despite the wind, waves and ice. One of the men even dived into the water to wrap a rope around the whale, and Jon had no idea how the man could even survive the cold. Jon himself tried twice to harpoon the carcass from the prow; missing both times, but the men were all in good cheer.

It took careful sailing as they tacked around to head back. That proved difficult, like trying to drag a hundred ton iceberg behind them in a fairly small boat, but Alvin was clearly experienced. From the size of the corpse, Jon had been sceptical it would even be possible, but Alvin had laughed and said that he had dragged in much harder kills than this.

The sun was only just about as they were to heading back. “Let’s get back quickly!” Jon shouted. “We’re expecting raids tonight and I want be there before dark.”

“Aye aye!” Alvin replied, still laughing. Jon couldn’t help but laugh as well.

The only man that wasn’t in good spirits was Byrn. The skinchanger was still draped half over the edge, clearly away somewhere else in his seal’s skin. Then, Byrn’s body jerked as he returned to the boat with a loud gasp. “We’ve got a problem!” Byrn shouted.

“What?” Alvin said, his voice sharp, glaring at the skinchanger.

“Around the coast!” Byrn shouted. “Ships from the south, coming this way! Big ships, lots of
All cheer evaporated in a second. Alvin instantly fumbled for a spyglass; a carved, hollowed auroch horn with a dark amber stone inside, wrapped protectively in Alvin’s furs. The man cursed after staring for a moment, handing the spyglass to Jon.

It took a while for Jon to see anything through the dark water and distorted view. Then, he slowly made out outlines in the water. The shape of sails.

*Ships*, Jon thought, his heart racing. He counted over a dozen. *Big ones. A fleet.*

*The Night’s Watch? No, there are too many. Eastwatch didn’t have that sort of fleet.*

“Cut the harpoons,” Jon ordered.

Alvin looked aghast. “What?”

“Cut the harpoons, forget about the whale!” Jon shouted. “We’ve got to get back to Hardhome right now!”

*Those are war galleys,* Jon thought. They looked like the sort you’d find in the Free Cities. A fleet of ships heading to Hardhome. *We’re under attack.*
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The battle of night, and the battle of ice

Val

Her screams echoed through the camp, making Val’s blood run cold. She stood by her sister’s side, holding her hand. The sound of Dalla’s shrieks never stopped. Val had never seen her in so much pain.

“Keep breathing,” the old woman ordered, crouching between Dalla’s legs. “The babe's coming, but it’s in the wrong position. Don't push yet.”

“… It hurts…!” Dalla screamed in gaspy breaths, sweat dripping down her brow. Val clutched her hand, stroking her hair and whispering sweet nothings into her ear.

“Is the baby alright?” Val demanded, looking up to the three midwives.

“It'll be a difficult birth,” the old woman replied, as a bucket of water was placed next to her. “First times always are.”

“But is the baby alright?” she insisted, noticing how the old woman never answered the question.

“Stay calm, girl, I've seen worse births.” Again, that never answered the question. From the dark glances the women gave her colleagues, Val guessed they couldn't have seen many worse.

The women were from Craster’s keep. The oldest was over sixty, while the youngest looked barely fifteen, yet she still had a young babe at her chest. Craster’s wives had joined them after Harma raided the keep, and Craster himself took an axe to the head. None of his wives had been particularly upset to see the old man go.

Still, they proved capable midwives, and as hardy as any free folk. Val had offered them protection in the camp if they cared for Dalla.

Her sister’s screaming put her on edge. Val would rather face down a pack of hungry wolves than listen to her sister scream.

The baby was coming now, and there was nothing anyone could do.

Dammit, Val cursed. Of all the nights…

It was a moonless night, cold and bitter. They were less than two days away from Hardhome, so close that their few mounted men had already went ahead and came back, reporting a large settlement with fortifications and protection, building ships and offering food. A place where the free folk could finally find shelter out of the forest.
They were at the final leg of their journey. Everyone in Val’s camp had grown weary and hungry, and right now they were so close they could feel it.

*Just one more day’s march,* Val thought. *We were only one more good day’s walk…*

That was part of the problem, though. They were so close that many of the free folk had decided to walk on through the night. There were maybe five thousand in the camp and another eight walking on ahead. That was a lot of people trekking through the forest at the dead of night, desperate to reach the peninsula by daybreak.

*This is wrong,* she thought. They had been careful all through the journey, setting up camp diligently, only to slip up on the final leg. Any other time, Val might have been tempted to join them in a night’s march, to try and keep the host together as much as possible, but then her sister went into labour and there was no choice for her but to stop.

Garth and two dozen mounted men had went on to try to secure passage into Hardhome. Sigorn and his Thenns had left as well, to protect the host as much as possible, but they were already scattered.

*Too many tales,* Val thought. They had all heard mad tales about salvation and protective gods, tales that only seemed to get stronger the closer to Hardhome. It had left so, so many free folk desperate to finally reach the settlement.

Her sister was crying. One of Craster’s wives rubbed Dalla’s stomach, trying to massage the baby into position.

“It's alright, it's alright,” Val whispered, frantic. “It's alright, it's alright…”

It wasn't alright. Not even slightly. The tent seemed freezing cold. The fire in the centre of the room flickered.

“We need more logs for the fire,” the old woman ordered. “Gilly!”

The young woman, a mousy girl clutching a baby, stood up flustered. *Gilly is a new mother herself,* Val realised. The last of Craster’s babies. “It's alright,” said Val, motioning for Gilly to sit down. “I’ll get them.”

Val needed to get out of the tent, and Dalla looked delirious. Val’s hands trembled. She pushed her way out, taking a deep breath. The night seemed dark even despite the many fires burning around the camp.

*My little sister is going to survive,* Val thought. *She’s going to hold her son. She has to.*

“Will you shut that bitch’s whining up?” A dark voice growled. “Some of us are trying to sleep.”

Val glared, turning around to see the Lord of Bones at the tent, frowning at her. “You talk about my sister again and I’ll see to it you never have children of your own, Rattleshirt,” Val warned.

The man scoffed. “I just want some fucking quiet. Dammit, is she whelping a cow in there?”

There was another strangled scream from the tent. Val’s gaze flickered. “Firewood,” she said. “I
need firewood.”

There should have been a surplus of chopped wood by the main camp fire. Val had been insistent – always keep enough more than enough wood to keep the fires going. Now, the wood stack was nearly empty.

The sight made her growl. “Who the fuck has been skimping on wood chopping?” She shouted, glaring at the men watching the fire.

“What the hells are you talking about?” Rattleshirt snapped. “There was a full stack.”

Val hesitated, suddenly staring at the surrounding fires. She could see the flicker of the torches through the trees. All of their fires were flickering, starving. Why are we burning so much wood?

She breathed outwards, and watched the mist shiver in the air in front of her. It’s cold, she realised slowly. Very cold. Val’s skin tingled. The cold had a way of creeping up on you.

Val staggered backwards slowly. The air was very quiet.

“… Oh no…” She muttered. Every instinct she had was screaming at her. Her breaths were shallow.

She rushed back into the tent. The women shared a dark look. Suddenly, all of the shadows seemed deeper.

Val never even needed to say anything. “… Aye,” the old woman murmured, still tending to Dalla’s side. “They’re coming. I can feel it in my bones.”

Val could feel it too. It felt like cold creeping under her skin, a cold as sharp as fear. Val’s heart pounded.

“… Look after my sister,” she said after a long pause. “Look after Dalla.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” the old woman promised. Her voice was sad, resigned. “… Always knew we’d see them again… Craster’s boys…”

“Gilly,” another of the wives hissed at the young woman. “Take your boy and run. Don’t let them take yours as well.”

Gilly looked wide eyed and frantic. Val hesitated momentarily, before clutching the sword on her belt and rushing back outside.

She knew it almost before she heard the cry. The long sharp sound of a war horn cut through the night. It was strangled prematurely by a short scream.

“Form up!” Val bellowed, charging out clutching her sword. “Form up! We’re under attack!”

There were more sounds all around her. The dark trees had never seemed so terrifying. Val could see figures rushing around the flickering flames, but it was too dark to see who or what. All around her, wildlings clutching weapons rallied themselves, but the air was thick with panic.

“Who is it?” Rattleshirt demanded. He gripped a long and sharp spear, tipped with a mammoth’s
tusk blade. His dogs barked furiously, so loudly Val could hardly hear him. “Where are they?”

There was a moment of absolute panic. Man ran grabbing weapons, shouting for formations. Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled.

A small figure in a shadowskin cloak scrambled towards them, flanked by a towering shadow. The great white bear reared up and roared, while Varamyr Sixskins burst into the towards them. Three wolves scattered around his feet.

“They're here!” Varamyr shouted. The skinchanger was a small, scrawny figure clad in long, fine clothes and flanked by his beasts. “Attacking from the west!”

“No.” His voice was grim. “The crows.”

Val turned. For a moment, there was darkness. Then, she saw figures in black riding through the trees. The sound of galloping horses charging through snow was deafening. Mounted riders charging through the camp.

The Night’s Watch was attacking.

“Form up!” She shouted, clutching her sword tightly. “Form up!”

She saw arrows rain from the tree line. Men fell, and then horses were charging.

Rattleshirt released his hounds. Varamyr’s wolves charged too, and then his snow bear lumbered forward as well. The wildlings had axes and spears, charging to meet the riders. Some of the horses reared and fell, but the rest just charged through.

The horses were strong and powerful. They barrelled straight through the men. Val saw lances lunging towards her.

That was the last thing Val knew before the world was consumed by panic and chaos.

The rider was just a shadow in black looming over her. Val tried to get close enough to cut at the horse, but then she glimpsed the tip of a lance zooming towards her head. She ducked, but the edge came so close she felt the tip scrape against her hood.

The body of the horse barrelled into her, knocking her into the snow. Val gasped, feeling her head spin. She was suddenly on the ground, staring wide-eyed at the bodies dropping around her.

Flaming arrows rained out of the darkness. Tents caught fire. After the charge came men on foot – rangers clutching iron swords as they rushed to meet the wildlings.

Everywhere she looked, there was fighting or burning.

A bloodthirsty roar broke through the daze. Val saw Varamyr’s bear pouncing on a mounted man, dragging the horse physically to the ground. The horse neighed, kicking and screaming under the bear’s claws, while more riders circled around it, furiously stabbing at the bear with spears.

An eagle screeched downwards from the sky, flying and clawing into a rider’s face and knocking
him straight off his horse, screaming. Wolves pounced on the screaming man in a second.

Val saw the Lord of Bones howling and screaming barely decipherable insults as he met two rangers at once, meeting their swords with his spear. “Come on you kneelers!” The Lord of Bones snarled, swinging his spear madly. “I’ll skin your bones and fuck your corpses!”

The two crows tried to overpower him, but Rattleshirt spat in one’s face and kicked the other in the groin. They stumbled, and one of the crows fell quickly under Rattleshirt’s spear. The other crow tried to skewer the Lord of Bones before he pulled his spear back, but then one of Rattleshirt’s dogs grabbed the crow by the leg and dragged the man down screaming. Rattleshirt’s spear plunged through his skull.

“Free folk!” Rattleshirt screamed, dragging his bloody spear upwards. “On me! Every fighting man on me!”

_The Lord of Bones is a scrawny, nasty bugger, Val thought, but he knows how to kill._

Val tried to stagger upwards off the ground. She glimpsed a man trying to charge towards her, but then a shape, as strong as a bear, tackled him to the ground and a heavy maul broke his skull. Harma Dogshead was standing over Val, her clothes dripping with blood. Her friend helped her to her feet.

“Protect the tent…” Val gasped. “Dalla…”

She could still hear her sister’s screams. _My sister is giving birth and the Night’s Watch is attacking…_

The crows had a good start – their riders tore through their camp and did huge damage, but the battle was slowly changing. Harma’s men joined the fray, around the tent, while the Lord of Bones and his men were fighting through the crows up ahead. Varamyr’s bear died from the rider’s spears, and, like a craven, he had sacrificed his wolves to clear him a path to flee.

Still, the majority of the wildlings had scattered, fleeing from the camp. The fighting men and spearwives were still dispersed, helpless as the crows cut through them from all directions. The riders were still running ahead, charging through the rest of the camp, but more and more of them were toppling off their horses.

The second rain of arrows came splattering down, and another dozen men fell.

Val saw the dark shadows of the crows on foot heading towards them. There were maybe fifty crows left in the clearing, against the eighty free folk that had managed to rally. All others were running.

_Protect the tent_, Val thought furiously, clutching her sword. _Protect Dalla._

A wordless war cry tore from her throat as she charged.

The free folk collided with the crows in a dull clash, splitting the air with grunts and sharp screams of pain. Val saw men wrestling with each other like bears, trying to drag each other to the ground.

For once, Harma and the Lord of Bones fought side by side. The Lord of Bones was like a viper with his spear; precise, quick and deadly. The sound of his bone shirt clanging filled the air. Next
to him, Harma was a natural brawler, swinging her maul hard and fast and sending men tumbling backwards.

Val saw a free folk fall to a crow’s sword across the fire. He was heading towards the tent. Val was already charging, her bronze short sword in hand as she slashed hard.

She hoped to catch him by surprise, but the man was swift. Bronze clashed against steel as he parried.

Val saw his eyes widen in surprise. He was a young man, thirtyish, with dark brown hair, wispy beard and a weak chin. He wore a heavy breastplate and a sable-trimmed cloak. Val's blonde hair was unraveled, whipping across her face as she hacked at him.

He backed away, blocking her sword on a dark oak shield. There was a flicker of doubt in his eyes as he circled. Near the tent, Gilly was crouching, hiding from the fighting with her baby in her arms. Gilly was crying. The sound of Dalla’s screams could still be heard.

“There's no honour in fighting women!” The crow shouted. “All women and children surrender and you will not be harmed! On my honour!”

“Fuck that!” Val hissed. “Fuck you!”

They collided. The crow was bigger than her, stronger too. He had a long steel sword as well as a reinforced wood shield, while Val only had a bronze short sword not much more than a large dagger. A single blow from him could overpower her.

Still, Val was faster. She could swing twice before he could manage once. His sword was much heavier, more cumbersome than hers. That shield of his protected him, but it also restricted his movements. Val's vision blurred as she slashed furiously, each blow hacking off his shield.

Never stay in one place, Val thought. Circle around him, keep on moving. Don't let it turn into a brawl, force him to turn to meet you.

His legs were staggering slightly as Val twisted around him, still hacking with every step. He had good reflexes, blocking each blow, but struggling to swing his sword. Val didn't dare try to parry, instead she darted backwards.

She was hoping he would try and give chase, and maybe leave himself open. He didn't, instead he stood his ground to hide behind his shield.

Val could see the sweat dripping off his brow. Val was gasping for breath. I'm going to tire faster than he will, she thought angrily. Still, she couldn't even feel the exhaustion over the sound of her heart pounding.

My sister. Protect my sister.

Val charged, screaming bloody fury. “Free folk!” She howled, swinging so hard she thought her sword might snap. “Free folk! Free folk!”

They collided. All around them, the night was screaming.

Val slammed against his shield with all her strength, so hard she could feel the bruises forming on
her shoulder. Finally, the crow staggered, losing his footing.

His sword flailed wildly. Val slashed upwards. Blood steamed in the cold air.

The crow’s eyes widened in horror as his sword dropped to the ground, along with three of the fingers on right hand. The blood oozed from his mutilated hand, half of his palm slashed wide open.

To his credit, he didn't fall back or yield. The crow gripped his shield tightly and tried to charge her, bludgeoning her with the solid wood. Val staggered, gripping his shield tightly with one hand as she struggled to bring her sword around with the other.

“For House Smallwood,” he said, so softly Val barely heard it. “For the realm.”

Val’s blade broke through his defence, stabbing him straight under the arm. It was an awkward cut – Val couldn't get any leverage – but it caused him to stagger. The second stab was much better.

She wrestled his shield away as he dropped to the ground, on his knees. Val plunged her sword forward, his time straight into his chest, above his breastplate and into his sternum.

"For my sister!” She hissed, stabbing repeatedly with the sword.

His body was tough and her blade felt blunt. She must have ruined the edge hitting it against his shield. It took multiple strikes before he finally stopped moving. His blood splattered, so warm it stung.

Val gasped for breath, struggling to breathe. All around her, the crows were retreating. The Night’s Watch were falling back, but none of the free folk were celebrating. It wasn't a victory.

The crows had already done their damage, now they were just retreating before their body count started to stack up as well.

Crows are evil, cunning birds. They would never fight to the death, and they would retreat in any battle they began to lose. Still, they'll never retreat too far; they would just fall back to their next position and await their next chance to gouge out your eyes.

She stared around the trashed camp, feeling her stomach squirm. The camp was ruined – most of the free folk had already fled into the forest. They would be running scared, alone, and at night.

By morning, the wilderness would have killed more people than the crows ever could.

Val had seen these tactics before. They had proved so devastating at the Frostfangs. Small groups of crows would be assaulting them all along the camp, bloodying them and then retreating. The crows would let them bleed out, before returning to finish the job.

Val looked around her, meeting Harma’s eyes. The raider’s gaze was dark. Across the camp, the Lord of Bones was cursing, clutching his side where a weapon had grazed his hip, shattering his armour of bone. Some of the raiders tried to pursue the crows, but both Harma and Rattleshirt had held back, cautiously.

The smell of blood hung in the air, as sharp as a blade. Val could still hear the sounds of fighting in the distance. It was cold, so very cold.
Next to her, Gilly was weeping as she clutched her child. Val stared at her, but the girl never met her eyes. Gilly held her baby so close to her chest.

A new sound broke through the ground. The sound of wailing. A baby’s wailing.

Val’s heart pounded. The sound was coming from the tent. Her nephew. Dalla’s babe. Her sister’s babe was born, and he was wailing. *I have a nephew. A boy’s screaming.*

*Dalla…*

There were screams in the distance. Even as Val listened, she could hear those screams falling silent. The newborn was still wailing. The air was so cold.

In the distance, a horn blew sharply. Not a wildling horn, but a horn of Night’s Watch. The horn sounded three times.

Val listened to the screaming. So many men, women and children were left running blindly in the forest, and they were here. The dead are here…

The Others were intelligent too. They must have been waiting for their opportunity, watching the sworn brothers and the free folk fight. Weakening them both until the moment the Others swept in…

“Fucking crows…” Val cursed. *Fucking crows…!*

Between the trees, the shadows whispered and hissed. It was so cold it felt like a knife in her chest. The dead are coming.

---

**Jon**

“Evacuate to the caves!” Jon bellowed, shoving his way through the crowd. Men and women were running around him madly. He had to scream just to be heard over the sound of so much chaos. “All refugees to the caves!”

Everyone on the peninsula could see the sails coming quickly now. It was already dusk, and the lights on the prow of the ships on horizon shone in the gloom. Jon had only just got off Alvin’s boat, yet there was no time. He was still dripping wet and he could feel the chill in his bones, but his heart was beating so fast. Alvin had sailed as fast as he could, but the fleet was still right behind them. They were already sailing across their perimeter.

*How long before they got here? An hour? Maybe less?*

“Snow!” A voice bellowed. Jon saw the Weeper marching towards him, slamming people out of the way roughly. The Weeper had his scythe over his back and two short swords on his hip. “Your bloody friends are here!”

Jon shook his head. “They can’t be the Night’s Watch, I’ve never seen those ships before…”

*There are twenty-four ships,* Jon thought. Alvin had counted. Eastwatch kept an active fleet of three ships; the *Talon,* the *Storm Crow,* and the *Blackbird.* There were maybe half a dozen more
ships that they could man in emergencies. Now where did all the others come from?

“Who the bloody hell are they, then?”

“They look like Free City galleys. Pirates? Slavers? I don’t know, I…”

“I recognised one of them,” Alvin called, jumping out of the boat. “That ship in the middle, near the left – she’s the Blackbird, from Eastwatch. The other twenty-three I’ve never seen, but I know the Blackbird well enough.”

Jon stammered, struggling to react. Then the Night’s Watch is taking part in this attack? What did that make the other ships? Sellsails? Reinforcements? That was bad. He saw the men’s gazes flicker too. Jon knew that Night’s Watch only had a thousand men. How many more men might this fleet bring?

The Weeper was glaring at him, eyes twitching. Jon bit his lip. Dammit, he cursed. I knew the Night’s Watch would try to stop us sooner or later. They still think the wildlings are the threat, not the Others. They’re coming to stop a wildling horde before it has time to form. I just thought I had more time…

Jon knew that the Weeper had agreed to work with him, but there was always that shadow hanging over their heads of what Jon would do when he had to raise swords against his sworn brothers.

The very thought of fighting against Grenn, Pyp, Toad or, gods forbid, Sam, made Jon feel physically ill.

Pick a side, the Weeper’s voice echoed.

I’m on the side of the living, he thought. Never the dead.

“Get archers on that ridge!” Jon ordered, glaring back at the Weeper. “They’re vulnerable as they come into the beach; we need bowmen on cliffs to fire at them. All warriors, along the bay! We hold position by the beach, and we fight with the high ground.”

“We kill them all!” The Weeper roared, to the sound of cheers.

Jon’s stomach twisted. No, we just hold them back. Force them to retreat…

The fear was so thick it felt like a knife in his chest.

“What about our ships?” The Lord of Seals demanded angrily. He clutched a bone spear tightly, beefy body covered in a seal hide cloak. “Our ships are on the beach!”

Jon shook his head. The boats and barges on the beach would be unprotected. “Forget about them. We can’t defend them, and we’d lose too many people trying. We defend the camp.”

Jon saw the flicker of uncertainty passing through the crowd. The Lord of Seals looked furious. They had spent weeks constructing their fleet, and now it might be for nothing. I always expected an attack from the land, not from the sea, Jon cursed. They had built their defences along the mainland, and they were vulnerable on the coast.

There was a moment of hesitation. The Weeper filled the silence. “You heard him!” The Weeper
roared, cutting in for Jon. “Get moving, you chicken-shits, or I’ll peel your eyes out!”

The men scrambled. Jon saw spearwives sprinting into position. Jon’s heart pounded, and he could only hope he was doing the right thing. *The Old Bear won’t waste men,* he told himself, *the Night’s Watch has too few of them. If they see a strong and unified defence, they’d retreat.*

*I need to force them to retreat - it's the only way to save lives.*

*Everyone’s lives. Theirs and ours.*

*The whole battle was unnecessary,* Jon cursed. *They should be fighting against the white walkers, not the wildlings.*

The Weeper was staring at him, with narrow eyes. “… We going to have a problem here, Snow?” He asked quietly. The way he pronounced ‘snow’ – it sounded so similar to ‘crow’.

“… No,” Jon replied. “No problem.”

The Weeper glared at him. *I can use Sonagon. I can scare them – end the battle before it begins.*

*Please, please, let them scare easily.*

Jon’s gaze flickered. He moved to step by the Weeper, when the man’s hands clutched Jon’s by the collar and dragged him to one side. All around them, there were people shouting and running. “… Snow,” the Weeper snarled. “… Answer me properly this time. *Do we have a problem here?”*

Jon gulped, trying to stare at the man’s crazed eyes, inches away. *I can’t fight against my sworn brothers.* Jon knew he couldn’t. And the Weeper could see it in his eyes.

“… Same rules apply,” Jon said, taking a deep breath. “Just like I said when we first met. If they don’t surrender, if they insist on attacking us, then we attack back.”

“I’d feel more confident about that if you met my eyes, Snow,” he snarled. “Your face is pale, and your hands can’t stop trembling. Now what am I looking at? Just another boy scared of his first battle? *Or do we have a problem?”*

*Damn, is it really so obvious? If I look like a craven then half the men here will abandon me on the spot.* Jon had to force himself to pull himself together.

*I’ve fought wights plenty of times, but going into a battle against living men... Good men...*

His hands were trembling and he couldn’t get them to stop. But what was the choice? Order the free folk to flee? That was just foolish. But which one will end up killing the most people? Fighting a battle or trying to run from it?

*No, the only way that everyone survives this is if that fleet is the one that is forced to flee.*

Jon forced himself to meet the Weeper’s gaze. Faint streams of blood trickled down from man’s eyes. *It’s the cold,* Jon realised. *The Weeper cries blood on cold nights.* “I’ll do my duty, Weeper,” said Jon. “You just do yours.”

Men were running everywhere, clutching weapons. The sun had fallen and it was already dark. The
clouds were thick and cold. *It’s a moonless sky,* Jon noted. A good night for an ambush.

“Furs! Haldur!” Jon ordered, pushing through the crowds and picking out the men. “Grab as many bowmen as you can find and get them up onto that ridge. We need burning arrows – aim for their sails. Hatch, Rolf, Erik, Yoldo – on me!”

“Aye, aye.”

The Weeper would have to lead the main body of men; he was the only one who could. The man was already assembling his warband, his screaming bellowing over the chaos. Still, the Weeper wouldn’t think about protecting the refugees, so Jon had to support him. “Find Bullden Horn, have him lead the flank,” Jon ordered to a nearby group of men. “And Old Man Harwick, have him form up near the caves at the rear.”

There were men running wild. Can’t let them lose control. “All shipbuilders!” Jon bellowed, so loud his lungs hurt. “On me! Any lumber or logs, drag them to that ridge as quickly as possible!”

“We won’t have time to build any decent wall, Snow,” Hatch warned.

He shook his head. “Not going to build a wall, we’re going to burn them.” A lot of effort had been put into gathering that much lumber, but there was nothing for it. “Burn the logs and roll them down the beach when ready. You think you can handle that?”

“Damn right I can.”

It was so hard to even think clearly in the noise of the camp. Jon hesitated, staring out over the horizon. They were getting closer. Jon could make out the striped hulls in the distance. What sort of ships had striped hulls?

He saw Alvin Whaletooth dragging up from the beach with his men. The sailor held a barbed spear and a thick leather shield, gathering his clan from the camp. “Alvin, can you make out their banners?” Jon shouted. "What flag are they flying?"

There was a long pause. “A stag,” Alvin said eventually, looking through his spyglass. “A stag in a red heart.”

“Well, they're sure not here to say hello,” Rolf growled, clutching two throwing axes. “Who the fuck are they?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. A stag in a red heart? The coat of arms was unfamiliar. Still, the stag was the sigil of the Baratheons – some division of House Baratheon maybe? Was this a part of the Royal Fleet? “… The Night's Watch sent out requests for aid,” Jon said finally. “I guess somebody else answered.”

How many? Twenty-four ships, with three hundred men in each one? They could easily be dealing with an army of seven thousand. A force of seven thousand knights could beat twice that number of barely organised wildlings.

The wildling’s boats would be useless against war galleys like those. They couldn't fight at sea; they would have to fight on land. The ships would have scorpions, spitfires and maybe even heavy catapults. Their bows would outrange the wildlings. From a range, they’d beat the wildlings.
And these are soldiers from the Seven Kingdoms, Jon thought. Maybe there are men from the north among them too. Maybe men from Winterfell. Good soldiers, answering a call to protect the realm. Men that don’t deserve to die…

A stag – that must mean Baratheon. Maybe the king himself, whoever that was now. Robert Baratheon had been a good friend of Winterfell. My father would curse me if I fought against the realm. To fight against the men my father lived, fought and died for…

He couldn’t stop his hands from trembling.

“Snow!” Someone shouted, rushing to him. “We’ve got Mother Mole and her bunch by the heart tree! They refuse to go to the caves.”

Damn, the heart tree is far too exposed, the refugees need to get to the caves. If the soldiers broke the beach, then they needed to keep all the refugees safe and out of the way, otherwise the battlefield could become too chaotic to fight. Jon was limping badly as he rushed. He had to strip off his soaking furs and cloak even as he walked. His leathers were still damp from the sea, and the cold wind felt like it stripped straight through him.

In the firelight, the shadows rippling, it looked like the heart tree was alive again. He could feel the crowd of people part around him as he walked.

Jon saw Mother Mole. The old woman was a shadowy figure as she clutched a bloody dagger in her hand. Jon heard squealing - the sound of goat crying in pain as the wood witch plunged a sharpened bone dagger into its chest. He heard the animal’s skin tear as Mother Mole ripped it open brutally, spreading its entrails over the roots as she chanted. The goat’s heart was placed in the heart tree’s mouth.

All around him, the crowd was chanting almost wordlessly as they huddled together. Between the darkness, the blood and the frenzy, it felt… savage… surreal. The weirwood’s bloody branches rustled in the darkness and the wind.

“… You need to retreat to the caves,” Jon said, his voice strangely turning quiet. “In case they breach the shore, you need to get to the caves.”

She didn’t reply for a long moment. Her eyes seemed distant, staring at the goat’s blood. In times of trouble, they sacrificed an animal, a goat or a sheep. Perhaps I’m lucky that it’s just an animal, Jon thought, there had been rumours.

There was the sound of frantic neighing. A sheep being dragged by another two followers to be sacrificed. Jon hesitated, staring upwards at the shadows and white branches rippling.

“They’ll come for you,” her wheezy old voice said, breaking the silence. Jon stared at Mother Mole, limping forward on a gnarly cane. “I’ve seen it. They’ll fight you with fire and false light, and they will not fall back easily. There is a power of their own on that ship. I’ve seen it – a witch as false and as bitter as smoking ash.”

Jon’s face flickered. The old woman spoke quietly, but every ear strained to listen. For a second, the old woman’s eyes seemed black in the torchlight. “But I promised salvation would be found in this place, and that is still true,” Mother Mole continued. “You will lead us away from the Long Night.”
“Get them to the caves,” Jon said. “They follow you, take them to the caves.”

“... We will. If it puts your mind at ease, then we shall retreat...” She muttered. “Yet the Old Gods shall fight with you, King Snow, I promise it. Let the darkness be your armour and your cloak... Let the shadows protect you...”

Jon froze, glancing around. He could hear the thump of footsteps, of free folk banging against their shields. There was no time, he had to go grab his heavy leathers, bronze disk chainmail and his shield before the battle.

Up on the cliff, he saw burning arrows and firepits being lit. The ships were still out of range, but not far now. The best of their bowmen were firing the first arrows, testing the distance.

“Snow!” A wildling shouted, running forward. “We got outriders at the perimeter! There are people in the forest!”

“Our?”

“Aye, refugees!”

“Then get them to help or keep the bloody bastards back!” The Weeper cut in, surrounded by armed men clutching torches and axes. “We got ships nearing the beach right now!”

**Outriders. Val’s host.** Jon had known they had been nearby, they must be climbing up Storrold’s Point right now. *Was there enough time to get them in as reinforcements? No, probably not.* There was barely enough time for Jon to strap his leathers on him. It would be freezing, but Jon did without his cloak. He saw men rushing around him in frenzy.

“We got a problem!” Hatch bellowed. “That bloody fool - the Lord of Seals is trying to save his damned boats.”

“What?!” Jon and the Weeper shouted together. The chaos felt overwhelming. So many running, so much happening at once.

Hatch pointed. “Him and his men have gone to the boats, to try and get them to safety!” he shouted. “They’re taking them out to sea!”

Jon could have pulled his hair out. The fool. He could see the Lord of Seals and his men on the coast, stealing quite a few shipbuilders as well. Ordering people he had no right to order. Maybe two hundred men, trying to get the half-constructed boats and barges out of the way. They would be easy targets for the fleet. The Lord of Seals had taken two hundred men and left them totally exposed.

What to do? Try to pull them back? No, half of them are already pushing the boats into the water. *I need to get them out of the way faster.* Jon cursed, but the Lord of Seals left him no choice.

“Alvin!” Jon bellowed, looking for Alvin Whaletooth. “Devyn! Byrd! Take your men and get down there and help that fool. Get them out of the way as quickly as possible.”

“Aye,” Alvin replied, grabbing his sailors and starting to run, but there was a hint of relief in his voice too. Alvin had ships at risk on the beach too.

*There still won’t be time,* Jon realised. He could see the shadows of the galleys rolling along the
dark waves. He could see the torches and the movement on their decks. The barges would be crushed by proper war galleys that size. I’ve got to push them back, give us more time to organise a proper defence…

“We need your dragon, Snow,” the Weeper growled, echoing Jon's thoughts. “Get that bloody beast in the fight – time for the monster to earn its stay.”

Could Sonagon fly? Probably, but his wings are still tender. The dragon might not be able to fly for very long.

And one dragon against twenty-four ships. A fleet armed with men with longbows and heavy scorpions. Sonagon was powerful, but he would have no protection in the air. Yet what other advantage do we have?

Jon could feel Sonagon now. The dragon was on his perch on the rocks off the coast, prowling softly but invisible in the darkness. Sonagon could smell the panic, his body tightening and a low growl in his throat.

Still, Jon hesitated. Something about this moment just felt wrong. The hairs on the back of his neck were tingling. The scar on his chest started to ache slightly.

Jon hadn't moved in several seconds. “Snow!” The Weeper snarled. “The dragon! Now!”

Jon blinked, staring up at the moonless sky. A dark night. A good night for an ambush. "Snow!"

For a second, amidst all the chaos and panic, it felt like everyone was running blind.

We were expecting raids tonight, he remembered with a chill running down his spine. “… The Others,” Jon said suddenly. “We know that the Others are in the forest right now. They’ve been building up for an attack for a long time. Think about it; if the white walkers see a battle happening here, what are they going to do?”

The Weeper paused, his face twisting. The Weeper was no fool. He must have felt something was off as well.

“… You think they’ll be attacking too?” The Weeper said after a pause.

“I think they’ll take advantage of the distraction. We might be dealing with an attack from the forest too,” said Jon. “We can’t leave ourselves exposed to them, not even slightly.”

His hands clenched. His weeping eyes narrowed. “We’ve got to split,” he said with only the briefest pause. “I’ll take four hundred men and hold the camp perimeter. You and your dragon lead the rest and deal with them in the boats. Hardhome is defendable, we’ll hold them back.”

Jon shook his head. “It’s not us that I’m worried about,” he said, lowering his voice and stepping closer. “… What about those in the forest?”

The Weeper’s face twitched. “You mean the host Val leads?”

“Along with Rattleshirt, Harma, and Varamyr.” Jon nodded. “We’ve got fortifications. They’ve got nothing. They’re vulnerable.”
He caught Jon’s meaning. The Weeper growled throatily and shook his head. “Fuck ‘em,” he snarled. “Protect us and our own. We can’t help them.”

“They want to separate us,” Jon hissed, squaring up to the bigger man. The Weeper was twice his age and twice his size, but Jon knew he couldn’t back down. “The Others won’t let us organise; they’ve been waiting for the worst possible moment to ambush us – before we can join together. They ambush us in the forest too, they beat us on both sides and they break us again. We can’t let that happen. We fight together.”

The Weeper was glaring down at him, mad eyes wide. “You want me to abandon a nice, safe camp and run after those fools in the woods?”

“Protect them, Weeper,” Jon ordered, his voice as firm as he could make it. The Weeper was a maniac and a murderer, but right now they were on the same side. “All of them. Protect them.”

The man’s face twitched. “Take a thousand men. As many as you can gather,” said Jon. “Stop the ambush. Get as many people back to camp as you can.”

For a second, the Weeper looked ready to cut him. “… You know, I rea-llly…” The Weeper stretched out the word over his tongue. “… don’t like it when you give me orders like that, crow,” he warned.

“Pick a side,” Jon said darkly. “Are you with the living or the dead? You let them die or you save their lives.”

In this distance, a lone wolf howled. The sound rang out over the night. Ghost, Jon knew instinctively. The direwolf could smell the upcoming battle too.

The Weeper paused, scowling darkly. “I’ll go,” he said, his voice a whisper as he pushed up close to Jon. “… And when I get back, we’re going to have a long discussion about how you talk to me.”

“Happily.”

The Weeper stomped away, drawing his scythe into both hands. “Aggis! Marthe! Bullden!” The Weeper roared at the wildlings around him. “With me, now! Come on, you bastards, we’re going hunting! As many men as you’ve got! Harle! Devyn! Howd! Move it already, sheep-fuckers, we’ve got cunts to kill!”

Few things could get the free folk moving like the sound of the Weeper screaming. The Weeper knew every man he was bringing by name as he tore through the crowd, selecting his warband man by man.

“Keep them alive!” Jon shouted. “Val, Harma, Rattleshirt, Varamyr – protect them. We need as many free folk leaders as we can get.”

“Aye,” the Weeper snapped. “You just worry about those ships and that dragon!”

That I can do, Jon thought with a gulp. Plenty of worry here. He turned to stare at the sails in the distance, but coming closer quickly. The Weeper would have to take the best of their fighting men. If they breach the shore, then the whole camp is in trouble, Jon thought. I stop them from reaching the camp.
He closed his eyes, feeling the presence of Sonagon, Ghost and Phantom in his third eye.

Phantom would be too hard to control, and too flighty with all the panic. Instead, Jon just left the shadowcat to cower by the cliffs, watching over the perimeter. Phantom could smell blood in the air.

Ghost could handle himself. The direwolf was familiar enough with the raiders to follow the warband, and maybe Jon could observe the battle in the forest through Ghost’s eyes. The direwolf was nervous, tense, but right now Jon needed the dragon more.

Jon could feel Sonagon growling, perched onto the rocks as he stared out over the harbour with inhuman vision. The dragon was invisible in the darkness, but Jon knew he was there.

The free folk were all scared. The last time ships had attacked Hardhome, it had been a massacre that stained the ground for six hundred years.

Everywhere Jon looked, he saw pale faces staring at him. Looking at him for protection. So many of those people were wearing white stones on their cloaks, Jon noted.

*Be strong*, Jon told himself, taking a deep breath. *Fight for them. Fight for the living.*

“Free folk!” Jon shouted, drawing Dark Sister in a smooth motion. “Everyone stand together! This is our home, and this our future! We fight so that our children can see the next summer, we fight for spring!” He met their eyes, still limping forward towards the cliffs. *Dammit, my leg feels so stiff.* “We stay together! We fight together!”

There were no cheers. Jon didn’t know what he was expecting. Instead, he just saw hard faces illuminated by the torchlight. He just walked forward to the cliffs, willing himself to move.

The ships were close now. So close that the first of the bowmen started to fire on them from the cliffs around the beach. The free folk archers could help distract the soldiers on the fleet from the dragon.


He felt his dragon stir, accepting Jon so easily. Jon gasped, and suddenly he was staring out through a dragon’s eyes.

An image flickered through his head. The image of Jon sitting on top the dragon’s back. It had only ever been in his imagination before. *I need to direct the battlefield,* he thought. *I need to fly.* The thought alone made his knees weak.

The roar was so loud it shook the earth. It felt like the howl of a storm rushing over him. The free folk all gasped. For a second, Jon could even swear that the rowers on the ships faltered.

Sonagon roared as he lumbered forward. His wings outstretched slowly, gingerly, flapping in the breeze. Jon could feel the dragon’s pain from trying to fly on tender wings, but the urgency soaked through to the dragon too.

*It’s time to fly again,* Jon thought, unconsciously holding his breath.

Sonagon crashed downwards, wings outstretcing wide to catch himself before he hit the water.
With an immense boom, the wind hit him and the dragon was soaring over the waves.

Jon felt the jolt of pain from Sonagon as the air collided with wounded wings, but that was overwhelmed by the pure exhilaration. The dragon’s muscles felt weak, weary after recovering from his injury, but he was still so, so strong. With a single flap, the dragon pounded towards the coast.

Jon was moving forward even before he quite knew what he was about to do. His heart was beating in his chest harder than ever before as he stepped towards the cliffs. For a second, Jon was staring out of two sets of eyes.

The dragon slammed into the beach so hard that the ground shuddered. There were screams of shocks, curses, or prayers from the wildlings, but there was no time. The men on the ship would see the dragon too now, and Jon wanted to use all the element of surprise.

Sonagon twisted his head towards Jon, coming so close his horn scraped against the beach and caused rifts of sand and rock to scatter. Jon saw the rope flapping off the dragon’s horn, and he grabbed a hold with both hands. He had to drop his shield to climb up. The hemp rope was soaking wet; cold, worn, but strong. He had to wrap his hand around it, and then suddenly the jerk of Sonagon’s head took him off the ground. The earth seemed to just fall away from him with a slight movement of the dragon’s long neck.

The world blurred. Jon was left flapping as the dragon twisted on the beach, swinging against hard, pointy scales. Jon’s muscles strained as he dragged himself upwards, levering against the rope to pull himself onto Sonagon’s head. All around him there were shouts and cheers, but Jon could only focus on the dragon in front of him, struggling to cling on tightly as he wrapped himself between the horns. The wind felt like a hurricane.

Even before Jon got a grip, Sonagon was already extending his wings again, flapping upwards with great, powerful strikes. Jon was left half-flailing, hanging on for dear life as the world dropped away before him.

The whole world seemed to blur. The force of that first beat of wings was beyond intense, so powerful it felt like the sky itself dropped down onto him.

Suddenly, they were rising up off the ground. Jon could see the entire camp, the entire peninsula, taking shape beneath him. The fires dotted around, like pinpricks of light in a sea of shadow. Jon gaped, struggling to breathe as the cold air hit him.

Jon focused on the ships through Sonagon’s gaze. The men inside were screaming more than anyone. They were all looking upwards, at the behemoth of a dragon rising above them. Jon gasped and sputtered, staring down at the fleet from atop Sonagon’s head.

*Even the living*, he thought. *Always the living.*

“Dracarys!” Jon screamed, clinging to Sonagon’s horn with one arm and Dark Sister in the other. “Dracarys!”

Sonagon roared, pulling his head backwards before shooting forward and exhaling. Powerful wings cracked like thunder. The white flames shone as bright as a shooting star in the night.

The ocean froze.
The world was trembling.

Davos could feel the fear in his gut, like a frozen lump of lead pressing on his spine. The shouts and screams from the boat, mixed with the steady beat of the drums for the rowers were slowly reaching fever pitch.

“Row!” The helmsman shouted, as the coxswain pounded his drums. “Row! Row!”

The smell of sweat stuck over every surface. The ships were chanting, trying to stay in formation. The rowers hoisted as one, while every soldier held shields and swords tightly. They had built a shieldwall over the rigging to cover the deck, but even at the very last moments men were running to smear planks with tar, or reinforce their cover.

They were on Salladhor Saan’s flagship, a great galleas, the Valyrian, at the head of the fleet. Twenty-two ships flanking around them, sailing in as close formation as they dared in the uncharted waters. The other six from Salla’s fleet had been left behind along with the queen at Eastwatch. Three hundred rowers on the Valyrian alone, all rowers pounding furiously at they picked up speed preparing for the tack around the cape. Davos could feel the rowers from every ship in the fleet causing the ocean to vibrate.

The sky was pitch black and the waters were dark and swirling. The sailor in Davos felt himself curse; he didn’t envy the captain’s job right now. Any hidden rock off the coast could threaten them all.

The Night’s Watch had offered a ship of their own, the Blackbird, for the fleet, but as a token gesture more than anything. They simply didn’t have the numbers for a meaningful contribution to the naval assault. The sworn brothers were most familiar with the waters than anyone, though, and so a dozen sailors from Eastwatch had been scattered to assist their navigators on other vessels, while Cotter Pyke captained the Blackbird on the rear rank.

They were close enough that they could see the campfires now. The entire peninsula was lit. The shadows of the fires highlighted the flickering shapes of men. It was already past dusk, and they had to light the torches at the prows. They always knew that the wildlings would see them coming, but by timing it correctly then hopefully the camp would have less than two hours to prepare for their arrival.

The fleet was in good formation. They moved in four ranks of either five or six vessels, although slightly skewed trapezoidally so that when they turned they could beach at once. The Valyrian, the flagship, took the second rank flanked by the Bird of a Thousand Colours, Old Mother’s Son and the Shayala’s Dance. It would have been too dangerous to take the Valyrian on the front row, Davos had argued, yet the flagship still needed to be towards the front and centre.

Davos commanded on the Valyrian, under Stannis himself, while Ser Justin Massey, Ser Ormund Wylde, and Lord Sweet commanded the other ships on their rank. Lord Axell Florent commanded the rear two ranks from the Bountiful Harvest - larger cog, not a war galley - much to the lord’s chagrin, yet it gave Stannis an excuse to respect the lord’s status while keeping him out of the thick of the fighting. Justin Massey, commander of the Old Mother’s Son, also gave Davos some pause – he considered the young knight to be too inexperienced for such a charge – yet Ser Justin was loyal and of high birth, and Stannis needed to reward him for his service.
Still, everyone knew that it would be the front rank that would face the hardest charge. The four ships at the very front would need to establish the beachhead. Nobody said it, but it was no coincidence that the majority of the knights and mounted men were travelling in the second rank while mostly enlisted soldiers and men-at-arms took the front rank. The front rank could take the brunt of the casualties and leave the beach open for the second. The ships at the front were the Saathos Saan, the Oledo, the West Allure and the Ariel Gail – they were all cogs or older vessels, still seaworthy and strong, but also ultimately expendable. The man in command of the forward vanguard was a landed knight Ser Clayton Suggs. Personally, Davos found Ser Clayton to be a despicable man, but there was no doubting his bravery to lead front line assault like that.

Even the sight of the horizon of campfires made Davos’ knees weak.

“How many?” Stannis demanded.

“Hard to say,” Davos replied, forcing his voice to stay level. “The Lord Commander guessed fifteen thousand.” It looks like more, he added silently.

Davos was no tactician, but he could see a hard battle. The wildlings were well fortified. To attack from the coast will leave us vulnerable from the cliffs, he thought. The landing will be an uphill struggle.

The problem with any naval assault was always the landing. The difficulty was getting the ships onto the beach and as many men out of those ships as quickly as possible. Once a proper beachhead had been established it could be a more even fight, but until then it was perilous. Charging into unknown terrain at a disadvantage.

“Ser Richard will lead the charge,” Stannis said. “I shall command the rear. Lord Davos, you will command the reserve.”

“Yes, your grace.” Davos knew little about leading men in battle. His first battle had technically been at the Blackwater, as disastrous as that was, but even then Davos had fell quickly. Even if the Hand of the King was technically leading the reserve, Davos had little choice but to leave leading the men to the knights Ser Patrek or Ser Godry Farring.

The reserve is important too. Should the battle turn sour, then the ships had to be ready to grab men and flee. Davos had spent hours obsessing over the possibilities; how to direct their ships, their formation. So much depended on the terrain and the weather, so much that could go wrong. Even a single unlucky rock or stray current could cripple galleys of this size in waters like these. Let alone trying to navigate and control them all in darkness…

“Milord, the Bountiful Harvest is falling behind,”’ Davos’ son, Devan, reported as he stared through his spyglass. “They’re trailing towards the port rear.”

His boy looked so tall and handsome clad in his squire’s raiment and surcoat, standing by the king. No, Davos thought, right now Devan isn’t my son – he’s acting as the king’s squire. Focus on my duty.

Damn, the Bountiful Harvest always struggled on the upwind turns. Too much bulk and not enough masts, Davos thought with a grimace, but Lord Florent should still be keeping it more in line.

“Signal the Ghiscari Prince to take up the slack,” Davos ordered. “Keep the formation close to starboard.”
They’d be dealing with arrows from the coast on the portside shortly, Davos needed to keep their defence tight on that side. He signalled to the spotted to pass the orders across. The whole deck was tense, anxious.

Still, Davos couldn’t help remember the last time he had been part of an assault like this. They had a much larger fleet at the Blackwater, but the memory of that ‘battle’ still sent shivers down his spine. *I lost four sons in that fire, and now my fifth sails with me for the next one.*

“This is folly!” A loud voice shouted. Salladhor Saan looked furious. His hands, clad in precious gemstone rings, shook angrily. “Folly!” He pointed a shaking hand at Stannis. “You promised me the wealth of King's Landing! Not to lose my ships in the godforsaken barbarian north.”

Stannis glared at the man. The pirate prince’s face twisted. There was a nervous ripple through the crew. Even pirates avoided wildlings.

Stannis never replied. His gaze was focused on the fires in the distance. He kept one hand on his sword, Lightbringer, clad and covered in its sheathe.

Three of Stannis’ guards, Ser Godry Farring, Ser Patrek of King’s Mountain and Ser Richard Horpe, stepped into block Salla. The knights made a formidable barrier - all broad-shouldered, well-armoured, with hard, stern faces. The pirate prince was not so easily dissuaded.

“Are you listening to me, Stannis?” Salladhor demanded. “You promised gold but give nothing but cold! Now you take my ships to war?” His eyes narrowed. “You promised that this would be an easy battle against savages. That does not look like an easy battle to me, Stannis!”

There were nervous glances around the crew. Everyone was on edge, but Davos’ stomach churned as he saw the ripple move through the pirates and sailors. The king’s men outnumbered the pirates ten to one, but somehow that didn’t make him feel better. This was still Salladhor’s ship, and they were all relying on the pirates and the sailors to man the ship.

“Be quiet,” Stannis said, his body and voice stiff. “You will have your due.”

“Oh aye?” Salladhor demanded. “Are there mountains of gold up in the frozen north that I cannot see? Will these savages have hordes of treasure after the battle? Or am I just risking my ships on another wasted cause?” He glared at him. “You *promise.* You make promises spew from your mouth in the same way I piss!”

Finally, Stannis turned. His eyes were angry. “Now is not the time,” he growled, turning to Ser Godry. “Take Salladhor here below deck and keep him there.”

The knight tried to grip him. Salla twisted with surprising grace. “No no no no,” the pirate lord muttered dangerously, eyes glinting. “You will not force me around, Stannis. Not here. Not on *my* ship.”

His hand raised. Suddenly, the sound of drums halted. The rowers all stopped with the coxswain. The Lysene men looked tense, nervous. Stannis’ men clung to the centre of the deck, around their king. They were all armed. Every pirate had a weapon close to hand too.

Stannis’ eyes burned. “Get your men moving,” he ordered.
Salladhor shook his head. “No. I am done with this folly. We either turn around right now or my
men will not make another step. My men. My ship.”

The Valyrian was gliding over the waters. Davos gulped. Without sailors to keep her steady, the
ship could easily wash onto the coast. To say nothing about the wildlings on the coast.

The other ships were watching the Valyrian too. As soon as the flagship stopped moving, the
others stopped as well. If Salladhor started a rebellion, it could claim all of their lives.

“… Your grace…” Davos warned, still watching Salladhor’s men. The pirates are all trained
killers. All eyes were alert on the rocking deck.

The king paused. “What are you trying to do here, pirate?” Stannis said, his voice low. Salladhor
swaggered closer.

“I told you, I deserve payment.”

“You will get it. But not now, not in battle.”

“You would leave me Salladhor the Beggar? I could have left you to die on Dragonstone, or to die
on the Blackwater. Payment is owed.” All laughter was gone from his face. He motioned to the
wildling camp. “Slaves. Good slaves will fetch high value in the Free Cities. Fill my ships with
slaves after the battle, and you will hire my services for this night.”

There was a dangerous glint in the pirate’s eye. Davos had known Salla for a long time, but that
glint still scared him. The pirate lord was not a man to cross, and for a second Davos might have
considered agreeing.

Still, Stannis never considered it for a second. “No,” he said. “There are no slaves in Westeros.”

“We’re not in Westeros, there is no law here–”

“I am here. I am the law.”

The pirate’s eyes flashed. “So that is that, then?” Salladhor muttered. “I get no reward for my loyal
service. Oh, poor Salladhor. You say there are no slaves, but clearly you expect me to labour and
serve like one. I will have it no longer.”

Stannis stepped forward, towering over the man. Everyone on deck was clutching weapons. “…
Salladhor Saan…” Stannis growled. “I promised you payment for your services, and payment will
be received – but treachery will only ever have one reward. Do not push me in this, pirate.”

The Lysene glared at him. “Turn my ships away from battle.” He didn’t back down.

Stannis never even hesitated. “Ser Godry, Ser Patrek, take this man to the brig,” he ordered,
clutching his sword. Salladhor tried to struggle, he opened his mouth to object. The two men
overwhelmed Salla easily, clutching him and dragging him with gauntleted hands. “Gag him,”
Stannis ordered, and Godry clamped the pirate’s mouth. The knight grunted as the Lysene tried to
bite him, but they both dragged him away.

The other pirates were drawing weapons, standing off against the king’s men. Stannis’ eyes were
solid as iron. Davos tensed. He expected a fight, a brawl, but instead the soldiers moved like
clockwork. Stannis’ soldiers were dispersed among the sailors, and they all had swords. They moved so quickly like they knew exactly what to do.

Davos was about to shout for men to stop the spotter from signalling the other ships in the fleet, but someone was already on it. Without even pausing, Ser Harys Cobb went straight to the drums and coxswain. Salla must have been counting on more of his men fighting for him in the confusion, but Stannis’ men gave them no chance.

“Any man that refuses to follow orders will be thrown overboard,” Stannis ordered, as his knights held swords to the pirate’s throats. “Lord Davos, you are now captain of this vessel. You are in command.”

Davos blinked. “… Yes, your grace.” The Valyrian was larger than any ship he had ever captained before. “Pull up the rear sails!” Davos ordered, stepping to the rudder. “Starboard from the coast!”

A few pirates tried to object, but the king’s men were on them quickly. “Get those drums beating!”

The coxswain refused to cooperate, but then two knights overpowered him and another man took his place at the drums.

Stannis’ men must been have shadowing the officers on Salla’s ship, waiting for the signal. The officers and captains might try to side with Salla, but the common sailors and rowers were mostly press-ganged in any case. Without anyone to signal, the other ships in the fleet wouldn’t even know about the coup. Davos had never seen a mutiny so smooth or well-executed.

It took five minutes before they were moving again. In total, ten men had to be forcefully removed, but the rest complied with the new command. Stannis’ men were ruthless, while Davos struggled to simply get his bearings.

They were approaching Hardhome quickly. They were on the other side of the cape, but tacking with the wind around the bend. Davos could see the wildlings getting rushing, fires and torches rushing. The wildlings have no siege weapons or ballistae, Davos realised. They would shortly encounter arrows from the cliffs, but otherwise the wildlings would have try and repel their landing on the ground.

Stannis walked up to Davos, eyes fixed ahead. Davos frowned, glancing at the king. Across the boat, Lady Melisandre slowly walked up onto the deck, staring in the distance. Even in the dark night, the priestess seemed to glow. The men rippled slightly with her presence. Her eyes were distant as she stared at the fires on the coast. Lord Florent had offered to keep her with him at the rear flank, but Lady Melisandre had insisted on travelling on the flagship by the king.

“… Once again, the Red Woman proves her worth,” the king said, after a long pause, to Davos. “Lady Melisandre warned me of the pirate’s betrayal. She saw it in her fires.”

Davos blinked. “You knew he would object?”

Stannis nodded. “I made preparations.”

No wonder it had been over so fast. The knights must have been forewarned. Salladhor had clearly been betting on more confusion and hesitation when he tried to take control. Davos blinked. Stannis must have warned two dozen knights and petty lords, but not him. “… I was not aware.”
“You have always been sceptical of the Red Woman’s prophecies, Lord Davos,” Stannis replied. “And I was advised that your friendship with the pirate may cloud your judgement. If it did not come to pass, then I saw no reason to concern you.”

‘Advised’, Davos thought. Advised by Axell Florent and his cohorts, no doubt. Still, there was nothing to do but not and accept it. “What do you want me to do, your grace?” Davos asked.

“Keep the crew in order,” Stannis ordered. “Nothing has changed. None of the other ships need to know about Salladhor’s mutiny until after the battle.”

“Yes, your grace.” Davos wondered briefly if it was really mutiny if the man mutinying actually owned the ship, before shaking the thought out of his head.

Stannis stormed into the middle of the deck. “We’ll be in bow range shortly!” he shouted. “Get shields up and bowmen ready to return fire! Send the signal to man the scorpions and spitfires. All others off the deck.” The king looked at Melisandre, lowering his voice. “My lady, you should return below deck.”

“I am quite safe here, your grace,” she replied with a faint smile.

“Are you sure? There will be arrows.”

“The will of R’hllor is powerful here, your grace. He will protect me.”

All around them, knights swarmed with more large shields, holding them in position on the rigging to cover bowmen on the deck. Sailors raced to cover the ship in wet pelts and position buckets of water to stop fires. The sails had been smeared with tar and vinegar to prevent burning arrows from spreading.

Melisandre smiled at Davos. “Come, Onion Lord,” Melisandre offered. “Come take shelter under the grace of the Lord of Light.”

Davos approached with hesitation, staring at the priestess in suspicion. She seemed happy, as if excited, and something about her knowing smirk put Davos on edge. He couldn’t help but remember the last time he had led a fleet into battle, at the cursed Blackwater. Had Melisandre been smiling then too?

Still, he went to her. I’m standing by my king, he thought to himself. Not her.

Davos couldn’t help but notice that he felt warmer just by being next to her. The air was bitingly cold, but it was like the closer he stepped to Melisandre the less he could feel the chill. The ruby around her throat shimmered in the torchlight.

They stood by the masts, watching the cliffs of Hardhome come into focus. The first arrow twanged in the air, but it was fired far too early. The arrow splashed into the water two hundred feet away from them.

“Prepare to beach, Lord Davos,” the king ordered. “Ser Harys, ready the siege weapons. I will ready the knights.”

They carried horses in the lower hull, but it would be too cumbersome to easily dismount them, and even worse to ride the horses up the steep slope. Instead, the king had resolved to win the battle
using siege weapons and ballistae to clear the beach to establish a proper footing, and long
catapults to devastate the camp.

The front rank contained mostly infantry, yet the larger vessels of the second had been outfitted
with heavy weaponry. Most of their time at Eastwatch had been preparation and building siege
engines.

The Valyrian had a dozen large, powerful scorpions mounted on the deck with much further range
than a longbow, capable of firing bolts that that could skewer a man. Personally, though, Davos
thought so many scorpions were a mistake – the bolt launchers were fantastic at naval combat, but
not so good for firing upwards from a rocking boat against infantry.

Their spitfires were far better. The spitfires on the Ghiscari Prince, Shayala’s Dance and the prow
of the Valyrian could hurl pots of burning oil nearly as far, and the flames could be devastating
against any beach force trying to repel them.

The Old Mother’s Son and the Bird of a Thousand Colours, though, had been outfitted with
lumbering catapults on the prow – rock launchers so heavy that Davos could see the ships
struggling with the weight of them during the turns. The catapults were nightmarish to aim and
they had limited ammo, but also the most powerful weapons they had; they could fire casks of
burning oil, large stones, or barrels of jagged iron shards. The men on had even been hoarding the
contents of their chamber pots during the journey; so they could launch foul waste during the first
testing shots.

“Raise the flare!” Davos ordered to one of the men. “Ready the ballistae. Those cliffs. Now.”

Ever since Eastwatch, everyday, the crew had been rehearsing the actions. The scorpions had the
most ammo and the longest range – they could be fired first for covering bolts, along with
longbows as soon as they came in range. While the first rank prepared to beach, the second would
sit it in the bay and fire heavy weapons, and the third would support from the side. The men all
looked pale and scared, but they moved through the practiced motions – clear, twist, hoist – like
clockwork.

“Hold,” Davos ordered, as they loaded up long bolts covered in oil-soaked rags. Flaming bolts
longer than a sword. “Steady and hold. Wait for a clean shot.”

The fleet was rocking on the waves. The beach came into view from their torchlight. It was rocky,
leading up a sharp incline.

“Signal the Oledo to ready for landing,” Davos instructed the signaller hunched in the crow’s nest.
“We land second, but fast. The third line can flank us, tell the Bountiful Harvest that the fourth
stays in reserve.”

“There are boats on the shore!” Their spotter called, ducking low and carrying a shield.

“Prepare the spitfires.” The firmness of Stannis’ voice was like a rock amidst the growing panic.
“Burn the ships first. All commanders to their divisions.”

More arrows were firing from the cliffs. He saw the burning tips flashing through the air. The
furthest of them stabbed into the ship’s hull. The wood was hard and soaked with salt. It wouldn’t
burn easily, but there was always a chance. Davos shuffled slightly further behind the shieldwall,
but Melisandre wrapped her arm around his, holding him still with a sweet smile.
“Have faith, Onion Lord,” she said softly.

“I’d prefer to have a shield, m’lady,” he replied, wriggling free to take a pre-emptive cover behind the shield wall built up on the port side of the deck. The arrows were getting closer. The sailors had to be on deck to main the rigging, and the captain had to be here to instruct them, but with every arrow it became just a little bit more dangerous.

*Almost there.* Right now they were just giving covering fire, to conserve their ammo. As soon as the Oledo was ready, the bombardment and assault would begin. Ahead, he could hear the sound of shouts as they engaged with the boats in the bay.

The front rank had already engaged the boats. With every wave, the second rank got closer. *Our turn soon.*

It had been so simple when they planned and rehearsed the movements. Who would fire first, who would follow, all of the actions and plans. Stannis had been through the battle plan and so many variants tirelessly. Now, in the middle of it, the fear in the night felt so thick that Davos was struggling to even remember his role.

Davos’ hands were shivering. He had never known such cold before.

“It is not too late to embrace the Lord of Light,” Melisandre said, her voice ringing through the shouts of sailors and soldiers.

“I’m sure it’s not, m’lady.” Davos’ eyes narrowed. There were arrows coming towards them. He had never known Melisandre to walk into danger before. “… Why are you on deck, m’lady?”

“I want to watch.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“I’m sure it is.” She seemed vaguely amused by his concern. Davos hesitated, but they were still a good distance away from the beach. They would have to go around the peninsula and turn into the shore to position.

*Damn, it is the waiting for the battle that is agonising.* The moments spent just frantically watching the coast come into view. Davos wished he could just push the ship to make it go faster.

“You say you’ve seen how this battle will go?” Davos said finally. “In your fires?”

She smiled softly. “You’re an interesting man, Lord Davos. A cynical man with the uttermost faith in his king. I wonder, why are you so reluctant to accept the Lord of Light?”

*Because your god burns people alive,* he thought. “I’m no believer.”

“Like I said, it’s not too late to embrace the one true god.” She smiled, staring out over the horizon.

There were two snaps of wire behind him. Davos raised a hand, and the scorpions fired flaming bolts into the cliff. One of them went high, and the other one missed in the darkness. The other galleys were firing too. Men with longbows supported the heavy weapons, firing arrows upwards into the cliffs. If they were lucky, the burning bolts could set tents and structures alight.
They’re nearly around now. Coming into the bay at any moment.

“How did you see this battle going?” Davos asked, glancing at the rippling shadows. More arrows were whizzing past them, or thudding into the shields covering the deck.

She smiled wistfully. “I saw a great battle of ice. A battle of darkness. A battle of where all true believers must rally against the cold.” She looked at Davos. “Like I said, it’s not too late. Not yet.”

“I see a camp of disorganised wildlings,” said Davos. “A large camp, sure, but Stannis seems to think a well-disciplined force can rout them.”

“Really? Because I see a dark night.” Her ruby glittered softly. “This dark night is full of terrors. I have seen them. I have told Stannis about them too. You will see the terrors too.”

Davos frowned. They would need to tack soon, lest the current sweep the ships into disarray, but Davos hesitated. Something about Melisandre’s voice made him pause.

“I wonder if you will still be a non-believer after you’ve seen the terrors for yourself,” Melisandre mused. “Fear does have a way of bringing out the believer, after all. Are you scared, Lord Davos?”

“Very much so, m’lady,” he replied.

“Not yet.” Her words were soft. She turned to stare out over the black sea, slowly walking towards the prow.

“M’lady, take cover! The arro–” Davos shouted warningly, but then the world trembled. The noise hit them so hard that the water rippled, like a crack of thunder. All around him, the Lysene sailors shouted warnings that Davos couldn’t recognise.

“A storm?” Davos exclaimed, staring over the horizon. It was so dark he couldn't see much beyond the lights of the camp. The wind had been so smooth.

“Yes, a storm.” Melisandre opened up her arms wide, shimmering like a burning figurehead of the ship. Davos was suddenly reminded of the burning carving of the Maiden, flaming brightly on Dragonstone. “A cold storm. Look to your sins, Lord Davos, for the night is dark and full of terr–”

The roar shattered the earth.

Davos could feel the impact even from the sea. He could feel the air pound like the beat of the greatest drum ever built. There was no sense in it, no thought – he could just feel it like an ant felt an hurricane.

The sky split open. Davos was staring upwards, watching as the stars disappeared under an enormous shadow. He felt his legs give way and his body topple backwards.

White wings burst into the sky. The black shadow cast over the ship even in the darkness, and a whoosh of wind above them.

The Red Woman stared upwards, her arms wide. “… For the night is dark and full of terrors…” She muttered, so quiet it was only audible in that moment of stunned silence.
A gaping mouth opened, and cold, white light broke through the sky.

The world turned into ice and blackness.

…

Davos heard screaming. It might have been him. He suspected that he screamed Devan’s name.

…

… Davos couldn’t breathe through all the panic. It felt like his heart was about to collapse. His hands were trembling. He had never trembled like this before.

The Valyrian jerked furiously, as it had just collided with a rock. He felt the wood groan and snap, and then up above him the whole sail was cracking against the wind. The men working the masts toppled out of the sky.

The deceleration was instant. The entire ship stopped moving with a tremendous crash. Davos felt himself flung bodily backwards, with men rolling like marbles. Only Melisandre, somehow, impossibly, managed to stay standing at the prow of the ship.

All around him, Davos was vaguely away of the temperature dropping like a stone. Cold steam billowed everywhere, blowing over the deck. The ship wasn’t moving, wasn’t even rocking, only creaking.

*The sea*, he realised dumbly. *The ocean is frozen solid."

In a single instant, the hull of the Valyrian was consumed by ice.

It was so cold Davos choked for breath. The condensation so thick that Davos couldn’t see a thing.

Screaming. He heard screaming. And roaring.

The white beast flew overhead, tearing over the fleet. Each pound of wings caused the thick, cold mist to billow. Davos glimpsed that white fire again, and then suddenly he saw the clouds of condensation explode over the ocean. Everywhere it touched, the ocean turned cold and froze. It didn’t freeze smoothly – the white fire caused the water to explode, and then froze it into jagged spikes of ice pluming outwards.

Where once there had been lightly rocking waves, Davos could see a huge, snaking path of jagged ice twisting between the ship. The whole ocean was freezing as the beast shot between them.

First, the front rank shuddered. He saw the Oledo collapse into an iceberg, frozen as it was about to capsize. Then, the dragon twisted and shot diagonally, cutting through the second and third ranks. The frozen fire went everywhere.

The Valyrian shuddered. They were caught between wind and waves and ice. The whole ship was twisting dangerous, grinding against jagged ice. He could hear wooden planks snapping.

The whole ship was pure panic. Davos had never known panic like it. It was like all rational thought stopped working and every man was reduced to primal instinct. Like rats running mad.
“For the night is dark and full of terrors!” Melisandre shouted suddenly, her voice cutting through all other sounds. With the clouds billowing around her, but her body illuminated by an alien red glow, she looked like some figure out of a story. Like she had walked straight out of scripture. “The Great Other arises and brings ice, darkness and death, but all believers must unite and fight against the night! Lightbringer, our saviour, will stand for the dawn!”

It shouldn’t have been possible for her voice to be that loud. Her voice suddenly overpowered every other sound, even the mammoth beating of wings, but it reached every corner of the bay. Unnaturally loud.

Davos was still trying to make sense of the world when he heard the chant.

“For the night is dark and full of terrors! For the night is dark and full of terrors!”

From across the deck, he couldn’t hear the men shouting. The queen’s men started the cry, but even the king’s men were joining in. Even the rowers and sailors were chanting and gasping.

Davos gasped, clutching at the rigging and trying to stop himself from trembling. Vaguely, he saw Ser Harys Cobb, a king’s man, stare upwards with frantic eyes. “… My god…” Ser Harys gasped. “… Lord of Light… The Red Woman is right… it’s real…”

In the distance, the monster flew away down the coast, but Davos could glimpse it twisting in the air. Turning around for another pass. In a single sweep half the ships had been crippled. The cold mist hissed around them, cold enough to strip wood.

Davos saw Stannis charge from below deck. The king clambered over the rocking ship, his face pale and his eyes wide, but he was clutching Lightbringer tightly. The sword had never shone so brightly before. It was so bright it was blinding.

“Rally the men!” Stannis bellowed at the top of his lungs. “Archers! Ballistae! Bring that monster down!”

They were all chanting. Even as the men looked half-scared to death, and clattering over the shuddering ship, they were chanting, “For the night is dark and full of terrors! For the night is dark and full of—”

The sound of the roar overhead caused every man to shudder. The beast was circling around, directly over them.

Davos gasped for breath, staring upwards as he felt the rush of air from beating wings hit him. A dragon, he realised dumbly. A white dragon.

Melisandre had called it the champion of the Great Other. The night is dark and full of terrors. Davos had never felt terror like it.

The ship shuddered. The sound of wood snapping broke everything back to focus. The deck was tilting around him. We’re against the ice – we’re going to capsize.

“Pull the sails in!” Davos shouted suddenly, trying to be heard. The sailors were running scared, while the soldiers were flanking around Stannis with sudden fervent faith. “Sails to port, sails to port – the ice, the ice!” Davos screamed.
But it was too late; the whole ship was creaking, tilting and taking on water. The wind pushed it against the jagged ice and the hull spilt. The world twisted and the ship crunched.

Still, the soldiers never stopped. As the dragon came around again, even as their ships were falling to pieces, Stannis held Lightbringer high and the arrows loosed from every bowmen in the fleet. They were mere minutes away from plunging into ice and water, but they all stopped to fire. Even the catapults were launched and the great limbs slung forward, even though there was no chance they’d actually hit. Davos saw men so mad with faith that they let go off their handholds to notch a bow and fire upwards.

Even arrows that weren’t covered in oil or burning rags suddenly seemed to catch alight. Every single arrow was on fire as they shot upwards like hundreds of shooting stars. The Red Woman was glowing.

Davos saw Lightbringer flash as burning arrows shot through the sky. Melisandre had her arms raised, and suddenly the sword in Stannis’ hands flashed like red lightning.

The dragon roared as the red flash hit it. The arrows and bolts pierced into its body, and into its wings. The roar shook the ocean and white fire burst madly. Davos saw spikes of ice and cold shoot everywhere; freezing tidal waves into jagged icebergs, immense clouds of cold mist billowing.

The dragon was crashing – diving towards the ocean as its wings folded inwards. The ship was capsizing and cracking against the ice, tilting so furiously the men tipped off as shards of wooden splinters broke into the air.

A cask of burning oil exploded against the dragon, highlighting the scene in glowing flames. Davos only briefly glimpsed a figure on the dragon, riding on its head, clutching its horn. He remembered Melisandre’s words. That moment seemed to freeze just before he fell. It’s true, he thought. A young boy, with white hair and grey eyes. The champion of winter.

That was the last thing he remembered before he fell downwards, crashing onto jagged ice along with the rest of the king’s men.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The battle for Hardhome, on the bay and in the forest.

Val

The world was screaming.

Val ran blindly, clutching the baby in one hand and her sword in the other. All around her, the bodies thrashed and flailed between the trees, but it was so dark she couldn’t even see who was attacking who.

The babe never stopped screaming. He was a pale, fragile thing, with delicate bones and pale skin. Skin that had never seen the sunlight, and maybe never would. The babe had been born screaming, and could possibly die screaming too.

Only an hour old, and already fighting for his life.

The child was still bloodied and naked, bundled in as many cloaks and furs as Val dared lest he suffocate. Dalla was unconscious, but she was carried between two men staggering with her between them. Her sister was still bleeding, blood staining her breeches. Harma ran at the front, clutching a maul in one hand and a torch in the other.

Her sister was alive, but left so weak from childbirth that she had to be carried. The midwives had done their job, Dalla survived, but so, so fragilely. Craster’s wives ran with them, huddled and cold, along with Gilly and her babe. Gilly was young and wild eyed, keeping next to Val for support, while Harma’s warband flanked them from the sides.

They had gathered maybe three dozen free folk to them. Val kept on calling for more to rally to them, yet more would fall away every second as well. They had women and children running in the centre, while their few remaining warriors tried desperately to cover them.

“Keep together!” Val bellowed, trying to shout over the screaming. “Keep together!”

She knew it was useless. Her voice was just one more in the orchestra of chaos. She was trying to get men to rally, while all around her others were bellowing to attack, or screaming for them to run for their lives.

In the darkness, it was difficult to tell the crows from the free folk, or the dead from the living. Only their eyes gave them away. The blue eyes shining in the blackness.

She saw a body lunge out of the shadows, shambling towards them. A wight, a large man covered in ragged furs and hoarfrost, staggering on a broken leg. Harma bellowed, shouting for Val to get back. Harma’s maul was fierce, the stone head shattering the wight’s skull open in a single blow. Val heard the sound of bone cracking as its brains splattered over.
Still, the wight barely even staggered. Even with half of its head collapsed, it still tried to lunge at Harma with black, powerful hands. It clawed at her face, right until another free folk slammed a torch into the wight. Even as it burnt, the thing was still attacking, trying crawl over the ground as its body burnt to cinders.

There were more wights all over the forest. It was less a battle and more just a constant brawl scattered through the trees. A moonless sky – a good night for an ambush. The white walkers waited for the perfect time to launch their attack.

Val watched as she saw two crows trying desperately to hack apart a wight before it reached them. They were still hacking even as an ice spider, as large as a hound, dropped from the treetops and plunged its fangs through their head.

Everywhere Val looked, she saw blood and death. It's like the Frostfangs again, she realised, her blood turning cold. There’s inhuman intelligence behind the attack.

They used the wights as their main force – lumbering, but also strong and durable. The wights were scattered across the forest, chasing down the living, but it was the ice spiders that were the real danger. The ice spiders were precise, deadly and stealthy – stalking between the trees and always attacking from behind.

Val could feel her heart pounding furiously. The Others only had one goal here; kill as many living as possible. Each man or woman that died was another body for their army.

Val staggered through the woods, clutching the babe tightly. So much screaming. Her hands were trembling so madly, and it wasn’t just from the cold.

Behind her, two men at the rear of their group were dragged down by ice spiders the size of ponies. There was no time to go back to help them. Val kept on running.

“Hold! Hold!” A voice ahead of them shouted, through the darkness. “Fire! Steady! Hold! Fire!”

Val stared at the figures up ahead. Crows, she realised. The men of the Night’s Watch had gathered ahead – huddled defensively back to back on a small hill, surrounding a heart tree. The bloody face on the white bark looked like it was crying.

The crows had rallied better than the free folk. The crows had come to ambush the wildlings, but now they were being ambushed by the dead. There were barely a hundred crows gathered around the heart tree, fighting back wights from all sides using lances and torches.

One voice bellowed above the rest – a strong old voice from a man standing in the centre. “Burning arrows!” The old man bellowed. Even the crows looked terrified. “Light burning arrows! Set torches in the ground, hold the hill!”

“That’s the Lord Commander,” Gilly whispered beside her, wide eyed, clutching her babe tightly. The Night’s Watch were making their stand less than a hundred feet away, fighting for their lives.

They were screaming, Val saw. The crows looked absolutely terrified as the dead shambled towards them.

… Good, Val thought viciously. Let them scream.
“They’re distracting the white walkers for us,” Val said after a pause. “Let’s go.”

She saw Gilly hesitate, walking towards the crows slightly.

“Where?” Harma said. Her brow was dripping blood from where the wight scratched her.

“East, meet up with Rattleshirt – find the Magnar and his men,” Val ordered. “We need to stay together and move.”

Harma cast her a nervous glance. Sticking together wasn’t in their nature. They had too many weak, elderly and children with them. Dalla was so weak she could barely stand – it took two strong men to carry her. Val knew that by herself she could probably survive – she knew the forests better than most – but with a baby and her sister to slow her down? How long would it be before the fighters abandoned the weak to try and save themselves?

Panic and confusion were the worst foes imaginable.

_I’m not letting my sister die. Never. I’m going to give her a chance to hold her baby._

“Stay together,” Val repeated, looking at Harma. “No matter what, we stay together.”

Behind her, two of the crows tried to flee their formation, breaking into the woods. The Lord Commander shouted ‘craven’ at them, but they never lasted long before three ice spiders lunged at them from the trees.

“Nobody run!” The Lord Commander bellowed. He had a strong voice for one so old. “We stand together! We fight together! For the Watch! For the realm!”

It could have been inspiring, if not for one for the sound of agonising screams that howled in the backdrop. There were more shadows converging on them from the trees. The heart tree rippled around them.

Gilly hesitated, staring at the crows. “Come on, Gilly, move!” Val hissed.

She paused, glancing fearfully at the Night’s Watch. “… There’s a man I want to see again…” Gilly said under her breath, before rushing after Val.

They ran. Harma led the way, but there were more wights coming from every side. Men and women running blindly through the forest, stalked by lumbering shapes. Wolves would panic a herd, so the pack could pick them off one by one.

_It’s a hunt, she thought as a shiver ran down her back. They sent in their puppets first to scatter them. They know how to hunt the living._

Val felt them coming before she saw them. She felt the cold chill her bones.

Val turned, and the ghostly shapes glowed in the dusk. They walked over the snow and never left a mark, stepping gracefully between the bodies. An inhuman grace to every movement. Their swords were as delicate as glittering ice. Even in the dark, their bodies shimmered and their eyes shone like blue stars.
Val felt the world freeze with every step the Others took.

Three of Craster’s wives, both old women, dropped to the ground as they saw the Others. They didn’t stand up again. Val couldn’t go back for them.

The Night’s Watch was screaming for order as the Others approached. Their officers were bellowing for the men to stand firm, but the fear was thick in the air. The Others approaching the west, slowly, cutting down every living creature they saw as they walked through the forest.

The Others looked so bright, beautiful and terrifying that it took a long time for Val to see the hulking shapes flanking them. The shapes of beasts with rotting flesh and frozen blood

The undead giants walked with heavy, powerful steps, their bloody, rotten fur covered in hoarfrost. One of the giants was missing a head, but it still moved even with arrows sticking out of its fur. The army of the white walkers came in all shapes and sizes; from hulking giants to bears, boars, elks and wolves – all with glowing blue eyes.

*The crows are fools,* Val thought, staring at the force coming towards them. Standing firm might work against a few wights, but there was no barricade in the world that could stop the force the Others brought with them.

“Stand steady!” The Lord Commander bellowed, his voice hoarse. “Archers! Archers fi–”

The words were cut off as three giants shambled out of the gloom, charging into the formation of spears and shields. They each grabbed three flailing bodies, and flung them at the Night’s Watch with inhuman force. They launched wights like a siege engine launches boulders. Screaming, clawing boulders.

The flailing bodies were still moving even as they clattered into the centre of the crows. The impact was devastating. One wight was cut to pieces as it landed, but it still scrambled at the men.

The ranks broke. All discipline was lost. Confusion reigned supreme.

“Stay together! Stay together!” The Lord Commander bellowed, as the men ran to escape the flying dead. “Fold up, fall back, fold up–”

That was the last thing he said before another flailing body flung towards them. The Lord Commander raised his shield, but the solid impact of the thrashing corpse still sent him scattering to the ground. Two of his men tried to pull him upwards, but the corpse was biting and scratching even with limbs bent out of shape.

The Night’s Watch fell. Dozens of wights pouring out of the darkness, chasing them down. Val saw the undead giants pounding towards them, along with lumbering bears and rotting wolves. Ice spiders so large they could be used as mounts littered backwards, clicking and hissing next to their masters.

The Others just watched, occasionally speaking a language like cracking ice. *This is just a game to them. They watch and laugh.*

Val ran. They all ran. Everyone who could still run was running for their lives. All of them running east, away from the Others. They ran as fast as tired, sprinting legs could take them through the thick trees, darkness and uneven ground.
In the distance, a wolf howled.

Val heard shapes charging after them, cutting through the darkness. Inhuman shapes, on four legs, running faster than any man could. Val saw three wolves, a shadowcat, a boar and even a giant elk, all with eyes of blue, rotting skin and hoarfrost on their fur, chasing them down.

*We won’t make it to Hardhome, Val realised. Not all of us.*

Her grip tightened. For my sister.

“Take the babe!” Val ordered, pushing Dalla’s child towards Gilly. The girl looked startled, trying to clutch two howling children at once. “Take the babe and run! All fighters form up!”

Harma nodded, turning around with her. Val forced the men carrying her sister to keep on going, but there were about a dozen warriors and spearwives stopping with them. All eyes were grim. They knew they wouldn’t be able to outrun the dead.

The wight animals didn’t howl or snarl, they just charged and galloped with unnatural bloodlust. “Free folk!” Harma roared, swinging maul and torch together. “Free fol–”

The wolf pounced on her. She met it with fire, but sharp claws and fangs still snapped at her even as it burned.

Val swung her blade at another wolf as it lunged at a man next to her, and then a spear pierced a dead shadowcat that tried to take her from the side. Val couldn’t even keep track of it; undead creatures all around her charging against the free folk.

The great elk charged into them, taking three men down with its antlers as it barrelled through them. Its left antler cracked and snapped smashing against a man, but the beast was still trying to gouge another using its right. A blade cut off the creature’s left foreleg at the knees, but it was still squirming forward in a chaotic crash of bodies and muscle.

The wildlings fought furiously, but the dead never stopped. They never paused, they gave no quarter. The tide was relentless. More coming.

Val saw the shape of a frozen, rotting snow bear lumber above them, roaring furiously, and flanked by half a dozen wights. The snow bear’s fur was peeling off, its skin black with frozen rot, but the creature was large and powerful.

Val’s sword was trembling so badly she had to clutch it with both hands. She stood her ground, side to side with Harma against the beast. “… Dalla…” Val whispered. “… For Dalla… For Dalla…”

The bear charged. Harma met it straight on. She slammed her torch into its mouth and swung her maul into its skull, but the pure force of muscle still took her off her feet. Val heard Harma scream as sharp teeth mauled at her.

Val lunged, trying to save her friend. The bear’s fur was alight, but it was enough large enough it could still thrash as it burnt. Val’s sword bit into the bear’s neck, through frozen fur and dry flesh, but its paw swung. The paw hit her with bone-shattering force. Val heard the crack from her ribs, but she didn’t feel the pain. She felt too numb, too much adrenaline, for pain.
The massive bulk of muscle crashed downwards. Val watched it all with open eyes. She saw the paw swing to crack open her skull.

“… Dalla…” She whispered, watching the burning bear crash downwards. “… Dalla… Dalla…”

Sharp black claws glinted in the torchlight. For a second, her heart stopped.

All she heard was the growl as sharp teeth lunged.

A shape pounced over her. A white shape that burst out of the trees. Val could barely breathe.

A wolf, she realised suddenly. A white wolf – the largest wolf she had ever seen. So large it could knock the bear backwards.

The direwolf crashed into the bear, tooth and claw. Red eyes flashed against bright blue. The snow bear was still on fire, but the direwolf gnarled away at its legs until it crashed to the ground to burn into cinders.

Val was still lying on her back, staring with wide eyes. There were barely four of the wildlings still standing, but then that direwolf was there, pouncing into the wights. A wight wolf tried to snap at him, but the direwolf tore out its spine with a vicious growl and shook it like a rat.

That direwolf, Val thought with a frantic gasp. Her body was still shivering. I’ve seen it before.

Shouting behind her. More men were rushing out of the forest. Living men – clutching weapons and screaming furious war cries. Men charging to meet the dead, clutching torches and swords. Burning arrows fired from behind them.

A wight tried to shamble at Val. A burning torch and an axe tore it to pieces before Val could even stand.

“You alive, girl?” A voice snarled above her, glaring down. Val stared with wild eyes.

She recognised the scythe and watery gaze instantly. “Weeper?”

“Aye,” The man snarled, glaring at the shadows. “You done lying on your back, bitch, or are you ready to fight?”

“Go fuck yourself,” Val snapped, wincing as she clambered upwards, struggling to hold her sword through jagged breaths. The Weeper only grinned.

Harma, Val thought urgently, turning to stare at the bodies littering the ground. She saw her friend lying in bloody snow. She could see the deep scratches across her body where the bear mauled at her, its teeth in her shoulder. For a second, she looked like a corpse. Then, Harma gasped – choked, pained gasps of air.

“She’s alive,” Val gasped, clutching her friend tightly. Gods, Harma was a tough old bitch – she would survive. She would have to. She motioned to the Weeper. “Harma – Harma Dogshead. She’s alive.”

Val could see the Weeper growl. The Weeper had spent years fighting against Harma in the past,
for a frightening second Val thought he would leave her to die. “… Get her out of here!” The
Weeper snapped, pointing two men. “Get her onto one of the horses, get her back! And hurry, you
cunts!”

The men obeyed – most followed the Weeper’s orders promptly, else they could lose a limb if they
didn’t. Val snatched a torch of one of them, dropping her short sword into her belt.

In front of them, the direwolf howled as the wildlings slashed and burnt through the wights.

“What are you doing here?” Val demanded, still glaring at Weeper.

“Call me a saviour, bitch, I’m here to rescue you,” the Weeper barked with laughter.

_The Weeper saving my life_, Val thought. _It must really be the end of days._

“How did you find us?”

He shrugged, nodding at the wolf. “Follow the wolf.” He readied his scythe. “Can you fight?”

“Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to?” Val retorted, brandishing her torch like a club. She
needed fire more than the steel here.

All around them, the raiders were spiralling out of the trees. The Weeper’s war band – at least a
few hundred strong. A few hundred good free folk warriors that had come prepared to face their
foe.

“Set the trees on fire!” The Weeper ordered, screaming at his men.

“What?”

“The trees! Set the bloody trees alight!” He snapped. “We burn this fucking forest down if we have
to! I want a line of burning trees across here!”

The trees were pine – cold and covered in snow. They wouldn’t burn easily. A man started to
protest, when the Weeper grabbed his cloak and held his scythe to the man’s face. “You either get
those trees burning, or we’ll see if cravens will burn any easier!” The Weeper warned.

The panic was everywhere. _Burning the trees is a good idea_, Val realised. Use the fire to keep the
wights away, and a large burning bonfire to rally anyone running blind, a signal to bring people
towards them. The Weeper wanted a flaming wall.

Men ran around in a mad frantic rush. She heard fighting ahead. The Weeper glared at Val. “How
many are we dealing with?” He demanded.

She shook her head. “I don’t know,” Val replied. There had never been a chance to count. “A few
hundred, a thousand, five thousand?” Her gaze darkened. “I saw five white walkers approaching
from behind.”

The Weeper’s scowl darkened. “Get those fire burning!” He roared, screaming at his men as they
hacked at the trees. There were still wights up ahead, but the raiders cleared through the forest,
setting up a perimeter in the snow. Val glimpsed the direwolf pounding along the forest,
disappearing into the dark like an apparition.
The Weeper’s men were trying to secure the perimeter gather the survivors from the camp and bring them to safety, but Val knew the Others wouldn’t be far behind. They needed to hold the ground while they gave the survivors a chance to make it to Hardhome. The forest was buzzing with figures running, and great fires catching light. The shadows danced with the flickering flames and suddenly the forest seemed alive.

*Five hundred men, maybe*, Val thought, *plus however many survived the ambush and could still fight.* It was enough to give the Others pause, but they were still spread out wide.

There were shouts up ahead. Five wildlings forced three men in black cloaks down to the ground. “We’ve got three crows!” A man in bloody furs howled to the Weeper. “We caught them running!”

The three crows all looked terrified as the wildlings forced them down, blades to their throats. Their faces were ghostly pale. The Weeper smirked cruelly as he looked at the men. “Kill them and dump them on the fires!”

The man was just about to swing his axe at the crow, when a sudden snarl interrupted him. The direwolf was there, teeth bared as the wolf snapped at the man about to execute the crow.

One of the crows, a large man with thick arms and a dull face, stared in shock. “… Ghost?” The crow exclaimed, looking at the direwolf.

The Weeper cursed in the Old Tongue. He appeared to hesitate for a moment. “… Don’t kill them,” The Weeper ordered, sounding reluctant. Val had never known the Weeper change his mind before, much less spare a crow’s life. “… Take all crows prisoner!” He spat the words in disgust. “Tie them up and march them back to Hardhome for questioning.”

Val looked at him in surprise. This wasn’t the Weeper that Val knew – the Weeper Val remembered would never have risked his life for anyone, let alone spare an enemy. He’s working for Jon Snow, Harma had said. Val could still scarcely believe it. Just what sort of hold did Jon Snow have over the man?

The direwolf – *Ghost* – was everywhere, running around the perimeter. It took Val a few seconds to realise that the Weeper kept one eye on the wolf, following his lead. All of the men were following the wolf.

*Those red eyes look more intelligent than any animal I’ve ever seen*, Val thought. Warg.

Around them, the fires were burning bright. More people were taking shelter through the forest, while the raiders covered their retreat. How many people could they save? Val wondered. How many from her host were still alive? Until they stopped to count however many were still standing, there was no way to know. They could only hold the line.

There was a sound up ahead. The direwolf howled again, splitting the night. Every man tensed at the sound.

Then, there were figures rushing back from the trees, banging furiously on their shields. “They’re coming!” A man screamed. “They’re coming!”

“Get behind the fires!” The Weeper ordered, retreating backwards. “Hold the line, force them into the flames!”
The smoke and fear were so thick in the air that Val could hardly breathe. She saw the shadows ripple, and shapes taking form. The lumbering bulk of the undead giants towered into view, flanked by creatures of all shapes and sizes. Val saw ice spiders as large as horses skitter in the gloom.

The shimmering bodies of the Others hovered, barely visible, letting their puppets charge in front. The Weeper screamed bloody curses, threatening to flay any man that turned craven, all the while the raiders took cover.

Val could hear the screaming and fighting all around her, even if it was too chaotic to see a thing. She was charging forward, swinging the torch like a club as the dead shambled at her. Bodies, alive and dead, thrashed around her.

The confusion and panic felt as thick as the smoke and darkness around her. *How long until daybreak?* She thought with panic. *How many dead, how many to follow?*

An undead giant charged straight through one of the bonfires, sending wood and cinders flying everything. Even as the creature burnt and thrashed, the Weeper hacked at its legs viciously with his scythe. Val roared as she threw her burning torch straight at the giant’s rotting skull.

And in front of them, the darkness rippled. The dead charged out of the trees towards them like a tidal wave.

---

**Jon**

Everywhere Jon looked, he saw ice. The ice plumed and roared across the bay like fire. The blades of ice sprouting upwards were as sharp as knives. Cold steam hissed from the jagged chunks of ice littering the bay. He could see the ice cracking, with waves rolling over the serrated spikes as the whole bay was consumed by chaos.

Sonagon roared, flapping powerfully through the air. The dragon was big, but strong enough to fly with natural grace. With outstretched wings, the dragon could smother any ships. The white, cold fire exploded from Sonagon’s throat in constant bursts, each stream scorching the ocean into solid ice. From above, Jon could see the icy tendrils spiralling out with surprising beauty. For a moment, it seemed surreal how the ice twined and spiralled outwards in sharp jagged strikes, cutting through the great galleys.

*Run away*, Jon thought, his heart pounding as the scene below dissolved into absolute panic. *Please, just run away. I don’t want to kill any of you.*

The dragon roared, another breath causing the ice to crack and sharp icicles scraped against the hull of the ships.

Below him, he could hear the screaming. Men scattered around the ships like ants running wild. Each breath turned the sea to ice.

The dragonfire was so cold that Sonagon could have easily destroyed the ships, if Jon had given the order. The wooden vessels would have cracked and splattered, the men on them would never have stood a chance. If Jon had wanted to, Sonagon could have turned each ship to frozen splinters with a single pass.
Instead, he didn’t. Instead, Jon focused Sonagon’s breath only the ocean, zigzagging around the ships. He froze the sea in front of the ships, weaving white streaks between the ships.

Jon was in the dragon's skin, controlling the dragon's jaw and wings as if they were his own. He could feel the pounding wind under leathery wings, and the power exploding from his throat.

*Freeze the ocean, block their path, force them to turn around,* Jon thought, gasping as he tried to breathe through the cold air rushing by him.

By the first sweep, the ice was so thick it was tearing against their hulls. Some of the men tried to fire arrows upwards at the dragon, but it was useless as the dragon was already streaming past.

Still, the men never broke. He could see running and screaming, but none of the ships were turning around. Jon was giving them as much leeway as he dared – directing Sonagon to pass wide. Trying to give them a chance. Jon cursed. *Why aren’t they running?*

Realisation struck. They couldn’t run, not easily at least. The dragonfire was colder even than Jon had expected – the ice spread outwards. It froze into sheets of ice stretching out from the spiked strokes, ice freezing their hulls.

The wind and waves pushed the ships further and further against the ice. Maybe if they had an organised crew they could have escaped through, but the sailors were going mad with panic. Too many running wild, and letting their ships get trapped even further in the fleet.

Sonagon broke off the attack, flying wide and soaring further out off the coast before twisting around. The dragon’s wings were aching, still very sore. Jon had to concentrate to keep Sonagon steady, pushing him forward.

This far from the mainland, looking down from a dragon’s eye view, Hardhome just looked like a cluster of lights in the darkness. The fleet was a scattered flicker of lights in absolute disarray.

*One more pass. I’ll make one more pass, one more line of ice – enough to a form barricade to make sure they can’t pass around and continue the attack. After that, I’ll back off – give the ships time to run away…*

They would run. They had to.

Sonagon howled. His wings pounded so hard they caused depressions in the water below. The dragon twisted and started to fly back towards the coast, building speed with every flap.

Then, he saw the light. There was something on-board one of the ships at the front - a larger ship, the flagship - dazzling like nothing Jon had ever seen before. A rippling light cutting through the darkness.

Jon had to squint to see through it. It was blinding white. Jon could only just make out a figure clutching a glowing sword, standing on the deck, thrusting upwards.

Men cheered around the glowing sword. The soldiers rallying.

That was the last warning Jon had before he saw the arrows shooting upwards.

The dragon roared in pain as the arrows from the boats below hit him. The arrows were like
pinpricks, but the bolts from the ballista were dangerous even to the dragon. Jon felt his pain as the soldier’s fired. Sonagon convulsed, wings thrashing–

Damn! Jon cursed. It was the very first time riding the dragon into battle, and he already knew he had just made a stupid mistake. Too confident – too stupid – flying too low. It left the dragon an easy target for the archers. He thought they’d be too panicked to fire back–

The light flashed. The fire hit him like a flash of lightning.

Through Sonagon’s eyes, Jon glimpsed a woman in red on the deck of the ship. She smelled like shadows and burning flesh. While everything around her was cold, she blazed impossibly hot.

Jon screamed – his mind going blank. It felt like the fire scorched his brain. It felt like his skull was about to explode. He felt fire flash in the air. They weren’t real flames – like shadow fires, an illusion that burned his mind rather than his body. The fires hit Sonagon, but it was like they were transferred through to him. Illusionary pain that still burned.

His connection to Sonagon vanished under the pain. The warg disappeared – like Jon had been scorched out of Sonagon’s skin.

The dragon roared in pain, body convulsing. Wings folded inwards. Air rushed past.

Magic, Jon realised dumbly. That red woman did something. He never knew what, but he could the feel the pain. He could barely even blink, trying to process the air howling…

Sonagon was crashing downwards into the icy sea. The dragon wasn’t following Jon’s orders anymore; their link was burnt. The wind howled so loud Jon couldn’t even scream.

Barely a second before Jon saw the frozen sea zoom into focus. His legs worked on instinct, dropping off the dragon’s horn and then Jon was half-jumping, half-falling.

The fall felt like an avalanche. The cold hit like a warhammer. Sonagon dived into the water, with so much force he broke straight through the ice. Chunks of ice flew everywhere on the waves.

Jon splashed into water, breaking through a fine layer of ice coating the surface. The force made him gasp. He could already feel the bruises forming. He could see icy water filling his vision, the blackness choking him.

There was no moment of hesitation, he just thrashed. The water threatened to pull him down, but then Jon shrugged off his cloak and splashed upwards. His boots very nearly drowned him. He felt his hands slide against solid ice, finding handhelds in the coarse surface, barely enough to pull him upwards. There was hardly any leverage but he kicked and thrashed, trying to clamber upwards onto the icy surface.

The cold pierced him to the core. Jon gasped, staring around him a jungle of icy blades.

I’m on the ice, he thought through wheezy breaths of shock. His body was dripping wet. He knew he was cold, but he could barely feel the chill through the fire in his blood and his heart beating so hard. He could hear the ice crackling all around him. The mist rising everywhere obscured everything, the ice so cold that it hissed.

He saw a ship in the distance burst into flames. Pots of oil and flaming arrows from their own
sailors set the ship alight as the crew started to panic. Arrows were still falling from the cliffs at the trapped vessels closer to the shore.

He heard the sea rumble. Sonagon dived beneath the water, while Jon was left lying on the frozen sheets of ice. The water rolled over the ice, the waves pushing it up to his ankles. Jon clutched his furs and leathers tightly, but there was no warmth against the wet cold. All around him, he saw jagged icicles from where Sonagon’s breath had frozen the water as it splashed. If Jon had landed even a dozen feet to one side, the ice could have skewered him.

Jon stared in shock. Around him, there was a tremendous crack. One of the ships nearby was being torn apart against the ice, capsizing and splintering over the frozen spikes. Jon stared in shock, gasping as he tried to pull himself off the ground. The ice wasn’t smooth – it felt rough and coarse. Even the small frozen blades were sharp enough to cut into his palms.

All around him, there were screams and shouts. It was dark Jon could barely see – but then he saw a light split the sky. A shimmering, unnatural light. One voice rose above them all.

“One king! One god! One realm!” A man bellowed. “Forward! For the realm!”

He could see dozens of men drowning in armour in the cold sea or falling overboard to be skewered on jagged ice spikes – but there were more clambering overboard from the cracked ship. Men in chainmail and clutching swords were trying to traverse across the ice, escaping their ships. The screams and noise was deafening. From above, from the dragon’s back, it had seemed distant and almost surreal, but on the ice there was just pure chaos. The whole bay had been thrown into pure, frantic chaos.

They charged. The soldiers were staggering across the uneven ice, trying to get towards the shore. The ice was sharp, cracking and barely stable, but they were still risking it.

“Brave men…” Jon gasped. Only the brave or suicidal would dare to try and charge across ice this treacherous.

The soldiers were rallying. He saw men abandoning ship – rallying across the frozen bay. His heart pounded in horror, but they weren’t stopping. They weren’t running away. There was no retreat, just a horrified, desperate charge.

All Jon had been trying to do was stop the battle from happening, but these men were insistent on fighting to the end. Fighting in panic rather than running in fear.

“… No no no…” Jon wheezed, clutching Dark Sister as he staggered forward. He could barely breathe. It was all going wrong; that Red Woman had done something, Jon couldn't feel Sonagon, and they were still going to attack the camp.

He could feel the ice swaying gently in the waves. He could hear the war cries and rallying calls.

Five hundred feet away, Jon felt Sonagon bursting from the ocean like a sea monster of old. The ice dragon had abandoned the sky, and attacked the ships from the sea instead. The dragon was furious, and not even Jon could restrain him anymore. Jon’s mind was spinning, he couldn’t warg. Sonagon tore the ship apart from underneath with claws and icy breath.
The sight sent tremors down his spine. Sonagon barely looked recognisable. It lunged out of the water looked like some wrathful god. The dragon was all coated in glistening spikes, looking bigger, bulkier than ever. *Ice, Jon saw. That’s why it dived instinctively.*

Sonagon used his own breath to freeze the water to its body – using its own dragonfire to form a second skin of hard, crystalline armour around its scales. Maybe the frost and rime slowed the dragon down too, but from the water the visage was horrifying. As if it was made out of ice itself. An ice dragon, glittering white and black.

Jon heard men’s screaming as the ship was shredded underneath them. He saw men die from breath so cold it ruptured their bodies, splattering them into gruesome frozen shards.

Twenty-four ships. One ship had just been completely pulverised. About another half a dozen had been destroyed – shipwrecked against the ice. There were more ships frozen in place in the bay, and that left only maybe two or three ships that might be able escape the ice altogether and sail away.

Jon spun, staring between the darkness and icy spikes. There was no coordinating this battle, there was no organisation, nothing but chaos and terror. Jon could never have imagined anything like. The panic so thick it was suffocating. *How could everything go so mad so quickly?*

All around him, men were dying. Loyal men. Brave men. Men fighting for the realm.

*Dammit!* Jon felt like screaming. *Why did you have to attack? Why didn’t you just run?*

Around him, people were shouting. How many men could still rally from the wrecked vessels to assault Hardhome? It was impossible to tell – but the best of Hardhome’s fighters would have left with the Weeper. Even if there were still a hundred soldiers left alive to attack the camp, they could be assaulting women and children…

He glimpsed arrows in the air. Screams. The men from the front ships had reached the coast, the sound of battle rang in his ear.

Jon clambered up over the ice. His head twisted and spun, struggling to keep track of the surroundings. The ice had formed a twisting labyrinth from the swirling strips that Sonagon had cut across the ocean…

“There he is!” Jon heard the voice behind him. “*It’s him! It’s him!*”

There were soldiers behind him, struggling to clamber up an ice cliff. Jon stared at men in heavy armour, his gaze turning to a bright light behind him.

Jon saw the man with the glowing sword. He was an older man, bald with a hard face. He had gaunt cheeks, high cheekbones and a close-cropped beard. He wore heavy armour, fine armour, clutching his flaming sword and a steel shield, but there was a crown on his head. Jon stared – was this man a king?

The king with the flaming sword was flanked by two dozen men – knights, all of them. At the sight of Jon, the whole crowd rippled.

*“By the God…”* He heard man bellow, staring at Jon in awe. *“It’s him. The champion!”*
“Seven save us…!”

“For the Red God! For the Lord of Light!”

More and more men were gathering out of the wreckage of their ships, clinging onto treacherous ice paths.

The icy path between Jon and the knights was sharp, twisting and perilous. The ice was dangerously thin in parts and frightening sharp at other places. The ice was rocking, creeping and cracking from the waves. It was perilous, and any men that fell into the black water would easily be swallowed by it.

Still, these men didn’t even hesitate. “Attack!” The king with the flaming sword bellowed, charging forward fearlessly. His glowing blade shone and blazed. “For the realm! Attack!”

No time for hesitation. No rational thought, just pure instinct. His blade was in his hands. His heart pounded furiously – Jon’s blood rushed so fast he never even felt the cold.

Jon saw men with bows. He jumped forward and dropped down, running towards the soldiers so there’d be no clear shot.

The knights charged like fanatics. At least twenty of them – so many Jon couldn’t even count. They were all bigger, older, with heavy steel. Jon wore furs and leather armour, but these men were clad in plate and chainmail, with helmets, boots, and gauntlets. Dark Sister was a fairly lean and light sword, while these men had broadswords, heavy weapons and shields.

Jon’s heart pounded, but there was no choice. He knew with one glance that they wouldn’t listen to reason, his blood was burning, and he wasn’t prepared to run.

_The man in the crown_, Jon thought. Their leader, their commander. If Jon could take him down, put a sword to his throat, force his men to retreat. Best way to save lives would be to end this battle quickly, try to regain control as quick as possible. _Capture the king._

Jon swung Dark Sister to meet them, his whole body rushing.

A man swung a broadsword at him, but Jon was already shoving his palm into the man’s breastplate, knocking him backwards. On the rocking ice, there was no saving himself as the knight toppled and crashed into icy spikes. The ice cracked and blood splattered. The warm liquid hissed against cold frost. Another knight tried to jump at him from behind, but he tripped and dropped before Jon could even raise his sword to meet him. He fell into the water and disappeared.

In a fair fight, Jon would have been overwhelmed by them in a second. Still, right now, their heavy armour was their biggest weaknesses. The ice underfoot was cracking and unstable, and Jon saw heavy steel boots fail to get a footing.

These were all southron knights – totally unsuited to the cold or frost. On a level, grassy plain they would be fearsome, but they had never fought on icy terrains like this. But Jon had walked across icy mountains and rough terrain for so long that his body balanced instinctively. He kept his mass low and his feet balanced, swinging and snapping like a wolf on the ice.

These men were angry, and aggressive. Jon was small, lean and fast. He stayed defensive; his
posture stiff and secure to compensate for his bad leg, while his foes were left shambling around him.

The treacherous path between them was so narrow they had to fight Jon almost one by one. They had to clamber upwards, over cracking and jagged shards to reach him, and in their numbers they were slipping and bumping against each other. Jon had every advantage; he could control the fight, while they were all dazed and weak.

Jon’s sword slashed faster and swifter than it had ever moved before. The men fell in front of him, one by one. His swordsmanship was so good that Ser Rodrik would have been proud. It took only the slightest slash before the knights lost their footing and fell.

And still, Jon’s blade slashed faster and faster.

A man swinging a mace tried to crack his head open, but then Jon ducked and Dark Sister severed the man’s foot at the ankle and he toppled backwards. He was still screaming even as he fell in almost slow motion. The man managed to grip the ice to save himself from the ocean, but left dangling uselessly in freezing water, unable to pull himself up, as he bled out with a missing foot.

In the distance, Sonagon surged out of the ocean again. The roar echoed across the bay as he tore his way through another ship. Even as Jon fought, the dragon was in the sea destroying the ships one by one.

“Kill the champion!” The man with the burning sword bellowed. His blade illuminated the battlefield with eerie white, reflecting on glittering spikes. “He controls the dragon, kill him! Kill the boy!”

There was no time for Jon to even reply. He was too busy trying desperately to fight against two heavyset men at once. It was less a fight and more a gamble to see who would lose their footing first.

A man with a cloak of white and blue stars fell first. He toppled, and Jon pushed him into his colleague and then they were both falling together.

You trip you die, Jon thought, panting for breath. His lungs felt raw, but his sword was singing.

Five men dead. Then seven, then eight, then nine. They dropped one after another, some in bone-rattling cries of pain, others cut down before they could speak. The ice cracked beside them, and at least four men fell into the ocean before Jon could even touch them. He was light enough to dance across the thinner ice, while the shambling knights stood no chance.

Arrows shot over him. Then screams. Jon glimpsed other figures – men in furs with spears. The wildlings. They were charging over the ice to meet the soldiers. They were all roaring, vicious. It was a scene so savage it made his hands twitch – wild men tearing over the bay, illuminated by the flickering flames and glittering ice.

But Jon could barely even look at them. He couldn’t look at anything except the man in front, and then the next, and the next…

Before long, Jon had lost count of how many men had fallen beneath his blade. He knew men were dying, but he wasn’t – his blood was pumping, his sword was swinging and he just suddenly felt so alive. A single misstep would have killed him, but he was dancing between them so lightly it felt
like his feet barely touched the ground.

He felt alive. It felt like his body was trembling.

“For R’hllor!” A man roared, gasping for breath as he barely parried Dark Sister. “R’hllor! R’hllor!”

The knight swung wide, completely abandoning any defence just on the hope of hitting Jon. Perhaps the man was counting on his chainmail to protect him. It didn’t. Dark Sister cut straight through his chest.

The black blade seemed almost hungry in the moonless night as the blood splattereded. Two more men followed him down in short succession.

"Boy!" A heavyset man tried to barrel at Jon. A burning red heart blazed on his surcoat. He was growling in rage as their blades clashed. He was too big, too strong, Jon scurried backwards. “… You are nothing but a boy!” The man roared, his face red. He slashed forward. Left, right, left. “I will kill you boy! Ser Godry the Dragonslayer; give the name to your evil master, boy!”

Jon remembered his lessons, eyes following every blow. Wait. Patience. Pause, and wait for the right moment.

He saw it. The knight overreached himself in a long cut. Dark Sister slashed. To his credit, Ser Godry managed to parry the strike, but barely. The knight was forced onto the backfoot, struggling to keep up as Dark Sister hissed at him time and time again.

“This boy is about to kill you, ser,” Jon whispered coldly. He saw fear in the man’s eyes, right up until he took one step backwards too far. The ice cracked underfoot and the man crashed straight into the ocean.

Around him, Sonagon was busy destroying the fourth ship in the fleet. Jon couldn’t see it, but he heard the screams and roars.

There were men rushing around Jon. There was fighting everywhere. The free folk had rushed onto the ice too, and they were clashing furiously even as more ships crashed and more and more men fell into the water at every second.

Dark Sister isn’t killing them, Jon thought between gasps and swings. They’re killing themselves. Their own fanaticism is murdering them faster than I ever could.

It was like no battle Jon had ever imagined. Like a giant brawl scattered on a jagged, frozen hellscape. Whether by bravery, fear, or fanaticism, Jon couldn’t say, but the soldiers never backed down. They fought with fury right up until their cold deaths. A battle of ice.

Bodies littered around him. Jon cut a bloody path straight through the men. Not all of the men were dead, but they were all left bleeding out. One man was still alive, gurgling for breath despite falling straight onto an icicle that pierced straight through his chest. Their blood steamed against the cold, causing Dark Sister to smoke softly.

There were free folk behind him, hollering and shouting as they covered Jon’s back. He just gripped Dark Sister with both hands as he limped forward with small, careful steps.
The king with the burning sword glared at Jon with hard, cold and furious eyes as he approached. There were other soldiers, but they were all holding back. The ice was now so thin that only one man could approach at a time, and now it was the king’s turn.

He was a big man – tall, broad shouldered and sinewy, with a hard jaw and angry eyes. There was a flaming heart inlaid on his breastplate. Well-crafted armour.

Under the helm, his expression was hard, dark, like chiselled out of stone. The king dropped his shield so he could fight sword on sword easily. It was a smart move – anything that restricted mobility was deadly in a battle like this.

“Stannis!” A voice shouted from the soldiers. The chant rose among them. “Stannis! Stannis! Stannis!”

Jon’s eyes flickered. The crowned man charged forward fearlessly. Jon swung Dark Sister to parry. Their blades clashed. Black metal scraped against the glowing sword.

For a second, it was like the world was watching as their weapons clashed.

Jon glared at the man. Stannis. He wore a crown. The stag. Jon put it together. “… You are Stannis Baratheon,” Jon said, parrying his blade. The resemblance to the great fat king they had feasted at Winterfell wasn’t immediately obvious, but Jon started to recognise the hard jaw, thick brow and dark whiskers.


The man growled the words, gasping as his glowing sword spun. Jon never knew what they meant. Stannis was a good fighter; practiced, experienced, good balance. He didn’t give ground and he knew how to use his size. He was stronger than Jon and his form was solid, but Jon was still fast enough that the king struggled to keep up.

That glowing sword was dangerous; up close it was so bright it was blinding. Jon could barely focus with how the sword blazed in front of him, and the light scolded his eyes.

The man glared at Jon with pure hate and fury. “I will defeat you, ‘Champion of Night’!” He snarled, teeth gnashing. “It was promised!”

His sword swung wide, a heavy blow that Jon could barely block. The sound rang out shrilly. “… I will not let you take what is mine!” He spat. “Dragonspawn. Savage. Usurper!”

Jon had never heard a man speak with as much hate as Stannis put into the next word.

“Targaryen.” The word was like a curse from Stannis’ throat.

Dark Sister parried. Stannis gripped his glowing sword with both hands, trying to force it to Jon’s skull. There’s no heat, Jon realised suddenly. The blade was cool. Nothing but phantom fire. Jon had been trying to keep his distance from the fire, yet there was nothing but light.

Jon’s fist slammed into the Stannis’ stomach. The blow against the hard chainmail bruised his
knuckles, but it knocked Stannis backwards and broke the grapple.

“You talk a lot about titles and names,” said Jon. Stannis tried to attack, but Jon was swifter. His blade forced Stannis backwards. “… And not enough about your men dying.”

Stannis roared, striking hard. His attacks were vicious, but he was also tiring faster. Jon had spent months fighting and living hard, growing lean, strong and restless. He towered over Jon, but Jon had fought larger and stronger opponents. Jon could strike twice for each blow of his. Jon knew he would not fall first, not like this.

Jon was angry too. He felt so, so angry. He was angry at Stannis for forcing this fight, he was angry at himself for fighting. He was angry at having to kill so many men when all was trying to do was save as many as possible from the dead.

In the background, there were howls as Sonagon demolished a fifth ship. Over half of Stannis’ fleet was already gone.

“These men,” Jon growled, meeting the king’s blue eyes, “they died because of you. They followed you here, and you killed them. No one had to die, but you and all your names killed them.” Dark Sister scraped against Stannis’ shoulder, but didn’t quite pierce the plate. “Yield, ‘king’.”

“Never,” Stannis growled, but he was falling backwards. He was still strong, but slowing, while Jon was only getting faster. The soldiers were still chanting his name, but every eye was focused on the glowing sword flashing in the night.

“Yield,” Jon pushed, striking harder. Stannis crumpled, and then Jon’s good leg kicked him in the chest. He fell backwards on the ice.

Nobody was chanting anymore. Two of Stannis’ soldiers tried to rush into their king’s aid, but Jon’s blade cut one of them down without a second glance and then the other backed away. It gave Stannis enough time to clamber to his feet, but he was still struggling.

Jon gave him no time to recover. He struck forward, knocking Stannis backwards with a ferocity and speed that the king could not match. More and more of Jon’s strikes were going through, glinting against his armour.

Behind him, another ship fell to Sonagon.

Jon could feel the air shift. It was like the fanaticism that drove the men was being hacked with every blow that Jon landed to the red heart on Stannis’ chest. “Yield!”

The man was losing ground, but there was still that power in his gaze – an iron ferocity that said he would never, ever back down.

Jon remembered what Donal Noye once said. Stannis was pure iron; hard and strong, but also brittle. *He’ll break before he bends.*

His army was being broken now. Sonagon was massacring his ships on the sea, and the free folk were massacring his men on the ice.

Vaguely, between the blows, Jon was aware of movement among Stannis’ soldiers. Screams and
shouts. Men were turning to run, and other men were stabbing soldiers in the back. There were barely any soldiers left, and it looked like a mutiny. There were foreigners – brightly dressed and from the Free Cities most like – stabbing at the soldiers with cutlasses and rushing to pull lifeboats from the wreckage.

Too many of Stannis’ loyal men had died rushing to their deaths, Jon thought. There would be bodies littered in the bay for a long time. That left all of the disloyal ones to break free.

Perhaps Stannis could feel it too. There was no one left to charge against Jon anymore. He saw his posture crack.

Still, he never wavered, not even for a second. Stannis screamed a wordless cry of fury as he swung his glowing sword with both hands, as hard as he possibly could. Dark Sister met the blow. The blades clashed for a final time, the sound ringing out like a bell.

Jon felt the metal crumble. Stannis’ magic sword exploded into shards under Dark Sister. The light disappeared without a trace.

Stannis’ eyes widened in shock as the shards of metal sprinkled across the ice. Dark Sister was still swinging.

“You should have yielded,” Jon whispered, as Dark Sister slashed through Stannis’ wrist.

The gauntleted hand disappeared in a splatter of blood, leaving only a bloody stump on Stannis’ hand.

The king never screamed. He never even flinched. He just stared at his missing hand in quiet horror as his body fell backwards.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then, someone started screaming. Jon heard a man howling “Stannis!” and the noise echoed in the bay.

The very last of the king’s men rushed to their liege’s side – maybe five or six men desperate enough to risk the thin ice. Jon’s body was still trembling, his sword hand swinging – he cut down the first figure that tried to charge him without a second thought. Dark Sister was already swinging at the second before his eyes managed to catch up.

There was a boy before him – clutching a dagger that was trembling so hard that he could barely even hold it. A boy younger than Jon; maybe eleven or twelve. He wore a leather squire’s raiment, and there was a black onion stitched into his surcoat. He had dark hair, pointy ears, and wide eyes that were staring up a Jon fearfully.

Jon’s blade stopped. The squire looked so much like Bran.

Bran had wanted to be a knight, Jon thought suddenly. He thought back to all the knights that he had just killed.

Jon met the boy’s eyes and lowered Dark Sister, watching quietly as the king’s men dragged their liege away. Maybe they could still a reach a lifeboat. If they were good sailors, and lucky enough, maybe they could even get away. Jon should have stopped him, but the squire stood in his way. The boy’s eyes...
Jon lost all interest in fighting. He let them escape. After a moment of stunned silence, the squire stared at the dagger in his hand, before turning to chase after the group dragging the king away.

The sounds of violence never stopped. Whatever soldiers had escaped the ice on to the coast, the wildlings were there to hack them to pieces. They fought well for a moment, but this was less a battle and more of a massacre now.

All of the fury, the pain, the fear and the adrenaline… it was like Jon could feel it bubbling inside of him. He paced restlessly among the bodies. He screamed wordlessly into the darkness, just to try and release the pressure in his chest.

Sonagon roared from ocean, still tearing through the ships. There were some boats in the open water, but few, and the other ships were left trapped in the ice.

And Jon suddenly felt so, so tired. It was like all the adrenaline and the fire suddenly dropped out of his blood.

_I need to take prisoners_, he thought. _I need to stop them_. The free folk would just kill any survivors, and Sonagon wasn’t like to leave any survivors at all. _The free folk won’t listen easily – I have to stay strong to convince them to take hostages instead._

He wasn’t quite sure if there was anything that could convince Sonagon not to destroy everyone remaining though. That witch had hurt it, and the dragon would demand its due.

Jon turned, staring at the bodies scattered across the ice. Anyone had been left alive was dead now – the cold and blood loss had just drained their lives away.

The ice would be breaking up soon, Jon would have to find a way off it quickly before it cracked or drifted off in the waves. Jon staggered, limping as he tried clambered across the icy paths as quickly as possible, his sword clenched tight in hand. The smell of blood and fear in the air left a foul taste in his mouth.

All around him, there were bodies littered on swords of ice.

_I’m on the side of the living_, Jon thought with pained gasps. _All I want to do is save people_.

_Now why the hells is so hard to stop everyone from killing each other?_

___

**Davos**

Davos gagged, feeling the pain in his chest. Everything felt cold, colder than it had ever been.

All around him, the world roared. The sounds were like nothing he had ever heard before – the sounds of pure panic and chaos. Everything was black, except for the torchlight reflecting off glistening spikes of black ice.

His heart was pounding. Davos’ felt an involuntary, harsh scream break from his throat as he tried to pull himself upwards. He felt blood oozing out of his chest, the slick liquid freezing against the ice.

His shoulder ached. _I broke my shoulder_, he realised. _Maybe a couple of ribs too_. He fell out of the
ship when it capsized, landing on hard ice…

The ice wasn’t smooth – it felt sharp and jagged. Davos gulped and staggered as he felt a spike of ice protruding into his stomach. It was so numb he could barely feel it. He had landed half-skewered onto one of the frozen spikes.

*My jerkin.* The reinforced leather jerkin was the only thing that had stopped the spike, but the ice still pierced through. It pierced at least an inch into his chest.

Davos stared upwards. Barely five feet away there was a man lying with a spike of ice jabbing through his skull.

It could have been worse. The ice was barbed and jagged like frozen thorns, but Davos had been lucky to land on one of the more mostly flat surfaces.

His whole body ached as he tried desperately to stand up. he could feel the ice shifting in the waves, the ice cracking underfoot…

All around him, there were people screaming. Davos saw men jumping from the flotsam of the shipwreck, trying to clamber onto the ice. The waters swirled and thrashed around him. The wreck of the *Valyrian* was alight with flames – the wood burning and crackling even as it capsized and the wind shredded the ship into splinters against the ice.

Davos stared, wide eyed. The ship was burning. Davos saw men – men he recognised – clinging uselessly onto the broken mast, even as it snapped into the black water. The only ones who survived would be the ones that jumped off onto the ice.

*Devan. My son. My son was on that ship.*

His head pounded so fast his vision blurred. *I can’t lose any more sons*…

Stannis. The king, Devan squired for the king. The knights. The soldiers. How many men made it off…?

There was almighty crash from the water. A chorus of screams drowned out by a bone-rattling roar. Davos’ brain shut down, reverting to pure, instinctive panic.

He watched as the beast – the *dragon* – burst from the ocean like a sea monster. The beast bigger than ever, made out of jagged ice. White fire exploded from its jaws, and then suddenly the dragon was ripping apart another frozen ship with claws and teeth.

Men jumped overboard like ants fleeing a storm. The waters would be suicide, but they still jumped.

The entire bay was dotted with streaks of ice – jagged flames frozen on the water’s surface. The ships were trapped in the bay, and any men that wanted to survive were fleeing overboard on the ice.

It was chaos.

Move, Davos ordered himself, groaning as he staggered upwards. *Find the king, find my son*…
Davos saw the light. He gasped as he recognised the light beaming in the distance, over the jagged icebergs. Lightbringer – Stannis’ sword. The king must be alive; he must have escaped the shipwreck. Stannis could use the light of his burning sword to rally the men…

There was tremendous splash as the dragon dived into the water again. Another ship destroyed. At this point, the dragon was just demolishing the crippled fleet one by one.

Ice cracked. Davos gasped, clutching at his side. He could feel blood oozing over his fingers. Stannis was there, on the other side of the ice – along with the soldiers. All around him, there was fighting, burning and freezing.

The wildlings are on the ice too. The savages broke onto the ice from the coast, hacking down the fleeing soldiers. There was no great battle, just skirmishes at every corner. Davos saw clashing shapes highlighted by the fires and men fighting desperately for their lives.

Still, the water killed more men than swords ever would. The ice was treacherous, sharp and unstable.

Davos glimpsed three men ahead, clutching to the ice with their swords, trying to lever a bulky shape out of the water with ropes. A lifeboat – four soldiers were trying desperately to recover one of the lifeboats thrown from the Valyrian. Not a big boat, but large enough for maybe a dozen cramped men.

Then a figure walked up behind one of the soldiers and gutted him from the back with a sharp knife.

Davos could do nothing but stagger, staring in horror as the bodies fell.

“My ships!” The figure screamed furiously. “My men! Mine! Your king thinks he can wreck me? Me!”

One of the soldiers tried to fight back. The attacked lunged at him, stabbing him savagely with his knife. “… I am Salladhor Saan!” the man hissed, letting the body drop. “I will see your king ruined for this! I will gouge out his eyes and fuck his wife until she screams my name!”

The Prince of Narrow Sea looked almost feral. Salladhor had always been a flamboyant, perhaps charming man, but that was gone. Now, his silks were drenched in seawater and blood, and his eyes were crazed.

Of course Salladhor Saan survived too. Underneath his silks, his flamboyance and his smile, the pirate prince was as hard as they came.

More men clambered behind him. The pirate’s words were sharp. “Grab the boat!” Salladhor ordered to his men. “Quickly now, drag the boat over the ice!”

They’re cutting down Stannis’ men, Davos realised in horror. Pirates had escaped the wreck too. While the soldiers were trying to charge forward, the pirates were cutting them down from behind. Fighting was everywhere. Not just against wildlings, against the other shipwreck survivors too.

Davos watched as Salladhor’s men dragged the boat out of the ocean. The Lysene pirates fought with cutlasses and more experienced skill than the panicking soldiers.
The pirate lord saw him, still clutching his knife. “… Oh Davos…” Salladhor growled. Davos staggered, still holding his chest. The men hoisted the lifeboat upwards, onto the ice unsteadily.

*“… My old friend… By rights, I should kill you too.”

Davos gulped. There was pure murder in the pirate’s eyes. “… Stannis…” Davos wheezed weakly. “… Stannis…”

“Your king is done,” Salladhor spat. “You cost me my fleet. You cost me my livelihood, my legacy. All for your bloody words.”

His eyes narrowed, staring at the wound on Davos’ torso. Davos had never been a fighter, and he most certainly couldn’t fight now. “… Congratulations, old friend. You finally get to do what you’ve always wanted. You get to die in the service of your king. Are you happy now? Does this make you fulfilled?”

Davos could barely even stand upright. “… Stannis…” he gasped. “… Where is Stannis?”

Salladhor just grunted. “Of course…” He hesitated with his knife. “Your loyalty is wasted on him, smuggler. Stannis is doomed to nothing but despair – the more fool I for not realising it sooner.”

Davos nearly staggered. The pirate caught him. Salladhor paused to tearing off his jerkin and forming a very crude binding around his wound. “… Consider this a final kindness, old friend,” Salladhor whispered. “… If you want to survive, come with me now. I have no intention of letting him steal my life too.”

He took a deep breath. His hands clenched. “Stannis,” Davos rasped.

“But of course,” Salladhor snorted, already moving away. “… You’re doomed to despair too.”

Davos watched wide-eyed as the pirates staggered away from him the ice, half-carrying, half-dragging the lifeboat. He means to carry the lifeboat to the edge of the ice, to open water so he can sail away, Davos realised. It would be perilous – a boat like that would be unlikely to survive waters like these for long.

Then again, it might be better odds for survival than anybody left here. The bay was a slaughter.

Davos knew that the king’s men might need that boat too, but there was nothing he could do to stop the pirates. Salladhor had the right idea – they needed an escape route.

Perhaps one of the ships could get free of the ice before the dragon destroyed them? Was it too late to run away?

He took a deep breath and staggered forward. He paused to pick up an iron dirk from the one of the corpses, holding it with one hand as he cradled his wounded side with the other.

Every step felt like it would be his last. Davos struggled to make sense of it, gasping and wheezing weakly as his feet almost slid off the ice. The whole iceberg was rocking in the waves, and the sound of screaming never stopped.

His eyes darted around the ships that remained. It was hard to recognise them, half-swallowed by ice. The Saathos Saan, the Oledo, the Bountiful Harvest… Which one of those could still escape? Which one was most likely to get away? Which one would the king flee too?
The *Bountiful Harvest* had been at the rear rank, Davos thought. Where the ice was thinnest. If any could break free, it would be the ships that had been at the rear.

It was the speck of red that caught his attention. Red so bright it shimmered in the gloom. Davos tightened his grip on his blade.

The dragon was at the other end of the bay, demolishing another ship. Davos could still see the light of Stannis’ sword nearby, flashing through the darkness. Davos was wheezing as he limped unsteadily. Even underfoot, he could feel the ice cracking. The cold water swashed over the ice, with freezing sea water washing up to his ankles with every wave.

It was so, so cold. And yet, somehow, the Red Woman burned as bright as ever.

Melisandre’s dress was impossibly pristine. It was like the cold and water never even touched her. The ruby on her throat glimmered brightly. Melisandre stood on the ice, watching as the *Bountiful Harvest* groaned against the waves.

They were at the edge of the fighting. The *Bountiful Harvest* was an old cog – a strong, sturdy ship tough enough to survive the ice. The ice was thinner here too, the dragon was distracted from the edge of the fighting. The *Bountiful Harvest* was still trapped, but now there were men dragging ropes, shouting and screaming as they tried to recover the ship.

*She’s preparing the ship to leave*, Davos thought with a gulp. Every other man had been caught in the chaos, but Melisandre… she had been prepared.

She must have known what would happen. She positioned herself next to the king to flee the shipwreck of the *Valyrian* easily. After that, Melisandre must have gathered enough queen’s men around her, enough to recover the *Bountiful Harvest* from the ice.

Davos glimpsed the shape of Lord Axell Florent from the deck, bellowing orders. He was following Melisandre too. They were pulling at the rigging, using axes and swords to chop at the ice, trying to hold the ship against the wind and waves.

Davos stared. All around the ship, the ice was cracking and slipping. *It’s melting*, he realised. Impossibly, only around that single ship, the ice was melting enough to free the vessel. Ice so thick and cold should have lasted for weeks, if not months, yet Davos could see it dripping away unnaturally fast in a matter of minutes. As if the heat of an invisible fire was scorching it.

Behind him, ships that had been set alight during the panic. Vessels burning, the men on board trapped between fire and ice, scorching like funeral pyres for all of the men on board. Even amidst the screams, he could hear the fires howl. *She’s using their deaths*, Davos realised. The deaths of the men trapped in the fires. *She’s using them to keep herself unarmed, and to prepare her own escape route*.

Melisandre turned. “… Ah, Onion Lord,” she called with a smile. In the distance, the dragon sent another ship crashing down. “You survived. Good. The flames were ambiguous whether or not you would or not.”

Davos staggered forward. “… You knew…” he gasped. “… You knew what… you led all of these men to their deaths…”
She raised a perfect eyebrow. “… I warned you that the night was dark and full of terrors.”

His hand trembled, still clutching the dirk. She has doomed us all. “… You let this happen! You knew…!”

She must have seen her own survival in the flames. She knew everyone else would die, but she would survive, so she let it happened. Even when thousands of men perished, Melisandre took steps to prepare an escape route just for her.

“… I know that some battles must be lost for the war to be won,” Melisandre replied coolly. “Some defeats are necessary.”

“Necessary!” Davos croaked. “What could be necessary about this?”

“It is necessary that Azor Ahai sees the threat he must face,” Melisandre said. “And he has. This is battle that will define him. It will drive him to do what he must, without hesitation, without pause, to save the world.”

“You promised –”

“I promised a great battle of ice and fire in which all true believers would rally,” Melisandre said, with a touch of sadness. “I did not promise that the battle would be won.”

The sound of swords clashing caused Davos to turn. Two hundred feet away, across the jagged paths of ice and rolling waves, he gasped as he saw the burning blade flash.

Stannis. He could see King Stannis – clad in all his armoured glory – as he swung Lightbringer. The sword had never shone so bright. So bright it was a like a star.

Davos saw the figures charge. He heard clashing blades and thrashing bodies in the gloom. They were too far away for Davos to reach, instead all he could do was watch.

He watched as the shadow cut through them all.

His lungs froze. The scene sent tremors down his spine. Davos watched a battle on jagged thorns of ice, absolute destruction all around, highlighted by the glowing sword as men fell one by one.

“… You see it,” Melisandre whispered next to him. “You see the champion of night.”

It’s him, Davos realised. The white-haired boy who rode the dragon. He was on the ice too; clad in black and grey furs, sword in hand as Stannis’ knights charged at him.

And Davos had never seen sword-work like it. It was like watching the boy paint in colours of red amidst white and black.

The boy held a fine black blade faster and sharper than any Davos had ever seen before. It cleaved through armour like a burning knife through butter. There were knights charging at him, trying to overpower him, yet the white-haired boy cut through them all with wicked grace.

It was the best swordsmanship Davos had ever seen, and they fell before him one by one. He was a blur of slashing black. The bodies dropped faster than Davos could recognise them. Ser Patrek, Ser Brus Buckler, Ser Benethon Scales, Ser Dorden and Ser Godry Farring…
Davos’ throat jammed as all of those corpses littered the ice. The boy was outnumbered twenty to one, yet he was cutting down Stannis’ men faster than they could reach him.

And then suddenly the boy was on Stannis. Davos watched as his king slashed his glowing blade downwards – fighting against one on one against the white-haired boy who had just slaughtered a dozen knights.

The king was all fire and fury as he locked blades. In the light of the glowing sword, the boy’s face was solemn, focused and unyielding. There was no rage, no anger… just a persistent ice-cold determination…

For a half a second, Davos thought his king might be able to beat him. Then he saw Stannis being forced backwards.

The men were shambling, but they couldn’t even get there in time.

*Stannis is going to lose,* Davos thought with trembling hands. *Hells, Stannis has already lost.* The dragon demolished his fleet, and then the boy cut through his knights. Any that survived wouldn’t last long against the wildlings.

“You did this…” Davos wheezed, turning to stare at Melisandre. “*You did this.*”

The images of Blackwater Bay rippled before his eyes. First Dale, Allard, Mathos and Maric… all burnt at the Blackwater, and now Devan was out there, caught on the ice. *How many men have to die in the Red Woman’s machinations?*

*How many sons must I lose?*

He glared at her. In the shimmering light, she looked more like some beautiful demon than a woman. His hands were trembling, his fingers numb as he clutched the blade.

She met his gaze. “… Careful, Onion Lord,” Melisandre warned. She didn't breathe, Davos realised suddenly. The air was so cold that a faint mist scattered in the air from Davos’ haggard breaths, but there was nothing but lies from Melisandre’s lips.

“Why?” Davos demanded, feeling his heart scream. “Why would you lead so many men to their deaths?”

“Their sacrifices are needed for the Lord of Light,” she replied.

He shook his head, suddenly not caring about the pain. He was wounded, but she was unarmed. He had the right idea after Blackwater – he should have killed the Red Woman then.

“No…” Davos growled. “Too much has been sacrificed for your god already.”

He raised the blade and charged. He saw Melisandre’s ruby flash.

And suddenly the ice underfoot cracked. One second Davos was staring at her beautiful, horrible face, and then, the next, he was plunging downwards into dark, cold, black water.
Val

“Fight, you cunts!” The Weeper roared. “Fight!”

Val barely heard him. The wight lunged at her, and she caught its attack wielding her torch like a club. The creature flailed and scratched even as it burnt.

Then, a second wight launched from the darkness. Val had to drop to floor to barely escape its lunge.

*It did that on purpose*, she thought. *The first wight charged deliberately into my torch just to disarm me.* It sacrificed itself to leave an opening for the second. Val had been watching, there was no communication between them, but the wights still moved with perfect synchronicity. How?

All around her, the battle raged. The wights would charge into their blades and torches madly. They thought nothing of sacrificing themselves, they only cared about killing. The wights died quickly, but there was that inhuman intelligence directing them.

“All around her, Val could see their line breaking. The wights slipping through either side of them, but there was no option to run. She could only fight for her patch of ground in the forest and hope everyone else did the same.

She dragged herself up, coughing and spluttering. Her ribs ached. Her head was spinning and her hands trembling.

All around her, she could see fighting. She could see men of the Night's Watch, free folk and wights all shambling together in the dark.

*The Weeper's line is breaking*, she thought. *They're pushing through.*

The giant the Weeper was fighting finally died. It took half a dozen men to hack off its legs, and then its arms, and then its torso. The Weeper himself hacked off its head with three swings from his scythe. All of the limbs were still squirming.

Val almost stumbled as she tried to walk. She felt an arm grab her, lifting her upwards.

“Val,” the woman croaked into her ear. “Stand up, Val.”

“Harma?” Val stared, as Harma dragged her upwards. The older woman was bleeding and staggering, still clutching at her shoulder where the bear mauled her. Her body lurched, unsteady but strong.

“Come on,” Harma wheezed, holding a stone axe with both hands.

“Dalla... the babe...”

“They're fine. We ran into Garth. He took them both and rode them into camp.”
“You should have left…” Harma was injured. She could barely stand. Why did she come back for me?

“Bugger off,” Harma growled. “You don't tell me what to do.”

They staggered upwards. The lines of wights were fading. A shambling creature tried to attack her, but Harma crushed its head with three short strikes of her maul.

Val took a deep breath, trying to recover. It was so, so cold, even despite the fires burning in the forest. The flames hissed and crackled, starving against the cold.

And then, the fires went out. She felt the cold mist creep through the trees.

It didn't make any sound, but Val heard it coming from the way the ground shivered with frost.

Val saw the pale glittering figure walk towards them, over the bodies.

She felt her breath freeze in her throat. Her blood had never felt so cold. The Other stood before clad in crystal ice armour, as still as a sculpture. Its armour flickered and reflected softly in the firelight, as if it could fit into the gloom, with flesh as pale as moonlight. Its eyes blazed like blue fire, mist drifting around its body. With every step, she felt the world go cold. Impossibly cold.

It took everything she had to keep her grip on her sword through trembling hands. Her skin felt numb. The Other stared straight at her, as if it’s gaze could pierce her body.

Slowly, challengingly, the white walker drew its blade – a slender, almost delicate sword, but so cold and so sharp it crackled in the air.

“Stand up you fuckers…” The Weeper whispered, gasping for breath as he paced. “Anyone who is still alive, you stand up and you fight right now…”

The Other waited. It stood and it waited as the free folk surrounded it.

Val stood in front of it. Even amidst the screaming, the air felt so cold and quiet. The Weeper paced from behind, as the free folk surrounded the white walker.

Val had her short sword. The Weeper his scythe. Harma staggered up next to her, clutching her maul with weak, strained breaths. Five other free folk clambered around them, circling the Other, armed with axes and spears.

Eight against one, Val thought. She could feel the fear like tar in her blood. We outnumber the monster eight against one - eight good warriors.

Still, the Other didn’t look concerned. It’s movements were slow, lazy, taunting. Eight against one, Val repeated, her hands trembling.

There was a long moment of still. The Other stood as still as the dead.

The Weeper charged first. He hacked from behind with his scythe, without warning, without restraint. Strong, fierce strikes so fast the air hummed.

And the Other blurred. It moved in a haze of cold mist, so fast her eyes couldn’t keep up.
She saw the Weeper knocked backwards. Harma roared a loud battle roar, all injuries forgotten charging in with her maul. The white walker just seemed to flow around her. The stone maul of Harma’s cracked under its blade, cleaving straight through like a burning knife through snow.

They all attacked at once, attacking from all sides. Val ducked downwards and lunged, swiping her blade and its legs. The Other blocked two men at once, and then spun. Val couldn’t even blink as she felt a foot collide with the centre of her chest.

She gagged. Its boot felt so cold it burned. She could see her furs crackling and hissing with ice from where it touched.

She dropped to the ground. Two others fell as well. Two men dead in a matter of seconds.

To his credit, the Weeper didn’t fall. He remained fighting, barely – and Val had never seen so much rage in a person’s eyes. Harma kept fighting as well, swinging her broken maul like a club. Another fighter - a man with a spear, tried to jab at the Other while the Weeper and Harma distracted it from the front and the back, but it flowed deftly between them all.

Too fast. Val gasped, but staggered up to her feet. It moved too fast to even touch; faster than she could swing a blade.

The Weeper fought stubbornly, but then he tried parrying the sword of ice, and his scythe split into frozen shards. The Weeper barely dived backwards in time, narrowly avoiding the Other’s sword splitting his skull.

Two men tried to catch the Other from behind. It cut them both down. A stone axe shattered against the Other's armour.

Four dead. Even eight against one and we don't stand a chance.

The Other paused, waiting for the free folk to stand up again. Mocking. Like a game to it.

“… Val,” Harma growled. “Run.”

Val's hands shivered as she clutched her blade.

“Run,” Harma snarled. “Now. I'll hold it, you run.”

The Weeper dropped his scythe and drew his two bronze swords, screaming a challenge. The Other raised its blade, staring around the clearing. Slowly, those bright blue eyes turned to focus on Val and Harma.

Harma attacked first. Even with a broken maul, a wounded shoulder and a limp, Harma was as fearless and as strong as ever. Harma threw herself like a bear, and the Weeper lunged from behind.

The Other’s blade arced.

The Weeper's sword shattered against the Others neck. Val heard ice crack as well. It bleeds cold, she realised. The Other’s wound wept like ice. It didn't flinch, but for a brief second the Other seemed almost irritated.
Harma dropped to the snow. The wound across her chest steamed.

She grabbed its hand, Val realised. Harma threw herself on its sword, just to grab its hand, to stop it from blocking the Weeper.

Val's heart pounded as Harma collapsed limply.

The Other took a sword to the neck and seemed to shrug it off. The Weeper gasped as the Other’s hand lunged and grabbed him around the throat. The man screamed from the cold of the creature's grip.

Val was on her feet and sprinting, swinging her sword. The Other blocked her with an idle swing with its blade, and her sword shattered into icy shards.

The Weeper croaked, facing turning purple. The Other’s hand on his throat steamed with cold.

Then, the other free folk, the only one still standing, struck from behind without warning and brought down his axe against the Other’s wrist in a vicious strike. Both the axe and its arm shattered like ice.

The Other gave something that almost sounded like a tut as it looked at its severed stump, before turning and skewering the man in a swift motion.

The Weeper dropped to the ground, croaking with an ice hand still clutching his throat. The Other rubbed its missing wrist, looked around, and slowly walked away. Like the battle had lost all interest now.

Six dead bodies littered the ground. The Other walked away.

“Harma!” Val shouted, rushing to her friend. Across from her, the Weeper struggled to pry the hand off his throat. “Harma!”

She didn't move. The wound wasn't bleeding, but the blade stroke went deep. Harma’s strong. Strongest person I know. She can survive…

Val felt Harma lurch slightly. Val gasped in hope, but then she opened her eyes. Harma’s eyes were suddenly bright blue.

“No no no…” Val muttered. Her eyes stung. Around her, all of the bodies were starting to tremble and lurch. Corpses twitching like puppets, their strings being jerked.

Harma's arms started rise. Val gripped them tightly, holding the corpse in a hug as tightly as she could.

“You bastard…” Val cursed, her voice nearly choking. “You utter bastard, I'll… Damn you Harma…”

The corpse started to squirm. Val gripped tightly, hugging the body as she pulled out a dagger from Harma's furs.

“Why did you come back, Harma?” Val snapped. The cold froze the tears on her eyes. “You could
have run, you should have run… Why the bloody hells did you come back!”

“Get a fucking move on, girl!” The Weeper spat.

The body thrashed, so hard Val gasped. “Damn you Harma!” Val growled, as she stabbed the dagger into her friend’s cold throat. “Why the did you come back for me?”

The flesh tore roughly. Val stabbed and stabbed and Harma’s corpse never even flinched. She was still freshly dead enough to bleed. Harma kept her dagger sharp, but Val still had to hack to cut the corpse's head off.

“You should have bloody run…” Val cursed. Harma’s headless body was still squirming.

The Weeper grabbed her and dragged Val upwards. “Move, girl!” He growled, his throat still raw.

“We need to burn her.” The last thing Val saw was Harma's empty blue eyes staring upwards from her decapitated head, still blinking.

“Fuck that. Move.”

The other wights were standing upwards, still clutching weapons. We fight them, and their army becomes bigger by the end of it. Val took a deep breath, and turned to run.

The line was collapsing. The free folk were fleeing. The night was screaming, and howling.

“Through the forest!” The Weeper bellowed. “The gates of Hardhome ain't far.”

Behind her, there were only pale blue eyes. She ran.

She heard the dead pound behind her. Only the Others could fight a battle and come out with more soldiers than they started with. Every single man, woman or child that fell were on their feet again; charging through the forest like a tidal wave. A pure mass of bodies shambling behind her, gaining ground.

She heard men holler, horns ringing. Their line had fallen, the wights were everywhere. Thousands of them, a horde of bodies charging blindly.

She heard a howl around her.

And suddenly the sky started drumming.

Val gasped. It sounded like the greatest war drum she could ever imagine, pounding above her. Like a hurricane blasting in heavy, consistent bursts.

Her legs collapsed. She felt the whoosh of air as something very, very large flew above her. Trees cracked.

Val might have screamed. It was hard to hear or think anything at all under something that big.

Behind her, the fires hissed and extinguished under the rush of air.

“About bloody time!” She vaguely heard the Weeper bellow.
She saw white light flash. Instantly, the monster whooshed forward, and a line of burning white scorched through the forest.

White mist billowed. Pine trees exploded. Val dropped backwards. At first, she thought it was fire, but then she saw the spikes of ice pluming, and the cold draft knocking her off her feet. The saw rime cracking the trees with every icy gust.

The wights splattered into pieces. They didn't scream, didn't make a noise, as they were obliterated in the cold fire.

The first streak left a white scar through the forest. Then, the storm twisted, and another flash of white light carved through the forest, a gash along their perimeter. Val glimpsed wights left with limbs so frozen they couldn't move, flesh scoured do brittle that it collapsed.

Her heart was pounding. She saw it. Even though the trees and the darkness, she saw it in the flash of white light. A monster with white flesh and immense wings.

“… What is that thing?” Val bellowed. She couldn't stop the quiver in her voice.

“… That…” The Weeper shouted. “That's our new god.”

She could hear the free folk shouting, cheering. The monster scorched the forest in brief, broad and destructive strokes, tearing through the wights. Its keeping its distance, attacking the rear. It's trying to avoid catching any of the free folk too, Val realised, but lighting up a perimeter better than any of the Weeper's bonfires. A wall of jagged ice.

She saw wights through darkness, but they weren't attacking, they simply turned to run without hesitation. Every wight moved as one.

The wights didn't even try to recover the battle, they just folded, Val saw. It was a totally emotionless decision for them; with that monster in the air the Others were now more likely to lose more bodies than they could kill.

Her mouth was hanging open as she stared at the monster above. With every breath, a hundred foot of forest disappeared into cold, white light. It was a sight so immense, so incredible, so terrifying that she couldn't even breathe.

The great dragon roared, and the world trembled.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The little piggy at the Wall...

Samwell

He watched from atop the Wall. On a dark night, you could see for miles and miles over the Haunted Forest. Right now, the fires in the Haunted Forest was a haze of red obscured by the trees. It was a faintly surreal sight; to watch the wilderness from so far away and knowing that all of his friends were going to be fighting for their lives shortly.

Sam had never felt so helpless, or so useless.

Four hundred men of the Night’s Watch – the second Great Ranging in as many months – were in the forest right now. Sam knew the plan, he had been over it obsessively in his head. Stannis and Mormont would rout both camps at once, to stop them assembling and launching a coordinated assault on the Wall.

Mormont said they had to take advantage of their victory at the Frostfangs, repeat their success. The other officers agreed – particularly with Stannis taking the far more dangerous job of assaulting Hardhome. It was a good plan.

So why do I feel so scared? Sam thought to himself, twitching as he stared over the Wall. This high up, the ground was nothing but black.

Maybe I’m just a craven, Sam thought. Maybe I’m just scared, and maybe Thorne is right to laugh at me every time I whimper. Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that this was a different type of fear.

Sam stared upwards at the sky. A moonless night, Thoren Smallwood had insisted. A moonless night was the best night for an ambush. There was something about that statement that kept on bugging him.

Castle Black was nearly deserted. There were barely a hundred and fifty left in Castle Black now; mostly stewards, new recruits or old men.

Or cowards, like me, Sam thought, twitching his sore arm. His wound was mostly healed, but the Lord Commander still hadn’t asked for him. Perhaps he really did make such a mess of the last ranging that nobody wanted him. Bowen Marsh had left for Eastwatch, and Ser Alliser had command of Castle Black. Sam did his best to stay out of the knight’s way.

Sam shouldn’t even be on patrol right now, but he had come to the Wall anyway. He needed to see. Ten thousand wildlings, he thought quietly, against four hundred sworn brothers. Twenty-five to one, he supposed, but there would be old, young and weak with the wildlings, while the Night’s Watch would be all seasoned rangers and disciplined fighters. The sworn brothers would have mounted formations and bowmen. The odds were far better than the numbers might suggest.
Sam shivered slightly. He couldn’t help but wonder about Jon. The rangers were insistent that Jon Snow had turned deserter, but Sam could still barely believe it.

_This is wrong_, Sam thought. He could feel it in his bones. _It just feels wrong._

But there was absolutely nothing Sam could do to stop it. Whatever happened was happening miles away, and Sam could only watch from afar.

The minutes ticked by in shivering silence. Sam had no torch so he could see clearer in the darkness, but even under the furs it was freezing cold.

He knew he should be going back soon – maybe Aemon would need him for the ravens – but he still hesitated, watching the blur of fire in the distance. It’s definitely getting smaller, he thought. Smaller specks of light scattering into the woods.

Sam stood on the Wall for hours, just watching and thinking.

Sam watched, wondering what would happen now. The wildlings scattered again, would they try to rally once more? What about Jon – would Mormont bring him in as a prisoner, or could he escape and come back, maybe to explain that this is all just some horrible misundersta–

_There are torches approaching the Wall._

The sight caused him to pause. He could see the torchlight coming south out of the forest – a dozen pinpricks of light coming out of the Haunted Forest. Heading for Castle Black.

_Rangers returning?_ Sam thought, his heart heavy. No – that didn’t make sense. It was both too late and too early. If they had decided not to go through with the attack, then they should have been back hours ago. If they did attack, then the plan was to fortify a position in the forest and return back early the next morning. _Why would rangers be coming back now?_

Maybe wildlings then? It was too dark to recognise anyone. Still, there were only a dozen torches – it wasn’t a wildling horde. They would have to get to the gate to see who they were.

Sam’s heart pounded. He could see the first of the figures break through the treeline. They were all running fast, desperately. It took a long time for him to figure out what to do.

He agonised over whether to blow one horn blast, or two. Eventually, Sam started running, while he struggled to puff a single long, uncertain blow that hovered over the Wall. Sam sprinted, heading for the stairs down to ground. There was nobody to operate the winch elevator. At night, the wooden steps were winding, icy and treacherous, and very long. Sam wheezed, struggling to skitter down them.

_Some watcher I am_, Sam thought with a flash of bitterness._They’re going to reach the gates before I do._

The Castle Black was already awake. Nobody really slept. Sam could see the people moving through the courtyard even as he descended. A much louder, more confident horn blast rang through the castle.

He could see men rushing through the barricades, into the tunnel. Sam followed the crowd, gasping for breath in the long and narrow passageway under the Wall. The cold air howled through the icy tunnel like the breath of a giant beast.

The wildlings had been known to disguise themselves as men of the Night’s Watch on occasion.
Whenever a horn was blown and there was doubt, available men were to head towards the tunnel. The sworn brothers could look down through the murder holes at anyone outside, and the three iron gates on the inner passage would only be opened one by one. If it was a deception, then they had to trick their way through four different checkpoints and the patrols on each one. Sam wasn’t on guard duty, but he rushed ahead because he desperately wanted to see who was coming through.

“Seven hells, let us in!” He heard a voice scream desperately, banging on the solid oak gate at the far end. The wood was nine inches thick and reinforced, so tough that a man could through his entire weight against it and it would barely knock. Sworn brothers rushed to the gate. “By the gods, let us in!”

Sam saw Donal Noye and Ser Thorne at the front of the crowd. Everyone was gathering, but Ser Thorne pushed his way through. “Who’s there?” Thorne demanded.

“Wyck from Shadow Tower,” the man stammered. “With thirty others! Please, gods, you’ve got to let us in!”

A man moved to the winch, but Thorne stopped him. “Where’s your commanding officer, Wyck?” He thinks they’re deserters, Sam realised, as he panted up towards the gate to see.

“He thinks they’re deserters,” Sam recalled. Deserters in large groups was a very real risk. Instead, they would have to wait between the inner gates until someone made a decision, or an officer came to vouch for them.

A man moved to the winch, but Thorne stopped him. “Where’s your commanding officer, Wyck?”

“He thinks they’re deserters,” Sam realised, as he panted up towards the gate to see.

“Dead! I don’t know! I think they’re all dead!” He pleaded. “Please gods, they’re after us! We’ve got wounded, they were following us…!”

Protocol said they couldn’t allow any men through without their commander officer, Sam recalled. Deserters in large groups was a very real risk. Instead, they would have to wait between the inner gates until someone made a decision, or an officer came to vouch for them.

Sam glimpsed through the narrow steel bars of the grating above. There were barely a dozen still walking, but they were dragging more figures with them. They all had torches in their hands, staring out behind them fearfully. Like they expected the shadows to attack any moment.

“… Please, ser…!” A man begged. “There are injured… We need medical attention!”

“Let them in,” Donal Noye ordered, his voice a growl.


That caused Thorne to relent. He stepped back, ordering the brothers to hoist the gate up. There was a moment of shambling confusion, and then he saw the man collapse weakly inside of the tunnels. Everyone had swords drawn, but the men were so weak most of them couldn’t even stand.

“… They were chasing us,” Janos murmured. Sam had never seen him look so fearful. He had been full of bravado and ego when the Lord Commander assigned him to the ranging. “… The monsters… Following us…”

The wind howled through the door. The brothers stared out into the dark plains, but there was nothing there.

“Get the gate closed. Increase guards on the outer gate, post some men at the north side to watch for others coming!” Thorne snapped, before turning to Janos. “Janos! Janos! Tell me what happened. The Lord Commander?”

The man had already collapsed. “He’s cold,” Donal said, touching his skin. “They’re all cold.”
“… It was them,” The man called Wyck stammered, shivering. His furs were covered in snow. “I saw them. The Others…”

Thorne frowned. “Stop talking nonsense, man.”

“… Following us…” Wyck stammered, teeth shattering. It looked like he had frostbite on his ears. “They kept following us…”

_He’s clutching his side_, Sam realised. “He’s wounded.”

Donal dragged the man’s furs upwards, looking at his wound. There was no blood, only ice. Sam stared. On the man’s lower waist, near the hip, his skin was gouged and peeling off, but frozen. As if he had been maulled by a giant animal, but then the wound froze.

_Teeth_, Sam thought, but like no teeth he had ever seen before.

Wyck stared at his own body in horror, like he couldn’t even feel it anymore. The cold left him numb. “The infirmary!” Donal ordered, pointing at men to carry them. “Get them to the infirmary.”

Most of them were conscious, but barely. They were all murmuring and shivering. Sam stared in shock, wondering what to do. “Tarly,” Thorne snarled. “The maester, fool. Fetch Maester Aemon.”

Sam gulped, and turned to run away. He heard the whimpers of the wounded men all the while they were carried out of the tunnel, into the guardhouse, and then upwards into the castle proper.

The maester was already awake. For an old, blind man, Aemon reacted quickly.

Aemon had Sam act as his eyes as he inspected the men. All fireplaces were to be lit warmly, for the men to be stripped of their dirty furs, and heavy cloaks to be placed over them to conserve heat. They were still so cold, so Aemon ordered boiling water pans for under the hard infirmary slabs.

Anybody with experience treating injuries was called to help. Sam saw Septon Cellador, swaying slightly from drink, trying to undress a man. Sam glimpsed Edd, Toad, Jeren, Dareon and Albett rush around them. The castle was so undermanned that they even had to get some of the new recruits to help carry the injured to the infirmary.

The master never rushed, but he moved quickly with a practiced calm and efficiency. “Samwell,” Aemon ordered, running his hands over an unconscious man’s shoulder. Garreth, a builder from Eastwatch, Sam recalled. “Describe him.”

Sam gulped, staring at the nearly naked man. He looked so very pale, his breathing haggard. “…Um…ah…he’s very pale,” Sam stammered. The maester’s fingers traced the man’s skin. “Um…And there’s a wound on the back of his shoulder. Several wounds, actually…”

“The same as the others?” Aemon demanded.

“Yes,” Sam nodded. He felt squeamish just looking at him. He nearly fainted as Aemon’s bony fingers ran over the wounds. “…No, a bit different. They’re smaller, but more of them. He looks like he was… attacked from behind repeatedly.”

_They were following us_, the man had said. Sam’s hand twitched. “They look like… bite marks, maester,” Sam added nervously.

The old man shook his head, but he didn’t seem so sure. “No animal has teeth in that shape.”
“What happened to them?” Thorne demanded, barging into the room.

“Still to be determined,” Aemon replied. “They all bear signs of injury from battle, but…” A pause. “There are stranger injuries as well.”

Thorne hesitated. The men were all struggling to breathe, and they all seemed so pale and cold. “What?”

“I believe it to be a form of poison,” Aemon said, and Sam looked at him in shock. “Something that robs the blood of its heat. I will need my herbs and medicines. Samwell, accompany me.”

“We need to question these men,” said Thorne.

“Right now, they are too weak.” Aemon replied. “Have you men refill hot water bottles, keep the fires burning, and poke and talk to them constantly to keep them awake. Samwell, now – I need your help to devise a treatment.”

Sam skittered past Thorne nervously. The knight glared, but he looked worried too. Aemon moved with surprising speed for an old man through the courtyard, towards the rookery. “Double the patrols on the Wall!” He heard Thorne shouting. “Ser Wynton will act as castellan of the castle. All fighting men take positions on the Wall. Get Clydas to watch for ravens. If we do not receive any reports within two hours, I will be leading a sortie into the forest to look for survivors!”

Thorne’s worried, Sam thought. It was strange for a single group to make it back to the Wall when there were four hundred that did not. Thorne must be very nervous indeed if he was willing to give control of the castle to Ser Wynton Stout, old man who lost his wits years ago, to lead a sortie himself.

“What happened to them?” Sam asked, jogging to keep up.

“I do not know,” Aemon admitted. The maester had always seemed so calm, so knowledgeable, but he was worried now. “… The wounds are severe, but they are not what are killing them. This poison… hmm… there was a book in the archives I recall, but… curses, it’s been so long since I read it…”

He was muttering to himself quietly as they raced up the steps to the rookery, to the maester’s quarters on the bottom level. “Samwell, I will collect the herbs,” the maester said. He knew every neatly organised jar in his quarters by touch. “You search for that book. Look in my office – on the top shelf of my cabinet, a journal. Leather covered, I recall, bound in a velvet sash.”

Sam blinked rushing to the maester’s private collection. Books of note from the Castle Black libraries that the maester had always wanted to copy and archive, even after he lost his sight. Some of the books at the very top looked like they had never been touched in years.

It took a few minutes of scrambling amongst the dusty tomes for Sam to find it. A leather book as small as a pocket diary, with pages of goatskin parchment so old they might have cracked. There was no title on the front, but Sam opened to the first page.

“An Account of Lord Commander Ryder – the Expedition to the Lands of Far Winter,” Sam read, squinting to make out the faded ink.

Maester nodded. “A journey to scout out the Lands of Always Winter – one of the very, very few to ever be documented. From eight hundred years ago, I believe. Bennard Ryder proved a very adventurous but short-lived Lord Commander.” The maester was still picking out vials from his cupboards, with the same care a knight might select his weapons. “I read it myself once, but my
memory fails me. There was something in there about an injury in the Frostfangs?"

Sam flipped through the delicate pages, trying to decipher the old, curly handwriting. “… ‘A company of men left Shadow Tower’… ‘travelled north’…” Sam skimmed. “… Oh! Their expedition stopped at the Fist of the First Men too!”

“Focus, Samwell.” The maester’s voice was quiet, but firm.

“… Um… ‘Found giant tracks in the valley’… ‘avoided a tribe of giants towards the mountains’…” Sam skipped the pages. “Oh! I think this might be it: ‘On the eighth month I learned how the Frostfangs earned their name. After moving north along the edges of Frozen Wastes, one scout was attacked by an unknown creature in the dark. Something that attacked from behind and disappeared into the mountains. Our best trackers found no trails, but we came across various bones – of bears, wolves and elk as well as some suspiciously human – at the mouth along a cave that lead into tunnels deep under the mountains. It looked like a lair, but for what I do not know. None dared pursue the strange beast any further into the tunnels’…”

He read quickly. “… I spoke to two wildling trackers from nearby mountain clans who told me tales of a terror that attacked at night, and had haunted their territory for generations. They described it as ‘pure ice, with teeth’…”

“… ‘As for the scout, we found him with a fang pierced into his back – the queerest fang I have ever seen. The fang dripped what I firmly believe to be venom, injected into his blood. My assertion has been met with doubt even from my own men, but I am confident that this evidence of an attack from an ice spider – the kind described in the stories’…” Sam gaped. “An ice spider? Really?”

“… Ah yes, I recall it now,” the maester sighed, leaning backwards. “The last time I read that line I was a young fool – I dismissed the Lord Commander’s claims as well. I thought he mistook a shadowcat’s tooth for a spider’s fang, and the effects of hypothermia as signs of a venom. Go on, Samwell.”

“… ‘From the size of the fang and the wound, I estimate the ice spider as at least eight foot tall’…” Sam gulped. There was a rough sketch of the tooth. The wounds on the men in the infirmary weren’t that big. “… ‘The scout himself died from the venom. From my observations, the venom appears to be almost pure ice. It is more of a paralytic than a poison. In smaller dosages it may be survivable, but in large doses it freezes the blood, and then the muscles. Eventually, the organs freeze too. It is a slow death, but the victim is consistently weakened and numbed until they finally die’…” Sam gulped. “… ‘The venom is unnatural. It is cold and it doesn’t appear to ever warm. I have never seen the sort before’ … um… it doesn’t say anything about a cure for the venom, maester.”

He didn’t reply. There was a long moment of quiet. Sam’s hand was trembling.

_Ice spiders_, Sam thought in shock. _Ice spiders!

_In the stories, the Others used to ride giant ice spiders_, Sam recollected with a stab of fear. He thought of the men in the infirmary, and his body squirmed. He was about to say something, but his mouth closed nervously.

“I can hear your mouth flapping open and shut, Samwell,” Maester Aemon said, with a frown. “If you have something to say, then speak.”

Sam twitched. “… Well, it doesn’t make any sense,” he said. “… Those men… they were weak.
They said they were being chased, but how did they get away?"

Aemon never replied, staring thoughtfully upwards with blank eyes. “I mean,” Sam said nervously. “You saw those wounds back then – oh, sorry, I don’t mean you saw them–”

“Samwell.”

“Right, um, I mean that man had been bitten repeatedly – over and over again. If they could do that, why not just kill them? Why let them escape?” Sam gulped. “There’s no way men that weak could have escaped by themselves. Instead, it’s like… whoever… were following the men, hounding them, but never killing them – letting them reach the gate.”

“You think they were allowed to reach here?” Aemon murmured. “Deliberately kept barely alive?”

“But it doesn’t make any sense!” Sam said, unable to shake the feeling that he was being a fool. “Why bother? Why would anyone–”

He stopped. His mouth hung open.

Strangely, he heard Lord Commander Mormont’s words come back to haunt him, from so long ago; Tarly, my lady mother told me that if I stood about with my mouth open, a weasel was like to mistake it for his lair and run down my throat. If you have something to say, say it. Otherwise, beware of weasels. Beware of weasels, Tarly.

One of the old stories that Sam heard came back to him. That the Wall was built to keep the Others out. “… They needed to be alive…” Sam muttered. “… Because the dead can’t cross the Wall….”

The vision of a blue-eyed corpse walking, attacking the Lord Commander’s tower, flashed in front of Sam’s eyes.

His knees were trembling. Barely alive, Maester Aemon had said. About to die.

The wights couldn’t cross the Wall – the old stories were firm about that. But that wight that Jon killed, they had been across the Wall. Because we carried them across, Sam remembered. They had been dead when the Night’s Watch found them, dead when they carried them through the tunnel, and then they had been resurrected on this side of the Wall.

“… The infirmary…” Sam gasped, his hands shaking. “… Oh no, the infirmary…”

Sam was already rushing out of the door, dropping everything as he ran.

Sam burst out into the cold. Sam had never been much of a runner, but he was running now. He heard a man shout some cruel jest – probably about a piggy running – but Sam never even processed it. The infirmary – across from the Flint Barracks, beneath the Silent Tower. It was barely five minutes away from the rookery and the maester’s quarters, but suddenly that distance seemed so, so far.

Sam sprinted as he clattered up the stairs and burst through the door so hard that his wounded arm stung. Sam panted, staring around the stone room – filled with rows of hard beds.

“Dammit Sam, close the bloody door after you, will you?” A voice snapped. Sam saw Hake looking at him irritably. “We’re supposed to be keeping this room warm.”

Sam blinked. There were seven stewards in the room, caring for the wounded men. Sam saw Edd, Hake, Tim Tangletongue, Jeren, Dareon and Toad scattered around the room filling up hot water
bottles and running between the men, while Three-Finger Hobb scattered around filling up cups of boiled onion stew.

“What is it, Sam?” Edd asked, frowning. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost. Surely Hake’s not that hideous.”

Sam’s throat jammed, struggling to get the words out. He jammed, still blinking repeatedly.

Everyone was staring at him like he was a fool. They stared at him right until the moment when Janos Slynt pulled himself up from his bed.

“Easy,” Jeren said, rushing to the man’s side. “Don’t move; you’re injur—”

Janos’ hand struck, grabbing Jeren by the throat. Eyes opened, and they were suddenly blue. Janos’ face was pale and blank.

Run, Sam thought stupidly. Five seconds later and it was far too late, and those five seconds Sam hesitated. I should have just screamed run.

Janos Slynt died on the bed and nobody noticed in time. Edd and Tim rushed to Jeren’s side quickly, trying to pull Janos off, but he was suddenly strong – much stronger than the man had any right to be. Edd was thrown to the ground, but while Tim was thrown backwards into another bed.

Sam finally found his voice. “Help!” Sam screamed. “Somebody! Help!”

The wight Janos dropped Jeren on the floor. The brother was gasping weakly, clutching his throat, but the wight was already heading to the nearest bed. The wight wrapped his hands around one of the wounded men’s throat, even as he lay dying, and he squeezed tightly.

First thing he does is try to kill the other wounded men too, Sam realised in the back of his brain, still screaming as he shambled backwards. If the others die, they’ll come back as wights too.

Another man pulled himself off his bed, pale blue eyes staring into the distance. Dareon was running for his life, while Edd struggled off the ground. Toad and Hake were trying to stop the wight Janos, but they were weaponless and the wight was very tough and strong. Three-Finger Hobb poured his tankard of steaming stew over the wight’s face, causing skin to blister and burn, but Janos never even flinched.

The man being strangled gasped his last breath, and then another wight sat upwards. Without a word, the new wight slammed himself at Three-Finger Hobb, dragging the man to the ground.

More and more wights were being raised every second.

Eddison stared in horror around the room, before diving out the door. “We’re under attack!” He shouted into the courtyard. “Wights! They’re bloody wights!”

Edd clutched tightly at the horn on his belt, blowing it deeply. Three times, Sam noticed as he stammered backwards.

Fire, he thought suddenly. Jon killed the last one with fire.

Sam never had a sword, so he ran backwards to grab a torch from the walkway, clutching it awkwardly with his one good arm. The flames burnt so hot he nearly scolding himself just holding the wooden torch, with a tip wrapped in oil-soaked rags.
Sam saw the men moving around him. The wights were all naked after being stripped, but they were didn’t seem to care. Sam saw Toad still trying to wrestle with Janos uselessly, right up until Janos gripped Toad’s neck.

“Toad!” Sam shouted, as his friend gagged. Sam tried to run, but more wights blocked the door. “Toad!”

Suddenly, Janos ripped Toad’s throat straight out of his neck. The sight nearly took Sam to his knees as he watched his friend gag and collapse. Sam staggered backwards, wielding his torch uselessly, while the wights spilled out into the room.

“What’s going on there?” Donal Noye shouted from below, running out from his forge. The one-armed smith never had a sword, only one of his hammers. “What’s happening–”

The man barely even had time to flinch as a wight leapt down at him from the top of the walkway out of the infirmary. Sam recognised the wight. He used to be Cuger, a heavyset young man, formerly a steward, a newer recruit. Cuger had always been slightly clueless in the training yard, but Cuger had been so excited when Mormont had picked him to come on the ranging to tend to the horses.

Now, Cuger was naked, frost sticking to his skin, as he tried to rip Donal apart with strength he never had in life.

Even with one arm, Donal fought off the wight. Around him, more wights were spilling from the infirmary. Sworn brothers were running, or being assaulted by the blue-eyed creatures.

Every monster Sam saw, he recognised. They were faces he used to know, men he had once called brothers.

_They planned this_, Sam thought. _Oh gods – the Others, the white walkers – they did this_.

Any man the white walkers touched came back, and the white walkers must have touched them all before letting them reach the gate. They let thirty men in through the gate. Now there were thirty wights in Castle Black trying to kill them all.

Sam’s head spun, frozen in the spot with fear. Thirty wights, against a hundred and fifty men left in Castle Black. But most of those men were either young recruits or old men – and they were fighting murderous undead creatures that felt no pain. Too many of their able men would be posted on the Wall or on patrol, not in the castle.

Sam watched as the whole castle spun out of control. The wights were shambling outwards – still stripped of clothes. Sam backed away, almost tripping down the steps.

Thorne screamed for men to rally, but wights were everywhere. To his credit, Thorne never backed down – he was at front of the cluster of men fighting back. He stabbed and swung at the creature, and it was still freshly dead enough to bleed.

Thorne’s sword chopped a wight’s arm off, and then slashed across its torso hard enough for it to shamble backwards. On his next strike, though, his sword jammed in the wight’s ribcage, so stiffly he couldn’t even pull the blade out in time, and then the wight grabbed at him with one arm.

Sam saw Thorne scream as the wight’s jammed its fingers into his eye, clutching at Thorne’s skull. He kicked and thrashed, but Sam saw Thorne’s eyeball pop as the wight dug in.

All around him, there were wrestling bodies and ragged screams.
Donal managed to fight off the wight, but then more leapt down at him and attacked. The one-armed smith was relentless, but the hammer was a poor weapon against them. The wights took each blow and barely even stumbled. Five wights charging at him, and the smith was staggering as he backed away.

He saw Septon Cellador stumble out of the Silent Tower, robes dishevelled and clutching a bottle in his hand. He was blinking, perhaps wondering what was happening with all the screaming. Then, the wight, formerly known as Wyck from the Shadow Tower, was on him, ripping the old man down with bare hands. A builder – a bulky man named Kegs – tried to save the septon, but then Wyck ripped off Keg’s head. Cellador was coughing, scrambling as the old man tried to crawl away.

The sound of a crossbow bolt pinging through the air. One of the younger recruits – a fresh-faced boy named Satin – had a crossbow. The bolt hit the wight in the eye, but the creature didn’t stop moving.

He glimpsed Hairy Hal shouting, charging bravely against the wight Janos Slynt with a spear. The spear plunged through the creature’s chest, but then the wight still crushed Hal’s skull against the wall with a single hand, pulling out the spear with his other hand.

Sam’s heart was pounding, so scared his body froze. Two wights closing in on him. Sam gulped, staring at the faces of Left Hand Lew and Muttering Bill. Lew had always been a good friend to him – a loyal brother, strong and dependable. Now, Lew’s face was blank as he tried to murder Sam with his bare hands.

“Oh no no…” Sam begged, hand shaking as he clutched the torch tightly. Their faces were so blank it looked like they looked carefree. Muttering Bill attacked first, staggering towards him. On pure instinct, Sam slammed the torch into Bill’s chin.

The wight caught fire, but it was still moving, still clutching Sam painfully as its body burned. Sam smelt burning flesh. He was so close he could see the skin strip off the creature’s bone.

Sam screamed. He screamed and fell backwards, with the burning wight still on top of him.

The flames burned unnaturally fast. It was trying to squeeze the life out of Sam. Sam’s face turned purple, gagging from the flames. His eyes were wide as he watched the wight sear into scorched flesh and then finally turned still.

Sam was so scared he couldn’t even move. The smouldering, charred body was still on top of him.

Stay still, Sam thought with pure fear. Play dead. Make them thick that Muttering Bill killed you before it burnt.

Sam was lying on his back in snow, a charred corpse on top of him, as the dead walked around him. He didn’t dare open his eyes to look.

There were shouts around him, mixed in with some screams of pain. People were dying, other people were running away. The men of the Night’s Watch were too slow to react. The wights kept to small groups, hunting through the castle. They are familiar with the layout too, he realised, they are intelligent.

Through a crack in his eyelid, Sam saw Thorne – bleeding from one eye – and Donal Noye – gasping for breath – struggling to gather survivors. Most people were running scared in fear. The wights were arming themselves, picking up weapons. Sam glimpsed Janos Slynt chasing after them.
– along with ten other wights. They marched naked through the snow.

Footsteps were over him. Sam tried so hard to stop himself from trembling, but then he felt the body over him. He opened his eyes, and he knew instantly that pretending was useless. The wight was standing over him, and it knew that he was still alive. Sam could see it in the eyes.

Sam screamed. The creature that was Left Hand Lew grabbed him.

The snow hissed. Sam wet himself in fear. He fully expected those hands to crush the life out from him.

Instead, there was nothing but pain as the wight grabbed his shoulder and dragged him physically across the ground. Sam thrashed and screamed in a high-pitched wail. Gods, it was so strong.

There was absolutely nothing but panic and terror. With a single motion, the wight lifted Sam upwards and slung him over its shoulder.

It kicked the door open as it lumbered forward. The wight half-threw him down the stairs. Sam gasped, rolling in pain, but then it was dragging him again like a sack of meat. It’s taking me downwards, he realised. It’s carrying me into the wormwalks, towards the tunnel.

Why hasn’t it killed me?

They reached the guardhouse at the front of the tunnel. More bodies around them – a dozen wights, but the shambling, screaming shape of living men too. There were four others being carried by the wights – Sam saw Dareon, Septon Cellador, Three-Finger Hobb and the boy Satin all being similarly dragged. Dareon was weeping, Cellador looked like he had soiled himself and rambling nonsensically, Hobb gasping for breath, while Satin seemed the most composed out of them all.

Why would they kill everyone else but leave us five alive?

The wights slammed the door shut behind them. They broke the lock and blocked the door with a heavy oak table, sealing themselves guardhouse. There was no hesitation or questions asked – every wight just moved with purpose. They all clutched a weapon and set about their task. Sam stared at the eyes, and realised that they all had the exact same eyes.

Those eyes were bright blue, but they weren’t stupid. They were sharp. There’s intelligence behind them.

Sam gulped as he recognised Janos Slynt. The wight was barely recognizable anymore. The man’s face and skull was bubbling and peeling from where Hobb’s stew poured over him, and bleeding from a dozen wounds, as well as a gaping hole in his chest were the spear went straight through. Like a butchered pig.

Sam could only squeal as Janos kicked him, marching the prisoners forward.

“They are heading into the tunnels, Sam realised. Fortifying the guardhouse and sealing the tunnel behind them. Heading back north of the Wall?

There would be guards manning the inner gates, but a group of wights went ahead and the guards never lasted long. Sam heard the screams. The tunnel was only really defendable against the north, not the south. They reached the first inner gate, and the wight of Left Hand Lew moved to winch the metal gate open. They moved synchronously.
There’s twelve of them down here with us, Sam realised suddenly. There had been twenty-nine in total. The other seventeen stayed in Castle Black to hunt down the living. But why go back through the Wall? If they wanted to take the castle, then they would need as many as possible. Why would these twelve barricade themselves in the tunnels with five prisoners?

And why keep us alive?

Seven wights stood in formation around them. Two of them clutched bows, notching arrows with unblinking eyes. Satin looked ready to try and charge them, but Sam clutched the recruit and shook his head. They were one fat steward, a drunken septon, a crying singer, a three-fingered old chef and a young recruit against seven armed, unfeeling monsters. They wouldn’t stand a chance in a fight.

But what was the alternative? Wait until Thorne or Donal assembled the men to throw the wights out? How long until they broke the fortifications, and the wights holding the guardhouse against them? The tunnel was meant to be defended from the south, not the north, but the gates were thick either way.

Janos pointed his spear, forcing the hostages backwards. Those eerie eyes shone. Its mouth opened.


Dareon was weeping madly. Satin had to pull him backwards, Three-Finger Hobb had to half-drag Cellador away. Sam almost stumbled.

Janos point its spear. “Walk,” it repeated, but didn’t follow. The wights with the bows pulled back their arrows.

Slowly, the group shambled backwards down the tunnel. The tunnel had never seen so dark, or so cold.

“What do they want?” Satin gasped. “Why are they…?”

“They’re walking us to our doom!” Cellador wailed, with skittering steps. “Demons that would drag us from the light of the Seven, to march us to eternal damnation…”

No… “They want us to walk down the tunnel,” Sam muttered. “But they can’t follow us. The dead can’t cross the Wall, not even walking beneath it.”

Did the barrier work both ways? Did it stop the wights from crossing from the south as well as from the north of the Wall? Or maybe they could cross from the south, but they didn’t because then they would be trapped on the wrong side of the Wall again?

But it didn’t matter. The tunnel was long and straight towards the outer gate, the wights had bows, and there was nowhere to take cover. A hundred feet long through solid ice.

“Walk,” Janos repeated, his voice louder. It pointed with the spear. *It wants to us to head for the oak gate to the north. Does it want us to open it for them?*

The group took nervous steps, like walking to be butchered. *I need a plan,* he thought. *What would Jon do in this situation?* “Keep walking…” Sam said, his voice quivering. “… We reach the gate… we open it, we run through it, and then we close it behind us quickly… They can’t shoot us when we’re on the other side of the gate…”
“But then we’ll be on the wrong side of the Wall!” Dareon wailed.

“So?” Satin countered. “It’s better than being here. We could run along the Wall, maybe meet up with the ranging, or head to Eastwatch if we have to.”

_with no supplies or proper equipment_, Sam thought, but he didn’t say anything. The gate was less than fifty feet away. Every step felt like an eternity.

“They’ll follow us,” Three-Finger Hobb muttered. “Chase us down.”

“They can’t. Look at them, they can’t cross the Wall.” _I hope_, Sam added to himself. “That’s why they’re marching us with bows.”

The gate loomed less than thirty feet away. Nine inches of solid reinforced oak.

_But it still doesn’t make sense_, Sam thought slowly. If there was an intelligence coordinating the wights (and Sam had to believe there was) then why would they let them get away? If they still couldn’t cross the Wall even with a tunnel, then why did matter if the gate was open or not?

Unless…

There was a sudden screech. They all froze. The sound caused them all to jump. The sound of wood groaning, metal creaking.

Sam stared in quiet horror at the gate in front of them. The huge iron hinges trembled.

With a tremendous crack, the wood shattered. Sam dropped as splinters like knives shot overhead. Metal bolts tore out of steel.

His heart almost stopped as suddenly the gate dropped in front of them. The wind howled through the tunnel, and suddenly they were left staring at the night beyond the wall.

Cold blue eyes shone back at them. The nine inch thick gate trembled and cracked as it was torn away. Dareon was screaming.

Sam glimpsed black, hulking shapes – larger than any he had ever seen – stomping outside over the thick snow drifts. He saw the outlines of mammoths and giants, massive beasts, all working to rip the gate straight off its hinges with unbelievable strength. Sam fell to his knees as he looked up at the monstrous giant, and it had glowing blue eyes.

There was no gate anymore. Standing out the front was an army of blue-eyed creatures, as still as the dead.

But his attention was fixed firmly on the creature in front. Even in the darkness, it seemed to glow. It was shimmering, colder, more beautiful and more inhuman than anything he had ever imagined. It stood like a beautiful sculpture carved out of crystalline ice. A sculpture with bright blue eyes.

An Other. A white walker. It stood tall at the mouth of the tunnel, wind and snow swirling around it.

The white walker stared through them. Like they were nothing but some sort of curious insects.

Cellador was on his knees, weeping and praying.

Sam felt his blood freeze. It was like he was looking into the eyes of death, barely fifteen feet away.
But it can’t reach us, some part of Sam thought. The tiny rational part that was still working amidst the pure panic. Even if the gate is open, it can’t come through. Otherwise they would be through already. The Wall is more than stone or ice – it’s a barrier. The ancient spells from the children of the forest. The Others can’t come through it.

So then why…?

Still, the white walker took a step forward. It raised a delicate, slender icy hand, stretching towards the mouth of the tunnel.

Its voice was alien, like the cracking of ice. It sounded like it was trying to form syllables that were unnatural for its tongue. “Walk,” the Other said, before motioning towards it again.

It wants to get through, Sam realised with quiet horror. Only living men could walk freely underneath the Wall.

Around it, he saw blue-eyed corpses step forward. Dozens of bows being notched. Arrows pointed at them. Even if wights couldn’t reach him, arrows certainly could. It’s going to kill us if we don’t do what it says.

Sam froze, staring out into the blackness. Standing at the mouth of the tunnel, staring at an army of hundreds upon hundreds of monsters waiting in the snow.

He couldn’t breathe. It felt like his lungs just jammed. It felt like he was literally about to choke from the fear contracting in his chest.

Very slowly, the creature stepped forward its hand still outstretched. It walked two steps, before Sam saw the very edges of its cold fingers begin to sizzle and burn. Its hands stiffened at an invisible barrier towards the mouth of the tunnel. A flash of something like annoyance crossed the Other’s gaze.

They burn. The Wall burns them. So the wights can be pulled across but the Others themselves can’t? Sam thought. Sam was struggling to understand how the boundary of the Wall worked, but he didn’t think the Other understood it either. This moment it felt experimental – investigative. Like the white walker itself was trying to figure out how to pass.

Castle Black had been short-manned. It must have seen an opportunity to try and get through the Wall.

Next to him, it sounded like Septon Cellador soiled himself again.

The Other paused, before motioning again at the five men. “Walk,” it repeated, in its gravelly voice. The wights around it moved like puppets. “Walk.”

Sam whimpered. Three rotting corpses dropped a bundle of stitched hemp rope at the mouth of the tunnel. The white walker pointed again down into the tunnel. Cellador clutched the seven-pointed star around his neck, mumbling scripture with his eyes focused downwards at the snow.

Behind it, the dark shapes of so many bodies stood like statues across the snow. “What are we going to do?” Satin hissed.

“It wants us to carry the rope under the Wall,” said Sam. There was a lot of rope – easily two hundred feet’s worth, the braid so thick a normal human could never lift it all.

“We do it and they'll kill us.”
“We don’t move and they’ll kill us!” Dareon snapped. “We need to run!”

Three-Finger Hobb shook his head. The old man was trembling. “We ain't getting through all
them,” he muttered. Easily a hundred dark shapes standing in the snow, in the dead man’s land
beyond the Wall and before the treeline.

The Other was looking straight at them. They picked us deliberately, Sam thought. The fat, the boy,
the old, the cowardly and the drunk – the weakest out of the bunch. Anyone stronger might try to
be a hero.

Either side, he looked at bowmen. The blue eyes were emotionless.

Sam twitched. “Pick up the rope,” he said. “Let's do what they say.”

“You craven!” Satin snapped.

Sam cringed, but he stepped forward. That moment as he stepped out onto the snow it felt like his
body was about to collapse. The Other stared at him, and then stepped back to let him touch the
rope. The Other was tall – easily seven feet, and long limbed.

His body shuffled as he bent down to heave up the rope. The cold, woven hemp was so heavy he
gagged trying to pick it. The Other kept its distance, staring at him with unblinking blue eyes.

Dareon followed. Then, hesitantly, Satin did too. Septon Cellador stumbled forward, muttering and
trembling. Three-Finger Hobb cursed, the old man's back stiff as he tried to lift too. The white
walker watched them go.

The rope hung over his shoulder, trailing behind him. Each slow, laborious step back through the
tunnel felt like marching to their execution. There’s an army of them across the Wall, and only
seven in the tunnel, on this side of the gate. How long would it take the Night’s Watch to recover
and retake the gatehouse? How long do we have?

“Why a rope?” Dareon murmured behind him.

“They want to pull more wights across the Wall,” Sam whispered. The wights couldn't cross freely
but they could be carried, or pulled. Yet the Others couldn't cross at all, could they? The Others
would burn trying to cross the Wall. The wights were just puppets, and the Other's strings burned
across the Wall. “They can't walk through.”

“We can’t do this, if they… if they get across…”

The rope won’t make a difference, Sam thought. They could still only get soldiers through a couple
at a time, and very slowly. The Night’s Watch would retake the tunnel before they pulled across
enough wights to make a difference. I hope.

Or maybe I’m just being a coward.

“… So they can’t cross beneath Wall…” Satin said in a hushed breath, walking very, very slowly
through the dank tunnel. “They can’t follow us?”

“Then what happens if we just stop walking?” Hobb mumbled. “In the middle of the tunnel, where
none can reach us.”

“Then they’ll shoot us with arrows!” Dareon hissed. Enemies on both sides of the tunnel, with
bows. It would be a long shot, but they’d be sitting ducks trying to dodge arrows. Cellador moaned.
“I don't want to die… I can't…”

“How many were back there?” Satin asked.

“Hundreds? Thousands?”

“If we help them get through then Castle Black doesn't stand a chance,” Satin hissed. Young boy, but brave. “We can’t do this.”

“We can't…” Sam murmured. “We can't stop them…”

“Let's just do what they say,” Dareon hissed. “They could have killed us, they didn't. They need us.”

“For now,” said Satin. “We can't beat them on the other side, but we might beat the ones in the tunnel.”

They were trundling closer, as slowly as they dared to move. Sam could see the rotting, naked body of Janos Slynt waiting for them. “There are seven of them,” Sam warned. Two with spears, two with bows. “They're armed, we're not.”

“If we do nothing they'll be more than seven!” Satin shouted. They were walking as slowly as they dared, feet trundling as the rope dragged behind them. “We charge them. Steal their spears. Just run for cover.”

Sam could feel himself shaking. “The boy's right,” Three-Finger Hobb said. He was an old, crooked fat man. The cook had once been a tall man, but now his spine was crooked, with a pot belly and blistered skin. The man walked with a limp and squinty eyes, but his voice still seemed strong. Scared, but strong. “We got to do something now.”

“Don't, it's suicide,” Sam begged.

“Take a deep breath, grow some spine,” Hobb ordered. “I take the one at the back with the bow. Sam and Satin charge Janos – steal his spear. Dareon and the septon go for Lew. As soon as we get close. Just take their weapons and ambush them.”

“We can't…” Sam muttered. *Yet what choice do we have?*

Cellador was wailing, unable to speak properly. Dareon never said a word, but he was crying too. Hobb and Satin seemed to tense themselves.

“Ready?” Hobb mumbled under his breath. Less than fifteen feet away. “Now or never. On three. One.”

“We can't…”

“Two.”

“… Let's not…”

“Three.”

Hobb dropped the rope and barreled forward. Satin dived, jumping to try to knock Janos to the ground. Sam tried to follow, but his knees failed him and he collapsed.

Dareon and Cellador didn't move at all. They were too busy crying.
Sam only vaguely was aware of Janos knocking Satin easily down with the butt of the spear. A bowstring thumped. Hobb fell too with an arrow embedded through his chest.

Sam gagged and whimpered with the sight. Hobb died quickly. No no no... Hobb had been a member of the Night's Watch for over fifty years. The cook was one of the longest serving members. He couldn't just die, not like that...

None of the wights even blinked. No surprise. Two of them picked up the end of the rope and dragged. Dareon wept and wailed.

The wight Janos raised his arm and pointed. “Walk,” the wight said again, while the other wights took the end of the rope and started pulling.

Sam collapsed, head spinning. The wight kicked him upwards with cold, purpling feet. “Walk,” it repeated.

That’s our job, Sam thought. The only reason they kept us alive. To walk backwards and forward under the Wall because they couldn’t.

The other wights were wrapping the end of the rope to the gate. The wight Janos used his spear like a cattle prod to push them forward. The mutilated flesh caused Sam to squirm, hyperventilating in panic. Their every step was unwilling, frightened.

They were all weeping, sniffling or crying. The wight never said a word, but the movements made it very clear that if they did not walk, they’d be killed. There was absolutely no emotion there.

At the other side of the rope, they had made a cradle. The wights in the tunnel were pulling the rope, dragging another three bodies—corpses clad in sheepskin or wool—through the tunnel. Sam’s heart pounded as he saw the blue-eyed bodies being lurched across the ice, heading towards the Wall. Three bodies formerly wildlings or sworn brothers.

All they needed was a rope long enough and wights in the tunnel, and they could pull more and more troops across by themselves. It was a slow, clumsy and awkward method, but the Others had found a way to get their soldiers south of the Wall. A crude way to circumvent the barrier.

The Night’s Watch will stop them, Sam told himself. As soon as the sworn brothers rallied, they could break the gates in the tunnel down to clear the wights. They’d throw rocks and arrows from atop Wall to clear those at the gate. The Night’s Watch could recover.

But if the Others start slipping through the Wall now, how long will it take them to break the Wall altogether?

The snow howled through the tunnel. Sam thought he might have heard sounds of battle in the distance, but the Other looked totally unconcerned. He watched it pace at the invisible boundary by the broken gate, swiping with graceful movements, as if trying to push through.

“They’re going to kill us...” Dareon wailed, as Janos prodded him to keep walking. “They’re going to kill us... Seven save me...”

Sam wanted to break down and cry, but he couldn’t. What would Jon do in this situation?

Jon would save the day. Jon would do something brave and heroic to stop them. Jon wouldn’t have let Hobb die like that. But how can I do anything like that?

“Remember your vows,” Sam hissed, trying to reassure himself too. “We’re men of the Night’s...
Watch, we can’t break apart now.”

“Men of the Night’s Watch?” Dareon laughed hollowly. There was a crazed look in his eyes. “My vows?”

“Whenever I’m scared, remember our vows.” Sam gulped. “We have to stay strong.”

“Vows?” Dareon snorted, shivering. “… I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls… fire that burns against the cold…?”

“Dareon…”

The Other stopped suddenly. Its head jerked at the sound of Dareon’s voice.

“… I am the sword in the darkness… I am the watcher on the walls…” Dareon mumbled. “They’re just words, I can’t do this, I can’t…”

The Other’s gaze focused on Dareon. Suddenly, a wight pointed a spear closer to the singer. “Say them,” the wight croaked.

Dareon gasped. The spear inched closer. “Vows,” the wight said. “Say.”

Sam stumbled, nearly tripping into the snowdrifts. The wight lunged to grab Dareon roughly, dragging him to the Other. It jerked as it stepped past the mouth of the tunnel, but it managed to push through to grab the singer’s neck. Satin rushed to intervene, but then the wights with bows pulled back on their arrows. Satin was grabbed too. Sam tried to stop them from pulling the boy, and then he felt a rotten, skeletal hand grab at his cloak.

He landed face first into freezing snow. Wind howled. They pulled us across the boundary, Sam realised. The Other couldn’t step through the boundary at all, but the wights could move at least part way through the mouth of the gate. The barrier affected the Other more than it did the wights.

Dareon screamed, high-pitched, girly. The wight dragged him by the collar through the snow.

The white walker grabbed Dareon with hands like ice. The singer gasped in pain. The words out of the white walker’s mouth sounded sharp, crackling, alien. “Say vows,” the Other crackled. “Say them.”

Dareon whimpered. “… Night gathers, and now my watch begins…” He gasped. “It shall not end until my death… I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children…”

His voice broke. “Say them,” it hissed.

“… I shall wear no crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post. I am the sword in the darkness…” He shivered “… I am the watcher on the walls…”

The Other’s eyes flashed. It forced Dareon to repeat the words three times, all the while gripping the singer’s wrist. Sam could only stare and shiver.

Then, the Other took a step forward, pushing Dareon forward too. There was no crackling. The ice of the Other’s skin did not sizzle.

Sam’s heart pounded. He realised. “Stop talking, Dareon!” He screamed. “Don’t say the words, don’t–”

A wight slammed his spear onto Sam’s head. The world blurred. He heard sounds of struggle.
Dareon tried to squirm. The Other held his wrist like an iron vice. “Repeat,” the Other ordered. “Walk. Walk, and repeat.”

The singer was gasping, screaming. Satin was screaming too. Cellador was on his knees, praying nonsensically. “… I am the fire that burns against the cold…” Dareon whimpered. “… the light that brings the dawn…”

The Other took another step. Sam could only watch in terror. Whatever barrier stopped the Others, it could be nullified by a brother of the Night’s Watch granting them passage.

I’ve got to stop them. The wights are bad enough, but if a white walker itself crosses the Wall…?

What would Jon do?

Sam shambled, half-running, half-crawling across the floor. He caught the wight by surprise, slipping through him. Charging at the Other.

The Other reacted fluidly. It’s hand slammed Sam to the ground, so fast he could barely even process it. Sam gagged as he felt the stinging cold from where its fist collided with his chest.

Still, it was the distraction Dareon needed to slip free of its grip. The singer squirmed, and as soon as he broke from the Other’s touch Sam heard the sizzling. The white walker flinched, starting to burn before it jumped backwards away from the Wall.

Dareon was weeping. The singer just turned and ran – sprinting back down into the tunnel as fast he could possibly run. The Other flinched, hissed and crackled, and then the wight archers fired. Sam had his face in the snow as he heard the bowstrings. Dareon barely made it a dozen steps before the arrows cut him down.

Sam wailed. He tried to struggle, but two wights were on him, holding him down. He heard Septon Cellador wail, and Satin thrash.

Behind him, there was the lurching of bodies as another three wights were dragged down the tunnel by the rope. The Other paced at the invisible line in the dark tunnel. It’s irritated, Sam realised. It’s found a way to get its troops through, but it can’t follow.

The white walker turned, to stare between the prisoners. It paused, and then walked towards Satin with long, graceful steps. There was no gentleness. The Other grabbed Satin by the throat and lifted him physically into the air with a single hand. It’s strong, Sam thought. Very fast, graceful, and strong.

“Vows,” the Other’s sharp voice crackled. It sounded like iron grating against bone. “Say them.”

Satin gagged. The grip was beyond cold. “Don’t!” Sam choked. If I’m right… “He’s a recruit, not a sworn brother – he hasn’t taken any vows! He can’t let you through!”

The Other paused, cocking its head. Then, without another word, its hand jerked, and Satin’s neck snapped. The boy went limp, spasming weakly like a dead fish.

Sam screamed.

Septon Cellador was still on his knees, praying with his eyes closed. Perhaps the septon had the right idea. Perhaps this was just some horrible nightmare, and if Sam closed his eyes hard enough it would all just stop happening.
The Other’s voice was growing impatient. It dragged the old man upwards, hand on his throat. “Vows,” it repeated. “Say them.”

“Seven help me… demons have no power in the light of the Seven…”

The Other grabbed his shoulder and squeezed. Its fingers must be like cold daggers. Cellador screamed. “Vows,” it said again.

Cellador was crying. Don’t, Sam begged silently, too scared to even speak.

The septon said the words. The Other took a step forward, before stopping. “Those vows have been broken,” it hissed, staring at Cellador. “Useless.”

A wight stabbed its spear straight through the septon’s back. The man crumpled in a hiss of blood.

Sam couldn’t stop trembling. He could barely even think. There had been five of them. Four were dead. *I’m next.*

The white walker reached out to grab him. Sam felt like his bones were shaking.

“Vows,” it said. “Say them. Say them and walk.”

Sam felt his body being hoisted up. “… I can’t…” he wailed, gasping for air.

“Say them.”

Sam couldn't even speak through the gasps of breath. It squeezed with fingers like frostbite, but the pain just made Sam mutter even more nonsensically. There was no thought, just fear. The Other snapped something in a sharp, crackling tongue. Irritated.

“*Say them,*” it hissed.

Sam was too busy crying, struggling even to breathe.

The wights shifted around them. Even if it could walk through, the Other could only pass so long as the wights held the tunnel. A dozen wights wouldn't be able to hold out long once the Night's Watch rallied. The white walker had a time limit too.

“… You want to live?” Its voice crackled, straining to speak. “Say the words and you live. You stay warm.”

Sam shook his head. “… I can't, my brothers they…”

“They go cold. All warmth goes cold. Warmth is abomination. Warmth is brief. Fire is chaos. *We are the only balance. We bring order, peace.*”

Its hands on Sam’s furs were cold, colder than anything Sam had ever felt. So cold it burnt even through his furs. “Say the words, and walk,” the Other crackled. “Then you walk away. Live out your warmth, live out your briefness.”

“You'll kill everyone.”

“*Kill.*” It spat the word with something that seemed like disdain. “No. You kill yourself. Your warmth would bleed without us. You are brief. We bring eternity.”

It pulled itself closer. Gods, those blue eyes were so bright. “When we conquer, the world will be
at peace. There will be order.”

There was something in its posture, its voice. It didn't seem like anger, it felt more like urgency. “Now say the words.”

Sam’s hands were shivering. *What would Jon do?*

Jon would fight. He would fight to his last breath, as hopeless as it was. Jon would be a true sworn brother, right up until his last breath.

…”I can’t be Jon. I’m sorry, I just can’t…”

“Night gathers, and now my watch begins. It shall not end until my death…” Sam recited between gaspy breaths. “I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children… shall wear no crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post…”

Sam said the words, still barely able to breathe. The Other held his shoulder tightly. The white walker pushed him to keep walking, into the black, cold tunnel.

How did it work? Were the vows like some sort of key, a way to unlock the barrier of the Wall? Certain phrases that could disable the spells?

The wind and snow had blown the torches out. The tunnel turned pitch black. The Other’s blue eyes shone in the dark. Every step felt torturous.

How far did the barrier stretch? At least halfway through the Wall? The Wall was two hundred and fifty feet thick at the base.

“I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men…”

Sam’s body was squirming. He could feel the cold walking next to him. He could have cried as they walked, one step after another.

“… I am the watcher on the walls… I am the fire that burns against the cold…” he mumbled the words.

*Count the steps. One step. Two steps. A dozen. Just say the words and walk. That’s all they want me to do. If I want to survive that’s all I have to do…*

Sam could see the first gate in the gloom. They were about halfway under the Wall. He must have repeated his vows a dozen times. It was amazing how fifty feet could seem like fifty miles. The Other kept on pushing him forward.

He could see a figure waiting for him in the gloom. The wight Janos Slynt, with skin covered in rime and blisters, standing halfway through the tunnel with his spear. Ready to greet his master.

“… I am the watcher on the walls…” Sam repeated. “… I am the watcher on the walls…” He took a deep breath, and then stopped. *Would this work?*

The Other’s grip tightened, so tight it felt like his arm would snap. “Walk,” it growled in his ear.

*Halfway through the Wall.* “I am the watcher on the walls,” Sam wheezed, gathering every sliver of resolve he could muster. “… and you do not have my permission to pass!”

The world seemed to pause.
For a second, it felt like the ice itself shivered. The barrier returned. Slam the door with it inside of it. *Please work.* He heard the Other howl – a soul-piercing shriek that seemed to reverberate in the tunnel.

Sam heard ice sizzle. The white walker’s body shuddered. *Fire,* he realised. *The Other is being lit on fire.*

The Other shrieked. Halfway through the Wall. It was too far for it to run back out. Sam had seen how the Other had flinched and jumped after Dareon stopped saying the words. He could only hope it also would work if the Other was too far under the Wall to run back.

Its hands clenched. For a second, it felt like it about to ripped Sam’s shoulder off, but then Sam shrugged off his cloak, dropped to the ground, and slipped out of its grip.

The white walker thrashed and staggered. Its white body burned. He saw milky cold flesh sizzle and blacken. Sam’s heart had never pounded so hard as he shambled upwards and started running as fast as his tired, short legs could take him.

He saw blue eyes shoot at him. The Other hissed and thrashed. The wight formerly Janos Slynt shivered in surprise, but then staggered after Sam.

*All of the wights are trembling,* Sam noticed vaguely. The Other was in pain, and the wights trembled.

It was too fast. The wight dived into him, knocking him to the ground, his spear in hand.

Sam fell. He wasn’t quite sure how he managed to, but he barely rolled out the way as the spear bounced off the ice beneath him. Sam screamed. His hands flinched, grabbing a hold of the spear’s shaft as the wight tried to pull the weapon backwards.

The wood stung. He felt the metal spear tip scrape his shoulder, but Sam couldn’t even feel the pain. Instead, Sam just pulled back, and the wight stumbled and fell into him.

The body crashed into him. He felt cold, sick, mutilated flesh. They rolled and stumbled, wrestling. Sam made a sound like a squeal.

The rest of the world disappeared. There was nothing but that black tunnel, and the two figures rolling, thrashing and squealing in the dark.

Sam could feel the wight trying to rip him in half. Even without the spear, Janos was strong, with powerful hands and an unbreakable grip. Sam could only roll and squirm, trying to stop those black hands from wrapping around him.

The ice underneath stung. Sam crawled backwards, feeling the wight clamber at him. Sam felt something bounce off his leg. The spear, he realised. The wooden spear he pulled from the wight’s grip.

Janos grabbed his ankles and dragged. Sam screamed in pain. His flailing hands wrapped around the spear’s shaft.

Sam was still screaming and wailing as he grabbed the spear and slammed the butt into the wight’s chest. The creature never even flinched, but it knocked him backwards slightly. Janos’ hand gripped at the spear, but Sam pushed forward. Using the leverage to knock Janos backwards.

The wight shambled. Sam felt tears in his eyes and piss in his breeches as he barely managed to
drag the spear upwards. The wight shambled, readying to lunge. Sam was grasping a spear he could barely even hold, against a monster that he couldn’t kill with it. Blue eyes gleamed in the dark.

_The eyes. Go for the eyes._

Sam squealed as he thrust the spear upwards against the wight’s head. The spear tip collided against the ridge of its nose, and then scraped off across his right eye and into the wight’s skull. The wight kept on pushing, charging into the spear.

Sam twisted, swinging the creature around. Using its momentum against it. It recovered quickly, and then Sam stabbed with the spear again. Straight at its remaining eye. Congealed blood splattered.

The wight thrashed blindly. Sam clutched the spear with both hands as he stabbed downwards again. The first stab grazed its upper arm. The second pierced its thigh. The third missed altogether. The fourth stabbed and jammed in its shoulder.

The wight was thrashing, struggling to move with torn ligaments. Sam panted for breath, eyes wide. In front of him, the Other was burning and sizzling. Its perfect, crystal skin was being scorched black with every step it made. Wounded and in agony, but pushing through the remaining distance. _It’s trying to force its way through. It’s still trying to cross the Wall._

Sam had no choice. He turned and ran. North, back down the tunnel, away from the white walker.

The wights at the mouth of the tunnel were crazed. Their master was in trouble, and they couldn’t help it. They couldn’t follow through the tunnel.

They were caught off-guard as Sam came tumbling out, gasping for breath and running harder than he ever had. There were hundreds of them, but they had slow reaction times and they struggled to respond. Sam turned left, scrambling out of the mouth of tunnel and over the snowdrifts as he ran.

_Beware the bowmen. Can’t die like Dareon did._ He had to run forward, not back. Use their own troops as cover from the bowmen’s fire.

Sam shoved his way through a rotten corpse. The creatures looked crazed. Some started to run after him, but they were sluggish, disorganised. They stumbled into each other – none of the eerily perfect coordination that Sam saw before. _The white walker is in pain,_ Sam realised. _It’s not controlling its puppets properly._

_Go for the treeline. Take cover._

There were bodies squirming behind him. Sam heard the lumbering footsteps of a rotting giant, chasing him. The monster was nearly twelve feet tall, so big it was nothing but a looming shadow glistening in hoarfrost. Sam screamed as he dived into the trees, but the wights were right behind him.

He stumbled. A branch. Sam’s body shut down as he tripped over a root and fell into the snow. He heard footsteps.

Then, another figure loomed over him. A wight charged, but the shadow in a black cloak cut out of the trees. The rotting wight was sliced in two with an easy stroke of a black sword. More wights attacked, but the cloaked figure held them back.

Trees cracked as the giant tried to barrel through. Sam heard flapping. He saw black wings –
ravens – flocking in the air as the birds launched themselves at the giant’s eyes.

Sam screamed. Everything felt so crazed he could barely see.

A hand was on his shoulder, pulling him upwards. “Run, brother,” a hoarse voice – the stranger’s voice – said. “We must run.”

“… Can’t… the Wall…”

The stranger shook his head. He pointed to the mass of wights.

Vaguely, Sam had wondered why so few of all those wights had chased him. He had been too distracted to realise. The rest of the wights let him run because they were busy crowding around the tunnel. The wights were moving in unison again, with perfect coordination. It took Sam a few panicked seconds to realise what that meant.

The Other survived. It had crossed the Wall. Sam took it halfway, and it managed to push through the other half by itself. His heart pounded. No no no… I didn’t mean to… I didn’t want to actually let it through…

Sam felt his body convulse. “We’ve got to help them, the Watch…”

A white walker was through the Wall. The Others had actually made it south.

The black-cloaked stranger just grabbed and pulled him backwards. His hands were cold. “We cannot. It is too late, brother,” the stranger said in his deep, solemn voice. “The Wall has already fallen.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

After the battle. The rise of a king, and the fall of one too.

Samwell

He was shivering. Shivering constantly as the stranger pulled him through the snow. Sam named the black cloaked ranger as Coldhands, but the man hadn’t introduced himself. No, he’s not a man. No man would ever be able to walk so far and so long without tiring or stopping for breath. Sam was exhausted, but Coldhands never seemed to tire.

Sam had walked for as long as he could, until his legs seized up and Coldhands had to drag him through the snow. The man’s grip was like iron. Sometimes Sam managed to shamble to his feet, but every time he fell the stranger would start dragging him with barely a break in his gait.

Coldhands was a hard, black shape marching through the waist-deep snow, clad in old, mottled black furs, his body thin and gaunt but so strong. The black sword – old, rusted and caked in rotten blood, with a blade like a sharpened chunk of iron – was always in his tight grip. A flock of ravens cawed around them, fluttering overhead through the trees.

“Hurry now,” said Coldhands, his voice rattling. “They are still behind us.”

“Where are we going?” Sam whined. It was very early dawn, but still gloomy as the light hovered barely visible through the trees. They had left the shadow of the Wall behind them and kept walking through the forest.

“Not much further now.”

It took another six hours to reach their destination. Sam was left panting, shivering and exhausted, barely able to focus. He saw a knotted weirwood tree clinging to a twisted rocky outcrop. The weeping red face was distorted and hidden by moss. He saw dead bodies littering the ground, dark shapes mostly buried by snow.

“Oh no…” Sam gasped at the sight of the corpses. They wore hide and sheepskin. It looked like they had died trying to huddle together, unable to even put up a fight. There was no blood.

“These ones are truly dead,” Coldhands said. “The power of the weirwood keeps their bodies from being easily possessed.”

“Who are… were they?” Sam said, as he struggled to breath. Even hours later after the night, it felt like the panic was the only thing keeping him conscious.

“Free folk,” Coldhands replied, shuffling quickly. “They came to take refuge at the heart tree, and the Others killed them. Quickly now, there is a passage beneath the weirwood that they did not know about. A safe spot.”

He called them free folk, Sam noted. Coldhands dressed like a ranger, but most men of the Night’s Watch would refer to them as wildlings.
Sam hesitated, but he had no choice but to follow. He was hungry and cold and all alone. If Coldhands had wanted to do him harm he would have done, and Sam never stood a chance all alone in any case.

Sam trekked forward, trying to see any tunnel in the dirt. Coldhands had to dig out the snow and hack at the roots to uncover it. The passage was a tunnel so tight that Sam couldn't even see it for a long while. *How old is this safe spot, if the tree has grown over it?*

Eventually, he made out the tunnel. Sam hesitated, but Coldhands was very clear that he had to go through. He scrambled on his stomach in the snow, earth and roots, crawling forward. The gap was so very dark and tight, and at one point Coldhands had to give him a shove.

“What is this place?” Sam cried.

“A safe haven, a waypoint. Once used by the children of the forest to hide from men. There is no barrier around it, but there are old wards that will prevent detection. We must hide here until the Others move on.”

It was so dark Sam couldn't see at all. He clambered by feel through the small, cramped cave. It was a tunnel dug for figures much smaller than him. The roots were everywhere, dangling across the passageway. The dusty stench of old roots and earth made him wheeze.

“What happens when they’re gone?” Sam squealed. He reached a clearing; a cramped cave nestled in the roots. The blackness made him shiver.

“Then I take you back to the Wall once it's safe,” Coldhands promised, as he climbed into the tunnel after him. He crawled quickly. Sam could only hear the roots rustling. “But for now, you must go to sleep.”

“What?”

“Weirwoods like this one link up to the whole. The children used them for meditation. Sleep here and you will be under the blanket of the Old Gods.”

It was dark and quiet. Coldhands never breathed, nor made any sound except when he spoke. “It’s too dark. Can we light a fire?”

“No. No fire, not here. Take shelter in the darkness.”

Sam gulped. He didn't understand what was happening, he was scared, hungry, and so tired.

After that Coldhands didn’t say a word. The stranger sat still like a sentry by the tunnel, his sword in hand. It felt like Sam sat in the darkness for hours, until eventually the panic and fear bled away and the weariness caught up. He didn't even realise he was falling asleep until he felt himself drifting…

He heard water. Sam gasped as the blackness blurred, until he was staring upwards at a huge cavern of white roots cutting through the black. He didn’t know where the light came from, but he could still make out the details. I'm dreaming, Sam thought, but it didn't feel like a dream.

He was standing on a bridge of woven roots, above an abyss of darkness. He heard a river gushing deep, deep below him.

“Welcome brother,” a slow, hoarse voice said. “You are not the one I sent the ranger to bring.”
Sam stared. His eyes had passed over the figure because of how it blended into the roots. It was a man made out of wood, with skin like white bark that matched the weirwood roots. No, Sam thought in quiet horror. A corpse. A pale corpse dressed in tattered finery, buried in weirwood roots for so long that roots had consumed him. A skeletal lord with white skin like bark.

The man could have been dead, if not for the single red eye that focused on Sam.

Sam’s mouth hung open. “This is a dream.”

“Of course it is,” the pale lord said, dust shaking from long hair like straw. He sat in a throne of weirwood roots that had overgrown to consume him. “The children would dream to talk to each other. They would link their dreams together, and use the heart trees as waypoints so that they wouldn’t lose themselves in the dreamscape. It is not the easiest, nor the safest, means of communicating to one such as yourself, yet it will be suitable.”

Sam stammered. He stepped forward, trying to make sense of the cavern. The dark heights made him woozy. “One such as myself?” He parroted, feeling like a fool.

“Indeed. I had tasked the ranger with bringing me a child of great promise, a child who could reshape the world with his will.” There was a soft smile on dry, shrunken lips. “Instead, he has brought me you. And yet we must make do with what we are given, it seems.”

Sam shook his head. His limbs froze. He couldn’t move, only stare. “Who are you?” What are you?

“I am a greenseer. The last greenseer according to some, but I have hope.”

“I don’t understand,” Sam said with a stutter. “What is happening?”

“You have been pulled into the middle of a war that is beyond you. I will explain, but I must hope that you are a fast learner.”

“The Others.”

“Yes.” A quiet, solemn nod.

Sam quivered. He took a deep breath. “The Other… it… it crossed the Wall.” I let it cross.

“It did indeed. Very unfortunately as well, which makes my task all the more urgent.” That red eye focused on him critically. “We are lucky in that the Other was injured in the crossing. It was injured enough that it could not quite slaughter every man in the castle. The Others are also not strong enough to survive under the light of the sun – not yet – and so come morning it was forced to flee and hide. If we are very lucky, the men of the Night’s Watch will find it and manage to kill it while it is vulnerable. But I think not – white walkers are not so easily hounded and defeated.”

Sam blinked. “The men of the Night’s Watch? They survived?”

“Some. Enough to retake the tunnel after the Other fled. The Wall quivers, but it holds.”

How does he know that? Sam thought. How could this man know something had happened leagues away? Still, there was no question that the greenseer just knew. Is this even real? Or am I going mad?

No, if I am going mad then I am already gone. Sam’s heart pounded. “So… so then only a single Other managed to make it through?” He asked with a twinge of hope.
“The barrier shivered, but it was not broken.” The pale lord nodded again. Another sprinkling of dust. “And yet even a single Other might still raise an army of thousands. So long as it is on that side of the Wall, the destruction it could cause is immense.”

Sam gulped. *I did that. My fault.* “And the Night’s Watch? Castle Black?”

“There were great casualties during the night, but the order is not dead. Not yet. That may in fact be our only hope.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You saw the barrier for yourself,” the greenseer said, looking at him curiously. “Where do you think it comes from?”

Sam floundered. “It was a spell.”

Magic, actual magic. The thought made him shiver. Magic is real. And monsters. Monsters are real too.

“I don’t…”

“The children of the forest assigned the task of upkeep to an order of men, who were weaved into the song. It fell to humans to keep order in the world, not children.”

Sam stared, struggling to understand. “The Night’s Watch.”

“Yes. The vows that you say are a part of a larger ritual. Every man who takes the black contributes to it, and so the barrier is slightly stronger for each man standing on the Wall. So long as there are loyal men manning the Wall and upholding their duty, the barrier will burn any Other that tries to cross.”

Loyal men? Loyal men are few enough even without anything murdering them. “But… but the Night’s Watch is in decline.” It had been for hundreds of years.

There was a slight grimace on the greenseer’s face. “And so the barrier withers too. The shield has cracks in it, and thus the Others returned.”

“They returned because of us,” Sam said breathlessly. A scared look passed over his face. *The last Long Night happened eight thousand years ago, and it is only now that the Night’s Watch has decayed that it is happening again.* “Because the Night’s Watch is falling. But what would happen if all the sworn brothers were to die?”

“Then the barrier would disappear in its entirety.”

“Oh gods.”

The greenseer’s face was hard and wooden. “And that is why the white walker in the south is very
much a problem. I expect the first thing that the creature is going to do is raise a force to exterminate every sworn brother on the Wall.”

“We have to… we have to stop it.”

“I will do what I can. You must do the rest.”

“Me?”

“I have a plan to raise an army to fight them back, but it will take time to reach fruition. Until then, the Wall must hold.”

“I can’t… I…” The very thought of that thing made his knees quiver. The Other had been something else entirely – strong enough to snap a man’s neck with a single hand.

*It must have fought its way through a hundred men in Castle Black*, Sam realised. *It had been wounded, burned, yet even a hundred men couldn’t stop it.* A hundred against one, and they weren’t enough. “How many of those things are there?”

“Presently? A few dozen or so.”

“A few dozen?” Sam said with a flicker of hope. A few dozen was surely manageable. “That few?”

“For now.”

“What does that mean?”

“The Others that are currently hounding the forest are, hmm, I suppose one word would be outriders. A vanguard,” the greenseer explained, his voice so low that Sam had to strain to hear it. “Savages, is a better term – those Others that have lingered in southern lands for thousands of years. They are only the brutes that have lost their culture, instead preying and relying on humans. White walkers that have been exiled from the main host.”

Sam gulped. “The main host,” he repeated.

“Yes. Those are the warriors that retreated to their ancestral home, to hibernate for thousands of years until their next cycle. They are a different breed altogether. The construction of the Wall interrupted their cycle – it blocked them arising again for millennia – and so their armies are retired in the City of Ice, led by their king.”

Sam felt lost. The world felt woozy. His voice stammered. The greenseer’s head cocked. “Ask your questions now, brother,” the pale lord said, his voice still a croak, but something about the tone turned gentle. “You must learn quickly. You must be prepared.”

He had to take a deep breath to calm himself. “They have a king. The White Walker King?”

The greenseer nodded. “That is correct. Though their king is half-human,” he said gravelly. “The child of a man best forgotten. That might well make him the most dangerous creature in the world.”

“What do you mean, *half-human*? How… Why… would…?”

“The Others stand apart from mortal men. They despise the living, but hatred and anger is not in their nature. They are too cold for such passions, any passion. They don’t even have a fear of death. But the one that calls himself their king is something different entirely,” the pale lord
explained. “He has both an Other’s powers and a man’s anger, fear and pride. The strength of a white walker and the viciousness of a human. He is king because he has been teaching the white walkers how to hate.”

He remembered the Other who gripped his throat. Those blues eyes had burned with such cold intensity. The very memory made Sam shudder. It had referred to warmth with disdain.

Sam’s hand went to his throat. There were no injuries on his throat now, but he knew that there were on his real body. The cold of its grip had burned. “They want to exterminate all life.”

“They do.” The old man’s voice was grim. “When the king comes south you shall know that the Long Night has truly begun.”

Sam shook his head. “We must stop them.”

“We must,” he agreed.

“How? How can we? If each of them is that powerful, if they have that many corpses behind them, if there’s army of them, then we can’t, it’s…” It’s hopeless. The words jammed.

“It has been done before. Protect the Night’s Watch,” he said quietly. “Protect your brothers. We need as many sworn brothers as possible. Do however much you can do, and hope that others do the same. Keep the shield intact.”

Sam shook his head, unable to speak. How? How could I ever?

“And then, when it is done, I believe that a record of the original spell that the children of the forest used to build the Wall must still exist somewhere. The children keep no archives except in their songs, and those have faded, but men would likely have copied such a thing onto parchment or stone,” the greenseer continued. “If we had such a copy, then perhaps we could see about repairing the shield altogether. Perhaps even build a new shield.”

He looked at the greenseer incredulously. “You want me to find a spell.”

“I do.”

Sam gulped. “A spell,” he repeated dumbly. “What does this spell even look like? Where would it be?”

“I do not know. But it must be found.”

Sam had never felt so lost before. How could he? Where could he even begin? Why did he have to do it?

I can’t. I can’t do it, I can’t do anything. I’m fat and I’m useless, I should have died in that tunnel.

Every time he closed his eyes he saw that icy sculpture with bright eyes, or the wight lunging at him. The voice in his head sounded like his father’s.

“Now is not the time for doubts. You have a task to do,” the greenseer said stiffly. His voice was low but hard. “This is a duty of the utmost importance and I need someone to fulfil it.”

“Why me?” Sam's voice quivered. “Why choose me?”

There was a long pause. The pale lord’s brow raised slightly. “Do you see anyone else around here?”
They stood talking for what felt like hours. Then, very slowly, Sam felt the light fade and his body being pulled away. The scene blurred into darkness. The last thing he saw was that red eye blazing in the black.

Sam gasped as he felt himself jolt awake, and he saw nothing but black. He felt the roots and cold dirt around him again.

A cold hand touched his wrist. Sam almost screamed.

“At ease, brother,” Coldhands muttered in the dark. Sam trembled and gasped, his stomach rumbling. Coldhands handed him a meal of roots and bugs for him to break his fast. “Prepare your strength. I will take you back to the Wall.”

**Jon**

He dreamt of a woman crying, begging for them to stop fighting. She screamed from atop a tower, watching the earth churn beneath her and great beasts rise out of the ground…

“Wake up, King Snow,” a voice called. “You are needed.”

Jon's eyes shot open with a groan. He saw Mother Mole standing over him. “You are needed,” the old women repeated. “They are calling for you.”

He shuddered. He could see the weak noon sun outside, but he had managed to sleep after dawn. He had finally fallen over of pure exhaustion with the sunrise. Maybe a few hours’ sleep, but he felt so raw it seemed longer. “They are waiting outside,” she said. “I will prepare your meal.”

His body felt so weary. He could feel the bruises. He had fallen asleep by a fire pit near the coast, but his furs still felt wet and cold. “Of course,” Jon blinked, as violent memories of last night returned to him.

Jon panted and staggered, his leg feeling so stiff he could barely even walk. The exhaustion was so thick in the air that morning itself felt heavy with low clouds and heavy smog.

_The worst part about a battle_ , Jon thought, _isn’t the battle itself_. During the fight, he had been so high of adrenaline and emotion he could barely feel a thing. At the time, he had danced over jagged ice and slashing blades without a hint of fear, hesitation, or weakness.

No, the worst part was afterwards, during the fallout. When the fighting was mostly over, but the exhaustion caught up with you and the tiredness kicked you like a horse. It was a time when the pain started to come back, and Jon had just wanted to collapse – but he couldn’t collapse. Not when there was so, so much still do.

He met Furs and several others waiting outside the tent. The mist from all the ice in the bay lingered thick in the air.

From the beach, Jon felt Sonagon slumbering on the rocks, closer to the camp than he had ever slept before. Ice bobbed around him, washing onto the sand with the wreckage. The dragon had been roaring fury last night – destroying ships and crushing men by the dozen, if not hundreds. The dragon chewed on so many men that his gums bled from the wrecks of armour and weapon caught between his teeth.
Jon knew that the dragon could eat just about anything – metal, wood, flesh or stone. He needed meat to survive, but occasionally the dragon would chew on stone and rocks as well. Swallowing swords and metal armour was just a delicacy for a beast Sonagon’s size.

“How is it?” Jon asked, pulling his cloak tighter. Last night it had been far too hectic to take stock. “How many died?”


In this distance, through the mist, he could see the skeletal wrecks of the ships still littering the frozen bay. A frozen expanse of icebergs and bodies. It was an unnerving sight in the light of day.

“Prisoners?”

“We got a few. I don't, fifty maybe? There were probably a few hundred that tried to surrender, but the raiders killed most of them.”

“I ordered them not to.”

Furs shrugged. “They mustn't have heard you.”

Jon looked around their eyes. They were all battle-worn and still on-edge.

That had been the hardest trial of the night – trying to take prisoners. It was hard, thankless work, and the wildlings hadn’t made it easy. Jon had heard that three dozen men had been captured by one of the ice river clans – but in the two hours it took him to find them he realised that half of those prisoners had already been captured and butchered for meat. It had taken two brawls and a very heated discussion before he got the clans to release the living men, but Jon had no choice but to leave the cannibals their meal.

All in all, out of the thousands they’d been fighting on the coast, less than fifty had been taken captive – and most of those wounded. The Weeper took two dozen crows too, but Jon had yet to see them. Even now, the wounded were tied up on the middle of the camp. Jon hadn’t the time to question them, and there were those who wanted to skin the men alive.

Bodies would litter the bay for a long time. He could see swollen corpses trapped in the ice, or floating on the waves.

“Alvin Whaletooth didn't make it back, by the way,” Furs said.

Jon's hands tightened. “Alvin is dead?”

“Yes. Him and his sons got caught by the ships. Dead at sea.”

Or did they die because of my ice? “What about Lord of Seals?”

“Oh, he survived.” Furs nodded. “He was further ahead. A lot of people behind him weren't so fine.”

The anger made his jaw clench. Alvin had been a good man, who went out to save the shipbuilders’ lives. Lots of people died so the Lord of Seals could rescue a few boats, he thought fouly. And I ordered Alvin to his death. Uselessly.

Jon looked around the camp. The smoke from the fires on the coast still hissed and the camp was in disarray, but it was still heaving with more people than ever. Crowds shambled trying to squeeze
into shelter. More people than ever. “How many do we have? How many survived the forest?”

“Buggered if I know. I pity the poor sod who tries to count them all too.”

“Try and count them, Furs,” said Jon, walking past. The man grumbled.

He looked around the group. “Rolf,” Jon called. “How is the Weeper? Casualties in his warband?”

“The Weeper is too stubborn to die,” the man replied. “The rest? A few hundred lost. A few thousand died in the forest.”

Even now – nearly noon on the morning after – they were getting refugees spilling into the camp by the hundreds. Hardhome had never been more crowded, or more dire. The camp was overflowing past the cliffs, and everywhere Jon looked he saw more hungry faces.

How many? Jon could only guess. At first he thought twenty thousand, but slowly that estimate was rising to nearly thirty. Thirty thousand free folk that all need food, warmth and safety.

Everywhere he looked, he could see new problems. Finding food, finding shelter. More boats to carry them. Arguments between rival clans. Organising patrols, sharing food. They had barely been surviving before, and now their camp had nearly doubled in size.

One problem at a time. “The Others in the forest,” said Jon. “They retreated, but we can't let them rally. We need to march against them, stop them hitting us again.”

“You can't march against wights, Snow,” Rolf warned. “They're dead. They don't have camps, they don't have fires. You can barely track the corpses and you can’t ambush them.”

“Then we clear the forest of many we can find. We won't catch the Others themselves, but we can cut down their wights.” Jon bit his lip, thinking of all the corpses hiding in the snow. “We need to press the advantage and scour the forest clear of corpses. Erik, Rolf, Haldur, Hatch – I want as many free folk raiders to me as we can get. We get them organised today, now – before the dust settles.”

He saw flickers in their eyes. Press the advantage. “Now. Spread the word. Have as many as you can get meet me by the heart tree in an hour.”

The men scattered. “… You know that they’re not going to be so eager to listen to you?” Furs muttered to him. “They won’t appreciate you bossing them around.”

“I'm aware.”

One problem at a time, he repeated to himself. One by one.

It was chaotic how much was happening. The refugees needed food, there were injured to take care of, and any fishing boats were blocked by the ice. Jon still had to arrange for teams to traverse the wreckage of the ships to salvage weapons, supplies or prisoners. The floating wreckage of a dozen ships littering all across the coast. Out of the twenty-four ships that had attacked, sixteen were destroyed, two were crippled and wrecked on the coast, three of them had actually been captured whole, while only three escaped the bay.

The three recovered vessels – two galleons and a cog – were now docked hazardously on the bay. The ships had been trapped in shallow ice and then abandoned by their crew as Sonagon crushed the ships around them.
It was little comfort, considering the boats that had been lost in the battle. They lost four dozen boats and barges as the fleet approached, and the soldiers on the front ships assaulted the beach while Jon was fighting on the ice. The soldiers set flame to remaining free folk barges along the beach, fighting stubbornly until they were routed by the wildlings. In a single night, Jon reckoned they had lost at least three quarters of boats that the free folk had spent so long constructing.

Still, by far, the worst casualties had occurred in the Haunted Forest. Thousands must have been lost, only miles outside of Hardhome’s boundaries. If the Weeper hadn’t led the rescue force, then it could have easily been much worse. The free folk might not have made it back at all if Jon hadn’t been able to eventually convince Sonagon to intervene.

And everywhere Jon looked, he saw more and more people wearing white stones as brooches and staring at him in awe and shock. He heard the whispers as he passed. There had been thousands who had seen Sonagon tearing through the fleet on the coast, or heard about Jon fighting off Stannis on the ice. The thought of all those eyes and whispers made Jon’s skin squirm.

He had seen Mother Mole in the morning. Her early sermon had been… fanatical. In a single night, her congregation must have at least doubled.

Jon saw a white shape bound towards him. He grinned as he saw Ghost, nuzzling up to Jon’s coat affectionately. The direwolf’s mouth was covered in dried blood. Ghost seemed weary too – they had both had their share of battle.

“Long night, wasn’t it, boy?” Jon whispered, stroking the direwolf’s ear like he was a pup again.

“Snow,” a voice called. Jon turned to see a woman, her posture guarded, as she stared from under a white bearskin hood. “We need to talk.”

Val, Jon recognised. She looked different from the last time he saw her in Mance’s tent – skinnier, gaunter, more worn. Still fair, but with darker circles under her eyes. He nodded. “How is your sister?”

“Weak,” Val said. “But alive. Dalla is holding her babe.”

He nodded. “I’m glad,” he replied, but he was too tired to put much enthusiasm into it. He stepped towards her, wincing slightly with his leg and bruised chest. “You wanted to talk?”

Her gaze flickered at his bad leg, but she didn’t say anything. “I hear you been calling us, Snow,” said Val. “You want a gathering?”

“Aye.”

“Careful now. If I didn’t know better I’d say you were trying to summon us. You expect the free folk to jump when you shout?”

“I saved a lot of lives last night. There’s a war to be discussed. They’ll gather. I hope you’ll be there too.”

She didn’t reply. She stood back, very cautious of him. Inspecting him critically. Jon met her eyes, and then kept walking.

“Snow,” Val said after a pause. “I hear you been taking prisoners too.”

“You hear a lot. What of it?”
Jon caught Val gaze, wondering what she wanted. “Unless you’re going to feed them to your beast tonight,” she said. “I’d be careful. Lots of men lost wives, lots of women lost husbands. They’ll want someone to blame – and those bastards attacked us. Don’t do anything stupid like trying to protect them.”

“I want to interrogate them.”

“And then?” Val demanded.

Jon met her gaze. “I don’t kill prisoners.”

She grunted, a single non-committal grunt. “They would have killed us.”

“And you would kill them,” Jon said with a shrug. “But I’ve had enough of death.”

Along the beach, Jon heard Sonagon growl sleepily, shuffling along the water’s edge sniffing at the ice. There was a crowd gathered around the dragon constantly. Val’s gaze flickered. “I heard stories about that monster of yours,” Val said darkly. “I didn’t believe them.”

“I barely believe it myself, sometimes,” Jon replied, limping again. Val walked slowly to keep pace. “That monster saved your life last night.”

“Yes, it did. That doesn’t mean I have to trust it for it,” Val retorted. “… I certainly don’t have to kneel.”

She cast a foul look at a nervous boy scattering around them, and the white stone brooch on his furs. “If you told me a month ago that the free folk would ever kneel to some young crow boy I’d have spat in your face.”

“They kneel to Sonagon, not to me.”

“Kneeling is for you southrons. We’re free folk, we ought not to be kneeling at all.”

Jon’s tent came to view, along the craggy, cold rocks. There was already a group crowded around his tent, waiting. The crowd parted. “Then maybe there’s just not as much difference as you’d like to believe.”

Her eyes were hard. “You expect me to kneel to you, Snow? You expect me to follow?”

“I expect nothing,” he said with a shrug. “I’m going south of the Wall. If you want to go as well then you should come along too. You’re welcome to stay behind if you’d prefer.”

“I remember when you were nothing but a boy kneeling in front of Mance,” Val called after him. “You were a scared little boy with not a clue of how things worked.”


He brushed into his tent to change his cloak and leathers, swapping to the giant fur cloak the children gave him, and bronze disk armour mail over boiled leather. He kept Dark Sister on his hip, but he placed another two daggers in his belt. There was dried salted meat – seal, Jon guessed – with bread and a deep flash of rich goat’s milk and honey waiting for him. A tribute from Mother Mole. He wolfed it down to break his fast as he dressed.

He saw the crowd gathering. It was early, but the free folk gathered fast. Jon clad himself with all the grace he could muster, and set out to walk towards the crowd of stony-eyed men and women
waiting for him.

Ghost stuck by his side. Furs, Hatch, Ulf, Rolf, Haldur, Erik and a dozen more walked behind him. The crowd parted for him as he headed to the heart tree.

It looked like the whole camp had gathered for him. The raider leaders and chieftains stood at the front – maybe eighty of them. All wildlings leaders, some of him that he recognised, many he did not. The Weeper stood more forward than any of them, standing with his arms forward and a new scythe on his back. After the battle, the Weeper’s throat was red and scarred and his breathing was haggard, but the raider still stood stiff and fearsome as ever. He’s a strong man.

The leaders were surrounded by their men – the raiders, warriors and spearwives, all clutching weapons. Circling around them all, there were crowds of refugees and free folk, all trying to see like this was some sort of ceremony. Jon glimpsed many – thousands – with white stones standing as far to the front as they could push their way through. The sight of so many people sent his breath away.

Thirty thousand. There were large towns with far fewer numbers than that.

There was a deep rumble, and heavy footsteps. Jon heard the shadows large creatures, rumbling forward. In the crowd, the giants stood hip and torso over the top of every other men. Giants, at least dozen of them. Jon knew the giant clans had been lingering around the cape – they tended to be antisocial towards humans – but he guessed that the Other’s assault had finally forced them into the camp itself.

One lumbered ahead towards the weirwood. Thirteen foot tall and with a grey shaggy pelt, staring downwards at the Jon. The giant’s broad, hairy face was indecipherable. The giant wore nothing but a necklace of bones.

Ghost pressed as close to Jon’s leg as he could. Jon was the centre of attention.

“Well, looky here,” the Lord of Bones shouted mockingly from the back, but even his voice was cautious. “The King Snow himself.”

“Rattleshirt,” Jon said with a nod, causing the man to glare. He looked around the group. “Garth. Harle. Morna. Gerrick. Varamyr.” Jon felt Ghost’s hackles raise at the sight of the other skinchanger. Varamyr Sixskins had lost his familiars except for his eagle and a single wolf, looking dishevelled, worn and bitter. That eagle glared at Jon with pure hatred. Some of the wildlings were so distinct he recognised them from their reputations alone. He gave them all passing glances. “Gurn. Ygon. Agnes. Soren.”

Jon turned to stare at a young man – broadly built, arms folded, with blue warpaint over his face. He had a strong jaw, and bronze piercings in his ears and brow. It took a couple of seconds for Jon to place him.

“… Sigorn, Magnar of Thenn,” Jon said finally. “I knew your father only briefly.”

“The crows ambushed my father and took him for dead.” Sigorn’s voice was rough. Unused to the Common. “Cowards ambushing a retreating foe. I will see all crows dead for that.”

Jon didn’t reply. He kept his gaze steady as he stared around the group, glancing around. They all clutched weapons, all with hard, disheveled appearances. The lords and ladies of the north.

“The crows are fools,” Jon said after a long pause. Now wasn’t the time for sentimentality. “They’ve been fighting free folk and you’ve been fighting them. I don’t care.”
Some rippled. “The real enemy isn’t the Night’s Watch,” Jon continued, meeting Sigorn’s eyes. “The real enemy is the same one that forced you from your lands. The Others that bring the cold. That’s only enemy that matters now. The crows will realise that soon enough.”

Rattleshirt spat. “I think you are a crow,” he said angrily. “I think you haven’t turned your back on them at all. I think in your heart of hearts you’re still black.”

“I won’t deny it,” Jon replied. “But I’m not fighting for them now. I’m fighting for the living.”

“Why should we trust the word of a crow?” A voice demanded. Jon noted how the Weeper stayed quiet. “We should kill you right now for what your lot done.”

“Go ahead and try.” Jon kept his hand close to Dark Sister. “But do you really think you’re more likely to survive without me?”

No one replied. All eyes gazed suspiciously.

“You lead a monster,” a large man bellowed, in a voice so gruff Jon could barely understand him. “A demon. I name you demon too.”

A man stomped forward, clutching a bone spear. He wasn’t that tall, but he was the broadest man Jon had ever seen. So broad-shouldered and stocky that he looked like a pillar of leather of flesh. The wildling wore layers of seal skin and furs, with a shaggy beard spilling over his mouth and tusks sewn into his hood. A Walrus man from the Frozen Shore.

“We haven’t been introduced.”

“I am Great Walrus.” Ah. “Chief of my people. You are demon. Vengeance must have blood.”

“It would not be wise to try.”

“You think our history is joke? Our ancestors?”

He stepped forward, but kept his voice low. “I think most here would be dead in the forest if it weren’t for Sonagon.”

He put enough of a barb into the words to cut through the air. I’ve played this game before. They’ll try to put you on the defensive. Don’t lose control.

“And why should let you lord over us?” Another man cut in for Great Walrus indignantly. A man with a bushy red beard. Gerrick Kingsblood. “You want us to kneel? To beg?”

“No. You should follow me because I control Sonagon.”

“Yes,” a voice muttered. “Now isn’t that a trick?

Jon turned towards Varamyr. The small scrawny man was sitting cross-legged. His wolf, a large grey shaggy animal, bared its teeth. His gaze was dark. “You have something to say?”

There were other people glancing at Varamyr too, looking between skinchangers. “You ain’t the only warg, boy. I’ve been a skinchanger for for years longer than you,” Varamyr said, his voice low. “You’re still learning. I reckon I could steal that dragon off you.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. Ghost’s hackles were raised, staring at Varamyr. “Try it,” Jon challenged, keeping his voice stiff. Show no weakness. Not here. How confident are you feeling, Varamyr?
There was a moment of quiet. For a minute, Jon was scared. Varamyr was supposed by the greatest skinchanger, after all. Jon couldn’t imagine Sonagon ever surrendering easily, but what if Varamyr really was that powerful? Varamyr could wear six skins at once, while Jon struggled with only two.

Still, then Jon saw the flicker in Varamyr’s eyes. That doubt, uncertainty. Varamyr might be powerful, but he was also a craven. He wasn’t going to risk it. Not now.

The moment stretched on. Varamyr averted his gaze slightly, a slight gesture of submission. Jon turned to face the free folk, his gaze solid – challenging. One problem at a time.

“You want to go south,” Jon said. “I can take you south. The Wall will stop your armies, but it can’t stop my dragon.”

“And in return?” The Lord of Bones demanded. “You want us to kneel?”

Jon tensed. This was the moment he had been dreaded, but there was no choice.

“No,” Jon replied. “In return, I want vows of fealty from each of you. They can be given standing up.”

The free folk rippled, muttering dangerously. Kneeling or not, Jon knew what he was asking them. He was asking the free folk to take him as their lord. Their king. No, Jon corrected, I’m demanding it.

“You what?” An older man demanded, among the chorus of angry voices. Soren Shieldbreaker. “You expect fealty?”

“You are no king of mine, Snow,” Val muttered, her arms crossed. There were mutters of agreement. In front of him, Sigorn spat curses in the Old Tongue.

Jon forced himself to say firm. He remembered how Ned Stark’s voice would cut through the air each time he addressed his vassals. “Who here was in the forest when the crows attacked?” Jon demanded, causing the voices to turn silent. “Who here was at the Frostfangs? Three hundred crows attacked us – three hundred against thousands. And they still slaughtered us.”

He heard the angry mutters. The Weeper stared strangely quiet, Jon noted. “The free folk are warriors,” Jon continued. “But no warrior can win a battle by himself. Not when every warrior is fighting by himself. If we want to survive – not just in the south, but against the Long Night – then we must fight together.”

“And you think you can lead us?” Rattleshirt growled. “You’re a boy.”

There were other murmurs. For the first time, the Weeper spoke up. “I never swore fealty to Mance,” he said gruffly. “I followed Mance, I fought for Mance, but I swore no fealty. And Mance never asked either. Mance knew how it worked; the free folk don’t kneel.”

There was warning in his voice. I have to push on, Jon thought, my position will not be stronger. They all owe their victory to me. Sonagon won the battle and they all know it. The camp is calling my name, I have influence that Mance never had. Press the advantage.

The free folk lived by their word. Every man lived and died by their honour. If enough swore fealty – publically – then that was a bound of honour as good as anything Jon could hope for.

Jon shook his head. “I will not take a haggle of clans south to be slaughtered,” he said. I will not
lead an army of raiders and murderers to attack the north, he thought to himself. The free folk
were dangerous; they would try to raid and pillage and Jon could not let that happen. “We will not
last unless we can stand together and trust each other. To do that, I need your fealty.” His eyes
narrowed. “If you can’t give me that, then you can stay behind.”

“Bah!” Soren Shieldbreaker snapped. “And what would you like us to swear? Promise to wipe your
bloody ass? I have breeches older than you, boy.”

“You will swear to fight together – to follow my commands, to fight those I say are our enemies,
and to make peace with those I say are our allies,” Jon said. “On your honour, to follow the truce I
set out – and to seek retribution against any who break the peace we make today.”

“That sounds like a kneeler’s prayer to me,” Rattleshirt snarled, clutching his spear tightly.

The air was so tense that Jon could barely breathe. They are desperate, though, more desperate now
than they had ever been with Mance. “And in return,” Jon continued, with barely a gulp. “I will
swear fealty to all of you. I swear to protect those that follow me, to work for the best interest of us
all. You fight for me and I’ll fight for you – I swear it. I swear it on my honour.”

Swearing myself to wildlings, Jon thought. He couldn’t help feel a tremble down his spine. Still,
he met the Weeper’s gaze and looked him straight in the eyes. Jon prayed silently that there was no
hesitation there. This is what I must do.

Rattleshirt and a few others looked defiant, but there were more whose gazes were flickering.
Nobody wanted to be the first to accept, Jon thought with a curse. Sigorn stepped forward
threateningly. The man was a whole foot taller than Jon.

“I am Magnar of Thenn,” Sigorn growled roughly. “Leader of my people. My blood is of the old
lords. I swear to no man – my people follow no Magnar but me.”

Sigorn’s eyes were furious. His father had been cold and intimidating, his son was more
headstrong. “You would destroy the Thenns? Erase our culture? Our history?”

“No. Let every man follow their gods, their culture, their clans,” Jon said. “I will take none of that
away from you. But you will follow me as well.”

Sigorn muttered a curse word that Jon didn’t understand, but he could easily translate. “Like hells I
will.”

The Thenns are one of the strongest of the free folk tribes, Jon thought. The most advanced, most
disciplined. I need them.

“Then leave,” said Jon, his voice dangerously low. “Leave my camp.”

Sigorn’s eyes flashed. The air felt so dangerous it might snap. Jon glanced around, before pulling
out Dark Sister from his belt. The black blade glittered in the grey sunlight.

“It’s either that, or we settle this the Old Way,” said Jon. “If you want to rule, then prove you
deserve it. Fight, and if I win you swear fealty to me.”

The Magnar of Thenn growled, before drawing two broad bronze blades from his waist, swinging
them in strong strikes. Of course this would be the only way to settle the matter. The free folk will
only ever follow strength. Give them a reason to follow me, not Sonagon.

But I don’t have to beat them all – just the first two or three.
Sigorn was about ten years older than Jon, and a warrior proven. Taller, broader, more muscled; he had probably killed his first man before twelve. The Magnar’s son and heir would have to be strong.

He remembered that Mance had to defeat the Styr three times before he agreed to follow Mance. Jon wondered how many defeats it would take Sigorn before he agreed to swear to Jon.

The raiders parted wordlessly. Jon saw Val watching intently. He was exhausted and worn from fighting all night, but the others would be too and there was no choice. There wouldn’t be a better time than now; when the memories of the Others and the dragon were still fresh and raw in everyone’s minds.

Sigorn held his two short bronze blades, broad like the scimitars of the Free Cities. Jon clutched Dark Sister in one hand, staying light and keeping his leg bent. His left leg was stiff, but Jon had learnt how to compensate for it.

\textit{Sigorn is bigger and stronger than I am, but I’m probably faster with better form. End this quickly.}

A raspy war cry burst from Sigorn’s throat as he charged. The Magnar was powerful like a bull, both blades swinging in brutal slashes. Jon stepped forward to meet him, bringing down Dark Sister so fast the air whooshed.

He saw Sigorn flinch and prepare to lock blades, yet then, at the very last moment, Jon twisted to one side to avoid the clash. He dodged, spinning around. Sigorn overreached himself trying to turn, while his blade swept downwards at Sigorn’s heel.

The flat of Dark Sister collided with his ankle sharply. Sigorn crashed downwards. \textit{Too aggressive and too wild}, he thought. \textit{Ser Rodrik would have smacked me if I had ever tried to charge like that. Skill and speed beats size and strength every single time.}

“Yield,” Jon said, stepping back. Sigorn growled and spat on the floor, recovering quickly. The young warrior jumped up, swinging both blades as he charged again.

This time, Sigorn was more cautious, he didn’t extend himself as much. Still, Sigorn was too used to fighting with strength; he would always go for the quick and brutal kill. Jon feigned an opening and Sigorn took it, and then Sigorn was crashing to the ground again, this time with a bloody cut along his hip.

He cursed violently in the Old Tongue. Jon kept himself calm, composed. “Yield,” Jon repeated more forcefully, drawing Dark Sister again. Sigorn recovered, but he was limping too.

Ghost growled and yelped as Sigorn charged again, but Jon held him back. Dark Sister danced between both of Sigorn’s blades for half a dozen strokes, before it slashed against Sigorn’s shoulder.

The man screamed in pain, thrashing powerfully with his sword in anger, but Jon ducked under the blade, and came up into Sigorn’s chest. Jon’s knuckles rang as his fist collided firmly with Sigorn’s jaw.

His knuckles stung. It felt like he cut himself on Sigorn’s tooth, but his leather gloves were thick. The blow knocked the Thenn backwards in shock, spitting blood.

Sigorn roared and tried to recover, but Dark Sister was already pointing at his chest. The blade poked lightly into his furs.
“I will not kill you, Magnar,” Jon said. “But I have no problem maiming you. If you fight me again, you will lose a body part.”

He glared, but Jon caught the flicker in his eyes too. Why is it that so many young men are willing to fight to the death, yet the thought of being crippled scares them?

Jon lowered his blade. Sigorn hesitated for a good few seconds, meeting Jon’s eyes. He knew if there had been any doubt in him then Sigorn wouldn’t have backed down.

Still, the man’s face twisted, but he took a step backwards. Young, Jon decided, but not stupid.

Jon turned to the other free folk. The air felt tense. “Anybody else?” He demanded. “Step forward now or hold your peace.”

Jon’s gaze searched around the raiders and warriors. He saw them rippling, glancing around to see who would go forward first. His gaze lingered on Rattleshirt, who stiffened as if he was about to step forward. He cradled Dark Sister, staring as the Lord of the Bones glared and moved—

“Aye,” a hoarse voice said suddenly, before Rattleshirt had a chance. “Snow, I’ll take that challenge.”

Jon blinked as the Weeper stepped forward, rolling his shoulders slowly. The crowd muttered. The Weeper’s watery eyes narrowed.

“Weeper,” Jon muttered, cursing himself. The Weeper lifted his scythe slowly. He had been standing so quiet.

“I warned you that we were going to have words,” the Weeper growled. “If you want my fealty, Snow, then I want you to bleed for it.”

Damn. Jon had come to rely on the Weeper – even trust the man – but Jon had let himself forget. The Weeper was a brutal raider, exceptionally cruel even by wildling standards. Maybe I finally pushed him too far.

Still, Jon couldn’t back down. He refused to show any hesitation here. He just nodded curtly, his body tensing. “Then draw your—”

His voice was cut off as the Weeper’s scythe blurred. He barely raised Dark Sister in time. He didn’t roar as he attacked, there was no warning. Jon grunted as the scythe blade hacked against Valyrian steel.

“You are a boy, Snow,” the Weeper snarled, not pausing for a second. “You presume too much. I’ve been killing and raiding since before your father ever got horny – you want me to swear to you?”

His scythe swirled. It was a wicked blade. Jon couldn’t dodge in time, he had to parry, but the scythe was so large and powerful he could barely stop it. Each time Dark Sister collided it took notches out of the bronze scythe head, but the Weeper didn’t seem to care.

Jon gasped as the blows forced him backwards. His hands could barely keep up.

“If you want to be king,” the Weeper roared, “then fight for it.”

Dark Sister slashed. The Weeper sidestepped the blow and then swung his scythe around from the side. Jon barely darted backwards in time, stumbling over his bad leg. The Weeper was still
swinging – every blow he made swept wide and viciously fast.

A scythe was a cumbersome weapon – it looked fearsome but usually it was more useful for cutting corn than battle. The wooden shaft was too vulnerable and it needed too much space to swing. Still, the Weeper wielded it expertly, swinging faster and faster and using its length to force Jon backwards.

*My sword is lighter, I should be able to strike three times for every one of his,* Jon thought. Yet he struggled to even keep up. The Weeper matched him blow for blow.

The air was deathly quiet except for the ringing of blades. The whole camp watched.

Jon grunted as he charged forward, swinging between swipes. The Weeper darted to one side, bringing his scythe up at Jon’s leg. It came so close that Jon felt the edge brush past his knee.

Another inch and Jon would have lost a leg. *The Weeper isn’t holding back.* Jon felt his hands shaking as the fear hit him. That fear of death you felt when you realised your opponent was stronger.

*The Weeper is better than Sigorn. Much, much better.* Sigorn had been young, strong but untrained – so full of openings that Jon could run circles around him. The Weeper was different; his stance was fluid and perfect, a seamless confidence from a life of fighting. He had an obscure weapon, but he swung it as if the hooked scythe was an extension of his arm. If there was any weakness in his style, Jon couldn’t see it. Not when the Weeper was trying to hack him to shreds.

“Fight, Snow!” The Weeper growled. *Can’t dodge him forever, need to get in close,* Jon cursed. Every step forward risked losing a limb. “Fight!”

He barely deflected the scythe with his blade, the hooked end coming so close it could have cut his fur open. Jon grunted. His arms struggled to even stop the hold the scythe back, and then–

He gasped with a dull ‘oomph’, feeling the butt of the scythe collide into his chest. He nearly doubled over. The Weeper struck out again, but by pure instinct he managed to dodge. He narrowly avoided the first blow, and then the Weeper’s fist slammed into Jon’s jaw.

He could feel his teeth rattle. Blood in his mouth. His head spun so badly he couldn’t even feel the pain.

Still, Jon didn’t hold back. A wordless cry burst from his lips as he slammed forward. As the scythe deflected, he charged up close swinging Dark Sister. The Weeper caught his sword hand with one arm, leaving Jon open to slam his other fist into the man’s nose.

There was a solid thud. Jon had instinctively been expecting the man to flinch or roll backwards.

Instead, the Weeper headbutted Jon’s knuckles.

His knuckles cracked, he screamed in pain through clenched teeth. Blood spurted from the Weeper’s nose, but the man didn’t even seem to feel it.

The Weeper slammed his knee into his chest. Jon slammed his shoulder into the Weeper’s chest. The older man staggered, before headbutting him straight in the forehead.

Jon stumbled. His sword slashed upwards, catching Weeper by surprise. He drew blood along the Weeper’s arm, but the raider didn’t even flinched. *Does the man even feel pain?*
Then the Weeper’s scythe slashed, clipping Jon across the thigh. He couldn’t help it – it hurt, and Jon screamed.

All eyes were on him. He could feel the pain, but he still staggered upwards.

“You call that a fight, Snow?” The Weeper grunted, despite his nose pouring with blood. “I’ve wrestled giants. I’ve seen more wars than you have years. I’ve murdered more people than you’ve ever met. You got to do more than that if you want to beat me.”

Jon’s teeth clenched, feeling his head pound. There was blood from his forehead, dripping over his brow. His hands clenched his sword so tightly it hurt.

He heard snapping split the air. Ghost was there – fangs bared as the direwolf approached the Weeper dangerously.

“No!” Jon shouted, throwing up his hand. His sword was raised even as his leg trembled weakly.

“Ghost! Stay back!”

The Weeper only grunted. Nobody said a word.

All skill was gone. Jon held nothing back – he didn’t dare. He wouldn’t win in a fight, and the battle dissolved into a brawl.

Jon growled as he limped forward, Dark Sister slashing. The scythe cut against his shoulder, but Jon took the cut to get closer to the Weeper and didn’t stop.

They clashed, trying to overpower each over. Jon met fury with fury.

“Weak!” The Weeper howled, kneeling him in the chest, even as Jon’s elbow smashed against his jaw. “Useless! Weak!”

Jon gasped breathlessly. He was bloody, but the Weeper was bloody too. The wildlings watching weren’t staring at him as if he were weak though.

Jon felt the butt of the scythe crack against his head. He staggered, but didn’t pause as he swung Dark Sister upwards.

The Weeper was winning, but that didn’t mean Jon had to let him win easily. Don’t back down, not for a second, he thought. Never back down.

Across from him, he glimpsed Rattleshirt’s eyes flicker.

“You’re a green summer boy!” The Weeper spat. “You know nothing of our ways, and you expect to lead us!”

“… Yes,” Jon gasped, spinning out with Dark Sister. The Weeper was driven backwards for a second, before Jon’s strength failed and the Weeper scythe nearly cut his chest open.

Jon fell backwards, but he still groaned as the Weeper’s scythe grazed across his chest. His bronze plate armour blocked the edge, but the strike still hit bruised ribs. “Then you’re a fool,” the Weeper snarled.

Jon staggered. A young free folk with a white stone on his furs and an axe in hand rushed to Jon’s aid, but Jon glared at the boy.

“Keep back!” Jon snapped through gritted teeth, gasping as he straightened up to face the Weeper.
again. The boy looked confused. Ghost paced restlessly. Jon glimpsed Val folding her arms. Jon forced himself to straighten up, wielding Dark Sister with both hands.

The scythe clashed. Jon took a few blows, before the scythe took his sword straight out of his trembling hands. Jon nearly stumbled over his feet as he fell, gasping weakly.

Dark Sister landed on the snow ten feet away. Jon panted, casting a glance at his sword, before taking a deep breath, straightening up, and raising his fists.

There was a pause. The Weeper grunted, dropped his scythe and stepped forward, swinging a heavy blow. Jon took the punch and replied with a blow of his own. The Weeper’s punches were more powerful, devastating like hammer strikes, yet Jon still met each one with a dull consistency.

They wrestled. Jon didn’t give an inch, even as the Weeper tried to grab him by the collar and pummel him in the chest. “… You… Fucking…” The Weeper panted through grunts of exertion. “… Bloody… Boy!”

The final blow hit him. A rough punch collided with Jon’s jaw, sending him backwards into the snow. His face was bruised, bloody and gashed.

The Weeper stood over him. There was a moment of pause, then the Weeper finally winced and rubbed his knuckles in pain.

Jon gasped, spitting out a bloody gulp between the pants of breath. I’ve lost a tooth, Jon realised dumbly. He felt one of his bottom molars crack. Still, he sighed and staggered up to his feet again.

The moment paused. All eyes stared at him unblinkingly as Jon raised trembling fists.

“You’re a soft summer boy, Jon Snow,” The Weeper declared. The blood dripped off his whiskers. “You’re as pretty as a girl, you’ve got no heart for war, you’re as naïve as a fool, and there are days when I think you’ve got nothing but snow between your ears.”

Jon didn’t object to any of that, mostly because his jaw was still trembling. He didn’t dare open his mouth.

“… Still,” the Weeper continued with an resigned grunt. “You say what you believe and you fight for what you say. You’re not a liar and you’re not a craven.”

Jon stared incredulously, or tried to, at least. One of his eyes was bruised shut, and there was blood stinging against the other. His hands were still shaking. The Weeper’s head cocked as he looked at him.

“I asked you to bleed for me, and you did.” The Weeper nodded. His face was bruised and bloody too. He cracked his knuckles with a quiet wince, admitting, “… You’re a hell of a fighter, Jon Snow.”

Slowly, the Weeper pulled a dagger from his belt. They all watched as the Weeper lifted the dagger upwards, and cut the blade across the palm of his other hand deeply. The blood dripped against the snow.

“You want my fealty? My vow, and my scythe – it’s yours,” the Weeper promised, still cutting the blade into his palm. “I’ll fight for you.”

The statement was loud enough that everyone heard it. It wasn’t a long vow, but enough to cause the free folk to ripple. The Weeper nodded at Jon, still staggering for breath, before picking up his
scythe and turning away.

“Next person who challenges King Snow…!” The Weeper shouted, glaring at the other raiders. “Fights me in his stead.”

The Weeper cast wary eyes at Rattleshirt. The Lord of Bones glared but didn’t stand forward.

“Aye,” A voice called. Jon saw Old Man Harwick walk forward, hands open. “I watched Jon Snow fighting on the ice last night. Never saw a man fight so hard. He fought for us then, and he fights for us now. I’ll give him fealty. I don’t care if he used to be a crow.” Following the Weeper’s lead, Harwick took a bone dagger and cut it roughly against his palm. “… He looks like a king to me.”

There was a pause. Slowly, Sigorn stood up again, still clutching his wounded arm. The warrior looked at Jon, who was barely standing up, with a bit less anger in his eyes. Sigorn shouted something in the Old Tongue, before reluctantly cutting the palm of his hand and letting the blood drip in front of Jon.

Jon didn’t understand the words, but he caught the meaning. There was a strange mixture of anger and begrudging respect in the Magnar’s eyes.

After that, more and more men started to stand forward. Starting with the free folk Jon knew from Hardhome, but even the newer arrivals were coming forward, one after another. Some came hesitantly, some came proudly, but they came. The Great Walrus spat and screamed at the men, but Jon could feel the tide shifting.

Even as Furs helped carry Jon to his tent, around him the whole camp was rippling.

Mother Mole was waiting for him, a pot of warm water already pre-boiled. Jon collapsed onto a stool, while the old, wizened wood witch prepared a bowl of herbs.

“You fight too hard,” Mother Mole warned. Jon winced as the poultice touched the gash on his face. “This will scar.”

“Yes,” Jon agreed, thinking about the Weeper. “I expect it will.”

Mother Mole didn’t say another word as she tended to his wounds. She was a skilled healer; she tended to his wounds and bruises with salts and poultices. Jon cast a glance at the chain of white stones around the wood witch’s neck.

There were still men crowding around his tent. Jon’s body was sore and bloody, but he forced himself to stay upright. He could feel the words spreading through the camp. The free folk were a proud people. They would give their fealties in person, and Jon needed to be upright for them.

Old Man Harwick swore fealty and gifted Jon a large horn, eight foot long banded in gold and graven in runes of the First Men. It was a fine gift, and he also offered Jon one of his daughters, to which Jon had to politely smile and refuse. Big Agnes tributed a shadowskin fur coat, Gurn offered a steel engraved longsword, Ygon Oldfather presented a massive mammoth’s tusk, and Harle the Huntsman gave a huge oak longbow. He got seven more offers of daughters and sisters from the free folk clan leaders, as well as many more tributes. The weirdest was Morna White Mask, a warrior witch, who swore loyalty and offered to bear him exactly six sons.

Some gave gifts, others brought terms. Gavin the Trader haggled like a fishwife – demanding new swords and horses for his sons, positions in the warbands before offering an iron cuirass and mail in tribute. Bullden Horn demanded a new ship for his raiders. Soren Shieldbreaker forced a promise to match his son with a daughter from a rival clan. Gerrick Kingsblood had to be bribed
with engraved silver bands before he swore fealty.

“I’m not sure about you, Snow,” the Lord of Seals said grudgingly, his fat chin wobbling. He hesitated squeamishly before bringing the knife to his hand. “But you’re the only one who seems to have a chance to save us, so aye – I’ll kneel. In return for my fealty, I want you to give me command of the ships. Any boat that my men built belongs to me – promise that.”

The terms tasted bitter, but Jon had no choice there. The Lord of Seals was the closest thing they had to an admiral in any case, unfortunately. Jon agreed, wincing as Mother Mole applied ointment to his wounds. He gave the Lord of Seals the one of captured galleons under the promise to get it manned. He gave the other two ships to other bay raiders, Devyn Sealskinner and Bloodtooth.

Outside, Jon heard the sound of fighting and arguing. There was screaming and brawls in the camp between free folk who refused to give fealty against Jon’s supporters. By late evening the word had spread; either give fealty or leave. Jon forced himself to stay in his tent, taking deep breaths as he listened to the camp rippling. Judging from the shouting, Jon had more supporters than he had opponents.

Eventually, Val came before him. She came between an aging raider called Garth and Harma’s brother Halleck. The wildling woman’s arms were folded, her eyes dark. “You put a good fight,” she said.

“Thank you, my lady,” Jon said with a nod, his body wincing.

Her lips twisted. “I’m no southron lady, Snow.”

“Yes, my lady.”

She rolled her eyes softly. “Tell me something,” Val said, “was that a mummer’s act? You knew they were threatened by you, so you arranged with the Weeper to fight to prove yourself.”

“No. There was no act.”

“So then…?”

“The Weeper legitimately tried to kill me.”

“Huh. And what do you intend to do about that?”

“I suspect he’s going to act very smug.” One problem at a time.

Jon suspected that it could have easily gone either way for the Weeper. Somewhere during the fight the Weeper must have made the decision. If Jon hadn’t have fought back well enough, the Weeper would have killed him – and he would have gambled on Varanyr maybe controlling the dragon. I was wrong, the Weeper had the right of it. Dragon or not, the free folk only follow the man.

Val scratched her chin. “I think you got lucky, Snow,” she said. “If the Lord of Bones had been the one to step forward, then you would have lost.”

“I could have beat Rattleshirt.”

“Doubtful. You ain’t ever seen him fight.” She cocked her head. “But if you had, you would have had to kill him and that wouldn’t made you no friends either.”

“Perhaps.” Jon looked at her, wincing again as Mother Mole applied a wet, soft stone to an ugly
bruise on his back. “What do you want, my lady?”

“I care for my sister,” Val said. “If you want my fealty – then that’s my price. You protect my sister and her babe. Promise that.”


“Good. Then take my vow as well.” She took a knife and cut her palm without a second’s pause. There was already a dark stain of blood on the ground. The drips of blood dripped slowly. “For you, Snow.”

With that, Val turned to leave, sweeping out of the tent. She paused at the door. “Now what is your southron term again…?” She mused, sarcastically. “… ‘Your Grace’?”

Jon sighed, leaning back after she left. “… I promise,” he repeated to himself. He could barely protect himself some days.

He heard the brawls escalate outside. Jon’s presence would only inflame things so he left it for his supporters to handle. There were a few free folk that protested, but they were in the minority. Furs and Hatch went to negotiate with the giants, and then Haldur reported that the Great Walrus was dead – he died in a mob and stomped to death by Jon’s followers. Apparently the Walrus Men would elect a new chieftain. The next Great Walrus would probably be much more diplomatic.

Only two clans were actually defiant enough to let themselves be chased out of Hardhome rather than give fealty. Through Ghost’s eyes, in the camp Jon saw mobs form of his supporters.

Towards the very back of the crowd, the Lord of Bones stomped in. The scrawny man looked in a foul mood, his shirt crackling. “I don’t trust you Snow.” Rattleshirt spat, a thick glob splattering on the ground. “I think you’re a fucking boy that couldn’t give a damn about anything north of your precious Wall. But you’ve forced the others to bend, so I’ll do the same. I give you my fealty, and I’ll honour it. I’m a man of my word.”

His eyes were dark as he drew a knife. “But just know this – the moment you break your vow, I’ll do the same. The moment you stop acting for the free folk, I swear it, at that moment my spear is going to be the first through your back.”

Jon watched as the blood dripped onto the ground. Rattleshirt didn’t even winced. “Thank you for your fealty, Lord of Bones, I will honour it,” said Jon, lowering his head.

Rattleshirt just scoffed, already bandaging up his hand as he stormed out of the tent.

Vaguely, Jon wondered where the gesture of cutting your hand and bleeding as sign of fealty came from. He was in no position to complain, but there would be a lot of people with bandaged hands and trouble clutching their swords come tomorrow.

It was dusk before Mother Mole left, Jon’s wounds safely patched up and body stinking of foul ointment. The camp was still in an uproar, but Jon was so woozy he could barely sit upright. Ghost nuzzled up to him protectively, and finally it became late enough that Jon figured it was safe to go to sleep.

At unspoken command, Ghost stood guard over him – just in case any of the unhappy wildlings tried to take out their new king.

King. No more avoiding that title. This is my responsibility.
Some coronation, Jon thought with a sigh. I became king by fighting a battle, then being beaten bloody in a duel, and the bleeding out in a tent while they haggled over fealty. The free folk most definitely made you work for it.

Still, Jon knew that Rattleshirt spoke the truth. Even if they gave him fealty now, as soon as Jon broke his own promises, all wagers were off.

My promises, he thought. Oh, so, so many promises.

He had promised the Night’s Watch he would commit himself to the black. He promised Qhorin that he would do whatever it took to infiltrate the wildlings. He had promised Mance that he would fight for him. Jon had even promised himself to Ygritte, and he didn’t even knew where she was.

He had promised the three-eyed crow that he would do anything to fight against the Others. He had promised Sonagon that he could keep the dragon safe. Every leader forced their own promises, their demands. And Jon had promised all of the wildlings that he would take them south.

‘Promise you’ll protect my sister’. ‘Promise to protect our sons’. ‘Promise us food, promise us victory’. ‘Promise you’ll save our culture, our families, our traditions’. ‘Promise me ships, promise me war, promise me loyalty’…

It was starting to feel like every promise was just another chain around his neck, and there were so, so many promises. He had bought his ‘crown’, as absent as it was, with promises.

Sooner or later, Jon thought as his vision started to fade, one of my promises is going to finally kill me.

Perhaps that is what they will write on my tomb, he mused sleepily. The king who promised.

Melisandre

The ship creaked dangerously, low in the water and unstable. They had left sight of the coast hours ago, and no sailing on open water. It made navigation treacherous, but there had been no choice. Nobody had wanted to risk the monster that could be chasing them.

There had been another ship to escape the bay with them; the Bountiful Harvest and the Ghiscari Prince. The ice had wrecked the Ghiscari Prince’s rudder, however, and she had consistently fell behind ever since they made their escape. Axell Florent had refused to wait or turn to help her, and so they left the cog and all two hundred men on-board behind. Likely those men were already dead.

The Bountiful Harvest was a big ship, but it was still filled to the brim far over capacity. They had rescued five hundred men, yet still had to leave hundreds of soldiers behind to die on the ice. Melisandre had never walked through a ship so cramped.

The decks were as sombre as the ones she had known as a child, but those ships had been filled with weeping and chains.

Five hundred men. Out of the four thousand they had brought, it was a sobering and miserable defeat and a treacherous journey back. Still, they were five hundred of the most devout men Melisandre had ever seen – grasping to a level of faith that could rival any Red Priest.
“We’ve got a strong north east wind,” the captain reported, a hefty man. Formerly the navigator, but there had been many changes in command recently. “We’re not getting back to Eastwatch without a westerly wind.”

Lord Axell Florent bristled. His fat ruffled under his fox fur cloak. “And what of the queen? What of our ships? We must return to Eastwatch with all haste.”

“I’m sorry, m’lord, but the headwind is wrong and we’re overburdened. We would have to tack, but we’re in open waters now.” The man looked nervous. “Perhaps if we kept heading southeast to Braavos, for supplies and repairs before…”

“Armies of savagery and darkness are about to descend on Westeros!” Lord Florent snapped, eyes bulging. “And the Queen and the Princess are right in their path! Eastwatch will be the first to fall. Do your duty, captain, and take us to Eastwatch.”

The man squirmed. “But the wind…!”

“The Lord of Light shall provide in our hour of need,” Melisandre said, cutting in smoothly. “Rest assured, captain, you shall have your westerly wind.”

She still had some power stored from the battle in her ruby. It was shame to waste it on something as petty as a steady gale, but needs must.

The captain gulped, but nodded and turned. Lord Florent staggered, but then bowed to her. He bowed. She had to keep the amusement off her face.

Did I ever imagine as a child that great lords would bow to me?

“My lady,” his voice was choked. “… Many of the men… many are disheartened… we were hoping for a sermon, to pray for the Lord…”

“But of course,” said Melisandre. “We shall pray together at dawn, in the glory of the rising sun. Yet forgive me, I must see to our king.”

“Oh. Oh but of course.” The lord gulped. “How is His Grace? His injury…?”

“Not well. But he shall be better.”

The king's quarters were the only deserted cabin on the ship. The knights and lords were cramped into corridors, but they had still reserved a cabin for her and the king. My king.

They all heard Stannis scream and gasp as his wound had been boiled and cauterized. The sound was almost as disheartening as their disastrous defeat.

Despite everything, though, Melisandre couldn't help but feel… elevated. Excited, even. It is grim, but we face the darkest hour. I know that dawn is coming.

For so long, she had been questioning, sometimes even doubting, but no more. She had seen the enemy. She knew her purpose, she knew her foe. It had been powerful and immense, but the thought of that cold night still caused her to smile.

It was one thing to believe, but to see it in the flesh… the memory still made her shiver.

Just as it was in my fires, it came true. I have never been more powerful.

The king's cabin was sparse, empty and quiet. Stannis Baratheon looked paler and more gaunt than
she had ever seen. The flames had seared his wrist, leaving only a bloody stump bandaged in
cotton. He looked like a skeleton of the proud lord she had first lay eyes upon.

“Your Grace,” Melisandre said with a deep curtsy.

He didn't reply. “We are three days from Eastwatch. We will have a good wind,” she continued.
“We cannot stay at Eastwatch, of course, not with the Champion’s army so close.”

Stannis's eyes stared at the wall. She walked forward. “Many of the men are scared, your grace,”
she said. “The sight of you, their champion, would do much to–”

“How many?” The question was quiet and sharp.

She stopped. He didn’t look at her.

“How many men do we have?”

Melisandre’s eyes flickered. “Five hundred on this ship. We left another five hundred behind at
Eastwatch, with six ships.”

“A thousand,” Stannis said, sounding hollow. “Less, even. I have just suffered the greatest defeat
of my life.”

“Your Grace…”

“Davos…” he said, almost croaking. “Lord Davos. Where…?”

“He did not survive, Your Grace.” That was a lie. One of the very few lies she had ever told him,
actually. “He died on the ice.”

She was sorry about the Onion Lord. Lord Davos had been a good man; she bore him no ill will.
But his refusal to accept the True God was his downfall. He had been wounded and delirious when
they met on the ice, but Melisandre had felt the intent from him. Davos had been misguided
enough to blame her for what happened.

Still, Melisandre did not kill him. She cracked the ice under his feet with the Lord’s heat, but she
took precautions so that he would survive. During the battle, Melisandre had been so swollen with
power at the time it had been easy. She had seen in her fires that Lord Davos would always be loyal
to Stannis, and so Melisandre ensured his survival such that the Onion Lord might recover and find
his way to his king's side once more.

Stannis’ jaw clenched. “His… son… the boy…” he muttered, sounding half-delirious. “My squire.
He was brave, very brave. Devan Seaworth deserves a knighthood, and his father's lands.”

“I think that is a grand idea, Your Grace.” It would please her to see the Lord Davos’ family in
good stead, the man deserved that much.

His eyes seemed to focus, and darken. “You knew.” The words were a growl. “You let it happen.”

“I gave you every warning, Your Grace.”

“It was a dragon.”

“The dragon is just a beast. The true threat is the Champion of Night – the man that controls the
beast.”
“The champion… I watched him cut down thirty knights. Thirty. What sort of man could do that? It’s…” His hand went towards his stump gingerly. There was a quiver in his voice. “The way he moved… I’ve never seen a sword move that fast…”

Melisandre stayed quiet. “He let me live,” Stannis murmured, “to mock me. I could see it in his eyes. He taunted me by watching me run…”

He was sweating despite the cold. A fever. “It was a defeat, Your Grace.”

“A defeat.” His eyes glared. “You promised me victory. You said the words, you gave me the glowing sword. You said I was promised.”

“Your Grace forgets his scripture,” Melisandre said, keeping her voice smooth. “Remember that Azor Ahai knew failure twice before he achieved success. Should I retell the tale?”

His body tensed, but he didn’t reply. She swept around him, dress brushing against the floor as she kneeled by his chair. “Azor Ahai tried thrice to forge Lightbringer. He slaved and he laboured for each blade, and each failure cut away at him, breaking part of him. But after each defeat, he stood up again, collected up the pieces, to forge something new. A weapon.” Her hand softly caressed Stannis’ cheekbones. “First, Azor Ahai laboured for thirty days and nights to forge a great blade of fine metal – a sword adorned with discipline and honour – and he stabbed it into the heart of a great lion to test the steel, yet the blade proved too weak and broke.”

There was no response. “And, so, Azor Ahai laboured for fifty days and nights, to forge a new weapon. He hammered his blade, his second sword, and went to temper it in icy water. The ice proved too cold, and the blade shattered. His second defeat.” Her hand stroked his shoulders gently. “Two defeats, Your Grace; one by lion and the other by ice. Do you remember what was required for the third attempt?”

She saw his eyes flicker. His shoulders were trembling slightly. “… Answer me now,” he muttered. “No more riddles, no more prophecies. Tell me everything you know.”

“If you are ready to hear it, then of course I will. I have never lied about your destiny, Your Grace.” That was true; she had never lied. Occasionally Melisandre kept some details to herself, but there were no lies.

“That… boy… he will lead his army and his dragon onto the realm.”

“He will.” The visions had been unmistakable – the boy would be Stannis Baratheon’s greatest enemy.

“And the realm will fall.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” she said sadly. “But you must stop him.”

“I will face him again?” His voice quivered. She had him.

“You will. The fires told me that you will face him three times.” It had been very clear, the number three constantly reoccurring. “The first has just happened. The first battle was always to be a defeat, but in the second battle you will draw to a standstill.”

“And in the third?”

“In the final battle, the fate of the world will hang in the balance. You must win.”
He took a deep breath, still trembling. Stannis looked so pale. “… I cannot…” he said. “You saw that monster… the size of it… It would take an army of hundreds of thousands to defeat something like that…”

“It will take a sacrifice. Are you willing to do whatever is necessary for the fate of the world?”

He stared at her with wide eyes. “Your stories…” Stannis muttered. “In your stories, Azor Ahai sacrificed his wife.”

“No. Azor Ahai sacrificed his heart.” Her fingers traced across his chest. “Nissa Nissa… the person who he loved the most in the world.”

He caught her gaze. *Softly now,* she told herself. *Gently.* “We must return to Eastwatch, Your Grace,” she said. “Your men wait for you there. As does your daughter.”

Stannis shook his head, breathing heavily. “No, I cannot… you cannot…”

“You must do what you need to do, Your Grace,” she said sadly, wrapping her arms around him. He sat tense like a statue, but she felt him crumbling.

He took deep breaths as if to calm himself, but then his shoulders shuddered. The sob broke his lips, and he seemed to collapse all together. Stannis fell weeping into her shoulder. *He’s crying,* Melisandre realised in shock. She hadn’t known him to ever cry before, but the pain, the grief, and the fever took its toll.

“… It’s alright,” she whispered. “… It’s alright. The battle does not decide the war, it is not over…”

Stannis wept and sobbed. Breaking down around her. The armour of pride shattered, and it felt like he was left bare in her arms. She cradled and hugged him, softly whispering in his ear. *It’s alright,* she thought, *it’s alright. Cry and weep and wail. Collapse and break down, my king. It is not the end.*

*Let yourself shatter for now, but you will be reforged. You will be remade.*

Melisandre had seen it in the flames: King Stannis Baratheon would be renewed and reborn from stone and fire.
Chapter 19

Davos

Davos gasped, sputtering water. His vision was blurry grey, which was surprising. He had never expected to ever see anything again.

Around him, people were yelling. He felt strong hands drag him out of cold water and roughly over hard ground. He was shivering, struggling to see, struggling to even breathe, only vaguely aware of his hands being bound to a post in the middle of the camp.

For a while, he felt like he would die any moment now, suffocated by the cold. It felt like there was ice in his blood.

There were other figures next to him, all similarly bound. Some were shouting or fighting, others just shivering weakly. Davos was one of the quiet injured ones. One by one, Davos watched through weak, painful vision as the cold killed others around him. Davos felt sure that he would be next.

There wasn’t even any fear with that thought. Davos felt like all of his emotion had drained out of the wound in his chest. He could feel nothing but cold.

Slowly, painfully, his breath came back. His body started to warm by the fire. It took a while before he realised he wasn’t going to die. *It seems like I’m cursed to live.*

_This is the second battle in a bay where I’ve survived the water_, he thought with bitterness, his head still woozy. *First the fire in the Blackwater, and then ice in Hardhome._

He blacked out a lot. His consciousness faded in and out. When Davos woke up one time, there was an old wizened woman tending to his wounds, and then pouring rough milk down his throat and almost force-feeding him a thick paste.

“… Why are you looking after me?” Davos gasped.

“King Snow wants all prisoners alive,” the old woman replied simply.

Prisoners. Davos couldn’t allow himself to panic. *I am Lord Davos Seaworth_, he told himself, his jaw clenching. _The Hand of the King. Lord of Cape Wrath. I cannot die, I have a duty._ In his bones, he couldn’t help but feel like it would have been so much easier if he had just died.

_My son, Devan, is with the king_, Davos thought. He had to believe that both of them must have survived. Stannis still had some men garrisoned at Eastwatch along with the Queen and the Princess. He could have escaped, met up with the remainder of the fleet.

_And the Red Witch…_ Davos thought. Melisandre had been on the ice too, yet somehow Davos couldn’t imagine her ever being taken captive. She had expected the defeat, but she must have been
confident that she herself wouldn’t fall with it.

The words she said came back to haunt Davos. ‘Some battles must be lost before the war can be won’. The Red Witch had led them all to their doom. I should have killed her after the Blackwater.

The camp was heaving. He saw ragged warriors glaring at the prisoners, occasionally spitting words in a language he didn’t understand. Davos saw men with painted faces and sharpened teeth, or savages clad in armour of bones. It was a huge camp – at least forty thousand men.

And then, one night, Davos heard pounding footsteps. He felt his heart tremble as he saw giant humanoids, at least thirteen feet tall, with shaggy fur and inhuman proportions. Giants, Davos gasped. In the distance, he once made out the shape of mammoths, great hairy beasts with terrible tusks.

It would have been the most incredible creature Davos had ever seen, if not for that monstrous white dragon. Occasionally, he heard the beating of huge wings, and he looked up to see the beast flying overhead. The dragon that had slaughtered so many of Stannis’ men.

I’m in the land of monsters now, he thought with a gulp. And all the monsters are readying to head south.

The other prisoners were tied to stakes in the centre of the camp too. Davos looked between them, sizing them up. Maybe seventy prisoners in total. Davos recognised three Lysene officers, one of Salladhor’s eunuch servants, as well as a beefy rower who was missing an arm. There were a dozen men-at-arms from Stannis’ army, a bowman that seemed on the verge of death, and a grizzled veteran who looked quietly murderous with both arms behind his back.

As far as valuable hostages went, Davos could recognise few. Ser Clayton Suggs – the commander of the vanguard from the Oleod – had survived; the man was snapping and shouting at the men who passed his post. He saw a young landed knight whose name escaped him, a soldier called Axell Flowers – a bastard from one of the queen’s cousins – and Ser Patrek’s old squire who appeared to be pissing himself. The most valuable hostage there was perhaps Ser Justin Massey, but the young knight had taken an arrow in the battle and appeared sickly ill.

After that, there were two dozen men of the Night’s Watch wearing black cloaks and haunted expressions. From the sworn brothers’ presence, Davos could only guess that the Lord Commander’s assault from the forest had failed as well.

Most of these prisoners are lowborn, Davos thought with a gulp. That was not reassuring. Maybe some could be tortured for information, but in all likelihood the sailors and soldiers would have nothing of value. Their presence implied that the wildlings had no intention of ransoming anyone, which made Davos all the more nervous about why they had been kept alive.

From the fragments of chatter, Davos heard that some of the prisoners had been eaten by cannibals.

Every day was cold and frightening. A woman came around to feed the prisoners daily, the fire was kept burning, but all other wildlings would spit on the prisoners whenever they came near.

Occasionally, more captives would arrive. The wildlings must be searching the coast, still taking captives of the men that had tried to run. Davos watched as new men were bound. He kept quiet, watching, but still trying to gather his strength, trying to think of a plan to escape.

On the fourth day, seven more captives were brought in. Davos stared as he saw a thrashing man dragged into camp by two burly savages. Davos had never seen Salladhor Saan so dishevelled, his
fine silks filthy and ruined. The pirate prince shouted bloody fury as his fine gold rings and chains were taken from him.

“Unhand me!” Salladhor spat. “I am Salladhor Saan, merchant prince of Lys. I have family that will pay for me, I will not be treat like this! Do you hear me? Salladhor Saan. Take me to your king, I demand terms!”

Davos guessed that Salladhor’s stolen lifeboat couldn’t have gotten very far. He could only hope the King had better luck. The pirate prince shouted indignantly, but he got only a backhanded slap for his efforts as he was tied to a post.

Salla was chained at the other end of the clearing, such that Davos could barely even see him.

“What are you planning on doing to us?” Davos demanded. The wildlings only grunted.

It was another horribly cold night. All of the ice floating in the bay created a constant fog. In the distance, Davos could see camps being unfurled. The wildlings are preparing to move. Davos saw that white dragon flying to and from camp repeatedly, over the hill. Davos found his eyes constantly on the sky, looking for any sign of the beast, and each time he glimpsed its shape it would take his breath away.

Near dusk, Davos saw a white wolf, a wolf larger than any he had ever seen before, bounding between the tents. A direwolf, he realised. It moved at ease among the men, the wildlings even parted to let it pass. Some of them stared at the wolf with a mixture of awe and respect.

“That’s Ghost,” one of the captive sworn brothers hissed. He was a big man with a blunt face. “I knew it, that’s Ghost.”

“Quiet!” Another Night’s Watch man snapped. Not unreasonably; one of the guards sent to watch over them – a mean little man who wore an armour of crackling bones – would beat any prisoner he saw talking.

“But that means Jon’s here,” he muttered, so quiet Davos could barely hear. “Jon is really here…”

“Jon is one of them,” the partner growled. “Fuck, Jon leads them.”

Davos eyed the men quietly. The big one bit his lip, uncertainly. “Jon…” Davos called, his voice low. “You mean Jon Snow?”

The black brother nodded. Davos had heard Cotter Pyke’s report about Jon Snow. The bastard of Winterfell, Ned Stark’s illegitimate son. The report had said Jon killed his commander and turned wildling.

The woman said ‘King Snow’, Davos recalled. “You know him?” Davos asked.

“Aye. We were recruits together.” The man gulped. “I never believed the reports, never believed he would defect…” He looked shaken. “Jon was my friend. He helped practice in the yard. He taught me how to ride…”

“Your friend is holding you prisoner,” Davos noted. All of the other prisoners were listening intently.

“I knew Jon as well, Grenn,” another brother spoke suddenly. A stout boy with mean eyes. “I remember Jon setting his direwolf on me when I slept – to look after his little henchmen Tarly. Jon had a nasty streak in him too.” The man’s voice was dark. “The bastard would have defected
months ago, to go join his half-brother’s rebellion, if you lot hadn’t have stopped him. Hells, I’m not surprised he made a rebellion of his own, I’m just surprised he did it so quickly.”

Davos listened quietly. “The dragon,” he asked in a low voice. “Where did that dragon come from?”

Grenn’s head shook. “I’ve got no idea.” He paused. “But I heard them say that Jon controls it.”

“How?” Davos pressed.

Grenn shook his head again.

“I never knew how Jon controlled that giant wolf of his, either,” the other black brother added darkly.

“Enough of this,” another man snapped. One of Stannis’ men, the grizzled veteran with the sharp eyes. “We must focus on escaping. If we could escape these binds, how many men here would be strong enough to fight?”

There were no replies. “There are forty thousand wildlings in this camp,” Davos warned.

“And they’re confused and spread wide,” the veteran growled. “We break the binds, we cut through them while they’re asleep. We get to the coast, steal a ship, and sail away.”

“Fuck running,” Ser Clayton Suggs said. “Let’s wait until it’s dark and free ourselves. We steal a blade and go straight for their ‘king’s’ tent.”

Davos could only stare at him. Ser Clayton was a vicious man. The veteran just shook his head.

“We’ll never get far with that dragon in the sky,” a man muttered fearfully.

“Then we’ll run into the forest, and head south.”

“Hells no,” Grenn said darkly. “There are more monsters in that forest than there are in this camp.”

All of the men of the Night’s Watch shared a haunted look. Davos’ eyes narrowed. “Craven,” Ser Clayton snapped. “I’m not going to sit here and die, if–”

“Quiet,” Davos hissed. He saw a figure approaching. The man with the bone shirt was heading towards them; the rattle of his mail gave him away. Any man that even looked like he was plotting an escape would be beaten. That man wearing bones is a cruel one. The night was spent in fearful silence.

The next morning, Davos knew he had to do something. He was the King’s Hand. He could not die like this. He had a duty.

“I am Lord Davos Seaworth,” Davos said, to the woman who came to feed them. “Hand of the King. I would like to treat with King Snow.”

The old woman said nothing. “King Stannis has appointed me to act in his stead,” Davos pressed. “I can negotiate terms.”

No response. “Please,” Davos hissed. If they thought he was useless, they would get rid of him like he was useless. Davos needed to show worth if he wanted to survive, to hopefully return to his king’s side. “Let me speak to your leader.”
For a long time, Davos thought she wasn’t going to reply. “King Snow will speak to you when he chooses to,” the woman said, moving away.

Later that night, the veteran man broke his own hand to escape the ropes. He nearly got free too, if not for the guard spotting him. The veteran looked half crazed as he charged at their jailor, but the man with bones simply released his dogs and watched.

All of the prisoners looked in quiet horror as the man screamed and thrashed while the hounds pounced and chewed on him, dragging the man across the ground. The veteran survived, actually, as he was tied back and restrained, but the dogs took a hand and half of his face. The man suffered a cruel death as he bled to death on his post.

Nobody else, not even Ser Clayton, tried to escape after that.

The next day, Davos finally met the wildling king.

He saw Jon Snow first by the procession he brought. He walked clad in thick grey and black furs wearing dull iron and bronze, a mismatch of armour well-worn and aged. He was flanked by fighters each much bulkier than himself, but Davos still felt his eyes drawn to the boy. The first thing Davos realised, was that Jon Snow was young. Very young, in fact, barely more than a teenager. He could have even been comely if not for his gaunt cheekbones.

Second thing Davos saw was his eyes. Pale grey eyes. Jon Snow’s face was young, but he had the eyes of someone much older.

He wore a dark shadowskin cloak, thick and rich, but everything else about him seemed ragged, hard and worn. His face was long and narrow, a gaunt face that was bruised and still bloody. His forehead was gashed with dark bruises under his eyes, but he wore the look well. He walked with a bad limp, but it seemed an old injury and well-compensated for in his gait. His hair was as white as bone, almost startling compared to his dark expression and clothes.

Davos had seen the boy fight on the ice. Davos had seen him cut through a dozen men. Davos looked at Jon Snow’s expression now and he felt shivers run down his spine.

“That’s him. That’s Jon,” Grenn muttered in shock. “Holy… what happened to his hair?”

The prisoners rippled as the wildling king approached. He made a formidable sight, escorted by wildlings with that giant white wolf by his side. There was a long moment of quiet.


“You bloody bastard,” the man named Rast snarled. “It’s true. You fucking lead wildlings now?”

“You watch your tone, crow,” a wildling with a gruff voice growled.

“You’re a turncoat, Snow,” he snapped. “A bloody traitor.”

Snow’s eyes were cool. “You would be dead in the woods if not for me,” he said. “You saw the dead. You saw the Others.” His voice was dangerously low. “You’re not my enemy, Rast. And I’m not yours – not unless you want me to be. I fight against the Others.”

Davos’ eyes narrowed. What is the man talking about? The Others? Still, Davos saw the black brothers shift uncomfortably.
Snow turned around, staring around the posts. “You can’t keep us here,” the man named Grenn begged. “Please Jon, we were friends. You can’t do this to us.”

“Yes,” he nodded. His voice sounded stiff. Something about the man’s tone reminded Davos of Stannis, and that made him uncomfortable. “And there are a lot of people in this camp that would like to kill you, Grenn. Hatred between the Night’s Watch and the free folk runs deep, and if I left you walk around the camp I don’t imagine you would survive long. It is because we were friends that I’m keeping you here, safe.”

“But—” Grenn gulped, before one of the wildlings growled at him dangerously.

“Please, Grenn,” Snow said, his voice turning very slightly softer. “Stay here, and don’t try anything. It won’t be long.”

Snow’s eyes glanced over the dead corpse of the man that tried to escape, still tied to the post. “I said none of them were to be harmed, Rattleshirt,” he snapped sharply.

The man in bones – Rattleshirt – simply shrugged. “He escaped. Tried to attack me. What was I supposed to do?”

_Not feed him to your dogs_, Davos thought, but he held his tongue. Snow’s gaze darkened, but he didn't say anything either.

There was a pause. Snow glanced around the prisoners. Inspecting them one by one. “You,” he said eventually, looking at Salla. “I hear your name is Salladhor Saan. You were asking of me?”

Salla’s eyes narrowed. He was a proud, vain man, but not a stupid one. The pirate knew when to be respectful. “I am. Pirate prince of Lys, Prince of the Narrow Sea. I have much wealth where I'm from, many sons that will avenge me.” His eyes darkened. “You cannot try me like this.”

“We are a long way from Lys, my lord.” The words ‘my lord’ came almost automatically from him, rather with deference. “But if we come to terms I will see you in better care,” Snow promised, before turning to Davos. “And you claim to be the Hand of the King.”

“That is correct,” Davos growled. His whiskers were unkempt, he was unshaven. Davos knew that he looked little like a lord. “I serve as Stannis Baratheon’s right hand man.”

“Indeed. Bring both of them to my tent.”

“Wait!” A haggard voice gasped. Ser Justin’s voice was pained. “I am Ser Justin Massey, eldest heir. I have lands and titles… um… Your Grace.”

He paused, thoughtfully. “House Massey. Of Stonedance, correct? Your father is Triston Massey.”

The man blinked. It was strange to hear of the lands so far south this far up north. _Jon Snow is no wildling_, Davos noted. “Yes,” Ser Justin replied. “My father died on the Blackwater. My cousin claims my seat, but I am the rightful heir of my house.”

“I see. We will talk later, perhaps.”

Snow nodded, walking away without another word. Ser Justin stared in horror, while Salladhor and Davos were dragged off the ground, after the King-Beyond-the-Wall.

There were some weak curses and shouts at Snow as he walked. The king stopped at another Night Watch’s man, a short wiry man with dark eyes, and then ordered the wildlings to bring that man as
well.

The wildling who escorted Davos was a stout but bulky wildling with a shaggy beard and missing front teeth. The air was so cold that Davos could only tremble, and his shoulder and stomach wound still pained him. The tent that they headed to was nearby; a wide circular tent shelter of hides and furs, with a large fireplace through the centre. Inside, the stifling warmth caused Davos to stagger. He had been left in the cold for days.

The first thing he saw was the shape curled by the fire. At first Davos mistook it for a shadow. The shadow had bright yellow eyes. The shadowcat stared at them with a low snarl, but none of the wildlings paid any attention to the unrestrained animal.

It was a large tent, but cluttered. There were armour, weapons, even what looked like a mammoth’s tusk littering the floor and stacked along the side. Sacks of bulky shapes and objects buried under furs, were piled up the walls to keep the warmth around the centre. The back of the tent was dominated by a huge ornate horn, six feet long. There were eight men inside, all armed, but Davos’ attention was fixed firmly on Jon Snow.

Behind them, Rattleshirt clanked into the tent, on guard, with a spear in his hand and a frown on his face. Davos looked around, meeting the eyes of a bulky, ugly looking man with a twisted face and bulbous, watery eyes.

There was only one woman in the room, sitting in the corner on a fur over the ground, so far back that Davos almost didn’t notice her. If not for her wildling furs, she would have looked out of place. She was a fair lady; young, golden haired, buxom and beautiful. Jon Snow’s woman maybe? Davos wondered. He guessed not, judging from the distance between the pair.

Davos, Salladhor and the man of the Night’s Watch all stood at the front of the fire pit, hands bound and caked in dried blood. Jon Snow kept the direwolf to his right and the shadowcat to his left.

An interrogation, Davos thought.

“Salladhor Saan, you said your name was?” Snow said finally. “I’m not familiar. You wear silk and I heard you had golden rings. Are you the captain of a ship?”

“I am the lord of a fleet,” Salladhor growled, his voice venomous. “Prince of the Narrow Sea. Lord of Blackwater Bay, as the fool-King Stannis named me. The dread of the Narrow Sea, as my enemies call me.”

“A pirate. Sellsail.”

“An old pirate. A pirate with many friends and many sons. The Saans are an old and venerable family from Lys. It is not wise to be my enemy, Snow.” His eyes narrowed. “There will be an answer for this disgrace, the theft of my belongings.”

“You attacked us, remember?” Snow replied. “All men have a right to defend themselves. They have a right to vengeance, too – as my allies keep on advising me.”

Salla looked ready to reply. “You would do well to watch your tone,” the woman with golden hair advised coolly. “Please remember your position here.”

Davos could recognise barely restrained bloodlust. Jon Snow’s eyes were guarded, but the other wildlings looked ready to kill without a second thought.
“It was Stannis that attacked you, not I. The fool I was, I took his promises of gold and committed my ships to his cause. It was Stannis and that mad witch that wanted you dead, we have no grudge with each other.”

“Then perhaps we could still come to agreement,” said Snow, but his eyes were hard. Something about his voice reminded Davos of when Stannis’ tone when he was forced to deal with someone unsavoury. *He doesn’t want any more enemies*, Davos thought. It was Salladhor’s threat of retribution from the Saan family that put Snow on edge more than anything. “We will talk later, my lord. For now, I will see to it that you have more comfortable quarters.”

The King-Beyond-the-Wall turned towards Davos. His hand was on his sword. He only has four fingers on his left hand, Davos noted. “Lord Seaworth, was it? I am not familiar with the house.”

“It is a new house… Your Grace,” Davos said guardedly. He forced himself to say the title. He knew fine well that kings were usually the prickly sort. “King Stannis knighted me and lorded me for my service. He appointed me his Hand.”

“I see.” Snow’s eyes were sizing up Davos just as much as Davos was inspecting him. “Let’s start with the obvious question, my lord. How many men does Stannis have behind him?”

There was a pause. “Seven thousand,” Davos replied. “Waiting in reserve at Eastwatch with the main force of his fleet.”

Snow paused, and turned to Salladhor. “How many men does Stannis have behind him?” Snow repeated.

“Less than a thousand,” Salladhor replied promptly. “Seven hundred, at most – largely the men he left in reserve with his queen and princess at Eastwatch. They have six ships left at Eastwatch. *My* ships, to my shame, but I expect that mutinous dog would have seized them.”

Davos’ face didn’t twitch, but he cursed quietly.

“How many houses support Stannis? How much backing does he have from the northern lords?” Jon Snow demanded, turning back to Davos.

“The entire realm will fight for its rightful King.”

Wordlessly, Snow turned to Salladhor.

“ Barely any. Most certainly none in the north.”

Snow nodded, facing Davos again. “And why did Stannis attack us?”

“Because you are a traitor to the realm. You are massing a wildling army to ravage the kingdom, and it is the King’s duty to protect it.”

Snow motioned to Salladhor. “Because that Red Witch told him to,” Salladhor said bluntly. “She has the King wrapped around her finger, obsessed with some fool prophecy of a great saviour. She has him convinced that you are some great champion of doom who will bring endless night upon the world.”

Davos wasn’t so sure that the last statement was untrue. Still, for a second, Snow blinked in surprise, looking amused at the accusation.

“You are going to destroy what little peace we have left in the Seven Kingdoms,” Davos said.
“Stannis sailed to stop you.”

“Then Stannis really is a fool. It seems like many men are fools, nowadays,” he said with cold venom. “He attacked us with no clue about the real enemy. Because he decided to attack first and talk later, I had no choice but to destroy his ships and kill his men. I cut off Stannis’ hand for that folly.”

Davos bristled. “You lie.”

There was a quiet snigger from one of the men. Jon quietly snatched up an object off the ground, holding it to Davos. It was the hilt of a sword; a metal pommel wrapped in black leather. The blade had been snapped clean off. There was ruby embedded into the fine metalwork.

“This is all that I could find of that glowing sword after I broke it,” said Snow. “An impressive blade that – very bright, but useless. The king’s hand itself was lost in the bay… and unlike you the hand didn’t wash up again.”

Lightbringer. Melisandre had said it was the sword that could save world. The king is missing a hand. Davos took a deep breath. “…Does Stannis still live?” He asked, almost afraid of the answer.

Snow shrugged. “Perhaps. His knights rallied to pull him away. They escaped on a ship that slipped away. If there was a skilled enough healer among them, they might have saved the king’s life.”

Davos’s thumb traced the severed tips of his fingers almost cautiously. The wounds had healed years ago, but the cold had still left them feeling raw. “Now,” the wildling king continued. “My question. Why would Stannis attack me? Last I heard, his quarrel was with the Lannisters on the Iron Throne, not with free folk. Why did he commit so many men to an attack like that?”

Davos hesitated briefly, glancing around. I must be useful. Because King Stannis was defeated on the Blackwater during the assault on King’s Landing. He intended on routing the wildlings, protecting the realm, and using the victory to rally the northern lords.”

“I see.” Jon Snow looked between them. “It appears I have been removed from the affairs of the realm for some time, my lords. Do you mind entertaining me?”

Davos had no choice but to nod. If I don’t answer, I become useless. Useless objects get discarded. For the sake of his duty, Davos would be a craven and answer this traitor king’s questions.

Snow asked few questions, but something about the silence demanded that Davos talk. Davos talked about King Renly’s betrayal, the War of Five Kings, the ironborn rising against the north, the Young Wolf’s campaign in the Riverlands. Davos’ voice was stiff as he told them about Stannis’ defeat at the Blackwater, of their fleet burning in wildfire. He didn't mention his sons, but the pain was still there.

Snow occasionally turned to Salladhor for confirmation, but otherwise he just nodded and listened.

“What about my brother?” Snow asked after a while, almost hesitantly. Like it was a question he feared to ask. For a second, Davos was confused, before he remembered Jon Snow was Eddard Stark’s bastard. “Robb Stark. What happened to him?”

“Dead.” The room stiffened. Answer the questions. A more cunning man would have tried to manipulate the wildling king, but Davos didn't know how he could. “Robb Stark died three months ago.”
He saw the man’s mouth stiffen, his grey eyes growing dark. Angry. Very angry. “How?” He said sharply.

*Because we burnt the leeches in the fire and the Red Woman worked her sorcery,* Davos thought. But that was the answer he would never, ever say. “Robb Stark died at the Twins, at the hands of the Freys.” Davos hesitated. *Enemy of my enemy. Make sure he has reason to hate Stannis’ enemies too.* “Most likely at the command of the Lannisters,” he added.

Snow took two steps forward. He had an unnerving gaze for one so young. “*How*?”

“During the wedding of Edmure Tully to Roslin Frey,” Davos replied, his voice low. “Robb Stark was engaged to Walder Frey’s granddaughter, but that engagement was broken. The Freys took offence, and they and the Boltons plotted betrayal. The Starks arranged the marriage of Edmure Tully in recompense, but during the ceremony they prung an ambush. The Stark men were butchered. Robb Stark died.” He hesitated. “They beheaded Robb Stark, and stitched the head of his direwolf onto the body.”

Snow’s nostrils flared. “And guest right?”

“The Freys broke it.”

Around him, he felt the room ripple. Guest right was sacred even here in the far north. Jon Snow took a deep breath.

Outside, Davos heard the beat of the dragon’s wings as it broke into the sky.

“My family,” he demanded. “Tell me what happened to my family.”

Jon Snow had a demeanour like iron. Still, Davos could feel it shivering with every word.

His sister, Sansa, married to the Imp and then vanished after Joffrey’s murder, and held responsible for the crime. His brothers, Rickon and Bran, murdered by the turncoat, beheaded and hung over Winterfell, before the castle was sacked. His other sister, Arya, disappeared during the murder of their father’s men and presumed dead ever since.

Davos saw Snow’s body tense at the mention of Arya.

There was a long moment of quiet. “Damn,” the man in the bones said finally, breaking the hush. “Your family has fucking awful luck.”

Jon Snow’s eyes were dark, murderous. His pale face and white hair almost made him look like a ghost. He didn’t reply for a long time. All eyes focused on him.

“Rattleshirt,” Snow said, barely even moving. “That man is trying to slip out of his bindings. He has been edging towards your spear for the last five minutes. Do your job – shut up and watch the prisoners.”

Davos glanced to the man of Night’s Watch alongside them. He had indeed been trying to wriggle his hands free of his bounds, staying quiet but taking advantage of the distraction. *Now how did Snow notice that, he didn’t even glance at the man?* But that shadowcat of his had been staring right at the prisoner.

Rattleshirt cursed, forcing the man to the ground. He didn’t resist, but something about his eyes told Davos the black brother was just waiting for his chance.
Jon Snow dismissed Davos with barely a glance. He was unnerved, visibly angry, but something about him looked focused on his job before his emotion.

_Damn, _Davos thought. _He reminds me of Stannis._ Stannis Baratheon could take all of his rage and grief and just push it to one side, right up until the moment he needed it. Jon Snow did the same.

“You are Iron Emmett, aren’t you?” Snow said, turning to the sworn brother. “We met once, briefly. Cotter Pyke considered you the finest fighter in the Watch.”

“Why don’t you take off these ropes and find out?” The man – Iron Emmett – challenged.

“I think not,” said Snow. “How many men are at Eastwatch?”

“Not a clue.”

“How many men did you take with you in the forest?”

“Never counted.”

“What happened to Lord Commander Mormont?”

“Who?”

_Brave man, _Davos thought. _Stupid, but brave._ Jon Snow rolled his eyes. “Give him to me,” the wildling with watery eyes offered. “I’ll get him to talk. Hells, I’ll make him sing.”

“Don’t bother,” Snow sighed. “I already know the answers to those questions. There were less than a hundred left at Eastwatch, maybe plus some from the survivors. The ranging had four hundred men, their forces scattered. The Lord Commander was last seen wounded during the battle, before his men deserted him.”

Snow looked down at Emmett. “In case you’re wondering,” he said after a pause. “Of those four hundred men, we captured two dozen. At the very most, maybe fifty or so managed to escape to the Wall during the night. All of the others were slaughtered.”

Iron Emmett didn’t reply. Snow continued, _“I never killed them. We both know what did. You saw the real enemy too.” _

There was no response. Snow paced around the fire. “I would think very carefully about whether or not we are still the enemy you should fight. Not when the _others _are still out there.”

The room felt deadly quiet. Snow paced, thinking as he looked between his prisoners. “Salladhor Saan,” he said. “I will give you better quarters and treatment. If there are other prisoners who you wish to join you, select them out. In return, I want your vow not to attempt escape, and then we can discuss potential partnerships.”

“Partnerships?” Salla said sharply.

“My people are hungry. We are a large host and food is thin. We have wealth, however, and the Free Cities are open for trade. We need merchants to trade with us, ships to supply us, and men to acquire for us,” he said, before adding, “perhaps in return I won’t sink every one of your ships I find.”

Salladhor nodded, an almost predator gaze flashing across his bloody features for a moment. The pirate could sense an opportunity a mile away.
“Lord Seaworth,” Snow said. “You will stay by my side. I have more questions for you, and I mean to treat with Stannis. Help me and you could spare many needless deaths.”

Davos nodded, his eyes guarded and suspicious. He didn't speak. Jon paused for a moment, as if waiting for an answer, before moving on.

“And Iron Emmett,” Jon Snow continued, turning to the final man. Davos tensed, sure that the king would execute him. Emmett’s eyes were defiant to the end. “I will release you. In four days, you are free to return to Eastwatch.”

There was a moment of silence. The wildling Rattleshirt reacted first. “What?” The man spat. “The crows attacked us, and you’d let them go!”

Snow’s gaze silenced the man. The king was not in a mood to be trifled with.

“You will act as envoy to Eastwatch,” he continued. “In five days, I will assault the castle. You are to bring a message to them before then. Convince them to lay down their arms, and nobody will be killed. I will be attacking with overwhelming force, but I would prefer it bloodless. The choice will be yours.”

“Attack with all the force you want,” Emmett snarled. “Larger armies than yours have been broken by the Wall.”

Jon shook his head. “I will not be attacking the Wall. I will be attacking by sea.” He paused. “And not by boat, either. I have a vanguard already in position. Four thousand men will be walking straight over the bay.”

Emmett hesitated. Davos realised first. “… Your dragon,” he said breathlessly. “You’re going to use your dragon to freeze the sea.”

Snow nodded. “And the free folk will walk straight across. The Wall will be useless.”

Behind him, one of the wildlings cackled wickedly. “And if you do try to mount a defence,” he said. “Know that my dragon will be flying over ahead of them. Anyone who tries to fight will face Sonagon first – and after that I can make no promises on your safety.”

Davos caught the flicker in Emmett’s eyes. “In case you’re wondering,” he continued. “The men belonging to Stannis have already fled. They ran as soon as they saw my force approaching. I spotted them sailing away from Eastwatch last night, from Sonagon’s back. That will leave only the men of the Night’s Watch to defend Eastwatch.”

Davos took a deep breath. Had Queen Selyse truly already fled? She would never have run without Stannis, so then his King must have survived.

“I will do my part to reduce casualties,” Jon Snow explained. “I will assault the Eastwatch patrols from dragonback and leave them shipwrecked. Assuming twenty men on each ship…” He thought for a moment. “I’ll take the overestimate and say there’ll be two hundred men left in Eastwatch. That’s two hundred men to defend against four thousand free folk and a dragon, without a Wall to hide behind. Do you see why I’m encouraging you to surrender instead?”

Emmett’s face was pale. There was no sign of a bluff in Jon’s voice.

Could he do it? Davos thought with panic. Yes, quite easily, actually. Davos had seen the number of men Snow had, and he seen the power of the dragon. The dragon froze the bay around Hardhome into solid ice, there was no reason to think it couldn’t freeze the ocean leading to
Eastwatch as well.

Sure, the wildlings would be at a disadvantage trying to cross solid ice and clambering up onto the coast again, but they could do it. The presence of Snow’s dragon in the fight would offset any disadvantage.

Hells, even without freezing the ocean, even if the dragon was just used to ferry men across a dozen at a time, then they could probably still take Eastwatch that way. The Wall couldn’t stop a dragon.

Davos’ head spun as he tried to picture it. They’d start at Eastwatch, and open the gates wide to let all of the wildlings from Hardhome come through. After that, there’d be no chance of retaking the castle again, not with the limited number of men of the Night’s Watch. Jon could move across the Wall at his leisure, taking every castle one by one. Castle Black was the only one that could mount any decent defence, but even that wouldn’t be enough.

After that, the wildlings would take the Wall. Until the northern lords rallied and built an army, there’d be nothing that could stop them.

The Wall was already beaten. Davos realised with a jolt that they would be relying on the Boltons, of all people, to throw out the wildlings, but the Boltons’ grasp over the north was tenuous at best. Between civil unrest, ironborn and wildlings, Jon Snow could form a powerful position.

Perhaps the first ever King-Beyond-the-Wall who could actually succeed.

Davos took a deep breath to calm himself. That dragon put the whole realm at risk.

“Go think on your positions,” Jon Snow said, his voice hard. “I do not want any bloodshed, but if you force me to I will reply in kind.”

Stay alive, Davos told himself. Stay useful. Keep calm and keep close to him. Keep close enough you could put a dagger in his chest.

“Yes, King Snow,” Davos said with a respectful bow.

Val

“He’s beautiful,” Dalla whispered, cradling the babe. “I want to name him.”

“You can’t, he’s still too young,” Val said, stroking her sister’s hair.

“He deserves a name.”

“Not yet, it wouldn’t be right.” The babe was still such a frail little thing. A quiet child. It made Val’s heart pang every time she saw him clutching her sister’s chest.

Across from them, there was a clanging as the pots of boiling water were hoisted up. “You should take him before the dragon,” the washerwoman, Wylda, interrupted. She was a strong, beefy woman, over sixty with half a dozen children of her own. “Let him touch the scales. Let the child be a blessed by a god.”

Val shifted slightly. The white stone on Wylda’s chest was smooth and well-cleaned. “I dare not,” Dalla said nervously. “The dragon is so big, I heard what happened to the crofter’s girl.”

“The crofter’s girl demanded too much,” Wylda said as she changed the pots. “No one ever said
the god must be gentle. But look at Gilly – she brought her child before the dragon and now the child is healthier than ever. Mother Mole welcomed her into the congregation, and the boy will be raised under the shelter of a god.”

Her sister looked uncomfortable. “We are not believers, Wylda,” Val said sharply.

“You should be,” the older woman said with a shrug. “Now is the age of the ice dragon.”

The washerwoman changed the pots without another word. Dalla didn't meet Val's gaze. There was a moment of silence as she left. “Have they been pestering you again?” Val asked. “You know I could–”

“It’s fine,” Dalla replied. “They’re fine. It’s not pester, Mother Mole has been bringing me food and blankets, she sends her followers to check on me.”

“Because she bloody wants you to convert.”

“Val, it’s fine. You don’t want to make it a problem.”

Val’s hands twitched. Their tent was hardly the biggest in the camp, but it was still warm, sheltered in hide, with a fire pit carved into the centre. There were two guards at her door at night. That would have made Val feel more reassured except, in all likelihood, those guards would be wearing white stones too.

“I know that two nights ago a fisherman was beaten half to death for ‘sacrilege’,” she said. “The man complained about how much the dragon eats, and was overheard by a few devotees. It’s already a problem.”

“They’ve been nothing but kind to me.”

“For now. How long before they decide that you’re sacrilegious too for not praying with them?”

Dalla didn't reply. Val had asked Snow to look after her sister, and he had. He made arrangements for her tent, he assigned guards to look after her, and women to care for her and the babe after her sister’s hard childbirth. Wylda and the other women stopped by very frequently, on the orders of King Snow.

No, King Snow never even needed to order them, Val thought. He just proclaimed that he wanted Dalla to be taken care of, and it had been done. They proved very good caretakers as well. Very rigorous, very devoted.

“If they ever cross the line,” Val said, “I’ll kill whole bloody lot of them. They can keep to cleaning pots and bringing firewood, but no preaching. I don’t like the way that they preach.”

Dalla paused, cradling her child. “It won’t be long. We’ll be going south soon.”

Val shook her head. “I'm going south soon. You've got to stay in Hardhome until it's safe.”

“Is Hardhome safe?”

“It's safer than attacking the Wall.”

“Don't go,” her sister begged.

“I've got to. It was part of the deal.” She kissed her forehead again. “You just look after the babe. Once we take Eastwatch we'll start moving people south.”
The camp was already in turmoil. They were gathering a force – strong fighters only – that would be marching south quickly in less than two days. The whole camp was stockpiling as many supplies as they could spare, and that dragon had been spotted flying south repeatedly. King Snow was preparing to move in force.

Val lingered by her sister’s side for as long as she could. Then, she heard the activity outside, and she knew that she had to go. She kissed her sister, kissed her babe, and promised to be back soon before leaving the tent.

*It’s part of the ‘agreement’,* Val thought with a scoff. *He protects my family, and I have to serve him. Fealty, he calls it.*

Outside, the camp was heaving. In the distance, she could hear shouting as free folk lashed together a wooden structure on the cliffs. King Snow had wanted a string of watchtowers around the camp, and it had been done.

She met the gathering warband by the southeastern cliffs. She saw Garth motioning for her, sword on his hip and spear in his hand. The older man looked weary. “Come on, party is moving out towards the cliffs.”

The bay was still blockaded by ice, most of their fishing vessels still destroyed. Food was short, so instead dozens of raiding parties had to take to the forest to hunt for game. No less than thirty men per party, the king had ordered. Large parties for hunting, yet they were hunting wights as well as animals.

“What’s the game this time? Rabbits? Boar? Deer?”

“No. We’re hunting giants. Let's move, Snow will be joining us.”

“Oh.” The camp already had fifty or more giants coming in on mammoths, but they had heard reports of larger giant clans sheltering in the forests near the cape.

Val sighed quietly, collecting up her spear and bow. About thirty men from hers and Garth’s warband were gathering, and another thirty from those that seemed to constantly follow Snow. They lingered on the sand dunes with a quiet wariness. Waiting for the king.

“Val,” Halleck greeted. The loss of his sister had been hard on all of them, but Halleck was a fighter first and foremost. “I haven’t seen you around recently.”

“Aye, been busy,” Val sighed. “Snow had me running around on a ‘special request’, of all things.”

Halleck grunted, and smirked. “Aye? What sort?”

“Hunting ghosts. Searching for some red-haired lass that he knows.” She had spent the last week questioning men from the Frostfangs about this mystery spearwife of Snow’s. He had been insistent Val try to find her. “There’s no sign of her.”

“Aye, too much going on in this bloody camp. He’s got every man running ragged with some task or other,” Halleck grumbled. “I can’t bloody keep up with what’s going on.”

Val nodded in agreement, tucking her furs up and settling into wait on the dunes.

“You heard the news?” Another raider said to her. “The dragon sealed off the west side of the camp last night.”
“Sealed off?”

“With ice. It scorched the pass in ice, left it impassable. I hear the king’s planning on making a whole wall of ice around the camp.”

“Of course, he would like his walls,” Val muttered.

“It's bloody insane,” a spearwife said. “I saw it. The dragon created bloody ice spikes so big not even the dead are getting through that way.”

“That's nothing,” a large man grumbled. Val recognised him as Hatch – Snow’s man. Hatch the Halfgiant. He was an enormous, bearded man holding a new iron warhammer. A lot of Snow’s supporters were well-equipped now. “King Snow wants to use dragonfire to freeze sea defences around the peninsula too.”

“He'll want his castle built out of ice as well, I expect,” Val grumbled. “Where is Snow anyway? He coming or are we just standing around with our dicks in the air?”

“He said to wait, so we wait.” Hatch folded his arms.

So he can order sixty seasoned raiders to stand around waiting for him? Val thought. If Mance tried that, everyone here would have told him to bugger off and left.

Garth gave her a cautious look. “You look annoyed?” He said quietly.

“Bloody stupid hunt, and the king makes us wait around.” Val said, before pausing. “And those devotees have been pestering Dalla again.”

“Oh.”

She kept her voice quiet. “You know it’s me she wants?” Val said. “They're trying to convert Dalla to convert me.”

“I know. Mother Mole is a hag,” Garth said with a grimace. The devotees were deliberately picking out the most influential targets and focusing on them. “She’s been targeting a lot of leaders, to pull more to her congregation.”

“They're a bunch of fools.”

His eyes flickered. “You sure?”

She looked at him. “All I'm saying is that the dragon is a hundred foot long and can freeze oceans and destroy armies,” Garth said. “If you want to argue it’s godhood then it's easier for than against. Folk can't see the Old Gods, but they can see the dragon.”

“So what?” She growled. “Just go along with them? Pray with them at night, worship at the dragon’s feet?”

“It keeps them off your back.”

She didn't reply, but the thought of ever putting a white stone on her chest made her feel sick.

They were waiting for another fifteen minutes, shivering in the wind, before they saw Snow walking towards them with another fifteen men. Some of Snow’s bodyguards were almost as intense as any of Mother Mole’s group. Now does he expect me to curtsy? Val felt more inclined to kick him in the groin for making them wait.
He approached with a nod. _The king makes a good sight_, she admitted, clad in shadowskin with his monster of a wolf at his heel. That white hair makes him look old. She wasn’t sure of his age, actually.


“Snow,” Garth said, crossing his arms. They had over eighty fighters with them. “How much trouble are you expecting here?”

“Hopefully none. I hear we've got a clan of forest giants not far in the forest. I want to go find them and bring them into camp.”

“You want to recruit some giants?” Val said. “If you expect giants to kneel to you then you're mistaken.”

“Of course.” He gave her a cool gaze. “I’ve gathered some supplies – nuts, vegetables and berries – to bribe the clans with. A gesture, show that we can support them, welcome them to our host. They should be friendly.”

“They're giants,” Val scoffed.

The warband moved out quickly. It was early and nobody talked. The king brought four garron to help carry the supplies and rations, but each raider still had to carry a sack over their shoulder too. The sack of turnips that Val took smelled mouldy. She was sure that Snow would take one of the horses, but instead he walked on foot. Nobody said anything.

There were several wearing white stones even in their warband, whose gazes would flicker to him with awe. Snow didn't seem to notice.

It was still early dawn when they set out. A crowd seemed to gather as they passed the barricades and guards around Hardhome. _Snow can’t even bloody move without a crowd around him_, Val thought.

When they reached the forest, the free folk started to walk spread out but always in earshot. Everyone kept their weapons ready. There had been patrols, but any distance outside of the stakewalls was still dangerous.

“You see any corpses,” Garth called. “Any at all, then we stop to cut off its head and limbs!”

Shortly afterwards leaving, they met up with a man waiting for them. He was a hulking man, black browed, with a flat nose, heavy jowls dark with stubble, and small close-set eyes. In the trees, Val glimpsed a huge shape as large as a bull, with tusks like swords. The boar sniffed at the soil and snow, snorting through the roots. She recognised the figure quickly.

“Borroq,” Val muttered, as Snow greeted the other skinchanger coolly. Borroq the Boar was a stiff, taciturn man who barely ever spoke. He even looked and acted like the beast he partnered with. He joined the group without even a word, causing a few men to ripple. A lot of raiders kept their distance.

“What is he doing with us?” Val demanded as they started moving again.

“Borroq?” Snow blinked. “He will help search for the giant’s camp. His boar will scout the west while Ghost searches the south.

She just grunted, settling into a continuous trek through the snow. Snow glanced at her. “Borroq
has been nothing but supportive. He’s even been helping me hone my own skills.”

“I’m sure. You skinchangers must have much to talk about.”

Snow nodded. “The free folk don't trust skinchangers very much. Why?”

“Have a look at Varamyr and see if you can guess.”

“Point. I suspect I will have to send Varamyr away shortly. That eagle of his looks ready to maul me at any moment.”

Val didn't reply. He glanced at her. “I was also considering recruiting every skinchanger into a single warband, and searching for any boys with talent so they can be trained properly. Bring them together so they don’t need to be shunned,” he said. “A group of skinchangers, sharing experience and talent.”

“Why? Keep them all together for when they turn against you?”

“So I can get more use out of them,” Snow replied. “The north has many skinchangers and wargs, why not encourage them rather than spurning them? Bring them into line and use them.”

Val grunted. “You're a southerner,” she said. “You want everything in its proper place, all the people standing in a line.”

“Seems better to me than letting them run wild.”

“And once again you prove that you don't even know us.”

“I suppose I am still learning, my lady.”

She grimaced at the honorific, glancing back at him. He kept his face as solemn as always.

There was a short call from Borroq. His boar picked up on a lead. They changed direction, walking past the scarred gouges in the woods burned by dragonfire. The trees had been scorched away that night, and the earth left deformed and twisted into jagged lumps. The ice had cooled, but the sight of what dragonfire could do even to a random patch of forest sent shivers down Val’s spin.

As they walked, Snow moved between the raiders, talking to each of them in turn. He asked the names of any he didn't know. Val watched him through the corner of her eye.

After six hours of walking, they stopped for a break. A skin of malted vegetable wine was passed around, thick and intoxicating enough to keep them warm. Val noticed Snow stretching his leg against a tree.

“Answer me something,” Val said, walking up to him and throwing a canteen. “You didn't have to be here. Why come yourself?”

He paused. “I wanted to see the giants.”

“Aww, you want to gaze at the queer creatures?” She said sarcastically.

“I want to make sure we're on good terms. I want to bring in as many giants as possible. I thought that coming myself would be a good sign of respect and trust.”

“You want giants for your army,” she said, folding her arms. “But giants are more than big humans, Snow, they're different creatures. They don't have leadership, or hierarchy, they have no
reason to follow orders. They don't care for gold or baubles; in a lot of ways they're more animal than man.”

“Mance recruited giants for his army. Mag the Mighty followed him.”

“‘Follow’ is a strong word. More like the giants agreed to head in the same direction. And those were plains giants, anyway, not forest giants.”

He glanced at her. Val smirked. “The plains and mountain giants are the only ones with mammoths, Snow. They herd their mammoths all over the north, they eat mammoth cheese and milk; they live and die by their mammoths,” she explained. “The forest giants don’t. The forest giants live in very tight-knit clans, they’re very isolated, very territorial. They’re smaller than the plains giants too – most only grow up to ten or eleven feet.”

The giants were famous for constantly being bonded to their mammoths, but that was only half true. Perhaps the forest giant clans had just run out of mammoths. Val had once heard the rumour that there were no giant women and that giants would fuck their mammoths to give birth to more giants, but she supposed the forest tribes disproved that.

“You know a lot about them.”

“There was a tribe of forest giants near the village I grew up,” she said with a shrug. “The kids would play games trying to sneak into their territory, and steal a tuff of giant fur.” That caused Snow to blink in surprise.

“It was a bloody stupid game,” Val admitted, but she couldn’t help but smile. “If the giants caught you, they were likely to eat you.”

“Wait, I thought giants were vegetarians? They eat berries and fruits.”

“Oh, they are. Mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“Depends on how hungry they get,” she said. “Giants don't often hunt for meat, but they don't like wasting food either.”

“I see.”

There was a call from their outriders. Borroq’s boar sniffed out the right direction, and they spotted the giant trails. Two men pointed to an uprooted pine tree, with gouged bark. “Those are giant markings,” Garth said with a nod. “They mark their camps deliberately, to keep humans away.”

“A warning?” Jon asked.

“More like a boundary.”

“Humans have a bad habit of hunting them,” Val added.

They all turned to look at Snow. Val quietly noted the way they deferred to him. He paused, thinking. “Well, these giants should be friendly. We have had scouts that made contact with them before. We go in slowly, offer the food.”

“Friendly means different things to giants, Snow.” Val shook her head. “You’re doing this wrong. You walk this many people into their camp, they’ll smell you coming and spook. They don’t like
surprises; they’ll get confused and angry.”

Jon frowned, turning to face her. “And how would you do it?”

“Small groups. Three or four going in first, make introductions, and then signal the others to filter in afterwards. Send the horses in first, butter up to the chieftain with food, and promise that there’s more food.”

To her surprise, Snow just nodded. “Very well. Lead away.”

“Excuse me?”

“You've got more experience here than I do. We'll do it your way.”

She hesitated, glancing at Garth. The older raider nodded fractionally. “Fine. Everyone else stay outside the perimeter. Bring those garron over here. And the apples. Giants like apples.”

She picked out a Thenn who could speak the Old Tongue better than she could. Jon walked forward too, along with Hatch. Val stared warily. “You don't need to come. If it's safe, we'll call for you.”

“I'd prefer to come myself.”

“If you're trying to impress, don't bother. Don't be stupid.”

“I'm not. If it’s not safe, then I can have Sonagon here in five minutes.”

“You think you'd last five minutes against a clan of giants?” Val scoffed. Snow looked sheepish. He's younger than he appears, she thought. “Fine, but keep that wolf back.”

Snow nodded. He never even needed to look at his wolf to give orders, she noticed. “And pick up those flowers – the purple ones in that bush there,” she said. “We crush them and smear them over us.”

“What flowers are these?”

“Buggered if I know. But they stink and giants are less likely to be surprised if they smell you coming. Remember, their vision isn’t so good but their noses are.”

The trees shivered as they walked on ahead. Val walked in front, eyes peeled for the distinctive tracks. The garron neighed quietly as they crunched over the snow, heading towards down into a rocky valley in the forest. There would probably be a river through here when the snows melt, she thought. A little valley filled with rocks, maybe some caves. Sheltered and hidden. Exactly the type of place forest giants would gather.

Val glimpsed the figure before the others did. The others probably mistook it for a rock at first glance. Despite their size, it was always amazing how easily giants could blend into the woods.

She heard the curse from Snow as the rock stood up. The giant was a big one; at least fourteen feet with malted, shaggy brown fur. It wailed and stomped its feet, scratching at the leaves with stubby fingers. Even hunched up it loomed over them all, barely thirty feet between them.

“Gods,” she heard Snow mutter as the other men called in the Old Tongue. “It's huge.”

She smiled, edging forward cautiously. “Too big to be from one of the forest tribes. He's a mountain giant. I guess they've been taking in outcasts and survivors from other clans too.”
“He’s an outcast?”

“Why do you think he's sitting in the forest by himself?”

They edged forward slowly. The giant kept on wailing, but backed away and kept the distance between them. A sentry. It sniffed the air with every step back, hunched up so its knuckles trailed across the ground.

Val walked slower, but pushed on ahead. “You can tell the difference between the tribes,” she noted. “The plains and mountains giants are big sods, but they're more used to moving and socialising, even with humans. They're less aggressive. Generally they'll run rather than fight.”

“And the forest giants?”

“They're the ones that you really want for your army, if you can get them. They're territorial, and that means they know how to defend it. The forest giants know how to fight.”

They could see the camp approaching. Between the trees, the forest shivered with large shapes moving. It was like the trees themselves were moving. They heard the sound of footsteps, and grunting and sniffing. Some of the wails sounded angry. Snow looked ready to back away.

“Stand straight,” she hissed. “Make yourself as big as possible. Got to make sure they see you.”

The giants seemed to ripple out of the trees, surrounding them. Some of them had brown pelts, others black, some patchy and others streaked with grey. Several hoisted weapons; huge clubs larger than a man, some so big and heavy that even the giants had to drag them across the ground.

A couple big brutes waved their clubs threatening, causing Hatch to curse and clutch his maul tightly. Snow looked ready to back away, but Val forced herself to stand her ground.

“It’s just a show of dominance,” she told herself. Don’t panic. Still, it was hard not to panic with an immense roaring beast towering over you. Twice Val’s height and ten times her weight. Each one was so broad and stocky they looked like walls of fur and muscles.

The sounds of grunting and wailing filled the air. Val knew the Old Tongue, but even she could barely make out the words. The Thenn spoke the dialect better. He replied with short, sharp sentences. “Friends,” the man called in the Old Tongue “Friends. We are friends!”

Most of them were around ten to eleven feet tall. The first giant they saw in the forest had been freakishly large. Hatch the Halfgiant had never looked so small.


“Tell them we offer protection from the dead,” she whispered. “We want to fight the wights too.”

Hatch and the Thenn held their hands up in the air, shouting to the giants. Val looked for the biggest giants, or the ones with the largest club. One of the giants was speckled brown beast wearing a bone necklaces of assorted skulls – goats, wolves, possibly human too – around his neck and a thick club in his hand. “Focus on the chieftains or the best warriors. The other giants will follow them.”

Val knew only vaguely about the dynamics of giant tribes. A single clan could have several chieftains that would lead them when it came to blood, but there would also be matriarchs that would lead for everything other than fighting or hunting. They formed very close-knit groups, and were quick to anger. You had to stay alert when approaching them; constantly respectful,
constantly non-threatening.

Snow's mouth hung open slightly as more and more giants gathered around them, sniffing and stamping. At least a hundred, Val reckoned. Maybe more than two. In this single camp there must be several dozen giant clans forced together from the Others’ attacks.

It took a long time for them to calm. A few giants looked threatening, but Val and the other free folk slowly reassured them as they placed down sacks of fruit and vegetables.

For the most part, Snow stayed quiet. “Tell them about Hardhome,” he whispered eventually. “Tell them there is protection.”

Val caught only a few words. One of the big ones stomped and growled. “Monster,” it said. “Flying death. Monster.”

Hatch translated. “They already know,” he said. “They're afraid to approach Hardhome because of the dragon.”

“Ah. Tell them that dragon is no threat. The dragon is there to protect them.”

It took a lot of pleading for them to relax, and even more to get their meaning across. The giants skittered, staring at them curiously.

Val saw a little giant, a babe, about four feet tall. It stood up to her chest, but it was so broad it was probably already heavier than she was. It had weirdly lanky arms and knuckles that dragged across the soil. Val stared into a gaping square jaw hanging open filled with large, flat teeth. The little giant approached curiously, reaching out to touch her blond hair in fascination. She forced herself to stay still. The giant babe wasn’t aggressive, yet it still had strong, curious, stubby fingers.

Slowly, the free folk asked for permission to bring the rest of the warband into camp, which was eventually accepted. Val gave orders to bring them in only four or five at a time, and to constantly talk to the giants to reassure them.

Snow had learned four words in the Old Tongue – ‘Greetings’, ‘Friends’, ‘Help’ and ‘Snow’ – and he was trying to use them repeatedly to introduce himself. He sounded like an idiot. A few of the giants were laughing at him.

The giant’s ‘camp’ had no tents or fire pits. The giants had been huddled together against the cold.

It took a while for them to convince the giants to follow them into Hardhome. The giants made no decisions, but they weren’t throwing them out either. They mingled very cautiously, but agreed that the free folk could stay with them for the night and travel back in the morning.

At Snow's order, the free folk set up a perimeter, and lit fires around the camp. A few of the free folk told stories of the dragon to the giants. The younger giants were more willing to mix with the men, while the older giants huddled together and growled at any humans who tried to approach them.

As dusk fell, Val was wide awake, keeping watch by the fire. She heard the lopsided steps as Snow approached her. “Two hundred and eleven giants,” Snow said finally.

“You’re a good counter.” The majority of the giants in the camp were from the forest tribes, but some plains and mountains giants were mixed in.

“We've already got a hundred or so at Hardhome,” he said, settling in around her fire. “Do you
think any more will come?"

“Maybe,” Val admitted, but with uncertainty.

Jon cast a look behind him, where Borroq was meditating by the fire pit. The skinchanger stayed a good distance away from anyone else. “We need to use skinchangers to find them. Men that can search through an eagle's eye. Groups of skinchangers could track down survivors before the Others do.”

“And what? You want an army of giants?”

“I want any advantage I can get. Bring them in, give them armour, give them proper weapons. Teach them how to fight alongside humans.”

Val snorted, but Snow looked so earnest she might actually believe him. He looked at her seriously. “What would it take?” Jon asked. “To bring men and giants together?”

She shrugged. “Give them shelter. Food. You'd have to talk to the chiefs one by one. The old chieftains would never agree to it – too much distrust towards men – but the matriarchs… hmm. Maybe. It would be a lot of work.”

“It usually is, my lady.”

Val grunted. “And what? You'd try to send legions of giants on the front lines?”

“I think they'd be better served in the rear, actually. Strength to support the troops, mammoths to carry supplies. They could move siege weapons, even. What sort of bow would a giant be able to fire?”

She glanced at him, measuring his expression. “Fine. Let's say it's possible and I agree with you. What's the plan, King Snow?”

He shrugged. “I will be marching on the Wall very shortly. Eastwatch is vulnerable, but I want to get Hardhome secure before I leave,” he said. “Sonagon takes Eastwatch, we open the gates, and then move across to Castle Black. Bring through as many refugees as possible.”

“And Hardhome?”

“Stays safe. Protects the women and children until we can move them by ship. Brings in the giants. Hardhome needs to keep sending out parties against the Others and looking for survivors, while I take a force to secure the Wall.” He nodded. “When we’re ready to leave, it has to be quick and smooth.”

Around them, the night crackled and hissed. Outside the campfires, the darkness in the forest was absolute. Val sat still, judging his expression. “And you want me to…?”

“I need people to manage Hardhome while I'm gone. I need leaders I can trust. You're one of them.”

She thought about it. “I see.”

That was all she said. That was all she wanted to say right now, at least. Snow looked at her quietly as if expecting more, but then handed her a skin of water. “I look forward to working with you, my lady.”
Val twitched. *My lady.* Every time he called her that, it caused her to twitch. He said it sounding so serious and forlorn too. “There are times when I think you're trying to irritate me, King Snow.”

“Of course not, my lady.”

**Jon**

He looked out over the sea, a craggy coastline overlooking the rugged waters of the Bay of Seals. He could see the towering black outline of the Wall in the distance, about ten leagues away. The cliffs were barren rocks, swept clean by vicious winds, but the wildlings had used this coast to launch raids across the bay for centuries.

Right now, they were sheltered in what used to be a small fishing village on the craggy coast. Four thousand wildling warriors left Hardhome, ready to take Eastwatch. The camp was alive, filled with warriors and spearwives ready for battle.

Jon’s heart pounded. It had been pounding for days. Even after coming up with the plan, even after convincing the other wildlings to follow through with it, and even after all of the preparation, he was still nervous. All around him, the free folk were cheering, celebrating, like the battle was already won, while Jon felt the fear seeping into him.

*Today is the day that I will defeat the Wall.*

He looked at the hulking shape of Sonagon, resting on the ground. The men clambered around the dragon like ants.

“Leather straps!” Devyn Sealskinner ordered. “Quickly, leather straps, around its wings!”

The dragon grumbled. Jon took a deep breath, trying to push calm, reassuring thoughts. It had taken a lot for Sonagon to stay still. They had to bribe the dragon with fish, and then wait for Sonagon to roost in the evening before they could get close. Even then, Jon had to be on hand constantly.

Mounting the harness on Sonagon had proved a major feat all by itself.

It started with a quiet word to Furs about whether or not it would be possible. Furs passed it on to Devyn Sealskinner and two dozen other sailors and crafters. It had spiralled into a major undertaking requiring all the leather and hides the free folk could muster, and every skilled leatherworker in the host. Two hundred men tanning and weaving, another hundred to bring in enough leather, not even counting the men trying to coordinate them.

Truth be told, Jon did little while others arranged it. There were a multitude of tasks that needed his attention in preparation for the assault, and it was just a quiet relief to have one less.

The harness was a hulking mess of long leather straps, hides and hemp rope designed to wrap around the dragon. They hooked the rope onto the dragon’s spikes, with a leather harness to across its back, and then underneath its belly. Jon hadn't quite realised how big Sonagon’s body was until they tried to wrap leather around it.

The harness came in two parts, one on across the dragon’s skull and horns and the other across his back. No more clinging desperately onto rough ropes around the horns; instead it would be a securely fastened harness that Jon could tie himself into. The leather harness on the head would be big enough to support four men easily between the dragon’s horns.

The harness across Sonagon’s back proved more difficult; it needed to be fastened very carefully across the dragon’s wings and huge, serpentine body. The back harness was much larger, more
difficult to climb on, but large enough for well over three dozen men to hold on between the
dragon’s wings as it flew. There were even straps that could hold the soldier's weapons, and
positions that hopefully good bowmen would be able to fire from. Archers and warriors on a
dragon’s back.

The hard part was trying to fasten the damned thing. Strong climbers had to scale Sonagon’s body
to wrap the leather straps, and trying to climb a dragon’s body was not a task for the faint of heart.
They were all brave men trying to delicately complete such a cumbersome task, particularly when
a single movement from the dragon might easily crush someone.

Jon could feel the dragon’s irritation with so many figures moving around him. It took everything
Jon had to keep the dragon calm, and still. Convincing the dragon to shift his body to one side
slightly to allow them to fasten the straps had been an achievement by itself.

Devyn tutted slightly, frowning as he inspected his men’s work. “We made the leather as strong as
possible. Still no telling how long it’ll hold, though. Don’t let the dragon dive into the water.”

Jon nodded. “Are you happy with it?”

“It’s the best we could have done with so little time,” Devyn conceded. “But still so little. Amazing
how difficult wrapping a few straps around a dragon really is. If I had more time…”

“You’d do what?”

He thought about it. “Better leather saddles for across the back. Stronger hide as cover from the
wind. I added some thick leather across the head – thought it might protect the dragon’s neck and
lower jaw a bit – but we should think about armour as well.”

Jon shook his head. Around them, men were shouting for ropes to be pulled. “Maybe something to
shield Sonagon’s eyes and snout,” he said, not a clue how that would even be possible. A dragon
helm, perhaps? “But Sonagon’s wings are the most vulnerable, and those are too wide to protect.”

“Aye, that’d be a challenge. Can’t put too much weight on the wings, either. Maybe a leather
sheath, but damned if I know how we could mount it. For armour, most we could do is around the
underbelly, neck and jaw, possibly legs, but that’d be a lot extra weight and a lot extra hassle.”

“Not worth it. Sonagon’s scales are already harder than most metal.” He paused. “Yet I was taught
that Valyrian dragonlords used to use armour dragons in steel plate.”

“Heh. You would float on a breastplate that size. How much can your dragon carry, anyways?”

“I’m not sure,” Jon admitted. “He could likely carry his own weight again, at least briefly. More
weight and he struggles. Right now, I’m thinking two dozen fully grown men would be a safe bet
for any journey.”

“Well, it’ll be an uncomfortable ride,” Devyn noted. “Make sure you get men strong enough to
hold on tight. The head is a pretty stable seat, though that one will jerk around a lot, but the back?
That’s going to be sitting right on the wing muscles.”

“We better bring heavy furs too,” Jon admitted. “It gets cold.”

“Ha! I can imagine. I think you’d be best off looking for experienced sea raiders to join you up
there. They’d probably handle it better.”

Jon grimaced quietly. The news that he was making a harness to fly men on the dragon had spread
like wildfire. I should have expected it, for bragging rights alone. How many could say that they’ve flown to war on a dragon’s back?

Jon had been flying Sonagon frequently recently; testing the dragon’s power, scouting the distance, moving between the two armies here and in Hardhome. The dragon loved flying again, growing stronger with every journey.

He had decided to ferry two dozen strong men across on Sonagon, an advance force that could make a difference if things went badly. If the harness was completed in time, Jon had offered thirty positions to the strongest warriors willing, but he had half-expected that nobody would stand forward. After all, they would have to fly through cold, harsh weather clutching a possibly unstable harness, all the while being easy targets for any archer aiming for the dragon.

That offer proved a mistake. The raiders took it as a challenge, and then two days ago Jon found the free folk hosting a miniature gladiator tournament all vying viciously for a spot on the dragon’s back before Jon put a stop to it.

The harness was already being tightened, but they looked like frilly bands of leather against the dragon’s white scales.

They would attack in three parts. The main force heads towards the gates, the vanguard crosses over the frozen water, and an advance force flying over on Sonagon’s back.

Assuming all went well, they would arrive at Eastwatch with the depleted men of the Night’s Watch surrendering peacefully, or maybe abandoning the castle all together. That would be enough for the free folk to fortify Eastwatch and open the gates wide.

If not, and things became bloody, Sonagon could douse the castle in dragonfire, and end resistance quickly. That’s the final resort, Jon told himself.

Jon knew he was probably over-preparing, wasting himself in trying to plan every eventuality. They likely wouldn’t face any sizeable resistance at all. Still, he was nervous so he made plans.

This time tomorrow, I will take the wildlings south. I will defeat the Wall and I will open the gates for the free folk.

He took a deep breath to focus on the task at hand. Less than twelve hours now. Did time always move this slowly?

Eventually, he left Devyn Sealskinner and the others to finish up the harness. A dozen men flanked Jon as he walked through the camp. In the distance, he saw the large shapes of mammoths rumbling over the ice. Giant clans ferrying supplies from Hardhome to them.

It was the eve of the battle, and it seemed like everyone was carving more arrowheads, weaving rope or sharpening weapons.

He met the Weeper bellowing at men to get into formation. The Weeper’s face was still bruised, as was Jon’s, but he had no time to hold grudges. “How goes the preparations for the march?” Jon asked.

“Aye. I got a thousand good men ready to cross the ice. As many from the ice lake clans as possible – they’ll take the front. The Thenns will bring up the rear. Make damn sure your dragon does a good job freezing the ocean.”

“Just make sure your men are ready to move light and fast,” Jon said. “How about the men who
will be riding on Sonagon? Have they been picked?"

“I’ve got twenty-nine of the strongest meanest raiders I could find.”


“The hell I ain’t. I’m the strongest meanest raider around here.”

“Your job is to lead the men over the ice.”

“Let Sigorn and Rattleshirt handle that, I’ll be buggered if I’ll let you fly on ahead.”

Jon didn’t trust Rattleshirt enough for that. Hells, he didn't really trust the Weeper, but at least the Weeper was reliable in an untrustworthy way. “You lead the men, I’ll lead the dragon.”

“I expect the battle will be over by the time we get there.”

“Perhaps.” Hopefully. “But I still need the main force to secure Eastwatch.”

He snorted. “It’s not so hard to secure corpses.”

“No killing.” Jon’s eyes were hard. “That was the deal.”

“Sure. No killing unless they try to kill us.” A cruel little grin past over the Weeper’s face. “But as soon as they do, I’ll slaughter them all.”

Not for the first time, Jon wondered about his ability to keep the wildlings in line. It was one of many matters to worry about.

Across the camp, Devyn’s men had finished securing the dragon harness. Right now, they were busy feeding Sonagon the last of the supplies they had set to one side. Huge sacks of fish, some of them rotten, were poured out in front of the dragon. Jon saw Sonagon’s nose twitch hungrily as the dragon’s neck stretched outwards. Normally they fed the dragon livestock or garron, but fish was a tasty delicacy for it.

There are metal-rich stones on the coast too, Jon thought. The dragon would fill up on fish, and then chew rocks for his stomach. Jon wanted Sonagon well fed and content for tomorrow, so he would be less likely to snack on any men.

He found Iron Emmett tied up to his post in a tent, but Jon had instructed that the prisoner needed extra rations. He needed his strength for tomorrow too.

“Emmett,” Jon called, with the Weeper and a dozen others behind him. “How are you?”

The man’s eyes were dark. Three times now Emmett had tried to escape. One time he had waited for a chance to throttle Jon. The sworn brother was every bit as dangerous as his reputation suggested. Jon took care never to approach him alone.

“You are a fool, Snow,” Emmett growled. “Gods, if you let the wildlings south they’ll rape and pillage the north. They always have.”

“If they do, I’ll stop them,” Jon replied coolly. “But it seems to me that keeping them locked up north just encourages more raping and pillaging. You’ve seen the real enemy, Emmett, or are you doubting your own eyes?”
A pause. “I saw the blue-eyed dead that night, aye.” Emmett growled. “But that does not make the wildlings any less of savages, or you any less of a traitor.”

*I can’t really argue that one*, he supposed. “Enemy of my enemy,” said Jon. “But enough. We will release you when we start to march. You will have furs. We’ll give you back your cloak. It’s ten leagues to the Wall, I suggest you make haste. Do you know what you have to say?”

“That wildlings and monsters are coming.” His voice was bitter.

“That anyone who surrenders will not be harmed,” Jon said. “Surrender the castle peacefully and nobody dies, on my word.”

“The word of an oathbreaker? What’s that worth?”

*More than you think.* “It’s all you have. This offer is a courtesy – I need not give it. I could quite easily take the castle by force, and I’m prepared to do so.” His eyes were hard. “Make sure you remind them of that.”

Emmett glared, but Jon could see the doubt in his eyes too.

“I want you and Sigorn leading on the ice,” Jon said to the Weeper after a pause. “Have Rattleshirt stay behind with the reserves. The dragon goes first, the army follows, and as soon as the door is open Rattleshirt brings the rest through.”

“Fine.”

“And I’ll send Devyn back to Hardhome by boat,” Jon said after a pause. “Have him tell Val and the others to prepare to follow.”

“What about the Others?” Furs asked. “What if they attack?”

“They’re in retreat. Hardhome is defended. I don’t think the Others are bold enough to launch an attack like that.” *Not yet.* “They’ll wait for a better opportunity.”

“If you say so.” Jon had organised two dozen hunt squads to work through the forests around the cape, to cut down as many of wights as possible. They could secure the area and keep the Others at bay, at least until they opened the Eastwatch gate.

Jon looked around his army and sighed softly. Tomorrow, he would fight the Night’s Watch. Fight against his sworn brothers.

The thought made him pause. *My brothers are dead. My real brothers had died while I was lost in the wilderness searching for a dragon. The Night’s Watch were the only family I have left, but I turned my back on them too.*

The camp was tense, but there was nothing to do except wait and prepare. Jon walked around the camp, inspecting the clans and soldiers. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep, so instead he paced through the camp.

Even at night, at least a hundred men or women – mostly women, actually – surrounded Sonagon. The dragon gathered a retinue that would flock around him whenever he was in camp; that would prepare meals, sometimes even clean his scales. A week ago they had an incident when a crofter’s girl very nearly died after being knocked by the dragon’s tail and Jon had tried to stop the followers, but they always seemed to come back.
Everywhere he looked, he saw men, women and children staring at him wide-eyed, with white stones on their furs. Even more of the raiders were taking the white stones now.

Jon honestly didn't know what to do about that one. It made him uncomfortable, but he also seriously doubted that he would have the same support if it wasn’t for his followers. Sonagon was no god, but Jon found himself protesting less and less whenever tributes were made. There were four old women who would prepare his meals every day, served on iron plates. Jon and all of his guards ate well.

He paused for a long time, staring at the outline of Sonagon further towards the coast. Tomorrow, for the first time in three hundred years, a dragon would invade the Seven Kingdoms once more.

*It would be an easy battle*, he told himself. It would be so easy that it didn’t deserve the amount he had been obsessing over it. They had forty times the number of men and a dragon. The Night’s Watch would be fools to try and fight back. Eastwatch was an undermanned castle cradled by a fishing village, with more ships than they had sailors to man them. The castle would never stand a chance, and everyone knew it. It would be an easy victory.

*So why do I feel so nervous?*

He spent the evening pacing. Darkness seemed to fall painstakingly slowly, until finally it was time for the army to move.

“Weeper! Sigorn! Get ready to march!” Jon bellowed. “All men to Sonagon, we mount now! Bring rope and as many furs as possible!”

The camp seemed to ripple. Jon motioned to Rolf and Hatch to keep everyone else back, while the thirty men gathered around Sonagon. Thirty very experienced men and they all looked terrified approaching the dragon. The man leading the warband was a grizzled white-haired Thenn named Stiga. One of Sigorn’s cousins, Jon had heard.

“You need to climb up onto its back,” Jon instructed. “Two men at a time; climb up towards the rear, over his hind legs. The scales are poor handholds, so be careful. *Do not touch the wings.* Leave weapons behind for now, bring rope instead. Climb up and hook yourselves onto the back spines, and then wrap yourself in as many furs as you can. It will be really cold.”

Jon went first. His heart pounded as he climbed up the dragon’s horn and delicately levered himself into the unfamiliar leather harness. It was uncomfortable, but Jon wrapped furs around him and tied himself down with the straps, clutching the rope. The leather straps had been left deliberately sparse to allow quick movement, but they still felt like very flimsy, sparse tethers that might be the only thing keeping him alive.

The dragon had been well-fed and sated, but Sonagon was still on edge. Jon watched with hushed breath as the men behind him slowly scaled the dragon’s back. Mounting the dragon was a feat by itself, let alone holding onto dear life.

Thirty free folk warriors – most of them Thenns – armed with willow longbows and copper spears, wrapped in sheepskin furs over bronze platemail.

His heart was in his mouth, watching with quiet horror and wondering if one man might accidentally poke one of Sonagon’s wounds, and then Sonagon would surely snap and tear the man apart in anger. It took everything Jon had to keep the dragon calm, but still…

How long does it take to mount men onto a dragon? Is it always so cumbersome? They’ll never be
able to dismount quickly in battle. We’re using a dragon alongside military tactics, Jon thought to himself, something that hadn’t been done in over a hundred years. There’s no experience with this. We have to make up the strategies as we go.

I wonder, how did the ancient Valyrian generals used to stop their war assets from eating their own army?

The camp was screaming, or cheering, as the last Thenn dragged himself up and held out to Sonagon’s back ridges, the man tying himself to the leather straps. Stiga was shouting in the Old Tongue, a series of short harsh raspy cries to rally his men. Jon could feel the tension in the air. They all grunted fiercely; raiders about to experience the most extreme raid of their lives.

He suddenly wished that he had warned Stiga to spare the battle speech: it would be a long, cold flight, and it was still far too early for any speeches.

And then, finally, they were ready. Jon gave the unspoken command, and Sonagon lumbered upwards. The dragon growled with irritation with the passengers, but Jon soothed him. Jon clutched the ropes, and behind him he heard the screams of the raiders clutching on as the dragon reared up.

Giant wings unfurled slowly. The first beat of immense muscles sent shockwaves through the camp. The sound drowned out even the cheering of the free folk.

This is the fifth time that I’ve flown on a dragon now, he thought.

It never became any less magnificent, or less terrifying.

Suddenly, the night sky rushed up to meet them. The cold air hit him like a warhammer, as the dragon gained speed frighteningly fast. Even with thirty men on his back, Sonagon was no less graceful in the air.

The wind was deadly, so cold that it could easily bite off fingers. Even under his thick hide furs, clutching the Sonagon’s scales, he could feel the wind buffering around him. If there was any exposed skin at all, the cold wind would bite it off.

His heart was beating. Jon couldn’t hear anything from the men on Sonagon’s back, but he just had to hope they could hold on.

It was exhilarating. Terrifying. The pressure, the wind, the power, the acceleration. Each beat of Sonagon’s wings threatened to tear him apart.

Jon gasped, trying to focus. Focus.

He extended his mind. He felt himself slipping out of his skin.

And suddenly the world shifted. He was staring out over a black ocean, feeling the joy in his wings with every beat. Sonagon loved flying. Everything was so black and cold, even Sonagon’s vision could barely make out a thing, but the smell… the scent of the ocean was so overwhelming, but on the wind there were fragrances and tastes from leagues and leagues away. It felt Jon was the king of the world, the natural predator in his element.

Focus. Don’t lose myself. Give Sonagon his freedom, but keep him under control too. Focus on the task. Sonagon quite often enjoyed diving into the water during flights, but if he did that now it would kill everyone. Sonagon couldn’t be completely controlled, but Jon just needed to push him in the right direction, to steer him.
The dragon swept through the black night. They would be nearly invisible in the dark.

The ships. The night patrols across the bay from Eastwatch. There were usually two ships, both undermanned by tired but experienced crewmen. Firstly, Jon needed to disable them, to keep their men away from defending or warning Eastwatch.

Sonagon picked up the pinprick scent of oak, metal and sweat among the salty sea air. Jon pushed Sonagon gently, and the dragon turned in the air, dropping low over the water.

He could see the glow of heat and lanterns from the ship. *The Talon*, Jon guessed. A narrow and low sloop with a dozen men on board; old, but sturdy against cold storms.

Sonagon came in fast and hard. The dragon’s wings folded, beating powerful strokes as the roar broke the air. Jon heard screams. Raw, strangled screams of pure panic. Even if there were archers ready and waiting with bows, Jon gave them no chance to fire. Sonagon went too fast.

*I’ve learned my lesson after facing Stannis’ fleet. Don’t give them any chance to retaliate.*

The cold exploded from the dragon’s jaw. Jon heard the hissing. *The water*, he pushed, as forcefully as he dared. *Freeze the water, not the ship.*

It was over in less than a dozen heartbeats. A single pass left the *Talon* caught in a streak of hissing ice across its port, and then the second pass it’s rear was frozen too. The sea water froze in icy tendrils, trapping the whole boat instantly. The sloop would be trapped in an iceberg so cold that, even with pickaxes, it would take days to get the ship free.

*It will be dangerous for them to be frozen on these waters, but I can send men to rescue them once I have a chance.* Lives would be threatened no matter what Jon did or didn’t do. He took the route with the best chance of saving the most.

It took an hour and a half before Jon caught the second patrol ship, off the coast of Skagos. With only a single pass, that ship was frozen too, left to drift aimlessly on a chunk of ice. The iceberg would probably drift back onto the peninsula of Skagos. Sonagon was already turning around, the dragon roaring over the bay and towards the mainland.

It was well past the hour of the raven. *Need to hurry.* The army will be on the move, probably nearing the coast. They wanted to cross the ocean at dawn, so they had the sunrise on their side.

The shape of the Wall loomed over head, a black brick on the coast, taller than a mountain. Eastwatch was barely a lump cradled at the Wall’s feet. Jon tried to keep the dragon low and slow, to save themselves the worst of the coastal winds.

Sonagon’s roar was like thunder. *They’ll know we’re here, even if they can’t see us in the dark.*

*Freeze*, Jon pushed, focusing on the swirling ocean. *Freeze, ice, freeze.*

The dragon grumbled, but his body was powerful and well-rested. Songaon wanted to exert himself, to conquer. Ice was the dragon’s domain. With a low growl, the white cold fire exploded outwards, firing over the sea.

Jon felt his body almost lose grip as the cold air hit them from below. Behind, Sonagon felt a shape topple off his back, crashing against his tail as he swept upwards again.

*A man fell off*, Jon cursed. The dragonfire was so cold that the man’s body exploded before it hit the water, lost in the cold mist. Jon could only hope the remaining men would hold on tighter.
Sonagon circled for a second pass. He breathed a continuous stream of fire for nineteen seconds, but then needed to break. *Not so cold,* Jon thought desperately. It was hard for Sonagon to understand such awkward instructions. *I need less intense dragon fire, but more continuous.* *Longer, freeze further streaks.*

The second pass lasted almost a minute. A full minute of icy fire, transforming everything it touched into solid ice.

Each pass formed jagged chunks stripping out of the sea, the tendrils pluming outwards. *Smoother,* Jon thought with a silent curse. *They have to walk over that ice; try to freeze the water into smoother pathways.*

Half a dozen passes, and beneath them the ocean was consistently transforming into an icy wasteland. Great billows of steam rose upwards. Sonagon was panting now, straining more and more with every breath.

Jon was panting too, his muscles hurting from holding on so tightly. It was still dark, but there was just the faintest tinges in the distance of the sun about to rise.

Sonagon could hear shouts from atop the Wall. The men of Night’s Watch would have seen the dragon beneath them, working his way south across the coastline. The darkness was Sonagon’s best cover, but that was fading. *How long before they start shooting arrows from the Wall? How long before one gets a lucky shot?*

*Need a distraction. Move forward, trust that there’s ice enough for now.*

Sonagon flapped forward, zooming over the frozen water. Jon saw the shadows and harbours of Eastwatch zooming ahead. Cut off any defence before they could mount one.

With a single breath, the harbour exploded into ice. Jon heard the bells of Eastwatch ringing in panic.

His body was trembling. Sonagon flapped, twisting around low to the group. *I need to be brutal here. Force them to surrender quickly.*

Sonagon roared overhead, so loud the earth rumbled. Jon wanted absolutely everyone to see the size of the dragon.

With a single beat of his wings, Sonagon twisted around in the air. Beneath him, Jon glimpsed old towers among thatch houses of the fishing village, and men and women running for their lives.

Sonagon dropped to the ground in the plains outside of the Eastwatch, the grass scattered in light snow. As the dragon dropped, great clouds of snow billowed around him.

Jon was panting for breath. It was almost dawn. The free folk had very experienced mountain and frozen lake men leading the front, men experienced at traversing ice, but it would still be slow going. Jon needed to cover them until they reached Eastwatch, to take the castle and the Wall.

“Everyone off!” Jon shouted, at the Thenns on Sonagon’s back. Twenty-nine free folk as a landing party, to hold the ground until the main force arrived. “Quickly now!”

Few of them spoke the Common tongue, but they got the meaning. The men looked ill and woozy from the long flight as they lowered ropes to climb down. The dragon trembled impatiently, growling at Eastwatch as the sun rose sluggishly over the horizon. They had barely even dismounted before Sonagon burst off again, roaring into the sky.
The earth disappeared. Jon saw rushing bodies across the castle and the Wall. In the morning sun, the frozen ocean looked like some strange, alien wasteland. He could barely make out the shadow of the wildling host on the other side of the coast, on the edge of the frozen, steaming ocean. The Weeper made good time, he must have driven the men hard.

Eastwatch is still a strong castle. Don't afford them the chance to build up a defence.

*This is the first time I've been to Eastwatch. I never thought I would come to destroy it.*

With an immense crash, Sonagon dropped right on top the castle’s keep, claws clinging to the tiled woodwork. The whole structure seemed to groan, stones clattering. With a single breath, the courtyard was split into ice. Jon could barely even hear the screams of terror. The second dragon breath tore open the balconies atop a tower, causing the stone to crackle and explode with cold. A warning for any archers that might try to take position against them.

Jon saw men on the Wall. He glimpsed shafts being loosed at them.

In a second, Sonagon shot upwards, tearing through the sky and to the top of the Wall. Seven hundred feet in an instant, the acceleration so fast that Jon nearly gagged. It took everything Jon had to suppress Sonagon’s urge to eat, and instead the dragon’s tail whipped out furiously, and then a craning siege weapon and winch atop the Wall shattered into massive splinters.

Jon glimpsed black shapes falling off the Wall, screaming. Men of the Night’s Watch driven off the edge in the chaos and panic, and dead because of him. Jon’s stomach clenched, but there was nothing he could do. He couldn’t save everyone.

Eastwatch was in chaos. A single sweep of the dragon was all it took to send the castle mad. Jon saw the group of free folk charging through the chaos – twenty-nine good men to hold the harbour while the dragon terrorised any defence.

*How long before the Weeper’s men get here?* Maybe another four hours to cross the frozen ocean. Sonagon just had to stop any foolish acts of bravery until the free folk arrived, and then they would have the men to hold castle and open the gates.

A dragon could destroy a castle easily, but Jon didn't want to demolish it. Jon needed to wait for the Weeper’s men before he could take Eastwatch itself.

The time moved so slowly. There was no battle; just pure, constant panic. Sonagon did regular passes of the castle, the Wall, the coast and the harbour. He saw men of the Night’s Watch riding from the castle, or across the Wall. Jon considered giving chase, but then decided against it. Let them run; running is better than fighting.

It took another twelve passes to freeze the ocean before he was confident the ice was solid enough. If anything it might be too cold.

Finally, when he saw the shapes of men skittering across the ice with ropes and ice picks, Jon knew it was as good as over. The advance force held position and faced barely any resistance, while Sonagon easily scattered anything that looked like a defensive perimeter.

It was noon by the time Jon finally dismounted the dragon. The raiders were clattering on the coast. The free folk in the harbour killed seven men, four Night’s Watch and three fishermen, but only those that tried to drive them away. The bodies left a foul taste in Jon’s mouth, particularly as he dismounted and clutched Dark Sister tightly.

About fifty men on the harbour, but more arriving every second. Easily enough to take Eastwatch.
Jon let Sonagon fly away. “To me!” He called, as others took up the cry. “Take the castle!”

On the ground, the perspective was so different. Eastwatch was an old dumpy castle, squat and well-made, but even the brief passes from Sonagon had ruined it. Half the tower had collapsed from where Sonagon had perched, Jon noted. He hadn’t realised at the time.

They encountered no resistance, but he glimpsed faces hiding in huts and houses. Old women, children, mothers – those too scared to run. The men of the Night’s Watch had fled with every horse they could find.

Or so he thought. Then, Jon rushed into the castle courtyard, he saw a dozen men in black waiting for him, huddled by the tower steps, clutching swords and bows. The free folk around him growled.

“Yield!” Jon shouted, holding up his sword. “Yield right now, and you will not be harmed!”

“Aye? You mean to feed us to that monster instead?” A sworn brother growled, a broad man with a stocky jaw and broken nose.

“No one will be harmed, you have my word,” Jon said, glaring at the free folk. “So long as you surrender your swords.”

“And what is the word of a traitor worth?” The man spat. “Jon Snow, I presume? You made a vow.”

“I did.” I made several. “And please don’t force me to break it. Lower your weapons.” Jon glared at the man. He was a brave man, facing off against Jon and fifty wildlings behind him. The other brothers were scared, but they looked to the one in charge. “Cotter Pyke, yes? You have command here?”

“What did you do to my ships, traitor?” Cotter Pyke demanded. “The men on them?”

“The ships frozen in icebergs, ser,” Jon replied coolly. “But the men unarmed. And will remain so, as long as you surrender now.”

Cotter snorted. “I am no ser.” His eyes were angry, defiant. “Eight thousand years this Wall has stood. You expect me to step aside and let it fall under my watch?”

Jon took a step forward. “If you are that eager to die, ser, then I have no choice but to oblige you.”

There was a pause. Behind him, he had no doubt that the wildlings would happily kill all the crows they could.

Finally, Cotter’s gaze twitched. “Lower your weapons,” he said, his voice sour. “We surrender.”

Jon suppressed a breath of relief. A castle fallen, the Wall breeched, and it appeared only single casualty on their side. One man who fell off the dragon.

Swords clattered to the ground. Jon nodded at the free folk. “Collect them, escort the crows to their quarters. If they resist, escort them to the cells.”

“Where are their quarters? Where are the cells?”

“Not sure,” Jon admitted. “Search the castle.”

About two dozen men of the Night’s Watch in total, mostly old stewards or builders. Everyone
who couldn’t run. Cotter Pyke himself could have run, though, Jon thought, instead he must have chosen to stay behind at his post. Brave man.

He saw wildlings roughly marching an elderly maester – Maester Harmune, he recalled – at spearpoint. Jon wanted to order them to be gentler, but he couldn’t. He had to pick his battles. It already took all of his control to stop them from killing the crows, it would be too much of a stretch to order them to act nice as well. Cotter Pyke looked absolutely furious as he saw wildlings stomping into the grounds, chanting and cheering.

“You’re going to destroy the north,” Cotter said. “Those savages will rape and pillage everything in their path.”

They would probably try, Jon admitted. He had to keep the wildlings under control too. “Your man,” Jon said. “Iron Emmett. Where is he?”

“Halfway to Last Hearth by now, I expect,” he scoffed, folding his arms.

So they ran to the Umbers. It made sense. Jon fully expected that Cotter Pyke’s men had either ran west to Castle Black or south to the nearest northern houses for aid. Jon just nodded. “I trust he made it safely?”

“Aye, arrived eleven hours ago, half-dead from cold. Always was a faster runner, Emmett,” Cotter said. “Babbling on about raiders coming, and dragons. Didn't really need to, I’ve seen that monster before.”

Jon paused. “You were at Hardhome.”

“Aye, I was escorting the King’s fleet. The Blackbird was at the rear though, and much tougher than any southern ships. We made it out of the ice. The Queen never believed me when I came back rambling about what I saw. Not until the King made it back as well five days later. Never seen so many men run so fast.”

“You didn’t run.”

“I did not,” Cotter agreed. “I've spent the last two weeks trying to think of some way to stop a monster like yours. Still didn't come up with anything.”

It shouldn’t have been this easy, Jon thought. The Wall should be better defended. If I could get through it, then how long until the Others did the same?

“Stannis Baratheon?” Jon demanded. “What happened to him?”

“Two ships of his crawled back a week ago. They grabbed his Queen and Princess and sailed south pretty damn sharpish. Your dragon put the fear of god into them.”

“Where to?”

“His Grace never deigned to tell me.”

“But he survived.”

“Presume so.”

Jon hadn’t been sure if Stannis would live or not after he lost his hand. Stannis had less than a thousand men, apparently, he was no threat now. Still, would he be able to rally more and try
again?

One problem at a time. “Sigorn!” Jon shouted. “The gatehouse is through there! Have your men secure the tunnel and open the gate.”

The Magnar grinned a toothy smile. Jon saw the Weeper charging through the crowd. The free folk looked exhausted from the trek over the ice, but they were already celebrating. Can’t let them celebrate, not now, he thought. Free folk tended to rape when celebrating.

“Weeper, we need to get on top of the Wall,” Jon shouted. “As many as you can grab, get up there and light the signal. Clear the wall and set up sentries.”

“You expected an ambush?”

Not really, but it’s possible. “Just be on guard,” he said simply. “And then we need barricades and patrols around Eastwatch in case they’ve got any reinforcements coming.”

“Aye,” the Weeper grumbled, before snapping at two nearby men. “Abel, Sten! Go find Rattleshirt’s hairy ass! Grab Rolf and Haldur too. Get them here and pass on the orders. I’ll take the Wall. Lord of Bones can handle the ground.”

“Be careful, the steps can treacherous.”

“Snow, my lot are used to climbing the Wall without steps,” the Weeper snorted, picking up his scythe.

“We sleep in featherbeds tonight, King Snow!” a raider laughed, staring at the keep. “The crow’s castle is ours!”

“No laughing, no jeering and no drinking until we’ve got barricades and defences set up!” Jon shouted, turning to bellow at the men. “Not unless you want to risk an ambush in the middle of the night!”

Cotter Pyke didn’t move, he stood still as the free folk rushed around him. The free folk would try to raid any supplies, weapons or valuables for themselves. It was in their nature. Jon had to assign men to find the important location first – the armoury, the pantry, the vault – and guard them.

Emotions were still high off the victory. They had come prepared for a battle, but there had been none. Jon couldn’t let them run wild. He could feel his head aching, but he didn’t dare rest lest he lose control of the rising chaos.

Maybe five hundred here already. About twenty thousand on their way from Hardhome.

Beyond the Wall, Jon could sense the remaining free folk marching through Ghost. The smoke signal rose into the air – the signal that the Wall had fallen.

Sonagon was flying off east, over the coast of Skagos. The dragon enjoyed exploring new lands. Perhaps he’d find a unicorn to eat.

It had been a long night and it looked like it would be a long day too. Jon stared around the unfamiliar castle. Jon would take the commander’s quarters for himself, but he had to figure out where they were first.

“The maester,” Jon ordered. The wildling gave him a blank stare. “The old man with the chain. Bring him to me, assign him to his quarters.” The rookery was important. Jon had a lot of letters
and world events to catch up on. “Cotter Pyke, I will let you stay alongside your men. I trust you will help keep the peace.” The warning was clear.

“My ships. My men,” Cotter Pyke said darkly. “You’ll bring them back.”

“I will.” Put it alongside the other hundred tasks that I have to do urgently.

“And what did you do to Castle Black?” Cotter demanded. “Do any of the brothers there still live?”

Jon paused. “Excuse me?”

“We lost contact with Castle Black well over a week ago. No ravens. I’ve sent brothers to investigate, but none returned yet. What did you do to the castle?”

He hesitated, meeting Cotter’s eyes. There was anger there, but uncertainty too. Cotter didn’t know. “Point me to the rookery,” Jon ordered. “I want any letters you have delivered to me straight away.”

He walked away. Cotter Pyke didn’t resist as Hatch, Rags and Erik took him to the quarters.

“We should keep marching,” Sigorn hissed, staring at Jon. “Get back on the dragon. Castle Black.”

Jon shook his head. “We will. Not right now. Sonagon needs to rest, so do the men. We’ll secure Eastwatch first.”

“My father—”

“— Is perfectly safe in the Castle Black dungeons.” That might be a lie, he admitted. “Rushing isn’t going to help anyone. We go slowly, secure the Wall first.”

The Magnar looked unhappy, but there was no time to argue. Too much to do, so many tasks. Jon saw Maester Harmune being shuffled out of the courtyard, much to the man’s chagrin.

“I’ll take it from here,” Jon said at the free folk, limping towards the maester. Damn, my leg seized up from riding so long. “Maester, please show me to rookery. There are also injuries that I would like you to look at.”

Harmune was an old, greying maester with patchy hair, and the stink of alcohol on his breath. He floundered, clutching at his robe. “… Um, yes, Your Grace…” he mumbled, quickly lowering his head.

Jon had to stop his grimace. Your Grace. Jon Snow, the King on the Wall.

He heard the cheering as the gates were hoisted open.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

The fall of the Night's Watch, and the deal of sworn brothers and free folk.

Davos

When he first arrived, the Wall had been a towering, indestructible blot on the landscape. The castles were old and sturdy, the defences better fortified than any in Westeros. At the time, Davos had thought that it would take hundreds of thousands to breach the Wall from the north.

Apparently, it only really took a single dragon.

“You like it?” A free folk laughed, a hard, beefy man called Leathers. He clutched polished brass plate with guffawing smile, while wearing a satin drape, formerly a curtain, wrapped around his body as a gown. “Like what southron ladies wear, right?”

“Indeed,” Davos replied, keeping his voice cautious.

“I hear that Two-Toed Dirk got a proper silk dress, found it in the keep,” Leathers laughed. “Fucking silk dresses!”

Davos had seen that dress. It had been one left behind by the Queen in her rushed evacuation. The thought made his stomach clench.

“I mean, dresses,” another wildling – called Lemmy – chuckled, as if it was the queerest thing the world. “Do you southerners all prance around in dresses and drapes?”

“Many do,” Davos said, keeping his distance.

The two wildlings were often cheerful, sometimes even friendly. Davos expected that Jon Snow picked them especially for their temperament. Still, Davos was well aware that his guards were armed while he wasn’t, and they were experienced fighters besides. Doubtless they’d be cheerful as they killed him too.

Eastwatch and the surrounding village had been a poor castle, but the wildlings still raided it dry. Davos watched as they laughed and joked, clutching metal plates and forks as if they were alien trinkets. Davos had seen a young wildling boy, barely thirteen, with a spear and holding an iron fishing hook as if it was the greatest treasure imaginable.

Jon Snow had apparently claimed much for himself to stop others from taking it, but there were still raiders walking away with everything that wasn’t bolted down. One time, Davos saw a man peeling the iron bars off a window to make clubs.

More and more wildlings were coming every day. First there were hundreds, and then quickly thousands. The gates had not shut, and tide was not stopping. At one point, a queue formed for people to fit through the tunnel.

Davos had watched as the giants on mammoths came through. His heart had been in his mouth to
see columns of massive woolly beasts trundle into the stone keep.

He tried to keep up with their activity from the bits and pieces he heard or saw. Jon Snow wasn’t in Eastwatch anymore; he had already flown either west across the Wall or maybe he went back north to Hardhome. Davos did know that Sigorn of the Thenns had went west to take Castle Black, followed quickly by a force of another two thousand to hold the Wall itself.

There was little doubt that Castle Black would fall quickly, and then soon the Shadow Tower would fall as well. After that, all three gates would be open, and every wildling in the north would be coming south.

It could easily form a horde tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands strong. A mass exodus from beyond the Wall.

For a while, the ugly man called the Weeper reigned at Eastwatch, but then he took a raiding party south to harry Karstark forces that were gathering. After that, it was the Lord of Bones who took control of Eastwatch. Rattleshirt was a mean, foul man, but he proved effective. Eastwatch was not easily defendable from the south, but Rattleshirt had built rings of sharpened palisades and fortifications all around the flooded wildling camp, with constant patrols across the perimeter. Davos had hoped that the unstable chain of command might leave an opening to retake control of the castle, but Rattleshirt proved as capable as he was ruthless.

Still, Rattleshirt also proved much laxer on the prohibitions against rape that King Snow had enforced. Within days of Rattleshirt taking control, the wildlings dragged two dozen village women into an outbuilding and raped them all half a hundred times. The eldest was a woman of fifty, the youngest a girl of eleven.

Jon Snow came back about three days later, flying on his dragon to check on Eastwatch. Davos heard that the king had been beyond furious upon learning about the rapes, so much so that he and Rattleshirt almost came to blows. Instead, King Snow took the twelve biggest conspirators of the mass rapes – the ones that had kept the women locked up – and tied them to a post and had them lashed more viciously than any Davos had ever seen. One of them was executed trying to protest.

The women were returned to their homes, beaten and trembling. To hear the rumours, Snow had threatened that anything that happened to more women would happen to Rattleshirt.

Davos had also seen the king’s shadowcat pet, lingering around the castle more. The whispers said that Snow left his shadowcat behind to watch matters more closely.

The rumours circulated constantly. There was nothing Davos could do but linger and try to listen to make sense of talk.

The Weeper was fighting off Karstark and Umber forces to the south, while apparently Varamyr Sixskins led sorties beyond the Wall. Raiders led by Soren Shieldbreaker, Morna White Mask and Gerrick Kingsblood had left Eastwatch, but then King Snow had warned that any warbands that raided without his permission would face his dragon, and they had all returned. Many times, Davos questioned just how strong Jon Snow’s control over the wildlings really was.

Still, there was no doubt the wildlings were in control. He had heard that a small fleet from Skagos tried to sail against Eastwatch, but the dragon had seen them away. The wildlings were even manning the Night’s Watch ships and claiming fishing vessels, forming a fleet of their own.

A fat man – the Lord of Seals – sailed to Eastwatch with a ragtag collection of barges, boats and ships, and started calling himself the Admiral of Seals. Wildlings were poor sailors, but they were
Fishing vessels went out constantly, trying to feed the growing host of men and women. At this rate, Davos suspected, they would eat the Watch’s rations bare in a matter of weeks.

The sworn brothers themselves were kept locked in the main keep. The king had been keeping them alive with the other prisoners, but none were allowed to conspire or move freely around the castle. A few had been placed in dungeons.

Davos had better fare, as did Salladhor and a few select others. Davos received private guards, friendly guards, and his own private room in the Eastwatch’s east tower along with other prisoners. His movement was still restricted.

“I hear Castle Black has fallen,” the wildling Leathers said suddenly, causing Davos’ heart to jump. “Sigorn took it. Expect the Shadow Tower won’t be far behind.”

“So soon?” Davos said with a gulp.

“Against a bloody dragon?” Leathers laughed. “Aye, not surprised.”

“God,” Lemmy said suddenly, causing Davos to blink. Lemmy wore a polished white stone on his furs. “Sonagon is a god, not a dragon.”

Leathers just shrugged. “What’s the difference?”

Outside, in the courtyard, Davos could look down and see the east wall was littered with figurines and statues of the dragon. The smallest were woodsman carvings, the largest a statue taller than a man. Some carvings were from stone, others wood, and more than a few were from weirwood. Frequently, free folk would come to place more carvings, or pray at the dragon statues.

Davos looked at Lemmy hesitantly. He dared to ask. “You really believe that the dragon is a god?”

The man just looked at Davos like he was stupid.

“It can fly, freeze oceans, and destroy forests,” Leathers said with a snort, lowering the satin drape. “Aye, I’d call that a god.”


“What about them?”

“How can you call the dragon a god when you already have gods of your own?”

“Who the hells said there can only be one or the other?” said Leathers. “I hear some say that Sonagon is an Old God given flesh. Others claim the dragon is a champion of the Old Gods, or a different god entirely. Doesn’t really matter to me. I was born under a heart tree, aye, but I sure prefer to stand behind the dragon than a tree.”

*What did that make Jon Snow? A man who commands gods? A prophet?* There were many upset with the restrictions that King Snow enforced, but he didn't think there was any real threat of dissent. Not when so many of the free folk would bow and pray to the dragon.

Davos honestly wasn’t even sure if it counted as religion. There were no sermons, no religious texts, no commandments. Still, the faith was there. Sometimes, Davos saw a type of faith and dedication that matched or exceeded anything he had seen among the queen’s men. Melisandre had
stoked the flames of faith into an inferno, while Jon Snow’s dragon seemed to exhume it naturally. That type of faith was scary. It had been scary on Dragonstone, and it was scary here.

He heard the free folk scoff at ‘kneelers’, but Davos suspected there wasn’t as much difference as many would like to believe.

Davos had heard one of the free folk mention that a few of the young girls who had been raped by the wildlings had converted to worshipping the dragon. Davos didn’t believe it at first, but then he started to wonder. Maybe the girls had converted to improve their standing with the wildlings, or maybe they had just been so traumatised by the experience that they clung to the faith.

Leathers was looking at him curiously. “You know, whenever the king comes into camp there are half a hundred men flocking around him,” said Leathers. “Raiders that give anything to try and get the king’s attention. Hells, the only reason I took this boring guard duty is because I hear the king wanted it. Do you know why?” Davos shook his head. “Because anyone who is even close to Snow gets featherbeds and full meals every single day. I hear that even the king’s guards get to bed a different woman every night. Imagine spearwives just opening their legs for you!” He laughed.

Lemmy’s eyes flashed. “They are serving the dragon,” he warned. Leathers was more pragmatic, but Lemmy really believed. “They are following the path to salvation, not serving selfish needs.”

Leathers just grunted. Davos held his tongue.

The prisoners were fed together in groups of a dozen or so, at a small canteen in the Eastwatch tower. Everywhere Davos looked, he saw sunken eyes and dark expressions. Food was stew, on a good day, or a turnip and an apple on a bad. No spoons. The majority there were Night’s Watch men, or captives from the battle at Hardhome. The wildlings barely tolerated them at the best of times; make any commotion and they could just as easily lock you in a cell.

Davos spotted Salladhor Saan slumped at the dining table. Without his rings or silk or perfume the pirate just looked like an old, withered man. Davos had seen Salladhor occasionally, but they rarely had a chance to exchange words.

“Salladhor,” Davos said throatily, limping slightly. The wound on his torso hadn’t healed properly. He winced as he lowered himself down, feeling older than he ever had.

“Onion Lord,” Salla grunted. No more ‘old friend’. “Enjoying your stay?”

“They keep us alive.” Davos had seen worse hospitality, in any case. “We get better treatment than most. Jon Snow must put value on us.”

How many valuable hostages did King Snow have? Not many, actually. Salladhor was perhaps the most valuable, though few would pay to see the pirate returned. Davos was worth something to King Stannis, perhaps, but to little else. Ser Justin Massey… maybe, yet the knight had lingering been on death’s door ever since the battle.

Davos glanced around the room. “I haven’t seen Ser Clayton Suggs in here,” he said slowly. “Has he attempted escape?”

“Hardly. Your Flea Bottom knight agreed to join the savages. He rides with the one called the Weeper, now.”

“Clayton Suggs?” Davos said in surprise, remembering the landed knight. A short, burly man, who flew a winged pig on his surcoat. Formerly a hedge knight, he had grown up in the gutters of
King’s Landing. He had been one of the queen’s men. “He truly defected from Stannis?”

“The winged pig knight always cared more for hurting people than he did for his king or god,” Salla snorted. “I’m sure he gets on well with the savages.”

Davos didn’t reply. “Several of my men defected too. So have some ‘sworn brothers’,” Salla continued. The boats taken by the wildlings would need seasoned sailors, Davos thought, they must be willing to recruit prisoners as sailors. “Men are like rats, Onion Lord. They’ll stay on a ship, but they have no loyalty when it goes down.”

“Loyal men are different.”

“Loyal men are rare,” the pirate scoffed, staring down at his stew. Turnip stew. Davos doubted that Salladhor Saan, pirate prince of Lys, had ever eaten turnip stew in his life before his captivity.

Davos lowered his voice. “Do you have a plan?” he asked quietly. “If you’ve got men on ships…?”

“Hardly. Less than fifty prisoners, amidst three thousand savages?” Salla snorted. “Salladhor Saan has no intention of dying in a fool’s escape attempt.”

“I never expected Salladhor Saan to surrender so easily, either.”

“Surrender? Oh no, you see patience, not surrender.” There was a glint in his eyes. “I have too many enemies to kill, so many debts to repay.”

Davos’ hairs tingled. “King Stannis is not…”

“‘King’ Stannis ruined me,” Salladhor snarled. Stripped off all the finery, there was nothing but vicious ruthlessness in the pirate’s eyes. “He promised me much and gave me nothing but paper. He stole my ships and destroyed my fleet. I will see him burn for that, I think.”

“You mean to join with Jon Snow and the savages?”

“Mean to?” Salladhor laughed. “Oh, I already have. Admittedly the hospitality is still lacking, but trust must be earned and so I will pay penance.” He shrugged. “The savage king is a man desperate for allies. Perhaps he is not such a savage. But even savages have their uses. And Jon Snow has a dragon.”

“If that dragon dies, then Jon Snow has nothing. His army will splinter.”

“So then it becomes a question of whether or not anything is capable of killing it, then?” Salla mused. “Tell me, how would King’s Landing fare if a dragon were to terrorise it?”

The picture of King’s Landing covered in ice flickered before his eyes. Conventional armies couldn’t stand up to a dragon of that size. He could quite possible ruin any castle in the realm.

Salladhor smirked. “I think that I may even have a better chance of reclaiming what is owed from King Snow than I ever did with Stannis,” he said. “You said once that I am good gambler, and yet it seems that only a fool would wager against a dragon.”

“Jon Snow might destroy the realm, but he’ll never conquer it.”

“Are you sure?” Salla challenged. “I told you, men are rats. If Jon Snow destroys enough kings and lords, how long before the rats flock to him? How long before people decide they’d rather be a savage than fight against the savages?”
Davos hesitated. “Is that what you are then, Salladhor?” He asked. “Just another rat?”

The pirate laughed hollowly. “I am the prince of rats, Onion Lord. That’s all I have ever been.”

He finished his stew and stood up. “I will be moving out shortly, I think,” Salladhor continued. “I have already negotiated with the Seal Admiral. They will give me a ship and a crew – at the king’s approval I could be sailing away across the Narrow Sea. To Braavos, perhaps down to Lys if I can arrange it, to negotiate for supplies and sellswords. I think the Free Cities will be quite… _excited_ to learn of a dragon in Westeros again.”

Davos was left sitting quietly on the bench, wondering what would happen next.

The rest of the day was spent in cold quiet. Davos pushed his bounds as much as he dared, watching the men coming and going through the castle, trying to talk to the guards or washerwomen. The wildlings mostly left him alone along with the other prisoners in the tower. Davos might have tried slipping away and running at night, but then again where would he go?

He had access to the rookery with Maester Harmune, where he could sometimes peek in on the ravens being delivered, and to a couple of the other prisoner's rooms. Rattleshirt and several others distrusted the maester and his ravens, often not letting the man tend to them, but Jon Snow had insisted that the birds be used. They received so few letters, all of them from the king, that each one was an occasion. When one such bird arrived, Davos lingered quietly by doorway as Rattleshirt and two dozen armed men stomped into the room. The maester had to read the words out loud. Underneath Rattleshirt’s bone helmet, the man’s eyes narrowed distrustfully of the writing.

The maester was practically trembling as he finished, mumbling so quietly Davos couldn’t make out the words. “… So Tormund and Mance still live,” Rattleshirt snorted. “Does that paper of yours say anything else?”

“The… um… the Magnar’s father, Styr of Thenn, died from injuries during his imprisonment.”

“It’s Mance that I’m more wondering about. How does Mance Rayder feel about bowing to the new ‘King-Beyond-The-Wall’?”

“I’m sorry, my lord, King Snow does not mention…”

The Lord of Bones waved his hand dismissively, so fast the maester flinched. “Get out of my sight,” he snapped, causing the maester to squirm and bow.

The news that Mance Rayder still lived caused a ripple through the castle. Later that night, Davos asked if this meant that Jon Snow is no longer king, but Leathers just snorted. “Mance was never king. We followed Mance, but no one ever bowed or swore fealty to Mance,” Leathers said with a shrug. “We swore to Jon Snow.”

“So then what does that leave Mance?”

“Buggered if I know. It’s your lot that tries to put titles on everything, not ours. Mance is just Mance.”

All of the other answers he got over the next days were equally confusing. Still, the rumours persisted; some saying that Mance had been left crippled from his torture by the crows, others saying that he was fighting against Jon Snow. There were others who swore that Jon had fed the former King-Beyond-the-Wall to his dragon.

Still, Davos watched as the castle rippled. Many celebrated the news that Castle Black had fallen,
but he could see others simmering. From the tower windows, he glimpsed quiet arguments in odd corners of the courtyard.

Rattleshirt started spending more and more time in the maester’s rookery, demanding that the maester read him letter after letter. He had never seen a man as terrified or as harassed as Maester Harmune.

Davos would often linger by the doorway, and one day he heard frenzied voices from the rookery. He heard the maester being sharply dismissed and skittering out the room, while Rattleshirt and some others retreated to the upper levels. Something was happening. Davos took a deep breath, but decided to take his chances and crept forward to eavesdrop.

“–destroy us, you know he will,” a man hissed. “We’ve got to do something now, before it’s too late.”

There was no response, only an exasperated sigh. The Lord of Bones was keeping quiet.

“He’s a much of threat to us than anyone,” another angry voice growled. “Have you seen the bloody courtyard – they’re bowing to him. Bowing.”

“I got eyes,” Rattleshirt said. “I seen it.”

Four men in the room. They were pacing at the top of the tower, in between the squawking bird cages. Davos crept quietly along the corridor, looking over the battlements and overfilled castle.

“We’re already south of the Wall,” a man grumbled. Davos recognised him as a raider, Ned Bearclaw, a bloated, powerful man with squinty eyes. “We don’t need him anymore.”

“Aye,” another agreed. “And we’ve got support. The Walrus Men are with us. So is Baldr Boarhunter, Larrs Stonebrock, and Erikkson of the West River. Varamyr will support us too, you know he will. Gerrick Kingsblood, Aki Twentysons and Broqq Big-Chin will likely be on our side as well. That’s at least a thousand men right there.”

“What of the Lord of Seals? Huh, the Admiral of Seals now, I mean.”

“If we sell it right, he’ll join with us,” Ned Bearclaw said firmly. “He’s got the boats, that’s important. You’ve got the gate, that’s all we need.”

“We could easily be pushing two thousand supporters,” another wildling hissed. “Think about it.”

“Oh, I am.” That was the Lord of Bone’s quiet voice. Davos crept forward, towards the stairs. “I’m thinking. And what happens to Snow?”

“Crows should be shot out the sky,” said Ned Bearclaw. “Next time he flies into Eastwatch, we’ll have some good men with arrows waiting for him.”

“And the dragon?”

“Let Varamyr take it. A group of skinchangers working together can overpower any beast. As soon as Snow’s dead and his dragon’s collared, any support he has is going to disappear.”

“Hmm.”

Davos’ heart was in his mouth. Rattleshirt said something he couldn’t quite catch, so slowly he crept forward a bit further.
“He’s making you serve, man!” Ned Bearclaw snapped. “He’s making us all serve. Telling us what we can and cannot do – he’s going to destroy the free folk as sure as anything. Have you seen the courtyard? Are you really happy watching them bow to him?”

“No,” said Rattleshirt. Davos was close enough to see the outline of his shadow scratching his chin. “I’m not happy.”

Ned Bearclaw sighed a breath of relief. “Then we can do this,” he insisted. “All of Snow’s biggest supporters have either been sent away or are still in Hardhome. We kill the bastard, we force any coming through the gate to swallow it or stay north. One gate is all we need.”

“Aye,” Rattleshirt agreed. “We can do this.”

A coup, Davos realised in horror. They’re discussing a coup.

He listened for as long as he dared. They talked about who they needed to recruit, how to deal with the devotees, how to they could hold Eastwatch. Davos crept by the stairway, before the fear caught up to him. If they see me they’ll kill me on the spot.

He very quickly and quietly left the rookery, taking care not to close the door behind him. A safe distance away, Davos stopped to take deep, calming breaths. A coup. They are going to kill King Snow.

He hesitated. He could have went and warned someone, anyone. Any of the true believers would do. Instead, he didn’t. Davos returned to his quarters and retired for the night.

If the king dies, the host will surely fall apart. It will be bloody, and savage, but the wildling army will collapse under itself and the threat to the realm will disintegrate. I’m not likely to survive, but I won’t stop it.

The next morning, Davos awoke to find the whole castle buzzing with news about the men that Rattleshirt had executed. The Lord of Bones had given the order, and the bodies of Ned Bearclaw, Baldr Boarhunter, Larrs Stonebrock, Eriksson of the West River and half a dozen others were swinging over the gates of Eastwatch.

---

**Samwell**

The siege of Castle Black didn’t last long. The sworn brothers saw the wildlings coming, they simply didn’t stand a chance to stop them. It was less a battle and more an argument.

They all saw Bowen Marsh and Ser Alliser Thorne screaming at each other in the middle of the courtyard. The tensions were so high that every man seemed crazed. Alliser wanted to stand siege in the castle, Bowen argued to run.

Sam felt the terror in his bones. Edd, Hake and Pyp both struggled as they hoisted a wooden table to barricade the doorway. They had been given orders to reinforce the towers, but Sam didn’t know why they bothered.

“We should be running,” Pyp hissed, his voice thick with fear.

“Run where exactly?” Hake muttered, wincing with his wounded chest. Hake had broken two ribs trying to fight the wights. Even over a fortnight later, the wounds from that night remained.
“Shadow Tower. Anywhere. Anywhere that is not here.”

“There are no horses left,” Sam said.

“We can still run.” Pyp was shaking. Lots of people were trembling.

“Run,” Hake repeated. “If we run, we have to run through a storm, on foot, past wildlings with horses.”

“And if we stay we get crushed and slaughtered.” Pyp gulped. “I was talking to Garth Greyfeather. He said that the wildlings have a dragon. He said those from Eastwatch saw it. Is that true?”

Sam paused, listening intently. “I don’t know,” Hake admitted.

Over a fortnight ago, no one would have believed stories of dragons. But then they had faced an invasion of wights, and now nobody in the castle was willing to disbelieve it.

Through the gaps in the crudely barricaded shutters, Sam could see the fires of the wildlings sitting right outside Castle Black. They were camped across the road. Not quite enough of them that they were willing to attack, it seemed, but enough that no one liked the castle’s odds when it came to battle.

There were four hundred of them already, the ones who came first on horseback and established a perimeter around Castle Black. There had been brief scuffles, nothing major, but they were choking the Night’s Watch. Ser Alliser had been readying a sortie to clear them out, when the patrols alerted the brothers to more marching west from Eastwatch.

Two thousand more wildlings coming along at the base of the Wall, and another two hundred moving atop of it. They were moving fast, only two days away.

Very soon, there would be two and half thousand wildlings against three hundred sworn brothers, with no walls to hide behind. Those weren’t even slightly survivable odds.

And yet what chance do we have? Sam thought.

Castle Black was ruined. When Sam first returned, over a week ago, it had been in shambles. Coldhands had dropped him off at a secret passageway through a white weirwood door leading under the Wall, into the Nightfort. By the time Sam returned to Castle Black, he found a garrison left devastated.

Sam’s return had caused some stirs. Everyone had expected that he had died. Sam had met up with a Wall patrol coming to recover the castle, and nobody was sure what exactly happened. When pressed, Sam had muttered something about escaping and running away.

There had been questions on how exactly he got away and back through the Wall, but fortunately everyone has been too distracted to really pressure him on them. What was I supposed to tell them, the truth? I had dream where I met a man in a tree?

In the middle of the courtyard, the gatehouse was wrecked. They had collapsed and blockaded the gate and tried to seal the tunnel with stone and ice after that night. No more rangings north of the Wall from Castle Black.

Seventy men died that night when the Other came through. Most of the survivors had been the ones barricading themselves in the towers, away from the fighting. The sworn brothers managed to kill the wights, eventually, but then everyone who had been trying to retake the tunnel had been
slaughtered when the Other itself came through gate.

Donal Noye had been in charge of that force. According to the garbled witness accounts, Donal had even managed to land a blow on the creature before it skewered him. Something described as ‘ice white and burned black’ limped away south into the forest.

After that, the only way to describe the situation was pure panic.

“What happened here?” Bowen Marsh had screamed, face red, when the recovery force from Eastwatch arrived. “How did the wildlings got through? How many were there?”

“Just the one,” Sam stammered. “One white walker.”

“Don't be a fool, man.”

“It was an Other,” Sam tried to protest. “It cut through our men and it's out there! We've got to go after it, hunt it down now!”

Bowen Marsh’s face flushed, shook his head. “We have too few men, we cannot waste them traipsing through the forest!”

“But it's out there!”

“And how do you know?” Bowen cried. “By your own account you were on the other side of the Wall at the time!”

There were a few corroborating witnesses, but most of those that had laid eyes on the Other had died. Ser Alliser Thorne survived, albeit missing his right eye, but he had been fighting the wights in the Flints Barracks when the white walker broke through the courtyard.

Bowen Marsh and the others from Eastwatch stubbornly refused to believe the story of the white walker, even despite Sam’s protests and the evidence. They’re scared, Sam remembered thinking. If they let themselves believe that an Other was out there, they’d break down in fear.

Sam didn’t know what to do. Bowen took command and very quickly ordered the tunnel to be sealed and barricaded, as if that would make it all better. The castle became a simmering pot of fear and confusion. Everyone was panicked, shaken, and nobody knew what to do.

I know what to do, Sam thought. I just don't know how to do it. And nobody will listen to me in any case.

Castle Black’s numbers increased to two hundred after patrols as well as reinforcements of Eastwatch and Shadow Tower men. There were even those who started to doubt that there had been wights there at all, once the bodies had been burned. Those who hadn’t been present.

Sam’s hands were trembling constantly. He had been treated like he was insane, or even a conspirator. He tried to do his duty. He tried to warn them, but no one listened.

Sam had also tried searching the library and vaults for any mention of a spell used to build the Wall, but found nothing.

Maester Aemon survived – the wights had targeted mainly fighting men, and the maester had been locked in his quarters – but the maester also knew nothing of any record of a spell from the children of the forest. Aemon questioned Sam about the details of his escape harder than anyone else. The maester was the only one who seemed to be really suspicious of Sam’s story, while the
rest had dismissed him.

But then wildlings arrived. A hundred sworn brothers fleeing from Eastwatch came first, followed by reports of wildlings on the Wall and south of it. Eastwatch-by-the-Sea had fallen. Stories of massive hordes of wildlings, and giant dragons.

Sam had never known this type of panic before.

*What am I going to do? The greenseer gave me a duty and I am failing.*

“Answer me, Edd,” Sam whispered, shuffling to one side. “What are our chances here?”

Eddison looked at him with a dark frown. “For what?”

“If we abandon the castle and run? How far will we get?”

“Maybe to Shadow Tower. We could rally with Denys Mallister.”

“That's over a hundred leagues, across mountains and there's a storm brewing.”

“I didn’t say we'd *all* make it,” Edd admitted with a grimace.

“And if we stand and fight? Barricade up and try to hold the castle?”

“Then maybe we'd last until reinforcements from northern lords arrive.”

“How likely is that to happen?”

“Not very likely at all,” Edd admitted. “Yet if we do nothing they'll kill us.”

“But if we fight or try to run then they'll also kill us,” Sam said shaking his head. “They will kill us no matter what.”

“Yes. So isn't this a bitch of a choice?”

There was an emergency meeting in the Shield Hall that night. Bowen Marsh’s plan won out, Thorne had too little support to fight. It was agreed that half the men would run to Shadow Tower, the other half would scatter south and flee to the nearest holdfasts. The Night’s Watch would have to scatter and try to rally later if they wanted to survive. Orders were given to raze the castle, to spoil the food, to destroy the weapons – to burn the castle behind them before letting the wildlings take it.

The air was grim, terrified. Sam suspected that half the men there would have deserted if they thought they could get by the wildlings at the front. Even Bowen Marsh, the man in command, looked like he was barely holding together.

Sam was ordered to go back to the rookery and collect any tomes, books or messages of the utmost importance. All other books and parchment would be burnt. Scorched earth left behind them. Sam tried to protest, but nobody listened.

He felt hollow. Maester Aemon wheezed by the fireplace, quietly sorting through his herbs and medicines. Nobody said it, but the maester would certainly die trying to flee at night.

“Are you happy with this plan, maester?” Sam croaked.

“It is not my place to be happy with it or not,” Maester Aemon replied. “The decision has already
been made. I am old maester; I simply serve.”

It’s wrong, Sam thought. He remembered what the greenseer said. The strength of the barrier relies on the sworn brothers on the Wall. *If they – if we – die or abandon our post, the barrier weakens.*

*But what can I do? Stop them from running and stop them dying? How?*

They would dismiss it as a ludicrous dream if he told them about the greenseer. Perhaps it was. *I'm useless.*

“T’m a craven,” Sam said out loud.

The maester looked at him. “Yes,” he agreed. “You are.”

He scratched his chin thoughtfully. “I once knew another man who was a craven too,” Aemon continued slowly. “Everyone else knew him as a great warrior, though. I always wondered how a man so cowardly could survive so many battles and so much deceit. It was only later as I got older and wiser that I realised that his cowardice kept him and everyone around him alive.”

Sam looked at the maester, unsure how to reply to that. “Brave men die hard but die fast, Samwell,” Aemon said, levering to his feet with cracking knees. “But the craven shall outlive us all. Whatever you are going to do, do it because you are a craven.”

Sam stared at the fire. “Now, excuse me,” Aemon sighed. “I feel like I should retire early for the night. Tomorrow will likely be a busy day.”

Sam sat for a long time, thinking.

From the very first rays of morning onwards, the castle was hectic. They would light the fires and flee together come dusk. Thorne would lead a group of fighting men to keep the wildlings back, while all others fled from different directions. The idea was that the wildlings might not be able to catch them all.

Sam stopped and stared, watching the men run like ants. Sam saw Eddison bustling backwards and forth, moving kindling through the keep. “The prisoners,” Thorne announced at dinner. “We’re going to take the prisoners with us during the sortie. We’ll put swords at their backs and we’ll use them as hostages to distract the wildlings.”

“We can’t let those prisoners escape justice,” Bowen warned.

“We won’t. We’ll kill them before we let the wildlings near them,” Thorne grunted. “But we should at least get some use out of them. Have a steward check on them, make sure they’re healthy enough to last one more night.”

That steward would be Edd. Sam watched the steward finish his other tasks, until eventually Edd headed downwards into the wormwalks. Sam followed him down to the vaults, and through the twisty mazes leading towards the ice cells.

The cells were cold, but that wasn’t the reason Sam's hands were trembling. He paused and picked up an unlit torch from its bracket and the wall, and clutched the heavy wood with both hands. His nervous feet skittered.

“Edd!” Sam shouted, wheezing. Edd walked fast. “Wait, hold on!”

“Sam?” Edd frowned. “What are you doing down here?”
He took a deep breath. “I'm really sorry about this,” Sam admitted.

With both hands, he slammed the torch downwards onto Edd’s head like a club. There was a dull thud.

“Bugger Sam!” Edd groaned in pain, clutching his head. “What the hells was that for?”

“Oh, I'm sorry!” Sam grimaced, stuttering. “I thought if I hit you over the head, you'd get knocked out, and, well, I need to steal your keys.”

Edd stared in admonishment and shock. “You need to steal my keys?”

“Yes. Really sorry.”

Sam hit him again. Harder this time.

“Oww!” Edd cried clutching his forehead. “Have you gone insane?”

He tried to lunge at Sam, but Edd was short and scrawny and Sam was still much bigger and heavier. Edd tried to yank the torch out of Sam’s grip, but Sam hit him again.

“Really sorry,” Sam repeated dumbly. He wasn’t quite sure what was happening anymore. *By the Seven, I am trembling in my boots.*

“ Bloody! You bloody–” Edd cursed. Sam raised the club once more. “Here, take my bloody keys just stop bloody hitting me!”

He dug out of his pocket and threw an iron ring of keys onto the ice. Sam blinked, and nodded. “Um, thank you,” he said, and then hesitated. “… And I need you lock yourself into one of those cells there?”

Edd’s jaw dropped. “Are you serious?”

Sam gulped, and nodded. “Yes. Go into that cell and shut the door.”

“Sam, you’re out of your mind.”

“Do it or I hit you over the head again.”

He looked at Sam incredulously.

“This really isn’t how I pictured this happening,” Sam admitted. Edd tried shouting for help. Sam was so lucky that with everything else happening, there were no men to be spared as guards on the cells.

Edd tried to wrestle the torch off him again. Somehow, Sam managed to overpower him and whack him once more. “Bugger it!” Edd howled.

“I don’t see another option here,” Sam said with another gulp. “I think I have to keep on hitting you until you get in that cell.”

He raised the torch threateningly. “Bloody, alright!” said Edd said. “Alright, I’m doing it, I’m going into the cell.”

Edd walked slowly. Sam had to force him through the door. “Why are you…?” He asked, baffled. “What are you trying to do here, Sam?”
“I’m trying to save your lives.” Sam slammed the door shut, and twisted the lock shut with a click.

Sam leant on the wall, and took a deep breath. He could hear Edd shouting and banging on the ice, but the cells were thick.

Maybe I didn't think that part through properly, Sam thought, taking deep breathes. His hands were shivering as we walked down the frozen corridor, by cell after cell.

When he saw the one that he needed, his courage almost failed him. Still, he unlocked the door and shambled in.

The cell was large, cold and empty. Sam saw two dark eyes staring at him from under a thick sheepskin cloak. The cell stunk of frozen shit and piss. Mance Rayder had been in here so long he wasn't even shivering from the cold anymore.

Sam stared. His mouth hung open.

“… The fat boy.” Mance croaked. His voice was so weak and raw. “Tarly, wasn't it? What are you doing here, Tarly?”

Five months. He's been in here five months.

They had been hard months. Mance’s arms were still chained to the ice, his wrists chafed bloody. His fingers had been broken and hadn’t set properly, leaving his hands looking twisted and mangled. His skin was frighteningly pale and his bones almost protruded through his skin. Like a skeleton that still had just bit of meat left.

They hadn't fed the prisoners much, Sam remembered. For a while after the attack, the sworn brothers had been too distracted to feed them at all.

The plan had always been to execute then when Mormont returned, but then the Lord Commander never came back at all so the prisoners had just lingered. Half the prisoners had died in their cells and the remaining ones were so weak. Sam hesitated. How is my plan to work if he is this frail?

“Excuse me, I'm unaccustomed to have guests,” Mance muttered dryly, rattling his manacles weakly. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Sam gulped. “I need your help.”

“Oh now this ought to be good.” Was there a ghost of a smile on his sunken face?

No choice. “A host of wildlings is camped outside Castle Black. They are waiting for reinforcements before they attack, but it’s coming soon.”

Mance’s eyes widened. “There are? Truly? How many?”

“There will be thousands shortly.”

Mance grinned. Sam had never seen a grin like that before. His teeth shone in the dark.

“Oh now that's beautiful. Now I get to die with a smile on my face,” he chortled. “I was ready to die months ago but you bastards had to keep me alive down here.”

“Maybe you don't have to die at all. Maybe none of us do.” Sam gulped. “The Night's Watch surrenders.”
“His head cocked. “They surrender?”

“Yes. They haven't realised it yet, but they surrender.” Sam looked at him with all the determination he could muster. “And you're king, aren't you? You could convince the wildlings outside to accept our surrender and leave everyone alive.”

“Maybe.” Mance pulled himself up straight. His bones creaked. His eyes were sharp now. “Who leads outside?”

“I don't know. I've seen men with bronze disk armour, painted faces and pierced brows.”

“Thenns.” Mance sighed. “Oh, now that's unlucky for you. Their Magnar, my neighbour, passed away a few months ago.”

“But you can deal with them, right?” Sam insisted. “Convince them to keep prisoners?”

“Possibly. But if the Watch tries to fight back then they'll get themselves killed.”

“So we won't give anyone a chance to fight back.” I'm a craven; I'll take the coward’s choice. “The only way that we might survive this is if we lose. We let the wildlings in with such an advantage that nobody even tries to fight back. They take us hostage instead, but everyone lives.”

Mance’s eyes narrowed. “And what's to stop them executing you later?”

“Hopefully, you,” said Sam. “These were your brothers once, you served for a long time. I have to believe that you don't want to see us dead either.”

“Hmmph. I'm not sure if you're a fool or not, Tarly.” Mance groaned in pain as he shifted position. “Alright, what's the plan?”

“I get you out of here, sneak you out of the Castle and over to their lines. You bring them terms, tell them the plan, and I'm going to light a fire in the main hall. During the distraction, the wildlings can swoop in and capture the castle.”

Mance shook his head. “Won't work; the sentries will still raise the alarm and there will be fighting. If you could get the free folk into the courtyard undetected, now that would be a better chance of losing the castle bloodlessly.”

Sam blinked. “What do you mean?”

“If you can distract the sentries enough to get a few dozen or so to one of the tower. They could make their way to Flint’s Barracks and hold position near the Grey Keep. The trick is to capture the sworn brothers in small groups rather than as one force.” Mance bit his lip. “Who has command in Castle Black?”

“Bowen Marsh.”

“Ha, now who really has command that men will listen to?”

“Ser Alliser Thorne.”

“Hmm… I know him. A hard man, aye, but he’s not the most creative thinker. We could use that.” Mance cast a worried look at the door. “How long do we have?”

“Probably not very long,” he admitted nervously.
“Very well, so listen to me closely, Tarly,” said Mance. He was still croaking, but his voice was hard. “Unlock these chains and help me to my feet. Then, go to the other cells and see how many prisoners are still alive and what state they’re in. After that, gather them together and we can see about coming up with a plan to lose a castle.”

Val

Castle Black wasn’t as large as she imagined. Somehow, she had pictured the castle being some mammoth structure as gigantic as the Wall itself. It wasn’t, but it was still the largest castle she had ever seen.

The walk through the courtyard seemed so strange, unreal. Val’s muscles were tense, walking between stone towers that seemed so foreign to her. She had never thought she would end up here, walking in the crow’s castle itself, except perhaps as a prisoner, or perhaps a head on a spike.

Above them, the white dragon circled the Wall.

The battle had been over by the time Val arrived with two thousand fighters. Castle Black fell quickly to the advance force by Sigorn and his Thenns alone. His instructions had been to wait for reinforcements and the dragon, but Sigorn had went ahead nevertheless.

“Val,” a voice called. She saw Sigorn waiting for her with his arms folded. Very few of the Thenns looked bloodied. “You’re late.”

“You went ahead,” she retorted, keeping her eyes cool. Next to her, a huge lumbering figure wailed, looking around the buildings in amazement. The giant kept close to Val constantly.

Sigorn’s eyes flickered. “You brought giant.”

“Meet Wun Wun,” Val said with a smirk. Wun Wun cried with the mention of his name. He didn’t know much of the Common Tongue, but he was learning.

The giant had travelled with her from Hardhome after the gates fell. Wun Wun was massive and very simple even by giant standards. He had been an outcast in the clan, but quite receptive when Val recruited him and brought him into camp. She made sure that he ate well and that nobody bothered him, and it helped a lot to have a friendly giant by her side when dealing with some of the giant clans. It also didn’t hurt to have a fourteen foot tall bodyguard.

Wun Wun growled as Sigorn stepped closer. Val raised her hand and touched his fur to calm him.

“He’s protective.”

Sigorn just grunted, yet he looked at her hesitantly. Sigorn wasn’t sure how to act around her. He’s a good man, Val thought. A bit simple and headstrong, but decent enough.

Val had slept with Sigorn a while ago, back when she needed to recruit his support for her host. She didn’t regret it, and he had been kind, but it didn’t become anything more than a few nights. Val had even been debating taking him for a time.

Still, despite his appearance the Magnar of Thenn had a soft heart; he had been looking a proper woman to hold and protect, while Val just wasn’t. Their ‘relationship’ had ended very quickly, but for some reason the man insisted on making things awkward afterwards.
“How was the battle?” Val asked.

“Quick,” he said sourly. He had been looking for a battle. She couldn’t see any bodies littering the courtyard.

“How many casualties?”

“Of ours, five,” he said. “Twenty of them.”

“Now that’s hardly a battle at all. So few?”

“One of the crows defected, opened for way for us and released the prisoners. We captured the castle quickly.”

“The prisoners,” she repeated. Her heart pounded slightly. “Mance? He lives?”

Sigorn just nodded. She took a deep breath. “And your father?”

He shook his head. Ah, no wonder he seems so bitter.

“I take you to Mance,” he offered, pointing towards the keep. “Others are securing prisoners. You have time to talk, before Snow calls us.”

She nodded. Mance, she thought with shock. Mance is alive. She had barely dared to hope.

Wun Wun wailed as she walked up the stairs to the keep. “It’s alright,” she reassured the giant. “You wait here, I won’t be long.”

The keep felt tense and quiet. Val saw some signs of fighting – half-made barricades, broken arrows littering the floor, a few blotches of blood – but it looked more like constant scuffles through the keep and corridors rather than any major fights. The stone corridors felt so confined that she tensed, but Sigorn pointed the way and she walked down into an old storeroom.

The first time she saw Mance again, he looked like a broken man. He was sitting on an old chair, and Val wasn’t so sure if he could walk. His bloodshot eyes widened as she saw her. Val had never seen him look so frail.

He’s been in a cell for over five months, she thought. Malnourished and broken.

“Val,” Mance croaked quietly. His voice was raw. “Dalla? How is Dalla, and…”

“Your son,” Val whispered, watching Mance’s eyes bulge. “He’s fine. So is Dalla.”

With that, Mance almost collapsed onto his chair. She saw tears in his eyes.

His fingers had been broken, and hadn’t quite set properly. His hands looked broken and malformed. Mance struggled to hold a cup as he drank a deep gulp of warmed tea.

The stone room was quiet and empty. Val opened the shutters, and paused to stare outside down at the courtyard. She could see more and more free folk milling through the keep. She watched as men dragged dead bodies out of the towers, and dumped them unceremoniously onto the fire. Twenty dead crows.

She wondered briefly how many of those corpses had been Jon’s friends.

“My wife,” Mance said after a pause. “Where is she?”
“Hardhome. Or perhaps moving towards Eastwatch by now.”

“Is she safe?”

“She’s with twenty thousand free folk. As well defended as they could be.” The gates at Eastwatch were wide open, and they were bringing as many through them as possible.”

“I see,” said Mance quietly. “So it’s true then? The Wall has truly fallen?”

“They’ll be opening the gates at Castle Black right now. The Shadow Tower still stands, but I doubt it will last any longer than Castle Black did. The Night’s Watch is broken. They could never stand against a dragon.”

Mance nodded, closing his eyes quietly.

“You saw it, haven’t you?” Val asked. “The dragon?”

“I saw it. I thought I was dreaming. I’m still not sure if I’m not.”

“Aye.” Complete disbelief, shock, horror and awe were all reasonable reactions to that sight. “It’s real, believe me.”

“Where did it come from?”

“Buried under ice, to hear the tales. Others say it fell from the moon, or burst from the ocean. I know a few claiming that it grew from a weirwood tree, a gift from the Old Gods – white bark given flesh.”

“And yet Jon Snow controls it?”

“King Jon Snow now.” Val nodded.

Mance smiled humourlessly. “… So I hear… I wonder if I will have to call him ‘Your Jon’, now?” He muttered, almost to himself. “I didn’t believe anyone could make the free folk kneel.”

“I didn’t believe in dragons.”

“True.”

There was a pause. “I remember Jon Snow,” Mance said. “I remember a young scared little boy coming into my tent, kneeling… he hadn’t really defected, you know? I suspect the Halfhand ordered him to infiltrate our camp. Qhorin probably ordered the boy to kill him too, the stubborn fool.”

“I always thought as much.”

“Oh, I was pretty certain. Jon agreed too quickly, he kept his words too vague and his hand didn’t go far from his sword. I’ve seen defectors before; Jon Snow was not one. He probably thought himself so cunning, telling the tale he thought I wanted to hear.”

“If you knew, then why didn’t you just kill him?”

Mance shrugged. “I was curious.”

“What?”
I wanted to see how long his vows would last. I knew he would probably return to the crows given a chance, but I figured he was no threat. I knew that girl Ygritte was warm on him, and perhaps if he had a chance to live among us…” Mance shrugged. “I wanted to see whether or not even a bastard lord of Winterfell could grow to like the taste of freedom.”

Val smiled softly. The room felt cold. She didn’t like stone rooms, they made her uncomfortable. “I saw Jon Snow again earlier,” he continued. “White hair, gaunt face… I didn’t even recognise him from the boy I once saw.”

“Aye,” Val agreed. “I didn’t either.”

“And he controls that dragon?” Mance said. “He actually commands it?”

“He’s a warg.”

“A warg with a dragon…” Mance shuddered, wincing slightly. Gods, he looked so starved and frail. “I’ve seen plenty wargs before,” Mance murmured. “Worked with them. Rode with them. Never trusted them. It goes both ways, you know? I’ve seen a man that skinchanged with a bear that ended up absolutely feral and living in a cave, or a man that couldn’t talk – only hoot – after warging with an owl for too long. The animal takes on traits of the human, but the human takes traits of the beast too. Men who start thinking more like animal than man… I shudder to think what a man shaped by a dragon could become…”

“What about the sort like Varamyr? The skinchangers that have multiple skins rather than just one?” She asked curiously. She knew that Jon Snow kept a direwolf and a shadowcat too.

“Oh, they are even worse. Controlling many bodies like that, living and dying in different forms – they forget what shape they are meant to be. Even on his best days, Varamyr was always half-insane.”

There was a long pause. Val didn’t know how to reply.

“How are you, good-brother?” Val said quietly. “My sister has been missing you dearly.”

“Not as much as I’ve missed her,” he muttered. “They locked me in a cell and forgot about me. Five months in that ice cell… I didn’t know if she still lived or not. I would have dreams about Dalla dead in the snow, or rising up with blue eyes. Dreams so vivid I wasn’t sure if…” He gulped. “I didn’t know what happened to her, and now you tell me that the Wall has fallen, and I have a son?” Val nodded. “I’ve been in a cell for five months,” Mance said. “Tell me everything.”

She did. Val told him about the fallout after the Frostfangs, the free folk gathering at Hardhome. Jon Snow and his dragon appearing, the battle against the Night’s Watch and the Others in the forest and against the king’s ships in the bay. Jon demanding fealty, and then taking Eastwatch with his dragon. Mance didn’t speak, he just listened intently.

“I see,” he said finally.

She hesitated. “There are many people wondering, Mance,” Val said carefully, “whether or not you’ll swear to him as well?”

“Why? Will King Snow take my head if I don’t?”

“I have no idea what King Snow will do,” she said honestly.

Could Snow do that? Probably could. Mance had been well-respected; Mance been a good leader
to the free folk for a long time. Still, Jon Snow had broken the Wall for them. Jon Snow had a
dragon. There were a large and increasing number of free folk worshipping King Snow and his
dragon as a god and prophet.

If Snow wanted Mance dead, he would be dead. A few people would grumble, sure, but not enough
to break King Snow’s reign.

Would he though? Val didn’t think Jon a cruel man, but she didn’t think that the current King-
Beyond-the-Wall would look kindly on the previous one.

Mance sighed, with a humourless laugh. “Oh, how things have changed.”

Val hesitated. “Tell me about the battle,” she said, changing the subject. “I heard you had a part.”

“Aye, a crow took me out of my cell. The most spineless man you’d ever seen, but he was smart
enough,” Mance explained. “There were enough strong prisoners to send someone over to the
Thenns, and we barricaded the doors to the barracks and locked the crows inside. It didn’t last
long, but it was enough of a distraction for the Magnar to…”

His voice trailed off as he heard footsteps outside. A free folk with a gruff, greying beard, clad in
chainmail and leather hauberk stepped into the room. Looks like they had been looting the crow’s
armour and weapons.

“Mance,” the wildling said with a nod. “Should have known you’re too stubborn a bastard to die.”

“Wulf,” Mance greeted with a sigh. “It’s been a long time, friend.”

“Aye. A good day. We’ve taken the Wall, just like you gathered us to do,” Wulf said with a rugged
smile. “Come. King Snow wants to see both of you.”

“King Snow?” Mance’s head cocked. Wulf was a seasoned warrior and raider – a true free folk.
*They have known each other for years*, Val recalled. “You kiss his arse as well?”

Wulf just shrugged. “If you had a dragon, I would have called you king too. Now come on.”

Mance’s jaw tightened. He struggled to stand. His legs were trembling, Val noted. He was a strong
man, but after five months of muscle deterioration, cold and untreated injuries his body was failing
him. “You can’t stand, Mance,” Val said. “Here, let me…”

“Bugger that,” Mance grimaced, gasping weakly as he clung to the chair with a pained wince.

“I could carry him if I have to,” Wulf said with a shrug, but Mance’s eyes flashed. There was no
way that Mance would let himself be carried. *Stupid male pride*, Val cursed. *Had Jon Snow done
this deliberately, just to shame him? Summoned Mance like a dog, just to parade him around as a
weak, broken man?*

In the end, Mance’s arm wrapped over Val’s shoulder and she had to hold him as they staggered
out of the room. The stairs proved difficult, and Wulf walked impatiently behind them with every
strained step.

It was night outside, but the campfires were burning and free folk were celebrating throughout the
castle. Snow drifted gently from the sky, and they trod through the crowds towards the oak and
iron door of the King’s Tower. *The King’s Tower*, Val thought. Of course Jon Snow would take
the King’s Tower as his quarters.
The King’s Tower was a hundred feet high, broad and circular. The stairs were nightmarish for Mance, he refused to stop even despite gasping and wincing in pain. The solar was a broad, stone room on the third floor, and it was full of people. There were four free folk guards standing outside, but they parted to let Mance past. Val could hear angry yelling from within.

“You fucking traitor bastard,” a man snarled angrily. “I should have gutted you when I had the chance.”

The room was on edge. Val saw Sigorn, Soren Shieldbreaker, Harle the Huntsman, Gerrick Kingsblood, Ygon Oldfather – every wildling leader and warrior crammed in the room, all tense with their hands on blades.

In the centre of the room sat half a dozen crows in black. None of them were armed, surrounded by angry free folk. Val could feel the tension with every step.

And there was King Snow, sitting behind the desk, staring at the crows with cold eyes. He wore his thick giant’s hide cloak, even despite the warm fire burning in the room. Now what is he thinking when he stares at the crows? Val wondered. Is he seeing enemies who would have him killed, or men who used to be his friends whom he betrayed?

The room hushed as Mance staggered through the doorway. Mance’s body was trembling, but his eyes were sharp. She heard the breath hiss as they stared upon the state of the man who was once their King-Beyond-the-Wall.

Still, the first person who spoke was one of the crows – a slim and sinewy aging man with grey whiskers and a bloody missing eye. The crow’s gaze darkened as he stared at Mance Rayder limping through the door. “Another one I should have killed,” the crow growled. “You proud of yourself, ‘King Snow’? You murder good men and let killers and traitors walk free?”

Val was half-surprised that nobody in the room killed him for that right there and then. She could see some free folk came close. “You forget your position, Ser Alliser,” Jon said coolly. “I’d advise you to restrain yourself.”

He paused, and then stood up. “Mance,” Jon said, with a respectful nod. “It’s good to see you again. Please, take my seat.”

The room shuffled slightly, but Jon didn’t seem to notice as he carried his chair away from the desk and placed it for Mance. Then he turned back to the crows. The one called Ser Alliser was almost fuming with rage.

“You happy, traitor?” Ser Alliser growled. “You bring savages into the realm? I’ll see you hung for the men you murdered.”

“You were the ones insisted on deaths, not me. I gave you every chance to surrender.”

“You were the ones insisted on deaths, not me. I gave you every chance to surrender.”

“Surrender to wildlings? I’ll fight you to the last, I swear it.”

“Let me kill this one for you,” Sigorn said suddenly, stepping forward, clutching his blades. “I’ll cut off his head and feed it to pigs.”

Alliser nearly jumped up, before three big men pulled him down. Ser Alliser had lost his right eye fairly recently, Val noticed. The ugly wound was still raw, as if it had been clawed out of his skull. He still bore wounds of battle, but he was defiant. Jon just shook his head.

“As bull-headed as always, Thorne,” Mance muttered, his voice croaky.
He was trembling. “Against traitors? Always.”

“That one should die,” a deep voice grumbled. Val saw a white-haired giant of a man looming at the far end of the room with angry eyes. His skin was paler, clumps of hair were missing, and his broad chest was gaunter, but there was still raw strength in his voice. Even after months of imprisonment, Tormund Giantsbane made an impressive sight. _Gods, how can Tormund even stand up straight?_ “That crow likes to torture his prisoners. Likes to hurt people, that one. I’d like to hurt him too.”

Sigorn’s eyes were vicious as he stared at Thorne. “Was this the man that tortured my father? Was this the man who left Styr, Magnar of Thenn, to die in a cell?”

_Ser Alliser is going to get himself torn apart, Val thought. Limb by limb._

“Aye. Your father died a wailing old man,” Ser Alliser growled. _As brave as he is stupid._ “I wish I had swung the axe myself. One less wildling.”

Sigorn roared in fury. He would have lunged if Jon Snow hadn’t have snapped, “Enough! Ser Alliser here is trying to provoke us. You will not let him succeed” His eyes glared. “Perhaps he will die, but not like this. Not tonight, or not in this room at least.”

“Why not give me a sword and try to kill me yourself, Snow?” Ser Alliser challenged. “One on one. Or are you not man enough to beat a one-eyed fighter?”

“The realm would come off worse if you did kill me, ser,” Jon lowered himself to glare into the crow’s eyes. “As bad as you think I am, it would be so much worse if I did die. I’m the only one who can control the dragon. Kill me, and Sonagon rampages wildly instead.”

That caused the room to pause slightly. Ser Alliser’s eye twitched. “Jon,” another crow said quietly. It was a fat, pudgy boy cower into the corner. The fat crow’s face was filled with fear rather than anger. “Please, Jon, don’t do this…”

Strangely, those words seemed to unnerve Jon more than any of Ser Alliser’s threats or taunts. Val looked at the fat boy curiously.

“I do not want to do anything,” Jon said, stepping backwards. “Mindless slaughter serves no purpose. Ser Alliser, you are here because you are the most seasoned ranger left in Castle Black.” He turned between the other crows. “Bowen Marsh, Lord Steward.” A round, red-faced man with a balding head. “Cotter Pyke, Commander of Eastwatch.” The broadstock captive they had brought with them from Eastwatch. “Othell Yarwyck, First Builder.” An old, white-bearded lantern man jawed with a stony face. “Maester Aemon, Maester of Castle Black.” An incredibly old, crooked man with a grey, blind gaze, but who still seemed strangely at ease. “And Sam Tarly. Steward.” The fat boy, he was the odd one out. Jon’s gaze flickered as he turned to him.

“You are here because you are some of the most respected men in the Watch,” he continued. “And you are here because together I wish to negotiate a truce.”

“A truce?” The crow, Bowen Marsh, squeaked.

“I have no wish to destroy the Night’s Watch.” His voice was firm. Some of the free folk shifted slightly. “I want the Night’s Watch help to defend against the real threat: the white walkers. Your rangers fought the dead in the forest. _They_ killed Lord Commander Mormont. They are the real threat, not us. And I propose a deal to work together to beat them.”

Nobody said a word. Jon kept on pacing the room. “The terms are simple. We agree to a ceasefire
between sworn brothers and free folk. The Night’s Watch continues to man the Wall, with the condition that any refugee is allowed free passage, so long as they keep the peace. The gates stay open.” Ser Alliser’s face twitched. “The free folk are allowed to settle in the Gift. In return, they will agree to aid and reinforce the Night’s Watch against the Others.”

“You’re talking about stealing the Wall,” Bowen Marsh said, aghast.

“I’m talking about coming to the best arrangement anyone is going to get. There are forty thousand free folk. Good men, strong men – well-motivated to fight against the Others. The Watch had less than a thousand and I don’t even know how many still live. You need more men to stop the Others, and we can offer you that.”

“The Others,” Ser Alliser spat. “You’re bargaining to fight against fairy tales?”

“You’ve seen the Others yourself, ser.”

“Oh, I’ve seen corpses move. I’ve seen corpses kill good men. That doesn’t mean I believe every load of horse crap around, though. For all I know, it could have been wildling sorcery that raised them. They could be working for you. I don’t know what the Others are, but I know the threat in front of me.”

“Then you are a fool,” said Jon. “I’ve seen the army of the dead. It is coming. Right now, this is just the beginning, their skirmish forces; they haven’t even started their main assault yet. The white walkers will build up strength, and they will not stop. Not unless we stand together to stop it.”

“It is treason,” said Bowen Marsh. “It is pure treason, to stand aside and let you…”

“I could take the Wall,” Jon said simply. “I don’t have to offer you this deal. I could quite easily just kill you and take it. I don’t want to, though; it would be a waste. The Wall needs every good man it can get. The living, rather than the dead.”

Ser Alliser won’t yield, Val thought. Too much pride. Bowen Marsh was a weaker sort, but she didn’t think he would concede either. He might be cowed, but he would always look for a chance to betray. The others though… the ones called Othell Yarwyck and Cotter Pyke were both frowning, thinking. The ancient man, Maester Aemon, hadn’t said a word, just listening intently.

“Let’s say I buy it,” Cotter Pyke said after a while, his jaw clenched. “Let’s say we sign a piece of paper or whatever. The wildling have been raiding, raping and pillaging the north for centuries. Hell, there’s even been peace before, but it’s never lasted. How do we know that they won’t just start pillaging and raiding all the more freely?”

Oh, now he’s a different sort. Raiding and stealing is our culture, true enough. All eyes were on Jon Snow.

“The wildlings can keep their culture,” Jon said. “But they will also keep the peace, I will ensure it. The stakes are too high, I will not tolerate anyone – on either side – who might threaten the real battle.”

His eyes gazed around the room, waiting for the objections. “You’d stop us free folk from taking vengeance against the kneelers?” a wildling growled. “After what they’ve done to us for centuries?”

“And after what you’ve done to them? Aye, I’d stop you, in the same I’d stop any who’d take vengeance against you.” He locked eyes with the man. “You swore fealty to me, Haldur Bullspear, and that means respecting my peace.”
You're taking a treacherous stance, Jon Snow, Val thought to herself, but stayed quiet. The free folk happily followed him when he brought them south, but to tell them that they couldn’t raid or take vengeance? Free folk wouldn’t like that.

“Do you see why any peace is doomed for failure?” Othell Yarwyck spoke up in a lumbering voice, shaking his great mane. “Others have walked down the same path. We’ve reached out to the wildlings in the past, they’ve even reached out to us. It always ends the same way; one side has to make concessions they don’t want to make, and bad blood rules.”

“Then we draw the line in the snow and we keep it,” said Jon. “The free folk get their own land, land gifted to them by the Night’s Watch. On free folk land, free folk culture rules.”

Ser Alliser snorted. “Don’t bother trying to wrap it up,” the knight sneered. “We all know that you’re going to take everything you want no matter what you say. There’s no deal here, not really. You won’t respect any terms we make, and no one else will either. The north will still raise banners to throw you out, whether you have the Night’s Watch’s ‘gift’ or not.”

“He has a point,” Cotter Pyke said with a grunt. “It seems to me that you’re negotiating with an axe in your hand while we’re in chains. That’s a hostage situation, not a negotiation.”

“If that’s what it takes for peace.” Jon seemed irritated, pacing the room. “We have either a chance for peace, or a certainty of war. Which one would you prefer?”

“I know which one is going to happen,” Ser Alliser scoffed. Brave man. Stupid, but brave.

Jon glared at him, eyes narrowing. He paused for a few seconds, staring around the room.

“Ser Alliser,” said Jon, loudly. “Do you agree to a ceasefire between Night’s Watch and free folk? Will you agree to do your duty, happily or not, to continue to man the Wall, while the free folk settle in Gift?”


“So did I, ser,” Jon replied, almost sadly. His hand went to his sword. “Very well. Fetch a chopping block, and take Ser Alliser down to the courtyard.”

Bowen’s Marsh’s face went pale. Ser Alliser bared his teeth and snarled. “You don’t have the spine, boy.”


Jon hesitated, but then nodded and stepped back. “Take his head, but make it quick.”

The Magnar of Thenn grinned toothily. Ser Alliser screamed, lunging at Jon. It took five men to restrain him. Ser Alliser didn’t go quietly – he went kicking and screaming to the last. The free folk had to beat him on the floor of the king’s solar, before dragging him physically out the door and down the steps. Sigorn was already clutching his swords.

The fat boy, Sam, cowered in the cower. Cotter Pyke averted his gaze. Othell Yarwyck stared at Jon. Jon’s hand was trembling slightly.

“Cotter Pyke,” said Jon, loudly, turning to the man. “Do you agree to a ceasefire between Night’s Watch and free folk? Will you agree to do your duty, happily or not, to continue to man the Wall, while the free folk settle in Gift?”
He snorted. “Do I have a choice?”

“There’s always a choice, ser.”

“If that’s how you want to play it, then fine.” Cotter nodded. “I’ll do my duty, I’ll protect my men. If bending the knee keeps more of my brothers alive, then I’ll bend.” He stared at Jon intently. “But when the bodies start stacking up, the villages start burning, and the woman start being stolen, I want you to look at your actions, Jon Snow, and I want you to really think, ‘Am I doing the right thing?’”

In the courtyard, there was a shrill scream, followed by a slice of a blade as Ser Alliser lost his head. It didn’t sound like a clean kill. The free folk cheered.

The ‘negotiation’ ended quickly after that. Jon forced a promise out of each of them to respect his law. It was a promise that was worth less than dirt, Val knew.

The fat boy, Sam, looked at Jon wide eyes as wide as saucers. “Jon,” Sam whispered, pale faced. “We need to talk…”

“Not now, Sam,” Jon snapped. His shoulders tense, as free folk escorted the crows out of the room.

“But…” Sam tried to protest, yet the free folk pushed him roughly out the room.

If they were lucky, the crows would be locked in some tower for the night. Otherwise, they would likely spend the night in the dungeons.

“Jon Snow…” Maester Aemon mused slowly, running the name over his lips. It was the first thing he had said. A raider went to pull the old man out, but he held up his hand and walked. His voice was quiet as he paused, limping towards the door with a crooked back. “Jon Snow… Tell me, Jon, were you perchance born under a red star?”

Jon blinked. *What sort of question is that?* Val wondered. “I have no idea how I was born, my lord.”

“I see,” the maester said without another word, hobbling out of the door.

Nobody left the room happy. Jon had ordered that the crows who agreed to the truce would remain unharmed, but it made Val wonder. The crows wanted to kill them, and the free folk wanted to kill the crows. That truce was little more than wind.

*Now how does King Snow expect this will end? Does he really think any sort of peace is possible?* Val wondered. *Or is he just afraid to kill men who were once his brothers?*

Tormund Giantsbane was the last one out of the door. “Har! Jon Snow! You have a member larger than my maul, boy!” He exclaimed, grasping Jon’s arm in a hearty handshake. “I thought you were gonner, but no! You were just out digging up a dragon to fly back!”

“Tormund,” Jon said wearily. “How are you, the ice cells…?”

“Oh aye, the crows captured me and tried to freeze my member off. But some things are too big to freeze, anyways,” Tormund grunted, yet there was a dark edge in his voice. The jape didn’t reach his eyes.

Jon hesitated. “Your daughter,” he said slowly. “Munda. She was captured at the same time.”
Tormund nodded, his jaw tight. “Aye. They took Munda to try and ransom her. Of course then, some crows must have gotten bored, because instead they snuck into her cell at night, raped her, and then slit her throat. Then they raped her again, I think. She was in the cell next to mine. I heard it all.” Oh. “Now, fair warning, boy, because you rescued me and everything, but if I see those crows who killed my little girl, I will be butchering the bastards, no questions asked. Understood?”

Jon blinked. Val remembered Munda. She had been a sweet girl; she used to play the harp beautifully around the campfire at night. Jon looked lost for words. “Tormund, I’m…”

The broad man just waved his hand. “Forget it. I get it; these crows were once your brothers, and I’m sure there’s some good ones among them. You don’t want to kill the lot of them, and you did save me – so I can forgive. Mostly.” He paused. “But not the crows who hurt my Munda. Those scunners will die brutally, alright?”

Jon just gave a stunned nod. Tormund flashed him a toothy smile. “Har! Jon Snow – King in the North and dragon rider! Never would have guessed it!” Tormund laughed, limping out of the room.

The other free folk trickled out, but Jon motioned towards Val and Mance to stay. It sounded like there would be a party in the courtyard. A great bonfire, while they raided the crow’s supplies and slept in their beds.

When everyone left, the room went quiet. Jon looked towards Mance, eyes turning wary. He looked tired.

“Jon Snow,” Mance said finally. “I didn’t think I would ever be in this room again. Not like this. How many sworn brothers still live?”

“Not many,” Jon admitted. “Mormont, Smallwood, Locke, Buckwell, Hobb, Dywen, Black Jack, Noye… They all died in one battle or another.”

“I see. I’ve known some of those men half my life. I was born in the Watch, my brothers were the only family I had,” Mance said sadly.

“And then they captured and tortured you.”

“They were doing their job. I knew the stakes when I defected. It was the price I paid for my red cloak.”

“Tell me something,” Jon said, sounding genuinely curious. “Let’s say your plan worked perfectly. You marched down the Frostfangs with the Horn of Winter. You forced the Watch to open the gates and you captured Castle Black. What would you have done to the sworn brothers?”

“Honestly? I don’t know,” Mance admitted. “I didn’t want to, but I suspected that I would have to kill them all. All who wouldn’t turn, in any case. I would have held a bonfire in the grounds and burnt every black cloak I could find. More likely or not the men would have died wearing them.”

Jon grimaced. “I don’t want to do that.”

“You had the choice between saving either – what? – thirty thousand men, women and children behind the Wall, or five hundred men on the Wall. You chose to save the thirty thousand. Like I did.” Mance nodded. “I wasn’t there to see it, but you have my lifelong thanks for that.”

“Maybe. But they’re not safe yet.”

“Nobody is.”
Jon paced across the room, quietly closing the door. “Some of the free folk will try to demand to
cut the crows. They’ll demand their right to raid.”

“They’re free folk. They don’t like anyone telling them what they can or can’t do.”

“If they want to survive, they’ll have to learn,” said Jon. “No needless deaths.”

“There’s always a need for some people.”

“And what about you?” Jon pressed. “Are you going to let them go wild, or will you help keep
them in line?”

He didn’t reply. Jon folded his arms. “I could use your help keeping control. You have more
influence than anyone.”

Mance snorted, staring at his crooked hands. “Ah,” Mance said after a long pause. “Is this the part
where you threaten the lives of my wife and son unless I support your claim?”

Jon shook his head. “No, I promised Val that I would keep Dalla and her babe safe. They have
nothing to fear from me, in any circumstance.”

Val allowed herself a soft smile. There were times when Jon Snow talked and she found herself
believing him. Mance didn’t twitch. “And if I decide to retake my title of ‘King-Beyond-the-
Wall’?”

“Then you're welcome to try,” Jon said with a humourless smile.

“You know, I spent eight years fighting to unite the clans into a single host,” said Mance. “Eight
years. Hardest eight years of my life. You did it in five months.”

“Yes,” Jon agreed.

Mance just scoffed under his breath, taking a deep breath. “And what would you have me do?”

“Actually, I was planning on giving you command of Castle Black.”

Mance blinked. “You’d make me Lord Commander?”

“Not Lord Commander, no. The brothers need to elect their own Lord Commander, as it should be.
But you’d be in command.” Jon nodded. “You’re the only man who knows the Night’s Watch and
the Wall as well as he knows the free folk. The Others attacked once, they could easily attack
again. They were testing the Wall, trying to break through. Sooner or later they’ll find a way. I
need someone to get the Wall into a better state, as quickly as possible.”

“And yourself?”

“I suspect I’m going to be busy. Ser Alliser was right; the northern lords won’t accept wildlings
through the Wall. I need to convince them otherwise.”

Mance scratched his chin. “And then what?”

“We evacuate the lands north. All of it. There will be no more living for the Others to kill, and then
they run out of corpses for the army. We stunt the growth of wights, and we force them to attack
the Wall. And when they do, they will find thousands of free folk and sworn brothers protecting
the Wall to repel them.”
“Standing side by side?” Mance said with doubt.

“Eventually.” Jon nodded. “We convince the Night’s Watch that their vows command them to fight white walkers, not the free folk. We make free folk a part of the realm, not a threat to it.”

“And afterwards we’ll all ride off together into the sunset, to live long lives in the land of eternal summer, I suppose?” He snorted.

Jon just smiled. “Why not?”

Mance thought about it for a long time. “I will sleep on it,” he said. “And I suggest that you sleep with your doors locked and really, really trustworthy guards outside.”

“I think I will,” Jon agreed, heading towards the door. “But these quarters are yours, my lord.”

“Excuse me?”

“You can take the King’s Tower for yourself,” Jon offered. “I wouldn’t subject you to climbing those stairs again, and I doubt I could sleep soundly on a bed that soft in any case. I’ve grown accustomed to sleeping next to Sonagon – I’ll be staying in Hardin’s Tower.”

Hardin’s Tower was a stout tower, but still one of the biggest and with a broken battlement spilling stone into yard below. The tower had a lean, but it would still be a good place for a dragon to roost on the top. Jon intended to sleep right underneath the watchful gaze of the dragon itself. *Clever boy.*

Jon nodded and bade Mance goodnight. Tomorrow, he said, they would see evacuating the tunnel, about resuming patrols, as well as organising the march to the Shadow Tower. Val said goodnight the same, leaving Mance bemused in the suite built for a king.

“May I walk you to your quarters, my lady?” Jon offered, like a respectable southern lord. Val could have snorted. *He does that deliberately,* she thought. *He calls commoners and free folk ‘my lord’, ‘ser’, or ‘lady’, just to catch them off-guard.* He even said it so earnestly that sometimes she believed it.

Val scoffed, stepping down the stairs. “You may, King Snow.”

“Many of the men will have to camp in the courtyard until the castle is secure. There will be space for you in either the Silent Tower or the Guard Tower. I could arrange for some guards for you, if you wish.”

“Don’t bother,” said Val. “I sleep with a dagger under my pillow – as any ‘respectable lady’ should.”

“As you wish,” he said with a nod, holding the door open for her into the courtyard. She could have rolled her eyes.

“So why are you walking with me… ahem… ‘Your Grace’?” She said, taunting. “Do I need my dagger?”

“I just wanted a word. You are popular with the free folk. They respect you.”

She shrugged. “I’m no raider.”

“No, but you’re popular among smallfolk – farmers, fishermen, the refugees. After the Frostfangs,
many would have kept to the fighters, warriors and spearwives, but you treat them all equally.”

“So I did. I stuck to Mance’s rules. What of it?”

They passed the bonfire in the courtyard. Val noted how Jon averted his eyes from the bodies littering the snow.

“What if I were planning on assigning titles, rank and land to free folk that have proven themselves?”

“Then I would say you mistake us, Snow. It’s you southrons that need fancy names, not free folk,” she said curtly.

He just nodded. “As you wish, my lady.”

They approached the Silent Tower, an old, dusty structure swarmed by rats, but it would be warm enough inside. Many of the spearwives had already made their camp. She would have to see about finding a place for Wun Wun and the others who had come with her, but right now she just want to reserve her bed for the night. Likely it would be a patch of floor somewhere until she could scrounge a bunk. Val simply nodded at the doorway.

“Good night, King Snow,” she said, before turning and walking away.

Only when she was inside did she allow herself a small smile.

End of Part 1
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

The Boltons at Winterfell, and the things worse than the Boltons...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 2 - The North

The Mad Hound

“Please, m’lord…” the old man wept. “Mercy… please…”

The knife paused. There was a moment of quiet.

“Say that again,” Ramsay said.

The man’s eyes flickered. “Go on,” Ramsay insisted. “Say it again.”

“Mercy,” he gasped. “Have mercy… I beg you…”

Ramsay scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Now why would you say that?” He asked, genuinely curious. “Do you really think that I would go this far, and then stop just because you ask for mercy? Has that ever worked before?”

The man let loose a whimpering cry as Ramsay cut off another finger. He never asked for mercy again.

_Honestly, ‘mercy’ – the cheek of it!_

The old man was still alive when Ramsay left him. He was only a poacher caught sneaking onto their lands. Ramsay’s father would likely just have had the man killed and be done with it. Still, truth be told, Ramsay didn’t actually like killing people.

In fact, Ramsay went to great lengths to avoid killing people. He much preferred to keep them alive. Every time somebody died, Ramsay felt like he failed somehow.

Dead people were just… _there_. Stiff and boring, pretty much useless to everyone. A living person, though, a living person was full of so many possibilities.

Ramsay took a deep breath, cleaning the blood off his hands as he walked out into the courtyard of Winterfell. His father disliked Ramsay’s sports, but Lord Bolton was out at the moment, gone to meet Lady Cerwyn. Ramsay had never believed in keeping it quiet like his father did – people needed to see it. The needed to see the bodies, the missing limbs, the scars, and they needed to know, yes, this could happen to you too. Otherwise what’s the point?
However, Lord Bolton’s tactics had their merits too. Sometimes it was the quiet, unspoken, uncertain fear that bound men more tightly. There was a fine balance between the insidiousness of the fear and the obviousness of the threats. It was a skill that Ramsay was still trying to learn, to be honest, but he was a dedicated student.

Still, part of Ramsay suspected that it was a subject in which he and his father would always clash heads over. After all, Roose Bolton preferred to rule through intimidation, while Ramsay would rule through hate.

Around him, there was the banging of hammers and shouts as men struggled to patch up the Great Hall. Even now, weeks after arriving, they were struggling to rebuild Winterfell after the sack. *The amount of time it takes to rebuild the castle, I almost regret burning it down. Almost.*

His marriage to ‘Arya Stark’ would be a joyous affair. Almost as joyous as their wedding night would be. The lords and ladies of the north would have to attend; they were expecting ten thousand in attendance, before marching off to throw out the last remnants of the ironborn invasion at Deepwood Motte. Torrhen’s Square had already fallen to the Boltons weeks ago, that had been a bit of delay from the wedding, but it meant that Ramsay’s wedding would be the start of a new, unified north.

*After that, I will march on Bear Island, and those stinking, treacherous Mormonts, Ramsay decided. Or maybe the bloated, weak Manderlys. Or maybe the Umbers. The mountain clans have been acting far too defiant for my liking too.*

“My lord,” a quiet voice muttered behind. Ramsay turned, to see Maester Tybald approaching him, head bowed respectfully. “A raven has just arrived with notice. Your lord father is half a day’s ride away.”

Ramsay grinned. The Lord Bolton was finally coming back. The sooner he arrived, the sooner the lords of the north gathered, the sooner he could finally be married.

“Then let’s greet him!” Ramsay said cheerfully. “Form up the men in the courtyard! Let us welcome Lord Bolton and Lady Cerwyn properly!”

The maester nodded, pausing uncertainly. “And, um…” Tybald hesitated. “There’s an incident in the kitchen with your… retainer.”

“Oh no. What did poor Reek do this time?”

The old man stumbled over his words. Ramsay heard a shout from the kitchens. He saw his squire, Little Walder Frey, rushing for him. “Never mind,” Ramsay said with a sigh. “I’ll go see myself.”

Maester Tybald bowed, not quite meeting his eyes. The maester had only recently arrived with Lord Karstark, he recalled. Ramsay didn’t mind – he quite liked maesters in general, actually. It had been a maester at the Dreadfort who had taught him to read and write, two years ago when Ramsay was first welcomed into his father’s household. The maesters had always fascinated him.

There was a time when Ramsay himself thought he might want to be a maester, if he had more patience. He had heard that maesters were men of learning. Ramsay was a man of learning too, in his own way. Ramsay was a student of humanity – he had cut open bodies to learn what was inside of them, he had cut men apart to see the animal inside. He was constantly pushing the limits, learning more and more about pain, fear and response.

Ramsay had very diligently learned how to read and write, and more often he had even mused
about logging some of the many things he had learned during his research. Ramsay suspected the tome would be ground-breaking.

*After all, I’m a highborn lord now. I am the Lord of Hornwood and soon-to-be heir of Winterfell, son of the Warden of the North,* he thought proudly. *Writing books about my exploits is what a respectable lord would do.*

If Ramsay ever did find the time to write that manuscript, he suspected that Reek would have a chapter all to himself. Reek was Ramsay’s finest work.

Ramsay found his creature huddled into the kitchen corner, between a shouting match of Tallhart men. Little Walder brought Ramsay straight to him.

“My name is Reek, Reek…” the creature muttered, sobbing. “It rhymes with freak…”

“Turncoat!” a man snapped, clutching an iron baton as he tried to run at Reek. “Fuckin’ turncoat Theon–”

“Why, you’re confused, my good man,” Ramsay said suddenly, stepping into the room. “I see no one called Theon. This is Reek.”

The sound of his voice made everyone go quiet. They all stopped still. Ramsay grinned brightly.

“Well, what seems to be the problem here?” Ramsay said happily, looking at the men. “I do hope there’s no disagreement.”

He turned to face the man at the front. A big broad northman – a man-at-arms bearing the Tallhart crest. The man hesitated, eyes flickering. *Gods, I love that expression.* “I was at Torrhen Square,” the man said slowly. “When the ironborn attacked. I lost good friends to the reavers, and then I find that you’ve got the bloody Prince of Pyke walking–”

“Prince of Pyke?” Ramsay laughed. “Reek is no prince. To be a prince, you’d have to be a man.” He paused, staring at Reek’s wide eyes with a small smile. Ramsay was proud of his work. He wanted to show it off. “Take off your breeches, Reek. And your tunic too.”

Reek gulped, his hands trembling. He was staring at the floor fixedly. Ramsay patted him on the shoulder almost kindly. Almost. “Come on now, Reek,” Ramsay said. “Take them off. Take off all your clothes.”

Reek knew that voice. Reek had learnt what it meant when Ramsay became that cheerful.

The creature’s mutilated hands were trembling as he stripped off his filthy rags. Ramsay heard gasps as they saw stripped, raw skinless flesh on his chest, and then cauterised, ugly, severed flesh as he pulled down his pants. Whole strips of flesh were missing, like any fate had been cut off him.

The Tallhart man’s face paled. *Yes,* Ramsay thought with pride. *Bloody fine work.*

“Do you see?” said Ramsay. “Reek is no man. Reek is a *dog.* Go on, lick the floor, Reek. Lick the floor.”

There were tears down Reek’s eyes. The room was deathly quiet. All eyes were focused on the broken little prince. *How strange,* Ramsay mused. *I didn’t know he was still capable of crying.*

“Please…” Reek muttered, eyes averted. Naked, frail, broken, standing in front of two dozen eyes. Tears leaving streaks down his filthy cheeks. “Please…”
Ramsay smile froze. “Oh Reek,” he said sadly. “You know that we never say that word.”

In a smooth motion, Ramsay grabbed a black iron kettle from the kitchen counter and swung it forward. Reek screamed. The impact of solid metal colliding with him sent him to the floor.

And then the kettle spilled, and scalding water splashed out. The sound of Reek’s screams howled outwards as the steam hissed. Burning water all over his head and back, so hot the skin bubbled.

The sound Reek’s agonised screaming filled the room. Some men fled. Ramsay just laughed.

“Lick the floor, Reek. Lick it.”

He did. The Prince of Pyke licked the stones of the kitchen, even as steaming water burnt him. He heard the wails. Ramsay approached the Tallhart man slowly.

“Do you see?” Ramsay said. The man’s face was pale, frozen still. “He’s not Theon Greyjoy – he’s Reek.”

“Reek, Reek…” Ramsay’s creature wept through stammering breaths. “It rhymes with freak…”

The man didn’t move. So strange how some men screamed and others just froze. “What’s your name, man?”

He looked deathly pale. Ramsay knew the men in the room – over half of them were his Bastard’s Boys now. “Cley, milord,” the man gulped.

“Well, Cley,” Reek said graciously, slowly pulling a dagger out of his belt. “If you still want to punish Reek for what the ironborn did to your friends…” He handed the dagger to Cley. “…then please be my guest.”

The man-at-arms stared at the dagger with wide, fearful eyes. Reek was still whimpering as he licked the kitchen stones.

“No thank you, milord,” the man stammered after a long pause, handing the dagger back to him. His hands were trembling too. “I have no quarrel with Reek.”

“Then as you were,” Ramsay said, smiling, before motioning for two of his men – Yellow Dick and Sour Alyn – to drag Reek back to the kennels. The Tallhart men ran away very quickly.

*What a shame,* Ramsay thought quietly. Honestly, Ramsay would have probably had more respect for Cley if he did take the dagger to Reek. Maybe if he cut off an ear, an eye, or even a good old-fashioned rape. If he had done that, then Cley would have probably earned a place with his Bastard’s Boys, and the world always needed more hounds. Instead, Cley proved to be just another sheep.

Reek was still whimpering as he was dragged away. Ramsay walked with him. “You know, Reek,” Ramsay said, his voice chiding. All dogs needed to learn boundaries. “I’m not happy with how you questioned me there. I think there might be too much of the old you left in there.”

“Reek… reek….” he whimpered quietly, body trembling.

Ramsay mused over it. “Tell me, do you want to fuck a dog?”

Reek stared at him with broken, fearful wide eyes. “The old Reek used to fuck dogs,” Ramsay said. “And if you’re a dog, then you should fuck like a dog. Of course, you can’t fuck anything. Maybe
tonight I will let loose a big brute of a hound into your cage and let the dog fuck you. How would you like to be a dog’s bitch?”

Reek never replied. His mouth hung open, quivering. “Your name is Reek,” Ramsay said quietly, just before the men dragged him away. “It rhymes with shriek.”

*I need to catch any disobedience in the bud. Always make sure they know what they are.*

He would have to have a word with the Ben Bones, the kennelmaster, about suitable partners for Reek. It would be difficult to train the hound not attack him, but Ramsay quite liked the thought of the creature that used to be Theon Greyjoy being taken like a bitch. Definitely something to think about.

Ramsay really did care about his Reek. He spent a long time caring for him. In fact, there had been several people who had died as practice before Ramsay ever took the knife to Theon. Ramsay had refined his art painstakingly – choosing the perfect amount of pain to break him without ever risking killing him. The very last thing Ramsay ever wanted to do was kill Theon – not when the sight of him as Reek brought Ramsay so much pleasure.

When he had first seen Theon Greyjoy, Ramsay had been the one in chains and Theon had been the brief prince of Winterfell. Ramsay had wanted him from first sight.

After all, Theon had been *exactly* the type of lord that Ramsay just loved. He had been arrogant, highborn, all easy smiles and daddy issues. If there was a combination that Ramsay loved to break apart…

*He reminded me of my brother,* Ramsay thought with a soft sigh.

Oh yes, it was so very satisfying to look at his new Reek – it was a victory every time he laid eyes on him.

The thought made Ramsay think of his betrothed, ‘Arya Stark’, waiting for him in the castle. Ramsay was so, so tempted to go see her early, but he had other distractions. The act of sex could never be half as intimate as the act of torture.

Ramsay still remembered his first time. He had been twelve when his father sent Reek – the original Reek, that is – to him.

*That was the last time I ever begged for mercy,* he recalled. It had been a valuable lesson too. Beg for someone to stop and they never, ever would. Begging is the most useless exercise.

He spent the day preparing for his lord father’s arrival, grinning as the men snapped to attention around him. The bowed their heads before him, and they called him ‘lord’. The Lord of Winterfell. He had made sure that nobody dared to ever call him bastard, or Snow.

He stood in finery, in his own castle, staring out over his land.

*Do you see me now, Mother? Do you see your little bastard now?*

Mother had been a mean, spiteful bitch. All the while Ramsay had grown up, she had barely used his name. He couldn’t remember his Mother ever calling him anything other than ‘bastard’.

He knew the story. Mother had told it to him frequently, whenever she was drunk and angry. All through his childhood, she told him the story. The story of how his father had murdered her husband on her wedding day, and then raped her while her husband's corpse was still swinging.
How she had spent her wedding night being violated by the stranger that had murdered her one true love, and raped her with her husband’s blood on his hands. The miller’s daughter whose life had been destroyed only hours after she’d been wed.

All because Lord Bolton had grown bored while on his hunting trip.

If not for the payment that Roose Bolton gave her yearly for Ramsay’s upbringing, Ramsay had no doubt that his mother would have strangled him in his crib. Instead, she used the coin to drink herself angry and bitter, giving Ramsay little more than cruel words and vicious neglect.

_You fed me nothing but hatred my entire life_, Ramsay thought with a self-satisfied smile, _and so I learned how to live on it._

He had learned very quickly that he could hurt her too.

Ramsay had been a bulky boy growing quickly. When he was twelve, Mother went back to his lord father to request help raising him. In return, Roose Bolton sent Reek. Ramsay long suspected that it had been his father’s idea of a jape. Reek had certainly been no servant or steward.

Reek had been a big man. The man had stunk of some birth condition, with rotten teeth and watery eyes, with foul yellow skin. Ramsay still remembered the way Reek had forced him down to the ground, back when Ramsay had been small and weak…

Eventually, Ramsay grew to be grateful. It had been a valuable lesson of how the world worked. In his own way, Reek had done more to raise him than his mother ever had.

Later, Ramsay stopped being small and weak, and Reek stopped being able to force him to the ground. Ramsay did not share in Reek’s… base tendencies, but Ramsay certainly learned how to appreciate being the one in power. That was something he and Reek could bond over.

It was all about power, really. How to not be the one being pushed to the ground.

That was when Ramsay had met Domeric Bolton – his father’s trueborn son. The son that Ramsay would never be.

_Mother taught me about hatred, and Reek taught me about cruelty_, he reflected. _But, in his own way, Domeric helped shape me into the person I am more than any of them._ Domeric had been his friend. His first, and possibly only, real friend.

Ramsay still remembered the way Domeric had rode into his cottage, following up rumours concerning his wild half-brother. Domeric had been older – he had been handsome, charming, and quick to laugh. He had been dressed in samite and velvet and he rode a horse like a knight. Domeric showed Ramsay a world he had never even imagined.

He had been cheerful and charitable. They rode together into White Harbour, Domeric bought Ramsay new clothes, a new sword, and he slept in feather beds. Domeric would laugh, and make girls blush. They didn’t blush when Ramsay laughed.

Meeting Domeric had been a whole different experience, a look at a completely different world. The look at the life of a lordling.

Ramsay still remembered when Domeric had sat him down at a tavern, ordered the finest wine, causing the barmaid to curtsy and he winked as he flicked a gold stag at her.

“Ramsay!” Domeric had said cheerfully. “We must get you out of that dreary cottage more often!
Life like that isn’t good enough for my brother.”

“Half-brother.” Ramsay had blinked, struggling to respond. He had never been good at keeping up with the laughter and smiles. “I have no money, I am a…”

He hadn’t been able to say the word. *Bastard.*

Domeric had scratched his chin. “Well,” his half-brother had mused. “Do you really need coin? It seems only fair that you have a chance for happiness too. I have a proposition, if you’re interested.”

“What?”

“How would you like to kill our lord father?”

It turned out that had been the whole reason Domeric had sought Ramsay out in the first place. Domeric had wanted Ramsay to murder Roose Bolton for him.

It made sense, actually. Domeric had grown tired of waiting for his father to die, and tired of being the heir to the Dreadfort rather than the lord. Of course, Domeric couldn’t kill him – not easily, not without coming under suspicious and risk being branded a kinslayer.

Instead, Domeric must have figured, who would want to kill Roose Bolton more than his insane, savage bastard son, neglected from birth and born of rape?

Domeric had promised a life of luxury if Ramsay did the deed. He promised to raise Ramsay up when Domeric became lord, for them both to have a chance to escape from Lord Bolton’s grip. To stand side by side in the Dreadfort as brothers.

Domeric promised a lot of things. He even supplied the poison that Ramsay could use. Ramsay had seen the glint in his grey eyes. Domeric had thought him a fool, some pawn to be manipulated.

They sat opposite each other, and that was when Ramsay realised; if one brother could become a lord, then why couldn’t the other one?

They had been toasting to their partnership when Ramsay had slipped the poison into Domeric’s glass instead. Domeric Bolton had died with a look of surprise on his face, gasping at his chest.

Soon afterwards, Ramsay turned up at the Dreadfort. It appeared Roose Bolton was now missing a son and heir. Of course, Roose always knew that Ramsay had been responsible for his trueborn son’s death, but Ramsay kept the exact reason why to himself. It felt good to be able to smirk secretly each time Roose compared him to his trueborn ‘golden’ son Domeric, with no idea that son had been plotting his father’s death.

Domeric hadn’t been the first person Ramsay killed, but he was the first kill that actually meant something to Ramsay.

*I am my father’s son.*

Ramsay was waiting on the battlements, watching the host march through the wide gates of Winterfell. There was a flurry of snow sweeping through the yard. Four hundred more men from Cerwyn, with Bolton men at the front.

He was smiling as he walked up to greet his lord father. “My lord,” Ramsay cheered. Roose Bolton sat grim faced on his horse, clad in black ringmail and leathers with his spotted pink cloak over his shoulders. “Have you had a safe journey?”
Roose’s pale eyes danced over him, but he didn’t reply. Ramsay turned to Lady Cerwyn, a plump homely woman, with fearful eyes. Lord Rodrik Ryswell and Lady Barbrey Dustin were in the courtyard too, while the men filed through the gate.

“Welcome to Winterfell, my lady,” Ramsay said, bowing fractionally. “It’s such a pleasure to have you here for my wedding.”

Lady Cerwyn extended her hand, timid as a dear. Ramsay noticed her eyes flickering. I murdered your father, Ramsay recalled with a smile.

“Ramsay,” his father said coolly. “A word.”

Ramsay’s smile never flickered. His father’s man – Steelshanks – walked by his side as they headed towards the Great Keep.

“I saw your work on the kingsroad,” his father said. “Half a dozen lords and ladies had to ride past your work. Who were they?”

Ramsay’s eyes glinted. “I can’t recall. Which ones are you talking about?”

“Discretion, Ramsay. Is the concept lost on you?”

“But they should see! I’ve been keeping the north safe. Winterfell is to be my home, and my men guard proudly it against traitors and the like.”

“Were they traitors?”

Ramsay shrugged. “Probably.”

Before the Sack of Winterfell, six hundred Bolton men had cut their way through two thousand collected northmen under Rodrik Cassel – assembled to take back Winterfell from the ironborn under Theon Greyjoy.

It had hardly even been a battle. Ramsay’s men had been the most vicious killers that House Bolton had to offer, while Ser Rodrik’s host had been expecting friends.

Still, some of them had escaped. Some men managed to flee the battle, who could testify that it had been Bolton’s men, not ironborn, who had sacked Winterfell. Ramsay had worked diligently to ensure that such men, nor anybody they may have talked to, ever had a chance to cause problems for his family.

Ramsay was feeling very protective of his family, actually.

“We will discuss this later,” Roose said coolly. “Come, to the keep. We have more urgent matters.”

Ramsay bristled as if he had been slapped. After all the work I’ve done…

He looks at me like Domeric did, Ramsay realised with quietly simmering anger. That quiet, arrogant superiority in the gaze. He thinks me a fool – some puppet that can be used.

A hound that can be kept on a leash.

Roose intended on using him. Ramsay the wild dog to hunt down his enemies, to make Roose’s rule seem tame in comparison. Ramsay wondered how his lord father would describe him in private. Vicious but with low cunning? Some sort of butcher? True, and Ramsay had even encouraged that description. But Roose Bolton was just like his Domeric, while Ramsay was more
than he could ever see.

*Let him have his games. He thinks he owns me, he thinks that my men will choose him over me. He really thinks that Sour Alyn, Luton, Skinner and all the rest actually report to him. Let him have his delusions.*

*I am a Bolton, father. My blade is sharp too.*

Ramsay followed his lord father towards the Keep, as the castle stirred with the new arrivals. He saw Maester Tybald bow to Lord Bolton.

“My lord,” the maester said. “A raven arrived from Last Hearth, from Hother Umber to you.”

“The Whoresbane,” Ramsay said sharply. “The Umbers have sent word? Why was I not informed?”

Lord Bolton gave a cool nod. Tybald trembled. “I will deal with them shortly.” Tybald whimpered away. Ramsay glared. His lord father glanced back at him. “And yes, it appears that House Umber will be giving fealty at your wedding.”

“They waited too long.” *I should flay them for that defiance.*

“Yes,” Lord Bolton agreed, musing. “It also appears that Lord Umber himself will be attending.”

*The Greatjon? Isn’t he a prisoner at the Twins? “Why are we giving hostages away to the Umbers?”*

“They have offered a token of fealty in return for the Greatjon’s release. I must admit it is unexpected. We shall see what comes from this deal.”

Ramsay was about to ask more, but they had already arrived at the Great Hall, and the lords and ladies were gathered. Ramsay saw the banners emblazoned with twin towers, battle axes and pikes, iron fists and chains, horse heads and moose, all under the flayed man of the Boltons at the top of dais.

The room was quiet, the granite walls still blackened from the sack, and many had to stand because there were tables. Men would have sat easily while Lord Stark held court, but they would never, ever sit comfortable in the presence of Lord Bolton. Nor did he expect them to.

“My lords,” Roose announced quietly, and the room quietened. “We welcome you to Winterfell. It has been a trying time for all of us. We have all felt the touch of war on our lands.”

“The ironborn still hold Deepwater Motte,” Lady Barbrey Dustin said coolly. *A bitter bitch.* “They have taken prisoners to their isles. The reavers still threaten the west coast, and you hoard men here that could see them off.”

“The ironborn are finished!” ‘Lord’ Arnolf Karstark announced, in a raspy voice. *Crooked old hunchback.* “They lost their grip on the north when they lost the Moat. They have already turned their attention to raiding the Reach – they attacked the Arbor barely a week past.”

“Then we must be rid of them for good,” Lord Rodrik Ryswell called, an old man with red-hair turning to grey and a long, stern face. *I’ve murdered his grandson and one of his sons.*

“At ease, my lords,” Lord Bolton said, his voice low. *People always fell quiet to listen to him,* Ramsay thought proudly. “The ironborn will not be able to hold their ill-gotten gains, not when the
main bulk of their fleet has already moved on. We will leave them in their stolen castles to starve, and they will fall easily when we do take them back.”

“And what of the prisoners of House Glover?” Berena Tallhart snapped angrily, to a murmur of agreement. *Aw, I married and murdered her good-sister. And murdered her husband, actually.*

“The heir to Deepwood Motte and other captives?”

“Hostages are most easily negotiated for from a position of power. The ironborn have none. Any prisoners will not be harmed.” Lord Bolton’s eyes shone. “I am Warden of North. I will see the north put to rights.”

The words caused the room to ripple. Beneath the dais, Ser Hosteen Frey and Ser Aenys Frey both look smug. “I expect vows of fealty from each of my loyal lords,” he said quietly. “And then together, we can return order to these lands.”

Some of the men looked like Roose had asked them to swallow shit. His father didn’t pretend it was anything other.

We murdered the old Lord Paramount – everyone knows it, Ramsay cackled quietly, and now we demand that they bend the knee to us as well. The Freys had an expression sickly-sweet.

They all knew what Lord Bolton would want of them. *Bend the knee, and we will give you back your lands and castles. Stand defiant, and we will break you. Our allies hold your kin hostage at the Twins. we have the men, we have the support of the Throne, you have nothing.*

Still, northmen were proud. Some like Lady Dustin and Lord Ryswell had surrendered early and would come off well, but others like Manderly, Tallhart or Umber would not say the oath easily.

And so Roose had invited the entire north to Winterfell – to make sure that everybody saw their defiance break.

“My lords,” Ramsay said sweetly, speaking up for the first time. *I am the Lord of Hornwood – I have a right in the room now too. “It is so good to see us all together like this. The north has been led astray for too long, now we can finally return it to peace.” He grinned. “Yet it seems to me that our numbers are lacking. What of House Manderly? House Umber? Should we not wait for their arrival, on my wedding day?”*

Roose stared at him with pale eyes, before quietly shaking his head. “The Manderlys will not be attending. They have refused the invitation.”

Ramsay froze. His smile disappeared. “They what?” Ramsay snarled

“House Manderly, House Locke, House Flints – many lords around the White Knife,” Lord Bolton explained quietly. Some of the lords were rippling, it was news to them too. “They sent a raven excusing themselves that arrived at Barrowton. They will not be attending.”

“Why?” Ramsay snapped loudly. He saw a few, but he didn’t care. They were all staring at him, but good. *They should stare. They should see rage. “They dare defy their lord?”*

“They claim the need to gather men to face the threat from the north.” Skin him. I’ll skin them all.

He snorted. “Stannis is already gone.” Ramsay’s voice was shaking. “You are their liege. *Command* them to come. Otherwise I’ll take their heads as my wedding prese–”

“It is not Stannis that is the concern.” Lord Bolton’s voice turned sharp. Chiding Ramsay for his outburst. “There was another raven. The Night’s Watch has fallen.”
Ramsay flinched. There were mutters from the back of the room.

Ramsay had been furious when reports came that Stannis had landed on their shores. If his father hadn’t stopped him, Ramsay would have ridden to Eastwatch himself to take the false king’s head. Stannis had even sent ravens to the northern houses – asking them to declare for him! The nerve of it caused Ramsay to shake.

And then, weeks ago, the news came that Stannis had fled. They had seen his ships leaving, sailing south past Grey Hills, and the raven came from Karhold. Twenty-nine ships had arrived at Eastwatch, but only eight had sailed out. No ravens, no announcement, just a broken king fleeing once more. Stannis had agreed to sail alongside the Night’s Watch against the wildlings. And then the wildlings won.

Ramsay had laughed so hard when he heard the news. It wasn’t the victory Ramsay envisioned, but it was funny. Ramsay could picture the pure indignity on Stannis’ face – to arrive declaring himself king, and to run away weeks later! ‘King’ Stannis would be the laughing stock of the entire realm, if he wasn’t already dead.

He had no idea where Stannis would run. He arrived with maybe up to five thousand men, and left with less than a thousand. Hopefully, Stannis would die at sea, crashed against the rocks somewhere, and that would just be the most gloriously ignominious end to a king famed for his pride.

First Tywin Lannister died on the privy with a whore in his bed, Ramsay mused, and then Stannis was turned into a craven beggar king. It was unhealthy to be proud man, it seemed.

Oh, how Ramsay had laughed and laughed for hours. Normally, whenever Ramsay laughed that hard, he needed to get cleaned up afterwards.

“We received a raven from Ser Denys Mallister, of the Shadow Tower,” Lord Bolton continued. “Many other lords received the same. It was quite desperate. He reported how their ranging led by the Lord Commander went missing against the wildling host. Then Castle Black fell quiet.”

“Mallister,” said Lady Dustin. “House Mallister rebelled alongside Robb Stark, could it be a scheme?”

“Perhaps. But nights later, there were urgent pleas from Eastwatch, reporting a large force of wildlings at its gate. Then they fell quiet.”

“All of the major houses on the west coast of the continent received similar pleas,” Arnolf Karstark said dourly. “Manderlys included. Shipbreak Point took in four men of the Night’s Watch – men who fled the battle – who confirmed it. They reported a horde of wildlings overwhelming Eastwatch.”

I’ve only just heard about this now. Have these fools been keeping me in the dark? “How many?” Ramsay demanded.

“They claimed thousands upon thousands. The men were scared senseless.”

That caused the room to stir. Ramsay paused, looking across dark faces. “If Eastwatch has fallen, the rest of the Night’s Watch will not be long. They will not be able to defend from the south of the Wall,” Lady Dustin noted.

“We should have seen this coming,” Lord Stout growled. “The Night’s Watch is less than a thousand men. They have been requesting aid for years. It was only a matter of time that a King-Beyond-the-Wall broke through.”
“Everyone is demanding more men, if you hadn’t noticed.” That was Lord Ryswell, snapping angrily. Bickering like fools.


A wildling invasion gave the disloyal houses an excuse to ignore the Bolton’s summons. They would claim to be massing a force against the savages, but they could turn their blades against them instead.

Ramsay’s hands were trembling. “Give me the men, father,” Ramsay snarled. “Give me a thousand men and I will paint the Wall in wildling blood.”

“The men are not what gives me pause,” said Lord Bolton.

Karstark grunted. “Surely you don’t believe such nonsense.”

“If it were one man reporting it, I’d call it nonsense too,” Lord Bolton replied calmly. “A dozen men saying the same gives me pause.”


“The ravens also report a dragon. A white dragon, in fact.”

There was a long moment of stunned silence.

“That is insane,” Lady Dustin said finally.

“Then the insanity is spreading. I have had testimony from three different houses saying the same thing,” Lord Bolton replied. His voice was calm, but his eyes looked troubled.

“There are no dragons left,” said Lady Cerwyn, shaking her head. “And there have never been any dragons in the north.”

“Well, apparently there’s at least one,” another lord – some minor north-eastern house – grunted.

“The reports are all consistent,” That was Maester Tybald, speaking up nervously. Ramsay glared furiously. I have been kept in the dark. How dare they? “They report a white dragon over a hundred and fifty feet long. Larger than Balerion the Black Dread, to hear the tales. This dragon breathes ice, and flies with the wildling host.”

“It could be only a wild rumour to stir up fear,” Lord Bolton said with a long sigh. “But I suspect more.”

“The Night’s Watch is weakened, but the Wall is still extremely defensible,” Lord Stout growled. “It would not have fallen so quickly except to something exceptional.”

A dragon. Ramsay blinked. Are they serious?

“How is that possible? Where could a dragon possibly come fr–”

“Who cares where it’s from?” Karstark snapped. “Karhold is further north than any of you – it’ll be Karhold on the front lines. There’s a bloody wildling horde heading south.”

“What of Last Hearth? The Umbers must see a threat coming to them first.”

“Dragons? Should we be concerned of grumpkins and snarks as well?”
He heard the bickering. Some were calling it lunacy, yet Lord Bolton didn’t speak a word. His lord
father was considering the possibility. That made Ramsay convinced. *A dragon.*

Ramsay’s face twisted. He had only read the books, heard maesters speaking. *I’ve never killed a
dragon before.*

… no… I won’t kill it… I could tame it. I’m good at taming things. I could cut its wings, I could
chain it, I could hurt it until it obeys me…

“And what of the king?” Karstark demanded. “The testimonies from survivors mention a wildling
king – *King Snow.*”

“Snow!” Ramsay said suddenly. That word snapped him out of his thoughts. “*Snow?*”

Lord Bolton cast a cautious eye over him. A few men stepped back from Ramsay. “They claim that
this dragon obeys this king. We have yet to learn the truth of it.”

There was a long murmur of quiet. Ramsay saw a few people shift. Rumours travelled fast in the
north, yet Ramsay hadn’t heard anything. *I’ve busy with my hunts and distractions, all the while
the lords have been talking and whispering without me.*

“And what of the rumours,” Lord Ryswell said slowly, his eyes hard, “that this King Snow is one
*Jon Snow* – the natural son of Eddard Stark, the bastard of Winterfell?”

The room froze. Ramsay felt his hands clench. *A bastard.*

*A fucking bastard.*

Nobody met his gaze. Lord Bolton was at the centre of the hall, but Ramsay could feel their gazes
glancing to him. His head spun. *Oh, no wonder nobody dared to tell me.*

*A fucking bastard* king.

Ramsay had to take a deep breath. He could feel his body trembling. All of that emotion – that
rage, that hatred, that pride – oh, he could feel it.

“The wildling king is a threat to the realm. I imagine each of the rumours that you have heard have
been exaggerated a thousand times,” Lord Bolton said. “More likely that this is nothing but some
savage king trying to take the identity of Stark’s bastard. A feeble and useless attempt to claim a
sliver of legitimacy.”

Nobody replied to that. There were more talks, talk of raising men and sending ravens, and strong-
arming allies, but Ramsay could feel everything that wasn’t said echoing with quiet glances in the
room.

The court dissolved quickly after that – Roose Bolton wasn’t fond of addressing assemblies of
large numbers. Lord Bolton much preferred to take men to one side, one by one to air and resolve
grievances quietly and discreetly.

Ramsay took a deep breath, feeling his arms shake. Everyone, even his Bastard’s Boys, kept their
distance. They looked at him like he was some rabid animal off the leash. Ramsay could feel the
whispers. By dusk, all of Winterfell would be whispering about the wildlings invasion.

*A dragon, and a bastard.* It was hard to say which thought infuriated Ramsay more.
King Snow, he thought. King Snow. King Snow…

He heard Ser Hosteen Frey arguing with Lord Bolton after the court was over. Ramsay was left lurking outside of the corridor, waiting for his lord father and glowering at the wall. Lord Bolton was calm, quiet, as he walked out. His father went everywhere flanked by at least four guards, Ramsay noticed. Although Lord Bolton usually preferred eight in Ramsay’s presence.

“Well?” Ramsay snapped at his father. “What are you going to do about it?”

“About what, Ramsay?” Lord Bolton replied, motioning for his guards to step backwards.

“The wildlings! The dragon! About King ‘Snow’!” Ramsay snapped. “Give me the men! I’ll kill them myself.”

“Don’t be a fool. You would march up to the Wall? Through the snows, mountains, risk the autumn storms and waste our strength?” he scowled. “You’d be taking five thousand men – many of uncertainty loyalty – to face a much larger force on their own ground.” He shook his head. “No, our armies stay in Winterfell.”

“But he comes south! Ned Stark’s bloody bastard!” Ramsay was almost frothing at the mouth, eyes bulging in rage.

“Patience.” His voice was dark. “Our hold in the north is tenuous at best. We must conserve and rally our forces.”

This threat could not have come at a worse time, Ramsay realised. Roose Bolton was a patient man, he liked to wait until he was in control, yet this invasion could be disastrous to his plans. In a few years, Lord Bolton could have the north completely under his thumb, or his blade, but now? When the memory of the Red Wedding was still so fresh? When any aid from the Iron Throne was nigh non-existent at best? These wildlings threatened everything they were building.

He kept his voice steady, but Ramsay could see it in his eyes. His father was actually concerned.

“Learn your history, Ramsay,” Lord Bolton said. “If we truly face a dragon, then armies are useless. Aegon the Conqueror proved that – large dragons can torch ten thousand men. No, we must be careful.”

“I’ll kill a dragon, I’ll rip its bloody wings off!” Ramsay spat.

“Perhaps you’ll have your chance,” he replied. “But patience. We must allow this ‘King Snow’ the first move. Our response will depend on his.”

“His? And how will he move, father?”

“Depends. If he is a fool, he will march south on us with his overwhelming force and put our castles to the torch. In that case, I will rally the north against a common threat to throw him out.”

That’s what I would do, Ramsay thought with a scowl.

“But I fear that this King Snow may be smarter than that,” Lord Bolton continued. “I fear he may reach out to our ‘allies’, to convince them to join him against us. His force is made of wildlings, and negotiating any alliance would be difficult, but in exceptional circumstances… hmm… he may succeed in finding supporters among the disgruntled northern lords.”

“And if he does?”
Lord Bolton smiled softly. “Then I will win. Against a conquest of might, it may be very challenging for me,” he said. “But if he tries to play the game of thrones, then I will most certainly kill him at it.”

Ramsay spat. “You keep your game,” Ramsay scowled, already storming away. “I will take his head.”

Ramsay spent the rest of the day in his dungeon, working through his anger. He felt agitated. He need a distraction, to clear his mind and help him think. Ramsay poured wine over one of his dogs – Kyra – and then lit the bitch on fire. The hound went mad as her fur caught light, howling, barking and snapping against the cage. Ramsay watched her fur sizzle for a long while, feeling the grin spread over his face.

Fire was too quick and messy for Ramsay’s tastes, but he could see the appeal.

He returned to his captive later that night and repeated the experiment, this time by pouring lamp oil over his head and shoulders. The man didn’t even have the strength to quiver in his chains. Oil dripped onto the floor. “Why?” The old man croaked. “Why are you doing this?”

Ramsay’s grin was predatory. “Because it’s fun,” he replied sweetly, before throwing a torch onto the man. “And because I love it.”

He forced Reek to watch as well. He watched the flesh bubble and smelled scorching skin. The man’s mutilated body spasmed and twitched even long after Ramsay would have said he was dead. Ramsay just laughed; the way he thrashed and fought so futilely… it felt quite satisfying.

It was only when the meat stopped smoking that Ramsay felt calm enough to think. Reek was trembling on the floor, trying to hide in the corner.

“Reek,” Ramsay demanded, turning to the quivering creature. “Tell me about Jon Snow.”

Reek’s voice quivered, but he talked. Reek described a young, dark-haired boy lingering around the castle. A Stark in all but name; a spoilt, proud boy who had been so eager to escape his father’s shadow.

A bastard, Ramsay thought. A proud, brooding bastard who calls himself king. A man with a superiority complex and a chip on his shoulder. I could have fun with a man like that.

He felt the idea form slowly. I’m going to kill a dragon.

______________________________

**Bran**

He heard them arguing. They would argue constantly, but never in front of Bran. The two castellans of Last Hearth would retreat to the main hall to argue, out of earshot, yet Bran would still hear them through the senses of the hounds and ravens in the castle. His abilities were growing so much it felt like he could see through a dozen eyes at once.

“Bloody fool!” Mors Crowfood cursed, a heavyset old man, white-whiskered, clad in a snow bear’s skin. “You’re a fool, brother, if you think the Boltons will give you aught but treachery!”

“Aye they’re vermin,” Hother Whoresbane growled, pacing. He was the older – skinny and gaunt compared to his brother’s bulk, but pacing constantly and snarling while Mors shouted and stomped. “And they’re vermin that hold our nephew hostage. I will not see that boy dead, Mors, I
refuse.”

_Boy. They called the Greatjon Umber a ‘boy’,_ Bran thought. Both castellans of Last Hearth, the uncles of Lord Umber, were well over sixty. Hother Whoresbane was pushing seventy, but the old lean man was still strong.

“I refuse. I refuse to pander to the fucking Freys,” Mors bellowed. “We kill them all and force them to release our nephew.”

“Now wouldn’t that be a fine thing?” Hother kept his voice low, dangerous. “Our armies of greenboys and greybeards marching against Winterfell and the Twins?”

Mors eyes flashed. “Yet you suggest treason. Treason against the Starks.”

“Treason has already been done. We bend, or we die.” He shook his head, long white beard rippling. “If it were only our lives I’d soak Last Hearth in Bolton blood before I cave, but I will not see the boy dead, Mors. We bend to save our lord’s life.”

The Crowfood hoisted up his maul – a large, unwieldy thing like a club of iron. “And what of our king, Hother?” He snarled. “Brandon Stark. By the grace of the Old Gods we found him again, and if you dare to suggest we turn him over like cravens I will end you right now.”

The dog that Bran possessed whined quietly from the floor, but both men ignored it. Hother just scoffed. His hands clutched the spear he used as walking stick tightly. Mors had his maul, but Hother fought with a spear. It was hard to say which one was more dangerous.

“What kind of man do you think I am, brother?” Hother said with a grunt. “No, Bran Stark will not fall into the Bolton’s grip, I would never send the last son of Eddard Stark to his execution. But we still must yield. We pay lip service to the Boltons, we march with their army and we say the words. Brandon Stark takes refuge at Last Hearth and then eventually we might see Jon again.”

“Bugger that. We have the King in the North under our roof,” Mors challenged. “The north will rally for Stark. Let’s fight back and take the heads of those kingslayers.”

“The boy is a cripple!” Hother snapped. “He will never lead an army, or take a castle. No, I will not do it, and I will not risk him like that.”

“I never thought you a craven, Hother.”

“And I never thought you a fool.”

They had been arguing for a week, ever since Hother found Bran and his party in the woods. Bran hadn’t been to Last Hearth before, but it was a squat structure of oak and stone so old it had been carved into the hillside. There were no towers and it wasn’t a large castle, but the three circular walls were thick and strong and the keep was solid like a block of granite, the whole castle nestled amidst a thick forest of soldier pine, ironwood and sentinel trees. There were two moats filled with sharpened wooden stakes, and three gates that were constantly open.

Every night, hunters, woodcutters and farmers poured in to find shelter in the keep. Last Hearth had only very rarely ever turned away smallfolk from their gates, Bran remembered. For miles and miles around, men and women would always take shelter at Last Hearth during the hardest times of winter or war. Even those from the mountain clans could make the trek to take refuge at Last Hearth. It left hundreds, approaching thousands of men, women and children huddled around the great fire pit in the keep for which Last Hearth was named.
It wasn’t the strongest castle, but the Umbers had held their territory fiercely for centuries. Rather than concentrated forces in a single castle, the Umber forces held the roads and pathways through the forest and the mountains of their lands. They manned any crossing over Last River all the way across to the kingsroad.

There were more petty lords than Bran could count. Their elite soldiers were more like hunters, who could move in small groups and constantly harry any enemy crossing their terrain. Whether against wildlings or Boltons, the Umbers could hold their lands better than anyone.

Still, House Umber was suffering dire times. The Greatjon had devoted a large percentage of their forces to Robb Stark’s host, far more proportionally than other lords had, and now they were suffering for it. House Umber was running out of men-at-arms, while wildlings and Bastard’s Boys ravaged their smallfolk from the north and south.

Mors Crowfood and Hother Whoresbane had been on the brink of schism when they found Bran. The last time Bran had seen the pair had been at the Harvest Feast. They had been elderly, lecherous lords full of cheer and bellowing voices, prone to arguments and mock battles, but now they seemed darkened and angry. His mother had once called them pair of hoary old brigands, but at the time they had appeared more boisterous than dangerous. Now, everywhere they went, they both carried weapons in hand.

The only thing the two castellans agreed on was that Roose Bolton and his bastard son would have Bran executed if they found him. Ever since Bran came to the castle, he had been restrained to his own wing along with Meera and Jojen. Not even Summer was allowed out to hunt. Hother had been paranoid that someone would spot him and word would get back to the Boltons.

Hother Whoresbane wants to keep me hidden, safe, Bran thought. Perhaps he’ll give me a different name and I’ll pretend to be an Umber, or maybe he’ll put on me on a ship. Some way to keep me out of Bolton grasps. Mors Crowfood wants to use me as a figurehead to lead a rebellion, a Stark that the northmen might rise for.

He spent a long time thinking about it. They're both wrong.

His body sagged as he fell back into his skin. Bran stared around the dim, cramped room, with Meera pacing and Jojen sleeping upright against the wall. Summer was almost as on edge as Meera, hacksles raised with their confinement. Every time Summer even howled, it was like announcing that there was a Stark here, and that made their guards very nervous.

Mors and Hother would argue violently all day, but whenever they came before Bran they pretended to be in agreement. They think I’m a young child who wouldn’t understand, Bran thought. Perhaps I am young, but I don’t feel like a child anymore.

That evening, the two castellans came to see him over the evening meal. Hother was about to suggest moving him away from Last Hearth to a smaller holdfast in the east, when Bran interrupted.

“No,” Bran said suddenly. “I want you to sell me to House Bolton instead.”

It was hard to say who was more surprised, the Umbers or Meera. Jojen just nodded.

“No,” Bran said suddenly. “I want you to sell me to House Bolton instead.”

It was hard to say who was more surprised, the Umbers or Meera. Jojen just nodded.

“Bran what are you–” Meera started, but Bran didn’t dare to meet her gaze. He was trembling.

“I've already thought about it,” he said firmly, meeting Hother’s and Mor’s gaze. “Send a raven to Winterfell saying that I am here. Promise the Boltons your fealty, and promise to send me to them,
if in return they release the Greatjon from the Twins.”

Mor’s mouth hung open. Hother shook his head, his long beard wafting. “Hells no. If I sold a son of Stark to get him free, the Greatjon would rip my arms off himself and beat me with them. And he’d be right to do so too.”

Bran forced his voice to stay firm. “There’s no other choice. I can’t stay here, and I can’t lead armies into battle. I won’t be useless, so I’m going to do the one thing I can do to be useful. I’m going to be sold for the Greatjon, and however many other hostages we can negotiate for.” He nodded. “Let the whole north know that I am alive. Make it sound like I’m your prisoner and you’re ready to sell me. Act a traitor, both of you.”

Mors shook his head, but his eyes twitched. “You don’t know what you’re asking, child. They will execute you. The Bastard of Bolton is marrying your sister, and they don’t need another Stark to challenge them. They’ll have you executed.”

“Yes.” Bran nodded. They have Arya. “That’s why I have to do it.”

Both men refused, no matter how Bran pleaded. Meera looked at him with shock. “Bran, what are you doing?”

“I need to go home. And this only way I can do it,” he whispered. “All I need to do is look Lord Bolton in the eyes, and then I’m going to kill him.”


“Just like I did with that wildling.” The man who died bleeding from his eyes.

“Bran, you jumped into his body and you almost lost yourself. It almost killed you.”

“Then it’s going to almost kill me again,” he said with a nod. “But it will definitely kill Roose Bolton.”

“Bran, it’s too dangerous,” Jojen said, shaking his head. “The Boltons might kill you on the spot.”

“They’ll take me to their lord first, I know they will. Or they’ll keep me hostage.” Because I’m a crippled boy who’s no threat to anyone. “And I only need to get close enough to look him in the eyes.”

Both Jojen and Meera objected as well. Meera tried to talk him out of it. Bran barely listened.

The next morning, Hother Umber was quiet as they broke their fast together, but his face was hard and his eyes thoughtful. “You said that I was King in the North,” said Bran. “Is that true?”

“You are the eldest living son of Eddard Stark. Robb Stark declared himself king, and you are heir presumptive. Many would see you take your brother’s place.” Hother paused. “But Robb Stark wore a crown for less than a year and didn’t step foot in the north while he had it. He was my lord, he was just, and none can question his bravery, but naming himself King in the North was a decision I did not support.”

“So am I your lord or your king?”

“You are Brandon Stark, and I would not send you to your death.”

“I could order you to send me to Winterfell.”
“Then that is an order I must disobey, my lord.”

Bran was quiet for a long time. He ate the porridge in silence, yet he had no appetite. An Umber serjeant had to carry him back to his room like a sack of potatoes. He was quiet as he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

There was no maester in Last Hearth, so Hother Whoresbane managed the rookery himself. Despite his strength, the old man was limping stiffly and cursing as he walked the steps to the rookery at the top of the keep. A raven flapped onto one of the battlements, staring Hother straight in the eye as it cawed.

“Stark,” the raven croaked. “Stark, Stark.”

Hother looked at the bird quietly, a heavy frown on his face. Another bird flapped. “Stark, Stark.”

The rookery rustled. One by one, the ravens took up the cry until they were all cawing and chanting. “Stark, Stark, Stark.”

The next morning, Hother watched Bran in the hall with something different in his expression. None of the ravens had stopped repeating the word. Soon, every bird down to the Lonely Hills would be chanting the name. If they do not agree, Bran thought, then I will let the whole north know that I am here myself.

Hother and Mors’ argument was especially loud that night.

It took over two weeks before they finally agreed. Bran would not be convinced otherwise. “House Bolton is fighting against the ironborn,” Bran insisted. “Ironborn are a threat to the north as well, so House Umber should join against them. Send the raven, offer your support, and go to Winterfell.”

Mors shook his head. “You would have me pledge fealty to a traitor.”

“Fealty means nothing to Boltons.”

Still, Hother Whoresbane finally nodded and reluctantly agreed to send the ravens. One raven to Winterfell, another to the Twins, and a final one to King’s Landing. Bran was shaking as he lay sleeplessly in bed that night. We can only be brave when we are scared, he told himself.

Bran half-expected it to happen instantly. Instead, it took a fortnight before a raven replied, with a letter written in the pink parchment of the Boltons. The raven came from Barrowton, so clearly the Boltons hadn’t reached Winterfell yet.

The message was short and cold, stating that the Starks were traitors, and that Last Hearth was committing treason by harbouring Bran. It threatened death to House Umber if Bran was not executed immediately.

Another raven returned from the Twins saying that Bran must be brought to Winterfell otherwise the Greatjon would be dead within the week. The letter from the Iron Throne, signed by Queen Cersei Baratheon, Queen Regent, was the last to arrive and the most diplomatically written, but it demanded proof of identity and also that Bran was sent to Winterfell.

“Bloody vermin,” Hother growled after he read it, already penning more letters in reply. He was a vicious old man, but he had plenty of wits and he could read and write with ease. “It’s a negotiation, boy. They want what we have and they know what we want, they just don’t want to trade anything.”
Hother penned another set of letters, sending them multiple times with different ravens to ensure they would arrive. He also sent letters to White Harbour, Widow’s Watch, and even the mountain clans. Bran forced himself to watch and learn.

It took another dozen ravens back and forth before the terms started to emerge. The wait between each one was excruciating. The ravens from House Bolton refused to negotiate at all at first, but King’s Landing seemed hungry for a deal. The Umbers had to deal between all three parties and that took time.

Eventually, the Twins agreed to release Lord Umber, Robin Flint and Ser Wylis Manderly to the care of the Boltons at Winterfell, in return for Bran Stark and the Umbers’ fealty. Mors protested that the last son of Stark was worth more than three highborn nobles, but Bran pushed them to accept the terms. While Mors and Hother Umber gave fealty, Bran would be brought to Winterfell for his identity to be confirmed and, if true, the Greatjon would be released to his uncles. Bran wasn’t to stay in Winterfell, however; instead, the Iron Throne had demanded that Bran should be shipped to King’s Landing to remain a hostage there indefinitely. The Boltons would have killed him, but it seemed King’s Landing wanted him alive.

Bran didn’t care. It was all just a mummer’s act to get him back to Winterfell. But it was a mummer’s act that took time, and he was left simmering in the keep of Last Hearth, in his cramped stone room. Jojen helped in the household, and Meera had taken to going out alongside the Umber hunting parties, but Bran could do little but sit and meditate.

The last letter said that the Umbers had to arrive in Winterfell for Arya’s wedding. My sister’s marriage to a monster, Bran thought. The date loomed. Every day and week waiting until then felt nightmarish.

While Hother held Last Hearth and readied as many as they could gather, Mors Crowfood would go out on patrols regularly. Occasionally Summer would join the Umber scouts and hunting parties. Wildlings were slipping over the Wall regularly and Umber lands were the first to be pillaged.

Through Summer’s eyes, Bran saw farms and cabins that had been raided by small parties of wildlings that had crept over the Wall, the corpses of men littering the ground and women and children raped and savaged.

More and more refugees made the journey to Last Hearth, but not all of them made it. He could feel the mood in the castle become more and more grim as the weeks turned into months. They tried to keep the reports away from Bran, but he still heard them. Sometimes it was wildlings who would rape and murder freely as they roamed, or Bastard’s Boys from the south who would leave brutal displays of mutilated bodies. Slowly, Bran started to hear of smallfolk that would just disappear entirely. Shepherds and hunters in the woods that would vanish without a trace.

“Mullen Holdfast went quiet two nights ago,” Mors reported one evening in the great keep, his voice low and furs still wet with snow. He had only just returned. “A whole family gone in the night. Two hunters the day before that.”

Hother shook his head. “This ain’t a subject to be spoken of in front of children,” he muttered, with a discreet nod towards Bran at the other end of the table, his voice low.

Bran still heard it. The dogs had better ears. “No, tell me,” he called loudly. “I need to know.”

Hother and Mors shared a glance. They had been arguing less and less since the plan formed, at least. “Riders along the kingsroad found the Mullen holdfast empty,” he explained. “No bodies,
nothing. Travellers pass that holdfast daily, so whoever hit them did it very quick and very quietly.”

“Wildlings?” Bran asked with bated breath.

“Must be, that far north,” Hother said with a nod.

“Except nothing was stolen from the home. No damage and no sign of a fight,” Mors growled darkly. “They just vanished. There are some queer bandits around Cragspeak Point.”

That seemed to unnerve Hother more than anything. The old man chewed his leg of mutton in silence, while Mors promised to send out three hunting parties to search for the brigands. Hother suggested to send four.

Jojen was fast asleep as Bran returned to his room. Meera was awake, watching him as the serjeant hoisted him back into bed. “Are you okay Bran?”

“Yes,” he said, wishing he believed it. “We’re going to be heading to Winterfell shortly. We’re going to go save my sister. I’m going to go home and everything will be alright.”

Jojen didn’t reply.

Bran closed his eyes and felt himself slip away. It was a comfortable, familiar feeling by now. *There’s something around Cragspeak Point*, Bran thought. He focused upwards as the world twisted, and he tried to push himself into the body of a raven or a crow. Instead, the birds seemed too agitated, and Bran felt himself falling downwards.

He felt the earth around him. Bran forced himself to stay concentrated and centred, pushing himself forward through the roots of the earth.

The world was obscured and distorted from a different perspective. Bran was used to such dreams, but this time he wasn’t sure exactly what he was looking through. The world twisted into something vague and dreamlike. No, a nightmare.

Bran dreamt of death – *the Stranger itself* – limping across the snow. A figure of black and white. Bran could see it, and he remembered the hidden, shawled statue that stood in his mother’s sept. His mother had never prayed to the Stranger, there were never candles lit under that statue, and all Bran remembered of it was a dark figure looming in the dark.

Bran saw a man in a black cloak gasp as he swung an iron sword back and forth, lashing and striking with desperate fury. He wasn’t fast enough. Instead, the man fell as a sharp white blade skewered him through the chest. The wound hissed and spluttered.

The corpses littered the snow. Two dozen brothers of the Night’s Watch. It looked like some of them had tried to run, but none of them ran fast enough. The man with the iron sword had been one of the last and most stubborn to fall.

He saw the Stranger look downwards at the corpse with disdain, before pulling out its sword and limping away. It was a creature tall and sinewy, with skin half as white as dappled ice glittering in the sun, and the other half blackened and scorched as if it had walked through a fire. It looked wounded, injured, with half its face burnt off and one arm hanging uselessly at its side. It walked with an inhuman grace despite the limp. It barely left a trace in the snowdrifts.

The final man in a black cloak tried to hide in the roots of a tree, trembling and wailing. He didn’t hide well enough. The Stranger hunted the man down and stabbed its crackling white sword
through his chest.

*Those are sworn brothers,* Bran thought, thinking of Jon. Men of the Night’s Watch being murdered. He could see the outline of the Wall in the distance. It looked too far away from Castle Black though, so these men must have been running from Eastwatch. They had been running as the Stranger hunted them down and killed them in the night.

The creature paused. *This is a dream,* Bran told himself. *This has to be dream.*

“I see you,” it said suddenly, to nothing but the empty wind and forest. It wasn’t speaking the Common Tongue, but somehow Bran could still understand it. “I see you, little boy hiding in the trees.”

It turned and paced, face still hidden in darkness. “You look… you look ‘scared’,” it said slowly, its weird, echoing voice rolling over the word. “I was scared once. They said that I was scared. They said that I had been a boy once. A son given to the cold, left to die in the snow. I was given over to something greater, I became something greater.

“Scared. Scared,” the Stranger repeated. It stepped forward, approaching the trunk of the tree. “Warmth is always scared before it dies, why? My liege tells me of fear, but I don’t understand. What is fear, and what is death? Why do you want to feel those things? Yet you must do, if you continue trying to resist. To resist the gift of immortality.”

Hands like ice touched the bark, and Bran felt himself shiver. He felt the world freeze. He saw an eye that shone like a cold blue sun. “*I see you.*”

Bran woke up gasping. He felt the cold sweat stinging his eyes, dripping down his brow. His whole body was shivering. The room had been warm, but now it just felt so cold.

“Bran!” Meera called, rushing to his side. “Bran, what’s wrong?”

“I saw it…” he heard himself mutter. “It saw me…”

Jojen was awake too. It was well past the hour of the wolf, but the crannogman looked wild-eyed and frantic. “Focus Bran,” the boy hissed. “Tell me what it was. Do you know whereabouts you saw?”

He blinked, still shivering. Just that gaze… its gaze alone had left him cold. It felt like something inside of Bran’s chest was frozen. The Stranger, Bran thought, still wheezing for breath. That was the gaze of death itself.

They all heard the sound of a horn echoing through the keep. A faint sound coming from the walls. An alert.

“That’s a war horn,” Jojen muttered, and the whole castle seemed to tense. He heard footsteps charging outside. Men reacting in panic. “The perimeter…?”

“We’re under attack?” Meera asked sharply, hand going for her trident. “Boltons?”

“No,” Bran wheezed. “*Worse.*”

Chapter End Notes
Author Notes:

Just to clarify some of the more subtle differences between here and in canon. In canon, the Boltons gathered their army and allies at Winterfell in force to prepare for Stannis' attack. In this story, though, there was no campaign in the north from Stannis, and so Roose Bolton could take his time, so he went to take Torrhen's Square and others from the ironborn before Winterfell. Bolton forces were split and Ramsay was sent to Winterfell ahead of Roose, which led to Ramsay's wedding not happening instantly as it did in canon. Without Stannis, there's been no open rebellion to the Bolton's rule in the north, instead there's more simmering from disgruntled lords.

Doesn't really make a difference, I just thought I'd comment for anyone trying to place the timeline.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Dark wings, dark words, and the lions stir...

The Gold Queen

“This is madness,” the Queen said firmly, throwing the parchment on the ground, beneath her gold-and-crimson high seat by the Iron Throne. “What, will have we to discuss grumpkins and snarks next?”

Qyburn smiled apologetically. “I am sorry, Your Grace, but the reports—”

She snorted. “—are either lunacy or conspiracy. I have yet to decide which,” Cersei said. “Do they seriously expect us to believe in ice dragons?”

Grand Maester Pycelle hesitated. “From a learned man’s perspective, the current stance is split,” the old man wheezed. “There is some evidence to suggest ice dragons either exist or used to exist, and a minority in the Citadel believe that they still might survive in numbers. Legends from Cannibal’s Bay in the Shivering Sea, for example, say that ships that enter find themselves trapped forever as the sea freezes behind them. Maester Margate famously theorised the possibility that—”

Cersei snorted and rolled her eyes, causing Pycelle to sputter and trail away. Lord Qyburn was all smiles and explanations, but the Grand Maester was shifting in his seat and the others on the small council seemed fairly uncomfortable too. Cersei felt like slapping them; did they really think that the realm was now under invasion from magical ice dragons?

It wasn’t so long that the Wall was giving reports of moving corpses and white walkers, she recalled. The audacity of the lies coming from that place astounded her. Did the cold freeze their wits?

No, Cersei decided. Far more likely it is some scheme of some sort. Who was scheming was harder to guess. The Night’s Watch had strong ties to Winterfell, so maybe this was some ploy on behalf of House Stark. Stannis had headed straight to the Wall, so he was a likely conspirator too. Another name that kept coming up was Cotter Pyke, so perhaps this was because of ironborn defiance too.

Too many enemies, too many lies. She instantly distrusted any reports coming from that cold place.

“Your Grace…” Lord Qyburn cleared his throat slowly. “… there have been ravens from across the north, particularly the Shadow Tower, Karhold, Last Hearth, White Harbour, and down to Winterfell. The details vary, but the message… they all report that a large force of wildlings have broken through the Wall.”

“How many?”

“The letters seem to suggest between ten to fifty thousand, Your Grace.”

Cersei scoffed. “These are the same reports that claim ‘ice dragons’, I take it?”
“Ice dragon, singular, Your Grace,” Qyburn corrected. “It is described as with a hundred-and-fifty-foot wingspan, white scales, and a breath that can freeze oceans.”

“I wonder why they didn’t throw in tales of armies of unicorns and mammoths as well?” She slowly took a long sip of Arbor Gold from her goblet. “It seems obvious that these reports have been exaggerated beyond all rational sense. I expect five thousand wildlings, at most, would be a more reasonable number.”

“Not so long ago, Lord Commander Mormont was reporting a host of a hundred thousand under a… Mance Rayder, if I recall,” Ser Harys Swyft wheezed. “He sent many ravens concerning it.”

“More likely some frightened fool has counted double,” said Orton Merryweather. “Or is puffing up the threat so we will not think them craven.”

“And the fact remains that the Wall has been breached,” Pycelle insisted. “Lord Bolton is calling for aid.”

That made her stiffen. “The north raised in revolt against us, and now they have the audacity to call on the crown to save them?”

“Lord Bolton is—”

“The Warden of North. It is his job to keep the north in order, not mine.”

“But, Your Grace, if the realm is threatened…”

“If,” Aurane Waters interrupted, glaring at Pycelle haughtily. “I remain unconvinced that any of these reports are genuine.”

“There are more letters streaming in daily,” Pycelle warned.

“Yet it seems to me to more likely be a ploy; they give us reports of some massive army, and expect us to race to their aid,” Waters pointed out. “A foolish trick to draw our armies and fleets away from us, to leave us more vulnerable to real threats. All the houses that gave you those reports are traitors or fools.”

Cersei smiled approvingly. Aurane Waters had proved himself a good choice for her Grand Admiral. Pretty, agreeable, and he knew who he was loyal to. “Exactly. They’re trying to exaggerate a threat.” Ice dragons – absurd! She shook her head. “I consider those letters little more than hearsay and ridiculous rumours.”

There were nods around the table. “There is one detail that many letters agree on,” Lord Qyburn added. “They say that the leader of the wildlings is a man named Jon Snow – the bastard son of Eddard Stark.”

Cersei paused, blinking in genuine surprise. Then she chuckled, actually laughing. “Eddard Stark’s bastard?” She said incredulously. “Turned… what is that ridiculous title? ‘King-Beyond-the-Wall’?”

The thought of Eddard Stark, the great, honourable Eddard Stark, having a bastard had always made Cersei smile. She tried to recall him from their visit from Winterfell, briefly recalling a dark haired, long-faced, sullen little boy. She had seen little of the bastard, truth be told; Catelyn Stark had tried to hide him from sight like a ugly wart.

Eddard Stark had been so ashamed of him that he sent his bastard to the Night’s Watch, she
remembered. “This… Jon Snow? How old is he? Sixteen? Seventeen? I thought he took the black.”

“So that made Eddard Stark’s dishonourable son a deserter as well as a traitor. Perfect. ‘Bastards are fiends by nature,’” Orton Merryweather said, drawing an evil gaze from Aurane Waters. “I suppose this one is trying to follow in his half-brother’s footsteps.”

“And I am sure he will end up lacking a head as well,” Cersei said dismissively, but she was still laughing to herself. What a perfect final insult to Eddard Stark’s disgraced legacy: his bastard son invading the realm with savages. She had no fear of some bastard boy, with savages and tall tales of dragons.

“I hear that wildlings are savages, Your Grace,” Ser Loras Tyrell said, clad in his white cloak standing by the table. Cersei cast him a foul look – the Knight of Flowers should learn to stay quiet. It still irked her that the Tyrell boy ended up on guard duty next to Ser Osmund Kettleblack. “And an army without discipline is no army at all. No wildling invasion has ever lasted long.”

“True, true,” Ser Harys Swyft said. “Surely the threat has been overstated.”

“Yet the rumours are disturbing,” Grand Maester Pycelle said with a gulp. “Perhaps we should—”

“Young blood must have turned to milk, if you are intimidated by tales like that,” Aurane sneered at the old man. Pycelle flinched as if slapped.

“It seems to me that this is an opportunity for Lord Bolton,” Cersei said. “His realm faces a common enemy, one that will unite the tenuous loyalty of his vassals. The wildlings have been foes since times immemorial, and so the north must come together to face them.” She paused, taking another sip of wine. “Yet we shall not be unreasonable. After Ser Jaime’s campaign in the Riverlands is complete, part of our forces shall march to the Neck to relieve them.”

March very, very slowly to the Neck, she thought to herself, and a small part at that. She had no interest in sacrificing Lannister soldiers unduly. “Very wise, Your Grace,” Orton Merryweather bobbed.

The north was no great concern, truth be told. It was an empty, cold wasteland. It didn’t provide food or great trade. In winter the north would be frozen shut, and Cersei had no interest in committing so many of her men to such a needless conflict. Not when they were already so thin on the ground, and so many more immediate threats around her.

No, the true threats were from the Tyrells, those power-grabbing whores. And from Stannis, as meagre as his forces now were, or even from those blasted peasant ‘sparrows’ and the dirty smallfolk that infested her city. The Martells also concerned her, the treacherous snakes holding Myrcella as they did.

She thought over it. Still, the north was very delicate, and she had growing concerns over House Bolton’s suitability as wardens. “Tell me,” Cersei said, “what of the Stark boy that came back from the dead? Brandon Stark, I believe?”

“House Umber has offered him in trade. I do not know of his situation after the news of the wildling invasion,” Qyburn said, apologetically.

“Has his identity been confirmed yet?” She remembered Bran Stark quite clearly, from a long time ago. The boy that liked to climb.
“It has not, Your Grace.”

“That deal has not changed,” Cersei decided. “If Last Hearth truly is under threat, then this Brandon Stark must be brought south to King’s Landing with all haste.”

“Would not execution be a simpler method?” Aurane Waters said with a frown.

Ser Harys and Orton Merryweather looked appalled at the suggestion. Queen Cersei only smiled. “A ten-year-old boy? Do not be barbaric.”

_No, I want this Stark kept alive and well as a hostage in King’s Landing. If House Bolton proves treacherous to them as well, then keeping the last son of Stark to replace them would be useful. Perhaps this Brandon Stark would be meek, useful and easily groomed. And he’s a cripple too, she recalled. A cripple must be very easily held captive – absolutely perfect._

Most of the small council seemed satisfied, but Grand Maester Pycelle still looked nervous. “Your Grace, if Lord Bolton requests aid then we should consider–”

“No, the matter is settled.” Cersei shook her head. “We cannot commit any significant forces north, not when there are so many threats closer to home.”

“You refer to the ironborn?” Ser Loras asked with a frown.

_I was thinking more of the Tyrells, you clutching thorns._ “I mean Stannis Baratheon,” the Queen said, moving swiftly onto the next issue at hand. “I find this letter from House Celtigar of Claw Isle far more concerning. Is it accurate?”

“I think so, Your Grace. Stannis’ ships have indeed been spotted past Claw Isle, heading south towards the Blackwater.”

_Lord Celtigar is our guest and hostage at the Red Keep, Cersei recalled. The letter had been penned by his wife, and she did not think they’d risk his well-being._

“Then Stannis is retreating back to Dragonstone,” Ser Loras said, leaning forward quickly. _Well, of course._

“Can we stop him?” Waters said. “We have four dromonds ready to sail, and if the Redwyne fleet is blockading Dragonstone…”

“That letter was penned three days ago,” Qyburn reminded. “Taking into account how the crow flies and deployment time, I expect Stannis may have already reached Dragonstone or is about to.”

Ser Loras Tyrell looked unhappy. “Then there could be a battle happening this moment on Dragonstone.”

Aurane Waters met his gaze. “And if Lord Paxter Redwyne fulfils his duty, then Stannis will never reach the castle.”

“We have a force laying siege to Dragonstone, do we not?” Orton Merryweather said, looking nervous. “Two thousand men, if I recall.”

“We sent messages and ships to alert them as soon as the news came in, last night,” the Queen reassured. “Lord Redwyne has already been informed, as has Lord Tyrell. We have deployed what reinforcements we can spare, but it could well be that there is naught else to do until news arrives.”
“So we will just sit here and talk?” Ser Loras fumed.

Mind your tongue, boy. “Yes. Whatever is happening is happening many leagues away, and we must plan for it,” she said coolly, turning back to Lord Qyburn. I will have to see about removing Ser Loras from small council meetings. “How many ships did the spotter report?”

“Eight cogs and galleys, Your Grace.”

“I recall that Stannis left with twenty-nine.” Eight ships – that was what? Perhaps a thousand men? It was hard to judge.

“He did indeed, Your Grace.”

“So it is true?” Orton Merryweather frowned. “Stannis was defeated in the north?”

“Either by the wildlings or by storm, the reports are uncertain,” Qyburn admitted. She took a deep sip from her goblet. “Then once again Stannis has been proven a craven!” She proclaimed. “He was defeated at Blackwater and fled north, only to be defeated in the north and flee back here! He has barely a thousand men left and half a dozen ships. How many times must this fool bounce around the realm trying to incite treason, before his men finally desert him and his so-called claim?”

She felt like laughing at the thought of Stannis running backwards and forwards across Westeros, or the thought of Eddard Stark’s bastard – ha! Stark had a bastard! – turning savage wildling king.

“That is true, Your Grace,” Grand Maester Pycelle said in a laborious voice. “And yet the fact remains that Dragonstone may have just been reinforced by another thousand men. The castle will not fall easily.”

“Then we can starve him out, if we must,” Cersei said. “Stannis’ meagre forces cannot match our fleet.”

“Dragonstone is a strong castle,” Waters warned. “And its stores are large. It will not fall quickly either.”

“We should have stormed it when the garrisoned was weakened,” Loras pouted.

“Lord Redwyne has Dragonstone blockaded, has he not?” Cersei said with a shrug. “The Redwyne fleet should intercept Stannis’ ships. There may well be no reason for concern.”

The discussion continued for a while, but there was little to be done. Stannis’ army was finished, but annoyingly he still held two of the strongest castles in the realm. Both Storm’s End and Dragonstone were under siege, yet both might still last months even against far superior numbers. The Redwyne fleet was two hundred warships strong, yet ships alone could not conquer a castle like Dragonstone.

It was the hour of the bat when the talk finally eroded Cersei’s patience and she retired for the night. During the siege at the end of Robert’s Rebellion, Dragonstone lasted for a whole year with a garrison of less than a thousand, and Cersei cursed the thought of spending a whole year with Stannis breathing down her neck.

With luck, a raven would come reporting that Paxter Redwyne had successfully routed Stannis before he reached the castle, but none came during the night. That useless fool Redwyne, weak like a sour grape.
The next morn, she held court and the whole keep was whispering about news of Stannis’ return. Ser Desmond Redwyne, some second cousin and commander in the fleet, could only give feeble excuses. “It was the wind!” the aging Ser Desmond protested. “A freak squall took Stannis’ ships in past the blockade, and no fleet of warships can defy the wind. We could not stop them, Your Grace.”

She scoffed. More likely Lord Redwyne had grown lax on his duty patrolling the Blackwater. “And the garrison at Dragonstone?” she demanded.

“They were ambushed in the middle of the night, Your Grace – Stannis came in too fast, and the warning did not reach them in time. Stannis broke the siege and reached the castle.”

She dismissed him angrily. Two thousand westerlands men ambushed and broken. Perhaps Redwyne did this on purpose, just to weaken us further, Cersei simmered. Lord Redwyne sent a message promising to redouble the blockade, but it left her in a foul mood.

**Enemies, enemies all around me.**

Two days later and she was only just retiring for the night, feasting on wine and lemon cakes when she heard footsteps marching to her chambers. Her door knocked, and Ser Osmund Kettleblack entered. “Urgent news, Your Grace.”

“Stannis? Has he been defeated?”

“No, from the Reach. Highgarden claims reavers moving against them. They’ve taken the Shield Isles,” Ser Osmund reported, unable to suppress a tired yawn. The hour was late. “Queen Margaery has called an emergency small council session.”

*She has done what?* Cersei downed the last of her wine in an irritated gulp. *Little brat should learn her place.*

The small council was already gathering in the shadows of the Iron Throne. It was the hour of the owl, or around about, and Cersei was left feeling stiff and weary as she walked through the gloomy double doors. Despite everything, she couldn’t allow the girl of a queen to host a small council session without her, so Cersei had to rush. Her hair was left tousled and uncombed, and her bodice felt lax and pudgy without her usual handmaids to tighten it properly.

The hall felt rumpled and confused. She passed Boros Blount and Meryn Trant, who seemed to be sleeping on their feet. Loras Tyrell and the darling little queen were wide awake, though, looking hassled by the news that just arrived by raven. *Dark wings, frustrating words.*

“Why is it that these damnable birds insist on arriving at such an hour?” she muttered irritably to Pycelle.

“Ravens do prefer the dusk, Your Grace,” the old maester tottered, walking quickly with rackety bones.

“A thousand ships!” Cersei heard the little queen exclaim, her voice echoing through the cavernous throne room. “Your Grace, this must be answered fiercely!”

Her eyes narrowed. *She dares say ‘must’ to me.* So the ironborn are gathering against the Reach, in large numbers too, though claims of a thousand ships was met with doubt from the small council. The new king of the Seastone Chair, Euron Greyjoy, had launched an assault of the like that had not been seen since the days of Dagon Greyjoy.
“The reavers come in strength,” said Margaery Tyrell. “Lord Hewett and Lord Chester are slain, as well Lord Serry’s son and heir. Serry has fled to Highgarden with what few ships remain to him, and Lord Grimm is a prisoner in his own castle. The iron king has raised four lord of his own in their place.”

“I see Stannis’ hand in this,” Cersei declared. “Balon Greyjoy offered my lord father an alliance, this new king has clearly made one with Stannis. Stannis returns just as his new allies launch a raid on the west, attempting to divide us.”

Pycelle frowned. “Stannis and ironmen have long been foes.”

“And yet clearly they have joined forces. By raiding in the west, he hopes to distract us from a renewed assault from Dragonstone.”

Lord Merryweather nodded eagerly. “He is more cunning than we knew. Your Grace is clever to see through his ploy.”

“And we will not rise to the trap.” She smirked, turning back to the little queen. “The Shield Islands belong to the Reach. It is for Highgarden to answer this.”

“The best part of our power remains with our lord father, though,” Margaery said, with Loras standing behind her. “We must send word to him at Storm’s End. At once.”

“Absolutely not. I will not let Storm’s End fall into Stannis’ grasp again, not after the failure Lord Redwyne suffered at Dragonstone. The siege of Storm’s End must remain strong and the Redwyne fleet is required in the Blackwater.”

“You Grace,” Loras Tyrell bowed. “From those strongholds on the Shields, the ironmen threaten Oldtown and the Arbor. With ironborn raiders on the warpath, they can sail up the Mander into the heart of the Reach, as they did of old. They may even threaten Highgarden itself.”

“Then you must roust them,” she said irritably. “But Lord Tyrell’s and Lord Redwyne’s forces remain in service to the crown.”

“Yet Stannis has eight ships,” Margaery protested. “The ironmen have a thousand. Our fleet is more urgently needed in the Reach.”

‘Our’ fleet? She stiffened. The Redwyne fleet belongs to the crown, lady. As do you. Not the other way around.

“You Grace, the siege of Dragonstone may take a year or more,” Grand Maester Pycelle warned, in a low voice. “The siege of Storm’s End perhaps just as long…”

“But you would allow such a knife at the capital’s throat? I forbid it. The crown forbids it.”

“But you must–” Margaery protested, and Cersei’s patience finally snapped.

“Enough!” she snapped, and the word rang and echoed through the cavernous hall. Margaery recoiled, Loras jumped to his sister’s side. “Mind your tongue and remember your place, girl – I am the rightful queen and you dare to command me?”

The room turned deathly silent, Margaery’s delicate little face paled. Cersei could have growled. There was a long pause that no one dared fill.

“Your Grace…” Pycelle stammered nervously. Cersei glared around the room at the speechless
expressions and she forced her fists to unfurl. Her nails dug into her palm like claws. *She deserves to be snapped at, little slut.*

“The hour is late,” Qyburn said coolly, his hands hidden up his sleeves. “I fear it is all too easy for passions to run hot where the security of the realm is at stake.”

“Indeed,” Cersei growled, with a lingering glare at Margaery. She turned to Ser Loras, because at least his effeminate face was easier to look at than that doe-eyed slut. “… How many ships does Lord Redwyne command?” she demanded.

“Two hundred warships and galleys, Your Grace,” Ser Loras replied with hesitation.

“And with enemies on both sides, it appears we must divide our forces. Equally.” She turned and paced, scratching her chin. “Lady Tyrell, in return for the crown’s leave to abandon their post, your father and Lord Redwyne must relinquish command of one hundred vessels of the Arbor to the Royal Fleet.”

“One hundred,” Margaery repeated quietly. “You would halve our fleet.”

“Seems only fair, does it not? I am sure that a hundred fine warships shall be more than sufficient to drive back the ironmen, as exaggerated as their numbers surely are.” Her voice was hard. “The remaining vessels must remain in the Blackwater, under the command of our Grand Admiral.”

There was a stunned silence. Aurane Waters blinked in surprise, and then grinned. Margaery Tyrell’s mouth stammered briefly. “You expect my father to confiscate half of Lord Redwyne’s fleet?”

“It is a Lord Paramount’s prerogative to command his bannerman’s forces, is it not?” *As it is for the crown.*

Aurane Waters nodded in agreement. “It seems very reasonable to me,” he agreed with a nod. “Overly reasonable, in fact, to allow so many ships to leave the capital in such a crucial time, and yet Your Grace is generous. We must combine the Redwyne vessels with the Royal Fleet. Together we can blockade Dragonstone and keep Stannis contained.”

“Exactly. I am sure that Lord Mace will understand the need as well – especially since Stannis threatens the very city where his own daughter resides.”

Margaery hesitated, but Ser Loras placed a hand on her shoulder. Cersei just smiled sweetly.

They would whine, but they had no good reason to object and Cersei would enjoy trimming the Tyrell’s thorns a bit. Doubtless Redwyne would leave his own captains and officers, but under Aurane Waters’ command they could see about filling the ranks with more… reliable men.

*Any man sworn to the Tyrells over the crown is a man who cannot be trusted,* she thought quietly. *If they are not culled, the roses might well overgrow the whole kingdom.*

*Yes,* she decided, growing more satisfied with the idea. *Let this Euron Crow’s Eye bleed Highgarden for us, to put them in their place.* Cersei would have to stock up on wine, though. The capital may well lose its supply of Arbor Gold for a time.

The small council meeting ended with forced pleasantries and tired chatter. Little Margaery barely said a word, while Pycelle whined and hobbled away to draft up the royal decree concerning the Redwyne fleet. Cersei smiled and excused herself, dress sweeping across the ground as she bid them all good night.
The meeting actually left her in a good mood. The reavers were concerning, but the thought of Highgarden facing such a threat was appealing. That, and the excuse to steal half of the Reach’s navy made her smile.

She could have returned to her own apartments, where Taena Merryweather shared her bed, but Cersei was suddenly in no mood to sleep. Instead, she walked the inner courtyard, heading towards the burned husk of the Tower of the Hand. She stared out over the blackened stone of the Tower, the wreck looming in the faint moonlit courtyard.

*First Starks rose against us,* she thought, *then the riverlands. Then Renly, and then Stannis.* The Tyrells were grasping, and her own city was being overrun by peasants under this new High Sparrow. There were ironborn reavers in the west and wildling savages in the north. *Why is it that this whole realm seems to be falling apart, everyone trying to steal what is mine?*

There were no shortage of enemies around her, Cersei thought with a grunt. Enemies trying to steal her crown, steal her kingdom, or steal her children. She would have to see about playing those enemies off against each other.

She had a serving boy fetch her wine from the kitchens. It felt apropos to savour the taste of the Arbor. She spent the night lingering around the courtyard, staring out over the godswood highlighted under the dark moon. There was a chill in the night, but she didn’t mind.

Very quickly, it seemed, she saw the faintest shimmer of dawn over the horizon. Cersei spent the night enjoying the serene of the godswood, with Ser Osmund and Ser Boros standing guard. The serving boy continued to fetch more wine. Arbor Gold was something to be enjoyed at night.

Above, in the holdfast, she caught the glimpse of dark wings coming and going from the rookery. Slowly, she decided to retire. Her head was tingling pleasantly, and she was Queen. She could spend the morning lazing in her apartments.

As she stomped up the serpentine steps, she saw a bearded figure waiting for her. Grand Maester Pycelle was twitching as he approached hesitantly, holding a piece of parchment tightly. Cersei had no patience left for him. “What is it now, fool?” she snapped.

The old man was flustered, out of breath. “I have just received a letter, Your Grace… it is marked from your brother.”

“Jaime?” She breathed a sigh of relief. “Good, then I expect Riverrun has fallen by now. How goes his campaign in the riverlands?”

The maester twitched. “No.” Pycelle gulped. “Your other brother. This letter is signed Tyrion Lannister.”

---

**The Griffin**

Jon Connington had never been an easy sleeper. At night, he stared at the stone walls constantly, thinking intently about every risk, every peril and everything that could go wrong. Come morning, he pulled himself off his slab of a bed, dressed in velvet and steel, and walked out the door.

He was met by the sounds of steel and boots ringing through the courtyard. The marble buildings of Lys stretched over the horizon, and the waters glittered in the morning sun, while the harbour churned with the sounds of war.
The Golden Company was preparing to set sail again.

Lys had been only a short stopover from Volantis, but still too long for Jon’s liking. The city of Lys was too soft, too bright, too perfumed. Too many of his men seemed too content to linger with the bed slaves and perfumed gardens of the Free City. Everywhere he looked he saw soft men, house slaves and extravagant luxuries.

Jon detested such things. That feeling of weakness lingered over the city like a stench. *I should be nearing my homeland now, to wage war, not waiting idly in this place.*

They were docked at a private harbour on a smaller archipelago of Lys, overlooking the merchants’ ships flowing in and out of the white city. The harbour was owned by one Magister Illyrio of Pentos, who had strong connections to Lys too. Many of the city’s magisters had been understandably nervous when the Volantene fleet carrying sellswords approached, but they had managed to smooth it over. It gave the Company a respite to restock and resupply before Westeros.

Jon had argued against the idea of a stopover altogether, instead pushing to go straight across the Narrow Sea for the Seven Kingdoms. It would be too risky, he had said, and it wasn’t so long ago that the Golden Company had been hired to fight Lys. As it happened, he had been outvoted and then proven wrong, which left a bitter taste in his mouth.

The magisters had been all too eager to accommodate the Company, to see them on their way. There had been gifts to placate them, and they had managed to recruit other sellswords to their campaign, all the while stocking up on all the weapons and armour that the famed tradesmen of Lys had to offer. Eventually, Jon’s complaints of ‘this is costing us time’ had to fall silent when he realised they could gather up to two thousand more men from a short stop.

“My lord,” a squire wheezed, rushing to meet him. A young boy, with a thick, fluid Lys accent, and the silver blond hair of Old Valyria. Even commoners had the features of dragonlords in Lys. “A message from Black Balaq. Four more ships from the rear flank have arrived at East Docks.”

“They have arrived.” After the hard voyage out of Volantis it had been doubtful whether any more ships would make it through the storms. “Has he reported casualties?”

“Few. One ship is crippled. Most survived – including fifty more elephants.”

He nodded in approval. The Company’s elephant cavalry had always carried the most risk during the journey. They had kept the majority of the elephants in the rear flank of the fleet. The huge beasts were logistical nightmares, but they’d be so worthwhile when they reached the open field.

“Have me updated when a full headcount comes in,” he ordered. “Send word to Balaq to report to me with all haste.” They would probably be up to nine thousand by now, at least. Only three of their ships had been completely lost.

“Yes, my lord.” The squire hesitated. “Also, my lord, Lord Tyrion requests your presence.”

“Requests my presence?”

“He is breaking his fast in the solar. Along with Captain-General Strickland and the King.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. It was well-known among the Company now, but to hear word of King Aegon babbled so carelessly… “Guard your tongue, boy. His presence is not one to be babbled around,” Jon said. “Who are you?”

The squire turned nervous. “Oshio Sathma, my lord,” the boy said. “I am the cousin of Magister
Sathma. Lord Tyrion recruited me for your noble campaign, my lord, to squire for Commander Strickland."

Under his gloves, Jon’s hands tightened. The dwarf had spent far too long making deals with the fat magisters of the city. His mood turned foul. “The crown’s catspaw would kill our liege if they knew,” he growled. “Secrecy is paramount, and loose tongues cost lives.”

“Begging your pardon, my lord.”

The Golden Company had already overrun and dominated Illyrio’s walled compound. Oshio Sathma led the way through the maze of extravagant Lysene architecture. *Doubtless any squire of Harry Strickland would never see battle, only wine and highborn guests,* he thought bitterly. Yet Magister Sathma must have still made some sort of deal with the dwarf.

It irritated him to no end that the dwarf was babbling about the king’s identity to every merchant lord of Lys. *Does he not know that Aegon’s identity must be kept secret until we reach Westeros? He risks losing our advantage – we cannot allow them to prepare for this invasion.*

*I should never have taken the Lannister with us.* A month ago Jon could have easily taken the blasted dwarf’s mutilated head, but the imp was a wily creature. While Jon had been busy with the goliath task of arranging transport for ten thousand men, the dwarf had been making plans of his own.

As Jon crossed the parapet marble walls, he glimpsed Ser Brendel Byrne and Ser Laswell Peake preparing horses and men. The sight made him frown, moving away from the squire and down to the courtyard confront the men gathering. Byrne and Peake both made a good sight; strong, handsome, dressed in finery. Both were highborn soldiers with rich gold bands across their arms.

“Sers, our departure is soon and this compound is on lockdown. Where are you heading?” Jon demanded.

“Into the city, my lord,” Peake replied with a grunt. A hard man, an exiled Westerosi lord. “Magister Allyios is hosting a soirée, and we have secured invitations. We are to attend.”

Jon bristled. “We should be preparing for set sail again and you wish to dawdle for *parties*?”

Ser Brendel looked confused. Ser Laswell’s eyes flickered. “Magister Allyios comes with a fleet of trading ships behind him, Lord Hand, and he has been looking to expand towards the Seven Kingdoms for years. We attend this party now, pay respects, and we are to ensure a dozen trading vessels of provisions sailing with us.”

Jon’s eye narrowed. “And who gave you that order?”

“Lord Tyrion, my lord,” Peake replied, mounting his horse.

*Of course.* Jon had no patience for such politics and flattery, but the dwarf seemed to live off it. There had been a few orders now given without his knowledge. *The dwarf seeks to usurp my campaign.*

The Lannister had arrived to the Golden Company as a prisoner, a curiosity. But the dwarf had sharp eyes and a sharper wit. He found a soft spot and pushed himself in.

At first, Jon didn’t think much of it when the dwarf started talking to Harry Strickland without him. It kept Homeless Harry’s cowardice away from him as Jon had been managing the fleet out of Volantis. But then, Tyrion Lannister signed up with the Golden Company by himself, squirming
under Harry's thumbs and escaping Jon’s grip. He was a prisoner no longer, he became a member
of the Company and Jon had no valid reason to object.

Soon after, though, Harry had the idea of promoting Gorys Edoryen to quartermaster, while Tyrion
stepped up to the job of company paymaster. Jon didn’t realise just how influential the position of
paymaster was.

The Captain-General Harry Strickland was weak and spineless with bloated feet. Tyrion Lannister
made decisions that the general didn’t want to.

Many of them had been good moves as well. The dwarf gave enough bribes to smooth their
passage out of Volantis. He had also weeded out the bad sailors and officers in the crews offered
by the Triarchs of Volantis. Tyrion had also insisted that the wives, sons and daughters of
Volantene captains travel on different vessels. It gave the Volantenes so much more motivation to
keep the fleet together.

It had been Tyrion who had pushed for stopping at Lys, and he manipulated Harry into the idea as
well. Jon was Hand of the King, but not even he could easily argue with the commander of his
army. He couldn’t risk a schism within the Company.

They made the journey out of Volantis in good time, through storms and all. Without the dwarf, it
could have been so much worse. Tyrion Lannister had taken over many of Strickland’s duties, and
quickly proved his worth in the Golden Company after the voyage.

Still, it wasn’t lost on Jon how all of his allies ended up on different ships. Whenever decisions
were to be made, Jon's supporters would be coincidently out on patrol and the discussion inevitably
ended up going wherever the dwarf wanted it to go. The Lannister allowed Harry more time to soak
his feet, eat plums and count coppers, and in return Harry became the dwarf’s own little puppet.
He may as well put motley on the Captain-General and use him as a fool.

The Golden Company was sworn to King Aegon and Jon Connington was the Hand of the King,
they should be following him. If it had only been Harry, then Jon would have been in complete
control.

Still, Tyrion neatly placed himself between Harry Strickland and the officers, and between Aegon
and his army, all the while gradually pushing Connington out of the picture. So long as the dwarf
continued making good decisions and proving a capable tactician, however, Jon could not easily
object.

Except this should be my campaign. My redemption. I am the commander. Yet the dwarf steals my
power and my influence with his blasted meddling behind the scenes.

There’s a reason dwarfs are malformed, twisted creatures. Cursed in the eyes of gods and men.
Jon’s eyes were dark as he marched up the room to the king’s solar. He heard laughter and the
chinking of glasses. There were five men in the king’s solar around the table, chuckling over Lys
wine early in the morn, and guards standing outside.

“… About fifty savages surrounding us – trapped in the Mountains of the Moon, just me and my
poor sellsword,” he heard a voice laugh. “This big one, the leader, comes up and asks me how I
want to die. And I reply, ‘In my own bed, with a belly of wine and a maiden’s mouth around my
cock, at the age of eighty’!”

Laughter. Jon heard the unmistakable sound of Harry’s guffaw. “I’m sure that that would be a
scene!”
“How did you survive?” That was Aegon’s rapt voice, leaning over to Tyrion’s side.

King Aegon sat at the head of the table, and yet everyone was still focused on Tyrion by his side. Streaks of blue still stained the King’s silver hair. The dwarf sat drinking a very large glass of wine from the castle’s rare stock. “Survive? I hired them,” Tyrion laughed. “A savage is a very useful thing to have by your side, Your Grace.”

Jon stepped sourly into the room. Blasted dwarf. Sometimes Tyrion antagonised Aegon, sometimes he was all charm and tall tales, but the young King had begun to seek the Imp’s opinion. Working his way into the boy’s head with every fanciful story and clever jest. Jon had been so proud of Aegon when he announced that he would sail against Westeros, but then he heard that it had all been the Imp’s scheme. Oh, he’s a cunning bugger, I’ll grant you. I should have thrown him off the boat.

“A savage is just a savage. Barbarity is all too common, it's men of honour that are rare,” the Hand of the King said as he stepped into the room. Jon turned his gaze from the dwarf, bowing to the king. King Aegon had already washed the blue out of his hair, sitting at the head of the table, young, proud and handsome. “Your Grace.”

“Ah, my Lord Hand!” The dwarf said the greeting as if he were the butt of a jape. “How are you? Did you sleep well?” He took a large sip of wine. “In my experience, though, men of honour have very tight lives and brittle deaths. A bit of savagery, however… a bit of savagery can last you a lifetime.”

The solar was well-cushioned and decorated. It was the king's solar, but the dwarf sat like he owned the place. Jon remained standing. Aegon had a large goblet of wine as well and the alcohol left his cheeks flushed. Jon glared at his young liege.

“You should not be drinking, Your Grace,” he warned.

“Why not?” Aegon said, but they were the dwarf’s words. “I am man grown, I can drink if I wish.”

“It is early and there is much to be done. We mean to sail in two nights.”

“Then please, Lord Connington,” Tyrion offered. “Take a seat. Take a glass. We were just reciting some old war stories.”

The two other men around the oak table, Ser Tristan Rivers and Ser Castor Stone, were laughing and drinking too. The scene was a disgrace. The drunken dwarf, Homeless Harry propped up on pillows, and Aegon going along with it all.

“There are duties to attend to,” Jon said, voice like ice.

“But it is an important duty here!” Tyrion protested. “It is a duty to enjoy the free moments, the times of peace. You learn more from tales over a glass of wine than you do from charging blind.”

“Hear, hear!” Harry agreed. “More haste, less speed, I always say.”

That is the commander of my army. You put Myles Toyne to shame. “My lord speaks the truth,” Castor Stone said. Another of the dwarf's catspaws. Castor was a young landed knight, hungry for advancement, young, eager but undistinguished, lowborn and with no place at the king's table. Why would they even permit such a man to speak? “Sharing tales of battles over a drink is a long-honoured tradition.”

“And what battles have you ever fought, my lord?” Jon said to the dwarf. “What great feats do you
“Oh, you’d be surprised,” he said. “I was regarded as the finest foreman of the drains of Casterly Rock in my youth.”

“Drains. You managed drains?”

“Oh, you jest, ser.” He looked wounded. “But the drains of Casterly Rock are not for the weak of heart. So much gold being flushed away each time my father sat on the loo, it would jam something terrible…”


“Indeed.” The edge in Jon’s tone caused the laughter to stop. He focused on the dwarf with cold blue eyes. “It is barely dawn. You are drunk. You detain the king and the Captain-General with this foolery, while there is business to attend to. Have you forgotten why we are here? It is not for wine and japes.”

Aegon blinked. Jon’s voice rarely turned so hard with his king. Aegon was like a son to him, but there was no time to be coddled. “There is a war to be won,” he warned, with quiet fury as he turned to Aegon. “Now put down the glass.”

The room stiffened. With just a few hard sentences he silenced them all. The full intensity of his glare focused on the dwarf.

“You mockery,” Jon said, his voice low. “You seek to waste the King’s time at this crucial hour?”

Aegon averted his gaze, shamed. He slowly pushed the glass away from him. The dwarf just shrugged. “I thought it would be educational.”

“On how to act a disgrace?”

“No.” Tyrion slowly extended a beefy finger to point at Ser Castor. “On how to spot a spy.”

The room froze. With his other hand, Tyrion took another sip of wine. “It’s always useful to tell bad japes, Your Grace. Tis the ones who laugh the loudest that you should be most suspicious of.”

Castor blinked. “What is this?”

“This is treachery. Your treachery.” The dwarf pulled out a small folded piece of parchment from his tunic, handing it to a stunned Aegon. There was a seal showing a white winged chalice on the front. “That is a letter written by you detailing our numbers, ships and infantry. You entrusted it to a merchant in Lys headed to King’s Landing.”

The young knight looked flustered, off-guard. “I wouldn’t… I would never…”

“You would. I have the proof right here, from your own hand. You are the bastard son of Lord Hersy of Newkeep. You think that by siding against us you could be legitimised by the crown for your services. To claim your father’s seat.” The dwarf took another sip. “I suspect you’ve been so eager to drink and laugh so that you could eventually play poisoner and assassinate someone. The King most likely. Did my dear sister reach out to recruit you?”

Castor protested, but the guilt was written all over his face. He was caught off-guard and intoxicated by wine.
Jon's hand went to his sword, but Ser Tristan Rivers was faster. Castor tried to charge out the door, and the knights collided. Tyrion clapped his hands and two guards stomped in and dragged the knight away screaming and red-faced. He kicked the table, spilling expensive wine over Myrish carpet.

“Was he truly a spy?” Aegon shouted. The young man couldn't hold his wine, he also sounded drunk. “What is to be done with him?”

“Execution is the only way to treat treason,” Harry Strickland blustered.

“Executed? But then we'd only have a corpse. A corpse is a fairly useless thing, Your Grace.” The dwarf’s voice was smooth. “Instead, let's keep him alive and keep him writing letters. That way, we can be sure that King's Landing knows exactly what we want them to know.”

The dwarf stood up, waddling with a glass of wine still in his hand. He looked at Aegon. “You see, Your Grace, that's the purpose of having these little sit-downs. Some battles are won by spilling blood, others by spilling wine.”

Jon looked at him, and back at Castor Stone. How much had the spy reported? Their numbers, their plans? That Aegon was alive? He had been counting on more of an element of surprise, if the Iron Throne already knew…

He turned to tower over the dwarf. “You should have come to me. His betrayal could have been handled diplomatically.”

Tyrion looked wounded. “But, my lord, it was.”

Is this a ploy? “Let us see this letter of yours. What evidence do you have that Castor was a spy?”

“Evidence? Poor Castor there was approached by an agent of the Iron Throne during the first night in Lys, who offered him the deal. After that, Castor wrote two letters direct to King’s Landing via peddlers and merchants detailing our movements, all of which were eagerly accepted. The third letter is in my hand, however, and the fourth will be one that I will dictate.” He nodded. “You are welcome, of course, to interrogate all of the witnesses and unwitting accomplices who saw Castor snooping around. There is plenty of proof to his guilt.”

“And what of Lysono Maar?” Harry demanded.

“Our spymaster must have missed Castor, I’m afraid. I handled it for him.” He turned to the table. “Please could you grab that goblet before it falls, my lord? It’s a horrible tragedy to waste good wine on the carpet.”

Harry blinked, and then laughed boisterously. Tyrion laughed as well. Aegon eagerly asked questions, while Jon stood stiff, glaring at the dwarf.

This was planned, Jon thought with quiet fury. Of course it was. The dwarf invited me to the solar knowing full well I’d object. He then named Castor as a spy in front of everyone, making me seem the fool while everyone praises his cleverness. He works to shame me.

The Hand of the King hesitated, glancing around. The spilled wine stained the carpet like blood. I had assigned Castor Stone to the king’s protective guard. I had thought him young, but bold and a good man. I let a double-agent come within sword’s reach of my king…

The dwarf excused himself quickly, claiming he had paperwork and payslips to complete. He trundled away with a bottle of wine to his quarters.
Jon went to see Castor Stone. The man was babbling excuses as Company soldiers stripped his golden armbands and threw him into the wine cellars acting as dungeons. He spent the hour questioning the man, demanding to know exactly who recruited him and what he wrote. After only a few punches from the interrogator, Ser Franklyn Flowers, Castor was left a wailing mess.

He just watched, fuming quietly. *There should only ever be one answer to treachery.* It disgusted him to have to keep filth like Castor alive.

Before long, the news had spread and any who even knew Castor Stone came quickly to denounce him and deny their own involvement. Jon knew there must be accomplices who, knowingly or not, helped Castor send those letters away. Jon would see all who slacked or assisted either lashed or hung.

Still, it was the thought of the smirking, ugly face that really caused Jon’s teeth to grind. Jon’s posture was as stiff as stone as he walked to seek out the Lannister.

Jon had assigned the dwarf one of the dankest, cramped storerooms in the compound as his quarters. He had intended it as a slight, but Tyrion didn’t seem to mind. The dwarf fit quite snugly into the small office, while Jon was left gritting his teeth as he tried to squeeze himself through the door.

“My Lord Hand!” Tyrion grinned, and bowed. He still held the bottle of wine. “You honour me with your presence. Are you here for your payslip?”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. “I promised you once that you would die before you touched a bottle of wine again.”

“You did indeed,” he agreed. “Awfully foolish of you to do so, if I may say so myself. Why make a promise when you have no means of upholding it?”

*I could gut you. I could split your malformed twisted skull in a single cut.* Back on the Shy Maid, he certainly could have done so too. Nobody would have objected to an execution when the dwarf had been Jon’s prisoner. Now, though, Tyrion Lannister was a listed man of the Golden Company and under Harry Strickland’s protection. As feeble as the coin-counter was, Jon still needed the Captain-General of the Golden Company. The dwarf had too many friends in the Company, and he was gaining more every day.

Focus. Patience. But Jon had little patience left. “How did you know that Castor Stone was a spy?” he demanded.

“I thought that would be obvious,” the dwarf said with a twisted frown. “I was the one who hired him to spy.”

Jon’s hand clenched in his glove. The tips of his fingers felt numb as they hovered over his sword in its scabbard. “I was the one who hired a mummer in Lys to approach him, pretending to be a Lannister agent,” Tyrion explained. “I put the idea in his head that he could sell information to the Iron Throne. He then sent the offer directly. I also paid mummers to approach several serjeants of the Company, but you’ll be relieved to know your sellswords are a loyal lot. They all reported their encounters to our spymaster, and two of the mummers almost died making their offer, actually.”

Jon glared. The dwarf’s voice was slightly slurred and intoxicated, but smug. “Castor Stone made the choice and sent off the letters all by himself, however,” he continued. “Nothing that my dear sister wouldn’t learn anyway, and it verifies him for when we send the false information through.”
“And yet each time you talk of Aegon’s existence you give the enemy more time to prepare. You have been dealing and talking to the magisters.”

“Yes. I have made our ventures seem like a grand quest of legend. Many magisters are quite eager with the idea, just as they were during the War of the Ninepenny Kings. I wager we could recruit another thousand reinforcements from Lys alone.” He scratched his chin. “With the support of Lys and the wealth of all the cheesemongers behind us, we could buy more mercenaries, sellsails and pirates into our venture.”

Jon’s face twisted. “I intend to put the Rightful King on the Iron Throne and you talk of recruiting pirates.”

The dwarf just shrugged. “A soldier is a soldier. And I also hear that my sister has stopped paying the Iron Bank of Braavos. We make our case properly and the Iron Bank will be more than happy to finance our efforts to put the realm to rights. That is all support which can make or break any campaign.” He smiled. “So yes, that is why I wanted to stop in Lys.”

“So you claim,” he growled under his breath. “But you’ve been spending more time with whores than anything else in the city.”

“Oh yes, the whores are important too,” Tyrion agreed, taking a deep gulp. “I was wondering if Lys is where whores went. Your soldiers have been enjoying the whores as well.”

The Hand of the King hesitated. *He’s a cunning creature.* “Mind your place, dwarf. You have no business giving orders to any of my men.”

“Yet you’ve been so busy.” He grinned, noseless face wrinkling. “And the men have been following.”

*That’s what disturbs me the most.* “And who gave you the authority?”

“I am the paymaster now. Sellswords follow those who pay them, even in this Company.”

First he takes over as paymaster, and then takes the job of spymaster and commander. A month ago, Jon could have killed him, but now? *Damn him, he’s made himself indispensable.*

The Hand of King considered his options. Killing him seemed so tempting and so satisfying, but also useless. It felt like he did when Jon agreed to work for the Spider; simply talking to the fiend was slimy, disgusting.

“What do you want?” Jon said finally. “No more games.”

“Me? I’m a creature of simple desires,” Tyrion said. “I want my right as Lord of Casterly Rock, of course, and I have already agreed to share the wealth with all faithful friends who help to place me there. I could be King Aegon’s most loyal retainer in the west.” He paused to think of it. “Oh, I also want to rape and murder my sister.”

Jon’s face twisted. *He likes to make people uncomfortable. Do not raise to the vulgarity.* “You wish to rule.”

“Rule? No, I have no interest in ruling. If we’re considering just rewards, though… well, I did quite enjoy my time my time as Master of Coin. I would be satisfied taking that position again.” *Liar.*

“Reward for your service?” said Jon, his voice a quiet sneer. “And which service is that? Undermining the campaign? Distracting my officers?”
“Have I not been helping? I think this venture stands a very good chance, truth be told. We have ten thousand loyal and seasoned men and the realm is torn. If Dorne declares for Aegon, with some financial support from the Free Cities, and if we convince my sister to make a few bad moves…” He mused, and nodded. “Yes, I think the Golden Company could finally succeed this time.”

He motioned at a letter on his desk. “Speaking of,” Tyrion continued, “when we reach Westeros, I wish to send this letter away to King’s Landing, Casterly Rock, and perhaps a few other select places. In the spirit of spreading disinformation.”

Jon looked suspicious, but picked up the parchment. It was written in a smooth, practiced hand. The words were fancy, pompous. The first line read; ‘Lord Tyrion Lannister, son of Tywin, Rightful Lord of Casterly Rock and falsely accused and sentenced, return to reclaim my rights and lands with the assistance of the leal and just men of the Golden Company of free brothers’.

Jon paused, lips moving as he tried to make sense of it. “This letter is lies and slander. You would claim that you hired the Golden Company?”

“We have the benefit of surprise. Let us offer a distraction from Aegon Targaryen altogether,” the dwarf said. “Instead, let us spin the tale that Tyrion Lannister recruited and hired the Golden Company, joining up with Jon Connington, to retake possession of Casterly Rock. We present this to the Seven Kingdoms as a Lannister invasion, rather than a Targaryen invasion.”

_He seeks to usurp my whole invasion._ “This is a coward’s and a fool’s game to seek recognition that is not earned.” Jon’s voice was hard, and bitter. “You have no place leading this campaign, dwarf. _None._”

“But if that letter is sent then Cersei will believe that _I_ am responsible. And her response to that will become the same as it has always been wherever I am concerned; irrational.” Tyrion grinned. “My sister is a very predictable woman. Mention my name rather than Aegon’s and I guarantee you she will destroy herself.”

Jon shook his head. “_No._ The realm sees you as a murderer and kinslayer. We must unite the realm behind us. You could taint the image of the whole campaign.”

“And yet if the Tyrells believe that this is a Lannister problem, rather than their problem, then they are going to be far less willing to rally against us. The forces of Highgarden would prefer to sit back and let us bleed the Lannisters first. And my brother Jaime will be reluctant to lead his armies against me. Cersei will spit and scream and become more and more unreasonable, and will only succeed in driving everyone away.” He held up his stubby arms. “With a few letters and a small lie, I could break the realm apart.”

_That I believe._ His eyes narrowed. “And what of Aegon?”

“King Aegon Targaryen stays in the background, quietly rallying support with Dorne and mustering his forces. When the bodies start to burn and the realm sees the options they have, they will raise for Aegon instead.”

Jon’s lips curled, but he paused before replying. “The battle plan is solid,” Tyrion continued. “Your intention to take Griffin’s Roost is a good one. We seize the castle, establish ourselves across the stormlands and Cape Wrath, raising forces among the disgruntled storm lords. Let the Tyrells bicker while we reach out to Dorne, and then Aegon starts gathering banners to him. The true threat to the Iron Throne goes unnoticed for as long as possible.” He nodded. “You lead the men in the field, I can manage the papers and the letters, while we both leave Captain Strickland plenty of time to soak his weary feet.”
“You’re not doing this for King Aegon. You don’t care about him, or the cause. You just want to gain everything for yourself.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” It was jape, but those mismatched eyes were hard.

Jon hesitated. The dwarf was clever, but… “No.” He shook his head. “I will not suffer you derailing this campaign. Mind your place dwarf. Manage the payslips, but if I hear of you giving orders to my men again then I will have you flogged.”

“Well, isn’t that a shame.” Tyrion sighed. “I only mean to be helpful. After all, I think you need someone like me.”

“You think wrong. No one needs you.”

“Yes father…” he muttered so softly under his breath, before smiling and saying, “but surely the strain of managing such a campaign must be taxing for you alone? With your condition?”

Jon froze. He felt his shoulders stiffen. Mismatched eyes narrowed at him, unblinking. *He has a piercing gaze too.* “What are you—”

“Greyscale. How is your hand, Lord Hand?”

*No… he can’t know…*

The dwarf chuckled, standing up slowly. “You think nobody would wonder why a man who shunned alcohol would suddenly start drinking the bitterest wine every night in his chambers alone? Let me guess, did you think that asking for a pot of vinegar would be too obvious?” He chuckled. “Did you also wonder whether wearing thick leather gloves even in the heat of Lys would go unnoticed?”

Jon shuffled his hands, twitching. Tyrion scratched his chin. “And, thinking back to the Bridge of Dreams, there was so much panic when I fell into the water but nobody ever stopped and checked you, though you pulled me out, did they? Did I ever thank you for that?”

The silence stretched out. His head whirred. Jon took a deep breath, his shoulders shaking slightly. “Who else knows?”

“Nobody, as far as I’m aware. Most men are very oblivious creatures.” He tutted. “But let’s keep it discreet, hmm? No need to create an unnecessary panic.”

*Oh, the bastard…*

“Do you see why you need me, Lord Connington? Why, if I were flogged, who knows what I might shout in my pain? If I were killed, who knows what letters I might have squirrelled away previously?” His voice was almost soft. “And how long would the King… or any of the officers, actually… suffer a man in such close proximity who is carrying such a horrendous disease? That does not seem healthy for you, Lord Hand.”

Jon forced his voice to harden, but he could feel the situation slipping out of his control. “What do you want?” He demanded lowly.

“Nothing. I’m here to help.” He cocked his head. “I just hope that you are not going to object to my help any further. Let us work together.”

*The bastard.*
“I’m not unsympathetic.” The dwarf smiled, while Jon’s jaw tightened and his mouth seized. “You are loyal, capable, and I understand why you would keep your condition discreet. You wish to see your life’s regret redeemed at all costs, and I am hardly one to judge.”


Jon’s gaze flickered. The dwarf caught it. “Ah. Or is it already too late? Both hands infected, I take it?”

He nodded without a word. *The bastard dwarf. The conniving little fiend.*

“Ah, my sympathies,” Tyrion said kindly. “I can understand your wish to accomplish something with the years you have left.”

“If you try to blackmail me again, you will see your own death far before I do,” Jon promised darkly.

“I would never dream of it. I only want to reach a compromise between us.”

*Never compromise.* A lifetime of war had taught him that. “Compromise is for the weak and the craven. The only thing that matters is certainty.” He kept his voice low. “I will see Rhaegar’s son taking his place on the Iron Throne before I go.”

“And I am here to assist,” Tyrion smiled widely. “Mayhaps this could be a glorious partnership, then? Together we may accomplish what one alone cannot?”

*You have no use. You are just too awkward to dispose of. Was this what Lord Tywin felt?* Still, Jon just nodded curtly.

Tyrion paused. “*However,*” he said, “there is yet another concern. Even if we could take King’s Landing, and the Iron Throne, our forces will have difficulty holding the Seven Kingdoms together without assistance.” He shook his head, and tutted. “Even if Aegon triumphs in the field, we will need Daenerys to secure the realm for the Targaryen regime come again. We will need her dragons.”

“I am aware. She will come to her nephew’s aid. For now Queen Daenerys is distracted in Meereen.”

“So she is,” Tyrion said with a nod. “And thus we must give her a reason to come west all the sooner. Rest assured, I will provide one. The cheesemongers of Lys are well-connected.”

Jon didn’t reply. *This dwarf and his schemes could threaten everything I’ve worked so hard to achieve,* he thought bitterly. *Blasted cursed little fiend.*

The dwarf stood up with a smile, motioning to the door behind him in a small gesture. Jon glared at him furiously. “I look forward to working with you, Lord Connington,” he said with a short bow. “But forgive me if I do not shake your hand.”
The Vale of Arryn stretched beyond her. The Gates of the Moon was a hard castle, drab and pale, but sometimes the view alone made it worthwhile. Alayne stood on the battlements of the keep, watching out over the valleys and sharp peaks. She could see low hanging clouds rolling across the mountains, and the Tears of Alyssa sprinkling down the Giant’s Lance.

The wind was so cold she had to wrap herself tightly in her woollen furs. She was wearing a thick wool dress with an overcoat, but the wind had a bite to it. Winter is coming. They had made the descent down to the Gates of the Moon barely a fortnight past.

Snow blanketed the heights of the Giant’s Lance above, but below the mountain the autumn lingered and winter wheat was ripening in the fields. From below, she could hear the laughter of washerwomen at the well, the ringing of steel on steel from the knights at their drills.

“You should not stand so close to the edge, my lady,” a voice called. She turned to see a tall, broad-shouldered and rough man looking at her with concern. “It is dangerous.”

“Ser Jorah.” Alayne lowered her head respectfully, just like she had always been taught. “How fares the castle?”

“Very well, my lady. Lord Baelish is to return later this evening.”

“That is good. He has been gone so long I was concerned he would miss the tourney.”

“I doubt your father ever would.”

“Lord Baelish,” Alayne chided. “You should address him as Lord Baelish, ser.”

“Forgive me, my lady.”

“That is quite alright, Ser Jorah.”

The knight lowered his head respectfully, stepping back. His hair had been balding when he arrived, but now he had shaved his head entirely, somehow making himself seem older and wearier. His face was weathered by lines and old scars. He was a big man, formidable and fearsome, but there was a certain softness in his eyes as well.

Lord Baelish had gifted the knight with a fine steel plate engraved with the likeness of a bear’s head, its maw gaping on the centre, with greaves and gauntlets to match as well as a thick brown velvet cloak. Somehow, the finery seemed almost awkward on him. He had been in boiled leathers and dull iron when he arrived.

Ser Jorah was most certainly not a comely man, but Alayne could understand why Randa enjoyed flirting with him sometimes.

“Do you mean to compete in the tourney for the Winged Knights?” She asked.

He shook his head. “I think not.”

“You and Ser Shadrich are both not, then.” She looked at him curiously. “Why not? I hear you were quite the jouster. You won the tourney at Lannisport.”

“That was more fluke than skill, my lady. And this tourney is for the Knights of the Vale, I doubt I’d be welcome.”

*He’s uncomfortable*, she noticed. Shifting on the spot. Alayne had to learn quickly how to spot the
little signs. “A pity then. The Brotherhood of the Winged Knights could use warriors of such
skill.”

“I am sure there are plenty in the Vale.”

Personally, Alayne didn’t really want Ser Jorah as part of Robert’s private guard either, but it was
good to stay respectful. She had envisioned the Brotherhood of the Winged Knights as Lord
Robert’s personal kingsguard – eight of the most noble knights sworn to protect House Arryn. Each
knight could walk proud as the strongest in the Vale, a mantle that both kept the Lord of the Vale
safe and the knights loyal. Ser Jorah would be a good protector, no doubt, but he would do little to
appease the Vale lords.

There were many that questioned the exiled knight’s presence, and his loyalty to House Arryn.
Lord Baelish had been all too eager to bring Ser Jorah in, however. “Ser Jorah is a simple
creature,” he confided to her once. “A man of little intelligence and low ambition. Varys used him
for years on the promise of one day letting him come home. He provided quite useful and reliable
information.”

“Yet why is he here now?” She had asked.

“Oh, he has nowhere else to go. The Spider is no longer around to pay him, so he came to me
instead,” Petyr laughed. “His Queen kicked him out, and the Starks are dead. He wants to return as
Lord of Bear Island and I can help him get there. Like I said, very simple, but useful enough so
long as you prod him in the right direction. The man is too straightforward to scheme.”

Some of the Vale lords had grumbled about the exiled knight’s presence, but Lord Baelish had hired him as a
personal guard and kept him out of the way nicely. He doesn’t know who I am, Alayne told herself.
Sansa Stark and Jorah Mormont had never met, except perhaps when she had been a very small
child.

But still, sometimes she caught him staring at her, curiously. Then again, she found more and more
gazes of men lingering on her. As she grew, her body became more womanly and Alayne knew
that she was turning heads more often recently. Still, somehow there was something different in Ser
Jorah’s gaze. She wondered if the knight had a lady he fancied.

Perhaps she was just on edge for the upcoming tourney. The tourney where I will meet my
betrothed, Ser Harrold Hardyng. It was a fortnight away, but the date loomed. Even the sight of
the grand mountains and immense expanse of the valley could barely calm her fluttering heart.

Alayne loved it here. She felt alive again, for the first time since her father… since Lord Eddard
Stark had died.

“If you excuse me, ser,” Alayne said with a curt bow. “I should return.”

“Of course, my lady.” It looked like there was something else the knight wanted to say, but he
didn’t.

Lord Petyr returned late that night. There was no warning or announcement, just a group of riders
from Gulltown returning to the castle near dusk. The next morn Alayne met her father breaking his
fast in the lord’s dining hall, feasting on porridge, mint leaves and summer fruit while sorting
through parchments scattered across the table. His eyes were red and tired and he looked quite
annoyed.

“It really is becoming quite irritating,” Petyr muttered as she approached, not looking up from his
papers. “I thrive on chaos, but at a certain point it becomes too much even for me.”

“What is the concern, Father?” Alayne asked.

“Oh, many things. We all knew that Queen Cersei would destroy herself, yet her brother giving her an extra push was really quite unnecessary,” he sighed, muttering under his breath. He looked over two rain-soaked parchments, both marked with a seal bearing a white winged chalice, before pushing them to one side. “And very annoying. Cersei has issued a ‘royal decree’ commanding the stormlands, the Vale and Dorne to muster men for the defence of the crownlands.”

“Truly? She has?”

“Indeed. She demands it. Quite strictly too,” he said with a humourless smile. “Apparently our dear Queen believes that the best way to fight a war is by starting three more.”

He normally laughed and teased more around her, but now just Petyr looked weary. “Is that why you have been gone for so long, Father?”

“In part. And yet the most truly concerning situation,” he said slowly, lowering his voice, “is the one developing in the north. It appears that land is in dire straits. Sooner or later we may just have to cordon it off at the Neck.” Petyr paused, glanced at her, and frowned. “Actually, tell me Alayne, what do you remember of one Jon Snow?”

Alayne blinked. Petyr very rarely even referenced her former life. She didn’t want to talk about it. I am his daughter, and we don’t speak about this out loud. Why is he mentioning Jon?

“Jon… you mean my half-brother?” She whispered. He nodded. “… I… he was my fath… he was Eddard Stark’s bastard.”

Just the thought of her old life made her shiver. Remembering Winterfell again brought back so many old feelings.

“Could you describe him for me?” Petyr pressed. “I want to know more of this Bastard of Winterfell.”

Why is he making me remember these things? “Um… dark haired, narrow face, grey eyes.” She remembered a boy of fourteen. “They would say that he looked like his father.”

“No, I care little for his appearance. Describe him. Describe his personality. Was he loud, angry? Temperamental or calm? Sensitive or reserved?”

“He was…” Alayne hesitated. “Sullen, quiet. Jon used to constantly compete with Robb, or tease Arya. When it was just his siblings Jon would be lively, but with my mother or with any guests he would turn sour. Especially as he became older. He didn’t laugh so much.”

“The life of a bastard among highborn.” Petyr scratched his goatee, fingers drumming. He turned over a few parchments so she couldn’t see what was written there. “Jon Snow was resentful, then? Did he curse his trueborn siblings?”

“No.” Alayne squirmed slightly. “I don’t think so? He would play with Arya, teasing her. He used to truss up her hair something terrible, and mother would spend hours trying to comb it straight. And Jon and Robb were constantly challenging each other. Jon was the better sword and he would always win in their spars, but Robb was the better lance and the better rider.”

“And when Jon was sent off to the Night's Watch?” Petyr insisted. “To be exiled from his home and disavowed by his father. Did that leave Jon bitter?”
“No. No, Jon wanted to take the black. He insisted on it. Uncle tried to dissuade him, but he said that even bastards could rise in the Night's Watch, that…” Even a bastard could prove his worth.

Her throat jammed. Jon is the only family I have left. My last living sibling. “… I never knew Jon very well,” she admitted. “Mother never wanted me around him. We rarely talked, we never had much to do with each other. He was a bastard.”

And so am I, now.

“Indeed.” Petyr looked at her critically, eyes sharp. “In my experience, every man or woman is defined by two features: the things they love, and the things they hate. Answer me, sweet thing, who did Jon Snow love, and who did he hate? And where does his family fall on that spectrum?”

Alayne gulped. “Arya. He used to love Arya.” Her lips pursed. “And Robb too. As for hate… I don’t know. Maybe Mother? Jon never liked the way Mother treated him.”

“Hmmm… one last question, and please consider it carefully. Do you think the bastard brother that you knew could grow to be a cruel man? Could he be vengeful, evil even?”

“I… I do not know,” Alayne admitted. A year ago, she might have replied “No”, but she had learned not to underestimate cruelty and its wickedness.


“Why are you asking me such things?” she asked. “What is Jon to you?”

“It appears that Jon Snow is causing waves in the north. And in quite a spectacular fashion too,” Petyr said, keeping his voice low. “Many of my plans for the north threaten to be undone by a bastard that I never even knew existed. So now, I must decide whether to try to stem the tide, or let the chaos run its course.”

“Jon is on the Wall. He joined the Night’s Watch.”

“Was on the Wall,” he corrected, and then paused. “Well, he still is on the Wall, but he’s most certainly not a sworn brother anymore.”

“What has he done?” she asked, voice trembling. Seeing Petyr so concerned made her nervous.

He forced a smile, but then seemed to hesitate. “Nothing you need concern yourself over. Forgive me, sweet Alayne, it has been a long trip and I am quite tired. I should not have pressed my burdens onto you.”

She just stared. Petyr smiled again, before standing up and retiring to his study. He kissed her on the lips before he left. Alayne wasn't sure what to do. The corridor was silent as she walked away.

Jon, she thought. What could Jon possibly have done at the Wall that could make Petyr so concerned?

She felt numb as she retreated to her own chambers. She passed Ser Jorah and Ser Shadrich, their eyes on her as she walked quickly through the hall. MaesterColemon found her to say that Sweetrobin was calling for her, but Alayne was in no mood for the lordling’s attention. Instead, she claimed she had a headache and excused herself to her chambers.

In her room, she closed the door and collapsed into her mattress. She felt tears in her eyes.
What is wrong with me? What is wrong with me, that even the thought of Winterfell again makes me cry?

The wound left by her family never healed. It was more than a scar, it was like a missing limb. Like the loss of her brothers, her sister, mother and father had cut something away from her.

I am not that person anymore. I am Alayne Stone, betrothed to the heir of the Vale. I am happy here. I have a new life.

She would have to clean herself up before leaving her room. She could not allow anyone to see her cry.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Dealing with dragons in Westeros again; problems at Castle Black, the duties of a king, and the founding of the Dragonguard.

Sam

They locked and barred the tower door. The captive brothers of the Night’s Watch were split between the storerooms, barracks, stables or cells of the castle, with no more than ten per group. The wildlings would lock the doors and stand guard outside, ensuring no sworn brother could even try to assemble or move against them.

_We’re captives now_, Sam thought with a gulp, _captives in our own castle_. He supposed it was better than being executed, but from the look in some of the wildings’ eyes he wasn’t sure that they wouldn’t be.

Sam ended up confined in the rookery, along with Maester Aemon, Clydas, Bowen Marsh and Othell Yarwyck. There weren’t enough bunks, so Sam had to sleep on the floor by the fireplace. The wildlings had already ransacked the tower for anything that could be used as a weapon, right down to the quills, as well as stealing anything of value. They would have stolen Aemon’s chain too, except the old man refused to part with it even under threat of violence.

It was a bitter night. The next morning was bitter too. Bowen Marsh paced constantly, convinced that the wildlings would have them all executed. _Did I make a mistake releasing Mance Rayder from his cell?_ Sam wondered. _Edd will tell all the others what I did, and they will curse me for it._

Come evening, a double-chested man built like a keg pushed through the doorway, flanked by two others. The whole rookery froze in fear. The wildling looked around the quarters. “You,” the wildling ordered, pointing at Sam. “Fat boy. Come.”

Sam squealed. “Come where?”

“Now.”

The wildlings had axes. Sam’s hands were trembling as the man grabbed him and dragged him roughly out of the room. Nobody else said a word, and the wildlings barred the door behind him.

The wildling frogmarched Sam out into the courtyard. The snow was thick underfoot. He had never seen Castle Black so wild – thousands of wildlings were hollered around campfires in the castle grounds. Celebrating and feasting on the sworn brother’s stores. The scene looked mad, savage, highlighted by fires in the black night.

Sam glimpsed a fourteen-foot-tall figure stomping around the grounds, roaring. A giant. The sight made his knees so weak the wildling had to kick him to keep him moving.

_He’s taking me to the King’s Tower_, Sam realised. _Jon?_

His heart was in his mouth as he was walked through the reinforced oak and steel doors, and up the
A heavyset wildling grunted as he stepped away from Sam.

Mance stood at last. It wasn’t Jon waiting for him behind the desk in the solar, though; instead Sam saw a gaunt, pale figure cradling his fingers. Mance Rayder looked at him and just nodded. The heavyset wildling grunted as he stepped away from Sam.

Mance could only stare. It had only been twenty-four hours, but Mance looked so different. Gone were the foul rags and filth; now he had been washed, and dressed in wool and leather. Three guards in the room stared at Sam suspiciously.

“Tarly,” said Mance, his voice still raw. He looked weary but alert. “Samwell Tarly, I hear?”

Sam could only nod.

“You are of House Tarly, I take it? What is it, Horn Hill?”

“Yes,” Sam said weakly. “Lord Randyll Tarly’s son.”

“Indeed. I trust you can read and write?” Sam nodded. “Good, I need you to write a letter for me, Tarly. Several, in fact.”

Sam hesitated. “Who to?”

“Denys Mallister, for now,” said Mance. “The Magnar of Thenn has already left for the Shadow Tower, and I would like to encourage the good ser to surrender. You will write how all of the sworn brothers who surrendered here have remained unharmed.”

That was a lie, for Sam knew of at least three who had been executed and five who had been beaten, but he nodded in any case. Mance dictated the words and Sam wrote them. It was a very firmly worded message, short and to the point. There would be a few hundred in the Shadow Tower against several thousand. Afterwards, Sam read it back, before placing it before Mance to check. Mance couldn’t even hold a parchment with his ruined hands.

Sam could feel the wildling guards staring at him with evil eyes. He couldn’t stop trembling. “How are your brothers?” Mance asked finally, as his eyes roamed over the parchment.

“Scared,” Sam replied truthfully.

“Understandable. Also necessary.” Mance looked up at him with curiosity. “Answer me, Samwell; why did you release me from those cells?”

“I was afraid for my brother’s lives, Your Grace…um, my lord…?”

“Spare the titles, they aren’t due,” said Mance. “But that was an awfully brave act for a scared man.”

“I was awfully scared.”

A pale ghost of a smile passed over Mance’s face. The former King-Beyond-the-Wall looked at him critically. “Indeed. You need not return to the maester’s quarters, Samwell; I want you by my side.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “You want me to be your steward?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I want you to be my deputy. I have been granted command of Castle Black, and I’m choosing you as my lieutenant.”

Sam stared with disbelief, stammering to try and form words. Mance just shrugged. “You proved
yourself smart, and capable, and I want smart and capable men next to me. You clearly care for your sworn brothers, but you can work with free folk too. So yes, you’ll do as my second-in-command.”

“No,” Sam gulped. “You shouldn’t, this… this looks like a reward.” Mance’s brow raised. “A reward for freeing you. I don’t want a reward for freeing you, my lord, I don’t want anything.” The sworn brothers will hate me. Despise me. I will be joining the wildlings in their eyes.

“The ‘reward’ is an offer,” Mance replied coolly. “If you believe that you can help those who you call brothers – to help me help them – then you will accept the position for them. Otherwise, I will give the position to a capable free folk instead, who may not care as much for the black brothers as you would.”

“But… but…” Sam squirmed, meeting Mance eyes. He didn’t have the appearance or the rank of a king, but he had the gaze of one.

“You are scared of what your sworn brothers would think of you working under me,” Mance said sharply. Sam could only nod. “Then that is your choice. But I think you will do what is for the best of the Watch. As you did before.”

There was a pause. Sam shifted on the spot, staring at the worn but rich carpet of the King’s Tower. It was already filthy from wildling boots. “Where is Jon Snow?” Sam asked finally.

“Away, preparing for the march against the Shadow Tower. I suspect he will be back shortly, however.”

Sam nodded, biting his lip. “There is something you must know…” he murmured. “Castle Black was attacked, the Wall breached…”

“Oh. You mean the white walker that escaped south.” Sam stared. “You know?”

Mance nodded. “From interrogating the prisoner.” That phrase caused Sam to squirm. How many fingers had been broken? “I heard the tale. Jon… ahem… King Snow was quite concerned. The Night’s Watch may not have had the manpower to mount a search for the Other, but the free folk do. Once we are secure in our position, there will be free folk raiding parties hunting the creature down.”

His mouth stammered. “Normal swords won’t hurt it,” Sam said, remembering what the three-eyed crow told him. “You need Valyrian steel or dragonglass.”

“Snow said the same thing,” Mance said, narrowing his eyes. “Valyrian steel is in short supply, but we have two dozen or so obsidian arrows, and a few daggers. They’ll be spread around our best hunters and archers.”

Sam blinked, struggling to respond. Mance cocked his head. “Was that why you chose our side when taking the castle? You were concerned about the true enemy?”

“In part,” Sam admitted. “But there’s more.”

He hesitated. Mance’s eyes narrowed. “Yes?”

I have to tell him, Sam thought. He had to tell him everything that happened, but… “You’ll think I’m crazy,” Sam promised.
“I will reserve judgement on that. Now what has you so concerned to speak?”

Sam bit his lip, well-aware of how it sounded. “Have you ever heard of a person called the last greenseer?” he asked hesitantly.

Mance didn’t reply. Sam told him everything that had happened that night. Unlike every sworn brother in the castle, Mance sat and listened.

---

**Jon**

His grey destrier pounded through the snowdrifts, while Jon’s eyes were peeled in the distance. Fourteen other riders galloped besides him, some with spears but most with willow longbows. The snow-ploughed plains leading up towards the mountains stretched out in front of them, dappled with white-capped sentinel pines.

Ygon Oldfather had gifted Jon the speckled grey and black destrier when he arrived at Castle Black. Doubtless it had been taken from the Night’s Watch stables, but it was a strong mount with a good temperament, and Jon had been grateful. Jon was even considering taking the horse to warg with – the ability to skinchange into a mount seemed very appealing – once the animal was more comfortable with him.

“These mountains clans of yours,” Hatch called to Jon as their party stopped. “Are they going to be an enemy?”

“Perhaps.” *Most likely.* “The mountains clans are old, dating back to the First Men themselves. They’ve been fighting against wildlings for time immemorable, and they won’t be happy to see so many pass,” Jon replied.

“And this is the place?” Ygon Oldfather called, a one-eyed, aging warrior who rode as strongly as a man half his age.

“Aye,” Jon said, pointing out over the foothills leading towards the northern mountains. Grey-green sentinels, spruce, fir and soldier pines littered landscapes. “Clan Norrey keeps a holdfast nestled in the hills just over the ridge. They have long been friends to the Night’s Watch; there is regular trade between them and they’ve came to brothers’ aid more than once.” He shifted his grey to have a look, trying to remember. “Further over the valley are the First Flints, the Wulls, the Burleys and Liddles. Clan Wull is the most powerful of the clans.”

“And how many men do they have?” Hatch asked.

“Three thousand fighting men in total, perhaps. Some regard the mountain clans as primitive, but my father once said that the north had none more loyal and steadfast than them.”

“Three thousand,” Hatch murmured. “We could take those numbers easily.”

He shook his head. “No. If we fight every force against us then we’ll lose men quickly. We will treat with the mountain clans, not fight with them. We will approach Norrey under a truce, and then negotiate with the rest.”

“Easier said than done,” Haldur Two-Notch called, the most keen-eyed of them as he scouted over the pass. “There are bowmen waiting on that ridge. At least a dozen.”
Jon frowned, squinting at the rocks and outcrops where the man was pointing. A faint slurry of snow obscured the scene. “I see nothing.”

“Aye, they’re wearing white cloaks,” Haldur explained. “But you can catch them when they move. There’ll be another bunch over on that side, by those rocks, and probably another group in the trees there and there.”

The horse whinnied, as it paced over the clearing. Jon tried to follow where the raider pointed. Parties overlooking the uphill approach, Jon realised. The mountain clans had no castles, but they knew how to fortify the terrain. If we bring our horses much closer into bow range then things will be bloody.

Haldur looked like he was having similar thoughts. “Snow, you could lose two hundred men against two dozen up those slopes,” he warned.

“You’ve seen tactics like this before?”

“I’ve used tactics like this before,” the lean man scoffed. “If they know what they’re doing, there’ll be pitfall traps and rocks rigged as well. You want to get into those mountains, you can’t use horses. You need men on foot moving slowly in small groups with bowmen of our own.”

Jon nodded, staring out over the distance. “And then that would guarantee a fight.”

“If they want a fight then we’d be better off giving them one,” Ygon called.

“Not today.”

Jon had wanted to make contact with the mountains clans, to offer peace, but those bowmen would be more likely to shoot first and talk later. He seriously considered moving forward anyway under a branch of truce, but he had no idea how they would react. It’s too risky, he decided. At least with this group.

“Alright, we fall back for now,” Jon ordered. “We need scouts with horses on the plains here, to watch for any force of men coming against us. I’ll arrange an envoy to head for the mountain clans.” I need to find free folk with the right temperament to broker peace between age-old enemies. Difficult. “They know we’re here, but let’s not drag ourselves into a fight.”

He glanced around, causing his grey to shimmy. “There’s a tower fairly close to here,” Jon said to Hatch, pointing. “A place called Queenscrown. It’s a ruin, but it’s defendable. Hatch, I want you to put together a force to hold Queenscrown, to form a perimeter across the Gift.”

Haldur and three other men agreed to linger to scout the route to the mountains, and Jon promised to send reinforcements to them shortly. Hatch turned to head back to Castle Black to gather the men.

Ygon Oldfather nodded, clutching the reins of his mare. “Aye. Back to Castle Black, then?”

“Not yet,” Jon said. “I sent Soren Shieldbreaker south down the kingsroad with a group of men to scout out Last Hearth. We ride southeast, and see if we can meet up with them.”

There were nods, stirrups whipped and the horses neighed as they started a quick gallop down the plains. There were so many who could be rallying against them, Jon needed to reach out gingerly to each northern house. Worrisome, particularly with the looming threat of storms. The last thing he wanted was to end up snowed-in at Castle Black while the northern houses rallied against the free folk. A truce must be brokered quickly.
House Umber and the mountains clans were the largest concerns. Both were significant forces, both with plenty of reasons to despise free folk. The Boltons and the Iron Throne might rally tens of thousands against them, but they were further away while Last Hearth was very close.

They rode until late evening. Everything was hectic managing the campaign, but it was worth the trip just to scout the landscape alone. Every valley or hill, Jon imagined how he would fight a battle there.

He saw the group of wildlings camped by the edge of the kingsroad, huddled into the forest. Horns blew as watchers spotted Jon’s party. Soren Shieldbreaker’s warband was mostly on foot, but large enough to secure a location by the road, but with orders to hold position and fortify rather than assault.

Soren Shieldbreaker met Jon as he dismounted, with a deep nod. “Snow,” the raider greeted, grey whiskers flecked with frost. “No dragon?”

“Sonagon is roosting at Castle Black,” he replied. “I’m here to check on the situation.”

“Situation,” Soren grunted, clutching his axe in his hand. “You mean freezing our asses off sitting here? You said I wasn’t to attack.”

“You’re not. You’re to hold the road,” said Jon, dropping to the ground with a wince. “Has anyone scouted out Last Hearth yet?”

“Aye, I sent four of my men forward to your keep. No return yet.” He paused. “However, I did pick up a few stragglers around the forest. They were heading your way.”

Jon frowned. Spies? Scouts? Soren Shieldbreaker led the way to the centre of the camp, and Jon saw seven men fastened around a tree with hemp rope that knotted and bound and across their wrists. All of them were men, the eldest looked over forty, the youngest barely seventeen. They wore old, ruined leathers and woollen jerkins. They aren't dressed like soldiers, Jon thought.

“Were they armed?”

“One was. With a bow,” said Soren. “Said they were hunters.”

Jon paused, looking between scared eyes and shivering bodies. These aren’t enemies, these are smallfolk. His hands clenched. “Why are they in binds?”

Soren frowned. “You said not to kill anyone.”

“And why do you view these men as enemies at all?” Jon demanded.

“Well, they ain't free folk, are they?”

Some of the captives were shivering and weeping. They were trapped, bound to a tree with no fire to warm them. A few had bleeding wrists from the rope.

“Release them,” Jon ordered harshly. “We will not terrorise smallfolk. There is no need.”

They’re not free folk, Soren had said. The wildlings viewed anyone who wasn't them as an enemy; they would treat commoners the same as they would enemy soldiers. We will not last long if that attitude prevails.

If the wildlings terrorised smallfolk, then the lords and highborn would never, ever treat with them.
Jon highly doubted that Soren would have unbound the men even after the free folk marched out. Even if Soren followed Jon’s orders and didn’t kill, they would happily leave these men bound to a tree in the wilderness.

*I only discovered this because I happened to stop by,* Jon thought. The wildling army was already occupying two castles and several villages around the Gift. *How many other commoners are being treated this way?*

The wildlings gruffly cut their prisoner’s binds. The hunters looked scared out of their wits. *I must be more careful,* Jon cursed. *This is the wildlings’ nature, and I must work harder to overcome it.*

“Hail,” Jon called to one of the men, stepping forward. Jon’s guards huddled protectively around him. “Where are you from?”

One of the eldest, a thin, gaunt man with a heavily wrinkled face like gnarly bark, gulped nervously. “We don’t want no bother. Just passing through, we never… we never knew…”

They stared at him with pure fear. “These men were too zealous, I apologise,” said Jon, glancing around. “But you were still trespassing and we have valid reason to beware spies. Now answer; where are you from, and where were you heading?”

“Mole’s Town,” the man muttered shakily. “I have two sisters there. My name’s Yorrick, m– m’lord. Three of us are from House Forrester, another four stragglers picked up along the way. We were heading to Last Hearth, when…”

His voice, glancing around the armed wildlings surrounding them. “When what?” Jon demanded.

“Fighting, m’lord,” another of the group said. He was a younger boy, with a stocky, podgy build, red face and wide pale eyes. “We heard fighting at Last Hearth, and we don’t want no part of that. I joined the group to get away from it, safety in numbers.”

“Fighting. Who was fighting who?”

“I don’t know… I never got close enough to see,” he said shakily. “If it weren’t, well, you, then it must have been flayed men.”

Jon paused. *Boltons attacking Umbers?* “What is your name?”

“Harlow, m’lord,” the younger man replied uncertainly. He bowed his head again quickly.

“Please,” Yorrick begged. “We are three hunters, one crofter, and two farmers. We don’t mean no trouble.”

“And these men could tell your northern lords exactly where we’re camped and how many numbers we have,” Soren Shieldbreaker warned.

“Let them. It is hardly a secret and I imagine a dozen other scouts will have done the same by now. The best scouts are the ones you don’t see.” He turned towards the captives. “Yorrick, your sisters are safe. Mole Town is under our occupation, but no one has been hurt.” *That I know of,* he thought grimly. *Might need to check.* “If you wish, I can take you to her. My party will be returning to Castle Black in any case.”

Yorrick didn’t respond, but he still looked scared. Harlow’s mouth hung open. *What am I going to do with them?* Jon cursed. *Forcing them away could be a death sentence in war-torn lands. And there is a white walker on the loose.*
He made the decision quickly. “There will likely be fighting in these parts, and I wouldn’t see anyone caught up in that. If you wish, you can join me to the camp at Castle Black. If nothing else, I can offer a meal and a fire for the night.”

Soren looked unhappy, but he didn’t say anything. All of the wildlings just glared. The men didn’t reply either, just nervous nods. Jon caught Harlow staring him intently through the corner of his gaze. They still think they’re prisoners, Jon thought. Perhaps they are.

Still, panic among the smallfolk was the last thing Jon needed. *I need to set a precedent, to make sure the wildlings can get along with the northmen rather than fight them.* It was a task that would only get more urgent the further south his army expanded.

Jon ordered some men to escort the hunters up the kingsroad, and told Soren Shieldbreaker to hold his position. News of fighting at Last Hearth was unsettling, and Jon couldn’t charge into an unknown battle.

*Perhaps I should take Sonagon to Last Hearth,* he thought. Jon could feel the dragon now, roosting atop the tower at Castle Black. Sonagon would sleep, but then he would need to fly again. Too much to do and not enough time, Jon cursed.

He debated returning to Castle Black, but the thought of those men’s treatment gave him pause. There were three other perimeter hosts led by Gerrick Kingsblood, Morna White Mask and Haldur Bullspear. Jon took a dozen riders to tour the other hosts, to check how they were treating any northmen they encountered. *I won’t let any claim ignorance as an excuse for raiding.*

Before long, the whole of the Gift would be under wildling control. *My control.* Expanses of vast, untamed forests, crags and mountains fifty leagues south of the Wall that Jon somehow needed to manage.

He spent the rest of the day riding through the plains and flurries, between the forests all the way up to Sable Hall. Morna White Mask reported coming across two abandoned homesteads, but little sign of any northmen moving against them. There was a chill hovering over the land that threatened a cold storm.

By the time he finally headed back to Castle Black, it was dusk and the setting sun threw long shadows across the snow. Castle Black was a shadowy silhouette in the distance, flooded by the wildling camp spilling out of it.

Castle Black was already overflowing. In the courtyard, they were only halfway through excavating the sealed tunnel to open the gate again, but already more and more free folk were already waiting on the other side ready to come through.

Jon heard the activity in the castle from the plains, stirring his destrier into a gallop. He heard the horn blast as the watchers saw him, but it sounded strained.

Sonagon was snoozing atop his perch, a white shape draping over Hardin’s Tower. Hardin’s Tower was a large tower with a dangerous lean, and the dragon roosted on the broken roof by using dragonfire to form a nest of ice around the top. Jon could see the glittering white ice glinting in the sun, cracking through broken stones.

Jon knew something was wrong as soon as he approached. He heard shouting, and saw men rippling across the perimeter. Jon’s hand instinctively went to his sword, but it didn’t look like there was any fighting. More panic.
As soon as his grey rode into the courtyard, Jon heard mutters and saw suspicious glares. The whole camp was silent, everyone looking at him. Shivers went down his spine.

“What happened?” he demanded, to no one in particular. His guards looked confused too. “What’s going on?”

He dropped off his horse. Everyone avoided his gaze. He saw Val’s blond hair whipping as she glared at him. “Snow,” Val growled. “What the bloody hells are you playing at?”

“What are you talking about?” Jon replied, eyes narrowing.

“Mole’s Town, Snow,” she snapped. “Why did you do it?”

“I did nothing.”

“Your dragon did.”

It didn’t take long for him to mount up his horse again and ride out down the road. Others followed. He could see wafts of steam in the distance, men scattered about the road. He heard somebody wailing.

As soon as he passed a bend in the road, he saw the jagged plumes of ice and torn up ground.

Behind him, in the distance, Sonagon was still sleeping on his tower, but the dragon’s snout and claws were filthy. Jon’s breath froze with the sight of the icy spikes jabbing out of the earth where Mole’s Town used to be.

Oh no no no…

Jon stared across the field, at what little remained of Mole’s Town. He felt his hands clench, his shoulders stiff. The cold had warped and distorted the earth itself, the whole ground swollen and cracked. Wooden buildings had to exploded and then frozen into twisted, jagged ruins.

Only this morning he had passed by the small village, and now there wasn’t a building left intact. The destruction looked hours old, but the ice was still steaming.

His grey whinnied, nervous to move any further. Death and destruction was as thick as the cold in the air. Jon’s mouth hung open, head spinning.

There were men gathered around, but nobody seemed to approach the icy ruins. Jon heard a spearwife sobbing by one of the frozen spikes. Her hands were bleeding from trying to scrape uselessly through the wreckage.

The air felt so cold that it hurt in his chest.

“… How many?” Jon asked with a pause, dreading the answer.

“Forty-three, by my count,” his man, Wulf, said with a grunt. Free folk cautiously surrounded the icy ruin, everyone staring back at Jon. “Maybe some got away, but I doubt it.”

Half of Mole Town had been underground, but Sonagon had destroyed it in a single explosion of dragonfire. Afterwards, the dragon had dug the ground and ice upwards to eat the frozen bodies. The earth was jagged from where huge claws ripped open the exploded buildings.

Mole’s Town had been small village, but there was barely anything left of it.
Jon’s heart was beating. His grey shimmied in the icy field. “Who?”

Wulf scratched his lip. “Let’s see… a dozen whores or so that didn’t run, some farmers, a couple of children.” Children. His heart skipped a beat. “A few free folk from the east coast. I think two or so Night’s Watch deserters as well. They were all in the village when your dragon attacked.”

“The free folk? What were they doing? Raiding?”

“Nah, guarding. Most of Mole’s Town fled before the battle, but some lingered. Mance offered them all protection, sent a few of his men to guard the place. The Night’s Watch been visiting there too – Mance said that the crows could keep the whores, to help calm tensions.”

Why didn’t I feel it happening? I wasn’t close enough to Sonagon, or was I too distracted?

He felt like screaming. He wanted to scream. Forty-three dead, their bodies scorched by ice and then devoured.

If any raider or sworn brother had butchered forty-three men, Jon would have had them hung. But how on earth am I meant to punish a dragon? Am I fool enough to try?

He stared at the destruction of Mole’s Town. Why did Sonagon do such a thing?

No, that’s a fool’s question too. Sonagon did it simply because he was hungry. That was his nature. The dragon had no concept of laws, or even right or wrong. Humans might as well be cattle to Sonagon. The dragon had eaten men before, during battle. The only difference was that Sonagon recognised some humans as ‘these men will feed me’ and others as ‘these men are food’.

Sonagon must have become peckish as he snoozed, flew off, and then went back to sleep. He killed forty-three men as easily as a terrier would kill a pack of rodents.

“I met some hunters in the forest,” Jon said slowly. “I had men escort them back to Mole’s Town.” Yorrick had two sisters.

“Oh aye, they’re dead. I think that’s what tipped the dragon off – it must have seen men approach and got curious.”

“All of them?” Jon demanded. “They’re all dead?”

“I think three of them went ahead into the camp. Only the ones who lingered in Mole’s Town died.”

Only the men visiting their sisters.

Sonagon knew through Jon that Castle Black was his. But Jon had thought nothing about any humans in Mole’s Town, outside of the castle. As far as Sonagon was concerned, the village had just been a convenient little pantry of forty-three tasty snacks.

How many others had the dragon eaten? How many hunters in the woods, or farmers in the fields? None that Jon was aware, but it was only a matter of time.

I had only been away for such a short trip too. The dragon had seemed so content roosting over Castle Black when he had left.

He heard screaming. A woman was shouting at him. She looked over forty with a leathery face and tears running down her cheeks. “You bastard!” The woman screamed. Jon recognised her; Zei, a
whore from the brothel. “You did this! You bastard! You bastard!”

The woman looked grief-stricken, charging at Jon. A few of the free folks drew their blades. “No!” Jon snapped. He glanced at the woman, but breathing deeply and unable to speak.

She picked up a stone, ready to throw at him. Wulf scowled, jumping off his horse to restrain her. “You bastard!” Zei bellowed. “YOU BASTARD!”

There was no choice and nothing he could do. Jon turned and rode back to the castle.

*She is right to demand vengeance too,* he thought hollowly. *But what can I do? Chain the dragon? Lash the dragon? Execute the dragon? Sonagon would kill Jon himself if he tried. There were no chains strong enough to hold a beast of Sonagon’s size, not here.*

*No, the fault is mine,* he thought coldly. *Sonagon is just an animal – a smart animal, but a beast nonetheless. He’s my responsibility, I’m the one who should be lashed.*

Anyone who hated him, and there were many who did, just received forty-three additional reasons to do so.

*I can’t leave Sonagon again,* Jon thought. *Ever. I have to stay by the dragon’s side constantly.* It had been fine north of the wall while Sonagon had been injured and didn’t move so much, but now Sonagon was becoming more restless.

*And when the food runs out?* Sonagon could eat as much as a small army all by himself. There were many free folk to feed, and the Night’s Watch rations had already been depleted. Come winter many men would starve at this rate, but with Sonagon they might not reach winter at all.

First, they were already sacrificing livestock to feed the dragon. Soon, they would have to start killing horses too.

All eyes were on him as the riders rode into the castle. Jon kept his face hard. *I can’t show emotion, can’t show weakness.*

He glimpsed Sam staring at him from the steps of the rookery with an expression of horror on his face. He saw Bowen Marsh, Donnel Hill, Hairy Hal and Pypar lingering by the Flint Barracks with angry, resentful glares. They looked too scared to even raise their voices with so many wildlings around. All eyes seemed fixed on him. *We have only just convinced the first of the sworn brothers to resume their duties rather than stay in chains, but what man of the Night’s Watch would work with wildlings now?*

The men of the Night’s Watch were outnumbered fifteen to one. Two hundred men of the black were still in Castle Black. Another seven men had joined Ser Alliser on the chopping block in the first two days, but after a few futile revolts or protests most had settled in simmering resentment.

The Shadow Tower was the last holdout for the men of the Night’s Watch, but not for long. Both Tormund and Sigorn were leading forces to take the Shadow Tower. Ser Denys Mallister refused to surrender, but he couldn’t last. There was little doubt that the Shadow Tower would break.

Tormund sent word that there could be up to four hundred men holding the Shadow Tower, men who had fled west all the way from Eastwatch as the Wall fell. Combined with the two hundred men held in Castle Black, Jon guessed that there were fewer than six hundred sworn brothers left.

Only six hundred. There had been a thousand, when Jon joined. Doubtless more would fall when they took the Shadow Tower. The Night’s Watch might well have been cut in half.
If only they had yielded, Jon thought. If only they had yielded and seen the true enemy. None needed to die at all. It was a bitter thought.

He saw Mance Rayder waiting for him outside of the keep. The man was clean-shaven again, still with a gaunt face, yet he looked much fuller wearing a thick hauberk and leathers. He wasn’t quite walking by himself, and still with a severe limp. He wore thick gloves to hide broken fingers. Maester Aemon had tried to treat Mance’s poorly-healed fingers, but Jon doubted if his hands would ever be the same again.

“Snow,” Mance said, his voice hard and arms folded. “A word.”

Jon was fumed quietly as they stepped aside. Mance winced as he tried to stagger forward. Jon saw the eyes watching him. “It won’t happen again,” said Jon.

“Is that so?” Mance grunted. He kept his voice low because of those watching. “How many?”

“Forty-three.”

Mance thought about it. “Five leagues further south, your dragon would have reached the first areas of farmland and homesteads. It could have quite easily been five times that many. A bit further still, and that’s Last Hearth. That would be a banquet for the dragon, I suspect.”

“I said, it won’t happen again,” he growled.

“And you’ll swear that, can you?” said Mance. “Promise it on your honour?”

Jon didn’t reply. “Course not,” Mance grunted. “That’s because it’s a dragon and not even you can control it all times.”

“I won’t let it happen again,” Jon growled, eyes blazing.

“Words are wind, Snow. We need actions.” Mance met his gaze with hard-worn eyes. “If your dragon needs to eat, needs to hunt, then I’m sure we can find hordes of enemies, but not whores and children.”

“I’ll fly Sonagon to Eastwatch,” Jon promised. “I’ll double feeding times. The host there and the fishing boats could supply for him.”

“For a while,” Mance agreed. “But no matter what, sooner or later there are going to be a lot of folk starving – but that dragon needs to eat.”

Jon couldn’t argue with that. “How bad is this?”

Mance snorted. “Well, it won’t be a picnic,” he said dryly. He hesitated. “But we can handle it this time. They’ll be a few angry and a lot more worried, but we can handle the deaths of some whores and farmers. Though if it happens again…”

“It won’t,” Jon hesitated, with a gulp. *I must make sure of it.* “How many chains are in Castle Black?” He demanded.

“What?”

“Chains,” Jon insisted. “What are the thickest chains do you think we could have forged? Enough to hold a dragon?”

“Oh no.” Mance shook his head, eyes wide. “You cannot be serious. You mean to chain your
“Forty-three people are dead, Mance,” Jon growled.

“And how many more will die if that dragon is chained when we need it?”

“That doesn’t make it right!” Jon snapped. “There must be justice. Lives need to mean something. How can you just brush off murder because it’s… it’s inconvenient?”

“I don’t bloody know what’s right,” Mance hissed. “And lower your bloody voice. But I do know that if you try to chain that dragon up, then that ain’t going to end very well.”

His jaw clenched. Mance looked down on him, with a curt nod as he walked away. “I can handle the men, Snow, but you need to take care of the dragon. Sort it out.”

My father would surely execute any beast that killed forty-three people, Jon thought.

Jon wanted to hit something. It would be easier if he could. If this was a fight he could handle it.

Jon glimpsed two of the hunters he met – Harlow, he recalled, and one other – gaping upwards at the dragon with open mouths. Jon might have approached them, but what would he say? I’m sorry my dragon has just eaten your companions?

Instead he walked on, needing time alone. The shape of Hardin’s Tower had never looked so foreboding.

Jon spent a long time pacing in his bare quarters as night fell, staring upwards, through the stone and ice towards where Sonagon slept. He wondered if the dragon even knew what he had done. Probably, Sonagon just wouldn’t care.

Jon wasn’t in control of Sonagon, not really. The dragon tolerated Jon, even followed him, but Sonagon would still have his own way more often than not.

Aegon and his sisters brought dragons to the realm three hundred years ago, he thought suddenly. The Valyrians rode dragons for centuries. Someone must have had this same problem before.

Now how did the Targaryens of old used to keep their dragons under control? It was hard to say, when the last Targaryen dragon died a hundred and fifty years ago.

Jon paused, as the idea came to him. He changed out of his sweaty riding leathers into wool and furs, and then broke his fast on dried meat rations from his bags. He had no inclination to wait for his guards, so he moved by himself.

He walked quickly out into the courtyard, heading towards the rookery at the far end of the castle. He knocked twice, and the door opened quickly. Jon took deep breath, forcing his body to stay steady.

“Just a minu – oh,” Sam gasped. Jon saw Sam’s face widen in shock at the sight of him. His mouth stammered.

“Hello Sam,” Jon said softly. “I would like to speak to Maester Aemon.”

The rookery was one part the free folk stay clear of. After settling in, they had left Maester Aemon, Sam and Clydas mostly alone. There were no guards posted on them, they slept in their own quarters. The ravens were important, but the free folk were unused to sending letters.
Still, Jon wondered if Sam would ever stop staring at him like he barely knew him. “Who is it, Samwell?” Maester Aemon croaked from the room.

“Umm… ermm… King Jon, maester,” Sam squeaked, stepping aside. Sam seemed nervous even just being in his presence. Do I really frighten him that much now? “Your Grace.”

“In private Jon is fine, Sam,” said Jon, stepping inside and nodding. Gods it feels so long since I was last here. How things have changed – it feels surreal. “Maester.”

“Your Grace,” Aemon said with a blind nod, shuffling to his feet. His old bones seemed to creak. “Although I must admit, I am uncertain of the honorific to use. They call you king yet I do not believe anyone bows, or that you wear a crown.”

“I ask for neither,” Jon said. “I am king because I rule, and that’s enough. So long as they obey, then I don’t see the crown as important.”

Aemon nodded. “Very well. But if I may say so, men must see respect being acknowledged for it to be solidified. The crown and the courtesies exist for a reason. I would advise you to either take a crown or do not, but don’t try to live in limbo.”

“And do you have a problem with that?”

“Me? No.” The maester’s wrinkled hand clutched his chain. “I am but a maester. It is my place to obey and to teach; never to rule and never to judge. For better, or for worse, you are in charge here, King Snow, and I will acknowledge that.” He lowered his head respectfully.

“Sam,” Jon turned to his friend. “I hear that you have been working with Mance.”

Sam nodded meekly. He hardly looked like the picture of a wildling leader’s lieutenant, but Mance seemed to be satisfied. He paused. “I also heard the tale you told Mance,” said Jon, his voice low. He blustered. “You did?”

“Aye. Mance told me last night.” You met the greenseer too.

“Mance didn’t believe me,” Sam squeaked.

“He did,” Jon promised. “I told him to.” Sam’s eyes flickered. Maester Aemon didn’t seem to react. “… We will talk later, Sam.”

Jon suspected that the three-eyed crow had saved Sam because he had known Sam was Jon’s friend. He must have wanted Sam to pass on the information to me, Jon decided. The three-eyed crow was clever and powerful enough to control events like this.

It made Jon wonder how many other strings the greenseer was pulling. There were too many coincidences that Jon was starting to suspect the greenseer’s hand in. Mother Mole’s prophecy, the support he had gathered at Hardhome, the wildlings flocking to him… the three-eyed crow could have easily been manipulating events. Now did the greenseer also manipulate Stannis and that Red Woman into attacking us? Jon mused.

It was a question for another day. He had to focus.

“I am looking for books on dragons,” Jon said, glancing around. “There are old tomes here, are there not?”
“Ah, of course. Come in,” Maester Aemon said, shuffling with his cane. “I have been expecting that you might stop by.”

“You have?”

“Hoping, is a better word, perhaps.” Maester Aemon walked slowly, towards the staircase heading downwards into the lower stacks in the wormwalks, leading down to the vaults. Sam hesitated in the quarters, unsure as to follow. Eventually, Sam lingered behind.

“How much on dragons?” Jon asked. How to control them?

“Too little,” Aemon sighed. “And too much unsorted and undocumented. Yet I have a selection of books prepared that may be of interest. Samwell has been assisting me. The Citadel would be a better source for dragonlore, yet the Night’s Watch has its archives too.”

The air was cold, but still and dry. Jon saw gloomy stacks of bound shelves looming below him, stretching outwards into the vaults of Castle Black. Each shelf was sealed; some with markings on them but most blank. He heard rats skittering in the darkness.

The maester stopped to motion at a lantern hanging on the wall. Jon paused to pick the rusty thing off its hook, lighting it before moving down into the narrow, dusty corridor. Aemon seemed to count the steps in the dark.

“The gods continue to be cruel, it seems,” Aemon mused softly. His voice even sounded like dry paper. “All my life, I have longed to see a dragon. And now, there is one right outside my very door, but alas, I am unable to see it.”

Jon wasn’t sure how to reply. “I... I am sorry.” He paused. “You are Aemon Targaryen. You have studied dragons?”

“Obsessed over them, in my youth. I was first drawn to the path of a maester as a means to discover more about them. Before I took the black, I would even say that I read every tome on dragonlore in the Citadel, bar one.”

“Bar one? Which one?”

“‘Blood and Fire’, “Aemon said wistfully. “‘The Death of Dragons’, a manuscript which only the Grand Maesters themselves are allowed to lay eyes on.”

He kept working towards a dusty oak at the far corner between the stacks, with a dozen half-burned tallow candles and four neat stacks of leather bound books. Some of the older books were wrapped in old vinegar-soaked clothes to preserve them against the cold, and the dust was so thick that even Jon was wheezing. Aemon sighed.

“How I miss my sight...” he muttered, his hands fumbling softly in the gloom. Jon blinked, reaching for another candle. “May I present the single most precious book in this collection,” he explained, pointing to an old, black bound tome four inches thick. “‘Dragons, Wyrms and Wyverns: Their Unnatural History’, by Septon Barth, Hand of the King for Jaehaerys I Targaryen. Please be gentle, this book may well be one of the last two complete copies in the world.”

Jon blinked. “Really?”

“Indeed. Too many tomes like such were burned under King Baelor’s zealous reign. This tome I stole from the Citadel archives before coming north, so many years ago. In my arrogance, I believed that my own safekeeping was better than any in Oldtown.” His voice was slow, laborious.
“Yet I could never part with this book. Brynden did love it so.”

Jon froze. Brynden. *Brynden Rivers?* He didn’t say anything, but there was a knowing edge to Aemon’s tone.

He hesitated, glancing over the leather-bound cover. The tome was so large and thick it might be used as a shield. “What does this book say? What are wyverns? Or wyrms?”

“The wyverns of Sothoryos are great winged lizards. Not as large or as long-lived as dragons, and they do not breathe fire, but they are still fearsome beasts. The firewyrms of Old Valyria are thought extinct after the Doom, but they were great serpentine creatures that would live in volcanoes, burrow through earth and could produce intense heats.” His wheezing voice was quiet, but the whole library was still. Jon had to focus to listen. “It has long been theorised that the very first dragonlords of Old Valyria bred wyverns and wyrms together to produce the dragons we know today. Some scholars suspect the use of blood magic, yet such theories are unpopular to the modern historian.”

He hadn’t heard that before. “I… I see.” *Dragons had been bred?* “So wyverns were fireless dragons? And wyverns are still alive today?”

“Presumably, though the swamps of Sothoryos are hardly the most accessible. While dragons were known to fly halfway around the world, the wyverns had smaller wings and were far more territorial. I know of no claim of ever being able to tame a wyvern.”

“And what of… what was the name? Firewyrms?”

“The wyrms are thought extinct, alas,” Aemon said shuffling around the stacks. “Either they are extinct or deep underground. The great firewyrms have not been seen since before the Doom, as the Fourteen Flames of the Valyria Freehold were the only place in the known world where the wyrms would ever come to the surface. Thus it is thought they were left extinct in the cataclysm.”

“I have never heard such things.”

“Tis not common knowledge,” Maester Aemon admitted. *But you are no common maester, are you?* As both a Targaryen and one of the oldest men alive, Aemon must have had access to histories like no other.

“So the Valyrians actually *created* dragons from these two different creatures?” Jon asked, entranced.

“Once, thousands of years ago, perhaps. There is no way to be certain. There is other evidence – the blood pits of Gogossos have long been reputed to have produced unnatural creatures and twisted hybrids under Valyrian rule. The basilisks of that area are another creature that are theorised to have been created by Valyrian crossbreeding and blood magic. My view is that very few of the monsters of the old empire continue to roam, but some linger.”

“And what of ice dragons?” Jon asked. “Is there any mention of them?”

“Not in Septon Barth’s accounts.” Jon wondered how many times the maester must have read that book before his sight failed. “The only veritable reference of ice dragons I have ever encountered came from a theory from Maester Margate supposing the existence of dragon subspecies. Cannibal’s Bay, north of the Shivering Sea, has long since been held as an example of ice dragon activity. Unfortunately, few ever return as witnesses from that place.”

The maester scratched his beard, shuffling forward between the stacks of books with small steps.
“Margate has often been dismissed as an… imaginative maester,” Aemon explained slowly. “He claimed that the term ‘dragon’ should be considered a genus, not a species. The Valyrian firebreathers were but one form. He referenced the old lore of ice dragons to the north, sea dragons of the west, and even the rumours of the shadow dragons of Asshai.”

“Sonagon is an ice dragon.”

“And yet yours is not the type that Margate described. In his work, Margate was very clear; that the ice dragons north of the Shivering Sea were wingless and could not fly, hence why they are not widely known. The ice dragons that he wrote of were more related to the sea dragons of the west rather than the Valyrian stock.”

Sonagon was a Valyrian dragon first. “And what is your view?”

“Me?” Aemon mused. “I consider wolves.”

“A hunting hound and a wolf appear very different animals. Yet most maesters agree that they share the same lineage and can even crossbreed. A direwolf and a dog seem drastically different, yet perhaps not as much as the appearances may suggest,” Aemon explained. “I think of the shape of the ancient dragons – the firewyrms and the sea dragons – which were all recorded to have long, serpentine bodies and stubby limbs, and I think that perhaps the Valyrians created an offshoot when they bred the first flying dragons from wyverns. They all, however, remain very similar creatures.”

“I see,” he muttered, lighting a candle carefully as he looked between the stacked books. “May I?”

“How long has it been since I just read a book? The last time had been at the libraries of Winterfell, sat next to Maester Luwin. He opened the leather cover of Unnatural History very gingerly. On the front page, a dark three-headed dragon was stamped, curled around itself. The Targaryen seal. The parchment was very thick, but the ink was faded and so cursive that he could barely read it.

“It has been decades since anyone other than myself has read that book,” Maester Aemon muttered, so quietly Jon barely heard him even in the gloom. “The last person to do so was a prince…”

Jon turned the page, squinting as he skimmed over the words. An excruciatingly detailed sketch of huge dragon – wings outstretched and its features annotated – dominated the double pages. The caption marked it as ‘Balerion the Black Dread’.

Septon Barth’s details and observations were absolutely precise and pristine. The first pages of writing were a mixture of his studies of the Targaryen dragons, their behaviours, diets and mating habits, as well as a good chunk of history and supposition.

Dragons require a very high iron content in their diet due to their metal rich bones, Jon read. They produce incredibly little excrement as there is little their stomachs cannot burn. In groups they establish very strict social hierarchies, but alone they become incredibly territorial. They are
extremely responsive to the phases of the moon, and well-known for becoming aggressive and broody under the full moon. Barth suggested that this was a mating cycle, as it was observed that dragons living in isolation rarely showed the same characteristics.

A dragon's natural lifetime was unknown. Balerion lived to two hundred years old before appearing to die of old age, but there was fairly significant evidence of other dragons living much longer.

Anything that Jon didn't understand, Maester Aemon would linger by his side. He began to realise that the maester was more knowledgeable than any book.

Three tallow candles burned one after another as Jon sat and read in thick, comfortable silence. He felt the stiffness between his shoulders slacken.

Jon was working through a description of dragon vulnerabilities. Contrary to popular notion, dragon could not be slain by attacking down its gullet – Barth wrote that “death comes out of a dragon’s mouth, but death does not go in that way”. However, Septon Barth considered the eyes and snout of a dragon their largest vulnerability, citing the death of Meraxes during the First Dornish War.

“What page have you reached?” Aemon asked quietly, after a long pause.

“Twenty-seven.”

“Pages thirty and thirty-one could be of interest to you.”

He turned the stiff parchment. At first, all he saw was a long list of names. Jon frowned. At the very top of the list, were three names: Aegon, Rhaenys, and Visenya Targaryen, marked with Balerion, Meraxes, and Vhagar. “This is a list of dragonriders.”

“That is correct,” Aemon nodded blindly. “That is a list of all known dragonriders of Barth’s time. And what do you notice?”

He paused. “Most of these are either Targaryen or Velaryon.”

“Yes. Many have attempted to tame dragons, yet a mature dragon will generally bond only with a few men over its lifetime, and usually only those of a certain bloodline. It is one of the reasons that the dragonseeds became so valuable during the Dance of the Dragons. Old Valyria created their dragons through blood magic, and through blood they kept control of them.” Aemon paused, his face hard. Jon guessed what he was implying. “Have you considered that you might be of Valyrian blood, Jon?”

“Aye,” Jon admitted, with a quiet grimace.

“Indeed. Now isn't that curious?”

“My father was Eddard Stark,” Jon sighed. “I know of the dragonseeds; there are many Targaryen bastards still lingering. More likely than not my mother was some fishwife or washerwoman somewhere with a drop of Targaryen in her.” Maybe my mother had silver hair. Perhaps that was why Lord Stark had been so ashamed to tell him of her.

“That is possible,” Maester Aemon said, but there was something in the old man's tone that Jon could not quite place. The old man sat quiet for a while.

Jon glanced at the old man. “Have you tried to approach Sonagon, maester?” he asked curiously.
“I have indeed. Your dragon reacted quite poorly to my presence. I heard it snarling, and poor Samwell had to push me away quite quickly for fear it would attack. I have not left the building since.”

So Sonagon objected to Aemon. Surely if it was Targaryen blood that was required, then Aemon has more than anyone? “I could escort you to Sonagon,” Jon offered. “You should have the chance to touch the dragon.”

“Yes,” he said with a deep sigh. “That would be most welcome. I am an old man, but I would so dearly love to touch a dragon’s scales before I go.”

Jon grimaced quietly, glancing back at the book. Septon Barth wrote that dragons were creatures of magic and chaos, he recalled. So why do men idolise them so?

“May I ask,” the maester wheezed after the long silence, “what has you so troubled, King Snow?”

He hesitated. “I killed forty-three people today.”

The old man paused. “Ah. So I hear.”

There was quiet again. Was that his only response? Aemon didn’t seem to feel the need to say anything more. Jon glanced at him. “They died because of me. I made a mistake – a mistake that seemed inconsequential at the time, and forty-three people died. I don't know even know their names.” His voice quivered. “And it was solely my responsibility.”

“Yes,” Aemon agreed. “It was.”

Jon sighed. He wondered if there should be more outrage, guilt, or rage at the statement. It felt like there should be. Instead, there was nothing but quiet in the cold stacks of the library.

“It’s going to happen again,” Jon continued. “I know it is. Maybe not with Sonagon, but maybe a wildling party will raid and rape a village because I wasn't there to keep them in line. I try, but I can't be everywhere and hundreds of people are going to die because of it.”

“Yes. Most likely.” Aemon just nodded.

“I don't even know what I'm supposed to feel about that,” he muttered. “How can I, when everything I do or don't do is going to cost lives? What sort of choice is that?”

“One which you must face every day,” Aemon said softly.

A humourless smile passed over Jon’s face. “Then I don't see how I could win.”

“You cannot. You will most definitely lose,” the maester muttered. Jon blinked. “It may be a disastrous loss or it may be a small defeat, but eventually you will lose. Every king or queen there has ever been must roll that dice, and, although many would pretend otherwise, the outcome is all too often beyond their control. You are not in control of everything, and sooner or later you lose.”

“That is…” Jon hesitated. “I don't know what to say to that.”

“It was what you accepted when you took this duty,” Aemon said. “It is a truth that every king must one day accept. The best rulers are the ones who accept it early.”

Jon didn't reply. His hand stroked the stump of his missing finger. “Be prepared, King Snow,” the old man continued. “Prepare for the defeats more than the victories and that will place you in good
stead. Accept the losses but work to reduce the next one.”

“That is easier said than done, maester.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “Most things are.”

Aemon hobbled to restack and wrap the books, treating *Unnatural History* with delicate care. “And what would you have me do?” Jon asked.

“That is for you to decide,” the maester replied softly. “But whatever it is, you *cannot* do it alone. If you continue to attempt to take sole responsibility regarding everything, you will simply fail all the faster.”

Jon opened his mouth, but then held his tongue. “I would suggest a *crown*, King Snow,” Aemon said. “Take your crown and force others to bow, no matter how uncomfortable it may make you. Give them order, and expect them to serve.”

“My army is free folk. They will not bow to me.”

Grey eyes passed over him. “Then you are doing something wrong.”

He didn’t reply. The old man winced as his knees cracked, hobbling weakly. “I must retire for the night,” Aemon apologised. “It was very good to talk to you, Your Grace.”

Jon paused, watching him go. He snuffed out of candle and walked out in the dark. *The maester is over a hundred years old*, he thought quietly. *He is a very wise man.*

It was dark outside. The hour of the bat, or later. He hadn’t realised how long he had spent in the library, but he was still barely a tenth through Septon Barth’s book. *I had forgotten how much I enjoy reading,* he thought, rolling his shoulders. *It has been so long since I just sat behind a book.*

He saw Sam waiting nervously for him by the door to the rookery. “Jon, I…” he stammered.

“I know,” Jon said, his voice low. “I’m sorry for putting you in this position Sam. You are just trying to do your duty. And so am I, Sam, believe me.”

Sam’s mouth paused, hesitating. “Ty and Jeren spat at me today. I passed them at the mess hall and they spat at me,” Sam mumbled. “I have been spending my time hiding with Maester Aemon because the sworn brothers spit on me at every chance they get. They call me traitor for siding with the wildlings, and… and they’re right. I feel like a traitor. Sworn brothers died because I tried to do what was right and they curse me for it.”

“I know, Sam. Believe me, I know.”

“But it’s not alright, is it?” he muttered. “The Night’s Watch are going to be captives and I’m walking around free and working for the man in charge. I know those men, Jon – they are my friends – and now they despise me.”

Jon grimaced slightly. They were his friends too. “And yet it doesn’t matter what they think. We have to do what is right, Sam.”

“And is this right, Jon?” His voice was a whisper. “People are *dead*. How many deaths can you justify because it’s all for the greater good?”

His mouth opened, and then closed. “I don’t know,” Jon admitted. “But I know we can’t give up
now. We do what we can, and then we try to do it a bit better.”

Sam shuffled. “I can handle the northern lords, Sam,” Jon said, wishing he can believe it. “I can work on keeping Sonagon controlled. I trust Mance to keep Castle Black running and the Wall manned, and I need you to help find a solution. I need to know more about the Others. I need to know how to defeat them.”


“Aye. So we need more of both. Much more. If there’s a spell that can stop the Others, we need to find that too. I need to trust you to help me with that.”

“And all the rest that must be done?”

“We find others that we trust too.”

Sam just nodded weakly. Jon offered a smile, before stepping out into the bonfire-filled courtyard. “I will talk to Mance about those spitting on you,” he promised.

“Alright, Jo…” Sam stifled, and straightened. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Val

She still wasn’t used to the thick stone walls and hard wooden rafters overhead. Just being in the castle made Val feel uncomfortable as much as anything. The giant man-eating monster that snoozing overhead didn’t help either. Hardin’s Tower was at the edge of Castle Black, but there was absolutely nowhere you could go where Sonagon was not in sight.

She could feel the mutters through the castle after what happened to Mole’s Town. Four dozen men and women dead. “This place is bloody loony,” Val heard one spearwife saying to another. “That beast is a monster. We need to get out of here.”

“Fuck, you want to run?” Her partner muttered. “You know that King Snow don’t take kindly to free folk that split off.”

The spearwife looked ready to object, then a woman wearing a white stone walked by with a pot. Everyone held their tongue when talking about the dragon while around those with white stones.

There were mutters and apprehensive stares wherever she went. The far more concerning ones to Val, however, were the wildlings that simply accepted the deaths, no question asked. She had overheard another spearwife saying, “the dragon killed them, so they must have deserved it.” Those who viewed Sonagon as a god would not accept that the god could ever make mistakes.

People are dead and those kneelers just swallow and accept it, Val cursed. She did not know what she would prefer, but the thought of so many just taking that view sent shivers down her spine.

Perhaps I should take a place on one of the hunting parties, she wondered, to get away from the bloody beast. The main reason she didn’t was because Mance was still weak and needed her aid. Val was in the armoury taking stock of swords and arrows for Mance, when she heard footsteps totter down the steps.

“Oi,” a man with a big bushy beard and an axe on his waist called. “The King wants you.”
She grunted. “Aye? And what does Snow want of me?”

“No, all of us,” the free folk called, motioning to the others in the room as well. “He’s summoning every leader who isn’t on duty. At the Shieldhall, at noon.”

Val bristled. Summoning? “And what does he want us all for?”

“Not a clue. Just be there.”

She dropped the tally and headed on outside. True, she could see the castle stirring with news.

King Snow invited every free folk leader, as well as sworn brother officers, to an assembly into the old Shield Hall. Val heard the mumbles as the summons went out, and then soon it seemed like half the men and women in Castle Black were cramming into the great hall. They had to stack the tables and dais out of the way so they could all fit, and even then many were spilling out the double doors. Val had to push her way through.

The sworn brothers were sat at the very front of the hall, under guard. Many of crows were given a wide berth, none of them had weapons, and they were all either wide-eyed or glowering.

The Shieldhall was a great feast hall of dark stone, cold and damp, and from the old dust it looked like it had been rarely used. A few free folk had been sleeping in the hall after the occupation, but they had to be shifted as the boots marched through. There were worm-eaten rafters overhead, and she glimpsed rats going mad with the sound of the ruckus.

Val only glimpsed Snow briefly, but then the crowd parted to let him to the front. He wore dark wool and ringmail, his longsword on his hip and a rich shadowskin cloak over his shoulders. The crowd murmured as he passed.

Val saw crows glaring at him with hate, while other free folk lowering their heads, but none said a word. Val could see a mixture of devotion, admiration and anger moving through the hall.

Mance sat at the top of the hall, one of the few sitting, watching quietly. Snow kept his face hard, pausing to talk to men briefly, moving towards the front. When he turned to speak, the muttering in the hall silenced.

Like a king, she realised. This was the first time he had ever assembled everyone like this. Like a king holding court.

“Friends,” King Snow said in a clear, stiff voice, stretching out over the hall. “Be at ease in my hall. We are here together – united against a common foe. There will be more battles ahead, but we will fight them for a better future.”

There was something that sounded like a snort coming from one of the sworn brothers. A man could have lost his head to a free folk’s axe for that, if Snow hadn’t raised his hand. “But this is not the time for celebration,” he continued, his voice hard. “Now is the time for unity, to come together to overcome the challenges we must face. For the future of the free folk. The future of the living.”

He kept it short, and his voice hard. To Val, it seemed the type of speech he may have spent all night rehearsing. “And for the future of the free folk, I must put affairs to rights,” he said, pausing as he looked around the hall. “Furs of Old Mother’s Crock, Hatch the Halfgiant and Haldur Two-Notch, please step forward.”

She saw the group stir. The three men looked confused as the bodies seemed to part around them. All eyes were staring. “Furs of Old Mother’s Crock,” King Snow continued, pacing. He motioned
Val blinked. Dragonguard? What the hells was that? By the looks on their faces, no one else knew either.

“He’s treating us like southrons, Val realised. Handing out fancy titles and accepting us to jump for them. She expected – wanted – others in the room to laugh at him for it, but instead they seemed quite serious.

“There must be just rewards given in return for good service,” the king said, almost shouting over the din of mutterings. “Now, I intend to allocated some of the rewards. Mance Rayder,” he called, turning to face the man, “I hereby formally appoint you as Lord of Castle Black, Keeper of the Wall. Let it also be known that I appoint Sigorn, Magnar of Thenn, as Lord of the Shadow Tower, and the Lord of Bones as Lord of Eastwatch.”

Mance didn’t react, but his eyes narrowed. Snow turned, pausing as he picked out faces. “Old Man Harwick,” he called, “I hereby appoint you Lord of Deep Lake, to hold and fortify the castle with your men. Ygon Oldfather, I grant you Sable Hall to the East. Haldur Bullspear shall take Hoarfrost Hill. Each will receive a suitable command, and the duty to man and fortify the castles.”

King Snow kept on talking and there were more names, but Val was distracted by stirring that sounded like a brawl taking place between sworn brothers and free folk towards the back. King Snow kept his voice hard and spoke over it. “Soren Shieldbreaker, I appoint you Lord of Oakenshield, and Lady Val of Whitetree, I appoint you Lady of Queensgate.”

She froze. Queensgate? Lady Val of Whitetree? What is the fool thinking?

Val would have confronted him there and then, but as he stopped talking the crowd seemed to surge towards him. Jon Snow’s voice bellowed as he demanded order. It seemed like every free folk pushed past each other to talk their king. She heard voice demanding their own appointment, crying out of their own worth. Fools calling for the attention of their liege.
She slipped out of the hall and paced. From the talk, she heard that Snow had been giving or promising gifts to those that support at him. Val could have growled. *We’re free folk,* she cussed. *We should not be jumping for attention like southron fools.*

The whole castle was stirring and talking. It was only hours later that he finally left the hall, but there were still so many men shuffled around him that Val couldn’t even approach. Finally, Snow retired to Hardin’s Tower, and Val followed.

She saw the white tail swaying from atop the tower. Normally she tried to avoid even going near that dragon, but this time she had no choice. There were guards at the tower doors that she had to push her through, and walked into a bare and dusty tower of rotting furnishings and crumbling stone.

Snow’s quarters were on the third floor. The rooms had collapsed, so he took what used to be the landing of the spiral staircase as his chambers. Val saw a mattress that had been brought up from one of the living quarters, and a fireplace over the broken stone and rubble in the corner, but his quarters were still bare. Like Snow had hardly had time to sleep in them.

There were voices. He wasn’t alone; Val saw an aging woman, and a very scared heavyset boy standing before Snow and two guards.

The woman was weeping. Red eyes glaring at the floor. “…ry sorry,” she heard the king saying. “Rei, the deaths of those at Mole’s Town were not at my command, and I am truly sorry.”

The whore, Rei, stifled but didn’t speak. Val stayed quiet, but she saw Snow slowly pull out a leather pouch from his pocket. “I will pay the gold price for any who lost kin and friends at Mole’s Town,” Jon continued. “These are gold rings that should see you in good stead. Wherever you want to go from Castle Black, I will see you there in safety.”

Rei paused, staring at the pouch. Very woodenly, she reached out to take it, but she didn’t meet his eyes or even say a word as she turned and left. The pouch jangled.

The king’s eyes looked sad, but he turned to the other one. He was a gormless, pudgy southron man wearing leather and wool, who had wide eyes and a fearful expression. One of the hunters who he had brought in yesterday, she recalled.

“Harlow,” she heard the king say to the boy. “I take responsibility for your friends’ deaths, it was… regrettable.” Snow’s voice twinged. “Do you know of Yorrick’s and the others next of kin?”

The hunter, Harlow, stammered. “I do not, my lo– Your Grace. We were just travellers for a short time. I did not know him well enough to deserve such.”

“Indeed,” Snow said almost… disappointed. Sad that he could not make amends? “Very well.”

The man gulped. “What is to happen to me now, Your Grace?”

“Whatever you wish. You are not a prisoner here and you have committed no crime.” He turned to walk away. “I am deeply sorry for your companions’ deaths.”

Harlow seemed to hesitate, bowing. “I heard that you were looking to reach out to the mountain clans?”

“That is correct.” The king’s eyes narrowed.
“There is a goat track I know of, it won’t be defended. If you want to reach Clan Flint, it will take you straight to their holdfast safely,” Harlow said. “I’m a hunter, I’ve used it before.”

“Really? And are you willing to share it with our parties?” Snow said. The man nodded eagerly, and for a second a bright grin split his features. “In return for…?”

“Safety, Your Grace? Shelter?”

“Of course,” Snow said with a firm nod. “You will have it.”

The man grinned brightly, and then bowed low before skittering off down the stairs. He made a fool of himself bowing so deeply he nearly stumbled. Val watched him go, before stepping up towards Jon.

“Will you expect all of us to bow to you like that, ‘Your Grace’?” Val scoffed. “I told you I don’t want no fool’s title, Snow.”

Jon appeared to hesitate. “It would be appropriate, my lady.” He nodded at the guards. “Please give us a moment.”

The men nodded and stomped away. The room felt quieter. Something about him seemed to relax as she approached. He had been standing so stiffly.

“W…kingly,” Val scoffed. “And if the ranks are nothing, then why do they bother you so much?”

He paused, stepping towards her. “Because you’re treating us like we’re southrons, Snow.”

“South of the Wall,” he noted.

“Dragonguards,” she said tauntingly. “You need a group of men with fancy names around you to protect you? Wipe your ass too, will they?”

“The Dragonguard will be to protect Sonagon, not myself. The dragon rarely interacts with anyone but me; I want that to change. I want Sonagon to be familiar with more people, and a group to watch the dragon when I cannot.”

“You want to prevent another accident. Stop your dragon from killing another village.”


Her eyes narrowed but she didn't reply. King Snow lowered his head. “Lady Val,” he said, stressing the title, “I will ensure you are given a capable command. A command with proper ranks and authority. Good fighters and spearwives, that will follow you alone.”

“And then what? You expect me to go to Queensgate?”
“I thought it would suit you. Queensgate is not far from here, yet it is a strong castle. Bring your sister and her babe, you could shelter them there. I do need good officers to hold the Wall.”

“Is that me,” she said, with a slight grunt, “another of your officers?”

She caught the flicker in his gaze. “… What would you rather be?”

Val stopped, meeting his grey eyes. He looked uncomfortable. He’s younger than I am, she thought. It was hard to tell his age from his hair and the way he held himself, but sometimes he let himself slip. He was around eighteen, and she about seven years older. She gave him a sweet smile, and stepped backwards.

“I’ll let you know,” she said. “I ain’t going to Queensgate. I’ll stay here and I’ll help Mance, but I won’t go off to a ruin like Queensgate.”

He hesitated, seemed to bite his lip, and then nodded. “Very well, my lady. I’m sure Mance could use your support.”

“I’m sure,” she replied, already turning to walk away.
Chapter 24

Samwell

“Tell me about the Other,” Sam asked, his quill poised over the parchment. He tried to make his voice sound firm. Mance had ordered him to try and talk less like a boy, with more force and much less stuttering. The free folk across the table stared suspiciously. “As much as possible. How much do you know of it?”

There were half a dozen of them, men and women, their furs still damp and muddy from just returning to Castle Black. For a moment, Sam thought the raiders weren’t going to answer, but then the heavyset man behind Sam – Wulf – gave a quiet grunt.

One of the raider’s eyes flickered. “It’s a vicious bugger,” he said. He was a short man with two scars over his cheek and a hunting bow cradled in his grip. “Cunning too. Arwin’s party spent two days tracking it west, before realising it left them a false trail. The thing has been haunting from here to Eastwatch – any holdfast, farmers or scouts are being targeted one by one.”

“It’s trying to create as many corpses as possible,” Sam gulped. The thought of blue-eyed dead sent shivers down his spine. “How many wights have you burnt?”

“As many as we find. Not as many as it killed,” another raider grunted angrily. “I reckon it’s raising everyone it slays and then burying the bodies underground. Storing its army in the snow until it needs them.”

The first man nodded, his eyes bitter. “Aye. It’s been roaming south for weeks now. It’s probably killed at least two hundred. It could have killed more, but it’s being very careful too.”

Two hundred. There was an army of at least two hundred wights somewhere, biding its time. The reports of missing scouts and abandoned holdfasts were increasing. More and more of their parties had encountered moving corpses on the roads. It was an army that only ever became bigger.

But we’re prepared for that, Sam tried to tell himself. The wildlings were all on the lookout for the Other, and there were dozens of hunting parties searching for it. They were scouring the woods burning as many bodies as they could find. Two hundred wights could raise a lot of mayhem, but not against experienced men cutting them down.

“And the Other?” Sam insisted. “Has anyone seen it?”

Their gazes darkened. “No,” a raider muttered as he chewed a chicken bone. “Nobody’s seen it. Nobody’s seen Malvern and lived, anyways.”

“Malvern?”

“That’s the name the hunting parties are giving it,” Wulf interjected. “Malvern – it means death in the Old Tongue.”

The memory of blue eyes flickered through Sam’s vision, causing him to twitch. “We ain’t seen it,” one of the hunters continued. “But we’ve felt it. You can feel the cold when it’s nearby. It makes the air itself colder.”

Sam nodded, gulped, and then made a scribbled note on his parchment: ‘do the Others have powers over cold?’ “Really? It controls the cold?”
“Oh aye. I don’t know what that thing does, but you can feel its presence in your chest, it gets harder to breathe,” a man muttered grimly. All of their eyes were dark. “That’s the only way you know you’re getting close. When your blood freezes. One night, we were so close that our fires froze over, and then a cold mist dropped upon us. We had to huddle together and Malvern slipped away. We couldn’t follow it in the fog.”

He made another note: ‘ability to summon fog?’ “You mean it created a fog to hide itself?”

“Aye. But that’s nothing. Marv’s party swears they got so near that a flurry appeared out of nowhere. They lost two men to a snowstorm that came and went in a flash. No human can match it in weather like that, but Malvern keeps on moving.”

‘Ability to create flurries? Immunity to cold.’ Sam scribbled quickly. “But you can catch it, right?” Sam squeaked. “You can kill it?”

A couple of them shared dark gazes. “It’s injured,” a spearwife muttered. Sam noticed that didn’t quite answer the question. “Most of its kind don’t leave any traces at all, but we think Malvern is limping. We can track it, usually. But it’s also careful – it doesn’t even go near the hunters, like it knows.”

“You have dragonglass weapons,” Sam muttered. “It knows you do and it’s keeping its distance.”

He made a note; ‘it’s not invincible’. Only one dragonglass arrow would be enough to kill the creature, but it had no reason to make things that easy. Sam flustered slightly, flicking through the list of questions he made. “Does it eat? Drink? Does it need to sleep or rest?”

“We think it hides during the day,” a man shrugged. “Malvern only seems to move and hunt at night, but it moves fast.”

‘Vulnerable to daylight/warmth?’, Sam jotted. He kept on going with the questions they had made, even as the raiders started to scowl. These men had been out hunting for weeks now, and had only returned to Castle Black when their supplies became critically low.

“So is that your job, crow?” the scarred hunter grunted. “ Bloody writing? Too scared to swing a sword?”

Sam squirmed in his seat. “Watch your tone,” Wulf warned darkly, from behind his chair. The raider grunted, but didn’t reply.

Writing is important, Sam wanted to protest. Jon asked to know as much as possible about the Others, and how to beat them, and that meant trying to collect everything the free folk knew. Sam was interviewing hunters, and there were even orders out to capture a moving wight for study. Sam had to gather information; he was thinking about sending his research to Oldtown to see if the maesters could assist.

Sam continued with his questions because that was his job, but the raiders didn’t stop glaring at him. If it wasn’t for Wulf standing behind Sam, he had no doubt the men would have spat at him and left already. Wulf made an imposing sight, standing stiff with folded arms.

When Sam was finally done with his lists, the free folk stomped off without a word. The man with the scars gave Sam a spiteful glare as he left the room. Wulf shifted slightly.

“That brat was giving you the evil eye,” said Wulf, after the door closed. Wulf’s hand went to his axe. “Say the word and I’ll teach him some respect.”
“No, no,” Sam choked, shaking his head quickly. “Please don’t, tha-that’s not needed.”

Wulf frowned, but didn’t reply. He thinks I’m weak too, Sam thought. Jon had asked Wulf to act as Sam’s bodyguard, but there was derision in Wulf’s eyes when he looked at Sam as well. The wildling was a big man, almost as broad and stocky as Sam was, but Wulf was head and shoulders taller, far more muscular than fat. A gruff figure coated in ringmail and hides.

Wulf had never once acted as anything less than devoted to being a bodyguard, but his constant presence scared Sam as much as much anything.

“How many warbands are out hunting for Malvern?” Sam asked, glancing down the list of scribbled notes. He outlined that name – Malvern, the single Other south of the Wall.

“Right now? A dozen or so. There would be more, but we don’t have enough dragonglass to risk it,” Wulf replied.

“A dozen,” Sam repeated. “So many?”

“Aye, a rumour’s going around that King Snow has promised a place on the Dragonguard to whoever kills Malvern. There’s no shortage of raiders eager to claim that.”

Sam had seen the Dragonguard. There had been a dozen or so chosen for the position, and they were already walking around like kings through the castle. It was a position offered to whomever proved themselves, open to all. A chance to be near the dragon. No wonder so many were eager for a chance to become one of them.

But still… a dozen warbands hunting a single Other and none of them had even come close.

*Maybe we’re trying to catch it the wrong way,* Sam thought. *A white walker is too strong, too fast and too smart to easily be caught, especially with the growing storms hampering the hunters’ movements constantly.* The Others could walk through the cold and the snow far more easily than any human.

*But what if we trap it?* Sam wondered. *We know it’s targeting small groups, so what if we disguised a group of wildlings as farmers, and armed them with obsidian weapons, small enough to be hidden?* The Other was too strong, too cunning; taking it by surprise might be the only way to easily kill it.

Sam would have proposed the idea to any of the raiding parties, but in all likelihood they would dismiss it just because it came from him. Instead, he would have to try and find a chance to talk to Mance. *I might have been appointed as second-in-command of the castle, but I sure don’t feel like it.*

It was nearly evening. Sam went to the mess hall near the time of the bell, just so he could try to avoid the sworn brothers, but he still passed Pyp and Hake in the courtyard. All the brothers in black gave Sam evil looks, but at least nobody tried to spit on him with Wulf walking behind him.

When he sat down with a bowl of turnip stew, he caught a mutter of whispers in the corner. He saw a red-faced Bowen Marsh talking to Wick Whittlestick in a quiet hiss. There was some brief argument, and a glimpse back to Sam. Bowen Marsh had been removed as Lord Steward two days ago for refusing to work with wildlings. Afterwards, Bowen had been sent to work in the kitchen chopping turnips. Now Sam had to take on the duties of Lord Steward. *As well as half a dozen other roles.*

After a pause, Bowen hobbled over and sat down opposite Sam, his eyes narrowed. There were
bruises on his face, Sam noted. Many sworn brothers had suffered similar beatings.

“Samwell,” Bowen muttered quietly, with a nervous glance at Wulf across the table. “A word?”

“I shouldn’t be talking to you,” Sam muttered, not meeting his eyes.

“I just want a word, Tarly.”

“There’ve been too many words already.”

“They bar my door at night, Tarly,” he muttered. “I cannot leave the kitchens or the mess hall. They beat me if I stare too long. I’m not even allowed sharp blades for the turnips. You are the only man in a black cloak who moves freely around the castle.”

There was disgust in the former Lord Steward’s eyes. He hates me too, Sam realised. They all hate me. He’s only talking to me because he has no choice.

“A word, Samwell,” he muttered darkly. “You write all the letters. What is happening at the Shadow Tower?”

Sam hesitated. “The Magnar of Thenn is laying siege to the tower. It is expected to fall shortly. I wrote Ser Denys the final offer of surrender that he’s going get. They will take the castle, with or without prisoners.”

Bowen Marsh’s gaze darkened. “And what of the mountain clans? The Norreys and the First Flints are the Watch’s allies.”

“King Snow took his dragon and a force of men to the First Flint Holdfast, and then all around the mountains clan’s villages. I hear the clans will yield.”

*Jon’s great-grandmother was a Flint,* Sam recalled suddenly. He heard that they were calling him ‘the Snow’.

“And House Umber?”

“Last Hearth was attacked by Bolton forces weeks ago.” Bowen’s eyes twitched. Sam paused, begging the man. “Please. It will be easier if you make peace.”

“Peace?” Bowen choked. “The wildlings don’t know the meaning of the word. Every night those thugs come into our quarters, just to beat someone new.” The man’s lips curdled. “You hear what happened to the miller’s girls, Samwell?”

Sam fidgeted. “They were children,” Bowen hissed. “*Children.* Right up until some wildling thug decided to take them for himself. They’ll do the same to every girl in the north.”

“They won’t,” Sam murmured, averting his eyes. “Jon won’t let them.”

Bowen just scoffed. “Have a look at what’s left of Mole’s Town and tell me what Jon Snow won’t do.”

Sam couldn’t even look the man in the eyes. The thought of Mole’s Town made him squirm.

Bowen Marsh stormed from his seat. For a moment, it seemed like he was about to spit on Sam as well, but then Wulf stood up. Bowen hesitated, glanced at Wulf, before turning and marching away.
It isn’t so bad, Sam tried to tell himself. The monster who took the miller’s girls had been punished for it, eventually. Some wildlings were taking advantage and going, well, wild, but Jon’s law kept most of them fairly tame. Bowen Marsh and the others only had a rough time of it because they refused to concede, but there were other sworn brothers who were starting to work with the free folk. Sam repeated the thoughts to himself, trying to make himself believe it.

Sam returned to his books. Come evening, a raven arrived, and he was summoned to the solar in the King’s Tower. Sam stumbled up the staircase, and saw Mance frowning over his desk.

“Tarly.” Mance nodded at him. “There’s been a raven from Karhold. I need you to draft a reply.”

“Is there news, my lord? Lord Karstark sent word?”

“No, the Weeper,” Mance said with grunt. “The Weeper has just taken Karhold.”

Sam’s mouth stammered. “So quickly? I…” He knew that the Weeper led five thousand men from Eastwatch, but for a castle like Karhold to fall? “Did Jon order him?”

“No. The Weeper’s orders were to defend Eastwatch from Karstark forces mustering, not to raise a bloody assault,” Mance said darkly. “And yet the Weeper claims that the battle was won swiftly.”

“How could Karhold fall so quickly? It is the strongest castle on the east coast, is it not?”

“The Weeper’s host marches with five hundred giants, Tarly.”

Oh.

Sam took the letter, beginning to read aloud. It was written by Karhold’s maester – maester Tybald – but stamped with the bloody fingerprint of the Weeper.

“He says that Karstark forces tried to hold the Grey Ford against them. There were two thousand, though mostly farmers and other rapidly-mustered smallfolk,” Sam read quickly. “At night, the Weeper led a sortie three leagues south, swimming the river at the mouth of the Grey Cliffs and raiding their flank. Karstark forces scattered, and then they fled altogether at the sight of giants approaching.”

Sam gulped, eyes flickering through the scribbled handwriting. “Lord Karstark retreated to Karhold, but the Weeper followed,” he read. “The giants broughts heavy bows and mammoths.”

“Aye,” Mance grunted. “Giants rarely use bows, Tarly, but when they do they’re fearsome. A giant is thrice as big but ten times as strong as a man. You call them bows, but siege weapons is a better term.”

Sam remembered relaying orders from Jon about those weapons. The first of them had been scorpions salvaged from Stannis Baratheon’s wrecked ships, but then the wildlings had started enlisting villagers and smallfolk to build more for them. They were bows that put human longbows to shame. Yes, that would be an overwhelming force.

“Lord Cregan Karstark surrendered,” Sam read. The parchment was stained by what looked like tears. “Both him and his wife Alys are captive in their castle.” He gulped as read the final line, glancing at Mance. “My lord, the… the Weeper wants to execute Lord Cregan and take Lady Alys for himself.”

“Aye. And won’t that just send King Snow into a fury?” Mance sighed. “Write a reply, Tarly, and hope that the maester has a very firm tone of voice when reading it back to him. Tell the Weeper
that we’re in the south, we play by southron rules. You don’t kill hostages and you don’t steal a man’s wife unless your king gives you permission to.”

Sam nodded. Mance winced as he tried to move his fingers, drumming the oak desk. “I’m not sure if Snow is going to be happy or not,” he muttered. “The Weeper has got himself a brand new castle, but I shudder to think how many of those smallfolk the man actually spared. And when Rattleshirt learns that the man ran off ahead all by himself…”

“Rattleshirt?” Sam asked.

“The Lord of Bones sent a letter as well.” Mance motioned across the desk. The parchment was filled with squiggles, like a child’s writing. “Aye, it appears Rattleshirt has been teaching himself to write. Now Rattleshirt and the Seal Admiral have been launching raids against Skagos, like they want to conquer the island all by themselves. News of the Weeper’s success by himself will only embolden them further.”

“He’s attacking Skagos, my lord? Truly?”

“Aye, and Rattleshirt is a fool if he thinks the stoneborn will fall easily. The Skagossions have always been half-wildlings themselves.”

“Skagos is sworn to Winterfell, is it not?” They rode unicorns there, to hear the tales. An island of cannibals.

“Only on paper. When was the last time Skagos ever offered men to the north’s defence?” Mance shook his head. “The Starks waged a hundred wars against the stoneborn. Even the Kings of Winter broke their jaws on that isle more than once. Eventually, they agreed that they ‘bend the knee,’ and occasionally the stone lords pay lip-service to those old oaths, but Skagos is and always has been its own land. It just wasn’t worth the trouble to keep on fighting it each time they rebelled, and they rebelled often. It’s the very furthest corner of the north.”

“And the Lord of Bones wants to conquer it? Why?”

“Oh, wildlings and stoneborn have had a bloody history. They raid us almost as much as we’ve raided them.” Mance thought it about it. “We must write another letter convincing Rattleshirt to keep away from that island until they’ve got a dragon to assist them. Let’s not use the word ‘order’, though, Rattleshirt won’t like that.”

There were more letters to be sent. Sometimes it felt like Sam could see the panic in the north spreading from the rookery alone. Messengers reported fighting from petty lords at House Forrester’s Keep, raiders breaking away from the host across farmlands, a roadblock at West Mill Road, and murders up and down the kingsroad.

We only learn of about a tenth of all the battles and skirmishes happening, Sam thought, at best, and only if we’re lucky. It was sobering realisation of how much violence must truly be happening across the north. The wildling’s invasion had truly begun.

From Hardhome, Mother Mole and her followers were moving south. Scouts reported Varamyr Sixskins bringing a group of fifty wargs and skinchangers to the gates of Eastwatch. Tormund Giantsbane reported groups of free folk already waiting across the Gorge, and a message from the wildling host at Shadow Tower saying that they were only waiting on King Snow’s dragon before assaulting the castle.

“Should we send reinforcements to the Shadow Tower?” Sam asked with a gulp.
“Why bother? It will be over by the time any get there,” Mance said with a shrug. “It likely already is.”

“But we can’t let any more sworn brothers die,” Sam warned, thinking of the greenseer’s warning. “If the men of the Night’s Watch fall so does the barrier.”

“Then the easiest way is to just bring in more men of the Night’s Watch,” Mance replied, giving him a cool stare. “There will be five hundred free folk taking the vows and wearing the black cloaks by the turn of the moon.”

Sam blinked. “You’re… you’re replacing sworn brothers with free folk?”

“Aye. Convincing men to give up women and sit on a wall is a tough sell, but I can do it. The word spread that King Snow wants more volunteers for the Watch and he will look after the families of any who steps forward, and suddenly we’ve got plenty of recruits.”

“And what about the existing men of the Watch?” He asked, with a lump of lead in his stomach.

“They’ll either have to learn how to get along, or face the noose,” Mance said. “That’s the only way this was ever going to work, Tarly. They’re the ones who have to bend here, not us.”

‘Us’, Sam thought. He wasn’t even sure what side he was on anymore. Why does that thought fill me with dread?

Mance looked at him, musing. “You’d be a capable Lord Steward, you know that Tarly?”

He stammered. “Excuse me?”

“You should spare a thought to where you want to end up. One way or another, the Watch will be lacking commanders,” Mance said, “but they could do a lot worse than choosing you as Lord Steward.”

Lord Steward. Sam heard his father’s voice ringing in his ears. No son of House Tarly will be a servant. “I would not, I…” he mumbled. “I am not experienced enough.”

“Who is?” Mance said humourlessly. “I will not stay on the Wall myself. I may be Lord of Castle Black now, but I have no interest in ever wearing a black cloak again. As soon as the Wall is secure, I mean to go south with my wife and son. I will recommend to Snow that you are considered for Lord Steward.”

Sam opened his mouth, and closed it again. He paused. “And what of the next Lord Commander?”

“Likely some free folk will be given the role. Probably one that the king chooses. I very much doubt any of the existing members are willing to step up for the role now.”

A brand new regime for the Night’s Watch, Sam thought. The wildlings had won.

Sam didn’t say a word as Mance dictated the letters. They were running out of ravens for Eastwatch, so instead Mance had to entrust the message to a runner. Afterwards, Sam watched and acted as scribe as Mance coordinated patrols and assigned commands for the Wall.

In less than a week’s time, they would have the largest new recruitment ceremony for the Night’s Watch in living memory. Five hundred free folk would head north before a heart tree to take the black. If Jon really wanted the Wall secure, Sam considered, there could well be thousands more very shortly. The wildlings were wholly abandoning the Lands-Beyond-the-Wall.
At dusk, two riders galloped along the Wall from the west. Messengers from the Shadow Tower, the scouts relayed. Sam’s heart was beating as the two men were brought quickly up to the King’s Tower. The wait even as they stomped up the staircase was excruciating.

“We bring word from King Snow, Lord Mance,” the wildling man said, stepping into the room.

“Aye?” Mance’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “And why didn’t Snow send a raven?”

“The Shadow Tower has fallen.”

Sam’s hands were twitching. “How many casualties?” he asked. “Did the sworn brothers surrender?”

The man frowned. His companion shook his head. “No, we mean literally fallen,” the man explained. “The dragon wiped that castle off the map.”

---

**Jon**

Jon gasped as the warm water hit him. He swashed the steaming water into his face from the bucket, trying to wash out the weariness. After flying for so long the chill had gone deep into him, his hands still hadn’t stopped trembling.

“You alright, Snow?” Hatch asked. Jon could only gasp, spitting hot water out of his mouth.

…”snow and screaming whipping through the air, stone crumbling…”

Jon nodded weakly. “Have the men prepare Sonagon's evening meal. The dragon will expect it.”

Since joining the Dragonguard, Hatch had taken to wearing a steel cuirass with a white serpent painted on the centre. He bobbed his head.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Your Grace. Jon had started insisting more on the use of the title. Right now, it didn't feel deserved. The sound of screaming, groaning stone and hissing wind still echoed in his ears.

His face was pale as he staggered around the courtyard. Jon's clenched fists were trembling. His Dragonguard rushed to prepare for Sonagon, clearing the crowds backwards. There were already thirteen members, all of them armoured and rushing towards Hardin's Tower. He had made two appointments just last week when he named Toregg – Tormund's son – and Bulden Horn.

There was still space for more. Guarding the dragon was a tremendous duty and Jon didn't want to restrict the numbers in the Dragonguard. Above him, Sonagon growled as he shifted on his perch hungrily.

Jon saw Grenn approach him, looking disturbed. How much had Castle Black already heard?


He bit his lip. “There was an accident at the Shadow Tower.”

“Ser Denys?”
Jon just shook his head, pushing his way past. Grenn was left standing confused, stunned.

Jon's staggered stiffly across the courtyard. He met Mance, Val and a few others waiting for him.

“Snow,” Mance called. “We got your message.”

“It was a mistake,” Jon said. “The Shadow Tower… it was an old castle.”

“What happened?” Val asked.

He looked around at dark eyes. “Sigorn’s and Tormund’s forces were camped outside. Ser Denys was insistent on holding siege against us. I flew Sonagon in to break their defences.” My mistake. “The sworn brothers panicked. I dropped Sonagon onto the keep, and the dragon breathed ice-fire over the courtyard to scatter the barricades.”

“And?”

Jon shifted. That moment flashed before his eyes. “The dragonfire is very, very cold. The stone cracked, and the foundations were already crumbling. And then when Sonagon dropped on the roof, the weight…”

The Shadow Tower was one of the oldest castles of the Watch. It was built overlooking the Gorge, to keep watch at the edge Wall and over the Bridge of Skulls. The main keep had been a single tower of black granite, nestled over the grounds and outbuildings where the Watch put up their last stand.

That scene replayed constantly, haunting him even on the journey back. Between the snows and confusion, Jon hadn't even known what was happening until he heard the stone groaning…

He shivered. It hadn't even been a battle.

Mance had a dark look. Mance had served at the Shadow Tower, Jon recalled.

“How many?” Mance asked quietly.

“Some managed to escape the tower. The Thenns pulled everyone from the rubble that they could.” Jon nodded. “There were about a hundred survivors.”

And three times that number dead. The Gorge was so deep that they would never even be able to recover the rest of the bodies. The Shadow Tower took a good chunk of the cliffs with it when it fell.

“Dammit,” Mance cursed, hands on his head.

“What of the Bridge of Skulls?” Val asked.

“Tormund took it. The Night's Watch tried to collapse the bridge when the army approached, but they didn't have time. Tormund is heading back here with the sworn brother survivors while Sigorn stayed to man the remaining structure.”


“Come on,” Val murmured quietly. “Go get yourself cleaned up.”

Jon shook his head. “No,” he muttered. “I want to talk to Maester Aemon.”
Two of his Dragonguard, Haldur Two-Notch and Urwen Rockfist, tried to escort him, but Jon waved them away. He needed time to think.

The image of a great black tower slowly tilting and screaming flashed before his eyes. Even as it fell, there had been men inside who refused to flee.

He found Maester Aemon waiting for him, boiling a pot of herbal tea.

“Your Grace,” the old man said, and bowed. *How does a blind man know it's me?* Jon shut the door behind him.

“How did Aegon the Conqueror capture castles with dragons?” Jon demanded.


“My fault. My mistake,” Jon muttered. “The castle was old, the tower crumbling, the Builders haven't been properly manned in centuries, and I… I just brought a dragon straight in, I didn't even think…”

“I see.” The words were soft. “Your Grace, have you rested?”

“I can't, I…” It felt like there were tears stinging in his eyes. “I need to know what I did wrong. What I should have done better.”

Aemon paused. “Your Grace,” he said, “have a cup of tea.”

Jon wanted to protest, but then Aemon gently steered him to the table. The two cups touched the old pine table.

Jon stared at the table. With everything that had been happening, it had been days since he had even sat down.

… It feels like a lifetime ago when I was at this table, trying to convince Aemon to take Sam as a steward. Now, I'm a king struggling to fight a war on a dozen fronts.

Jon could feel the stress getting to him, like a knife in his gut. *Three hundred men dead because of a stupid mistake…*

“Is the Bridge of Skulls secure?” Aemon asked quietly.

“Aye. There were still enough outbuildings to house Sigorn's troops,” Jon said hollowly. All three gates were now open. There had already been wildlings across the Gorge waiting to cross. When the Frozen Shore clans crossed too, his ‘army’ could well reach fifty thousand.

“I see,” Aemon nodded. “And what of your search for allies?”

“Clan Liddle and Norrey cursed my guts,” Jon replied with a sigh. He spent a week in those mountains before rushing to the Shadow Tower. *Maybe I rushed too fast.* “Nobody likes wildlings. But nobody seems to like Boltons either. I said I was the son of Ned Stark, and that I could hurt the Boltons for them. Clan Wull at least considered an alliance, and the First Flints agreed to allow my hosts passage. They all saw Sonagon and I don't think they'll move against us.”

He paused. “Scouts say Last Hearth was sacked by Bolton forces. The Weeper conquered Karhold, and I think Lord Karstark may be willing to make an alliance. Otherwise the best chance for allies may be House Mormont or Manderly.”
“And then you mean to fight against House Bolton?”

“Aye. They won't accept us.” *And they murdered my brother.*

Aemon just nodded, blindly shuffling along to his chair. Jon held his cup but didn't drink it. He spent a long time just staring at the liquid. “How did Aegon Targaryen conquer castles with dragons, maester?”

“His dragons rarely did,” the old man replied. “A dragon is far more suited to demolishing a castle, like at Harrenhal, rather than taking one. Aegon used his dragons to destroy, and to force lords to concede or burn. Aegon and his dragons… changed the game, so to speak. Nobody at the time knew how to fight them.” He paused. “If you want to learn more from Aegon’s example, however, you’d be better served looking at his failures.”

“What do you mean?” Jon frowned.

“It is very easy to think of a dragon as invulnerable,” Aemon said softly. “It is not. But that is a mistake that even the first Targaryen conquerors made. They grew so comfortable in their success that they became lax. They became overconfident enough to siege a castle from dragonback without suitable ground support, and thus Meraxes ended up with an iron bolt through its eye.”


“Oh, many reasons,” Aemon sighed. “House Martell learned their lessons by watching the folly of the Reach, stormlands, and westerlands. Dragon wars require a different type of tactic; the Dornish learned quick to never amass troops in numbers. They learned that dragons themselves could be nigh unstoppable, but the support troops that the Targaryens relied on were anything but. A dragon alone can destroy, but it cannot conquer.

“Eventually,” Aemon mused, “it became a matter of simple economics. The Targaryen newly forged kingdom was just too fresh and too unstable. Their dragons could do much, but they couldn't rebuild trade, establish a stable government, or appease a population. Aegon the Conqueror ran out of resources to continually invest in a costly war in Dorne, so he was forced to retreat bloodied into order to secure what he already had. A thousand pinpricks killed a dragon, so to speak.”

“I… I see.” *The Boltons might well use the same tactics against me.* “Do you have any books on the First Dornish War?”

“Let us see what we can find, Your Grace.”

Aemon hobbled slowly to the stairs. He didn't bother with a lantern, but Jon picked one up.

“May I ask,” Aemon asked. “Why do you wish to learn so much, Your Grace?”

His lips pursed. “Because I want to do better.”

The maester just nodded. “Then I believe we have an account from Maester Yandel in our stores, who provides a study of the use of dragons during the Dornish War.”

It took a while to pull the dusty old tome from where it had been wrapped up in the stacks. Jon lifted the book down when Aemon’s hobbling knees failed him.

“I will fetch a bowl of hot water and a pot of stew, Your Grace,” the old man wheezed.
“You need not—”

“I insist.” The maester was already walking back up the stairs. “Wash, ease your mind and relax. You will not be disturbed.”

Jon bit his lip, but slowly sat down on the chair. Somehow, the quiet gloom of the vaults felt comforting. His eyes were red and weary, but he gingerly opened the book.

The candlelight flickered, wax slowly dripping down the stem.

_I should have done more_, he thought quietly. _I could have gone to the Shadow Tower sooner, before they had a chance to seal themselves in. I could have approached slower, more carefully…_

_Even if I just waited for better weather, I would have been able to see the tower falling. I was too impatient and too late._

Maester Yandel had a slow, cursive hand. The words were long and laborious. Jon felt his eyes drooping as he started to read.

Three hundred brothers died at the Shadow Tower. There must be fewer than four hundred left.

The candle slowly burned downwards in peaceful silence. His muscles ached after moving and riding for so long.


Suddenly he felt metal chain wrap around his throat. Jon gagged. Arms thrashed. He pushed back, but strong hands held him down. He heard his attacker grunting.

“Quickly!” A voice hissed. “Kill the bastard.”

More footsteps behind him. Couldn't breathe. His face turned red. His whole body lurched, kicking back.

The chair toppled. His feet kicked the table roughly. Parchment scattered, and the candle toppled.

His attacker fell backwards with him. Sweet, sweet air hit his lungs, and then they were crashing into the ground. Bodies rolled in the dark.

Figures. Multiple figures. Jon barely managed to gasp and then someone was on him. A heavyset man grunting and wrestling.

“Kill him already! Kill the bastard!”

“Watch the door!”

“I'm trying, he's squirming!”

Something sharp in the man's hand. Metal. Jon managed to grab his wrist before it stabbed into his chest. It didn't seem like a dagger, it was round and sharpened. A sharpened spoon.

Jon felt the edge press down against his chest. If it wasn't for his leathers, it would have skewered him. The man was on top, trying to push the crude edge downwards, while Jon desperately tried to hold the man’s hands up.
A blow. His teeth rattled. One of the other men kicked his face. They rolled, thrashing…

Jon couldn't breathe. His vision blurred, panting…

He felt the metal edge jab into his stomach.

The world rumbled. Jon could barely hear it over the sound of his heart.

“Kill him! Bloody kill him already!”

“For the Watch!” a voice cried. “For the Watch!”

Something big and heavy crashed into his face. Jon fell.

In the distance, he heard screaming. Roaring. The ground was trembling, the stacks shaking. He smelt smoke. Burning parchment.

Jon dropped, and the attackers were on him. Multiple men, lots of feet and blunt objects crashing against his body as he fell. Jon couldn't even feel the pain, not through the panic and fear…

“For the Watch! For the Watch!”

He glimpsed a flash of blond. A sharp cry. Suddenly, warm blood was hissing.

He couldn't even make sense of it. He was too busy gasping on the floor while the bodies thrashed. He heard shouting, and sharp bloody strikes of a blade.

Val, he realised suddenly. He recognised her blond hair striking, face twisted in fury. There were half a dozen men, but she had a sword and they didn't.

Flames hissed. The table he had been sitting at burst into flames from the toppled candle. Ancient tomes scorched in dusty flames. He saw Val kick a figure backwards, where he burned, thrashed and screamed. Wick Whittlestick, Jon recognised suddenly. He could recognise these men. He saw Sweet Donnel Hill scream and fall.

In the light, Jon saw Bowen Marsh fall backwards, crying. “Please, please!” he begged. “It's for the good of the realm!”

His skull splattered and Val’s sword jammed into his head.

Jon was gasping, struggling to breathe. There were other bodies stomping down the steps. He heard screams as bodies were being hacked to pieces.

He saw a podgy young boy flailing as he tried to wrestle a man in a black cloak. He was about to be overpowered, when two wildlings rushed to his aid.

The attackers were being killed quickly, but the everything was shaking…

A figure heaved Jon upwards off the ground. The ground was still trembling. “Your dragon!” Val screamed. “Calm your bloody dragon down!”

It took two men to pull him up the stairs and out of the rookery. Jon’s vision was still spinning.

Outside, it was absolute pandemonium.

He heard wood and stone raining downwards. The ceiling was shaking. The rookery, Jon realised.
Sonagon had ripped the tower of the rookery apart.

They opened the door, and then the figures yanked Jon backwards as a stone gargoyle crashed into the porch. Heavy wood splintered, stone crumbled. The whole structure shivered, ready to collapse.

There was a scar over the courtyard. Sonagon must have tried to tear up the ground to reach him in the vaults. He could feel the dragon raging.

*Calm down, Jon pushed. Calm down! They’re dead! They're dead!*

Sonagon roared so loudly the whole Wall quivered. Those moments were absolute panic.

The dragon didn't relax, and instead took to flying restlessly above. It felt like the whole castle was screaming. *Sonagon felt my pain and panic too. He really didn't like it.*

His throat felt raw, bruised. *I nearly died. Sonagon went mad.*

“Snow!” He saw Hatch and a dozen others stamping towards him clutching weapons. “What happened? What happened?”

“They tried to kill me,” Jon muttered, still wheezing. “They tried to kill me…”

He could see the bodies littering the floor. All with black cloaks. Some had tried to run, but they never escaped the building. Eleven of them in total. Val had been first through the door and killed four, and the other wildlings hacked apart the others.

Many of their faces were barely recognisable through the blood and gore. Then, Jon glimpsed a short figure with large eyes, wide eyes and an axe through his gut.

“No…” Jon muttered, staring at the lifeless corpse of his friend. “Pyp?”

*Pyp tried to kill me. Bowen Marsh and ten others tried to kill me.* Those moments were frantic, replaying in his mind.

*Once Pyp chased me down as a friend to stop myself from forsaking my vows. He was a friend. How could he try to kill me?*

“We're sorry, Snow!” He heard someone shout in the chaos. “They slipped past and ambushed the guards. Killed a man with a sharpened spoon.”

“Maester Aemon,” Jon demanded, head spinning. “*Maester Aemon, where is the old man?*”

They found the maester lying crumpled by the pans, blood dripping from his head. Lifeless grey eyes stared upwards. The old man was scattered and crumpled as if he had tripped.

Jon felt the scream jam in his throat.

Eleven men slipped into the rookery to try and kill him. Six went down into the vaults to do so while the other five stood guard by the stairs.

It looked like the maester tried to stop them. It didn't seem a deliberate murder; instead it looked like one of them pushed him and the old man fell and cracked his skull.

His whole body was trembling. He saw Val, panting for breath with blood on her sword and streaking through her hair. Jon was still shaking.
“… What… what happened?” Jon wheezed.

“Your dragon went berserk,” Val replied. “Nobody knew what was happening, but then I heard someone shouting that you were being attacked.”

His eyes were wide. “You saved me.”

“Aye.” Her eyes were hard. “And if I hadn't, that dragon would have slaughtered everyone in this castle. Snow, you be more bloody careful.”

Sonagon had been trying to save me too, he realised. Except the dragon didn't understand how, so it went mad trying to reach me.

Mance took him, brought him to the King's Tower. Behind him, it looked like the rookery was ready to collapse. There were orders to evacuate everything they could just as the walls started to crumble.

Jon took a deep swig of ale from a leather pouch, trying to calm his shaking nerves. Aemon. Gods, Aemon couldn't be dead – he was the last Targaryen in Westeros, the oldest man alive. How could a man like that die just because someone pushed him?

His mind kept replaying that moment. There hadn't been any escape plan for the attackers. Pyp, Bowen, Wick, Donnel... they all wanted me dead so badly they were willing to die for it.

“We found three other crows who helped those bastards escape the kitchens. Killed another guard too,” a man reported later, his voice angry. “They worked with the conspirators, keeping the guards distracted so the others could slip out to try to kill you.”

“Who?” Jon croaked.

“Their names Jeren, Hake and Rast.”

Gods I know those men. Jeren was a recruit alongside me …

“Are you sure?” Jon demanded. “Are you sure they were a part of it?”

“Oh aye. The one called Rast had a man's bite mark on his wrist from where he strangled the bloke.”

Mance gave him a dark look. “Snow,” he muttered. “No matter what these men were to you, you know what has to be done now.”

Jon stared at the floor. “Place them in a cell.”

“Snow—”

“I'll execute them myself in the morn,” Jon snapped. “Just place them in a cell.”

Mance lips tightened, but he nodded. Outside, the castle felt frantic. Mance's men and the Dragonguard had to seal the King's Tower.

“How many?” Jon asked finally. “How many died?”

“The conspirators killed two, three if you include the old maester,” said Mance. He paused. “And then your dragon probably killed two dozen or so when it became enraged. I'll tell you exactly how many when we find the bodies.”
Jon's hands tightened into fists. He didn't reply.

“We need to deal with the crows, Snow,” Hatch warned. “They tried to kill you.”

“Some of them tried.”

“And how many of the others are going to try again?” Hatch said. “We don't need those crows and they're not going to work with us. Say the word and they'll be dead.”

“No,” Jon growled.

“And what? You want to keeping staying in the same castle as men who hate our guts?” another voice growled. “How did you think this would end? There must be blood.”

There were mutters of approval “Enough!” Jon shouted. His jaw clenched. “Leave the room.”

He saw angry scowls. “… You heard the king,” Hatch said, folding his arms. “Everyone out.”

Shuffled footsteps traipsed through the door. At Jon's nod, Mance lingered in the room. “How do you want to play this, Snow?”

He stared out of the shuttered window. “Start by picking up the pieces. Keep the Night's Watch men out of the way until tempers cool. Compensation to the families of all those who died and rewards to Val and all the others who came to my aid.”

Mance nodded. Jon’s shoulders felt so tense. “And Maester Aemon deserves a proper funeral,” he said quietly. “A cremation – that’s the Targaryen way. He was a good man, he didn’t deserve to…”

Jon paused, trying to focus. “But keep the sworn brothers alive,” Jon continued, muttering. “Weed out any that look like they're going to cause trouble and send those away. They'll work with us, they will, as soon as tensions calm.”

“Aye. You stay in the King’s Tower tonight, Snow.” Jon was ready to object. “This tower has thicker doors and it’s easier guarded. I don't trust Hardin's Tower after your dragon gave it a whack.”

Jon bit his lip, but nodded. “I can't keep Sonagon in the castle, can I?” Jon muttered.

“No. You need to keep that dragon well away from everyone else. We should have moved it out a long time ago.”

“Aye.” But where can I keep him? “Tormund will be here soon with his host. Keeping so many wildlings, crows and Sonagon… it aggravates things. As soon as Tormund arrives we'll march out.”

“It would be easier if we killed the crows,” Mance noted.

“You want to do that?”

“No. Just pointing it out. It would be easier.”

Jon shook his head, but didn't reply. Mance didn't push the subject. “Where will you be marching to? Winterfell?”

Jon just nodded. Home. “Aye. I will have to. The Wall is yours Mance. Keep it secure.”
“Aye.” He folded his arms and narrowed his eyes. “But take my advice, Snow. That's a dragon. It's good at destroying and little else. Give it something to destroy.”

Val

She watched as the free folk cleared the ruins of the rookery. A single tail whip from the dragon had sent granite and wooden beams across the courtyard. It took the giant Wun Wun to hoist up the great chunks of stone, while men scrambled between the debris.

Hardin’s Tower had lost a good chunk of stone too as the dragon had thrashed, and then there was the huge gash through the wards where the beast tore up the ground. The earth was jagged and gouged from where giant claws and teeth had torn and ploughed up snow and stone.

Two minutes of rage, and the whole castle trembled.

Sonagon wasn’t here now; the beast had left to hunt. She had seen it flying away north beyond the Wall, and the castle sighed a breath of relief to see it go.

Val saw the bodies of the dead crows being dragged out. Jon Snow insisted that the old maester should be given a proper funeral pyre, though all the others were taken behind the logging house and burned in a shallow pit.

It's a queer thing, Val thought, to watch men whom you fought being carried out. In the moment it had been nothing but rage and bloodlust. Her shoulder still ached from where one of the big crows had tried to claw at her.

A messenger, a boy with wide eyes and a white stone, told her that Snow demanded to see her. Her jaw stiffened, but she nodded and headed off to the King’s Tower while the boy ran off to other raiders. Val paused as another three raiders trundled up the stairs besides her. There were four Dragonguards standing stiffly at the entrance to the tower, and another three by the king’s door. Cool eyes watched her as she passed.

She found Jon Snow waiting for them. “Val,” he nodded to her and the others. His throat was still raw and bruised. “Boyd, Hal, Erik.” No one spoke, but Snow just limped forward, and slowly dropped a sheepskin pouch onto the table in the solar. There was a metallic thud. “You all came to my aid, and good service should have good reward. Take yours.”

From the pouch, he poured out a mismatch of dull bracelets onto the surface. Silver armbands, Val realised. They were unpolished, but rich. The free folk had little coin, but there was still wealth enough.

She saw flashes of avarice in the expressions of the men next to her, and they quickly bowed, muttered to Jon, and walked away cradling the sliver. Val stared more suspiciously, but she took one of the bracelets in any case.

“You should take more than one, my lady,” Jon offered. “You killed four men by yourself.”

She paused, then took two. They were both forged for thicker wrists than hers, but she could barter using them. “Aye,” Val nodded. “You pay silver in exchange for your life?”

“I already tried to give you a castle, but you refused,” he said with a dry smile.
She tutted, but let the issue drop. He looks tired, she realised. Very tired and worn. Now when was
the last time he slept? The king seemed to always be moving and working, she didn't think he ever
took time to relax.

“… It is that southron you should reward,” Val said, as she started to walk away. *Fair is fair.* “The
one you brought in. I heard him shouting for aid. Everyone else was running from the dragon, and
he was the only reason I managed to get there in time.”

“Then I must reward him too. Care to join me, my lady?”

She paused, but nodded. He wrapped himself up in his cloak and had a quick word with his man,
Furs, before following Val. Three of his Dragonguard stomped down the stairs behind them.

“You mean go to everywhere with your guards behind you?” Val asked.

“I think that would be wise.”

So did she, but she didn’t say anything. The dragon would have killed everyone in the castle if
something had happened to Jon. The rumours of what had happened yesterday and had already
spread, and she wondered briefly if anyone would dare attack the king now.

The camps outside of Castle Black were sprawling tents of cloth and hide, with fire pits dug into
the ground, littering outwards from the Tower of the Guards. As soon as Snow even stepped foot
towards them, Val felt the murmur pass through the camp and wide eyes staring up at him. So
many people all looking and muttering. Even refugees who weren’t fighters had made the trek
along the Wall to Castle Black with their host, to follow the dragon. Every single person seemed to
have a white stone on their furs.

She passed a carving of white bark in the shape of a dragon, sitting at the very centre of the camp.

So many eyes looking towards her like that made her nervous, but Jon either hid it better or didn’t
feel it. Towards the fringes, there were tents of those that weren’t free folk, villagers that had been
captured by their army or forced to flock to Castle Black nevertheless for food and shelter. It didn’t
escape Val’s notice that everyone who wasn’t free folk was at the back of the queue whenever
food was handed out.

Jon saw the boy first; the pudgy young man named Harlow. There was a wound across his
forehead from where he had tried to fight the assassins. Val just nodded. “Aye, he’s the one.”

For a second, Harlow looked scared witless as Jon approached him. Between the crowds, Val
couldn’t catch the words, but she caught the look of absolute astonishment on the boy’s face as Jon
extended his hand.

She hung back and watched. Harlow looked stunned, but the king said some words and Harlow
nodded, and grinned. Val caught the mutters from the reactions, though not what the king said.

“What did you say to him?” Val asked as he turned back. His Dragonguards escorted Harlow out of
the refugee camps.

“I offered him a place on my Dragonguard,” Jon replied simply.

“You did what?” Val smirked. “That boy is gormless. I saw him try to fight against one of those
crows and it was absolutely pathetic. He is no fighter.”

“Yet he still tried,” Jon said as he walked. “While everyone else was running mad, Harlow was the
only one who thought to chase after me. I would be dead if not for it.” Jon shrugged. “And he helped me greatly in dealing with the mountain clans. I know he’s brave and resourceful, and I don’t think he’s scared of Sonagon. He’ll do on my Dragonguard.”

“And yet he's not exactly a warrior.”

“I need more than just warriors.”

“And how many are you planning on appointing?”

“As many as needed. The Dragonguard needs stewards and stable-keepers as much as anything.” He shook his head. “No, the Dragonguard won’t be my version of the kingsguard. It will be a rank open to anyone from commoners to knight.”

They were heading back into the castle, muddy slurry underfoot. There were light flecks of snow in the air. “I don’t know what a kingsguard is, Snow,” Val said with a frown.

Jon blinked. “They are the royal bodyguards of the Iron Throne, the finest knights in the Seven Kingdoms.”

“And then that would be that fancy place down south, the big chair that the little boy sits on?”

“Tommen Baratheon,” Jon nodded. “He is king right now. But the kingsguard is an ancient brotherhood, founded three hundred years ago by Aegon Targaryen.”

He must have seen the confusion on her face. “Aegon Targaryen,” he repeated, with a frown. “The Conqueror? Do you not know of the Targaryens?”

“Snow, I know how to track a hare under three feet of snow and how to herd a bull mammoth away from a village,” Val said, irritated, “but don’t be surprised if I know little of your southron names.”

He blinked, and then smiled. He had a soft smile. “Forgive me, my lady,” he said, bowing his head. “The Targaryens were first dragonlords in Westeros, those who built the Iron Throne and conquered the Seven Kingdoms.”

“Dragonlords,” she repeated. She’d heard there had been more dragons that went extinct, but she never really knew the truth. Such things were little more than idle rumour north of the Wall. Or they had been, until Sonagon appeared. “Like you?”

“I suppose so.” He shifted. He didn’t sound comfortable saying so.

Val was about to ask more, but then he paused and headed up the stairs towards the Flint Barracks. Val caught figures coming out to watch him. The Barracks seemed to shuffle.

Val heard the words he gave to a free folk through the doorway. “All Night’s Watch men get double their current rations,” Jon ordered. “The curfew is still in place, but from now on they have permission to move around the castle freely.”

She heard the brothers mumbled. What is he thinking? Val cursed, stepping into the cramped and dirty barracks. The Dragonguard shuffled, trying to squeeze in and follow him.

Jon walked straight up to a thick necked and broad-shouldered crow, a head taller than Jon. Still, the big man looked nervous, shuffling on his feet. He had a blunt and honest face.

“Grenn,” Jon said quietly. “Did you know that Pyp was plotting to kill me?”
The big man’s voice sounded choked. “I did not,” he mumbled. All of the free folk around him were staring hatefully.

Jon didn’t reply. Something about the silence demanded answers. “… Pyp was angry, Jon,” Grenn muttered. “He… we… had friends at the Shadow Tower. We had brothers who died in the forest. And then you come along with wildlings and dragons and there’s death everywhere…”

A free folk growled, moving to strike Grenn. Jon raised his hand, glared at the wildling, and motioned for Grenn to continue. Grenn gulped. “I saw the blue-eyed dead in the woods, I did,” Grenn continued nervously. “But I don’t know what they were. There were mutters going around that the wildling sorcery was responsible for them, and the Red Woman did say that you were evil…”

His voice trailed. The room was quiet. Jon just paused, and nodded. “You’re right,” he said slowly. “… I’ve been expecting the Night’s Watch to come around, as I did, but I’ve given you no reason to do so. No reason to trust me. I’m sorry Grenn, that’s on me. I could have done more.”

The crow blinked. Jon just continued in a firm voice. “Grenn of Duskendale, I name you to my Dragonguard. I offer you a full position in my service,” he said, as the room muttered. “If you believe that my motives are foul, then you can stand in my presence during the day and you can see that they’re not.”

Grenn’s jaw dropped open slightly. He looked stunned. Some free folk looked ready to object, but Jon’s gaze turned hard. “Furs, give Grenn armour and weapons as suitable,” Jon ordered. “And a room under the King’s Tower.”

He turned to walk away, passing a cold look over a few free folk that were glowering at him. “I also expect free folk to watch their manners around the men of the Night’s Watch,” Jon said, warningly.

Some of them tried to object. His Dragonguard pushed their way through. Val heard Hatch the Halfgiant bellowing for them to get back. Val hesitated, lingering away at the bottom of the barracks.

“Are you a fool?” Val muttered as he approached. “The crows try to kill you and you name one of them as your guard?”

“Grenn didn’t. I know Grenn, he’s a good man.”

“You knew the others too.”

His glanced at her as they walked. “Grenn is strong and good with animals. He’s honest, and he’s brave. Aye, I’d trust him as my Dragonguard.” He nodded “And I appointed him for the same reason I chose Harlow. I want to fill the ranks with more than just free folk – it has to be free folk, sworn brothers and northmen come together.”

Val narrowed her eyes, but didn't object. They were heading into the King’s Tower. Guards opened the double oak doors for them, and they trundled up the staircase. Val lowered her hood.

“There’d be a spot on the Dragonguard for you too, my lady,” Jon noted, “if I thought you’d accept it.”

“And what? So I could spend my time looking after a dragon?” Val snorted. “I want as little to do with that beast as I can, Snow.”
“As you wish.”

He shrugged his cloak off as he limped into the solar. The air was cool, and he moved to light the fireplace. Val lingered, looking at him curiously. *He is constantly so busy,* she thought, folding her arms. *When was the last time he relaxed?*

“So these dragons of yours? There were more, at one time?” she asked. “How many?”

“At one time? Dozens. The last dragon in the south died over a hundred and fifty years ago.”

“And they were as large as yours?” She said doubtfully.

“Some as large, perhaps, but none larger I think.” He paused, hesitating. “I have a book I can show you, if you're curious, my lady.”

“I cannot read, Snow.”

“There are pictures too.”

From underneath the desk, he brought out a heavy, dusty tome of yellowing parchment. The cover and some of the pages looked recently scorched, charred by fire, but others towards the front were still legible. Jon treated it with the utmost delicacy. “I intend to find a maester as soon as possible.” He sounded sad. “To transcribe as much as possible before more is lost.”

He opened the cover. The faded squiggly lines and runes looked nonsensical to her. He turned the page again, and there was a sketch of a dragon with wings outstretched flapping over the double fold. Val peered over his shoulder. It was a strange thing to look at something so large that had been drawn so small.

She pursed her lips. “So this what you southerns do then?” she muttered. “You write words and draw little pictures of big things?”

“Aye, I suppose we do.”

He turned to a page showing a dragon’s maw and teeth as it gaped open. She had to admit, they were good pictures.

She peered over so she could see, trying to trace the ancient pencil strokes. Val ran the tips of her fingers over the dry parchment. Jon smiled softly.

“So these old dragons,” Val muttered. “You said they died. Died how?”

“There was a war.”

“A war of dragons?”

“Aye. The Dance of Dragons, it was called. The Targaryen civil war. Where once there were dozens, after the war there were only a few, and none that produced healthy offspring.” He walked, moving to sit down. *He sighs when he takes weight off his leg,* she noted. “That was the start of the Targaryen decline.”

“These Targaryens,” she mused. “Dragonlords. Does that make them kin to you?”

A flicker passed across his face. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “But the last Targaryen in Westeros died yesterday. He was an old man. He fell and cracked his skull.”
“The blind maester.” Val glanced at him, trying to read his expression. Whenever he had dealt with trouble his eyes could turn hard like grey iron. Slowly, she watched as they softened like fog. “… So he could have been your family?”

“I’m not even sure,” Jon said, with a hollow smile. “But it felt like he was.”

Val paused. “Lives should be celebrated, Jon Snow,” she said, her voice turning softer. “Let’s raise wine to the blind old man.”

He looked surprised. “I shouldn’t,” he said, biting his lip. “There are duties to attend to.”

Jon seemed strangely nervous. Val smiled sweetly.

“The castle can survive one evening without you, I think.” She leant backwards on the chair, stretching outwards. “Tell me about these dragons.”

Jon hesitateed slightly, but he smiled. “Aye, alright.”

“I think Mance stashed a bottle of wine in the cupboard there.” Val pointed.

“Will he mind us taking it?”

“We’re wildlings, Snow,” she said as she stood up. “If we steal his wine, then it’s his own fault for not keeping it properly.”

She went to fetch two wooden cups. There were glasses, but it still felt so weird for her to drink out of glass. Jon smiled as he uncorked the decanter, and the smile looked out-of-place on him. Like he wasn’t used to it.

“To Maester Aemon,” he said quietly. Their cups clunked.

Snow talked about dragons, about Targaryen history. He mentioned names like Aegon, Dareon, and Aemon, the Conqueror and the Dragonknight and wars in places that she couldn’t even place. Val laughed, and drank wine, noticing how his eyes lit up slightly as he talked.

It was good wine too. Probably something the old Lord Commander had been saving. Thick southern wine, lighter and fluffier than the hard northern stuff she was used to. Not so bad, she mused, as she downed the last of the cup with a small belch.

For some reason, Jon seemed very amused by that. He burst out in quiet chuckles. “What the hells are you laughing at?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” he chuckled. “Nothing, my lady.”

They went through the wine quickly. Darkness was falling outside, the smell of smoke from the camps heavy in the air.

“… so when King Daeron declared to announce another campaign on Dorne, his advisors thought him mad,” Jon was saying. “They reminded him that that Aegon the Conqueror and his sisters failed twice trying to conquer Dorne and now the Iron Throne had no dragons. Daeron replied, ‘You have a dragon. He stands before you’.”

“Wow,” said Val. “He sounds like a pompous little shit.”

That caused him to chuckle. “I suppose he does. But he was the Young Dragon. He was a great tactician and leader.”
Her head cocked. “You sound like you admire him.”

“I do. I used to read stories about his campaign with Robb. We used to pretend we were Daeron the Young Dragon and Aemon the Dragonknight.” He paused, a pained expression over his face. Eyes flickered. “… And then Robb led his own campaign. He became the Young Wolf.”

He seemed to pause. The wine left his cheeks flushed. “You have a dragon,” Val said, lowering her voice.

“I do, but I cannot…” He trailed off, and then shook his head. “Forgive me, my lady, too much wine on an empty stomach. I will have Beth bring us up a meal.”

“Beth,” Val repeated. “Is that the lass with the mousy hair always tottering around you?”

“Aye. She and the others have been tending to my meals and clothes.” He stood up, walking towards the door.

“I'm sure. That's because she wants you to fuck her.”

He blinked, gaping. “What, she’s not…”

“Snow, she's a free folk. No free folk girl would ever bring a man food without expecting that man to take them too.”

He shook his head. Gods, is he blushing? “They are just being helpful.”

“Sure.” She rolled her eyes. “Although I am surprised she's kept at it even after she must have heard about the…”

“The what?” he asked, baffled.

“The snip-snip,” she said softly, with finger motions. He gaped at her. “Well, they do geld you when you take the black don't they? I imagine they must cut it off so you don't miss it when you're on the Wall. It explains a bit.”

Jon looked flustered. “I am not a… they didn't… who has been…?” He paused, and blinked. “… Are you teasing me?”

“Never. Perish the thought, Your Grace,” she said innocently.

It seemed like he was trying to respond, but his mouth just opened and closed a few times. He shook his head. “… I will see about food, my lady,” he said finally, turning to walk away.

Val just smirked, dropping the cup on the table as he left.

She waited. She heard voices outside the door. Somebody shuffling up the stairs.

“What is going on?” Val called, pulling herself up. There were mutters from outside; somebody must have come up to meet Jon.

She creaked open the door. The voices were very low. She saw the fat crow – Samwell – standing nervously by the landing. In the torchlight, Jon's face suddenly seemed hard.

He's clutching a letter, she saw. “Oh, one of your birds have arrived?” Val called. “Where from?”

Neither of them replied. Jon's hands were trembling. Val moved closer.
The letter was smeared in pink, she noticed. She couldn't understand the words. “What is going on?” She asked, lowering his voice.

Without a word, Jon dropped the parchment on the ground and stormed away. She could see his shoulders trembling.

Sam squirmed, fearful. Val reached to out to grab him.

“Oi, crow,” she demanded. “Sam, right? What was in that letter, Sam? What the hells did it say?”

He quivered. “… I shouldn't…”

“Tell me.” Now what would make Snow react like that?

Eventually, Sam conceded. He picked up the parchment and he read out loud;


“Your sister Arya has been telling me about you. She tells me that you used to love her. She told me that she used to mess up her hair. She told me about the little sword you gave her. That you would play with her. Now, I play with her.

“She's my wife, and when I hurt her it is your fault. I make her scream your name. Sometimes she calls for you to help her.

“I hurt her. I rape her every night and cut her every morning. For all of your crimes and lies, I make your sister suffer and cry for them.

“Come and see, bastard. Come and see what I'm doing to your sister.

“I want you gone. Take your savages and go back north of the Wall, but leave. I want your dragon. Surrender the beast to me. Every day you are in defiance I will hurt your sister a little bit more. Come and see.

“Challenge me and I will cut out your bastard heart and feed it to her.

“Ramsay Bolton, Trueborn Lord of Winterfell.”

There was a long silence. Sam gulped. “There was something else,” he muttered, lifting up a wooden box with a shrivelled, severed thing inside of it. “It came with the envelope.”


Without a pause, she pushed past Sam and strode after Jon. The snows were thick, she had to force her way out into the grounds. She saw him barge his way into Hardin's Tower and storm up the staircase. The guards looked confused.

When Val followed, she heard a short, sharp scream. There were short, dull impacts. Fists punching against the wall.

She had never seen him look so crazed. “… Jon…” she called softly.

His breaths were haggard. He was pacing constantly, restless as a wolf. For a while, Val didn't think he would reply.
“He has my sister,” he growled, punching the wall again with an angry growl. “My sister.” She walked forward hesitantly. “I know of that man. Ramsay Bolton,” he spat, between deep, trembling breaths. “The man is a butcher. A dog. And he has Arya.”

“Your sister,” Val muttered. “How old is she?”

He stopped. “Twelve. I have not seen her in three years.”

_I am sorry_, she almost said, but she held her tongue. He wasn't looking for sympathies right now.

“They cut off her nose,” he growled. “Ramsay Bolton. Bolton. When he married Lady Hornwood he imprisoned and starved her until she had to eat her own fingers. And they married Arya to him?

“They murdered my brother. They killed my family. They torture my sister.” He screamed, slamming his fist against the stone again. She heard something crack.

“I think that wall has had enough, Snow,” she said. Her voice turned hard. “You done?”

He turned to her. There was no softness in his gaze now. “What?”

“Go ahead, keep beating the wall. While you're breaking your knuckles, your sister is being raped.”

“Don't,” he warned.

“Fuck hurting yourself over that prick,” she snapped. “Don't waste your rage against a wall; _savour_ what you're feeling right now, keep it in your heart, and then put it through that bastard's skull.”

She stepped forward, pushing into his space. She kept her gaze locked on his.

“He's got her,” Jon muttered. “She's a hostage, he'll kill her…”

“Then take her back.” Val challenged, raising her chin defiantly. “Take your justice. Take your vengeance. Take their heads and take their balls. You're a wildling, Snow.”

She took another step forward, keeping her eyes on his. Gods, her heart was racing. The air felt so tense, savage…

“If you want something,” she said, “all you've got to do is _take_ it.”

The moment froze. In the background, the fire hissed.

He lunged at her aggressively, his body pushing into hers. Val felt herself smirk just before their lips smashed.

His body was against her, pushing her back into the wall. She could smell the thick pang of wine on his lips. She could feel him, drunk and full of desire.

They broke for air. His breath was husky, shallow, panting in her ear. Jon seemed to hesitate, until Val grabbed him and pulled him into her. She bit his lower lip so sharply he winced, which seemed only to drive him further.

His hands pressed into her body. His hips pressing into hers even through their clothes. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders.

It seemed like he tried to say something, but she kissed and bit his lips shut. No words were
Groping hands went for her bosom, and she replied with a sharp slap to his jaw. Jon blinked, looking stunned.

Val just gave him a sultry smirk, eyes twinkling. Her blond hair whipped around her face.

*Come on, ‘Your Grace’,* she challenged. Not a word was said, but he could feel the challenge in her touch, and in her gaze.

When his hands went for her again, he was far more aggressive, forceful. She gasped as she felt herself slammed back against the wall. She felt the hardness protrude through his breeches, desperate for release.

Hands fumbled at her furs, so she ripped the threads of his tunic off his shoulders

His chest was toned, muscular and lean. She felt her hands roam over the scars on his body.

By the time he finally got her clothes off, it felt like there was a fire between them. His hand clawed her breast so tightly it hurt.

Val bit, scratched and slapped him at every chance she got. Her nails scraped between his hair, forcing him to go just a little bit further, a little bit harder, a little bit stronger….

*Oh yes… there we are…*

Around her, she felt the tower shake as the dragon roared.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the bastard letter, and dragons attacking...

Val

Her eyes flickered open lazily. The faint morning sun filtered through the shuttered windows of the room. Val yawned and stretched, feeling toned muscles and hair lying underneath her. He felt warm, solid, masculine. The smell of him in the morning caused her to smile.

Jon was already awake. He lay on the featherbed, staring up at the ceiling.

“Morning,” Val muttered tiredly, rolling slightly. She still wasn’t used to these soft southron beds. The smell of sex and sweat still lingered in the wool blankets, but it wasn’t an unpleasant smell. Her whole body felt stiff, sore, but relaxed, in the way that good sex did.

He didn’t reply for a while. “I am sorry, my lady,” Jon said finally. His voice was low, forlorn. “We… I shouldn’t have… it was dishonourable.”

Val didn’t react straight away. She sighed. Well, there’s a bucket of water over my good mood. Too early to do this, her head ached. “Now isn’t that what every girl wants to hear the morning after?”

He shuffled away from her, tripping and stumbling slightly as he pulled himself out of the featherbed, taking a deep breath. Val groaned, pulling herself upwards. They were both naked, and a chill crept into the room.

“Get back in bed,” she said with another yawn. “The air is cold and the sheets are warm.”

“No, I… I shouldn’t have done that,” he said, voice dripping guilt. “I beg your pardon, Val. Last night, it was shameful.”

“We must have different opinions on what that word means,” she said, pulling the sheets off her to reveal her naked form. “Do I look shamed to you?”

He bit his lip and averted his eyes. “It was shameful for me.” Still he didn’t even look at her. It made her irritated. “I took a vow.”

“That ship has sailed, Your Grace.”

No reply. She saw him wince in pain as he moved his scarred leg, trying to get dressed quickly. Where is he trying to run off to? She wondered. This is his room.

He hasn’t even called me ‘my lady’, she realised. Normally that was their little teasing joke; he’d say ‘my lady’ and she’d say ‘Your Grace’.

“You’re serious,” she groaned. “You really want to do this now?”

“I was upset last night. I exploited you.”
“Good. Exploit away.” She rubbed her eyes. “You were upset and you took comfort in the arms of another. There ain't nothing wrong with that.”

“It shouldn’t have happened, I’m sorry…”

“You say sorry one more time and I will geld you,” she warned. That apology irked her.

He took a deep breath. “There’s someone else.”

She nodded. “Ah. Your little redheaded girl, I take it?”

He nodded. The guilt on his face reminded her of a little pup, staring at the ground. He can't even meet my eyes. Or my breasts.

Val shrugged. “So?”

He flustered. “So it’s dishonourable, I shouldn't have—”

“When was the last time you saw your girl?” Val demanded.

“Seven months ago.”

“Is she even still alive?”

No reply. He doesn’t know, then.

“And you think it’s dishonourable taking company with another after a lay you had seven months ago? Bugger off.”

“Ygritte,” he snapped. “Her name was Ygritte, we were together and I never finished things with her. I can’t… do this… it’s…”

“Sex,” said Val. Her good mood was burning away fast. She shambled up. “Rutting. Make love. Coupling. Fucking. Call it what it is, don’t act like a bloody blushing maiden.”

“It’s wrong,” he stammered. “There was too much wine and I shouldn't have.”

A mistake? Is that really how he wants to treat me? Oh, that made her annoyed. “I swear, Snow; you’re not a eunuch but you sure do pretend to be one. You act like you're frightened of your own dick.” She tried to wash her face with her hands as she shambled over the cold stone floor. “We had sex. So what – why do you need to make it something foul? There ain’t nothing dirty in it unless you make it so.”

His gaze flashed. “I have a duty. I never intended on breaking my vows and I can’t break them again.”

“Is there really some god in the south that goes around punishing folk each time they get their dick wet?” she said incredulously. “Do you think you’re marked for each night you spend with another?”

He shook his head. “I have a duty,” he repeated. “And love is the death of duty. I can’t, there’s…” He grimaced. “I can’t marry you, Val. And I can’t sire a child.”

“Did I ask for marriage?” she said, standing upwards. “And bugar off if you think I’m having a child. Moon tea exists for a reason, Snow. Why do you always have to try and complicate things?”
“It’s not that simple.”

“It’s very simple,” she said, stretching out the words like she was speaking to a dimwit. “We had sex. It was good sex too. If you want to have sex again, then let me know and maybe I’ll want to as well.”

He didn’t reply. He stood frozen at the far side of the room, looking downwards. Couldn’t even come close to her. She pulled on her breeches and tunic, and then her gown in an easy motion. She didn’t bother with her smallclothes, they’d need to be washed anyways.

“I swear, Snow,” Val continued. “You’ve got a nice body and I’m attracted to you, but I really don’t need this headache afterwards. I’ve got things to do.”

She walked out of his chambers without another word, letting the door slam behind her. She shivered in the cold, trying to straighten both her furs and her hair as she walked down the spiral staircase.

She saw two of the Dragonguard at the bottom clearing looking upwards at her. One of them, Furs, call up and asked, “Did you two just fuck in there?”

“Yep.” Val nodded. “It turns out that King Snow really does have no balls.”

She went back to the Silent Tower to wash, and change her clothes. She left her knife behind and picked up her dirk and belt instead. She thought back to the exchange in Jon’s quarters. Did I go too far back there?

No, she decided. That was a pretty justified reaction against someone who used the word ‘shameful’ the morning after we slept together.

---

**Jon**

He groaned as he paced his chambers, hands on his head. The wine left his head aching and the sex left his body aching. His skin still shivered from her phantom touch.

*It was mistake*, he told himself. *A drunken mistake made in grief. Too much wine.*

Val could send him mad sometimes. She was beautiful, fearsome and so, so maddeningly alluring. She had glorious blond hair, sharp cheekbones and a lean and nubile body. Her lips, her legs, her breasts…

All of the alcohol in the world couldn’t dim the feeling of last night. The tension, the touch, the trembling motions. Thrashing bodies and soft squirming. He could barely picture it, but he remembered the sounds – her breathing in his ear, her muffled groans beneath him. He remembered golden hair in his face, lips tracing his collarbone…

Ygritte had been fair, even cute, but Val was the type of beauty that men could fight over.

The thought of Ygritte made Jon feel even worse than he already did. The memory of him pushing her off the cliffs had haunted him for months.

His body didn’t stop trembling.
I shouldn’t have spent the night with her. That was a mistake, he thought, ignoring the tightness in his chest. I shamed myself, and shamed her.

I loved Ygritte, I did. Now why is it that everyone I love seems to die? My father, Robb, Ygritte, and Arya…

Love is the bane of honour, the death of duty. What is honour compared to a woman’s love? The ghostly words of Maester Aemon only served to make him feel even more tense.

He broke his morning fast alone in his tower, stewing in frustration. Jon caught the flicker in the serving girls’ eyes, but no one said anything. After that, he didn’t want to see anyone at all.

After a long time, he sent word to Sam to bring him the pink letter from the Boltons. The thought of that letter sent shivers down his spine, but he needed to read it again in the cold light of day.

Jon didn’t even say a word to Sam as he dropped the parchment at Hardin’s Tower. Sam muttered something about burning the severed nose, and Jon just nodded. What was the acceptable way of disposing of your sister’s nose? Jon had to force himself not to even think about it.

He read that letter four more times, constantly. He had been too drunk last night to really process it beyond rage. Arya, he thought. Gods, Arya what are they doing to you?

Jon remembered a sweet, wild nine-year-old girl. Would he even recognise his sister anymore? Would she recognise him?

Why would Ramsay Bolton send me a letter like this? Jon thought slowly. It was crude, taunting, mocking. He used the phrase ‘come and see’ three times. He’s trying to provoke me. He wants me to do something rash like charge to Winterfell in anger.

And it might work too, Jon though. His was a constant, simmering anger, like tar bubbling in his gut.

He delegated his duties to his Dragonguard and to Mance while he retreated into Hardin’s Tower. He gave the pink letter a special place on his desk, so he could reread it constantly. Then, he passed a message onto Sam to bring him all of the letters and correspondence the castle had received concerning the Boltons.

The more he read and the longer he simmered, slowly all that rage turned cold, as frigid as the roost of the ice dragon’s perch above him.

All of the grief, the stress… all of the problems he had but couldn’t deal with it. The assassination attempt, his dragon, Aemon’s death, Val… Jon could feel it all getting to him. He could feel himself becoming liable to do something rash, so he gave the order that he wasn’t to be disturbed. He needed focus. Jon couldn’t even focus on anything without the echo of Ramsay Bolton’s words haunting his mind.

They torture my sister. They murdered my brother.

Jon turned to focus on an older letter, well lined with faded ink. This letter had been sent months ago – declaring Roose Bolton the Warden of the North. Robb Stark executed for ‘treason’. How would Robb react to this?

It had been over three years since the last time Jon saw Robb. He remembered a smiling, confident, curly red-haired boy who could always outride him but would never gloat. Now, Jon sat at the desk in Hardin’s Tower, staring at so many letters describing events that he had missed.
It was like looking at a timeline of everything that had happened. Sam had dug out every letter they had ever received - every missive of events that occurred so far away.

Now, Jon had to try to match his memory of his half-brother with the person described in the letters. The parchments described the Young Wolf and his campaign – a young king who fought valiantly in the riverlands, fighting for justice for his family and the freedom of his country. Robb Stark had been crowned, married and then murdered all the while Jon had been in the wilderness, a thousand leagues away.

Jon’s hands gripped the table, tightening quietly with every letter he read.

He remembered Theon Greyjoy – laughing, cocky, constantly smirking Theon Greyjoy. Jon wondered whether Theon had been smirking when he murdered Bran and Rickon and mounted their burnt heads over Winterfell and sacked the castle.

He remembered Tyrion Lannister, the clever dwarf who had even befriended Jon during their trip to the Wall. Jon wondered if Tyrion had been so kind and clever when he married his sister, and plotted to murder his family. Now Sansa was gone, by all accounts; disappeared and implicated when the Imp assassinated Joffrey at his wedding.

And Arya… wild, sweet Arya… It made Jon’s hands tremble with just the thought.

*Was that the fate of the Stark children?* Jon thought, quietly fuming. *The sons to be murdered by their enemies, and the daughters to marry their enemies?*

He wasn’t angry, it wasn’t rage anymore. It felt colder than anger; like an ice-cold blade through his chest. His fingers traced the line of the scar between his ribcage. The more he thought about it the more he felt the dagger dig into his heart...

There was a knock on the door. Furs brought him an evening meal. Jon was in no mood for company, so he ordered his guards to refuse all guests.

He didn’t sleep that night. Instead, he reached out to Phantom, feeling her prowl darkly and simmer. The shadowcat seemed to suit him better right now. The feline prowled restlessly over the battlements of Eastwatch, sharp eyes overlooking the hustling bay.

Jon felt Ghost howling, still hunting beyond the Wall around Hardhome. Sonagon was on top of the tower, looming over Castle Black like some enormous gargoyle.

*What would Robb do in this situation?* Jon thought. He thought of his brother a lot, of the campaign he had led. The Young Wolf victorious in every battle he fought. *Would I have been able to do that? To win those battles?*

Robb had always been the leader, the confident, assured trueborn Stark. Jon was a fighter more than a leader. The free folk followed him not because of his leadership, but because he fought for them.

*What would Robb do here?* Robb Stark would have rallied the north. He would have raised his bannermen and led them against the Boltons, marched down to Winterfell and rescued his sister, and put the Boltons and the Freys to the sword. Robb Stark could have won justice for his family, could have rallied the realm.

*I can’t do that. I am Jon Snow, not Stark. I am a deserter, wildling and traitor to the realm. By the laws of men I should be executed. I am a warg and skinchanger – a bastard.*
He could feel that anger in his chest. Robb would have been the justice. But I can be the vengeance.

He woke up early that morning. His two legs felt weird after spending the entire night in Phantom’s skin. Jon spent some time thinking about it, and then prepared his full battledress. He clad himself iron top-capped boots, a worn wool-lined hauberk and leathers, before fastening his giant hide furs over his shoulders. He took a steel half-helm formerly belonging to the Lord Commander, cradling it under his arm.

It was only just dawn when Jon walked down the tower, with Dark Sister on his hip. His guards stared at him in surprise.

“Furs!” Jon shouted. “Prepare the saddle.”

“Your horse?”

“No,” he replied. “The other saddle.”

Furs grinned, revealing both missing front teeth. “Ah.”

“Hatch, prepare ten of the Dragonguard to fly with me. We need supplies for a week, thick furs, and we’re going prepared for a fight. Make sure the men are ready,” Jon ordered.

He saw the big man’s face pale. “We’re riding the dragon? Today?”

“Aye. It’ll be a long journey too.”

“Where are we heading?”

He paused. “We’re going raiding. I’ll tell you more on the journey.”

He could see the murmurs spreading. He just pushed on. Jon stopped off by the armoury with one of his saddlebags. He picked up a spare longsword, a wooden buckler, and a set of dull iron gauntlets. He ordered his men to bring longbows.

The castle was already moving. Jon saw Grenn watching him open-mouthed as his guards prepared equipment and supplies. He glimpsed Val standing on the battlements with her arms folded, but Jon just walked past her. He couldn’t handle complications right now. Let’s focus on what I can do.

He met Mance limping from the King’s Tower, with a spearwife holding his arm for support.

“Where are you going?” Mance demanded, eyes narrowing.

“South. Sonagon and I will be gone for a few days, a week at most,” Jon replied.

“You leave and we might have a riot on our hands.”

“It’s only a week.”

“That might be too long. Lots of free folk worship you like a god. That dragon might be the only thing keeping the northern lords back and the Night’s Watch in-line. What happens when they figure that this might be a chance to throw us out?”

“Well, make sure they don’t. Remind them who has the power here. You’re in charge of Castle Black when I’m gone.”

Mance’s lips pursed, but he nodded. I’m king now, Jon thought. Let’s be king.
He could feel the people stirring. His Dragonguard rushing for arms was confirmation that Jon was moving out. He knew it was sudden, but sudden was good. Sudden gave any conspirators little time to conspire.

The whole castle was definitely waking up quickly. Mance looked at Jon with a frown. “... I heard about that letter, Snow,” he muttered quietly.

“Yes. They have my sister.”

“And if you fly to Winterfell, your sister will be the very first casualty in that battle. She’s a hostage.”

“I’m aware,” Jon said coolly, walking away towards the rookery. His heart was pounding. This was a big moment. This time, he was finally flying south, and he knew just what to do. “I’m not going to Winterfell.”

Sooner or later, the whole realm would know about Sonagon, but Jon wanted it to be on his terms.

He headed towards the rookery, before remembering and staring at nothing but broken rubble of the half-crumbling keep. Jon had to backtrack, recalling that Sam had moved the ravens and anything salvageable to the Grey Keep – the Lord Steward’s former quarters. His rooms in the Grey Keep was left a dump from all the books and letters that had been piled, unsorted. Jon saw a big, beefy man standing guard in front of Sam’s chambers, before he half-bowed and let Jon through.

Jon met Sam staring at him wide-eyed. “Sam,” Jon said, his voice turning softer. “I need maps – as good of maps as you have. I’m heading south.”

Sam’s voice trembled. It looked like he had been crying after Aemon’s death. “Maps? Um, I’m not sure... I think Aemon had a few... where of exactly?”

“South of Moat Cailin and down towards the riverlands. Maps of the Trident, if you’ve got it.” Jon hadn’t even been south of the Neck before, and it was too easy to lose all bearings when flying on Sonagon. “As detailed as you have, as fast as possible.”

Sam blinked, and nodded. With Aemon gone, Clydas would be in charge of the ravens and Sam the library. Aemon never even had a chance to touch Sonagon, Jon thought with a pained grimace. There just hadn’t been time.

Jon paused, an idea coming to him. “And if you want,” Jon offered, “there’s a place for you to come with us.”

Sam’s mouth dropped. “Wha... I can’t...” he stammered. “You mean on the dragon?”

“Aye,” Jon ordered, but gently. He had plenty of fierce fighters, but he needed intelligence. “I’ve never been out of the north before, you have. You know the route, and you can manage ravens. I need to bring a few birds to send messages back to Castle Black.”

The noise out of Sam’s throat sounded vaguely like a fish out of water. Jon gave him no time to protest as he swept out of the room.

Val cornered him as he was packing supplies from the kitchens. “What’s going on Snow?” she demanded.

“We’re going on a trip south.”
“Why?” She said sharply. “Your sister…”

“It’s not about her,” he lied, sharply. “All across the realm, there will be rumours about a dragon on the Wall. I don’t want them to be rumours for much longer. We’re going to take a trip south on Sonagon’s back, and make sure that everyone knows that there is dragon in the north.”

She looked at him suspiciously. “I thought you wanted to wait for the right moment.”

“I’m tired of waiting.”

Jon was already walking away. So much to do, so little time. “You’re going to make a lot of people very scared.”

“Good.” I want them scared. When your enemies are scared, then that’s half the battle already won.

Jon had wanted them ready to move out as fast as possible, but anything involving Sonagon’s harness required at least two dozen men to prepare. Three of his Dragonguard – Harlow, Gregg Sheepstealer and Mo – would stay behind but the rest were coming with him. Twelve fighters in total. He saw Toregg, son of Tormund, roaring in anticipation. Grenn looked pale-faced and trembling; he wanted to stay behind but Jon ordered Grenn to come and ordered the sworn brother to stay by Sam’s side at all time.

The first flight is always frightening, Jon thought. Only four members of his Dragonguard had ever even flown before. They needed Wun Wun to help clear the courtyard to prepare for the dragon, and carry stacks of rations. Furs was busy directing the giant, getting him ready to help lift the men on to the dragon’s back.

Crowds were gathering. He heard Bullden Horn and Hatch arguing for who got to sit at the front.

Jon closed his eyes and reached out with his mind. Sonagon was already awake, already alert. It didn’t take much prodding before the dragon started to twitch. *Come. Hunt. Green fields and new territory. We fly.*

The white shape twitched. Enormous wings unfurled. From atop Hardin’s Tower, the white dragon dropped downwards. Jon heard the collective gasp of breath as those wings pounded against the ground. The sudden beat pounded so hard that great billows of snow whooshed in the wind like a sudden storm dropping out of the sky.

Sonagon landed so hard that the ground rumbled, while snow washed around them. People were screaming, but Jon could have laughed.

The dragon was so large that it could barely fit in the courtyard. Sonagon was a fearsome sight, lumbering between the buildings. The great keeps and towers of Castle Black looked like toy houses compared to the dragon.

Men ran under Sonagon’s wings in panic, causing the dragon to snap and growl irritably, but Jon soothed him. *We’re going to fly a long way together,* Jon promised. *We’re going further south than you’ve ever been before…*

Furs was one of the few who didn’t panic. The wildling was more used to Sonagon than most, snapping orders for men to get moving. *Perhaps I need to appoint him some rank,* Jon mused looking at Furs. Official dragon keeper, perhaps. Furs was certainly capable enough.

It was awkward, panicked, and took longer than Jon would like. It required a lot gentle pleading to
get Sonagon into position, and even longer to position the men around them.

Jon had to rub the dragon’s snout reassuringly to stop the dragon from moving. They needed Wun Wun to lift the men upwards with his great, beefy hands so they could clamber onto the dragon. I need a better way of mounting, Jon thought. Perhaps something like a siege tower that could be pushed up against Sonagon.

Sonagon’s back was jagged and ridged, particularly around the wings, but they were more experienced now. Sam and Grenn had to be fastened down and covered over with their cloaks, but Hatch and Furs wrapped ropes expertly around the dragon’s back spikes to secure themselves.

Jon couldn’t help but grin. By contrast, he had an easier job. He was well-used to climbing up the rope over Sonagon’s right horn, using the dragon’s neck crests as footholds, to position himself on top the dragon’s head.

“Get comfortable, and secure!” Jon ordered. “Find a position and keep in it, but make sure you’re wrapped up!”

“It doesn’t seem so cold,” Hatch shouted. When Jon was on the head and the others on the back, there was about a twenty-five feet distance between them.

“It will when we start flying,” Jon said grimly.

The best bowmen of his Dragonguard – Haldur, Bullden, and Harle – had longbows cradled in their grasp, but most didn’t dare take their hands off the hoists. Very awkward sitting, Jon admitted. His seat on the head was more vulnerable, but also far easier to mount. Anyone on the back had to shuffle dangerously over rippling muscles, clutching the dragon’s spikes.

Sonagon shifted uncomfortably with the weight shuffling on his back. Jon had to soothe the dragon constantly. The dragon was a fickle beast at best, but only the promise of food and flying made him wait.

By the time they were ready, it was already noon.

They were fiddling with the last few straps, when Sonagon decided he had enough. Jon heard screams. The dragon rumbled and his tail whipped, and Jon ordered them to back away. Time to go.

Jon’s heart was beating. He had flown nine times now, and twice with other people, but flying on a dragon’s back would never be anything less than magnificent.

South, he pushed. Let’s head south.

“How long do we have to stay like this?” Haldur shouted, his body rattling with every thunderous step as Sonagon turned.

“Maybe half a day!” Jon bellowed, though truthfully, he had little idea. He could barely guess how fast Sonagon could fly or the distances involved – he had never taken a trip this far before. “Just hold on really, really…” Sonagon took another step. Jon’s teeth rattled. “… tight!”

He had deliberately not mentioned their destination to anyone. He didn't want to give any warning, as unlikely as it was to reach ahead of them. Now, he was on his way.
There were screams as the dragon reared up onto two legs, wings outstretching wide. Sonagon roared, taking a few uncertain, unsteady steps as his wings started to beat. Jon had to hug the dragon’s scales to protect himself from the draft and snow.

And then, slowly, he felt the dragon rising up into the air. Sonagon roared under the strain.

_I wanted to go to Winterfell_, he thought foggily. _I wanted to go home_. But he couldn’t; that letter seemed too much like the bait for a trap, and they held his sister hostage regardless. Heading to Winterfell seemed too risky, too expected.

But that didn’t mean he had to let his brother’s murder go to unpunished. “The Twins,” Jon muttered head rattling by the thunderous, mind-wracking beat of wings. “We go for the Twins.” *To give Walder Frey my regards.*

They were lifting upwards quickly. The pressure so intense he gagged. Jon’s eyes opened, only to see the Wall disappearing beneath them…

For the first time in two hundred years, there were dragons flying over the north.

Sonagon had never flown so freely before. Generally, the dragon liked to keep its own territory, to patrol the same hunting grounds on an evening. Now, though, the dragon was roaming wild, flapping over pine forests, lakes and rolling hills.

And Sonagon loved it. Jon could feel the dragon’s glee as it pounded faster and faster, accelerating and streaming through the air.

All around him, the cold wind hissed so hard that it could have sheared skin. Jon had to keep his face pressed against the dragon’s scales, cloaks wrapped around him.

He had no idea how the others were doing. Jon could only thank the gods for the quality of Devyn Sealskinner’s workmanship. The leather harness felt secure even despite billowing winds.

Flying on a dragon’s back… it felt like a once in a lifetime experience. Jon could still barely believe that he got to do it repeatedly.

The people on the ground would be like ants. Jon wondered vaguely what it must be like to be on the ground beneath them, to see the white shadow flying over the clouds…

He gasped as he extended the warg towards Sonagon. The dragon was having so much fun he didn’t object. Jon’s mind expanded as suddenly he was staring downwards, watching the world through a dragon’s eyes.

_Dragons._

_Dragons._

No one had ever mapped the world like this. Jon struggled to recognise the shapes of the mountains, or of the forests in the distance.

_South._ Jon pushed, thinking of all the landmarks he knew. South towards the Long Lake, the Wolfswood, the White Knife, and the coast. The Neck, Moat Cailin, the Bite – all the way to the rivers. Jon wanted to see the south. And Sonagon wanted to see it too.

Jon had no idea how long that journey lasted. It was hard to measure time when every heartbeat felt like your last.
Jon forced Sonagon to fly low, low enough to be survivable for the passengers. Sonagon reluctantly complied, but it was still so fast the winds were vicious.

He felt the way the dragon instinctively sheared over wind currents. The dragon tilted left to avoid a strong headwind storm, his tail swishing through the air. Jon could feel the exertion every time the dragon pounded his wings, but the dragon was well-fed, energised, and free. Flying was where he belonged.

*He must have made this trip before,* Jon realised suddenly. *A lifetime ago. Sonagon once flew from Old Valyria to the North.*

They were making good time. As fast as the raven flew, if not faster. Jon reckoned he could probably reach the bottom of the north by the end of the day.

The sun was bright. Sonagon’s shadow roamed over the ground. By tomorrow, the whole north would know the dragon was no rumour.

It was dark when the dragon finally landed. Sonagon flapped down over a small mound on a grassy plain, one of the old barrows of the north. The kingsroad was somewhere to the west, probably. He could smell coast and ocean to the east. Jon spent most of the journey with his own body unconscious, while he shared Sonagon’s skin.

By the time they stopped, it was past dusk and the riders could barely even see straight. Most of them had fallen unconscious during the trip. Over half had soiled themselves, but Jon honestly couldn’t fault them.

Sonagon was exhausted too – exhausted enough to curl on the ground flat for them to stagger off. Hatch and Toregg were the only two who managed to stay conscious the whole trip. It took Grenn and Urwen to carry a pale and limp Sam down to the ground.

Sam had brought two caged ravens with him. One bird had died during the flight, the other didn’t look so good either. But at least no one had fallen off this time.

“Fuck. Me,” Black Maris gagged, her body trembling. “You said nothing that it would be *that* hard, Snow.”

Jon nodded wearily. Black Maris was the only woman in the Dragonguard with them, yet the spearwife was better with a spear than Furs and as hard a leader as any. She shambled to the muddy ground, helping Furs clamber off as well.

The trip around the Wall had been a gentle breeze by comparison. It had been a day of hard flying. Thank gods they had all buried themselves under cloaks. Hopefully there wouldn’t be frostbite.

“Set up camp here!” Jon ordered, as the men staggered on the hilltop. “Eat, clean yourselves up, sleep however much you can.” He stared at Sam sympathetically, still half-conscious and white-faced.

All of them were hardened raiders or rangers, but the journey still nearly proved too much. Gerwick almost crashed as soon as he hit solid ground. It was lucky Jon brought plenty of rations, because they all pigged themselves out on supplies, and then puked again.

“Fucking hells!” Grenn gasped. The big man was pale and trembling. “Fucking hells!”

“We must keep watch,” Jon ordered. “Someone must have saw us, they could have followed. Rest now, but don’t unpack. We leave early at first light.”
It wasn’t ideal – they could lose a lot of their advantage if anyone saw them coming – but there was nothing for it. People would die if they had to fly through the night as well.

Jon couldn’t sleep. He had to unroll the maps and try to figure out where they were. He reckoned somewhere north east of Moat Cailin, by the coast, in a deserted cliffside. Six hundred leagues, he decided finally. They’d had flew for over half a day straight.

“What’s the plan here, Snow?” Furs slumped down next to him. Others were listening around them. “You say we’re raiding? Raiding where?”

“We’re going to a place called the Twins,” Jon muttered. “And we will burn it to the ground. We raid only what’s left.”

“Aye? Just the fourteen of us?”

“And a dragon. Have you ever heard of what Aegon the Conqueror did to Harrenhal, Furs?”

Grenn’s eyes widened. Furs paused. “I can guess. So this place is a big castle?”

“Yes.”

“And you're okay torching it like this?”

“Aye.”

“Without warning or chance to surrender?”

Jon’s jaw clenched. “If they have any warning whatsoever, we lose half our advantage. They might try to prepare a defence.” He shook his head, well aware that everyone was listening. “We don’t give them any warning. Surprise and panic are our best allies here.”

*They murdered my brother. They don’t deserve surrender.*

“Then let’s bring those bastards down.” Furs grinned, tightening his clutch on his spear.

The Twins. Jon hadn’t even seen the Twins before, but he knew of it. The Freys murdered the northern host there. They murdered Robb Stark. Jon would bring dragonfire to the Freys, and he would make sure that the whole world knew.

*I will take my lesson out of Aegon’s book.*

The whole north would know. The Boltons would lose their strongest ally. Any man who tried to oppose Jon would think twice. Any man who wanted vengeance for the Red Wedding would flock to his side.

And the Freys would pay. *Oh boy, will they pay.*

The anger didn’t fade. Sonagon could feel Jon’s bloodlust seeping through their connection. The dragon stirred slightly.

The camp was tense. They were all ready for battle, but had to wait. Grenn, at least, stuck by Sam’s side protectively. Jon didn’t sleep at all.

The next morning, they mounted Sonagon again. They climbed on faster this time, although Sam still had to be carried. By first light, they were ready to go.
“Noon,” Jon promised. “We’ll reach the Twins by noon. This needs to be a fast journey, but we can take it gentler going back.”

Grenn muttered something that it would be easier to walk. Jon just smiled, but the smile was wooden. His fist hadn’t unfurled.

No matter how intense the journey was, Jon knew that it would be nothing compared to what would happen when they reached there. Jon’s heart was buzzing with the thought. *Is this what Aegon felt before he razed Harrenhal?*

Sonagon made good time. This far south the air was warmer. Jon could afford to lift his head up, staring down as they flew over boggy swamps and marshes. They flew so low that, occasionally, Jon could even see the people running. He glimpsed horses galloping down the roads.

Dragons. Dragons flying south.

Oh yes, come tomorrow the whole realm will be buzzing.

He saw mountains in the distance, dressed by low-sitting clouds. He smelled lands teeming with livestock and people, new scents he couldn’t place. Sonagon roared, a cry of dominance like thunder.

The maps were useless. Jon couldn’t even think to place the squiggles on parchment with the great expanse that stretched before him. Instead, he just had to try and guess their position. *The Trident*, he thought. *I know the Twins rest upon the northern Green Fork of the Trident. Follow the river.*

He could see a cape in the distance. He heard seagulls scatter around the dragon. *The Cape of Eagles,* he realised. *I must have gone too far south and west.* Sonagon had to backtrack and flap east again.

There were definitely people screaming beneath him. He passed over farmsteads and small villages and he saw panic.

Jon saw the Trident. The river muddy and reedy, but it was so wide he could barely miss it, even through the forests and clouds. He followed the Green Fork upstream, watching the river turn deeper and swifter.


The dragon roared. They would hear the dragon coming, like thunder in the distance. But so long as they don’t have the time or the coordination to prepare, it won’t matter.

He smelled the stench of men. He saw two squat, ugly and formidable castles of grey stone with curtain walls and towers sitting in the distance. There was stone bridge beneath them, the Trident gushing through the pillars. From dragonback, the Twins had never looked so small.

He heard Hatch from the the back shouting for the men to prepare themselves. Sonagon flew so low over the rushing waters of the Trident that the river splashed with every immense pound of the dragon’s wings. The river was wide, yet the length of Sonagon’s wings still reached over its breadth.

Jon heard the ringing of bells. The Water Tower sat in the middle of the bridge, with barbicans and portcullis leading left and right. He heard the east tower ringing first, and then the west. The two were singing in fear. His heart pounded in the moment.
The sun was bright, the air was warm, yet winter was here.

Dragons. Dragons are attacking the realm.

*This is right. This is my vengeance.*

“*Dracarys!*” Jon shouted at the top of his lungs, over the sound of roaring air. “*Dracarys!*”

White fire exploded from Sonagon’s mouth in a continuous stream. The dragon swept over the eastern bridge, and ice plumed from underneath. Jon saw men like ants skittering over the white stone.

The first plume of ice froze a chunk of the bridge twenty feet wide. The spikes of ice were ten feet high, the cold steam billowing upwards. The cold was so extreme that the stone shivered and cracked. Great billows of steam hissed and howled.

Suddenly, the frozen rock crumbled away, and a wall of ice split the crossing into two. The ice plumed across the river, chunks of frozen stone scattering the wastes.

Screaming, so much screaming. It was so chaotic Jon could hardly process it.

Jon was gasping. He had known it would be panicked but this… it felt unreal.

Sonagon roared upwards, circling. The dragon was eager, ready. The cold was bubbling in his chest. The dragon loved a good armageddon.

Men littered across the battlements of the Water Tower. Men running mad.

*These men killed my brother.* All Frey bannermen had been either conspirators or complacent. Jon could give them all a king’s justice.

No. Vengeance. *This is* vengeance, not justice. But right now Jon just didn’t care.

Wings roared as Sonagon flapped over the Water Tower. A few arrows bounced uselessly off hard scales. The sounds of screaming filled the air as the ice burst out of the dragon’s throat. The tower exploded into bloody white spikes and mist.

The castle. The bridge could be destroyed at will, but the castles were the priority. They were both identical, so Jon just had to pick one to destroy first. *The east,* he thought, the east one was facing the north.

Destroy the east castle first. A small but squat keep with high curtain walls and deep moats. Both were useless now. There was an apple orchard and cornfield spilling out of the grounds, with men and women scattering…

Sonagon circled. Jon saw hundreds of men trying to stampede out of the gate. Jon saw men jumping off the battlements in their panic to escape. A few tried to shoot arrows, but it was useless – the pure force of Sonagon’s wings swept the arrows away.

Sonagon was a blizzard given flesh. The dragon swept over the gate first, white dragonfire raging.

All of those men fleeing. Jon saw bodies rupturing and exploding in the extreme cold. Frozen chunks of bone and pink ice, scorched in white steam. Dragonfire scoured the ground clean.

Some men – the ones towards the edges – were left frozen solid, transformed into brittle, grotesque ice statues frozen in motion. A courtyard of dead frozen bodies.
*At least fifty men dead in an instant.*

Then Sonagon swept over the walls, in a continuous stream of dragonfire. The walls cracked and froze into rubble. The limestone didn’t stand a chance against anything that cold and destructive.

*Another thirty dead.*

Then the courtyard. Sonagon perched on an outbuilding, flapping amidst the great billows of steam, raining bursts of frozen death onto the yard.

*Another fifty.*

Jon gasped as the dragon jumped, crashing into the main keep. The dragon dropped down onto the tiled roof, crunching through stone, and the frostfire exploded from his jaws. The dragon’s breath blew down through the roof and the walls exploded outwards. The whole structure groaned and screeched.

The waves of cold were so intense that even the backdraft nearly scalded Jon. The noise sent him deaf. Frozen rubble scattered.

He could see the keep crackling and crumbling. Ice so cold it burned.

After that, Jon lost count of death. He wanted to push the dragon to restrain himself, but Jon could barely even think. The noise and chaos left his mind blank.

It was over quickly. In a single sweep, Sonagon turned the castle into a frozen ruin and graveyard.

And then, the dragon leapt into the air towards the western tower.

Jon lost control. Sonagon wasn’t listening to him anymore. The dragon’s blood was burning for destruction.

*My brother’s killers.*

The din was deafening, the force bone-shaking. Jon couldn’t even focus on the falling mortar and flying arrows when everything was screaming and shaking. He heard a woman’s wail.

Those sounds… they made his blood curdle. *This was a mistake. This is a mistake. Too much death, too much…*

Too much chaos, so little order. Jon had no idea the fury he had unleashed. The cold scorched his skin. The dragon had hard scales to protect him, but those on Sonagon’s back had nothing.

He glimpsed Haldur managing to fire his bow uncertainly from Sonagon’s back, but most others were struggling to even hold on. The panic, the disorientation, the noise…

*The dead. So, so many dead.*

A tower collapsed under Sonagon’s breath. Jon watched it crumble.

It was all Jon could do just to hold on.

The dragon felt exhausted from breathing so much ice, but also so, so happy.

Around them, the Twins were crumbling into the Trident in frozen rubble.
It was too much. Jon couldn't even breathe. *Down*, Jon ordered. *Put us down.*

The dragon didn't even seem to hear him. The beast was having too much fun catching those trying to flee. Jon saw some of them, and they were serving girls or servants, not soldiers. Sonagon gave them all the same mercy.

Icy fire transformed the orchard yards into cold ruin. Trees exploded in frozen splinters.


Finally Sonagon complied. The dragon dropped to the earth outside of the eastern keep with a great growl. Jon staggered, feeling the bile rise in his throat. The air was so cold.

They shambled down off the dragon's back. Sonagon twitched impatiently. Jon's hands could barely clutch the rope.

“Please…” a voice croaked. “… By the Mother's mercy, please… help…”

Jon turned, to see a figure crawling across the stone. It was hard to even recognise him as a man under the rime and frostbite coating his skin. The figure used to be a man-at-arms with a jerkin emblazoned by the two towers, but Sonagon's breath had ripped straight through him. The man’s legs were left frozen solid as he dragged himself over the courtyard.

Jon watched in horror as the man's foot broke apart as he crawled. He didn't even seem to feel it. His legs were just lumps of ice dangling from his waist. Dragonfire had frozen over half his body. “Please…” the man whimpered.

Jon’s jaw tightened. “Put him out of his misery.”

“Aye, Your Grace,” Hatch offered, hoisting up his hammer and stepping forward. Jon averted his gaze. There was a dull crack. Metal through skull.

Sonagon flew back up into the air. The dragon's bloodlust hadn't been sated, not yet. There were hundreds of men left running down the road, but Jon doubted they’d get far. Jon heard Sam being sick.

In front of them, the eastern castle of the Twins was a steaming wreck. Great walls of limestone were left pulverised. They heard the crash as another chunk of bridge fell into the current.

“By the Gods…” Grenn muttered breathlessly, staring in horror.

Sam’s legs gave out, falling to his knees. Jon felt the urge to do the same. *Focus,* Jon told himself.

“Haldur, Bullden, and Harle, go stand guard on the walls. Watch for anyone coming back. Hatch and Stiga, guard the doors,” Jon ordered. The oak gate had exploded in cold, along with half the walls. “Grenn, you stay here with Sam. Everyone else, on Furs or me, we search the castle for survivors.”

“To prevent any?” Toregg asked.

“Just search,” Jon ordered. “But watch your step, the structure is crumbling.”

They had only fifteen men to hold the castle, but it looked like everyone had either died or fled. The biggest worry was if any of the survivors managed to group together and head back towards them, but with Sonagon still in the air Jon wasn’t too concerned.
There could have been a thousand men between the two castle. Jon doubted if more than a dozen had survived inside the castle itself.

_They deserved this_, Jon told himself, trying to calm his beating heart. _They deserve this_.

He heard Furs cackling as he walked away towards a steaming outbuilding. “Big castle like this! Let’s see how much treasure we can salvage.”

“Just be careful!” Jon ordered. “Beware – it’s still very cold. You could lose a hand touching the wrong place. And any survivors, let me know.”

The wildlings split up in groups of three or two. Sam and Grenn were left huddled together.

They found the first three survivors, a group of serving maids, huddled together and weeping under a wall. The girls looked at him like he was a demon. One of them was a young serving girl with wide eyes and pretty brown hair and she had her left hand frozen into a block of ice. There was no doubt she would lose the arm.

Furs encountered another four men, guards, who tried to attack them. The men were left so panicked and crazed they couldn’t think, though, and the wildlings killed them all. Black Maris and Gerwick cut through them easily and stole their armour.

The only ones who survived had been the ones to hide in the odd nooks and crannies of the castle, taking shelter from the ferocious cold breath. There were corridors that had been scoured clean by the power of Sonagon’s dragonfire. Afterwards, the collapsing buildings killed almost as many the cold did.

Jon found a screaming man who had dived into a well to take shelter, and broke both of his legs from the fall. They had no rope to get him out, so they left him in the well to die.

It turned out there were two dozen or so survivors in total, but most injured, panicked or weak. Jon saw several limbs that had been bitten off by the cold. It seemed like the castle was wailing and weeping.

“Walder Frey,” Jon demanded from one man. “Where is Lord Walder Frey?”

The man pointed weakly towards the great hall in the keep, unable to form coherent words.

It had been some sort of meal when the dragon attacked. The great hall had taken the full blast of Sonagon’s fire exploding downwards through the roof. It was left a frozen, desolate waste; there was nothing but steaming, cracked stone and frozen corpses remaining. The dragonfire hit the hall like a giant hammer of ice, gouging a massive streak through the stone floor.

The high table of the Twins had been blasted into frozen splinters. It would be impossible to even identify the bodies. Even the intact corpses had been frozen beyond all recognition like bodies. Lord Walder Frey died over his table, in the middle of his meal, and his body blasted into oblivion.

_My brother died in this room_, Jon tried to remind himself. He wanted to explore the keep further, but it was too cold to even enter.

From the wall, Haldur reported some men poking around the castle. The archer put three shafts into two of them to convince them to stay back. Fourteen men could hold a castle like this easily when everyone else is frightened witless or dead, Jon told himself.

The only highborn survivor they found was a man called Merrett Frey, discovered hiding in the
pantry with frozen piss in his groin. He tried to run, and Bullden Horn killed the man before they even realised who he was.

Everything that wasn’t destroyed, the wildlings tried to steal. Furs found a good pouch of several hundred gold dragons hidden in one of the chambers somewhere, but the treasury or vault was left inaccessible when the building collapsed.

The prisoners were left huddled and guarded together in the only surviving stable. Black Maris and Eywn stood guard over them, but they looked too scared to even move. The sight of scorched frozen flesh scattering the castle made Jon feel sick.


Jon came running as fast as his leg could move over the crackling ground. He saw Hatch standing over a fat, bald, white-faced man in wool robes. “He has one of those chains,” Hatch explained, folding his arms. “That makes this one a maester, aye?”

It did. The rookery had been destroyed in one of the first passes of Sonagon, but the maester was lucky to survive hiding under the stairwell even as the tower collapsed. Jon nodded Hatch away, and bent over the man. He kept his hand on Dark Sister. Good. A maester would know everything that had been happening in the castle.

“Maester,” Jon muttered. The man was wheezing for breath in panic. There were bodies crushed by frozen rubble around him. “Deep breaths, maester. What is your name?”

He stammered. “Bre— Brenett.”

“Maester Brenett.” He nodded. “My name is Jon Snow, maester. King Jon Snow. I trust you will answer my questions.”


“Aye. The dragon obeys me.”

His eyes were wide, bulging. Jon had rarely seen a man so scared. “You killed them. You killed everyone.”

_The maester would lose at least three fingers from the cold_, Jon realised. He had seen frostbite like that before. It looked like a broken leg too. Doubtless the man would never walk or write properly again. “You monster,” Maester Brenett gagged. “How… how could you?”

“This is justice.”

“This is barbarity.”

“I am Jon Snow. My brother was Robb Stark.” Jon’s eyes were dark. “He died in this castle, did he not? Murdered in defiance of guest right and the laws of men.”

“You monster,” the maester croaked, shuffling backwards. “Monster.”

“No. Vengeance for the Red Wedding.” Jon stood upwards. “Hatch, bring the man here a drink to calm his nerves. Tend to that leg. He has questions to answer.”

Brenett looked so scared he couldn’t even grip the bladder of water. Hatch had to force it down
into his throat. Even afterwards, he was left a twitching mess. “How could you?” Brenett gasped, looking fearfully at Jon. “How could you kill so many?”

“Did you ask the same after the Red Wedding?” he replied coolly. “The Freys murdered my brother, maester.”

“What of the serving girls and stableboys?” Brenett demanded. “The innocents in the castle?”

“They died for the lord they served, and for the crimes they are accomplice to.”

“The Red Wedding,” the maester gagged. “I knew naught of the Red Wedding. No one told me until it happened, I had no part in it. Many who did know tried to object. For every one soldier in the castle that could be held accountable, there were ten stewards and servants that were just doing jobs, trying to provide for their families. Do you see those as murderers?” His voice cracked. “And what of the babes and widows? Did they murder your kin?”

Jon’s hand twitched, clutching Dark Sister. Maybe the maester caught his unease. “You killed them just the same,” he accused, voice breaking. “How many in the castle even survived?”

Not many. “Mind your tongue,” Hatch warned.

“Tell me who was in the castle,” Jon demanded. “Where was Lord Walder Frey?”

“In the hall. It was Edwyn’s nameday, there was a feast…” He trembled.

Then all the Freys in the Twins were dead. There had been no survivors from the hall. “What of guests? Was there anyone else in the castle?”

“Lord Tytos Blackwood and Lord Karyl Vance were being hosted,” the maester gasped, struggling to speak. “As were guests Ser Harys Haigh, Ser Marq Piper and Patrek Mallister. And Tristan Ryger.”

They were? Blackwood, Vance and Mallister had both been Robb’s allies. Loyal allies. Jon twitched. ‘Hosted’ – a polite term for hostages. “Who else? What of Frey allies?”

“Ser Harys Huigh, and his son Donnel Huigh. Ser Theon Charlton. Ser Daven Lannister was present – he was to be betrothed to Walda Frey.” Lannister. The maester must have seen Jon’s expression change. “Ser Daven was named Warden of the West. Cousin to the Queen. Ser Jaime Lannister had been here over a fortnight passed before marching to break the siege of Raventree. And Tytos Marbrand stayed to squire for Ser Arwood.” The maester quaked. “Hoster Blackwood and Jayne Bracken lingered before heading down to the King’s Landing. They were children.”

The Freys had been sitting themselves up as the most influential house in the Riverlands, Jon realised. They had been taking hostages from other houses who had been forced to bend the knee. Hostages.

The maester’s eyes were wide. “Oh Gods… and Roslin Tully,” he gasped. “Her babe.”

Jon’s hands clenched so tight they hurt. “Roslin Tully.” Formerly Roslin Frey, he realised.

“The woman that Edmure Tully married. She was staying in the West Tower. She was pregnant.”

Jon looked. There was no West Tower anymore. Somewhere in the rubble maybe there was a body of pregnant woman. How could he know? What can I do about it?
Deep breaths. Focus. But she had been pregnant. With the child of Edmure Tully, my brother’s family.


“Prisoners?” Jon said urgently. Loyal Stark prisoners. “Where? Where were they being held?”

Brenett gave him directions to the dungeons, the entrance of which was under the causeway. Jon ordered Toregg to go investigate. The man came back fairly quickly and shook his head. The dungeons had been completely collapsed. Unlikely to be any survivors. He ordered him to try and clear the rubble nevertheless.

Jon could have screamed. “These prisoners,” he demanded. “How many were there? Who?”

“Two dozen or so,” Brenett said nervously. “The crown ordered us to surrender them to King’s Landing, but Lord Frey refused. He kept them in the castle. They were from either the north or the riverlands. Um, there was Lynel, no, Lyndel Westerly, um… a son from House Ryswell, and…”


The maester shook his head. “No, Lord Umber, Robin Flint and Ser Wylis Manderly were moved a month passed. There was to be a trade of hostages in the north and they left for Winterfell escorted by Black Walder, but their caravan was ambushed by the crannogmen in the Neck. Lord Frey was furious, yet the prisoner went missing.”

So Lord Umber hadn’t been in the castle. Oh gods, small mercies. If I had actually murdered Lord Umber…

There had been hostages and prisoners. Of course there had been prisoners.

This is vengeance, Jon tried to tell himself. The men who murdered my family are dead. The Red Wedding had been avenged. The Freys are destroyed, the Lannisters and the Boltons have lost their major ally. There are casualties, yes, but there is no way to save everyone, and this is vengeance.

He stared around at the bodies and the ruined castle. If this was vengeance, then he didn’t like how it tasted.

So, so many dead.

How did Aegon feel after torching Harrenhal? Jon wondered. Did he feel victorious, or was he left shaken by so many dead? Did Aegon ever torch another castle the same way again?

He spent the next hour questioning Maester Brenett. How many men had there been in the castle? Where were their allies? Who ruled the riverlands? What was happening in King’s Landing?

The answers came quickly. The main force of the Freys had either left north with the Boltons or went west with Jaime Lannister's host to Raventree. They had then been summoned south to deal with an invasion of sellswords, but many men had lingered to hunt down the outlaws plaguing the riverlands. Ser Jaime Lannister was said to have vanished after being captured by the Brotherhood-without-Banners. Lord Petyr Baelish was supposedly Lord Paramount of the riverlands, yet Riverrun was held by Emmon Frey and his wife Genna Lannister.

The Golden Company under Jon Connington and Tyrion Lannister was said to have taken Griffin’s
Roost, and there had been a schism in King’s Landing after the High Septon declared Queen Cersei unholy. It was either a power grab by the Faith to topple the government, or a cry for justice for the Queen’s crimes, depending on who was believed.

Euron Crow’s Eye was said to be readying to assault Oldtown, and the Golden Company was marching from the stormlands. There were revolts from smallfolk all around the crownlands, and the Tyrells and Lannisters were at each other's throats. Stannis Baratheon was waging war from Dragonstone with a series of raids and skirmishes. The most recent news said that Stannis had seized Claw Isle.

Ser Kevan Lannister and Lord Mace Tyrell were trying to contain the unrest in King’s Landing, while the city was locked in a power struggle. Rumours said that Queen Margaery Tyrell was being held hostage, either by the High Septon or Queen Cersei, but details were foggy. The Lannisters face enemies on every front; Ser Jaime had vanished, Queen Cersei was said to be going mad, and Tyrion was leading an invasion against the realm. Ser Davan had been trying to regather forces in the riverlands and from the west, but now he was dead too.

From the maester’s words, it seemed like the whole realm was collapsing in on itself. A power struggle in the capital, reavers in the Reach, mercenaries from the south, bandits in the riverlands and even the Vale was said to be suffering some leadership strife.

The War of Five Kings was over, but it had left the realm so, so unstable. It gave Jon much to think on, head still spinning.

Jon listened for as long as he could, before passing the maester over to Furs to continue the interrogation. He gave orders to collect as many letters and correspondence as salvageable, and pass them over to Sam. The maester was a wailing mess as Jon limped away.

He heard activity from the building. Gerrick, Maris and Urwen had finally evacuated the ruins of the vault beneath the keep. Jon glimpsed gold bullions being hoisted into sheepskin sacks. The Twins had a lot of wealth in them – they had been wealthy and in a good position. Well-paid for their services. The wildlings would steal it all.

“King!” Haldur shouted from the ruins of the crumbling curtain wall. The man had his weirwood bow notched and poised, not even turning his head from the scene. “We’ve got men poking around out front, by the trees.”

“How many?”

“Fifty or so, I think. Maybe more coming.”

“Can you hold them back?” Jon demanded, limping forward. The gates and wall were ruined – they couldn’t stand siege in this castle.

Harle, Bullden and Eryn all had bows drawn too. There were only four archers standing guard on the walls, but they were all very good.

“Oh aye. For now. They seem awfully scared.” His bowstring pulled back a little bit further. “But sooner or later they’ll want to come back to this castle. We’d be good making ourselves scarce.”

“Aye. I’ll call Sonagon back.” Jon turned to stare out over the steaming ruins of stone. We have to get out of here. “Gather what you can and prepare to leave.”

Jon didn’t meet Sam’s eyes. The feel of death seemed to linger over the castle. Perhaps they could have pillaged the west castle of the Twins too, but there was no chance since the bridge was
It took Jon a long time to centre himself enough to reach out to Sonagon. He felt the dragon flying happily over the river, idly chasing down horses. Like a well-fed cat toying with mice. Sonagon responded quickly to Jon’s call.

“Oi,” Dark Gerrick called over to him. The hard warrior wore the necklaces and expensive lady’s jewellery he had pillaged from the chambers, wearing silk and silver draped over boiled leather. “Why stop now? There are other castles around here, aren’t there? I don’t think your dragon is tired yet. Why not bring down a few more too?”

Jon’s fists clenched. The thought of the man crawling with frozen legs flashed before his eyes. “No,” he said icily. “This is enough.”

As soon as Sonagon appeared over in the sky, Jon heard the men in the forest screaming and scattering for cover. Haldur and the others launched shafts at them as they fled.

The sight of Sonagon sent some of the prisoners into a frenzied panic. Hatch had to kill three of them before they finally fell back. Sonagon dropped slowly into the courtyard, sniffing at the ruins. “Load up anything we’re taking. Get ready to move quickly!” He shouted.

Maester Brenett was still wailing. The wildlings loaded up their plunder, as Sonagon sniffed and rummaged. “Maester,” Jon said, approaching. “I want to you write a letter for me.”

The maester didn’t reply. He didn’t even look up from the ground. “You will write that for the breaching the laws of men, for treason and breaking guest right, for murder and kinslaying,” Jon said, “that the Freys of the Crossing faced the highest punishment. Their lands are razed, their lord is dead. The guilty are punished. Write that I will see justice for the all crimes committed against my family.” Jon knelt downwards by the old man. “Write the letter, maester, and sign it King Jon Snow, King-Beyond-the-Wall and in the North.”

It took a bit of coaching before he actually wrote it. Only one of Brenett’s hands could even clutch a quill. The handwriting was horrible and shaky, but the message was short. There were no ravens left, but Jon ordered the maester to keep a hold of it and pass it on to whomever came to rescue them. All of the prisoners were to be left unharmed when they flew away.

There was no hesitation in Jon’s voice. He couldn’t afford any sign of weakness, not here, not now. This is right, he told himself. These men were my enemies, and this is a good tactical decision.

Still, it didn’t feel like it. The sound of wailing women echoed around the frozen ruins.

One of their prisoners – barely more than a boy, actually – tried to lunge at Jon with a pitchfork as he moved to leave. He was a brave boy, to attempt to assassinate him so boldly. Furs intercepted him, though, and knocked him easily to the floor. It took several spear thrusts before the boy was finally dead. Jon didn’t say a word.

It was approaching dusk by the time they were mounted on Sonagon and ready to leave. As Sonagon burst upwards into the sky, Jon saw a land in pure panic. Behind him, the wildlings were cheering. The ruins of the two castles were still steaming gently in the faint sun.

I was so, so angry. He didn’t feel angry anymore, just hollow. I have my vengeance, but my brother is still dead.

They couldn’t safely fly at night, so they had to stop around the coast as they had done the previous night. Sonagon could smell an early winter storm brewing up north. The grassy plains
were deserted, but as they made camp, Jon ordered everyone to stay alert.

“They may well be riders following us,” Jon ordered. “They can’t beat Sonagon in battle, but they may try to ambush us while the dragon is asleep. Everyone stays alert.”

There were wary mutters. They were all tired and weary, but the tension kept them alert. There had been few injuries – Eryn took a cut across the waist from a man’s broken sword, and Harle had some nasty scalds from getting too close to Sonagon’s frostfire. There were many bruises from bouncing and holding onto Sonagon’s back, but one of the most vocal injuries came from Sam tripping and spraining his ankle.

Night fell. The watch fires burned over the cold, grassy knolls. He had spotted the rocky coast to the east. “Where are we?” Grenn asked finally.

“Between the Neck and the Bite, I think,” Jon replied. “That’d be the waters leading to the White Knife over in that direction. Moat Cailin to the west or northwest, maybe thirty leagues.”

“Moat Cailin,” Furs repeated. “Those Boltons hold that place, yes? They’re enemies too?”

Aye,” Jon nodded.

“Better put scouts on those hills over there, then,” Black Maris advised. “With no torches lit, but to give a bit earlier warning if anyone approaches.” Jon agreed, and Maris and Haldur both went to take positions watching south and west.

“Then let’s see if they’re brave enough to charge against a dragon,” Hatch barked. Sonagon was a huge coiled white shape snoozing against the hills.

“They’re all enemies here,” Dark Gerrick insisted. He had his longsword cradled in his grasp. “Let’s start with this Moat Cailin place. We torch that castle by dragon too.”

“No,” he said sharply.

“Why not? We got good plunder from that place, and they didn’t stand a chance.”

“We won’t survive long if we treat everyone as our foes.” So many dead. “We find someone to treat with.”

“You mean to ally?” Furs’ eyes narrowed.

“But why should we treat at all?” Gerrick grunted. “We have a dragon.”

Jon turned to Furs. “If the realm really is as unstable as the maester said it was, then we need allies. There may be a chance,” he said. “The Freys weren’t well-liked. Maybe in destroying them we might make ourselves some friends.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know,” Jon admitted. He felt so, so tired – emotionally and physically. “Give me time to think.”

He said that they could sleep in turns, but nobody even tried to rest. The camp felt restless.

“We don’t have long,” Eryn warned. He was a short man, lean, with a worn face and quiet and soft voice. A sailor’s slender dirk cradled in his hand. “The weather is getting cold and it’s a long and dangerous flight back north. We aren’t a vulnerable target here with the dragon, but we are an
exposed one. We could use shelter.”

“… Um…” Sam gulped, and spoke up hesitantly. “What of Greywater Watch?”

Jon frowned. “House Reed?”

“It’s not far,” Sam offered. “And the… the maester said that crannogmen are opposing the Freys and Boltons. Maybe they could shelter us?”

“Or maybe they could try to trap us,” Bullden warned. “How would we know what they’ll do?”

“Maybe,” Jon admitted. “Yet the weather is getting cold and it’s a long and dangerous flight back north. And we sorely need an alliance.” He stopped, trying to think of the maps he saw. “Sam, who else is around here?”

His mouth floundered slightly. “Moat Cailin is the closest. The kingsroad to the west,” Sam said. “Oldcastle across the water to the east, White Harbour to the northeast. Or the Three Sisters if we fly across the Bite.”

_I know of those names, but I know little of the men who live there_, Jon cursed. They were all foreign places to the wildlings too. The idea of approaching a noble house for an alliance was tempting, but if he made the wrong choice then they could all be in danger.

“White Harbour,” Jon said. He remembered the fat Lord Manderly. “White Harbour is the biggest city in the north.”

Sam looked pained. “The maester said that Lord Manderly was to marry his granddaughters to Rhaegar and Walder Frey.”

“Then we run out of options that would help us.”

It was past the hour of the wolf. Hatch, Gerrick and Bullden argued that they should fly against Moat Cailin. Jon was more tempted to head south to Greywater Watch, if not for the possibility of meeting forces coming from the south. The torches crackled in the darkness as the hard wind swept over the plains.

He heard a horn blow echo. His turned south, but then he realised it was coming from north. Black Maris’ alert cried over the dark hills.

“We got riders,” Harle shouted suddenly. He already had longbow in hand.

They were exposed on the plains, but they could see anyone approach easily too. Jon quietly prodded Sonagon as his hand went to his sword. “How many?”

“Two dozen mounted men.”

Jon spotted the torches too. They were coming from the north. Jon could see spears and lances. Furs grinned. “Well, you think they can match a dragon?”

Two dozen riders, all well-armed. The Dragonguard reacted quickly. They quenched their fires to hide in the darkness, drawing bows or taking cover behind the dragon. Sonagon stirred, nostrils sniffing, but Jon restrained him. Furs was right – the dragon had little to fear from so few men in an open fight.

“We take their horses,” Jon decided. Sonagon was too awkward to mount easily, good steads
would be useful. “Give them a chance to surrender, but be ready.”

With a gentle prod, Sonagon lumbered upwards, growling and sniffing irritably. They must were able to see the dragon, but they didn’t stop. Brave men, Jon thought quietly.

Furs must have had similar thoughts. The riders were coming in too slowly, too obviously. “If this is an ambush, then they’re doing a crap job of it.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed. “But don’t relax.”

They were all in position when the riders stopped, fifty feet away. Their horses shimmied as the dragon loomed over them. Most of the riders lingered backwards, but three of them broke off to approach. They had to force their scared horses to trot forward towards the shadow of the dragon. Don’t attack, Jon thought, pushing to the dragon. Not yet. Sonagon snorted, breathing a gust of steam.

“Identify yourself!” Hatch bellowed. “Who do you serve?”

The riders didn’t move. They’re not here to attack. The men looked terrified, staring between Sonagon, the wildlings and Jon. “We hail from White Harbour,” the man at the front shouted back. “King Snow! Lord Manderly would treat with you.”

Notes

Dragonguard of King Jon Snow:

- Furs of Old Mother’s Crock
- Hatch the Halfgiant
- Haldur Two-Notch
- Toregg, son of Tormund Giantsbane
- Bulden Horn, unicorn hunter
- Stiga of Thenn
- Urwen Rockfist
- Gregg Sheepstealer
- Mo
- Harle the Huntsman
- Black Maris
- Eryn, son of Alvin Whaletooth
- Dark Gerwick, seventh son of Old Man Harwick
- Harlow
- Grenn, of the Night’s Watch
Chapter 26

The Queen of Love and Beauty

Lances clashed like lightning. The sound of horse’s hooves clattered like lances. The crowd cheered as once more the wooden lances snapped against each other.

“Well struck!” Lord Gilwood Hunter cheered. “Oh well struck, well struck indeed!”

“They are both very gallant, my lord,” Alayne agreed. Despite herself, she could stop her heart from beating faster as the horses toured the tilts. Both riders were noble and dashing figures. Every highborn maiden must be swooning right now.

And yet I am betrothed to one of them, Alayne thought. And the other carries my favour. I think I chose well between them.

Both Ser Harrold Hardyng and Ser Roland Waywood motioned toward her as they passed. Ser Roland Waynwood pressed his hand to the sewn falcon handkerchief on his breastplate, which seemed only to make Ser Harrold more determined to beat the older knight.

Harry the Heir was fostered at House Waynwood, she thought. They were distant cousins, but Alayne could see something of a brotherly rivalry between them. Ser Roland was taller, with an easier laugh and more prone to teasing comments. Ser Harrold was stiffer, stockier built, and sullener, yet he also seemed far more focused and determined.

Four nights ago, after dancing and flirting with Ser Harrold, Alayne had given her favour to Ser Roland. The knight had been teasing Ser Harrold relentlessly ever since, all the way until they were the final two contenders. They’re not competing for the tourney of the Winged Knights anymore, Alayne thought with a smile, they are competing over me.

“Our Harry is the simple sort,” she remembered Littlefinger saying, “he enjoys comely women and jousting. He always wants what he can’t have, and he loves fighting for it. Make it difficult for him and he will follow you to the end of the earth.”

Ser Harrold is going to win this, she thought quietly. Ser Roland seemed to have the advantage in the first tilt, but since then he had been riding more and more unsteadily, while Ser Harrold only seemed to get stronger.

If he wins, he will crown me as queen of love and beauty, I know he will, Alayne thought. She had seen the wreath of white roses that would be handed to the victor. He will place the laurels on my lap and it will be just perfect. The Vale will toast us, and later we will be betrothed.

Alayne sat in the lord’s booth, below her father’s empty seat. The most powerful lords in the Vale were all around her, watching intently. Myranda Royce sat by her side, bouncing in excitement.

She tried desperately not to think of the last tourney she attended, a lifetime ago at King’s Landing. Her fath… the Hand’s tourney. She had been a different person then, but something of that old excitement and wonder started to creep through.

“He is very good,” Randa whispered with a smile. “Ser Roland is seven years his elder and many times more experienced. But Harry the Heir rides well.”

“Indeed, not quite a jumped-up squire,” Alayne said lowly. Harry the Arse, Lothor Brune called
him when they first met. When they first met, he had been rude, dour and aggressive. Yet ever since that unpleasant introduction he has been the perfect gentlemen, she added to herself.

“It’s always nice to see a man who can handle a lance,” Randa whispered.

“Oh hush.”

She gave a teasing smile. Randa is wearing a very tight corset, Alayne noticed. She displayed more cleavage than was strictly decent, particularly considering the cool air. Alayne knew that Randa had been flirting with Ser Roland before the tilt as well. She japed, but perhaps Randa hoped to be named queen of love and beauty if Ser Roland won. Alayne doubted it would happen – Ser Roland was likely to name Alayne as well.

“What is the reward for the victor?” Randa asked.

“A thousand gold dragons,” she replied. To the last of the sixty-four noble knights. “And admiration of the Vale.”

“I believe they both care more about the admiration.”

Indeed. The eight members of the Brotherhood of the Winged Knights had already been selected from the semi-finalists. Ser Harrold Hardyng, Ser Roland Waynwood, Ser Andar Royce, Ben Colderwater Ser Andrew Tollet, Ser Edmund Breakstone, Ser Elbert Belmore and Ser Osgood Upcliff had all qualified to the order. Ser Mychel Redfort had been a strong hopeful, but he lost the final place to the surprisingly skilled Ser Osgood Upcliff. Nobody had expected Ser Harrold to go so far either, considering his youth and newly minted spurs, but the young heir had a series of good tilts all the way up to the final.

The knights clashed again. The crowd was in arms as Ser Roland swayed dangerously from the broken spear against his shield. He was having difficulty with his horse.

“Your lord father is missing quite the bout,” Lord Gilwood noted, as he clapped.

Yes, and that is queer. Petyr had been so very busy recently. “Six broken lances so far!” Lady Waynwood said, clapping for both her grandson and her ward. “Soon we will need to judge it.”

“Yes,” Lord Yohn Royce rumbled. The Lord of Runestone had a face lined and carved like stone, and a booming voice. “Should we search out our Lord Protector?”

There was just a bit of bitterness with how he said the title. “Forgive him, my lords, but my father has been quite under the weather recently,” she lied. She turned to Lord Nestor Royce. “But Lord Royce, as our host here I am sure there will be no objections if you would make the judgement, if it comes to such.”

Lord Nestor looked surprised. “Indeed?” He looked around the box and no one objected. “What of it, Lord Robert, may I?”

Her Sweetrobin was the only who wasn’t looking at the tilts. Lord Robert Arryn had the largest chair in the lord’s stands, yet he was curled up on it with his back turned, trying to hide from the crowd and the tourney. Lord Petyr had to force the young lord to attend.

“Sweetrobin,” Alayne chided, gently. “Lord Nestor is trying to talk to you, you mustn’t be rude.”

“Tell him to go away,” the boy muttered, under his breath. Alayne knew she was only allowed to sit alongside the high lords because she was the only one Sweetrobin could talk to. “I don’t want
“Hush now,” she soothed, with a smile. She softly stroked his hair. “They’re fighting for you. Your Brotherhood of the Winged Knights, your loyal protectors.”

“Not him,” Sweetrobin muttered, with a fearful motion towards Ser Harrold. “He wears a falcon on his shield. He’s not a falcon, I am.”

“It’s okay, Ser Harrold is your cousin. He will be your protector too, a loyal knight.”

“He’s not. He’s just waiting for me to die.” The boy sounded scared, quivering as he clutched his throne. “They all are. They think I don’t know, but I do. They all want him to be lord, not me. He wants my castle.”

*That is not strictly untrue,* Alayne thought with a sad, sweet smile. *He is a delicate thing.*

There was a break after the seventh broken lance. Ser Roland’s horse lost a shoe and he needed a replacement. Lord Nestor decided to allow them an eighth and final tilt, before making a judgement.

The anticipation was horrible. *How long does it take to find another horse?* she thought impatiently.

“I don’t want any of them near me;” Sweetrobin muttered. He constantly stared at Ser Harrold. “Send them all away, I don’t want them. Take me back to the Eyrie.”

“Hush now, Sweetrobin. Just enjoy the tilt.”

“I won’t, I—” She put a finger on his lips. He was quivering.

“This is the final tilt, my lord.”

“I don’t want them!” Lord Robert wailed. The sound caused all the lords to turn to stare. “Send them all away! I am Lord of the Eyrie, I command everyone to get out!”

There were mutters behind her. *He’s in one of his moods again. Gods, where is Petyr?*

“Forgive me, my lords, I fear Lord Robert is quite tired,” Alayne said apologetically. She stroked his fingers reassuringly.

“I want everyone out!” There were tears in Sweetrobin’s eyes. “I don’t like that Harry, I want him gone! Make him fly! Make him fly!”

*Curses, he’s likely to scream at Ser Harrold when he wins. I can’t let there be a scene. “Ser Byron, Ser Morgarth,”* Alayne called to knights. “Please, take Lord Arryn back to his chambers. Fetch Maester Colemon to tend to him.”

Normally, Alayne would have left with him to soothe him, but she couldn’t leave her seat. Not when she could be named her queen of love and beauty so shortly. She didn’t miss the look in the lords’ eyes while their liege lord was carried out of the stands, though. Lord Robert was not the lord the Vale wanted.

The crowds cheered as Ser Harrold and Ser Roland rode onto the tilt yard once more. Ser Roland had switched to a grey charger. “Harry the Heir!” the crowds boomed. “Harry! Harry! Harry the Heir!”
I hope Sweetrobin does not hear this, she thought, but it was fleeting worry. The two jousters galloped. Alayne was on her feet, cheering. Both horses sprinted full force, both lances leaned in hard…

And then Ser Roland crashed downwards off his horse. There was a moment of worry, but squires rushed to the knight’s side, and then the call came that he was unhurt.

The crowd went wild. Ser Harrold dropped his lance and shield, raising his hands above his head. They were chanting his name. The Young Falcon, they called him, and Alayne couldn’t fault them. He looked every inch the part – handsome, strong, with sweat across his forehead and shining armour.

Ser Harrold rode a lap of the tilt before coming before the stand. Alayne’s heart was in her mouth as he stopped before her, bowed, with a wreath of white roses in his hands.

She couldn’t stop the giggle, or the blush. Harrold’s deep blue eyes shone brightly, dimples in his cheeks as he laughed.

Strong hands placed the crown of roses over her head. There she was, bastard-daughter, yet the envy of every highborn maiden in the Vale. Ser Harrold had eyes only for her even as Lord Nestor declared him the champion.

She gives him a coy smile, eyes twinkling. Randa was giggling besides her. Lady Waynwood smiled at her brightly as she clapped.

The excitement didn’t fade. Even as Ser Harrold was played away to dismount and clean, Alayne’s heart was skipping. Every maiden was cowing around her, gushing at the sight of the crown of roses.

There will be a feast, she thought. A celebration. Ser Harrold will be the champion and I will be by his side. All eight of the finalists will receive their silver wings, and blue cloaks bearing the Arryn coat of arms. The eight members of the Brotherhood of the Winged Knights would walk proud for the next three years, as the Lord of the Vale’s personal kingsguard.

The closing feast wasn’t as lavish and extravagant as the opening feast had been, but somehow it felt even more exciting. Ser Harrold was surrounded by crowds of knights and squires, and Arbor Gold was served by the casket. Even before the feast began, she saw Ser Harrold celebrating with his first bottle.

Ser Shadrich, Ser Jorah and Ser Lothor Brune escorted her back to the Gates of the Moon. Still she heard young knights laughing and toasting by the tilts. Ser Jorah walked stiffly, but Ser Shadrich was smiling.

“They were all very skilled, weren’t they?” Alayne laughed. “Sixty-four of the finest knights in the Vale, and those eight proved the champions.”

“Skilled?” Ser Shadrich laughed. “I wouldn’t say that. When it comes to jousting, skill matters less than the length of your arm, in my experience.”

Alayne blinked. Ser Shadrich was a wiry, short, sharp-faced man with a brush of orange hair. “Why do you say that, ser?”

“Well, if you have two men with lances charging against each other, it’s always the one who has the longest arms that hits his opponent first,” Ser Shadrich said with a smirk. “What does skill matter, when your reach decides the battle? Take a look at your champions, my lady. They’re tall.
Every one of them. Do you think that’s a coincidence, or that no short person can be skilled?”

Alayne laughed. Ser Shadrich was so short that he might have been taken for a boy, but his face belonged to a much older man. She saw long leagues in the wrinkles at the corner of his mouth, old battles in the scar beneath his ear, and a hardness behind the eyes that no boy would ever have. This was a man grown. “I fear you underestimate them, ser.”

“That would be an achievement,” he said with a laugh. “But mark my words. Length of the arm, that’s all it is. I am sure Ser Jorah here can attest to that.”

The older knight looked off-guard with being mentioned. “Excuse me?”

“The tourney at Lannisport, where you were declared the victor,” Ser Shadrich explained, with a smirk. “I give good odds that Ser Jorah here was simply the biggest of all his opponents.”

It was a jape, but there was a somewhat mocking edge to it as well. Ser Jorah was a big man, sure enough. “You jest, ser,” Alayne chided, but with a smile.

“And if size is all that matters,” Ser Jorah rumbled as they walked, “then why did I never win again after Lannisport? Did I become shorter?”

Ser Shadrich shrugged. “Perhaps everyone else started using longer lances instead?”

Ser Jorah scowled quietly. The big, bald knight stood nearly two feet taller than Ser Shadrich and twice as wide, but the smaller man still made jests.

“And if size is everything,” Alayne teased, “then why on earth would a mouse ever become a knight?”

“Oh, we mice have our place too. We are smaller targets, harder to hit.” Ser Shadrich smiled. “I imagine that the melee on the morn will have a different result. Ser Jorah, will you be competing?”

The big knight hesitated. His eyes glanced at Alayne, and then he said, “I think not, ser.”

“A shame. It could be a good contest. The best fighters prefer the melee to the joust.”

“I am sure it will be a grand spectacle,” Alayne smiled. They reached the keep doors. “But forgive me, sers, I must go find my lord father. I will be back down shortly for the feast.”

“As you will, my lady.” Ser Jorah lowered his head stiffly.

She was still smiling as she skipped – skipped – up the castle stairs. Alayne never touched the wreath of roses on her head. He chose me, she thought happily. Harry the Heir picked me. They would be betrothed soon, and then married. The whole Vale would cheer for her marriage. Ser Harrold Hardyng. Or maybe soon Lord Harrold Arryn.

Soon, she could be Lady of the Vale, just like Petyr planned.

And then maybe Winterfell… Alayne’s heart hurt at the thought. No, don’t think about Winterfell.

She heard voices approaching Littlefinger’s solar. Annoyed voices. “–ween ten and fifteen thousand,” a man’s voice grumbled. “With Dorne gathering swords they could easily reach thirty-five thousand.”

“And yet the Tyrell forces stand at forty thousand,” said another voice. A deep voice, with something of a lisp. “Perhaps five thousand from crownlands and riverlands. Potentially another
ten from the westerlands.’

“No.” That was Petyr’s voice. “War is not maths, numbers only go so far.” He paused, thinking. “What of the Faith Militant? How many, and which side of the coin will they answer to?” “Who can say? Can you count the number of smallfolk with pitchforks?” a voice scoffed. “Easily thousands, and hundreds of Warrior’s Sons. I’d wager there could be a riot of tens of thousands any day now.”


“It’s not enough. Best numbers say that Aegon leads eight thousand against King’s Landing. Part of their forces have split, and another three thousand are heading west.”

“Then they are to fight armies several times their size,” the other man in the room protested. He sounded younger than the other, his voice more high-pitched. “And three thousand sellswords against Casterly Rock? Is the Imp a fool?”

Alayne’s heart pounded. “The Imp is many things, but rarely foolish. Ambitious, though,” Petyr noted. “And I would not count the Golden Company out yet. They have other allies that have yet to show their hand.”

“The crown demands the Vale start mustering men,” one of them protested. “And the Vale lords are eager to do so. It will be rebellion if we refuse any longer.”

“We need not defy, just… delay,” Petyr muttered. “For just a touch. Let us give it a bit of time for the pieces to fall as they may. Very soon the stalemate around our dear Queen will …” his voice trailed off. Petyr glanced to where she was standing at the doorway. “Ah, excuse me gentlemen.” Petyr very quickly walked towards her, and closed the door before she could glimpse inside. “My dear Alayne. I do apologise, sweet thing, my business has run over.”

Littlefinger looked tired. There were bags under his eyes like he wasn’t sleeping. She was well-used to Petyr running from one meeting to the next, but recently it seemed like he rarely stopped. “I heard the Imp. Tyrion Lannister,” she said, her voice a whisper. “How… where…?”

“Nothing to worry about,” Petyr soothed. “But it seems that Tyrion may well be losing his head soon enough. How did the tourney fare?”

When Tyrion Lannister dies, I could be married again. “Um, Ser Harrold was victorious.”

“Marvellous.” He smirked. “And how did Ser Roland fare?”

Alayne blinked. Something about the question… “His horse lost a shoe.”

“Such a shame.” But he didn’t sound surprised.

“Indeed.” I wonder, did Lothor Brune or Oswell spend some time near the stables this morning? She wondered suspiciously. And when the brackets were drawn, Ser Harrold did end up with fewer matches than anybody. The length of the arm.

“You I am sure our Harry is celebrating. Do celebrate with him; this is an opportunity, sweet Alayne. A good chance to secure Ser Harrold’s favour.”

“It…” She hesitated. He seemed off. The smile was less smooth than it usually was. “Father, is everything ok?”
“It is indeed. Very well, in fact, except we may have to move a bit faster than intended. Timeframes must be moved up.”

“Why?”

He gave her a reassuring smile, caressing her cheek. “It seems the lord of the Vale are eager for war, and I cannot deny them any longer. Soon our armies will be gathering, and when they do I expect to see Ser Harrold Hardyng at the very front. I would like to see you wed before that happens.”

“But… but the betrothal…?”

“Can be accelerated,” Petyr promised. “I imagine that Harry will be quite eager to. You need only be your beautiful, charming self, Alayne. You are the queen of love and beauty tonight,” he said with a soft stroke of her forehead, brushing at the wreath on her head. “There are none in that hall a higher status than you. Dance with your champion and there are none who could take you away from him. Wrap him around your little finger and how could he resist?”

“I thought Lady Waynwood wanted the betrothal to wait.”

“She did,” Littlefinger said with a nod. “But if Harry insists, then we can make it happen sooner. Dance with the boy, drink and laugh with him. Later in the night, spend some private time alone with your betrothed. Entrance him like I know you will.”

There was a flicker in Littlefinger’s eyes. Something she could not quite place, but then he smiled again. A soft, gentle, nearly wistful smile. This is what I wanted, Alayne thought. A handsome, young and gallant knight to marry. She nodded. “Yes, father,” she nodded. “I will.”

“That’s my girl.” Petyr smiled. He kissed her on the lips as she turned to leave.

The celebration in the hall of the castle was already underway. She heard laughter, music and singing. Sweetrobin could not abide singing ever since Marillion, but it seemed that nobody cared.

“Off to Gulltown to see the fair maid, heigh-ho, heigh-ho,” the singers cried. “I’ll steal a sweet kiss with the point of my blade, heigh-ho, heigh-ho. I’ll make her my love and we’ll rest in the shade, heigh-ho, heigh-ho.”

“Off to Gulltown”, she thought. It was a bawdy song to sing in a noble castle, but this was a celebration. “Alayne!” She heard Ser Harrold shout. His face lit up as soon as he saw her. “Alayne… my lady.”

He lowered his head. His cheeks were flushed. She grinned. “Good ser,” she said, with a low curtsy. Ser Harrold laughed and took her by the arm.

The whole hall was in good cheer. She saw Randa dancing with Ser Roland, and Ser Lothor dancing stiffly with Mya Stone. Wine was flowing, and for once Alayne partook in it. Sweetrobin will be calmed and put to sleep by the maester, she thought, tonight is for Ser Harry the Heir, first of the Brotherhood of the Winged Knights.

“You are beautiful,” Ser Harrold whispered in her ear. “My queen…”

She didn’t reply, but she grinned and she stood up to dance again. Ser Harrold shared a toast with every knight who passed, celebrating his victory.
As they danced, she felt his hand slide against her bosom. He had soft hands. She didn’t react, but she didn’t move away either. *Tease him a little*, she thought. Just like Petyr taught her to.

The celebration lasted until late. Many of the older men retired early, but the younger knights and squires remained, content with their music and drink. Lord Petyr apparently gave instructions to let the merriment happen.

It was black outside – the hour of the bat or later – before finally the singers started to retire. Ser Harrold greeted, drunk with and laughed with half a hundred people, but he only ever danced with her. “My lady,” a voice called. “It is late. Allow us to escort you to your chambers.”

She turned, to see Ser Jorah standing there. The large knight seemed so grim-faced and stiff amidst all the merriment. He looked at her with narrowed eyes. “A bit longer, good ser,” Alayne laughed. The wine made her giggle.

Ser Harrold grabbed her hand as she made to walk away. She giggled, biting her lip. “Don’t go,” he begged into her ear. “I don’t want the night to end.”

The laughter burst from her throat. He nuzzled into her hair and pressing against her neck. He had soft lips, and his breath caused her skin to tingle…

Ser Jorah stepped forward warningly, eyes angry. Alayne quickly pushed Ser Harrold backwards. “Forgive the good ser, Ser Jorah, he’s had quite too much to drink,” she said, before turning to Ser Harrold. “Ser Harrold Hardyng! You are being quite uncouth! You forget your manners.”

Still, her eyes were playful. Ser Harrold grinned brightly and she grinned too. “We must go now, my lady,” Ser Jorah ordered, strictly. “Your father would not want you up so late.”

“One of course, ser,” she said, curtsying again. Her head spun. “But first, to the chamber pots, please. I’m afraid I’ve had too much to drink as well.”

Ser Jorah walked behind her closely. *He means to chaperone me to my room*, she thought sourly. Still, he lingered in the corridor outside of the latrine, which gave her the chance a slip out down the other hallway. She glanced around, and then noticed Ser Shadrich sulking by a tapestry.

Alayne grinned. Ser Jorah was strict, but Ser Shadrich was often more playful. “Ser!” she called. “My lady.” He seemed surprised to see her. “Um, what are you doing here?”

“I was hoping to ask a favour of you, ser,” she said, with a smile. “I was hoping for more… private time with my betrothed.” *Bewitch him*, Petyr had said. “It is not proper, of course, for a young lady to be out at night, but… could you assist?”

He hesitated. “Private time?” He repeated.

She nodded. “I fear Ser Jorah is too zealous in his duty.”

Ser Shadrich smirked. “Yes, I think I could help,” he said. “Let Ser Jorah take you back to your room, my lady. Wait until you hear a knock on your door, and then count to a hundred before leaving. I’ll lure the guards away and clear the corridor for you. Take the servant’s exit to the wards, and the east stables will be deserted this time of night.”

Alayne grinned. “My gallant knight,” she said happily, before rushing back. Ser Jorah was just about to come look for her when she headed out.
Ser Harrold chased after her, to bid her goodnight. Ser Jorah had to try to push the knight away. Still, he allowed him a goodnight kiss, and when he bent forward to kiss her hand, she whispered, “The east stables. Tonight.”

There was no indication that he heard for a bit, but then he smiled brightly and looked at her with wide, bright blue eyes.

Alayne could have danced as she walked away. My gallant knight. There were two guards outside her quarters. Ser Jorah muttered something to her about her betrothed, but she didn’t catch it as she bid him goodnight and closed the door. She never undressed, she never even took off the wreath of white roses. Instead, she stood behind her door, and waited, hopefully.

She was about to give up hope when she heard footsteps outside. Her guards. Sure enough, there was a quiet knock on the door. She closed her eyes and counted to a hundred.

When she left, the corridor was deserted. She pulled on her shawl and walked quickly. She passed a few serving girls in the castle, but she walked with purpose and nobody questioned her. The castle was only just winding down from the celebration. There was movement around the main hall, but it left the postern door deserted.

The night’s air was chilly, but Alayne walked fast, excitedly. Dainty heels clipped against the cobbled stones as she rushed to the stables. Even in the dark, she recognised his outline instantly.

“My lady,” Ser Harry muttered, stepping forward.

“Good ser,” Alayne replied. There were no torches, she couldn’t make out his face, but she could smell his musk, feel his breath on her cheek, and his hand on her waist…

Something soft touched her lips. Ser Harrold was on her, pressing into her. Oh Gods… By the Maiden…

“You promised to be all the spice I want,” Ser Harrold muttered in her ear. The flirt she had said when they first danced.

“I did,” she whispered, so softly like any noise might break the mood.

The kiss was deep and tender. Alayne remembered the last kiss she received – the one from the Hound in the dark room with the bloodied cloak. This kiss felt nothing like that, Ser Harrold – Harry – felt nothing like the Hound.

She took a deep breath as the lips parted. He was breathing deeply too. Then, they kissed again, longer this time, deeper. Yes, she thought. This feels good.

She didn’t want it to end. The wine was thick on his breath, but he felt warm, strong, and tender. For a what seemed like a lifetime, there was nothing but him and his lips.

When Harry’s hands moved upwards to her breasts, she didn’t object. But then, slowly, when his fingers started to fumble with her dress and her neckline, she grasped his fingers and slowly moved his hands away, but kept kissing him.

His fingers came back again to her breasts shortly later. She giggled, but she had to hold his hands to stop him from trying to take her bosom out. “No, good ser,” she muttered chidingly. “Not tonight.”

They kissed. His lips were strong, forceful, but not unpleasant. She kept on hold of his hands,
caressing his knuckles.

And then his grip slipped out of hers. His hand went for her inner thigh, and she jumped as she felt him grip at her groin. She slapped his fingers instinctively. “No, Ser Harrold,” Alayne warned. “No tonight. Not until we are wed.”

“My lady…” he muttered huskily. “You are my queen… my queen of love and beauty…”

“And until we are married, keep your hands to yourself,” she said, as she stroked his cheek.

“Are you sure?” Harry whispered. “I have good hands. They can do a lot of things these hands…”

He pressed her close and kissed her tightly, leaning her backwards. The kiss was good, but then she felt his hand sliding up her dress. “No, ser,” she said forcefully. “Not until we are wed.”

In the gloom, she saw him grin. *Does he think I’m teasing?* His hand didn’t leave her leg. It hovered upwards slowly, and she slapped it away.

And then, his body pressed into hers, forcing her backwards. She could have squealed, but then his lips were on her. She tried to object, but he was forceful. Suddenly, she could feel his fingers in her smallclothes, his hands fumbling at her lips.

“NO!” Alayne shouted. “No, don’t, don’t –”

Her voice turned muffled as forcefully kissed her. His body pressing against her so tight she could barely breathe. Harry was big, strong, solid. One hand between her legs, the other at her breasts. It didn’t feel good anymore – it felt like he was fumbling at her, pawing her body, fingers grasping and squeezing.

Alayne dug her fingernails into the back of his neck, scratching at him to stop, but that seemed only to egg him on further.

“It’s alright… It’s alright… it’s alright…” she heard him mutter. The stink of wine on his breath almost made her gag.

*How much has he had to drink?* she thought with panic. *How drunk is he?*

Pain. It hurt. Clumsy fingers at her most sensitive region. Fumbling. Squeezing. Tearing. A sharp cry broke her lips, panic swelling her body. She was twitching, thrashing, but he was just so strong…

She heard something rip. *My smallclothes. He tore them off.* She heard the clink of him fumbling with his belt. *Taking off his breeches.*

Alayne screamed. Suddenly, a great hand was over her mouth, clamping her shut. “Quiet,” Harry whispered into her ear, still kissing her cheek. “It feels good, but you must be quiet. They’ll hear us if you scream.”

She choked. Panic. Fear. Pain. Gasping for air, arms flailing, and suddenly he was lifting her upwards and dropping her to the ground. Sharp hay poked beneath her. Her dark hair falling loose, the wreath of roses toppling and falling over the stables.

“No… no… stop! Stop! Stop!” she protested, gasping for air. He either didn’t hear her, or didn’t care.
Her dress ripped. Her breasts spilled out of dress, hungry hands clawing at them. She would have kicked him, but he was between her legs, his body pressing down onto hers, so heavy it hurt.

_No, no, no… Can’t let him, don’t let this happen…_

There were tears down her cheeks. She could taste the salt. There was nothing but the black stables, and the thrashing and flailing bodies.

She felt aching pain from her nether regions from his hands. She gagged.

He had his breeches off. She couldn’t see it, but she could feel it. Between her legs, him grunting to position herself. He kissed her neck, mauling her like an animal, and all the while Alayne couldn’t even move, or breathe, or–

“Ahem.” That single sound in the darkness felt like it shattered some spell. There was suddenly light in the stables. A lantern.

Ser Harrold shot upwards. There was a figure in the doorway. It was a boy’s figure, but the voice was of a man.

“It… It’s not what it looks like!” Ser Harrold protested, scrambling up. His cheeks were flushed, his breath panting. “We’re betrothed, _she_…!”

Alayne could only sob, barely able to breathe. She was crying. “Help…” she sputtered. “…Help…”

Ser Shadrich looked around the barn quietly. The small knight wore full armour, a long sword at his belt. His gaze was cool. “Ah,” he said. “Not what it looks like indeed.”

Ser Harrold flustered, drawing himself up. His pants were still half-down. “Listen to me, _hedge knight,_” he said sharply. He stood head shoulders above Ser Shadrich. “I am the _heir of the Vale._”

The knight paused. “Yes,” he agreed. “You are.”

One moment they were standing against each other, and the next Ser Shadrich had a dagger in his hand. Ser Shadrich lunged so fast Alayne couldn’t even process it. Then she heard Ser Harrold gag.

Ser Shadrich shoved him backwards, pinning him against the wall. He was small but strong and lithe. The dagger was in Ser Harrold throat. The younger man flailed, but Ser Shadrich pressed up close. Blood gushed as Ser Shadrich twisted the knife and cut downwards. Ser Harrold’s red cheeks drained quickly.

“_Short arms,_” she heard Ser Shadrich mutter. “They don’t have the reach, but they sure can draw a blade faster.”

He paused only to pull the dagger out of the corpse’s throat. Alayne’s jaw dropped, eyes widening.

She saw the crown of white rose, stomped on and splattered with blood.


Something heavy collided with her jaw. A gauntleted fist knocked her down.

The world went black.

She felt pain. Everything was spinning.
There was something being forced into her mouth. Ser Shadrich ripped off part of her torn dress, to make a gag.

“I am sorry about him, my lady,” Ser Shadrich said quietly. “I really cannot abide men who would treat women that way.”

The bloody dagger was at her throat. “Now, I don’t want to hurt you,” he warned, his voice a whispered. “But make a noise, and I cut your throat.”

The dagger’s blade glinted even in the gloom. She glimpsed a plain blade with a black and unadorned handle, but it felt so sharp. Alayne was gasping, and then his hand smothered her mouth.

She could only gasp. The panic shut down her lungs. *What is happening? What is he doing?*

Alayne heard him sling a heavy satchel over his shoulder. A knight’s travel satchel, packed and ready to go. He forced her upwards, and he was small but strong. “Forgive me, my lady,” he said. Ser Shadrich really did sound apologetic “But, pray tell, would you prefer Alayne or Sansa?”

*How could he…? Why…?*

He dragged her into the far section of the stables. She tried to run, but Ser Shadrich knocked her down, and lifted her physically off the floor with a quiet grunt. Alayne could barely even breathe as sharp metal – the gorget over his mail – dug into her stomach. A wordless cry of pain broke through her lips, yet Shadrich just cursed and yanked her hair violently.

She heard horses neighing. Ser Shadrich’s horse, a rangy chestnut courser, was already waiting for him saddled in the stables. With practiced ease, Ser Shadrich jumped onto the horse and dragged her kicking and screaming over his lap. He held the dagger in one hand and the reins with his other hand as he wrapped them around Alayne in a crude knot.

“Listen to me,” Ser Shadrich hissed into her ear. “I really don’t want to hurt you; the bounty is for you alive and whole, Sansa. But if need be, I’ll cut off your head alone and just apologise. So come willingly because you’ll die before I get caught.”

The bounty. *Oh Gods, Cersei.*

He kicked his horse into motion, a fast stride. Alayne tried to squirm, to slip off, but then the dagger pressed into her torso softly. The blade was sharp enough to draw a trickle of blood even without any force.

*He’s trying to take me to Cersei,* she realised in panic. *Trying to steal me from the middle of a fortified castle filled with knights, from the most secure realm in the Seven Kingdoms.*

*The man is mad.*

Behind her, she heard Ser Shadrich break the glass of his lantern and throw it into the hay of the stables. The flames sputtered and spread. It was the dead of night, past the hour of the wolf and he rode quickly. *But there’ll be guards on the gates? Even at this time, there must be…?*

He glanced at her, holding her close. “The guards have already been dealt with,” he promised. “And the gates are open for the tourney.”

“But you can’t…. you can’t…” Alayne stammered. “You’ll never get past the Bloody Gate, you’ll never get through the high road!”
He just smirked. The guardhouse was deserted. Ser Shadrich spurred his horse into a gallop.

She heard shouts behind her, but they were the wrong direction. Guards rushing to fight the fire in the stables, not stop the man stealing their lord’s daughter. Nobody even knows I’m not in my room, she realised with horror.

Before Alayne even knew what was happening, they were galloping out of the postern gate and the highroad. If anyone saw Shadrich galloping away, they never reacted in time. She screamed, but Shadrich just slammed a hand over her mouth while laughing maniacally.

Behind her, horns rang and voices yelled, but Ser Shadrich’s courser was fast and hardy.

The air was bitingly cold, so cold through her torn, flimsy dress that she could only shiver. They were out on the road, riding past the watchtowers. “No no no!” Alayne gasped, trying to thrash. The horse neighed as it galloped. “No, no, you ca–”

With an idle motion, Ser Shadrich brought the pommel of his dagger onto her head. There was a thud. Everything went black.

All of the pain, all of panic, and the fear and the emotion. Alayne couldn’t handle it, she just blacked out.

When her vision returned, she felt cold. Woozy. The earth was rocking and jerking. Snow on the forest ground, staring down as hooves struggled to push through. It was daylight, but still just as cold. He had wrapped a cloak around her. Shadrich was still riding, pushing his courser through uneven terrain. He wasn’t on the road, it was barely even a dirt path.

She was so dazed she couldn’t even protest. He’s going east, she realised slowly. He’s trying to slip through the forests and the Mountains of the Moon rather than the Bloody Gate. The panic was so thick she struggled to breathe.

It was noon before Ser Shadrich finally stopped. He paused only to allow his courser time to breathe, and to bind her wrists in thick rope.

Her blue wool dress was torn. If not for the cloak, she would have frozen. Her body was shivering, weak and sore. When she looked, she saw droplets of blood staining the inside of her thighs, and bruises across her breasts. Ser Harrold’s strong hands.

“He’s going east,” he offered her skin of water. “Drink up. It’ll be a long journey and you don’t want to lose your strength.”

“You can’t do this,” Alayne begged. “You won’t escape. Every knight in the realm will be looking for you. You killed the heir to the Vale and kidnapped their lord’s daughter. You’ll never escape.”

“Maybe. But I reckon they’ll be more likely to think that I’m going west or north rather than east. And the Vale is a big place, not even high lords can cover every mile of it.”

“The Vale of Arryn is impassable except for the high road, everyone knows that.”

“It’s impassable to an army,” he said with a shrug. “But one man can slip through the Mountains of Moon, if he’s strong and tough enough. I am the Mad Mouse, Lady Stark, I reckon I’m tough enough.”

“And what of the mountain clans?” She said fearfully.
“Well…” Ser Shadrich mused. “That’s more of a reason for you to keep quiet now, isn’t it?”

“This is suicidal, you cannot…”

“Maybe. Every battle is a bit of a suicide, if you think about it. In each battle, both sides rush forward to commit mutual suicide. It’s the mad ones that come to enjoy the rush.” He grinned. “And for your sake, don’t cause any trouble. If we are spotted by the mountain clans… well, at least I’ll get a quick death with a sword in my hand. You don’t even want to imagine the things that those savages will do to a sweet girl like you.”

He started moving again very quickly. Alayne didn’t even know where he was going – it was like he navigated the forest at random, keeping off the trails. Father will have sent search parties after me, she thought, there’ll be hundreds, thousands, looking for me. But Ser Shadrich moved fast and pushed his courser hard, all day with few stops.

“You worked for Littlefinger,” she mumbled as they rode. “You were hired for protection.”

“Not really. I was searching for you all the time,” Ser Shadrich explained. “I wasn’t sure that it was you in the Vale, but after the third week or so I was pretty convinced. It was the little things that gave you away, Sansa – like how you couldn’t describe anything about Gulltown despite claiming to be from there.” He smiled. “But even once I knew, I just had to be patient and wait for an opportunity. You gave me one last night so I helped myself to a few of your father’s valuables,” he motioned to his satchel with his dagger. “And set about my escape.”

“And Ser Harrold?” she whispered. The thought of her gallant knight pushing himself on top of her haunted her eyes. She could still smell the booze and horse manure in the stables, hear the grunts and gasps.

“Oh, he wasn’t planned,” Ser Shadrich admitted, sheepishly. “Truth be told, I probably made a mistake by killing him – that could well come back to bite me. Still, I just can’t stand seeing brutes who enjoying hurting women.”

“You’re kidnapping me.”

“That’s just money. I don’t want to hurt you.”

The snow thickened. They started to move over the mountains, and the forest became rocks and scattered spruce trees. Alayne felt so weak and disoriented that she faded in and out of consciousness, but Ser Shadrich barely even paused.

The cold winds swept over them all through the night. Her body trembled fiercely, and she had to hug to the horse to try and keep herself warm. Ser Shadrich ate in the saddle, from a pouch of dried bread and meat.

The next day, Ser Shadrich dismounted and pulled the saddlebags off the courser. She thought he was finally stopping for camp, but then he started walking, leaving his horse behind. “Come on,” he said, clutching the dagger. “Start walking.”

“What?”

“Would you prefer I left you here?” he said with laughter. “I leave you alone out here and you’d be dead long before anyone finds your body. Start walking, my lady. Here, you can carry these bags too.”

“What about the horse?”
No, the horse is too easy to track. Won’t make it much further over this terrain either. We go on foot from now on.”

*He’s insane,* she thought with horror, but he clutched the knife tightly. Short as he was, she knew she wouldn’t be able to overpower him. She was shivering, but he gave her a blanket as a cloak and ordered her to start walking. Her blue woollen dress was already ruined and ripped, her shoes falling apart. She had never felt so cold, or so weak.

“It is fifty leagues to the coast,” she muttered finally. “You expect to go that distance on foot? Through mountains?”

“Not really. We just need to go two leagues, towards the Oak Lake, where I’ve stashed a boat to take us down the river.” She looked at him. “What? Just because you’re mad doesn’t mean you need to be stupid. Now keep walking.”

She was shivering, but he refused to stop even when she started trembling. It was only late that night when he finally stopped for rest. Alayne was left pale and cold, while he nestled into a camp under a rock to keep them out of the wind.

She was hoping there might be a chance to steal his sword away from him, or even just the dagger, but instead he bound her wrists to a tree before closing his eyes, and slept with both sword and dagger tight in his grip.

Alayne was so weak that she couldn’t even protest. She was only given hard bread to break her fast. Shadrich stuffed his face with dried meat and gulped water, but he gave her very little. *Starving me so I can’t resist.*

The mountains were hard, steep and threatening. At one point, Shadrich had to hold her to push her forward through the fog and snow.

It took another day before she glimpsed Oak Lake in the distance. In the patchy morning light flickering through the clouds, the lake looked picturesque. The lake was fed by a dozen small streams running down the mountains, before breaking away into Oak River and leading out to the Narrow Sea. *Iroquois and House Waynwood is not far from here,* she thought. *They’ll save me, they must.*

“You won’t reach King’s Landing,” she muttered wearily. “Whatever boat you have will never get make it through open sea, much less around down the Blackwater. You’ll need to charter a ship in Gulltown, and Lord Baelish will spot you. Father owns Gulltown.”

‘*Father,*’ Ser Shadrich snorted. “Tell me something, has your ‘father’ fucked you yet?”

Her shoulders tensed. “He wants to fuck you, you know that yes?” Ser Shadrich laughed. “You think it’s normal the way he kisses you? Oh yes, I’ve seen that. The man you call father used to love your mother, and you look just like her, don’t you? You are his replacement, the copy of the woman he couldn’t get in his youth.”

“You’re wrong,” Alayne said, body stiffening. *The man is a fiend.*

“Sure,” Shadrich laughed. “Did he also tell you what happened in King’s Landing? Who do you think betrayed your real father? Who put a dagger – *this* dagger – to your old man’s neck?”

“You lie.”

“I do not. I heard it from a Spider.” His clear voice rang out, still pushing his way over the heavy
snow. “Lord Baelish had your father killed, all so he could take the daughter and make her call him daddy. I’m not sure whether to be impressed or horrified.”

Her hands were shaking. He lies. Of course he lies.

Ser Shadrich smirked. “You’re nothing more than a game piece to him. He’d fuck you himself if he didn’t think he could make more money selling you to someone else. Why do you think your Ser Harrold forced himself on you like that?”

Alayne froze. “Oh the booze, sure,” Ser Shadrich continued. “But I’m guessing Littlefinger took you to one side and told you exactly how to entice him. Drink with him, take him alone? If I was a betting man, I’d say Littlefinger probably shared words with Harry as well. Maybe something like, ‘My daughter is really fond of you, and nobody would be too upset if you enjoyed some time with her’? Hint, hint.” He looked at her expression and laughed. “Come on, you’re a smart girl. Littlefinger wanted you married. What better way is there than arranging some leverage he could hold over Lady Waynwood, to make sure the marriage happens quickly? Maybe knock something off the dowry too?”

“No. You lie,” she muttered, shaking her head. “My father would never do that…”

“Who’s lying now? You know exactly the type of man your ‘father’ is.” He shook his head. There was something like sympathy in his eyes. “Now come on, keep walking.”

Alayne took a few nervous steps. “Listen,” he continued. “I know you probably don’t see it now, but this is a good thing for you. The absolute healthiest place you could be is away from Littlefinger. That man is more dangerous than anyone. I’m helping you here, believe me.”

“The Queen will have me killed,” she said with a gulp, trying to shamble over the rocks. Her shoes weren’t meant for mountain climbing, and even under the cloak it was cold.

“I’m not taking you to the Queen.” He shook his head. “I work for the Spider. You should be happy, Lady Stark, because I don’t think Varys wants to kill you. I’m doing you a favour – I’m getting you out of the grip of a man who is just going to use you and discard you. Say what you want about the Spider, but at least he doesn’t pine after little girls who look like their mother…”

“You’re lying,” Alayne growled, glaring at him. Her legs stopped.

“Keep walking, my lady,” he warned.

“Say that you’re lying!” she hissed.

Ser Shadrich’s eyes narrowed, clutching his dagger a bit more tightly. “Keep walking, or I’ll mak–”

Suddenly, a horn blew out over the mountainside. They both froze. It sounded harsh, screeching and jagged. She saw the knight’s eyes widen in fear. Shadrich’s hand went to his longsword. “Burned Men,” he hissed, growling at her. “Run, girl.”

There was a second horn blast. She couldn’t tell from where it came. “What, where–”

“The treeline,” he growled, grabbing her shoulder and starting to sprint. “Run, the trees!”

Alayne stumbled, dainty shoes stumbling over rocks. Shadrich cursed, grabbing her arm and yanking her upwards. There were more horns blowing. Some spotter had seen them, and the savages were answering the alert.
“Keep running!” Ser Shadrich sounded scared. “They catch you and they feed you to the flames, girl.”

They ran down the slope, taking cover in the trees. She was panting for breath, but Ser Shadrich kept on dragging. Behind her, she saw figures on mountainside. Dark figures clutching spears, pitchforks or axes. One of them was clutching a huge burning torch, his face painted red, howling war cries.

“Keep running,” Ser Shadrich hissed, and Alayne ran for as long as she could. She heard men behind them, but the forests and rocks were thick and winding. Shadrich dropped his satchel without a second thought so could run faster.

She could hear the sound of waterfalls down the mountainside. The fast rapids were fed from the Tears of Alyssa and swashed into Oak Lake, and then all the way down to the Narrow Sea.

More horns were blowing. Even Shadrich was wheezing for breath. When Alayne finally turned, she glimpsed figures moving away through the trees. The clansmen were moving away. “Why aren’t they chasing us?” she panted.

Shadrich just shook his head. “Because they didn’t see us,” he muttered, grabbing and pulling her away.

Only when they shambled up a ridge did she realise what he meant. In the distance, five hundred yards away, she saw riders trotting through a snow-buried road. A group of knights. Knights searching for me from the Gates of the Moon. While we cut through the mountains, a party of knight heading east must have travelled along the highroad and made similar time. The Burned Men had been watching the road – they saw them first.

She lingered to stare, but Shadrich grabbed her and pulled her roughly towards the waters.

Behind her, it looked like a standoff was forming. A dozen knights on horseback against thirty or so clansmen slipping out of the forests. She glimpsed burning arrows. A battle. The knights would ride through the clansmen to save her.

She heard war cries and horn blasts. No, Alayne realised. It looked like the knights were being forced to retreat. They didn’t have the numbers to safely fight through the Burned Men.

Shadrich was still running. Alayne’s heart pounded.

“HELP!” she bellowed at the top of her lungs, before Shadrich could stop her. The sound rang out over the forests. She glimpsed the mounted men ripple. “HELP M—”

The backhanded slap took her to the ground. Her vision blurred. A horn answered her screaming. At the sound of her voice, the knights wouldn’t retreat anymore.

“Bitch!” Shadrich hissed furiously, face red. “You’ve just cost a lot of good men their lives.”

He grabbed her and hoisted her upwards, his feet shambling over the rocks. Behind, she heard screams, sounds of horses charging. Shadrich was staggering, struggling to lift her over the uneven rocks.

In the distance, she glimpsed two mounted riders fall to Burned Men’s arrows.

Her heart was beating so hard it might stop. She could hear rushing water. “Nearly there…” Shadrich wheezed. “Nearly there…”
The world seemed to blur. She heard hooves behind her, arrows pinging, people and horses screaming. A voice – a heavy, husky voice – bellowing words she couldn’t make out.

“Fuck!” Shadrich cursed, and without another word he shrugged his shoulders and dropped her onto the snow and stone. The impact caused her to body to oomph. She could barely breathe. “You think you can stop me, Mormont?”

Footsteps approaching. A large figure. “Move away from the lady,” a voice growled. Alayne could barely make out of the shape of a man in heavy armour, pacing towards Shadrich. A bloody bear’s maw growled from his breastplate.

Ser Jorah Mormont was wheezing slightly. His sword – a broad hand-and-a-half sword – was slick with blood. His eyes dark and his face hard under his helm.

*He must have cut through the Burned Men to chase after me.* She glimpsed a fallen horse with an arrow in its rump. Ser Jorah’s mount had collapsed, but he kept on running on foot. Over the ridge, the clansmen were still clashing with the remaining knights, but there weren’t many left. Ser Jorah was a strong man.

Ser Shadrich forced a laugh. “You ready to die over a bastard girl, Mormont? You sure you want to do this?”

“Sansa Stark,” Ser Jorah growled, glancing down at her lying in the snow. She looked a mess – beaten, bruised and weak. Unwashed and filthy. “Are you injured?”

Her heart pounded. He knows, she thought. *He knows who I am.* Shadrich’s face flickered. “So not quite as dense as everyone thought you were, old man,” Shadrich grunted. “But it seems there’s even less reason for a fight. You sure you want to risk your life over a Stark?”

“You think I fear you?” Ser Jorah grunted, taking another cautious step.

“Depends on how much a fool you are. Back away, Mormont,” Ser Shadrich warned. “Turn around, walk away, and you can still get out of this. Or better yet, come on and help me. There’s a fat purse of gold in return for this lady and I’m happy to share.”

“Move away from the lady,” Ser Jorah growled again, raising his blade.

Shadrich had his longsword in one hand and his dagger in the other. He swung both of them with confident ease. “What do you care?” Ser Shadrich scoffed. “You’ve sold people before for coin, haven’t you? The gold is good and there’s a debt to be repaid, Mormont.” His gaze darkened. “We’re just the same, Mormont. We both do what we need to do.”

“Move away.”

Shadrich just smirked. For a little man, he had an easy arrogance. “Then have it your way.”

The Mad Mouse stepped forward, darting at Ser Jorah. The large man swung first, a furious double-handed swipe. Shadrich didn’t parry, he just sidestepped, and as soon as Ser Jorah tried to recoil Shadrich’s blade was jabbing forward.

If it wasn’t for Ser Jorah’s platemail, that jab would have cut open his stomach. Instead, the edge grated off hard metal. Shadrich swung his blades as fluidly as water.

The second stroke, Jorah managed to block, but barely. The third swipe and Jorah was on the backfoot. The fourth attack was with Shadrich’s back hand, and she saw the dagger lash against
Jorah’s shoulder. The bear knight winced.

Ser Shadrich swung his blades in his hands, and then darted in for another assault. Jorah barely had a chance to retaliate.

Ser Jorah was bigger. Much, much bigger – he looked three times Ser Shadrich’s size. He was stronger too and Ser Shadrich didn’t dare even try to block any of the larger man’s blows. And yet Shadrich was the faster swordsman, and that mattered far more.

The blades clashed. Alayne could only stare, still wheezing with pain and fear.

Ser Shadrich took second blood with a graze across Jorah’s hip. The bear knight might have lost his head too, but he barely managed to push Shadrich away. The sound of Shadrich’s laughter filled the air.

“You are slow, old man,” he taunted. He spun and caught his sword in one hand, mocking.

Jorah could only growl. Blood and sweat dripped down his brow. He clutched his bastard sword with both hands.

Shadrich charged. Jorah managed one hard swing, but the next four strokes were all wicked fast and precise from the Mad Mouse.

She heard the clang of steel against steel. \textit{His heavy armour is the only thing saving his life}, Alayne realised. While Shadrich wore light mail, Ser Jorah was clad in heavy plate. Ser Shadrich’s swords clipped his plate repeatedly in short succession, but didn’t pierce. Not quite.

She glimpsed the panic in Jorah’s movements. He was losing ground while Shadrich danced over the rocks. Ser Jorah swung out wildly, yet Shadrich was too close and already attacking. Shadrich’s dagger darted forward, straight for Ser Jorah’s grip on his sword.

There was a plume of blood. The impact of the cross-guard took the dagger straight out of Shadrich’s hand and it flew backwards and landed in the snow. She heard Jorah scream and stagger backwards. He was clutching his hands.

\textit{His fingers}, she realised in horror. Ser Jorah was missing two fingers on his left hand from where the dagger had carved straight through his gauntlets. The large man staggered, eyes bulging in rage, but he was struggling to even grip his sword.

Ser Shadrich laughed, leaving his dagger behind him and swinging the longsword alone. \textit{“Tis a fine thing, is it not?”} Ser Shadrich taunted. \textit{“The mouse that can maul a bear.”}

Jorah’s veins throbbed, his face red. Blood dripped from his hands. He didn’t speak, or even scream, there was just one long grunt of pain.

“You should have walked away, ser,” Shadrich said with a soft smile, before stepping forward and swinging his sword downwards–

She never knew how it happened. One heartbeat, Alayne was lying on the floor staring in horror. The next, her body was moving all by itself.

She felt cold and fear. She felt the snow brush underfoot. She felt her hands wrapping around the smooth dragonbone hilt. She felt Ser Shadrich’s mail cleave as she jammed in the edge forward with both hands. She felt a sharp scream breaking through her throat.
Before she had even realised what was happening, Sansa was standing upright and plunging the dagger straight into Ser Shadrich’s back. Her hands were still bound and trembling. Blood oozed over her fingers.

His eyes widened in surprise. His body flinched.

“Oh,” Ser Shadrich said dumbly.

He tried to raise his blade. Ser Jorah roared and his sword swung first. The steel bastard sword went straight into his skull.

Blood and bone shards splattered against Sansa’s face. The blade cleaved halfway through Ser Shadrich’s skull before it jammed, dragging his body with it like a ragdoll. The Mad Mouse’s body flopped limply under Ser Jorah’s blade.

The knight roared in wordless fury. He had to grunt as he dragged his sword out of the man’s head. There was barely a head left – brains and skull splattered like a half-squashed tomato. Gloopy gore and blood soak into the snow.

He was wobbling slightly, panting heavily. “Lady Stark,” Ser Jorah murmured, with a nod.

There was blood dribbling down her chin. “Ser Jorah,” Sansa gasped, dropping weakly to the ground. Her hands just felt numb. Her wool dress was shredded, stained and filthy.

Jorah was staggering, limping. “I can take you back to Lord Baelish, my lady,” he said, still cradling his bloody hand. “I could take you back to Lord Arryn, Lord Royce and Miranda, my lady. If that is what you wish.” His face was pained. “Or I could take you north. I could take you home, as a Stark, where you belong. There are allies there, those that support your family… I am here to bring you home, but I will not do so without your permission.”

He grimaced, struggling to breathe. “It is your choice, Lady Stark. I could take you home. If you want to go. Say the word.”

She was left breathless, staring upwards in numb shock. “Home,” Sansa repeated. She wasn’t quite sure where the words came from, but her head was spinning and… “I want to go home.”

“Aye,” Ser Jorah said with a gulp. “Then we must run.”

Her fingers were gripping the dagger so tightly she wasn’t quite sure if she could dislodge them. Ser Jorah shambled upwards, wrapping his missing fingers roughly and then snapping her binds off with his other hand. The knight’s armour rattled as heavy feet started to pound.

Behind them, a ragged horn blew over the rocks. The Burned Men. Two of the knights turned to gallop away, and one was cut down by arrows. The clansmen were howling, victorious, and she heard heavy footsteps chasing after her and Jorah.

Sansa stumbled, and Ser Jorah stopped to pick her up with one arm, pressing her close as he kept on running. He stunk of musky sweat and blood, every breath deep and heavy. Even injured, Ser Jorah had stamina. He ran in heavy armour, with her body pressed into his shoulder, lumbering feet never stopping.

The clansmen gave chase, blowing horns and stomping spears. *They are behind us, and we have nowhere to run.* There was nowhere to hide, no way to outrun them. Ser Jorah could only sprint and stagger, towards the sound of rushing water.
She saw Oak Lake stretch out before them. She heard the gushing falls. The currents streamed down forty feet into cold water beneath them, as hard and as grey as stone. She saw spray splashing, droplets hissing in the air, and the falls rumbling like some great beast.

“Lady Stark,” Ser Jorah gasped, staggering up the rocky ridge. “Can you swim, my lady?”

Her head spinning so fast she barely made sense of the words. “Lady Stark,” Ser Jorah pressed. “Can you swim?”

Swim. “Yes,” she gasped. She used to swim with Jeyne Poole and Beth Cassel in the shallows of the Long Lake during the height of summer. Little Arya would have joined them, sometimes, splashing and giggling by the beach, and her mother would watch from the shore, fretting. Sansa stopped going out to swim as she grew to be a lady. Gods it was so long again… “Yes, I can swim.”

“That is very fortunate, my lady,” Ser Jorah said with a grimace. He struggled with the clasps of his steel plate briefly, but could not unfasten them with one hand. “Because I cannot.”

“Wait, what—”

He didn’t even pause. Without warning, Ser Jorah held her tightly, and jumped off the cliffs.

The Wildling King

Jon had never seen White Harbour before. His first sight was of New Castle rising over the landscape, while seagulls cawed and the smell of salt was thick in the air. The city was all white stone and straight streets, with steeply pitched slate roofs tilting downwards towards the coast of the White Knife. Even from a distance, Jon could see the harbour heaving with sails, ships attended by ant-like figures.

The journey had been quick and hard, but they ran their horses into the ground. The White Harbour riders led the way, but Jon and his Dragonguard huddled together. “I do not trust these southrons,” Gerwick warned, as hooves galloped over the grassy plains. “This could be a trap.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed. “But they say Lord Manderly promises me guest right. They approached with an offer of truce.”

“Didn’t they give your brother guest right too?” Gerwick said darkly. “It seems to me that honour stops at the Wall.”

“These Manderlys,” Furs called from Jon’s other side. “You say this fat lord was to marry his daughters to those Freys. Now what sort of man gives his grandchildren away to scum like that?”

“It may be that betrothal was forced.” Jon kept his voice as low as he could. “Or you’re right, this may be a trap. Be wary – if they try to hurt me, Sonagon will hurt them much more. Make sure they understand that.”

The leader of the men, a lithe and tall knight introduced as Ser Alek, had dismounted and bowed before Jon. His men had dropped their weapons. They had been extremely formal and scared, and begged that Lord Manderly wanted to treat, that the lord offered safe passage to White Harbour. If there was deception in them, Jon didn’t see it, and it was too good an opportunity to pass.

There had been little time to dawdle. Ser Alek had offered each of the men a horse, some to ride
two abreast, and even left eight of his own men on foot. Ser Alek surrendered his own horse to Jon, a great grey warhorse. Jon noticed how the man had been sweating, constantly lowering his eyes as he addressed him.

It took a while to convince Sonagon that the men weren’t a threat. In the end, Jon was convinced to leave the dragon to hunt aurochs over the plains, to avoid attention, while they rode to White Harbour.

They passed two smaller villages, but never stopped as they rode. Ser Alek seemed afraid to. They rode for a full day, until finally they saw the pale walls of White Harbour. They were approaching the first of the stables and farmhouses leading up to the city. None of the wildlings had ever seen a town so big, so crowded. Some tried to hide it, but they all looked either awed or nervous.

“Halt,” Jon shouted to the riders, drawing his destrier to a stop. The riders paced. “What is the intention here, Ser Alek?”

His face seemed pained. “Your Grace,” the knight said. “Lord Manderly wishes to treat, White Harbour offers no threat to you, I promise.”

“Indeed. And we will be entering through the main gates?” Jon demanded.

“I had clear orders to bring you direct to the New Castle. We will not go through the city, we will circle around and there’s a postern gate to the north straight into the keep itself.”

No, that felt risky. If this was a trap, then it would make sense to keep Jon out of the streets. “If Lord Manderly wishes to treat, then let’s go the most direct route,” he said firmly. “Through the main gate, and up the Castle Stair. I wish to enter through White Harbour itself.”

“Your Grace, the city is in panic. The sight of your dragon sent many into frenzy, it may not be safe to ride through the streets.”

“I have no doubt you can provide a suitable escort. I also expect Lord Manderly himself to meet me outside the gates. Go ahead and bring those requirements to your lord, and two of my companions will escort you. When they return and tell me the path is clear, I will enter the city tomorrow morning. To give you ample time to prepare a procession.”

He grimaced. “You—Your Grace, it is not safe for you to linger on these plains all night.”

“I am sure I will be fine,” he said coolly. “Furs and Eryn, please escort the good ser. We will camp on the coast.”

Ser Alek tried to protest, but Jon gave him no space to. Furs and Eryn were two of the most level-headed of his Dragonguard, and Jon ordered them not to antagonise, but just watch. Jon’s instincts said that the offer of truce was genuine, but he couldn’t afford to take that chance. If Lord Manderly really is willing to meet me, then let him meet me personally, during daylight, in the main street, to reduce any chance of an ambush.

It starting snowing during the night, but they camped two leagues outside of the city. Ser Alek left twelve of his men, but they all kept their distance by unspoken command. The Dragonguard kept watch diligently, still suspicious of the southerners. Jon could feel Sonagon hunting over the Bite, and if need be the dragon could be here quickly.

It was a cold morning. Furs and Eryn both returned at first light, reporting that Lord Manderly was waiting with a group of fifty guards by the front gates. As they rode off towards the city, Jon called Sonagon back towards him, just to be safe.
They had barely reached the gates when the dragon soared above them high in the sky. The shadow blanketed the entire road.

Jon’s first impression of White Harbour was of a city in panic. He saw people on the road sprint in panic as they approached. He heard screaming in the streets. Jon only caught a single word, “Dragon, dragon!”

Even the guards that met them seemed terrified. Jon approached slowly, and a field of green cloaked soldiers with tridents stood to attention outside the thick ironwood gates. Jon could smell the fear in the air, even though Sonagon circled far above. Well, I wanted the whole north to see Sonagon.

“Your Grace,” a man greeted, pushing a great horse forward. He was a big man: very fat, bald, with a large walrus moustache. His green cloak was clasped with a silver and sapphire trident. He held himself straight, but there were dark shadows under his eyes too. He said the words ‘Your Grace’ very hesitantly. “Forgive me, but my lord father is sickly and does not travel well. I am his son and heir, Ser Wylis Manderly, to greet you. I have bread and salt for you and your party.”

A table of honeyed bread and jugs of wine was already set out for them. All guards very deliberately kept their weapons lowered. Oh, they're being very, very nervous. They were treating him as if a single offence risked sending him into a rage – they didn’t know what to expect from him, and that made Jon feel better. “Thank you for your hospitality, Ser Wylis, it is very much appreciated.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” He bowed in his saddle. Jon noticed how he winced. There were men near him as if to support Ser Wylis. “House Manderly are not Freys; our hospitality is ironclad. I swear it by the Old Gods and the New.”

Jon pushed Sonagon to back off a little bit. The gates were opened, and Jon heard the sounds of the city get louder. There was already a crowd in the streets, a mob that had been trying to push out of the gates towards him. He saw thrashing bodies forced backwards by green cloaked guards with tridents.

Ser Wylis grimaced. “Please, stay close to me, Your Grace. Ser Marlon will clear the way for us.”

Horses shimmied nervously. Guards rushed. His Dragonguard all had weapons readied. “Your people are panicked.”

“We have heard rumours of you and the wildlings from the north for months,” he shouted over the din. “Refugees pouring into the city. The sight of your dragon flying south two days ago triggered riots in Fishfoot Square.”

So I see, he thought, but he kept his face hard. “Savages!” Someone in the crowd was screaming. “Rapers and savages!”

“Death to wildlings!” another shouted.

Still he heard someone else shouting, “Death to the Boltons! Vengeance for the Red Wedding!”

Then the white dragon shot over them in the sky above, each flap causing gusts of wind through the narrow streets, and the whole city watched as the shadow of the dragon cut across the buildings. Many ran for cover, and others just fell to the ground in terror. Sonagon isn't even being aggressive, just curious.

It looked like a riot as Jon’s party rode up the main street. The city guards had to fight to clear the
path up to the Castle Stair. In the distance, Jon sensed Sonagon fly out over the coast, and then turn
to perch on the Seal Rock overlooking the harbour. There were townsfolk trying to flee the gates,
but the city was on lockdown. It was all so hectic Jon could barely even process it.

By the time they started the approach up the pale staircase leading to New Castle, Jon saw fighting
on the docks below. Ships were trying to flee the harbour, but there were galleys in the water
forming a blockade to stop anyone leaving. On the docks, the green cloaks looked like they were
seizing ships and making arrests, and the cries of fighting were sharp noises in the orchestra of
chaos. The whole city felt crazed with panic. Off the coast, Sonagon roared.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” Ser Wylis panted. “The city is…”

He didn’t seem to know how to finish that statement.

Jon was shuffled quickly into the handsomely furnished pale castle. Silver and green ordained the
walls, along with broken shields and rusted swords from ancient victories, and wooden figureheads
from the prows of ships. The doors to the Merman’s Court opened, leading into a great hall of
wooden planks decorated with all the creatures of the sea. A large cushioned throne of weathered
oak rested at the far end, in front of a painted wall showing a kraken and grey leviathan locked in
battle.

The first time Jon lay eyes on Lord Wyman Manderly, the fat lord’s chins were wobbling furiously
at a maester with blond hair in the centre of the Merman’s Court. There were screamed objections,
shouts that Jon couldn’t quite make out.

The whole room was heaving. Men were stomping their feet. Someone was screaming. Whatever
he was expecting, this wasn’t it. Jon saw fat lords and ladies in silk and the whole room felt…
bloodthirsty. Savage. For a moment, he was left speechless.

Jon saw the elderly maester in chains being dragged away as he screamed, “Please my lord, don’t –
this is treason! This is treason against the crown!”

Lord Wyman was clad in sealskin and wool as he shook his great head. His face well-lined,
doughy and wrinkled, but those eyes looked wide and mad. “That crown committed treason first,”
the fat lord growled. He could barely stand, but he was trembling. “Take the maester away and
throw him in the Wolf’s Den. No ravens leave White Harbour tonight.”

There was the sound of wailing and crying. Jon could only stare as he limped into the Merman’s
court, all eyes wide. The sight of Jon walking through the doorway seemed to cause the room to
freeze. Jon saw ladies and young girls backing away from him.

The maester’s face paled as he saw Jon. “You can’t do this, my lord!” The maester screamed,
struggling against the men pulling him out of the doorway. “He’s a monster! He’ll bring ruin to the
realm! He’ll-”

He was cut off by a blunt blow to the stomach with the butt of a trident.

The lords and ladies of Manderly’s court were all up in arms. There were others trying to object,
but they were being forcefully escorted out of the room too. The Dragonguard flanked around Jon
closely, all of them staring in shock.

Suddenly, all of their southerners didn’t seem so civilised, Jon reckoned.

“We have all heard the news!” Lord Wyman boomed. The voice was echoing. “The ravens have
been flocking across all corner of the realm. The Twins – the Freys! – scorched by a dragon’s
fury!” Jon stepped forward, and all wide eyes were on him. “My only regret is that I could not watch it myself. Letters from Seagard down to Fairmarket all speak of the destruction of the Twins, and I say those honourless bastards deserve to freeze in the very coldest of hells!”

Ser Wylis Manderly lingered at the back of the room. Jon stepped forward, walking quietly into the hall towards the dais. Lord Wyman was a fat, morbidly obese man, struggling as he stood up. Jon didn’t say a word, he just watched.

“The Freys,” Lord Wyman spat. He could barely make out the words over all the din. “They butchered my son and my liege. They imprisoned my other son for six months. They defile all honour with every breath they took, and they had the gall to smirk about it?”

He motioned to his guards with a flabby hand. Jon locked eyes with the lord; Wyman was trembling with emotion, but Jon showed none. “If there is naught else that we can agree on, King Jon Snow,” Lord Wyman continued, “we can agree that House Frey had to be punished for its crimes.”

He heard someone screaming. Wrestling bodies coming through the door. Jon’s hand went to his sword instinctive, and the wildlings braced, but no attack came. Instead, it took seven men to force three squirming, chained men into the Merman Court. Jon forced himself not to react, but many in the court seemed shocked.

The men squirmed and thrashed, but the green cloaks were ruthless. They stomped the three men to the ground in front of the dais, chained them and tightened their binds until they were pinned to the ground. There were manacles on the prisoner’s feet that were stretched outwards, until all three were left stretched out like starfish. The clanging of thick metal rings echoed and chimed as arms and legs squirmed.

Some were shouting for Lord Wyman to reconsider. More were egging him on. “May I present the noble Ser Jared, Ser Symond, and Ser Rhaegar Frey…!” Lord Wyman shouted over the din. “The sons of Lord Walder Frey who came to deliver my dear Wendel’s bones back to me, under the guise of friendship! The murderers who came to blackmail me, to steal for my granddaughters by threatening the father they held hostage, and to spread lies about my liege!” Beefy, trembling hands tightened. “You dared to claim that the Freys were the victims of the Red Wedding?”

The three Freys looked frantic. Bloodshot eyes, pale faces. Chained in the centre of the room atop a painted octopus’ tentacles, while around them the mermen looked ravenous. “You can’t…” Ser Jared gasped. He was tall, thin, pockmarked and of fifty years of age. “We came in peace…!”

“You came to deliver the body of the son that you murdered!” Lord Manderly growled. “You came to strongarm me to bend the knee – you came to smile at me after you murdered and captured my sons!”

Rhaegar Frey gasped. He was round-shouldered and kettle-bellied. “It was Robb Stark – he betrayed us, he–!”

A guard slammed his foot into the man’s face. “You betray all honour, Frey,” one of the other men shouted. A bushy bearded man, Jon didn’t recognise him. “Your lord father died a frozen grave, your castle lost. You lands froze in dragonfire!”

“You promised us!” Ser Jared Frey screamed at the lord. “You bent the knee, you gave amends. You promised!”

“Weasels deserve no promises,” Lord Manderly growled. “I feasted you when you arrived. I
smiled, I fed you, I danced along to your tune. When you left here, true to the laws of hospitality, I even allowed you to ride freely for three leagues unencumbered. Before I had you captured again.”

He waddled backwards towards his throne, eyes fixed on the Freys. Ser Rhaegar Frey broke down into tears. “This time, you receive chains instead of bread and salt. Consider your previous treatment as my gratitude for returning my son’s bones. This, however, is your punishment for murdering him.”

A large figure, well over six-foot-tall, stepped into the room from the other side of the hall. The crowd part for him. He wasn’t dressed like a guard; instead he wore an executioner’s black mask. He dragged with him a warhammer so heavy that the head scraped across the planks.

The man stepped up to Ser Rhaegar Frey. The knight was shrieking something nonsensically, tears and snot dribbling down his chin.

The big man heaved the hammer above his head, with a hard grunt. The whole court seemed to freeze as the hammer swung downwards…

Jon flinched. He heard the crack of wood and bone. Blood plumed as Ser Rhaegar Frey’s right leg shattered. The massive warhammer snapped his leg like a matchstick. Jon saw a splinter of bone flying into ground.

He had never heard a man make the same noise that Ser Rhaegar Frey made. Jon didn’t think that type of scream was humanly possible. It sounded too high-pitched to come from a human.

“Well, damn,” Furs muttered quietly as he watched. One of the ladies in the court, a young girl, looked like she was about to be sick, but she didn’t turn her eyes away.

The man with the warhammer was already swinging again. This time at Ser Rhaegar’s right leg. There was barely a scream this time, Ser Rhaegar just went limp.

Ser Jared was next. He was begging incoherently, screaming something about mercy, justice and trials, and but then the warhammer cracked against the wood once more. As loud as Rhaegar screamed, Jared screamed louder as the hammer squashed straight through his leg, severing the limb at the kneecap in a bloody gloop. First the left leg, then the right. The manacles went loose. Blood splattered over the sharks on the ceiling.

Symond didn’t scream at all – instead his lungs seemed to clamp shut in pain and horror. He received the same treatment. By the time the executioner was done with Symond, Ser Jared had already died of bloodloss. Ser Rhaegar lingered, babbling strange sounds almost like words.

After the legs, the executioner moved to squash their spines with his hammer. Jared was already dead, but the hammer cracked through his back anyways. Ser Symond was the last to do, spasming with the hammer head through his back. Even the executioner struggled to pull it out again.

Lord Manderly just watched hungrily as the men were executed in front of him. Jon had never seen a man with so much raw hate. Three large pools of blood stained the painted ground.

Those moments blurred. So much screaming, like the panic permeated the air.

Lord Wyman needed deep breaths to calm himself. “Begging your pardon, Your Grace,” Lord Wyman said finally, pulling his eyes up to look up at Jon. “But I require time to bring my house into order. May we treat together another time?”

Jon nodded. He didn’t say a word. They were escorted out of the hall and into the castle. Jon didn’t
let it show, but he was shaken.

White Harbour has just declared open revolt against the crown, he realised. The whole city was in uproar. Lord Wyman was cleaning his court and preparing for a war. The dragon in the harbour tipped the scales.

*Why did he execute the Freys like that?* Jon wondered. It could have been done cleanly, it certainly didn’t need to be done in the middle of his court. It felt barbaric, savage. Like Lord Manderly wanted to make a point.

It took him a while before he realised. *Because of me*, he thought. *Lord Manderly knew of my ruthlessness at the Twins, so the lord wanted to demonstrate his own ruthlessness. He wanted to impress me.*

Jon was given quarters in his own wing of New Castle, and all around him the castle was filled with hectic activity. From the windows, Jon could see the whole harbour being shut down, and war galleys in the water. The realm would learn about Lord Manderly’s actions very quickly, and the lord seemed intent to be ahead of it.

Hatch just looked at him in quiet shock. “Vicious creatures, these mermen, aren’t they?”

Each of his Dragonguard were offered their own chambers. House Manderly’s servants were very respectful. Scared, but respectful, and constantly on hand to tend to Jon. Just like Ser Alek did, they stared at him like he was some wild monster that might tear their throat out at a minor slight. *Now just what have they been hearing about me, I wonder?*

He paused. *And how much of it isn’t true?*

Ser Wynal, a cousin of the lord and castellan of the castle, came to Jon’s quarters to beg his forgiveness, but Lord Manderly had urgent business to attend to and he begged the king’s patience. He provided orders that all of Jon’s needs would be met, and that White Harbour would do its best to accommodate His Grace. His quarters in the New Castle were fit for the most prestigious guests.

In return, Jon kept Sonagon calmed in the harbour. The dragon still lurched over Seal Rock occasionally snapping at seals in the water every time he moved. There had been an old fortification on Seal Rock, but that was abandoned to the dragon.

*Lord Manderly wants – no, needs – an alliance*, Jon thought. *If White Harbour was going to fight the Boltons and the Iron Throne, then they needed a dragon on their side.* Sonagon was the greatest military force in the north.

There could be little doubt of Lord Wyman Manderly’s intent, at any rate. By killing those Freys in the middle of his court he had made it quite clear how he felt. Perhaps it was some sort of trap against Jon, but he struggled to see any advantage for the lord. Far more likely, Wyman Manderly was sincere in his desire to ally with him.

*And we need White Harbour too*, Jon thought quietly. White Harbour could provide food for the Wall. Jon had plenty of wildlings under his command, but White Harbour had ships, silver and infrastructure.

It made Jon feel hopeful about an alliance. If House Manderly was that angry with the Freys, then they could have a strong position. Jon gave Lord Wyman the patience he requested, and he settled in without complaint. He ordered his Dragonguard to stay cautious, but rest, and Jon for once relaxed in the stone chambers, curling his feet in Myrish carpet.
At his request, a bath was drawn up for him – a warm bath in a marble chamber carved with seahorses – and Jon soothed into the waters gently. It was the first castle bath he had since leaving Winterfell, oh so long ago, and it was like he could feel dirt from months in the wilderness ooze out of him, the water was brown when he finally left.

Jon’s clothing, thick padded leathers lined with wool, were warm and sturdy, but also worn and unwashed. Good for riding, not so good for meeting with lords. He debated meeting in full armour, but he decided that might appear too aggressive. Instead, he requested more proper attire, and a scrambled hour later the servants returned with a grey velvet tunic, lined in silver, and tanned cotton trousers. The leather boots they provided were slightly too large, but still better than iron-heeled boots he had been wearing.

His cloak – the giant fur cloak that the children of the forest had provided – was dirty itself, but it was still thick and rich enough for him to wear. He kept Dark Sister on his hip at all times.

His companions were mixed. Manderly had provided a room for all of them in the castle. Many of the wildlings snapped and growled suspiciously, others had to be restrained not to pillage their rooms. Sam just washed and changed, while Grenn looked totally befuddled by all the attention from the servants. This is the first time that the wildlings, or Grenn, have ever been in a lord’s castle, Jon thought with a quiet smile, let alone as guests of honor.

As evening approached, Jon was served honey roasted lobster, fine wine and fresh apples. He could have eaten with the others in the private dinner hall of the wing, but instead he retired early to his room. Lord Wyman must have removed any other guest in the whole wing for Jon and his companions. There was no lack of hospitality, as scared as the servants were. In his quarters, Jon closed his eyes and carefully reached outwards.

First, he checked on Ghost – beyond the Wall in Hardhome, hunting in the forests as the refugees moved towards Eastwatch. There had been some wight attacks, but the wildlings were organised enough to survive them. Then, Jon reached out to Phantom, stalking and simmering on the rooftops of Eastwatch, before finally stretching himself out to Sonagon.

The dragon responded, perched over the Seal Rock off the harbour, lazily snapping in the water at the fish. Slowly, the dragon’s wings unfurled with great gushes, rising upwards to the air. The dragon circled on the warm air from the coast, circling in the low clouds, while Jon stared downwards at the coast. He tried to count the ships through Sonagon’s eyes: thirty vessels on the coast and another ten under construction in the Inner Harbour.

Lord Manderly had indeed been preparing for war. Sonagon circled, sniffing and staring over the rolling landscape. Even from the sky, he could see the blur of bodies gazing upwards from the ground.

It was dusk when the knock on Jon’s door alerted him. A small group: Ser Wynal, Leona Manderly, some stewards, and two escorts. “Your Grace?” Ser Wynal called nervously. “Begging your pardon, but Lord Manderly requests your presence.”

Jon just nodded as he exited, wrapping his cloak loosely over his shoulder. The men had swords, but they kept their hands well-away from the weapons. Very deliberately non-threatening, Jon decided. Hatch and Furs were standing guard by his door.

“The lord wishes to discuss terms in the Merman Court,” Lady Leona said hesitantly. The wife of Ser Wylis, he recalled, a plump pink woman with yellow hair. “Will any of your… companions wish to accompany you, King Snow?”
“Samwell Tarly will join me. As well as Furs and Hatch.” It would be too aggressive to bring all of his Dragonguard, but he didn’t want to go in alone. Sam could represent the Night’s Watch.

They were escorted down to the Merman’s Court. “King Snow…” Furs muttered dryly. Was it his imagination, or did he sound apprehensive? “So this is how you southerners do things?”

“Sometimes.”

“I will announce you to the court, Your Grace,” Ser Wynal said with a slight gulp as they walked. “Forgive me, but what honorifics and titles would you use?”

“Jon Snow. King-Beyond-the-Wall.”

“Um, is that all?”

“I believe so,” Jon replied coolly.

The Merman’s Court seemed strangely quiet. Compared to the frenzy of earlier, this time Lord Manderly wanted a more private meeting. There were no guards, no crowds. The corridor seemed strangely quiet. The floor had been wiped of blood, but Jon could still see the stain, and the wood was cracked where the executioner’s hammer had smashed the Freys’ legs.


The voice rung in the cavern. The stewards sealed the door behind them. There were a dozen people in the hall, all standing grim-faced around the dais. Jon met their eyes, one by one. He recognised six.

Lord Manderly stood – heaving – to greet him. “King Snow,” the fat man said, clearing his throat. “It is good to have you have in White Harbour. I hope this is a chance to come to terms.”

Oh, how strange it feels to be in a lord’s court again. I’ve been among free folk too long. “As do I, my lord. You are very gracious to extend the invitation.” Very brave too, to publicly invite a wildling king and his dragon into your city.

“This morning’s events gave little time for greetings. Formal introductions are in order, I believe,” Lord Manderly said, raising his voice slightly. “This is Ser Marlon Manderly, commander of the city garrison. The castellan of New Castle, Ser Wylan. And you have met my son, Ser Wylis, and his wife, Lady Leona of House Woolfield.”

“Ser,” Jon nodded. Be patient, respectful. “I heard you were imprisoned at the Twins.”

“I was, Your Grace. For a long time. It is good to know that justice has been delivered.” Still, the polite comment didn’t reach his eyes. Ser Wylis looked suspicious, maybe even angry. Perhaps he too was thinking of the prisoners he left behind, as Jon was. Jon didn’t press the comment.

“And may I present Lord Jon Umber,” Lord Manderly introduced, turning to the next figure. “Lord of Last Hearth.”

Oh yes, there was no mistaken him. It had been years since he’d seen him, but somehow the Groatjon seemed bigger than ever. He was a broad, huge man with dark face, muscular arms like tree trunks. Still, he also looked more… ragged. The Groatjon’s beard was unshaven, his face
gaunter. Jon could see scars around his neck. He’s missing fingers, Jon noticed.

“I didn’t expect to see you here, Lord Umber,” Jon said respectfully. Behind him, Hatch tensed – it was rare for Hatch to ever meet a man bigger than himself.

“You can thank Lord Howland Reed for that,” the Greatjon grunted. He too, stared at Jon suspiciously. “I was in a cage being moved through the Neck when the crannogmen sprung an ambush on the convoy. Those weasels spent weeks searching for us, but Lord Reed sheltered us at Greywater Watch before bringing us here.”

“That is good to know. My father always spoke highly of Lord Reed.”

There was a slight ripple through the room with the words ‘my father’, Jon noticed. “Aye,” the Greatjon muttered. He kept his arms folded. “I thought Lord Reed a sickly old craven when the crannogmen did not march with Robb Stark’s campaign. And yet he proves that he still has wits; his bog-devils have been bleeding every force, from ironborn to Boltons and Freys.”

“That is why we are here, is it not?” Lord Wyman said, with a glare at the Greatjon. “To find common ground against common enemies?”

He turned around the group. “May I introduce Galbart Glover, Master of Deepwood Motte, and his brother and heir, Robett Glover.” Jon could see the likeness between them – both were stocky, brown-haired and broad-shouldered. “And Lady Maege Mormont of Bear Island.” Another one Jon recognised, she was a short, stout grey-haired old woman, with lined eyes. She was the only one in the hall wearing armour, clad in patched chainmail, heavy gauntlets and a bearskin cloak over her shoulders. There was a flicker of eyes as they greeted each other stiffly. Bear Island is a long way from White Harbour, Jon thought quietly.

“My lady,” he nodded. “You marched with my brother Robb?”

“We did,” Lady Maege replied. “Before the reaching the Twins, King Stark sent us to Seagard, to then sail to Greywater Watch in preparation for the assault on Moat Cailin. Lord Reed sheltered us, and after we heard the news of the Red Wedding, he gave us passage to White Harbour.”

Now why would you go that far rather than return to your own lands? Jon wondered. “I see,” he said. So they had already been gathered in White Harbour, preparing a rebellion to fight back against the Boltons. Lord Reed has been recovering loyalist forces.

“Also, we have Lord Ondrew Locke of Oldcastle.” An old, toothless man with vulturous features. “And Lady Lyessa Flint of Widow’s Watch.” She was a plump, red-faced woman with dark hair. She looked around seven months pregnant, swollen with a hand on her stomach. “Lady Flint’s son, Robin Flint, is upstairs, yet he is still recuperating from his captivity.”

“That is good to hear. Robin Flint served in my brother’s personal guard, I believe.” He kept his eyes fixed on every little detail. It was polite, but it felt dangerous. “May I introduce Sam Tarly, steward of the Night’s Watch, as well as two of my Dragonguard, Hatch the Halfgiant and Furs of Old Mother’s Crock.”

The Greatjon’s eyes were locked with Hatch. His arms were still folded. “Wildlings,” he growled.

“Aye,” Jon nodded. “Though they prefer the term free folk.”

“Wildlings have been a blight on the north for millennia.” The Greatjon had a formidable scowl, looking down at him. His voice dangerously low. “Do you expect me to stand easy in front of the man who brought a horde into my lands?”
“Lord Umber,” Lord Wyman warned quietly.

Lord Wyman was trying to be diplomatic, but Jon could feel aggressiveness coming from others as well. “You invited me here, my lords,” Jon said after a pause. “I had hoped we could make peace.”

“So you say,” the Greatjon growled. “But I think you might just be as much of a threat as every other bastard out there.”

“Enough,” Lord Wyman ordered. “Let us not be distracted by squabbles. Not when there are more pressing matters to attend to.”

“Jon Snow,” Lady Maege said loudly, stepping forward in front of the Greatjon slightly. Her armour rattled. The older woman had hands that seemed designed for a mace. “Let us be clear. Are you the same Jon Snow, natural son of Eddard Stark, half-brother to Robb Stark?”

“I am.” He met her gaze firmly. She had such a piercing blue gaze.

Robett Glover shook his head. “He lies,” the man said firmly, glaring at Jon. “I saw the boy before, and you do not look like him. The Jon Snow I remember had black hair for one, not white.”

“Forgive him, Your Grace,” Lord Manderly said quickly, casting a warning look at Robett. “But the question does remain.”

“If you walked through a snowstorm north of the Wall, my lord,” Jon said, looking at Robett, “then you would not come out looking the same either. My hair froze when I was stranded in the ice. I am Jon Snow of Winterfell, son of Eddard Stark – and we last met saw each other four years ago, when you brought your son Gawen to Winterfell. I spent little time in the hall, I admit, but Robb told me afterwards that you almost broke Sansa’s foot, tripping over her in the dance hall.”

Everyone turned to Robett Glover. He didn’t speak, but he gave a curt nod. Lord Umber’s eyes flickered. Jon turned to Maege Mormont. “Lady Maege, we have not met before, but I did meet your daughters Dacey, Alysane and Lyanna when they passed through Winterfell. Alysane feasted in the hall, but Lyanna snuck out with my sister, Arya, to swordfight with sticks in the yard. I was ten, but the girls roped me into teaching them to fight.”

“I remember,” Maege admitted. “The girls told me so. Dacey said you were quite the gentleman.”

“I believe he is who he says he is,” the Greatjon spoke up, sourly. “White hair aside, he does have his father’s look to him.”

“Then perhaps he is,” that was Lord Locke, speaking up gruffly with toothless gums. “But Robb Stark fought for freedom for the north. He is a Night’s Watch deserter who might have damned the north when he opened those gates. He shames his brother’s memory.” Lord Wyman flinched slightly.

“I do no such thing.” Jon had to force his voice to stay level. He knew what he had to say, but… “I brought the free folk south to save the realm – to strengthen the Wall against the true threat. I united the free folk to fight against the white walkers.”

The room froze. He saw the surprise and confusion over people’s face. Yes, I knew they would react like this, he thought sourly. The majority of people south of the Wall would. Still, they had to be warned. Robett Glover guffawed. “White walkers?” he exclaimed in genuine confusion. “Are you defending against snarks and grumpkins as well?”

Someday, I wish snarks and grumpkins actually do invade, he thought. “You talk about matters
you know nothing of, my lord.” His voice was bitter, meeting their eyes darkly. “I’ve seen the Others myself. So have many – ask any free folk or sworn brother on the Wall.” Lords glanced around, looking for any sign that this was a joke. “I could provide you with ten thousand witnesses that the white walkers are very much real.”

“Or better yet,” Furs spoke up suddenly behind Jon, “why not go north to look? I expect you’d see them yourself soon enough.”

Robett coiled as if he had been snapped. The room hesitated, the lords sharing glances. “It is true, my lords,” Sam stammered, his voice a squeak. “Castle Black came under attack from wights two weeks ago. Dead bodies were brought through the gate, and dead bodies rose again as creatures with no heartbeats, and blue eyes.”

“And who are you?” the Greatjon demanded.

“Samwell Tarly, my lord. Son of Randyll Tarly, steward of the Night’s Watch,” Sam said, stepping forward. “I took my vows and I uphold them, my lords, I swear it. And yet when the wildli… when the free folk came through the gate, I sided with the living because I believe that is the only way to stop the Others. All I want is to keep the Wall standing, and I believe that Jon Snow wants the same thing.”

Sam had an earnest voice. It caused some of them to hesitate. “Your own brother sent letters to all houses the first time we encountered them,” Jon said, staring at Maege. “You know that Jeor would never lie. It was only two of the wights then, but then we came under attack from thousands.”

She didn’t reply, but her eyes were thoughtful. Robett stared at him as if he were insane. “White walkers? Dead rising?” he exclaimed. “This is a fool’s excuse to justify an invasion. A bastard’s attempt to steal his brother’s kingdom.”

“I once believed that all southerners are fools, my ‘lord’,” Furs spoke, cocking his head at the man. “You are doing little to disprove that opinion.”

“Enough!” The Greatjon shouted, so loud the whole room seemed to shudder. Despite himself, Jon flinched. “I do not know if the Others are real or not,” he growled. “But that dragon is real, that’s for certain.”

Lord Wyman nodded. “Aye,” he agreed, chins wobbling. “The dragon is very much real, and very… concerning for many people. Can you tell us about the dragon?”

“His name is Sonagon.” Jon gazed around the room. It felt like he was on trial here, so many men staring at him intently. “He was buried in the far north, buried for a long time. I awoke him to fight against the Others.”

“Awoke him how?” The Greatjon demanded.

“I bled on him,” Jon admitted. “As I was dying.”

There was a long, uncertain pause.

“And you control it?” Lord Locke pushed.

“Sonagon listens to me.”
“But not with words,” Ser Wylis spoke up. “I was watching when we entered the city – you never said a word to the beast, not even a motion. Instead, you close your eyes and the dragon obeys.”

“Aye,” Jon said simply. The discussion of wargs could get even more tangential.

“How?”

“How did Robb Stark control his direwolf?” Jon asked. “I have a direwolf too, in case you’re wondering.”

“Is the dragon tame?” Lady Maege asked with a pause.

“He is when he’s well-fed.”

There were a few uncertain mutters, but the Greatjon just snorted. “I know plenty of Boltons I’m happy to feed to it.”

“I do not trust him,” Robett said, shaking his mane as he glared at Jon. “He’s given me no reason why I should.”

“He’s standing here, talking to us, for one,” Lord Wyman objected. “He came willingly, because he wants to treat with us. He struck a devastating blow against our enemies, for two. And his dragon is not destroying my town right now, for three.”

For the first time, Galbart Glover spoke up. “I think my brother is understandably upset,” he said quietly. He was much calmer, taciturn compared to Robett. “But we had kin at the Twins. Two cousins who were being held hostage.”

Oh. Jon forced himself to stay stiff. Others were staring accusingly. He hesitated, and then risked, “I see.” He kept his voice low. Dammit. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“I understand how casualties work,” Galbart said coolly. “And I am trying to remain very rational and calm in this matter. I think to myself that their deaths are primarily the fault of Freys. And yet there are more hostages. My family, my brother’s wife and children are being held by Boltons. If we side with you, they may well be executed as punishment.”

Nobody replied. Jon held his tongue too. Lord Wyman continued in a hoarse voice. “And the fact remains that a dragon may be the best weapon possible against our enemies, my lords,” he continued. “Aegon the Conqueror proved the worth of dragons three hundred years ago. Jon Snow proved it again at Twins.”

“There are few castles in the realm that could stand against a dragon that size,” Maege agreed, her voice low.

“And if you were to fly to Winterfell right now?” The Greatjon demanded, glaring at Jon. “Could you destroy those blasted Boltons as you did the Freys?”

“Perhaps I could.” Jon nodded, his eyes hard. “But not while they hold my sister. I will not risk Arya Stark’s life.”

Nobody replied for a while. He didn’t know why, but that seemed to change the atmosphere in the room slightly. A bit of the aggression faded away. “The north is a land divided, my lords,” Lord Wyman said carefully. “The Dustins, the Ryswells, the Cerwyns, the Karstarks… they all declare for the Boltons. I think I can speak for all of us that none here ever will. A dragon could tip the balance in our favour.” He looked between them. “Can we all agree that we are united in our
enmity for House Bolton?”

“And all he asks in return is for us to bow to him,” Lord Locke grunted, with a foul look at Jon. “I have difficulty trading one usurper for the other.”

Jon’s eyes flashed, stepping forward. “You mistake me, my lord,” said Jon. “I have no interest in my brother’s crown. I am no King in the North, and nor do I want to be.” He shook his head. “I am no Stark.”

“Says the man calling himself king,” Lord Locke muttered.

“I am. I am King-Beyond-the-Wall. I don’t think anyone would question that. Perhaps I am King-on-the-Wall too, but I have never claimed to be King in the North.”

Lady Maege’s frown deepened. “Then what do you want, King Snow?”

“I want the north to be put to rights,” he said firmly. “If the north is secured, then the Wall will be. I want for northern soldiers to reinforce the Wall, to fight against the white walkers when they come.” He paused. “And I also want citizenship for all free folk south of the Wall. As well as amnesty from all past crimes and raids. The free folk become part of the realm, to settle on the Gift.”

That seemed catch them all off-guard. Even his Dragonguard seemed surprised. The Greatjon’s face twisted. Ah, Lord Umber lost two daughters to wildling raids, didn’t he? “Citizenship?” the Greatjon spat. “Amnesty?”

“Aye. If you expect the free folk to assist you, then they deserve that,” Jon said. “That is my price. Peace.”

The Greatjon looked ready to object, but Lord Wyman motioned at him. “The terms of an alliance can be negotiated.” Lord Wyman said, trying to move forward, to deny the Greatjon his chance to object. “But let us say that we are successful in bringing justice for Roose Bolton’s crimes.” Lord Wyman cleared his throat and spoke carefully. “Who would you expect to take the position as liege in the north?”

That question… it felt weirdly worded. Jon almost instantly replied “Stark”, before realising. All my brothers are dead. “That is for the great lords of the realm to decide,” Jon said after a long pause. “I do not know the rights of succession. But so long as the north is stable and the Wall is manned, I will not intervene.”

Was that the right answer? Jon honestly wasn’t sure. Galbart Glover and Lady Maege shared a look, as if unspoken words were going between them. There’s something else in this room that I am not aware of.

“Now, I have been very patient. I have answered your questions, yet I have nothing to defend here,” Jon said, his voice turning sharp. “You invited me here for a reason, and I expect you to answer mine. You are plotting rebellion here from White Harbour?”


“Then you must rescue my sister.”

“We hope to,” Lady Maege admitted. “But so long as Arya Stark is married and in Winterfell then matters are difficult. We gathered together in White Harbour to determine the rightful king.”
Jon frowned. “Show him,” Galbart said quietly. “He has a right to know.”

“Show what?” Jon demanded, looking at Lady Maege. He was taller than the old woman, but she still seemed to look down on him.

“Your brother wrote a will,” Lady Maege admitted. “He did so shortly before arriving at the Twins, after the news of the sack of Winterfell came through. It was something else that we were to bring north to Greywater Watch.”

There was no reaction for a good while. “A will,” Jon repeated.

“Aye.” She slowly picked up a sealed sheepskin pouch from the side of the dais. The parchment inside was stiff and well-lined, but it had been well preserved. All eyes were on Jon as he took the paper.

He paused before opening it. There were shivers down his spine. When he finally did, he pulled it open so tenderly as if it might crack.

Jon’s heart pounded. He recognised the handwriting instantly, even though it had been so long since he’d seen it.

“I, Robb Stark, First of His Name, King in the North and of the Trident,” it read, “hereby legitimise my brother Jon Snow, to be released from his vows of the Night’s Watch and to take his rightful place as a Stark of Winterfell. If I should I perish without progeny, I hereby name Jon Stark as heir and successor to my crown.”

Jon blinked. He reread the letter again. It was marked by the seal of Winterfell, as well as half a dozen great noble houses.

There was no reaction. He reread it again, looking for any sign it was forgery. There was none, but he reread it twice to make sure.

Nobody said a word. Jon read every letter of the message individually, as if he could understand it better that way.

They were all looking at him, as if waiting for a reaction. He didn't give them one.

“We gathered to attempt to bring that decree to you, but at the time you were reported lost in the wilderness,” Maege said slowly. “And then, when news arrived that you led wildlings, well, we had to debate whether or not that left the king's will invalid.”

He stared at Robb's signature. “Is it invalid?” Jon asked, a whisper.

“I do not believe so,” Lady Maege said, looking around the room as if daring anyone to disagree. The Greatjon scowled, but didn’t speak.

Robb… Robb chose me as his successor?

The thought was… he didn't know what it was. It just doesn't feel right. I'm a bastard, he shouldn't have…

Jon Stark. He said the name and it didn't feel his. He couldn't imagine ever feeling comfortable with a name like that.

“No,” Jon said, finally looking up from the paper. “Robb made a mistake. I cannot be his heir.”
He handed the parchment back to Lady Maege. Jon kept his body stiff, but he could feel his hands trembling slightly. Nobody seemed to know how to respond to that.

“That was a king's final decree,” Lady Maege said quietly, frowning.

“He was wrong. I'm a bastard, and the realm will never accept a bastard on the throne of Winterfell.” His voice turned cold. “King Robb was mistaken, my lady.”

“He legitimised you.”

“He was mistaken.” Jon was trying very hard to keep himself stoic, but the anger still felt like it was slipping through.

_All my childhood I wanted to be a Stark and now... now I'm finally comfortable being a Snow. I can't fill Robb's role, I can't..._  
_I'm a bastard_, he thought with a deep breath. _I know I am, I wear that title like armour._

The lords and ladies didn't understand. That was fine, because Jon didn't feel like explaining. He just nodded and stepped back.

“You have the largest army in the north,” Lord Wyman said carefully. “You have a dragon. With the support of the lords in this room and your brother's decree, we could win this war in a month.”

“I will not steal my brother's inheritance. It was not meant for me,” Jon growled. His eyes narrowed. “I'm a Snow, not a Stark.”

They looked confused. The Greatjon had a deep frown on his face. He met Lord Wyman's gaze for a moment.

“There is,” Galbart Glover said gingerly, “another option.”

“Yes,” Jon agreed. “We rescue Arya Stark from the Boltons. She is the lady of Winterfell.”

“I was not talking of her,” he said lowly. “The sons come before the daughters.”

Jon frowned. The room was quiet, thoughtful. “What?” he demanded. “What does that mean?”

“It means...” Lord Wyman cleared his throat. “That is another issue concerning the succession, to make matters more complicated. It may well be that King Robb's will is mistaken, as it seems that the reports of your brothers' deaths may have been false.”

Jon blinked. “What? Ho-”

“Bran Stark still lives. There good reason to suspect Rickon does as well,” Lord Wyman admitted. “They were not killed during the sack of Winterfell as the realm thought. It appears that Theon Greyjoy could not find the Stark children, so he killed two other children in their place.”

Jon blinked.

“I heard this first from a witness at Winterfell several months ago,” Lord Wyman explained. “I had no proof, but I began my search. I knew that we needed a Stark, so I investigated all the possibilities. It was only last month that we received confirmation.”

“Proof,” Jon repeated dumbly. _Bran. Rickon. Is this a scheme? Or am I really so lucky that they might still..._
“Aye,” Ser Wylis said darkly. The Greatjon grumbled something. “When we were being moved north from the Twins, we were going to be traded. Three highborn prisoners in exchange for one Stark. Bran Stark was discovered at Last Hearth, and the castellans there offered a trade.”

“You're sure?” Jon pressed, not daring to hope. “You're sure it was actually him?”

“Hother and Mors Umber would not have mistaken him,” Lord Manderly said. “They sent ravens to White Harbour as well as Winterfell and King's Landing with the news. I urged them desperately not to go through with the trade, to bring Bran Stark to White Harbour instead, but I could not discourage them.”

“I do not know what those fools of my uncles were thinking,” the Greatjon growled. His gaze darkened, he looked even angrier. “I should beat them both senseless for even considering a deal like that. I can hardly believe they'd be so foolish.”

“Yet there was no trade.” Jon felt himself smile. “The crannogmen rescued you before there could be. So where is Bran Stark now – I can find him and rescue him on dragonback.”

His heart was beating faster. My brother. My brother is still alive. Why was no one else ecstatic with the news?

He met Lord Wyman's eyes, and they were grim. “At their last message,” he said slowly, “Bran Stark was being held at Last Hearth. Then the castle was attacked and razed by Bolton forces weeks ago.”

The Greatjon shifted, glaring down at the floor. “It was the Bastard of Bolton, and his thugs,” Lady Maege explained. “Fiends worse than rabid dogs. We think the Bastard's Boys disguised themselves as refugees and snuck inside the castle among the smallfolk. They set an ambush from within and without at the same time.”

“So… so where is Bran Stark now?”

“As far as anyone can guess?” Lord Wyman said grimly. “Your brother has been captured and is in the care of Ramsay Bolton.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

The coalition of the lords of the north, and a war is declared.

Jon

The mattress was soft. Satin sheets, pillows of goose down. The four-poster bed was by far the softest and most luxurious he had ever slept on – a bed fit for an actual king. Naked, silver-eyed, mermaids were engraved on the bedposts. The pillows and sheets felt suffocating, as if he was sinking into them. If he hadn’t have been so exhausted, Jon wouldn’t have been able to sleep at all.

Jon was up early, before the first light of dawn. There’s a war to plan, he thought grimly. Kings don’t get the luxury of sleep. Still, his head felt foggy, his eyes ached, and his muscles stiff – he could feel the strain of too many long days and short nights taking their toll.

White Harbour was churning for war. From the window, he saw the curled white dragon snoozing at the mouth of the harbour like a great marble sentinel, his body curled over the Seal Rock so his long tail dangled into the water.

The castle felt half-asleep, but there were still eight guards posted in the outer chambers of his quarters, and then four of his Dragonguard in the inner chambers to watch over the Manderly men. As he passed, Jon noticed that Furs had shaved to fit in with the southerners, and the man looked queer without his bushy brown beard. Too long-necked and weak-chinned.

Jon was to break his fast with Lord Wyman, yet an idea had come to him the night before that he wanted to see to first.

“Bullden,” Jon called to the wildling. “Meet me in the solar. We have matters to discuss.”

Bullden Horn followed. The solar was unfamiliar to Jon, yet the stewards had left a tankard of wine on the desk. Jon was about to pour a glass, before remembering his audience. He passed the whole tankard to Bullden and spared the glasses.

“What is wrong, king?” his Dragonguard asked.

“How well do you know Skagos?” Jon queried.

Bullden frowned. “Is that a jape?” The man had changed his tunic from the castle’s laundry, but no matter what he wore he always kept his unicorn horn hanging around his neck.

“Of course,” he said with a smile. “Lord Wyman believes that my youngest brother Rickon might have taken shelter on Skagos. The lord has been unable to mount a search party, but I would like you to search for my brother, rescue him, and bring him to safety. You are familiar enough to search the isle?”

“Oh aye. I’ve raided Skagos half my life. How old is your brother?”

“Nearly six.”
“Then he better be one hell of a tough six-year-old to survive on that isle,” Bullden warned. “It ain’t place for anything but the tough.”

“He has a direwolf with him,” said Jon. Shaggydog had always been the most aggressive out of the litter. “And he is in the company of a spearwife. Lord Wyman has a witness who said they fled to Skagos.” His eyes hardened. “This is important, Bulleden. We need a Stark to reclaim Winterfell. If Arya is a hostage, Bran is missing, then Rickon could be vital to rally the north.” While Sansa disappeared, and Lord Wyman has only the faintest suspicions of where she could be.

He scratched his chin. “Then why not fly your dragon over there to find him?”

“I can’t.” Jon shook his head. “Sonagon creates panic everywhere he goes. If Rickon is truly hiding on Skagos, he could be endangered in the chaos a dragon sighting will cause. I can’t risk flying my dragon in blind, and a small party on the ground stands the best chance of tracking him down. Find my brother first, and then I can fly in to bring him home. Can you do that?”

“Last time I went to Skagos, I was hunting unicorn,” Bulleden scoffed, fiddling with the bone horn around his neck. “The stoneborn protect their unicorns viciously, they’re... sacred animals to them or whatnot. The best raiders hunt unicorns just to prove that they can. It took me four days to bring that bloody beast down and take its horn, and I had to cut through half a dozen cannibals to do it. Aye, I reckon hunting a child on Skagos can’t be any harder than hunting a unicorn there. I can do it.”

“Good. Take Eryn and Gerrick with you.” Eryn was a sailor from birth, and Dark Gerrick was as fearsome with a blade as anyone. “As well as however many of Lord Manderly’s men you think you can move fast with. A ship will take you to Eastwatch, and from there you can cross to Skagos.”

“I won’t want many of these southrons with me. A few men can move more safely than a dozen. Black sails and small boats are the way to go – I’ve done that raid a hundred times. Usually from the north, but can’t be much different from the south.”

“Yes,” Jon agreed. “But Rattleshirt will be warned to help however he can. If I thought a fleet would have a better chance, you’d have one.”

“If your brother is so important to you, I’ll get him,” Bulleden promised. “But how do I recognise the boy?”

“Lord Manderly has a young man in the castle – a boy called Wex Pyke. He followed Rickon and this spearwife as they fled, so take him with you. The boy is mute, however.” Bulleden’s eyebrows raised. “Yet I’m told that Wex is a clever, resourceful, and eager to prove himself. I’ve arranged for Wex to squire for you during the journey.”

“Squire?” Bulleden snorted.

“To tend to your armour and weapons, manage your horses and luggage. An apprentice,” he explained. *My Dragonguard are elite warriors, they should act like it. Each member should have at least one squire beneath him. As should I, actually.*

Bullden shook his head, but didn't object. “Aye, alright. When do I leave?”

“As soon as possible. And there’s one more thing; my wolf will escort you.” That took Bulleden by surprise. “You will pick up Ghost at Eastwatch,” Jon explained. “Take him with you on the boat. If Rickon is on Skagos, then my direwolf stands a very good chance at tracking his. Then, if you do
find him, I will know through Ghost and I will be able to meet you on Sonagon.”

“Wargs,” Bulden muttered under his breath, but he nodded. He took a deep gulp of the wine and dropped it on the table. “Aye. Understood.”

“Thank you. Send in Hatch when you pass him.”

He left. One done. Hatch the Halfgiant traipsed in shortly afterwards. Jon pushed the tankard of wine to him.

“Hatch,” Jon sighed. “I have something to ask of you. You won’t understand why, but I just need to do it.”

He frowned, but nodded. “I want you to go to the godswood in the Wolf’s Den, below New Castle. Make sure you are alone, and sit before the heart tree and describe, out loud, everything that was discussed last night. Mention the need to find my brother, Bran Stark, and ask for help. Repeat three times.”

Hatch did look confused. “You want me to pray for you?”

“Something like that,” Jon said with a wry smile. “I just ask you to trust me.”

Hatch looked puzzled, but he nodded and walked away anyways, albeit frowning. Jon would have done it himself, but then at least two dozen people were likely to follow him and he didn’t want to have to explain himself, or turn it into a scene. It was risky to even leave the castle unsupervised. But the three-eyed crow will be watching through the weirwood tree, Jon thought. Let us see whether or not the greenseer can offer some aid in rescuing my family.

Hatch barely left before a servant cautiously summoned him. Jon downed a large gulp of wine himself. So much to do, so little time.

Lord Wyman was waiting in the dining hall. Jon had expected a light meal for the morning, but instead he saw lobster, eel stew and thick pastries covering the table. Even just breaking his fast felt as formal as any great feast. Six nobles and knights of House Manderly sat with them at the table.

“Your Grace,” Lord Wyman greeted.

“My lord.” It didn’t feel quite as tense as the meeting last night, but it was still a long way from being comfortable. “We have a rebellion to plan.”

“We do indeed. Have a seat, I find the best plans are ones made over the dining table.”

Jon took a seat. All eyes were on him, but he acted as if it didn’t affect him. He paused, and then slowly took a slice of bread from the banquet. “Let us start with the obvious question,” said Jon. “We declare defiance against House Bolton, and an alliance between you and me. We raise men to bring Roose Bolton to justice. How much support could we expect to raise? And what forces will we face?”

Lord Wyman cracked a lobster’s claws roughly. “That… is a difficult question. Lady Mormont will support us steadfastly, and Lord Umber will fight the Boltons to his last breath. We can raise banners for justice, for punishment for the Red Wedding, for the sack of Winterfell, but without a Stark to rally around our odds plummet.” He paused. “Will you please reconsider your brother’s decree?”
“No.” Jon said, his voice was a bit more of a growl than he intended. “We recover Bran and Rickon Stark, and we fight for them.”

“Then we are fighting for a King in the North that we do not have,” Lord Wyman sighed. “But I can guarantee the loyalty of all lands east of the White Knife, from Widow’s Watch and Ramsgate to the Sheephead Hills and the headwaters of the Broken Branch. I have a fleet of fifty galleys and the men to sail them, I can field four hundred heavy horses, fourteen hundred infantry, and a hundred or so trained knights.”

“And Lord Umber? And Lady Mormont?”

“If Lord Umber is capable of returning to his lands to raise swords? Potentially a thousand. Lady Mormont I suspect a few hundred or so. Lord Glover has lost his seat and is in a more difficult position, yet perhaps in the hundreds. There are factions from the battle at Winterfell that won’t sit quietly, either.”

“And the Boltons have…?”

“Houses Ryswell, Dustin, Hornwood, Cerwyn, and Karstark. As well as two thousand of the Frey army that marched north with them. I hear that their forces sits at ten thousand. Whether or not they can raise more, hmm, I cannot say.”

“What of reinforcements from the Iron Throne?”

“Very doubtful. The Lannisters fight this arisen dragon, and the Tyrells the kraken. Let us say ten thousand, as a broad guess of what we might face.”

“Ten thousand,” Jon repeated. “I have five thousand men from Eastwatch already in the field. By now, the numbers of wildlings that are south of the Wall has likely exceeded fifty thousand, including women, children and elderly. I suspect that, should I call for them, then at least ten thousand of those would be ready to fight – the free folk have a higher proportion of fighters than any other; both men and women.”

“And a dragon.”

“Yes. The dragon is well worth a hundred thousand by itself.”

There was a dark glint in the fat lord’s eyes. I can see why Lord Wyman is pushing so hard for an alliance. Even with the lords Umber, Mormont and Glover by him, White Harbour cannot match the Bolton forces by themselves.

“Yet there is a catch, my lord,” Jon continued. “The free folk are not a unified host. They are not trained soldiers, they do not have formation or ranks.”

“Yet they will follow you?”

“They will,” he said. “But they need supplies. They need food, blankets and rations sent to the Wall. They need armour and good steel.”

“I can provide it,” Lord Wyman promised. “I have silver in my vaults that I am prepared to spend. There are many silversmiths in White Harbour.”

“I care for steel more than silver now, my lord. And for grain more than gold. The need is urgent; there are starving, exposed mouths on the Wall and the weather is turning.”
“And there is a fleet in my harbour that could deliver aid,” said Lord Wyman. “But right now, I need manpower. I need soldiers guarding my lands, to allow our allies muster their forces.”

“There are five thousand free folk in the Grey Cliffs, led by a man named the Weeper. I can summon them to White Harbour.”

“Aye yes. The same army that half the north has been preparing to fight against. Any alliance with wildlings will be dangerous, but…” He thought about it. “I need guarantees that there will be no raiding and pillaging of my lands. I have seen refugees pour into my city from Karstark lands, and I cannot suffer the same. By your word, King Snow; you must keep your wildlings in order.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed. “The Weeper is a hard man, and he knows the stakes. He will keep order.”

“I must hold you to that, King Snow,” Lord Wyman warned. “For it is the only way that this alliance has a hope of succeeding.”

Jon didn’t reply. He wished he felt as confident as he spoke. I must fly to the Weeper, to make sure they’re keeping the rules. “You hold Karhold, do you not?” Lord Wyman demanded.

“Aye.”

“And Lord Karstark still lives?”

“As a hostage. Him and his wife.”

“I know of Cregan Karstark. His father Arnolf was a castellan, yet his son became lord by marrying his cousin. It should be Rickard Karstark’s eldest, Harrion Karstark, the rightful lord, but he was being held prisoner at Duskendale and may already be dead.” Lord Wyman thought about it. “If Cregan is a prisoner, then we can push Karstark forces into our ranks. We convince the new Lord Karstark that he is better served as an ally than a hostage.”

“Is it needed? I have a second host under Tormund Giantsbane already mustering in the north, and we have something of a fleet stationed at Eastwatch.” Jon nodded. “In terms of numbers, it seems we already have the advantage.”

“It is not the numbers that concerns me, it is the men. What type of war do you want this to be, King Snow?” Lord Wyman crunched through a pastry roll. “The Boltons will never fight a pitched battle that they cannot win. Do you wish to see burning farms and poisoned wells? Do you want to see riots in every town and village, defiance in every corner? Even if we win, this war could tear the north apart – turmoil and strife, murder until our forces are stretched on every side. No, I will not let it occur.”

“Then we are agreed.” Jon kept eye contact. “Aye, a thousand pinpricks could hurt us more than a blade.”

“Then heed my advice,” the fat lord warned. “I know Roose Bolton. The man does not fight a battle without preparing for both outcomes. Before he allows himself to lose, he will turn any victory for us into something bitter. He will scatter his forces and turn them into bandits and raiders. He will burn crops and slaughter cattle until we all lose come winter. He will incite such violence and discord that even if we kill him, his legacy will be worse than a thousand battles. He might not win, but he could well deny us a victory.”

“His own reign will fall apart before that,” Jon said. “The other lords will not let him do it.”

“Oh, they might. If you are naught more than a wildling invader, then this realm will deny you to
their very last. What does it matter what you are, compared to what they see you as? Regardless of your intentions, you could easily become a tyrant invader king, and I the fat, spineless lord that was cowed to support you. Smallfolk will rise against you in every corner.” He shook his head, crumbs of pastry flying from his whiskers. “No, if this war dissolves into bitter skirmishes then the damage could be devastating. It must end in battle, or it may not end at all.

“Do not underestimate House Bolton, Your Grace,” Lord Wyman warned darkly, as he cut from loaf of bread to slather butter on. “Do not dismiss the grief that a smaller force can inflict, if they are vicious enough. Roose Bolton is as dangerous as they come, and to say nothing of his son…”

“Ramsay Bolton.” Jon’s voice was cold. *The man who married and tortures my sister.*

“Ramsay Snow,” a knight spoke up from the table. Jon didn’t know his name. “A bastard born of rape. He is a Snow, no matter what the boy king says.”

Jon’s hands tightened. “He concerns me,” Lord Wyman continued. “Roose Bolton is cunning, but predictable enough, in his own way. But Ramsay? There is no predicting him. The Boltons have always been as cruel as they were cunning, but this one seems a beast in human skin.”

Jon didn’t reply. His gaze was dark.

Lord Wyman picked up the knife again to cut a slice of pie. “No, we are not lacking forces. We are lacking legitimacy. The only way to beat Roose Bolton in the long run is to have every house supporting us, to have a rightful claim to Winterfell. To ensure that they are the tyrants and we the champions.”

*Lord Manderly has his wits,* Jon thought quietly. Jon wanted to deny it, but a war was more than just men marching into battle. It wasn’t simple, it could never be simple. *I tried to make it simple and I ended up surrounded by the corpses of hostages. I will not make the same mistake twice.*

“Words are wind, Lord Wyman. We could sit here, eat lobster and talk about it until winter comes for us all,” Jon said stiffly. “But how do we make it so?”

“Beyond finding a legitimate member of House Stark?” Lord Wyman muttered, and then swallowed.

“We do have a legitimate member of House Stark. Arya Stark.” Jon said harshly. “She was forced into marriage under duress, their wedlock is invalid. Without knowing my brothers’ fates, she is the Lady of Winterfell, so we gather banners to rescue her.”

“Yet that is a more difficult war cry to call. Would you not reconsid–”

“No.” *If I took the name Stark, would I be damning Arya’s rescue as unnecessary?* “Do not ask me again.”

“Then I suggest marriages,” Lord Wyman sighed. “We must seek to arrange as many betrothals and alliances as possible between northern highborn and the leaders among your wildlings.”

“That… that is a good idea. Strengthen the bonds to the north.” *And give the free folk less reason to pillage.* “But they are wildlings. Would any noble lord truly entertain the notion of a betrothal to one?”

“Many won’t,” Lord Wyman admitted. “But we should be considering petty lords rather than great lords. Each marriage is a thread of string that brings your wildlings, and yourself, closer to being accepted by the realm; we should aim to facilitate as many as we can. Hundreds, mayhaps.”
He frowned. “Why would so many petty lords ever consider such?”

“Consider their situation. A small lord and his holdfast may have only a dozen or so fighting men under him. If they hear of a wildling army coming south and threatening their lands, lives and livelihoods, then their circumstances become dire. Such a lord may quite happily consider wedding his daughter to a wildling chieftain or leader, if it would ensure the safety of his holdings.” He nodded. “There are many such petty lords in the north, these lands are vast. A strong wildling warrior could make a good match to northern lady, provided there is influence promised and the wealth to provide a dowry, of course. Do you have, ahem, commanders in your army that could consent to such?”

“I have.” Although the thought of arranging marriages on their behalf made his head spin. “They may be… difficult matches, but, yes, in the right circumstances.”

“The lords of the White Knife will follow my lead. I know that Lord Holt of Westwood has two daughters that he would see married, the house owns large grain farms and a mill outside of Ramsgate. It is very important to secure our farmland. Lord Dywen Poole has a mature daughter who was widowed in the Young Wolf’s campaign, as well as a young son who has proved problematic to betroth. Lord Anders of House Overton is an old man, but a good warrior in his heyday and still an influential name – he may well accept a young wildling bride. Perhaps even our Lord Locke, Lord of Oldcastle, could be convinced to betroth one of his grandchildren for the cause.” Lord Wyman paused. “Would you care for a scribe to make note of this, King Snow?”

“I think that would be best, Lord Manderly.”

Jon summoned Sam towards the dining table with parchment to scribble notes and names as they discussed. Lord Wyman called for his castellan, and several other men who were more familiar with the minor nobility. Together, they went through and made lists of lords and ladies who could be willing to accept wildling betrothals. There are so many houses that Jon had vaguely heard of but couldn’t even place, with names like Forrester, Lake, Harclay, Ashwood, or Slate.

Scribbled lists were made until the ink spills stained the parchments: the most influential of the petty houses and landed knights, and the wealth, men and influence they might bring. Soon, there were arguments erupting on whether Lord Lake’s twice-widowed and dim-witted daughter was still marriageable, or whether House Whitehill would support a second-cousin over an unpopular nephew, or whether House Lightfoot’s wool and furs were worth more than House Slate’s rockeries.

Jon had to wrack his brain to suggest matches from loyal clans and leaders in the free folk host. It was like every option had to be ranked and matched. The great and old houses, with names like Umber, Karstark, Mormont or Manderly, were by far the most valuable alliances, but Lord Wyman seemed more interested in quantity than anything.

“Threads of string, King Snow,” the lord said when Jon asked. “The realm will only accept your wildlings if they become part of the realm. With enough threads of string you can weave a rope.”

“And yet shouldn’t we be considering great lords as well?”

“We will,” Lord Wyman said with a nod. “But the great lords will be more willing to accept wildling betrothals if the petty lords beneath them have done the same. Start from the bottom. There is also the matter of cost – each of these potential betrothals will need require a dowry, and it is far cheaper to pay the dowries for ten minor houses than for one greater one.”

Politics. Lord Wyman said it so matter of fact. The decisions I make at this table could well shape
the rest of people’s lives. It was an unnerving thought, more so than leading them into battle for some reason.

Lord Wyman hunched over parchments, lips muttering as he read back through the notes. “Lord Umber should be involved in here,” he decided. “House Umber has more lesser lords sworn to it than anyone. Further, lands to the north are the most critical, as well as the most urgent, in building relations.” He paused. “Mayhaps we could even convince Lord Umber to take a wildling wife himself.”

“The Greatjon? Truly?”

“It would go a long way, if it is possible to persuade him,” Lord Wyman admitted. “Lord Umber lost his eldest son and heir at the Red Wedding. He did have two more sons and three daughters, but two daughters were lost to wildling raids and the circumstances of the rest are uncertain after the attack on Last Hearth. The Greatjon could possibly be pushed to accept a new wife for the future of his house and the security of his land.”

Jon couldn’t imagine anyone pushing the Greatjon, but he nodded in any case. Sam scribbled down Lord Umber’s name, with a question mark.

“What of lords south of the Neck?” Sam asked suddenly. “Why not reach out to southern lords for alliances as well?”

“We’d be overreaching ourselves to attempt such, I think.” Lord Wyman shook his head. “No, if this to succeed we must aim to work for the north. Leave the riverlands to their own conflicts.”

“The riverlords supported Robb Stark as well,” Jon noted.

“It was the riverlands and their squabbles that damned King Robb. He crowned himself King of the North and of the Riverlands, but an area as central as the riverlands could never be defended. Robb Stark lingered south to protect the riverlords — a noble effort, aye, but also futile. As the war shifted, we all knew the riverlands would have to be abandoned, and yet Robb still lingered for their sake.” Lord Wyman’s voice turned bitter. “If only your brother had returned north sooner, to consolidate his power in the Kingdom of the North, the tyrants of the south would have lost tens of thousands of men trying to break the Neck to end our independence.” The lord’s face scowled slightly. “No, we need nothing from the southerners, least of all to be embroiled in their conflicts. Dragonfire was the only thing capable of forcing the north to kneel, and now that is no longer a concern of ours,” he said with a soft smile towards Jon.

Jon frowned. “It is surprising to hear you say such. Didn’t House Manderly originate from the Reach?”

“Aye, for thousands of years we were the lords of the Mander; in the age of the Gardener kings we grew to one of the most powerful forces in the Kingdom of the Reach. And yet House Manderly was the only major house under the Oakenseat not to claim descent from Garth Greenhand, and so, despite our riches and influence, we were constantly slighted in favour of those with a better bloodline. The Peakes were envious, the Gardeners insecure and the Tyrells grasping. A thousand years ago our lands and castle was finally usurped, and we were left exiled.” Lord Wyman scoffed quietly. “Yet when I look back through my family’s history, leaving the Reach for the Starks of Winterfell was the best decision my ancestors ever made. Winterfell has been naught but good and loyal to us, while the south continues to squirm like a pit of vipers. We are northmen, that is the only loyalty my family knows. The blasted iron chair is nothing to me – White Harbour will fight for independence in the north.”
There was an iron passion in his voice, Jon noted. “The north has been part of the Seven Kingdoms for three hundred years,” Sam said nervously. “The Iron Throne unites the realm.”

“And yet I wager that the Iron Throne will fall within my lifetime,” Lord Wyman said, with cold anger. “It has been falling for the last seventeen years, in fact. Ever since Robert Baratheon broke the Targaryen dynasty, the Seven Kingdoms has fallen into decline. Succession and order was broken, a once iron-clad reign was shattered and flimsily patched together. The war proved that, and continues to do so. Each claimant is another hole poked in the broken rule of the boy king, they come one after another. Even after one set of contenders falls, another set takes their place. And the rebellions will continue to rise and fall until finally the Iron Throne is ground into dust. Southron affairs are best severed before they hurt us further. I would build a wall across the Neck if I could.”

Sam looked like he wanted to object, but Jon just nodded. “And to unite the north,” Jon said, trying to push the subject back on track, “what would it take for the lords under House Karstark to accept the free folk host?”

The discussion continued. It turned into the longest meal Jon had ever had. By the end, it felt like they had been through every house in the north and there was still so much more to go. Jon could only promise to inquire on which of his followers could be rewarded with an arranged marriage, and the first of the dozens of letters were drafted.

Lord Wyman pressed him on which lands north of the Wall could be used to incite allies, on whether to name new lords north of the Wall, to form new houses of allies. Jon kept himself focused and patient, working through each detail in turn. One problem at a time.

Eventually, Jon agreed take both Lord Wyman’s cousin, Marrion Manderly, and Lord Locke’s grandson, Bennard Locke, as his squires, as well as to consider naming several northern lords to his Dragonguard. Jon donated the gold they had raided from the Twins to House Manderly, while the lord would make inquiries into arranging some of the betrothals. Lord Wyman promised to arrange the captains and ships to move supplies to Eastwatch, provided that Jon could bring the free folk host at Karhold into line.

There was still so much to discuss. Which houses will be burned in dragonfire and which ones will be negotiated with, Jon thought.

“Let us retire for now,” Lord Wyman said with a sigh. It was already late afternoon. “Yet we must still write a letter, King Snow. Many letters. To announce our alliance and our intent to the entire realm – let no lord be unaware that the dragon and the wildlings fight for justice, and for House Stark.”

“Aye, I agree.” Jon nodded. He had seen too much panic and uncertainty already. “That is urgent.”

“Then I will arrange a gathering of the nobles in White Harbour this evening. We will need to rally their support, and then we can inform every castle in the north.”

“Good.” Jon hesitated, slightly. “And to the riverlands,” he said firmly. “Especially to Houses Blackwood, Vance and Mallister. Any of my brother’s supporters who might have lost kin at the Twins. I must offer my apologies, and promise recompense for their losses.”

Lord Wyman flickered. “Your Grace, I would urge you not to. There are absolutely no words that you can offer them that would not seem insulting.”

“No.” Jon shook his head. “They deserve apologies. I mean to pay the gold price. I will offer
houses that lost innocent kin at the Twins coin in recompense for their loss.”

“I… I would not,” Lord Wyman warned. “Giving gold in return for murder only makes bitterness sow deeper. Do not send them any messages, do not admit any responsibility. Let them think the deaths happened as punishment because they conceded to the Freys. It is better to be seen as ruthless than as making a mistake.”

Jon could not be persuaded otherwise. The families of those who died deserve something, Jon thought, they were loyal to my brother to the end. Lord Wyman protested, but he conceded eventually.

“From what I hear, the south faces its own strife,” Jon said. “Let the riverlords know that the north are still allies, and we could offer support after House Bolton is deposed.”

“Very well. I would, however, also suggest penning a letter to this ‘Aegon Targaryen’ in the south,” Lord Wyman said. “He has recently taken Storm’s End.”

“Aegon Targaryen,” Jon repeated. “I heard of him, the contender who leads the Golden Company. What is there for me to say to him?”

“From what I hear, a short message could be a useful thing. Maybe not an alliance, but at least offer an agreement. Agree to leave him to his campaign and us to ours, so that he might distract any southern reinforcements from the north.”

“This Aegon,” Jon said slowly. A Targaryen in Westeros – can he bond with dragons too? “Is he genuine? Rhaegar’s lost son, is it truly him?”

“Perhaps. I’m more inclined to name him a pretender, the Imp’s little puppet, but his army is effective at least. The Golden Company marched through the stormlands swiftly, and Aegon’s forces under Jon Connington have won victories in the crownlands, while Tyrion Lannister leads a force of mercenaries west to Casterly Rock,” Lord Wyman explained. “So long as the Golden Company is camped outside King’s Landing, however, we can safely expect to be free from Lannister involvement in the north. If Dorne declares for Aegon – and I am hearing strong mutterings that they might – then this returned king might well have a good chance of taking the Iron Throne.”

“Aye,” Jon nodded. “And what of the other one – this Euron Greyjoy?”

“The Crow’s Eye. As mad as they come, I hear, but he dropped the ironborn invasion of the north for favour of warmer plunder.” Lord Wyman’s huge shoulders shrugged. “I will be a strong advocate of scorching the Iron Islands in frostfire from dragonback, but for the moment Euron Greyjoy is distracted leading reavers in the Reach.”

Sam didn’t look happy with that statement. How far is Horn Hill from where the ironborn are reaving? Jon wondered. “Whereabouts in the Reach is he raiding?” Sam asked. “Ironborn have not threatened the Reach since the days of Dagon Greyjoy. What of the Arbor Fleet?”

“They took the Shield Isles first, and for a time they appeared to be preparing for an assault on Highgarden,” Lord Wyman explained. “The Arbor Fleet was left on the wrong coast, in King’s Landing. Yet since then, the Shield Isles have been recovered by the forces of Highgarden, and the ironborn have moved south. Most recent news I heard said they had conquered parts of the Arbor, and then Three Towers itself. It does seem that they are preparing for an assault on Oldtown itself.”
“Never!” Sam’s face paled.

“Aye, he’s an ambitious man, this Crow’s Eye, but not particularly clever. He failed to secure a foothold against Highgarden, and he is a fool again if he thinks Oldtown will be easier prey. The kraken does not have the tentacles.” Lord Wyman shook his head. “No, the Crow’s Eye will not succeed. He does not have the men, and he faces forty thousand of the Reach’s finest to oppose him. Still, so long as Euron Greyjoy is keeping the Tyrells and their fleet busy in the Reach then that is only good for us.”

“But not good for the Reach,” Jon noted.

“Does it matter? While the other six kingdoms are preoccupied with their own civil wars, we have an opportunity. To establish our independence before any might break it.”

It took two guards to help Lord Wyman to his feet. There were still platters of food left on the table. Jon left with Sam, and Sam promised to sort through the pages of scribbled notes. “Are you happy with this plan?” Sam asked as they walked down the corridor. “To break away from the Seven Kingdoms altogether…”

“No,” Jon said slowly. “I don’t agree with Lord Wyman on that matter; I think that Westeros is strongest when it is united.” He paused. “But he’s right in one respect; there can be no unification with the crown as it stands. The Seven Kingdoms are falling apart.”

Jon took a detour out onto the balcony, feeling the cold air whip around him as soon as he opened the door. The view from New Castle overlooking the city was stunning, but the coastal wind felt bone-chilling as it swept across the white cliffs. The seagulls cawed out over the coast, but otherwise the city seemed strangely deserted. There were no ships leaving the city.

Even from this distance, Jon could see Sonagon roosting atop Seal Rock. The old ringfort of the First Men seemed a comfortable perch for the dragon. As he watched, the dragon splashed down into the water, swimming towards the cliffs so the dragon could scratch and chew curiously at the white cliffs of the coast. From the docks, he saw figures pointing and staring out across the coast.

I’m a long way from Hardhome, Jon thought with a soft sigh. Today, he had to barter an alliance between great lords, arrange several dozen marriages, secure a fleet of ships to provide aid, and declare independence and rebellion against the crown. Tomorrow, he would wage war on dragonback. Somewhere in between, he would have to figure out a way to save his brothers, and stop a white walker. Those are the stakes now.

But with White Harbour’s partnership, there is a good chance. House Manderly took a huge risk reaching out to him, but they were invested against the Boltons and they had much to gain. With all the resentment after the Red Wedding and the fear of the dragon, they could likely gather allies.

Jon stared out over the city. The Lannister’s crowned lion wasn’t flying over White Harbour anymore. Instead, once more the Manderlys had raised the grey direwolf of the Starks. He could only imagine the ripples that would be spreading around the north.

He wished he could go down into the streets, to find out what the common people were saying of him. What was the mood in the city? Were they terrified of the dragon lingering at their port? Were they furious at the news of defiance against the crown? Were they plotting to flee or incite riots? Were they cheering at news of an alliance, or celebrating vengeance for the Red Wedding?

Jon wanted to go down and find out, but he couldn’t. He was likely to trigger a riot if he stepped out of New Castle. I am the wildling, dragon-warg king, after all.
Spending so long discussing politics had left him stressed and tense. His head ached from so many thoughts and concerns, possibilities and chances. All of the numbers of men and potential alliances. Back with the free folk, negotiating for so long would have probably ended in a brawl by now. Somehow, sitting at a table and just talking left him feeling more exhausted than a dozen fights.

Jon paused, thinking of the fat lord and his great dinner table. *Is it strange that I miss the fights?*

He took a long breath, and rubbed his face to try and clear his eyes. A good spar felt more and more appealing.

Jon found Ser Wylan quickly. The castellan seemed to be following Jon around, to ensure he was content. “The sparring yard,” Jon demanded. “Where is it?”

The man directed him into the wards. Jon heard the thuds of colliding tourney swords. Knights and soldiers were drilling constantly for battle. The grounds seemed to quieten as Jon stepped into the courtyard. All eyes looked at him, but Jon ignored them all.

“Toregg,” Jon called to his Dragonguard. “Care to spar?”

Toregg grinned. He was a foot taller than Tormund was, and he fought with a bastard, bone-hilted iron longsword. “Aye, King Snow,” he said in a deep voice.

“Tourney swords?” Jon offered with a smile.

“No where’s the fun in that?” The wildling laughed, in a deep boom. Jon could see the similarities with his father sometimes.

Jon drew Dark Sister. A few onlookers stopped to stare at the spar. Metal blades clashed, Valyrian steel against dull iron. Toregg was a good sparring partner, but not an especially challenging one.

*His reach is long, and he’s powerful with a strong form.* Jon couldn’t match him easily in strength. Still, Toregg’s footwork was predictable, and he swung his sword like a maul. He would overextend himself in the long swings, and would flail slightly against sudden counterattacks.

After a dozen strikes, the flat of Dark Sister slapped against Toregg’s ankle. The tall man winced. “Keep your arms up,” Jon warned. “If you’re going to fight with no shield, you can’t risk leaving yourself open.”

“Aye,” he said, panting for breath.

“Are you sure you don’t want to use tourney swords?”

“Those wooden things? Like twigs. How you supposed to fight properly holding something like that?”

Jon shrugged. The image of Arya flashed before his eyes. “You stick them with the pointy end.”

They clashed again. Jon focused on defence and parrying, challenging himself to try and meet Toregg’s reach. Jon saw opportunities to counterattack but didn’t take them, trying to make the spar last.

“That sword,” a voice boomed across the yard suddenly, “where did you get it?”

Jon broke off. He could see the Greatjon looking at him across the yard. The Dragonguard were all staring at the big lord. “From a friend, my lord,” Jon replied.
“That’s Valyrian steel,” the Greatjon said suspiciously. “But I’ve never seen one so fine.”

“Aye. Her name is Dark Sister.”

“Dark Sister.” His eyes flashed. “A Targaryen sword.”

“Once.”

That seemed to catch him off guard. “I don’t know what the hell you are, ‘King Snow’, but I don’t trust you,” the Greatjon said, shaking his head. “The fat lord will stammer and beg, but don’t expect me to.”


He blinked. “A spar.”

“If you would like,” Jon offered, nodding. “You seem restless.”

“Do not get arrogant, boy,” the Greatjon warned. “Aye, lets spar. Squire, bring me my steel.”

The castellan looked nervous. “Please, my lord, perhaps tourney swords inste–”

“No,” the Greatjon growled. “King Snow seems to prefer steel.”

The huge man flexed slowly as he stepped downwards. Nearly seven feet tall and heavily muscled. Jon paused, he wore a helm, gauntlets and greaves, full armour, for the spar. Jon debated bringing a shield as well, but then he saw the Greatjon’s weapon – a greatsword bigger and uglier than any he had ever seen – and he decided that a shield would be useless. The Greatjon’s blade was like a sharpened slab of steel, one of the few that could even make his father’s greatsword Ice appear small.

Perhaps this wasn’t a good idea, Jon admitted silently as they sized up. He had wanted to make a point.

By the time the Greatjon even lifted his sword upwards, a large crowd had formed. Everyone stopped to watch.

He’s a big man – big men tend to attack fast and hard. Survive the first few strikes and you have an advantage. Watch his footwork, and just don’t try to parry against that greatsword…

“Anything to say?” the Greatjon growled, lowering his helm.

“Let us fight, my lord.”

With a grunt, he attacked first. Jon could almost feel the ground shake as the armoured, towering lord swung at him. He thought of the actual giants he’d seen. He’s a big man, Jon thought, but I’ve fought bigger.

Jon sidestepped the first two strikes. The third one very nearly took Dark Sister out of his grip, but then he barely managed to break the lock to counterattack. The Greatjon avoided Dark Sister smoothly. For a big man with a cumbersome weapon, he has a perfect form, Jon thought. He reminds me of the Weeper, actually.

Jon attacked first this time, quick sudden slashes and strikes. Dark Sister clunked against that ugly greatsword.
“You seem to dislike me, Lord Umber,” Jon growled between the ringing of steel.

“You let wildlings in to ravage my lands,” the Greatjon growled as he parried. “My people. My family. Aye, we won’t be friends.”

“It seems to me the Boltons have been doing more ravaging than anyone.”

“And that’s the only reason you’re still breathing in my presence.”

He saw him preparing to swing. Jon backed away quickly, and the Greatjon lunged. Jon parried, but the force of the blow still sent him flailing to the stones. He wheezed.

“I am sorry about your two daughters, Lord Umber,” Jon said, panting as he stood up again.

“Don’t mention my daughters,” he warned. The Greatjon stunk of booze and sweat, like a perfume clinging to his leathers. “They were only babes when the wildlings attacked their caravan. I can name a dozen families that have lost babes and kin to wildling raids. It makes me sick to have to ally myself with someone like you.”

Swords clashed again. Jon struck three times for every one of his, but each strike from him felt devastatingly powerful. Perhaps he was expecting Jon to back away. He didn’t.

“I cannot do anything for your girls,” said Jon. “But perhaps we can stop anymore daughters from being taken!”

“I told you not to mention them!” the Greatjon growled, swiping up and then swinging hard. Jon sidestepped the first but the second swing… there was no choice but drop downwards as the blade whooshed overhead. Jon fell to the cobbles again. “My girls were stolen and taken the gods-know-where, and you expect me to give their killers fucking amnesty?”

The Greatjon was over him. Jon kicked out and jumped to his feet, pushing so close into the big man’s defence he could hardly even swing the greatsword.

“Let the wildlings be on this side of the Wall,” Jon hissed between frenzied blows. The Greatjon tried to shoulder-barge him. It very nearly knocked him down again, but he spun. “If there are raids, we will know the responsible and then we can bring punishment to them. There could be accountability – punishment against those who commit the crimes rather than the whole people. Give wildlings a chance to learn of law and justice.” Metal clashed. Jon pushed with everything he had, trying just to push the Greatjon on to the backfoot. “Having a Wall between them only serves to encourage more wildlings raiding over it!”

The lord recovered by kicking Jon away. Jon had to back off as soon as that greatsword was raised. Still, the greatsword had notches taken out of it, while Dark Sister remained flawless. It’s an exceptional blade.

“This could be a chance to stop the casualties for good, Lord Umber,” Jon said, panting heavily now. “Rather than fighting off one raid and then the next, we could change things for good.”

“You want to talk about casualties?” he growled. “Tell me, if they hadn’t have moved me from the Twins, maybe if they delayed and left me in the dungeons. Would I still be alive right now?”

Jon didn’t reply. The lord struck back, hard. “You’ve got a bloody dragon. We side with you to defeat our enemy, fine – but what about when you decide we’re your enemy too?” The blades clanged. “What if you decide to take whatever you want, like your wildlings?”
He couldn’t reply. It took every bit of speed and concentration he had to fall backwards from the swooshing blade.

“What if I strike a bit too hard?” the Greatjon growled furiously. “What if I part your neck from your head? Maybe I could get rid of another tyrant king right here and now.”

“Maybe you could,” Jon panted, struggling to pull himself straight. “But we have a chance for peace or a certainty of war. Which one would you prefer?”

The Greatjon’s jaw clenched. He didn’t reply.

Jon attacked first this time. He could feel his movements becoming sluggish, tired. “Only together can we actually do something good,” Jon panted. “I know what the stakes are here.”

“You don’t know a bloody thing,” he snarled. “I watched my son be murdered right in front of me. I watched my king shot full of bolts and stabbed by that traitor. They tried to drink me under the table that night and I was left flailing drunk when they came for me. I spent six months being tortured by those murderers.” Jon saw wide, bulging eyes under the helm. “And when I escaped, my home had been sacked, my entire family could well be dead. Do you think you understand my rage?”

“I do understand,” Jon panted. “This war killed my family too.”

They kept on fighting for a while. The next time Jon hit the ground, he pulled himself up, and had to surrender. It was becoming too dangerous to avoid the Greatjon’s sword the wearier he became. Jon was panting heavily as he bowed and conceded the fight.

Still, the Greatjon was panting too. He was bleeding slightly from his hand where Jon clipped him, and Dark Sister cleaved straight through the gauntlets. For a long time, the Greatjon just stood and glared, still gripping his greatsword.

“You’re a fighter, Jon Snow,” the lord said finally, as he turned to walk away.

Jon took a deep breath. *Gods, if the Greatjon is weakened at all by his captivity, I can’t see it. The man fights like a monster.*

The Dragonguard helped him out of the armour. Jon saw Sam staring at him with wide eyes. “You nearly had him,” said Sam breathlessly. “For a moment, I thought you were going to take the bout.”

Jon shook his head. “No. He beat me soundly. He is bigger and stronger, and he was holding back.”

“But he’s the Greatjon!” Sam hissed. “One of the strongest living men in Westeros. You matched him blow for blow.”

Jon allowed himself a small smile. There were others in the crowd mimicking Sam’s expression. *The Weeper had been slightly better,* Jon thought, *or maybe I had just been more tired in that fight.*

He was limping badly as retreated back to his quarters. He needed to stretch and relax his leg again, smoothing out the cramps. There was a brand new bruise on his chest, shaped like the Greatjon’s boot.

Still, Jon couldn’t help but grin. His hands were shaking and muscles were aching, but it was a good pain – like stretching stiff muscles.
He had a barely settled when he heard a rapt knock on the door. It opened and he saw a grey-haired, hard faced woman walk through, arms folded. Jon ordered the Dragonguard to leave him. Lady Maege seemed to walk everywhere wearing her grey, patched ringmail. Her eyes were guarded.

“Lady Mormont,” Jon said, nodding. “What can I do for you?”

“Just wanted to share some words,” she said dourly. “Should I call you ‘Your Grace’?”

“If you wish.”

“Then let’s not. You don’t appear to be comfortable with the title.” She walked forward glancing around the room. “I saw you in the courtyard. You are skilled with a blade, especially for one so young.”

“Thank you, my lady,” he replied, coolly.

“And Lord Umber was right. That sword is a Targaryen blade – you say it is Dark Sister? Once wielded by Visenya Targaryen, I believe. A slender blade; designed for woman’s hand originally, but you swing it with enough grace.” Her voice was suspicious.

“Aye, and it was last wielded by Bryden Rivers, the Bloodraven, when he took the black. It went missing north of the Wall and ended up in my possession.” That was true, at least, though Jon wouldn’t mention the greenseer.

“Indeed.” She cocked her head. “You are not what we expected.”

“Should I apologise?”

“Don’t. Lord Manderly prepared White Harbour for a savage wildling king. The whole north has been hearing tales of the King-Beyond-the-Wall that could curdle blood. I thought our host was a fool when he suggested we may make an alliance with the king that broke the Wall. So did many.” She had a piercing gaze. “And yet instead, here you stand.”

Jon didn’t reply. When in doubt, stay silent. She met his eyes, critically, and seemed to frown.

“Let me state the obvious. You can guarantee that others are thinking it. You have white hair, you control a dragon, and you wield a Targaryen sword.”

“White is not my natural hair colour.”

“Nevertheless.” The single word hung in the air.

“I am a bastard, my lady,” Jon said, answering the unspoken question. “I do not know my mother’s heritage.”

She paused. “I heard of you at Winterfell,” she admitted. “Did you know that the rumour was that you were born from Ashara Dayne?”

That caught him off-guard. “I… I did not.”

“Your father was quite taken with Ashara Dayne at Harrenhal, shortly before the war. His brother Brandon teased him relentlessly on it,” Lady Maege explained. “When the war broke out, they always said that Lady Ashara was pregnant.”

“Ashara Dayne,” he repeated. He knew only vague mentions about her. The sister of Arthur
Dayne, Sword of the Morning, the finest knight in the realm. House Dayne, one of the most ancient and noble families in Westeros. “I… I don’t…”

“Tis a sad tale. Lady Ashara was said to be a great beauty, dark haired with the brightest violet eyes,” Lady Maege explained. “And then towards the end of the war, Ned Stark rode to the Tower of Joy – a misnamed place if there ever was one – to rescue his sister. He slew Ser Arthur Dayne in single combat, and afterwards returned his greatsword to Starfall. Lady Dayne threw herself out of the Palestone Tower in grief. And from there Lord Stark rode back to Winterfell carrying you, a babe.”

Jon’s head was spinning. Lady Dayne. Does that make me Jon Sand? A child born of war. Did my father really kill my uncle, and my mother committed suicide? Is that what I was to him, a reminder of the love he lost…?

She was looking straight at him. Jon took a deep breath. “Did House Dayne have any Old Valyrian blood in it? Blood of dragonlords?”

“Not as far as I’m aware,” she replied. “House Dayne descends from the First Men. If you are looking for women that have Valyrian ancestry then I can think of few options. Some daughter of House Celtigar or Velaryon? It is possible, I suppose.” Her tone was doubtful. “As is some dragonseeds or Targaryen bastards. As far as the mainline of House Targaryen goes, well…” She stopped to think. “As far as I’m aware, there was only one mature Targaryen woman around at the time; Queen Rhaella Targaryen, wife of the Mad King. And she was pregnant. Do you think it’s likely that Ned Stark had a clandestine affair with his liege’s wife?”

The thought was so outlandish Jon could have laughed. “Of course not!”

“Then I run out of options who could be your mother,” she said with a nod. “I vaguely recall someone mentioning a nursemaid that Lord Stark met in Starfall, but I cannot attest to it.”

Jon shook his head. “I spent my childhood agonising over the identity of my mother, I will not do it any longer. No matter who she is, serving girl or highborn, it doesn’t matter.”

“Is your mother why you refuse to accept your brother’s will?” Her voice turned sharp. “To refuse legitimisation?”

“No,” Jon admitted. The room was quiet, he kept his voice low. “But I know of the Great Bastards, my lady. I know of the Blackfyre Rebellions. If I took the name Stark, then that would be one more insult my enemies would throw at me. Pretender. Usurper. It is a name that will only divide when we should unite.” Jon shook his head, and laughed hollowly. “Just another bastard trying to steal the realm. I will not do it.”

For a moment, there was some strange expression he couldn’t recognise in Lady Maege’s eyes. “Indeed. You are interesting man, King Snow.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

“I’m not so sure it was compliment.”

He smiled softly. “Very well.”

“Answer me one thing,” she said. “What happened to my brother, Jeor Mormont?”

Jon’s eyes flickered. “He is dead. He died on a ranging north.”
Her face frowned; not angry, just faintly sad. “I thought as much. Did you kill him?”

“No, I did not. I swear it, my lady, he died fighting the Others, not the free folk.” There was no immediate reaction, just a quiet nod. “I’m sorry for your loss,” Jon said after a pause, sounding earnest.

She sighed. “My brother was an insufferable, grouchy, little sod,” Lady Maege said with a grunt. “Part of me thought he took the black just because he couldn’t stand my presence. But he was my brother, and I loved him, wretched fool as he was.” After a moment’s pause, she frowned. “And what happened to his sword? Our family’s sword, Longclaw?”

Jon’s face was pained. “It was lost, my lady.” It felt like something else needed to be said. “I wish I could have saved him.”

“If wishes were warmth then summer would last forever, King Snow,” she said curtly, walking towards the door. “But I believe Lord Manderly would see us shortly. There is a war to declare.”

“Very well,” Jon nodded. He paused, twitching, and then called, “Lady Maege… are you happy to accept the alliance between the wildlings?”

The She-Bear stopped. “Happy? No. Bear Island has suffered more from wildlings than anyone. I grew up losing friends in raids from the Frozen Coast,” she said. Her voice was like iron. “But queerer unions have happened. And my brother was too simple to lie; if he said the dead were rising, then I’ll believe it.”

She stopped at the doorway. “Jeor also said that you could be a good leader,” she continued. “In one of his letters, he wrote that he hoped you might succeed him. I’ll believe that one too.”

When she left, Jon released a sigh he never realised he’d been holding. There was something about Lady Maege that felt as hard as the strictest matron.

Outside, it was already dusk. Gods, where did the day go? Doubtless tomorrow would be just as busy.

He paused as he looked out over the setting sun. Despite what he said, he couldn’t stop his head from raising up at the sky. He could see the flickering stars in the darkening red sky. Ashara Dayne, Jon thought. Could I really be the nephew of the Sword of the Morning? Jon Sand, of Starfall?

Jon was summoned to meet with the lords again that night. Minor lords from White Harbour and the surrounding area, not just great lords. They met in Lord Wyman’s personal solar, far smaller and more cramped than the Merman’s Court. All eyes were wary and red; Jon didn’t think that anyone had been sleeping for all the frenzied discussions and talk of war.

Besides Lord Manderly, Galbart Glover and his brother, Lord Umber, Lady Mormont, Lady Flint, and Lord Locke, there were a dozen other petty lords of the White Knife present. Jon looked coolly around the room. The Greatjon stood stiffly at the doorway, arms still folded, but there was maybe something less hostile in his expression.

“We all know why we’re here,” Lord Wyman announced. “I wish for everyone here to place our seals on a declaration of war. To reclaim our lands and justice for our lost kin.”

Nobody spoke first. Jon stepped forward.

“Let us start with what we want,” Jon said to the quiet room, after a long pause. He looked between
Lord Wyman, Lord Umber, and Lady Maege. “I want security for the free folk, the realm put to rights, and the defence of the Wall. You want justice for the crimes committed by House Bolton, your lands and holds secured. Am I right in saying that no one in the room can achieve their wants unless we all agree to work together?”

There was no immediate reply. “And what's to stop you and your savages raiding our lands if we don’t comply?” A man demanded, some minor lord or knight that Jon didn’t know.

“Nothing,” Jon admitted. “Except I don’t want to.”

An alliance is in their best interests too, Jon thought. They're all just nervous.

Galbart Glover demanded that his family was to be rescued at any measure. The Greatjon demanded that Last Hearth was to be recovered, and that there was to be no mercy for those responsible. The matter of citizenship and amnesty for the wildlings caused the Greatjon to spit on the floor, but there were no objections. Maege Mormont was the voice of reason as things became heated, while Lord Wyman came close to expelling one obnoxious lord from the room.

Jon said very little. He remained calm, stoic and patient even though it felt like a few of them were trying to draw him into a fight.

I have the army and the dragon here. They need me more than I need them.

The Greatjon made the demand that Ramsay Bolton was to be hung, drawn and quartered. Nobody objected to that one, and Jon found himself agreeing happily as well.

Finally, some sort of agreement was reached. Lord Wyman called a scribe to dictate a letter.

Jon had never known a message take so long to write. The lords seemed to squabble over every detail, on what to include. Lord Whitehill insisted fiercely that the letter should be signed in name of the Seven, while others demanded that the north would only follow the Old Gods. Jon could feel himself becoming more irritated, but he couldn’t let himself be drawn into an argument. Stay calm. Stay focused.

Lord Umber wanted to declare the alliance for Bran Stark, but Lord Wyman insisted that it was too dangerous to declare for a King in the North until one was secured. Instead, Jon forced them to declare for the only Stark that they could be sure of: Arya.

It was the hour of the owl before the letter was finally written. The scribes agreed to copy it with all haste, and the ravens would fly at first light. Jon spent a long time reading it over and over again, and when the line was done the scribe read it out in a loud, clear:

“On behalf of all true and loyal houses in the north, I hereby declare Lord Roose Bolton a usurper and his rule unlawful, and I call upon all good men to bring justice for the crimes committed by House Bolton.

“The Red Wedding was planned and perpetrated by Bolton men for their own advancement. We have witnesses Lord Jon Umber of Last Hearth, Ser Wylis Manderly of White Harbour, and Robin Flint of Widow’s Watch who attest to the murders. Roose Bolton murdered the good and noble King Robb Stark with his own blade, in breach of the laws of fealty and hospitality. They are as guilty as the Freys of the Crossing for the massacre; House Bolton planned and perpetrated the coup from the beginning.

“For his detestable crimes, the crown saw fit to name Bolton as Warden of the North – a rank left invalid by the illborn boy that sits on the Iron Throne. There is no legitimacy to any of Bolton’s
claims.

“True bannerman of the north renounce the Bolton’s rule. The north renounces the Iron Throne. The north remembers.

“Their crimes are countless and evident. The daughter of the honourable and true Lord Eddard Stark, Arya Stark, was forcibly and unlawfully wed to Ramsay Snow, Bastard of Bolton. A wedding under force is no true wedding. The whole north knows of the monstrous crimes committed by the Bolton Bastard. His first ‘wife’, the widow Lady Hornwood, was starved, tortured and murdered in a tower after being wed at dagger point. Loyal bannermen of the north must rally to save the young Lady Stark from such a fate.

“The Sack of Winterfell, a crime accused on the ironborn, was committed by Bolton men under Ramsay Snow. They torched the castle and put its inhabitants to the sword, another ploy to weaken House Stark’s power in preparation for their defiance. There are countless deaths of innocents that demand justice.

“It falls on noble houses to bring Roose Bolton and his illborn spawn to trial, and to rescue the rightful Lady Stark of Winterfell.

“To answer the call, free men from the lands beyond the Wall have been enlisted against the true foe. Warriors from the far north and loyal bannermen stand side by side, united in the common cause of defending the realm. The forces that hold Karhold, that march from Eastwatch, Castle Black and Shadow Tower are allied with those of White Harbour, Last Hearth and Bear Island.

“The white dragon has been tamed and mounted to put the north to rights. The conspirators, the vermin of House Frey, have already been served justice by dragonfire. The Twins was destroyed in the name of vengeance for Robb Stark, and the same dragon stands ready at the forefront of our armies.

“Let Roose Bolton and his bastard stand judgement before the lords of the north for his crimes. There will be a trial, or they will be brought to trial. He will be judged by the laws of men, by the honour of the Old Gods and in the light of the Seven.”

“Signed Jon Snow of Winterfell. Son of Eddard Stark, half-brother to Robb Stark. Defender of the Realm, King-Beyond-the-Wall, and dragonrider.

“Allied alongside Lord Wyman Manderly of White Harbour, Lord Jon Umber of Last Hearth, Lady Maege Mormont of Bear Island, Galbart Glover Master of Deepwood Motte, Lord Howland Reed of Greywater Watch, Lady Lyessa Flint of Widow’s Watch, Lord Ondrew Locke of Oldcastle.

“The north knows no king but the King in the North, whose name is Stark.”

Jon signed his name to the bottom. He didn’t have a seal, so he left the space blank. It went around the room for lords to sign and seal. It was a big letter to fit on a raven’s leg.

“This is your chance,” Lady Maege said quietly, her voice low enough that no one else would hear. “Follow your brother’s will, and take the name Stark. Let us sign a different name rather than Snow.”

“No.” Jon shook his head simply. He could hardly even explain why it felt so wrong to be Jon Stark, but it just did.

“What do you think?” Galbart Glover asked Lord Wyman behind him.
The fat man paused. “I think that this letter, with those names behind it, aye, that carries weight. It will cause a stir. I do not imagine any Bolton supporter will be sleeping easily. Lord Bolton will never surrender for a farce of a trial, of course, but it is justification enough to begin a campaign.” He paused. “And yet all the ink in the world is useless without the actions to support it.”

“And it is signed by a bastard’s name,” Lord Locke said sourly. “We are giving the realm the choice between one bastard or another.”

Jón didn’t react. He kept his gaze completely cool and stoic as he looked towards Lord Locke. The room felt tense. They shuffled around in silence. The start of a new war.

“I want riders to leave as soon as possible,” Lord Wyman said finally. “Criers to every town and village for leagues around. Let them all know the deal that was struck tonight.” He turned to Jon. “You will have your ships to Eastwatch within days, Your Grace. But first I need your vow that the army at Karhold will be brought to order.”

“Aye,” Jón promised. “I will leave on dragonback on the morn.”

In the end, that was what it came down to: promises and vows. The Greatjon forced him to promise that he would try to find out who raided his daughters’ caravan, and then also threatened that at the first wildling raid then all agreements would be off. Lady Maege needed a promise that all raids on Bear Island from the Frozen Shore would stop, and that the dragon would be ready to defend Bear Island should the Boltons launch an invasion. Galbart Glover only demanded his family must be ransomed and recovered.

There was more talk with other lords, and reassurances concerning protection, family, lands and payment. Jón didn’t even know many of their names. He found himself growing more and more stoic as he looked around the grim, nervous faces and listened to the polite, desperate talk.

So much fear and tension in the room. Everyone has so much at stake, and this is war. They’ve all lost family, and they are likely to lose more still. Why do people talk only about all the big battles and not of all the nervous meetings and grim war council discussions?

“I suggest that White Harbour will become the centre of this coalition,” Lord Wyman continued behind him. “We will need steel, sellswords and more from the Free Cities. And my gates will accept refugees and free folk from the north.”

“What of armoursmiths?” Jón asked, shaking himself out of his distraction. “Does White Harbour have smithies capable of forging steel in bulk?”

“Armour for your forces? It is easier to purchase it.”

“Armour for giants. And armour for mammoths,” Jón said, to a few glances. “As well as steel armour for a dragon.”

There was more discussion. The Greatjon and Lady Maege were to head out quickly, to raise forces from loyal lords to the north. Galbart Glover wanted to leave for Deepwood Motte but Lord Wyman argued that the journey would be too long and too dangerous.

Jón just stood rigidly. For all the discussion and tension, he knew this was only just beginning. Perhaps when he had been younger he would have been excited with the thought of marching off to battle, but now he just felt weary, stiff.

He wanted to retire for the night, but Lord Wyman insisted on having a feast and a celebration of their declaration. Jón was too tense and too tired to understand how he could even want such, but
he found himself going along with it in any case. Summons were sent out, and suddenly the whole castle seemed to be stirring.

“A feast is important,” Lord Wyman insisted, as the lords moved down to the Merman’s Court. “We must announce the news in proper manner.”

It was very late, but the castle gates were opened and the city was restless. Half of the Manderly household was crammed into the Merman’s Court, along with every noble and rich merchant in the city. The long tables were overfilled, and crowds spilled out through the doorway. There wasn’t the time to prepare a feast, so instead they just served wine by the gallon. The Greatjon drunk more than Jon thought possible.

The Merman’s Court was stunned as Lord Wyman announced the news in a booming voice. That White Harbour was allied with the dragon, the wildlings would join them in the fight against the Boltons. Defiance against the Iron Throne, and an army of tens of thousands and a dragon by their side.

There were a few nervous cheers, but there were more confused mutters than anything. Jon felt hundreds of eyes fixed on him.

Jon was sat at the high table, besides Lord Wyman himself. His throne was almost just as tall as the lord’s. A seat fit for a king. The last feast I attended, he thought, I was sat in the bastard’s chair. Nobody looked twice at the bastard, hidden among the men. Now, I’m on the high table and everyone is staring at me. Did I ever imagine that I would end up here?

He felt far too tense for any cheer. They served wine, but Jon didn’t trust himself to drink it. He had never known any ‘feast’ so tense – it felt like the entire hall was muttering and whispering. Dozens of men approached Lord Manderly to voice their worries – trade from the Seven Kingdoms, supplies in their granaries for winter, the refugees in the city – but no one approached Jon with anything other than wide-eyed stares.

It was late, when a brave minstrel stepped forward to play his harp. The sound rang out over the cavernous court as his fingers plucked in a long, slow melody. Jon slowly recognised the tune as the Rains of the Castamere.

He felt the hall tense, but then he made out the words the minstrel was singing.

“And who are you, the late lord said,
that I must respect some feed?

Only a bowl of bread and salt,
that’s not the vow I need.

Be a wolf or a leaping trout,
give crossbows to the bards,

And may the north remember this, my king,
the Freys send their regards.

And so he croaked, and so he croaked,
that Lord of the Crossing,

But now the snow sits o’er his hall,

with no one left to sing.

Yes now the snow sits o’er his hall,

and not a soul shall sing.”

When he finished, a cheer went up through the court. It was the first time all night that there was laughter breaking through the tension. Lord Wyman applauded, stamping his great feet from under the table.

Jon didn’t smile. He just sat and watched. A few other bards and singers followed suit: changing words, adding new verses, turning it into a glorious victory ballad. “The Frayed Crossing”, Jon thought quietly, as he took a deep breath.

Val

Eastwatch-by-the-Sea looked like whole different place. Somehow, in the weeks since she last past through, the whole castle and village had boomed into a thriving settlement. She saw the smoke and fires thick on the horizon, the sound of cattle and livestock bustling. The small village of thatch and stone had expanded into an overflowing flood of bodies and tents, with palisades, ditches and spike walls stretched over the countryside. The harbour was filled with ragtag boats, ships and barges.

Even from the distance, she saw shapes of giants and mammoths at the fringes of the camp.

“How many do you think?” Val asked as her small group approached. They rode hard-bred pounceys through the snow, bringing with them two wayns of blankets, arrows and rusted iron weapons for the Eastwatch force.

“Thirty thousand?” a free folk said with a shrug. “Likely more.”

And the majority of them have white stones on their chest, she noted as they entered through the earthen defences. Nearly all of them, actually. The Lord of Bones ruled as the lord of the Eastwatch, but since Mother Mole and her followers moved through the Wall their numbers were legion.

She headed into the castle itself. The grim stone towers had been decorated with wildling statues and markings. It used to feel barren and desolate, but now it felt lively and hectic.

The castle’s courtyard was now dominated by a hulking structure of oak. They had built a huge wooden hut right by the gate, and inside a whole weirwood tree had been cut down and carved into the shape of a winged, white serpentine figure, with its jaws open. The statue had smoothened obsidian shards for eyes, and it was painted with streaks of red that looked like blood. It stood in a place of awe, in the middle of the temple for the ice dragon.

Somebody felled a whole weirwood tree to carve that thing, Val thought, as she looked at the dragon’s eyes. The free folk didn’t used to chop down weirwoods – the trees used to be sacred.
Val met Garth in the middle of the Eastwatch crowds, as he overlooked the huge gate through the ice. The older man looked more tired and worn than she had ever seen him. “Garth,” she called, smiling. “How are you, old friend?”

“Val,” he said with smile and sigh. “Lady of Val of Whitetree, I hear.”

“Don’t you start,” she scoffed, moving to pull him into a hug.

“It is good to see you. You look well.”

“As do you,” she lied. “How goes it?”

“Long days and long nights,” Garth said. “King Snow appointed me ‘Warden of the Exodus’, along with two other men and women. It was our job to bring as many living south of the Wall as possible, and gods if I had known it would be so hard.”

“Hardhome?” she asked.

“It’ll be deserted by now. The very last of the folk there will be sailing down the peninsula now,” he explained. “We could not move them all quickly in the cold, so it had to be done step by step so we were not left undefended.”

She cast a cautious eye of the crowds and sprawling camp. She saw hungry mobs, and cold, hard eyes. It did not look like a safe place for a young mother and her child. “What of my sister?”

“Dalla will be arriving by ship shortly,” Garth promised. “The sky was calm and wind steady, and with her babe we thought safer to go by sea rather than make the trek. Less risk of an Other attack.”

Good, Mance had tasked with her bringing Dalla back safely. “Were there any attacks?”

“Four,” he said grimly. Gods, no wonder he looks so weary. “But none so bad as that night. And King Snow left his direwolf with us, for protection.”

She blinked. “His direwolf?”

“Aye, the beast is hunting north right now. The wolf warned us before attacks, but more importantly the man was watching through it. He never abandoned us, and we could have called the dragon to aid us when needed.” Garth paused, and then added, “Is it queer that I think the Others were aware of that too? They didn’t seem to risk it.”

“Wargs.” The word had so often been used as a curse, but now she said it with a touch of uncertainty.

“I won’t deny their use,” Garth said with a shrug. “King Snow promised status and protection to any skinchanger that came forward. And he might be the most powerful skinchanger of all.”

She glanced behind her, at the ice dragon temple. It was crowded even now with shuffling bodies. A mother and her babe prayed together at the base of the statue. Val noticed more carvings rather than just dragons; there was wolf statuette of cream oak with red eyes, and a feline statuette of ebony pine with amber eyes, both standing at the base of the dragon. Garth noticed her looking.

“You see there?” He pointed to the west of the castle, and a stubby tower on the walls. “That’s the Hook Tower, reserved for the king. Right now, the only creature there is the king’s shadowcat, and the man himself hasn’t been to Eastwatch in months. That’s a whole tower, just for a shadowcat. That cat is kept better fed than most folk too.”
“So even his pets are royal too.”

“Aye, even his pets,” Garth agreed. “Word spread around that the king favours those who gift him animals. First it was Kyleg Stonehand bringing a great snow owl. Then Marrick One-Foot and his clan spent four days capturing and reigning in a big brute of a bull auroch that they intend to present to him. Not to be outdone, Aki Twentysons and his family vowed to capture a snow bear for him, one bigger and stronger than Varamyr ever had. Larrs the Pretty took the challenge – he started bartering with one of the giant clans, so he could bring King Snow his very own mammoth.”

Val stared incredulously. “These people are fighting for their lives and they’re worried about gaining favour with him?”

He nodded. “Aye. Take a look at that temple over there and tell me you’re surprised.”

She pursed her lips. Her eyes darkened slightly.

Everywhere she looked, she saw pale faces, gaunt expressions, and wide eyes. Even now, there were more people trekking through the great gates. The line of free folk never stopped. Maybe it was an army, but it was a weak, exhausted and hungry army.

“And now they’re coming south of the Wall,” Val said after a pause. “How do you intend to feed them all?”

Garth shrugged. “Isn’t that why we’ve got a king?”

It was only the next day when she realised what he meant. She was awoke at first light by the sound of shouts and horns. They spotted the white dragon flapping in the distance, circling around the coastline. Shortly later, there were cries of sails on the horizon.

*Ships*, Val realised, *big ones*. They were galleys of dark oak, each with three sails and lines of oars. Big southron ships coming north. The ships flew a green half-fish figure as well as a grey wolf on their banners.

*But the dragon isn’t attacking them*, she realised. Instead, Sonagon flew in slow, lazy circles above the vessels – escorting them. She heard the mutters ripple around her as the crowds gathered. Some were rushing for weapons, but not many.

It was noon by the time the dragon finally came into Eastwatch. It dropped itself onto the roof of the keep, and Val saw cautious figures climbing down from it. They used ropes to clamber onto the balcony of the keep.

There were so many men and women rushing forward to meet King Snow that Val could hardly even get close. The free folk pushed, shoved and neighed like cattle, all calling for their king’s attention. It was so hectic that the sudden rush through the gates threatened to crush those in the middle.

Between the shoving bodies, Val didn’t even try to get close enough to see the man, but she heard his voice as he shouted to the crowd from the castle steps. “White Harbour has allied with us!”

King Snow shouted over the chaos. “They will support free folk settling in the north, and fight alongside against those who will not! These ships bring food, blankets and iron. There will be more coming behind them. I cannot promise feasts, but I promise that nobody will starve!”

The mob reached fever pitch. Some shouting questions, but Val saw other faces of wide-eyed, stunned hope and devotion. She didn’t see where it came from, but slowly she started to hear the
sound of stomping feet, and the chant from a dozen lips. “King Snow! King Snow!” The cry spread around the crowd, growing louder. “King Snow! King Snow!”

Bloody kneelers, Val thought angrily, turning to walk away. The supplies were good, but they’d be kissing his feet at this rate.

She could hardly even explain why the thought left her so bitter. The thought of her lying in his bed, and that word – *shameful* – flickered through her memory.

The ships docked that afternoon. So many crowded around the harbour that it took the king and his Dragonguard to keep order. Huge boxes and barrels were unloaded by nervous sailors. Most of it was taken into the castle by Rattleshirt and his men, but they were already starting to distribute crates of turnips, fish and grain by the beach.

Val had very little to do with it; she only gave the scene glances from afar. Instead, she moved around the camp, enquiring after her sister, the giants and people she knew. More than once, though, she heard the phrase “the blessings of the ice dragon”. She even saw men and women wearing white furs and with the shape of a dragon’s body painted or tattooed onto their cheek – the most devout of Mother Mole’s followers had taken to dedicating themselves to their god. The dragon worshippers.

*No doubt there’ll be more joining the cause after tonight,* she thought darkly. Right now, they had one temple. Soon, there could easily be more.

Even after dusk, the camp didn’t settle. The king hosted the sailors from the ships in the castle, while outside it looked like a celebration. Huge bonfires were raised, with the sound of singing and chanting filling the air. Whole queues of men and women formed at the castle gates, pushing and shouting for an audience with King Snow. The Dragonguard had to huddle to keep them all back, while men uselessly bellowed for the king’s attention.

Val set up her tent and retired early for the night. It was a full moon, pale light shimmering over the smoke and fires around Eastwatch. She saw the dragon’s scales glint in the moonlight. It’s a new age, Val recalled Mother Mole proclaiming. An age of people bowing and whimpering at the ice dragon’s feet.

The night stretched out, but there was no sleep to be have. Then, she saw a hooded figure walked towards her tent. The figure went straight for the door. She reached out for her knife.

“You walk towards a spearwife’s tent and you lose an appendage,” Val warned, drawing her blade. It was late, but she wore furs and leathers at all times, wrapped in her white snow bear fur cloak.

“Val,” a familiar voice said. He lowered his hood, and she saw bone white hair. “It’s me.”

She didn’t lower the knife.

“Snow,” Val said curtly. “You’ve got crowds wanting to see you.”

“Furs will keep them back,” Jon sounded tired. “I’m in no mood to stand before any of them.”

“And here you are. Is it normal for kings to have to sneak away from their… what is it?… subjects in the dead of night under a hood?”

“Perhaps not.” He smiled humourlessly. “But there are only so many problems I’m capable of handling in a day.”
She didn’t return the smile. “Well, where are my manners? I should be curtsying, should I not?” she said snidely. “Or do you want me to turn around and hide myself under a blanket, so I do not tempt you into anymore ‘shameful’ acts?”

“Val…”

“Or perhaps you just want to continue where we left off,” she continued. She knew she was being aggressive, but she was angry enough not to care, “after bedding me and dismissing me as a mistake? I hear in the south you have those ‘silent sisters’, so perhaps you want–”

“Val,” he said, with a low sigh. “I’m here to apologise. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have reacted how I did.”

Her eyes narrowed, but she didn’t speak. Her arms folded.

He smiled ruefully, gaze flickering. She saw the dark circles under his eyes. “I… I enjoy your company,” he said hesitantly. “I enjoy spending time with you, I… I enjoyed spending the night with you. You’re beautiful, and… I didn’t mean to – it happened fast, and I don’t want to…”

His voice seemed to trail off. She let the silence linger for a good while, before finally asking, “what do you want, King Snow?”

“I don’t even know,” he admitted. His expression felt softer. None of the iron demeanor he put on when others were watching. “I want to do my duty well. I want to protect people, I want to keep my promises, and I…” A pause, a sheepish gulp. “I’ve made a lot of promises recently. I promised a lot to even just get this far, and then I promised more to get this alliance. I don’t want to make another promise that I can’t keep or another person that I fail, but I would still…” He sighed. “I would really, really like it if I could spend more time with you.”

The silence returned. Val kept her face stoic, but her heart betrayed her with a slight skip.

His face looked pained. “And right now,” he admitted in a quiet murmur and with wide, honest eyes. “I really like to just go to sleep. I have been working on half a day’s rest for the last week and I am so tired.”

Her posture broke. A chuckle broke through her lips, and she felt herself smile. She moved her hand upwards, scratching at her chin. He seemed different, more vulnerable, more… weary and exposed.

“How many women have you had, Jon Snow?” Val said finally, keeping her voice quiet.

“Just one. Ygritte,” he replied. His gaze flickered to the ground. “And she… Ygritte pursued me quite forwardly. Even when we first lay together, I did so because… well, I did so because I thought I had to fit into Mance’s host. I loved Ygritte, I did, but I… gods!” he cursed, breaking his ramble. “I suppose what I’m saying is that I don’t know much on how to do this.”

“With women?”

“With anything.”

Her cheeks twitched. There was something of a young, lost, little pup in his expression. It made a change from the cold, quiet and strong wolf she was used to. She took a step forward. “It’s really quite simple,” she whispered. “Kiss me.”

She could feel the air between them. He took a step forward too. She could see every detail of his
face; the lines around his eyes, the faint grey stubble on his chin. Dark eyes and white hair. She felt him leaning in, and his breath on her lips.

The kiss was soft, light and chaste. Val didn’t know why, but that made her giggle.

There was a long moment of quiet. Suddenly, all of the noises from outside didn’t seem to matter.

They paused, their breaths hushed. His arms wrapped around her slowly, but still he seemed to hesitate. Like there was something else he needed to say. “I pushed Ygritte off a cliff,” he muttered, eyes pained. “The Others were coming for us and I needed to get her away, but I... I promised to protect her and then I pushed her away.”

She paused. Ah. “You don’t need to promise anything to me,” she muttered. He felt his hand stroke her hair. He had nice fingers. Her hand touched his chest, tracing the line of his scar. “Let’s go to bed, Jon.”

He nodded. His lips moved forward to kiss her again. Her hands slowly unfastened his tunic. Then, they wrapped themselves in the furs of her tent, curled up together, and went to sleep.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

The kings in the realm, and the tyrants trying to destroy it. The war of five kings come again.

Chapter 28

The Imp

Their camp was bustling, constantly hectic. They had ridden most of the day, but somehow even when they’d stopped the activity had never ceased. The camp was nestled by a curve of the Tumblestone River, north of Lord Harroway’s Town. The muddy earth was covered in a faint slush of dirty snow stomped by boots and hooves. There’d been no time to set up stakewalls around the campsite, but the men of the Golden Company were experienced enough to patrol and watch diligently.

It was a hard, bare campsite of horses and a hundred hide tents with few comforts, but it wasn't the worst place Tyrion had ever stayed. The lack of wine caused him more grief than the lack of blankets.

Tyrion saw the riders come from the north. Three chargers galloping down the road. “Is it true?” the dwarf asked eagerly, as they approached.

“Aye,” one of forward riders said. His eyes were grim and his face exhausted. “It's true. We followed the river north and saw it ourselves; the castles really have been turned to rubble. I swear, I've never seen aught like it.”

“Survivors?” Ser Franklyn Flowers asked harshly. Tyrion was trembling.

“Few. Not many of the host at the Twins made it out, and then the monster chased down those who did.” The man looked an experienced, hard-faced sellsword, but he sounded unnerved. “We saw riots from Fairmarket to Oldstones. Whole mobs mad with panic.”

It’s true. Dragons. The laughter broke through Tyrion’s throat. The sound caused a few men to jump. “That is brilliant!” He cackled. “Come, let us raise a toast! To Walder Frey, and the legacy he will leave!”

There were some strange looks at him. The news of the dragon had left the riverlands in disarray, even many of the Golden Company had been shaken. For days, the ravens were flocking around the sky in panic – demanding answers where there were few to be had. Nobody had expected the destruction of the Twins, and now it was just gone.

Still, Tyrion just had to smile.

Walder Frey worked with my father, Tyrion thought viciously. The destruction of the Twins is just another bit of my father's legacy broken to pieces. And by the time I'm done the realm will remember Tywin as the great lord who broke everything.
These last months had been... revitalising. Tyrion felt like he had a purpose again.

“Dragons,” he muttered out-loud, as he waddled back to his tent. “Dragons!”

“Just the one dragon, it seems,” said Ser Franklyn Flowers, walking next to him. Ser Franklyn was a big-bellied, shambling hulk of a man with a seamed face crisscrossed with old scars. His right ear looked as if a dog had chewed on it and his left ear was missing entirely. He was an extremely formidable fighter, and a loyal lieutenant, so Tyrion quite liked having the man with him. By comparison, Tyrion was one of the few men who could make Ser Franklyn seem handsome.

“But it’s a big one,” Tyrion chuckled. “Do you not see the jape? I go halfway around the world for Queen Daenerys’ dragons and it turns out there’s one right here at home. Our king declares himself a dragon returned, but, no, a real dragon has already beaten him to it!”

“How the hells can you even laugh about it?” Ser Franklyn said incredulously. “That dragon ain’t on our side, you know.”

“We should all be laughing. We might as well laugh rather than cry.”

In his tent, a letter waited for him where he left it. Such a glorious letter too. Tyrion had read the letter several dozen times already, and his reaction had slowly turned from incredulous shock to laughter. Jon Snow, now King-Beyond-the-Wall and dragonrider, Tyrion thought. He remembered the young bastard, he had even befriended him during the trip to the Wall. Who would have guessed?

“What does this mean for us?” Ser Franklyn grumbled.

“Means?” Tyrion scoffed. “It means that our king may well be scorched – sorry, froze – to a crisp should a certain Stark bastard wish it. And there’s absolutely nothing we can do about that possibility either. The whole realm stands at the northern king’s mercy; we are somewhat lacking dragons ourselves.”

“We have a dragon,” another sellsword said harshly. A tall, hard-faced serjeant called Chains.

“King Aegon is a dragon.”

“But not the flying sort, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t bloody understand,” Ser Franklyn grumbled. “How can there be a dragon in the north? Why is it here?”

Tyrion chuckled as he scrambled up onto a seat. They were no chairs with them, so instead he just used a barrel. “Oh, it’s quite simple really; it’s here because the gods are cunts,” he explained, with a cheerful, bitter laugh. “All of them – vicious little cunts. The powers-that-be heard of Aegon’s return, a young boy with a very good chance of actually reclaiming his throne, and so they decided to ruin that plan with another conqueror with another dragon. They are gods – they’ll stamp on your face every single time.”

There were a few glances shared between the Company serjeants. Tyrion didn’t really care what they thought of him. Lord Tywin had been obsessive about preserving his reputation, staying stiff and prideful. Tyrion didn't have a reputation – he was already the drunken, fiendish dwarf. There had been mummers’ plays performed about the Imp’s evil misdeeds. So instead, Tyrion had resolved himself to drink and to jape, and yet be just as ruthless as his father ever was. More.

“But this letter,” Tyrion said finally, pointing, “it came from Harrenhal, did it not?”
“Aye.” The Golden Company had taken Harrenhal a week past, and the castle fell very easily too. The castle supposedly belonged to Lord Baelish, but it had been held by Ser Bonifer Hasty and the Holy Hundred. Then Ser Bonifer left for King’s Landing for the ‘Holy War’ brewing between Crown and Faith, which had left Harrenhal so poorly held a token force of the Golden Company managed to seize it easily.

“If Harrenhal received a raven, then it’s a good bet that Storm’s End has too,” Tyrion said. “Oh, how I wish I could be there to see King Aegon’s reaction when he reads it.” Though, truthfully, it’s Jon Connington’s reaction I’d be more interested in. Perhaps one of the spies I left behind could relay it?

“We can’t fight against a dragon,” Chains grumbled. “If this bastard Jon Snow has declared himself king too, where does that leave us?”

Tyrion stopped to think about it. He shook his head. “It doesn’t change a thing,” he said finally. “Our plans remain the same for now. Read the letter; Jon Snow has not declared himself king of the Iron Throne – his interest appears to be in the north.” But how long will that last? He paused, biting his lip.

“I know of Jon Snow. I met him, travelled with him for a time,” Tyrion admitted. “I remember a young, brooding boy so bitter about being a bastard that he ran off to take the black. Nice lad, though a bit sullen, naive and arrogant. I have difficulty matching him with the king declared in this letter. And yet I suppose war changes us all.” Idly, Tyrion ran his finger over the scar mutilating his face and cutting through his missing nose.

They were all looking at him, uncertainty in their eyes. “No, we must use this to our advantage,” Tyrion said. “The riverlands has lost its major force, and the west is now lacking its warden.” I must raise a toast to my poor cousin Daven. We Lannisters seem to be dropping like flies. “If Aegon has his wits, he’ll use this to his advantage as well. The people are panicked, they should be calling for a strong Targaryen leader to save them from the savages and dragons.”

“And if the Bastard King flies south to raze Aegon’s castle too?”

“I’m not so sure that he will. But if he does, we will negotiate.” I wonder what type of man Jon Snow has become? “We will stall him with talk and empty words, and we will do so for as long as we can without fighting him. Remember that sooner or later Queen Daenerys will be coming from the east, and she will bring three dragons versus his one. When she arrives, Aegon Targaryen must be sitting on the Iron Throne, and of course Daenerys will support her own family over a northern pretender.”

Hopefully, with Queen Daenerys’ reinforcements, they could convince Jon Snow to bend the knee. If not, he’d have to die to secure the Seven Kingdoms. Tyrion wouldn’t be happy to see the boy dead, but, well, Tyrion had lived with worse deeds.

The thought of Shae’s gasping face flickered across his eyes. He wished he had some wine.

The sellswords didn’t look convinced. “It changes nothing,” Tyrion insisted. “Our war is in the south, we leave the north alone. We need only take King’s Landing and then the rest of the realm will declare for us. And when Daenerys arrives, it will be simple maths; three dragons is greater than one.”

“Aye, if you say so, my lord.” Chains muttered, as he stepped out the tent.

Tyrion grinned. My lord. Lord Tyrion Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock. Yes, this changes nothing
of the plan.

“Should we prepare to move out?” Ser Franklyn asked.

He mused. “Not just yet. Let’s give our guest one more day to arrive,” he said. “But bring me the letters we have on Riverrun, Darry, Fairmarket and Pinkmaiden. Let us see if we can forge any alliances while the ruins are still warm. Or cold, as the case may be.”

Tyrion settled in, exhaling deeply. He reread the northern letter one more time, just because it was still barely sinking through. *A dragon of ice.*

“I should think that House Bolton will be able to fill a moat from their collective shit after they read this,” Tyrion announced in his tent, to no one in particular. “Oh, what a grand letter. I shall frame this letter and mount it over my fireplace: in the lord’s chamber of Casterly Rock, right next to where I place my father’s skull and my sister’s crown.”

Some much work to be done. *This is my campaign,* he thought, *and gods it feels exciting.* It was Tyrion’s first true campaign as well; the only experience Tyrion had with an army was his short-lived tenure alongside his father’s host, up to the battle on the Green Fork. Even then, his lord father had denied him any true command. Now he was the commander of his own force; a fairly inexperienced commander, true, but Tyrion felt like he was learning quickly.

Now then, how will the riverlands react? Where are the most crucial places? Who will muster forces first? My aunt still holds Riverrun, but her options are limited. Houses Blackwood and Piper are lacking lords, so Pinkmaiden and Raventree will be wide open. The brotherhood without banners and the outlaws are sure to take advantage. Wayfarer’s Rest will be stirring, Fairmarket is in frenzy, and the Saltpans were raided to all hell. Harrenhal is already ours, and House Darry...

Tyrion paused with the thought. After only a brief hesitation, he picked up a quill and started to write a letter. Three letters, all in a swift hand.

“Ser Franklyn,” Tyrion called. “I have a letter here. I want five good riders to head for Castle Darry with all haste.”

“Darry?” Ser Franklyn frowned as he stomped into the tent. “What is there in Darry?”

“An opportunity. This letter is for Darry, addressed to Lady Amerei Frey. These two are for Storm’s End, one for our king and the other for Ser Tristan Rivers,” Tyrion explained. The man looked confused. “I do believe we could a broker a marriage here.”

“A marriage,” he repeated dumbly. *Not the sharpest tool, Ser Franklyn,* Tyrion thought, *but not that I need him to be.*

“Yes. The male line of House Darry went extinct during this war,” he explained. “The castle and lands were named instead to my cousin Lancel Lannister when he married Amerei Frey, whose mother was a Darry. The marriage was never consummated, and poor Lancel abandoned his newfound house to go join the Warrior’s Sons. It seems that bedding my sister drove my cousin to a vow of celibacy.” Tyrion chuckled.

The knight still didn’t understand. “This all leaves Lady Amerei Frey, wed but not bedded, in a very precarious position, sitting in a castle that she has little claim to,” Tyrion continued. “*However,* in the ranks of the Golden Company we have Ser Tristan Rivers, a bastard of Darry who fled Westeros after Robert’s Rebellion. A strong man, a well-seasoned and loyal knight. Such
a bastard could be legitimised by the king, to provide Lady Amerei with the claim she needs to keep her castle, and I think that in light of recent events, we could broker a union between them quite quickly.” He paused, and then added, “Very quickly, if half the rumours I hear about Lady Amerei are true.”


“It’s not about men,” Tyrion said irritably. “House Darry is traditionally an extremely Targaryen loyalist house. If House Darry declares for Aegon, then that means something – another part of Targaryen legacy reclaimed for Aegon.”

By the look on his face, it seemed Ser Franklyn was beginning to understand. “But wait,” he said with a frown, “why would this Lady Amerei even want to wed a bastard anyways?”

“Because it’s become very, very unhealthy to be a Frey in this kingdom,” said Tyrion. “She will be looking to ditch her family name as soon as possible.”

Between Lady Stoneheart and the brotherhood without banners and now this ice dragon, it seemed that anyone from House Frey had developed a very short life expectancy.

Ser Franklyn agreed to gather the riders. “And tell them to bring back a casket of wine from Darry, as payment for brokering the marriage!” Tyrion called. “I have gone the last four months without ever being sober and I don’t intend to start now!”

A grin spread over his face as he went through the letters and maps, twisting his scar. Yes, many riverlords will be panicked, and looking for new allies. The Golden Company is in a good position to make some friends.

He could imagine Lord Connington fuming yet unable to object over yet another service Tyrion provided for Aegon. Now aren’t I a devoted ally to the king?

He paused where Riverrun was marked. Tyrion debated the wisdom of visiting his Aunt Genna as well, but decided against it. He had nearly three thousand men under him, and a campaign in the westerlands awaited.

It was dark when his guest finally arrived. The patrols saw the horses coming, and a runner called for him. Tyrion had just left his tent when he saw an old, familiar facing dismounting and walking guardedly through the perimeter. A tall, well-worn man with dark hair and narrowed eyes. The sellswords all watched as he strode through the camp.

Lord Bronn Stokeworth of the Blackwater wore steel and finery rather than his old leathers and ringmail. He wore a steel plate, and a surcoat showing a black lamb on a red field, drinking from a silver chalice. The coat of arms of House Stokeworth, but inverted. Bronn wasn’t just hired muscle now, instead he had two guards of his own walking behind him. He’s come a long way from being the sellsword I picked up at the crossroads inn, Tyrion noted. Oh, doesn’t war change us all?

“Lord Bronn!” Tyrion greeted, his voice slightly icy. “Such a pleasure to see you again.”

Bonn’s eyes were cautious. “Lord Tyrion,” he muttered. “So it’s true; you are behind this invasion. I didn’t think I’d ever see you alive again, my lord.”

“Evil men never die, my lord.” Tyrion replied. “There’s too much bitterness in us, the Stranger won’t go near. That’s why both of us are still alive, is it not? Come into my tent.”

‘Lord’ Bronn followed cautiously. His hand never moved far from his sword. Ser Franklyn kept by
Tyrion’s side, staring suspiciously. “And I see you’ve got yourself some new muscle,” Bronn said, with a nod at Ser Franklyn. The burly knight only grunted.

“It’s a profitable position, is it not?” Tyrion said. “Why, just ask my former muscle, and see what heights he’s achieved.”

“You sound bitter.”

“What, because you abandoned me in that jail cell to be executed? *Never.*”

He only grunted. “You’ve done alright for yourself.”

“As have you. Selling out friends appears to be good business.”

“As does murdering your father.” For the first time, Bronn cracked a wry smile. *There’s the old dark sellsword I know.*

Tyrion raised his hands. “I’m an opportunist.”

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you with a head again,” Bronn muttered, shaking his head incredulously. “Tell me, how the bloody hell did you manage all this? The Golden Company? Invading Westeros behind a bloody Targaryen?”

“I have too many debts to be repaid, old friend, I didn’t have time to let myself be killed. Pray tell, how has the Seven Kingdoms been since I’ve been away?”

“Falling to pieces. Did you know your sister tried to have me killed?” Bronn said, shaking his head. “She manipulated my new goodbrother to try and kill me. Bloody fool he was. I mean, honestly; the murder plot is bad enough, but sending an assassin *that* crap is just insulting.”

“Of course. You know Cersei would never rest easily with an old friend of mine sitting so close to her in a position of power.”

“Yes, well.” Bronn just shrugged, dropping onto a barrel cross-legged. “Oh, and I named my son after you.”

“I heard. Little Tyrion Tanner? The bastard born after his mother’s rape by a hundred men? Aww, I’m honoured,” he said with chuckle.

Bonn chuckled too. “I thought you’d like it. I don’t think your sister was laughing, though. Lollys wanted to call the babe Tywin.”

“That would have been better.” He nodded. “How is your lady wife?”

“She’s sweet enough so long as I don’t talk to her,” he said. “But I’m Lord of Stokeworth now, so who cares?”

“So I see. The black sheep on a bloody field is a fitting personal sigil for you.” Tyrion leaned forward, resting his head on his hands. “But let’s be frank; we both know that any opportunities you have in a realm where Cersei is in power are fairly limited. There’ll be more catspaws to kill you, more lords to replace you. Do you really want to keep suffering my sister’s meddling?”

“From what I hear, your sister isn’t going to be in power much longer. She’s not in much power right now, actually.” Bronn shrugged. “My guess is that the Queen Dowager will be removed and sent away somewhere remote, after the mess she’s made of things. She’ll probably be exiled on
“And will the Tyrells, or whoever comes after, treat you any better? Do you expect them to share their influence with you, or invite you to their court?” Tyrion challenged. “You’ll always be just an upjumped sellsword to them, someone to be shunned from their games. Wouldn’t you be better off joining us?”

Bronn bit his lip, pausing. They both knew why Tyrion had invited him, and he rode a long way to get here. The Golden Company could use support. “Hells, I like you. Twisted little thing that you are. But I’m Lord Stokeworth now, I got a castle and everything. So you aren’t buying a blade anymore, you’re dealing with a noble house. Why should House Stokeworth commit rebellion for you?”

“Because you’re a sellsword at heart. And the rewards are great,” Tyrion scoffed. “Don’t act noble; you would sell your own wife for enough gold to buy a prettier one.”

“Is that supposed to be an insult?”

“Do you take it as one?”

“Not really.” Bronn shrugged. “But I got a status at stake now. And I won’t get a damn thing when you lose.”

Behind him, Ser Franklyn stiffened. Tyrion held up his hand. “‘When’?” Tyrion asked curiously. “You think we’re going to lose?”

“Well, yeah.” Bronn nodded. “Your sellswords are putting up a good fight, I’ll give them that. But they ain’t going to be able to take the city, and I can’t afford to back the wrong side here.”

“Every war is a gamble, you know that more than most,” Tyrion said. “But let’s go through the odds, then. How many men are holding the city?”

Bronn paused to think of it. “Five thousand men under Kevan Lannister. Fifteen to twenty thousand under Mace Tyrell. Anywhere between four to eight thousand from the city itself, including gold cloaks.” Bronn would have more experience than most in holding the city. “And you have got – what? – five thousand sellswords marching up the kingsroad?”

“Seven.”

“Alright, seven.” Bronn shook his head. “It still doesn’t work. Stannis had twenty thousand, and he couldn’t break the city walls. And Stannis was up against fewer defenders too – we didn't have Lannister and Tyrell men to support us against Stannis’ siege. You’re not going to win that battle without some serious reinforcements.”

“Except those numbers aren’t right, are they?” Tyrion argued. “Do you really think the Lannister men and Tyrells will still be on the same side when the Golden Company arrives?”

Bronn didn’t reply. “My dear sister holds Queen Margaery hostage in the Red Keep,” Tyrion said softly. “The Red Keep is besieged by the Faith Militant. Neither Mace Tyrell nor my uncle Kevan can even get through the city without triggering riots. This High Sparrow has declared that the Red Keep is on lockdown until Queen Cersei comes forth to stand trial, and she refuses to do so.” He grinned. Thank you Cersei, for your beautiful assistance to my war effort. “Ser Kevan is trying to keep the peace, a difficult task when the king and his wife are being held hostage by his mother.

“So let me share how we are going to win the battle, Lord Bronn, it’s fairly simple; we are going to
convince the High Sparrow to declare for King Aegon.”


“But why wouldn’t he?” Tyrion challenged. “Three hundred years ago the High Septon fasted for a week, and then declared Aegon the Conqueror as the anointed and rightful ruler of the realm; do you think this one couldn’t do the same for the rightful Targaryen ancestor? The High Sparrow is a man who cares for the smallfolk, who wants a more devout and dutiful crown, while Aegon VI could be the king he requires. What would a pious septon appreciate more than a young man of humble upbringings, rising up to accept a greater duty?” Tyrion smiled sweetly. “Yes, I think the High Sparrow could be convinced, especially when considering his other options. My sister has proven herself corrupt and unworthy, Stannis is mad and nobody else seems to care about the smallfolk that he holds so dear. Meanwhile, Aegon VI, young, bold and earnest, will prostrate himself before the Faith and pledge to uphold his duty to the people. Once the High Septon and the Faith Militant declare Tommen as illborn and unrightful, then I think the tides in this war will very quickly change.”

Poor Tommen, the thought made Tyrion feel a little guilty. The boy was one of the few innocents in this whole game. Still, it would be worthwhile just to hear Cersei’s screams. *I will destroy your legacy, father. I will pull down everything you ever built, brick by brick, just so I can hurt you again.*

Bronn was looking a lot more interested. “Alright then.” Bronn nodded. “That would get you a hundred or so Warrior’s Sons, but gods-know-how-many thousands of the Poor Fellows. Smallfolk with pitchforks. There’d be riots in the city like you’d never seen before, and the whole Tyrell-Lannister alliance wouldn’t be looking so good after that. But your young king *still* needs to beat an army at least twice his size, and he just doesn’t have the numbers.”

“Not so when Dorne declares for us. Do you think that’ll even the odds?”

He looked surprised. “You have Dorne on your side?”

“I spoke to Princess Arianne myself,” Tyrion said smugly. “She is with King Aegon right now. Yes; there’ll be Dornish spearmen fighting alongside the most formidable company in the world. We will take King’s Landing, King Aegon Targaryen takes the Iron Throne to the jubilation of the people, and suddenly lords will start bowing to him. Does that sound like an opportunity you’d want to be a part of?” He cocked his head, meeting Bronn’s gaze. “This is a golden opportunity for you, Lord Stokeworth. A chance to hedge your bets on the dark horse early, and reap the greatest rewards.”

“Alright,” Bronn said, eyes sharp. “And what are you offering me?”

Tyrion smiled. “What castle would you like?”

“What are you bringing?” Ser Franklyn spoke up suspiciously from behind him. “From what I hear, you are nothing but a mercenary who bought a dim-witted highborn wife.”

“I’m Lord Stokeworth. I’ve been recruiting for a while; I’ve got two hundred good men,” Bronn snorted. “Maybe up to five hundred once I round up some of the local boys.”

“Five hundred farmer’s boys and sour sellswords?” Ser Franklyn scoffed. “Ain’t worth it.”

“And he also controls Stokeworth – a castle of crucial importance right outside King’s Landing’s
“Gate,” Tyrion argued. “When King’s Landing is under siege, they rely on Rosby and Stokeworth to provide food and aid. You control them, and that is another notch on the noose.”

“Aye,” Bronn said with a smug smile, “and I could bring you Rosby too. The late Lord Rosby’s ward – the one who controls the castle – he ain’t so fond of Lannisters. You buy my services, and I promise you that no aid from Duskendale or anywhere else will be getting through to King’s Landing.”

Ser Franklyn looked unconvinced. “He’s a fiend, but he’s good for it,” Tyrion promised. “House Stokeworth’s declaration will be the start of a crownlands rebellion, undermining the throne where they should be strongest. And Bronn led the defence of King’s Landing during the last siege against Stannis; who could be better to lead the second siege?” Tyrion turned to Bronn. “Let us go through the numbers, Lord Bronn. Let’s see what your contribution is worth. If you want a second castle or a second wife, I’m sure there’ll be lands and widows to spare. I pay my debts, you know I’m good for that.”

“Shouldn’t it be King Aegon that I speak to?” He said suspiciously. “He’s the one I’m fighting for.”

“I’m the King’s Master of Coin,” said Tyrion. “Aegon appointed me as a commander in his army, to be Warden of the West under his rule. You fight for me.”

Brons shook his head, but he looked impressed. “Well, you’ve got yourself in with him good and proper, haven’t you? How the bloody hell do you manage it? I sell my sword, sure, but somehow you manage to sell your words.”

“His Grace was very appreciative when I helped broker the alliance with Dorne,” Tyrion said. Princess Arianne had been somewhat reluctant to agree to such, but Tyrion helped persuade her. “Come on, walk with me. Let us enjoy the night’s air.”

They stood up and walked out of the tent. The sound of water gushing and crickets chirping sounded in the night, but the camp was restless with the stomping of boots and stirring men. “I want Claw Island,” Bronn decided finally. “You make me the Lord of Claw Island and I’ll declare for you.”

“That is the seat of House Celtigar.” An old and ancient seat too. He’s still ambitious. “It was, until Stannis Baratheon raided that island to the hells and set it on fire,” Bronn explained. “I take Claw Island and all of its lands. I reckon if they’re looking for a new lord they could do a lot worse than me.”

“I’ll bear it in mind.” Tyrion paused, frowning. “So Stannis is still in this fight?”

“Yes, he’s been strangling ships from Dragonstone, and starving the city by sea,” Bronn explained. “They say Stannis went half mad after his defeat on the Blackwater, and then went the other half after his second defeat up north. He doesn’t have the forces to fight any true battles, but he sure has been hacking away at the corners.”

“Last I heard he had less than a dozen ships.” Tyrion shook his head. “How could Stannis even compare against the size of the Redwyne fleet from King’s Landing?”

“He can’t. But I’m not surprised Stannis is still fighting, I am amazed that his men are still following him,” said Bronn. “Most men, even loyal ones, would desert their commanders when their cause becomes that desperate, but his men are fanatics, from what I hear. And he has the luck
of a devil with him too; in every raid or ambush he has the wind behind him, but no other vessel does. Stannis burned three galleys off the coast of Dragonstone just the other week.”

“Beautiful.” One more knot in Cersei’s noose – a relentless force blocking travel by sea too. Cersei won’t risk fleeing by ship, and her Royal Navy had been rather lacking ever since Cersei’s ‘Grand Admiral’ Aurane Waters had fled the city along with three dozen of their vessels. That’s another fine decision I must thank her for.

Tyrion stopped to enjoy the view the rivers. Somewhere in the distance a wolf howled, but the sound of boots and horses filled the quiet din. There are thousands of experienced men camped here in the riverlands and ready for war under my command. Let Lord Connington besiege King’s Landing, I have a campaign of my own to lead.

“One thing I don’t get,” Bronn commented as he looked around the camp. “You have, what, three thousand men here?”

“Twenty-five hundred,” he clarified. “All of them mounted men. We went ahead of the main force to secure areas of the riverlands, heading west.” A tactic borrowed from the Young Wolf’s playbook.

“Why the riverlands? Doesn’t Aegon need all the men he can get to take the city?”

“Unfortunately, it seems I will have miss that battle. There is the fear of reinforcements gathering from the west, and so Lord Connington wants to be ready. I was sent ahead of the main host to lead a sortie, as well as to potentially rally any riverlords to our cause.”

That was true, but there had also been something of power struggle between Lord Connington and Tyrion. The Lord Hand was insecure in his position, and he feared Tyrion’s influence. Lord Connington couldn’t get rid of him, of course (the dwarf had nestled himself in too deep), so instead he had resolved to send Tyrion away. Tyrion ended up named as the commander of near three thousand cavalry going west.

Lord Connington wants to take the lion’s share of the victory, he thought with scoff, he doesn’t want me around in King’s Landing. Still, in this case Tyrion was all too happy to comply. There were opportunities that Tyrion intended on exploiting in the riverlands and in the west.

There had not even been a whisper of news concerning his brother Jaime, but Tyrion had been preparing to fight against Ser Daven when the news of the dragon attack against the Twins emerged.

Tyrion explained their plan and the progress they had made. Bronn didn’t look convinced. “Does Lord Connington expect your twenty-five hundred men to fight off the entire westerlands and riverlands for him?” Bronn said doubtfully. “Seems like a waste to me. Whatever force they rally will be more than you can beat.”

“Oh, Lord Connington doesn’t expect me to win anything. He simply requires that I harry and delay any reinforcements heading east until his victory in King’s Landing is complete. The Lord Hand does not want to risk getting caught between two hosts, and the Young Wolf proved that a small force of mounted cavalry moving swiftly in enemy territory can be quite effective,” Tyrion explained dryly. “Ser Franklyn Flowers over there joined me as second-in-command on the off-chance that we would be raiding Cider Hall, while most the other sellswords here joined for the plunder. None of them are the Golden Company’s best, I admit – many of them are unreliable recruits from Lys. No doubt Lord Connington expects to win the war with Aegon before I even play a major role.” Which was doubtless the intention, Tyrion mused. The Lord Hand only allowed
Tyrion paused, pursing his lips. “Nevertheless,” he continued slowly as the smile spread over his face. “It occurs to me that there may be an opportunity here. Ser Daven died at the Twins, Ser Kevan is very much distracted in King’s Landing, and my brother Jaime is nowhere to be found. That means my home is currently being held by the old master-at-arms, Ser Benedict Broom.” He felt the smile twist his scar. “So why shouldn’t I march straight for Casterly Rock itself?”

There was a pause. Bronn looked at him like he was japing. Yes, if Lord Connington thinks to reduce my contribution to this war, then let's prove him wrong. “You expect to take Casterly Rock with less than three thousand men?”

“Take? Of course not. A siege or an assault would be pure folly – even dragons would struggle to take that castle. But I am the rightful Lord of the Rock now,” Tyrion mused. “I expect them to open the gates and let me in.”

The Lioness

It was my brother. It was all my brother. He’s behind everything.

Cersei sat stiffly on the hideous iron chair, feeling the world fall to pieces around her. There was another set of petitioners today. Firstly a snivelling envoy from Ser Kevan pleading for her to negotiate, and then from the fishermen’s guild reporting the lack of food. Then, Lord Adrian Celtigar, a gnarly and sour old man, came before the throne sweating and shivering to demand retribution against Stannis after his crimes on Claw Island. She dismissed them all and made no commitments. After that, there were more of those pathetic Warrior’s Sons who demanded that she surrender herself to face trial in the Great Sept of Baelor.

She told the Warrior’s Son the same thing she said every time; the Queen and the realm will not dance to the twittering of sparrows.

If not for Ser Robert Strong standing diligently by the throne, it might have ended in violence. Her champion was as silent and as strong as stone. The whole court was quiet, tense, as she gave her decree. Ser Robert stood toweringly in armour thick enough for an elephant.

The final petitioner was her own Master of Coin, Ser Harys Swyft. He came to her in front of the whole court, looking twitchy and panicked. “Your Grace,” Ser Harys said with a slight stammer. “Please, Your Grace, reconsider your position. There are women and children in the castle, highborn daughters and sons that long to see their families. The stores are dwindling and the situation only grows more dire. Please, Your Grace – let us open the gates and make peace.”

Cersei sat silently. Two months ago, she had been a lioness, proud, beautiful and strong. Now, she felt cornered and betrayed. Enemies everywhere, allies dead, and treachery around every corner. It was my brother, he forced me to this.

Even her own body had betrayed her. Where once she had been slender and beautiful, now her waist was growing thick. She felt fat, bloated and weak.

“I am aware of the plight,” Cersei said to the court. “And yet treachery and corruption invades our city. The enemies of the Crown are camped outside our gates. Men who plot conspiracy and rebellion under the banner of the Faith. I cannot allow anyone to leave until such wickedness is
destroyed.”

There were no replies. Ser Harys gulped, but backed away as Ser Robert Strong stepped forward. Her tone and the presence of her champion left no room for protest. They all knew that everyone in the Red Keep was a hostage. *My son included,* she thought foully. *They have left me a prisoner in my own castle.*

*My brother did this. This is all the twisted little Imp’s fault.*

They are all working together. The Tyrells, the Martells and Tyrion Lannister – a conspiracy to steal her throne.

It was obvious, really. She had known that Martells and the dwarf were allied from the beginning; that became clear when Tyrion sold her precious girl Myrcella off to Dorne, and it was only further proved when the Red Viper chose to champion the Imp. Cersei had also known that the Tyrells were untrustworthy and ambitious, but she realised too late that they were *all* in the plot.

First Tyrion killed Joffrey. Joffrey was strong, proud, a true lion, and so Tyrion killed him on behalf of House Tyrell. The Tyrells wanted their little slut to marry Tommen instead, as he was weaker and more easily manipulated. Her father Tywin might have challenged the Tyrell conspiracy too, so Tyrion killed him next.

She should have realised sooner. She had even found the gold coins of the Reach, used to pay for Tyrion to escape from the black cells.

But Cersei only really realised the full extent of the scheme when Tyrion returned to Westeros with the Golden Company. That was when she knew; the dwarf didn’t have the coin to hire mercenaries like the Golden Company. Not without the Tyrells and the Martells bankrolling him.

Slowly, she realised as the conspiracy started to form, the teeth started to close, but by then it was too late. *The prophecy is coming true. The valonqar – the little brother – is coming to kill me.*

Everywhere she walked, she kept Ser Robert Strong by her side. She saw dark eyes staring at her from the corridor. Her true allies could be counted only on one hand.

Cersei didn’t even know why she bothered holding court anymore; every day it was the same. The same whining, the same petty demands, the same simmering defiance. *I should let Moon Boy hold court next time, for all the use it will be.*

She met Lord Qyburn as he climbed the stairs from the black cells. He had grey hair, a lean frame, and looked fatherly, slightly stooped with crinkles around his soft blue eyes. He was garbed in white robes with golden whorls around his hem sleeves and high collar. There was just the faintest scent of dried rot about him. Her spymaster was one of the true friends she had left. And a capable one, at that.

*“Your Grace,”* Qyburn said, bowing deeply as she approached. He pulled out a bundle of letters from his thick sleeves. *“I have sent out your letters as you required, and replies were quickly received. There is a message from Lord Mace Tyrell. He demands the release of his son and daughter. He gives three days before his men break the walls and take the city.”*

*“Margaery Tyrell has been placed under arrest for murder and treason,”* she said stiffly. She would not use the title queen.

*“Indeed she is.”*
“And Mace Tyrell made the same threat a week ago.”

“Indeed he did, Your Grace,” he smiled apologetically. He had a sweet smile. “But now Lord Randyll Tarly is in position outside of the city as well. They have twenty thousand men between them.”

Cersei bristled. “Make sure they understand the stakes. If they will resort to barbarity then I will meet them in kind.” Her voice turned dangerously low. Tommen, I am doing this for you. “I have over two hundred highborn hostages with me in the Red Keep. Should they break the city walls, I shall drop Margaery’s ladies-in-waiting – Megga, Alla and Ellinor Tyrell – over the walls. Should they pass the Street of Sisters, it will be the Redwyne twins. And should they reach our walls itself, I will return Lady Margaery. By trebuchet.” They won’t risk it, they won’t. “Let there be no misunderstanding. Make sure that Mace Tyrell knows the consequences his rebellion brings.”

He hesitated. “That is a drastic ultimatum to put to ink.”

“These are drastic times,” Cersei said stiffly. “Walk with me, Lord Qyburn.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” They set off down the corridor. Robert Strong was a silent shadow behind them, strangely light-footed for such a big, heavy man. “And I have a letter from the High Septon too, Your Grace.”

“Call him what he is. A sparrow,” she said in a low voice.

“Very true. But he and the Most Devout have reached a verdict,” Qyburn continued, reaching for the letter. “He has declared that you have seventy-seven days to present yourself to the Great Sept to be tried before the Seven. Else your sovereignty will be renounced and you will be judged in absence.” The maester hesitated. “Your Grace, I do not believe that the High Sparrow is a man to make a false threat, or to back down on an ultimatum like Lord Tyrell will.”

“An ultimatum,” Cersei repeated. “He issues an ultimatum to me. He presumes to have the authority to judge me? I am Queen Regent.”

“He has a confession from Ser Osney Kettleblack that you gave the orders to assassinate him, Your Grace,” Qyburn said softly. “As well as Ser Osney claiming to have murdered the previous High Sparrow on your behalf. Charges of infidelity and accusations from Ser Lancel Lannister have also been levelled.”

That was a mistake. I should have never have trusted Ser Osney with the task. Not only did he fail, he allowed himself to be caught and interrogated. A confession brought about by torture. Her posture didn’t even twitch. Cersei just felt dead inside. “A sham of an accusation. The High Sparrow is no holy man, he is just another one of my brother’s catspaws.”

“As you say, Your Grace.” His voice was level.

“The High Sparrow is working for Tyrion too,” she continued. “Of course he is – the Imp has shown in the past that he can buy and control High Septons, and he used the same trick again. The Imp brought the man into further weaken my rule, and the fool I was for not noticing it sooner. Dwarves are cunning, wicked creatures.”

“And yet the man has decreed that you must fast until you see the path of redemption. The Faith Militant will not allow food or supplies to enter the Red Keep for the duration, until you relent for a trial.”

Her shoulders felt tense. “Any trial will be a sham orchestrated by my brother to shame and strip
me of power. No, I will not do so. I will not leave this keep.” Seventy-seven days, she thought. *Time enough for this stalemate to end.*

The Red Keep was under Cersei’s control. She had over two hundred hostages, and strong walls and enough loyal men. But even outside on Aegon’s Hill, the Faith Militant were camped in the streets. Cersei dared not allow a single soul to leave the keep for fear of losing control altogether.

She saw a figure across the grounds. “Ser Harys!” Cersei called. “Walk with us, Ser Harys.”

The Knight of the Cornfield looked worn and weak. *He had lost weight since his stay here. If the High Sparrow intends to starve us, I expect he will lose more.* Ser Harys wheezed, glancing up at Ser Robert Strong fearfully. “Your Grace?”

“Tell me, Ser Harys, why has your goodson not acted?” she said coldly. “He has been given explicit orders on how to act, and still he replies with defiance. He replies with inactivity and negligence to his duties.”

He looked pained. “Your Grace, Ser Kevan is trying to maintain peace—”

“He is doing nothing,” she said sharply. “I ordered Ser Kevan to take the Great Sept and remove that charlatan of a High Septon from power, and still he does nothing. Ser Kevan leads five thousand men in the city, does he not?”

“Ser Kevan is a precarious situation, Your Grace,” Lord Qyburn soothed. “He is caught between Lord Tyrell’s demands and the High Sparrow’s. He is trying to negotiate a peace.”

No, she thought. Ser Kevan will not march against the Faith, not when Lancel fought alongside the Warrior’s Sons. *Ser Kevan refuses to fight against his son. His inactivity may doom us all.*

The city could well turn into a battlefield any day now. Battle lines were being drawn. The Faith Militant was fortified in the Great Sept of Baelor on Rhaenys’ Hill, while Ser Kevan Lannister’s forces were being garrisoned in the Dragonpit on Visenya’s Hill, and the Crown in the Red Keep on Aegon’s High Hill. A city-wide stalemate, where no force dared to act.

*My uncle is a weak fool. If it was my father and not my uncle outside then this would never have happened.* “Ser Kevan proves himself a fool. He is negotiating between two enemies,” she said, looking between the men. “House Tyrell is allied with the Imp. The High Sparrow is the Imp’s puppet. Tyrion murdered Joffrey and Tywin for them, and in return the Tyrells bought his release. And then the Imp returned with the Golden Company – a force paid for with Reach gold.” Her voice was a growl. *How many times do I need to say it? “An invasion to justify a coup. Or do you think it’s a coincidence that this pretender appeared at the same time the Tyrells tried to steal the kingdom?”*

Ser Harys looked pained. Qyburn kept his face blank. “Aegon Targaryen, Your Grace.”

“A mummer’s puppet. Some boy hired in Lys most like. A farce to get rid of the rightful king Tommen Baratheon so that they can steal power through Margaery. House Tyrell steals the kingdom, House Martell gets revenge against my family, and my brother gets to hurt me.”

“Your Grace…” Ser Harys wheezed. “How could you possibly know that?”

*Because it was prophesied. My little brother is going to kill my children and choke me. “Because I know the Imp, I know his puppets,” she growled. “And because I see the strings. If not for Lady Margaery, how do you think the assassin managed to infiltrate the holdfast to murder the Lord Hand, his wife and the Grand Maester?”*
Neither of the men could meet her eyes. *This is all that is left of my small council,* she realised suddenly. *My weak treasurer and spymaster.* Cersei’s Grand Admiral Aurane Waters betrayed her, her brother, the Lord Commander, abandoned her, and her Hand of the King and the Grand Maester were murdered.

It was two months ago now. They might have murdered Orton Merryweather too, but she knew the real target was Lady Taena Merryweather. As far as anyone could tell, Grand Maester Pycelle had only stumbled upon the scene but he was killed too.

The death of Taena still pained her. An ache in her chest. It had been one of the rare times that Cersei wept.

Cersei had ordered her friend and confidant Taena to keep a close watch on Margaery and report back to her, and then the woman was found dead with a crossbow bolt in her stomach, right in the middle of the Red Keep itself. Taena must have found something about Margaery and the Tyrells, and she was killed for it. The assassin must have come into the keep along with the House Tyrell guards, and that was when Cersei knew that there were knives hidden all around her. Thorns crawling up the walls.

*Margaery murdered my friend. No, Taena was more than just a friend. The Tyrell slut deserves to be imprisoned, the evil bitch that she is.* Tommen wept and wailed, but her babe didn’t understand. Cersei needed to keep Margaery hostage; she was the only leverage she had to keep the Tyrells at bay.

Cersei didn’t have a choice. It was all Tyrion’s fault.

Qyburn paused. He drew another parchment out of his sleeves. “Your Grace…” Qyburn said slowly, glancing quietly between her and Ser Harys. “I must… I fear the letter from White Harbour demands more attention. What of the reports of the white dragon and Bastard King in the north?”

Cersei hesitated. Her eyes twitched slightly. “I know not how my brother managed it,” she said finally. “But these false claims of a dragon are just another way he seeks to ruin my power.”

Qyburn didn’t reply. Ser Harys’ eyes widened. “False claims?” the man exclaimed. “Your Grace, do you truly believe that the reports of the Twins are false?”

“Hearsay or rumours or blatant forgeries of noble house signatures. The letters cannot be trusted even if the lies spread like wildfire.” Cersei’s face flickered. “Or do you seriously believe an ice dragon just happens to appear at the same time the Imp leads an invasion of the realm?”

“But, Your Grace, there have been hundreds of letters. How could your brother even…?”

“Imps are cunning creatures, Ser Harys,” she said sharply. “And treachery is thick in the realm. I know not how he managed it, but he has; the tales are false.” *They must be.* Cersei paused. “And a detail returns to me; I remember that this Jon Snow and Tyrion travelled together. My brother escorted Jon Snow up to the Wall, three years ago now. Doubtless they were planning betrayal together even then. Tyrion recruited Jon Snow into his schemes – parallel plans that work together.” Cersei shook her head, flicking her blond hair back. “No, these reports of ‘ice dragons’ are just another way the Imp seeks to hurt me, by inciting mass hysteria and panic in the realm. He recruited his sour bastard traitor friend to do so. There must be hunters shooting down the ravens from noble houses, and then replacing them with false messages dictated by the Imp, false testimonies of dragons. Doubtless the Twins were raided and razed by wildlings, the deed ascribed to a dragon such that the rumours might aid their cause. Words are wind, Ser Harys, and the Imp has been blowing them. My brother could arrange it so; this conspiracy must have been a long time
in the making.” She shook her head again, more forcefully.

Neither of them replied. Qyburn looked down at the ground silently, and Ser Harys stared at her, mouth agape. *This is all my brother’s doing, why can no one else see it?*

That clueless look on Ser Harys’ face made her eyes narrow and her lips purse. She stepped forward warningly, lowering her voice. Behind her, Ser Robert shifted slightly.

“You asked me to open the gates, Ser Harys?” Cersei said coolly. “Allow me to tell you when the gates will open and this will end: Ser Kevan is going to attack the Great Sept and put those blasted sparrows to the sword. He will remove the High Sparrow from power permanently. Mace Tyrell is not going to be allowed into the city lest his son and daughter suffer for it. Instead, Lord Tyrell will fight the Golden Company for us – to fight the very sellswords that he himself hired. Afterwards, once both threats have been vanquished – when my brother and his schemes are finally dead – I will open the gates and Lady Margaery can be tried properly. That is the *only* way this will resolve. Is that understood?”

Ser Harys nodded, weak chin flapping. “Then I suggest you write to your goodson, ser,” she ordered. “Make sure you convince Ser Kevan of the need.”

Ser Harys bowed and stammered away. Her eyes narrowed as she watched him run.

“Do my warnings fall on deaf ears?” Cersei murmured. “The murders, the invasion, the schemes. There is a conspiracy afoot and for some reason I seem to be the only one who can see the strings. It all leads back to my brother.”

The castle felt silent. Cersei saw the Redwyne twins, Horas and Hobber, staring at her suspiciously from the far side of the courtyard, but none dared to approach so long as Ser Robert Strong stood behind her. Her gaze met the Redwyne boys, and they backed away.

*Treachery behind every corner.* “Is the keep secure?” Cersei asked, keeping her voice low. “I do not trust our hostages not to try and overpower the guards to escape.”

“They have no weapons to speak of, Your Grace,” Lord Qyburn reassured her. “But the soldiers have been warned of the possibility. Due precautions have been taken.”

“All hostage that seems rebellious goes into the cells,” Cersei ordered. She paused. “And what of the soldiers themselves? Are they loyal?”

The sack of the Red Keep had posed a problem. It had to be done swiftly, but there had been many guests and guards inside, while Cersei couldn’t even trust any of the gold cloaks. All of House Tyrell’s men had to be captured, killed, or removed from the Red Keep, and that required manpower. Lord Qyburn had proved invaluable in arranging it.

“Many of the soldiers were formerly sworn to Ser Gregor Clegane, Your Grace,” Qyburn explained. “The Mountain’s Men, as they were called.”

“Good,” she nodded approvingly. “Seasoned, loyal Lannister men.”

“Indeed. There are also what remains of your household guard, some handpicked sellswords. I also recruited two dozen Tyroshi mercenaries that do not speak the Common Tongue – it makes them very difficult to be bought. All of the men were vetted by me personally, Your Grace: three hundred in total to hold the castle and the walls.” He smiled, with just a hint of quiet pride. “And then, of course, there is Ser Robert Strong. Ser Robert will be eternally loyal, and as formidable as ten men, Your Grace, I guarantee it.”
She nodded. “Loyalty is most important attribute in times like these. There must be no catspaws left in my house.”

“As you say, Your Grace. Alas, none of the men are the most… shall we say… disciplined soldiers,” he said apologetically. “But they are of a certain simple nature and low barbarity that they will remain loyal. They will not falter no matter how long this siege lasts, I just fear we may have to allow them a certain leeway with respect to the stresses they face.”

“Barbarity has its uses.” In desperate times, she would take Qyburn’s simple soldiers over all of the treacherous knights in the realm. Even the kingsguard had to be vetted and secured.

Ser Loras Tyrell had tried to protest when she secured the castle. The Knight of Flowers killed two men who tried to take his sword, and it took Ser Robert himself to overpower Ser Loras and place him in the black cells. Ser Loras suffered two broken legs and a shattered arm after Ser Robert Strong threw him physically against a wall.

Ser Osmund Kettleblack had abandoned his white cloak and fled when the Faith captured his brother, only to be captured himself by the Warrior’s Sons. All three of the Kettleblacks were tortured and became more witnesses against Cersei.

Tommen only had two white cloaks left in the castle – Ser Meryn Trant and Ser Boros Blount. Both of them guarded her little boy constantly, but she had to keep Tommen restricted behind a locked door for his own safety.

*I can keep my castle secure until the crisis is over,* Cersei thought with a deep breath. *My child will forgive me so long as he is kept alive.*

“Your Grace,” Qyburn said cautiously. “I must ask; what is the intention should Ser Kevan not raise swords against the Faith Militant?”

“He will. His king commands him to.” Everything hinged on Ser Kevan, his was the only force Cersei could call upon to act. *He is a follower, he must obey.*

“I fear that if Ser Kevan was willing to, he would have done so by now,” Qyburn shook his head sadly. “Your uncle seems more concerned trying to keep the peace within the city. Forgive me, Your Grace, but I do not believe he will act as you command.” Her jaw tightened, but she didn’t speak. “I fear Ser Kevan will be more inclined to wait out the High Sparrow’s deadline, until you are forced to surrender,” Qyburn continued. “The situation is… volatile. Should either the Faith or Lord Tyrell move against you first, matters may quickly spiral out of control.”

“I am aware. And I will not let power-grabbing schemers break this kingdom. I will not allow it.” *Tommen, I’m doing this for you.* She turned away, and walked towards two men-at-arms in motley grey armour, standing guard by a doorway. “You. You two. What are your names?”

They both looked surprised. One of them was a younger man wearing a yellow surcoat, with a mop of sandy hair. “Um, Raff, Your Grace,” he said. His voice was softly spoken. “They call me Raff the Sweetling.”

*I see why; he is handsome,* Cersei thought. *Though there’s something in his eyes.* The other guard was the opposite; he was gruff, unkempt, short and portly, with hard eyes and a scarred, pockmarked face under his grey helm. “Craster, Your Grace,” the man grumbled, in a deep, hard voice.

She looked between them. *Yes, they’ll do.* “Lady Margaery Tyrell has been arrested for treason.
She conspired to steal the throne. She arranged the murder of Lady Taena Merryweather, Orton Merryweather, and Grand Maester Pycelle. Her scheming threatens the whole realm,” Cersei said curtly. “She is restrained in the Maidenvault. She must be interrogated and then tried. Are you fit to question her?”

Raff the Sweetling looked panicked briefly. Craster grunted. “Your majesty,” the heavyset man rumbled. “She is the queen.”

“Was the queen.” Her voice was cold. “The marriage was not consummated, it has been annulled. She is naught but a traitor to the realm. She will confess to her lies and her treachery. Do you understand?”


“See that a confession is drawn from her. Keep her presentable. Recruit whatever aid you require,” Cersei ordered sharply, and then walked away. She motioned at Qyburn, while Ser Robert trailed behind. “Lord Qyburn, Margaery Tyrell committed treason. She fucked the Kettleblack brothers and sent them to the High Sparrow to slander me. She coerced them into a false confession that they revealed under torture, using my name instead of hers. That is what Lady Margaery will confess, and she will admit her crimes to the realm and beg for mercy in her punishment. In return, the throne will give… leeway.” She might keep her pretty little head, if she concedes, Cersei conceded, but not her crown. “It’ll be a generous sentence – one of exile or imprisonment rather than execution. Lord Tyrell will be humbled and shamed, but unable to object. Can you see that it happens?”

“Of course, Your Grace.” The white-robed man bowed again.

“And then the High Sparrow will demilitarise the Faith Militant, or they will all face the sword as they did in Maegor’s day.” I should never have tolerated those sparrows in the beginning. Her red satin dress brushed against the stones as she turned towards the staircase. “Lord Tyrell will be forced to deal with the mummer’s king and the Golden Company, the forces in the Reach will beat this Euron Greyjoy, and the Boltons will overcome the Bastard King. Stannis will be destroyed as soon as we can rally a proper force to deal with him.” She kept her voice low, a quiet growl in the cavernous staircase. “They will not steal my son’s throne, Lord Qyburn. None of them will. I refuse to allow it.”

“Very wise, Your Grace. I shall assist of course.”

“I will need you to keep my castle secure. As well as to take over the duties of maester since our late Grand Maester’s demise. You report to me directly, nobody else.” Cersei winced slightly, stretching her shoulders as she walked up the stairs.

If Qyburn was uncomfortable with the added duties placed upon him, he didn’t show it. He kept his expression humble and neutral. “However I can help.”

“You could help by providing me a treatment for my back,” Cersei said irritably. “Sitting in that damnable chair has left my spine aching constantly.”

Qyburn bobbed his head, and then appeared to hesitate. “Forgive me, Your Grace, I cannot help but notice…” His lips pursed. “It is of a sensitive nature, but I would be remiss in my duties if I did not broach the subject.” His eyes were soft, grandfatherly. “Your Grace, you are gaining weight.”

Cersei froze. She had worn the same red satin dress for the last week because none other would fit
her. Her handmaidens still had to restitch the others. She spun around and snapped. “You dare?”

“Forgive me, Your Grace, I mean no insult,” he said quickly. “I spoke to the serving girls. They say you have not had your moonblood for at least two months.”

She stiffened. “It is stress. The stress of running a kingdom takes its toll on the body.”

“That is true, Your Grace,” Qyburnnodded. “However, I fear you may be pregnant.”

The corridor turned silent. Cersei’s hands clenched so sharp her fingernails dug into her hands. “No.”

Qyburn didn’t reply. He just lowered his head, respectful. “No,” Cersei repeated.

I cannot be pregnant, she thought firmly. *How long has it been since my brother left the city? The dates do not match up, it's impossible, I can’t…*

And then she remembered Ser Osney Kettleblack, and the ‘reward’ she had granted him before sending him off to kill the High Sparrow. She remembered his unsatisfactory kisses and rough thrusts. *I told him to come on my stomach. I told him to come on my stomach.*

“No…” Cersei muttered. She felt the colour draining from her face.

Qyburnstepped forward. “Your Grace, I can provide a simple tonic to ensure–”


Qyburn bowed, and very quickly turned to trot back down the stairs. Cersei was panting, head spinning. *Not here, too many watching eyes.* She turned and very quickly walked upwards to her quarters. Ser Robert Strong stood like a sentinel at the base of the stairwell.

As soon as she closed the door, she collapsed into a fit of wheezing breaths. She felt herself groan.

*It’s impossible. The prophecy. Maggy the Frog foretold that I would have three children, not four…*

*Unless I do not survive to term carrying the babe. Seventy-seven days.*

*I’m pregnant. That cursed, treacherous sellsword’s babe.*

She saw Ser Osney Kettleblack’s mocking grin. With a sudden jolt, she realised that she might finally be carrying a black-haired child.

She could feel herself gasping, struggling for air. Her legs buckled and she fell. *No,* she thought. *I am a lioness. A queen. Not a fat, bloated woman begging on her knees.* Still, no matter how hard she tried she couldn’t control her breathing, or pull herself to her feet.

*It’s all coming true. My brother. The younger queen. My dead children. Joffrey is already dead, Myrcella is in the grip of the Dornish, Tommen is trapped in a city besieged. My little brother is coming for me.*

She felt tears stinging her eyes. *My son, my babe…*

*The valonqar will wrap his hands around my pale white throat and choke the life from me. Just like he did with that whore.*
Her plans were nothing more than grasping at straws. She could barely control the Red Keep, let alone a kingdom. Her allies were treacherous, her friends gone. Her enemies everywhere.

*This is all the Imp's doing. And I cannot stop it because it has already been foretold.*

Cersei spent the next two hours weeping and wailing on the floor.

Then, she stood, straightened her dress and cleaned her face. When she left her chambers, her face was once again stiff like ice. She motioned at Ser Robert to follow her.

*I will not allow them to hurt my son. I will defy them all, I will defy the gods, I will defy the fates to keep my little boy alive.*

She met Lord Qyburn again in the Grand Maester’s chambers, sorting through Pycelle’s vials, papers and medicines. “Lord Qyburn,” she said curtly.

“Your Grace.” He bowed quickly. “I apologise if I crossed any line, I meant only to offer assistance—”

“Enough. We will not speak of that matter.” The thought scared her, she couldn’t even begin to handle it. For some reason, she couldn’t even swallow the thought of drinking moon tea. *No, I will have to. I must get of rid of the babe before any talk starts.* “What of the tunnel that you discovered under the Red Keep?” Cersei demanded.

He blinked, off-guard. “Yes, Your Grace. You ordered to seal any secret exits, and so I had the castle searched from top to bottom. We discovered the tunnel built into a well in the lower dungeons, it leads out towards the sewer, and then the river. A relic from King Maegor’s construction.”

“And does anyone else know of it?”

“No, Your Grace.”

“Keep it that way,” Cersei ordered. “But have the tunnel unsealed. We will need a secret tunnel into the city. There is much work to be done.”

Lord Qyburn bowed. “Whatever you require, Your Grace.”

“Firstly, I shall need a hundred more just like him,” Cersei said, motioning to Ser Robert Strong’s hulking mass. He stood at the doorway stiff like a stone titan. “Apply your skills, Lord Qyburn, and make your soldiers. There are tasks to be and I will need their unwavering loyalty.”

His eyes widened. “Your Grace, my methods are still so rudimentary!” Qyburn exclaimed. “Ser Robert was the first of his kind and he required months of labour! To create a hundred more? I am but a blind man studying a whole new field, I cannot make such a promise.”

“Whatever resources you require, you shall have them. Draw your work out of the black cells if needed. The castle is at your disposal. *Whatever it takes.* Tommen, *I am doing this for you.* “I require one hundred soldiers of Ser Robert’s quality. You have seventy-seven days.”

Qyburn blinked, bit his lip, and then bowed. She caught his eyes flash as he lowered his head quickly. “I shall devote myself to the task, Your Grace.”

“Good. And then bring me Lord Hallyne of Alchemist’s Guild,” Cersei demanded. “I will require him and his pyromancers too.”
The Godly Man

“Do you ever wonder of mermaids, Urgard?” Euron mused. “Do you wonder whether they are fair or hideous?”

The grim-faced man never replied. He had two flame-shaped brands on each cheek, and crisscrossing scars over his face. “You may answer, Urgard,” Euron insisted.

“I cannot say, my king.” Urgard’s voice was a grumble. He didn't turn away from the candles. He didn’t even blink

“It is strange, is it not? They talk of mermaids as being beautiful, but men do like to idolise the unknown,” Euron wondered, as he paced the dark cabin. The glass candles blazed all across the far wall. The Silence rocked against the waves, the wind and ocean a low howl in the background. “But if mermaids truly are fish, then I would say they would have to be hideous. Have you ever seen a sea creature that has any care for beauty? Does a shark or a tuna look pretty? And if mermaids are just ugly fish things, then I think they would also be fairly benign. I find that even the biggest, scariest creatures of the sea generally want to be left undisturbed.”

Euron paused, as he picked up a glowing hot poker from the low fire. “But,” he continued, “if mermaids really are pretty, then does that not make them far more dangerous? For if they are comely, then they must have knowledge of men. They must have cunning. They must be more than just fish, for they have the intelligence to entice and entrap. It is strange, is it not? How the hideous creatures are the most benign, yet the fair ones are dangerous?”

Urgard didn't reply. He kept his back turned, staring blankly at the obsidian flames. Euron just smiled, as he stepped forward and moved the poker to Falia’s face.

Falia Flowers would have begged, but she could not because she had no tongue. Euron preferred the silence.

His bed mate’s eyes were bloodshot and wide, and her wrists were chained. Her dark hair was coated in salt and sea grime. Falia had been good company to him, easy to laugh and full of whimsy. Her stomach was swollen, pregnant with his child. Euron just smiled, as he stroked her cheek. She tried to squirm, to escape to, to cry out.

“You are very beautiful, Falia,” Euron whispered. “But right now I wish to test my theory on whether uglier things have less reason to be dangerous.”

He put the burning poker to her cheek. Flesh bubbled and hiss. Chains rattled and her mouth gasped, but there was nothing but choked, frenzied and wordless screams.

Urgard didn't stop staring at the candles.

Euron knew he could do whatever he wished aboard his ship, and not a single crewmember of the Silence would ever speak of it.

When he was done, Euron kissed his pregnant bed mate on her mutilated forehead and let her drop to the ground.

“This is a good thing, Falia,” he whispered gently. Her hair was burnt from her scalp, her skull black and red with deep blisters. “There is power in pain. Strength from suffering. I hurt you, and
perhaps you will become more for it. The more our bodies are cut away from us, the closer we become to something more than mortal. Divinity comes from burning away the flesh and the mind.”

She could only whimper. Euron pressed his hand against her pregnant stomach. Old Valyria built their empire from harnessing the power of suffering, and Euron intended to follow suit. Perhaps something worthwhile could be birthed from Falia’s pain, but, if not, such distractions were still useful. Euron considered cruelty just another skill to be mastered. A learning experience for both parties. He sighed softly and walked away.

“Urgard,” he said finally, turning away from his distraction. “How goes it? What do you see?”

On the black wall of the cabin, three dozen dragonglass candles blazed across the shelves with quiet, flickering black flames. The art of scrying through obsidian fires was a delicate and subtle skill. Fire was power, and power gave knowledge. Skilled men could see across the entire world using a glass candle, they could see into dreams and into the future. Past, present and all possible futures all flickering in the candlelight, refracted in every spark of light. The same power existed in every flame, or so the red priests claimed, but the dragonglass helped focus it.

Urgard had been a red priest, once upon a time. Euron wasn't sure what he was now, but any faith the man once had had been whipped out of him. Now, Urgard was one of the many sorcerers and mages that had been brought upon the Silence, and one of the few who still had their tongues. It took great skill, focus and patience to use the glass candles; Euron had the first two, but he was often lacking in the third.

“I see naught but snow and ash,” Urgard muttered hoarsely after a pause. “The flames are out of balance. I shall attempt to refocus them.”

Euron sighed. And that could take weeks, even months. The glass candles were an extremely difficult art; it was easy to light a fire but far, far more difficult to focus it. “Just do it. Find me dragons. Show me my brother’s progress towards Slaver’s Bay. Show me when my bride-to-be is coming home,” Euron ordered. “Do it, otherwise I shall cut off your eyelids so you will never be distracted again.”

He left the cabin. As he walked through the rocking hull, Euron passed lines of warlocks, red priests, holy men, shadowbinders, spellsingers, firemages, hedge mages, maegi and necromancers. They were all bound in chains with their eyes covered and their mouths gagged. On quiet seas, you could hear the strained, muffled gasps from his hull. Sorcerers and the like are useful things to have, Euron thought, but it's important to keep them contained. Like a blade, you must sheathe them when not in use.

He kept all his mages chained constantly at the very bottom deck of his galleon, blind and manacled and always under watch. Euron’s collection of mutts and murderers from the far east kept a close eye on their prisoners, and they carried barbed whips and daggers. His crew was on-guard against magic to point of paranoia; they had to be, to survive in the places where the Silence had sailed. They had all learnt to watch for flickering shadows or lingering hexes, or any sign of a prisoner trying to use their skills against them. No exposed flames were allowed anywhere near the spellbinders, except under close supervision. It left the decks of the Silence in constant gloom, but the darkness had a certain comfort.

Euron was something of a collector. He didn’t care for riches or gold, but he was an avid collector of old magicks, monsters and myth. Ever since sailing away from the Iron Islands so long ago, he had become obsessed and devoted to the power of gods and magic. Knowledge is power, Euron thought silently. Knowledge is also fear. Power and fear shape the world.
His ship was the silence before the storm. His crew of mutes, mongrels and mages brought fear to the entire world. *No,* he thought. *Not yet. They do not know fear yet.*

It was raining when Euron stepped out onto the red deck. The sky was black, and a sharp wind howled down through the straits of Redwyne. Rain sputtered down across the bay, and the coast was ringing with the sound of thousands of men and hundreds of ships.

On either side of the *Silence,* the *Thunderer* and the *Dusk* rocked on the choppy seas. *So both the Drumm and the Knight of Grey Garden are here, then,* Euron thought, as a wiry smile stretched over his blue lips.

He saw grim faces waiting for him as he stepped out into the rain. Hard-faced men standing steady on the rocking vessels. Raindrops scattered across Euron’s black Valyrian steel armour, water dripping down to the red blade at his hip. He stepped past Harren Half-Hoare, Rodrik Freedborn, and Left-Hand Lucas Codd all standing stoically by the door. Euron’s grin widened as he saw his guests.

Ser Harras Harlaw, Lord Denys Drumm, Lord Maron Volmark, Lord Gorold Goodbrother, Lord Germund Botley, and Andrik the Unsmiling all stood waiting for him. *All powerful and influential men of the Iron Islands,* Euron thought. *And all of them are bitter and coming here in defeat.*

“My lords!” He laughed, raising his hands in the rain. “Happy days! It seems the Drowned God blesses us with more water from the sky!”

In the distance, thunder rumbled over the Arbor. Across the bay, hundreds of ironborn longships scattered over the beaches, the entire fleet docked and fortified on the northern edge of the island, nestled around a collection of wooden thatch houses and barns. The ironborn had taken and occupied an Arbor fishing village, but there were far too many ships to fit in the small harbour.

Three hundred and sixty-six vessels, Euron was told. Once, they had been over five hundred, but then there had been battles, and the best one hundred longships of the Iron Fleet left for Slaver’s Bay. Now, the ironborn had more ships than they had men to comfortably sail them – his army was nine thousand strong. On average that meant twenty-five to a boat, Euron mused, but there were many smaller longships that were holding only ten or so.

Nobody spoke. “Lord Botley,” Euron called, looking to the man. “What news from Lordsport? Are these rumours that I’m hearing true?”

Eyes flickered. The lord wiped the rain from his brow. “Aye, they are true. The whole realm is up in arms about it. There is a dragon in the north – a huge, white beast larger than Balerion the Dread. It is ridden by the Bastard King. It destroyed the Twins, demolished two whole castles in a single afternoon.”

Euron felt laughter rising from his throat. Around him, the waves howled. “Well, isn’t that just typical?” He chuckled. “I send my brother halfway around the world to fetch me dragons, but it turns there was one right next door the whole time! Ha! Oh, how the fates like to tease us, don’t you think?”

In truth, Euron had suspected the dragon for a long time now. Months ago, all of his glass candles had suddenly started burning brighter and clearer. Magic returning faster, older powers were stirring and Euron was likely one of the first know about it. All of the magicks aboard the *Silence* had become… clearer. Sharper.

*Yes, another dragon,* he thought. *Another great elemental force to move the world; such beasts*
caused ripples of power as naturally as fish splashed. This is only good news. A fourth dragon for me.

They didn’t look so amused. “We are at war with the north, and now they have a dragon!” Lord Goodbrother growled.

“I know, brilliant, isn’t it?” The taste of shade of the evening on his lips made his head feel tingly. He danced softly over the rocking deck. “It does indeed look like I sent Victarion and the Iron Fleet away for no reason. Typical.”

“We need to return to the Iron Islands,” Lord Goodbrother insisted. “If there is a dragon, we need to return to defend our lands.”

“You cannot. I will need the whole force of the Iron Islands for our assault on Oldtown,” Euron said, shaking his head.

There were mutters. Ser Harras Harlaw stepped forward, frowning. “So it’s true. You really intend to assault Oldtown.”

“Of course. Have I not been announcing such?” Euron said with a smile. “I hope the entire realm knows my intention. We will raid wealth that no ironborn has been able to pillage in thousands of years!”

“This campaign of yours becomes more moon-addled by the day!” Ser Harras Harlaw shouted. The Knight of Grey Gardens sounded angry. He had his hand on the black Valyrian steel blade at his waist, Nightfall. “The Shield Islands have been retaken by the thorns, and you move on to your next folly?”

“The Shield Islands were supposed to be our launching point for this campaign. You named us the lords of them, yet abandoned them at the first chance,” Lord Denys Drumm accused. Lord Volmark and Andrik the Unsmiling looked bitter too. Yes, they had all been my potential enemies, and they lost their strength trying to hold the lands I handed to them. “We’ve lost our foothold in the Reach.”

Euron just shrugged. “Then you should have defended them better. That is your failure, not mine.”

“You dare–” Ser Harras bellowed, before Lord Drumm held up his hand.

“How could we defend them, when you took the fleet south with you?” Lord Denys Drumm shouted over the waves. “You left us with a half a dozen ships each, to defend against Highgarden itself!”

“Ships that you use to flee upon,” Euron noted. “Do you really care so little about the newfound lands that I gave you that you would flee from battle?”

Lord Denys Drumm’s face twisted. The young Bone Hand was a stout and strong fighter, clad in grey armour with skeletal white bones painted upon it. His iron helm bore a white skull. “My father perished trying to defend Southshield! We barely held them back, but Oakenshield had already fallen! Once two out of four isles fell, there was no choice but to retreat.” His eyes flashed. “We escaped those islands, and then I find that you had your men steal my father’s blade!”

Euron cocked his head, looking at the young lord. The newly-named Lord Drumm had none of his late father’s patience or wits. Euron’s hand lingered on Red Rain on his hip. It was a fine Valyrian steel blade of shining crimson metal, with a white hilt carved like a skeletal bone. Red Rain was formerly the ancestral weapon of House Drumm, but it was sword that had been known to change
hands. The Drumms themselves stole it from House Reyne. It was a bloody sword if there ever was one.

“Lord Dustan was an old man,” Euron scoffed. “He fell in the battle and some rat looted his sword. It is a nice blade, I liked it myself. I found that rat, and I bought this blade off him with the iron price. Truth be told, Red Rain has quite taken my fancy.”

“That sword belongs to House Drumm,” Lord Drumm said darkly, stepping forward.

Harren Half-Hoare and Left-Hand Lucas Codd took a step to block him. Euron raised his hand to stop them. “I told you,” Euron repeated, with a mocking smirk. “I paid the iron price for the sword. Do you want to try and buy it back with the same?”

Lord Drumm’s face twisted. He didn’t back down, but he hesitated. Everyone was watching.

“Forget the bloody sword,” Ser Harras growled. He was a tall and dark man, fearsome in full grey armour. He was glaring at Euron too. “You attack the Reach but you leave our homes undefended. The retaking the Shields was just the beginning. You claimed those lands but you had no intention of defending them, did you? You let the lords you raised linger there only to be defeated.”

Yes, actually. That was completely my intention – I took the credit for taking the isles, and then I left you to take the blame for losing them. Still, Euron just smirked. “Why would you obsess over bunch of cold, dreary rocks?” Euron laughed. “Look around you – I am offering you the whole Reach itself. The Arbor is undefended, go pillage and rape to your heart’s content! Lord Orkwood has already conquered Three Towers, soon Oldtown itself will be wide open! We could be feasting on lands that have grown fat and rich for hundreds of years, where no ironborn have raided since the days of High Kings of old.” Euron looked at Lord Drumm and smirked, keeping his hand on Red Rain. “Surely, what is a little sword compared to that?”

“You dare to steal my family’s ancient weapon and laugh?” Lord Drumm growled. He had a war-axe in his grip, a hefty, well-rounded weapon. Many of the other lords were looking angry as well. Oh, they are mad. What, just because I abandoned them to defeat?

“It is better than not laughing at all, is it not?” Euron smirked. “Come now, have I ever led you to defeat? We have seen victory after victory, I have given you plunder more than you could have found up north! Why are we squabbling? We are all ironborn here!” The sound of his chuckles was like thunder. Euron spun, motioning to the great island of the Arbor, filled with rolling hills and grape fields. “I promised the ironborn victory, and here I am providing it! We will ravage the lands, just like the Drowned God promised to us, when he brought flame from the sea, and sailed the seas with fire and steel! I am leading you towards a victory the likes that Balon couldn’t even imagine!”

A few looked uncertain. Lord Volmark and Lord Botley were staying very quiet, but Ser Harras and Lord Drumm didn’t back down. Ser Andrik the Unsmiling, the great grim giant of a man, looked ready for a fight too.

“What of the Damphair?” Lord Goodbrother said suddenly. He was an aging, portly, white-haired man, but still strong. His eyes were narrowed, dark.

Euron just shrugged. “What of him?”

“How do you expect us to follow your orders, ‘king’?” Lord Goodbrother grumbled. He pointed towards the front of the boat. “When you have the leader of the drowned men – the Drowned God’s chosen priests – tied to your fucking prow?”
He chuckled. “My brother seems to like the ocean. I thought he would appreciate being closer to it.”

Aeron Greyjoy was all rags and bones, frail and pale, fastened to the prow of the *Silence* by chains. On the prow of Euron’s ship was a mouthless maiden of black iron with long legs, slender waist, high breasts and mother-of-pearl eyes. The Damphair was left chained against the iron woman’s bosom, dangling metres above the cold water. *Probably the first set of breasts my brother has touched in years*, Euron thought with a quiet scoff.

Every time a high wave hit the prow, the salty water splashed hard against the man. At first Aeron had been sputtering and coughing, but now he just hung limp and weak. *I hope he’s not dead. It would be no fun if he’s dead.*

“I placed him there for the battle against the Hightower and Redwyne ships,” Euron explained. “My brother had a better view of the battle than any of us. And I thought it would be lucky – surely it must be good fortune to hang the Damphair as a figurehead, to gain the Drowned God’s favour?”

Truth be told, Aeron Greyjoy fascinated Euron. Religious and devoted men always did, there was something riveting in their blind belief. Euron considered faith to be only one step down from magic.

Lord Goodbrother looked appalled. “The Damphair was right about you. I should never have supported your claim.” He shook his head, raindrops splattering from his whiskers. “No, I will have no part of this madness.”

“Aye,” Ser Harras agreed darkly. “You are mad, king. You talk of madness. Aeron spoke the truth; you are a godless man.”

Euron saw the Red Oarsmen, ready to move forward, spear in his hand. Euron just shook his head and kept his men back. “Godless?” Euron laughed. “I am the most devout man you have ever met.”

The deck was tense. There were men clutching axes on the *Thunderer* and the *Dusk*, either side of the *Silence*. Reavers were preparing for a fight, Euron turned his smiling eye between the group. The lords hesitated, and Ser Harras shared a look with Lord Goodbrother.

“We will be taking our men and leaving,” Lord Goodbrother announced. “Try to stop us, and half the lords here will abandon you as well. We will return to our seats and leave this madness in the Reach behind us.”

“Madness is a word for concepts greater than feeble minds can understand.” The rain pounded around them.

“Enough of this. Our ships and our men are leaving your fleet,” Lord Drumm grumbled. “Do what you want with those fool enough to keep following you.”

*Hmm, that's not very good. Houses Drumm, Harlaw and Goodbrother have a hundred and fifty vessels between them.* He saw the Red Oarsmen and Qarl the Thrall move to block them, but there were men on their ships too. Euron paused, still smirking.

“Do not stop us, Crow’s Eye,” Ser Harras warned. He had Nightfall drawn, sleek and black like obsidian with a moonstone pummel. *Nightfall is a fine blade too.* “If you wish to start a battle here, you will suffer for it. Let us disembark.”

“Disembark,” Euron mocked. “Cravens running from a fight.”
Dark eyes all around him. “Crow’s Eye,” Ser Harras warned. “Do not—”

“What of you, Lord Drumm?” In a smooth motion, Euron drew Red Rain from its sheath. The blade seemed to growl bloodthirstily in the gloom. “Are you really so happy to walk away and leave your family’s blade behind?”

Lord Drumm stiffened. “Your father would be ashamed,” Euron continued. “Not only would you shame his memory by fleeing from his battlefield, you would abandon your own family’s weapon?”

Euron took a step forward, motioning the others to keep back. Lord Drumm had his axe tightly held in both hands. Andrik the Unsmiling was clutching his great blade too, standing head and shoulders above all others.

“You are a fiend,” Lord Drumm growled, body shaking.

“Why not settle this the Old Way?” Euron offered, as he danced backwards and forwards over the rocking deck. Black armour and red sword. “You and me. Pay the iron price, Bone Hand.”

Lord Drumm hesitated, and then turned to step forward. He was a stout and strong man. Ser Harras’ face flickered, and then he stepped forward too. Lord Goodbrother looked more interested in fleeing, but he paused uncertainly. Lords Volmark and Botley stepped backwards.

“Asha would have been the better ruler, better than you ever could be,” Ser Harras growled. “If you die, could our queen take the Seastone Chair?”

Euron only laughed, loud, clear and taunting.

Lord Drumm charged. A wordless battle roar broke his throat as he swung his axe, hard and strong. Euron fell backwards. A chant broke out across the Thunderer calling for their lord, but the crew of the Silence didn’t make a sound. Ser Harras stepped forward anxiously, but no one interfered.

Heavy boots clattered over the red deck. Euron kept on falling backwards, moving almost idly, while Lord Drumm hacked and slashed. Euron’s bright blue eye didn’t stop mocking him, even as the axe slashed and the Bone Hand grunted and roared. Red Rain hovered and waited.

“You are a godless man!” Lord Drumm bellowed. The skeleton on his armour rattled. The axe struck downwards.

Somewhere in the distance, lightning flashed.

And Red Rain moved like a viper. There was a crunch of metal, and then blood splattered against the decks. Red steel carved through the iron skeleton.

“I am the most godly man you’ve ever met,” Euron whispered as the Lord Drumm fell with the downpour. “Can you not hear the gods crying out for my victory?”

Before Lord Drumm even hit the ground, Ser Harras jumped in and struck. Red Rain was still embedded in the Lord Drumm’s chest, Euron couldn’t pull it out in time. The Knight of the Grey Garden lunged at him with Nightfall slicing in the gloom, as fast as a shadow.

Euron dropped his sword and rushed to meet him. He didn’t try to block, instead he shoulder-barged against Nightfall’s swipe, and the blade rushed towards his breastplate. Valyrian steel clanged against Euron’s armour. It didn’t pierce, it just bounced off and jarred the knight’s wrist. He saw Ser Harras’ eyes widen in surprise, as the sound rang out like a bell’s chime.
Men who wield Valyrian steel are always surprised when their blades don’t pierce, he thought smugly. My armour is well-worth the price I paid for it.

He didn’t need a sword. Euron grabbed Ser Harras’ shoulder and pushed him down to the deck. Ser Harras didn’t recover in time from his lunge, and Euron was grabbing his arm and twisting it around. The knight tried to wrestle, but then Euron’s armoured knee slammed into his throat. Ser Harras could only gurgle and thrash, pinned to the ground. The knight’s arm flailed, yet Euron grabbed it by the wrist and twisted. Euron slowly forced the blade around, still grasped in Ser Harras’ own hand.

“Godless man, you call me,” Euron scoffed, his voice low and gentle, whispering in his ear. “You have no idea how false such an accusation is. I know more of god than any priest ever will. You all just delude yourselves into thinking you know of god. You look at the waves and imagine something greater, but me?” Nightfall crept closer to Ser Harras’ throat. “I’ve seen god itself with my own two eyes.”

The blade cut through Ser Harras’ neck. Blood wept and gurgled, disappearing into the rain and soaking into the red planks. The deck turned quiet.

Euron grinned, dropping Ser Harras’ arm. He moved his hand up to scratch at his eyepatch. Euron would never forget that moment he sailed into Valyria itself, deeper, further and darker than any man ever had. He had seen something… something divine, and it had burnt his eye out of his skull just by laying his gaze upon it. From that moment onwards, it… it had defined him.

I am a godly man. I will become god.

The bodies rolled with the waves beneath his ship. Two noble ironborn lords, killed by their own blades. Euron picked up Red Rain in his right hand and Nightfall in his left, spinning both Valyrian steel swords at once. The old men say the Drowned God made the ironborn to reave and rape, Euron mused, to carve out our kingdoms and to make our names known in fire and blood and song.

Fools. Gods are but one fractal of something far greater.

Euron looked between the other men, and laughed. “What of it, Andrik the Unsmiling?” he challenged. “Do you wish to challenge me too?”

The giant of the man hesitated, face twitching as he looked at Lord Drumm’s corpse. After a long pause, the giant of a man lowered his axe. “No, my king,” he murmured.

“Throw the bodies overboard,” Euron ordered to his men. “And then send word to Donnel Drumm and Hotho Harlaw. Congratulate them on their new rank.” He turned towards Lord Goodbrother, and smiled. “My lord, you seem to have lost your allies. Are you sure you wish to proceed with your defiance?”

Lord Goodbrother twitched, but didn’t speak. Euron looked around the ships. Two of his mutes dumped the bodies into the churning waves. “What is dead may never die,” a few of his men chanted.

“Oh yes. What is dead may never die,” Euron agreed. “They are given to the Drowned God, are they not? To be served and pleasured by mermaids, I’m sure.”

Ser Harras’ and Lord Drumm’s men looked unhappy, but Euron’s crew were all around them. He gave orders for the Red Oarsmen to seize the Thunderer, and for Harren Half-Hoare to claim the Dusk. Lord Goodbrother was escorted below deck, to be held hostage as his ships were secured.
The Lord of Hammerhorn would be kept safe in the hull, to make sure his sons followed their king’s command.

Whatever rebellion they were intending died as swiftly as Lord Drumm and Harras Harlaw. Euron gave orders to seize their men and ships.

Then, Euron walked before Lord Volmark. He was curious to see how the young lord would react.

Lord Volmark bowed quickly, kneeling down against the blood-soaked wet wood. “My king.”

“Come, stand! The wealth of Westeros is stretched out before us!” Euron said cheerfully. “I promised to deliver the ironborn the entire realm. For glory like we have not seen for an age!”

Lord Volmark was pale. He was young, pale and beardless. “My king, those men…”

“Fools with no sense of ambition,” Euron dismissed. “They squabble and they fight with no concept of something greater than us all.”

“They were scared, Your Grace,” Lord Volmark said with a gulp. “They’ve seen the forces of Highgarden. I know you mean to attack Oldtown, but the latest raven from Three Towers said that there are nigh forty thousand Tyrell and Hightower men mustered to oppose us. And the Redwyne fleet must only be weeks away.”

Euron paused. “Forty thousand? Truly?”

“Aye, Gormond Bluetooth reported it so. They are gathering forces in strength, from Highgarden down to the marcher lords. A huge force led by Garlan Tyrell, he says. And then when Paxter Redwyne arrives from around the Cape of Dorne, they will have ships to support them too.”

“Forty thousand. Hmm, that’s not very good for us,” Euron mused, scratching his lip. He paused for a while, thinking about it. “No, let us delay by another fortnight, then, before launching our assault. There could well be ten thousand more by then.”

“Ten thousand more?” Lord Volmark looked confused. “How could… Wait, you mean ten thousand more enemies? You want to give them more time to prepare?”

“But of course. What is the point in taking riches if you can’t kill for them?” Euron chuckled. He sounded panicked. “We are outnumbered four against one!”

“Aye, and I’ve always thought that an ironborn is worth at least five green landers. Let us also attack Blackcrown, so they will be certain of our intent. Once the bay of the Whispering Sound is secure, we will sail up the Honeywine in strength,” Euron commanded. And slowly. No point moving too quickly; the most devastating storms are those that have time to simmer. “In the meantime, let us enjoy raiding the Arbor. I feel like we should be taking more thralls and salt wives – let every captain indulge himself. Let each warrior take several slaves. Let us take them all, actually.”

Lord Volmark’s mouth trembled, staring at him as if he were mad. Fools with no sense of something greater. “My king…!” he protested weakly. “Once the Redwyne fleet arrives we will lose what little advantage we have!”

“Well, we need to give them a fighting chance,” Euron said, a cruel smirk spreading over his lips. “Come now, Lord Volmark, why not enjoy the day? The Arbor is rich and populated. Find yourself a salt wife to warm your bed. Find yourself several. Let us pillage and reap, as is our right. Do you
forget? The Drowned God granted us supremacy over all that we could take, so let’s take it all.”

The young lord looked ready to object, but the glint in Euron’s smiling eye caused him to pause. The lord was left shaking as Euron walked away. Euron was still holding the two blades. Red Rain was sleek and bright, while Nightfall was far more ornate and sublime. Nightfall’s blade would ripple, while Red Rain’s edge glinted. Yes, Euron thought as he stared out over the stormy waters. **Two fine blades.**

*This is my age.* Firstly, Euron intended to reap and rape the Arbor of everything it had. *They will speak of the destruction I wrought for hundreds of years.*

In the distance, thunder rumbled. The storms had been brewing through the Redwyne straits for a while now, but it could simmer for just a bit longer. His mages had promised him so, and Euron could be patient.

A few hours later, his mage Urgard walked up from the bottom of the deck. His eyes were raw. “My king,” the scarred man muttered, bowing his head. “The glass candles have responded.”

“Aye? And what did you see?”

“I saw your brother Victarion in the fire. His fleet has taken losses, but they are heading into Slaver’s Bay now. A fleet of ships has blockaded Meereen, though the Lord Captain is intent on cutting through them to reach the city.”

“Grand. Let my brother bring my wife to me.”

Urgard hesitated. “My king, I have seen more. The flames showed me Victarion’s intentions. He doesn’t plan on bringing Daenerys Targaryen to you, he intends on claiming the Targaryen and her dragons for himself.”

Euron gasped. “Oh no. You mean my own dear brother plans to betray me? To ruin my ambitions so. How shocking.” He laughed raucously, grinning as he looked around his men. “Well, I *certainly* didn’t see that coming.”

---

**Author Notes:**

*Edit: There will be no update this weekend, I'm afraid. Next update on the weekend of the 3rd.*
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

A day in the march of King Jon Snow, and the road to Winterfell...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 29

Jon

He saw the dragons explode into the sky. They burst upwards from their rocky perches, scales of all colours glittering in the bright orange sun, from deep blue to glimmering gold to pitch black. The youngest were barely more than hatchlings, the oldest a great grey and brown behemoth with a wingspan twice the size of his own.

The largest of the dragons, the dominant, perched at the peaks of the crags while the lesser dragons lingered on the hills around them. There was a structure, a feudalism almost, to the massive reptiles scattered across the cliffs. They were dragon clans, each one a pack under a single alpha ruler.

He wasn’t happy giving tribute to anyone, however; he was a roaming dragon, beyond the claims of others’ territory.

The waters of the mountain lakes reflected his own body. He was huge, lean, his scales a blood red. A hundred battles had marked his hide, but he was large, lean and formidable. Not the biggest of the wild dragons, but close, and vicious and strong enough to hold his own against any foe.

Every full moon, dragons flocked to these mountain ranges to mate and fight. To prove dominance or to relent, to establish their hierarchies and their clans. Some moons were more important than others: sometimes a few clans fought, other times every wild dragon gathered from across the peninsula. Each one a vicious beast eager to prove its strength – a dance of dragons that blocked out the sky.

The first of the spars was already ignited. A great plume of scorching flames exploding from one maw, other beasts meeting them in kind. Beneath them, the bleak grey mountains caught fire, until the fires lit the sky. The rocks themselves melted and burnt.

The heat and power… it was incredible. As was the force beneath his wings as he flapped upwards, a great shriek exploding from his throat.

His target was the big grey and brown dragon. The biggest and eldest, with bleak dull scales that looked starch and cold compared to the bright colours of others. The grey dragon was twice his size, but he had no intention of submitting to anyone but the very strongest.

The two immense beasts collided in mid-air with the force of a storm, meeting fire with fire and teeth with teeth. All around them, the other dragons were shrieking, crying out and flapping around their duel.
For all that he was outmatched, the red dragon held his own. He was smaller, but his flames were hotter and his jaws more determined. He snapped forward and bit down on the bigger dragon’s neck – not at full strength, this was just a spar – but hard enough for black teeth to leave a mark against the hard scales.

Right now the red dragon was the weaker one, but the flock knew someday he would transcend. He was growing faster and flying further than any others, taking territory where no other dragon was brave enough. He had flown across the seas, far away from the burning mountains. The few beasts that could match him was steadily decreasing.

All around him, hundreds of wild dragons danced through the air. The sound and the heat was so immense it could have been a fifteenth flame on the peninsula.

Then, a shriek burst through the air. One of the hatchlings, crying in panic. The cry was echoed by others. At once, the dance stopped. Every dragon forgot their duel, abandoning the fights in a single moment.

From the south, he smelt a large group of more dragons approaching. Dragons that smelt of humans.

The dragon ‘lords’. Dragon slavers. A bloodthirsty growl broke through the red dragon’s throat. They hunted the wild dragons relentlessly; pathetic humans that were constantly eager to steal eggs or fill their cages. They had grown bold to interrupt a dance of such numbers.

Many of the wild dragons fled the humans, but not all were so easily cowed. For every two that fled in panic, one would roar in anger. A great cry broke through the tribes as the dragons swarmed to meet them.

He saw them. The tamed dragons wore great, spiked metal armour wrapped around their bodies, and they carried men on their back. The humans’ dragons were outnumbered, but they flew in formation. On the ground, he smelt human armies marching with them, bringing siege weapons, nets and bolts. A trap. They prepared an ambush to interrupt the dance. The wild dragons didn’t care. Dragons were the superior, not humans. This was a challenge of dominance, and the great beasts met them in kind.

In a single lunge, the great grey dragon snatched another out of the air, crushing wings in its teeth like a fly. The red dragon followed suit, lunging downwards against an armoured dragon and forcing fire into its throat. Its metal plate bubbled and melted under his breath, its body thrashing. No mercy towards those corrupted and enslaved by humans.

Humans were shouting, screaming, a buzzing of insects compared to the dragons’ roars.

And yet the dragon slavers didn’t relent. They fought back with flaming lances and whips of pure fire. They used arrows and nets and wires. Even when their dragons were outmatched, the armies supporting them launched great boulders and bolts into their wings. Dragging wild dragons to the ground, shredding their wings. A grounded dragon could be overpowered by their unending armies. If the dragon slavers had to sacrifice ten thousand men for one caged dragon, they would. The humans’ armies always needed more dragons.

In the air, the mounted dragons focused on the weakest first, and they matched raw fury using formation and tactics. The thick smoke, the stench of burning flesh and the immense shrieks filled the air.

The red dragon fought against two smaller beasts at once. Unyielding, merciless. The dragons he
could handle, but the men… the men wielded unnatural fiery whips that would lash against his hide, so hot they burned even through his scales. Their whips spun into great lengths, hissing and snarling like they had lives of their own.

And then there were the shadows, clinging to his scales. It was the men’s doing, somehow. Shapeless shadows with claws, clutching at the dragons’ bodies, snaking around their wings, digging inky black tendrils into open wounds and biting…

He could see bodies failing out of the air one by one. The human armies could not be stopped. Still, the dragons fought.

The grey great dragon was trembling, struggling to keep in the air, burning lances and arrows through its wings. He heard the humans chanting something, their voices were weak and meaningless.

And then a great boom shattered through the mountains. Dragons screamed and fell. Pain rocketed through his body, his wings spasming. It was a noise like the screaming of a thousand souls, lighting his very bones aflame and scorching his skin from the inside…

The red dragon fought it. He fought for as long as he could but the sound of the horn could not be matched. The whole world seemed to explode into shadow fire. Ahead of him, he saw the great grey dragon collapse, falling to the earth with enough force to shake the mountains and then everything turned–

“Wake up, Your Grace. They are calling for you.”

Jon gasped, struggling to process the phantom pain in his head. Sonagon stirred as he woke up at the same time.

Wide eyes stared at him. “The host is to move out, Your Grace,” his squire said nervously. “I was told wake you.”

Jon gulped, still blinking repeatedly. “Urgh, aye. Aye. Bring me a skin of water to wash my face. And then prepare my horse.”

“Your horse is already readied, Your Grace,” Marrion bowed his head. “I will fetch water.”

Jon’s head was still spinning. He remembered fire, flying, and dragons clashing in the air. A dream, he told himself. Sonagon’s.

Focus. The army had been marching hard, and there was little time for rest. All around him, six thousand men stirred. The sound of horses and boots filled the air.

He washed his face roughly, wiping cold water into his eyes. Too many long weeks of marching had left his body sore. Jon knew they were close and could hardly quit now, but his body yearned for rest and comfort. Weeks since he’d had a decent night’s rest. More and more he found himself daydreaming of Val’s dark golden hair, planting soft kisses across her neck while her…


“Lord Umber says we are three days’ march away,” the boy reported. Marrion Manderly was a young boy of eleven, podgy and stoutly built, though a dutiful squire. “And, um, Lord Giantsbane has sent three parties ahead.”
Jon smiled. His squire brought his riding leathers. “Lord Giantsbane,” he repeated. “Have you called Tormund that?”

“I… I haven’t, Your Grace?”

“Best not. The man doesn’t need more titles.”

*It’s a been another night, and the Greatjon and Tormund still haven’t killed each other, he thought wearily. That is a success in its own right.*

Jon stepped outside of his tent. The plains were thick with snow, though the camp had stomped it into a muddy slush. The weather made progress slow, but they were moving forward. He could see the frozen headwaters of the Weeping Water in the distance.

From his Dragonguard, Toregg the Tall and Gregg Sheepstealer both stood outside his tent. Jon’s second squire, Bennard Locke, had his destrier ready and waiting for him. Bennard was a dark-haired and grim-faced boy of fourteen, attentive, quiet and keen-witted. He wore a surcoat with a crude stitching of a white dragon on a grey background. Jon hadn’t yet decided on a coat of arms himself, but his squire proved a quick hand with a needle.

“How goes the march? Any more attacks?” Jon asked as he mounted his horse.

“Not that I’ve heard,” Toregg replied. “But we still can’t find that supply escort that got attacked. My pa has been hunting the bastards that did that for the week.”

Jon nodded. They were a big host, snows were thick, and supplies were proving a problem. “We have food to last for now. We can restock when we meet the Weeper’s host. Until there’s an alternative we can’t delay the march.”

“A hungry march then.”

“Not so,” Gregg Sheepstealer grunted. He was a stout, fat-bellied man with thick arms. “The southerners brought horses to eat, didn’t they?”

Jon grimaced. *Not ideal, but my army is mostly free folk – they have survived harder marches than this.* Behind him, Sonagon stirred. The dragon rested at the very centre of the camp, but all the men kept their distance. “Better get the dragon in the air, king,” Gregg warned. “We don’t want to be caught by any raids like the other day.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed. His grey destrier shimmied slightly beneath him. “Fetch Ser Marlon, Lord Umber, and Tormund. We move out quickly, and I’ll send Sonagon ahead.”

He closed his eyes and stretched out the warg towards Sonagon. It was accepted easily. The dragon was still tired and sluggish, but they had been bonding more and more easily during the march.

*Come now,* Jon pushed, as forcefully he dared. His vision blurred, his senses shifted. *Fly. Hunt.*

Huge wings flexed outwards slowly. The great shadow fell over the camp. Even after weeks of Sonagon being with them, there was still a minor panic every time the dragon burst into the air.

Jon felt himself rising up into the cold air, the wind howling under his wings, snow drifting across his body. All around him, there was the stink of men marching into the Lonely Hills. Jon’s host of over six thousand seemed so formidable from the centre, but it was left a small shapeless blur from a dragon’s eye.
Head towards the hills, Jon pushed. Find the river. Look for any armies amassing.

Sonagon flapped southwest, before twisting and circling east. Then, his nostrils flickered as a sharp scent hit him on the wind.

He heard the cries from over a mile away. Sonagon smelled the cold tang of blood. A faint slurry of snow rolled over the forests, and then blobs of figures appeared in the snow, as small as ants. Wrestling bodies in the middle of a battle between the pines.

The boom of wings cracked through the air. The men below all heard it. Jon watched hundreds of figures quiver – actually *quiver* – as the white shape roared above them like a hurricane.

There was no shock quite like Sonagon’s roar. Ant-like figures fell down in the snow, panting desperately as if their hearts were collapsing in their chest. A dragon brought out a primal fear in all men – it could turn even the bravest into scurrying little rats.

*It’s the sense of scale,* Jon thought. *No man likes to see how little they are.*

Sonagon roared. The blob scattered and broke, and a cry of victory rose from the ground. By the time Sonagon turned to sweep low across the hills, the men were already running into the trees.

He would have chased them, if it were possible to recognise ally from foe.

*How can you tell which side are allies when they all look like bugs?* Jon cursed. It was lucky that one side ran, because Sonagon was left useless trying to intervene in a pitched battle. *I need large banners, something that even a dragon’s eyes can make out.*

Jon took a deep breath, feeling himself shudder as he let go of the warg. His senses blurred, and slowly he fell out of the dragon’s skin. Snow whipped at his face. Beneath him, his grey destrier snorted.

“There’s fighting on the Lonely Hills,” Jon shouted, blinking repeatedly, trying to focus. “Bolton forces attacking our forward parties. Pass the word to Greatjon and Tormund.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Marrion said hurriedly, turning to run over the snow.

A figure wearing the Manderly sigil rode towards him. “How many?” Ser Marlon called.

“Hundreds or so.” Damn, it was so hard to count from above through Sonagon’s eyes. “Their forces scattered as soon as they saw Sonagon.”

“Again?” a free folk grumbled, by Jon’s side. “Isn’t going to be much of a battle then.”

“Aye, but I don’t want to let them get away,” Jon said. *The Bastard of Bolton could be with them.* “Gather up five hundred mounted men, we move out quickly.”

“What of your dragon?” Toregg asked.

“They’ve reached the woods. Sonagon can’t follow easily through the trees.” And they know that; their entire tactic is based around making it inconvenient for the dragon. “We need mounted men if we want to stop them getting away again.”

Most of their cavalry were from White Harbour. In the host, there were four times as many free folk than northerners, but the free folk were primarily infantry while all of the heavy horses were northern soldiers. Jon heard Ser Marlon shout as he prepared the riders.
“Bloody hells,” Tormund Giantsbane grumbled as he came trotting forward on a large dark pouncey. *He chose a mild and comfortable mount, but he still sits uneasily in the saddle.* “What are we chasing this time?”

“Skirmishers in the hills,” Jon ordered. Sonagon was still in the sky, soaring through the low clouds. “I saw them ambushing one of our groups.”

“The fools. How did they expect the fight to go when that dragon is in the air?” He guffawed.

“The dragon is not always in the air. If I hadn’t spotted them it could have gone badly for us,” Jon said stiffly. *They take the dragon for granted and that’s dangerous.* “That warband shouldn’t have went so far ahead.”

“Aye, that’ll be bloody Gerrick Kingsblood,” Tormund snorted. “I bloody warned him not to go too far, but him and his warband were all eager for a fight.”

Horses were stirring, riding from the camp. Bennard Locke brought him his helm and shield, but Jon didn’t want his squires with him. He needed to move quickly. “*Come on,*” he ordered. “I will not allow Ramsay Snow a chance to escape.”

“You saw the Bastard with them?” The Greatjon growled darkly. He rode a huge, dark warhorse, with his greatsword over his back.

“No,” he admitted. “But someone must be leading these attacks. It could be Ramsay Snow. I intend to find out.”

“Then *move,*” Lord Umber snapped. “He will not escape.”

“Oh aye,” Tormund agreed, hoisting up his maul. “This Bastard of Bolton seems like a scunner who ought to be losing his limbs.”

Their horses marched out, all of them were strong northern breeds to manage the snow. Jon gave orders for his Dragonguard to bring the infantry and follow as quickly as possible.

Ahead of them, the Lonely Hills stretched out ahead of them. Jon saw the streams that led down to the Weeping Waters trickling over the landscape. The ground was thick with snow, and the sound of galloping hooves.

Sonagon swept over the sky, the huge shadow passing over the ground. Horses around Jon whinnied, and the riders had to struggle to control them. “I see them scattering south and west,” Jon called. “*Ser Marlon, ride around the hills, try to cut them off!*”

“Of course, your Grace!” Ser Marlon called, and he shouted to split off with a hundred men.

Jon pulled on his rein looking for the officers. “Ewan Bole,” he shouted at the northerner. “Take fifty men along the streams, in case they try to double back.”

Ewan Bole just nodded. He was a heavily bearded man, one of Robett Glover’s sworn swords. “*Aye, Your Grace,*” he shouted gruffly over the sound of horses. “*Riders, on me!*”

Beside him, Tormund scoffed. “*‘Your Grace’. Now why does it being king suddenly make you so graceful, I wonder?*”

“Just go left through the hills,” Jon ordered. “They’re on foot and they’ve scattered.”
They circled around, striding through the snow. Jon had his forces split again. The Lonely Hills earned their name; they were desolate and barren hills and rough and empty countryside. Large, but lightly sloping and scattered, leading down to the Weeping Water and the Dreadfort. Jon heard that sometimes the wind blowing through the hills sounded like wailing.

“If this is Ramsay Snow,” the Greatjon called, riding next to Jon, “then we take him alive. We take him alive so he gets to die slowly.”

Jon just nodded, casting a wary glance at the big man. The Greatjon had recovered Last Hearth a week ago. It hadn't been difficult; there had only been a skeletal Bolton force holding it, most of whom had tried to flee. The entire keep had been ransacked bare.

Inside the castle, the Greatjon found his youngest son, a boy of six, nailed to the keep’s wall. Ramsay Snow had signed his name.

They had also found one of the castellans, Mors Umber, with a spear wound in his chest and on the brink of death's door. It was doubtful the Crowsfood would survive much longer. Some of Lord Umber’s other family may have fled. There was no sign of Hother Umber.

Or of my brother, Jon thought with a grimace. Bran.

He could see a dark, simmering anger in the Greatjon's eyes. What happened at Last Hearth had been savage. The sooner the Bastard of Bolton is caught the better everyone will be.

They met up with Ewan Bole’s force again quickly, who reported that none had slipped away towards the streams. After securing the foothills, they rode to meet up with the forward party. Jon saw the wildling warband atop the snowy field. They were cheering, celebrating. That made Jon’s fists clench as the cavalry rode up to meet them.

“Gerrick Kingsblood,” Jon shouted. “What the hells do you think you're doing?”

The broad, red-haired man grinned. He could have passed for a southerner, with his hair shaved and wearing chainmail and leathers provided by the White Harbour fleet. “Victory, that's what,” Gerrick laughed. “We saw those bastards fleeing like cravens!”

There were bodies littering the snow. More wildlings than Boltons, it seemed. “They fled from Sonagon, ser. Not you,” Jon said curtly. “And if the dragon hadn't been there, I would be burying your corpse right now.”

The man faltered slightly. “But we won!”

“You let your bloody warband get ambushed. You got lucky that Sonagon was in the air, there were no guarantees he would be,” Jon said angrily. “You went ahead of the main host and left yourself exposed.”

Gerrick bristled. “You gave the order to secure villages around the Dreadfort, I went and did that.”

“Did I tell you to walk into a Bolton ambush?” His voice turned cold.

His eyes were wide, his shoulders tense. Gerrick opened his mouth to object. Tormund pushed his horse forward. “Stop talking now, Gerrick,” Tormund warned. “Bow your head and step back if you know what's good for you.”

Gerrick’s face twisted, but he didn't speak. Jon let his gaze linger on him quietly. “I'll handle it here. Gerrick, you are relieved,” Tormund offered. “Snow, you go chase the cunts responsible.”
“Aye,” Jon muttered, turning his horse and signalling the men to follow. They rode down the hill, following the footprints in the snow.

The Greatjon looked at him with a scoff. The horses didn’t stop their quick trot. “Your wildlings aren’t soldiers.”

“They know how to fight.”

“That ain’t the same thing.” The Greatjon grunted, as he shimmied his horse away from Jon’s.

From Jon’s other side, Ewan Bole moved his horse closer towards his, cautiously. “Lord Umber has a point, Your Grace,” the man noted, in his very rough voice. “I do not doubt your wildling’s strength, but there’s a reason why no King-Beyond-the-Wall has ever succeeded.” Jon turned his gaze on him, but the man’s tone was just observational, not aggressive. “The wildlings are not trained. They can fight, but can your wildlings hold a shield wall? Can they set battle lines and keep to them? Can they mount a siege, or brace against cavalry? Their raiding parties are fearsome, but their hosts are less so. Historically, even when the wildlings have had the far greater numbers, their armies have been bested easily enough by those of the Night’s Watch or Stark.”

Jon hesitated. “They can learn what they’re missing.”

“Then I hope they learn quickly,” he warned. “Too many make the mistake of focusing on the number of men, rather than the type.”

*He’s right,* Jon thought. Bringing the northmen and the free folk together had highlighted some fairly large flaws in Jon’s army. “Yes,” Jon said, suppressing the sigh. “Thank you for the honest counsel, ser.”

He laughed brashly. “I am no ser. I ain’t no friend to wildlings, either, but I lost kin at Winterfell and then again at the Red Wedding. Between wildlings or Boltons, I know which one I hate more.”

Jon could believe it; the northman had a strong, honest attitude to him. Jon had been keeping an eye on which of his men had been distinguishing themselves, and Ewan certainly had. “Joining forces will help greatly to patch our weaknesses. And good commanders like yourself will aid even more, if you’re willing to work with them,” he said. He tried to measure the man’s reaction to that comment. “Right now, they’re overconfident. We’ve been winning every battle we’ve fought, and that makes men like Gerrick brave enough to do something stupid. Or become lazy.”

“You do have a dragon,” Ewan noted.

“I have one dragon. And when there is more than one battle happening, my dragon can't attend them all.” Jon shook his head. “The Boltons have proved they aren't willing to fight a pitched battle when Sonagon is involved, but they're still trying every other type of conflict.”

“Aye, they've been a nuisance. But we cut them down piece by piece and sooner or later they run out of places to—”

The man’s voice was cut off by a horn blast over the hills. Ser Marlon’s men. At once Jon's riders turned to change direction. He reached out and summoned Sonagon back towards him.

The horses galloped, but by the time they arrived the battle was already practically over. Jon saw some fighting on the ground through Sonagon, but he had to hold the dragon back. Sonagon would hurt his own men as much as the enemy if he intervened in tight rank skirmishes.

“We found them,” Ser Marlon called to Jon as the reinforcements arrived. The last of the attackers
were being subdued. “Mostly Bolton men, some Karstark and Hornwood among them. They tried
to fight, and then they surrendered pretty quickly.”

It wasn't much of a battle. They had been fleeing the dragon on foot and Ser Marlon's men were all

“Sixty or so surrendered. Another twenty died in the fight.”

Jon shook his head. “No. I saw at least three hundred ambushing Gerrick's men.”

“Yes,” Ser Marlon agreed. “But these are the only ones we caught.”

Jon could see the soldiers gathered in the middle of the riders. They didn't have enough rope, so
instead the prisoners were held at spear point, forced to their knees in the snow. He saw the flayed
man of Bolton stitched on their hauberks. Gods, Jon thought, they all look so scared and cold. Why
is it easier to think of enemies as faceless foes in uniform rather than as cold and scared men?

“We think the rest of their force must have scattered between the three villages around here,” Ser
Marlon explained. “Or maybe they have hideouts in the woods.”

“No, it'll be the villages,” the Greatjon grunted. “They run to the villages and they hide their
swords and helmets; all of those soldiers pretend to be farmers and smallfolk. When you go chasing
after them, they'll shrug and say “who, me?”. And when you walk away they'll pick up their
swords and stab you in the back.”

Jon was reminded of the books he read on the First Dornish War. Dammit, I do not want that type
of war. “And what do you suggest?”

“Put the Bolton villages to the sword.” The Greatjon's eyes were grim. “Make sure they know the
punishment for harbouring soldiers.”

Jon smiled humourlessly. “Wouldn't that just encourage more villages to resent us? Give them
reason to hate you and they will learn how to hide soldiers better, how to make their ambushes
more effective. That is the catch, Lord Umber; you lose no matter which way you fight it.” Jon
shook his head, turning to Ser Marlon. “No, try to find out where these soldiers went. Question the
smallfolk – carefully – but the rules haven't changed.”

Ser Marlon nodded, moving off to gather up his men. The Greatjon stood stiffly on his mount,
arms folded.

“We cannot punish smallfolk, Lord Umber,” said Jon. “Not even Bolton smallfolk.”

“I might have agreed,” he replied darkly. “Except then my home was razed because my uncles
were too generous in which ‘smallfolk’ they let through the gates.”

Jon didn't reply. He turned to inspect the prisoners, the first of which were already being
interrogated. Perhaps some would have useful information, but Jon doubted that common soldiers
would know much of Lord Bolton's plans. And it is impossible to weed out the lies from the truth in
any case, Jon thought bitterly. It’s hard to trust anything they say when it might be a desperate lie
or a deliberate ploy.

I have the larger army and a dragon, yet they are still making things difficult at every chance. The
Boltons know how to harry a force from all sides.

“Sixty prisoners,” Lord Umber noted. “That’s sixty more mouths to feed out of our rations. And
another delay to our march.”

“We're not executing prisoners, Lord Umber. Not because they're inconvenient.”

“Half-measures, boy,” the Greatjon warned. “They'll kill you every single time.”

The Greatjon refused stubbornly to ever call Jon king. Jon wasn’t fool enough to call him out on it; their alliance wasn’t so secure.

Afterwards, outriders reported movement to the west. The rest of the attackers were fleeing from the hills. Jon closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and in the sky Sonagon twisted around with an almighty flap. *The dragon will become irritated flying like this without hunting*, Jon thought with a grimace. There was a limit to how much Sonagon would allow himself to be controlled. *I cannot keep using him indefinitely.*

Jon’s infantry caught up with them towards dusk, as they moved over the hills. He had done his best to try and organise them, but even from a distance he could see the lack of rank and file in the sprawled, black blob of men. His host of six thousand men, mostly wildlings with some northmen mixed in, stretched over the snowy fields. Tormund had brought the wildlings south from Castle Black, and Lord Umber had rallied what he could from the Umber lands, and the rest were Manderly men that had rode up from White Harbour alongside Ser Marlon and Ser Wylis. Robett Glover and a small force of men had joined them from other houses of the east coast.

*We will meet up with the Weeper’s force from Karhold soon*, Jon thought. The Weeper brought five thousand wildlings, some Karstark men, and five hundred giants with mammoths. The plan was to converge on the Dreadfort together, from the west and northeast. They would be over ten thousand strong. Whatever Bolton force was left stood no chance in battle.

*Of course, that’s little reason for them to fight a battle*, he thought grimly.

Later, Ser Marlon returned. The knight was grim-faced, his horse breathing heavily as he rode towards them. “We gave chase for as long as we could, Your Grace,” Ser Marlon reported. “We only caught ten of them. The rest slipped away. There was little luck scouring the villages.”

“Chasing bloody ghosts,” Tormund spat, grumbling as he walked towards Jon. “They’ll have us chasing our tails at this rate.”

“But they *are* folding,” Jon insisted. “They are losing ground, and the worst they can do is slow us down. They can’t stop us. We are days away from the Dreadfort, and they don’t have forces to even try to stop us.”

“Aye, and am I the only one who thinks that’s queer?” Tormund folded his arms. “We’ve been marching all the way through Bolton lands and not a single bastard is even trying to challenge us.”

“So the wildling has some wits,” the Greatjon grunted. Tormund glared at the lord, sizing up against him. The Greatjon was over head and shoulders taller, while Tormund was short and stocky. “He’s right, we haven’t even seen a tenth of the opposition we should expect.”

“They’re scared of the dragon,” said Jon.

“If they’re that scared, then why don’t they surrender?”

Jon didn’t reply, but there was something bothering him too. It was only at the hour of ghosts when he learned what. Outriders arrived from the east, reporting a battle on the banks of the Weeping Water. The Weeper’s host, the one that had been coming down from Karhold. Ambushed as they
tried to cross the river.

The Battle of Weeping Water was over before Jon or any others even heard of it.

It was too dark and cold to safely move men at night, but Jon readied their mounted men to head out at first light. He brought his Dragonguard with him, and summoned Sonagon to follow. He could see the frozen banks of the Weeping Water in the distance; in spring it was a long, slow and gloomy river, but now it was frozen scar cutting through the snowy plains. Jon smelt the smoke and blood in the air before their horses even got near.

“It was a bloody distraction,” the Greatjon growled, echoing Jon’s thoughts. “They ambushed your outriders and led your dragon on a merry chase to the west. All the while a larger force ambushed your second host while the dragon was busy.”


Jon saw the bodies littering the valley. There were corpses with arrows in them, half-buried under the light snow. They spotted a bloodied corpse of a mammoth, with spears through its hide, as it lay collapsed through the ice in the trickling river.

Jon saw the smoke of the Weeper’s camp, surrounded by wooden spike fortifications in a typical wildling defence. Besides the mammoths, the Weeper’s force was on foot. Thousands of men all huddled together in the bend of the water. Likely around four thousand, Jon thought. Maybe less.

Their army wasn’t moving, the camp felt bloodied. Wounded. Horns blew as they approached, and the Weeper met Jon and the riders as they rode into the camp. Jon saw the shadows of giants, sniffing in the air cautiously. Wildlings lowered their heads or bowed to Jon as he passed.

The Weeper didn’t bow. Even in steel and hard leathers, the man looked just as hard and worn as ever. His armour was grimy, and blood trickled down his cheeks.

“About bloody time you arrived,” the Weeper grumbled as Jon pulled his horse to stop. “I was thinking I would have to win this whole bloody war by myself.”

“Weeper.” Tormund spat the word. “Why aren’t you dead yet?”

“You think anyone has the stones to kill me?” The Weeper’s voice turned taunting. “Fucking ‘Giantsbane’. You’ve lost weight. Did the crows not feed you after you lost the battle at the Frostfangs like a–”


He grunted. His scythe was covered in dried, cold blood. “The flayed men ambushed us crossing the river last night. They came from all sides, with arrows and horses.”

“How many?” Jon demanded.

“Five hundred. Maybe more. I could only count the corpses, but enough of them ran away. We fought them off.”

“So we won?” Ser Marlon asked. Jon didn’t look too convinced.

“And how many losses did you take?”
The Weeper’s eyes flickered. *Dammit*, Jon cursed. The camp stunk of blood, weariness and wounded. He saw giants with the stubs of arrows still sticking out of their furs.

“Where the bloody hells was that dragon?” the Weeper demanded. “We could have used him here last night.”

“Distracted,” Jon replied icily. *Lured away.* “Sonagon can’t be everywhere. I didn’t even receive news of the battle here until it was too late.”

*The Boltons are learning, trying to find weak spots in my campaign. They’re learning how to fight around the dragon rather than face it.*

“How many managed to flee?” the Greatjon demanded. “And who was leading them? *Was it Ramsay Snow?’*

“Hundreds or so,” the Weeper grumbled. “And I didn’t bloody have a chance to ask.”

“You let hundreds escape?” Tormund guffawed. “You must have had five times their number.”

“Aye, five times as many weary and tired. They were fucking prepared,” the Weeper snapped. He glared angrily between them, bristling aggressively. “I gave chase and they hurt my men coming over the hill for it.”

The battle would have gone poorly from the beginning, especially as the wildlings were struggling trying to cross the river. The Weeper was a ruthless and capable leader, but *of course* he would always attack. When a prudent man would have fallen back, the Weeper must have tried to lead an assault up the valley.

Wildling warbands didn’t have formations – in open skirmishes that wasn’t so much of a disadvantage, but in any fortified clash it was disastrous. From the state of the camp and the battlefield, Jon expected that at least ten wildlings fell for every Bolton man. *Maybe thousands dead. We only ‘won’ because of numbers.*

“What of prisoners?” Jon demanded.

The Weeper’s lips twitched. The grin was bloodthirsty. *What prisoners?*

*Dammit.* But not now. “Where did the Bolton men retreat to?” Jon demanded, quickly changing tack.

“South. The southerners ran back to their little castle.”

“Then we follow them,” Jon ordered. “The plan hasn’t changed; we bring our hosts together and march on the Dreadfort. We split our mounted forces. Tormund and Ser Marlon, return to the camp with half our horses. March on the Dreadfort from the west. The Greatjon and I will stay with the Weeper’s forces and march from the northeast.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Ser Marlon bowed in his saddle. His men turned and rode away, along with Tormund.

“‘Your Grace’,;” the Weeper sneered, glancing at Jon. “So while I’ve been fighting a war, you’ve been getting those southern dipsticks to bow at you?”

“Just be careful with the way you speak to me,” Jon warned. He kept his voice very low. “I will only tolerate so much.”
The Weeper only snorted.

*He’s been fighting more battles than anyone,* Jon told himself. *He’s weary and grim.* As gruff as the Weeper was, Jon could hardly ask for a better front-line commander. The Weeper had fought off both Umber and Karstark forces ever since the crossing at Eastwatch, and fought all the way down to take Karhold itself. The Weeper’s four thousand men were all battle-tested and worn. *And this battle has likely been the worst casualties he’s suffered.*

“We need rest for our horses,” the Greatjon grumbled, glaring around the wildlings. Jon noticed how nervous many of the northmen were at the sight of giants. The Weeper motioned and waved for one of his men to handle it.

“To me, my lord,” a deep voice called. Jon saw a short burly man with a balding head and a mouthful of broken brown teeth step forward. He wore thick iron plate, carrying a large, ugly longsword over his back. “I will arrange for them.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. The man did not sound like a wilding. He had a southern accent. “And who are you?”

“I am Ser Clayton Suggs, Your Holiness,” the man bowed. He had a white stone on his chest. He smiled, but there was no humour there. *Eyes like a pig.* “Formerly of King’s Landing.”

*A knight?* Jon paused, making the connection. “You served Stannis at the battle of Hardhome.”

“To my *shame.* I was deluded by false gods and fake prophets.” Ser Clayton was respectful, but Jon didn’t like his expression. “I see the truth now. For the glory of the ice dragon, Your Holiness.”

“Indeed,” he said, icily. “You converted fast.”

“Lord Weeper vouched for me.” Ser Clayton Suggs’ grin widened. “He said that I have talent. Talent better served on a battlefield rather than a prisoner. I serve faithfully, I swear it on my honour.”

Jon didn’t reply, but he dismounted and let Ser Clayton take his horse. The southern knight’s eyes lingered on him. Looking around, Jon was surprised to see that quite a few of them weren’t wildlings.

*Karstark men.* Most averted their gaze, but he followed their eyes towards a group of four men, huddled together.

The only one who met Jon’s stare had the look of a lord. He was a strong man past fifty, with brown hair, a beard and thick moustache, wearing dishevelled clothes. Jon stepped forward.

There were bloody dark bruises over the lord’s face, Jon noticed. Some of the bruises were old, others fresh. Gritting his teeth, the man lowered his head jerkily. “King Snow,” the man choked. “I am Lord Cregan Karstark of Karhold.”

*Ahh.* “Thank you for supporting our cause, my lord.”

His jaw clenched. “I will do what is best for my family,” Lord Karstark said. He was a strong man, but his voice was strained. “And for my house. Your Grace.”

“Your family,” Jon repeated. “Tell me, where is Lady Alys?”

Lord Karstark’s gaze was dark. “On a ship heading to White Harbour. Along with my brothers,
sons and nephew.”

“And yet your father Arnolf Karstark is at Winterfell, allied with Roose Bolton, I believe?”

“Aye.” Jon could see the anger and emotion hiding behind a faint layer of civility. *Civility reinforced by fear, though. Karstark has not been treated kindly.* “And I fought against the wildlings that invaded my lands, I did. I will not lie and say I would not do it again, even. But I will act as is best for my house and my people – and if that means resolving this war with you, gods forgive me, I will do it. I will fight alongside you and so the name Karstark will survive. My lands, my castle, my family will be kept safe.”

“I see.” *There’s no loyalty with this one. The only reason he is with me is because he knows he will not survive being against me. But perhaps that is enough?*

From the looks of things, Lord Karstark was being kept under very close supervision by the wildlings around him too. It didn’t escape Jon’s notice that Cregan Karstark was missing a sword on his waist.

“That was the pledge you forced from me, *Your Grace,*” Lord Karstark spat the words. “And I will even uphold it. However, should anything happen to me or my wife, then the whole realm will know you a liar and oathbreaker. Just like your accursed brother – a man that would wipe his ass on vows and loyalty. So just keep your dogs away from me and my men.”

Jon had to consider his words very carefully. There was a long pause. “Thank you for your loyalty, my lord,” he said slowly. “Although I would advise you to consider your words more thoughtfully. And respectfully.”

The man’s face twisted. He had to close his eyes, and force the words out of his throat as if they were bile. “I apologise, Your Grace,” Lord Karstark growled, taking a gasped, deep breath. The words seemed to physically pain him. “I will mind my tongue.”

*How many times must the Weeper have beaten the man to put that sort of fear into him?*

He looked around the camp. The free folk were loyal, even the White Harbour men had come willingly, but the other northerners that were filling their ranks? *How many have only joined because of the same fear?*

The thought felt like a lump of iron lodged in his chest, making him scowl.

Jon walked around the free folk, trying to recall the names of the leaders that left with the Weeper. Everyone was worn and tired, but he still saw many wearing white stones. Jon’s squires looked terrified at the sight of giants and mammoths lumbering near the water. Several giants approached to stare at him, and in the Old Tongue he heard them muttering, “King, King.”

He met the Weeper by the water’s edge, washing the blood off his face in the icy water. “I got headcounts from the war chiefs,” the Weeper called. “We lost two thousand in the battle last night.”

“Then we must find the men to burn the bodies. Leave none untorched,” said Jon. “They’ve bloodied our noses, but this is still a Bolton defeat. Combined, we will still be nine thousand strong. We will take the Dreadfort, and then the Boltons lose their seat.”

“Nine thousand strong,” the Weeper grumbled. He was bare-chested as he washed, but he didn’t seem to mind even despite the freezing cold. His back was covered in scars. “And most of those free folk. You’ve got what, two thousand southrons with you? Less?”
“For now. The northern lords are still rallying.”

“And so are the free folk. I hear Rattleshirt is mustering another host from Eastwatch. Sigorn of Thenn is doing the same from the Shadow Tower. We’re still getting refugees trickling south through the Wall, and they’re likely coming through faster now that we’ve got all three gates. There could well be an army of over fifteen thousand free folk fighters gathering for you.”

“What’s your point?”

“Fifteen thousand.” His voice was low, warning. “Just remember which side you need more, king. In a choice between these southerners and the free folk, I expect you to choose the free folk.”

“It doesn’t have to be a choice. It’s not us versus them.”

“And once again you prove yourself a fool.”

_He still sees all southerners as enemies._ Jon met his gaze. “What did you do to Lord Karstark, Weeper?”

He scoffed. “That filth? I bent him over and I showed him the butt of my scythe a few times. Maybe more than a few. The man was stubborn.”

Jon’s fingers twitched. “You did what?”

“Hells, you told me to convince Karstark to declare for us,” the Weeper chuckled. “I convinced him to declare for us.”

“And can you not show restraint?” Jon snapped.

“He’s still got a head, doesn’t he? That was my restraint.” He pulled himself up by the river’s edge, scowling. “That scum should count himself blessed he’s still breathing. I would have happily killed him, except I knew you would have a hissy fit over it.”

“And how do you ever expect his loyalty after bloody beating him?”

“Who the fuck cares about his loyalty? I don’t need him. He shouldn’t be alive,” the man snarled. “Cregan didn’t have any choice but to join me. At every fight, I put Karstark men on the very front ranks. I don’t trust any of them, I don’t give any of them a chance to betray us. You can sure as hells bet I have men ready to kill them at a moment’s notice if they even look treacherous.”

Jon thought of Ser Clayton Suggs. The Weeper recognised ‘talent’. “And how do you expect that’s going to work in the long run?” he challenged. “We will lose if we try to rule by fear, Weeper.”

“Fear is the only thing men like Cregan Karstark understand,” he grumbled. His hands twitched as he turned to face Jon. Without his armour, Jon could see the ugly, bloated red scars across his neck from the white walker’s grip.

“And fear will only sow more hate,” Jon muttered, stepping forward. “We will not do it. We will conquer the northern way, not the wildling way.”

Weeper’s bulging eyes narrowed. “You see, that’s what concerns me,” he growled. “Consider this a friendly warning, Snow. It surely as hell seems like you’re abandoning the free folk in favour of your new southron friends.”

Jon stiffened. “What are you talking about, Weeper?”
“I hear you’ve been selling free folk daughters to your ‘noble houses’,” the Weeper spat. “Your marriages.”

“And I’ve been buying highborn brides for free folk warriors,” replied Jon. “They are alliances that help bring us together.”

“And also rewards for those that serve you,” he sneered. “Making proud warriors want to be treated like dogs. Forcing them into all your northern games for what? Your favour?”

Jon didn’t reply. There had been only five confirmed betrothals so far – two of Old Man Harwick’s granddaughters to minor lords of the White Knife, Ygon Oldfather’s son to Lord Forrester’s third daughter, Gerrick Kingsblood to Lord Holt’s eldest daughter, Soren Shieldbreaker’s daughter to Lord Bole and Baldor Icewall’s daughter to Ser Ian Poole – but the news had spread and there were two dozen other potential matches up in the air.

The Weeper rolled his shoulders as he stepped up from the riverbank. “Me?” the Weeper muttered. “I might start wondering why I should have to be given a woman at all. Why not just take one?”

“That would be a mistake,” Jon warned darkly. “There are still more of them than there are free folk.”

“Oh aye. And I’ve followed your rules, I’ve kept these free folk in line. You ordered ‘no raids’, and, hells, I’ve followed. Not a single warrior has pillaged from my warband without losing his own head for it, I dare you to find to find living soul that can say otherwise.” The Weeper grinned. “But now I’m starting to wonder what I get for all my efforts.”

There was an edge to his voice. “What do you want, Weeper?”

“Karhold. I took that castle, I get to keep it.”

“Karhold is the seat of House Karstark.”

“A family that betrayed and fought against you, from how I hear it,” the Weeper said. “Now why should a bunch of traitors get to keep a castle like that?”

Jon’s lips pursed, but he nodded. *Good allies needed to be rewarded.* “I can make no promises right now,” said Jon. “But I will bear it in mind.”

“And I also want the girl,” the Weeper called. Jon stopped. “She’s a pretty girl. Alys Karstark. I want her.”

His eyes turned hard. The Weeper folded his arms. “Is that not how you southerners do things? You marry the right woman and you take the castle?”

“Alys Karstark,” Jon said stiffly, “is already married.”

“Not because she had anything to do with it. I spoke to her. If you take that Cregan cunt’s head, I imagine she’d be cheering the loudest in the crowd.”

“Lord Cregan Karstark is an ally now. He agreed to support us.”

“Not willingly. He conceded only because we didn’t give him a choice.”

“That’s not the point.” Jon took a step forward. “There are rules here. When a lord surrenders to you, you can’t kill him afterwards. Otherwise no lord will ever surrender again. How do you think
the northern lords would react if I executed a prominent northern lord and gave his wife away?”

“Fuck them. Cregan Karstark is a nasty little parasite. World would be better off if he never had a head. I should have killed him already.” He folded his arms, shaking his head quietly. “Did you know that Alys asked me to? Back at Karhold – she suggested it. She wanted me to kill him for her, and I wanted to do it. But I decided to be really reasonable,” he spat the word, “and wait for your permission. This is a simple one, Snow; let me kill the sod and take the girl.”

No, Jon thought, not so simple at all. There was a nasty glint in the Weeper’s bulging eyes. Jon twitched. “And why,” he asked slowly, “why do you want Lady Karstark so badly?”

“I told you. She’s pretty.”

“I heard what happened to the last woman you stole, Weeper. The fisherfolk’s lass,” Jon said icily. “Tormund told me the tale.”


“And the last one was a girl of seventeen. You cut out her eyes.”

The Weeper’s smirk only grew. “Well, she had pretty eyes. I’ve still got them somewhere, I think.”

It took everything Jon had to keep the revulsion off his face. His hands clenched. The Weeper is not a good man. He’s never been good. Even among the free folk, the Weeper is feared for good reason. He’s an evil psychotic fiend who just so happens to be my strongest ally.

“Why?” Jon growled. “By the all the gods, why would you do that to a girl?”

He only scoffed. “What, can’t a man do whatever he likes to his own wife?”

And I argued for amnesty for all crimes north of the Wall. I defended all of the wildling’s crimes.

A castle was one thing, but Jon couldn’t give the Weeper a wife like Alys. The Lady Karstark didn’t know what she was asking for, calling on a man like Weeper to help her. That was a disaster waiting to happen. Jon’s nostrils flared. “You will not touch Alys Karstark,” Jon warned. There was no anger, his voice just turned cold. “You will not harm any woman. Any rapes – any missing eyes – and there will be no peace. No peace between us, no peace between the lords.” He shook his head, unblinking as he met the man’s gaze. “I will not tolerate it. Ever.”

The Weeper took half a step forward threateningly. “Boy,” he muttered. His voice turned low and his eyes bulged. “If I wanted Alys Karstark, I could have taken her. Maybe I still will.”

“You won’t.” Jon shook his head. There was a pause, and then he turned to walk away. “I’ve got to believe not even you are that mad.”

“I could have Fucking killed you in those woods!” the Weeper snapped. “I could have killed you at Hardhome.”

“Yes,” Jon muttered, not turning around. “You could have.”

“If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t even be here! You would never have made it this far!” the Weeper shouted. “Just remember that, boy.”

Believe me, I am. I am.

It took a long time for Jon’s temper to cool. He needed deep breaths, trying to shake the image of
the Weeper cutting out a young girl’s eyes from her skull. *I will raise commanders and officers from White Harbour amongst the free folk,* he thought finally. *Men who could be trusted to watch the Weeper carefully, and enforce order. But for now, I can’t risk reprimanding and alienating him.* The Weeper scowled when he saw Jon later, but neither of them said anything. He knew the matter was shelved, but not forgotten.

It was snowing when the host set out again. They used mammoths to carry rations, and the crowds of wildlings with spears set out over the Lonely Hills. They spent a full day marching hard along the branch of the Weeping Water, and then the next morning they saw the high red walls and triangular merlons, like sharp teeth, appearing over the hills.

The Dreadfort was a strong and squat castle of light red bricks that appeared pink in the weak sun, with thick walls and high, looming towers.

*A castle as old as Winterfell, Jon thought. A strong and formidable castle by any measure.*

The Weeping Water joined streams by the castle, and water from the Lonely Hills gushed over the frozen banks. A large town, a mill and farmland scattered around the Dreadfort, but it all looked eerily abandoned. There was a sour tang in the cold air.

Jon saw Tormund’s men and the Manderly host already in position. The armies surrounded the castle from the east, north and west. Jon called Sonagon towards him again, but from the first sight he knew that there wouldn’t be a battle here; the Boltons had already retreated. The gates were sealed and the castle was fortified against a siege instead.

The moat around the Dreadfort was filled with spikes. The drawbridge was raised. There were men on the walls hidden under wooden huts, shield walls already in position. Jon caught the glint of scorpions scattered around the keep and walls, and faint shapes of what looked mangonels in the courtyard. All of the scorpions were angled upwards towards the sky. They prepared themselves to face off against a dragon.

Sonagon would still win, of course, but there was a more of a risk here. A small risk, perhaps, but not one that Jon was comfortable with.

The Weeper gave orders to prepare stakewalls and spikes for defences, while Jon headed into the town. It stunk of old smoke. *The Boltons burnt the town and the homes rather than give us any advantage,* he realised. Scorched earth warfare. Ewan Bole and a small escort met him with word from Robett Glover, that the commanders were waiting for him.

Jon met the Greatjon, Ser Marlon Manderly, Ser Wylis Manderly, Robett Glover and half a dozen others again in the ruins of a mill they took for a command centre. The walls and ceiling were charred black from the fires, but the structure seemed strong. Lord Karstark wasn’t present, but Jon knew that lord had no place in their war council. Or within earshot of it.

“*My lord,*” Jon nodded at the Greatjon. “*How goes it? Were there any attacks?”*

“A few stragglers, nothing of note.” Lord Umber shook his head. “*My guess is that the battle at Weeping Water was their last attempt to try and drive us away. We’ve got the larger army and they know it.*”

“How many men are holding the castle?”

“A small garrison, by the looks of it,” Ser Marlon replied. “*The majority of their forces have already fled. If it was just us I would wager they’d be more likely to stand and fight, but*…”
“But they’re scared of the dragon. They won’t risk devoting large hosts of men to battles where
dragonfire would obliterate them.”

“The skinless man has no spine,” the Greatjon grumbled.

“Does that not make them more dangerous? Spineless creatures are often the most venomous,” Jon
sighed. They won’t make it easy, the Boltons seemed insistent on taking whatever victory they
could get. “Will the garrison surrender?

“I very much doubt it, Your Grace,” Ser Marlon admitted. “I am told it is being held by a man
named Steelshanks, and manned by old, hard veterans. I sent an envoy to the drawbridge under a
banner of truce, and they put four quarrels in the man. They will not negotiate, Roose Bolton
wouldn’t have left them if they would.”

“And they’ve have had weeks to prepare for us,” Robett Glover noted. “I’ve rarely seen a castle
holed up so tightly before. They burnt their own lands and hoarded whatever they couldn’t flee
with inside that keep. No, there will be no negotiation here.”

“So as far as I see it, we have two options,” the Greatjon said. “We either siege the castle or storm
it.”

“It’s a strong castle. A siege could take months.” Jon frowned.

“And a storm will take hours.” His eyes narrowed. “Can you dragon raze it?”

“Of course.”

“Then let’s bring the beast here,” the Greatjon ordered. “Turn the cursed place into ruin. Show
them a storm.”

Jon lips tightened. The thought of what he had seen at the Twins had not left him eager to repeat
the experience. *But if they will not surrender then what choice is there?*

Ser Wylis grimaced. “Your Grace,” he said hesitantly. The son of Lord Manderly was a large man,
but he looked worn and haggard in platemail that didn’t quite seem to fit. “I would urge you to
not.”

“Is there an alternative? We cannot leave the Bolton’s seat of power intact. The Dreadfort must be
secured before the march on Winterfell.”

“We have enough forces that we can safely dedicate some towards a siege, Your Grace,” Ser Wylis
argued. “Their garrison cannot threaten us. We secure the area and leave behind, say, two thousand
strong to starve the castle and we continue our march.”

“And how long would that take?” the Greatjon protested.

“No, it will leave us too vulnerable,” Ewan Bole said, shaking his shaggy head. “Our men will be
exposed.”

“It is better alternative than destroying a castle entirely,” Ser Wylis countered. “The Dreadfort is an
ancient northern castle. Even despite its reputation, it’s an historical and influential seat. To raze it
into ruins will not endear anyone to our cause. The Dreadfort is valuable enough to be worth a
siege. Let us take it, rather than raze it.”

“It would cost us time,” Robett Glover said quietly. “But there is little risk to our own men.”
“Little risk?” another said incredulously, to the support of others. “Are you mad? What of storms? Or starvation? You want to leave men hungry and cold outside a castle like the Dreadfort.”

Jon hesitated uncertainly. The Greatjon folded his arms. “Bugger that. You want to devote two thousand men to a siege like this? We will need our forces against Winterfell.”

“We have a dragon. Surely our armies are already secure.”

“No, a siege is folly,” the Greatjon insisted. “Just bloody blast the damn thing.”

“All the while the Dreadfort stands, we risk Roose Bolton taking back his lands,” Ewan Bole nodded. “And it weakens us in the process.”

“He won’t take it back. How could he, when his forces are amassed at Winterfell?” Ser Wylis objected.

The Greatjon shook his head. “No, we should turn the castle into rubble. Demonstrate just what treatment Bolton scum deserve. Demonstrate power.”

Ser Wylis eyes flickered towards Jon. “Or you could demonstrate patience and restraint instead.” He lowered his head quickly. “Your Grace.”

Jon didn’t outwardly react, but he looked to the mood of his allies. The Greatjon wanted destruction, but most others seemed to agree. Ser Wylis was the only one who really seemed to object. *I want to destroy it too*, Jon admitted silently. *But…*

“There will be hostages inside the Dreadfort, Your Grace,” Ser Wylis said finally. His eyes kept flickering to Jon. “There will be prisoners from the sack of Winterfell. Bolton dissenters as well. Their dungeons are vast.”

*Ah, that’s why the man is so hesitant.* “How many hostages?”

“I cannot say. But all of the smallfolk from this town must be somewhere.”

“The Boltons are expecting us to destroy the castle,” Ser Marlon noted. “They only left that garrison behind to ensure that we will not benefit from their loss. They are trying to make our victory as bitter as possible; maybe they’ve filled the castle with smallfolk, but there will be no important hostage inside. They would left no one that might drastically help our campaign should we recover them.”

“Aye,” Ewan Bole agreed. “Lord Bolton is a ruthless man, to leave behind his own seat as a sacrificial goat.”

“So you would support razing it, then?” Jon demanded, turning to the knight.

Ser Marlon grimaced. “It would be a logical decision, Your Grace.”

Ser Wylis was the only one vocal about a siege, the rest strongly opposed the idea. Robett Glover looked like he may agree with Ser Wylis, but he didn’t speak out loudly in support either. The discussion continued for some time. Lord Umber snapped at the heir of White Harbour as if he were a fool, and Ser Marlon had to try and mediate between them.

“Could your dragon breathe at the castle with more care?” Ser Marlon suggested finally, looking for a more moderate path. “What if your dragon demolished the gate and walls only, such that men could then assault the keep?”
“Sonagon is a dragon, ser, not a siege engine. He has only one type of attack.” Jon shook his head. “No, I cannot restrain him, and I must attack with overpowering force or not at all. To do anything less puts Sonagon at risk from scorpions and iron bolts, as I’m sure Meraxes could testify.”

Jon remembered the battle at Hardhome, and how poorly that battle had turned because he tried to hold Sonagon back on the initial strike. No, a dragon's greatest advantage is overwhelming power without restraint. So why am I hesitating?

Ser Wylis was still arguing. White Harbour was a crucial ally and Jon had no wish to dismiss Ser Wylis’ opinion, but the whole room was stacked against him. Jon didn’t even need to ask to know that Tormund and the Weeper would both object to a siege too.

“Please, Your Grace,” the knight said, looking to Jon, “the prisoners inside don’t deserve to die. Even just as a statement, we could show the realm…”

He hesitated. Show the realm that I’m not a monster. Jon bit his lip. I really, really want to destroy that castle. The majority of my commanders agree that it is the tactical move, and they’re right.

Still, the image of the Twins, and all those frozen corpses flickered before his eyes. No, he’s right, Jon thought with a sigh. The smallfolk inside don’t deserve to die.

That made Jon’s decision. “I did not have choice but to raze the Twins,” he said finally. The room muttered. “But there is a choice here. We will siege the Dreadfort with men rather than using Sonagon.”

The Greatjon cursed. “That will take months, boy. Months.”

“We have the resources to spare,” Jon said firmly. “What sort of commitment will be required?”

“I would wager three thousand men would be a good number,” said Robett Glover. “The old Kings of Winter proved that it is a difficult castle to siege.”

“But it is the good option,” Ser Wylis insisted. Nobody else looked convinced. “When the starvation kicks in and they see our intent, men inside will trade whatever prisoners they have for leeway.”

“For three thousand men, it will have to be a mix of free folk and northern soldiers.”

“I… I see. And who will lead them?” Ser Marlon asked. “Your man the Weeper?”

“No,” Jon shook his head. The Weeper would be the worst possible commander to lead a siege. He briefly considered Tormund, but Jon wanted to keep Tormund by his side. A siege required patience and discipline, a free folk would not be ideal. “Ser Marlon,” Jon said finally, turning to the face the knight. “Will you accept the command?”

Ser Marlon blinked, off-guard. The commander of the guard at White Harbour had proven himself capable, level-headed; a good, patient man for a long task. “The— ah, yes, Your Grace. I will.” He bowed.

“The free folk will follow you, I will ensure it,” Jon promised. “And there will be reinforcements from Eastwatch led by a man named Lord of Bones shortly. The dragon will return regularly to support the siege. The rest of our forces must continue onwards, west to Winterfell.”
“I will take the castle for you, Your Grace.” Ser Marlon bowed. “For my house and my realm.”

The Greatjon spat on the floor in disgust. There were a few unhappy objections, but Jon’s tone left no room for argument. Jon looked at Ser Wylis and tried to imagine what it would be like to be trapped in a prison for all those months.

There was more talk: who else would have command, their forces that would march. They had much ground to cover and they agreed to split into three hosts: Ser Marlon’s force to stay at the Dreadfort, the Greatjon to lead men to secure Hornwood, while the Weeper would lead his force west towards Long Lake. Jon insisted on integrating the northmen alongside the free folk, so that Tormund would keep with Lord Umber while Robett Glover and Ser Wylis would move with the Weeper.

They would need to spread themselves and secure as much area to fight against the skirmish attacks, and Jon wanted the giants and the mammoths with him as they hit Winterfell. It was to be a pronged attack against Winterfell supported by reinforcements from the north and south.

“What of you, Your Grace?” Robett Glover asked. “Where will you be heading?”

Jon grimaced. Where was the most urgent priority? It seemed like he was needed absolutely everywhere recently. “I must fly back to White Harbour with all haste,” Jon decided finally. “Lord Manderly should be informed and I must see to our alliances.”

Above him, he heard the flapping of great wings as Sonagon circled above. There were faint cries from the walls of the Dreadfort, and arrows were feebly fired upwards.

The Bolton men inside should know how fortunate they are that they’re not being scorched in dragonfire right now, Jon thought fouly.

All around him, the camp churned. Ser Marlon was talking about setting up fortifications and catapults, but Jon only nodded. Across the plains, Sonagon dropped into the river, crashing through ice with enormous thud and clawing at the water. Sonagon is getting antsy, Jon thought with a grimace. He’s hungry and there has been poor hunting across these hills. I must leave quickly before Sonagon’s patience burns out.

Still, Jon lingered long enough to watch their siege take formation. He had to arrange supply trains and set commands, and twice he had to interfere between Tormund and the Weeper butting heads. It was getting late and his scouts warned of bad weather, but Sonagon wouldn’t tolerate being used much more and Jon had to leave.

There were only a few hours before dusk as Jon climbed onto Sonagon’s harness. For once, Jon travelled alone; both of his squires were too young to risk riding Sonagon, and he left them with his Dragonguard to represent him in his absence.

At the first red rays of dusk, the dragon burst into the sky. The ground shrunk beneath him, and suddenly the imposing Dreadfort turned so small. All around him, he could see the plumes of smoke scattered across the Lonely Hills as his army marched out to secure all the surrounding villages and towns. Jon could smell the tang of blood in the air.

Sonagon was restless. They made good time, and it wasn’t long before Jon saw the pale cliffs of White Harbour nestling in the distance, and the sea wind blowing over the Bite. There were ships in formation across the harbour, and overflow camps stretching out of the gates of the city. Despite the late hour, Jon heard a bell ringing as soon as the dragon was spotted.
Sonagon has come to the city two dozen times now, and every single time they insist on ringing the bell, he thought with a grimace. They would wake the whole city for his arrival. The dragon’s wings whooshed as he soared down towards the Seal Rock jutting out of the ocean.

There were torches already moving from the rock. The old ring fort was a crumbling, circular structure of ancient stones, but they had cleared the centre and set up tents for the garrison. There were crude wooden structures nestled between the ancient stones, and barricades and fortifications carved into the rock. The top of the Seal Rock stood thirty feet out of the water, and they built a rickety wooden staircase sprawling across its side down to a single dock by the waves.

It was a very good roosting spot for a large dragon, Jon thought. The Seal Rock was high, secure and defensible, but large and open. It was isolated enough that the dragon couldn’t cause disturbances in the city, and that nobody could disturb the dragon either. It even overlooked the harbour – an ideal position for Sonagon to sit protectively should they come under attack.

Occasionally, Jon wondered if the ancient ring fort from the First Men had been designed specifically to house a dragon in its heyday.

As soon as Sonagon dropped, he curled onto the exact same spot that he had left, right down to the grooves he had carved into the stone. Jon heard voices, and saw men pushing carts of meat towards the dragon. Very little warning and yet they are already prepared to meet Sonagon’s needs, Jon thought approvingly. My Dragonguard has become very efficient.

He saw men dump the contents of a cart onto a marked spot on the ground, and then quickly backed away. Sonagon sniffed, snorting cold mist hungrily.

“Get the second cart ready!” Jon heard a voice shout as he lowered himself. “Drop the food and get out of there – this dragon doesn’t like waiting for his meals!”

He saw the big man standing by the barracks. Hatch wasn’t wearing armour, but he still wore his cloak. Jon saw Urwen, Black Maris, Mo and Harle all rushing and giving orders. His Dragonguard didn’t have any uniform, but they all wore something white to signify their rank: such as a white cloak or white stones stitched into the shape of dragon on their hauberk.

More and more wildlings from the Wall were arriving in White Harbour by ship. Galleons would ship food supplies to Eastwatch and return carrying refugees. Jon had sent Sam and Grenn back to Castle Black, while the Dragonguard that he left behind had arrived in White Harbour recently.

“Hatch,” Jon called. “How goes it?”

“Aye,” Hatch grumbled. “The city is in a right state, but we’re keeping this rock for you.”

“Not a luxurious place,” Jon admitted, looking around the gloomy torches and bleak, wind-beaten stones.

“Hells, I’ve lived in worse,” he said with a snort. “And we’re Dragonguard, right? Glorified nannies to a giant monster.”

Jon smiled wearily. “We should prepare carts three and four,” an eager voice called, rushing up to Hatch. “Two of the last five times, the dragon has eaten four carts after long trips. We still have that cut garron that will likely turn rotten shortly, and then there’ll be two carts of fish in reserve to break the dragon’s fast on the morn, next delivery after that.”

“Aye, get to it then,” Hatch ordered, and the young man nodded quickly.
“Harlow,” Jon greeted.

Harlow grinned as he saw Jon, and then flustered and bowed quickly. He had a white stone on his chest. “Your Grace.”

“At ease,” Jon said with a wry grin. “You have good response time to Sonagon.”

“The meals were prepared in advance, Your Grace,” Harlow explained quickly. “Last time the dragon arrived very hungry and… well, the delay was not well-received. Since then I try to keep five carts loaded and ready to be served at any hour.”

“It is appreciated.” Behind him, Sonagon gouged into his meal with sharp black teeth, his hard tongue scraping the rock. They didn’t bother unpacking the food, instead Sonagon just ate the sacks as well. Even a huge sack was a tiny morsel to Sonagon’s size – it was little wonder that whole carts were needed.

“It is my honour, Your Grace.” Harlow bowed again. Now how can I convince him not to keep doing that? Jon mused. The young man never even met his eyes – he always looked to the floor in Jon’s presence.

Hatch was bellowing orders for the men to gather to remove Sonagon’s harness. Jon notice there was something in Harlow’s hands. He was fidgeting, glancing back to where Sonagon had already finished his meal. “What is that?”

“Um, just a parchment, Your Grace,” Harlow admitted sheepishly, handing the rough animal-skin parchment to Jon. “I have been keeping a tally of how frequently your dragon eats and drinks, Your Grace, and which meals he seems to like more. To plan.”

The parchment was rough with flint scribbles and markings. Harlow couldn’t write, but he used crude sketches and tallies to keep notes in messy columns. It must make sense to him. Jon looked at it curiously, while the man seemed abashed.

“The dragon eats five parts of stone and rock for every one part of meat,” Harlow explained, eyes twinkling. “And four parts grain and veg to fill out the size of the meals. And a larger serving of meat after the dragon has been flying for a long time. It’s usually fish, sometimes livestock too. There are seven butchers and fishmongers in the city that have been hired to prepare solely for the dragon.”

Slowly, Jon started to make sense of the scribbles. There were columns for servings and rows for days. Gods, how much does my dragon eat? It never failed to impress him how gluttonous Sonagon could be. “And the stone?”

“Mostly the white stone from the cliffs. Chalk, I think. The dragons seems to prefer soft rock to bedrock, usually. It really likes these yellow rocks, I guess they must be tasty for a dragon? Sometimes the dragon likes chewing on iron or steel as well, but I’m not sure how often…” he grimaced. Jon could see him trying to stop himself from rambling. “Well, they’ve brought across barrels of old rusted swords and such as well, just in case the dragon is peckish.”

“This… This is good,” Jon said after a pause. “Talk to a maester. Have him transcribe your logs into a proper form. And then have the maester send letters to Eastwatch, Castle Black and any other place Sonagon is likely to visit. Make sure they reserve at least a good day’s worth of supplies for Sonagon at all times.”

Harlow blinked. “Your Grace?”
“His diet is important. It’s what keeps him placated. We need to know how to best feed him.”

Perhaps if I fed him properly, would there be forty-three people at Mole’s Town still alive? Jon wondered. I must wear every mistake I make on my chest, and resolve to never make any of them ever again. “This is good work, Harlow.”

“I… Thank you, Your Grace.” He bowed again. Jon had to stop himself smirking lest the man think he was mocking him. “It is my honour, Your Grace. I would likely be dead in the wilderness if not for you. However I can help.”

“Good service must be rewarded. Yours has not gone unnoticed,” he said with a smile. I shall have think of a rank or boon to grant.

Harlow rushed off to prepare Sonagon’s meals. “Oh aye, he’s good for feeding and cleaning the dragon, that one,” Hatch agreed, stepping back to Jon and motioning at Harlow. “Bloody useless with a sword, but eager enough.”

“Well, you said it yourself that the Dragonguard are glorified nannies,” he mused. “A squireship would be good for him, I think. Perhaps Furs would take him on.”

There were men rushing around Jon, all looking between him and the dragon. The Seal Rock was garrisoned by fifty men, but Jon’s Dragonguard had command. When Jon had left, it had been a rough military outpost, but it had quickly been established and better fortified. New wooden outhouses had been built between the great slab of rocks to the house men, supplies and arms, and there were at least two dozen scorpions overlooking the rocks pointing down to the water. There were bowmen perches and gates built around the fort. Good, proper defences to guard Sonagon while he roosted and slept. Jon had placed Furs in command before he left, and it looked like he had done a good job.

“Where is Furs?” Jon asked, glancing around.

“Lord Manderly requested him in the city,” Hatch replied. “I think there was talk of recruiting stonemasons to rebuild the Seal Rock entirely.”

“Good. The Targaryens built the Dragonpit for a reason. I will fully support as much security built around Sonagon as possible.”

“We’re on a raised outpost in the middle of sea with a fleet of ships stationed around us,” Urwen noted. “How much more defence could there be?”

“That depends on whether or not we can trust the fleet,” Hatch snorted. Jon sent him a hard glare to mind his tongue, and the large man shifted.

“Your Grace,” a Manderly man said, bowing his head as he approached. He was dressed like a sailor. “I have a small boat ready by the port. We can escort you into the city itself.”

Jon shook his head. “No. It is late and I am quite tired.” And doubtless Lord Wyman will insist on seeing me straight away. “I will rest here for tonight and travel across in the morning.”

The man’s face paled. “Your Grace, we… Tis a barren outpost here, we have little hospitality to offer you.”

Jon could have laughed. “I think I shall survive sleeping rough, ser.” And I shall be grateful for it, compared to that hideous suffocatingly soft bed in the castle. “A tent and a blanket will serve just fine.”
As it happened, the commander of the garrison insisted on clearing out a storeroom for Jon’s sleeping quarters. The building was a cramped and narrow outhouse built at the edge of the rock, previously used to keep their lumber and arrows out of the damp and salt air. It stank of dust, and there were bugs skittering in the corners. Honestly, Jon would have preferred to sleep out in the open sky, but he didn’t care enough to make it an issue.

He could hear the waves gushing and crashing against the rocks, rocking him to sleep. There were bells from the nearby ships. Often you could hear the seals shuffling and barking as they gathered on the rocks below as well, but Jon guessed that Sonagon had quickly scared those away.

As he slept, he saw the world through a direwolf’s eyes, pacing and scratching at a narrow barge. Ghost was on a ship too; confined in a narrow hull and rocking with the waves. He could smell stone, smoke and earthy scents drifting on the sea wind.

Dawn came too soon. Jon was already up with first light, and he washed his face in cold salt water to wake himself up. Early morning, and a large ship came to ferry him across into the city. Ser Alek met him on the rickety, tiny port built onto the Seal Rock, and he left Sonagon to Hatch’s care, bringing Urwen and Harle with him into the city.

There was a crowd waiting for him on the Inner Harbour of the city, but there were no riots at least. It was quiet. Jon glimpsed free folk wearing white stones lingering in the crowd. True to his word, Lord Wyman had been ferrying wildlings to White Harbour. The free folk huddled together in small groups, and the cityfolk kept their distance. All wanted to see Jon, but there were different moods mixed in the crowd.

“How fares the city?” Jon asked Ser Alek.

“White Harbour is prepared for war, Your Grace.”

“That is not what I asked, ser.”

“It is strained,” the knight admitted. “Winter looms closer than ever, rationing has been introduced, and our stores are already suffering. The refugees are already overflowing the city, and there have been disturbances between the wild– the free folk and cityfolk.”

“I see,” Jon said, keeping his voice firm.

“But we are prepared for war,” Ser Alek insisted. “Our forces have been mustering; nearly every house on this side of the White Knife is with us. More and more noble houses are joining the coalition.”

“Yes,” Jon mused. “Tell me, are they joining because they support us, or because they are too scared of the dragon and the wildlings to do otherwise?”

A brief grimace flickered across the young knight’s face. “Does it matter? They are still joining.”

Jon smiled hollowly. “Do not act the fool, ser. You’re not very good it,” he said with a sigh. “It matters a great deal.”

The whole atmosphere of the city seemed so different from what it had been a few weeks ago. He saw grey camps and grimy tents set up in the middle of the white streets. The trip up to the New Castle was short and tense.

Jon met Furs at the top of the Castle Stair. He wore armour fit for a knight, but he kept his bone spear. Furs had a lanky body shape, though he still strong. Strangely, Furs bowed low as Jon
approached. “King,” he greeted. “How was that bow? These southerners have been teaching me to bow properly.”

He smiled softly. “Very well. How goes it, Furs?”

“Oh aye, we’ve been minding the keep sure enough. How is the real war going?”

“Making progress. It’s not over yet.”

There were nobles and guards milling around him. Jon struggled to remember all the names and faces. “I wish you told us to expect you,” Furs noted, “this place always goes in a right panic whenever you just fly in.”

“I was I knew myself. I come back only when I have a chance,” Jon muttered. “Have the free folk been settling in?”

“Oh aye. I don’t think your southerners know how to handle so many free folk filling up their fancy castle. You know these guys use four knives and forks during meals?”

Jon smiled, but before he could reply he recognised a familiar face. “Galbart,” Jon called to the Master of Deepwood Motte. “It is good to see you.”


“Robett is quite fine. Any news of the hostages from Deepwood Motte?”

“None.” There was a grim look in his eyes. “Little news at all of my family.”

Too many families have been split in this war. “We will recover them, Lord Glover,” Jon promised. “The Dreadfort may not have fallen, but it is lost. When we push against Winterfell, the Boltons will sell their hostages to save themselves.”

“As you say, Your Grace. I linger here to aid with White Harbour’s defence, though we will join the force against Winterfell’s walls.”

He turned to walk down the hallway. Galbart walked with him. “Although, I’m glad to speak with you,” Jon said. “I was intending on offering Ewan Bole, one of your house’s sworn swords, a place in my Dragonguard.”

Galbert looked surprised. “Ewan? Aye, I know the man. Loyal and steadfast, but he hails from a minor and unremarkable house.”

“I care more for the quality of men than the name they bear, my lord. During the march Ewan Bole proved himself more than capable. I am looking to fill the ranks of the Dragonguard,” he explained. “I was also planning on offering Ser Alek the same.”

“Ser Alek is a good knight. The son of a landed knight in White Harbour. He’s young, but brave. He was the first to volunteer to ride after your dragon on the plains.” Galbart frowned, looking confused. “But your Dragonguard will have more influence if you were to name sons of old and great houses. Few hightborn will respect such a… mixed grouping.”

Jon shook his head. “The Dragonguard needs little status or ceremony, my lord. I care for skill, loyalty and bravery in its ranks.”
“Then you should still recruit from good houses. You cannot expect common blood to breed noble qualities,” Galbart Glover said as if it was obvious. “Noble families are reliable, their heritage breeds loyalty – they can be trusted. The commonfolk have no past, they must be treat with caution.”

“I’d disagree. I find that hightborn most certainly have no monopoly on any of those traits,” said Jon. There were too many who constantly misunderstood what his Dragonguard was. “I will happily recruit men from low birth too. Months ago, I found a hunter in the woods of no standing whatsoever, but Harlow has continually impressed me with his dedication and resourcefulness. I would more than happily invite many of the same – I have no wish to reward good service anything less than the appreciation it deserves.”

Galbart frowned. He didn’t understand, Jon thought. Many lords wouldn’t. Perhaps it was a bastard’s trait. “Your Grace, if you want this rank of Dragonguard to be respected, then you must fill it with men who can be respected. Not commoners.”

“Not so,” argued Jon. “In the Night’s Watch even those of low birth could rise to high positions and influence. All the way up to Lord Commander in many cases. The sworn brothers appreciated their duty and the skill of those who uphold it more than any name. They appreciate stewards and caretakers more than just fighters. I mean to follow suit.”

“So you would fill your guard with farmers and stable boys?” Galbart asked, baffled.

Jon smiled coolly. “Should they earn it, then yes, happily, my lord.”

**Glorified dragon nannies, as Hatch phrased it**, Jon mused. Still, Jon was considering splitting his Dragonguard into two ranks, perhaps dragon guardians and dragon keepers? Jon couldn’t expect the stewards and caretakers to fight, and it was a waste of the fighters to have them constantly looking after Sonagon. Perhaps the keepers under Furs could be responsible for Sonagon’s care and wellbeing, while the guardians led by Hatch would be the fighting unit responsible for defence? It was something to think about – his Dragonguard were already taking on far more duties and responsibility than he had originally conceived. All of them are good men and women well-motivated to prove themselves.

He excused himself from Galbart, and Jon was met at the stairs by Leona Manderly. The plump woman curtsied towards Jon. He motioned for his guards to stay back. “Your Grace,” she greeted. Lady Leona’s eyes looked red like she had been crying. “Lord Manderly would see you at the earliest convenience.”

“I thought he would. Please, I will see the lord now.”

Jon knew the way and Lord Manderly rarely left his quarters, but Lady Leana escorted him nevertheless. Jon noticed how stiff and brash her posture was towards him, even despite the forced courtesies. “Your husband rides with the army, my lady,” Jon said, lowering his voice. “I spoke with Ser Wylis only last night.”

“That is good to hear,” Lady Leona replied curtly. “And yet once more my daughters and I must wait for him to come home again.”

There was a quiet hurt in her voice that caused Jon to wince. “There is little danger to him,” he said lamely, trying to reassure. “We have won every battle we’ve fought, my lady.”

“So did the Young Wolf, Your Grace.”
They reached the corridor towards the lord’s solar. Without another word, Lady Leona curtsied and walked briskly away. Jon stopped to stare after her, before shaking himself off and walking towards the solar.

As he approached, he heard voices from the room. They sounded polite but strained. The voices were too low for him to make them out, though Jon caught a few snatchets of words: “… rightful and just liege, m’lord… bring the realm to ruin…”

There was something that sounded like a short, sharp dismissal. The door opened, and Jon saw a short, greying and stout man, looking unnerved. Lord Davos Seaworth’s eyes widened in shock and horror as he saw Jon standing there. There was a pained pause, and then Lord Seaworth bowed and quickly walked away. Jon watched him go, before stepping inside the solar.

The fat lord stood to meet Jon as he entered, wheezing for breath slightly. “Your Grace,” Lord Wyman said. The circles around his eyes seemed darker. “I have just received the raven from our forces at the Dreadfort. You should have come straight to me last night.”

“Sleep is underrated attribute for kings, it seems,” Jon said dryly, as he took a seat opposite the desk. The chairs were oak with velvet cushions.

The lord laughed humourlessly. A steward brought wine and pastries into the room. “Yes, too many waking hours do creep up on you. And you have a dragon. Has there ever been a commander who can move around the realm half as fast as you do? Where most men must rely on the use of ravens, you could arrive just as fast in person.”

“Aye, it’s useful, my lord, but also taxing.”

“Indeed.” Lord Wyman’s voice softened. “And how fares my son?”

“Ser Wylis is a strong man and a capable commander,” Jon reassured. “He led the rear flank competently, and is a valuable voice at the war table. Ser Marlon will command the siege of the Dreadfort, and Ser Wylis is secure in a force many thousand strong.”

“That is good. His captivity was a long and arduous thing, I admit I was concerned about his health and his recovery. And his wife, and daughters, have dearly missed him so,” Lord Wyman sighed. “It was a painful and terrible thing, Your Grace, to watch my son leave for war once more. I am unable to follow him; my body has become my prison. I know that Wylis must go, and yet…”

There was a quiver in his voice. Lord Wyman usually sounded so strong and booming. For a second, Jon was left unsure what to say. “Your son is at the centre of a large army,” he said finally. “He is secure, and wily enough not to put himself at risk. We have soundly won every battle we have faced.”

“We both know how quickly wars can turn, do we not? Make no mistake; Roose Bolton has been allowing himself to lose ground. We have the larger armies, yes, but he is not surrendering and he is not fighting back in force. There have been no true battles; only Boltons harrying us and slowing us down. He will be preparing his own campaign too, though what exactly he intends I cannot say.”

Lord Wyman shook his head, multiple chins wobbling. “No, this is no time to become complacent. I shall not rest easily until both Roose Bolton and his bastard have their heads on spikes above Winterfell.”

Yes, Jon agreed. For all the difficulties, their progress so far had been unnervingly unchallenged. “I had hoped to face Ramsay Bolton at the Dreadfort,” Jon admitted. “But there was no sign of him.”
“I have had no word either,” said Lord Wyman. “Concerning Roose Bolton, at least, I can be reasonably confident he is at Winterfell, but Ramsay has seemingly disappeared.”

Along with my brother. Damn Ramsay Snow. First my sister, and then Bran? The Bastard of Bolton must be brought to justice. The mood over the desk turned grim.

“What of the search for your brothers, Bran or Rickon?”

“There has been no news.”

“Well, it is still early days.”

“And yet they must be recovered to unite the realm.”

“We have other options, it is still…” His voice paused, and then Lord Wyman shook his head again. “No, enough of this. Obsessing over ghosts and what ifs becomes pointless. I cannot lead any battles, so I will trust the command of our armies to you, Your Grace. In return, I hope you can trust me to manage affairs of state and politics. You lead from the battlefield, I from the city.”

“Happily, my lord.”

“With the Dreadfort under siege, House Bolton’s lands are effectively ours. That means that Houses Umber, Karstark, and, very soon, Hornwood will be under our control. Most of the east coast, while House Bolton gathers still holds power and allies in the west.” He paused. “Can we expect more forces from the Wall mustering for us?”

“Some. The Lord of Bones and Sigorn of Thenn will both be readying to assist,” Jon hesitated. “Though I dare not reduce the defence on the Wall much more. There are other threats to consider than just Boltons.”

Lord Wyman straightened slightly. “You mean your white walker?”

“Aye. Malvern we call it. Just the one, but it has proven itself too strong and too cunning to be tracked. I can’t commit entirely to this campaign so long as Malvern is a threat to the Night’s Watch castles.”

He looked uncertain. “Just for one of these fiends?”

“Malvern has proven itself capable of fighting and defeating a hundred men singlehandedly, my lord. Its power is not to be underestimated. It has been haunting holdfasts and farms in the Gift, killing any party small enough to be taken easily and hiding otherwise. Perhaps I am lucky that Malvern was left so injured in its crossing through the Wall, because I fear that it is capable of doing much more.” Jon grimaced with the thought. How many had Malvern killed already? At least hundreds, but they hadn’t found most of the bodies. “Though the good news is that so long as my hunting parties are hounding it and my castles are fortified, the walker’s options are limited too. It still cannot face an army. I need only keep on the pressure, and sooner or later an obsidian arrow will find its mark.” I hope.

“And you sound concerned.”

“I am very concerned. But there is naught I can do about it,” Jon confessed, his gaze twitching. “Malvern is an extremely dangerous creature and one that I don’t know the location of. I prefer my enemies where I can see them, my lord.” And this war is proving a poor one on that front.

“Yes,” Lord Wyman said with a sigh. “If there is anything I can provide—”
“Obsidian, my lord. Dragonglass. Do you have a means of purchasing obsidian? We require large quantities.”

“I cannot say that I do. Obsidian is usually used in trinkets, not typically needed in bulk. I will make inquiries,” he promised. “I must speak with merchants in the city, and find captains willing to scour the free markets on our behalf.”

“Are there any?”

“Not many,” Lord Wyman replied, reluctantly. “Most independent merchants and captains have shunned White Harbour’s docks ever since the dragon appeared in the harbour.

“Of course they have.” Why couldn’t anything just be simple?

“It is not yet dire, but our trade is being stifled.”

“Can I assist?”

“Not with force. A softer hand is required to secure trade, I think.”

He nodded, and conceded the task to Lord Wyman. I trust Mance to guard the Wall, and the Weeper to lead his raiders. I must trust Lord Wyman to his duty too. Still, Jon paused, and then frowned. “Mind, what was Lord Seaworth speaking to you about before?”

“You, of course,” replied Lord Wyman. “The Onion Lord tries to convince me to support Stannis Baratheon instead.”

“Ah. Lord Davos is a loyal man.”

“His loyalty cannot be faulted.” Lord Wyman nodded. “Neither can his earnestness. Both are traits that I admire, except it is his sense that I question.”

“What arguments does he make?”

“The same ones that I hear several times a day. He says that our alliance is doomed for collapse. That the wildlings will not recognise authority, or accept laws, be controlled. He says that this war will schism and ruin the north in the worst possible way. He urges me to return to the fold of the Seven Kingdoms. Lord Seaworth then supports and defends Stannis Baratheon and his actions, but that is the point where his bias becomes apparent.” The lord paused. “Still, it is rare to see a man who chooses to act from loyalty rather than fear.”

Lord Wyman sounded mildly impressed. Perhaps Lord Davos made more of an impression than he realised, Jon wondered. “Lord Davos is a good man,” Jon said finally. “I have no wish to let him suffer unduly. I took him as a hostage, but there is naught needed from him and no family to ransom. His continued captivity seems pointless, perhaps he should just be released and allowed to return home.”

“Perhaps. Though Lord Seaworth is still held in high regard by Stannis Baratheon. If Stannis’ campaign musters support and gains strength once more, Lord Seaworth could still be a valuable piece.”

“How likely is that to happen?”

“Unlikely,” he admitted. “But who knows? Stannis has been doing remarkably well in the battles he’s been leading. In any case, to release Lord Seaworth now would be folly: there are many wars
and outlaws about, the crownlands are in turmoil, Dragonstone is under blockade and he has no means of travelling safely. He would likely not make it home to his wife. No, the Onion Lord is being treated fairly in New Castle; he can remain here until a better solution appears.”

“Very well,” Jon conceded reluctantly. Lord Davos was a good and loyal man, though Jon knew that he would never be loyal to him.

Lord Wyman picked up a pastry from the platter. “Another of your associates has reached out to me from across the Narrow Sea. One Salladhor Saan of Lys.”

Ah, now he was the opposite of Davos. An untrustworthy man that was their ally. “A pirate,” Jon said with distaste. “A pirate lord, he calls himself.”

“I am aware. But the man is ambitious and eager enough to ally himself with us. The man has been quite capable too, and well-motivated to earn influence to rebuild his former fleet and wealth. I received a letter; Salladhor is in Braavos, and he approached the Iron Bank on our behalf.”

“A pirate dealing with the Iron Bank?”

“Oh, the Iron Bank never turns away potential customers. They are the greatest pirates of them all, in many ways,” Lord Wyman said with a scoff. “But yes, Salladhor Saan was largely dismissed in Braavos, until you flew south, then the word spread and there could be no doubt that we truly have a dragon. In the wake of that news, I imagine the pirate was looked upon in a different light by the Braavosi.”

“I allowed Salladhor Saan to sail free on the promise that he would broker trade and supply for me,” Jon said, slightly sourly. “Has he?”

“I believe so. It is a planting that might provide fruit. I cannot understate how useful the Iron Bank’s support would be, if we are able to secure it. I have hope; the news of a dragon causes stirs, and perhaps a savvy banker would rather be on the right side of that wager.”

“But you don’t sound convinced.”

“From what your pirate writes, there is a conflict of interests,” he explained. “The Iron Bank has already entered a contract with Aegon Targaryen, financing him to claim the Iron Throne. It was to be expected; when the Lannisters burnt that bridge, the Iron Bank sought other ways to reclaim their debt.”

“Ah. And I am in conflict with this Aegon.” As indirect as it is. “As indirect as it is. “The Iron Bank can’t support me without jeopardising their interests in their chosen champion?”

“Just so. A difficult position for them. However, the Iron Bank does not like being on the losing side. The deal they made with Aegon was agreed upon before your presence was widely known, and suddenly the young Targaryen does not seem such a promising wager, since there is a dragon stacked against him. A new loan could perhaps be negotiated.”

“For how much gold?”

“Enough gold to establish a new kingdom in earnest,” Lord Wyman said with a nod. “The price will be steep, but such a loan is not to be dismissed. It could pay for food all winter, to repair the damage after so much strife.”

Jon leaned forward in his seat. “And what must I do?”
“For now? Nothing. I only wished to alert you to the possibility. After Winterfell is secure, taking your dragon to Braavos may be a useful thing. I cannot afford to bankroll this campaign on my own indefinitely.”

The conversation continued for some time. The lord quizzed him on every step of the campaign. Lord Wyman drunk wine, but Jon didn’t. The lord insisted on the servants bringing more platter of pastries or dishes of stew for such meetings, and Jon was beginning to realise why Lord Wyman was so fat. As the talk turned to alliances, Lord Wyman called for two scribes and his castellan.

“Where is your steward, King Snow?” the lord asked. “The Tarly boy.”

Jon shook his head. “Sam is not my steward, he has been appointed the Lord Steward of the Night’s Watch. He left to return to Castle Black along with Grenn.” Jon paused, hesitating. Sam had a duty of his own to see to – to search for more information on the white walkers. Sam had left from Eastwatch escorting Mance’s wife and babe to the Wall. “I have been debating whether to send Sam to Oldtown, in truth,” he added. “The Citadel may be the greatest source of knowledge in the world, and I need someone to scour it for information for us.”

“I would strongly advise against it,” Lord Wyman said. “Not while the ironborn still reave, it is too perilous a journey.”

Jon agreed. *Too many duties as king, too little time.* Ser Wylan brought a stack of letters that the lord insisted on going through with Jon. It was already noon. Jon reluctantly resigned himself and took a glass of wine.

There were five more acceptances of the betrothals from northern lords that Jon had to sign off. There were petty lords that needed promises of safety and protection from Jon before they agreed to the coalition, and a dozen other matters that needed attention.

Lady Maege wrote from the Flint Holdfast in the northern mountains. The northern mountain clans had been reluctant to join with wildlings, but they had strong relationships and respect towards Houses Mormont, Umber and Glover. The letter said that Lady Maege was having success where Jon did not in persuading the mountain clans to declare alongside them. They were eager to fight for Ned’s girl, even if it was alongside wildlings too.

*There will be more promises made before the day is done,* Jon thought with a grim sigh. *But there is nothing for it; the mountains clans are another three thousand strong that are sorely needed.*

As he added up the numbers, the force of their combined, deployable fighting men started to reach over twenty thousand. And rising.

The discussion turned towards Hornwood lands. Even though Ramsay Bolton claimed to be the Lord of the Hornwood, whatever hold he had on the lands disappeared quickly. The minor lords previously under House Hornwood were all too quick to declare against House Bolton.

“Your Grace, Lady Hornwood was my cousin, and fine woman,” Lord Wyman said, pushing the paper to one side. “I offered myself as a suitor to Lady Hornwood once. House Manderly has close ties to the area, and it is a tragedy that their house has gone extinct in this war. I suggest that Hornwood lands and titles be granted to House Manderly, to secure their loyalty.”

Jon paused, frowning. “You would take the Hornwood for yourself?”

“I have a strong claim to it. A cadet branch of House Manderly could be formed,” he explained. “And who has staked more on this cause than I? It seems a fair reward.”
Except the Hornwood is an extremely large, rich and valuable area. It would leave House Manderly as undoubtedly the largest and most powerful house in the north. To take another great house’s holdings in their entirety is a bold demand.

“I cannot make such a decision here,” Jon said eventually. It may upset too many others. I cannot afford any schisms right now. “It is a matter to be decided by a rightful liege, once Winterfell is secure.”

“Very well. Although I do intend to push my claim. I will look after the future of my house, Your Grace.”

“It seems too early to consider such while the war has yet to be won, my lord.”

“You can be sure that others are doing the same,” Lord Wyman insisted. “The easiest way to win this war is to ensure that it is in the best interests of all parties that the war is won. The Greatjon will want security for his lands, Lord Glover will want security for his family. And I have high hopes that Lady Maege will marry her daughters to the strongest of your free folk leaders, such that an alliance could be made and Bear Island could start providing ships to evacuate the Frozen Shore. More will follow suit. Even Lord Karstark decided to support us, when it was made clear that was the only way he could keep his lands.”

Jon paused. The thought of the Weeper’s words came back to him. “Lord Karstark,” he said slowly. “You hold his wife, do you not?”

“Alys Karstark is being transported to White Harbour. She will be kept safe in my castle.”

“I hear that Cregan Karstark only claims lordship through his marriage to Alys Karstark – was the marriage legal?”

Lord Wyman paused. “Perhaps,” he admitted. “Lady Alys was the last of the main branch of the house, and with her father’s death her uncle Arnolf became custodian. He was within his rights to marry her to her cousin Cregan. Legally married? Justifiably so. Happily married? Most certainly not.”

“My… my commander, the Weeper. He said that Alys asked him to kill Lord Cregan for her.”

“Hmm. Unfortunately, that does not surprise me. She is a girl of sixteen and Cregan is, from what I hear, a hard and brash man of fifty. She is now his third wife, he has buried two previously. It was hardly a desirable marriage for her.”

How bad could any marriage be if she would prefer the Weeper over Cregan? Jon thought foully. The Weeper is the most psychotic man I know.

Lord Wyman looked at him, measuring his expression. “The marriage could, perhaps, be annulled,” the lord said carefully. “If there was an alternative.”

Jon grimaced. “And how divisive would that be?”

“Potentially problematic. But Karstark only nominally supports us as is; they still have forces from Arnolf Karstark alongside Boltons,” Lord Wyman mused. “And this ‘Weeper’ of yours is a strong candidate for the same marriage betrothals we are offering others. With Lady Alys’ agreement in the matter, we could–”

Jon shook his head. “No, Alys does not know what she is asking from the Weeper. I trust the Weeper to lead my armies, but I’ve never deluded myself concerning what sort of man he is. He is
liable to cut her eyes out himself if she even looks at him the wrong way. No, when Lady Alys arrives in White Harbour, we must keep her well out of sight from the Weeper.” *I do not trust him not to become obsessed.*

“As you say, your Grace. And what of Lord Cregan?”

His jaw clenched. There was a moment of painful indecision. “Lord Cregan Karstark is a vicious and unlikeable man,” Jon said finally. “But I cannot dispose him of his lordship. He has committed no crimes that would justify me so.”

Lord Wyman frowned. “House Karstark has many crimes to their name, Your Grace.”

“Oh yes. His father is a traitor who sided with the Boltons,” Jon said foully. “Even his cousin was a child-murderer who helped doom Robb Stark’s cause. But that does not matter because I can’t punish any man for acts of other members of his family. Maybe killing Cregan Karstark would be the right action, but it wouldn’t be lawful. The law *must* work both ways.”

“There is one offence to Cregan Karstark’s name. He did fight against you,” Lord Wyman noted. “He led his forces to attack your wildlings.”

“And in that he was well-justified to defend his lands.” Jon shook his head. “And the Umber lords did the same. If I punished House Karstark for fighting wildlings, I would have to do the same against others.”

“That would be unwise,” Lord Wyman said with a grimace.

“Aye. And I cannot make up laws to kill a man just because of a grudge.” Jon shook his head. *Damn being king.* “For now, Cregan has little option but to support us. He is being kept under close supervision.” It was a bitter thought. Legalities or no, Cregan Karstark was an abusive brute who forced Alys to marry him. “Perhaps we should do something concerning his marriage later, but for now let us not risk causing problems.”

“Very well,” Lord Wyman said, though he didn’t sound in agreement. “Although, it occurs to me, that there is another marriage that deserves consideration.”

“Whose?”

“Yours, Your Grace.”

There was no immediate reaction. Jon felt his hands stiffen. Lord Wyman sucked his lips. “I have considered it. You do not have lands, house or rank in the north, Your Grace, and it would be beneficial for your status and our cause if you did. I offer you my granddaughter’s hand in marriage, and an alliance between us stronger than steel.”

“Your granddaughter.” There was no reaction or emotion. Jon kept himself like stone. *Do not react until you have figured out how.*

“My son’s eldest, Wynafryd. She is of an age with you, Your Grace, and a more fair, brave and capable girl you could not hope to find. Have you given any thought of what should happen to you and your dragon after this war?”

“The end of this war will be the start of the next, my lord.”

“Preparations must still be made,” he insisted. “Your dragon is the greatest advantage the north has, it should not stay in Winterfell. Winterfell would struggle to house Sonagon, and struggle
further to feed it. Winterfell may be the heart of the north, but I see little advantage of keeping a beast like that close to our chests.” The lord placed his goblet on the desk of papers. “However, when the north becomes an independent kingdom, it seems only fitting that White Harbour should be the capital city. A dragon would be a great boon in White Harbour, and we have the resources to support it.”

Jon blinked, struggling to understand. “You… you want me to marry into House Manderly?”

“I considered it, but no. It would not send a good message. Far better to create a new house; a house of northern dragonlords,” he explained. “Take a new banner – a white dragon, perhaps. This is my proposal; I will grant you lordship of the Wolf’s Den in the city. It’s an ancient castle with a long history of serving House Stark. It was once named to House Manderly, but truthfully it has been neglected ever since the construction of New Castle. Right now it is used only as a prison, currently under the custodianship of an old and had knight who once served me well.

“I will provide the funds for the Wolf’s Den to be renovated to its former glory,” Lord Manderly offered. “Likewise, your dragon appears quite comfortable upon the Seal Rock, so I shall name you the lord of that too – to turn the Seal Rock into our version of the Dragonpit and to provide defence of the harbour and kingdom. And if you were to marry my granddaughter, then that would be the beginning of an alliance that could see the north in very good stead indeed.”

“And Sonagon will reside in your city.”

“What other city has the trade to provide for it?” he challenged. “You will become a great and influential lord in White Harbour. I hope that this alliance will prove greatly beneficial to us both.”

But especially to you. White Harbour would benefit immensely. The kingdom of the north would be created by the dragon, and the dragon would be at the centre of it. “And your granddaughter?”

“Wynafryd. She is precious to me. Both my granddaughters are. My youngest Wylla is willful and strong, while Wynafryd has always been determined, brave and dedicated. I do not offer her hand in marriage lightly, Your Grace.”

Marriage. Jon remembered seeing the granddaughters, vaguely. Wynafryd had looked a few years older than him; she had been holding the hand of her little sister tightly. The youngest girl had dyed green hair, while Wynafryd was tall and full-bodied, with brown hair tied in a long braid. Not the most beautiful woman, but fair and comely.

Politics relies on marriages. I always knew it would be on the table, even for me, but…

The thought of Val’s golden hair flashed before his eyes.

Jon shook his head. “I cannot make any such commitments now, my lord.”

“I do not expect you to. I am not Walder Frey, Your Grace; I will not pressure you into an unhappy marriage. I hold my granddaughter far too dearly for that. Consider the options in full, and I will discuss and treat with you honestly and fairly,” he said with a nod, leaning back on his chair. The wood groaned. “However, I do hope that you will consider the benefit it might bring to us both. Spend time with Wynafryd, if it pleases you.”

“And is your granddaughter aware of the proposal?”

“I broached the subject to her, briefly,” replied Lord Wyman. “I spoke to her mother in great length. Leona eventually agreed that it was in our family’s best interests. My son does not know, he left before I could talk to him about it, but he will agree.”
Jon didn’t reply. Lord Wyman is an ambitious man. He fought for House Stark, but he was most certainly looking after his own house’s interests too. A marriage to bring a dragon into White Harbour could certainly be a huge boon to his standing.

Though he makes good points. It would benefit me and my cause too. He would give me a castle. The dowry would be great. In return for a wife.

But I haven’t even spoken to the girl before.

There was a long moment of silence. The lord tried to measure his expression. “Nothing need be decided now,” Lord Wyman said finally. “As you say, Your Grace, there is a war to be won first.”

There was more small talk after that, but Jon grew more and more reserved, and distracted. How did I think it was going to end? Sooner or later I was always going to have to marry to solidify my standing.

Which standing, though? My standing with the free folk? Or my standing with the north? With the Seven Kingdoms? Should I be considering gold, influence or martial strength? Too many different concerns, all of them reliant on marriage.

And how can I rank my happiness compared to matters like these?

By the time they retired, Jon was left feeling worn and gloomy. Lord Manderly would doubtless insist on feasting tonight with the highborn, but Jon was already feeling bloated just from the pastries served. It was all too easy for lords to lose control of their gut. Is it queer that one day in this castle makes me miss weeks of hard marching through the north?

Jon left the solar walking stiffly. He asked a servant about sleeping arrangements, and then Lady Leona Manderly came to escort him to his quarters. “Your… um… household has been settled within the castle, Your Grace,” the lady said, curtseying. She still didn’t quite meet his gaze. “The west wing has been reserved for you and your court.”

“And have there been any issues?”

“Few. Your pet, the shadowcat,” her voice was haughty, “proved troublesome to relocate.”

“Phantom can be stubborn,” Jon said with a grimace. The ship journey moving the shadowcat from Eastwatch had not been a pleasant experience for anyone. “Provided she has her privacy she is no trouble.”

“The cat has a room by itself, by yours. The windows barred and the door locked from the servants.” Leona’s tone was slightly icily. I wonder, has any noble castle ever hosted a shadowcat before? “And I directed your paramour towards your chambers.”

Jon stopped. “Excuse me?”

“Your… Lady Val of Whitetree. She was placed in the other room adjoined to yours,” she explained. “Is that suitable, Your Grace?”

Val has arrived in White Harbour already? His heart pounded.

My paramour. For a moment, Jon was left fazed. “Um, yes. Yes, thank you, my lady.”

Is Val really my paramour? His instinctive reaction was no, but then… well, they weren’t betrothed and they were together. Though the word ‘paramour’ implied that Jon was a highborn
lord, and that was a concept he was still struggling to get his head around.

*Paramour. Mistress. Is that what they will view Val as?*

The wildlings looked they had made themselves at home in the west wing. Tapestries were missing from the walls. Jon passed a sketch of a dragon drawn on the wall in chalk.

Lady Leona’s eyes lingered on the crude marking. “There was a… a conflict at the Sept of the Snows last week,” she said, breaking the quiet. “A mob of free folk tried to burn the statues of the Seven. They tried to raise up a totem of the dragon instead.”

Jon didn’t reply. He didn't know how to. Lady Leona just kept walking.

His Dragonguard were waiting for him, sprawled out before the spiral staircase leading upwards. The wildlings kept weapons in their hands constantly. Lady Leona looked scared by their presence, shuffling and averting her eyes.

Jon noticed that his own chambers had been marked with a white crown. “If there is anything else you require, Your Grace,” Lady Leona said, with a stiff curtsey.

“My lady,” Jon asked. “You know of the betrothal Lord Manderly offered me?”

“I do.” Her arms were tight at her sides. Still she didn't meet his eyes.

“I would like to know what you think of it? Do you support it?”

She hesitated. Jon heard the quiver in her voice, like she wanted to say something else. “I support stability for the north, Your Grace,” Lady Leona replied. “I want to see the north and my family brought to order again. The Seven knows that there's so little left in the north these days. Goodbye, Your Grace.”

Lady Leona turned and left. *She's scared*, Jon thought. *She's scared in her own castle.*

Jon hesitated for a good while before placing his hand on the door and walking through. Val is here.

The first thing he heard was a low growl. A bloodthirsty snarl. “Close the bloody door, will you?” a voice called. “Last thing you want is this girl bolting away.”

Jon blinked. Val was in the room, standing at the far end. She's wearing a dress, he realised. A white and blue samite and silver-lined dress, with a cream ermine shawl, highlighting her dark golden hair. She wore her long hair pinned upwards in a southern style, with only a few locks coiffed down from her crown. With her high and sharp cheekbones could have easily been mistaken for highborn. She would have looked right at home in any southern court in the Westeros. She was beautiful enough to draw every gaze in the hall wearing that dress.

*No, Val would draw gazes no matter what she wore*, he thought with a shallow breath. She could be wearing rags and look like a queen. Wearing finery made her so attractive it seemed unfair. She still kept a sheathed sword on her waist.

Jon had to blink as he realised she was holding a slab of raw, bloody meat in her hand as she turned to him. “Well,” Val chided. “You've finally got here. I was wondering how long it would take you before you deigned to pay me a visit, King Snow.”

“I didn't know you had arrived.”
“Well, you do now.” Val turned back to her task, carrying the meat towards the adjoining room. Jon heard that growl again. He recognised it instantly.

“Careful, Val!” Jon called, but she just tutted.

In the doorway of the guest bedroom, he saw a pair of pale blue eyes staring back at him. Phantom had a whole chamber for herself. There were velvet blankets over the mattress, but the shadowcat had shredded the pillows and clawed the sheets to shreds, before curling up underneath the four-poster bed. The room was dark; the servants must have blanketed the double windows so the shadowcat would be more comfortable in the gloom.

Phantom was growling as Val threw the cut of bloody meat, and sharp teeth flashed hungrily. Val just watched curiously, already pulling out another cut from a platter the kitchens must have provided.

Jon could have reached out into Phantom's skin, but he didn't. “Careful, Val,” he warned. “She's not tame.”

She looked at him curiously, raising a perfect eyebrow. “Would you expect her to be?”

“I… I suppose not.”

Val threw another slice of meat at Phantom. “She's just a cat,” she said with an affectionate stare. “A beautiful cat too. Her fur is lovely but I don't dare touch it. She wants to eat, she wants to hunt, she wants to be kept safe. She might attack me, though so long as I don't threaten her and I keep her sated I don't think she will.”

“And if she does?” Jon took a slow step forward cautiously.

“That's why I have a sword, Jon.” Her other hand never left the blade, he noticed. “I'm not stupid, but neither is she, so it's fine.”

Phantom gulped down the meat with a hungry growl. Val watched, entranced, as she threw down the last of the meat. “You control her, don't you?” Val asked curiously.

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “I can take her skin, or share her senses. But most of the time I don't, I can't – I don't have the concentration to spare. She's still a wild animal, and it only works so long as she's kept contained or isolated any time that I'm not present.”

“Well,” Val said, “that's where the similarities between her and me end, I suppose.”

Phantom took the last of the meat in her mouth back to her lair under the bed. The shadowcat disappeared into the dark. Jon could hear the shadowcat gulping down the meat. Phantom seemed comfortable enough not to lash out. He felt himself relax.

“She has mellowed somewhat,” Jon admitted. “When I first found her she was feral, I dared not let her close to me unless I was in her skin. For a while I couldn't even bring her into camp. But she has grown more comfortable around people, I think. She doesn't lash out so much. I can leave her alone for longer periods.”

“And you're still nervous to be in the same room with her?”

“She’s still a shadowcat.”

“True.”
Very cautiously, Val stood up and moved to close the door. The door thudded, and Val latched it shut. There was a splatter of blood from the meat on the stone floor. Val wiped her hands clean on her dress.

Then, without a word, she reached across and pulled Jon into her. There was a sharp intake of breath, and then their lips touched. The kiss caught him off-guard and her touch… he could feel her hands moving across his chest, causing his whole body to tremble. She tasted warm, fiery, alive.

“I’m glad you’re back,” Val whispered as the kiss broke.

Gods, she was beautiful. Everything about her was beautiful. She was slender, toned and full-bodied, the type of body shape that was universally stunning. Dark golden hair and pale grey eyes. Even just being in her company left Jon feeling nervous, hesitant. He tried to reply, but the kiss stole his words.

Val looked at his expression and smirked. There was a playful glimmer in her eyes.

“Have you been treated well?” Jon managed finally.

“I have indeed.” She turned to look around the room. “These southron castles do not lack for luxury, I’ll give them that. I even wear these dresses that they insist on placing on my bed, but you should see the queer looks they give me when I wear the sword too. And at every feast your fat lord insists on parading me through his court.”

“Lord Manderly does that? Why?”

“To show off the savage wildling dressed like ‘proper’ folk?” Val snorted. “Every meal it’s always one knight this or noble lord that who tries to approach me.”

_They think you are my paramour._ Jon could almost understand it too, looking at her now. He wondered how many of those in the Merman’s Court could only see the beauty, and not the strength underneath. “Should I be worried?” Jon asked.

“What of? Of me entertaining one of them or gelding them?” Val laughed.

“The latter more than the former,” he admitted.

“I’ll have you know, I have been the picture of grace, Your Grace,” she chided, with a smile. _You always are._ “I’ve been sharing their smiles, even using all of their little titles. A few have asked me to dance, but I always decline _politely._” She rolled her eyes. “Isn’t that why we are here? To make all of these kneelers like us?”

“I am sorry for the torment you’ve endured. It sounds horrible.”

“Well,” she said with another smile. “I am sure you can make amends for it.”

Jon really, really wanted to step forward and kiss her again. _Gods, how I’ve missed her._ Even the weeks of being apart had left him craving her touch. Her voice. Her scent. Her taste. Still, he hesitated. _They call her my paramour. I was only just offered a marriage betrothal by the lord of the castle who is hosting me, and here I am with another woman._ It felt wrong, disrespectful, even, but….

Val paused, stepping forward. “You look tired,” she noted. “How goes the march?”
“Long. Too long. If every man had a dragon to ride upon we would have reached Winterfell by now. But we are winning.”

“You don’t seem triumphant about it.”

“It is hard to feel triumphant when the battle is not over,” said Jon. “They have not been good victories.”

“Ah.” That word seemed to linger in the air. Val took another small step closer. “How long until you must fly out again?”

“Not long,” he replied with a grimace. “Too soon.”

“Very well then.”

Casually, Val pulled her dress off her shoulders. In a smooth motion, she twisted her arm out of the sleeves, and her shawl fell to the floor. And then the dress itself fell too. She was not wearing any smallclothes. She bit her lower lip, a smirk playing across her eyes.

Jon was left staring at her bare breasts, mouth agape. Her skin was smooth, soft and unblemished, with full breasts. Her nipples were erect. Val quietly pulled off her belt and kicked off her dress. Jon could see the bush of dark blonde hair beneath her legs. Val’s pale grey eyes didn’t even twitch away from his.

There was a long moment of quiet. “Perhaps I can stay a bit longer,” Jon said dumbly. Val only laughed.

He stepped forward to hold her. Their kiss was much more forceful, aggressive, hungry. Her naked body pressed against his armour. Jon’s clothes had never seemed so restrictive.

Whatever hesitation, doubt or worry seemed to just vanish. Perhaps Val dragged it out of his mouth. No, Jon thought, there is absolutely nothing wrong with this right now.

Fumbling hands tried to unfasten his belt and chainmail, clumsy trying to strip his clothes off him without breaking their embrace. His cloak fell off him, and then his belt. Dark Sister clunked to the floor. Val fumbled to unfasten his breeches, yet Jon held her off.

Instead, he kneeled down onto the cold ground, his lips trailing downwards from her breasts, kissing down her navel. He could feel Val shivering as he lowered himself towards her moistness.

He could smell her. One hand was on the back of his head, pushing him into position, the other hand rubbing her own breasts.

“So,” Jon whispered. “Kneelers, huh?”

“Oh be quiet,” Val gasped. “And don’t stop.”

Jon grinned as he pressed his mouth towards her lips. Val was shivering, muffled groans from her throat as she pushed his tongue forcefully towards the right places. Jon pushed her backwards onto the bed, and she fell on her back, her thighs wrapping tightly around his head.

She was all he could taste. It was a bitter, sweaty taste that he hardly noticed. He loved that moment where she lost control, her body convulsing and the cry breaking her lips. She was normally so stiff, tight and composed, and at that moment when he pushed her to the point of breaking down… that felt special.
Val didn’t scream, instead she just gasped. She would bite her lip trying to restrain herself, and all that would come out were short, raspy groans and moans, building in pitch. Jon loved that sound.

At some point, Jon’s breeches were lost and he climbed into bed, into a tangle of limbs and hungry kisses. It stunk of sweat and sex, but he didn’t care. He could have spent an eternity wrapped with her wrapped around her, and it wouldn’t have been enough.

*By the gods, how did I ever go so long without this?*

Nobody disturbed them. Vaguely, he was surprised that no summons came for him from Lord Manderly, he supposed his Dragonguard must have heard the sounds and held the servants back. Perhaps that was disrespectful to his host, but he couldn’t find it in him to care.

By the time it was dark outside, they were both left gasping for breath. Jon could hear Phantom scratching at the wall in the adjoining room.

She was laughing. He didn’t know why, but Val was left chuckling throatily as she gasped and shivered. “Have I amused you?” Jon asked, feeling the grin spread.

“Somewhat,” she replied, closing her eyes and taking deep breaths. Her hands were on her breasts as she stretched outwards across the bed. “So if you’re a king and you kneel in my presence, than what does make me?”

“A goddess?” Jon leaned across her to take another kiss.

Val flicked his nose. “Flatterer,” she chided, and then kissed him again.

Jon was left grinning like a fool. Something about her face, the sweat dripping from her breasts, that moment, he couldn’t stop chuckling even as he kissed her again. Trying to breath, kiss and laugh all at once felt painful, but he couldn’t help it.

All of the weariness and achiness from the march felt like it was creeping out of his bones. He hadn’t even realised how tense and stiff he been until now, until her.

Val’s long, long leg wrapped around his torso and pulled him closer, her foot stroking against his back. It felt so comfortable, with her muscles squirming softly beneath him and the scent of her skin all around him.

“I want you with me,” Jon whispered in her while as he kissed her neck. “Val… will you come with me when the host sets out?”

“What? To warm your furs at night after a long march?”

“If you’d like,” he spoke between the kisses. “I don’t like being apart from you. And I want to show you Winterfell.”

She paused, and smiled. “Aye. Alright, let’s go see this castle of yours, Jon Snow.”

He froze. There was a slight shiver down his back. Those words… it made him think of Ygritte. Then Val kissed him and that thought disappeared from his mind.

“And in return,” Val whispered. Her cheeks were still blushed red. “I expect more of those king’s kisses of yours, Your Grace.”

“**Happily**, my lady,” Jon grinned.
Her fingers traced the scar on his chest. “I’m sure,” Val whispered, smirking. With a gentle push, she shoved him around and onto his back. Val pulled herself up from the blankets. “But I can take the hint.”

“Where are you…” She stood up and walked around the four-poster bed across to his side. And then she kneeled down by his legs. “Oh.”

Val was still smirking. Somehow, that smirk was even more enticing that her breasts. He felt her fingers playing around his groin, running through his hair. He could already feel himself turning stiff again, and then the sight of her moving downwards between his legs, and her mouth, and her lips…

Jon groaned. His fingers clenched, and clawed at the mattress. “So…” he said, strained, as he took a deep breath. “… you lose all right to criticise southerners for being kneelers.”

“If you make that jest again, then I’ll bite you,” Val warned, but they were both grinning and giggling like fools.

Chapter End Notes

Of all the chapters that I’ve written so far, there have been a few that I haven’t been that satisfied with. And then there is one. This one has been a pain...

From now I’m hoping to get the next few out weekly. Next chapter is mostly written, and after that I’ve got a quite a few bits and pieces of the next five or so.

Oh, and also I’ve just noticed that Dragons of Ice and Fire now has it's own TV Tropes page! Google "Dragons of Ice and Fire serpentguy", it's one of the top links. Special thank you to whoever created it, I wish you told me.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

The two lost Starks, trapped and held hostage, and the road to Winterfell...

The Wayward Daughter

Lightning split the northern sky, etching the black tower of the Night Lamp against the blue-white sky. Six heartbeats later came the thunder, like a distant drum.

The guards marched Sansa and Jorah across a bridge of black basalt and under an iron portcullis showing signs of rust. Beyond lay a deep salt moat and a drawbridge supported by a pair of massive chains. Green waters surged below, sending up plumes of spray to smash against the foundations of the castle. Then came a second gatehouse, larger than the first, its stones bearded with green algae. Sansa walked across a muddy yard, the guard holding her arm tightly. A cold rain stung her eyes. The guards pulled her up the stairs into Breakwater’s cavernous stone keep.

Sansa walked with them, face buried in her old wool cloak, but Jorah fought and thrashed against the men with every step. There were heavy iron manacles around Jorah’s arms, but it took half a dozen men to force the knight. He didn’t look much like a knight now – Jorah had abandoned his armour, vambraces and greaves for a cheap tunic and weather-beaten cloak to pass as a fisherfolk. He had sold his engraved steel breastplate for a small fishing dinghy to take them to the across the Bite.

They might have gotten further than Sweetsister, but then the storm hit. It still hadn’t ceased, either. Breakwater Castle howled in the stormy wind. The roar of the waves against the rocks made Sansa shiver. The waves were thunderous and unyielding, like the beating of some great heart as they pounded one after another.

Sansa was scared. She would have told Jorah not to fight them, but the man escorting her didn’t give her a chance. They beat Jorah with the butts of their spears until he finally ceased. It took four men to drag the great knight up the stone stairs.

The guard escorting her was the captain, a fleshy and portly man, face hidden under a half-helm. When she looked, she saw that his hand had webbing between his fingers. She refused to let herself panic, but she couldn’t stop her heart from beating.

Breakwater Castle had a threadbare Myrish carpet over its entrance, and a gloomy stone hall with mould clinging to the ceiling. As she was escorted into the main hall, Sansa saw a great white spider-crab on a grey-green field hanging over the hearth. They found the lord alone in the gloom of his hall, making a late supper of beer and bread and sister’s stew. Twenty iron sconces were mounted along his thick stone walls, but only four held torches and none were lit. Two fat tallow candles gave a meagre, flickering light.

She could hear the rain lashing at the walls, and a steady dripping from where the roof had sprung a leak. Several leaks, actually – they had tried to stop the water with buckets and clothes, but then it seemed like they had resigned themselves when the buckets overfilled. The heavy boots of the guards splashed through the puddles on the stone floor.
“M’lord,” said the captain. “It was as you said. A large man and a girl he calls his daughter, at the Belly o’ the Whale, trying to buy passage north off the island. We knocked on the door and demanded he come with us. He refused. He was armed with a greatsword. He didn’t come easily.”

“Indeed,” the lord said darkly, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “You fight well for a man missing two fingers, ser.”

Jorah Mormont only growled, trying to protest. Sansa felt her breath freeze. She knew the lord by mention only; Lord Godric Borrell of Sweetsister, Shield of Sisterton, Master of Breakwater Castle and Keeper of the Night Lamp. How much does he know?

He was an ugly man, big and fleshy, with massive shoulders and no neck. Coarse white hair grew from his cheeks and chin, with a bald scalp and a lumpy red-veined nose. The Lord of Sweetsister dressed more like a hard-worn sailor or smuggler rather than a lord. He has a webbing between the three middle fingers of his hand, Sansa noticed. So it’s true; the lords of the Three Sisters truly do have webbed hands. In the Vale, she remembered Randa saying it was as the Sistermen descended from mermen.

Lightning flashed outside, making the arrow loops blaze blue and white for half a heartbeat. One, two, three, Sansa counted, before the thunder came. Behind her, she heard the noise of the guards struggling to drag Jorah further into the hall.

“Have you ever heard such a storm?” the lord said. “The Andals may have torched our temples, but once the Sistermen worshipped the Lady of the Waves and the Lord of the Sky, and when they lay together they would give birth to scared storms. From the sounds of it, right now the two gods are fucking each other’s brains out in hate.” A dry chuckle. “Tonight will be a profitable night for me, I think.

“Alas, I fear the Night Lamp will not be visible in weather such as this,” the lord continued, with an ugly smirk. “Already the wreckage of an Ibennese whaler has graced my shores – I expect at least one of the White Harbour’s new fleet will do the same. Merchants and cogs through the Bite will be stranded on my rocks. If there is one thing the Sistermen know and all others seem to have forgotten, it’s that the ocean has teeth. Men are not the masters of the sea, not by a long shot. I could tell you tales of the things that reside in the depths, or the storms that could shake the earth.” He stood up, waddling forward to inspect them. Sansa met his gaze. “But here you are. Another gift from the storm. I think you will be more valuable to Sweetsister than a thousand shipwrecks.”

There was nothing sweet about Sweetsister. The isle was cold and drab and wet. Sisterton was a vile town, a sty, small and mean, rank with the odours of pigs and rotting fish. Its streets were mud and planks, its houses daub-and-wattle hovels roofed by straw, and by the Gallows Gate Sansa had passed hanged men with their entrails dangling out. She hadn’t wanted to enter, but Jorah had said that the Three Sisters were a favourite haunt of smugglers, and a good place to find voyage north across the Bite without drawing any attention. Jorah had been proven wrong.

Ser Jorah was gasping on the floor, his face bloody. He had grown out a large beard lined with grey, looking haggard and older than ever. His bandaged hand was bleeding again from the fight. “You have no right,” he panted. “To detain us like this.”

“No right?” Lord Godric Borrell seemed amused. “I think I am well within my rights to apprehend criminals, Ser Jorah Mormont.”

“You are mistaken,” he snarled. Sansa only pursed her lips, glancing around the room quietly. “I am no ser. My name is Qhorin. This is my daughter Beth. We are but two travellers, heading north—”
Sansa hid her grimace. *Ser Jorah is a poor liar.* “Liar,” Lord Borrell scoffed. As if I would believe that a brute like you could produce a lovely daughter such as this.” He turned to Sansa with a polite nod, but she said nothing. She knew little of Lord Borrell, and she would not put herself at a disadvantage with rash lies. “You are Ser Jorah Mormont, former Lord of Bear Island, once a slaver and now murderer and kidnapper, it seems.”

“You are mistaken–”

“Oh very well, if that’s how you want to play it.” His voice turned annoyed. He still kept looking at Sansa, frowning. “Captain Gerrick, take off his breeches.”

“What?” Jorah shouted, shocked. “What are you – no! No, damn you!”

“And then his tunic,” Lord Borrell insisted, folding his arms. “Strip him naked.”

Sansa’s heart was in her mouth. Ser Jorah thrashed ferociously, but there were too many men. The man holding her arm kept Sansa back, while the others swarmed against the knight. There were muffled grunts and curses. Sansa heard fabric being torn. She heard the thud of Ser Jorah’s forehead breaking a man’s nose.

*He will only be beaten more by resisting*, Sansa thought quietly. *He should learn when to concede.* The guards had to drag the knight up, tearing off his clothes. Jorah body was hairy and scarred, trying to cover himself. She saw strong, muscled shoulders, but also a flabby gut that was growing with age. The big man’s face was flushed with anger. He screamed bloody murder right up until a man slammed a spear under his chin.

Sansa had never seen the big knight look so small. She still didn’t speak.

“Fiend!” Jorah gasped. “You bloody–”

“Oh, don’t flatter yourself,” Lord Borrell said with a grunt. “You have a scar on your thigh, ser.”

Jorah glowered. Sansa glimpsed a large, old wound across his waist, looking like a cut from a sword, decades ago. “My father once told me to never to discard anything that may be of use, and once more he is proven correct,” Lord Borrell continued. “Did you know that I still have a letter from eight years ago, when you fled the kingdom to escape Stark justice? Ned Stark sent out ravens to White Harbour and the Three Sisters, to watch for an exiled lord fleeing on a ship across the Narrow Sea. Ravens that arrived too late, as it was. Most of the descriptions he gave are out of date, but the letter mentioned that scar across your thigh as a means to recognise you. I suppose Stark would know about that battle wound, considering he was there when it was inflicted, at the Siege of Pyke.” There was pause as he stepped forward. “Now I was fairly confident about who you were, but that scar proves it without doubt. You are Ser Jorah Mormont, and do not insult me by lying about it again.”

The lord turned towards Sansa. She gulped, but her gaze stayed steady. “And so that makes you Alayne Stone, natural daughter of our Lord Protector,” he said, a slight mocking edge to the title. “Your father has missed you dearly.”

*He is not my father.* There was a frown on Lord Borrell’s face as he waited for her to talk. She did not. “The girl is drenched to the bone,” he said after a pause. “Gella! Bring the girl a blanket. And a pot of sister’s stew. Warm yourself by the fire, lass. Never let it be said that House Borrell was inhospitable.”

*Inhospitable.* Sansa could have laughed. The Three Sisters were sworn to the Arryns of the Vale,
but the Eyrie’s grasp on the islands were tenuous at best. She knew the Lord of the Three Sisters, Tristan Sunderland – him and his sons had attended the Tourney of the Winged Knights – but House Borrell had had little involvement in politics in the Vale. The Keeper of the Night Lamp was infamous for the lantern going dark, and his men scoured the shores for wrecks like crabs. Smugglers, scavengers and pirates. *This is an island of fiends.*

*But the world is full of fiends,* Sansa thought. *Fiends and evil men. And yet all of the evil men are on different sides, are they not?*

It sounded like Ser Jorah was trying to growl something, but he couldn’t with the spear under his throat. The guards held the knight to the ground. The captain standing by Sansa stepped forward. “She had this on her, Godric,” he said in grumbling voice, as he handed up the dagger. “Found it hidden in her dress.”

The sleek black dagger gleamed in the gloom. Even after everything, Sansa had kept that dagger on her, hidden in her tunic. She had never forgotten how it felt to jam that blade through Shadrich’s back. Sansa stiffened as Lord Borrell took the blade.

“Hmm,” the lord grunted, suspiciously. “A dagger. A fine dagger too. Isn’t that curious? Now what sort of kidnapper allows their captive to carry a dagger, ser?”

“I kidnapped no one,” Jorah said, his voice low and rumbling.

“So you say. And yet you disappeared along with Littlefinger’s daughter. Now what were they supposed to think? The first raven I received blamed the crime on a Shadrich something or other, yet the second raven named you as accomplice too. Littlefinger names you responsible for her disappearance, as well as the murder of Ser Harrold Hardyng. Now there’s a crime that has the Vale up in arms.” He looked between them. “My lady, do you have anything to say in your knight’s defence?”

Sansa paused. The room was tense. “Ser Jorah did not kidnap me, my lord.” Her voice was soft, innocent. She averted her eyes like a scared, helpless maiden. “He did not murder Harry the Heir either.”

“Indeed.” A few of the men in the hall hesitated. Lord Borrell bit his lip, before coming to a decision. “Gella!” He called to a portly woman stammering into the hall. “Fetch a second bowl of stew. Let Ser Jorah eat at the table as well.” The lord motioned at the guards. “Place him on a chair. But keep him naked. Naked men are less inclined to brave and stupid acts, I find.”


Lord Borrell sighed, and rolled his eyes. “Fine. For the sake of the ladies present, he gets a cloak to cover his decency. But cause any trouble, ser, and my good nature evaporates quickly. I am told you killed two men before they managed to restrain you in the tavern, and a third one might die still from his injuries. The *only* reason why I am not delivering you to a cold wet hell for such, is because right now my curiosity exceeds my anger.”

She could see the bruises across Ser Jorah’s body. His hand was covered in poorly-bandaged linens, stained with dried, black blood, after Ser Shadrich severed two of his fingers. She had warned Ser Jorah the wound was likely to fester if not properly treated, but then had never been time. Lord Borrell stared at Ser Jorah too, keeping his distance across the table. “You are strong man, ser,” he said finally. “To escape the Vale such, on foot as well. You have left a realm in an uproar behind you.”
The bowl placed before her was filled with some yellow, stringy meat, along with bread still hot from the oven. Sansa didn’t touch it. The woman who placed the bowl had webbed hands too, Sansa noted, but she did stare. “Eat, my lady,” Lord Borrell insisted. “Gella makes the finest sister’s stew on these islands. Eat. It is good.”

Crab stew served with leeks, carrots and turnips. She had seen the giant spider crabs scuttling on the islands and the meal had turned her stomach at first, but it was good. *He gives us guest right, at least.* The lord of Sweetsister had a black repute, but even robber lords and wreckers were bound by the law of hospitality. Few would succumb to the depravity of Freys.

Lord Borrell eyed Ser Jorah closely. “You should eat as well, ser,” he said. “Because I am sick of you wrestling against my men. Take your bread and salt and quit it with the defiance. From the moment you eat, my men will not force you and neither will you attack them. Yet the chains stay on, ser.”

Jorah did, but he didn’t stop glowering. The guards didn’t go far from the table, either. There were strange spices in the stew, but Sansa had no time to focus on them. Her attention was on Lord Borrell, sitting in his leaky hall.

“Is there any news of Lord Baelish?” Sansa asked hesitantly.

“Oh yes. He may not be Lord Protector for much longer. The Lords Declarant only ever tolerated him because Robert Arryn was sickly and they thought Harry would become Lord of Eyrie soon enough,” Lord Borrell replied. “But Harry the Heir’s death has left the succession in crisis. Nobody is certain of who has the next strongest claim, and it seems every great lord is vying for the seat now. You have much to answer for there.”

“I did not kill Harry the Heir,” Ser Jorah wheezed.

“And yet he is dead and you disappeared with his betrothed.” His eyes turned to Sansa, waiting for her to speak. She did not. “Now then, *clearly* she is no captive so answer me here; why did you run, and why did you take her?”

Jorah grit his teeth, eyes narrowing. “Ser Shadrich of Shady Glen kidnapped Alayne and murdered Ser Harrold. I rescued her,” he said. “And yet her father is abusive. She asked me not to return her to Littlefinger, and so I did not.”

“And you were the noble knight to come a lady’s aid? The bear and the maiden fair,” Lord Borrell shook his head. “No, I do not believe it. I know your type, ser, and you are not so noble as you would pretend. And why would a man like Littlefinger offer twenty thousand gold dragons for his bastard daughter?”

Jorah didn’t reply. His jaw clenched stubbornly. “If you will not answer, you have no place at my table,” Lord Borrell ordered. “Wait out your guest right in my dungeons. Escort him there.”

Jorah’s stew toppled over the table as he stood defiantly. The guards in the room all stepped forward, spears raised. “No, wait!” Sansa shouted.

“Give me the truth, girl,” Lord Borrell warned.

“Alayne, don’t—” Jorah shouted. He doesn’t want them to know. *He thinks Lord Borrell a fiend who will ransom me if he knows the value of the hostage he holds. Jorah is probably right, but greed I can work with.*

“I am not Alayne Stone, my lord,” she said softly. “I am Sansa Stark of Winterfell.”
The room turned silent. There was no noise but the pitter-patter of rain on the leaky roof. She saw Lord Borrell’s face freeze. Then, a long grin spread over his bloated face.

“Oh,” he said, and then frowned. “Oh! Oh, now so many puzzles make more sense.” He burst out in brash bark of laughter. “Littlefinger. Of course. And here I was wondering why a bastard daughter would ever be betrothed to the heir of the Vale. Oh, now things come into focus. No wonder he offered twenty thousand dragons for you.”

The large man jumped to his feet, pacing happily. The men stood back. Jorah glowered at the lord. “Ah, but of course, Littlefinger proves his reputation,” he mused. “First he was appointed Lord Paramount of the Trident, and then he took power in the Vale. Next, he intended to seize the north too, with the eldest daughter of House Stark. He means to take over half the realm, piece by piece!”

The man laughed. “And Lady Stark. Or is it Lady Lannister now? I wonder how the queen would react to learn that the wife of the most infamous man in the realm was being harboured in the Vale?”

“You must not tell,” ordered Ser Jorah, but he sounded nervous.

“I must not? You are no position to make demands.” Lord Borrell laughed again, shaking his head. “But thank you for enlightening me, my lady, I shall be laughing over this for days. I must admit, you do not have your father’s look to you. I do remember seeing your mother, only briefly, and, yes, you share her resemblance.”

“And now I am in your hall, my lord,” Sansa said. “What are you to do with me?”

She could see greed in his eyes. “Hmm, now there’s the question. The Iron Throne will be very appreciative to receive you, I have no doubt. Perhaps your husband will be too, and I do hear the Imp commands legions of men with gold.” He smiled sickly. “Sunderland would demand that I hand you over if he knew. He’d sell you for a pot of gold. The poor man is always looking for gold to keep his sons in plate and mail, and riding destriers.”

Sansa remembered Lord Triston Sunderland’s sons; they hadn’t been very skilled knights, but they were brave and earnest. Still, she knew from the look in his eye that Lord Borrell would never surrender his prize for another to sell. He paused, and then shook his head. “No, I think Lord Baelish is still the highest bidder,” the lord announced. “Although perhaps twenty thousand is too modest a figure for the Lady of Winterfell. Perhaps I could raise a new castle from the gold your caretaker will pay me. You will be returned to the Vale, ‘Alayne’.”

Jorah’s face paled. “Please, my lord,” he begged. “You cannot.”

“I cannot? You do not return wish to return to Eyrie, my lady?”

“There are few things I would despise more, my lord.” She kept herself calm. I could try crying, or begging, but he is not one to be moved by a maiden’s plea, Sansa thought.

“I would not be so certain. Tis the best option for all, it seems,” he mused. “Queen Cersei would most certainly have your head for her son’s poisoning, but regardless the lioness is unlikely to last much longer, and she has little means to pay in any case. Perhaps the Tyrells and their little queen would want you, but it still does not seem sensible for me. The Reach may be rich, but it is far away and I would be best served to seek favour with the Vale.”

Jorah looked ready to object. Sansa spoke first. “Favour with whom, my lord? The Lord Protector? You said it yourself that Littlefinger may not be in power much longer.”
He grunted. “True. And gods know that I have little love for the men of the Fingers. Sistermen have clashed with the Fingerlords for ages. I could tell you tales.” A pause. “But gold is gold and Littlefinger has it.”

“Gold means little if you tie yourself to a sinking ship, my lord,” Sansa argued. “And why would Littlefinger pay for what he could take instead?”

His face twisted. “Do you think I fear that upjumped coincounter?”

“You should, my lord. Petyr Baelish is ambitious, cunning and remorseless. Do you think he will leave you with knowledge that may threaten him? Littlefinger is not a good person; he would not allow anything to interfere in his plans.” Her gaze turned dark. “He will give you the same treatment he always gives; he will pay you for your service, and then he will have you killed for your silence.”

Lord Borrell scratched his stubble. “And what did the man do to you to give you such a foul opinion of him?”

“He tried to have me raped, my lord.”

That caused the table to fall silent. Sansa kept her voice totally level, emotionless. *There will be no weakness here, not from me.* “In retrospect,” Sansa continued, “I wonder if that was his intention from the beginning. He betrothed me to a union that he knew would turn sour. He knew the sort of man that Harrold Hardyng was, he knew how Harry treated the last two mothers of his bastards, he knew that any marriage to him would end in ruin. He even encouraged the ruin. So Littlefinger sold me to a handsome chivalrous knight, one who would rape me and force himself onto me.” She smiled softly. “And I wonder… did Littlefinger think then maybe, in my hurt and pain, I would cling to him more tightly for support? Perhaps he meant to position himself to be my solace, my support, to make me dependent upon him. To take advantage of a miserable marriage, well, it’s a plan that worked very well for Littlefinger with my aunt, did it not?”

There was no reply. Sansa absently stirred her stew. “But Harrold was to go off to war and get himself killed, Littlefinger could arrange that. And maybe I would be left afterwards with a child in my stomach, and Littlefinger’s arms around me for ‘comfort’.” She shook her head. “I know what the man wants. He wanted my mother. He wants me. By marrying me to Harry the Heir, he aimed to obtain everything he ever desired; he thought he would have me weak, wounded and malleable, and in doing so he would secure his own position in the Vale through whatever child I carried. That is what he does. *That* is how he manipulates people.”

*That is what he has done before.* She thought of Lysa Arryn, weeping, fearful and proud, and putty to Littlefinger’s schemes. Perhaps Littlefinger thought he could manipulate her in the same way, with fake kindness, gentle words and so many schemes. There was a sympathy towards her aunt Sansa never felt before.

*You told me to put the tears in Jon’s wine, and I did*, Sansa remembered. *The Tears of Lys.* She remembered Lysa screaming that before she was pushed, but Sansa hadn’t truly realised the meaning at the time. It was only during the trek with Jorah, after the words Ser Shadrich had said, Sansa started to wonder. *Littlefinger arranged the death of Jon Arryn, to start this whole war. All part of his plan, and it worked.*

*I wonder, did Petyr Baelish also have my father killed just so he could get to me?* Sansa doubted it was the sole reason, but it would have been a motivation – Littlefinger didn’t make just one scheme, he made several running in parallel. She was done with it. Done being the little bird.
There was a long pause. Sansa shook her head. “So no, my lord. I will not return to Petyr Baelish. I understand your position, but understand mine; I will never let that man get his slimy hands on me again.” She didn’t break from Lord Borrell’s gaze. “I will defy him out of pure spite. If you try to ship me back to Littlefinger, I will scream and I will fight to my last. If I become desperate enough, I will shout lies and I will claim that you abused me, or took advantage of me, or anything that I can say that might help me. And if I am truly left with no choice, I will claw out my own eyes or bite off my own tongue before I let Littlefinger touch me. You will be the lord that delivers my corpse to Littlefinger, before you deliver me alive.” No emotion in her voice. Lord Borrell shifted. “But you’re right. I am completely in your power right now. If you insist on selling me to Littlefinger, then there is nothing I can do to stop you, and it will not go well for me. But I can promise that it won’t go well for you either, Lord Borrell.”

Beefy eyes bulged at her. “My lady…”

She took a sip of her stew. “Also, give my compliments to Gella please,” she added. “This stew is truly delicious.”

The Lord of Sweetsister’s face twisted. “I think I have been very kind to you, my lady,” he warned. “I risked my men to rescue you from your kidnapper, I feast you in my hall.” Around her lightning struck. The blue-white light flashed in the wet, gloomy hall. “Do you really want to turn this unpleasant?”

“No at all. I understand your position. I am under your roof and you want to be paid for me. I understand that, I do,” Sansa said with a nod. “But find someone other than Littlefinger. Think of a different buyer.”

There was something like astonishment in Ser Jorah’s face. Lord Borrell bristled. “Someone else? Are you thinking of your Imp of a husband, my lady? Or that mummer’s monkey he calls a dragon?”

No, I wasn’t. But out loud she said, “Aegon Targaryen will want the daughter of the north as much anyone, my lord.”

“This ‘Aegon’ will not last long enough to see you,” the lord grumbled. “Did you know that the knights of the Vale have rallied for the crown’s defence? Fifty thousand Vale soldiers are marching south to King’s Landing. The Golden Company does not have a chance.”

“Even while the Queen goes mad?” Sansa asked.

“Even while,” Lord Borrell nodded. “Despite everything, the boy king still has the wealth of Casterly Rock, the power of the Reach, and the might of Vale behind him.” His voice turned bitter. “Littlefinger persuaded the Vale lords to muster and they have. Their armies will crush the rebellion around King’s Landing, and doubtless Littlefinger will be well-rewarded once more for his service. He is no fool, this enemy of yours.”

“And you’re still far from eager to sell me to the Iron Throne,” Sansa noted. “That is because you know the Iron Throne is more unstable than it has ever been.”

He didn’t reply straightaway. I have him, Sansa thought, I can manipulate him. “The whole realm is unstable,” the lord said after a long pause. “This storm is breaking the Seven Kingdoms apart.”

Jorah raised his voice. He was shivering in his cloak in the cold hall. “There is another option,” the knight said suddenly. He took a deep breath, hesitating. “Queen Daenerys Targaryen. The last good and just ruler. You must raise your banners for her, my lord.”
Both Sansa and Lord Borrell stared at Ser Jorah in shock. What is he…?

Then, Lord Borrell laughed. “The fucking dragon queen of Meereen?” he guffawed, in clear confusion. “How could you think she’s even a contender?”

“Daenerys Targaryen?” Sansa said, frowning.

“The daughter of the Mad King. She takes after her father too, from what I hear, but the tales say she has dragons,” the lord explained. “I heard of her from sailors from Qarth, and then from Meereen. I also heard that this Aegon, who claims to be her nephew, begged her for aid and she rebutted him. Daenerys abandoned Westeros to forge a new kingdom in Slaver’s Bay.”

“I know not of Aegon Targaryen,” Jorah grumbled. “But I know Daenerys. She is good and she is rightful, and she will be coming to take the Seven Kingdoms. If you were to support her –”

“How long till then? A year? A decade?” Lord Borrell shook his head. “If Queen Daenerys was interested in the Seven Kingdoms, she would be here by now.”

“She has three dragons. She is Aegon the Conqueror come again,” Jorah insisted, stubbornly. “The only rightful ruler, you must declare for her. Sansa Stark of Winterfell could bring the north to Dany’s name–”

“A name that is half a world away, ser,” the lord said. Sansa could only stare at Ser Jorah in shock. Is that what he is fighting for? Even after weeks of travelling together he had never told her. Why he really saved her.

“Daenerys is the rightful–”

“Rightful,” Lord Borrell snapped, slamming his hand on the table. “What is bloody rightful? Some dead man’s arse in a chair. Who cares what cock gave birth to her? The only thing that is right to me is my island, my family, my castle! My rock that I sit on.” He spat. “Goddammit, talking to you makes me remember why I hate the whole bloody lot of your games. The days were better when the Sistermen ruled the Three Sisters.”

Jorah faltered slightly from his outburst. Sansa averted her gaze, while the lord scratched at the table with webbed hands. “… You’re right, my lady,” the lord said finally, taking a deep breath to calm. “The options that would buy you are all terrible. All of the mainland kings are horrible. Now maybe I should just drown the both of you in my waters and be done with this headache.”

His tone didn’t sound like he was japing. Jorah grimaced. “You could just let us walk free.”

“I don’t like you, Ser Jorah.” Lord Borrell muttered, narrowing his eyes. “It would please me more to see you drowned to the Lady of the Waves, as they did in the days of old. Your septons forbade that practice, but Sisters do not forget.”

Please be quiet, Ser Jorah, you’re not helping here. Sansa took a deep breath. “There is another option, my lord,” she muttered quietly. “Sell me to White Harbour. They are near, they have silver, and my brother Jon Snow will pay for me.”

Lord Borrell gawked at her. They had heard of the tales as they fled the Fingers. Every smallfolk was talking about it. Sansa didn’t know how true they were, but…

“The Bastard King,” Lord Borrell muttered. “The bastard with the dragon. Every bastard has a dragon nowadays, it seems.”
“It’s not true.” Ser Jorah shook his head. He had never believed the tales of the dragon as they passed through the villages on the Fingers. Jorah dismissed them outright in every tavern. “The rumours are false. They must be.”

“It’s true.” Lord Borrell nodded, and Jorah’s face paled. “I’ve seen the beast myself, flying over the Bite. Your Jon Snow has released a monster, as well as hordes of savages,” said Lord Borrell. “And you would want to go to him, my lady?”

The smallfolk in every village they went through all talked about Jon Snow as if he were a demon from the coldest hell. The Seven Kingdoms were mad with whispers about the ice dragon.

“He is my brother,” she replied. *Although I barely even talked to him. My mother shunned him and so did I.* “I have not seen him in years and I do not know the truth to the rumours, but I choose him. I want my family.”

*And Petyr was frightened of him. If Jon has become Littlefinger’s enemy, then I want to be by his side.*

“You should not. Bastards are cursed fiends. Bad blood, my lady,” Lord Borrell said. “The Sunderlands dragged us into two Blackfyre rebellions and Sweetsister suffered for them. This Jon Snow is just another bastard stealing a crown, and I do not care to be another one damned for it. Bastards and pretenders.”

“I would think you would be more eager to gain favour,” Sansa noted. Jorah turned quiet, uncertain. “He has an army. He has a dragon.”

“His cause is still doomed.”

“Not from how it appears.”

“Then you do not have my perspective,” the lord rumbled. “I have seen the wildlings run amok. Raids across fishing villages even this far south. Families and lords are fleeing the north in droves, how can you build a kingdom from that? I hear the tales, I have seen the fear. There will be no peace in the north. Whatever ‘kingdom’ your bastard builds, even if he does win, will surely collapse. You cannot build order out of wildlings.” He shook his head. “Maybe Jon Snow considers himself a conqueror, but he is bringing only ice and fear.”

He swigged down the last of his beer, and slammed the mug onto the table. “I will not ally myself with such a man,” the lord said. “You cannot expect me to aid your bastard’s rebellion over my own lord.”

*I must go to White Harbour.* It was the only option that could be good for her, where she could be more than someone else’s hostage. *What words will sway the Lord of Sweetsister?* She could promise gold that she could not guarantee, or lands, honours and titles that maybe her brother could grant. She could threaten retribution, or she could beg and weep for pity. She wasn’t so sure that any plea would work.

Instead, she said, slowly, “I notice you speak very poorly of House Sunderland, my lord. You do not care for the Lord of the Three Sisters?”

The man shifted. “What of it? Triston Sunderland is an old penny-grabbing geezer.”

“He also descends from Andals and the Vale,” Sansa noted. “They are mainland lords at heart. They are not true Sistermen, are they? They do not share your heritage, or your history. They do not have that the mark on your hands, that legacy of your family. And yet they are the Lords of the
Three Sisters – they sit in Sisterton. The town right outside of Breakwater, a town that you have historical claim to, and yet you still must give fealty to them? What percentage much of your plunder, fish and livelihood do they tax?”

There was no reply. In every kingdom, there were areas that were only nominally sworn to the Lord Paramount. The north had Skagos, the Iron Islands had Lonely Light, Dorne had the Stepstones, and the Vale had the Three Sisters. Their loyalty to the mainland is barely a thread.

“I spent time at the Eyrie,” Sansa continued. “In their politics, in their minds, the Three Sisters receives no consideration. Now House Sunderland competes and tries desperately to earn favour and status for themselves, but where that does leave you? It seems to me that the Vale has not been very kind to you. Their septons forbid your faith, their rule hurts your trade. You said it yourself that the Three Sisters have suffered greatly in southron wars and rebellions.”

“The Kings of Winter and the Kings of the Mountain and the Vale once spent a thousand years fighting over the Three Sisters,” Lord Borrell said bitterly. “The War Across the Water, it was called; or the ‘Worthless War’, as others named it.”

“It was not worthless to you, I’m sure.”

“No. The maesters say it was two thousand years ago that these islands were conquered by the northmen – an invasion called the Rape of the Three Sisters – but we Sistermen have long memories.”

“Do you remember a time when the Borrells were pirate kings?” Sansa asked. The only sound was the howling of the rain and wind. She could feel Jorah’s eyes on her, but she kept her gaze on her Lord Borrell. “It could be again.”

“And you expect me to take your side?” he said incredulously. “I have no love for the Starks of Winterfell.”

“You said it yourself that there are bad options all around. I don’t think you care for the Vale either,” Sansa insisted. “My brother is fighting for independence in the north. Why wouldn’t he support another ally seeking independence too?”

Sansa paused for five heartbeats silently. He did not reply. “Support my brother, and he could support you,” she continued. “You depend on trade with White Harbour, they are a strong partner to you. If there were a dragon behind you, House Sunderland couldn’t resist. House Borrell could be raised up to rulers of the Three Sisters. And my brother will be very grateful if you were to return me to him.”

His eyes narrowed. “The Sisters only bent the knee to the Eyrie originally,” the lord said slowly, “in exchange for driving the northmen out.”

“And the world is circular it seems.” Sansa gave a sweet, innocent smile. “Why not think, my lord, on the benefits that you could reap with standing behind a dragon? The same benefits that the Tullys, the Greyjoys, and all the others once reaped for being the first to declare for Aegon during the Conquest. You have a dragon right next door.”

I think I have him. This is an argument that may work. It didn’t escape her notice that Lord Borrell was very invested in the old history and culture of his people – that past was important to him. And there is a tension between his and House Sunderland that could be exploited. She caught the flicker in his gaze.
She didn’t push it. She just sat back and waited for his response.

“Tell me, my lady,” Lord Borrell said finally. “Why do you want to be by your brother’s side so badly?”

“Because he is my father’s son,” she replied honestly. “Because Jon took after my father.”

“Your father,” Lord Borrell repeated. “Ned Stark. Did you know that your father once sat in this very hall?”

That caught her off-guard. “I… I did not. He was here?”

“At the dawn of Robert’s Rebellion. The Mad King had sent to the Eyrie for Stark’s head, but Jon Arryn sent him back defiance. Gulltown stayed loyal to the throne, though. To get back home and call his banners, Ned Stark had to cross the mountains to the Fingers and find a fisherman to carry him across the Bite. A storm caught them on the way. The fisherman drowned, but his daughter got Stark to the Sisters before the boat went down. He left her with a bag of silver and a bastard in her belly. *Jon Snow*, she named him, after Jon Arryn.” Sansa’s mouth hung open. “That is where your bastard comes from.”

“I did not know that,” she said, gobsmacked. “Jon’s mother?”

“The mother is dead; she died at childbirth, I hear, and the new Lord of Winterfell took the babe back with him as he sailed back home,” he replied. “But before then, when you father was shipwrecked on our shores, my father sat where I sit now and Ned Stark was walked into our hall. Our maester urged us to send Stark’s head to Aerys, to prove our loyalty. It would have meant a rich reward. The Mad King was open-handed with them as pleased him. By then we knew that Jon Arryn had taken Gulltown, though. Robert was the first man to gain the wall, and slew Marq Grafton with his own hand. ‘This Baratheon is fearless,’ I said. ‘He fights the way a king should fight.’ I argued my father to allow Ned Stark leave Sweetsister freely.” She could see a glimmer in his eyes. The lord hesitated, his voice softening slightly. “… But the difference between then and now, my lady, is that your brother faces a very different fight. And perhaps I could gain a great advantage by siding with this Bastard King, except for the fact that I do not believe that your brother has the support needed to prevail in his fight.”

“He has the gained the support of White Harbour, has he not?”

“So it seems. He has the fat, cowardly lord with him.” Lord Borrell shook his head. “No, the Bastard King has succeeded in only splitting the north into thirds; one third that supports him, one third that will oppose him to the last, and another third that has supported him because they’re too scared to do otherwise. I hear that he is marching on Winterfell right now, and I think he will win. But he will still lose, do you know why?”

She didn’t reply. “Because winter is coming, Lady Stark,” Lord Borrell continued. “They say it will be the longest and hardest winter in living memory. Because the north is war-torn and ravaged, it doesn’t even have enough food to support itself. Come the heavy snows, the people will starve and Jon Snow’s little kingdom isn’t going to be able to feed itself. Not without support from the south, and you can be sure that there will be none coming from there. As soon as the circumstances turn dire, his wildlings will pillage, and his people will revolt. His weak ‘rule’ will collapse under his grip and tear down the north with it. He will win the battle, but the war and the winter will destroy him – that is inevitable.”

Sansa kept her gaze unblinking, focused. There could be no weakness in her eyes. “Winter is the only thing that is certain, my lord,” Sansa replied. “Everything else is still to be fought for.”
She didn’t know why, but the comment cause Lord Borrell to pause for longer than she would expect. She saw his face twitch. His hands stirred the sister’s stew. “You look very much like your mother, my lady,” the lord said finally. “But there is something of your father in you too.”

---

**The Lost Prince**

The world was spinning. Screaming. The ground split beneath him, bodies pouring into a great black abyss. Bran was left staring downwards at the huge tide of corpses, all the while he fell upwards into the green and red skies. Giant white roots snaked around him, great veins spreading everywhere. He could see shadows and ice dancing across the world.

*Beyond the green,* he remembered. *That was what the crow called this place.* The home of the faces in the weirwoods, a place beyond past, present or future.

The scenery blurred. The world was red with blood. Pools of red burning. He glimpsed a great tower piercing the dark sky over a churning ocean of blood. He saw a stone man dissolving into a sea of shadows bursting from the earth. He saw a great river frozen solid, bodies trying to escape the ice—

“You cannot do this, Bran,” the voice was in his ear. He felt claws around his waist. Huge wings flapping around him. The three-eyed crow was on him, a giant winged monster snatching him out of the air. “If you keep on losing your skin, you may not be able to pull yourself back.”

Every time Bran fell into this place, the three-eyed crow was there to catch him. He could feel the greenseer dragging him back to the ground. Back to his anchor, his body, his time.

“This is not the place to lose yourself,” the crow cawed. All around him, he saw a raging storm, ice and fire clashing. The crow had to physically pull him away. “Now is not the time to dream, Bran.”

The world lurched. Bran dropped.

He fell into his own body. He felt pain. He tasted blood in his mouth. Bran gasped and shuddered, coughing into a dirty stone floor.

The little boy trembled, trying to lift his gaze upwards. A pair of unseeing grey eyes stared back at him from the darkness.

Bran would have screamed, but his throat jammed.

Hother Umber was lying across from him, dead, limp and pale. Hother’s long white beard was stained red, his limbs flailed across the floor. The Whoresbane died clutching his chest in a pool of dried blood, his heavily lined face was scowling even in death.

*They killed him,* he thought in horror. The axe cut open half his stomach, and then they left him to die slowly. They let Hother Umber bleed to death and then they just left his body where it fell in the prison cell.

Bran’s first thought was of his father. He wanted to scream for his father to save him.

“Bran,” a quiet voice soothed, but she sounded scared too. “Don’t move, Bran, they hit you over the head pretty hard.”
Meera. He could see Meera in the gloom. She looked like she would have come to him, but there were manacles on her legs. She looked so skinny, frail. They were in a stone, black room. Two children and one corpse, all in chains.

His heart was racing so fast it might burst. The stone floor was cold and dirty. Bran tried to squirm, flailing helplessly. “Meera. Meera! What happened, where are we, those men…?”

“They got us, Bran. They got us.”

His head ached. He remembered blurry visions and sounds from the battle.

He remembered the frenzied bodies in the darkness, men screaming. He remembered Hother Umber bellowing at them to run. He remembered Mors Umber bellowing some war cry, and Summer howling viciously. Hodor had been trembling, weeping. He remembered faceless figures storming the castle, and fires raging.

*The Whoresbane tried to get us out of Last Hearth*, he recalled. When the ambush hit them, Hother Umber tried to flee with Bran and the others into the woods while the Crowfood held the attackers off. *There were children in that castle.*

A shiver went down Bran’s spine as he remembered hearing the dogs barking, and those seven figures chasing after them from the darkness. One of them had pale blue eyes, and a mad smile.

*Ramsay Snow.* Bran barely recognised him from when he first came to Winterfell in chains. ‘Reek’, he had called himself once. The man had been covered head to toe in blood, clutching a blade like a cleaver, laughing maniacally. The hunters taunted them as they tried to run through the dark forests, hounds barking. Ravens flocking all around him, the direwolf howling…

Bran remembered Summer surrounded by packs of feral dogs. The Umber guards tried to fight, but the Bastard’s Boys had arrows and horses and torches, while they were all on foot. Hother hadn’t backed down for an instant, bellowing for him to run while lunging at Ramsay Snow with a spear and a murderous cry.

*Run.* That word haunted Bran’s head. *They had all been screaming at a crippled boy to run.*

Hother tried to stop him, and the Bastard of Bolton cut half the Whorebane’s stomach open while his men charged at the children. Bran couldn’t stop it, it was over too fast. Hodor stumbled in the darkness, tripping over a root. Another man had lunged at Meera with a spear. Bran hadn’t even hesitated; he jumped into the man’s skin, and crushed his presence beneath him. And then everything had gone black.

The man Bran possessed had spasmed and then died quickly, bleeding from his eyes. Bran lost his grip on the world and dropped into the world beyond the green. *I killed that man with my mind, and then I blacked out. How long was I out?*

His whole body was trembling. His head ached, he could hardly breathe. “What happened?” Bran gasped. “Where’s Jojen? Where’s Hodor, or Mors, or—”

“I don’t know,” Meera said with a gulp. He had never seen her look so frail or pale. “I lost sight of them during the battle.”

“Meera, where are we?”

“I don’t know.” She was whispering. *Why is she whispering?* “Bran, they took us. It was the Bastard of Bolton.”
Bran’s head was still spinning. There was blood oozing down his forehead. He was in a keep, must be. A stone castle or holdfast. A prison. Above him, he heard voices. Heavy footsteps. Laughter.

The battle. The memories kept on rushing back to him. Bran remembered the battle from a hundred different skins. He had taken the skins of dogs and birds, but it hadn’t been enough to stop the men. He remembered clawing the eyes out of dozen different men, but not even Summer could stop them—

*Summer. Where’s Summer?* A jolt of panic shot through him.

He reached out to his direwolf in the same way he would grope for his own limb. Summer was part of him. Bran flinched as he felt pain. Scorching and blinding pain.

The direwolf was injured. Bran could feel Summer curled up, whining and hiding in a den under the roots of a gnarly tree. It was snowing, but the air smelled of death. His silver-grey fur was covered in blood, his jaws scratched and bruised. There was an arrow embedded into Summer’s hind leg that he couldn’t remove. Bran had never felt the great wolf so weak, so wounded.

There were corpses littered across the snow. *Summer had tried to chase me,* Bran realised, *but not even a direwolf could match armoured men wielding lances and arrows.*

*Captives. Prisoners.* Somewhere in the distance, the wolf howled and Bran couldn’t even hear it.

“Where are we?” Bran asked again.

“I don’t know. They blindfolded us and galloped us here. A long day’s ride,” Meera whispered. Her chains rattled. “A small keep or holdfast. There are at least two hundred men. Maybe three.”

“Jojen,” he choked. The room felt like it was shaking. “Hodor. What happened to Last Hearth? All of those men, the children—”

“I don’t know. I don’t, Bran, we’ve got to focus, we’ve got to—”

Her voice was quivering. It was all too much. Bran felt his vision blur and blacken again.

When he woke up, he was cold. And hungry. So weak he was shivering. The cell stunk of dried blood. He could see flies buzzing around Hother Umber’s corpse. The fear was so thick he struggled to breathe.

Meera was squirming and trying to escape her iron manacles, but the restraints were so thick and tight it was useless. There were chains around Bran’s ankles too, but he couldn’t even feel them. The manacles were pointless on him; his legs were useless, numb hunks of flesh.

Their prison was a dusty stone box, but the oak door looked old and rotten. The door had even been left ajar, yet that didn’t matter because they were chained to the wall.

Above him, it sounded like a celebration. He heard stomping feet and laughter through the stone floor. That noise scared him more than anything.

Meera hissed some words at Bran, but he could barely hear them. The room felt like a coffin. Hother Umber didn’t stop staring at him, dead-eyed.

The walls were getting tighter, more constricting. He needed to escape. So he did.

Bran forced all the concentration he had and he reached outwards. The world blurred. He felt the
presence of a rat who jerked and gasped as Bran squeezed his way into the rat’s skin. The rat skittered through dusty corridors, staring at the world through half-blind rat eyes.

He heard heavy boots stamping through a dusty keep. Bran didn’t recognise it, but the keep was heaving with movement and men. It was a small stone keep with a wooden wall, and his horses in the grounds. This wasn’t a great castle, just a minor one – only a single floor and a cramped stone hall filled with barking dogs and drinking and cheering men.

Then, Bran heard squeals and quiet sobs from the middle of the main hall. Women were crying and men were jeering. The rat skittered beneath the tables, its little heart pounding. Bran felt his whole body tremble in horror.

There were women on top of the main dining table. Six women, all of them stripped naked. Their bodies were beaten, covered in blue and yellow bruises and blood. Some of the girls were begging for help, but the men just laughed.

The rat could only watch from the floor in horror as men dragged the women to the floor and unfastened their breeches. He heard the grunts and squeals. Raping them, Bran realised in utter horror. A hundred men, and they were raping the women in the right middle of the hall while they laughed, jeered or drank. They sacked Last Hearth, and this is how they celebrate.

He heard the girls begging, weeping, for mercy and the sound haunted his soul. The ones who begged were only raped harder. Bran found himself almost grateful for the rat’s poor vision, because it was a sight that scarred his eyes.

‘Worse than Boltons’, Bran had said. I was wrong. Not even monsters could be worse than this.

He even recognised those women. Two of them were serving girls from Last Hearth. One of the older women had been a wife of a petty lord, he suspected. The youngest was barely older than Meera. As Bran watched, the men finally slit the throats of a woman who wouldn’t stop crying. Then, her corpse was given to another man to be raped again. All the while, they didn’t stop jeering, drinking or taking turns.

Bran couldn’t watch anymore. He fell back to his own skin. His eyes were wide and bloodshot. He felt sick rise up his throat from the memory. He couldn’t stop trembling. He could still hear the jeering from above, and now he knew what they were jeering at.

These are the Bastard’s Boys, he realised. The worst killers and murderers in the north. The monsters in human skin that had sacked Hornwood, sacked Winterfell, and sacked Last Hearth.

I heard what happened to Lady Hornwood. The memory of Ramsay Snow’s laughter haunted his mind.

He could see Meera’s wide eyes. “We must escape, Bran,” she hissed. She did not stop scraping against her manacles and the mortar with her bare fingers. Her ankles were scraped from where she struggled against the iron bracelets.

Every hour felt torturous. It was like he was counting every heartbeat. He struggled to breathe, struggled to think.

“They’ll come for us,” Meera kept on saying. “They will, they’ll come for us… We will escape and they’ll come for us.”

Nobody came for Lady Hornwood. She had to eat her own fingers. Bran stared at his hands.
I am not trapped. I am a skinchanger. I am the winged wolf. I have killed men with my powers and I can do it again. That thought was the only one that gave him strength.

It was nightfall when he heard men coming down the steps towards him. Five figures. He recognised the man at the front instantly. It is him, Ramsay Snow. Twice now he has razed a castle and slaughtered innocents to get to me.

Ramsay was an ugly young man, wearing a black leather jerkin over a pink velvet doublet slashed with dark red satin, along with black boots, belt, and scabbard. He was big boned and slope shouldered, with a fleshiness like he would be fat later in life. Ramsay's skin was pink and blotchy, his nose broad, his hair long and dark and dry. Although his mouth is small, Ramsay's lips were wide and meaty, wormy looking, and he smiled a wet-lipped smile.

"Brandon Stark," the Bastard of the Dreadfort laughed. "Oh, how we meet again. I believe we haven't been introduced properly: I am Ramsay Bolton, Lord of Winterfell, Lord of Hornwood. You will address me as Lord Bolton."

Bran didn’t reply. He was too busy trembling with fear and rage. "I must admit, for a boy with no legs you can run," Ramsay chuckled. "I had been sure that, after Theon and the miller’s boys, you would end up dead in a forest somewhere. But instead you made it to Last Hearth. Where you conspired to steal my title. For shame, Brandon. For shame."

There were sniggers. Meera was coiled, pressed up against the wall as far as her chains would allow, like she was readying herself for an attack. I could attack. I am winged wolf. I could kill him. But I can only kill one of them. Will the others kill me and Meera as soon as he fell?

"The little prince," a man besides him snorted. "Not anymore," Ramsay’s voice sound cheerful. "I am the Lord of Winterfell now, Brandon. We are goodbrothers, are we not? Your sister Arya is so sweet."

Arya. Arya.

Maybe he was waiting for response. Bran was curled up on the floor and quivering too badly to give him one. Ramsay Snow stepped forward, with that eerie smile and pale eyes.

"Those people at Last Hearth? They died because of you. Brandon Stark. Just like the miller’s children did. Those at Winterfell? The Umbers? Jojen Reed, your dumb stable boy, your little wolf? They’re all dead and it’s all your fault."

"No," Meera growled. Tears in her eyes. "You lie. You lie. Jojen can’t be…"

Ramsay just laughed, but his attention was all on Bran. I could kill him. I could kill him… "I want you to remember that, Bran. I want you to remember just how many people die because of you."

Bran’s eyes flickered towards Meera. Ramsay’s grin widened. A predator sensing weakness.

"So I’m going to leave this old man’s body in here with you, Brandon, just you know exactly what your defiance costs," Ramsay continued, with an idle kick at Hother Umber. "Oh, today is going to be a good day, I think."

“What do we do with him?” A man with yellow teeth grinned. “Another hunt?”
“Hunting a cripple? Now where’s the sport in that?” Ramsay chuckled, pacing. “No, Brandon Stark, you are valuable to me. King’s Landing wants you to hold over my father’s head. My father wants you to hold over my head. You might be my replacement, should I step out of line. After all, you have a better claim to Winterfell than me, don’t you? A little crippled puppet to replace a ‘rabid’ dog.” His lips pulled back to reveal teeth, but it couldn’t be called a smile. “No, I will not let that happen. I will not let my lord father get his claws on you either. I wouldn’t kill you, Brandon, I would never kill you. But maybe I’ll cut off your face so nobody will ever recognise who you are?”

The men were laughing. They were towering figures, all big and armed, and Bran was just a curled shape on the ground. “But until then,” Ramsay mused, sucking his lips. “I need you alive and looking like a Stark. You’re my game piece now, Brandon. You are the perfect bait. Bait enough to catch a dragon, I think.”

*What is he talking about?* Ramsay was looking at him almost hungrily. Finally, Bran trembled and raised his voice. “Are… are you taking me to Winterfell?”

“So he speaks. Joy,” Ramsay laughed. “But no, not just yet. Nobody knows where you are, and I mean to keep it that way. Let my lord father fret a little bit – nobody will be speaking of you. Isn’t that right, Alyn? Luton? Skinner?”

The thugs nodded. “Oh aye.”

“Aye,” another agreed. “Keep your tongue or lose it, like you always say, m’lord.”

“Oh yes.” Ramsay kneeled down in front of Bran, his face barely metres away. Bran averted his eyes. “I know what you thinking, Bran. You’re thinking that you have me at a disadvantage because, well, I can’t hurt you for fear of killing or mutilating you. You think that I need you whole, and, hmm, you’re right actually. I do.” There was that grin again, worming over his cheeks. “But that’s why she is here with you. So here’s the deal Bran; if you disobey, I take it out on her. If you object, if you cause trouble, then your little girlfriend suffers for it.”

“You fiend…!” Meera snapped. Ramsay only laughed, while one of his thugs kicked Meera in the stomach. Bran screamed.

“They’ll rape her, Bran,” Ramsay laughed. He sounded cheerful. “Every one of my boys will happen have a go. Have you seen what it looks like after a girl’s been raped by a hundred men half a dozen times each? I doubt you’ll even be able to recognise her by the end of it. I could take you upstairs to show you a few examples of what it does to a girl, if you want?”

*He’s a monster. They’re all monsters.* Bran was struggling to breathe.

“So be good, Bran,” Ramsay said, still chuckling. He was towering over a crippled ten year old boy, and laughing about torturing him. “I’ll be back soon enough, and I’m sure we’ll have more time to get to know each other. Now is there anything you want to say to me? I want to hear you address me as Lord Ramsay Bolton.”

His voice quivered. “You’re a bastard,” Bran muttered, still staring downwards. “That’s all you are, just a bastard.”

The cold blue eyes flickered, and then a cruel smile spread over Ramsay's face. There was no immediate reaction, he just stood up. Then, Ramsay raised his foot and brought his boot down upon Bran’s ankle. Slowly.
Meera shouted. There was a crack of bone as Bran’s foot crunched. The boy stared, but didn’t even flinch. He couldn’t feel a thing from his legs.

For a second, Ramsay seemed confused. “Hmm, how strange,” the bastard mused. “It’s not as satisfying if they don’t feel it.”

With that, Ramsay turned and walked away. Bran looked at his crumpled foot, like it belonged to someone else. His ankle bent out of shape.

They were walking away. Bran’s heart didn’t stop racing. The other men left the room, sniggering. What would happen if I took his body now? I am a winged wolf. I could kill him, all I need to do is fly…

Barely even thinking about it, Bran extended his mind. He opened his third eye and he focused on Ramsay Snow, he focused his power and he extended himself out of his skin…

Bran gasped, flinching hard. His head burned. He felt rage. Hate, so much hate. His warg recoiled as if slashed.

The footsteps stopped halfway up the stairs. He heard Ramsay break step slightly, momentarily dazed, but Bran was left gasping for air. “Lord Ramsay,” a faint voice called. “You alright?”

In the cell, Meera hissed. “Bran!” Chains rattled as she tried to reach him. “Bran! What happened?”

“It’s him,” Bran choked, staring wide eyed at where Ramsay left. “There was so much hate.” I’ve never even imagined anyone with that much pure hate in them. As if hate was the only thing Ramsay Snow could feel.

Meera didn’t seem to know how to reply. Ramsay must have shrugged off whatever it was that caused him to stumble slightly, and Bran heard the door to the dungeons close. He’s gone, Bran thought. I lost my chance to take his skin. I’m not even sure if I want to.

Bran was shivering in the cold and the fear. Men can only be brave when they are scared. I must be brave.

“You can skinchange,” Meera whispered, when she was sure no one was around. “Take Summer’s skin. Go get help.”

“How?” Bran murmured. It felt wrong to even raise his voice. As if Hother Umber was only sleeping next to them. “And from who?”

She didn't reply. Meera looked scared, more scared than he had ever seen her.

She's the trapped one now, Bran thought. She's trapped in this cell, but I can fly through the animals and birds. My powers are the only advantage we have.

They went another day without being fed. Meera’s fingers and ankles were bloody from struggling against her manacles.

The next morning, Bran heard orders being given, and felt men preparing supplies for a march. The ears of rats and birds couldn’t make out any words, but he felt the activity. The Bastard’s Boys were moving out. Ramsay left very early morning with his hounds and most of his men, heading north.
One hundred men were left garrisoned in the keep behind them. They sealed the portcullis and barred the gate after the other Bastard’s Boys left.

The Bastard of Bolton must have a plan. He attacked Last Hearth to stop me from being traded to his father. But why would he leave in such a hurry? Bran spent some time thinking about it and couldn’t reach any conclusion. He means to ransom me, but ransom me to who?

“They’ve left,” Meera muttered, after Bran relayed the news. In the gloom of the cell, there was no day or night. It was so dark he could only just see the bruises on her faces.

“Half of them have,” Bran explained. “The other half seem to be locking themselves down tight.”

“Where are we? Where’s the nearest help?”

“I don’t know. I can see crags and ironwood trees nearby. There’s a forest outside, and it’s cold. It’s a small stone keep with wooden walls. It looks old, decrepit, very recently occupied. I think we must be towards the mountains – maybe this keep used to belong to one of the small mountain clans – but the area seems isolated.”

“He’s hiding us here,” she said breathlessly. “He doesn't want anyone to know about you.”

Bran nodded. His stomach rumbled hungrily. “But that means there can't be any reinforcements around,” Meera insisted. “And you can control animals. Could you chase these men away, just like you did with the wildlings at the Nightfort?”

The boy bit his lip. “Maybe I could. If I could skinchange into enough of them. I could control ravens or crows, rats, maybe some wolves if I can reach them. There are horses in the courtyard I could maybe take too…”

“Then do it,” she insisted. “They don't know about your powers, they could never expect it. Kill the bastards.” He hesitated. “Do it, Bran. Beat them.”

“And what happens if I do?” he said slowly. “We're still chained, Meera. We still can't escape.”

“We’ll find a way, but you've got to stop them from hurting anyone el–”

“But it won't stop them. How many fully-grown, armed men can birds and rats defeat?” Bran argued. “Maybe I could take down ten. Maybe even twenty. But one hundred? They won't fall that quickly. And all it will take is one of them to come down here with a sword and then we're dead. We're at their mercy.” A shiver ran down his spine, his voice cracked. “One man with a sword could kill us both, and they’re all experienced killers.”

Maybe if it was just Bran’s life he would have taken the risk, but Meera’s too? No, he wouldn't. He couldn't. I can't let Meera get hurt.

Meera looked stunned. “Bran, we… we don’t have any other choice.”

“We do,” he whispered. “If Ramsay Snow wanted us dead, he would have killed us. He’s not going to.” Not until he gets his use out of me, whatever that is. I must figure it out. “Our plan hasn’t changed.”

He tried to imagine what his father would do in this situation. Father would do what he had to do, no matter how scared it made him. I am a Stark, I must return to Winterfell. “He’s going to hold us prisoner. We’re going to let him,” said Bran. “We’re going to let him take us to Winterfell. We’re going to let him bring me close to Roose Bolton. And then I’m going to end this war once for all.
Roose Bolton is the one who must die, not Ramsay.”

“Bran…”

“It will work,” Bran insisted. “I’ve done it twice now. First on that wildling, then on the bastard’s soldier. I steal their skin, and their minds break. They can’t handle it, they snap, and they die bleeding from the eyes. There’s no defence against that. Ramsay caught me off-guard before, but if I had another chance I could do it. I can do it.”

His insistence sounded so empty in the dark prison cell. Meera stared at him, agape.

“You were dead to the world for over a day after the battle in the forest,” Meera warned. “You do it, and you collapse too. You fall unconscious and you drop into… whatever that place is where you go.”

“So I only have one shot,” Bran said, suppressing the gulp. “But I’ll collapse for a while, Roose Bolton will collapse for good. As soon as Lord Bolton dies it’s over. I can save my sister, I can the end the war. I can do this, Meera.”

“And in the meantime?” She demanded. “What are we supposed to do until then?”

“We just wait. Let them think that I’m helpless,” Bran whispered. “That’s the plan, Meera. We wait and we get ready.”

They argued for a while. Meera tried to convince him otherwise. She talked a lot about reinforcements that could be coming, ways to set traps and ambushes for the men. Ways to get them out of their prison.

By noon, she was interrupted by the sounds of boots coming down the stairs. A foul-faced man with a hunched back came to finally feed them – bringing cold chicken stew and water. Bran didn’t like the way the man leered at Meera, but Bran was thirsty enough he swallowed the water down so fast he was nearly sick.

The man left the prison door open when he left. There was no point to close it, considering the thick chains around their legs. Meera didn’t say a word, but he heard her counting the footsteps of the man walking up the stairs, to try and plan out an escape.

Through the skin of rats on the main floor, Bran heard grumbling. The men were complaining about how Ramsay took the women with him. A lot of the men seemed to establishing their camp tightly.

He heard the crooked man calling the holdfast as Thistle Hall. “Thistle Hall. I think this place must have belonged to House Norrey, they have green thistles on their coat of arms,” Meera said, after Bran told her. “So we must be close to the Gift.”

“House Norrey,” Bran repeated. “Why doesn’t anyone know we’re here? House Norrey is a friend to Winterfell.”

“Maybe this holdfast is abandoned. Or maybe none of the Norreys survived.”

He didn’t reply. In the distance, Bran felt Summer cry mournfully. The direwolf was left limping, struggling to survive in the cold. The thought made Bran’s heart ache. Be safe, boy. Just be safe.

Every hour felt torturous. The next day was the same. They slept on the floor. The same crooked man coming to feed them, the same tense, constant and quiet fear. Meera tried asking for a bucket
for their waste, but the man just jeered. Bran needed the toilet first, and there was choice but soil himself. His eyes stung and he finally broke down into sobs, but there was no judgement from Meera. Only fear.

In their cell, Hother Umber’s corpse turned pale and bloated, and started to stink. Bran watched the old man’s flesh slowly rot, the foul odour filling the air.

*This is what Ramsay Snow wants,* Bran thought weakly. *He wants to torture us. To leave us trapped in a cell like this. He wants us to suffer, he wants us to break down. For no real reason other than that being what Ramsay Snow likes.*

Bran remembered what it felt like to touch the mind of a person who lived solely for hate.

He spent most of his time in different skins, looking through his third eye. Bran escaped his body by slipping into the bodies of animals, as far away as his powers could reach.

He felt sorry for Meera, though. She couldn’t escape it.

The days were agonising. And then it was a week, and the weeks felt so, so much worse.

One night, through Summer’s skin, Bran saw a huge shadow fall over the earth, heard a sound like a hurricane fill the air. The trees shook as something huge passed over the wolf, heading into the mountains. The great wolf was left hiding in its den, trembling in fear.

Bran couldn’t even process what it was, it had been too immense. Meera had been confused too when she told him. She sudden maybe it had been a sudden squall, but it wasn’t. *There are monsters in this realm.* He thought back to the Stranger he had seen in his dream. Summer would have fled the woods, but the wolf was left hiding and starving in his lair. With Summer’s injury, he couldn’t even hunt properly, he had to scavenge for meals.

Shortly afterwards, in Thistle Hall, Bran saw some huddled men talking very nervously. The gates were sealed, and no one was even allowed outside. They didn’t even allow open fires in the courtyard, lest the smoke give away the garrison.

In his cell, the stink turned so hideous that even the man with crooked back could barely stand it. Meera never stopped scratching and struggling to break the iron manacles.

*I am Brandon Stark of Winterfell. I am Brandon Stark of Winterfell.*

He felt himself struggling just to stay sane. Frequently, the men in the keep would comment on the erratic behaviour of the rats and birds around them.

One night, Bran collapsed out of pure exhaustion. Flies and bugs were buzzing around him. He opened his eyes, and he was standing in the middle of the courtyard of Winterfell itself. He could see the grounds where he and Arya used to play, and all the towers and turrets that he used to climb...

“I am sorry, Bran,” a voice cawed from atop the stables. Bran saw a flutter of black wings. A raven. A raven with three dark eyes.

“You,” Bran gasped. *This is a dream.* His legs wobbled. “You could help us.”

The raven didn’t reply.

“You could help us!” he shouted. “Bring help, bring anyone. Do something!”
The bird’s voice was soft. “I cannot.”

“You must! They’re going to kill us! Or they’re going to keep us here until we break! You must help!”

“I did try to help, Bran,” the three-eyed crow said sadly. “I tried to bring you out of this realm. I wanted you to escape before this war sucked you in as well. If only you had crossed the Wall, things could have been different.”

“I couldn’t, I couldn’t cross—” he stammered. *I chose not to cross the Wall.* “Does Jojen still live? What about Hodor?”

The crow did not reply. “Why won’t you tell me?” Bran demanded.

“Because such attachments are dangerous. There is no answer I can give that won’t cause one hurt or another.”

*He’s evading the question. The three-eyed crow always evades the question.* “Does anyone know where we are? Is anyone coming for us?”

“This is not your war, Bran.”

“This is my war! I’m trapped here, I’m part of it!”

“You are meant for greater things.”

He shook his head. “What did you want from me? No more half-answers, no more vague statements. What do you want from me?”

“I give vague statements because you would not thank me for details,” the bird replied.

“*Answer me!*” Bran screamed. His legs collapsed. There were tears in his eyes. “You say that I was meant to fly, that you could help…” Bran gulped. “You said that winter is coming. And I saw something. In my dreams. It was cold, it was death, it was…”

“A white walker. An Other.” The voice turned softer. “Yes, they are the reason I need you. They are the… well, let us call them the enemy. The true enemy.”

The stranger of black and white. The very thought still made him shudder. “And you want me to defeat them?” Bran demanded. “What was I supposed to do?”

No reply.

“Answer me!” Bran screamed. “Answer me, or I’ll never listen to you ever again. I swear it by the Old Gods and the New.”

Wings fluttered, the beak twitched. There was a soft mutter of breath. A sigh, he realised. “No. You were not to defeat them. I wanted to keep you safe, Bran. I summoned you north to try and protect you from them.”

“Why?”

“Because they cannot be defeated,” the three-eyed crow admitted.

There was a long pause. Bran just stared incredulously.
“The Others cannot be defeated any more than the cycle of the world can be changed. To fight them is to fight winter itself,” the crow said. “They can only be endured.”

“I… I don’t understand.”

“You are the next greenseer, Bran. You are part of a legacy that goes beyond you, in ways you cannot possibly know. When the Long Night comes, the living will turn cold and the forests will perish, but afterwards there must be a greenseer to restore balance. To bring back the trees. It was your place to save the world, but only after the Others have destroy it. That was why I tried to keep you safe.” The birds ruffled its wings. “Yours is the place somewhere between ice and fire; to represent the living between two elements.”

Bran shook his head trying to understand. “But… but my family. My friends.”

“There must be sacrifices, Bran.”

Realisation struck. The greenseer manipulated Jojen to come to Winterfell, so that the crannogmen would take him north. “You mean… when you were calling me north of the Wall, you wanted me to abandon them all to die!”

“Death will be a mercy compared to what comes next,” the bird said darkly. “This is not a safe place for you. For anyone.”

All of the stories of the Long Night, the white walkers and the monsters came rushing back to Bran. Old Nan’s tales. “Then the last hero,” Bran muttered, “and the Battle for the Dawn, when the white walkers were defeated…”

“They are children’s tales, Bran. Exaggerations of a history long past but coming again. The Others were not defeated; the Long Night ended only because the Others chose to retreat.”

Bran stared in shock. There was a hollow, humourless and croaky laugh from the three-eyed crow. “Yes,” the bird agreed. “I do not easily accept it either. I try to fight against it, I try to give men a chance to resist. For what little it is worth, I oppose them however I can. But in my bones, I know that it is useless.”

His head was spinning. “In the stories,” Bran said with a gulp, “the white walkers were beaten by the children of the forest.”

“The children of the forest know the futility of opposing them better than most; this song has been written for a long time.” The bird’s beak shook. “No, the children cannot stop them. The children created the Others, once upon a time.”

“What? They created them…!”

“I suppose summoned is a better term,” the crow explained, “not created. They accessed a force elemental and eternal, and the children of the forest summoned it into the bodies of men. Ice given flesh, how the Others as we know them came to be. That was the beginning of the white walkers – created during the time of the First Men. Perhaps the children responsible intended the Others to win the war for them, but I think it more likely that it was an act of final spite against all men.” The bird sighed. “A curse such that men would suffer eternally the same torture that they inflicted on the children.”

He didn’t know how to reply. The bird hopped down from its perch. “Like I said, Bran, this war is greater than you know. You are not prepared.”
“How am I supposed to prepare? I’m captive, I’m in a prison surrounded by killers. Ramsay Snow,” Bran said with a gulp. “Can you help stop him?”

The three-eyed crow scoffed. “‘Ramsay Snow’ is meaningless. Just another mad man who wants to rape the world, I have faced his like many times. He is nothing to be concerned about.”

“He is a concern!” The thought of Hornwood, Winterfell and Last Hearth all flickered before his mind. “He holds me prisoner! He tortures me! He has Meera too, he…!” Bran hesitated. “I felt his mind. It was full of hate. It wasn’t normal, it wasn’t…”

“Hm. A legacy of his ancestry, perhaps?” the three-eyed crow mused. “I know of the bloodline, he does claim distant descent from the Others themselves.”

“What?”

“During the Long Night, and afterwards during the Cold Spring, while the Others ruled as overlords there were many twisted offspring formed between unions between them. Half Other, half human. Some came from sacrifices given, or from captives, and other men and women would even lie with them willingly for promises of power,” the bird explained. “Over the thousands of years the bloodlines mostly either went extinct or were exterminated, but some traits still emerge. Did you look at his eyes, Bran? You can see the Other’s influence in his eyes.”

Those pale, blue eyes. “Ramsay Snow is a white walker?”

“No. Gods no. He is human, but he has something of their influence in his blood. Perhaps he is not even aware of it, but you can see the traits. It breeds men and women without empathy, to whom cruelty is in their nature, and everyone around them is but cattle. House Bolton earns its reputation – it is not a power that should be underestimated.”

Bran stared. He remembered that moment; he had tried to jump into Ramsay’s skin and the man had flinched back. The bastard had reacted instinctively. “Is he a skinchanger?”

The bird paused. “No,” the three-eyed crow said finally. “I do not believe he has had any training as a skinchanger. But he does have a similar sort of power, one which I do not think he is even aware of.”

Bran needed to take a deep breath. All around him, Winterfell was shaking. “Could I kill him?” Bran demanded. “Or his father? Could I take his body and kill him?”

The bird stopped. There was a silence longer than the previous ones. “You have power over nature itself,” the crow said distastefully. “It is a gift you do not know the value of, and you are wasting it. Like a philistine who has been given a precious gem, yet you use it to crack stones.”

“It’s my family! It’s my home! I’m trying to save it!”

“Don’t you understand, Bran?” the three-eyed crow insisted. “As foul as this bastard is, he is but a pale imitation of the Others. Do not waste your time with this war in the north; there is a greater duty that is needed of you.”

“I can’t. I’m trapped,” he panted. “I’m in a cell.”

“No,” the crow said sadly. “You are not trapped. You were never trapped, no more than you were crippled. You must come to me, Bran. I can show you how to use your powers properly.”

“I can’t, I–”
“If your body can’t move, leave it behind. It is not needed, you know it’s not.” The voice turned harsh, strict. “Leave your body, and move into your wolf. Take your wolf to a heart tree. And then leave your wolf, and enter the tree. Come to me directly, through the weirwood roots. I will be there to greet you.”

He froze. The air in the courtyard was cold. “But… but…” he stammered softly. “If I leave my body behind then how do I get back?”

“You do not, Bran.”

He wanted me to abandon everything, he realised with a gasp. The thought of Meera in that cell flickered before his eyes.

“I summoned you. I do not need your physical form,” the three-eyed crow said. “You have a way to escape. You must leave it all behind you.”

There was a long moment of a silence. Bran stared, his mind running through all of the vague comments and promises the crow had ever given him. For so long, Bran had believed that the three-eyed crow was the only way he would ever walk again. ‘You will fly’, the crow had said…

“You monster.” The words from Bran’s throat were like a wolf’s growl. They were so vicious the anger surprised even him.

“Bran…”

“You lied to me! You deluded me! You said you would make me whole! That you would teach me to fly!” There were no tears, but his eyes burned. “You promised me my legs, and you knew that I would go anywhere to not be a cripple! And you never told me what you really needed because you knew I wouldn’t want to.”

“Sacrifice is not an easy duty to ‘want’, Bran.”

“You just want to use me!” he screamed. “Just like Ramsay, just like all the others, I’m just another piece to you!”

“I want you to save the world!” The crow’s voice turned into thunder. The whole castle trembled. Bran saw towers collapsing into rubble. “This cannot be neglected. You have a choice, Bran. A choice between damning the earth or saving it. You can either remain trapped or fly free.”

The dream was collapsing around him. He saw Winterfell falling under a storm. “And what about my friends? What about my family?”

“That is the choice. That has always been the choice.”

The earth collapsed. Bran felt darkness swallow him.

Suddenly he was back in the cell. His whole body lurched, wheezing and cough. He could barely breathe, arms flailing. The stink, the fear, the pain… he felt it all again.

“Bran… Bran…” Meera’s voice. “It’s alright Bran… It’s alright…”

He felt her hand holding his. She had to stretch herself out across the floor to reach him despite the manacles, but he could feel her hand. She had slender fingers, but strong. She didn’t stop muttering in his ear, trying to calm him.
Even in the horrible, disgusting prison, she was the only thing holding him together. And yet there was a pain in her eyes like she might break too.

The night was quiet. The three-eyed crow’s words echoed in his head. *I could do it. I could move myself into Summer. I could leave everything behind. I don’t have to be the crippled little boy anymore.*

A choice between saving the world or damning it, the crow had said. *I could close my eyes, leave my body and not come back to it.*

Then he looked at Meera, frail, trembling and holding his hand. She was trying to reassure him even though she needed more help than anyone. Bran looked at Meera and made his decision in an instant.

*I choose her. I won’t leave her behind.*

The days and nights passed slowly. Every day was the same, trapped in that cell.

On the second week, Bran threatened to bite his own tongue, or strangle himself, or anything, unless they were given buckets, linens, and basic hygiene. Their prison was left so foul by then that not even the guards could walk in without cringing, but the crooked man only smacked him over the head in reply. Still, Bran made the same threat the next three days, and by the fourth the boy must have looked so desperate that they had to concede.

*They can’t let me die. That’s not much power, but it’s some.*

The bastard’s men grumbled and moaned as they wiped the cell with a dirty mop. Meera and Bran would pretend to be unconscious so they wouldn’t beat them. One of them gave Bran and Meera a flea-infested horsehair shirt so long that it could be used as a dress, while Bran’s old, stained, wool clothes were discarded into the latrine. By the time they finally moved Hother Umber’s corpse, the body didn’t even look recognisable. Bran had spent over a fortnight watching it decay, barely six feet away from him.

In return for a bucket, regular waste disposal and occasional clean linens, Bran promised not to try and kill himself. When the guards unfastened his manacles to change his clothes, they didn’t bother putting the chains back on. After all, the men laughed, he was a cripple – it wasn’t like he could run.

The cell door was open and he was unchained, but he couldn’t even leave. Instead, he dragged himself over by Meera to sit by her.

Every chance they had, they would talk. The conversations were only things keeping them sane. Meera would tell him about life in the Neck, about Greywater Watch, about her father, and all about the ways that crannogmen would hunt. And Bran would tell her about skinchanging, and what felt like to take another skin. Together, they started to plan.

There were ninety-two men garrisoned in Thistle Hall. Bran counted them one by one through the eyes of animals. He even tried to learn their names; like Luton, Yellow Dick, Grunt, and, their leader, Skinner.

Then, one of the Bastard’s Boys was kicked in the head while tending to a horse, and after that there were ninety-one.

A few days later, another man fell off the palisades while patrolling, and then there were only ninety.
The very next day, a man was ambushed by a pack of wolves while foraging in the forest, and then there were eighty-nine. That one was perhaps a mistake, because afterwards the garrison became far more paranoid.

Then, Bran had to get more creative. He took the body of the biggest rat he could find, and he directed it towards Yellow Dick while he slept. The rodent bit Yellow Dick’s toe clean off, and then mauled the man’s foot with sharp, gnarly teeth. The rat died quick for its efforts, but a week later Yellow Dick lost his foot from the infection.

Bran could feel the keep become more and more tense. The men never knew what was happening, but the mood in Thistle Hall was changing. They were a small force of men garrisoned in an old keep in an isolated forest. Confined. Trapped.

“Be subtle,” Meera insisted. “Don’t push too hard lest we lose our advantage. We want them to be just the right amount of scared.”

Bran stalked and hunted them one by one. He thought of Last Hearth, and he felt nothing when he killed them. He felt more sympathy towards the animals than he did towards them.

The weeks passed slowly. It turned into months.

Gradually, Bran felt Summer begin to heal and head west towards him. After weeks of scavenging and starving, the direwolf grew strong enough to move. One night, Bran heard Summer’s howl from the forests right outside, and the sound gave him strength.

The wolf howl also made the Bolton men even more scared. The very next day, a horse went mad in the stables, and trampling three men and killing one. The horse was so crazed it had to be killed.

They served horse meat the next morning.

Afterwards, at Meera’s suggestion, Bran started to target their leaders more selectively, the men who were keeping control. Perhaps if the competent leaders were killed, Meera said, someone incompetent would take over. Learn more about them, kill the right ones and you could herd a force of men into poor leadership and reckless actions.

Bran stalked the men through birds across the keep; watching, listening, waiting.

They are all scared. Even killers and monsters could get scared. One time, Bran snuck a rat close enough that he could overhear frenzied whispers between Skinner and two others. The rat’s ears couldn’t make out sentences, but he caught some words – he heard ‘wildlings’, ‘dragon’ and ‘Jon Snow’.

Bran’s heart pounded as he made out his brother’s name.

As the weeks passed, Bran began to understand why the men were remaining so confined and holed up in Thistle Hall. “They’re hiding,” he said. “They’re not hiding from Umber or even Bolton men, they’re hiding from wildlings.”

“So it’s true,” Meera whispered. “Wildlings across the Wall. The Bolton Bastard must have picked the most backwater and isolated holdfast he could find so that nobody will find you, or even know where to look. That means he’s scared, Bran.”

Bran nodded. The thought that Ramsay Snow might fear something was not as comforting as it might have been, however. He remembered the black shadow that passed over Summer.
Over the next few weeks he caught many more murmurs mentioning “dragon”, but the men seemed nervous to say the words out-loud. The word only made Bran more confused. Wildlings and dragons.

*What is Ramsay planning? Why not take me to Winterfell already, if there are wildlings about?*

For so long, absolutely nothing happened. The mood in the garrison became so tense that fights broke out in the courtyard. The men forbade hunting parties, or even anyone leaving the gate.

The number of Bastard’s Boys in the garrison fell below eighty.

Bran heard men muttering, saying that Thistle Hall was haunted. *And they are right – it is.*

The boy spent so long in that cell that he started to forget what it was like outside. There were no rowdy celebrations in Thistle Hall anymore, the mood was too grim and silent. At night, the only sound in the cell was Meera, scraping constantly against her manacles using chips of stone. She had been scraping for weeks, months.

It was a moonless night when Bran’s birds finally sensed movement in the forest. He felt Summer stir, prowling in the dark. He smelt horses on the dirt road – horses with riders, along with hounds barking. A party of half a dozen hooded figures riding straight for Thistle Hall.

The men reached the keep and pounded four times against the wooden gates. There were no horns, very little noise at all. From the courtyard, the men seemed to tense, but once they heard the four knocks the mood changed.

It took three men to move the wooden logs barricaded behind the gate. The only sound in the forest were bats and birds. As soon as Bran had found a chance, he jumped from a crow into the body of one of the hunting hounds. The dog tried to howl in pain as he forced his way into his skin, but Bran took control so quickly the animal could only whine.

Bran could feel the colour around the dog’s neck. The dogs were yelping, but the man holding the leash was ruthless with the lash. The door crept open slowly. “Quickly, m’lord,” a man hissed. “Come inside. This forest is a cursed place.”

One of the hooded figures chuckled snidely. “Cursed? You think there’s anything in these trees more dangerous than me, Bones?”

“Of course not, m’lord.”

The man lowered his hood. Bran recognised that smirk instantly. Through a dog’s senses, Ramsay Snow stunk of old and dried meat, covered in an old dark wool cloak. *He’s returned, Bran thought. Finally. How many months has it been?*

The riders came inside. Every man stationed in the keep gathered around, all of them worn and tense and clutching torches. “What news, m’lord?” a man asked with a gulp. Luton. “Is it time?”

“Aye, it’s time,” Ramsay laughed. “The trap is readied and it’s time for the bait. I trust the little prince has been kept well?”

“The boy is right where you left him,” Luton nodded. “The brat spends more time sleeping than anything.”

“Be sure of it. Time is short and I cannot linger, but after this is done I intend to give Brandon Stark the treatment he deserves.” He glanced around the men, and snapped, “What are you
standing around for, fools? Tend to the horses. Ben Bones, see to my girls.”

The aging man, Ben Bones, bowed quickly and yanked the hounds. The dog Bran possessed tried to squirm, to stay in earshot of where Ramsay was huddled with his men.

“–sure he’s ready to leave,” Ramsay was ordering. “This ends at Winterfell, and the little prince has his role.”

“How many?” One of the men said nervously. “I hear there’s legions of the savages.”

“My father prepares for thirty thousand, but there’s less,” Ramsay said with a chuckle. There was a cruel edge to his voice. “Deluded savages without a clue, and fools that chose their side over my father’s. We give them time to muster, and we destroy them all at once. The Bastard King wants a battle, and we will oblige.”

There was hesitation among the garrison, but Ramsay just laughed, clear and mocking. “What of the Dreadfort?” Yellow Dick asked. “I heard that the Dreadfort has fallen.”

“No, the Dreadfort still stands. It’ll likely last for another few weeks now, until their armies reach it, but my lord father has already resigned himself to its destruction,” Ramsay snorted. “It will be torched in dragonfire, no doubt, and I must arrive south before it does.”

The words caused the crowd to ripple. “The dragon,” a man said. “So it’s true.”

“How can we face that?” another gulped. “If it’s truly so large…”

Ramsay sneered. “You scared, Jarl?”

“No, m’lo–”

“I got no need for scared men in my ranks,” Ramsay snarled. “I need hounds. Men willing to tear open a few throats. If that thing between your legs is so small, then I’ll cut it off and turn it into the girl you act like.”

The man called Jarl quivered and retreated quickly. The Bastard of Bolton glared around them, those sharp blue eyes alert for any sign of weakness. “The dragon can be taken care of,” Ramsay hissed. “Do not concern your fool heads over that.”

Luton looked around the men, twitchy. “And the army?”

Bran caught Ramsay’s smirk in the torchlight. “The army isn’t a problem either,” he chuckled. “My lord father has been arranging that. Not all of the Bastard King’s ‘allies’ are as loyal as they might pretend.”

Ramsay stepped back, motioning to the garrison. All eyes were on him. “Listen up, boys! This will not be a battle, it will be a massacre!” he shouted. “We will let the Bastard King gather up his army, right outside Winterfell gates, but the battle will be won by daggers, not by lances, swords or shields. We will kill ‘King’ Jon Snow right in the middle of his camp!”

King Jon Snow?! Bran was so shocked that the dog whined, but Ramsay only laughed louder. “Did you know that the dragon goes berserk whenever the Bastard King is threatened?” Ramsay continued. “We kill the king, and then the dragon kills all of the wildlings for us! They have already lost, but none of them have even realise it yet.”

The Bastard’s Boys were clapping, stomping their feet. The hound struggled to hear the words over...

“My lord father has his task, and I have mine,” Ramsay scoffed. “Yours is to be sure that the little prince is in place for when—”

That was all Bran managed to hear, as the kennelmaster yanked the dogs away. Bran tried desperately to overhear what Ramsay was saying, but the man huddled at the other end of the courtyard with his men. Ramsay gave instructions in a sharp, firm voice and forced each man to repeat it.

The whole keep was stirring, for the first time in months. Bran tried to listen in through the bodies of crows on the wall, but birds didn’t have the right ears to make out human words.

The night felt dark, dangerous. Dogs were barking and boots stomping. Bran watched with bated breath, but Ramsay didn’t even enter the keep. The Bastard of Bolton stayed only long enough for his horses to rest and to pass instructions to his men, before ordering that the riders would be on their way before daylight. Ramsay was impatient to set off again, but there were no ravens in Thistle Hall so he had to stop to deliver instructions again.

It was the hour of the nightingale when the gate opened for the second time in one night, and Ramsay’s horses set off down the dirt path at a quick gallop. Bran could feel Summer in the trees, stalking the road from the foliage. He wanted to attack Ramsay, to stop him leaving, but there were ten other riders with him. Summer wouldn’t be able to fight ten armed, mounted men, not even with Bran’s help, and Bran couldn’t risk his wolf’s life.

They closed the gates behind him. Bran heard Skinner shouting for men to ready supplies and horses for a quick march. The lull that had settled over Thistle Hall was shaken off quickly. Whatever Ramsay ordered them to do, it seemed they were to abandon Thistle Hall and follow quickly.

With a gasp, Bran returned to his body. His heart was pounding. Meera was over him, green eyes wide with concern. “Bran,” she whispered. “What happened? What’s happening out there?”

“Ramsay Snow,” Bran gulped. “He arrived and then left again quickly. The garrison is preparing to set out.”

“Are they taking us to Winterfell?”

Bran nodded. “There’s to be a battle at Winterfell.” He paused, trying to make sense of what he heard. “My brother. I think my brother is leading wildlings. Jon Snow is leading an army to take Winterfell.”

It was the only thing that made sense. Meera just stared at him. *Jon Snow, wildling king? How? Why?*

No, Bran could answer that last one. *He must be trying to save Arya.* If they’ve got Arya, then Jon would go to the ends of the earth to save her. *Did Jon abandon his vows, and open the gates for the wildlings in return for an army?*

“And they’re going to kill him.” Bran was shaking with fear. “I heard them, they’re going to kill Jon.”

Her mouth opened in surprise, and then she nodded. She focused on what was important, no questions or doubts. “We’ve got to stop them. Warn him.”
“I don’t know where he is,” Bran hissed. There were heavy bootsteps across the floor above. “I don’t where we are, Meera.”

“Then we escape. We find out,” she said. “How many men are there? Did any leave with Ramsay?”

“Five did,” Bran replied. “But we still can’t go, we’re trapped…”

“Actually no,” Meera admitted. There was the clatter of iron rings. “We’re not.”

Slowly, she raised her leg upwards. The iron bracelets still clattered around her ankles, but the chain to the wall had been broken from the joint. Bran stared at shock. “I broke through two nights ago,” she explained, with a grim face. “Rusted iron is not as strong as you’d think. You were too deep in your warg, there was no chance to show you.”

Bran could only stare. Meera’s fingers were scarred and gnarly from where she scratched at her manacles. She broke chips of stone from the wall to scrape at the metal, he thought. Her nails were ruined and blistering, it must have pained her hands, but she didn’t stop. She worked day and night, for months, no matter how much it hurt.

Those manacles had been thick. Bran remembered thinking it was pointless; the guards must have thought it would be impossible too. *And nobody put the manacles back on me because I’m just a cripple. They never bothered closing the cell door either.*

“What of the door at the stairs?” Bran asked, breathless.

“That’s locked, I already checked,” she answered. “But that’s just a normal door. I could break through, with a bit of work.”

*She’s been free to move around for the first time in months,* Bran realised. *And yet she stayed on the floor to keep me company.* His heart fluttered. *There’s nothing holding us back, we could escape together.* Then he remembered. “What about the men?” His voice trembled. “Meera, how are we supposed to get through all of those men and out of the gate?”

“How many are there?”

“Seventy-four.”

“I could set a trap, ambush a few while they’re sleeping. I’m a bog-devil, that’s what I do.”

“Can you ambush so many?” She didn’t reply. “And if we sneak out, they have horses and they could track us down.” Bran grimaced. “And we’ll never be able to sneak out anyways, because I’m a cripple and I’ll just slow you down.”

“We’ll find a way, we will. We’ve got Summer to help us.”

“We still need to get out of the gates first. There’s seventy-four men standing between us and the gates – *seventy-four murderers.*” Each one bigger and stronger than Meera. Maybe she was smarter and a better hunter, but that could only count for so much.

“Seventy-four men who have grown complacent. They won’t be expecting me, they won’t even see me coming. And they don’t even know about what you can do.”

“And if there were ten, sure. Maybe twenty would be possible. Thirty is pushing it. But *seventy?*” He shook his head. “It’s not going to work, Meera, you know it’s not.”
“We have to try!” she argued. “We have to.”

Bran realised why she was pushing so hard. “Because as soon as they move us they’re going to realise you’re not chained anymore,” said Bran. “As soon as they start marching we’re going to lose our advantage.”

“We can do this,” she insisted. Her eyes didn’t flicker; she was a hunter, she didn’t allow herself to hesitate. “Trust me, Bran.”

“I do. But I won’t let you kill yourself trying.” She was so beautiful. Her ropey brown hair was a mess, her skin pale and pasty, and her face gaunt, but somehow Meera was still so strong, lean and determined after so long of captivity. Every night he had seen her flexing her legs and straining her muscles, forcing herself to stay fit even when chained. “We’ll find another way, Meera. Somehow.”

There was a long moment of quiet. In the gloom, he saw her face crinkle. “Could you make a distraction?” she said finally. “Some distraction, enough to give me a chance.”

I don’t know. He couldn’t say the words, but his expression was enough of an answer.

Meera paused, and then continued. “We can steal a horse, Bran. Steal a horse and ride away.”

“And how do we get the gate open? Or get through the courtyard?”

She didn’t reply. Thistle Hall wasn’t very big, but it was secure. Meera had been trapped in the dungeons, but Bran had inspected all the sharpened wooden palisade through birds and rats. He had seen no escape large enough for two children.

“Can you even carry me up the stairs? Escaping is hard, but you have to do it carry a useless body with you,” Bran asked in a croaky voice. His face was pained. “Meera, if I hold you back, then you should just try to run witho—”

“Don’t even say that, Brandon Stark,” she said sharply. “And don’t insult me by asking. I took a vow, remember? By earth and water, bronze and iron, ice and fire.”

Her tone caused him to twitch. He didn’t know how to reply. I need to do something. Some way to get rid of the men. A direwolf alone won’t be enough, maybe a big elk, or a bear, or a…

Bran stopped. He heard her words. Ice and fire.

The idea came slowly. “What?” Meera asked. “Bran, what is it? Do you have a plan?”

I do. But it’s not a good one. “Meera, are you sure?” he pressed. “Are you sure that you’re strong enough to carry me?”

“I can carry you, Bran.”

“And how fast will you be able to move?”

“Fast enough,” she promised. “Tell me how fast I must go, and I’ll do it. We’re both getting out of here.”

And it had to be soon. Before the garrison was ready to move out. We’re only brave when we’re scared. I must be very brave now. “Alright,” Bran nodded. “I think I have an idea. Just promise me you’ll be ready to run when the time comes.”
She did. Bran gulped, closed his eyes, and he tried to concentrate. He tried to picture ice and death. He opened his third eye, extended his mind, and tried to see how far he could go. The world blurred, like stepping out of his body and into a dream.

He felt the earth around him. He felt the roots, he felt the snow. Everything was twisted and distorted, slipping away from his body, but he pushed outwards.

Bran remembered that feeling of pure cold and he tried to find it again. He focused on the image of a Stranger of black and white. The last time, at Last Hearth, Bran had felt himself drawn to it as he slept.

He could feel its presence. Something about it felt like it polluted the land for miles around. In his mind, the Stranger felt like a beacon – a beacon of power as bright and as horrible as a cold blue sun.

Bran followed its trail like a moth drawn to the flame. He felt the power shiver as he approached. The white walker sensed him searching for it too. He could feel it and it felt him.

*There’s something about our abilities*, Bran realised. *They feel similar. We share common powers.* Except the Other was colder and more powerful than he could even imagine – like an unholy, unnatural storm pressed into the shape of a man. Cold given flesh.

The vision came into focus. He saw it; the Other was exactly how he remembered it; half scorched black and half icy white. There was only a single bright blue eye, the rest of its skull looked scorched by flames. It was covered in darkness, limping on the ground in earthen cave. Hiding in the shadows, body crouched and infinitely patient.

Outside, a snowstorm howled. The air felt so cold it chilled Bran’s ethereal body. Something about the Other made the very earth colder. Bran was in the earth and in the roots, watching it through the ground itself. The Other twitched, like a predator sensing prey.

*“Little boy,”* the voice croaked. A voice like scraping ice, so cold it chilled Bran to his bone. “I see you.”

*It doesn’t speak the Common, yet I can understand it. Can it understand me?* “I can see you as well,” Bran replied.

The Other paced, twitching. It had its icy sword in its hand, so cold that mist chilled around the blade. Bran backed away instinctively. *This is just a dream, the exact same as I do with the three-eyed crow.*

*“Scared,”* the Stranger said. “Scared little boy.”

“Yes,” Bran agreed, gulping. “I’m very scared. I also will be very brave.”

It was looking right at him, like a cat might stare at a particularly interesting mouse. “‘Brave’. I know that word too. Mortals call themselves brave for denying the inevitable, but they’re not. Only blind.”

He remembered what the three-eyed crows said. “You want to kill us.” The cold seemed to chill him to the bone, his throated choked. “You want to kill all men.”

“Kill. Kill. No, we do not… we do not want to kill.” It took a step forward. Bran took three steps back. “Death is coming to all mortals. We are here to save you all.”
It didn’t blink, it didn’t each twitch, Bran noticed. Like a statue of ice, or a predator staying very, very still. “Fire and ice, little boy,” the Stranger continued. “Fire would burn the world into ash, but ice freezes. Preserves. The fire would destroy you all, but ice offers immortality.”

It took another step. Bran forced himself to meet its gaze. Every instinct he had screamed at him to run but…

“I saw you killing those men. Those Night’s Watch men. You killed them without a second glance.” It didn’t reply. “But then you saw me. You stopped to talk to me, and I don’t think you do that very often. Why? Why did you pay any attention to me?”

“Scared little boy,” it replied.

Bran shivered. “I was drawn to you. I don’t understand it, but… but I think that you have power, and I have power too. We see each other. And you feel like a threat to me, my whole body is trembling. I feel like screaming and running away right now. It’s like every instinct I have is yelling at me to run.” Bran took a deep breath, trying to focus. “And I have to wonder… if our powers are similar… maybe you feel the same way about me too?”

No answer. “I think that’s why you stopped to focus on me,” Bran continued. “I think you paid attention to me because I’m more of a threat to you than thousands of men combined.”

_That was why the three-eyed crow wanted me. Whatever plan the Others have, I’m not a part of it. Maybe I’m a challenge to it. “And I don’t think you like threats. I think you would want the chance to kill me. Or freeze me, or use me, or whatever.”_

There was a long moment of silence. “Little boy,” the Stranger said finally.

No time to back down now. Its attention was on him. “I think you’d want to come and get me, then?” Bran challenged. His voice turned into a shout. “Come on! I’m right here, why don’t you get me? Think about how good that would be for your war!”

The world blurred. Bran tried to picture Thistle Hall, and pass the scenery onto the Other. _It shone like a beacon to me, maybe I can be a beacon to it too._ “Come on. Right here. West, towards the mountains,” Bran gasped. The vision shuddered. He felt a cold sweat on his brow. “Follow the wolf’s howl. It will lead you right to me. Come and get me.”

Its head cocked. There was no reply, but that eye shone. _This is my only chance._ What could defeat seventy-four monsters except one bigger, scarier monster? “If you knock four times on the gate,” Bran continued, “then they’ll think you a friend and open the gate for you. The men will try to stop you, but they can’t, can they? They won’t be able to stop you.”

No reaction. “You think it’s a trap,” Bran said. “And it is, but not for you. And I think that I’m valuable enough of a prize that you’re going to come anyways. And you better come quickly, because otherwise you might lose your chance.”

The dream was shaking, dissolving. “So come on!” he screamed. “Come and get me!”

The cave dissolved. Bran shot awake, gasping for air. He saw darkness. Stone walls. The cell. The cold still lingered to his brow, and shivers down his spine.

Meera was staring at him, squeezing his hand. “Bran, what happened? What was it?”

He was still struggling for breath. “I’ve got a way to get us out,” Bran wheezed. “Something very dangerous is going to come for us. There’s going to be screaming, and then everyone between us
and the gates is going to die.”

Heavy boots above him; seventy-four Bastard’s Boys. This cursed keep where they had been imprisoned for so long. Whatever happens, Ramsay Snow will not be able to use me as bait. “Just be ready to run, Meera. Just be ready to run.”
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

The Battle of Oldtown.

The Sphinx

He could see the faint rumbling of ships over the horizon, gathering like crows. At first they had only been a black shadow at the mouth of the Honeywine, but slowly Alleras watched the fleet take form. There were hundreds of sails, from great longships, small raiding vessels, to captured cogs, carracks and galleys with the fading sun glowing red like blood behind them.

_Thousands of reavers_, Alleras thought. For months, Oldtown had been terrified by tales of over twenty thousand ironborn sailing against them. Archmaester Benedict assured them all that Euron Greyjoy had far less than twenty thousand – somewhere between five and ten – but the rumours still swirled.

From even the lowest terrace of the Hightower, Alleras stood four hundred feet over the sea level. The lantern itself was nearly nine hundred feet high. The cityfolk of Oldtown liked to say that you could see the Wall from the top, but Alleras knew that was untrue. Within his first month at the Citadel, he had risked sneaking up to the very top of the tower to prove it false.

The Hightower was fascinating to Alleras. One of the tallest structures built by man, most certainly the tallest in Westeros. From below it looked like a looming solid structure, an immense needle piercing the sky, but when you walked through the gloomy halls inside you could see the mismatched architecture, the patchwork columns and clashing stonework. The foundations were black stone and unadorned, yet the base was granite bearing the spires and columns of the First Men. The higher levels bore the gargoyles and sphinxes of distinctly Andal design, with elements of Rhoynar and Valyrian slipping through now and then. A thousand different architects contributed to the same structure; Alleras knew that in the first days of the Kings of the High Tower, it had been mostly a timber tower rising some fifty feet above the original fortress. Piece by piece, century by century, the wood was replaced by stone and the Hightower rose upwards.

Both Alleras and Archmaester Perestan, who held the copper ring, mask and rod showing mastery over history, had shared some fascinating conversations concerning the Hightower and its mysteries. It was rare that acolytes of the Citadel were even allowed into the Hightower, and Alleras jumped at every chance. He was a curious person, and he couldn’t help but be amazed by the ancient stonework beneath his fingers.

Alleras’ usual fascination with the tower was faded tonight, though, by the sight of the army mustering in the Bay of Whispering Sound. Tonight would be the first battle that the Hightower had seen in over a hundred years.

In truth, the Hightower was a poor castle. The Battle Isle was high with sharp cliffs and couldn’t be sieged, but it meant the Hightower stood removed from the city. It was too big to be easily manned, and many of the halls and rooms were left defunct. Some of the lower levels had to be reinforced and filled up altogether as the stone started to creep. The seat of House Hightower was so isolated and large it was essentially a small town within the structure, and entry was usually heavily
restricted except for kin and trusted allies to the Hightowers. The Lord of the Tower, Leyton Hightower, had not left the upper floors in decades, and it was often said that many of House Hightower lived and died without coming closer than four hundred feet to the sea. The Hightower was too large and too much of a labyrinth to be easily defended in battle.

A poor castle it may be, Alleras thought, but as a landmark it is unmatched. The men rally around the Hightower in times of war.

Below him, bells were ringing from the city, horns blaring from the mass of Tyrell and Hightower forces taking formation. The ships were set to defend the harbour all the way up to the rocks of the Battle Isle, where the Honeywine widened into the Bay of Whispering Sound and soft, gushing water drifted through the city. It was a deep harbour and a slow river – dotted with small isles and lazy currents, and usually filled with pleasure yachts sailing between the isles, with cogs all the way from the Free Cities overflowing the ports and merchant barges trading up and down the river all the way to Brightwater Keep. There were no yachts or barges today, though; the only ships allowed on the water were warships or those requisitioned for the defence of the city.

It seemed like the perfume of war was lingering over the usually fragrant city. It stunk of sweat, smoke and tension.

A strong wind blew from the west, bringing with it the cries of men on the boats, and the smell of so many torches. As Alleras watched, he saw the ships working to fasten into formation, anchoring themselves and wrapping ropes between them to keep them steady against the wind. There were so many ships that if they had been slightly closer together you could have crossed from one side of the Honeywine to the other, several times over.

From above, the city was a labyrinth of wynds, crisscrossing alleys, narrow crookback streets and markets, built in stone with cobbled roads. King’s Landing may be the most populated, but Oldtown was the largest, oldest and richest city in Westeros. Alleras could see the maze of streets and alleyways that he had committed to memory laid out before him, but now the docks seemed strangely quiet. There was no movement or trade on the piers and wharves today – there was nothing but grim silence, smoky torches burning, and rapidly-built barricades facing the sea.

If he walked around to the other side of the Hightower, Alleras would see the great Starry Sept looming downriver, its huge marble dome at the heart of the city. Further upriver, there were the Citadel buildings spreading on both sides of the water, and the Isle of Ravens located in between and joined by a weathered wooden drawbridge. While most of the Citadel buildings were sleek and marble, distinguished and adorned with dragons and sphinxes, the Isle of Ravens held the oldest building in Oldtown, dominated by the gnarly, moss-covered Ravenry and the great weirwood tree on which the ravens perched.

Alleras spent a long time staring at the city as he thought of all the ancient histories he had learnt of it. Tales of pirate kings that once held the Ravenry, the ruins of the First Men that the city was built upon, and dragons that used to perch on the Hightower.

He heard lopsided footsteps behind him. Alleras recognised the gait without even turning. “Oi,” Mollander called. “There you are, I was looking for you. What are you doing out here?”

Alleras grinned wryly. “Enjoying the view. It may be a while before I see it again. My father always taught me to enjoy the moment.”

“Well, next time bloody warn somebody,” Mollander grumbled. Alleras’ Dornish drawl was clear against Mollander’s broad Reach accent. “Armen has been pestering me to keep the group together. And have you seen Pate? The pig boy?”
“I have not.”

“He bloody vanished this morning. Nobody seems to know where he’s disappeared off to,” Mollander said with a sigh. “Archmaester Theobald will have my head – the Seneschal warned me to keep the acolytes together.”

“Hmm,” Alleras muttered. Personally, he had his doubts about Pate, but he didn’t let them show. “How goes it with Benedict?”

“Nearly done, I hear they’re winching up the last trebuchet now.” Mollander cast a worried eye over the horizon. “What about them? How long do you reckon?”

“I think six hours or so, perhaps,” Alleras replied.

“Benedict said four, but he said the same three hours ago too.” Above on the higher balconies, Alleras knew there were men watching the ironborn taking ranks through Myrish lenses. The Reach ships were forming ranks the same in the harbour ready to meet them.

“It depends on how fast the ironborn can muster. It will be time enough for us to return to the Seneschal’s Court, in any case.”

And that’s concerning, Alleras thought. It seemed like the threat of a mass raid had hung over Oldtown’s head for months, but when it finally did come it was slow. Early morning the criers rode through the city saying that the Redwyne fleet had arrived, Three Towers had fallen and ironborn were mustering past Blackcrown, but the attack in response was sluggish and obvious. Alleras heard some confidently declare Euron Crow’s Eye a fool, but Alleras didn’t share that opinion. In his experience, it was unhealthy to dismiss anyone as a fool. And yet if he’s not foolish, then what is he?

For so many months the ironborn had left the city constipated with tension and dread, it felt a weird relief to finally see them attacking. The Citadel had offered to assist House Hightower however possible; maesters volunteered themselves to manage stocks and coins, rations and supplies, and all the acolytes, students and scribes were expected to drop their regular duties to assist the war effort. Everything from writing troop movement reports to counting arrows and swords.

Archmaester Benedict, who bore the iron rod, ring and mask showing his specialisation in war and siegecraft, offered himself and the Citadel’s students to repair the ancient trebuchets and mangonels that were fixed on the lower levels of the Hightower. Soldiers built poor stonethrowers, Benedict often said, and it took learned men who understood projectiles, tension and motion to do the job properly.

It had been a hundred years since the great trebuchets on the Battle Isle had been last used, Alleras heard. They had fallen into disrepair, and fixing them proved no simple task. It took acolytes and men-at-arms by the dozen to ferry lumber and stones from the mainland, and carry them up the tower.

The stairs were too narrow to hoist rocks large enough for ammunition through the Hightower. Instead, they had to bring empty barrels and fill them up with smaller stones at the top. For days, the Citadel students had been trekking back and forth with rocks for the trebuchets, preparing stacked barrels.

Not that Alleras was complaining; it offered opportunity to inspect the Hightower, and it contributed towards his iron link on his maester’s chain. Practical experience of warcraft, Benedict called it, as much as a maester would ever get. There will be many students earning their iron links
after this battle, Alleras mused. Still he couldn’t shake the unease.

“The last ferry will be here in an hour,” Mollander sighed, limping to join Alleras over the balcony. “But I don’t mean to join the others in the Seneschal’s Court. Better to wait out the battle in some tavern with plenty of ale.”

A tavern far, far away from the water, I think. Their usual haunt, the Quill and Tankard, was on its own small island on the Honeywine and had been taken over by a garrison. “Shame,” Alleras said idly. “I hear that Archmaester Perestan means to give a special lecture for the students taking shelter.”

“Well, that’s one way to put us to sleep rather than fret. But I prefer to get drunk.” Mollander paused. “It’s either that or stand on the walls. I hear Garlan Tyrell has promised a silver for every man that stands with the militia on the wall.”

“A silver isn’t very much for fighting in a battle.”

“Nobody expects much of a battle. Not at the walls, at least. They’re defending the harbour, the ironborn will never break that far through. Doubtful the militia will do much, except maybe loose some shafts.” Still, Mollander looked excited with the thought of taking part in the battle, even a small part. Mollander could have been a knight, Alleras thought, if not for his limp foot. “What do you say? You’re a hell of an archer, Alleras. They could use you on the walls.”

“I think not. I prefer shooting apples to men.”

“Why? It’s an easy silver.”

“It is until the men shoot back.”

Mollander scoffed. “We’ll win, you know. This will be an easy battle and everyone knows it.”

Yes, Alleras thought. And how can you be unconcerned by that statement? Surely the ironborn must know it too?

The ideal time for the ironborn to assault had come and gone. There had been a time, after ironborn victories in the Arbor and Redwyne straits, when Lord Hightower had been left panicking about the defence of the city. Rumors said that Leyton Hightower had been so scared he resorted to consulting a book of spells along with his daughter, the Mad Maid Malora, to which all the maesters scoffed. When the ironborn first took the Arbor, the Redwyne and Tyrell forces had been miles away and distracted. The militia was raised and a ragtag fleet assembled, but then later the panic was relieved when allies started to muster. Garlan Tyrell arrived through the city with thirty thousand Tyrell men coming from the crownlands. That number had slowly risen as more and more gathered.

All the while the Arbor was being pillaged and razed, Oldtown readied for war. For weeks, knights had been riding down the squares, calling upon all able-bodied men to join the battle and bring justice for the atrocities committed in Ryamsport, Vinetown and Starfish Harbor and all down the Redwyne Straits.

“I hear Benedict wagered Norren good odds that the ironborn will fall back as soon as they see the defence,” Mollander continued. “They’d be smart to do so, too. That’s the Arbor Queen down there – the greatest ship in the Seven Kingdoms. She’s never been beaten at sea.”

Yes, the Arbor Queen was a great galleas, no argument. Even compared to the other great warships of the Redwyne fleet, she was huge. She bore three large burgundy sails, triple decks of oars
painted white and gold, and decks filled with scorpions and armed soldiers. A hundred great warships of the Redwyne fleet had arrived at noon and very quickly reinforced the defence around the city. The battle lines that Archmaester Benedict had drawn on his maps looked so different when staring at them from above.

“I hear that ironborn longships are faster.”

“Faster, yes. Stronger, no. Most longships are built small and swift for raids, not naval battles,” Mollander replied eagerly. “Only a very few of the Iron Fleet and similar can even compare to the Arbor Queen and the Honour of Oldtown. They are the two biggest ships in Westeros.”

Alleras nodded, still thinking quietly. Lord Paxter would lead and command the battle from the mouth of the harbour, and Alleras couldn’t fault him. The Redwyne fleet was made up of solely galleys, galleases, and dromonds. In contrast to the sleek and powerful warships of the Arbor, the fleet of House Hightower consisted of far more carracks, wine cogs, trading galleys and whalers refitted for battle.

The flagship of the Hightower, the Honour of Oldtown, would lead the reserves captained by Ser Baelor “Brightsmile” Hightower, eldest son. The second son, Garth “Greysteel” Hightower would lead the troops and militia on the docks. Although technically Lord Leyton Hightower was to command the weapons and stonethrowers on the Battle Isle, the Old Man of the Tower was old and reclusive, and his role was an empty honour.

When Alleras and the others had arrived by ferry to the Battle Isle this morning, he had witnessed the Hightower sons, noble knights, captains and commanders all leaving – all of them dressed for battle and eager for it. They had been young knights laughing and cheering.

The most dangerous command would perhaps be the force of infantry established as a beachhead on the Bloody Isle – the isle to the front of the bay – but Ser Garlan Tyrell had shown no sign of shirking that duty. Sharpened spikes and trenches had been dug in deep into the sand to resist any longships, while scorpions were raised on the muddy isle. Ser Dickon Tarly – a very young and very freshly spurred knight, but said to be strong and bold – commanded forces on the east side of the bay by the Thieves’ Market to block any landing on the coast, while Ser Mattis Rowan led forces on the west near the Guildhalls.

Even while the Lord of the Reach Mace Tyrell was distracted with the schism in King’s Landing, an impressive number of heirs and great knights had assembled at Oldtown. Sixty thousand, Alleras was told – a force he knew that Lord Paxter intended to take north to conquer the Iron Islands themselves after the battle was won or repelled. After the destruction on Redwyne's own seat and people, he doubted the retaliation would be gentle.

If the ironborn expected the Reach’s response would be weak, they were sorely mistaken. Alleras heard tavern talk saying that Lord Paxter would make the Iron Islands pay tenfold for the damage in the Arbor; he would raise an island from their bones.

Sixty thousand. At least six to one odds, and the advantage of heavy fortifications besides. Alleras spent a long time staring at the formation, and found little to fault with it. The wind was unfortunate – it meant the defence would be fighting into a sharp headwind and the ironborn ships would have an edge – but Lord Paxter seemed prepared for such. They had set formations on every side to counter whatever scheme the ironborn used; understandable, but Alleras also feared it may leave their forces too spread out.

Mollander was still talking about how swiftly the battle would be won, but Alleras just smiled absently while paying very little attention. His’ sharp, black eyes never left the blot in the distance.
The skies were growing dark and the sun was setting slowly.

“– is a fool to test Oldtown,” Mollander was saying. “I do not know what this Crow’s Eye wishes to accomplish here, but he will lose.”

“I think he is here to send a message,” Alleras said slowly. “He wishes to prove something.”

“How small his army is?” Mollander laughed.

“No,” Alleras mused as he rested his head over the balcony, hands under his chin. There were gulls flapping in the air. “He taunted the Reach and they answered in strength. He must have known the response.”

“But he will flee. Crows are cowardly creatures. He will flee just as Dagon Greyjoy was known to do, the last time ironborn threatened the Hightower.” Mollander shook his head. “They have no business here.”

Yes, Alleras thought. All of the maesters – experts in war, mathematics, logic and reasoning – agreed that the ironborn would not break their harbour. Strangely, the thought made Alleras think of Archmaester Marwyn. The grey sheep are fools, Marwyn oft said, they bleat the same facts over and over again until those facts were all they know. They have all the facts but so little truth.

“I wonder…?” Alleras bit his lip. “Do you know of the black stone foundations of the Hightower?”

Mollander looked at him in surprise. “Huh?”

“The foundations of the Hightower is a labyrinth fortress of unadorned black stone. What the Hightower was built upon. It’s one of the great mysteries; nobody knows who built those foundation, or where it came from, or even what stone it is made from.”

Mollander shook his head. “No, I heard Theobald talking about this. The archmaester said the stone is dragonstone – the type the Valyrians used for their dragonroads. Evidence to say that the Hightower could have once been an ancient Valyrian outpost in eons past.”

“No, there’s more evidence to say that’s untrue. The stones are similar, but dragonstone is harder and stronger than metal, while the black stone of the Hightower feels wet to the touch with stranger properties. Some say it is black basalt, but no stonemason can reproduce its queer texture. The stone doesn’t seem to age either – none can even truly guess when it was first hewn. The foundations bear more similarity to the Five Forts of Yi Ti, and they predate the Old Valyrians by thousands of years.” Alleras fiddled with copper link on the chain. He was a quick study, and he had earned his links in both history and architecture. “I know that Archmaester Quillon suggests a connection between the fortress and the mazemakers of Lorath. The construction and style is very similar.”

Mollander just looked confused. “The mazemakers of Lorath,” Alleras continued, still not turning his gaze, “were said to have been destroyed by an army of creatures coming from the sea. By merlings, selkies or walrus-men.”

“You believe that?” Mollander laughed. “You’ve spent too much time with Marwyn. Archmaester Perestan would strip that copper link from your neck if he heard you saying such.”

“I don’t know what I believe,” Alleras lied. “I just find it curious. The mazemakers of Lorath weren’t human – the bones found are closer to giants – and they built some of the greatest ancient cities ever raised. Older than Valyria, older than Ghis. And then they were destroyed, seemingly
overnight.”

“What does that have to do the ironborn?”

“It’s making me thoughtful, I suppose. Did you know that there is only one other example of the same black stone used in the Hightower foundations in Westeros?”

“Is this a riddle? What?”

“The Seastone Chair,” Alleras answered. “The same throne that Euron Greyjoy claims. An ancient throne of oily black stone, and nobody knows where it came from. But there is some link between Seastone Chair of Pyke and the foundations of the Hightower, yet nobody can even answer what or how.”

He could see the smoke rising in the distance, dark clouds swirling on the wind. “Nobody knows where the ironborn themselves come from, either,” Alleras continued, thoughtfully. “They weren’t Andals, very little evidence to say they were First Men. Some say they are descended from visitors across the Sunset Sea. The ironborn themselves have been known to claim they descended from merlings from the Drowned God’s hall, yet the maesters reject the notion. Maester Theron once posited the existence of a species he called the ‘Deep Ones’, a race of misshapen fish-men, but he was mocked out of the Citadel.”

Mollander looked baffled. “You’re not usually this talkative, Alleras. What are you going on about?”

He shrugged. “Don’t really have a point. If there’s answer to these questions, then I don’t have it. We’re surrounded by riddles going back thousands of thousands of years. Like Nagga’s Hill on Old Wyk – was that truly made from the bones of an ancient sea dragon? The best answer anyone here can give is ‘maybe’. Or what of the Wall? The children of the forest and the giants? Even the mysteries surrounding Moat Cailin and Storm’s End. A maester could tell you every scion and every lord of every major house, but cannot answer how their most prominent castles came to be.”

Mollander paused. All around them, they heard bells from hundreds of ships chiming below. “Lazy Leo was right about you,” he said finally, still looking baffled. “You earn your name, the Sphinx.”

“I just find it curious. There’s a big and ancient world out there and the maesters still know so little of it.”

I came to the Citadel to find the truth. But is there is little truth here, only facts.

The thought made him think of Archmaester Marwyn, and not for the first time Alleras wished he had gone with him. Marwyn the Mage left on one of the final ships to pass the ironborn blockade, before the harbour was locked. Alleras’ time as Marwyn’s student had been brief, but… enlightening.

He wondered where Leo Tyrell – Lazy Leo – was now. Probably getting drunk in some dive on the eve of the battle. Leo’s father, the captain of the city guard, had been insistent that his son should take part in the battle, but that was hardly going to ever happen. Lazy Leo was the outcast in his own family, in good part by his own choosing, who had been shunned into joining the Citadel. Still, for all Leo was degenerate, unmotivated and arrogant, Alleras didn’t think Leo was stupid.

Quite often, Leo tried to flirt with Alleras, in his own snide and taunting way. He was one of the few who noticed. Alleras recognised the smirks when few others did, the constant teasing comments about Alleras being a ‘nobleman’s son’, and the way Leo’s eyes would linger. Leo was
perceptive and quick-witted enough to be a fine maester, and yet cursed with a temperament so
grating that none but Marywn would take him as a student. Alleras had seen little of Leo since
Marwyn left, actually.

Where is Leo? Alleras wondered. And how many glass candles do we have left?

There was a voice calling for them. Armen the Acolyte stood on the pavilion, bellowing at them to
move for the docks. “The last ferry is coming in,” he shouted. “Get a move on or you’re stuck
here!”

Armen looked flustered as he ran off again. “We have time,” Alleras said lazily. “Linger for now,
we’ll reach the ferry in good time. I want to watch for a bit longer.”

“Perhaps I should stay,” Mollander mused, standing up and stretching out his clubfoot. “This place
will give us the best view of the battle in the city, and should they breach the harbour the
Hightower might be the safest place in the city.”

It was a jest, but Alleras still felt uneasy. No, I don’t think this is the safest place at all. Alleras’
father had once said that fear and nerves were nothing more than weakness that most weren’t able
to purge. Something to be fought against, not heeded. Doubt was debilitation, and panic was a
plague. But then again, Alleras mused, my father is dead.

From the Battle Isle, they saw the streets were clear and many of the harbourside buildings had
been barricaded, just in case. The cityfolk would be fleeing en masse to take refuge in the Starry
Sept for the night, and the Citadel students and scribes were expected to gather in the Seneschal’s
Court, but more would be holing up in taverns during the battle. Few would be sleeping, that was
for certain. Alleras had heard that many winesinks and whorehouses would be offering discounts.

I wish I had left with Marwyn, Alleras thought for the countless time.

Mollander was staring at him. Alleras made no rush to move, still leaned over the stone wall.
“What is with you?” he asked. “You seem very… distracted.”

“It is just nerves, I suppose,” Alleras replied. “I feel uneasy.”

“Well, understandable.” Mollander pursed his lips, but there was a smirk playing over his features
too. “But we will beat them. They don’t stand a chance, Benedict says so.”

Alleras didn’t reply for a good while. He heard gulls chirping – all of the activity in the bay
disturbed the birds. He knew the birds wouldn’t settle tonight, he could feel it in the air. Come
dusk, the skies would be swarming with ravens and crows from the Isle of Ravens.

“Did you hear Archmaester Benedict calling this the War of the Five Monsters?” Alleras said
finally, still not taking his eyes off the horizon.

“Excuse me?”

“The War of the Five Kings is over. Once there were five kings, each noble in his own way. The
Young Wolf fought for justice, Renly fought for prosperity, even Balon fought for independence.
Now, the noble kings are dead and we’re left with a war between five villains and tyrants, each
more foul than the last,” Alleras explained. “The War of the Five Monsters, this will be called.”

“Five monsters?” Mollander frowned. “That doesn’t seem right. I mean, yes, Euron Crow’s Eye is
undoubtedly a monster; we’ve all heard of his atrocities in the Arbor. The man is as wicked as they
come; he would rape and enslave the world to hear the tales.” Alleras nodded, still watching the
clouds drifting in the distance. “And yes, the Bastard King in the North is a monster, no doubt,” Mollander continued. They had all heard of King Jon Snow too – even amongst everything else the Citadel had been abuzz with that news. Apparently, House Bolton had sent letters requesting aid to every major house in the realm, but they were all denied due to all the other troubles. “The wildling king that controls beasts and works savage witchcraft – he comes south to pillage and destroy the realm. The Bastard King is another monster, sure enough, but that’s only two. Who are the other three?”

“Stannis Baratheon,” Alleras said quietly.

Mollander opened his mouth to object, but Alleras cut him off. “Oh yes – a righteous man Stannis once was, according to some. And arguably justified, depending on which tale you believe. But now it seems Stannis has turned crazed and tyrant – a madman haunting the Narrow Sea and leaving ruins behind him in his desperate war. He is the only contender from the last war still fighting, and he has been left bitter, broken and crazed from it.”

“Alright,” Mollander conceded. “That’s three. But what of King Tommen? Do you consider the little boy a monster?”

“Not him.” Alleras shook his head. “His mother. The Mad Queen.”

“Ah.” Mollander grimaced.

“The mad woman who holds her own son hostage, along with his fair wife,” Alleras continued. “An adulteress and murderess who denies the Faith, and holds siege in the Red Keep. Cersei would see the kingdom burn, if not for Mace Tyrell and Kevan Lannister trying to stop her.”

“Point. Then the fifth contender is Aegon Targaryen, I suppose? And yet to call him a monster seems unfair,” Mollander noted. “I have heard that the boy is brave and chivalrous. The Young Dragon, some call him.”

“I have heard the same. But that assumes Aegon Targaryen is any true king.” Alleras shook his head. “No, to the mind of many, this ‘Aegon’ is naught but a puppet, and the true contender is Tyrion Lannister.”

Mollander didn’t reply. “Perhaps that makes the Imp the most dangerous villain of them all,” Alleras mused. “What could be scarier than the monster that tries to hide out of sight? Tyrion Lannister raised a puppet king and called him a Targaryen, all the while his influence grows. The Imp is both kin and king slayer; malformed and cursed in the eyes of gods and men. If this Aegon is crowned, then it will be the Imp that takes the throne.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“I do not. But still, what does the truth matter, compared to what everyone believes? They see Aegon as the Imp’s puppet, so he becomes the Imp’s puppet. And if it’s true,” Alleras said grimly, “then no matter who wins, the Seven Kingdoms are doomed.”

Mollander barked with laughter, slapping him on the back. “You are too grim, Alleras. It will not happen. Lord Paxter will defeat the ironborn tonight, and Lord Tyrell will force the Mad Queen to yield. Their armies will defeat the Imp’s Dragon, and the rightful Tommen and Margaery will reign. As for the Bastard King, well, I cannot say. Too many rumours and talk; I know little truth of what is happening in the savage north.” Neither do I, Alleras thought but he didn’t speak. “Regardless, House Bolton is set to defy the Bastard King valiantly, and I doubt his armies will be able to move south come winter. Whatever happens in the north is not worth fretting over tonight.”
Mollander chuckled. “Come on, you definitely need a drink. Find a cheap winesink and a pretty girl, and this night will be over before you know.” He laughed as he shook his head. “But we really must go. The ferry will be coming in any moment now.”

Alleras cast one final glance to the horizon, before slowly pulling himself up and rolling his shoulders. His muscles felt tense. **No; I do not think I want to be in the streets tonight.**

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the walls?” Mollander insisted, limping as he walked. “My father always said you have to face your fears head-on.”

“My father said the same.”

“Then let’s go! We’ll have a grand view of the battle, and it’ll be the easiest silver you’ve ever earned. I know that the militia will be bringing wine to celebrate when the ironborn are driven off, and I doubt we’ll even need to fire an arrow.”

“I think not.” Alleras glanced behind him, at the dark clouds swirling over setting sun. There was a sharp edge to the wind. “It looks to be a stormy night.”

Mollander shook his head surely. “Norren said not.” Archmaester Norren bore the ring, mask and rod of electrum, showing his expertise in meteorology and the weather patterns. The old maester had devoted his life to mapping the wind and clouds. “He predicted a warm easterly wind for at least the next quarter, and good sailing weather up until the turn of winter. There should be no storms.”

“The maesters say a lot of things,” Alleras replied. “But I can still see the storm clouds.”

---

**The Kraken**

The world was shaking. Oceans roared, the waves churned, and the wind howled, while Euron laughed as he stumbled through the gloomy hull as if drunk. He felt giddy, actually giddy. From the deck above, loud voices were bellowing,

He clutched a sloshing skin of leather, filled with liquid as thick as bile. It smelt like burnt flesh and rot. Without even hesitating, he took a long chug, gulping the shade of the evening so fast that blue wine poured down his beard.

The shade of the evening was a good drink. It was drink that helped to… open the mind, for those that had the gift to see it. A drink that let you fly.

For those unaccustomed to the nectar, shade of the evening would taste disgusting, initially, before calling upon the rich sensations of memory. Euron had drunk so much of it tasted only like the blood of the world, rich and thick, staining his lips blue. It was an expensive drink to find on this side of the world, but Euron drank so much of it that his fingers would tremble the longer he went without its nectar. He needed it now, he needed the power and clarity the blue wine brought.

As soon as the wine gulped down his throat, he felt free. The world transformed into glorious shades of blue and red.

Euron heard himself laughing. High above, it was like he could see into the heavens themselves, where the storm gods shook their mighty hammers and stirred the sky itself to battle. Below him, the waves trembled and quivered, and he could see something great and ancient flexing beneath the
depths. Soon.

In the darkness, there were eyes. Eyes all around him, invisible in the black, but Euron knew they were there. The world was staring at him. Watching. Cheering.

_The world is watching me. Those eyes, so many eyes. This is my moment._

He felt a rush of… wisdom, awareness, hit him – like suddenly he could _feel_ his place in the universe, see the way forward – but it was gone too quickly as the shade of the evening faded. _I need more_, Euron cursed. _More wine, more power, more knowledge. There can be no error, not tonight._

The lower decks were flooded, ankle-deep. Water gushed over the sides. Euron splashed through the salty water and clambered upwards, stumbling drunk with the waves. The sound of his laughter broke through screams. His lower deck was crowded, filled with stirring men and the dangling of chains and slaves.

He saw restless bodies lingering in the gloomy hull, clutching blades. A few of the chained warlocks and mages were whimpering, chained against the wood.

“What is happening?” A large, monstrous man grumbled. Mall the Monstrous was a Norvoshi, born disfigured and given to the bearded priests to train as an infant. Before he even reached puberty, he had been discarded. He was a big, bloated man; his skeleton misshapen and his back hunched, but his arms were thick and strong.

“It will be battle, soon,” Euron chuckled, shambling as the ship jerked in the rough seas. “Prepare yourselves.”

Other men crowded around him, all eyes dark. Euron was proud of his Grotesques – he considered them the finest killers in the world.

Most of the time, the _Silence_’s Grotesques stayed below deck, watching over the mages and spellbinders. There were Braavosi, Tyroshi, Myrish, Ghiscari, Ibbenese, Yi’Tish, Lhazareen and Sorthoryi among them – a selection of as many freaks and monsters Euron could collect. About half of them were missing tongues, but they were all chosen for their certain… temperament.

Mall the Monstrous had been sold to a freak show near Lys before Euron raided the town, the huge man’s lumpy back was crisscrossed with scars. Also among them was an evil, Ghiscari dwarf clutching two daggers that was prone to raping corpses and body parts, an unnaturally tall, skinny Tyroshi man who could contort as if boneless whom Euron stole from a Astapori Master’s collection, an albino Summer Islander with striking red eyes, a couple of eunuchs from the fighting pits of Meereen, a hooked-face corsair with a whip, two Ibbenese brothers with long, hairy arms and crunched faces, one malformed Ibbenese-human crossbreed, and a cone-headed Jogos Nhai rider that Euron found in the blood pits of New Ghis. Not all of them had wanted to join Euron’s Grotesques, but there were ways of making them… compliant.

Typically, the ironborn sailed the ship above, but Euron’s mutes, monsters and dedicated murderers had their place too.

In the corner of the hull, Euron saw the disfigured, blistered figure of Falia Flowers, her pregnant belly swollen and her arms chained to a hammock. After Euron had finished with Falia, he had gifted her to Mall the Monstrous and the other Grotesques to rape. The thought of the festering, tortured ball of hate and cruelty that was gestating inside Falia caused Euron to grin.
“Mall, you are in charge of the lower deck. Prepare the men for a fight,” Euron ordered. “You know your duty?”

A twisted, swollen hand pounded against Mall’s chest. His left hand was so twisted he couldn’t even grip anything. “Yes, Your Holiness.”

Holiness. Soon everyone will be addressing me like that, not just my Grotesques. A beefy, hairy figure stood arms folded by the doorway. “Ghrazzac,” Euron called. “I appoint you in charge of my hull. Prepare Urgard and my mages.”

Ghrazzac made a guttural sound that could only be agreement. The man didn’t speak the Common, he didn’t have the tongue, but he could understand it. Ghrazzac was of the Brindled Men from the forests of Sothoryi; massively muscled and big-boned with long arms, sloped foreheads, huge square teeth, heavy jaws, and flat noses more like snouts and thick skins brindled in patterns of brown and white more hoglike than human. Ghrazzac had been a slave once too, before the Silence raided a slave ship around the Basilisk Isles. Euron liked the man; freaks were useful, and Ghrazzac was too dim to be manipulated.

“We will need their power. Give them fire as needed, and see to it they fulfil their role,” Euron continued. “Now is everything we’ve been working towards.”

Ghrazzac grinned a bloody smile, his scars twisting. He looked more animal than man.

A wordless war cry burst from Mall the Monstrous, and the Grotesques started moving. The Silence was so crowded that every level was filled with bodies. “And bring me more shade of the evening!” Euron ordered. “Whatever stores we have left, I need it!”

A scarred, burnt mute brought him another satchel, with blue wine sloshing out of the mouth as the cabin lurched. Euron gulped it down hungrily. Colours twisted into shades of red and blue. Euron shambled up the red stairs, and into the storm. The decks were filled with rushing bodies, horn blasts and shouts. Euron had to clutch the guide rope leading out on deck, all the while feeling the grin widen across his face.

He could feel the shade of the evening taking effect. He could see shadows flying across the air. All around him, he could see ghostly phantoms littering the floor of the Silence. But they cannot speak, Euron thought proudly. I took out their tongues so that their ghosts could never haunt me.

All around him, the battle was only just getting started. The sound of the Silence breaking through waves was deafening.

Euron laughed.

His crew were rushing, frantically trying to fight the wind. Euron stared, and all of the men around him had no eyes. Blood dripped from their empty eye sockets. Their skins were bloated, corpse-pale and water soaked.

“Captain!” Torwold Browntooth called. Bloody water was gurgling from his mouth and half his skull had been cut open, but the man didn’t seem to notice. “Orkwood has fallen. The Bloody Watchman is ablaze!”

“Their numbers?” Euron demanded.

“Three hundred vessels,” Kemmet Pyke shouted from the prow, barely audible over the wind. There was a phantom arrow sticking half-through the man’s skull. “Including a hundred great galleys.”
Most others on the ship were dead and maimed too. The shade of the evening allowed him to see their phantoms.

In the distance, Euron saw flames and great burgundy sails. The bright red, greens and purples of their sails and banners clashed with the setting sun.

He saw three spikes breaking the sky, like the prongs on a broken crown. On the coast, the first husks of longships were burning in the shallows. He saw mammoth shapes of the great galleys up ahead, swirling in the black waters.

The Redwyne fleet had finally arrived. And the ironborn were ready.

Lord Orkwood’s garrison holding Three Towers had crumbled under the force of Lord Paxter’s galleys. Lord Orkwood’s sons had held it valiantly, yet the size of Redwyne’s fleet meant a brief battle. Raiding vessels had seen the fleet approaching, but by the time Euron's reinforcements had gathered from Blackcrown, Ryamsport, Starfish Harbor and Vinetown, the battle was already nearly over.

The castle itself was burning in black, smoky flames. Good, Lord Orkwood proved that he was a true ironborn, Euron thought approvingly. He torched the castle before they allowed it to be reclaimed. May Lord Orkwood enjoy his time in the Drowned God’s halls.

Around them, the seas were choppy and the wind howled. The storm that had been brewing over the Arbor was finally being released.

Yes, tonight is the night. A vision of bloody, churning seas flashed before his eyes. It will be glorious.

“Blow the horns!” Euron bellowed, shambling forwards. His Valyrian steel armour clanked. “All ships. Signal the formation and prepare for assault. Tonight we reap some grapes!”

“What about Lord Orkwood?” A young raider – Steffarion Sparr, he remembered – shouted. He had a spear through his chest. “There might still be survivors held up on Three Towers.”

Who cares? “Lord Orkwood did his duty.” The first sacrificial lamb of the night. “We assault the Redwyne fleet. Burning those galleys matters more than a castle.”

The shadows of the Redwyne fleet loomed. As they got closer, they could see skirmishes on the beaches of Three Towers – the ironborn of the castle fighting against the Reach men, even after their longships had been crushed. Euron had no interest in relieving them. Tonight is about killing, not saving.

“We call the fleet! Bring our full force to bear!” Euron shouted.

The men on deck were but half of his tried and tested crew, with whom he’d ranged to the world’s edge; the other half were nobles and heirs of the houses of the Iron Islands. Lord Goodbrother, Steffarion Sparr, Dagon Ironmaker and Quenton Sunderly and many others had all been ‘invited’ to crew the Silence in preparation for the battle, while their fathers or sons led other ships in the fleet.

Euron walked among his men, looking at how each one would die. “Lord Goodbrother!” Euron proclaimed. The aging lord’s eyes narrowed. “As is fitting for a man of your experience, I grant you command of my deck and sails. Stonehand – you are in command of the rowers and coxswain. Kemmet Pyke, you man the crow’s nest.”
“Aye captain!” the Stonehand called as the bodies rushed around him. Ropes strained and wood groaned – it took ten men to drag the black masts in against the wind. Euron saw a figure with seawater gushing from his mouth, gasping through lungs filled with salt. Euron grinned. “Rodrik Freeborn!” he announced. “I appoint you as hornblower – see to your duty below.”

Rodrik Freeborn looked shocked. He was a tall, wiry man clad in the heavy chainmail – a reaver past his prime, but still as hard and as worn as rock. “Hornblower?!” Rodrik exclaimed. “I’m one of the best damn spears on this ship, and you’re putting me as hornblower? Let me lead the first raid.”

“Your duty is with the damn horns, see to it,” Euron snapped. “You listen for my command – my command alone – and you blow accordingly. We must rally the fleet – now blow the first horn for them to muster and follow.”

The hornblower was a crucial task, but hardly the most glorious one. It was a duty usually fulfilled by squires and apprentices, but tonight Euron couldn’t risk any but one of his most loyal men as hornblower. The ships of the fleet would be looking to the Silence to lead, and for this battle the Silence had been fitted with five great horns to pass instructions. They were horns of iron, silver, bone or oak, all very different shapes and sizes. The smallest horn was four feet and the largest over seven, but each one had a very distinguishable pitch and tone – the sound of which gave different orders. It was the only way to pass orders through a fleet of hundreds of ships.

He could see the fleet mustering down the Redwyne Straits. The first horn – a long, sullen sound like a whale’s cry – echoed over the water. Euron saw flares and signals rise from the longships in response. My fleet has been prepared for this, he told himself. They will be ready.

He couldn’t stop his heart from beating. In the distance, the Redwyne fleet grew closer.

“He flees like a craven!” Quellon Humble snapped.

“Craven? No, it seems Lord Paxter has his wits,” Lord Goodbrother called darkly. The lord was a ‘guest’ aboard the Silence, but a capable tactician. Yes, he will do to command the sails. “He doesn’t wish to face us in open water, not when we have more ships than he does. He could lose too many if his galleys are encircled by our longships. Instead, he leads us down into the bay itself so he can fortify around Oldtown. He expects to crush us with the size of his hulls if we dare to follow.”

The Stonehand’s face twisted. “Then what do we do?”

“We follow, of course,” Euron grinned as he stepped forward. “Blow the horns. Sound the drum. Tonight’s the night – we break through their fleet and we take the attack to Oldtown itself. Come, tonight let the Drowned God sing!”
Lord Goodbrother looked nervous. “Your Grace,” he said hesitantly. “Those are great galleys. The *Great Kraken* and the *Silence* are more than equal to any lesser warship, but most of our vessels are not. Our fleet is primarily longships built for raiding, not battle.” He shook his head. “Only the Iron Fleet itself could stand to match the force Paxter Redwyne commands, right now we do not have the ships—”

“The ships?” Euron taunted. “We are ironborn. We can break them.”

Over the horizon, he could see the immense burgundy sails and the three hundred oars of the Redwyne flagship. The *Arbor Queen* alone was three times the size of any ship the ironborn could field.

The sound of drums and rowers was deafening. The entire fleet was behind him, one of the largest Westeros had ever known. He could see the cliffs come into view as the ironborn fleet spilled into the bay.

The *Silence* led from the centre rear, alongside the *Thunderer* and the *Dusk*. The ships of House Drum and House Harlaw kept their crews but were now captained by Euron’s captains, the Red Oarsman and the Harren Half-Hoare. Euron had been sure to place his own men and allies at strategic points in the fleet.

Command of the *Great Kraken*, his dear brother’s old flagship, had been gifted to Donnor Saltcliffe to lead the starboard rear. The *Nightflyer*, formerly belonging to House Blacktyde, until its lord had been cut into seven pieces, was now captained by Lord Waldon Wynch to lead the port rear, along with Hotho Humpback Harlaw on the *Gargoyle* to support him. Germund Botley on the *Silverfin* and Lord Maron Volmark on the *Leviathan’s Wail* led the front flanks, while the Sparr led the vanguard from the centre aboard the *Hatchet’s Edge*.

Euron could make out the greatest ships of their fleet – the *Foamdrinker*, the *Axe Maiden*, the *Bone Reaper*, the *Last Light*, the *Maiden’s Tears*, the *Forsaken*, the *Northern Hunter*, the *Salt Bitch* – as they gathered around them. The strongest few of the ironborn longships were the only longships that could match war galleys, and beyond those they had hundreds of smaller vessels with a dozen oars filling the waves.

Their ranks were supported with cogs and merchant ships captured from the Arbor, gathered mostly at the front. The largest of which was a towering three-deck galleas they had captured in Raymsport – its masts still bore the golden lion of Lannister, yet the lion was crossed out in blood. The ‘*King Joffrey’s Valour*’ had been under construction when the ironborn razed the port, originally a gift from the Arbor to the Crown. It was a two hundred oar vessel, barely a quarter of which were filled, and the ship had been built by Redwynes and very hastily finished by ironborn. Barely seaworthy.

Euron had given the vessel to Eldred Codd to command from the front, but he had refused to allow anyone to change ship’s name. It made Euron laugh to call her the *King Joffrey’s Valour*.

The gathering from anchor to open water took time, and their force blanketed over the choppy seas leading to the bay. Euron didn’t rush. The Redwyne fleet attacked Three Towers in the morning, and by late evening the entire force of the Iron Islands was gathering to give chase into the Honeywine. The leading longships moved faster than the galleys, but their numbers were large and Redwyne fleet had too much of a head start.

Lord Goodbrother scattered onto the deck, peering over the prow. Everyone was shouting and running, but the lord looked worried. “My king!” Lord Goodbrother called to Euron. “This is folly! Our fleet won’t catch them in time before they reach Oldtown!”
Euron just smirked, and didn’t respond. The lord’s features were writ deep with worry.

The skies were growing dark and the storm rumbled. The wind was still building in intensity, howling through the Bay of the Whispering Sound. Rain splashed, waters churned. We will have the wind behind us, Euron thought smugly.

He ordered the coxswain to beat the drum, and the rowers to begin.

“Crow’s Eye!” Lord Goodbrother bellowed once more. “We aren’t ambushing them, they are ambushing us. Lord Paxter has joined up with the fleet at Oldtown and means to crush us in the harbour!”

Exactly. And we will fight straight through them. As soon they positioned themselves at the mouth of the Honeywine and the harbour, the Redwyne’s forces would have a significant defensive advantage. Let the grape lord think that he has the upper hand for now.

“King!” Lord Goodbrother shouted again. “Please, stop the oars! Bring the sails in, let us take formation! A blockade, perhaps, or a landing force, but not a charge. We have more ships, but they have far more men – we cannot survive it.”

The sky crackled, an enormous growl rumbling over the fleet. This storm is only just getting started. In the distance, a shadow flashed against the intense blue-white light. “Do you see that over the horizon, my lord?” Euron asked, pointing across his ship. “That is the Hightower itself – one of the Nine Wonders made by man.” Euron grinned. Lord Goodbrother looked at him as if he were mad. Foolish little minds. “What arrogance that is, don’t you think! For there are only Seven Great Wonders made by nature, and it is the arrogance of man to think that they can do two better! Men truly believe that they can spew forth more wonders than nature?”

His eyes were wide. “Please, my lord… if we follow, then this will be a battle we cannot win.”

Euron’s lips stretched into a mad grin. Blue wine still stained his beard. “I am a force of nature, my lord. I am fury made flesh.” He turned and bellowed to Rodrik Freeborn below. “Blow the second horn! We charge!”

The horn blew, a high-pitched screech in the wind. The Thunderer and the Dusk replied first with their flares, but the other ships followed suit. We attack with the storm. We are the storm.

Lord Goodbrother tried to object, and then Qarl the Thrall imposed over him threateningly, eyes dark, fingering two long and slender daggers on his belt. Last thing I want now is discord among the men. “Take him to oversee the scorpions on deck,” Euron ordered Qarl. “But if he questions my orders again, throw him overboard.” Seas red with blood. “Sound the commands! The plan has not changed. Signal the fleet to form up.”

The lord was walked away, his jaw tight and his face pale. “Remember where your sons are,” Euron overheard Qarl the Thrall warning Lord Goodbrother.

Above him, the clouds were churning, black and roiling. He could see the great dark storm forming, it was a pillar of the sky, an immense funnel to the gods. “Many other captains will have the same doubts, my king,” Quellon Humble warned, sticking again close by Euron’s side. “They are emboldened now, but their courage will fall when they see the size of the army we face.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Euron smirked. “As soon as we enter the bay, the wind will be smashing against their backs and they’ll be unable to flee even if they try to.”

The ironborn were starting to chant as the rowers splashed, paeans to the Drowned God echoing
over the salt water. The beacons on longships stretched out before him, sea spray crashing against hundreds of ships.

Slowly, without an obvious order, the Silence started to break ranks and fall back slightly. The Silence, the Great Kraken, the Thunderer and the Dusk were all falling back towards their positions at opposite sides on the rear ranks, to cut down any longships that tried to break formation. Hopefully, in the frenzy, few of the other captains would realise that their formations were herding certain ships towards the front.

Euron had his own captains in the most vital positions. His men would destroy ironborn ships themselves, before allowing any to flee.

The excitement didn’t fade. He took another swig of shade of the evening, so he could watch the world twist around him. The blue wine dripped from stained lips, it made his head swirl, but he also felt sharper and more focused than ever.

All around them, wind grew into a frenzy. “This storm!” he heard Ralf of Lordsport call through the air. “Have you ever seen the like of it?”

“Yes,” Euron laughed as he walked forward, “in my dreams!”

Euron clambered up the sails, so he could bellow orders from the crow’s nest. He clutched the rope tightly, heavy raindrops bouncing of his Valyrian armour, feeling the whole ship shudder below. I will not die. Death cannot take me.

He hung metres off the roaring seas, bellowing and laughing so loud that even the ships either side of him could hear. “Tonight we reap the Garden! Tonight we break the Tower!” he roared. “Forward! Forward, reavers! Slam the drums and man the oars! We bring the Drowned God’s fury!”

The war drums were ringing. The ironborn fleet sailed through the storm, each man chanting and singing over the howl of the wind. “By the Drowned God’s fury!” the reavers chanted, banging axes against shields. “By salt, stone and steel! Salt, stone and steel! Salt, stone and steel!”

“What is dead may never die!” Euron bellowed.

“BUT RISES AGAIN! HARDER! STRONGER!”

Yes, he thought happily. There’s nothing like a storm and a charge to build up passions and quench rational thought.

The leading ranks were of all the smaller vessels, captured carracks or cogs or longships of a dozen oars, a fleet of the weak so thick it could blanket the sea. Oars splashed, warriors pounded drums. Every fighter was wearing heavy iron as the rowers swept saltwater to the heartbeat of war.

So many will fall to the Drowned God today, but we are ironborn. Tis a gift.

From the prow of Euron’s ship, the Damphair was screeching and wailing madly, but he couldn’t make out the words over the sound of the storm. “Bring my brother in from the prow!” Euron said to the Stonehand, like an afterthought. “Poor Aeron shouldn’t die yet. He has yet to meet his god.”

The Bay of the Whispering Sound was screaming. He felt the wind batter the ships, fighting against the current, jerking with every wave. They broke through the bay, sailing up towards the small isles scattering the harbour around the mouth of the Honeywine.
The storm only grew, until every man was struggling to wrestle with the flapping sails.

And in the distance, the blob of lights of Oldtown became clearer. They hoisted up great torches from the docks and walls, but it was too dark to make out any detail in the city. The sky was pitch black, but they could see the shadows of hundreds of vessels of the Reach, highlighted by the pinpricks of torches on their prows. Above them, the great lamp atop the Hightower shone. Like a giant flaming eye in the darkness, brighter than the moon.

The Hightower was huge. Nine hundred feet high, an absolutely gargantuan stone structure, pronged like a crown, the giant lantern glowing ghostly yellow in the dark.

Bells rung from the city, another chime in the deafening orchestra of the world. The great bell of the tower boomed like thunder.

The solid wall of vessels approached. The city was ready for a fight, and the ironborn rushed to meet them.

“We have the wind on our side!” Queer Qarl Kenning bellowed. “We sail against them and smash them with the force of the storm!”

The lights became close. The lights of a city, and strong walls and defenders filling the docks. “We have the wind.” Steffarion Sparr’s voice sounded grimmer. “But they have the numbers.”

More and more vessels became visible as the isles emerged. The Hightower sat on the Battle Isle, at the mouth of the Honeywine, while the ships streamed out from the harbour.

The ships of the green lands sailed to meet them. Their sails and hulls were covered in bright colours, banners and heraldry, stark contrast to the bleak and grey vessels of the ironborn. The fleet of the Reach pulled their sails in tightly, battering together against the winds and shouting for formation. They fastened ships together with ropes and grapnels to keep tight rank, their sails high and their oars fighting against the waves.

He saw the burgundy sails of the Arbor Queen at the front of the barricade.

*Lord Paxter angles his ships prow first,* Euron noted, skewed along the window and roped into formation. *But he chooses to use his most valuable vessels at the front.* It wasn’t an unwise decision, though it was an exploitable one.

More and more shapes took form from the darkness. Great banners of Hightower, Redwyne, Tyrell, Tarly and Rowan came into view first. The Redwyne galleys hunkered together, forming a solid wall across the harbour while the fleets of Oldtown poured in from the flanks.

Boom. Boom. Boom. The crashes exploded into the air, as sharp as thunder. Euron saw heavy shapes clattering in the air.

Their booms were so loud, it could have been thunder. From atop the Hightower itself, the arms of immense stonethrowers unravelled, launching projectiles from higher and further than any Euron had seen before. He heard the splash as they crashed into the ocean with the rain; still too early to hit any of their ships, but coming frighteningly near. *They are testing their range in this wind.*

Barrels filled with stones, Euron guessed. The great stonethrowers on the tower could barely aim at all in winds like these, and they had to use light and dense projectiles that would scatter in the storm. *Doubtless as we get closer they’ll be supported by siege weapons from the docks and walls too. It doesn’t matter.*
There was only a brief window while their trebuchets would be devastating – but after their ranks collided the greenlanders wouldn’t be able to risk firing their siege weapons without hitting their own ships.

“The Stonehouse and Lord Sunderland are raising flares to retreat!” Ralf of Lordsport shouted.

“Ignore them,” Euron ordered. “Blow the second horn again. The charge continues!”

The sharp horn blast sounded strangely forlorn amidst the storm. Euron could feel the mood changing quickly.

Oh yes. Euron could only laugh. The weakest of their number would likely break in fear, but his men were positioned to ensure none would stop the charge. *My men know their duty.*

Around them, the fleet’s oars were being pulled by thralls captured in the Arbor. There were thousands of farmers and fishermen that had been captured and put to work, and then whipped until all rebellion died in them. Euron promised that any thrall that could not keep pace to the drumbeat would be thrown overboard. Each time a thrall collapsed in a pool of blood and sweat, they were replaced by another prisoner from their hold. All of the oars of the ships moved sharply, frantically.

The ironborn had razed the Arbor to all hell, capturing thousands of thralls and salt wives. *They will speak of the devastation I brought to the Arbor for a hundred years.* Euron thought smugly. *But it will be nothing compared to what I will bring to Oldtown.*

Once the news of his brutality in the Redwyne Straits had spread, it was little wonder that House Tyrell had assembled such a force to face him. Even despite the wars brewing in King’s Landing, the Reach must have mustered absolutely every single man and ship they could spare to try to meet him here today. Euron saw banners bearing roses and towers, huntsmen and centaurs, knights and castles, foxes and weasels, cranes, swans and pelicans, butterflies and yellow suns, apples and horns of fruit, golden trees and oak leaves, dolphins, wyverns and lions. More heraldry than Euron recognised, or could ever care to learn.

“How many are there?” Dagon Ironmaker demanded.

“I count a hundred of Redwyne warships leading the fleet, another hundred ships supporting their rear,” Kemmet Pyke replied from the perch on the mast. “Thirty from House Hightower and Tyrell each. Another hundred assembled ships from other houses. At least two hundred so from Oldtown’s docks fill the ranks, merchant vessels and cogs included. No more than five hundred, I say.”

Five hundred vessels then, of greatly varying quality, but most were much far bigger than the standard longship. A ragtag fleet could be overcome, though, the true risk was still the warships. “They have more men than they have ships to carry them!” Lord Goodbrother warned, twitching fearfully. “Each one of their vessels will be overcrowded with swords, if they’ve even had to seize merchant ships to carry all their men.”

*Whereas we are the opposite. I have over four hundred ships yet not enough fighting men to properly fill them.*

“It will be the Redwyne ships that will hit us first!” Euron chuckled. “Strong galleys built for war – they will hold like a wall and crush us with their size. I expect Hightower will lead their ships along the flank, to cut through our number while we grapple with the Redwynes. The assorted ships will hold position at their rear; they can’t risk such a ragtag fleet ruining their own formation.” He scratched his beard. “Yes, Lord Paxter proves himself a capable strategist. He risks
taking heavy losses against our rams, but after the charge we will only lose momentum and positioning while they will gain it.”

“Look to the east and south!” Steffarion Sparr shouted, voice cracking. “There are hosts of men on the beaches, in formation.”

Across the coasts, they could see men on horseback riding along the beaches, following the fleet. Men jabbed wooden spikes into the rocky sand, and raised roses on their banners. The thorns sought to trap them, to hold the coasts while the ships clashed. Lord Meldred Merlyn had wanted to take a force of men on the beaches too, to support the naval assault, but Euron refused. *True ironborn fight at sea.*

“Aye, the Tyrells mean to stop us disembarking, they pre-empt us setting a beachhead. If any of our ships go near the coast we will suffer for it,” Euron agreed. *Not that it matters. I always intended this as purely a naval battle.*

“How many men do think there are against us?” Dagon Ironmaker shouted. “Lord Orkwood feared forty thousand.”

Euron shook his head. “No, we’ve made our intentions very clear, and they’ve met us in kind. I expect sixty thousand.”

There was a mumble through the men. “We will give glory to the Drowned God tonight,” the Stonehand mumbled.

*Oh yes we will. Nine thousand against sixty. Absolutely perfect. They will remember this as the greatest victory since the Fields of Fire.*

There were more booms. The stonethrowers had launched another volley, and this time he heard screams and crashes. Wood shattering under the force of rock. The first deaths of the night, at the fringes of their front rank. Dozens dead maybe, but it wasn’t enough.

More and more screams, and Euron could barely make out half of them.

“Garrison on the Bloody Isle! More trebuchets being readied!”

“I see reserves on the wall!”

“There are forces on the starboard and port taking position!” another voice called, cracked with fear. “They mean to trap us in the harbour!”

Euron could see the longbows and scorpions being readied. Then there were horns blown from their rear.

“My king!” Kemmett Pyke bellowed, loud enough to cut through all others. “Lights to our rear! Fifty or so heavy cogs!”

They heard the whine of distress horns to their rear. He saw longships raising red flares. Euron was totally unsurprised, but a ripple of fear started to pass through the *Silence. So even my men can still feel nerves. They are only mortal, I suppose. “But of course,” Euron laughed. “Lord Paxter has entrapped us. While we chased after his vessels, he left a small but heavy force behind the cape, to follow us as we chased the main fleet. He means to entrap us in the Honeywine.”*

*And yet his trap only serves us.* One of Euron’s biggest concerns had been if his own ironborn would desert him in the battle. By entrapping them with a rear force, Lord Paxter Redwyn had
quite helpfully ensured that no ironborn would escape even if their courage did break. Between the trap and the storm, there was no choice but to fight to the death. Trapped men would fight crazed.

A few men gawked at him. “There will be no retreat in this battle,” Euron promised. “But what do enemies behind us matter, when we will be attacking forward?”

He saw Lord Goodbrother’s face was pale and his eyes wide. The man might have been trying to speak, but the experienced captain could only stammer in fear. Euron had taken steps to ensure this would be a battle that held nothing back.

Yes, they are in a good position. They will expect a bitter battle, but one that they would win. Lord Redwyne's trap would embolden them to commit as many men as they had into the battle. The Reach intended to slaughter the ironborn soundly, and so they were holding little back. And thank you for that, for my plan only works if both sides clash in full force.

He hadn’t been sure whether or not the defenders would try to hole up in Oldtown. That would have been bad – trying to lay siege to the city would go poorly for Euron. Instead, he had needed to provoke them into meeting him with force. He spent his time razing the fields of the Arbor into ash, and taking slaves by the thousands, to provoke the Reach so badly that they would have no choice but to muster an army to crush him. They would not allow him to bring such destruction to their precious green lands, so they had rallied every farmer’s boy and greybeard in all the land to fight.

That they were able to gather such a host even despite how occupied Mace Tyrell was in King’s Landing… it was a testament to how gravely Euron had provoked them.

It had taken months of planning for this very moment. First, he had to embolden his own army with easy victories in the Shields and the Arbor. Then, he had to make sure there was no one to deny him when ordered to a full-scale assault on Oldtown. All of the objectionable voices in his fleet, his brother included, had been quietly weeded out or distracted.

It hadn’t been easy. Even among ironborn, it had been a tall order to convince nine thousand men to sail into the bloodiest battle of their lives. Euron had no delusions about how many would be surviving.

Let’s see… Lord Paxter Redwyne commands the battle from the Arbor Queen, while one of the Hightower’s sons leads the rear from Honour of Oldtown. Garlan Tyrell will likely lead the force on either the Bloody Isle or the docks.

There was nothing to be done about the heavy siege weapons on the Battle Isle, they could only be endured. He had seen them gathering in the glass candles.

The Honeywine was a deep and slow river. So many ships blanketed the black, churning waters. The sound of the drums and oars felt like the frenzied heartbeat of an enormous god.

The sky seemed to crack. The rain poured from the rumbling clouds, heavy droplets splashing over axes and helms. The beats of the drums seemed to grow into a frenzy.

“It seems the Drowned God won’t allow defeat either! Can you hear him blowing his horn?” Euron shouted as the sky crackled. “The Drowned God has called forth a storm for us! The only way forward is over the ruins of our enemies!”

“This is madness!” Dagon Ironmaker trembled, struggling to clamber against the wind. “They are lining up prow first! We cannot ram against a formation like that!”
“We can. Brave men can do whatever they want.” *They just won’t survive doing it.*

The first salvo of arrows filled the sky. Euron heard men in the front ranks screaming, clutching shields, trying to take shelter while still rowing.

“What commands from the front?” Steffarion Sparr gasped.

“That would be the Lords Codd, Sharp and Myre, with Harlaw and Stonetree not far behind.”

“Tis a slaughter,” the young man gasped. Another boulder fell from the air, and a longship shattered into splinters. The sounds of screams, waves and snapping wood all mixed together in an immense boom.

The front row of longships collided with the Redwyne formation. One after another, like bloated ants trying to swarm giants. The longships looked so tiny compared to the bulk of the galleys. Euron could hear the screams even above the storm as the arrows cut them down. He had given the privilege of leading the front rank to a select few reavers, all of them sons of salt wives or lesser lords.

More and more flares requesting asking to retreat were raised, but Euron didn’t return them. They would all look to the *Silence* for their lead, but the *Silence* was merciless. “Raise the red banner,” Euron ordered. “Make sure every ship knows to keep the charge.”

Besides Euron, Quellon Humble shook his head grimly. “It’s a bloody slaughter,” he muttered. “Longships that size don’t stand a chance against ships like that.”

“They were never meant to.”

Euron’s grin widened. The Redwyne ships were slaughtering one longship after another, but he could still see the warships hesitating. *They are starting to realise,* Euron thought happily.

The sounds coming from the breaking longships were not the cries of warriors.

“Do you want to know what every ship I placed in the front rank has in common?” Euron chuckling, his smiling eye shining. “They are all full of *slaves.* Every single one of them has their hulls filled to the brim with thralls taken from the Arbor.”

From ahead of them, he could hear the screams of panic and pain as arrows and bolts shredded the hulls to pieces. The Arbor fleet looked to be shifting and shouting – the men on board must have finally noticed that the men they were shooting at weren’t enemies.

That wreckage started to fill the bay, shattered husks of longships grinding against the Arbor fleet in the waves. It was a slaughter, but not of ironborn. The churning salt waters began to darken with red.

*Hundreds dead, maybe. But this is just beginning.*

“Aye, Lord Paxter is killing more of his own people than he is mine,” Euron chuckled, before shouting. “Signal the second rank to assault! All sails forward!”

The second rank was more of the same; there were at least twenty thralls and slaves for every one ironborn. Another set of sacrificial goats. *By now, Lord Redwyne’s men must be feeling rather unnerved.*

Lord Goodbrother stared at him with horror. “This is your formation… sending ships to the
slaughter en masse! What are you doing here??”

Euron laughed. “They want blood, I will give them blood. I will send more and more ships at him; until they run out of arrows and their men’s courage breaks. Let them listen to the screams of our slaves – let them kill their own smallfolk one after another.”

Euron knew that at least a dozen of those longships had been filled solely with children. Even hardened soldiers weren’t emotionless. And they’re greenlanders. Not ironborn.

If Lord Paxter broke ranks to try and rescue the slaves, he risked letting ironborn through. And yet, if he didn’t, his men would become more and more distressed.

Even in the dark, even in the spraying salt, Euron could see it. The hulls of Redwyne’s galleys were losing formation, all the while the wreckage of longships drifted against them. Bodies floated thick in the water, some of them still screaming. Euron saw slaves and thralls begging for mercy, trying uselessly to clamber up Redwyne's hulls to escape the churning waters. Lord Redwyne must know they couldn’t break formation to rescue them, but that wasn’t an easy thing for mortal men to accept.

And that's why he will lose. He cares about things like innocence or justice. ‘Morality’, Euron had to stop himself laughing with the thought. He is only mortal. I will be something greater.

The men of the Arbor fleet were panicking, losing control. The wind and waves and the wreckage were taking their toll. Many ships cut down the enslaved smallfolk climbing onto their decks, fleeing the salt. Others lost their rank to rescue as many as they could. Redwyne’s formation, his wall of a hundred galleys, began to splinter.

But from behind, the cogs attacking the ironborn’s rear were quickly enclosing, entrapping them into the bay.

“Signal the third rank!” Euron ordered. “Break their formation apart!”

The Silence sat on the fifth rank, along with the bulk of his main strength. He could see the battle coming closer. Wreckage groaned against the galleys. Lord Waldon Winch and Hotho Harlaw were doing a valiant job holding back the Hightower ships moving in from the starboard flank, but Euron wanted his true force focused at the Redwyne warships. Like a lance to their shield.

More and more arrows and stones fell from the sky. Shafts poured like the rain, great boulders crashed like thunder.

Their losses were drastic already, but the tide of ironborn didn’t stop – as relentless as the waves and growing more and more frantic. All above him, the ships were being forced into the meatgrinder one after another, and Euron could feel the air slipping into pure chaos.

“The King Joffrey’s Valour is taking the line!” the Stonehand announced, banging his axe against his shield.

“Then let us beat the drums for our valiant flagship!” Euron cackled through the wind. “Beat the drums! Beat them louder!”

The King Joffrey’s Valour shuddered uncertainly in the waves. The huge galleas was wobbling, threatening to keel and sloping in the rocky water, but its huge sails pushed it forward. It was the largest ship in the ironborn armada, but barely even seaworthy. Arrows and scorpion bolts pierced its hull, its mast quivering, but the galleas tumbled straight into the wall of wreckage.
The ship was all oak and solid construction. Even without its oars, the huge sails swept it forward—an unstoppable mass in a straight charge. The captain didn’t back down for a second.

_Brave Eldred Codd_, Euron thought. _He knows what is expected of him._ “Forward!” Euron boomed. “Their lines will be breaking, forward!”

In the dark, he glimpsed ironborn jumping off the hull into the water. Bodies pouring into the churning waters. The _King Joffrey’s Valour_ was groaning, tearing itself apart, but pounding towards two of the great warships. They tried to flee out of the way, but their ranks were too tight and they couldn’t turn into the headwind. He could see their men were panicking, the storm was pushing them backwards almost as much as the ironborn were.

Euron recognised the galley with yellow and green sails; a great warship, the _Pride of the Reach_. The _King Joffrey’s Valour_ crashed straight into it.

When they collided, Euron felt the immense thud, a boom shocking through the water. Screams, panic, solid oak splintering into pieces. The grinding of solid wood, splintering under pure force.

He saw the _King Joffrey’s Valour_ buckle and capsize, turning over itself as the wind swept up the pieces. The _Pride of the Reach_ broke, a great rent torn into its side, and then both immense vessels were twisting in the water. Ropes snapped and men desperately leapt overboard, bodies churning in the waves.

On-board the _Silence_, the men were clanging their shields to the beat of screams. “You sent those men to their deaths,” Lord Goodbrother gasped. “All of those men…”

“My men walked willingly.” Euron said with a smirk. “My men know that godliness demands sacrifice.” _I spent a long time teaching them such._

“All forward!” the Stonehand was bellowing to the rowers. “Faster! Forward! Forward!”

All around him, ships were being crushed into wrecks. The _Gargoyle_ and the _Silverfin_ had collided against the _Honour of Oldtown_, the _Nightflyer_ crashing against the _Vigil_. He saw the _Great Kraken_ crushing the _Wise King Urrigon_, and then the _Hatchet’s Edge_ struggling against a great cog with purple sails and a spiked ram.

Their flanks were collapsing inwards. His army was left mad with fear, but they would charge forward into the meatgrinder because there was no choice of retreat. The storm and wind howled like a mad beast.

Still, he saw the formation of the Redwyne fleet slipping. The _Arbor Queen_ was left flailing against the tide of bodies and wreckage. There were men on the flotsam, hacking bodies, raining arrows and churning waters. Survivors in the ocean fought frantically to stay afloat, hands clawing uselessly at the sleek hulls. Euron didn’t stop to rescue anyone.

_Lord Paxter chose to meet us on the water, his great warships first. Let us make him regret that choice._

“So signal the _Thunderer_ and the _Dusk_,” Euron ordered. “Bring us into the battle.”

In front of them, the _King Joffrey’s Valour_ had split into half. One half was sinking, yet the other half was still dragging the _Pride of the Reach_ down with it. It gave Euron one last chuckle at _King’s Joffrey Valour_.

“The port rank is being slaughtered!” Lord Goodbrother screamed. “Hotho Humpback raises a
distress flare, and the *Leviathan’s Wail* is taking on water. They’re breaking us from the sides.”

Damn, I’ve taken on too many new crewmembers, Euron cursed. He had to – he had needed spread his loyal and proven men out over the fleet – but in doing so he been required to refill the *Silence*’s own ranks with new ironborn. They were all seasoned warriors, the veterans of many raids, but they weren’t the men who had sailed with the *Silence* from Valyria to Ibben to Asshai. *My old crew would never be so cowardly.*

“And we will break them from the front. I told you; there will be no retreat here, my lord,” Euron replied, before turning to the Stonehand. In the choppy waves, he needed to clutch the roping so tight it hurt. “Bring the *Golden Antler* into the fight. We take down the *Dusk* and the *Thunderer* charge the *Gardener’s Glory*."

“What of the *Arbor Queen*?”

“Leave them, let Lord Paxter flail against the headwind. We have done our damage; abandon the assault against the centre and focus on the starboard side.”

“‘Done’ our damage?” Lord Goodbrother shouted incredulously. “We’ve lost over a quarter of our ships and for what? Half a dozen of theirs? *They’re slaughtering us here!*"

*We broke their formation. In a battle like this, as soon as their formations break everything snaps.* “Aye, and can you not see the crack in their rank? Lord Redwyne is struggling to keep control. We charge the *Golden Antler* leading their starboard and the *Arbor Queen* will have to tack to intervene. She’ll fall back in the wind, we open up the crack a bit more, and then the *Great Kraken* will drive in the lance.” Euron laughed madly, taking another swig of shade of the evening. “Push through them, turn their numbers into a weakness!”

The wreckage of broken ships bounced off their hull. The black scorpions of the *Silence* thudded, firing flaming bolts ahead. The ocean was screaming. Some of his men called for ropes to throw to the bodies in the water.

“Leave them,” Euron ordered. “We will not rescue cravens, and if they were true ironborn then they would have sunk.”

Flailing hands scraped at his ship, bodies trying desperately to stay afloat. One man grabbed a hold of an oar and almost managed to pull himself aboard, until a mute put an arrow in his eye.

The Oldtown fleet didn’t look so well-positioned now. Large galleys were not manoeuvrable. *As soon as we push through them, they will struggle to turn to face us. Their own ships will block each other as we push deeper into their ranks.*

The battle would turn close and bloody. *It is time for my Grotesques to prove their worth.*

Arrows thudded against their hull. Both the *Golden Antler* and *Gardener’s Glory* were bracing for the *Silence*. A ship bearing a green huntsman on their port was coming into intercept them. The galleys had the mass, but the longships had the speed and momentum. “Bring in the sails and twist to port!” Euron bellowed. “Prepare to ram and prepare to board. Rorq, you’re leading the charge over the prow!”

“You would attack prow to deck?” Lord Goodbrother paled. “That is suicide.”

Euron turned to Rorq. The Tyroshi was short and scarred, grim and one-eyed. He had a hooked blade instead of a right hand, and a spear in his left. Euron had cut off Rorq’s right hand years ago, during a fit of rage.
“What say you, Rorq?” Euron asked. “Do you have any qualms going prow to deck?”

“None, my king,” Rorq grumbled, bowing deeply. “For the glory of our god.”

“Good man.” Euron turned back to Lord Goodbrother. The fat lord was trembling in his chainmail. “There is no fear of death on this vessel, my lord. We are holy men; each one is worth ten cravens.”

Lord Goodbrother looked at him, and then at his crew, as if they were all monsters. They were.

The noise and the chaos was reaching fever pitch. Two boulders from the stonethrowers crashed to either side of the ship, making it shudder on the water. Many of the crew were screaming or panicking, but not Euron’s men. The Silence’s killers were emerging from the hold, mute and scarred men clutching barbed weapons. He saw Mall the Monstrous clutching a warhammer with his one good hand, and booming orders in his grumbling, lispy voice.

It was a good time to clear the decks. The Silence had ramed many ships before, but few in winds like these, with this speed and force. Euron stumbled, still drinking wine, as he pulled himself towards the stairs.

“Signal Ghrazzac,” Euron ordered to Mall as he passed. “His time is coming up.”

Around them, Euron watched the Great Kraken break ranks, turning portside to meet a cog spitting flaming pots. The Honour of Oldtown was shoving its way through smaller ships and into their lines. The ironborn were folding, but there was no retreat. The Stonehand was screaming on deck while the waves rocked. “Brace!” the voice bellowed. “Brace! Brace! Brace!”

The galleys were so close that Euron could hear men screaming the same from the Golden Antler. The mouthless iron maiden cresting the Silence’s prow gleamed eerily in the smoky gloom.

Euron went below deck, and calmly took his position hiding under the stairs. He sat down on the wet wood, placed his feet upwards, and braced for impact.

Still, the Stonehand’s voice shouted on repeat, growing in pitch and trying to drown out the chaos. “Brace! Brace! Brace!”

Euron took his position clutching to the ropes on the stairway below deck, taking a deep breath in the dark. He had no interest in being on deck for the fighting, not yet. Beneath the stairway, a mumbling gasping shape discarded in the fighting. Euron grinned as he recognised the gaunt figure.

It had taken three men to drag Aeron Greyjoy up from the prow, but the man was all bone and rags. Euron’s men must have had dumped the Damphair down the stairs beneath deck during all the chaos. Aeron was a man on death’s door, his arms so frail he couldn’t even pull himself up.

Instead, Euron shuffled himself closer to his brother. Euron kneeled down and wrapped his arms around the Damphair’s shoulders, holding him securely and bracing for collision. His gauntleted hand softly stroked Aeron’s gaunt cheek. The man tried to squirm, but he was weak, delirious. Euron’s grip was gentle, comforting.

“This is the moment, brother,” Euron whispered softly into Aeron’s ear. “These are the last days, when the world will be broken and remade. Kneel, bother. I am your king, your god. Worship me, see my divinity, and I will raise you to be my priest.”

“You… You…” Aeron wheezed weakly. “You are mad…”
Euron only laughed.

The *Silence* was trembling. He could hear the arrows thudding, the rain pounding and the storm howling. Still, that voice bellowed intensely, “*BRACE! Now, brace! Brace, brace, brace…!*”

“Just keep your eyes open, brother,” Euron whispered. “Watch me and see true power.”

*You will bow before me. I have seen it.*

With that, he yanked Aeron’s salt-soaked long hair, pulled his head backwards, and poured the shade of the evening down his brother’s throat. The man sputtered and gasped, drowning in the blue wine. *Why can’t you see what I see?*

Euron let Aeron fall, sputtering and he gulped down the last of the shade of the evening in the skin himself. Blue-white light filled the air, a bolt of lightning bursting against the Hightower.

Everything blurred. There was one final, strangled scream, “*BRA–*”

The boom was tremendous. Euron kept his legs pinned up against the wall, but the impact still nearly snapped his spine.

The ships collided. The sound was more intense than thunder. First there were screams, and then there was nothing but grinding wood against the iron lady of the *Silence*. Solid iron crunched, tearing the figurehead off the prow.

Wood screeched, men shrieked. Two ships were groaning against each other, but the *Silence* pushed its way through. The *Golden Antler* was bigger, but the *Silence* moved faster and more fiercely.

Euron almost crumpled with the crash, but he was laughing through the pain in his chest. All around him, reavers and Grotesques were bursting out on to deck, and men screeching for more grapnels, more arrows and more shields.

In his arms, the Damphair was wailing nonsensically, like a mewling babe. The sound reminded Euron of his childhood, and the creaking of the rusted iron hinge.

He heard thuds so loud that they drowned out the storm. The *Thunderer* and the *Dusk* collided next to them, bringing their main force to bear. The rear ranks of the ironborn had joined the battle with their most powerful ships, and he could feel the Redwyne fleet buckling.

They were breaking into the harbour.

All around him, the world was red. With the shade of the evening pulsing through his body, Euron could see so, so clearly. The white veins in the sky were breaking, and the world itself was bleeding.

“More blood,” Euron gasped. “I need more blood.”

He tripped as he stumbled to his feet, clutching the rope with both hands against the quivering ocean. He had to drag himself up onto the deck, and the Golden Antler was already breaking against the force of the *Silence*. Euron’s Grotesques had been released – every freak, mute and murderer the *Silence* had to offer, burst over the deck.

He saw Rorq leap over the prow and onto the deck, only to miss horribly and bounce into the water, limbs crushing. The men behind him didn’t even hesitate as they jumped after him.
The ram had split the *Golden Antler*’s hull open, and Rorq’s vanguard was already slaughtering the men on the crippled ship. He saw iron lady from the *Silence*’s prow left jammed into the rent on the through ship’s deck.

Euron saw Kemmet Pyke crumple out of the masts and thud onto the red decks, with an arrow in his eye. The rocking took his body into the frothing red waves.

Lord Goodbrother was left crazed in panic, but the Stonehand stepped up. “Raise the sails to starboard, pull tight!” the Stonehand bellowed. “We push through! *Through!*”

Euron could see the *Thunderer* ramming the *Gardener’s Glory*, and then the Tarly vessel rammed them. All around him, ships collided one after another. The wind had pushed them all backwards towards the harbour of Oldtown, and all order collapsed.

There were no more stones being launched from the Hightower. The ships were left metres apart, pushing through each other.

“The *Great Kraken* has fallen!” Euron didn’t know who was screaming, but the voice was quivering with fear. “The *Honour of Oldtown* has brought her down.”

“Forward!” the shout continued. “Forward, forward, *forward!*”

The *Golden Antler* was done, but his reavers were left to fall with it. The *Silence* was already breaking through the ranks, and the galleys couldn’t turn to stop her. Then the *Dusk* was through too, and then the *Nightflyer*, and then the *Gargoyle*…

“Give them all to the Drowned God!” Quellon Humble bellowed, swinging an axe. “What is dead may never die!”

*But rises again!* the chant of men replied. “*Stronger! Harder!*”

Others ships were chanting too. He saw the *Gardener’s Glory* capsizing in the wind. Warships burning, bodies thick in the water.

“More blood,” Euron growled, and then raised his voice. “More blood!”

He drew both his swords. Nightfall in his left, Red Rain in his right. The world was churning, spasming, bleeding.

Cogs came to meet them. Arrows, ropes and men. The two ships scraped against each other, and then soldiers were jumping the gap from both ways. Euron saw bodies crashing, men with swords and boiled leathers, but they weren’t even human to him now. They were just corpses that hadn’t yet fallen.

Valyrian steel flashed. This time, Euron was at the front of the battle. Two bodies fell, then three, then five, then six…

“*More blood!*” Euron heard someone screaming. It was his voice. “*We need more blood!*”

The cog was burning. The *Silence* pushed its way through, yet there was another ship to the right. The ships and flotsam were so thick that a man might have walked all the way across the harbour, but the water churned so violently. No more battle lines here, only crazed frenzy.

So many screams that the ocean seemed alive.
Even the most veteran reaver had never, ever experienced a battle like this. There was something in the air that turned men berserk with panic. The storm had a bloodthirsty edge to it.

The *Thunderer* collapsed, but its men were still fighting. Euron glimpsed the Red Oarsman, spear lunging, defiant to the last as he cut a bloody path through Tarly men with his spear.

On the *Silence*’s other side, the *Gargoyle* was burning. Euron heard Hotho Humpback wailing and shrieking as the ship went down.

“Blow the horn, Rodrik!” Euron bellowed. “Blow the horn!”

From below deck, the third horn blew. It was a strangled, desperate cry, like the cry of a painsed animal. Rodrik Freeborn did his duty – he strapped himself in and blew the horns. The third horn was a signal for Euron’s loyal men, with orders he didn’t trust to most captains.

Heavy footsteps clambered out onto deck. Euron saw Ghrazzac stepping out as he hoisting a flailing, screaming body who was wrestling uselessly against the Brindled Man’s bulk. The Brindled Man knew no fear, no disobedience. The man being carried was bald and clad in filthy, shredded blue robes with blue lips, screaming nonsensically. “Pryat, pryat!” the warlock screamed, right up until Ghrazzac tore open the man’s throat with his beefy hands and threw the thrashing body out into the red water.

There were other Grotesques behind Ghrazzac, each marching mages up from the hull to be slaughtered and given the waves.

Euron had given his men explicit orders; when the time came, they were to kill every mage, warlock and spellbinder on-board and toss their bodies overboard, one after another. Execute them all until it was enough.

The death of a single mage was sacrifice enough to bring forth a storm. Euron would sacrifice hundreds to bring forth a god.

Ships crashed. The decks were littered with arrows and bodies. Lord Redwyne had planned this battle for a mortal, sane man, but Euron had given him a storm instead. Their men were panicked, frightened. The battle was turning, and the Redwyne fleet was suffering losses they had never expected. It sounded like the sky itself was applauding.

Euron felt himself howl with laughter. “She’s keeling!” a voice called. “The Arbor Queen is keeling!”

He saw the burgundy sails of the great flagship ahead. Their masts were tearing trying to fight the wind. “We bring her down!” Euron bellowed. Lightning flashed, so close the booming thunder was instantaneous. The mast of a ship exploded into blazing sparks. “Paint the sea red! We need more blood!”

He stepped to the prow, staring around him. There were crew boats in the water, and fighting on every deck. Waves smashed and ships crashed, and all the while the mad, maniac laughter burst from Euron’s throat. Visions of red, black and white swirled before his eyes.

“Can you not feel it?” He screamed. “Can you not feel the heavens applauding us? The sea is rumbling – the Drowned God hungers!”

Bodies wrestling on the deck, arrows falling. He heard screams for the rowers to push forward, forcing their way through the wreckage churning in the waves. In the middle of the battle, Euron stood and laughed.
“We stand at the dawn of a new age! The storm that will break the earth and shatter the heavens! The bleeding star bespoke the end, these are the final days and a gibbering god will be raised from the graves and charnel pits to forth bring their end!” Euron shrieked as his swords swept left and right, each stroke a bloody brush painting the world red. “Feel the beating of the world, feel the waves, feel the wind! Feel the force of all nature itself swirling around us, that is what we give blood for, that is ineffable truth for which we sacrifice our bodies!

“There is no tribute more sacred than that of an axe through a skull! No greater glory than killing and dying for a higher power. Divinity is blood – the gods are built from pain and death and devotion! The drowned men gave you naught but tales and stories of gods and glories, but I can give shape to myth!”

The warship in front of them was blazing in blood-red flames as the waves swallowed it, men disappearing into the dark water. “For every man that falls into the water, we rise up! Rise up to greater heights, and the glory of eternal sacrifice! There is no place for fear or hesitation – this is my gift. You will all bear witness to the rise of a god, what is the value of your lives compared to that?”

Bodies fell, faster and faster. Euron saw Torwold Browntooth take an axe through the skull. “We have a new destiny before us, waiting for our grasp,” Euron screamed, “and we must leap for it! Leap for it and fly!”

He was still screaming maniacally, the words almost nonsensical, as a cog crashed into the port of the Silence. The ship cracked, and groaned as the waves and wind wrestled around it.

Then they were all the way through the harbour, pushing against the Battle Isle and right underneath the Hightower itself. The defenders were struggling to force their way through each other to stop the ironborn, but the storm never ceased.

The ocean shuddered as the Arbor Queen smashed through the Nightflyer. Lord Waldon Wynch didn’t stand a chance. The flagship was recovering, reclaiming its might. She was a strong ship, twisting in front of the Silence like a leviathan. Even when caught against the wind and attacked from the rear, the Arbor Queen didn’t fall – the great galleas was too large even for the Silence to ram.

There was a huge groan, and the Silence shook so violently Euron felt his entire body bounce. Men were swashed off the deck as she jerked, swept away like insects helpless in the elements. The sails, Euron saw. He could see the wood tearing, almost in slow motion. Solid planks rippled like paper. The black sails of his ship had finally cracked, tearing off the main mast. Ropes snapped and the rigging buckled.

The mast collided against the deck so hard the impact rattled his bones, and the whole ship was sloping.

Men were struggling to keep control. Ahead of him, he saw the Arbor Queen pushing her way through. The Redwyne fleet had suffered in the ironborn charge, but now the longships were losing against the wind too and the fleet of the Reach was rallying. The rocks of the Battle Isle were before them, and the furious currents crushed ships against the shallows.

“Crow’s Eye!” a voice screamed. “Crow’s Eye!” Euron saw Lord Goodbrother, bleeding from a gash across his brow, scattering up towards. The ship rocked so violently the men had to clutch the ropes just to hold on. Trying to fight, sail and hold on for the dear life at the same time. Red oak planks tore like parchment. “Crow’s Eye, the battle is lost! We must retreat!”
“Retreat?” The thought was outrageous. *Are these mortals really so blind? Why can no one see what I can?*

“Retreat!” Lord Goodbrother shrieking, voice cracking. “Rally whatever ships we still can, try to force our way out of the harbour! We have *lost!*”

Euron shook his head. “How many times must I say it, my lord? There will be no retreat here. Rally the ships to attack, we focus on the Arbor Queen. There is still more blood to be spilled.”

The lord’s face twisted in pure horror, stammering as he tried to speak. It looked like the lord had soiled himself. “You’re – you’re… they’re crushing us, we can’t–”

Euron drew Red Rain and placed it under the lord’s throat. The Valyrian steel blade came so close it drew a dribble of blood from his chin. “I *told* you. We need more *blood,*” Euron growled, but he was still grinning. “Now, I would *prefer* it if it they were the ones to bleed, but if not your blood will suffice. *Do you understand?*” Eyes bulged but there was nothing from the lord’s throat but frenzied gasps. “*Now get on with the bloodletting!*”

“Blow the fourth horn!” the Stonehand bellowed. “Blow the fourth horn and press together to attack!”

The noise rang out as, below deck, Rodrik Freeborn blew the great auroch’s horn. It was a sharper pitch than the others, like a knife cutting through the battlefield. The signal for the final push.

Euron heard horn blasts from the Arbor’s Queen as well, calling the defenders together. The two flagships were barely five hundred feet apart.

*My men know what to do,* Euron thought. *They are all well-prepared for the fourth horn.*

From below the deck, Euron heard the screams from the rowers. There was the sound of axes hacking, feet stomping through the ship, and the thud of dying flesh. Frenzied screams and abrupt silences. The fourth horn was the signal for Mall the Monster to slaughter every single rower on the Silence. One by one, the reavers cut through the chained, helpless men and dumped their bodies into the water.

Similar sounds were coming from other ships. He could see the bodies pouring from their hulls, a waterfall of corpses. Every thrall or salt wife that the ironborn had left was to be slaughtered and given to the waves.

Any man who was no longer contributing to the killing could instead help by contributing to the dying. It was simple maths, really; Euron just wanted to maximise the amount of blood. It did not strictly matter whose.

Lord Goodbrother was shouting, demanding to know what was happening, what was going on, but Euron only laughed. He reckoned that even the Redwyne fleet was left shocked to see the ironborn turning on their own crew and dumping the corpses.

Some ironborn tried to object. There was fighting on the remaining longships in panic, but Euron’s killers were all ready. From the Leviathan’s Wail nearby, he saw Lord Volmark protesting. His objections died when Left-Hand Lucas Codd, Euron’s man, cut his dagger across the lord’s throat.

First there were scores, then hundreds, thousands of bodies falling and splashing one by one into the salt. *Not enough. I need tens of thousands.*

Even in the dark, Euron could see the red water plume outwards.
“MORE BLOOD!” Euron screeched. His desperate pants for air were half-gasps and half-chuckles. “We need… more… blood!”

Somehow, even amidst all the noise, Euron heard Aeron clutching at the railing, chanting to his god in a frantic voice. Soon, brother. Soon.

Euron saw Urgard and seven other mages being walked out of the hull by Ghrazzac. Urgard gave one final glance towards Euron with sullen, resigned eyes, before bringing a bone knife across his own throat. The other spellcasters did the same, blood weeping from their necks, as they stumbled overboard and into the churning seas, blood pouring, gibbering and hooting bile.

The Silence’s fanatics didn’t need to be forced, not anymore. They gave their own lives willingly.

Euron was almost sad to see Urgard go. Almost. He felt far more jubilation with the thought of their sacrifice. Urgard knew what was required of him. Ghrazzac was emptying Euron’s hull quicker now, dumping bodies until there were none left.

Blood is the only currency the gods accept. The storm growled voraciously and the sky blackened like whirring ash.

There were birds in the air. Crows and ravens and black shapes all swirling around the stormy harbour. Wrecks of ships crashing against the rocks, and so, so many corpses. It would be a feast.

Even missing its main mast, the Silence pushed forward for its final charge. There was no holding anything back this time – Euron was on the front ranks, both red and black blades in his hands and laughter on his lips.

The shadow of the Hightower had never seemed so high. Arrows were raining all around them, but Euron knew all of them would miss him. He could see all of the corpses before him, just waiting to die.

The ships crashed. The storm howled.

The Silence buckled, its prow ripped apart. Redwyne men were spilling from the decks of the Arbor Queen, men in boiled leather and armed with rapiers. Men afraid to wear heavy steel. Euron stood at the edge of his sinking ship, clad in Valyrian steel, both swords swiping left and right, high and low, slashing and stabbing as if hacking through vines. They weren’t even men to him – the blood just poured out of their bodies like pierced wineskins.

The ocean was thick with corpses. Tens of thousands were dead already – the fighting broke through the harbour and reached the edge of the docks themselves. Men were on the wharves, trying to fire arrows into the churning ships.

Euron saw brave ironborn staggering over bridges made of wreckage, axes in hand as they charged to a frantic, bloody end. The Drowned God took all of their bodies home.

The ironborn fleet was devastated, but the Reach’s fleet had suffered for it too. Maybe there were barely a tenth part of the ironborn still fighting, but there were tens of thousands of corpses and wrecks littering the bay.

Nearly there, so close…

He heard Aeron wailing. Lord Goodbrother was left clutching the broken mast’s stump, hanging on for his pathetic life. Men’s courage broke and their ranks shattered, but they were all just more sacrifices to the deep dark.
Grapnels hung all around the Silence’s railings, as the Arbor Queen tried to drag her in. Euron wondered if Lord Paxter was watching above from the decks, grim-faced, as his men overpowered his broken flagship. The thought pushed Euron to move a little faster, swing a little harder, as he danced over the waves and broken planks and cleaved men down one by one…

*Just a few more… just a few more…*

Red Rain splattered. Blood gushed over the planks.

And Euron heard the storm crack. The ships quaked with the sound of thunder. Thunder coming from beneath the sea.

The breath he didn’t realise he had been holding exploded from his throat. He felt his heart pounding so hard it might explode from his chest. For a brief second, his laughter drowned out the storm as the sea broke.

A wave, larger than any before, swelled in the harbour. There was only one brief moment of warning as the tidal wave crashed against the coast with an immense groan. Soldiers were washed straight off the decks, vessels shuddering. The ship was groaning, the wind howling, and then suddenly there was a louder, deeper roar filling the chaos.

In that moment… he was smeared in blood, his heart racing, his hands trembling and he looked out over the bloodied stormy seas… and in that moment he was a god.

*This is my storm. The last storm, as was promised to me.*

Another great wave hit them. Euron dived to the decks, jumping for the broken mast and clinging on for dear life. The whole ship buckled – but few people on deck managed to brace in time, and bodies were washed off by the impact. The Arbor Queen trembled. Euron heard the cries. The Redwyne sailors had to cut the grapnels and try to brace themselves, lest the fierce waves bring them down too.

Even the great Arbor Queen rocked like a toy boat in a bathtub.

The world was spinning. There was no thought, just panic. He felt the bone-crunching crack as the shattered husk of the Silence crunched against the rock.

Each impact threatened to shatter bones. The waves cracked against the broken ship, grinding it again and again. The keel was shattered, prow falling apart, and it was all Euron could do just to hold on. Every time the blows slammed his body against the wood, he could feel the bruises forming on his chest. There was blood in his mouth.

And yet he laughed. Despite the pain and the fear, he laughed and laughed.

There were barely a dozen left alive on-board, all screaming and trying to cling to the broken rigging, but the sacrifice of the others had been so worth it.

Over the dark horizon, at the mouth of the bay, Euron saw the water swell upwards.

The backwash alone scattered great ships as if they were nothing but flies. The Oldtown fleet was being washed wild, whole ships lifting upwards and crashing into the city's wharves.

The noise, the chaos, the sight of it… it was all beyond immense. Cacophonous.

Euron could barely hear a thing over the immense boom, but he saw Aeron shrieking and praying.
The drowned man would have fallen to his knees if not for hanging on for dear life. Yes, Euron thought happily, I told you that you would bow to me.

“By the God…!” he heard Lord Goodbrother scream.

“Yes,” Euron called, voice breaking. “The God indeed… the Drowned God’s chosen… they are the true masters of the ocean, not men…!”

The waves were breaking, water gushing over the piers and into the city as the gargantuan shape rose upwards from the ocean. The sea spilled over its banks, sweeping through the city’s streets and tearing through the walls of Oldtown. The men didn’t stand a chance. They looked upon it and went mad.

Screams. So many screams, but they were like the hissing of flies compared to the monster.

“The Old Ones!” Euron cackled. “I summoned it here and it is here!”

A great tentacle rose up from the black waters, stretching and uncoiling. Hard, spiny skin broke over the crests. A gaping mouth opened, and the roar it let forth was a thousand storms exploding at once.

The kraken wreaked pure devastation with every slight movement. He saw its body rise upwards, a endless pit of black teeth as its jaws unfolded.

The backwash swept a dozen ships straight into the kraken’s maw. Hundreds and hundreds of black teeth ground through wood with ease. It was large enough to swallow whole ships and the men onboard in the same way a whale swallowed krill.

Not even the thunder itself could drown out that noise.

The kraken. The heraldry of the Greyjoys. There was no beast that better represented the Drowned God. The storm, the black ocean itself made flesh.

The people didn’t believe they existed – they preferred to think of them as they would giants and dragons, unicorns and basilisks; as something historical and mythical, fit only for the fantasies of children. Perhaps it was just the sense of scale – men didn’t want to accept the truth that they shared their oceans with such as this. That they were not the masters of this world. Euron knew better; he knew of the krakens, of the Old Ones in their black depths.

It was Euron’s second time seeing such a creature. The first had been eight years ago, on Euron’s first journey around the Stepstones. He had seen a Ibbenese whaler struggle to bring in a whale, when a typhoon struck. The Silence had set to attack the whaler, but the kraken emerged from the depths, and dragged the entire ship and her whale both under the waves.

Euron hunted the black lore. The ruins of the mazemakers of Lorath, the forgotten scrolls of dead, cyclopean Sarnath, the barnacled runestones of the Grey King, the humanleather-bound tomes of corpse-city Stygai. The rituals of the chittering flesh-priests of Gogossos, the pagan idolatry of the fishfolk of the Thousand Islands, the black rites of the Sorcerer Lords of Carcosa, the oily hieroglyphs of the Bloodstone Emperor, carved into black stone. The oldest myths of the Pale Child Bakkalon, the Black Goat of Qohor, the Lion of Night and dead dreamer Nyar of the Church of the Star’s Wisdom. The scattered points of forgotten lore, drawn together into a line. It had all led to this. A piece of the power of the Old World, of the time before the Dawn.
And that beast he’d seen near the Stepstones had been barely a quarter of the size of this one. A kraken this size must be tens of thousands of years old, older than the First Men, its rust-red skin so hard and rough, smeared in algae and ancient scars. *This is what all of those lives have bought,* Euron thought in awe. *Let no one say that I have not paid the iron price.*

Sailors told ghost stories about krakens. Maybe one in a thousand ever actually saw one, and fewer lived to tell about it. The kraken lived in the ocean’s blackest depths, hunting leviathans, feasting on flesh and magic and enduring the ages of the world. There were so few of them left in this era, but Old Ones would sleep rather than die.

Still, during the worst storms, krakens would occasionally come to the surface. Blood in the water could entice them towards the shore. Euron had supplied both the storm and the feast, and the kraken had come. Just as the glass candles foretold.

Everything he had done, working towards this moment.

“Blow the horn!” Euron bellowed. “Blow the horn! Blow the fifth horn!”

The huge shape was coming closer, so large the mouth of the Honeywine could barely fit it. Its crest was covered in spines, its skin was greyish-red, its body a solid mountain of flesh. Its jaws extended circularly, needle-like teeth in rows around the top and sides, and its mouth convulsed to grind ships whole. Euron saw the *Honour of Oldtown* shattered into splinters by its jaws, men uselessly jumping overboard as the currents rushed into the kraken’s maw.

Giant tentacles extended, drifting in beats, capturing the waves to waft the red water into its mouth. With every twitch of its huge limbs, there were tidal waves.

With an enormous gush, the kraken swallowed, and water ejected from the great creature’s gills – a stream so intense it was like a flood dropping from the sky, let forth by the Storm God howling above.

There was no order anymore. There was nothing but panic. The sky stank of desperation and raw fear.

“Blow the horn!” Euron screamed. “BLOW THE HORN!”

Finally, Rodrik Freeborn must have heard him. The fifth horn was special compared to all the others. It was a horn over seven-feet tall, fixed in the most secure cabin the *Silence* had, held in place by thick lashes of black leather. It was solid, ivory white – the polished bone of some huge beast, and bound in oily black stone. Runes older and darker than Valyria’s were etched over its surface, yet Euron had smeared mud over the horn to disguise its significance.

As soon as Rodrik Freeborn placed his lips against the horn, the sound echoed like the scream of Nagga herself. The horn sounded, and suddenly the storm seemed to freeze.

The noise sent Euron deaf. Men were screaming in pain, clutching their skulls. Rodrik Freeborn would twist and convulse, his body held kissing the horn as unseen fingers squeezed the life out of him. Euron could hear the soul-shrieking blast take the full range of his sense, battering high and low and all in between, like the wail of the world, of a soul on fire and lit for kindling. The sound of the horn seized the waves like the Drowned God’s own scream of fury. The ocean bubbled, the wind hissed, and men fell.

Euron felt the pure power explode into him, bound by dragonsteel. His armour was singing, the runes etched on the breastplate glowing like white fire. Beneath the patch, Euron’s bloody eye
pulsed. The kraken convulsed and thrashed. The tsunami wave crushed a dozen ships. The \textit{Silence} was very nearly swept away, but the wreck of the ship clung to the rocks, grinding with the world’s heartbeat.

After ten eternal seconds, the horn fell silent. Euron knew that Rodrik Freeborn would die coughing salt water from his lungs, without touching the waves.


Waves crashing, great red tentacles rising upwards, beating with the storm. The beast was trembling twitching, a strangled roar coming from its maw… \textit{“I BIND YOU! I BIND YOU, I BIND YOU, I BIND YOU!”}

The kraken’s cry broke. The sky split. An immense sound of pain so loud the earth and seas rumbled. The power was rushing around him… he could feel the waves crash beneath his tentacles, the ghost of sensation…

His awareness hammered into something immense beyond mortality; a mind cthonic, an archean beast of flesh and magic that measured the passage of time in eons and moved with the fury of storms. An abyssal awareness that could have hammered the minds of a hundred skinchangers into bloody, gibbering foam.

It was a mind rent by torture, aflame with the agony wrought by Krakenbinder, entrapped in a body searing with the brands of a blood magic ancient and foul, made vulnerable and pliant.

It could not resist.

Suddenly, Euron was larger, more powerful than ever. The world of the mind’s scope expanded, the range of awareness \textit{stretched}. His whole body was trembling, overflowing with might. The kraken was twitching, yet the magicks of the horn scolded its greatness over its skin, binding the immensity of its will. Ancient runes burnt into abyssal flesh, binding its muscles and its black limbs, its very mind to his own. Two hearts beat as one in the storm.

Euron heard the hiss of steam billowing off the horn. The water around the ship was bubbling. Lightning cracked, and the kraken let forth one final, strangled roar.

And suddenly Euron was laughing again. Laughing louder and sharper than ever. Laughing so hard he might explode from his own body. \textit{You are mine. The God is mine.}

Lord Goodbrother’s eyes were bulging, but he was left unable to speak, only gasp. Euron couldn’t breathe either, otherwise there would have been a snide remark. \textit{What? Euron wanted to taunt. Did you really think that I would entrust my only hellhorn to Victarion?}

Krakenbinder was one of the five sorcerous horns that Euron had in his possession. Euron had sacrificed Dragonbinder to Victarion, but Euron would never, ever give up his other four.

The great beast stopped moving. The harbour seemed to turn strangely silent. There were still screams, but Euron couldn’t hear them. \textit{Like insects.}

He saw the Damphair fall to his knees.
The Silence was still shuddering too intensely for him to stand, but Euron raised his hand.

In the distance, a great red tentacle rose upwards from the surf at the same time, uncoiling itself slowly.

Euron brought his hand down sharply.

The crash of water rocked the world. Two dozen Oldtown ships were destroyed at once. The tidal waves swept over the Blood Isle, and the garrison stationed there didn’t stand a chance. All of the Tyrell men were crushed and swept away under the waves.

There were screams, wails. Most of the men in the bay seemed to have collapsed in pure, bloodcurdling horror, but there were a few ships that were trying to flee. But it doesn’t matter, there will be no escape.

Slowly, curiously, the kraken flexed its muscles, twitching gills, squirming its body and fins as Euron experimented with its strength, reaching out with the new scope of his will. Gingerly, the kraken pushed its way forward, its huge underbody scraping against rock and sand. A rust-red wall of mass and muscle extended towards the Silence.

He heard the squelch as its suckers ground over the wood. Each suction cup was like a set of teeth biting into the wood. With extreme care, the red tentacle wrapped itself around the Silence, sheltering the ship protectively from the waves. The tentacle was pure muscle, hard as stone. The whole vessel lurched as the kraken pulled it upwards from the rocks.

With another limb, the kraken crushed the Arbor Queen as idly as a child would stomp on a bug. Or perhaps popping a grape, and feeling it splat. All of the ships panicking, collapsing or trying to flee were all nothing before it. Great tentacles stretched outwards, curling upwards from the depths.

There was chaos all around him, but Euron could barely feel it. He could feel nothing but power.

The kraken’s lower body scraped over the sands in the harbour, its tentacles flailing and digging as it pulled itself upwards into the shallow harbour. He could see the beast’s eyes, huge, black ovoids larger than small boats. Its milky gaze was empty, but Euron knew its attention was all on him.

It took two great tentacles to lift the Silence straight out of the water and shove the ship roughly onto the shallows, away from the waves. Three men fell overboard as the vessel lurched, but Euron didn’t care. His whole body was wrapped around the broken mast, but controlling the beast felt like an extension of his will. The runes embedded on Euron’s armour shone ghostly pale.

With its other limbs, the monster devastated the fleet in long, idle swipes. Thousands, tens of thousands of men crushed dead by the waves and yet Euron had to struggle to notice them.

Euron’s two gazes turned upwards towards the Hightower. The bells were ringing in frenzy. He saw men shooting arrows and scorpions, but even the largest iron bolts were nothing but splinters to the kraken’s mass. Stones fired from trebuchets bounced uselessly off the kraken’s skin.

And the world watched in stunned awe and horror as the great beast roiled its way forwards. Euron finally let go of the mast, his body aching in pain as he felt the beginning of ugly, deep bruises forming across his body. Still, there was no emotion but elation, no pain of that but victory, as he stepped forward across his ruined ship.

The few survivors were staring at him, eyes bulging so hard they might burst. The kraken dragged its way deeper into the harbour, the Honeywine barely deep enough to cover its gills. From behind,
all Euron could see was a spine-covered mountain, black and reddish and barnacle-strewn

“How arrogant,” Euron mused as he stared at the nine-hundred-foot-tall Hightower. “The Nine Wonders made by man. How arrogant to think that man can even compare to nature.”

The kraken’s body was screaming in pain, in unaccustomed motion, but Euron forced it to into the shallows. He forced its tentacles to shatter the docks, and then the immense mass was heaving itself out of the water. Its body was bloated, flailing and hulking, but strong enough to squirm forward even on land. Tentacles thrashed, crushing houses to try and drag itself forward all the while the monster’s body squirmed and twisted like a slug.

Huge limbs crushed the walls of Oldtown with ease, sending stone flying into the storm. From a distance, it looked almost… serene. An act of nature. Euron watched from the far side of the harbour, and wondered what it would be like to be one of all those screaming mortals as the rubble came crashing down.

Men were staring at Euron with horror, but he could only laugh, and laugh, and laugh. Who can doubt my godliness now?

Then, the kraken turned and surged its way towards the Hightower, moving as slowly and as unstoppably as an earthquake, a glacier made of chthonic flesh, leaving a flattened world behind. The cliffs of the Battle Isle posed some difficulty, but the kraken’s tentacles were strong. Its limbs carved a grip, cleaving into soft stone, and then its whole body was heaving upwards.

Across the horizon, Euron heard the bells ringing, the thunder rumbling, and the sea screaming as the great limbs wrapped themselves as far around the base of the Hightower that they could reach. Then, enormous muscles clenched and heaved, stone strained and cracked, the foundations shuddered, and the great shining Hightower was toppling towards the sea.

---

The War of the Five Monsters

Contenders:

Jon Snow

“The Bastard King”

His crimes:

- Oathbreaker / deserter,
- Consorting with / arming wildlings,
- Usurper,
- Rebellion,
- Invading the realm,
- Large number of wildling raids and pillaging,
- Witchcraft and sorcery (skinchanging).

Strength:
• One ice dragon,
• ~50,000 free folk, approx. 15,000 of which are fighting bodies;
• The Cult of the Ice Dragon,
• 500 giants, and fewer mammoths,
• A few score wargs and skinchangers,
• The northern coalition;
• Houses Manderly, Umber, Mormont, Glover, Locke, and Reed,
• ~5,000 men,
• Fledgling alliances,
• The Dragonguard,
• Skinchanging.

Prominent Enemies:

• House Bolton,
• House Frey,
• The Night’s Watch?

Stannis Baratheon

“The Broken King”

His crimes:

• Attempting to usurping his nephew’s rightful seat (accused),
• Kinslaying (accused),
• Sorcery,
• Renouncing the Faith of the Seven and consorting with witches and devil magic,
• Piracy,
• Crimes and raids in the Narrow Sea.

Strength:

• ~500 men (last count),
• Houses Bar Emmon, Farring, Florent, Velaryon, Celtigar and Massey,
• His soldiers noted to be extreme fanatics,
• Less than ten ships (last count),
• Currently holds Dragonstone,
• One Red Woman.

Prominent Enemies:

• House Lannister, House Tyrell,
• Jon Snow.

Cersei Lannister (through proxy Tommen Baratheon)

“The Mad Queen”

Her crimes:
• Assassination and attempted assassination of two High Septons.
• Murder,
• Infidelity,
• Incest (accused),
• Destabilising the realm,
• Madness,
• Supporting necromancy.

**Strength:**

• Currently holds the Red Keep,
• ~200 extremely valuable hostages,
• Including King Tommen Baratheon and Queen Margaery Tyrell,
• ~100 ruthless killers holding the Red Keep,
• The Mountain’s Men,
• Sellswords,
• Lord Qyburn,
• Ser ‘Robert Strong’
• Necromancy and dark arts,
• The Alchemist’s Guild.

**Prominent Enemies:**

• Just about everybody.

**Tyrion Lannister (through proxy Aegon Targaryen)**

**“The Imp”**

**His crimes:**

• Kinslaying,
• Kingslaying,
• Rebellion,
• Being a dwarf.

**Strength:**

• The Golden Company,
• Less than 10,000 seasoned sellswords,
• A number of war elephants,
• Force led by King Aegon Targaryen and Lord Jon Connington,
• Sellswords from Lys,
• House Darry,
• House Stokeworth,
• Support of the Iron Bank,
• Support of magisters in the Free Cities,
• Currently holds Storm’s End, Harrenhal, and Griffin’s Roost.

**Prominent Enemies:**

• House Lannister, House Tyrell,
Euron Greyjoy

“The Crow’s Eye”

His crimes:

- Rebellion,
- Kinslaying (accused),
- Heresy (accused),
- Piracy,
- Slavery,
- Brutality and countless deaths,
- Sorcery and dark arts.

Strength:

- The Iron Islands,
- All houses sworn to Pyke,
- ~9,000 men (last count),
- Fleet of ~400 ships (last count),
- The Iron Fleet (nominally),
- The Silence,
- Collection of mages, warlocks, priests and spellbinders held onboard,
- The Grotesques – monsters, mutes and murderers,
- Cult-like devotion from his men,
- Secrets and treasure plundered from Old Valyria and beyond,
- The Dragonbinder?
- Sorcery.

Prominent Enemies:

- Houses Tyrell, Redwyne, Hightower,
- The north,
- His family.

The Battle for Oldtown:

Conflict: War of the Five Monsters

Date: 301 AC

Place: Oldtown, the Bay of Whispering Sound, the Reach

Result: Total devastation. Greyjoy victory
Combatants:

- 9,000 ironborn.
- House Greyjoy, houses sworn to Pyke.

- 60,000 Reach soldiers, including militia.
- Houses Redwyne, Hightower and Tyrell, houses sworn to Highgarden.
- ~400,000 population of Oldtown.

Commanders:

- King Euron Greyjoy

- Lord Paxter Redwyne
- Ser Baelor Hightower
- Ser Garth Hightower
- Ser Garlan Tyrell

Casualties (prior to the Rising of the Kraken):

- ~8,000 ironborn.
- ~5,000 slaves, thralls and salt wives brought from the Arbor.

- ~7,000 Reach soldiers in the harbour.

Casualties (after the Rising of the Kraken):

- ~50,000 Reach soldiers in the harbour and port.
- Uncountable deaths in Oldtown itself.
- All Reach commanders dead or missing.

Result:

- Both fleets almost entirely destroyed.
- Oldtown devastated.
- The Hightower torn off its foundations. Eight Great Wonders made by man remaining.
- Rise of the Kraken God.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Prelude to the Battle of Winterfell, the Battle of Snows...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sansa

The Merry Midwife creaked and groaned with the waves. She was an old cog, her figurehead carved of ill-treated white pine, rotten at the edges. A laughing matron at the prow cut through the waves, holding an infant by one foot, as if dangling the wooden babe over the water. The woman’s cheeks and the babe’s bottom were pocked with wormholes, and the leavings of seagulls speckled her brow. Sansa leaned over the railing and for a long time found herself staring at the carved midwife and her fixed, wooden smile. Perhaps it was just poor craftsmanship, but that wide, merry grin seemed forced, desperate, as the mother offered her child to the sea.

Sansa pulled her wool-lined hood up against the bite of the wind, but her long hair still whipped across her skin. After so long, the black dye was beginning to fade; Sansa’s tips were still dark, but the red roots were showing. On the narrow cog, there had never been the time or space to braid her hair properly as she had used to, so Sansa let it hang and grow free.

A horn sounded in the distance, and the chiming of bells carried over the water, to the sound of faint echoes. In the distance, she could see the shape of the Seal Rock jutting out of the bay, wreathed in mist like some great, eroded hunter. A remnant of a past age, a protector. White Harbour, the city beyond, was a faint haze obscured in the cold morning mist, inscrutable in the distance, but the shadows of sails loomed over the mouth to the White Knife. All aboard, from captain to sailor to cook, were tense as the Merry Midwife wafted in the wind towards the fleet of House Manderly.

Yet above all, Sansa wondered if she would see the dragon. Her heart was in her mouth with the thought. Her eyes lingered on the shadow of the Seal Rock, trying to imagine a dragon hidden atop it in the mists. After all that she had heard, the rumours and hedge tales whispered over meals or muttered in dark corners, it couldn’t help but remind her of the tales Old Nan had once told.

There was a cold edge in the soft wind, she clenched her furs closer to her form. Jon Snow. An ice dragon. The north at war. My home. She felt like a girl venturing into the storm, the legends of an earlier age made real. Should I be excited or scared? she wondered. Instead, she just felt queerly detached to it all.

“You should not be on deck, my lady,” a low voice warned. “It would not do if you were to fall ill. And we ought to keep your return as discreet as possible.”

Sansa found herself smiling faintly at the exiled knight’s words. She glanced at him from the corner of an eye, as he took a place beside her at the cog’s prow, slightly staggering into place.

Ser Jorah’s face was a slowly recovering ruin, his features still bruised and bloated, his eyes a little
weary, lined by shadows. He was clad in a moth-eaten cloak of wool, lined with sealskin, looking larger and gruffer than ever under layers of worn and salt-stained clothes.

“They will know soon enough.” Sansa could see the shadows of sails through the fog, an indeterminate number of them rocking in the bay’s waters, forming a barricade across the harbour. Galleys, she realised. Fairly large hulls, large enough to be seen across the great distance yet remaining. The fleet of House Manderly slowly took shape from the vapours, each one looking crisp and clean, fresh from the shipyards. *The first northern fleet in a hundred years.* “Will we be allowed to pass?”

“They will board us first, and search our hull,” Ser Jorah admitted. His voice carried weirdly in the damp air. “White Harbour is under lockdown; even more so than it was when I was last here.” Silence stretched for a passing of moments as the bear knight stared into the mist, his eyes visibly roaming for detail in the grey vapour. He was on edge; shoulders tense, his fingers drumming.

“How do you suppose so?” Sansa asked.

“The evidence is before your eyes.” He pointed, drawing her attention to the harbour’s near shores. Port and starboard, the two shorelines slowly converged as the *Merry Midwife* approached the White Knife’s mouth. She saw nothing, save for dark shorelines. She shook her head.

“Look,” Ser Jorah insisted, drawing her attention to a point in the distance, drawing her attention away from the vessels of the blockade. “There.”

She saw it. Empty wharfs, silent docksides speckling the far shoreline. A small yellow flag, devoid of decoration or heraldry, raised above the quay, flying beneath a pennant emblazoned with the Manderly merman. It was a small stead, too small to even be called a village, at the very edge of the harbour outside of the city proper.

Ser Jorah continued at the slight widening of her eyes, at her curiosity. “Do you see the empty berths? The guttered lighthouse? You look upon the plague wharf, the cheapest dockage along the waters of the White Knife. At any other city, a fleet blockade would normally escort vessels to such a dock, or some equivalent. In times of peace, the vessels of smallfolk will likely seek harbourage there. All port cities of sufficient size have such a wharf.” Somehow, Ser Jorah’s features darkened even further.

“All throughout the seas, during times of blockade, vessels seeking entry to port are typically brought to the plague wharf or some lesser equivalent for inspection.” He took a breath, gripped the railing, and explained through a grimace. “If they are not repelled, taken, or sunk at first sight, that is. If brought in by the blockade, standard practice dictates a full and thorough inspection by the port authorities, ensuring that a hull’s contents conform to the law of the land. It is a process that may take days of labour. It isn’t so unusual to see vessels lie in wait for weeks, if they seek entry during times of blockade. In my time in Lys, I once saw the Triarch refuse to admit all vessels for a month, during a rumoured outbreak of the Sothoryi Sailor’s bane in the Stepstones – the boats were jammed so tightly in the water that one could have all walked across the bay.”

She stayed quiet. The bear knight turned to her a little, glancing at her with rough, but not unkind, features. “White Harbour is the busiest port north of the Neck, my lady, yet we see no vessels under inspection here. It is a dark, dark sign.”

She could see the lines tightening across his eyes. She measured him quietly through the edge of her gaze. *Yes,* she thought, *he’s very nervous. Scared of facing the north’s law again? Scared of facing his family?* “One does not look need to see through these mists to know that there have been few merchants seeking harbour in the city, my lady.” Jorah continued. “None, perhaps. In times of
quiet, a plague wharf may see use by petty fishermen, seeking less tax. Yet we see none; no vessels under inspection, no smallfolk, though we are still in the season for herring. Meaning that the smallfolk dare not tread these waters now. Where even commoners fear to tread, men of birth and power will never walk. The blockade has been blockading nothing, I think.” The bear knight paused for a breath, his eyes lingered on the small tower. “Set the plague wharf aside. I imagine that the Lord’s Port and the Merchant’s Quay will be places for fit for ghosts.”

Silence lingered for a long moment, as their small cog tepidly approached the Manderly fleet.

“What will that mean for us?” Sansa asked finally.

“They will be suspicious of our ship, if only out of one part prudence, two parts boredom.” Ser Jorah muttered. “We will be boarded and inspected. Thoroughly, I expect. Few with petty cause would seek berth at a city that has raised its banners in revolt, and the caution of the inspectors and longshoremen will be redoubled now that they have a vessel in sight.

“But, when they learn of you, my lady. then I have no doubt that Lord Manderly will be most eager to welcome you home. Before, he would have certainly seen you smuggled into the keep, under hood and cowl and in cover of darkness. Now, with their banners raised against the Iron Throne?” There was a pause, and he seemed to consider his words carefully. “I do not know. Lord Manderly will certainly want it known that the eldest daughter of Eddard Stark has returned to the North, and stands with him. I would suspect he would want tale of you known amongst the people sooner, rather than later. But he will want to speak with you for himself, to understand your wishes.”

Sansa just nodded absently. Ser Jorah was so quick to speak of the great lords of the north, but Sansa had to wonder. Would she even be recognized? Would Lord Manderly know her? Doubtful. So many years had passed, and Lord Borrell had declined to send a letter to vouch for her identity. Arriving like this, unannounced, gave the Lord of Sweetsister deniability should the news of her arrival spread, but it weakened her stance. He’d refused to put any words to writing – men could talk, he had said. Ravens weren’t secure enough, he had insisted, any word or letters so found could reach back to the Vale.

It had taken over a fortnight of negotiations and arguments before she had convinced Lord Borrell to send her on to White Harbour. The Lord of Sweetsister had been slow to convince, but Sansa persevered. This could be a huge benefit to your house, she had argued, in a dozen separate facets of argument. There is no better way to earn advantage than to openly stand with those who would win.

But still, even after he had come to agree with her, Lord Borrell wanted to hedge his bets. He had put her on a small cog and sent her to the city unannounced. The Merry Midwife, captained by the hard and hairy Casso Mogat, was the only ship willing to even approach White Harbour – a ship that had done the journey a thousand times. Men spoke of the city as though it were cursed, whispering of wildlings, dragons, and rebellion.

I will need to convince Lord Manderly of my identity, she knew. After being someone else for so long, the need to convince someone, anyone that she was Sansa Stark felt so queer. She had spent the trip trying to recall all the details she knew of House Manderly, but it all still felt… unreal.

Sansa had visited White Harbour before, only once, and it had seemed a grand thing then. But, now, strangely, the city seemed so much smaller. White Harbour was a dwarf compared to King’s Landing.

Sansa kept her black-hilted dagger hidden in her dress. She had never had a dagger before, her mother would never have allowed it. It was unladylike, but now the sleek, sheathed blade had
become… comforting? No, comforting was the wrong word. So many restless nights had been spent cradling the dagger for protection and sleeping in the rough, as she was smuggled across the Vale and through the Bite. *And now I am sailing into a dragon’s lair.*

Maybe the thought should have scared her, but instead she just felt thoughtful. Recollective, even melancholic. *The north is my home, but I barely know it anymore.*

Weirdly, Ser Jorah seemed even more nervous and agitated than she was. His maimed hand – wrapped in wool – never strayed far from his sword. She kept a watch on his expression from the corner of her eye.

They stood in uneasy silence for a long time, watching for their vessel’s approach. Strangely, the wind no longer felt cold. She heard the chime of bells above.

“Will we see the dragon, ser?” she asked finally.

Ser Jorah twitched. “Casso says it is unlikely.” His voice was torn, his expression strained. “He says the dragon is often away, but returns frequently enough.”

“I see.” Sansa looked to a large white sail emerging from the mist, pennant above flying the merman and trident of the Manderlys, lined with a border of silver. “Do you believe the tales of Jon Snow and the dragon?”

There was a long pause, the swell of small waves shuddering the prow. “I have heard many people saying it so, my lady.”

“That is not what I asked, ser.”

“And I cannot say for certain,” he said, shaking his head. “I dare not say. It is the way of smallfolk, to confuse and exaggerate in times of strife. But the stories all agree on a precious few points; that the Night’s Watch is fallen, brought down by a King-Beyond-the-Wall and dragonrider named Jon Snow.” His lips twisted. “Little else can be trusted.”

He was rambling, talking on about little and less; rumours and tall tales. Her focus went elsewhere. She remembered her brother Jon.

She remembered the often sullen, brooding boy. A bastard who retreated from her mother’s glances, but came to life with her father and older brother. She remembered a boy more at home in the practice yard than the great hall. She remembered a few of the countless times he’d spar with tourney swords against Robb, Theon or the men-at-arms, or sometimes boys from the winter town.

She didn’t remember much else. What were his likes, his dislikes? What had he thought of her? Had he ever seemed jealous, hateful, as she’d oft heard that bastards were wont to do, for their trueborn siblings? She couldn’t say – she could hardly recall sharing more than single word conversations with him.

She tried to match what remained of her memories to the stories she heard – those of the Bastard King-Beyond-the-Wall and his ice dragon larger than a storm – and she struggled to see it. She had often wondered if it was a different Jon Snow, or an imposter pretending to be Lord Stark’s once-least-known son.

*Yet I am still going to him willingly, because there is no other option. Whatever happens, whatever Jon is, I will handle it.*

Sansa’s eyes flickered towards Ser Jorah. The memory of that moment, jumping off the cliffs into
the lake, running from clansmen, flashed before her eyes. She remembered thrashing and flailing, screaming as cold water consumed her and heavy limbs dragged her down. Ser Jorah hadn’t been able to swim in his armour.

*But that was me,* she remembered. *I saved Ser Jorah’s life and dragged him to shore. That was me.*

She spent a long time staring at the knight, grizzled and worn. White Harbour was the end of their journey. She could hardly even describe the emotions scintillating inside of her.

“You have seen dragons before, haven’t you, ser?” Sansa said finally.

His mouth tightened, but he was slow to reply. “I saw the way you talked of Queen Daenerys. How you reacted to news of dragons,” Sansa insisted. “You said you spent your exile in Essos, but you were with Daenerys Targaryen, weren’t you? That is why you returned to Westeros now.”

“Aye,” Ser Jorah replied, reluctantly. “Those tales are true. Queen Daenerys has three dragons – I was there when they were hatched.”

“So when you saved me?” Sansa asked. “You were doing it for her?”

Jorah nodded, averting his gaze. Sansa didn’t feel betrayed. Rather, she felt relieved – it felt good to understand more of the knight’s motivations. *Everyone has their own ambitions and vulnerabilities, and understanding is power.* It was a relief to know the strings which Ser Jorah danced on.

There was a moment of quiet contemplation. She heard the bells chiming in the distance, becoming clearer. “And what do you want, ser?” she asked curiously, still leaning over the railing. “Tell me, what do you hope to gain here?”

The man shifted, looking uncomfortable. He took a deep, slow breath. “I want you to convince your brother to ally with Queen Daenerys Targaryen,” he said finally. “Advocate for her, for an alliance. Convince Jon Snow to support her, to renounce his rebellion, and in return Daenerys could legitimise him and put the Seven Kingdoms to order.”

Sansa laughed hollowly, after a brief silence. “I have not spoken to Jon Snow in over three years, ser. I barely spoke to him before then. I did not say goodbye when he left to join the Night’s Watch. We grew up in the same castle, but we lived at different ends of it. Were it not for meals, I could go without seeing him for days at a time.” She shook her head. “I have no influence with him. I don’t even know his feelings towards me – perhaps he resents me for our childhood, perhaps he’d be threatened by me, perhaps he’d want to punish me? For all I know, he might just be another man who’d try to exploit me.” *Like yourself,* she thought quietly.

“And yet still you're going to him?”

“What choice do I have? I am a Stark – the north is where belong.” She shook her head. “There must always be a Stark in Winterfell. No matter the type of man Jon is, I’ll deal with it. But I do not know Daenerys Targaryen.”

“She is the Seven Kingdom’s best option for peace and stability,” Ser Jorah insisted. “A good queen that all will rally behind – one with the most rightful claim to the Iron Throne. She will bring dragons – three dragons – she will bring an order that the realm has not seen for hundreds of years. If you convince your brother to join with her, then the war will be half-won already.”

“And why would he?” *And why would I?*
“Queen Daenerys could legitimise his position in the north. He is a king of wildlings. The realm will turn against your brother quickly, but Daenerys could help him.” Ser Jorah’s eyes were grim. “Or she could destroy him. Unless your brother wants to see the Dance of Dragons come again, then he must make an alliance.”

Sansa nodded, but didn’t reply. She kept her posture non-committal. Jorah grimaced. “My lady, please. Queen Daenerys is good and kind and just, I can vouch to it. She freed the slaves in Astapor, Yunkai and Meereen, brought liberation to Slaver’s Bay. I swear to you, there could be no better liege – no one more deserving or worthy than Daenerys Targaryen.”

She paused, measuring his expression. “Do you love her, ser?”

Ser Jorah seemed to falter. “She has my undying loyalty.”

So that’s a yes. For some reason, Sansa had to suppress the bitter chuckle rising from her throat. “By the telling, your queen is half the world away, yet you still advocate for her? Here, to the granddaughter and niece of lords whom her father burned alive? You have such ‘loyalty’ that you went halfway around the world with no clear goal, I think, if you set your hopes on something so dubious.” Sansa mused. “You were willing, perhaps eager, to die in her service, ser. You set yourself to an impossible task with no idea how you could return from it. And then you found me.”

His eyes narrowed with her tone. “Are you mocking me, my lady?”

“No. Quite the opposite.” A jaded, humourless smile played over her lips. “What you do goes beyond loyalty. She can do no wrong in your eyes, can she? You’ve devoted yourself to her, you define yourself by her. Do you consider her your future, your destiny? She… she owns you, I think.”

“She is my queen,” Ser Jorah growled, bristling.

Sansa shook her head. “No, ser. She is much more than that to you.”

The knight was obvious. She could see straight through him – there was nothing but possessive love and admiration inside him. I know that type of love. I’ve felt that type of love.

The images of all the handsome and horrible men she had loved flashed before her eyes. Sansa thought of Lysa, crazed and mad with devotion. Strangely, she even thought of Cersei too. That type of love is worse than poison.

He didn’t reply. In the distance, the hulls of the White Harbour galleys were slowly taking shape through the mist. Nineteen, she counted. Their freshly painted hulls gleamed, even in the fog.

From the city, bells were still ringing. The first few chimes were expected as a ship came into harbour, but the bells didn’t cease. They were close enough towards the White Knife now to make out the walls of the inner harbour, and there was hectic movement on the docks. Sansa frowned. Why are the bells ringing?

“My lady,” Jorah tried again cautiously, unwilling to let the matter lie. “You must consider it – when Queen Daenerys arrives—”

“Sails!” A sharp voice called through the cry of gulls. “Sails to the south!”

Jorah jumped. Sansa turned, but she couldn’t see anything through the mist. “Who is it?” Casso Mogat boomed in his gravelly voice, stomping out onto deck as the planks creaked. “Mermen?”
“Don’t recognise the flags!” the spotter shouted from the perch above. “They’re coming round the cliffs of Oldcastle now.”

The whole cog stirred as footsteps rushed towards the stern. Sansa had to squint to try and make out anything through the fog.

The great grey cliffs seemed so tall and looming in the mist. The galleys in the bay were forming tight ranks, each one flying the green merman of Manderly.

She heard Ser Jorah bellowing, demanding to know what was happening, while Casso placed a seashell horn to his lips and blew tightly. His dyed green whiskers wafted in the cold air, and his red cheeks bulged.

Sansa still couldn’t see, there were too many bodies covering the deck. She felt herself linger back, as the pitch of the voice raised.

“Turn her around!” the captain ordered, his voice somehow cutting through the air. “All hands to deck – tack and bring her to the beach.”

“What of White Harbour?” Ser Jorah bellowed over the sudden clamour. “We must go to White Harbour!”

“I ain’t having no part of that!” Casso objected. He was short man, barely five-foot-tall, but stocky and muscled enough to size up against Ser Jorah. The man was hairy and stout-legged, clearly of Ibbenese heritage. “Get us out of this bay!”

“How many are there?” One of the men called out to the crow’s-nest.

“I count eight!” the spotter high above called down. “No, wait… twelve – no, more… Oh, by the gods…”

“We must go to White Harbour!” Jorah bellowed at the captain. “We can’t go back! Go forward! Into the city!”

Sansa finally managed to see, climbing onto a crate and clutching the rigging against the rocking deck. She could see the masts coming through the mists, taking shape as the vessels turned the cape. At first, they seemed small in the distance, but then she saw all the oars.

Oars, hundreds and hundreds of oars, sweeping through the waves in trained synchronisation. Moving quickly, forming into a charge. The ships at the front were three-decked dromonds; great vessels with red sails and painted hulls of gold, green, and brown. There were more dromonds, and then galleys and more warships. The vessel at the front, leading the charge, was massive – as large or larger than the King Robert’s Hammer.

Dromonds of that size made the White Harbour galleys look like dwarves.

The mists weakened, and the shapes beyond were becoming clearer. At least thirty, she realised with a gasp. Maybe as many as fifty. The ship at the front bore a coat of arms showing a black shape against red that Sansa couldn’t recognise, but then she could slowly make out the colours of the vessels. Some were plain and bleak, others had brightly striped hulls, but Sansa’s eyes were drawn to the reds and golds, purples and greens – the colours of Lannister and Tyrell. The royal fleet.

Her breath froze. How could… No, it’s impossible, why are they…?
It was a fleet. A mixture of ships from great dromonds to cogs, some Westerosi and others in the style of the Free Cities, of mismatched colours and sizes, but they all looked ready for war.

Behind her, White Harbour’s bells were still ringing, and growing in pitch. Ser Jorah and Casso Mogat were screaming at each other in the middle of the deck. Sansa could barely process it, but slowly the thoughts started to form.

The bay of White Harbour seemed so peaceful and serene for a moment, but Sansa watched the warships coming closer and coming fast.

*White Harbour is under attack.*

---

**Jon**

They camped in the middle of a frozen farmstead, a hamlet of barely a dozen houses and barns that had been overwhelmed by the legions of men. A city of tents surrounded the scarce few wooden structures, sprouting endlessly from the snows, like a field of winter mushrooms. The ghost of a cold, pale sun loomed overhead, washed out from behind the thick, dark clouds.

The snow was three feet deep in places, and crunched underfoot into a muddy slush. The army – my army – flooded out over the snow and the ice, camped in the ruined fields. A few of the further perimeters spilled forth onto a nearby frozen lake, squeezed outwards from the camp’s cramped core. Jon watched a few men fish on the lake, in separate groups around holes laboriously cut through foot-thick ice. Out on the ice, wildling stayed far from northerner, and vice versa, occasionally shooting one another mistrustful looks. The sight made Jon frown.

He’d wanted to keep going, but then the threat of snowstorms to the north had brought the march to a halt, forced the army to take shelter and hold out for better weather.

Long Lake was to the northeast, where the White Knife and a dozen streams cut over the rolling hills. The kingsroad was somewhere to the east, but the host had abandoned the road to trek through the acres of hard, deserted farmland. Jon stood out atop one of the snowy hills, staring at the silhouette of stone walls and towers hovering in the distance.

*Winterfell, my home. It has been so, so long.*

Even despite the dull clamour of the men below, and the faint howl of the wind, it seemed so quiet from the hilltop. Jon stood and stared at the Winterfell, trying to reconcile the far-off view with his memories.

“That storm looks like a killer,” Ewan Bole warned, looking off at the clouds swirling over the mountains to the north. Jon did not turn to him. He remained focused on the castle.

“How far off is it?” Ser Alek asked. The knight stood behind Jon, with in a steel hauberk with a white dragon stitched on his surcoat and the Manderly merman on his shield.

“Hard to say. Anywhere between three days or a fortnight, but she’s moving south quickly,” Ewan grimaced. They could hear the wind howling faintly, the storm looming over the forests on the horizon to the north. The weather had slowly but surely been worsening. “We better be well and truly dug in before the snows hit.”
The Boltons are as unlikely to risk the weather as us, but their shelter is superior. Winterfell is old and strong, fit to station an army. The longer this lasts, the more desperate our efforts. Jon’s eyes were still fixed on the seat of House Stark, trying to map the pale and looming towers to what he remembered from all those years of childhood. I was a summer child.

“It won’t fall easily. She’s a strong castle,” the Greatjon’s voice warned with a grunt, as the large man trekked up beside him.

“Strong enough to survive dragonfire, do you think?” Tormund Giantsbane scoffed from his other side.

It seemed like no matter where Jon went, he walked with a constant retinue. Of his Dragonguard, Ser Alek, Ewan Bole and Toregg the Tall were on duty around him now. Men were constantly demanding his ear, and more and more problems demanded his attention.

“We want to take Winterfell, not destroy it,” Jon said, as he turned away with a final, forlorn glance. My hands are trembling, he suddenly realized. He willed them to still. “Sonagon’s frostfire could raze the castle to the ground, but I’d not destroy the seat of the north. Not while other options yet remained.”

“What about the men?” the Greatjon asked, folding his arms. “You have any problem torching those inside?”

“If they refuse to surrender, then none.”

“Good.” Tormund guffawed. “Then all we got to do is get them out of their castle.”

“They’ll be fools if they did. They likely have several thousand holed up in there. We’ve got eighteen thousand out here,” grunted Hugo Wull, the great-chested leader of Clan Wull. The Big Bucket, as he was called, was said to be the largest stomach in the north, and he looked even broader with a rugged tapestry of furs, leather and mail wrapped over his body. “This fight is ours.”

Men from the northern mountain clans had joined their host a week past, and before that Lord Umber’s and the Weeper’s hosts joined together at the curve of the White Knife. The last reinforcements from White Harbour sailed up the river to meet them. Slowly, painfully, his army had converged together.

Twelve thousand wildlings, Jon thought, and six thousand northmen. There were around one thousand from the mountain clans, one thousand Umbers and Mormonts, and one thousand from White Harbour. We could outnumber the Boltons three to one, Jon thought. And yet they still haven’t surrendered.

Yes, the Boltons had a castle, yet he had a dragon. Logic said that they never stood a chance. So why haven’t they surrendered?

Jon could raze Winterfell down if he had to. It would be a bitter victory for him, yet he could do it.

His army was camped around a small lake, a pond in the curve of the hills and sentinel trees. The host had encamped around the north and western edges of the lake, with wooden spikes jammed into the snow along with a bulwark of troops wrapped around the perimeter.

To the south, he could see the dragon roosting in the middle of the frozen lake, coiled like an island rising from the snow and ice. The water was so frozen the ice was as solid as the earth, easily strong enough for the dragon. The Dragonguard had set up a perimeter around the dragon to keep back any onlookers, but Sonagon had been snoozing sluggishly for days. Their slow progress and
his rationed meals food seemed to have gradually pushed Sonagon into a lull, for which Jon was grateful. A sleeping dragon was far better than an agitated one.

Supplies were already a problem, and the dark clouds stirring to the north gave him worry. The mountain clans and the supplies they brought had helped save lives, but even the semi-regular supply chains from White Harbour struggled to feed a host of their size. I could likely lose more men to starvation and the weather than I will to battle, Jon thought with a grimace. A quick battle is good for us.

We are only a day’s march away from Winterfell. Arya is so close.

Tormund and Greatjon were bickering again. “Gather up the war council and bring them to my cabin,” Jon ordered, turning around and limping away. “We must discuss battle plans. Call the Weeper, Lord of Bones, Ser Wylis Manderly, Jeremy Locke, Alysane Mormont, Robett Glover, Torghen Flint, Morgan Liddle and Brandon Norrey to me.” Now there’s a list of names I never thought I would see sitting around the same table together.

Jon’s cabin was a wooden thatch fishing hut on the lake. He had felt guilty about ejecting villagers from their homes, but there had been little choice. His commanders took the dozen simple wooden houses for themselves, but most of his men still had to sleep exposed to the elements. Jon himself took largest building in the hamlet, but it was a bare and empty barn – previously it had been used to store salmon. The fish had been requisitioned, but the stink remained. They used empty barrels and crates as chairs. It was hardly warmer inside than out, but it was shelter from the wind.

Jon’s squire, Bennard Locke, waited at the doorway. “Is there to be a battle, Your Grace?” the dark-haired boy asked. It was hard to tell if there was fear or excitement in his voice.

“Perhaps.” Likely. “If there is, I will fight on Sonagon. I expect my squires to hold position with the Dragonguard.”

Bennard’s face looked crestfallen. “Your Grace, I can fight! I am man grown, I should be with you in the battle.”

He’s fourteen; same age I was when I joined the Night’s Watch. The thought made Jon flinch. “You have your duties. You will support the guard – I expect you to stick by Fur’s side throughout. Pass the message onto him.”

It took a few hours for the commanders to gather from their various posts. Jon dressed himself in his armour – steel and iron wrapped under wolf and shadowskin furs – as he broke his fast on dried horsemeat. Two dozen men came and went giving reports and updates. His lords trekked through the doorway; some walked easily, others more tense. This close to the battle of Winterfell, every man in the camp kept their swords close and they were clad in chainmail at all times.

“Robett,” Jon called. “Any update on enemy numbers?”

Robett Glover shook his head, dark brown mane bristling with snow. Jon had appointed Robett as commander of their scouts and outriders, a duty the man had once served for Robb. “None, Your Grace,” he replied. “There are no hosts as far as Cerwyn; all resistance must be within Winterfell. If Roose Bolton has been consolidating his power, you could expect up to ten thousand.”

Ten thousand. Most likely less, though – the Boltons must be struggling to keep rank by now. The last commander through the door was Rattleshirt, his bones crackling as he skulked in at the rear.

“We are going to win this battle,” Jon announced to the room. “We have far more than their
number, and Sonagon can breach the walls. We can beat them.”

There were quiet nods, but hard eyes meeting his. “However,” Jon continued. “Right now, the difficulty is not how to beat them, but how to make it a good victory. We cannot afford a long fight, we cannot let them bleed us. We must capture Winterfell soundly.”

“And Ned’s girl,” added Morgan Liddle – the Middle Liddle, as he was called, although not out loud in his earshot – second son of Clan Liddle. His father was too old to fight, so the Middle Liddle came south along with Glover and Mormont reinforcements. Morgan was a big, bearded, bald man, wearing a byrnie of patched and rusted mail, arms folded. “We rescue Ned’s girl.”

“Aye,” Jon agreed. “We save Arya Stark and any other hostages they are holding.”

There was a moment of quiet. I do not want to raze Winterfell, so Sonagon cannot destroy the castle. And I cannot let my sister die.

“Roose Bolton is a cunning as they come,” Ser Wylis Manderly noted, casting a nervous look around the room. “He won’t fight any battle that he can’t win.”

“In all likelihood, Bolton has already fled,” Jeremy Locke agreed. He was a slender and short man – Lord Ondrew Locke’s son and heir – but he had hard, sharp eyes. Ser Wylis and Jeremy Locke both shared command of their rear. “Perhaps to Cerwyn, more likely to Moat Cailin to raise forces from allies in the south. He knew we were coming, why would he stay?”

“We haven’t received any reports of any large force heading south. Sonagon hasn’t spotted any host leaving, either.” Jon looked to Robett for confirmation, and the man just nodded.

“We have the men. We could take that castle,” the Weeper said with a scoff. All of the northern lords kept their distance from the man, Jon noticed. Come battle, the Weeper was to lead the vanguard.

“You could lose ten thousand men against Winterfell’s walls and count yourself lucky,” Alysane Mormont warned. The second daughter of Lady Maege was a big woman. She’d arrived days before with the reinforcements from the north, and was to command their reserves in her mother’s absence.

“How about with a dragon fighting alongside us?” said a gnarly toothless man with red-knuckled hands as big as hams. Old Torghen Flint, appointed commander of their train.

Jon shook his head. “Sonagon can’t aim his breath very well,” he said. “If it’s a dispersed battle, the dragon could hurt our own as much the enemy by scorching the land with dragonfire.”

“So all we got to do is getting them lined up in a row in the open for your dragon, then?” the Greatjon said sarcastically.

“The Norrey muttered, not quite under his breath. Brandon Norrey was wrinkled and slight of build, but sly-eyed and spry like an old fox clad in fur and iron. “How do you hope to win with it if you refuse to use it properly?”

“Sonagon will destroy as much as he helps.” Jon replied coolly. The thought of Mole’s Town and the Twins flashed before his eyes. “Sonagon will assist, of course, but this battle can only be won by men.”

The Norrey’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t reply. “If you’re a coward, Norrey, then walk away,” said the Middle Liddle, but his gaze drifted towards Jon. The Flint and The Wull muttered
agreements too. “The rest of us are fighting for the Ned’s girl.”

“And how do we breach those walls?” The Norrey objected. “We got the strongest walls in the north standing between us and the lass.”

“Then we need to draw them out. Set a trap,” Rattleshirt spoke up, his voice low, arms folded.

“Hard to imagine them failing for any trap when they know that dragon is out there,” Hugo Wull grumbled. “Them cowards are holed up in the castle like rats.”

“Fuck traps,” the Weeper objected. “I got raiders that are real good at climbing. We get hooks over those walls at night, we get in there and we start cutting throats. We’ll steal your sister from her bed and we’ll slaughter those fuckers from all sides.”

“You expect to climb over eighty-foot walls and cut through thousands of soldiers?” Jeremy Locke said doubtfully.

The Weeper grinned toothily. “That’s what my men are good at. Hells, I’ll lead them myself – you think I haven’t done it before?”

Jon noticed how the Greatjon and Torghen Flint stiffened, both of them hatefully glaring at the grinning Weeper. The wildling’s voice was taunting.

“It’s possible,” Jon admitted. “Very dangerous, but possible.”

Rattleshirt nodded in agreement. “It could work. We’ll have the dragon in the sky making a big distraction for us too,” the Lord of Bones agreed. “You southerners pretend like you’re ambushing one side of the walls, while the free folk climb over the opposite side and do all the real work.”

“You wildlings want another castle to rape and raze?” The Norrey growled, but others pushed in.

“If it goes wrong, you could be sending a lot of people climbing to their deaths,” Alysane Mormont warned.

“What I want to know,” the Big Bucket said loudly, “why should anyone be climbing at all? Your dragon has wings, don’t it?”

“Sonagon cannot ferry men over,” Jon said, shaking his head. “Not easily, at least. He could only carry fifty men at a time, and it takes too long to dismount.”

“How about dropping men on to the roof then?” The Wull grumbled. “If you’ve got a dragon with wings, we should bloody use them.”

“You said that dragonfire is too destructive to use easily,” Ser Wylis noted. “But what about other ways? Could your dragon drop boulders or whatnot?”

Jon wasn’t sure how to reply. He stayed quiet, hesitating, while the chorus of voices became more pitched.

“We need siege engines. Ropes,” Torghen Flint was shaking his head, his raspy voice crackling. “If your dragon could help make a bridge over the walls, then our men would do the rest.”

“It’s a bloody dragon,” the Greatjon grunted. “Let it go in first and break down the gates. Problem solved.”

“The Bolton men have been holed up in there for months,” Ser Wylis warned. “We’d be fools to
think they haven’t made preparations against a dragon. They would have trained their men not to panic, and expect them to have built scorpions and heavy weapons.”

That was a concerning thought. Sonagon wasn't invincible, and had to be used very carefully. *If I lose my dragon I lose everything. Sonagon is too important to risk.*

Jeremy Locke slammed his hand on the table. “I’ve seen your wolf. And that cat,” the northmen announced suspiciously, looking at Jon and then around at the wildlings. “Your king can control animals. Why not let them chew those men out?”

Jon was about to protest, when the Big Bucket guffawed. “We got giants,” the clansmen laughed. “Giants and mammoths. Let those bloody beasts go first and break the walls for us.”

“Those walls are eighty-foot-high, my lord, and the gates are solid. We don’t have enough giants to risk them on the front lines.”

“Your dragon is bigger, ain’t it? Use it.”

Sonagon could do a lot, and the dragon would be nigh-unbeatable flying overhead and spewing down frostfire. If the dragon had to break a fortified gate, however, or drop into the courtyard, then that became riskier. *All I need is to open up a way to get men into the castle,* Jon thought. *But how to do that when the castle is as strong as Winterfell and the enemy is heavily entrenched?*

The Wull was insisting on storming the gates. Ser Wylis argued constructing siege equipment, while other voices were mixed. Jon was caught trying to answer three different questions at once.

“Fuck off if you think free folk are going to bleed for you,” Rattleshirt snapped, glaring at The Wull. “It’s your castle, you southerners should take the front-lines.”

“You expect to use our men as fodder?” Jeremy Locke accused. “Like you do with Karstark?” That caused the Weeper to snap. Jon tried to intervene, but the voices were rising.

The meeting was dissolving into a pointless bicker. Tormund and the Greatjon were arguing again, the Weeper was spitting angrily against Ser Wylis and Jeremy Locke. Everyone at the table had their own ideas, their own way of doing things. *Nobody’s used to this type of battle,* he thought with a grimace. *Nobody had ever fought alongside a dragon before. Or with each other.*

“You southerns like to argue,” Rattleshirt sneered quietly, arms folded as he clattered towards Jon and then rested back against the wall. The thought made Jon grimace. *This is not a unified council.*

Jon listened for as long as he could handle, but every man was talking over each other. “Enough!” Jon snapped. It took a while for the room to silence. “Enough! We will not be divided. The Boltons will take advantage of us if we are. No, this is a battle that will be won calmly and with certainty.”

A man scoffed from the back. Jon suspected it was Rattleshirt. “Lord Umber,” said Jon carefully, looking around the room, “Tormund and Morgan Liddle shall lead the forward siege. We’ll set up camp at the east gate and fortify position. Sonagon will do regular passes overhead to keep them down. We assess their strength, and go from there.”

There were a few grunts and nods. “Rattleshirt, you take the northern boundary, Ser Wylis, the south. Watch for any attempts to flank us around the walls. We need eyes on every gate and scouts watching every stretch of outer wall.” Jon wasn’t going to risk his numbers trying to siege every gate; they’d focus their efforts on the Hunter’s Gate. Jon turned around. “Alysane, Lord Norrey and Jeremy – I need you to start preparing siege weapons. Battering rams, ladders and ropes at the very least. Stone-throwers and towers if you can.”
“And how bloody long is that going to take?” the Weeper grumbled.

“I did not come to camp outside castle’s walls,” the Big Bucket agreed. “Winter is almost upon us, boy. My men are here for Ned’s little girl, not to waste ourselves in the snows.”

“The weather could easily turn,” The Flint warned. “If we’re still exposed…”

“It will take as long as it needs to,” Jon said sharply. The argument gave him worry. *These are my commanders, they should not be squabbling such.* “We have the clear advantage, I will not lose it with rash action. We go forward step by step.”

“What of our supplies?” Ser Wylis pressed.

“And what of your sister?” the Middle Liddle demanded, louder. Morgan Liddle was focused on Arya, Jon noted.

“When they feel the jaws closing, they’ll ransom her as a hostage. Their men will mutiny, and sooner or later they’ll try for a deal to save themselves,” Jon promised, wishing he believed it.

“Aye,” the Greatjon nodded, mouth twisting. “But we will *not* let those rats get away. Not after what they’ve done.”

“No,” Jon agreed. “We will not.”

The men started to shuffle. “Tormund, Weeper,” Jon said quietly. “Get some good men ready to climb if need be.”

The two wildling raiders nodded as they headed to the door. He met with the men one by one afterwards, trying to delegate the commands fairly. Jon was painfully aware that every man there had more experience than he had. Still, their attitudes towards him ranged from stoic to vaguely aggressive. The Norrey only grunted at him.

*My army still has its fractures,* he thought with a grimace. *The northern coalition came together, but not cleanly. Sonagon is the only thing really keeping the host together.*

*That and Arya.*

Alysane Mormont was waiting for him afterwards; a short, chunky and muscular figure with big breasts and thighs, who seemed round under layers of leather and mail. Alysane was heavier-set than her mother, but Jon could see the likeness around the eyes. Alysane also shared her mother’s hands – she had a calloused grip that seemed built for holding a mace. Underneath the half-helm, her hard face was lined with worry.

“You know Winterfell is one of the strongest castles in the realm?” Alysane commented.  
“Somewhere between Casterly Rock and Storm’s End, if I had to rank it. She’s larger than the Red Keep and the walls are thicker than Harrenhal. Not the fanciest castle, but it’s hard to find many stouter or well-built.”

“I’m aware.”

“Then do not go thinking this battle is won just because you’ve got a dragon,” the woman warned. “Winterfell has never *once* been taken by siege before and I worry that men seem to think the Boltons are no threat to us. I do not like the attitude in your army.”

“Yes. I will need your help to keep them in line,” agreed Jon. “Stop any from advancing too far. I
don’t trust the Boltons not to set a trap.”

Alysane gave a curt nod, but the discontent on her forehead didn’t ease. “Aye. Just be wary, Your Grace.” The honorific sounded more flippant than respectful. Her head barely bobbed as she bowed and left.

Jon pursed his lips. *This is the last battle,* he told himself. *Winterfell is only days away.*

He turned to look at a rough map one of the scouts had carved in a piece of bark, with the walls as crude oblong and the gates and positions marked in crosses. Jon remembered his childhood home, and tried to imagine besieging it. Winterfell was huge – it spanned several acres, the outer granite walls eighty feet high, the inner walls a hundred feet. The battlements were old, but they had never decayed. The great keep alone could withstand an invasion.

*I could have another five thousand men here in a fortnight,* Jon thought. Sigorn of Thenn and forces from the Shadow Tower had yet to arrive. *There may be up to twenty-five thousand with me in a month. If they turn this into a prolonged siege, we won’t lose.*

Still, perhaps the greatest threat was the weather. An early winter storm could be devastating for a large force camped outside. *Is that the Boltons’ plan – hold out and hope for the elements to take care of us?*

No, Jon wasn’t willing to wait months. *Sonagon would end the battle for us, one way or another.*

The visitors to his cabin didn’t stop. Even as the sun started to drip down over the cloudy hills, more and more protesters were coming and going. Jon had to oversee everything from supplies to perimeter, to give a hundred different orders. “You’ll wear yourself out like this, Snow,” Ewan Bole warned from the doorway, as he stood guard stiffly.

Jon could only grimace. The news had spread quickly that they would be marching out on the morn.

It was dusk, but the thick, black clouds left the air bleak and cold. Jon was wide awake, fretfully pacing all night. He could have looked for Val, but he was left too anxious and unquiet to even think of taking comfort with her.

The camp was stirring restlessly, torches fighting against the wind and snow. *I am so close,* Jon thought, *only days away.* The stress of leading a whole army felt unbearable sometimes.

He saw the dragon snoozing gently on the ice, white scales shimmering in the torchlit gloom. His Dragonguard had set up camps circling the dragon, huddled around fires and small fishing holes on the lake. There were twenty-seven men in his Dragonguard now, but only twenty of them were with the host at the moment.

Jon reached out gently, and the dragon felt tired. Too snoozy to respond. *Mayhaps Sonagon is the only creature that is sleeping tonight.*

The camp was fortified. The men were organised. It was nearing dusk, which meant there was nothing to do but wait until morning to start the final march to Winterfell. Jon looked around the camp staring at the bulwark of shovelled snow and earthen spikes around their camp.

*Tomorrow, I assault the castle I was raised in,* he thought with a sigh. He could feel the tension in the night. Tomorrow there will be a battle, perhaps several. It lingered in the air, put everybody on edge.
In the sky, a gibbous pale moon glimmered behind the black, swirling clouds, barely visible. *Why is it that full moon always makes everything feel more… agitated?*

A muffled roar echoed from the distance, followed by the sound of great mammoths trumpeting. Jon could barely see the giant camp at the far side of the host – huge figures huddled like rocks across the lake. The giants and their mammoths were still a source of conflict in the camp; even after months of travelling with the free folk they had to be kept to their own corner at the north-eastern fringes of the host. As devastating as the giants and their mounts were in battle, they were not the most docile to camp alongside.

*Much like Sonagon, actually,* Jon thought with a grimace. Twice now, men had almost died from irritating Sonagon in his sleep, and it reached the point that Sonagon had to be kept well away from the host.

The sound of a mammoth’s horn filled the air. “Toregg,” Jon ordered to his man. “Find Hatch and see to the giants, they sound unsettled.”

“Aye, king,” Toregg nodded, before stomping off. *Doubtless there would be another complaint of northmen intruding on the giant clans, or their mammoths breaking the perimeter,* Jon thought. Such scuffles happened several times a week.

Across the ridge, there was sound of yet another squabble breaking out between free folk and northmen, while raiders and soldiers rushed to extinguish it. Jon turned, trying to assess it. The camp was never quiet or peaceful.

“Snow,” Jon heard the Greatjon call to him from behind. “We need words.”

“Lord Umber.” He turned. The lord’s jaw was tight, his gaze dark under his half-helm.

“I’ve been hearing things, Snow. What do you know about Creston?” the Greatjon demanded.

“I’m not familiar.”

“It’s a village by the kingsroad to the north of here. Little place, my son and I stopped at it often enough on the road to Winterfell.” His voice was grim, walking closer imposingly like a wall of mail and muscle. “A few farms, a mill, a pretty lass used to serve in the tavern.” There was a pause, as if daring Jon to speak. He didn’t. “And now I hear that your wildlings burnt the village to the ground.”

*What? Dammit.* “Lord Umber, I was not–”

“Does it fucking look like I care for excuses?” the Greatjon growled, dangerously low. The man was often shouting, but his voice was most dangerous when it turned quiet. “You promised me you’d keep those savages under control, Snow, and then my men overhear yours bragging – bragging! – about what they did to that village.”

“It was not my order,” Jon protested. He could see the commotion in the camp spreading to the north. *Dammit.*

“Yet it happened. You promised me there’d be no raids, Snow.”

“I will see to it, Lord Umber, I will.” He stepped forward, sizing up against the lord. The Greatjon looked ready to spit on him. “I don’t know which warband was responsible, but I’ll find out.”

“Aye, and now I’m wondering how many more villages have been pillaged that I haven’t even
“I will find whoever is responsible, I will make sure—”

“Your Grace!” A voice called through the gloom, and Jon heard shuffling feet through the snow. A podgy figure was running towards him. Harlow was panting for breath, face covered in wool-lined hood. The Greatjon glowered. “Your Grace, there’s – the Ser Wylis says there’s a rider from White Harbour, Your Grace. They are calling for you.”

“A rider?” At once, Jon twitched, tightening his shadowskin cloak and hood against the chill. “A scout?”

“I think a messenger, Your Grace,” Harlow said with a gulp, quickly lowering his head.

“We ain’t done here,” the Greatjon warned looking at Jon.

Jon turned to the Greatjon impatiently. “I will deal with this later, my lord. If there’s been word I must see to it.”

There were other bodies moving in the same direction. From the Manderly encampment, a trumpet bellowed. Jon heard Lord Umber calling after him, while Harlow quickly rushed away to spread the word. On the ice, he saw the fires of his Dragonguard stirring.

The Manderly encampment was towards the southern edge of the village, by the broken and rickety dock on the edge of the icy lake. In summer, you could have launched fishing vessels from the small boathouse that would trawl all the way to Long Lake, but not when the waters were ice. Ser Wylis and the White Harbour knights took the old boathouse for themselves, while their men huddled in wool and sealskin tents compared to the hide and leather of free folk. House Manderly provided the vast majority of their heavy horse, and the green merman banners fluttered over tents. Another trumpet blew – they weren’t under attack, but calling for attention urgently. “What the blazes is going on there?” Jon heard the Greatjon grumble behind him as he followed. Jon didn’t reply.

He saw Ser Wylis’ party at edge of the encampment, figures gathered in front of a bonfire by the boathouse. A crowd was already forming, their sharp murmurs barely audible over the windy wails. Jon heard Tormund’s voice shouting over the din. “Bugger off, you cravens!”

“If we do not move out now, we could—” That was a highborn voice, fighting amidst the rising frenzied racket.

“You don’t get to give us orders, kneeler!” a wildling jeered.

“–is more important, they won’t be able to hold!”

“The commands are clear, we must gather south–!”

“You do not command us.” Jon easily recognised the Weeper’s guttural voice, growling to the sound of murmured agreements.

“–under attack!”

Jon broke into lopsided jog. He could see the figures gathered before a bonfire in front of a barnhouse, horses neighing while more and more pressed to be heard.
“What’s going on?” Jon shouted, while Ser Alek and Ewan shoved their way through. Jon noticed how the White Harbour knight received more than a few glares. His voice struggled to be heard – Jon was wearing his hood, and few had recognised the king approaching. “What is happening?”

“Order, you bastards!” the Greatjon boomed, so loud that everyone went silent. “The blazes is this?”

He saw Ser Wylis, red-faced, caught off-guard. “Your Grace,” the knight gasped. “The southern patrols spotted a rider, but in the snows they weren’t sure. Three men had to go out to find him, I thought it urgent, but your wildlings…”

“Speak, Ser Wylis,” Jon ordered. “There was a rider?”

“Aye,” the Weeper snorted, and his armour clanged as he stepped forward next to Jon. “And these cravens want to run away.”

“A messenger hailing from House Beck of Daleton to the south, the man rode his horse so hard the beast nearly died. House Beck relayed a raven from Ramsgate,” Ser Wylis insisted, “who received the message from House Locke, who speaks of fishing sloops coming from Sisterton. Your Grace, Lord Locke must have sent many ravens, we’re lucky that this one managed to find us, Oldcastle is reporting—”

“The witless old man.”

“—is reporting a fleet of warships sailing through the Bite. Your Grace, White Harbour itself is under threat.”

What? Jon could see the nervousness in Ser Wylis’ face. Many other northern knights looked the same. “How many?”

“He writes of a great fleet. Truthfully, Lord Locke doesn’t know, but he guesses fifty.”

“Aye, and I could write that my member is four-foot-long and oft used as a spear,” Tormund harrumphed. “Those little words mean nothing unless someone is actually about to get stabbed.”

Standing next to Ser Wylis, Jeremy Locke flustered. “You doubt my father’s word?”

“I doubt his sense, his wits and, hells, his messenger,” Tormund retorted. “How do we know those words are true?”

“Let me be clear, ser,” Jon pressed. “Are you saying that White Harbour is under attack?”

“Aye,” Ser Wylis gulped. “Lord Locke writes with the utmost urgency. The garrison at the city will not be able to hold.”

Jon shook his head, but he felt uneasy. “It doesn’t make sense, a fleet of fifty ships? On the east coast? How could House Bolton muster such a thing?”

We were never expecting an attack against White Harbour. We secured the lands piecemeal, and House Bolton doesn’t have a fleet.

“Perhaps it’s not them, the fleet of King’s Landing, or the Redwyne’s…”

“They are both indisposed with their own wars,” the Greatjon said. “There should have been more warning.”
“Your Grace, I do not know,” said Ser Wylis. He sounded pained. “But the message is at least three days old already. White Harbour could be under attack right now.”

“What of the White Harbour fleet?”

“Manderly’s fleet is dispersed, but even if it musters in time they will not be able to hold the harbour against such numbers,” Jeremy Locke chimed. “The city is in peril.”

“Only if the force is a large as the man says,” the Weeper said, to mutters of agreement. Lord Umber looked torn. “How can we base anything on a single bloody scrap of paper?”

“But if it is,” Ser Wylis urged. “Your Grace, White Harbour will need support. Let us gather mounted men to move swiftly. And we must fly the dragon south.”

“On one letter, on the eve of battle?!” Tormund’s voice was incredulous, and Jon was caught looking at Ser Wylis’ desperate face. He felt the dread seeping through. “Far more likely that someone is sending bloody lies.”

Move Sonagon south? “The storms…” Jon muttered. They had seen the black clouds rumbling south, not even Sonagon could fly safely through such weather. When the storms hit it could well block the path.

“It’s a trap,” the Weeper snapped, glowering.

“My father would not have lied…”

“What of our families?” Ser Wylis insisted. “We have families – wives, children, babes – in the city, to lose such… We must delay the march on Winterfell, Your Grace, turn south instead.”

“To delay costs lives, boy,” an old wildling said angrily. “We got eighteen thousand men exposed right here in the snow.”

“If we knew for sure the words were true, then maybe…” the Greatjon muttered, and then shook his head. “But no, we can’t commit from one letter alone. Those words and seal are too easily forged.”

Jon agreed, but Ser Wylis’ face looked desperate. Jeremy Locke was by his side, and many other White Harbour knights looked unnerved. “And yet the second letter could arrive far too late! To wait on a second rider reaching us, in this weather, how could we…?”

“We can’t trust them,” the Weeper insisted.

“You dare to doubt–” Jeremy bristled.

“If there’s an assault–”

“–re outside the gates of Winterfell!”

The voices reached fever pitch. In the distance, he heard the sound of giants booming, barely audible over the wind and snow. The ripples were spreading outwards, the whole camp felt like a melting pot. Where could such a fleet come from? Could White Harbour truly be under attack? His initial instincts said no, but…

Jon’s hands tightened. “Enough!” he snapped, but the voices barely ceased. “Enough! Ser Wylis, I understand your concern, but I cannot move Sonagon right now without proper cause.”
The knight’s mouth opened to object. “However,” Jon continued. “I have my shadowcat at New Castle still. If the city is truly under attack, I can soon tell through her.”

“You can know?” Jeremy Locke demanded.

“Aye, I am linked to her.” And yet the shadowcat is far away, and my link to Phantom has always been tenuous. Jon grimaced. “I need… I need concentration. Let me focus. Give me time, and I will bring you a better answer.”

Ser Wylis gaped, and then nodded. Other northmen looked confused too – few of them understood warging.

Phantom is sealed in her chambers. Would any of the household think to warn the shadowcat in an emergency? Jon could only try to concentrate, but the chorus of voices still rang around him. The noise and wind echoed around his head.

Jeremy was shouting that that wasn’t good enough, while Ser Wylis was fretting. Arguments rising from the free folk and knights all around him. Focus, Jon pushed. He could only try to feel the sliver of the shadowcat’s presence. Focus.

… He felt stone floors, darkness, and hurried noises…

And yet the voices still rang in his eye. More and more demands coming at him, making it impossible to think: “What is happening?”, “The letter says…”, “Your Grace, the giants…”

“Fuck you and you kneelers.” Jon heard the Weeper curse. “Fuck you if you think the free folk will jump to attention for you and yours!”

Jon’s eyes snapped open. In the crowd, he saw the Weeper facing off against a burly knight. “You are obligated to White Har–”

“I ain’t obligated to shit,” the wildling’s voice rang, spittle dribbling with every word. “You and your pansy knights don’t order free folk around.”

“That’s enough, Weeper!” Jon snapped. The air was too tense, everyone’s blood running too hot. The dread and the panic seemed to seep into the air. This is not helping. “Move these people out, this is over! I want this fire cleared. Weeper, go patrol the bulwarks.”

The raiders face twisted in fury, but Jon was already turning away. “Clear it out, we’ll deal with this properly in the morn,” Jon ordered to Tormund, and then turned to Ser Alek. “Ser, see to Ser Wylis. He seems distressed – reassure him, keep him content.”

Both Tormund and Ser Alek nodded. Too much happening, Jon cursed. Could barely keep track of half it. I need time to think and focus.


“We’ll deal with it in the morn!” Jon snapped. With cooler heads.

There was already a crowd, blocking his way back to his cabin. Jon could have groaned. The night was stressed and anxious and nobody was sleeping. It didn’t sound like the arguments around him were settling.

Morgan Liddle was at the front of the group, along with many other clansmen. “Snow, I heard about the letter,” he growled. In the dark, his eyes flashed with anger.
Jon’s voice turned curter than he intended. “Ser, the Manderly men will inform you, but excuse me—”

“I want you to inform me, Snow,” Morgan replied, stepping sharply in front of him. There were shouts from the free folk. There was an iron axe at the clansman’s side, and his hand wasn’t far. “Is it true?”

Jon blinked, startled. The clansmen were stirring, and the Middle Liddle looked seething. “Excuse me?”

“Bloody bastard,” Morgan cursed. “I knew we shouldn’t have called for you, Snow.”

“Stand back, Morgan,” Jon growled, fingers twitching for Dark Sister. “What are you speaking of?”

“The letter, Snow.” Morgan waved a curled parchment in his other hand accusingly, as if that was supposed to mean something. “You think we wouldn’t find out?”

“You are mistaken, ser.” What is this? The man seemed to think Jon was being evasive.

The man’s jaw clenched, the scar over his cheek twisting. He stepped in confrontation, towering over Jon. “You deny it? I got from your own man, Snow. You promised that you would save the girl, and I’m fool for trusting an oathbreaker’s word.”

Jon stepped forward too, until they were nearly pressing against each other. Ewan Bole shouted warning, while free folk clutched spears. “I have not seen that parchment before. I do not know what it says. You are mistaken. And I do not have time for this.”

He tried to push back, but the man blocked his way. “Step back Morgan!” Ewan shouted.

“ Fucking liar,” the Middle Liddle spat, slamming the parchment against Jon’s chest. “It says that you’re a fucking liar.”

The heavy hand jarred his shoulder. Jon fumbled trying to grip the parchment in his gloves. In the dark he couldn’t make out any words, but it was written in pink paper. Boltons? Jon thought confusedly.

“I trusted the Lady Mormont when she said we could trust you,” the man cursed. He was really angry, and Jon was just left baffled. “And the one thing that you promised – the one thing that actually made us rally for you – you said you would rescue the Ned’s girl.”

Wildlings stepped forward warningly, and Jon had to hold up his hand to stop them. “She is my sister and I will.”

“Then explain the bloody letter,” Morgan growled. “And the nose!”

What?

The seal was already cracked, the parchment worn. It was so hard to even pull the page straight in the howling wind and flecks of snow. Jon had to squint to make out the words in the flickering torchlight. “To Jon Snow, King Beyond the Wall,” the curled handwriting read, “I, Roose Bolton, Lord of the Dreadfort, Warden of the North, offer my complete surrender.”

What??
All around him, there were shouts and rustling bodies. The Middle Liddle was demanding answers from Jon when he had none to give. The mountain clans were well and truly riled up. All semblance of order was lost in orchestra of incensed voices. It felt like the chaos was rising around him. What’s going on here?

Jon could only struggle to make out words, still staring baffled. “All I ever intended was a peaceful land and a quiet people, and yet I will not ruin the realm in defiance. In return for safe passage for me, my wife and my loyal men beyond the Narrow Sea, taking with us the wealth of our houses,” the letter read, “I offer the complete and unconditional surrender of my forces, and the safe return of Arya Stark of Winterfell.

“My prime concern is the security of the realm, my family and my allies, and I am forced to place my faith in that you can preserve it.

“If accepted, I shall surrender Ramsay Snow, my ill-blooded ilk, to answer for his crimes. I do not, I have never, condoned such brutality; I am prepared to surrender Ramsay to your justice. All I seek is the promise of safe exile and there need not be a war.”

It was signed, “Roose Bolton, Lord of the Dreadfort.”

People were shouting. Jon was caught off-guard, trying to keep up. “And that arrived a month ago, with more following it. Lord Bolton offered the same surrender four fucking times,” Morgan Liddle accused. “Why the fuck did you refuse the offer, Snow, and why did you not tell anyone of it?”

Wait, what? Jon was struggling to process it all, but Morgan Liddle had already reached his own conclusion. All around him the camp was howling. “I have not seen this before.”

“Your maester says otherwise. It was delivered to your quarters.” What? “You know I think, Snow? I think you never intended to save Ned’s girl from the beginning. I think it’s better for you if you let Arya Stark die, so nobody can challenge you.”

“Tell us about the nose, Snow.” That was Old Torghen Flint’s voice, staggering with his spear as a walking stick. “The Bastard of Bolton threatened you with the poor girl’s severed nose, and then you abandoned her for the dog to cut off more parts of her. You wanted Arya Stark to die.”

“I… I did not,” Jon protested, but his head was spinning. The severed, wrinkled nose that Ramsay Bolton sent to him at Castle Black. The nose? I never told anyone about the nose. I’ve been trying not to even think about the nose. Sam and Val were the only ones who knew of the pink letter, how could the clansmen find out…?

“You didn’t want a surrender, did you?” a man accused. “You wanted to burn them all and let Arya Stark die.”

They were pushing too close, the crowd stirring. “Stand back!” Ewan Bole ordered. “Your Grace, get back.”

“Why did you keep the letters a secret?” Torghen Flint demanded. Crowds turn into mobs turn into riots… “Why hide them unless you had something to hide?”

“I did not keep that bloody letter from you, I have never seen it before!” Jon snapped, but there was no chance to explain. Too many voices all shouting, he couldn’t reply to them.

Their glares were all accusing. They found these letters and they were already convinced of his guilt, for it confirmed what they had already feared. The mountain clans were fiercely loyal to
Stark. *Declaring for Arya was the only thing that persuaded them to come to my side, and if they think I abused that…*

He heard more accusations. Jon’s head was spinning. “You are mistaken,” he shouted, shaking his head and pushing his way through. Heart was pounding. *Get to the cabin. Calm down, focus…*

“Enough of this, I have urgent matters to see to.”

“You do not walk away from us, Snow,” Morgan Liddle bellowed. “We want answers.”

Bodies all around him, and in the dark Jon couldn’t hardly make out anything more than stomping and flickering figures.

“Your Grace…!” That was Ewan Bole, shouting warningly.

He heard White Harbour men stomping up behind him, their green cloaks billowing in the increasing wind. “Ser Wylis demands to know what of White Harbour!” A White Harbour knight shouted from behind.

There was a panic rising. More voices, blurring into each other. Jon tried to see, but the bodies blocked his view. All the cries muffled together, a howl like the storm…

“What’s bloody going on here?”

“You want your sister to die, trying to usurp…”

“Bastard–!”

“Fires!”

“We must return to the city…!”

“Snow, the giants are–!”

“*Fucking wildlings!* A sudden voice shrieked through the gloom. Jon didn't know who was bellowed, but it was like scraping a flint over dried kindling. “*Fucking savages!*”

Something snapped. He heard a muffled cry, and bodies thumping together. A fight. The earth rumbled. Somebody lunged at somebody else. Jon couldn’t even tell who was attacking who, or where…

There was no order, there was just so many bodies. All of them armed and on-edge and not sure what was happening… “*ENOUGH OF THIS!*” Jon screamed at the top of his lungs. They all wore hoods against the snow, in the crowd and dark it was so hard to even tell who was who. “*ENOUGH OF TH–*”

And suddenly the cabin collapsed as with an almighty shape exploded through. Jon felt something collide against his skull.

The earth trembled, great roar trumpeting…

Bodies screaming, running in chaos.

Flames, immense cries of pain.

His head spinning, couldn’t understand…
Jon glimpsed a great mammoth running amok, stampeding wildly through his cabin. Its shaggy fur flickering smoky red, blazing with the stench of scorched meat as the creature went mad with panic. Everyone was running, crashing into each other, while the mammoth thrashed.

Its great trunk blared with an ear-shattering cry. *It’s on fire,* Jon realised dumbly. *Someone set the mammoths on fire, and they stampeded…*

All around him, it was like the whole camp was being plunged into pandemonium. People were running, screaming, fighting. He saw more flames; the ground was shaking…

His forehead was bleeding. A splinter from the cabin cracked against his skull when the mammoth burst through. Ash and smoke in the air. The whole crowd had been sent scattering, he couldn’t even make out any figures.

*Under attack.* That one thought pushed its way to forefront of his mind. *We’re under attack. Need to muster, need to rally…*

Men screaming his name. “Snow!” the call came. A chant in the dark, the voices strained, urgent. “Snow, Snow, Snow!”

“To me!” he screamed, but he was still gasping for air. Bodies rushing towards him. “To m–”

His throat jammed, the word turned into a grunt. His blurry eyes focused to see a flash of steel. A dagger in a man’s hand, as it slashed at him. Jon twisted from the knife, just enough so it barely grazed his skin. He felt blood welling over his cheek, the warmth stinging against the cold.

Jon could barely even make out the figures approaching him. They had just been shapes in the crowd, slipping out of the blackness. His hands reached for Dark Sister, but his fingers were suddenly stiff and fumbling.

Steel flashed again. His flailing arms managed to catch the blow from the front, but the blade from the side caught him completely off-guard.

His felt himself gasp as blade hit his torso, grinding against chainmail. He didn’t feel the edge, it was more like a kick to his chest. Pain washed over him. *Stick them with the pointy end.* His whole body trembled, trying to thrash, but in the dark and madness…

Someone was still screaming for him, calling his name. He heard the clash of fighting. In that moment, there was absolutely nothing but stampeding feet, black shadows and screaming shapes.

---

**Val**

It was a cold night. Tense. Quiet and restless.

She sat and she watched the sun slowly setting over the snows, her face huddled under double-lined furs. Val had spent a long time debating on whether to try to sleep; to keep herself focused for the coming morn, but her nights had been restless for a while now. In an army on the march, most would welcome whatever rest they could have, wherever they could find it. But something in Val kept her awake, restless and pondering, where others would sleep.

Instead, tonight, she sat by the cages of ravens, sheltered under a thick hide tent, snows packed around it. The birds had been carted by donkey all through the snows. The black birds fluttered,
pecking at their metal bars, cawing for corn. The maester, a brown-haired, round-shouldered and aging man named Medrick seemed nervous with her presence. Still, she didn’t care to leave, and the birds fascinated Val.

There were two maesters travelling with the army; one a young greenboy named Henly who seemed constantly scared out of his wits, and the other the fretting, fidgeting Maester Medrick. Henly had come serving House Slate along with the Manderly men, while Medrick had been with Lord Umber’s host since Hornwood. As far as Val could tell, their duties including ferrying letters, seeing to injuries among the nobles, and trying to stay away from all the free folk.

Outside, the sky was dark and the camp was ready for war, but during her restless walks Val oft found herself lingering by the maesters’ tents. Benefits of being the king’s paramour, she thought with a quiet scoff. I can go wherever I wish.

Paramour. She knew what it meant, but the label was meaningless to her. Still, these southerns seemed to have put the name onto her, and Val had better things to do than object.

The ravens pecked the tips of her fingers hungrily, while she dangled her hand over the cage. Maester Medrick was fidgeting, cycling around his birds with handful of corn, as he always did when he was nervous. He is a podgy greybeard, not a man comfortable with war.

“So these birds,” Val asked curiously, after long stretch of silence. “They send messages. But how do they learn where to go?”

The maester blinked in surprise. “My lady?”

“These birds, how do they work? I’ve known men who trained hawks to hunt, but how could you train so many birds to deliver messages?”

“Um, the ravens are trained to recognise castles, my lady,” Medrick explained. “They are bred for strong homing instincts. Most know only of a single castle. Some few can be taught to fly between two or three castles, but those are rare.”

“Rare,” a raven echoed between the bars. The maester flicked at the cage. “Rare, rare.”

“So I understand. Then you keep a bird trained for a certain location?” The maester nodded. Val scratched her chin. “But then how do you get the birds back?”

“Often you don’t,” Medrick admitted. “Most of a maester’s rookery is collected from birds that have been sent to you.”

“And if you run out of birds?” she mused. “If you send more ravens than you receive?”

“Then you must either trade birds from a nearby castle, or send a request to the Citadel in Oldtown for a new shipment.”

“And then who teaches them?” Val pressed. “Does that mean there must be a person who walks a learning raven to a new location and repeats the name? Is there a poor sod who has to travel between every castle to teach the ravens?”

The maester seemed off-guard by her questions. Perhaps it was so mundane to them that nobody else asked? “It is difficult,” he explained, blinking. “Most maesters have to work together to teach their flocks. When a bird is learning, first we teach it to follow a more experienced bird. Quite often, there are birds that arrive with blank parchment – they are requests for a local maester to train that bird, release it, ensure it comes back to their castle reliably – and afterwards it is expected
they send the trained bird back to the maester who sent the request.”

“I see.” Val mused. “And yet that could only work so long as every maester train each other’s flock.”

“Just so.”

“Is that not exploitable? What stops one person from using their birds without helping any others? Or couldn’t an enemy steal all the ravens from a certain a castle?”

“The... The Citadel, my lady. That is why all maesters are trained at Oldtown – we are an order that must rise above such conflicts. Maesters must focus on the greater good,” There was just a hint of a quiver in Medrick’s voice. “Maesters must share and trade with each other freely to keep the communication working. Lest your castle may end up like Greywater Watch, which can neither send nor receive any messages at all because they have neglected their ravencraft.”

She nodded as she moved her hand away from one of the cages. The bird cawed for corn. “But you are not in your castle at the moment – these ravens won’t know where to return to, correct?”

“That is correct. We can only reliably send messages; a camp on the move cannot receive them. The birds will return to their trained roost only.”

Her gaze moved around the cages. The maester stood stiffly like he was being interrogated, Val noted with amusement. She was just curious.

“I took a good selection ravens, trained to the most significant of the northern castles, and a few of the greater keeps. And I keep track of the birds diligently,” he explained quickly, pointing to each in turn. “Those birds are trained to White Harbour, they are important. Those are for Last Hearth. Those three are for Castle Black, and they have suddenly become in high demand. I cannot send any raven further south than Moat Cailin, I’m afraid, with the exception of one bird trained for King’s Landing, which I dare not send but for the direst message.”

“I thought you said that maesters train all other maesters’ birds.”

“They try. But Hornwood has had little reason to message distant castles in the realm for a long time. If my lord wished to send message to a holding for which we lacked the birds, then common practice is to relay the raven through a greater rookery, like Winterfell or White Harbour, and request for that maester to forward the message onwards. If I were to send a letter for... somewhere in Dorne, for example, it is possible that the letter would have to be relayed between several castles.”

“So many distant places. How queer to think your little words can travel between them,” she mused. “But it hardly the most secure means.”

“It has its limitations,” Maester Medrick said, before risking, “You... You are very curious about ravencraft, my lady.”

“It is... interesting,” she admitted. “You southerners treat it as something so mundane.”

She wondered what it would be like, to have a raven’s wings. To be able to fly between some many queer and exotics places, lands so vast that Val hadn’t even known of them beyond the Wall. Tis a big world, Val thought with a twinge of sadness.

“The art of ravenry is one of the cornerstones on which the Citadel itself was founded,” Medrick explained. “It is one of the core duties of every maester, to allow communication between the
realm. Without us, the realm would shatter and break.”


“Indeed.” What a strange thought. Val tried to imagine any of the free folk devoting their life to something as trivial as other people’s letters, and she couldn’t. Sacrificing themselves for the convenience of others. And yet, nevertheless, all of these ravens in cages and maesters in chains kept this southern realm running. Each one of them was a greying old man, but they contributed to something greater.

How long would it have taken an army of this size to assemble, if we hadn’t have been able to send ravens from White Harbour to Castle Black to Eastwatch to Last Hearth? They would have had to wait for messengers on foot, and maybe they would have lost their timing altogether.

Maybe that was why the free folk had always lost in every invasion, she mused. The southerners were just so much better established, better organised, the ‘wildlings’ had never really had a chance.

Outside, the sun was setting, and the gloomy skies were turning dark. The camp felt restless. Nervous. It would likely be a battle tomorrow, and the unease lingered in the air. Val had found that it was better to distract herself rather than fret.

“Help,” a raven cawed dumbly from its cage. “Help, help, help.”

Val stared at the bird curiously, as a few others picked up the chant. She just shrugged, and turned away.

Jon will be pacing, she thought quietly. He always started pacing, winding himself up and obsessing manically. She knew Jon well enough to know how prone he was to turning stoic or snapping with nerves. Perhaps Val would have gone to him, except Jon wouldn’t want to ease off tonight. She cared for him, sweet fool that he was, but there were times when getting him to relax was like drawing teeth.

“Jon,” another raven cawed. That caused Val to stare. She wondered where it had picked up the word. “Jon, Jon, Jon.”

Noise from outside, beyond the tent’s furs. The camp was a bustle. Val didn’t care to be caught up in it, she wished to linger in this little place of peace and quiet.

She roused herself and idly set herself to her curiosity. She found herself thumbing through scrolls and parchments filled with words that she could not understand, keeping out of the maester’s way as he saw to his own duties. Medrick’s logged all of the army’s correspondence, she noted. She couldn’t make sense of the words, but she could still tell something of the nature of most of the letters. The messages meant for nobles and lords were all long and squiggly, filled with far more details, courtesies and addresses than needs be, while the stock counts and scouting reports were all short and abrupt, oft with few words, some marked with more scrawling numbers than words. Many field commanders couldn’t read, and so they oft sent doodled sketches with stick figures and maps rather than proper letters.

Occasionally, there were small sheaves of parchment with large, crude lettering, written by a hand using the charcoal as one would a carving knife to wood. She had caught glimpses of these letters in Jon’s rooms. So the Lord of Bones has been teaching himself to write, Val noted, riffling through the sheaves.
There were quite a few letters from Rattleshirt, actually.

She found herself distracted, flicking through the crude letters and trying to figure out what they were saying. Maester Medrick was twitching, his hands fumbling as he went through the locks on the cages, feeding the ravens a cage at a time. Oft, he would fumble, dropping a handful of corn to the floor of the cage, where the ravens would fight over the cobs. Val observed him through the corner of her eye, as he fumbled yet again, slightly sweating despite the cold. He is really nervous.

After a passing of minutes, a haggle of mountain clansmen came looking for the maester, and he met with them outside the tent. Whatever they spoke of, she didn’t pay attention. The maester went off together with the clansmen, seeming to linger outside the tent for a moment, not quite looking at her. Val frowned, realising her sudden solitude.

Time trickled by. Slowly, the hairs on the back of her neck started to shiver. She went through all the papers and squiggles again, picking out Rattleshirt’s. She could tell the Lord of Bone’s letters from the hand they were written in. The force from Eastwatch, under his command, had joined them two weeks ago. Yet there were copies of letters sent by him, from after that time. Now why is Rattleshirt sending messages when there was nothing to be sent?

Val couldn’t read, but she had good instincts. Something felt off but she couldn’t quite place it. It took her some time to realise what was bothering her; Medrick’s organisation was meticulous. He kept all the slivers of parchments jammed under the respective raven’s cages, everything ordered by sender and time, copies of letters sent and received in separate loosely bound books. Every letter sent and received had been copied and put into its place in the maester’s system. And yet there were holes in the system, spaces were no letters had been sorted. Differences in the numbers of letters sent and received. On its own, it wouldn’t have brought about her attention – ravens are sometimes lost, the maester had said – but the numbers were high, too high, for letters from certain specific locations and commanders.

It was all so foreign to her, but Val had to go through it again. She tried to match up the birds to their destinations, which ones were from White Harbour, which ones to Eastwatch. The nagging suspicion in the back of her head just kept on getting louder.

“Jon, Jon, Jon…” the ravens mournfully intoned, attracting her brief glance.

The southron lords all insisted on having their maester around. But who really checks what the maester is doing?

In the distance, she heard a roar coming from the giant’s camp. Snow and wind whipped through the night. Outside, she saw men shuffling in the dark.

After a moment, Val made her decision.

She pulled her cloak on quickly and stepped out through the muddy slurry, between the mismatch of tents and fire pits clustered together haphazardly. It seemed like everyone was sharpening swords, fletching arrows or wrapping rope for the march tomorrow.

Val saw the mountain clansmen stirring, and then she caught the glimmer of the maester’s chain in the gloom. Men were haggling together, ganged around Maester Medrick. Val couldn’t hear the words, but she could read their posture and tone. The maester was crouched, scared, while mountain clansmen were demanding answers.

In one of their hands, she caught sight of a pale pink parchment. A bald man held up the parchment
Val kept her hair hidden under the hood, watching from the distance. She looked for familiar faces – free folk she trusted, that could reinforce her – but she saw only strangers in every tent.

Men were moving out, trekking through the fire pits. Val’s hands twitched towards the blades on her hip – two steel shortswords with leather grips, hidden under her cloak.

This is wrong. Something was happening, yet the camp was so large she could barely tell what.

As soon as the men left, the maester was left tottering in the snow nervously. First chance she got, she confronted Medrick. The old man squealed – actually squealed – as she lunged at him, grabbed him by the collar and dragged him to one side.

“What are you playing at?” Val demanded. “What was that about?”

Wordless gasps came from the man’s throat, stammering helplessly. Val tightened her grip. “What is going on?”

There was sweat on his brow even despite the cold. Trembling weakly. Even before any accusations had been made, Medrick looked guilty. “It’s not... I... I didn’t...”

Not all correspondence made it through him, Val realised. The ravens don’t add up; he’s been sending birds nobody told him to, and receiving ones he has not been telling people about. And that pink letter the clansmen had been holding... Val had been with Jon most of the march, there had never been a pink letter. But why...?

Val had seen Medrick nod as the Liddle men confronted him.

Somebody is playing silly buggers. Her grip tightened. “Who are you answering to?!?” she demanded. “Who?”

“I didn’t... I didn’t have a...” Medrick choked, weeping. His chain dangled like the chime of bell. “… It’s my... conclave... I didn’t...”

He fell back into the snow a sobbing mess. Around her, Val heard men shouting, demanding to know what she was doing with the maester.

Val grimaced. Their camp was too large, too quickly assembled. They had free folk from dozens of clans, northmen from over a dozen houses, and clansmen that had all come together quickly. Lots of unfamiliar faces to everyone. Everyone knew that Jon Snow was in command, but nobody was really sure of the chain beneath him. Nobody really knew where they were expected to get their orders from.

She heard a muted roar break over the camp. It was coming east, from the giant’s camp. She couldn’t see anything in the dark, but she could feel the camp stirring. Movement to the east.

This is wrong. With barely a moment’s hesitation, she turned and she ran, towards the noise. She drew her blades, sprinting through the snow.

Across the lake, she saw great shapes rippling. There were specks of fires dancing. Then, shouting. Screaming, amidst dull giant’s roars. There were already groups of armed men, and hundreds of voices shouting.

There had been orders for men to leave the giant’s camp alone. The giants and their mammoths
were too easily agitated.

She heard cries, grunts and in the gloom there were wrestling shapes. Men tried to rush to help, but all the bodies just made it worse.


Toregg the Tall stood head and shoulders over most of the crowd. Men were trying to push forward, but a white-haired giant at the front was stomping and wailing. “Bugger if I know!” he snapped. “Lun Leg Dar Tar just started screaming!” In front of them, the giant took a thundering step forward, Toregg’s voice bellowed in the Old Tongue. “Back down Lun! Back down and calm down!”

The great hulking shape howled something. Technically it was the Old Tongue, but the giant’s dialect was so thick Val couldn’t even make sense of it. Men were trying to push back, and Lun Leg raised a great wooden maul with an iron tip.

“Get back!” Toregg bellowed, but even his voice was lost in the chorus of sounds. “Get back, you fools!” Then, in the Old Tongue, he shouted, “What are you saying, Lun – whose attacking you, who…?”

There was an earth-trembling cry. Val caught a glimpse of flames. Suddenly, an immense mammoth burst from the camp, raising up onto hindlegs and trumpeting. Not even the giants could stop them – the mammoths lost control. Bodies were sent scattering, and the mammoths were stampeding.

Each mammoth was like an avalanche, the ground trembling as they thudded.

Everything lost control. In all the noise, it was near-impossible to tell it was happening. Maybe that was the point.

Val caught a flick of flames. The giant’s camp was on fire. She saw great shapes wielding clubs, chasing after shadows in the dark.

Three men charged forward, Lun Leg’s maul snapped outwards with bone crunching force. Three bodies splattered.

Val heard the cry that the giants were attacking. And yet Lun Leg’s posture seemed more panicked than aggressive. Men charged forward around her. “NO!” Val bellowed against the tide. “NO! NO YOU FOOLS, LOWER YOUR STEEL! STOP!”

Her voice wasn’t loud enough. No voice could be. You fools, Val cursed. They’re giants – they can’t differentiate between humans.

Somebody had slipped into the giant’s camp and started lighting fires. All the while the giants tried to chase after their assailants in the dark, more men rushed from the camp to help. Except the giants couldn’t tell that – they thought that all of the people coming to help them were also attacking them. The men just thought the giants were going berserk.

And then when the mammoths stampeded, all semblance of order was lost.

“STEP BACK!” she heard Toregg boom. Another two bodies were crunched by Lun Leg’s great swings. Corpses sent flying, men smeared by immense strength. Some were listening to Toregg’s orders, but others were not. Maybe they never heard, maybe they weren’t listening. The camp was
too large, too many bodies, nobody could make sense of it. “STEP BACK!”

Giants were wrestling to try and control their terrified mammoths. Val couldn’t blame them… in that moment, with all the shouting, the darkness, the panic and the chaos… her heart was beating furiously and even she was terrified.

She saw fires spreading. She heard the clash of steel, mammoths charging blindly…

To the south, a flaming mammoth trampled through the opposite edge of the camp.

More giants coming, but they were pulling Lun Leg back, restraining him. Toregg’s voice was starting to take control of the situation, at least locally. Another giant – a matriarch, more level-headed than the fighters stepped forward and wailed questions. She was demanding to know what was happening. Toregg demanded the same.

In a beefy paw, the giant raised up a corpse from the ground, a man whose body had been crushed into pulp. Her huge hands wrapped around the corpse’s skull, easily lifting it like a ragdoll, holding it up as an example. “Attacker,” she cried. “Attacker.”

The dead man was dressed in hides and bone totems. He was a free folk. Val cursed.

Fuck. Enemies in our camp. One foe inside the camp could do more damage than a hundred outside. Traitors in our camp, and they’re hitting us we’re most vulnerable.

It was all so chaotic. Toregg was bellowing for order. The mammoths were stampeding and the giants were flailing trying to recover them. Frantic activity all around her, and Val had to make the decision on where she could do the most good.

Instantly, Val turned to the north. Rattleshirt. She saw moving speck of lights at their northern perimeter.

“Toregg!” Val screamed, pushing her way forward to be heard. “Look to the north. It’s him, it’s the bloody Lord of Bones!”

He turned. From incline, they could see the northern bulwark. It was impossible to tell any details through the dark and snow, but there was a patter of torches that were heading outside of the camp. Men in the hundreds were breaking ranks.

The Lord of Bones has been sending dozens more messages than he should have been, Val cursed, and now his men were fleeing a devastated camp. The man learnt to write so he could betray us.

“That’s him, isn’t it?” Val hissed. “Rattleshirt is in command of the north perimeter.”

King Snow had been clear. Nobody should be going anywhere tonight. Val’s hand went to her sword.

“Oh that cunt,” Toregg cursed, voice turning dangerously low. He barely hesitated before he turned towards war chiefs he recognised. “Abel, Rolf – work with Tar Tun here, help her get those bloody mammoths under control. Sten, run to Snow, let him know what’s happening. And alert the Dragonguard, make sure they’re ready!” Toregg turned and raised his greatsword, white cloak fluttering in the howling wind. “All others, on me! Now!”

Val clutched her swords tightly and ran with them. Toregg was at the front, charging north and screaming orders.
The whole camp was alive, screaming, moving, fighting. Men were bellowing, demanding to know what was happening, but Val was most fearful of all those men who might reach their own conclusions.

Panic spread faster than communication. Chaos was the bane of every army. Miscommunication was worse of all.

If Rattleshirt was up to something, a lot of loyal men might follow him out of the camp on the assumption he was obeying the king.

Val could see Rattleshirt’s men moving at the fringes of the camp. There weren’t that many – a few hundred men amidst eighteen thousand – but the torches in their hands still lit them up. It was very easy to trace the fluttering torchlight in the dark night.

A cold wind cut through them, a flurry snow sputtering from the skies. The threat of a storm hadn’t past, but the night was still bitter.

Val heard a scream howl on the wind. A clash of metal, coming from the north.

Toregg’s eyes were bloodthirsty in the gloom, and he growled. “Come on!” the warrior roared. “Rattleshirt!”

Bodies rushed everywhere. Val saw flames. She past a stable, and it blazed with fire and billowy smoke through the snow. Men were setting stables and tents alight. She heard the flames roar, horses neighing. She saw bodies clashing, but in the darkness she couldn’t even make out who was attacking who.

“Stand down you fuckers!” Toregg bellowed, but his voice barely broke through the chaos. “Stand down or I’ll put you down!”

There was another shouts and roar of flames somewhere else. It sounded further away. Somewhere else in the camp, she saw tents burning as torches were thrown madly. She could see corpses littering the crowd – but were they of foes or allies? How could you tell?

Enemies in the camp, Val thought with a flash of dread. There was nothing scarier. Foes outside could be dealt with, but how could you even identify your enemies mixed between your own men?

The brawling, the crashing bodies, the panic – was spreading outwards. Toregg rushed into the fray, while Val held back, trying to make sense of it. It was hard to understand anything from sight – the camp was too large, too crowded, too dark – instead she had to rely on all the sounds. Where was the fighting coming from, where were the screams the loudest?

Standing here, right in the middle of it, it sounded like everything was magnified a hundred times.

Suddenly, a man lunged out of the darkness at her, a cry broke through his lips as he jumped between the tents. Val barely reacted in time. She dropped as bronze speartip cut at her skull. It came so close that it scraped her hood off her cloak, but then her sword was in her hand, slashing upwards. Her blond hair billowed in the wind as blood splattered. As he fell, she glimpsed a man wearing sheepskin tied with hemp. A free folk.

She didn’t have the swing – her blade crunched against his torso, but it lacked the leverage to pierce deep enough. Instead the man howled, and jumped at her. He was too heavy, dragging her into the snow.

Her sword was in her hand, but then another – one of Toregg’s men – reacted in time. Her
attacker’s head was crushed beneath a stone maul, teeth shattering. Blood splattered across Val’s face.

Across from her, Toregg had cleared through the dozen or so men who lit the fire, but the fighting wasn’t stopping. The fighting was everywhere. We are fighting free folk.

“Rattleshirt!” she heard Toregg roar. “Fucking Rattleshirt! My pa should have bitten the head off that chickenshit.”

Rattleshirt didn’t scare her, but those letters outside the camp did. This was planned, this was organised. Hitting us from within and without.

She saw the earthen spikes of their encampment to the north – dunes of snow packed around sharpened logs. Horns were echoing in the wind.

The warriors rallied quickly. At once, Toregg was charging through the snow into the tents, demanding Rattleshirt’s head. She saw figures meet them, everyone clutching weapons.

Val’s head spun as she tried to keep up. The Lord of Bones only had about three hundred men, yet Toregg’s men were still gathering.

It wasn’t a battle. No battle could ever be so mad.

So many feet pounding, hearts racing, bodies grunting and wrestling.

Focus, Val thought with a gasp. Focus, don’t let the panic overwhelm you too. Focus, stay back, think.

She heard a voice howl. Toregg was leading the charge through the tents, but Val turned around and slipped through to the barricades. Rattleshirt wasn’t the sort to get trapped in the meatgrinder of bodies; he would try to sneak away. Val kept on running, until she heard the distinctive crackling of bones and the slashing of swords.

The Lord of Bones looked like he was halfway out of the gate, trying to sneak out through the barricades in the dark. Val’s hands tightened around her sword. Grunts of fight, gurgling of blood. She saw two men fall to Rattleshirt’s spear, stabbing with bloodthirsty ferocity. His eyes looked crazed, blood splattered over his giant skull helm.

Just for a second, their eyes met. He froze at the sight of Val. Her hood was missing, and her golden hair whipped in the wind.

Then, Rattleshirt’s face twisted in rage.

“You fucking bitch!” Rattleshirt hissed, as he turned and charged. Abandoning his escape to try and kill me, she noted.

She twisted as the mammoth tusk spear jabbed into the snow. He’s fast for someone so scrawny.

Val dropped and spun, listening to the clatter of his bone armour coming for her. Blood pounded through her, so much anger… so much fury…

Her sword slashed outwards. She could see the wide-eyed, crazed fear as the blade clipped against bone. “I will gut you will like a pig!” Val shouted, meeting spear with sword. Fighting all around them, but Val could only focus on Rattleshirt.
“You traitorous fucking whore!” His spear flashed again and again. He has the reach on me, need to get close. “You chose southern cock over your own people!”

That spear was deadly. Val fell back, losing ground, but Rattleshirt was relentless. She darted backwards and forwards, forcing Rattleshirt to parry, all the while her two blades spun.

Underneath the giant skull helm, his wide eyes looked mad, greasy hair whipping over his brow. “If that fucking ‘king’ wants me head, he’ll not get it!” The spear grazed her furs, far too close for comfort, but there was no time to think of that. “I warned him what would happen when the cunt betrayed us!”

“You’re the cunt here!” He overreached himself. As he tried to pull the spear back, her sword glanced against his shoulder. Bones crackled in the wind. “Fucking traitor!”

“Like hells I am,” he hissed, and they paced around each other. There was a slight flicker in Val’s eyes.

“Who are you working with?” Val demanded. “You must have planned this with someone.”

“Bah! I told the ‘king’ – the minute he stopped acting for the free folk, my spear would be the first through his treacherous back!” he spat. “Bloody kneelers, I knew it!”

She paused. His voice, his body language… “What are you talking about, Rattleshirt?” Val demanded.

“Fucking ambush,” Rattleshirt spat. “You give me orders to lead a sortie in the middle of the goddamn night. What, did you want me out of the camp so you could get rid of me?”

She blinked. “Wait, what?” She had to shout to be heard over the wind. “There were no bloody orders!”

“Well, I sure received them.”

Was that why Rattleshirt’s men had been breaking ranks? “What about the letters?” Val bellowed. “Those secret messages you’ve been sending?”

Now it was Rattleshirt’s turn to look confused. “What bloody letters?”

There was a long pause. Around them, men were still fighting or running in the dark.

“Who gave you the order to move out?” Val demanded.

“King Snow.”

“Directly?”

“No.” She caught a flicker of doubt. “He sent one of his guards.”

They stared at each other. They both swore.

“Get your men to back down!” Val ordered, turning to run.

“Get that fool to stop killing my men!” Rattleshirt screamed, but he was running too. The bones crackled with every panting step.

She saw Toregg stamping his way through the tents, his greatsword bloody. One of Toregg’s own
men tried to attack her as she ran towards him, and if Toregg hadn’t have noticed and bellowed at him to stop the stone axe could have broken her skull.

“It ain’t Rattleshirt!” Val shouted.

“What?”

“Those weren’t Rattleshirt’s men, Rattleshirt thought it was us.” Her mouth tightened. “Someone’s playing us.”

Toregg swore. She heard Rattleshirt howling for order, but it was hard for men caught in blood-fury to accept commands like that. It wasn’t a fight, it was a brawl.

They were at the northern fringes of the camp. In the camp proper, the conflict wasn’t stopping.

For a second, she caught the flicker of fearful doubt in Toregg’s eyes. Normally the young warrior was so bold and brash. “Where’s Snow?” she demanded. “Where is he?”

“Last I saw, he was with the Manderly men. He sent me off to see to the giants.”

I should have gone to Snow straight away. If this is happening here…

“We need to rally around him,” Val ordered. “Gather around him, call loyal men. If we get these people into ranks, then we’ll be able to see easily which ones aren’t friends.”

“Aye, aye, except…” Toregg looked pained. “If it’s not Rattleshirt, then who exactly screwed us?”

Val grimaced. The sounds of fighting were only getting longer, turning as loud as a battle proper, not damping down. Just how many attackers were there?

Above them, the pale shimmer of full moon glittered over the snow. The wind was churning. It might have started out as few brawls, but it was escalating. Too many warriors who attacked first and asked questions later, too little trust.

The traitors were nothing, the chaos was devastating. Firefighting is only spreading more fires. This isn’t working.

Jon. Val grimaced, and cursed in the Old Tongue. “Start calling warbands!” she shouted, as she started to break into a run. “Gather them one by one – make sure they’re men you trust. Reform the ranks, gather them together. Do it!”

Her whole body was gasping, shivering for air, but she couldn’t stop now. The king’s tent was to the south, near the edge of the lake. I’m running backwards and forwards over the bloody camp like a bloody fool, she cursed.

Over the lake, she could see the shadow of the dragon coiled on the ice. The dragon was kept far away, but it hadn’t reacted at all. That could either be good or very bad. Perhaps Jon was deliberately holding the dragon back, to avoid more chaos in the camp?

Val sprinted as fast as she could, shambling through tents and stomping bodies. Some were fighting, others were trying to call for order. She saw men fighting, being dragged to the ground. Where those the attackers or men trying to defend themselves? In the chaos and the dark, it was impossible to tell.

Eighteen thousand men, all of them unfamiliar with each other, all suspicious, all crammed
together in a crowded camp on high alert. The bulbous moon was gloating over them in the 
churning skies above.

*Yet these types of attacks can only work for a brief period,* she thought. There were maybe a few 
hundred enemies scattered over a large camp? Burning tents, attacking small parties – trying to sow 
as much confusion as possible while slipping within their own numbers. It was devastating at night 
and when nobody could track them, but as soon as people caught on they would lose any 
advantage. Come morning, the traitors wouldn’t stand a chance.

That thought wasn’t encouraging, though. *This attack is well-planned, which implies* …

She saw the old fisher’s village, nestled in the tide of soldiers. She had to push her way through the 
mob. She heard men calling for King Snow, but Val could only push her way through the ramble.

There was a dead mammoth littering the snow, its bloody hide littered in dozens of spears. The 
king’s cabin had been destroyed where the mammoth rampaged through, and afterwards it looked 
like it had taken half a hundred men to hack the great beast down. There were corpses left as 
squashed paste from where the beast stampeded over them.

But there were other corpses that had died from wounds made by blades, Val realised. There had 
been fighting here, right next to the king’s cabin. She could see the signs of battle – skirmishes, 
really – leading all the way down south towards the Manderly boathouse.

Val ran. Other free folk were running too. Val heard screaming, and bodies wrestling in the snow. 
She ignored the fighting outside, and burst straight into the main building.

Snow and wind howled behind her. Even in the gloom, the first thing she saw was blood.

Someone was weeping. Bodies littered the building, and they were all wearing steel armour, green 
cloaks, and tridents on their clasps. The sound of a sharp blade grinding through skin and bone 
filled the air, blood gushing.

Inside, she saw the Weeper, covered from head to toe in blood. The man had his scythe in his hand, 
as he separated Ser Wylis Manderly’s head from its shoulders. The bloody, decapitated head 
dropped to the floor. The heir to White Harbour had his mouth open, blood covered his beard, and 
a look of surprise and fear fixed on his face even in death.

Val’s eyes widened. She clutched her sword, trying to take it in. All around her, free folk raiders 
pulled up spears. There were dead bodies littering the floor and walls, blood-stained wooden 
planks beneath. All of the Manderly knights and commanders had been residing in the boathouse, 
and the Weeper’s men killed them all.

“Oh gods, Weeper,” Val called. “*What did you do?*”

The Weeper cast her a look, and then grunted as he motioned the others to lower their weapons. 
“These bastards fucking betrayed us,” the Weeper growled, kicking the headless corpse. “Their 
men attacked Snow, murdered his guards and I found them trying to run.”

*Attacked Snow? Would Lord Manderly betray us, or…?*

There was only one Manderly man left alive in the boathouse. He was a tall figure wearing a steel 
hauberk with a white dragon stitched over his surcoat. The knight was sobbing uncontrollably, 
surrounded by dead men. By the looks of it, the Weeper had killed most of them single handed.

One knight. He only left one knight alive. “Take this traitor out,” the Weeper snapped, motioning
at the knight sobbing nonsensically. Piss stained the knight’s breeches. “I figured Snow might still want this one.”

Her head was still spinning. “Where is Snow now?” Val looked around desperately, such for some semblance of order to latch on to.

“I don’t know. He disappeared in the attack, I got men out looking for him.” The Weeper spat over Ser Wylis’ headless corpse. “Fucking kneelers tried to screw us. I bloody knew they would.”

Val’s lip pursed. “Are you sure?” she demanded. “Are you sure that it was really Manderly men?”

“Fuck yes. These cunts faked a letter, trying to give them an excuse to run away before setting up this ambush. Snow refused, he was heading back when the assassins hit.” The Weeper kicked Wylis Manderly’s head as he walked, and it rolled leaving a bloody streak over the floor. The heir of White Harbour stared blankly up at the ceiling. “I saw the bodies, and a dozen witnesses pointed me to this scunner here leading the attack.”

That statement, Val struggled to process it. Jon attacked, missing, but… “Witnesses,” Val repeated. “Where are these witnesses?”

There was a feeling of pure dread coiling in her stomach. She really, really hoped that she was wrong. The Weeper stormed out of the boathouse, a great cry cutting through the air as he bellowed orders. The crowd was still forming, both northmen and free folk. So many unfamiliar faces, demanding answers. As far as anyone knew, the mammoths had stampeded and there were skirmishes breaking out throughout the camp.

Val heard the Weeper scream for his lieutenants, trying to figure out what was happening. Others in the crowd were calling for Manderly. Nobody knew where Jon had disappeared to in the ambush. Gods no…

The voices grew more pitched. There had supposedly been eleven free folk witnesses that saw Manderly men attacking Jon. As it turned out, all while the Weeper had been slaughtering Manderly’s men, those ‘witnesses’ had died trying to escape from guards the Weeper had assigned to them.

Four of the men run away and slipped into the chaos of the camp, but another seven bodies in sheepskin furs littered the bloody snow. No one in the crowd had known what was going or how to intervene.

The Weeper’s face twisted. “What the hells is going on?”

“Oh, you fucking fool!” Val hissed, keeping her voice low. Pieces started to fall in place. “Those men weren’t witnesses, they were the bloody attackers! Your men found them, and they pointed the finger at the Manderlys.”

The Weeper froze. She saw his mouth twist, jaw clenched. “No, couldn’t be – they were free folk,” he growled. “Snow’s men, white stones.”

“How do you know? Did you recognise them?”

“I can’t recognise most the people in this bloody camp!” he snapped, but his hands were gripping his scythe angrily. “But they were free folk!”

Val could have screamed. Of course the Weeper would instinctively believe free folk over kneelers. In the heat of the moment, the Weeper had been all too willing to believe that the
southerners had betrayed them. The Weeper was not known for his calm head during battle.

Too much panic, the winds were howling and the chaos…

Her hands went to her head, taking deep breaths. She stared around her, listening to the shouts, screams and fights. The northmen would demand to know what happen, and the bodies of House Manderly’s noblest knights were littering the boathouse. The lords would demand answers, otherwise the whole army could schism…

*How many enemies actually were there? Who could count?*

No, there was no time for counting. There was nothing but the moment. “Get this bloody camp under control!” Val bellowed. “Get the men to form up, get them to stop fighting. Rout out who the real enemies are.”

The Weeper’s face twisted, but he nodded and turned away. Val’s hands were shaking. *How did this happen? Who did this?*

No, those were fool’s questions. It happened all too easily, actually – the free folk had no discipline. Wildlings had little experience forming large armies, and no experience in working with anyone who weren’t wildlings. Despite his best efforts, not even King Snow could change an entire culture. The intruders had cut through them in all the cracks in the army.

As for the whom… she cast a wary eye over to the black horizon in the west.

Val’s eyes looked outwards. She saw the shadow of the dragon in the distance, still coiled on the lake. There were firelights on the ice too – the king’s Dragonguard.

“Find me the king. *Find me Snow!*” Val bellowed, pointing over the lake. She could only guess what happened. Jon had been attacked, disorientated, so he must have run instinctively towards his dragon. A single figure in the wake of the mammoth’s stampede and the ambush would have been all too easily missed.

The wind was picking up intensity. She couldn’t see in the darkness, but she could the black cloud churning overhead.

There was a pit of tar twisting in her stomach. *It was coordinated, and we reacted far too late.* There had been letters being send outside the camp, that maester had been a part of some scheme. This was planned, for the maximum effect; maximum discord, maximum chaos, maximum opportunity. *If I was planning an assault like this,* she thought, *then what would be the next step?*

She didn’t like the answer she came up with.

Val heard the horns far, far too late. They were panicked, urgent horn blasts that strangled over the western perimeter. *We should have had more warning – what of the scouts, the outriders… no, that is foolish too.* The scouts and outriders, or anyone who could have provided warning, must have been the very first to fall.

Instead, there was nothing but a salvo of frantic howling horns in the wind, and the cries of alert rippling through the camp.

She knew what was about to happen before it did, but there was no way of reacting in time. One faction inside their camp, sowing bedlam, making sure everything was nice, chaotic and vulnerable for the main assault.
The ground was shaking, rumbling with the sound of cavalry while the air churned like a storm.

Val looked to the west, staring out over the fires and the screaming as she saw arrows raining down from the sky.

**Jon**

The bright blade flashed. Jon rolled.

His body oomphed as he landed onto cold, hard snow. All around him, bodies were wrestling, tumbling together. Black shapes against black.

The attacker lunged again. He tried to twist. Jon felt the edge scrape off against his iron mail, like a punch to the stomach.

Dark Sister was on his hip, but he barely even had time to reach for it…

Across from him, the flaming mammoth roared and thrashed, crashing through tents as it tried to extinguish itself.

Someone screamed, roared. Perhaps there were words, but Jon couldn’t even make them out.

He glimpsed Ewan Bole slamming into his attacker, his sword swinging hard. Jon’s head was still spinning trying to catch up, struggling to think…

*Ambush. Assassins.*

So many bodies, some running, some fighting, all screaming…

It was less a battle, and more fighters fumbling around in the darkness.

Ewan’s blade cracked the man’s skull. Then, another shadow skewered Ewan from behind. The Dragonguard didn’t drop, but he staggered, flailing…

Jon gasped, dragging himself to his feet. Another body lunged at him from the dark, and Jon barely twisted to block him. Strong hands wrestled at him, both men staggering as they tried to tear each other down. In the dark, Jon caught a glimpse of wild, frenzied eyes and crooked teeth. He wore sheepskin fur, with a white stone patched to his cloak.

The attacker toppled first, flailing wildly as Jon twisted out of his grasp. The man fell face first into the snow, while Jon staggered backwards. The shadows were coming for him – hooded figures in sheepskin clutching knives…

There more shouts. Jon saw green-cloaked knights drawing swords and rushing to help him. Jon was gasping for breath, trying to focus…

A great bellow broke through the wind. The mammoth reared up in pain, maddened as soldiers tried to bring it down. *Help! Over here!* Jon could have yelled, but his voice wouldn’t have broken over the chaos, and he was panting too hard to even scream.

Maybe there weren’t many assassins, but Jon couldn’t count them. They were better prepared, they had the advantage of surprise. The attackers were coming for him, abandoning all else just to try to kill him. Knights trying to stop them, but in the gloom and madness…
He saw Ewan Bole fall to half a dozen swipes. The assassins were coming forward. It was so dark Jon couldn't make out any details, only black bodies and bright blades.

_Run_. That one thought cut through everything else. Can’t fight them in the dark, don’t know how many, who, or where… _Just run. Run._

Jon turned and staggered away, wheezing and fumbling with every breath. His cloak had been ripped off sometime during the attack, and the cold wind cut straight through him. There were shouts behind him, but Jon could make sense of the knight.

Men were running past him. Jon staggered, still struggling to breathe. In full armour and shadowskin, surrounded by his retinue, he was a king – but now he was just another bloody and wounded man lost in the chaos. He slipped by the men in the dark, limping away still clutching his side.

The assassins had been following him and waiting for a chance to ambush the king. There was safety in anonymity for now. _Need to recover, focus…_

Jon’s feet tripped, and then he was falling down the snowy dunes leading towards the lake. The fall took his breath away, but he was up and staggering away a second later.

He felt frozen twigs snap under the snow. Then, he felt the crunch of ice as he stepped onto the lake, shuffling through the snow. Everything was pitch black – nobody could follow him in the darkness.

Behind him, the camp was alive. Screaming. All of the noises mixed together, impossible to tell any details.

He felt a slickness on his side. Warmth. Blood. His mail hadn’t quite stopped the blade. He was bleeding from his torso. He hadn’t even felt the cut.

The sounds of fighting behind him didn’t cease.

Finally, Jon collapsed into the snow, wheezing for breath. _I’m bleeding and it’s cold_, Jon cursed. _I will lose strength quickly. Focus. Think._

_Assassins_, he thought. Enemies. _Mingled among the camp to get close, taking full advantage of the chaos._

He couldn’t head back to the camp. Those assassins, they had been waiting for him, following him around in the camp. The mammoth simply provided a suitable distraction, and then they had all attacked at once. Any man among those looking for him might be secretly wanting to kill him.

Jon was in no state to defend himself. He didn’t know how many more might be waiting for another chance, or where…

There was no safety, not in the chaos. The ambush had been well-prepared, swift and devastating. And, from the sounds, it was happening all over the camp.

In the morning light they could sort out the infiltrators from the loyal men, but in the bloody night under the full moon there was nothing but panic.

Jon was shivering the snow, as pale and trembling hands tried to tighten his belt around the cut. He heard men shouting for him in the distance – “Snow, Snow, Snow!” – but Jon didn’t return the cry. _How do I know if they are assassins?_ He couldn’t even recognise them. _Focus, recover. I am safer_
by myself until I do.

I won’t die here, he thought. He was weak, wounded and exposed, but he wouldn’t die alone on the ice. How many nights did I spend trekking through the snows alone beyond the Wall, all by myself on the hunt for Sonagon?

Jon could rely on himself, he knew.

The sky was howling. The snowstorm from the north had was stirring in the need, and the skies were twisting in frenzy. Whirling snow obscured his vision. It wasn’t as bad as a snowstorm beyond the Wall, but it was building.

Sonagon. That thought was the only thing he could be sure about. I need Sonagon.

As soon as he was mounted upon the dragon, he would be unbeatable. No assassin could threaten a dragon. The Dragonguard, Jon thought desperately. All loyal and good men. Gather the Dragonguard, get Sonagon into the fray, retake control. Let the camp rally, and flush out the infiltrators…

Through the snows, he could barely make out of the shadow of Sonagon’s bulk jutted from the frozen lake in the distance. The glittering white scales illuminated by the faint fires of the Dragonguard camped around the dragon. Jon’s vision was hazy, his eyes blinking through the snows battering against his face.

With a pained breath, he pushed himself to his feet and staggered forward. He tried to reach out to Sonagon, but he couldn’t. Couldn’t concentrate. The blood loss, Jon thought with panic. It made everything woozy.

The cold clung to his skin, shambling through the snow as he tried to push one leg in front of the other.

Jon made it two dozen steps before his knees failed him. He collapsed, face first into the snow. A hundred yards, two hundred, from the shore, lost on the expanse of ice, there was nothing but snow and darkness.

Behind him, the sounds of battle rang out over the storm, torches flickering. Jon was panting, struggling to breathe, struggling to focus. He couldn’t feel the pain, it was too cold.

His mind blacked out. He might have lost consciousness, he wasn’t sure.

Jon! a ghostly voice called on the wind. Jon!

Jon’s eyes flickered. It so hard to hear anything but the rumbling of the storm, but there it was. Jon! the cry echoed again, like a wail. Strangely, it felt like he recognised the voice.

“Bran…?” he mumbled weakly, yet the wind didn’t reply. His brother’s voice was so distant, like he was shrieking something urgently yet Jon could hardly make it out.

Why my brother’s voice? Am I so close to death that I’m hearing ghosts?

Jon had to force himself to pull himself up, and kept trekking forward.

He was already so far from the coast that there was nothing but a haze of fires and frenzies struggling against the snows. The sky rumbled above him like an enormous beast stomping in the clouds.
Sonagon was before him, but Jon couldn’t see the bonfires of the Dragonguard anymore. Instead, there was nothing but Sonagon’s massive bulk in the darkness, a black shadow snoozing over the ice.

They had very deliberately let Sonagon roost as far away from the camp as possible. But where is the Dragonguard? he thought fogily. Furs, Hatch and the others should be camped around dragon. It was a cold and lonely post, but there had been nothing for it.

It hadn’t been safe to keep Sonagon in the main camp, but the dragon still needed protection. Jon remembered him thinking that the lake was a good position for the dragon – isolated, yet in the very centre all their fortifications with an army positioned by the coast.

A forlorn shriek of wind cut across the lake, nearly taking Jon off his feet. In the distance, he could see the shadow of Sonagon’s coiled over the snow. Sleeping. Why is the dragon still sleeping?

The battle was thick in the air. Sonagon should have responded. The dragon should be all ice and fury right now.

With no torch and amidst the snows, it was too dark for anyone to see him on the ice. Jon would have called out, but his lungs were straining just to breathe. His eyes tried desperately to such out any figures, but then his foot collided with something solid and he stumbled into the billowing snow.

Jon felt a shape beneath him that was so hard and cold that at first he thought it was a rock. Then, his flailing fingers grasped the jawline of a man’s thick stubble, frozen solid in the ice. A lifeless corpse that was stiff, with frozen blood gushing out of a gash across the body’s neck.

In the dark, it took a long time for Jon to recognise the body. Furs had died with his neck slit open, his contorted face frozen stiff, his whole body flailing from where the man had tried to crawl through the snow.

Jon’s breath froze. The attacker had slit Furs’ throat, and then left the corpse where it dropped.

Desperate eyes made out the shapes of the Dragonguard’s camps, the bodies already cold and half-buried by the snows. The Dragonguard had been huddled together around bonfires in camps of three or four, forming a perimeter surrounding the dragon’s roost. Now, Jon saw nothing but lifeless shapes littering the floor.

Rolf, Maris and Gregg, all slopped around a burned-out campfire with their throats slit, and frozen blood coating their cloaks. The three of them, ambushed from behind and slaughtered. The bodies were cold.

They were all dead. Every one of them. Some had tried to squirm, but many looked like they had died at their posts, bodies hunched over their cups. Jon saw the large shape of Hatch, his hands so frozen that he was still clutching a tankard in his grip.

All of the Dragonguard camped on the lake had been slaughtered.

They must have been killed first, he realised. Sonagon roosted away from camp, nobody was allowed near. The Dragonguard had been ambushed and slaughtered before any of the attacks happened in the camp, and nobody had even been close enough to realise.

Fifty men, the elite guard, all dead on the ice. How did the attackers get so close? Why did no one react? Jon stared in pure horror, barely believing his eyes. How…? It didn’t make sense. No alarm had been raised. Nobody had tried to fight, or run. How could they all just… just die and nobody
Why wasn't an alarm raised?

... Why didn't Sonagon react?

The thought of Fur’s and Hatch’s empty eyes haunted him as he pushed forward. He couldn't feel Sonagon at all.

He could see the wall of Sonagon's flesh and scales above him. The dragon was coiled on the ice, its body as still as stone. For one horrible second, he thought Sonagon was dead.

Then, he saw Sonagon’s great hide rising and falling in long, slow breaths. *He's alive.* Jon wasn't sure whether to be scared or horrified. *He's weak, but alive.*

With all the concentration he had, Jon focused and tried to reach out towards the dragon. He could see Sonagon, barely fifty feet away. *Sonagon!* Jon screamed mentally, pressing forward with as much focus as he could muster.

The dragon didn’t even stir. Jon could feel only the faintest slivers of a connection, and through them the dragon’s body felt weak, stiff and laboured. Sonagon’s breaths were hoarse, strained. The dragon couldn’t even rouse itself.

The dread that fell through Jon’s body was colder than the ice beneath him. *This was planned,* a small voice whispered in the back of his mind. *They attacked the camp, they needed a way to attack the dragon too.*

He heard movement. There were bodies taking shape through the snows, and they had noticed him too. Jon’s hand fell to Dark Sister, his ice-coated gloves clenching the hilt.

He could see three figures stepping forward. The sound of laughter was barely audible over the roar of the wind.

How did the Boltons do this? Jon thought with frantic gasps. How could anyone do this?

“Bastard!” an elated voice called, so cheerful it was mocking. “There you are, bastard! Oh, I was really hoping I’d see you.”

Jon froze. He heard footsteps shuffling towards him. Three men. “You hear the music?” The voice laughed. “That's my father slaughtering your troops. Oh, is it not the most lovely sound?”

Jon's right hand was on Dark Sister, his left was on the wound in his side. “Did you not think that some of those northern lords seemed all too eager to join your side?” the shapeless voice laughed. “We've got ten thousand men outside your camp and one thousand inside it. Which means you really didn’t stand a chance at all, bastard.”

Jon backed away slowly, staggered towards the dragon. *Sonagon,* he thought, trying desperately to concentrate. *Sonagon, I need you.* The dragon still didn't even stir.

“Except for the dragon, of course,” the figure continued. “The dragon would have been a problem. That was my job, you see; get close enough to put the dragon down.”

Jon finally recognised the voice. In the dark, he saw a mad grin, and bright eyes. “Harlow?!“

“In the flesh,” said Harlow. Jon saw the bright grin that he had come to recognise, but it was
bloodier than he had ever seen it. His blue eyes seemed to shine in the dark. He was clutching a bloody slab of iron like a cleaver. The normally clumsy stable boy looked very comfortable holding it too.

Jon stared, his brain barely working. No, Harlow has served me well for months. He was the one who saved me from the black brother’s assassination attempt. I named him in my Dragonguard. I… I made him Hatch’s squire. So many thoughts raced around Jon’s head, but the one that reached his lips… “Yo-You saved my life.”

“Why, of course I did.” Harlow seemed almost insulted by the accusation. “I don’t want you dead, bastard. I don’t want to kill you. I was really, really hoping we’d have this moment.”

I named him Dragonguard. He was a good servant; good with Sonagon, good with animals. The dragon even liked him. The other Dragonguard would have trusted him.

He slit their throats, Jon thought with stunned horror. The Dragonguard regularly carry my orders. Harlow had run of the whole camp. If Harlow passed a message, people would have assumed it came from me.

Jon's hand clenched so tight that he couldn’t feel his fingers. He raised Dark Sister, looking between Harlow and the other unfamiliar figures. “Harlow…” Jon growled.

The man only laughed, loud and clear. “Oh, we haven’t actually been properly introduced, bastard,” he mocked. “My name is not Harlow. I am Lord Ramsay Bolton, and from now on I think I’m going to call you Reek. Do you like that, bastard? Reek. Reek – it rhymes with bleak.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, hiatus is officially over. It started out with a holiday, then a stretch of busy real-life stuff, and then I decided I wanted to wait until after the end of Game of Thrones season 7 before restarting.

Next chapter should be coming pretty soon.

Also, just point out something – Jon did get pretty screwed here, and there were quite a few reasons for it. One of the main reasons is because, well, Jon is not very good at being in command.

Which shouldn’t really be surprising, to be honest; leadership is a skill like anything else, and it needs to be learned. Robb was the heir, he learned and was groomed for his role from birth, and so Robb took to commanding men naturally. Jon wasn’t – Jon’s style of leadership is almost entirely self-taught, and as such it has flaws in it.

Even in canon, Jon was appointed the leader of 600 men, most of whom he knew and was familiar with, and yet Jon still made a lot of critical mistakes. Here, he became the leader of tens of thousands of men and a very fragile alliance – Jon was not prepared for that role.

All through recent chapters, there have been a lot of mistakes going on which maybe
haven’t been that obvious since it was Jon’s POV. As a general, he has been failing at
delegation, neglecting the commanders beneath him, micro-managing too much,
fixating on the wrong areas, and overall failing to get a good breadth of things.

Take, for example, his conversation with Galbart Glover in chapter 29. There, Galbart
was warning Jon that nobles are more reliable because they’ve got families, rank and
reputation that they want to preserve, whereas commoners don’t. A random person
could backstab you with far fewer consequences than a person from a house that you
know. Jon didn’t grasp that one though, yet Jon walked away thinking ‘Galbart doesn’t
understand’. A lot of his own mistakes he makes he doesn’t realise from his POV.

The Boltons realised though. They realised and they hurt him for it.

Also, special thanks to Diablo Snowblind on FF.net for helping me a lot with these
chapters. He’s writing an Iron-Blooded Orphans fic, “The Devil’s Reprisal”, that I
highly recommend checking out.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

The Battle of the Snows

Bran

It was time.

The night air came alive with the Stranger’s coming. Stirring and shivering. Bran could feel the cold around him, icy tendrils twisting round every corner, curling like a spectral hand tightening all around them.

Meera was already moving. She hoisted Bran’s body up off the ground with a strained grunt, heaving him over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Meera nearly buckled lifting him, but she didn’t stop. She held a rusted iron bar in one hand to pry the door open, and a sharpened, knifelike hunk of stone in the other. Even with Bran’s dead weight across her shoulders, even after months of captivity, the bog-devil was fully willing to go down fighting.

Bran was left trying to hold on, with Meera’s bony shoulder digging painfully into his chest, staring down at her feet where the broken iron manacle on her ankle clattered across the stone. He could feel her beneath him, gasping and panting with the strain as she staggered up the stone steps of the dungeon.

“Two men outside in the hall,” Bran whispered when she reached the doorway, crowbar in hand. “Don’t.”

“Tell me when,” Meera said in a hoarse voice.

It was past the hour of ghosts, but Thistle Hall was wide awake. The Bastard’s Boys were all moving towards the courtyard, staring upwards at the sky. Even in the dark night, they could see clouds churning over the waxing moon. There was something in the air – an eerie energy that even they could feel in the night.

It's the Stranger, Bran thought with a gulp. It distorted the world around it with every step it took. I called it and it is here.

The storm brewed all around them, the sky stirring unnaturally fast. The first flurries of hail were spitting downwards.

Bran was out of his body. He could feel everything through two dozen different skins. The rodents were all twitching, screaming silently. In the woods, he heard Summer’s howl echo through the trees, warning. It's here, he thought with a shiver. It's here.

A slow boom rattled through the courtyard above. The knock of something solid jarred against the barricaded gate. The whole keep seemed to hush, every breath frozen by the noise.

Three knocks, but each one felt slow, rasping, steady. The noise felt mocking. The courtyard was rustling; dogs barking, horses quivering, and the Bastard’s Boys moving towards the gate, blades held to hand.


Bran felt the horses buckle in panic as the sound of tearing wood filled the air. Men shouting. The solid oak gates were being torn from their hinges. Old hardwood tore apart underneath an inhuman strength, the sound of splintering cracking the air.

He felt birds and bats explode from the bushes as dead things rushed through the woods. Summer smelt them; dead, decayed bodies milky white in the cold, but shambling through the leaves from all directions. The Stranger had them surrounded.

There was shouting across Thistle Hall, calling for arms. Meera broke through the door, her feet clapping over the hard stones. The walls were shivering from the buffering winds, the gales howling through the stone hallways.

Bran was in dozens of bodies at once; flickering through so many skins he couldn’t process them, trying to make sense of the chaos. He could see it. He could feel it. It was maddening, like the whole world was screaming – howling – at him to run.

The white walker was pure cold – a figure of scorched black and icy white, blade in hand as it cut forward, shambling things pouring forth from the tear in the gate. The Bastard’s Boys were all armed, holding spears, bows, axes and swords.

Seventy-four men facing against one white walker. There could have been seven hundred, and they still wouldn’t have stood a chance.

Bran could barely hear their screams over the howl of the winds.

“Run,” Bran gasped. He could feel Summer in the woods, the direwolf tearing through the leg of a misshapen corpse. There were more walking bodies, all of them flooding around the Other like a tide of rotten flesh. “The stables. The horses.”

Meera didn’t reply. One of the men spotted her, but before he could call out there were a dozen crows swooping through the hall to peck at his face. He fell screaming, thrashing at the squawking, flapping shapes. A murder, Bran thought numbly. A murder of crows.

The dead creatures shambled over the walls from all sides, shaking the battlements as they swelled upwards. Arrows were useless against them. Wood splintered and tore, and bones cracked, but they found grip where no man could. Ramsay’s men hacked, shouted, staggered, and died.

Meera had reached the main doors of the hall. Bran had already seized control of a horse’s body; there was no gentleness from him, nothing but raw force. The beast felt mad with fright, but Bran grasped the animal so hard it could have crushed – forcing the horse to stand as still as shivering statue. Meera tripped over the stone steps and Bran dropped off her shoulders. Still, she barely even hesitated as she clutched his arm and started to drag him instead. Bran’s body thumped hard against the stone, but he couldn’t even feel it.

The hallway. The steps. The stables. Bran was trying to plot their path, gathering birds to clear the way for Meera. His heartbeat was pounding so fast that even a dozen yards felt like an age. Two dead men tried to jump at her, but Bran grabbed the body of another horse and jerked it to trample through the creatures. The dead creature dragged the horse down with it, and crushed the horse’s
spine with its black hands. *You can’t stop them*, Bran realised. *You could only hope to slow them down and run.*

The Other was coming closer. Bran could feel it, cutting like a blade of ice, an unstoppable knife shredding through the tide of chaos. Meera reached the horse, but her strength failed her trying to hoist Bran’s body over its back. The Stranger was outside, cutting through men with such ease its movements seemed lazy.

Bran could feel it. His lungs froze in its presence. He could feel it staring at him, even through the wall, its single blue eye as bright as a star.

“Scared little boy,” its crackling voice was almost soft as snow. It lifted the milky blade and limped forward. Even despite its lopsided gait, its every movement was sleek and graceful, like a predator in its element.

The Other was only a dozen heartbeats away. Meera was screaming something. Bran couldn’t hear it. Couldn’t think. There was nothing but terror.

And then suddenly a black cloud dropped from the sky. Everything exploded into flailing, squawking bodies, lunging and flapping at the Other. Meera fell to the floor as the shapes burst through the windows, tearing over Thistle Hall.

*“Bran!”* Meera screamed.

_It’s not me_, Bran would have shouted, if only he had control of his tongue. Ravens, crows, bats and a hundred other creatures swarmed around them. There were even moths, flies, hornets and wasps. Insects. Bran hadn’t even known it was possible to possess insects. Hundreds, thousands of swarming creatures all bursting around them. Bran could feel the presence blanket over the keep – an immense, shapeless being that seemed to swell upwards from the earth.

The three-eyed crow. The greenseer. Bran could feel his power in the air, seizing control like a force of nature itself. The greenseer had been unwilling to intervene to save Bran from men; perhaps the greenseer had even preferred Bran to be held captive and out of the way. Still, the greenseer would never allow the Other to reach Bran.

It was a power so immense Bran could hardly even imagine it. The birds were all around them, so many that the Other had to slash its way through. The Stranger spat a sound, a word Bran couldn’t recognise – not so much in anger, more like annoyance.

“Old crow,” Bran heard the Other tut to the screeching air. “Lost watcher. Tree-fiend. Death-stealer.”

_Dead-stealer?_ Bran didn’t know what the what the words meant, but they were said like an insult. Like it was something taunting, foul. There was no time, Meera was already pushing him onto the horse’s back. The birds spiralled and burst around them, forcing a path for them.

It felt like the wind and snow were clashing above them, like the clouds were wrestling. The storm was raging, the air crackling with power. It was so intense Bran could barely even process it, he could do nothing but try to hold on.

Bran felt himself tumbling. He was falling out of those bodies, his mind dislodged and spinning.

Behind him, he heard the creak as the tide of the dead pushed their way through the wooden palisades. The gale tore the roof off Thistle Hall, sending tiles and bricks scattering over the yard.
Bran felt Meera fumbling, trying to fight off some bloated dead woman in washerwoman clothes. Meera could only slash out with her iron bar to beat the thing back. The horse didn’t wait for her as it broke into a gallop. Bran couldn’t even be sure who was controlling the horse anymore, but it wasn’t him.

He felt Summer, rushing through the gate with jaws bared. The great wolf tore a dead man down with his fangs, and then shook the body like a rodent. Bran’s heart nearly pounded out of his chest when he saw his old friend again, leaping to protect him.

The three-eyed crow’s birds were slamming against the Other like a hail of frantic bodies. They couldn’t hurt it, but the animals were throwing themselves just to try and slow it down.

The wind, the dead, the panic… it was all too much. The air crackled. Bran felt it all spinning, burning, screaming, unable to make sense of it. It was all blurring. The world – blurring around Bran… He couldn’t…

He felt himself falling off the horse at the gates, only for Summer’s jaws to yank him out of the mud and drag him away. He remembered how the ground seemed to be shaking. He saw the forest was rippling, every tree seemed to shift in the wind. Summer dragged him roughly through the brambles, while Meera ran backwards as she fought off the dead things as well.

The earth was churning. Bran could feel an otherworldly sound echoing in the air, ringing like a song that roused the woods. A dead corpse of a black-cloaked man tried to lunge at Bran, only for the trees around it to twist – the roots of the ironwood trees seemed to curl around the thing’s legs, gripping it still. Another dead woman, entangled in rippling branches. The forest itself, Bran realised, the greenseer is in the trees.

The trees themselves were dancing around them, clearing their path and blocking the dead.

In the moment, all of the old stories that Maester Luwin or Old Nan had ever told him about the magic of the children of the forests came rushing back to him. Wearing animal’s skins, possessing the trees and the streams, moving through rocks, like reshaping the earth and the hammer of the waters. Bran could feel the power – the magic – all around him, and it was so intense it felt like a different scale to warging. This is a greenseer’s power.

Bran could see the Other’s blue eye watching him. There were yards of trees and palisades blocking the distance between them, but Bran could still feel the Other’s gaze. Above them, the storm seemed to be growing.

The last of the Bastard’s Boys was hiding, weeping, in the cellar beneath the main hall. Bran could feel him vaguely through a dozen scattering rats. The Stranger killed the man with a lazy lunge through his chest, barely even breaking stride.

We would never have escaped without the greenseer’s assistance, Bran thought with a gulp. He didn’t know how many dead things there were, but they couldn’t overwhelm an entire forest. There was strength in the trees. Even the Stranger itself seemed hesitant to follow them through the thick forest.

Meera was screaming something at him, but Bran couldn’t hear it. He couldn’t feel or hear a thing from his own body. Sometime in the clash of elements, he had become dislodged from his skin. Everything just felt numb, surreal.

Visions swirled around him. Bran saw an ancient lord – as pale as a corpse – coughing and spitting blood amongst old white roots, as he was tended to by small creatures with the shape of men. Bran
saw a frail, wailing babe abandoned in the snows, waiting as silent figures came to collect it. He saw nearly a hundred cloaked men dying to an icy blade, their eyes bulging in horror before their bodies turned cold. The visions flashed before him, writhing and dancing in the air.

The whole forest was alive, pulsing with a power the trees hadn’t known for millennia. The snowstorm was spreading outwards over the mountains, the clouds brewing and churning. Flashes of cold lightning burst through the dark, and thunder rolled over the hills.

*It’s a song.* Bran didn’t know where the thought came from, but he knew it to be true. It felt like song, reverberating in the earth. A song so intense that Bran was left spinning in it.

And Bran saw Meera. She was gasping, wheezing and coughing blood. She looked barely able to stand, but she was dragging his limp shape, shambling through the snows. Meera was the only thing keeping him tied to his skin.

*It will be chasing us,* Bran thought with quiet horror. Whatever it was that the greenseer did to let them escape, Bran didn’t think he could keep on doing it.

It was a long and cold night, huddled for shelter on the mountainside, shivering in the fierce winds. Meera kept on trying to rouse Bran, but he faded in and out of consciousness. There was so much energy all around him, Bran didn’t understand how Meera could even stand it. It felt like the earth was still quaking, squirming beneath them. It was a power so vast that Bran fluttered before it like a leaf in a gale.

“Bran!” Meera was shouting in the distance, shaking his shoulders. “What do we do? Where do we go?”

*I don’t know,* Bran would have replied. He could feel the Stranger moving over the hills, leaving a ruined Thistle Hall in its wake. Bran remembered the warning of Osha, a lifetime ago. Osha had warned him where to run. *South, as far south as south goes.*

“Bran! Bran, wake up!” Meera hissed, trying to shake him awake. Bran was outside, staring down at his own unconscious body. “Bran, I don’t know what happened back there or what you did, but… but you’ve got to…”

She didn’t seem to know how to finish that. Summer moaned, nuzzling against Bran’s chest.

Meera had to hoist Bran over Summer’s back to move him the next morning. The direwolf whined in protest. They had to trek through the winds, moving as quickly and as quietly as a fatigued woman and a cripple could. The storm didn’t ease – the winds were so fierce that even Summer struggled, so sharp that they could kill a man within minutes.

The only cloak that they had was one which Meera snatched from a dead man – a hemp cloak that felt mouldy and smelled foul. Still, they both huddled beneath it, desperate to preserve any heat on their skin. Bran pressed against Meera, her lean and strong arms hugging around him so tightly, but he flickered in and out of his skin.

They could light no fires. The snows swallowed all warmth.

Vaguely, Bran could recognise the plains stretched out before them – the fields to the north of Winterfell. *We trekked through here, once,* he thought, *back when we heading north towards the Wall.* There had been eight of them back then – six people and two wolves – but now there were only two and one wolf.

Osha, Rickon and Shaggydog were gods-know-where, while Hodor and Jojen could well be dead.
Ramsay had said they were dead, but Bran wasn’t sure if he believed him. How many people died, all because the three-eyed crow was calling me?

Once, these fields had been grassy and green, but now it was hard to see anything but endless plains of snow. Winter isn’t coming anymore. It’s here.

They holed up in the roots of an old birch tree, and they chewed on bark for dinner. Not even Meera could hunt in weather like this. They had few supplies after their escape, and no help. We will starve if we do not escape the snows quickly, Bran knew.

They hid from any hunting parties, either Boltons or worse, all the while trying to make their way south. Meera had to lash Bran onto Summer’s back, despite the direwolf’s protests. A direwolf was not a pack mule – Summer might have lashed out, if they had not been so desperate.

It was an uncomfortable journey, but Bran spent most of it unconscious as he scouted around him. The storm scattered everything, even the wildlife. There were no fluttering wings in the branches, there were no foxes scratting through the trees. The north seemed to be huddled, hidden, bracing against winter.

Then, to the south, Meera reported seeing a shadow in the distance – a huge host of men marching south towards the kingsroad. It was an army, but there was no way of telling whose or where they were heading. Meera wanted to follow in their wake, to see if they could sneak in amongst the camp followers to find shelter.

“A cripple will draw attention,” Bran mumbled weakly. They had to press up close to hear each other over the sound of the snows. He was so close he could feel her heartbeat, soft and steady.

“I know,” Meera said with a grimace. “But I could go myself, try to steal some supplies for us.”

It spoke to how dire their conditions were, that Meera would even suggest leaving him.

They made poor time, and all the while the winds didn’t ease. Bran could only watch as Meera became more frail, pale and helpless – weaker than he had ever seen her. If not for Summer sticking by Bran’s side, he didn’t know how they could survive.

No, Meera would be able to survive. If she left me, she would be able to survive by herself. The very thought caused his stomach to twist. Perhaps I could survive without her too – if I left my old body behind and moved into the trees.

Still, neither of them did. They clung to each other, still futilely trying to push through the snows together.

“I can see the wolveswood,” Meera called to him. “We can shelter there. This is the last chance if we want to meet up with that army.”

Bran only nodded. Winterfell, he thought with a gulp. We must get to Winterfell. The Boltons in Winterfell didn’t matter, not anymore. Bran had to return home.

It was a dark morn when they reached the first pockmarked sentinel trees of the wolveswood. He knew these lands; he had ridden through them with Father as a boy. Those days felt like an age ago. Bran had never seen the forest so grim, so foreboding, every tree trembling in the gale. Meera clutched that rusted iron bar – the closest thing to a proper weapon they had – with both hands. Even Summer was so frail they could barely last much longer. Bran watched Meera fumble uselessly trying to light a fire, cursing and begging the woods, and he felt his gut clench.
As night fell, they saw the bulbous full moon shimmering over the woods. With the light reflecting over the snows, the moon seemed to glow as bright blue as an eye.

The weather had followed them south. Bran could feel the rumbling of northern winds moving closer. There was something in the air, that power again.

The cold crept after them, sucking their strength. The snows made hard travelling, and they had to retire for shelter quickly. We need help, Bran thought. We’re going to die out here, buried under the snows...

There was no choice. Bran took a deep breath, and he stretched out his mind.

For a second, he felt nothing but emptiness, or animals hiding against the snow. He felt an owl stranded by the winds, torn out of the sky. He felt a fox starving in its den.

Then, he felt something at the edge of awareness, like a bonfire in the darkness. There were men, thousands of men all huddled together. The minds of men felt so different from animals – where animals were sharp, distinct and focused, humans felt intricate, bright and wispy. Bran could barely focus on the presence of humans.

There were more. Horses, plenty of horses, and there were ravens too. Birds squawking in cages. He reached out to them, trying to understand, trying call for attention.

It was an army. Not too far from them, either. Ramsay had been preparing to fight against someone, Bran remembered. The Bastard King, he had said. Wildlings?

Bran reached out further, trying to understand. His mind extended, his presence flittering over the fields.


He could only blink, stuttering. Bran recognised that feeling in a way he could barely describe. “It’s my brother,” Bran stammered out. “Jon.” Jon?

Meera gaped at him. Bran could barely make sense of it. Around him, the winds howled.

They sat for a while in quiet confusion, huddled by the trees, as Bran reached out, trying to feel what was happening. Bran couldn’t make sense of half the things he sensed through his third eye.

Then, in the distance, Bran felt something spark. Like a little flash in his mindscape. It was followed by a second, and then a third, until one by one there were dozens. Each one was so wispy that he could barely feel it, but together they became something more.

It was only by the hundredth spark that he started to understand. In his mind, every presence was like a little light and when they died, they flashed. People are dying, Bran thought. I can feel them dying.

It felt like power. Like every person was a little bit of power, and when they died they sparked. Like fireflies in the night, that he could reach out and hold.

I felt the same thing at Last Hearth and Thistle Hall too, back when I had been so close it felt overwhelming. I blanked out both times, Bran realised. The feel of all those people dying around me overwhelmed me.
The tide of deaths didn’t stop. Bran could feel it growing in intensity. It was a battle. A storm of death.

Meera shuffled to his side, staring wide-eyed. Her brown hair looked wispy, like it was going grey in the snow. “Bran?” Meera asked. “What’s happening? What is it?”

Bran wasn’t sure how he could answer that. He felt like a near-sighted man trying to describe events in the distance.

He couldn’t make out any details, but he could make out the general shape of it. A cluster of men, the air broiling in the storm, and more and more presences were being extinguished. Sparks of power lighting up the sky as they dissipated. It was like raw energy, the same type that had been at Thistle Hall. Bran could feel it…

He could feel it. He felt it so much it hurt.

The flow of energy didn’t stop. He was too alert, too aware. It felt like his skin was on fire, it felt like burning.

His body started to spasm, gasping. “Bran!” Meera shouted in his ear, holding him uselessly. “Bran!”

A battle. Bran thought. It was a battle, and the clash of men – the emotion, the pain, the deaths… Bran could feel it all.

Oh gods…

“It’s Jon,” Bran sputtered. “My brother. Jon. I… I can feel him, and…”

The tide didn’t cease. In the sparks, Bran could see flashes of visions. Like beyond the green, he thought with a gulp, but… but closer… coming closer… “It feels like Jon’s going to die.”

All around him, the sky cackled and rumbled, the winds and snow tearing over the earth – like immense giants rumbling and wrestling in the sky.

The False Guard

“Oi, Harlow,” the wildling called. “Bring the bloody horses around, will ya?”

Harlow jumped to his feet at once, as quick as a rabbit. “Yes ser, right away!” he replied, grinning brightly.

“Boy, you were meant to sharpen this blade,” another Dragonguard complained, not too long afterwards, dropping the bone-handled greatsword onto the snow. “How am I supposed to swing an edge like that?”

“Oh – apologies, ser, I’ll sharpen it now,” Harlow gushed as he bowed low.

“Squire!” another shouted for him later. “Message from Eastwatch came in, deliver it on to the king.”

Harlow dropped all of his many tasks to run to his feet, eagerly. “Yes, of course!”
“Oi! And fetch us some ale while you’re up,” a Dragonguard ordered from the campfire.

“I will, ser.” Harlow broke into an urgent jog through the flurry of snow.

As soon as he returned, he heard, “Those stables are a bloody mess!”

“I’m so sorry, I’ll clean them now,” Harlow replied eagerly.

“And ready those saddles when you’re at it,” the man ordered, before shuffling away with a skin of ale in his hand.

Harlow bowed and hopped to it. “Right away!”

“Harlow, where the bloody hells are you?” another called for him shortly afterwards. “We need to prepare the dragon’s meal.”

“Of course, I’ll handle it.” He bowed again, just for good measure. “I can handle it all.”

“And gods, Harlow,” the great bearded figure snorted, his nose crinkling. “You stink of shit.”


He did everything they asked of him and more. He took on the duties of half a dozen squires, and he devoted himself to each task eagerly. He smiled and he laughed, and he laboured with such zeal.

They could have fucked him up the ass, and Harlow would have grinned and asked for more.

He wore a white stone on his chest, polished to perfection. At night, Harlow would pray with the free folk around the idol of the dragon, accepted into their fold. Even as only a squire, he was a member of the Dragonguard too. The woods witch said that he was blessed, to be able to serve the dragon so.

When the dragon shat, Harlow would be the one to clean it up. He was so very grateful too.

It took a very special type of man to be able to maintain such an act for months. One day at time – bowing low, obeying orders, and all the while he watched, listened and planned.

Of all the accusations they could lay at him, nobody could say Ramsay was not devoted.

Every single time Jon Snow greet Harlow, he bowed deeply. Ramsay bowed like a buffoon and he lowered his head – all to hide his eyes.

Dressed in finery, in his armour and bloody helm with his bone falchion, Ramsay was the Red Helm, the Monster, the Bastard of the Dreadfort. Without them, he was just a podgy young man with wide eyes and slumped shoulders, who stuttered as he spoke and was always eager to please. A boy like that could go anywhere.

It was a scheme that had been months in the making, the plan evolving and adapting at every step. The Bastard King had required extreme measures. You couldn’t backstab anybody, Ramsay had reasoned, unless you got behind them first. Jon Snow would be planning a campaign, Roose Bolton would be scheming to stop him, and so Ramsay made a plan of his own.

It had been the middle of the night in Winterfell, after a very rushed wedding, when Ramsay and his men abandoned his father’s plan and snuck off into the night.

First, Ramsay had ridden fast and sacked Last Hearth for all it was worth, and put every man,
woman and child to the blade. Ramsay couldn’t allow his father or the Bastard King to get their hands on Bran Stark – either one of them would happily replace Ramsay’s status as Lord of Winterfell. Razing Last Hearth to the ground had helped Ramsay get things moving in the right direction.

While most of the Bastard’s Boys took shelter in Thistle Hall, Ramsay himself took a few handpicked men, and rode north. Ramsay killed his own horse, and dressed himself as a commoner. They buried their swords, wool and mail in favour of bows, hemp and hide. Without any armour, they became just another group of huntsmen, stumbling around the forest after the battle at Last Hearth.

There was a refuge in audacity. They had been captured, stripped, and interrogated. He had begged and shivered. Ramsay Bolton had walked right into the wildling’s army, cold, scared and exposed.

After all, acting the prisoner had been a tactic that had served Ramsay very well indeed with Theon Greyjoy at Winterfell. Ramsay’s impression of Jon Snow had reminded him much of Theon, actually. Ramsay had known that the wildlings were capturing villages rather than killing them – the risk of being put to the sword was very low. At the time, Ramsay figured that the Bastard King was trying to expand his ranks, that they would be very eager to recruit another few northmen soldiers.

Very quickly, Ramsay realised that acting servile, young and innocent would serve him far better. Even from their very first meeting in the woods by the kingsroad, Jon Snow demonstrated himself as a man who went out of his way to save the ‘innocent’.

That was what Roose never really understood. His father could only think in terms of the ‘big picture’ – he was a man leaning over a cyvasse board. Ramsay knew differently; armies were more than just blobs, they were people. Together they became a force to topple countries, but individually each man was weak, exposed and prone to manipulation. If you wanted to beat a bigger army, you had to do it man by man.

Ramsay had been born a commoner. So often, the generals forgot that their army relied on the messenger boys, the scouts, the watchmen. It was quite easy to infiltrate an army if you were alone and looked harmless, and if you could outwit a single, bored sentry keeping watch on a snowy night. The little pieces were as important as the big, but nobody ever focused on them. One man, Ramsay told himself. One man, one blade. One very... focused man is all it takes.

That’s what made the Bastard’s Boys special. They were a small force, handpicked for their cruelty, but without the cunning for treachery. Every Bastard Boy had no greater ambition than to kill and rape. Ramsay considered each one of his men, his hounds, to be worth a hundred sheep, and so far he hadn’t been proved wrong.

It had served him at Hornwood, it worked at Winterfell, it worked at Moat Cailin, and it worked at Last Hearth. Wildlings or not, Ramsay knew about human nature. Hounds and sheep.

The plan hadn’t been perfect – the dragon’s attack on Mole Town had been unexpected, and too often Ramsay had to fluke his way through. Still, he had walked into Castle Black unarmed and he made it work.

During the assassination attempt by the Night’s Watch, Ramsay had been tailing Jon Snow. The only reason that ‘Harlow’ managed to save the Bastard King’s life by raising the alarm was because Ramsay had been prepared for it. And so Ramsay acted the resourceful little goon, and he screamed for help and he saved the king. The dragon’s rage proved that it would have been unhealthy to do otherwise at the time.
Afterwards, once in earshot of King Snow, Ramsay meekly revealed a secret route to make contact with the mountain clans. Ramsay himself had been planning on ambushing the mountain clans, but he surrendered his plans to the Bastard King and Harlow started to work so loyally and gratefully to earn his place.

For all his efforts, Harlow had been so grateful to be named to the king’s Dragonguard, and very dedicated to prove himself too. The pink letter that arrived at Castle Black had been written months in advance, and prepared to provoke the wildlings into moving south with Ramsay among them. The king’s attack on the Twins in retaliation had been unexpected, but Ramsay hadn’t been disappointed.

And so Ramsay’s plan started to adapt. It wasn’t so much a plan – he didn’t need a step by step scheme, that was far more how Roose thought. Instead, Ramsay had only an intention, and the dedication to see it through.

They had planned everything to come together on the night of the full moon, all that work for a single night. The Bastard King had made his moves, and the Boltons had prepared for their own. Their armies would have been soundly defeated in the field; there had been no other choice but to risk everything in a different form of battle.

The goal had always been the same; either kill Jon Snow, or capture him, and then see to the dragon. Roose had preferred assassination, but personally Ramsay had been really, really hoping they’d capture him. With the dragon, even a rampage, even uncontrolled chaos had been acceptable to his father. If it were to rampage free, bereft of its master, his father had explained, it would only drive the realm back into their own hands. Eventually the dragon would retire and find a roost like any other beast, or the north would be forced to rally together to stop it.

For the same reason, even a mass wildling horde raiding through the north was manageable.

“War is a zero-sum game,” Lord Bolton had told him once, months ago, “and where absolute victory cannot be had, relative victory will suffice. There will be chaos, but we will cope with the chaos better than our enemies can. It doesn't matter whether or not victory is found cleanly, so long as our enemies lay defeated at the game’s end.”

“That sounds like a complicated way of asking me to kill somebody for you,” Ramsay remembered scoffing.

“Of course I’m asking you to kill somebody,” Lord Bolton had replied calmly. “That is your talent, that is why I tolerate you. And I have no doubt that you will – you are my son, after all.”

Despite all of their differences, despite their clashing mentalities and styles, there were times when Ramsay and his father did work together quite well. My father’s plan, my execution.

And now, he could see the end. Harlow stepped over the frozen bodies of the men he had spent months serving, and he laughed.

Months of work, of study, of worry, of copying orders, of passing secret messages and discreetly forging replies, intercepting ravens and constantly acting clueless… so much effort, all for working towards a single night.

And it was glorious.

The look in the Bastard’s face, as he stared up at Ramsay’s bloody grin. All around them the wind was howling and the men were screaming. “Bastard!” Ramsay cried, his heart beating in pure
elation. "There you are, Bastard! Oh, I was really hoping I’d see you!"

The Bastard looked as lost as a puppy. Around them, the night screamed. "You hear the music?" Ramsay called as he stepped forward. "That's my father slaughtering your troops. Oh, is it not the most lovely sound?"

Ramsay stepped closer. The Bastard was on the snow. His eyes were wide, his face as pale as his hair. His furs were bloody, his face pale and dishevelled. He didn’t look the king anymore – he was nothing but a frantic, wounded man lost in the snows.

While Ramsay… Ramsay felt like a god.

The Bastard still didn’t understand, not really. Ramsay loved this moment. He loved the faces. He loved be close enough to see their expression after he screwed them. "Did you not think didn't think that some of those northern lords seemed all too eager to join your side? We've got ten thousand men outside your camp and one thousand inside it. Which means you really didn’t stand a chance at all, bastard.

"Except for the dragon, of course," Ramsay continued with a sneer, as he drew his sword with the utmost care. "The dragon would have been a problem. That was my job, you see; get close enough to put the dragon down."

"Harlow?!" the Bastard gasped finally. Ramsay could have choked with mirth.

"In the flesh," he chuckled.

"Yo-You saved my life," he stuttered.

"Why, of course I did." Ramsay stepped slowly, waiting for his men to catch up. He wasn’t fool enough to risk a wounded wolf by himself. "I don’t want you dead, Bastard. I don’t want to kill you. I was really, really hoping we’d have this moment."

"Harlow…" the Bastard’s voice turned to a growl, staggering as he pulled himself to his feet.

"Oh, we haven’t actually been properly introduced, Bastard," Ramsay mocked, lingering for that one last moment of satisfaction. "My name is not Harlow. I am Lord Ramsay Bolton, and from now on I think I’m going to call you Reek. Do you like that, Bastard? Reek. Reek – it rhymes with bleak."

Ramsay didn’t need to draw out the moment, but he wanted to see the man’s face. He loved savouring their expressions. He watched, and watched, and smiled, as the Bastard’s features twisted, his skin paled, and the wind howled.

The moment passed. Ramsay drew his sword high, and the laughter broke his throat as he leapt forward, blade swinging in a downwards arc. The Bastard stumbled backwards, almost slipping on the ice.

There was laughter by his side. Two of the Bastard’s Boys paced next to Ramsay, stalking forward. Werwick and Lems were both sniggering, their hands on their weapons as they moved after the king.

They could see the battle in the camp in the distance. Northmen and wildlings, men and women, all running mad. Behind him, Ramsay heard the rumble of the ice dragon’s great breaths – each one was laboured, hoarse and weak.
There were only fourteen Bastard’s Boys with him on the ice – as many as Ramsay had been able to sneak through with him into the camp – but it was enough. Fourteen men were enough to hold position until the Bolton forces won the battle.

They were in the middle of it all – just a few men scattered over a black, frozen lake, sheltered by a sleeping dragon, as the battle waged on the shore all around them. Warhorns, drums and screams all echoed together in a dull roar in the distance, drowned out by the fury of the storm above them.

There were no torches, they didn’t want to make themselves a target with the light. Instead, the Bastard King was naught but a shadow as they scrambled in the dark, illuminated only by the rippling light of distant fires through the snows.

“How…?” the Bastard gasped as he stumbled, hidden in the dark. “How could…?”

Ramsay only laughed, stalking forward and swiping with his blade. The Bastard had his own black sword drawn, fumbling in the dark. Ramsay had heard that the Bastard was a great swordsman, but all the skill in the world couldn’t help if you couldn’t even see your opponent.

Footsteps shuffled around him. Werwick and Lems went far, circling around to stop the Bastard from running. He snapped out in the dark, like a wolf surrounded by hounds.

The dead men’s camp littered the snows, their blood already cold. The ‘Dragonguard’ died scattered around the ice. Ramsay heard the strained gasps and grunts as the Bastard stumbled over the half-buried body of his own men. Dark blots stained the snow with each of the Bastard’s steps.

The blood of the leader – Furs – was already cold. He died face first in the snow, his throat slit, his body stiff, frozen and contorted.

“Your men died painlessly, I want you to know that. Mostly painless,” Mock him – Make him angry. Lure him into a mistake. “It only took just a bit of poison in their cups – they drank it all.”

Cold men huddled on a lake, drinking to stay warm at night. Nobody even thought twice when Harlow rushed around with skins of ale, as he had every night for months. “Some of them died quickly, but him – Furs tried to run. I had to cut his throat myself.”

“What did…” the Bastard stammered. “What did you…?”

Behind them, the bulk of Sonagon shifted slightly, a long drawl breaking from the dragon’s maw. “What did I do?” Ramsay laughed. “I beat you.”

His voice was loud and clear. The Bastard focused on the sound, and he lunged. He was quick, and sword was sharp. He swung fast and darted over the snow with surprising speed, but Ramsay was ready for him. Ramsay ducked low, and hacked forward with his blade like a cleaver.

Metal chimed. The Valyrian steel jarred against Ramsay’s blade, taking a notch out of the iron, but the ferocity still knocked the Bastard backwards. He recovered swiftly, but Ramsay was already hacking again – screaming like a madman as he slashed and hacked There was no skill to it, no restraint – nothing but a bloodthirsty growl between crazed chuckles of laughter.

The first few strikes caught the Bastard off-guard. He managed to recover, and that sharp black blade of his struck out like a snake. It sliced straight through Ramsay’s shoulderguard, the leather splitting and the blade cutting deep through skin.

If not for Lems stepping in, Ramsay might well have lost his head. Instead, Jon Snow crumpled as the Bastard’s Boy lunged his sword into Jon’s back. Ramsay didn’t stop laughing, even with the blood swelling from his shoulder. Ramsay couldn’t even feel the pain, he was too high.
Lems’ iron blade didn’t pierce the armour, but the Bastard still staggered. He reacted admirably, twisting to meet the attacker behind him, and then Ramsay charged forward with a backhand strike with his other arm. His sword crashed into the Bastard’s ribs, clattering against chainmail under hard leathers.

Blood splattered from the Bastard’s mouth. Ramsay felt the warm droplets against his face. His smile widened.

Maybe one on one, Ramsay might have lost, but three-on-one? While the Bastard was dazed and wounded? Not a chance. The Bastard staggered, but Ramsay’s boys surrounded him. Both Lems and Werwick were there, darting around from either side and forcing Jon to twist and parry.

“Sonagon!” the Bastard screamed at the top of his lungs. “Sonagon!”

The dragon stirred and groaned, but it could hardly even twitch. It was left too weak, too strained. Ramsay’s laughter didn’t stop.

“What did you do?” the Bastard bellowed. “What did you do?”

It was almost impressive, how the man was fast enough to hold off two at once. Ramsay held back, nursing his wounded shoulder. Blood wept from the cut, stinging against the cold. In the dark, Ramsay could only see the blades flashing. The Bastard rippled and parried, while Werwick and Lems hacked closer. It was a dance of steel and snow – desperate, strained.

Ramsay heard the squelch of blood. The Bastard’s blade lashed out, gutting Lems straight through the stomach.

Ramsay struck. Before the blade could even recoil from the Bastard Boy’s stomach, Ramsay’s fist slammed into his face. Both Jon and Lems fell to the snow at the same time. “Bastard!” Ramsay howled as he kicked the sword from the Bastard’s writhing hand. It clattered away over into the snow. “Bastard!”

The Bastard was left unarmed, trying to flail, trying to find his feet, but Ramsay was all ferocity and strength. Ramsay was shorter, but stockier and heavier, and still strong enough. He kicked the Bastard’s feet out from under him, and kicked again where he saw dark fluid staining the Bastard’s furs. Jon retched and Ramsay fell on him, grabbing him. They writhed in the snow. The Bastard twisted and punched, splitting Ramsay’s lips. Ramsay could taste the red, where his lips had been cut on his teeth.

His eyes glittered. His lips widened. Ramsay had felt harder blows before his eighth name-day. Weak. He’s so weak now. Ramsay felt the world… widen. Come into clarity. Oh, I will so very enjoy this.

Ramsay smiled, twisting his form, and answered the bastard with his own punch, then another, and another. The Bastard weakened, his limbs shaking, and the dragon twitched. Ramsay hooked around the Bastard and dug the hilt of his blade under the Bastard’s chin. Ramsay heaved in and dragged the Bastard him a few paces away, letting the iron crush into the Bastard’s soft throat. Ramsay could feel him gurgle and thrash through the metal.

“Sonagon!” The word split the Bastard’s throat. A desperate cry for his dragon’s attention. “Sonag–”

“Come on now, Reek,” Ramsay growled. His grip tightened. “Do you really think the men were the only ones I poisoned?”
Ramsay yanked the Bastard’s neck. The dragon didn’t even squirm, even as its master was being strangled right under its nose. The Bastard gargled for breath, squirming beneath him.

“Do you know how long it took find a poison that would work on your dragon?” Ramsay whispered in his ear, and Jon convulsed. “Why, I spent months researching what it ate. I spent a long time taking care of it. Beautiful animal.”

Discovering a means of disabling the beast had always been the hardest task Ramsay faced. Poisoning it had been difficult – the beast could eat metal and stone, even. Trial and error had been needed; every night for months Ramsay had been switching up what went into the dragon’s meals, and then observing its behaviour afterwards. It had required months of study to develop a poison that would be crippling for a dragon.

He’d gone to the greatest lengths, never allowing himself to be discovered. Many ideas had been settled on, tried, and discarded. Flesh infused with the bloody flux, the pox, the greywater fever – even the flesh of rabid foxes. The dragon had shrugged it all off, not even noticing his efforts. The heavy metals had proven more promising – a mixture of natural waste-rock, lead and sulphur from the Manderly silver mines could make the dragon sickly. It was not obvious at first; the dragon’s constitution was just too great, and it had not been enough for a reliable poison.

Their deadline had loomed with little success. The easy solution that Ramsay desired proved difficult, and all other alternatives were rather more… messy. Ramsay had nearly thought the mission lost, his task failed, until they had found an ally – ready and willing, dancing to another’s strings for the same end. A maester, with whose assistance he had finally made the true breakthroughs.

Greyscale. Greyscale-tainted flesh, mixed into the dragon’s meals... now that had given a marvellous result.

The first sample had come from a plague ship quarantined by the White Harbour port, but the maester had access, and then House Bolton had allies that helped ferry it through the city. Ramsay brought it to the dragon’s roost. The plague flesh required extraordinarily careful handling, and afterwards Ramsay had planted the contents into the dragon’s meals, one small strip at a time.

His initial source had been too small to debilitate such a large beast, but greyscale was so infectious; Ramsay had found that it was easy enough to simply create more stock. All it took was a thick pair of gloves and a piece of raw, poisoned meat – for every barrel of raw fish that came to the dragon, Ramsay dropped an extra piece of meat in it, and then let the fish simmer for a day or two before serving. Sometimes Ramsay had taken aside barrels and let them linger in fermentation for weeks, scurried away in dark corners, to replenish his stocks. No one but Ramsay had noticed that the dragon was eating a few barrels less on some days, and a few more on others. If a few barrels happened to stink more than the others? If the dragon didn’t care, why should they?

The ‘Dragonguard’ trusted him to watch over the dragon’s food, and no one noticed. The Bastard King filled his guard with dumb warriors, not a drop of cunning between them. That Hatch, the big one, the supposed leader, was the worst. All of them were fighters, they were above such stewardly duties. Ramsay ran circles around them all.

There was no food-tester to protect a dragon. The dragon was gluttonous enough to eat it all.

Even from the first meal, the results were instant. Whatever the disease did to the dragon, it seemed to drain the beast’s strength. Ramsay had been carefully, increasing the dragon’s intake of tainted food only in small increments, so as to avoid attention. Eventually, as the march to Winterfell began, he’d settled into a pattern, constantly weakening the dragon over many tainted
meals, and eventually drawing it into a lull. The others had dismissed it as the dragon just being
tired on the march, perhaps they had even been grateful for how complacent the beast had become,
but Ramsay had known the truth.

The Bastard’s dragon had unknowingly consumed nearly all of Ramsay’s tainted supplies earlier in
the day, and now it could hardly seem to breathe. Ramsay honestly wasn’t certain whether it would
survive or not. He hoped it would; he didn’t want the dragon dead, after all.

*The disease drains their strength, makes them weak*, Ramsay had decided, weeks before. *The
symptoms differ, from human to dragon, but the terminal result is the same. Petrifcation. Outwardly in
man, inwardly in dragon.* The maester had been so very helpful. Ramsay had started
to wonder just how exactly the dragons went extinct the first time around.

Ramsay could feel the fear in the Bastard’s body, in his desperate shudders and strained breaths.
Ramsay squeezed, pulling backwards tighter and tighter, choking the life out of him. Ramsay only
laughed.

It felt like the world was cheering for him. The sky was screaming, and the ground was rumbling.

Ramsay watched the Bastard’s face turn red, his eyes bulging so much that they might pop…

The Bastard jerked, like the final spasm of a convulsing fish. “No…” Ramsay muttered. “I’m not
going to kill you, Bastard. I don’t want to kill you.”

After a moment’s pause, Ramsay relented. He had to force his hands to relent. His grip slackened,
and the Bastard gasped for air. Ramsay still hugged him tightly, pinned to the ground.

“I’m going to destroy you,” Ramsay whispered. “I’m going to break you, piece by piece. You are
mine. You will be my new Reek.”

*Oh, you’ll be the best Reek too. Theon is nothing compared to you. I will have the whole world
coming to see my Reek, crawling and begging around on the floor. You will lick the stones under
my feet.*

They would look at the great and proud Bastard King, once a conqueror and a dragonrider, now
something less than human and dancing for Ramsay’s pleasure. He would be Ramsay’s pet. No,
pet was the wrong word, Ramsay quite liked his pets. Rather, *puppet*. Yes, Reek – Ramsay’s little
puppet.

Werwick was hunched over the wounded Lems, wailing in shock as his guts spilled outwards.
Lems gut was oozing outwards, where the black blade had slice his chest open. “Werwick!”
Ramsay snapped, with no regard to his fallen man. “Gather up the others, as many that are still
alive. We hold position on the lake, keep near to the dragon.”

Werwick jumped to attention, shivering and trembling in the cold. Lems was still gasping with his
stomach bleeding out. If Ramsay had his hands free, he would have cut the man’s throat just to get
it over with.

Instead, Ramsay hooked his arm around the Bastard’s neck, and dragged him to his feet. The man
tried to thrash, but the headlock was too tight. His feet kicked at the snow, slipping on the ice
while Ramsay heaved him upwards.

“Your training begins now, Reek,” Ramsay said, his voice bouncing with joy. Cold, bleeding and
fatigued, but Ramsay had never felt happier. “We’re going to watch, you and I. Let’s watch
everything you care about be destroyed.”
The storm was deafening, but they could still see the flurry of battle. There would be warhorns, charging horses, arrows raining and boots stamping, but it all felt just strangely unreal watching from a distance. The Bastard might have tried to say something, but made nothing but a choking sound. “It’s already over,” Ramsay cackled. “I poisoned your dragon. I killed your men. Mine were set to raise havoc in your camp, and my father convinced yours to betray you. We beat you.”

More of Ramsay’s men were slipping out of the shadows. He only had only a dozen of his Boys with him on the ice, but that was enough. The Bastard squirmed, and Damon Dance-for-Me slammed his fist into the Bastard’s stomach. Werwick, Lou and Merwyn all laughed. “I need him alive,” Ramsay ordered to his men, “but I don’t want him healthy. Wrap up his wound, and then beat him until he stops resisting.”

Ramsay stepped backwards to tighten his cloak around his bloody neck, to stop the bleeding. All the while, Lems was left gurgling in the snow – dying slowly as his intestines spilled out. Ramsay ordered someone to shut him up, and, finally, Yellow Dick hacked open Lems’ head to silence him, before stealing the sword that killed him.

The Bastard was left flailing on the ground. Ramsay’s men were already thumping spears into the snow, ready to defend against any who might be coming to save him. They all knew the plan – the Bastard King would die before they would ever let him be recovered.

There was still a fire – a defiance – in the Bastard’s grey eyes. Ramsay leant over him, pulling him close. That is good, Ramsay thought with a laugh, I will have fun beating that fire out of you.

“The only reason you made it so far was because we let you,” Ramsay whispered into the man’s ear. He made gasps that could have been pleas. “We wanted you here, your army gathered right now – so we could destroy all of our foes on a single night. What use is an ambush, if the prey isn’t all gathered for it?

“But do you want to know the secret?” Ramsay’s voice lowered slightly. “We didn’t win. This isn’t our victory, this is your loss. We wouldn’t ever have beaten your army in a straight battle. If it was anyone else, any other commander, I don’t think this trap would have worked. No one else would have so often hesitated, while wielding so much power. No one else would have let me get so close. An anonymous man, with no family and no past save that I spun out of whole cloth, and you let me so close to the most precious beast in the world. No one else… But it wasn’t anybody else, it was you.”

He moved so close his lips brushed against Jon’s ear. “This is your loss, yours,” Ramsay whispered. “Your failure, your fault – all yours.”

The look on the Bastard’s face – the pale, wide-eyed look of horror as he stared out and struggled futilely – it was just… it was beautiful. It sounded like the Bastard would have screamed, if only he could breathe in Ramsay’s chokehold.

The snowstorm was only getting stronger. Ramsay laughed and laughed and laughed. Even from over a mile away, they heard the tremble as camp’s bulwarks collapsed, and heavy cavalry pierced through the host. The wildlings were all disorganised, their camp was in shambles, and Ramsay knew that his well-prepared assault would make short work of them.

If the fighting did break out to the ice, Ramsay would hold their king hostage until his father’s army slaughtered them. Ramsay’s men could hold position, or Ramsay would cut the Bastard King’s throat and run.

Either way, as soon as soon as the battle was won, they’d have the manpower to secure the dragon.
Ramsay reckoned he’d be able to tame it. The methods… starvation and chains, certainly. Whips wouldn’t do, the hide was too thick to inflict pain by ordinary means, but what of needles in the eye? It was an ice dragon, could it be made to feel pain by fire? It was a beast, not so different from any other, and he hadn’t met a beast yet that couldn’t be broken. And, after all, the dragon liked Harlow. The thought made him smile. Maybe it won’t even be so difficult.

His grip around the Bastard’s throat tightened. First, I will break the dragonrider, then I will break the dragon. With a dragon under their thumb, the Bolton regime would truly begin – and Ramsay would become invaluable to it. Indispensable to his father.

It was all about the dragon – that had been the only thing that the Boltons could not handle, and so instead they targeted the dragonrider. You came prepared for a battle, but we spent our time readying a trap, Ramsay thought with satisfaction. Several traps, in fact.

Sound gargled from the Bastard’s throat as he thrashed against Ramsay’s grip. They were short, sharp and hoarse cries, as if the man could overpower the storm, screaming for his army in the distance. The army that was being massacred.

“Look at it,” Ramsay whispered into the Bastard’s ear, smiling, as his Boys took him away and set to binding his injuries. “This is you. All you. You did this. Your army, your allies, your dragon, your loss.”

Tonight will be a good night, Ramsay thought. Oh, tonight is a good night!

Val

The commanders bickered. Even as the arrows rained down from the sky, she heard a hundred voices and a hundred conflicting orders, orders that few had any business giving. Trying to project authority by sheer overwhelming volume. It was all such a blur that in the din she could only make out the loudest of the rabble.

She stood by the commander’s tent, near the central stead of the fishing village, staring over the horizon where great army was being torn apart. She couldn’t see the charge, she could only see the haze of a thousand torches writhing, and the shimmer of arrows raining downwards.

They were a good day’s march away from Winterfell, maybe half a day if they really pushed. The Boltons must have left the gates even before the fighting in the camp began. It was coordinated.

Val could hear the horns echoing, the sounds of battle chiming in the pandemonium. The Boltons were at the perimeter, with absolutely no warning from the scouts or outriders. An organised defence could have routed the Boltons – fortified men on the earthen encampments could have resisted the ambush, sent them back bleeding – but there was no organisation. No discipline, no clear-minded orders. Their camp was large, dispersed and now fractured; even by the time the northern coalition gathered to resist them at the fortifications it would be too late.

The storm was growing like the wrath of gods. Val could only stare, feeling numb with fear and cold. There were no details, she could see nothing of the battle – it was too dark and too chaotic to see anything other than incoherent panic. The blizzard tore the weaker tents apart, sending the leathers flapping madly in the wind. The howling wind, the snow, the screaming - it all blended together, set the world to madness.
They’re attacking from both the north and west, she realised. They’re pushing with soldiers from the front, horses to the rear. A hammer from behind, to the anvil. She could see the arrows in the distance, the shafts scattering wildly in the winds. It was an ambush – a solid line of soldiers taking full advantage of superior discipline, bowmen and cavalry. They would be pressing forward slowly to keep their lines intact, but as unstoppable as a dagger through the heart. Rattleshirt’s men had been holding the north perimeter, but they were lost. As soon as the Boltons broke through the bulwarks then was no easy way to stop them.

One collected force fighting through a disjointed one.

The snow fell from the sky in a fierce flurry, nearly horizontal with the winds. Tents were torn out of the ground, men running huddled under billowing cloaks. In weather like this, every man would be running blind.

“We got horns over the ridge! West and south!” the Weeper shrieked as he stomped forward. “Warriors on me, we break their charge! On me! On me!”

“Retreat! We must run!” some southron lord – Locke something or other – shouted. “Retreat!”

“Fuck that, where the hell is Snow?” Tormund Giantsbane exclaimed, barrelling past them all. “The king??”

“Archers! Archers! Bowmen!”

“Retreat! Retreat to the southern bulwarks!” a scared voice shrieked. “Cavalry! Cavalry breaking through!”

“Southron traitors!” a wildling’s voice - a mad-eyed raider clutching two stone-headed axes, facing off against some Manderly soldiers. “You bloody fucking traitors!”

“Reinforcements to the west!” That was the Greatjon's voice, a heavy bellow as he pushed through, heading towards the Manderly boathouse. “Where are the bloody heavy horse?”

*That was the problem*, Val thought quietly. In moment of alarm, all rational thought stopped. *Men would just follow the loudest voice.*

Gods… the fear in the air. It was overwhelming. Every single second, somebody was dying. There were a hundred crises happening all through the camp, and Val just couldn’t respond to it. How could you stop a tide of a thousand men?

Her hands were shivering. She could feel it too. A certain type of panic was infectious.

*No*, Val thought. *Now is not the time. Not everybody can be helped, focus on what I can do.*

She cast her gaze around the frenzied, burning camp, and her heart skipped. The thought of the battle at the Frostfangs fluttered through her mind. The Others hit Mance’s host from multiple sides, scattering them, before bringing in the main assault. *I've seen this type of chaos before. The Boltons are even using similar tactics to the white walkers.*

Tormund and the Greatjon were arguing – one wanted to hold the line, the other insisted on reinforcing the perimeter. In the pandemonium, the men looked close to coming to blows against each other. Accusations still ran through the camp – shouts of ‘craven’ or ‘traitors’, and Val couldn’t even pick out who or what. *There’s no calm, not here. Their blood is too hot.*

Val saw the Weeper already pushing his way through, screaming. The man had no patience for
arguing, his warband was already rallying to his roar. The Weeper already had his scythe in hand and he was on the hunt for his enemy’s heads. In a pinch, any head would do.

*I can’t let this happen.* Val made her decision quickly; she ignored the others and ran after the Weeper, shoving her way through the snows and the raiders.

“Weeper!” Val snapped, stepping towards him. “You fall back! Gather your men, send the signal to fall back.”

The Weeper twitched, his bloody scythe snapping at her. Blood was dribblling down from his eyes, his face twisted into a feral snarl. “What the fuck–?”

No time to back down now. “Fall back, Weeper,” she ordered. “With as many as you can gather, fall back to the shore and regroup.”

“Are you fucking mad, bitch?” he snarled. “They're slaughtering us!”

“We got cavalry breaking the encampments,” a scarred wildling growled. “The bulwarks–”

“–are already lost. The instinct is to counterattack. That's what they're expecting. Resist that instinct, Weeper.” Val was already storming her way through. “Gather them all, fall back and rally!”

Too much of a rabble, her voice didn't gather enough attention among the warriors. “Orders from the king!” Val screamed at the top of her lungs, but it still felt barely loud enough. “Gather anyone you can! Fall back!”

The Weeper’s arm grabbed her shoulder, his grip so tight it hurt. He left a bloody handprint on her furs. Manderly blood. “Bitch,” the Weeper snapped. “You do not order my men.”

His eyes bulged. No weakness. *He’ll kill me if I show weakness.* “If you had your wits, then I wouldn’t have to,” Val challenged. “You fall back, Weeper, and the ranks rally around you. Let the men see their commanders, know who to follow. Run mad and you’ll only get more killed. Again.”

He didn’t slacken his grip. They could hear the screams in the distance, howling with the wind. *He could kill me. One word, one movement, one look in the eyes, and I’m dead.* The thought of Ser Wylis’ bloody head flickered before her gaze. Still, Val said, “Move your hand or lose it.”

After a pause, the Weeper relented and lowered his hand, but his eyes didn’t lose their ferocity. She caught the flicker of hesitation moving through the men, and Val turned around between the warriors and raised her voice, “King Snow has gone to rally the dragon! He'll be flying through any moment now!” *I hope.* “So bloody fall back already!”

Jon’s name caused a few stirs, but there was just so much confusion and bustling bodies around her. Val was fighting against a tide – the whole camp was flooded with bedlam, and she had to fight and scream just to get a single message through.

The Weeper twitched, but Val was already turning and pushing away. A man with a bloody winged pig on his surcoat moved to stop her, but he froze at as the Weeper shook his head.

She could hear the sound of hooves rumbling closer. It felt like an earthquake - slow, steady, but unstoppable. *How many men have died in the last minute alone?*

“The men on the perimeter!” someone protested.
“Leave them!” Val snapped. She drew her blade and raised it high. “Fall back! Fall back and rally!”

Men were stirring all around. She had to shove and barge her way through. She glimpsed the Weeper's face twitch, curse, and turn after her.

“King Snow!” a red-faced man – a southerner – bellowed at her. “Where is he? Where is he?”

“He’s fighting a battle! Like you should be!” Val snapped, turning and screaming. “Now are you going to stand around with your cocks in the air, or are you going to get moving?”

There was no time to look for Jon. They had minutes to spare, and Val had to make the hard choice. Either Jon was dead and they wouldn't find his corpse until morning, or he was moving but lost. Either way, Val couldn't distract herself with him right now.

“Ser Wylis!” a man, a knight, was screaming. “Where is Ser Wylis? The wildlings–”

“Your commander was a fucking traitor!” that was one of the Weeper’s men, an ugly man with a bloody winged pig on surcoat, heaving a greatsword. “House Manderly betrayed us!”

The knight moved his hand to his sword. “Ser Wylis! What did–”

“Enough!” Val shrieked, so loud her throat hurt. “Enough! Fall back! Rally! Fall back!”

Some were trying to keep the fights going, but the call was starting to spread around her. “Fall back!” they were screaming. “Fall back!”

How many thousands would die in the retreat? Val wondered. How many are the Boltons cutting down right now, and how long would it buy us? Still, their sacrifice was the only chance the rest had.

There was a certain flow to battle. The tides of men would wax and wane, and churn like turbulent waters. When one side started to gain ground, they would build momentum. It became more and more difficult for the other side to recover against a moving charge. The Boltons had already had a strong ambush against a disorientated host, there would be severe casualties.

Val turned to the north; she couldn't see anything through the crowds, she couldn't even make sense of all the noises – but she could feel the enemies pushing closer and closer.

We need the kneelers. The free folk have the strength, we need the discipline.

In the camp beyond, Manderly men were rushed to arms, but their ranks had already fallen apart. The northerners and the free folk wouldn't fight together easily.

There were skirmishes all around them, and Val couldn’t tell who; nobody who the betrayers were, but the fighting still seemed to be spreading. Val pushed her way through a dozen raiders howling against the Manderly knights, their words lost in the storm. We can't win like this.

She heard bellows. Tormund. The Greatjon. Val saw their shadows, sizing off against each other, clashing. The Greatjon wanted to move men south, Tormund wanted to stop him. They were spitting with each other, each one flanked by a dozen other lords and chieftains.

There are too many commanders in this army. No general.

“You fucking chickenshits!” Tormund was roaring, maul in hand. “You fucking cunts!”
“Out of my way, fat man!” The Greatjon was so much bigger, his ugly greatsword lifted high. “Out of my fucking way!”

“Enough!” Val screamed, lurching into a run. “Gather your men! Rally at the lake!”

The Greatjon twitched. Men shouting all around her, but the Lord Umber was louder. “Girl! Where’s Snow? Where the fuck is he?”

“These bastards have traitors in their ranks!” Tormund hollered. “Get your fucking men under control!”


She wasn’t the only one screaming. Their voices blurred together, fighting against the wind. “Where’s the king?” another man bellowed at the same time.

“Ser Wylis!” a northern lord demanded. “What happened to Ser Wylis!”

“The dragon! Where is the dragon?”

“Retreat!” Val recognised the scrawny man – Jeremy of House Locke, heir and commander in Lord Locke’s place. “We must retreat!”

The cries of retreat gave Val the most concern. If their ranks fell apart, in this weather, then they would all die fleeing in the snow. Val had seen it happen before.

As the tide kept on crushing them, morale would completely shatter and they would lose as many to desertion to death. After that, there was no chance.

Lord Umber raised his greatsword, ready to swing at Tormund. “You get out my bloody way or I’ll kill you all!”

_The loudest voice. The loudest voice is the most important._ Val focused on the Greatjon, pushing up against the hulk of a man. “Enough!” Val screamed, pushing so hard even Lord Umber was knocked back. “Fuck you and fuck your cock measuring! Get to the fucking centre and rally your fucking army!”

For half a second, Lord Umber looked speechless. A few men made to grab her, but Val twisted away and shoved the Greatjon again. “Move! Rally! Now!”

“They got traitors!” Tormund warned. “Bloody kneelers—”

Val spun her head so fast her hair whipped. “Who gives a fuck!” she snapped at Tormund. “Fuck traitors – there’s your enemy!” She pointed to the west, where Bolton cavalry was pushing through their ranks. “If they stab you, kill them – and do what I say if you want to fucking live!”

She sounded crazy. She felt crazy. _Good. Crazy is good, so long as they don’t try to argue. We can’t beat the tide swimming in different directions._

The Greatjon's eyes bulged. He was a hulk of man in leather and steel byrnie, and Val was a slender young woman banging against his chest. “Little girl…” he growled.

“Fuck off,” Val snapped, already turning around. “Get moving.”

Thousands of bodies frenzied all around her, shoving and bellowing. Horses were galloping. She heard a hundred screams echoing on the wind. Val glimpsed a spear-ridden corpse of a mammoth,
littering the ground nearby.

“Retreat!” Jeremy Locke was still shouting. “Retr—”

At once, before anyone could stop her, Val drew her sword and stormed towards the heir of House Locke, pressing the blade against his chest.

“Say that word one more time,” Val promised. “I’ll kill you right now,”

Jeremy only gaped at her. With Ser Wylis dead, Jeremy Locke was now in command of the White Harbour men. All of the knights had steel in their grip. If I do kill him, then his soldiers will kill me a second later and everyone will dissolve into fighting, Val thought. She couldn’t even feel her fingers, that rush of fear was just so… One twitch of a sword and she’d be dead. But there’s no choice – if he keeps on screaming to retreat, then too many will follow it.

Val could only hope that Jeremy was not as stupid as he seemed.

With her sword at his chest, the heir to Oldcastle could only stutter. The White Harbour knights seemed speechless too. Good enough, Val thought with a tut. “If anybody calls to retreat,” she shouted to whoever was listening. “Kill them!”

It probably wouldn’t make a difference, but it made her feel better. Gods, her heartbeat was so fast it was fluttering – fear and adrenaline made everything fuzzy.

“Why the fuck should we listen to Snow’s lay, you cunt?” an angry voice snapped. Val turned to see a bald and scarred man in an iron byrnie glaring at her. It took a few seconds for Val to recognise him; the Middle Liddle, of the mountain clans.

Val raised her hands open. “You see anyone else keeping their wits?” The Middle Liddle looked ready to strike her. “No? Then bugger off.”

She heard a few grunts that could have been guffaws. Maybe they were laughing at her; the little girl who thought she could boss them around. That was fine. Even mockery was better than panic. Before the Middle Liddle had a chance to respond, Val turned to the men, and it was the soldiers that were really important, not the commanders. “Whatever grievances you have – whatever problems with King Snow or with each other!” Val screamed. “Then sort them out in the morning! Tonight, you bloody fight them!”

The Middle Liddle spat a word that sounded like ‘cunt’, but Val was already pushing away. Don’t focus on anyone, don’t get drawn into an argument. Just keep on pushing through and keep the cry spreading. Everybody had to know the same thing.

“Rally! Rally! Rally at the village – free folk and northerners gather together!”

The village was defendable, at least. The lake at our back would stop them from surrounding us. If the Boltons pushed forward too fast after the perimeter broke, then they’d overreach themselves and hit against a hard defence. If enough of the commanders pulled together, then there would be a chance. If they stayed fractured, there’d be none.

She could feel the rumble of battle pushing closer, the pitch turning so loud it overpowered the storm. They must be through the bulwarks now – there would be horses storming through the camp and raising havoc. Only a solid line of infantry stood a chance at stopping cavalry.

How many men have already died, in the time it took for the commanders to get their shit together?
She hadn’t even realised how much they were relying on the dragon until it was missing. Nobody, not even her, had been expecting a proper fight because they had a dragon. Their armies were a smouldering mess without it.

Val stopped. Her eyes flashed around the crowd, trying to find free folk she recognised. She saw a tall and lean raider she recognised from beyond the Wall. “You! Bjarl! Follow me!” Val ordered. There was another young man she vaguely recognised. *Lars, Leif, Lothar, maybe?* “And you! Lars! Both of you, on me.”

Bjarl looked surprised. Maybe-Lars didn’t react in time, so Val had to grab his hand and yank the man away. The wreckage of Jon’s cabin wasn’t far; half the building had been pulverised by the mammoth’s stampede through, but there was another half that was still upright. Val had to scramble over the splintered debris, noting the bodies littering the ground. In these snows, it was already a foot deep surrounding everything.

It had only been the other day, when Val had taken solace in this boathouse with Jon, wrapped around him and underneath the sheets. The thought made her curse. *Gods, how did I let myself become so complacent?*

Maybe-Lars gulped. “What are we doing here?”

Val didn’t hesitate. She saw a shadowskin cloak littered over the broken planks, Val picked it up and threw it at the wildling. “Get dressed,” she ordered. “Into whatever you can find. Both of you. Dress yourselves like a king, and there’s chalk over there. Break it and smear it into your hair.”

“Wait, what–”

“We need the king. You two, both dress like him, and make your hair white.” She found a steel hauberk, right where Jon had left it, and pushed it into Liam’s arms. The king had more armour than he could wear. “*Now.* You go south, and you go east. Shout as loud as you can, and people will rally around you. So give them a king, get them to the centre.”

Bjarl’s jaw dropped as he realised what she wanted of them. “You can’t… we’re not…”

Both men were roughly the right height and build. Neither of them looked remotely like Jon, but that wouldn’t matter much in the dark and snow. So long as they could make their hair appear white, then they’d pass. Perhaps any other time, Val would have explained the need to them, but right now she really didn’t have the time or patience. “What makes you think you have a choice here?” Val raised her swords, pointing one blade at each man. “Get your clothes off. *Now.*”

If they had had their wits, they could have maybe protested. The trick was to not give them an opportunity to protest. Men scared witless tend to become compliant.

Val shoved them into Jon’s spare armour and cloak, pointing them into the right direction. “If you can’t think what to say,” she ordered, “then just shout the same word over again – *Rally.* The words don’t really matter, the men just need to think that you’re in control. Do you understand me? Even if you’re about to shit yourself, even if you don’t clue what to do, you *must* sound like you’re in command.”

Bjarl gave something like a nod, his mouth agape and a chunk of chalk in his hair. There was no time for anymore instruction than that. As soon as Val stepped out of the cabin, the fighting was coming towards them.

It moved like a wave – like a swell bursting over rocks, sweeping the camp. It surged through the
encampments and it wasn’t stopping.

She could see the Bolton cavalry was upon them; a tide of horses trampling through tents, each man with a lance in one hand and a torch in their other. It was a storm, crushing men beneath an avalanche of hooves and iron. Their formation was a wall of mounted, armoured horses that scattered free folk. Val heard their chants, a war cry that sounded wordless as it echoed through the winds.

In thefluttering torchlight, she caught a glimpse of the banner flapping at the front – two grey keeps castles on blue, with a red band crossing through them.

Val was already running. She ran as fast as her legs could manage, stumbling through the snows. She heard the Greatjon bellow, and a tide of soldiers was rushing out to meet the charge. “Shields! Shields front!” the cry came. “Shields and lances!”

A few flimsy arrows shot through the air, but they were scattered by the wind. She saw some of the riders fall, but the charge was already shifting direction. The cavalry turned, notching to the side. The horses won’t charge against a solid mass of men, Val realised. The cavalry will carve their way south instead and try to flank us.

In the distance, Val saw the Bolton’s infantry pouring over the bulwarks, pushing forward with armoured lances. The free folk were falling back; whatever men Rattleshirt had left to hold the perimeter had already crumpled.

They are keeping rank, Val thought with a grimace. She could see the tactics being used against them. The Boltons ambushed the west and north simultaneous to confuse any attempt to retaliate, and then their cavalry charged through to clear the path and divide the enemy. While their flanks held off any attempt to rally using bowmen, the van was free to push all the way through to the centre of the camp.

It’s organised. Firm regiments and a coordinated plan of attack. This was rehearsed.

A gale cut through the camp so fierce that she saw tents dragged out of the ground. It was so, so cold but Val could hardly even feel it. Any body that fell would be buried under snow in minutes, or they’d be trampled by the frenzied tide of boots pushing through.

“Hold the line!” The Greatjon boomed. “Hold the bloody line!”

Val had never seen a battlefields so tight, so close quarters and cramped. She had never been in the mash of soldiers slamming together. There were so many men, all ramming into each other like livestock crammed in cages. If she fell, she could be trampled to death and nobody would even notice. This is a southerner’s battlefield – the free folk liked to fight spread out in raiding parties, not rank and file.

It felt livestock, rambling together in a herd – a stampede – towards the slaughter.

A chant filled the air, beating with the footsteps of men. “For the north!” they boomed. “For the north! For the north!”

That’s not our side, Val realised dumbly. The Bolton forces were fighting for the north too, as they trampled through them.

All around her, she heard screaming. Crying. Howling.

It was almost overwhelming. Get to the front. They’ll need me on the front.
The Bolton cavalry was coming around again, twisting around to the south, trying to flank them. “The south!” someone called. “The horses! The south!”

“On me!” That was the Weeper’s voice, a roar distinctive even amidst it all. He was pulling men to meet the cavalry charge. “Raiders on me!”

She saw the shadows pushing through. A few men were still fumbling with bows and arrows, but archers were left nearly useless in winds like these. There was no way to count numbers, there was no way to make sense of it. Val was trapped in the bedlam, every man crashing together like stones in a great wave.

The two battle lines were about to collide. Two tides of men crashing forward to meet each other, the battle churning like a storm.

In the moment… her mind blanked out with the raw frenzy of it all. The night was too wild, too raw.

*There will be no surrender here,* she knew. She could feel it her bones. There would be no peace, no quarter given. It was all too wild; there was too much bad blood between the armies. *This war has been simmering, festering, for too long, their forces turned too bitter.*

The snows and the wind felt like all of that hatred given form.

Val had to claw her way to the front. Behind her, she heard the cries as her two decoy kings left in opposite direction to rally men from around the lake.

She heard the war cries, the stomps as the Weeper’s warband gave chase after the cavalry, meeting lances with axes and shields. Val would have called the Weeper a fool for breaking rank like that, but there was no doubting the man’s bravery.

They were coming closer. She felt their footsteps as they broke into a charge, she heard the deafening screams. The earth rumbled with the pounding of boots.

When the two ranks collided, it felt like absolutely everything went black.

It was no ‘fight’ she had ever seen. It felt more like a riot.

“Hold steady!” the Greatjon roared, ahead of her. “Hold steady!”

The clash eased off, and the wildlings lost ground. She could see anything through all the bodies, but she felt it as the two forces collided again and again, pressing forward until one side fell back. It was like the oceans breaking against the rocks – crashing together all around her, and then easing off. It was waxing and waning, churning and crashing. Two forces tearing against at each other until something broke. The men would pull back only to charge again.

Bodies surged and fell around her. Val had two swords in her hands, but she didn’t even have the space to swing them. She could only lunge and hack, all the while she was being battered from all sides. She was hit more by the men around her than she was by the foes in front.

She wasn’t even sure if there were foes to the front at all; there were only black shapes.

Several times, she nearly stumbled over bodies littered in the snow. If you fell, you were trampled, and if she stopped to help anyone she’d be trampled too. Val had no idea whether the men were enemies or allies; there was little distinction between the two in the thrashing.
“For the north! For the north! For the north!”

That chant didn’t stop, it only reached fever pitch. A voice at the back of her mind wondered how queer it was that both sides could have chanted the exact same thing.

She couldn’t make out any details of her enemies; she couldn’t see their faces, not even the whites of their eyes. Bodies blurred together. Instead, it was more instinctual than that – any figure coming towards you was an enemy.

“Press!” That was Tormund’s voice. Was she near Tormund? Val wasn’t sure; amidst the surge of bodies she had no control of her movement. “Press forward!”

By the time the ranks finally broke, Val had no idea where she was, but it felt like they had fallen back a hundred feet or so. The Boltons were dropping back to retreat, and as they flowed away Val saw a sea of buried corpses scattered like stones.

Val was panting for breath. There was bruises across her body she couldn’t even feel. This was a bad decision, she thought with a gasp, the thick of the rabble is a bad place to be.

“Regroup!” Tormund’s voice bellowed again. “If you can fight, stand up!”

All across the camp, there were more battles. Skirmishes, really, and the shouts echoed in the storm. If I collapse here, I die. “Tormund!” Val called, her voice turning to a croak. “Tormund!”

“Val,” she saw the great white-haired man turn towards her. Tormund was bleeding from a gash across his forehead, but he barely seemed to notice her. “Val, get out of here! Go support the rear!”

“Fuck that,” Val gasped. There was blood on her swords. She honestly couldn’t remember stabbing anyone. It was all hazy. “How many are there?”

“Buggered if I can tell,” Tormund grumbled, casting a wary eye to the west. “But those bloody horses are going to slaughter us like this.”

Val understood – their men were on foot, and mostly lightly armoured. The free folk favoured axes and arrows over than lances and shields. Without a solid rank to support them, a mounted force could tear straight through them.

The cavalry charge would be turning around. Their forces were already scattering faster than they could rally them. If the Weeper couldn’t stop the charge… “We need the giants, Tormund,” Val said suddenly. “The giant camp. We need to get them with us, into the fight.”

Tormund caught her gaze, and shook his head. “You want me to go?”

“You know the chieftains better than I do,” she argued. “The giants know you, they’ll rally with you. Hells, you speak their tongue better than me.”

“Bugger that,” Tormund growled. “I ain’t leaving here.”

“Toregg was over there,” Val pressed. “Your son was fighting that way.”

She caught the flicker of doubt pass over his face, and Tormund swore in the Old Tongue. Once, before joining with Mance, Tormund had many sons, but he had already lost three sons and one daughter in this war. He couldn’t lose any more. “Dammit. Fine, aye, I’ll go,” he cursed, before turning to the men and shouted, “Twenty raiders! On me! The rest to the centre!”
Tormund was already pushing off, moving as fast he cut over the thick snows and scattered corpses. There wasn’t a minute to spare, the wildlings were running haggard as it was. “Gather to the centre!” Val shouted to the remaining men, as she pushed through to the opposite direction. “Move! Regroup!”

There were skirmishes all around them – men wrestling in the snows – but there was no time to intervene. The Boltons would be regathering, and the free folk clans were already drifting apart, fracturing away from the northerners. She needed to form a defence, to gather around a single commander and turn the tide.

*But it won’t be me.* Val saw the towering figure of the Greatjon, standing head and shoulders above the rest, as large and bulky as a bear. *The loudest voice.*

“All free folk!” Val shouted as she approached, raising both her swords to gain attention. “Lord Greatjon Umber has command of the battle! Follow him! The Weeper commands the vanguard and Tormund Giantsbane the reserves – spread the word, all raiders must flock around the Greatjon!”

Val saw the Greatjon turn to stare at her, caught off-guard. A few free folk chieftains shouted objections, but she didn’t even hear them. “Orders from King Snow!” Val snapped. She could only hope she had enough of a reputation that the free folk would listen to her. “The Greatjon has command!”

Lord Umber glared at her, and for a second it seemed like he was going to say something to her. Then, a horn blasted in the distance, and the march of men demanded his attention. “Form up, you bastards!” the Greatjon bellowed, so loud even the storm couldn’t match. “Form up! Form up!”

Val was gasping for air, trying to make sense of the rumbling chaos all around her. She would have stolen a shield or lance from one of the men, except she didn’t have the upper body strength to wield either properly, and her swords were more comfortable in her grip.

She was a good enough fighter, but she knew she couldn’t last on the front lines like this – not in ranks so tight there was no place to dodge or swing properly. That was where big men like the Greatjon excelled, but not her. Val hesitated momentarily, searching through the snows at where she would be most useful.

*The rear,* Val decided. *Let the Greatjon hold the line, I need to keep the host together from the back.* She was already running – stumbling, rather – through the snows to the edge of the lake.

Across the fields, she heard the cries as the Weeper kept the push the charge against the cavalry – his warband fearlessly pushing against mounted men. For any other man, Val would have called it suicide, but the Weeper was holding on.

If Tormund could rally the eastern camp as well, then there could be a chance to change the tide. The Boltons had already broken through half of the camp, but there was a proper line starting to take form around the Greatjon. They were pushing back.

Val didn’t stop shouting. Even when wheezing for breath, even when she was barely audible over the wind, she still shouted. “Form up! Form up and push!” she called. “They’re falling backwards, push!”

It hardly mattered the words she said, Val just knew that she had to keep on shouting anything she could to stop them from breaking down and fleeing.

*Crash.* Val felt the lines collide again against Bolton forces. It felt different this time, the battle
lines were crumbling, scattering outwards in the snow. Discipline was being shredded, turning into more a skirmish than a charge. Val couldn’t tell if that was good or bad.

The fighting felt strained, desperate – there were no great battles, there was nothing but men staggering through the snow and trying to thrust spears at each other. The enemies weren’t to the front anymore, they were all around her. Either the free folk were pushing back or they were falling apart, Val couldn’t tell.

“Fight! Northerners! Free folk! Fight!” Val shrieked, so loud it hurt her lungs. “Whatever you care about, whatever your reason, just fight for it! For freedom! For honour! For justice!” For Jon.

It was impossible to tell who was ‘winning’, not from the middle of it all. Not through the snows and screams. Too many men were fleeing, or too many were going wild in the chaos. She couldn’t count the enemy, she couldn’t count anybody. The winner would only be whoever was standing upright by the end of it all.

In the moment, it felt like a slaughter.

She glimpsed a wild-eyed figure, stumbling mad around the frenzy. Jeremy Locke looked like a man crazed, staggering through the snow. The young heir seemed like he had lost his wits somewhere along with his courage. “Wylis…!” Jeremy called, lost. “Ser Wylis, where are you?”

Even between the dozens of rushing men, they caught sight of each other. Val’s golden hair fluttered madly in the wind, marking her clearly on the battlefield. She would have covered her hair, except it was a distinctive enough rallying point. “Get a sword in your hand and get to the fight!” Val ordered. “If you can’t fight, see to the wounded, or search for survivors. Collect arrows, secure supplies, or even just stand steady. Whatever you can do, just do something!”

He didn’t seem to hear her. Jeremy blinked, mouth agape. Gods, for all he was a man grown, the heir to House Locke just seemed lost. “You…” he stepped towards her. “It’s you… The battle is lost. The battle is lost!”

His voice was too loud. Val grimaced. She couldn’t allow anyone to be screaming things like that. Think it, fine, but don’t scream it. Morale was fragile enough already. “Ser Jeremy–”

“The battle is lost!” the man wailed, crying as he stepped towards her. “I have family, I have a son, we must retrea–”

Val’s sword was already swinging. Jeremy Locke was caught completely off-guard as the blade hit him. Her wrist jarred as it hacked through mail, and then jarred against bone. “I warned you,” Val cursed. “Nobody is allowed to say that word.”

Jeremy dropped quickly, but he was still wheezing for breath as she stepped over him. Val left her blade where it jammed, embedded through his shoulder and neck. Just another corpse for the snows.

Her arms were trembling. No weakness, not here, Val ordered. “To the fight!” she screamed. She saw men holding spears, rushing at her. Maybe they were Boltons, maybe deserters, but they were moving in the wrong direction regardless. “To the fight! Push them back! Push them back!”

The Greatjon was leading the surge forward, a tide of men coming together and pressing outwards. All around her, the screaming, the madness… it was all just so much she couldn’t even make sense of it. She might have soiled herself, except she honestly wasn’t sure that she would notice if she did.
And all the while, the storm roared above her. The camp was in shambles – so much snow flurrying from the sky that a man could be buried just standing still. She could see snow dunes rolling over the ground, being pushed across the camp by the wind.

The armies were left fighting the wind and snow, shambling in the dark and wrestling blindly. So much fear, panic and rage in the air that it could have made her sick – physically nauseous. It was all more feeling than sense.

*The world is convulsing*, Val thought, and the thought made her twitch.

The wind howled over the lake like a banshee’s wail. Val stood, staring out, just trying to make sense of the world again.

Then, she heard a voice echoing through the rumble. A voice so faint she could hardly hear make it out. *Help him*, the ghostly sound cried. *Save Jon!*

It sounded like a child’s voice. A young boy’s. Even amidst everything else, the sound made her freeze.

Val turned to stare out over the lake, watching the snow churn across the blackness.

---

**Jon**

*Sonagon!* Jon shouted through the warg-sense, just trying to rouse the dragon, trying to achieve anything at all. *Sonagon! I need you!*

He had been trying to break through to his dragon for hours, pushing with all the strength he had. But it was so hard. The dragon’s mind felt like an ocean of sickness. *Sonagon could recover. Sonagon could turn the battle, could save the camp.*

The dragon stirred slightly, cracking the ice with every movement, but it didn’t wake. Jon could feel Sonagon’s pain – its lungs were in agony, struggling to even breathe. Even its heartbeat felt sluggish, straining against the poison in its blood. Jon felt sick and ill. He felt faint. He had lost so much blood.

Jon was left trying to fight on the ice, with Ramsay Bolton’s – no, Ramsay *Snow’s* – arm wrapped under his neck. The Bastard of Bolton’s grip was solid, keeping Jon trapped with the blade poised at his throat.

Around him, he heard the cries as the Ramsay’s men dug themselves in, but Jon couldn’t make out the words over the roar of the wind.

On the centre of the lake, the storm felt earth-shattering. The winds were sweeping across the frozen water so sharp they could cut down to the bone. Whatever hope Jon had that someone would come for him dwindled as the storm grew in pitch.

Even Ramsay’s men had to take shelter beneath the Sonagon’s mass, all the while the wind swept through snow so furiously it looked like the ground was flowing.

And in the distance, Jon watched as the burning fires were extinguished, one by one. All over the coast, the light fizzled out into shapeless blackness. Swallowed by the snows. He could hear the screams on the wind, the horns so faint they sounded like dying gasps.
Jon screamed. Sonagon!

There was a low groan as the dragon shifted a wing.

Jon’s body jerked. Something heavy collided against his skull, and Jon gagged. “Oh no,” Ramsay growled in his ear. “You’re doing that thing, aren’t you? Oh no, bad Reek. None of that. Not until you teach me how to do it too.”

The man is mad. Still, Ramsay dragged him backwards, but held off from hitting him again. One of Ramsay’s men had even wrapped up Jon’s wounded side, and they wrapped him in a cloak tightly to keep him out of the snow. Ramsay even seemed restrained, hesitant.

They can’t risk me dying, Jon realised. If they’re confronted, their only chance is to hold me hostage. They were only fourteen men, relying on the cover of darkness and confusion to keep them safe.

“That’s some trick you do, Reek,” Ramsay continued, hissing. “It made a lot of my men really nervous too – the Bastard King that could control animals. But they didn’t see you like I did; they didn’t see the little boy who didn’t have a clue. You’re out of your element, Reek, nothing but a failure.”

Ramsay had taken Dark Sister for himself, and wore the Valyrian blade on his hip. He didn’t wield it, though; Ramsay seemed to prefer his brute of a butcher’s blade rather than the slender sword. Jon was left defenceless. Jon could have struggled, would have tried to wrestle, but the sword was poised to slice open his throat as soon as he twitched.

The Bastard of Bolton was being paranoid, paranoid or carful – he had never once lowered his blade.

Sonagon, Jon pressed so much it hurt, forcing open what felt like an ocean of sickness. Sonagon, I need you. Now.

Sonagon felt so weak, but Jon was close enough to warg as strongly as he ever could. Just raise your head, Jon begged. Just raise your head and crush them.

The dragon could barely even breathe, but he was slowly beginning to stir. Trying to twitch with muscles that felt like lead…

They all heard the dragon tremble. This close, the dragon was a mountain of flesh. Jon glimpsed Sonagon’s snout twitch, and then his serpentine body rumbling as the dragon raised its head upwards. Jon’s heart was pounding so fast, watching the dragon uncurl laboriously.

Ramsay reacted smoothly. “Move away!” he shouted to his men, as he yanked Jon back quickly. “Move away, take positions!”

The Bastard’s Boys scattered around him, fleeing as the dragon groaned. A single wing struggled to unfurl, shuddering as claws scraped against the ice.

Ramsay’s arm was under Jon’s neck, dragging him backwards. Couldn’t breathe. Jon tried to struggle, but he didn’t have the strength. His arms thrashed, he tried to get a grip, and then agony shot through his side as Ramsay slammed a fist into Jon’s open wound, under the cloaks and bandages. He retched as Ramsay scrambled to his feet, dragging him up with.

“Get back, dragon!” Ramsay was screaming, barely audible over the wind. He was facing up against Sonagon’s immense snout, holding Jon before him like a shield. “Get back!”
The dragon was above them. Its neck unraveled, and then they were both staring at an immense jaw of white scales lined with red.

Sonagon’s black eyes… even in the darkness they seemed to gleam murderously.

Cold mist billowed from Sonagon’s nostrils. The dragon was struggling to breath, but Jon saw dark eyes flickering as they tried to focus. Sonagon’s body protested, but the dragon was staggering upwards, its great jaws opening. Sharp teeth as long as swords glinted in the dark, a cold luminescence shining deep in the dragon’s maw. Hoarfrost billowed from Sonagon’s jaws in faint sheets.

And even when facing down a beast as large as castle, Ramsay didn’t back down for a second. “That’s right!” Ramsay screamed, and manic laughter broke from his throat. “I’m right here! Now what you are going to do?”

Sonagon could have swallowed him whole without chewing. *The man is mad.*

His men scattered, running around Sonagon’s body as the dragon lumbered. Sonagon body shuddered, trying to unfurl. Immense claws scraped against ice, uselessly clattering. *Sonagon can’t pull himself up,* Jon realised. The dragon couldn’t even find its feet. He was reminded of a wounded man, or a drunkard, fumbling in disorientated anger and pain.

Ramsay’s grip around Jon’s neck tightened even further, strangling. “One breath of dragonfire,” Ramsay warned, snarled into Jon’s ear. “We’ll die together, bastard. I don’t think your beast is that good at aiming.”

For a second, Jon could have almost willed Sonagon to do it anyways. The dragon could smell the blood in the air. He didn’t know what was happening.

There was raw hatred in Sonagon’s eyes as they slowly focused on Ramsay, but the dragon was so weak he couldn’t even stand properly. Jon heard shouting, and in the darkness he glimpsed Ramsay’s men picking up spears and lances.

“I didn’t want to hurt your dragon, bastard,” Ramsay warned, his grip not slackening. “But I will. I can’t kill it, but I can gouge out its eyes. I can cut out its nostrils. I can hurt it, I can maim it. Lets see what a blinded dragon is worth, shall we?”

Ramsay’s men were prepared. A dozen men against a dragon. Normally Jon wouldn’t have been concerned about such numbers, but now? A dozen men while the Sonagon was addled and weak, drunk with pain?

*Don’t,* Jon gasped. *Can’t. Stop him.*

Jon’s body spasmed with all the strength he had left, his elbow snapping backwards. Ramsay took the blow on the chin, but hardly staggered. Somehow, Jon managed to slip out of the man’s grip, but he didn’t even make it a single step before Ramsay gripped his furs and dragged him face first into the snow.

A cry broke through Jon’s lips. Sonagon growled, but the noise was strangled, strained.

They both toppled. Arms flailed, their bodies grappled against each other in the snow. Jon could feel the hard ice beneath him, could feel Ramsay’s grip against his neck.

Ramsay’s other hand found Jon’s wound, and Jon felt him squeeze. Flesh ripped. The pain… Jon couldn’t even…
Amidst all the chaos, just two bastards wrestling in the snow.

“Bastard!” Ramsay’s fist collided against his chin. He was on top of Jon, pinning him down.

“Bastard!”

Sonagon growled, retching and wheezing before clambering to its feet. Sonagon staggered towards them. Ramsay dragged Jon up. “Come on!” the Bastard of Bolton howled at the dragon. He was almost laughing. “Come on!”

*The man’s mad,* Jon realised.

The dragon could have crushed Ramsay in his jaws, would have, if not for Jon lying so close. Instead, the dragon hesitated. There was no way a thing of Sonagon’s size could intervene without crushing Jon too. *Because of me,* Jon thought, struggling to breathe. *My weakness.*

The Bastard’s Boys shouted something. Jon saw a flash of a spear through the air.

Jon felt the jab, felt a spark of Sonagon’s pain, only a foot away from his eyeball. Ramsay’s men were all around the dragon, and they had spears. In the dark, weak and poisoned, with enemies all around him, Sonagon could hardly resist. Jon saw a man pull back the string on a longbow, his arms hoisting the weapon upwards.

Straight towards Sonagon’s soft, fleshy eyeball. The dragon’s scales were hard enough to stop metal, but his eyes were not. Jon felt the ice beneath quiver as Sonagon shuddered, flinching in pain.

The other Bastard’s Boys were throwing spears, from all sides. One man was crushed as Sonagon’s neck whipped out, but the rest were still pushing. One man was gouged by the horns on Sonagon’s crests, but then the dragon fumbled, and two others had a clear shot at its right eye.

Jon heard their cries of victory, and white blood plumed from Sonagon’s eye. The dragon cried out – a bone-curdling shriek of pain.

Sonagon was trembling, bleeding heavily from his right eye as he flailed. Jon felt the panic, fear and anger pulsing from the dragon. Sonagon didn’t understand what was happening – the memories were vague, sick with pain. He’d fallen asleep after a great meal, and when he woke his body was screaming and there were men attacking him. The pain left the dragon disoriented. Weak and confused. The storm. The wind was so loud it overwhelmed the senses, the poison in his blood paining his muscles.

Sonagon was too weak, too dazed. The men were like fleas, gnashing at the dragon while the animal was wounded.

“Get your dragon to back down,” Ramsay snarled into Jon’s ear. “Or they will blind it. I will blind it and shred its wings – I will turn your beast into ruin.”

Another spear jabbed. Sonagon was so disorientated, so pained and fatigued. The rage was the only thing overcoming the poison. If Sonagon’s eyes were pierced, he would go berserk with blind rage…

Through at all, Ramsay just laughed. The world was mad and thick with panic, but it was as though the Bastard of Bolton… loved it. The man holding him was laughing, laughing and howling even as the frostfire welling in Sonagon’s throat threatened to freeze them all. Even in the middle of the chaos, Ramsay Bolton laughed. Sonagon could roll at any moment, and smear them all like ants…
“Last chance to calm your fucking dragon down!” Ramsay cackled, voice howling over the storm. “Calm it down like a good little Reek. It doesn’t matter if you live or die here, bastard. It doesn’t matter if your dragon kills me here. My father’s army is killing yours right over there, our allies are taking your city right out from under you. You’ve lost! Bastard!”

Those words haunted Jon, trembling in the cold, in the pain. He just didn’t have the strength anymore… *This is me. My fault.*

Sonagon’s gasp of strength waned, and the dragon sank into the snow.

“Company!” someone cried suddenly. “Over the shore! Someone! Someone’s incoming!”

“No, more!” Another of Ramsay’s men bellowed. “Too many!”

At once, the words caused everything to change. “Fuck it!” Ramsay cursed, and then turned to order. “Leave the beast, get ready! Hold position! Hold steady!”

_Is it help?_ Jon tried to focus, tried to see what it was the others could. And then he saw it, the pinprick of a torch fighting against the flurry of snow. Sprinting over from the shore, from the direction of the camp. Jon’s heart skipped. A single person, against Ramsay, against a dozen of his men?

No. There was more movement. A single person, leading a column of at least twenty raiders in thick furs. They tore over the ice, bellowing war-cries.

“Hold them back!” Ramsay screamed. Jon’s body lurched, the bastard yanking him back. “Hold them back!”

Everything was blurry. Jon couldn’t make sense of it, not through the pain, the blood loss and the cold.

Spears and arrows flashed through the snows. There was a strangled cry of pain, followed by the thud of an axe embedding itself into a chest. Jon saw two men crashing against the Bastard’s Boys, only for both of them to fall with the whizz of arrows. There were bodies wrestling, and then a flicker of golden hair between the snows.

Jon was being dragged backwards. Ramsay was running away as his men fought, but the blade never left Jon’s throat.

The cries of pain and fury could barely even break over the din of the wind. Another two bodies fell into the snow, but Jon couldn’t even tell if they were Ramsay’s men or his own.

The dragon screeched, trembling with pain. A flurry of arrows wafted overhead, splattering down onto the bodies wrestling in the dark.

Jon was left so weak he could barely even gasp. He heard Sonagon growling – a low moan like a whine - as the dragon thrashed madly with pain. All around them, bodies fumbled and thrashed.

He heard another clash of steel, followed by a strangled scream. Sounds of battle were getting further away. Ramsay still dragged him backwards, still keeping the blade at Jon’s throat. Away from Sonagon.

The dragon’s tail thrashed again. Jon felt the ice crack with a tremendous crash. Ramsay stumbled, but he didn’t fall. Even here, dozens of paces away, it felt like the ice beneath them was groaning, ready to break.
Jon was gasping, but Ramsay’s grip felt strong. Relentless. “Come on, bastard,” Ramsay growled. “I’m not done with you yet.”

Ramsay was fleeing. There was no visibility in this storm. All Ramsay had to do was take a dozen steps and he as good as vanished into the pitch black. Men were running around blind.

Jon heard someone cry out – he couldn’t make the words, but he recognised the voice, high and sharp. Val? Everything was spinning so madly he felt delirious.

Jon felt another jab of Sonagon’s pain. A spear. In the chaos, the pain, the confusion, Sonagon collapsed. The dragon dropped and thrashed, his claws, his wings, his tail toppling into the ice like the calving of a glacier. Like the falling of a mountain. The ice tore asunder with an unholy roar, the entire lake rippling beneath the ice, swelling and cracking as far as the eye could see.

Shouts all around him. Screams. Men scattered. Men died. Great geysers of slush, blocks of ice the size of horses scattered through the air as the dragon’s churning tail tore the frozen lake apart. Jon watched men fall, consumed by the black water.

For a moment, he was alone. Ramsay’s grip from his throat had vanished, and Jon gasped, breathing the pure cold air. He looked up imploringly into the darkness. Jon couldn’t see anybody coming for him, but he was so dazed he could barely make sense of anything. It was dark, so dark – the wind and snow… and then Ramsay yanked him up, too quickly to see.

The bastard was spitting and cursing a flurry of winds Jon couldn’t even make out. Ramsay’s footsteps were heavy, desperate, wheezing as he still dragged away Jon’s flailing body.

He isn’t even trying to fight them, Jon realised. Ramsay had ordered his men to hold position, and then he just ran. All Ramsay intends is to run with me and find somewhere to hide in the dark until morning. The Bastard of the Dreadfort expected Roose Bolton to win the night, after which Ramsay could deliver Jon to his father.

Even in the worst case for him, Jon thought numbly, Ramsay will cut my throat before he lets anybody recover me.

Either way, the Boltons would win.

The sword’s edge was on his neck, pressing into his skin as Ramsay jerked. Jon felt his blood oozing out into the cold.

Behind him, Jon felt Sonagon split the ice further. The frozen lake burst with a crack like thunder, and more bodies toppling into the water. The dragon staggered, half-collapsing into the lake and too weak to drag himself out. The dragon was groaning, breathing with a bellows and shuddering in agony, trying to hold on…

Ramsay was gasping for breath, but he didn’t stop running. A man could die from frostbite in this weather, but Ramsay didn’t seem to care. His eyes were crazed, still holding his cleaver to Jon’s throat.

There was nothing but darkness. No torches, no light, only snow and wind. He’s going to do it, Jon thought. He’s going to kill me. Maybe we will both die, trapped in the storm...

“JON!” He heard the cry split through the wind. Coming towards them. Ramsay stopped. Jon’s heart pounded, his hands flailing uselessly.

That voice. Even in the black, he recognised Val’s hair, streaming in the blizzard like a golden
banner as she pushed her way through the snow, staggering with every step. *How did she find me? How could she…?* Even in the dark and the storm, despite Ramsay running randomly, Val came straight for him. Jon had no idea how she had found him, but she had.

“Jon!” she called again. It sounded like her voice could have cracked. She was panting for breath.

Ramsay’s hands tightened, and Jon glimpsed bloody teeth. It wasn’t a smile, not really. “You…” Ramsay growled, raising his blade closer to Jon’s neck.

Val had a sword too. A single short steel blade she gripped with both hands, the edge slick with frozen blood. “Harlow. You fucking bloody bastard…” Val snarled. With every step, she had to push her way through three feet thick of snow, struggling to balance in the wind.

“Stay back,” Ramsay shouted. “You step closer, I’ll slit your little boy’s throat! You hear me? Don’t you take another fucking step!”

Val didn’t even hesitate. She took another step. “No.”

Ramsay’s face twisted. “You fucking bitch. I’ll kill him, you hear me? I’ll kill him.”

“Fuck you,” Val replied simply, shambling another step, her sword still raised. “Bastard.”

In that moment, Jon’s heart was beating and his head was spinning so fast he could barely even think. Ramsay’s blade hovered less than inches away from carving out Jon’s jugular, before he stopped. Ramsay’s eyes scanned through the snow, glaring around suspiciously.

Every heartbeat felt painful. Ramsay was looking back to front, squinting for any more shapes, any movement between the snows. Jon could only gape and beg quietly, willing for there to be more figures materialising behind Val in the dark, but there was nothing. There was nobody left but her, shuffling forward through the snows.

“You’re alone,” Ramsay said slowly.

Val didn’t reply, she just kept on pushing forward, sword drawn. They stared at each other, both squinting as the snows roared. Then, Ramsay started to laugh.

“Oh!” Ramsay’s voice turned into a howl. “You’re alone! Oh, this is my lucky day. This is going to be good.”

Without even another word, Ramsay’s grip slackened, and Jon collapsed weakly into the snow. Even an hour ago Jon still had strength to move, but now he could barely tremble. *Move*, Jon tried to force himself, but his limbs weren’t replying.

Jon could barely even pull himself up, but Ramsay was still moving strong. The man was a monster – relentless as a hound. Ramsay held his blade tightly, and stepped forward to meet Val. “Are you watching, bastard?” Ramsay called happily without turning. “I want you to watch. I told you I’d make you watch!”

If Jon was strong enough, he would have screamed for Val to run. He couldn’t, he could barely even gasp. Too much blood loss, too much pain. His wound was seeping blood, frozen solid against his furs. *Run*, Jon begged. *Just run.*

Val didn’t make a sound, she just stared. Ramsay’s pale blue eyes glinted in the dark, his chuckles like a rabid dog’s growls.
“And you. Bitch. I’ve been wanting this for a long time. I’m not going to kill you,” Ramsay promised. “Not straight away. I want my Reek to watch.”


Ramsay lunged. The cry broke his throat as he brought his cleaver downwards, hacking like a butcher. Jon heard the ringing of steel as Val parried, and fell backwards under the assault. Ramsay was relentless. Like an animal, not a swordsman. Val was a good fighter, but…

Move, Jon cursed himself. He tried to pull himself to his feet, but the wind took him down again. His body was trembling, his knees failed him. Have to move. Have to…

Jon didn’t have a sword. He didn’t even have any strength left. He couldn’t walk, he could barely even crawl.

Val met Ramsay’s blade, time and time again. Val might have been faster, but the snows were too thick for mobility. The odds were against her from the beginning. Ramsay had more weight behind him, he had the heavier weapon. Val’s short sword could barely even compare to Ramsay’s cleaver, and yet the sound of steel rang out, the blades chiming like bells in the storm.

He saw Val fall onto the back foot, stumbling in the snow. Ramsay was injured too, but the man was a monster. Val couldn’t keep up. She stumbled, and…

It should have been me. That was the last rational thought before raw emotion consumed everything. Jon staggered upwards, just trying to reach her. He was so weak. He’d lost so much blood, taken too many wounds.

They were a dozen yards away. It might as well have been a dozen miles.

Ramsay saw the advantage and he took it, laughing like a madman. Val stumbled, and Ramsay lunged. In that moment, it seemed like time froze, and Jon could count every frenzied stroke of his cleaver. One, two, three, four…

And on the fifth stroke, Val’s grip broke. Her sword fell from her hands, she fumbled to grab it, and then Ramsay’s blade hacked straight down into her chest.

His throat jammed. Jon couldn’t even scream.

He just watched Val stumble, red pluming against white.

The butcher’s blade hacked through her furs, straight down into her shoulder and down into her chest. She didn’t scream, there was no sound except a strained gasp.

And then, a heartbeat away from ripping open her ribcage, Ramsay froze. His lunge stopped, his sword embedded her chest, and Jon saw the bloody grin flicker over his features. Ramsay pulled back before giving her the quick death. He wants to savour it, Jon thought dumbly. He likes to savour the moment.

That moment seemed to last forever. Jon frozen, Val falling, and Ramsay grinning.

Val’s knuckles tightened around her blade. Even before Ramsay could retract his lunge, Val’s sword slashed upwards.

Ramsay’s smile stopped. Val’s sword cut sliced straight through his stomach. Perhaps it was just a trick of the dark, but Jon could have sworn that she spat at Ramsay just as time reasserted. He
made a noise that sounded a lot like “Oh.”

And then they both dropped together, falling backwards into the snow.

“Val!” Jon screamed, and his voice broke. “VAL!”

She landed on her back, trembling, bleeding. Jon could see the life pouring out of her, blood swelling from the cut, her warmth steaming against the stone. She was alive, gurgling for breath, as Jon collapsed over her.

Ramsay was struggling too, dying – gargling in agony, flailing with Val’s short sword embedded in the bone of his chest. Jon glimpsed the man’s hands clutching at his stomach, trying to hold in glistening loops of intestine.

Jon’s numb fingers went to her wound, as if he could hold her body together himself, or squeeze the blood back into her veins. The blade hacked all the way into her breast. He could feel sliced flesh, the cut from her shoulder down to her torso.

He couldn’t even see her properly in the dark. There was nothing but snow, darkness and blood.

“Val!” Jon’s voice was a strained cry. “Somebody! Somebody help!”

The shriek of the wind was his only reply.

Val was making sounds that could have been words. He couldn’t hear her. He couldn’t hear her words. A gurgling noise came from her throat, coughing up blood. He could hardly even see her in the dark, instead his fingers were left groping helplessly.

Jon was left kneeling in the snow, clutching her body, his tears freezing against his cheeks as the storm howled and wailed. The snows fell so furiously they could bury him.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

The end of the night, and the final sacrifices...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sansa

The world was screaming. There was no logic, no understanding, no civility. There was absolutely nothing but an unending frenzy – a drumming in the air like the heartbeat of a crazed god – that sent the world mad.

“—hold fast, hold the line, hold the line, HOLD THE LINE...!”

Sansa could have shrieked, as another tower collapsed over the harbour in the distance and stone rained from the sky.

The hulls of the enemy fleet were launching barrels by trebuchet; filled with sharp stones and nails, raining death over the harbour and decimating whatever they crashed into. The heavy, tumbling projectiles crashed through the walls, tearing through mortarworks as shrapnel scattered like hail. A few of the enemy vessels, larger, further in the water, were launching flaming barrels of oil, setting aflame even the stones they splattered over. And the people, the people...

She did shriek as nearby a stout stone building next to the Merchant’s Quay collapsed, rubble scattered everywhere. The last vestige of morale among the guards of White Harbour outer docks collapsed along with their barricades.

“Stand and fight!” Ser Jorah roared, standing tall and strong against the current of men. “Hold the line! Hold the line!”

But it was meaningless. The barricades on the Merchant’s Quay had already fallen. The Fisher’s Port probably had as well. The outer harbour was lost. Only the Lord’s Port – the defence that Ser Jorah led – had managed to cling on, their discipline holding despite the frenzied human tide slamming against their chokepoint.

Ser Jorah was nothing but one man trying to stop a flood. He could swing his sword at a hundred men, but there were a thousand pushing behind them. They thumped upwards from the docks in a great mass, each one shapeless, faceless and never-ending.

Sansa could feel it in the air. The tide of the battle was already set. It was rising, rising and set to drown them.

The enemy fleet assaulted the outer and inner harbour, overwhelming the ships blockading the harbour as they pushed their way through to the docks. The Manderly’s fleet was lost, and now the fighting was in the city. Arrows and stones rained from the wharves and walls, but they were met by scorpions and trebuchet, longbows and heavy crossbows. All the while, the frenzied guards tried to hold the piers against the attackers – they had torn down trader’s stalls and merchant carts for
makeshift barricades to bar the way up the docks. There were dozens of men bearing tridents clad in the tabard of the Manderly merman, trying to huddle behind flimsy barriers of broken wood and cloth, organising a desperate defence and failing.

Sansa had watched the Battle of the Blackwater from afar, but she had never been so close to so much fighting before. She had never seen the fear in the men’s eyes, or heard the clattering of arrows as they scattered on the cobbles around her. She’d never smelled them as they died, crying and wailing and full of fear.

“Stay low and hide,” Ser Jorah had said, as he pushed her into a crevice by the road, a cleft in the storm drain running along the stone wall of the wharf. The grating was not large enough to clamber through and climb down, otherwise she might have tried to escape down into the sewers, but the enclave was still enough to shelter her in the alleyway. The stink was horrible, her dress was grimy with mud, but at that moment Sansa simply didn’t care. “Tear your dress,” Ser Jorah ordered of her. “Smear mud on your face and – if they come for you – cry and wail and sob. Spit, wail or piss yourself even. If they get past me, you must cry for your mother and hope these men have some conscience.”

_He’s worried about the city being sacked_, Sansa had realised. _He doesn’t want me to be identified as highborn._

“We must– we must head for New Castle,” she had argued, shaking and stammering.

“There will not be time, _Beth._” His grizzly head shook, and she noticed the glint in his eyes. _Beth – I am back to pretending to be his daughter._ The Manderly guards were nearby, Jorah deliberately hadn’t addressed by her real name. _He doesn’t want me to reveal myself, not in the mere minutes before the battle._ “If we run to the New Castle now, we are liable to end up trapped outside its gates. And the city is in a panic, I dare not risk these streets. The wharves are the only place that they stand a chance at holding the enemy, so I must stay here. Stay near me; the fighting will be close, but you are safer with the guards than you are by yourself.”

The _Merry Midwife_ had sailed past the blockade, and as they’d hurriedly disembarked there were Manderly criers calling for able-bodied men to help hold the docks. Jorah had walked into the Lord’s Port holding himself high, looking so strong and experienced that it seemed the Manderly men just parted around him. Jorah had introduced himself as a knight – sounding loud, strong and sure – and the men were so desperate that they’d just accepted his authority, put him at the head of the port’s defence. In the distance, despite its captain’s protests, the _Merry Midwife_ was joining the force of ships to meet the enemy on the water.

“And if you hear me screaming your name – if you hear me screaming _Beth_ – then I am lost and you must turn and run,” Jorah said grimly, lowering his voice. “Just run and hide, no matter where. Hide in a sewer, hide in a latrine, or hide in the manure of tanner’s shop. Do it without shame, just _hide_. Stay away from the crowds, any crowds, and hide and wait.”

Her hands fumbled at the Valyrian steel dagger, hidden in the folds of her dress. Her hands gripped the plain black handle. “Put that away,” Jorah ordered. “Keep that dagger hidden at all times. Do not let anybody see you with it.”

“It’s a sharp blade, it could–”

He shook his head. “_No_. Keep it hidden. If they see you with steel, they will treat you differently. A man might show compassion to a woman, but he won’t if there’s a blade in her hands. Your best defence is to have none. Just run.”
The soldiers wore steel or leather, but a woman’s only defence was to try and look so ugly, weak or mad that no man would take her. They always said that during the Sack of King’s Landing, women had been raped by hundreds in the streets.

“Ser Jorah,” she choked, trying to protest.

“You don’t understand.” he growled. He looked… scared. She’d never seen him with such a look before. “Panic is the worst enemy tonight. You will want to run for help, to seek shelter in a crowd of people, but you must overcome that urge. You do not know how quickly a crowd can turn to mob, or how quickly such a thing can trample a young girl to her death.”

Her heart was beating so fast. She remembered all of the warnings she had been given before the Battle of the Blackwater. It had been terrifying, but she’d been a lord’s daughter sheltered in a strong keep. Now, she was nothing more than a young woman exposed on the streets.

The bells were ringing madly as the dromonds on the water rumbled closer, ready for battle. They moved like a storm through the mist, each splash of the oars like a drum.

If the soldiers catch me, they will rape me, Sansa thought. Lollys Stokeworth had been raped by half a hundred men behind a tanner’s shop, in broad daylight. The thought of being dragged to the cobbles and defiled in the street was more frightening than death itself.

That quiet dread in the knight’s eyes made her shiver. “There is a beast in every man,” Jorah muttered, his voice turning low. “It growls when you put a sword in his hand. You can feel it in the air, can’t you? Tonight the beasts run free.”

Then, the knight pulled himself straight, turned around and bellowed orders to the guards around him. Sansa didn’t think it mattered what he was shouting – the men just needed to hear a strong voice.

She noticed how Ser Jorah positioned himself with his back to her hiding spot, as he bellowed orders at the White Harbour guards. In times of crisis, it seemed that scared men would listen to anyone with a loud voice. He ordered them to seal the streets, to prepare to resist enemies coming through the pier. But he’s not trying to save the city, Sansa realised, he’s only trying to protect me.

For all his crimes and flaws, none could fault Ser Jorah’s bravery in the face of battle.

The battle seemed to move so slowly. Perhaps it would have been easier if was quick. Instead, Sansa was left crouching in the mud, while the oars of the ships and the bells of the city reached a deafening frenzy. Through the harbour, through the ships, and against the docks…

Slow, but inescapable. Sansa thought. Like the tide.

Boom. When the first dromond collided against the White Harbour galley, black iron ram tearing through oak, it was like the world cracked.

Shouts. Screams. Boots running past, frantic cries and dull crashes. Loud voices and sudden, abrupt silences. Sansa remembered being in King’s Landing again, sheltering in her room in Septa Mordane’s arms as the flood of red cloaks swept through the Tower of the Hand and slaughtered her father’s men…

Sansa didn’t close her eyes. She didn’t want to watch, she didn’t want to be there, but she refused to close her eyes.

“Stand and fight!” Ser Jorah was screaming. “On me! On me!”
Sansa couldn’t even count the men. She was struggling to make sense of it, her mind reeling to fight back against the panic.

As the ships clashed in the harbour and men fired arrows down from the towers and walls along the docks, it was left to the White Harbour guards to try and hold the wharves at a few dozen choke points.

Ser Jorah hadn’t been sure whether or not they would dock and take the plague wharves first, to attack the city from land as well. Instead, the enemy chose to sail straight against the main harbours with their full strength. It was the fastest, most direct, route of attack, but also the most dangerous for them. *Maybe the garrison has a chance to resist?*

But her hopes were dashed, as the enemy came closer into view and she saw the immense size of those three-decked dromonds. The ships on the water didn’t stand a chance. The White Harbour vessels folded around them, and the first of the dromonds pushed all the way up to the jetty.

The ships let fall thick planks, and began to disgorge their contents into the city. Soldiers came up from the docks with lances, halberds and polearms – all manner of long weapons at the column’s vanguard, forming a wall of spikes and blades. They were not marching. Nothing so rushed, so mad, could be called a march. A stampede. A tide, maybe.

Many of them wore rapiers, shortswords and cutlasses sheathed at their sides, or javelins slung across their backs. They were dressed for war in the fashion of corsairs; clad in mismatched boiled leathers and jerkins, some with arms threaded through small bucklers. Not many were wearing plate, instead they clad themselves in coifs and hauberks. A few of them wore peacock plumes on their heads, or had bright colours like yellows and reds smeared over their tunics. Through panicked glances from behind the wall, Sansa glimpsed tanned skin and dark hair, in so, so many shades.

*These men aren’t Westerosi.* The soldiers were chanting something as they marched; at first Sansa thought it was gibberish, then she made out the tones and pitches of words she couldn’t understand. *Tyroshi,* Sansa realised dumbly. *Why are Tyroshi men attacking White Harbour?*

She glimpsed a figure in purple-trimmed furs trying to charge through the failing barricade, only for Ser Jorah’s bastard sword to cleave his head clean off. Red splattered against the cobbles, and a bloody blond-haired skull rolled. Before he died, Sansa recognised words of bastard High Valyrian. *Lyseni,* Sansa thought. *That man was Lyseni.*

Jorah and the White Harbour men were holding the alleyway, barely, but then Sansa caught sight of figures scaling up the buildings and scattering over the tiled roofs. Voices screamed to stop them, but the men were slipping through from above. One of them raised a rapier high, and screamed a war cry in a different foreign tongue. *Braavosi,* Sansa recognised. *They are speaking Braavosi.*

They were from all the Free Cities, in clad in armour as mismatched as their fleet. Most didn’t even seem like they spoke the Common Tongue. *These are sellswords, sellsails, pirates.*

On the water, the fleet was powering through what remained of the White Harbour defences, cracking the Manderly galleys with ease. The red dromond towards the front looked as big as the *King Robert’s Hammer,* while the flagship at the rear looked even larger. Such ships were immense leviathans, wildly superior to the White Harbour galleys. They would be the pride of any great lord’s fleet. *It doesn’t make sense; how could sellswords have ships like that?*

There had been nineteen vessels in the White Harbour blockade, and then reinforced by another
seven galleys resting in port, plus a motley ragtag of hastily ‘requisitioned’ merchant vessels. As many as they could muster, but the White Harbour fleet was already either falling back or being crushed by the enemy’s might.

Another flaming barrel launched overhead, scattering into the street beyond. The screams rising from where it landed were as nothing human. The fleet was already through the harbour, and slamming up against the port. To the west, Sansa saw the Merry Midwife blazing, the sails aflame, the ship falling to a striped Lysene vessel’s black iron ram and breaking into the waves. Men were jumping overboard, but archers from a nearby dromond picked them off in the water with methodical and well-practised volleys. Less than an hour ago that ship had ferried her to the harbour, and now it was a wreck in the waves.

That was me, Sansa realised breathlessly. It was me who convinced Captain Casso to volunteer to defend White Harbour. I warned him of Lord Borrell’s wrath should he run, I pleaded with him that he would be safest among the defenders even though I knew it was a lie. His ship was destroyed, his men dead, because of me. There was no guilt, only shock.

From the sounds of things, Ser Jorah was the only thing keeping the White Harbour men fighting. Their courage would have broken long ago, if not for Jorah’s booming voice and relentless blade. But all the while Ser Jorah holds this one alleyway, will all of the other barricades hold as well?

Despite all the knight’s ferocity and resolve, the enemy was still slipping through into the city itself. Most of the enemy ships on the water hadn’t even pushed through to the docks yet. There would be more men in their hulls, more sellswords waiting to unload.

The unloading is the only saving grace we have, Sansa realised. Even the inner and outer harbours together weren’t large enough to fit so many great ships at once. Shallops or rafts could have unloaded faster, but those would leave their men more vulnerable during the approach. The docks were crammed, the piers were raining arrows – their ships were limited in how many men they could actually land at once. It was the only reason the White Harbour soldiers on the wharves could actually put up a fight.

Sansa didn’t know how much of a garrison White Harbour had, but she could tell it wasn’t enough. Sansa saw greenboys and greybeards wearing green cloaks, fumbling to hold their tridents. The older men kept to the bowmen on the walls, leaving the boys failing as they tried to hold the barricades.

“Stand fast!” Ser Jorah boomed, but Sansa saw two young recruits throw down their spears and turn to run.

She heard screams behind her. The sellswords had already breached the city, White Harbour was being sacked. She saw smoke rising from the stout buildings near the Merchant’s Quay, corsairs pushing towards the banks, the insurers, the silversmiths. From the port authority geysered yellow flames so strong they seemed to split the sky, as pirates carrying blazing torches marched up the pier for the merchant’s warehouses.

Ser Jorah was a man swinging his blade trying to stop a river, all the while the current rushed around him.

There was no mercy from the sellswords, no restraint in their assault. They attacked hard and fast, and seemed intent on looting the city as quickly as possible, and burning all else.

The dragon, Sansa thought suddenly. Perhaps they fear the dragon could return at any moment? Their fleet was only exposed during the approach to the city, so they tried to cover the distance and
break the defences as quickly as possible. As soon as the sellswords reached the streets, then not even dragonfire would be able to target them easily from the air. Not without hurting White Harbour itself too.

What if they manage to hold? Will the Manderly men hold the streets, or will they have to fold? They can barricade themselves up in the New Castle, but if their–

Boom. Another barrel crashed from the sky, stone and rubble scattering, and instantly all of Sansa’s thoughts went blank. It came so close that the wall opposite her collapsed and Sansa felt a wave of dust against her face.

“Hold!” she heard Ser Jorah’s voice. It sounded like he was in the distance, although she knew he was less than a dozen yards away. “HOLD!”

Bodies littered the alleyway, so many that men staggered trying to step over them. She saw arrows raining down through the gap between the walls, their barbed shafts squelching into corpses. She saw tanned men in boiled leather raising crossbows, pulling back on heavy winches. They wielded big, ungainly crossbows, the Myrish type so rarely seen in Westeros, that could fire three quarrels at a time. The crude barricades couldn’t stop the salvo of bolts.

The first twang of a dozen bolts together shredded through any fight the Manderly guards still had. The green cloaks either fell or ran.

She heard heavy footsteps, and saw the bear knight staggering backwards towards her. Blood dripped from his forehead, and she saw the shaft of an arrow sticking out of his left forearm. Jorah cradled the arm, but made no move to remove the arrow.


She staggered to her feet, flinching as she stepped out onto the bloody cobbles. Blood and mud and corpses. “Run where?”

“To the walls. Still men holding out. Hurry.” His feet shambled, nearly tripping over his boots. The knight was so exhausted he could barely walk.

“The city–”

He shook his head. “The city is lost.”

As soon as she left the alleyway, she saw a wider view of the battle. A cold morning mist filled the air, and there were a dozen burning wrecks on the water. They were through the wharves, and flooding out into the cobbled streets.

The soldiers would be rushing forward to New Castle. To fall back would leave them trapped in the thickest fighting. Ser Jorah meant to go east instead, along the Fisher’s Port and towards the shipyards and inner harbour.

She could still hear fighting. The outer harbour had been overwhelmed, but it looked like the wharfs along the inner harbour was still holding. A mile-long thirty-foot-tall granite wall surrounded House Manderly’s private piers and shipyards, with towers every hundred yards, leading down to the Wolf’s Den on the rocks at the far end of the pier. The sellswords seemed intent on pushing through into the city’s heart, but even as they surged past the defence on the inner harbour still held. There were still green cloaks holding the walls of the shipyards, the garrison based around the Wolf’s Den.
Ser Jorah wrapped his beefy arm around her, clutching his sword tightly with his one good hand, but he was so exhausted that she had to try to carry him. The knight stunk of sweat and fresh blood. She saw the old bandages around his missing fingers weeping again, the blood from his maimed hand dripping onto her shoulder.

As they stepped onto the street, she saw a gaggle of sellswords marching down the road, bursting through houses and slinging stones wrapped in burning rags through shuttered windows. They scattered the cityfolk around them, screams and wails filling the air. Sansa and Jorah slipped out behind them, and ran in the opposite direction.

“Surrender! Surrender all defiance!” one of the sellswords bellowed from a rooftop, clutching a flaming torch. One of the few Westerosi voices she had heard from them. “The Lord of Waters owns this city now!”

She barely made out the words. The Lord of Waters? What?

There were skirmishes in the streets. Sansa saw soldiers clashing with figures in furs with spears. Women, she realised dumbly. She saw women clad in furs, with hard-bitten features wielding spears, shrieking battle cries in a queer language, clashing with corsairs on the cobbles. Sansa could have stared, but Jorah was pushing her forward into another alley.

Behind her, she heard the rumbling footsteps as the soldiers pressed through.

Less than a few hours ago, she had arrived in hectic cobbled wharves of a strong port city, filled with stalls and fishmarkets. Now, the wharves were burning, the stalls had been smashed and the docks looked like a totally different place.

Men, women and children gushed in the streets around her, trampling to the west away from the battle. The Manderly guards were falling, trying to recover some semblance of order. There are not enough fighting soldiers, she thought. This attack came when there was not a proper force to defend against it. The streets felt like they were full of women and children, old men and mewling babes, or scared folk trying to push away. She heard clashes, snapping voices and cries of pain...

The crowds were different to what she would expect, Sansa realised through the fog of fear. She didn’t know what was happening, but it all felt… tense. She saw women wearing animal hides rather than wool, and old men with shaggy figures with bone daggers. There were fishwives and sailors among them – cityfolk – but also crowds of hard-worn figures that just seemed different. Like they had come out of the wilderness, filling the city. Refugees? she thought in a daze.

Across the yard, Sansa saw an aging woman with skin like leather, wearing a necklace of a white stone, step on top a cart and raise a spear high – shrieking in a weird language for others to join her. Sansa couldn’t even recognise the language. She nearly tripped as she stared, but Ser Jorah pushed her forward towards the gates.

She heard shouting from the men on the walls of the inner harbour, and Jorah pushed his way out of the rabble and towards the huddle of Manderly men at the base of the tower. Sansa half-expected someone to demand Jorah and herself to identify themselves, but nobody did. Perhaps it was because Ser Jorah had fought with the soldiers on the pier, or maybe because he was sheltering a girl.

“They are coming up behind us,” Ser Jorah shouted at once, looking around the men. “A dromond and a galley docked at the east pier. They broken the wharves, heading towards us through Baker Street!”
“Baker Street?” a man looked alarmed. “The crowds–”

“Get them in or get them away!” the knight snapped, glaring at the shocked soldiers. “Move! Now! They’ve already got a foothold – close the gates and hold them!”

A few of the men were already moving even before waiting for command from their superior. The others turned to look for orders from their officer – look to a white-bearded man with a gnarled face and a green cloak, swaying slightly on the spot. The man wore a greying hauberk and ringmail, with one of his eyes gouged out from an old battle wound under its helm. “Aye,” the one-eyed soldier ordered. “Get to the gates, prepare to hold the yards!” He turned to Jorah with a heavy limp. “And you are?”

“Ser Jeor, knight of House Mormont,” Jorah replied promptly. Why give a false name? Sansa wondered briefly, before realising herself; on the off-chance that anybody had heard of Jorah Mormont the slaver, he didn’t want the issue to distract them now. If it came to it, the names Jeor and Jorah were similar enough that he could claim they misheard.

“Ser Bartimus, castellan of the Wolf’s Den,” the old man introduced. He didn’t look much like a knight. It was only when he staggered around that Sansa noticed Ser Bartimus had a peg-leg. “Ser Marlon is off at war, Ser Garth ran for reinforcements to the New Castle, I am in command here.”

“How many?” Jorah demanded.

“Not enough. We held them back at the harbour, but these gates haven’t been sealed in a hundred years,” Ser Bartimus said, shaking his head as he hobbled forward. “We must hold the Castle Stair. I need every man I can get to hold the gates!” He turned towards another greybeard. “Serjeant! Clear the yard of savages and brace for attack!

Savages. Sansa noted the word even between a hundred other shouts, thinking of the women in hides clutching spears. She could hear the scuffles even from here. While the cityfolk ran to the Manderly guards, the ‘savages’ were huddling in the streets, holding their own councils as they prepared to battle.

Those are wildlings, she realised suddenly. There were wildlings filling the streets.

“All women and children get to the Old Mint,” a Manderly man-at-arms shouted. A heavy figure moved to grab Sansa with a beefy hand. “Women and children run to the Old Mint!”

Jorah stepped into stop him, keeping Sansa close to him. “The Old Mint is already lost. They’ve broken Fishfoot Square.”

Sansa didn’t know enough about White Harbour’s layout, but the words caused ripples through the guards. They all seemed so young, so pale, quivering and pissing in their breeches.

“What of Sept of Snows?” a man demanded, his voice breaking. “My wife and daughter ran to the Sept of Snows.”

“Dammit, we can’t help them now,” Ser Bartimus ordered. Even despite his age, he had the grizzled and loud voice of a captain. “If you’re lucky, they will have made it to the New Castle, but we must hold position. Serjeant – open up the Wolf’s Den, get as many as we can in there. We hold steady here for as long as we can fight, and then fall back to the Wolf’s Den!”

The Wolf’s Den is a prison, Sansa remembered. She had seen the old and squat fortress during their approach, dark, thick and dreary like a cave on the rocks at the easternmost end of the docks. It used to be a castle; once the seat of the Greystarks, but then it fell into ruin after their rebellion, and
the Manderlys built New Castle as its replacement.

She could hear chaos clamouring outside. The cityfolk gushed through the gates, but the others – the wildlings – were clashing with the guards. Either the Manderly soldiers weren’t letting them through, or the savages refused to go – Sansa couldn’t even tell.

She could still feel the booms of stone-throwers from the ships, and smoke billowing over the tiled roofs. Houses were burning towards the city’s centre, along the plaza through which the Castle Stair ran.

*The assault has broken the city in half,* she realised. The sellswords had breached the outer harbour, the main docks, and they rushed to the centre of the city; the New Castle, the Sept of Snows, and the bulk of the city was on the west side, while the inner harbour, the shipyards, and the Wolf’s Den were on the east. If the sellswords controlled the Castle Stair and the central plaza, then they could choke any defence trying to muster against them.

Jorah pulled himself off her, staggering forward with a visible wince of pain. The arrow was still embedded in his arm, but he didn’t remove it. *A barbed arrow,* Sansa realised. He would maim himself even more trying to remove it.

Still, he didn’t lower his sword, not for a second. Sansa was dazed in the moment, watching so many men either rushing with purpose or running mad with panic.

“Any able man, get to the bloody gates! Block the road!” Ser Bartimus bellowed. “We’ve another two ships coming in towards us! All women, children, get to the Wolf’s Den!”

They were pushing around her, shoving and trampling. A man-at-arms made to move drag Sansa away, but Jorah stopped them. Sansa was left clinging to the knight’s side. “My daughter, Beth,” Jorah snapped quickly. “She knows how to shoot a bow. She can help.”

Sansa stared speechless. For a second, the old knight looked like he might have objected to a woman fighting, but then he thought better of it. It was too dire, he need every able body he could get. “Get the bloody lady a bow!” Ser Bartimus snapped. “All bowmen, get to the walls!”

*The walls? A bow…?*

The rush of bodies almost pushed her away, but Sansa clung to Jorah like a rock. She stared at the man in horror, stuttering. “The Wolf’s Den is a cave, it has no escape route,” he muttered lowly in answer. “If they break through, you would be trapped there. The bowmen, though, are always kept in the safest place in a battle.”

“I don’t know how to fire a bow!” Sansa shrieked. She didn’t mean for her voice to be so high-pitched, but she was breathing so hard, her heart was jumping so fast, she couldn’t stop it.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s simple enough,” Jorah hissed, his eyes commanding her to quiet. “Just take a bow, and get to the quietest corner of the walls you can find. Whichever side they attack us from, you run in the opposite.”

*He expects them to lose,* she realised. *He wants me to have an escape route when they do.* “I…”

People were shouting all around her, calling for arms. Her hands clung to the knight’s shoulder. “Go, Beth,” he roared above the clamour, with a firm shove towards the tower. “Go!”

She could have stumbled. A man-at-arms slammed a flimsy willow shortbow into her hands and pushed her forward, in through the gatehouse and up the stone spiral staircase. Sansa stared at the
wooden thing like it was foreign object. *I’ve never fired a bow before*. Her mother would never have allowed it.

Sansa wasn’t a lady here; she was just a scared young girl, smeared with sweat and mud, shivering in the cool and bloody air. Nobody even gave her a second glance. *Panic is the worst enemy*, she thought vaguely. *I cannot be a mindless body in the herd here; I must keep my wits to survive. I am not Lady Sansa Stark today.*

She smelled smoke. She was nearly knocked down, as two men heaved a huge pot of boiling, bubbling oil up the staircase, so frantically the pot splashed.

Her heart was beating so fast the pounding of her own blood was deafening. People were shouting things, but she couldn’t even make them out. Each step up the stone wall felt bone-shuddering. Her first sight from atop the walls, and she could see nothing but smoke and chaos.

She heard the cries, the screams, the wails, echoing from below. She heard the creaking as the old wooden gates were heaved shut. Sounds of scuffles, stampeding boots, bodies clashing – it was all coming closer.

She tried to focus, she did, but it was too much. Sansa couldn’t even make anything out in the seething frenzy.

Around her, men were already firing shafts, bow strings snapping. Pots of wooden arrows were dropped around the battlements, every man rushing to grab them. “Fire!” somebody was crying. “Notch! Ready! Loose! Notch! Ready! Loose!”

She fumbled with the bow feebly, but her fingers couldn’t even find a grip on the string. Then, objects clattered over the stone, and something solid chimed off a man’s helm right next to her. Blood plumed, and he fell screaming with a notch carved through his helm and cracked his skull. *Slingshots*, she realised dumbly. The corsairs were firing slingshots, launching stones hard enough to crush bone.

Footsteps stormed beneath her. They had reached the walls, slamming their way through the guards.

“Push them back!” that was Ser Jorah’s voice. “Push them back!”

Sansa clung to her useless bow and hung back among a pile of crates, paces away from the battlements. Bodies were falling around her, stones clattering, shafts falling. The morning sea breeze brought with her the sound of screaming and the stink of smoke.

There were mobs beneath her. Mobs of soldiers, mobs of sellswords, mobs of panicked wildlings. It all mixed together in such fury that the streets were writhing and crashing together.

It felt like the boots were retreating – no, regrouping – but the clamour didn’t stop. She could see them huddling out of bow-range at the edge of the yard, she could even hear the foreign tongues as commanders ordered them to reform ranks, for archers to climb the buildings, ready for another surge.

The white city was burning. She could see fires as far off as the gates of New Castle, and the blur fighting on the Castle Stair. The harbour was a massacre – a graveyard of broken ships being washed up against bloody docks.

And yet, still, the rear ranks of the dromonds were only just reaching the shores of the city. The final ship at the very rear was a striped galley hovering at the edge of the harbour. More and more
men were rushing out their hulls – their bright colours clashed against the cold and dreary morning mist of the White Knife.

Tides of refugees were filtering in from the north. The guards could barely control them. They tried to bring as many as possible into the Inner Harbour, but then the orders rang out to seal the gates. The cityfolk barrelled against them, while the soldiers shouted them to go elsewhere. They couldn’t risk enemies slipping in amongst the refugees, perhaps, or maybe the soldiers just didn’t have the manpower to protect them anymore. Citizens were left stranded, wailing, in battle-torn streets. The city was seething like a melting pot, bubbling and thrashing all around her.

“Incoming!” the cry called from the gatehouse. “They’re coming!”

The flagship of the enemy fleet had finally reached the docks. Sansa saw the shadows of men struggling to pull out wooden logs – rams – over the gangway while the echo of boots clattered over the commons.

Sansa watched it all happen from a distance, and she just felt numb. Dazed and numb, like it was all a dream.

The inner harbour had walls to split it from the rest of the city, but it wasn’t a fort, not truly. The shipyards were never built to withstand siege. As soon as they breached the wharves, the defenders were left at a disadvantage – the only true way to protect a city from naval assault was to hold the ships in the harbour, to prevent the battle from spreading into the streets, but those dromonds had proven far too powerful for that.

Even while more and more men charged through the city, she could see the catapults and stone-throwers from the ships raining destruction downwards. The charge of soldiers seethed through the streets, burning buildings, cutting through panicked mobs.

Among the sellswords flooding up the narrow-cobbled streets, she heard Westerosi voices. “Surrender now!” a loud and shrill voice called, to the beat of thumping spears. “Surrender and open the gates, or we’ll bring them down.”

There was no reply. The sellswords didn’t wait for one either. Instead, the footsteps reached fever pitch as they stampeded.

Archers were shouting for more arrows. Then she saw a pocket of swarthy figures clad in the seahorse tabard, clutching crossbows on the opposing rooftops, and then she heard the pang of a score of crossbow bolts fired as one. Organised crossbowmen moved in formation, reloading and firing with perfect synchronicity and shredding through the archers. A dozen men fell from the battlements, raining down onto the streets, screaming right up until the thudded against the stones.

The sellswords pushed forward in organised ranks, spears and shields paired together – one rank covering the other as rams were relayed to the front. These were men that did this for a living; sellswords that just wanted to do the job and get paid. Their ranks were filled with experienced and hardened soldiers. The leftover Manderly garrison and its sloppy defence couldn’t even compare to them.

*Jorah knew it. He knew that the garrison wasn’t going to last.*

Sansa did what she was told – she fell backwards and found a place to hide. She ducked and scrambled for cover against the battlements, all the while steel-tipped bolts scattered overhead.

There was a corner on the walls, near a stout guard tower, and she curled up as far back as she
possibly could. There was no order, no discipline left.

So many deaths, and she just felt numb to it. She had never even imagined what this moment would truly be like. She could never have comprehended it. Somehow, Ser Jorah and only a few experienced soldiers managed to make sense of it, to stay focused, but for all the rest the panic and chaos was suffocating.

She kept on crouching, eyes skittering as she tried to search for something to focus on, something to make sense of. From the walls, she could see a flag fluttering over the largest dromond on the water – black and red and fluttering in the wind. Even despite the colours, Sansa recognised the sigil; the seahorse of Horse Velaryon, but it had inverted colours. A black seahorse in red waters – the Velaryon sigil but Targaryen colours.

She couldn’t understand it. *House Velaryon declared for Stannis. But didn’t they change fealty after the Blackwater? That means…*

*Those dromonds must be of the Royal Fleet,* Sansa thought suddenly. Some of the galleys looked like they were of the Redwyne fleet too. There were many more ragtag sellsail vessels or reclaimed merchant ships among them, and they didn’t bear the colours Sansa would have expected, but the bulk of the fleet must have come from King’s Landing.

*That means Cersei. She did this. Cersei wants to scorch White Harbour off the map. Maybe the royal army was too depleted, so she hired sellswords by the thousands to do it. It must have been extraordinarily expensive, but she paid it.*

She heard the boom of the rams slamming against the gates, and the sound of straining wood. There was another bellow demanding surrender, but none answered it.

Across the commons, there sellswords chasing down to grab figures fleeing their houses, or barricading streets to herd the crowds of stampeding cityfolk. Others were marching lines of wailing captures backwards to docks at spearpoint, or dragging women into dark corners. Their shrill screams carried even over the cacophony of battle, and sent tremors down Sansa’s spine.

*They are going for the civilians,* Sansa realised. The sellswords were deliberately targeting the cityfolk. Of course, it made sense – they wanted hostages, just as many hostages as possible. They would burn the city and capture prisoners.

*The dragon. If this is part of an organised assault to outmanoeuvre the dragon, then attacking fast and taking captives is the only way to win.*

Sansa stared up at the sky, and wondered if she would see wings. If there was ever an ideal time the dragon could appear to save the city, then that window was closing. She looked upwards, and no help came.

She heard the bone-crunching crack as the gates snapped, the desperate cries as men tried to hold them. The defenders would be poking spears through the gaps of the splintering wood, just trying to force the assailants backwards. It sounded like the gates had been torn off their hinges, but the men were still trying to hold them up.

Sansa’s heart could have stopped. All around her, she saw bowmen falling to arrows, or breaking ranks completely. Sansa took shelter at the back of the walkway, but she could still feel shafts scattering around her.

Whichever side they attack from, move in the opposite, Ser Jorah had told her. She repeated the
instructions to herself, over and over in her head. But right there, in the moment, it was hard to see anything that wasn’t battle.

Then, she heard the clunk of metal against stone. The sound of metal hooks clanging against the gatehouse’s battlements. Grapnels, she realised suddenly. Hooks were being flung upwards – some as crude as ropes tied around axes. They were climbing over the walls, right towards her.

Men tried to unhook the ropes, but there were too many of them. The walls weren’t high enough and there weren’t enough defenders. Sansa knew she needed to run, but the arrows… so many shafts scattering through the air, even a single one might pierce her skull as soon as she raised her head.

She saw the first figure climbing over the battlements, clutching a rapier in one hand and the rope in the other. The man was straining for leverage against the stone, with a knife in his teeth.

The gates were breaking, the walls falling… Sansa was left paralysed, gasping for air.

“Beth!” the cry came from below. “Beth!”

That was the signal. Run. She knew she had to. She had to crawl away over the walkway, but she risked a glimpse down below into the yard. Her eyes couldn’t recognise anyone through the flailing bodies, but she looked for her knight in the chaos. “JORAH!” Sansa screamed, her voice breaking. “JORAH!”

“Beth!” the cry came again, moving away from the fighting too, and Sansa turned towards his direction. The stairwell. Get off the walls, get to safety. Find a place to hide. Maybe I can slip towards the docks, swim down the shore…?

Sansa turned and ran. South, away from the gates. Away from the Wolf’s Den and towards the jetty between the two docks. She turned and ran over the walls. Her dress was so shredded it barely stopped her feet.

She saw the streets collapsing into chaos. It looked like a mob – a riot – flushing through the streets and rumbling towards the city centre. Manderly guards, against wildlings, against corsairs.

She glimpsed Ser Bartimus, the old one-legged knight stumbling as he tried to swing a sword, only to be hacked apart by the men pouring through the broken gate. The Castle Stair is lost.

“Jorah!” Sansa shouted as she ran, and she was replied to with a cry of, “Beth!”

Sansa caught sight of him. A tall figure in bloody wool and sealskin, shambling through the muddy backstreets. Ser Jorah stood head and shoulders over the figures fleeing around him, using his bastard’s sword like a walking stick. Their eyes met. He was running towards her. Where are the nearest stairs? I need to get off the walls…

“Jorah Mormont!” a voice called suddenly, splitting the air. “Ser Jorah bloody Mormont!”

Even in the chaos, Sansa froze at the sound of the voice. She turned, just as a figure cut down two green cloaks at once, shoving their bodies out of the way to push forward.

She saw a short and stout man in grey dour armour, crouching behind a shield to ram a bloody path through Manderly men. There were sellswords around him, but he turned towards the direction of her cry. Following the sound of my voice, Sansa realised. Even amongst all of the other screams and shouts, the man focused and followed the name ‘Jorah’.
“Jorah Mormont!” the man bellowed again, sounding the name like a war cry. “You here, Jorah Mormont?”

Ser Lothor Brune, the knight of Brownhollow, was covered in blood. She recognised his squashed nose and square jaw even underneath the iron helm. His heavy plate armour wasn’t shining or polished, but it was hard and worn. Not a strong or gallant figure charging through battle like the knights Sansa used to dream of, but he was sharp, lean and hardened.

The sight of him even in the battle, this battle, caused Sansa’s heart to shudder. If he’s here…

The tide of sellswords pushed down the road towards the Wolf’s Den, but Ser Lothor shoved his way free of it. “Ser Jorah Mormont!” Ser Lothor called, striding towards Jorah with his sword and shield raised. “I bloody knew it!”

Lothor Apple-Eater, she thought in a daze. During the Battle of the Blackwater, Ser Lothor was said to have cut a bloody path through Fossoway men-at-arms, to capture the Fossoway heir and kill his brothers. Sansa heard the tale, but never really understood it; at the Vale, Lothor had been quiet, polite, respectful and even gentle.

Sansa had danced with Ser Lothor at the start of the tourney, and she had giggled with how he fancied and smiled towards Mya Stone. An honest face, Sansa had thought of him when they first met, what felt like so long ago, and later it had always struck her as queer how such a stoic and unassuming man could earn a knighthood by such rumoured brutality.

That was before she saw him in battle. Now – Lothor Brune’s sword was bloody and he walked over the corpses, and it was like seeing the man in his natural element for the first time. Where other men would walk through a battlefield, he strode. A short, grey-haired, middle-aged man, but he moved through the battle as if he lived for it.

Jorah fumbled, gasping for breath. In the moment, Jorah gaped towards Lothor, and his eyes flickered back at Sansa. Ser Lothor followed his gaze, turning to stare at the muddy, dishevelled woman watching from the walls.

Their eyes met, and everything froze. Sansa saw the flicker of surprise pass over the knight’s face. He came expecting to see Jorah on the battlefield, but he wasn’t expecting to see me.

But if Ser Lothor is here, then that means…

There was that moment where everything seemed to click. Ser Lothor looked between Sansa and Jorah, evaluating it the situation. “Lady Alayne,” Ser Lothor’s voice turned polite, like the respectful, quiet man she had once known. “I’m here to take you home.”

Sansa’s heart could have stopped.

“Beth!” Jorah roared, raising his sword with all the strength he had left. “Run!”

She did. She turned and ran, even as Ser Lothor flourished his blade, racing to meet Jorah’s in the middle of the road.

“Alayne!” Lothor shouted at her, his voice broken by the clash of steel. “Come to me, I can keep you safe!”

Their blades rang out. Jorah charged, and Ser Lothor fell back. “Alayne!” he called again, crouching behind his shield. Clash. “Your father has been missing you so!”
Sansa didn’t stop. She just ran, faster than she ever thought she could. Faster than she ever thought she would have to.

Ser Lothor cursed, while Jorah roared bloody fury and tried to overwhelm him. Both hands were on his blade, staggering and screaming with every swing. Sansa could only watch through strained glimpses behind her. The first blow Ser Lothor deflected on his shield, and then the second and third he sidestepped. His footwork was faster, and Jorah had to swing wide to keep up.

The moment Ser Lothor counterattacked, his lunge very nearly sliced through Jorah’s chest. Jorah stumbled, barely able to swipe upwards before Lothor’s second lunge parted his head.

Ser Lothor was the better fighter. It was obvious from the very first strike.

Jorah’s sword was twice the size of Ser Lothor’s, and he swung it like a club. Flailing like a bear – strong, big and desperate. But Ser Lothor crouched behind his shield, dodging as often as he blocked, with a fine and tireless footwork. The man moved calmly and with experience, yet striking with startling speed, methodically stepping and sidestepping into flanking strikes. Strike after strike, clash after clash, Jorah was being forced backwards, blood trailing at his heels.

The great bear of a knight panted with every clash, the exhaustion deeply set in his hard features, but he swung with all the might he had left. Even in his prime, Sansa didn’t think Jorah could have matched the Apple-Eater. The only thing keeping Jorah alive now was pure desperation. Ser Lothor took the strikes on his shield, and then pushed him backwards. The sword in Ser Lothor’s hand was singing, while Jorah was left staggering trying to keep up, grunting and sweating.

Ten strikes and a dozen heartbeats and it was over. The fighters broke away from each other, distracted by the bodies swelling behind them. Jorah took one look at all the men rushing towards Ser Lothor’s side, and he turned around. Jorah was shambling down the road, running west along the walls. He was gasping – heavy, heaving pants – as his footsteps stomped over the cobbles.

Even as Sansa ran, even as the battle flooded the shipyards, she heard Ser Lothor bellow. “After him! After her!” the knight ordered, motioning to the sellswords behind him. “The dark-haired girl on the walls, catch her, bring her to me! Do not hurt her, not a hair, just catch her!” He then repeated the orders in Tyroshi, and over a dozen men rushed to his side.

*Ser Lothor is not with the sellswords*, Sansa realised foggily. *He’s leading them.*

*Of course he is*, a small voice in the back of her mind replied. *Ser Lothor is exactly the sort of man that Littlefinger would send to reclaim back his property.*

White Harbour was in shambles. This assault had been ruthlessly effective, well-planned, and well-financed, and suddenly everything clicked into place. Cersei wouldn’t have been able to do something like this. *This is all Littlefinger.*

*I’m here to take you home*, Lothor had said.


Even as her feet clattered along the stone walkway, her mind raced trying to piece it all together.

*He used sellswords*. Of course, Littlefinger wouldn’t have the influence to commit the knights of the Vale for such an assault, so he’d called upon sellswords and sellsails from the Free Cities instead. They were expensive, even more with them so far from their usual climes, but Littlefinger could afford it. More importantly, sellswords were both expendable and deniable.
Footsteps behind her. Ser Jorah was running too, trying to reach her, with Ser Lothor not far behind. There was fighting all around her, battles raging in the street. Women with spears and white stones, men in green cloaks, battling the sellswords and corsairs. *A beast in every man.*

White Harbour was in flames. *This is what Littlefinger is.* Hundreds, thousands dead, just to get at her.

*How did Littlefinger know I'd be here? No, he didn’t need to know; he only needed to suspect.* White Harbour was a likely target to where she might run, and in any case was now her brother’s seat of power, and so he’d moved to wipe it off the map. Maybe he hoped to flush her out, or to cut off a kidnapper’s options. Maybe he suspected that Ser Jorah had been working with the Manderlys, or maybe he just didn’t want to take the chance.

*I should have known that Littlefinger would never stop until he got me.*

And even if he hadn’t gotten her, in this assault, he’d still strike the King-beyond-the-Wall’s cause a blow; maybe even a mortal blow, by the mere act of sacking the city. Even in failure, Littlefinger would find success.

The blisters on her feet burst, but Sansa didn’t stop running. The pain was everywhere. Ladies shoes weren’t made for running. *Why aren’t they made for running?*

“Alayne!” Ser Lothor shouted after her. “Stop, please, stop! I promise, I can help you!”

*No. You will only help Littlefinger.*

The wall turned around, stretching towards a gatehouse across from wharves. Fighting was everywhere, but Ser Lothor abandoned the battle to chase her. Behind her, Sansa could see the White Harbour shipyards, where the half-constructed skeletal husk of a galley stood out of the water. The wharves were in the distance – the docks burning with great billows of smoke.

All of the ships were finally docked at the coast. There was only one vessel still on the water – a Lyseni ship with a striped, painted hull – that lingered in the harbour while the rest were storming the city. Sansa heard cries coming from the docks, but she couldn’t focus on them. She couldn’t focus on anything, it all blurred.

Feet behind her. Clattering of boots, running up the stone stairs. They were behind her – she could hear the grunts and frenzied swings. Jorah almost fell to his hands as he stumbled up the steps, flailing his sword to push back the men chasing her. There were a dozen of them, with Ser Lothor at the very front, and Jorah could only flail as he tried to hold them back at the staircase.

The staircase. The wall. Sansa realised too late – the walkway came to an end as it curved around to another set of gates. There was nowhere else to run, not over the iron-spiked edge of the wooden gates. *I should have run down the stairs, Sansa cursed. Maybe I could have lost them in the shipyards, but there’s nowhere to hide or run atop the wall…*

She turned, yet Ser Lothor and his men were already pushing through up the stairs. Even when fighting from the high ground and using the steps to channel, Jorah couldn’t hold them back. They were there, blocking anywhere she could go.

*Can I jump down? Could I climb the wall, just find some way to get to the ground? No, it was too high and the walls were too smooth. The thirty-foot drop onto hard cobbles would surely kill her…*

Ser Jorah could finally run no more. The knight looked ready to keel over in exhaustion, but even as he gasped and staggered, he turned and he swung his sword. The soldiers easily avoided the
swing, and one of them stepped forward to bring the flat of his blade against Jorah’s leg.

Jorah collapsed to his knee. He was a bloody wreck, beaten, bruised and weak. His size was the only thing keeping the men back— even bent and bowed, he swung his huge sword like a man possessed, defiant to the very last. Even as they surrounded him, even as he was on his knees.

“I knew you were a bloody traitor, Mormont,” Ser Lothor said darkly. “Lord Baelish welcomed you under his roof, gave you his hospitality, you repaid him with treachery!”

The knight didn’t reply. A guttural noise spat from his throat as he rose once more, bracing his weight against the blade’s pommel as he forced himself back to his feet.

For a second, it looked like Jorah was praying as he fought for his life.

A Lyseni sellsword stepped into the fray, his blade flashing as he swung. Jorah batted the scimitar aside with a gloved hand and crashed the pommel of his huge sword down the corsair’s skull. The pirate cried out, shrieking, the orbits of one his eyes shattered, pale gelatinous fluid mixed with red leaking from behind clenched fingers. Jorah trembled, retching in exhaustion. The other sellsword hesitated uneasily, but then, Ser Lothor stepped forward in bounding strides, one, two, three, and slammed his shield forward like a battering ram into Jorah’s two-handed guard.

She didn’t see what collided, but she heard the distinctive crack of bone. Sansa screamed, but her throat could hardly form the word. She felt like she was shaking. “Ser Jorah…”

Jorah was half on the ground, blood dribbling from his beard. He took one gasp for breath and pulled himself up, clutching his sword with both trembling hands. It was as though he could scarcely lift it. Ser Lothor stepped forward to meet him. “You are a traitor, ser.” Ser Lothor muttered, levelling his sword. “And this is the only reward you have ever deserved.”

“For my queen.” Jorah’s voice was so low Sansa barely heard it. “For my queen.”

Jorah lunged at the knight with a great upwards slash, face twisted, eyes bloodshot. Lothor Apple-Eater easily blocked the attack on his shield, and then his sword lashed outwards.

The air turned red as the blade plunged straight through Jorah’s cheekbone, and out of the back of his skull.

“NO!” Sansa was screaming, as the great bear of a knight collapsed to the stones. “Ser Jorah, no…”

Even in death, the man’s bloody face was contorted into a snarling growl. She heard the sickening squelch, saw the squirt of gore, as Ser Lothor dragged his steel out of the man’s brains.

Jorah flopped. Even with a sword through his head, the man’s limbs spasmed and grasped.

Her lungs weren’t working. It felt like Sansa’s whole world was breaking apart. He’s… he’s dead… he’s just…

The image flashed before her eyes over and over again— watching Ser Jorah flop.

Lothor Apple-Eater turned to her, his sword still slick with blood and brains. The sellswords stood back to let the knight pass. “Lady Alayne…” he said softly. “It’s alright. It’s alright.”

She stared at him like he was a monster. A monster with soft and honest eyes. “No…!” Sansa said blankly. “No…”
“My lady…!” He stepped towards her, and she recoiled back.

“Stay away!” Sansa shrieked. “Get away! Get away!”

*Defenceless. I’m defenceless. He could overwhelm me, grab me… pull me away… deliver me to his puppetmaster…*

Her legs clattered, shoes knocking against the stone as she shambled backwards away from him. She felt something tear, tripping over her own tattered dress as she staggered. Her whole world was rocking, tears streaming from her eyes.

*It’s Littlefinger. It’s all Littlefinger.*

“My lady, the edge!” Ser Lothor cried in alarm, as Sansa tottered closer and closer towards the edge of wall. “My lady…!”

He made to grab her, but she recoiled from his touch like it was foul and shrieked. “Get away, get away!”

Her foot spun off the side of the edge, and she very nearly fell off the wall.

“No!” Ser Lothor cried, and Sansa barely managed catch herself onto the battlements before she toppled.

There was a cool sea breeze wafting from the coast. The moment was frozen still. Sansa was left hanging at the very edge of the wall, above a twenty, thirty foot drop onto cobbled stones. Her body was trembling, tears pouring from her eyes and her breath broken by frantic gasps.

Sansa turned to stare down at the drop.

Ser Lothor caught the look in her eyes. He stopped still, his face going pale.

“I won’t let him take me,” Sansa promised. “I won’t, I won’t, I won’t…”

“My lady,” Ser Lothor gasped. “Don’t do it, just… step away from the edge. Step away.”

“He won’t have me!” Sansa cried, her shrill voice turning into a shriek. “I’d rather…”

*I would as well, she realised, feeling numb. I’d rather drop than let Littlefinger win.*

The thought of crazed Aunt Lysa shrieking and dangling over the open Moon Door flashed before her eyes.

Ser Lothor tried to step forward, trying to calm her down. He looked scared, more scared than he had been in battle. “My lady,” he gulped. “You can’t… Lord Baelish cares about you. He only wants to protect you – he made me swear to bring you back at all costs. On my honour I will protect you.”

“He doesn’t. He wants me for himself,” she sniffled, casting another look behind her. “I won’t let have me, I won’t be part of his scheme.”

“Alayne… Sansa…” Ser Lothor pleaded, risking another step. There was about a dozen yards between them, any closer and he’d be able to catch her. Sansa shuffled backwards, so far back her heels were dangling off the precipice. “I don’t know what lies they’ve been telling you, but it’s not true. Everything he’s done has been for your own good.”
“This?” Sansa shrieked, staring wide-eyed at the sellswords behind him, and at the burning docks. “This is good?!”

“This city is in rebellion! The streets are filled with savages. They are traitors to the realm, this is war.” The sellswords were looking confused. One man stepped forward, and Ser Lothor motioned him back. “Lord Baelish offered his aid in routing them, for the good of the Seven Kingdoms.”

She could see Jorah’s corpse staring at her. “You killed them!” Sansa cried, sobbing shrilly. “You killed them all! He killed everybody – he killed my aunt, he… he killed them all!”

A sellsword called something in a tongue she couldn’t tell, but his face was uncertain. Asking for orders. Ser Lothor turned and snapped, “Get back! Leave us!” The men didn’t react, not until the knight then hissed a string of Tyroshi words. Then, the sellswords hesitated, before turning to move back down the stairs.

They stepped over Jorah’s corpse as they pushed their way back down. Sansa caught a few of the looks towards her. He thinks I’m liable to spook, she thought, and so he cleared the rest away. The sellswords were running towards the gate. And he’s ordered them to run around to try and catch me under the gates, should I fall.

I won’t let them. She could jump headfirst into the ground. Sansa met Lothor’s gaze and she could feel nothing but a crazed desperation.

“It’s alright,” the knight soothed. “Look, it’s alright… It’s just us.” In an idle motion, Ser Lothor dropped his sword and slung his shield off, both clattering to the stone. He opened his arms wide, unarmed, but there was still blood splattered over his armour. “Nobody is going to hurt you, Alayne. I promise it. I swear it on my life, my family and my honour. We’re here to protect you, that’s all…”

She didn’t twitch. Ser Lothor held himself low, with a bent back, moving in small steps to make himself seem less threatening. Approaching her like she was unnerved animal, like a spooked bird that could fly off. All around him, all across the city, there were screams.

“I protected you once, remember?” he said softly. “At the Fingers, the singer – Marillion – he was drunk and would have forced you, overpowered you, but I stopped him. I saved you. That was the only thing my lord ever commanded of me – to protect you. I saved you then, let me save you now.”

She didn’t twitch. “Maybe you’re unhappy about what happened to your aunt, or what Lord Baelish did to the singer.” Ser Lothor said, taking another careful step. Sansa’s eyes were fixed on his feet, measuring the distance. “But that singer was a bad man, and Lysa would have thrown you from the Moon Door. Lord Baelish just wanted to protect you. He saved you from King’s Landing, from Joffrey and from Cersei. I don’t know what lies they told you to get you to go with them, but that’s all they were – *lies*. Lies to steal you from the man who sheltered you, who rescued you.”

There were not many steps left. A few more feet and he could grab her. She would have to move soon, or she would lose her chance. Sansa’s body was so tense it was trembling.

“Lord Baelish isn’t angry with you. He’s worried,” Ser Lothor said. One more step. “He’s been searching the whole realm and beyond. I didn’t know you’d be here, but Lord Baelish warned me there was a chance, and I…”

His throat seemed jam, as he gulped. She could see the sweat dribbling from his brow. Sansa pulled her gaze to meet his. He had honest eyes. “Think of your friends,” Ser Lothor pleaded.
“Think of Randa. Sweetrobin. Mya. Think of all those who love you, who are missing you so.”

Believe me, I am.

She couldn’t feel her heart beating. She felt too numb. After a long moment of tense hesitation, she pulled away from the edge. She heard Ser Lothor’s deep sigh of relief. “Come to me,” the knight promised softly. “I can bring you home.”

Ser Lothor’s arms were wide, as if to hug her. Sansa stood still, shaking, as he wrapped his arms around her shoulders in a soft, comforting embrace.

His armour jangled around her. She felt the blood smeared on his breastplate.

Ser Lothor didn’t even notice the Valyrian steel dagger hidden in her grip as he moved in to hug her. The blade had been in her hands the whole time, hidden from view as she cowered, and as soon as Ser Lothor held her it was in her hands again. She held it tight, bringing the blade down against the nape of his neck as she returned the hug.

Blood splattered beneath the sharp edge. The knight convulsed so tightly he could have crushed her.

She felt that gasp – a gasp of pain, shock and horror – as Sansa pulled the blade in and twisted it against bone. The blow was awkward, unsteady, but the blade’s sharpness, her desperation – drove it home. Like coring an apple, she thought, hysterical – and the thought was so jarring so could have laughed.

His heavy body fell onto her, she nearly toppled before she managed to push it backwards. It clattered, flopping against the stones. Sansa was left standing there, bloody with streaks of tears down her face, clutching the dagger with horror. It was like they were someone else’s hands.

Then, before anyone even managed to react, Sansa turned and she ran.

---

**The Leech Lord**

He watched the battle from the hills, using a Myrish spyglass to try and find the answers through the snows. Roose had his squires boil up a skin of thick brew, which he sipped to warm himself as he watched it all unfold.

In the valley below, by the lake, raged the storm of steel.

Roose always enjoyed the moonlight. He found that he was so often bored and dreary during the day, but at night everything seemed to come alive. It offered a rare clarity, a perspective, a solace that he found… comforting. He stood as still as statue, staring down through the darkness, before turning around to the pale faces surrounding him.

“Send a runner to Lord Ryswell,” Lord Bolton quietly ordered to his serjeant. “Begin the western charge.”

The mounted man nodded, and quickly turned and cantered off through the drifts. Roose only had eighteen men with him on the hills as a personal guard, all trusted Bolton men-at-arms. There had hardly been a point, to bring any more than that. Roose didn’t consider himself a wasteful man.
Besides, every last soldier was needed for the assault.

His guard were all mounted, but the frenzied snows were swiftly reducing horses, even the sturdier northern breeds, to barely a step above useless. *Our cavalry will be hindered in this weather,* Roose thought with mild annoyance. He was making a mental list of everything that could go wrong, and trying to think of how to compensate for it.

“I cannot see a flare!” one of his serjeants called, bellowing to be heard over the wind even half a dozen feet away. “Ser Aenys was supposed to light a flare!”

Lord Bolton didn’t reply, or react. *One of the more likely points of failure.* The signal flare could be all too easily missed in these inclement conditions, or, even more likely, it had simply failed to fly. Perhaps they hadn’t even tried, perhaps they’d been slain, perhaps they’d panicked at the key moment and failed in their task.

Either way, regardless, he had to proceed without the signal. There was no practical option, save to attack. This ambush had been far too long in the making. Every resource, every soldier, every sword – everything that could be wagered, had been wagered. There could be no retreat.

The armies had ridden out from Winterfell before the break of dusk, their force a touch over ten thousand strong. The Bolton army had been readied for a night-time march at breakneck speeds, as Lord Rodrik Ryswell led the centre, Ser Aenys Frey led the right, and Ser Walder Rivers led the van. Roose claimed to be commanding the reserves, but in truth, he delegated that duty to Arnolf Karstark while Roose moved out of the way just so he could watch from an isolated area.

If – despite all his efforts – the dragon was still active, then Roose really didn’t want his person to be anywhere near the bulk of his men.

Roose allowed himself a small smile as the initial charge proceeded perfectly. True to his word, the wildlings had no warning. The commander of the enemies’ outriders, Robett Glover, had quite helpfully ensured that all of their scouts would be blind to the Bolton’s approach.

He could barely make out the assault through the dark and snowy night, but he knew it would be starting. He had rehearsed it all in his head.

The wind was vicious, even through his black ringmail lined with wool. Unlike most of his past battles, his armour was unimposing. Roose had left his distinctive spotted pink cloak behind, and had selected the plainer boiled leather and ringmail of his house guard, rather than the suit of dark grey plate armour with rondels shaped like human heads, quilted with blood-red leather. Such extravagant, imposing armour had its uses to inspire fear and mark him on the battlefield, but it would have been nearly useless on a battlefield fought in the dark. Even despite the usefulness of pageantry, Roose preferred much a plainer, tasteful decorum.

Not that it really mattered. Roose himself had absolutely no intention of fighting tonight.

The riverlanders would lead the charge. The two thousand men from House Frey that had been stationed at Winterfell were eager for blood. After the destruction of the Twins, Ser Walder Rivers – the eldest bastard – had vowed revenge and gathered as many men he could rally from the ruin to ride north for Winterfell. Ser Walder Rivers had brought another one thousand-plus riverlanders – many Frey remnants, but also including Blackwood, Bracken, Mallister, Vance, and Ryger men – and Roose wanted those men at the very front of the ambush.

He stared out through the spyglass, and tried to judge what needed to be done. “The van is faltering,” Roose decided finally. “Send a runner with all haste – Ser Aenys must move south
urgently to support.”

In the dark, there was little else to do but stare at the squirming mass of shadows through the Myrish glass, willing himself to make sense of the flow of battle. In this storm, it was a coin’s flip of whether or not any orders he gave would actually get through. Roose allowed himself a small tut, before taking another sip of his brew.

The night passed by, the hours churning, all the while Roose watched from the hill.

He had hoped that the weather would turn, but the snows only seemed to be growing in intensity as the night went on. His men around him were getting nervous, warning him that snows threatened to overwhelm their hosts.

Roose himself could have laughed. *So much preparation, and the one thing that I couldn’t predict,* he thought with a bitter, soft smile. *The weather.*

A lesser general would have screamed or cursed, or howled at the gods. Roose considered such acts with disdain. Instead, Lord Bolton remained completely calm and focused, as he made preparations and tried to recover from the disadvantage.

From the few details he could make out, Roose eventually decided that Walder River’s charge must have failed. A pity. The bastard of the Twins had certainly been… passionate about taking vengeance. Roose had hoped that such passion could fuel the heaviest fighting.

*We had as much of an advantage as we could have ever had,* Roose reminded himself. He had taken the mark of his enemy, measuring their strength and weakness, and reacted accordingly. The attack on White Harbour would be well under way by now, if his ally had come through; and thus the enemy’s organisation would be broken on two fronts. They had the advantage of surprise, of superior discipline. Roose had spent months planning, preparing for this single night. Now, all that remained was to see it through, and find out whether or not it was enough.

It had always been a gamble. Roose knew from the beginning that they were going up against far superior numbers, but he had tried to play the odds as best he could.

He could see the writhing shadows in the dark; the armies were... shifting, but the mass of men was shifting towards the wrong direction. The wildlings were gaining ground, rather than losing it. Their camp wasn’t falling to pieces like Roose had been counting on. He had wanted to settle the battle by ambush – by meeting the enemy in pitched, confused slaughter, before their numbers could be rallied. To break their organisation before attrition could come into play. If it ever came to that, then the Bolton forces would lose their edge. Precisely the possibility he’d been trying to avoid, and yet, it had happened still.

The battle still looked like a massacre, but not the type Roose had been planning.

*It’s the snows,* he thought sourly. *The weather is hurting us just as much as it hurts them.* His ambush was stalling. What should have been a well-coordinated and prepared pincer charge was slowly degrading into an incoherent mess. The snowstorm had blunted the momentum of his ambush, given the enemy more time to organise.

Still, Roose couldn’t see a dragon flying overhead, so that gave him hope. There was most certainly no option to retreat, in any case. He gave the command to commit the reserves into the fight.

Afterwards, Roose stood back, watching and waiting.

Around him, amidst the blizzard, his men had been forced to slaughter two horses, to put the beasts
out of their panic. Their horses had been bred from a long, long line of Bolton horseflesh, with an eye for hardiness and reliability. No mere weather, save the deepest winter or thunderstorm, would scare them so. Still, there something was in the air, something that Roose liked little, and the horses liked still less.

Perhaps an hour later, and they received a frantic runner from Lord Ryswell. The courier was a seasoned northmen, but he was gasping, pale and shivering. In the frigid wind, Roose noted the stink of piss. “Giants, m’lord!” the man wheezed. “Giants have taken to the field!”

Ah, I had been musing over those inhuman figures, he thought, staring through his glass into the battle’s heart. Giants, indeed. The view was so dark, so obscured he hadn’t been certain on what the shadows were. All he could see was that where they went, the field parted before them. In a flash of morbid curiosity, Roose wondered how many of the giants there were, or if it would be possible to see them up close.

Roose had anticipated that they would likely have to fight a number of such beasts, and still irked him that he hadn’t managed to come up with a way of combating such monsters. There were limits to what spies could accomplish, and in the open field only mounted cavalry with lances of the longest stripe seemed like they would be effective, and only in overwhelming numbers at that. By all reports, the giants possessed a constitution, a natural resistance that shrugged off most weapons and arrows. Perhaps scorpions… but no, that never could have been a possibility, never in a battle of this kind.

His officers were squabbling, but Roose barely heard them. He was too busy thinking, deliberating. Ramsay is surely dead by now, Roose decided, and he surprised himself by feeling a twinge of sadness towards his bastard son.

All around him, the men were having difficulty controlling their horses. The beasts were nickering, neighing, even screaming where discipline fell lax. Even the horses were going mad, turning useless. Why? Roose wondered with narrowed eyes. These snows were extreme, but he had seen the stallions of the Bolton bloodlines endure past winters with little complaint. What is scaring them, so?

Regardless, fleeing men wouldn’t make it far in snows like these, not afoot. Roose paused, pondering over his options. The weather continued to turn for the worse, the snows becoming so heavy that they could swallow them. The night was pitch black, with winds howling over the hill that could bowl a man over.

The battle was breaking out of the camp, rumbling through the hills. By Roose’s reckoning, his ambush had been fairly successful, all things considered. He expected there would be mass casualties to testify to that.

Still, he thought with a sigh, it seems it simply comes down to pure numbers. The ‘northern coalition’ was large enough that they could suffer mass casualties, and still have enough men to match them in the storm.

He saw the shape of men break – the Bolton reserves were being crushed under the force of the giants, their once-disciplined formations degenerating into a crazed, vulnerable incoherence. The fighting was breaking out over the hills, but Roose expected it would be more a slaughter than a fight by now. A fight without discipline. Men cut down in the snow.

“We must retreat!” one of Roose’s serjeants was screaming at him. “Retreat! We must run!”

Lord Bolton paused, considering it. “Why?” he said finally. He still didn’t raise his voice, his tone
was as calm, as soft as ever. “We will not escape, not in this weather.”

In other circumstances, Roose would have agreed with the serjeant—now was indeed a good time
to run. But even northern horses would be trapped in these snows, if they were fit to ride at all, and
Roose had no interest in dying while blindly and futilely trying to sprint away in the dark.

There was no emotion. He had bled himself of emotion a long time ago.

They were coming closer. He saw immense figures—taller and broader than any man—tearing
through the collapsing ranks. He heard their roars, as loud as thunder. He saw wildlings storming
the hills with axes. It seemed that, as the weather turned worsened even further, the wildlings
retook more of a relative advantage. The blizzard hobbled the wildlings, but not so much as it did
his own men. The cavalry had been far less useful than anticipated.

Half of his guard had already broken ranks and scattered, but it didn’t seem like there was any
point in trying to recover them. Let them run. Roose could already see wildling raiders with axes
and spears, mercilessly hacking down fleeing figures in the snows.

No, he decided, I always knew that there would be no retreat here.

It was the risk he had decided to take, months before. To fight, rather than flee from this King-
Beyond-the-Wall. A gamble. And sometimes, the coin just doesn’t go your way. Roose could
accept that. The garrison he had left behind at Winterfell had been prepared for this eventuality, as
bitter as it was.

He had never enjoyed gambling.

In any case, he thought with a sigh, there is only one thing left for me to do. Roose drew his sword,
and then idly let it fall away from him. It sank into the snow.

He calmly knelt down into the drifts. He raised his hands above his head, gloved palms open,
unarmed, and waited until the savages came for him. There were half a dozen brutes in furs, the
blood rage shining in their eyes as they stomped through the darkness.

“I surrender,” Lord Bolton said meekly.

Theon Greyjoy, Heir of the Iron Islands, Turncloak, Kinslayer, Ghost, Prince of Winterfell,
Prince of Fools, Prince of Stink…

They were dragging her. He saw them yank her by the heels and drag her through the corridor,
even as the girl clawed and scratched, trying to find a grip against the stone floors. Reek watched it
happen, and he just froze like a scarecrow. Twitching. Like a useless, pathetic scarecrow.

“No! No!” she wailed. “No, don’t, I—I’m Arya Stark! I swear, I’m Arya Stark!”

She used to be pretty, Reek thought dumbly. She had dark mousy hair and sweet brown eyes. She
had been pretty, once. Not beautiful, but cute, full of life and giggles, and so very pretty. But being
trapped in this cursed place had left her body a wreck, her face a ruin—her eyes red with tears, her
jaw jarred and bruised and an ugly gash across her brow. Every time she screamed, he saw a mouth
of broken or missing teeth.

Ramsay’s doing, Reek knew. The Lord of Winterfell had spent only a short time with his wife, but
he had been sure to leave his mark. He had broken her jaw and pulled out her teeth when she tried
to bite him. And he forced Reek to watch.

Arya clawed so furiously that her fingernails snapped against the rough stone, leaving a bloody trail
from her hands, but the men didn’t care. It wasn’t Ramsay’s men dragging her now – it was Rorg
the Queer, Red Lucy, Halvert and Dirt Dalton. Big, ugly men – Roose’s men-at-arms. The four of
them had barged through the tower at the break of dawn and dragged the Lady of Winterfell away.
Reek was left quivering at the end of the corridor, staring with wild, fearful eyes.

They were dragging her towards him. Arya was screaming, convulsing. Rorg had his hand on his
sword… “Move out of the way, Reek,” Halvert spat.

Reek stared. He saw her bloodshot eyes staring at him, begging him…

Then, with a gulp, he stepped out of their way and he let them pass.

They were dragging her up to the West Tower – back to Arya’s own bedchambers. They had been
sheltering in the Great Keep when the men came for her. She was screeching, sobbing, wailing.
She pleaded for mercy, she begged to know why they were doing this. None of them replied. They
didn’t even look at her.

He stepped after them, and then flinched as the winds broke through the shuttered windows,
slamming and bashing the wood against the frame. Reek could hear the sounds of screaming, and
of arrows flying over the gates. Down below, he saw the ant-like figures of the remaining Boltons
scattering around the courtyard – they all would have fled, if there had been anywhere to run.

The savages were at the gates, and slamming against them as madly as the wind.

Winterfell was falling, and the world was falling with it.

He could see it all going mad. He could feel all semblance of order collapsing. The feeble Bolton
garrison was confused, helpless, being overwhelmed. It was morn, but there was no sunlight to be
seen through the grey thick clouds. The towers of Winterfell were trembling against the winds.

He heard the clattering of the bell, so loud and frantic it was like a drumbeat. Reek couldn’t tell if
there was actually anybody ringing it from the Bell Tower, or if the bell was just chiming madly
with the wind.

Reek stood on the upper floors of the Great Keep, watching the castle – the castle he once called
home, the castle he had conquered, the castle he had been imprisoned in – dissolve around him.
Technically, Lord Harwood Stout had been left as castellan of Winterfell in Lord Bolton’s absence,
but he was an old and tired one-armed man. Everyone knew that Lady Barbrey Dustin truly had
command. Reek had crept past her, earlier in the morn, shrieking commands, trying to order the
remaining scrapings of men-at-arms into something resembling a formation.

Lord Bolton had taken nearly every fighting man Winterfell had with him on his march. The castle
had been filled to bursting the day before, reinforced by the men of the lesser houses garrisoned in
the winter town. The army of Boltons, Freys, Ryswells, Dustins and a dozen other northern houses
left the castle before dusk the previous night, nearly ten thousand strong, and they hadn’t returned.
The garrison left behind was a skeleton crew, barely fit to maintain the castle; mostly women,
children, or the old and infirm.

“The gates!” a voice cried from below. “They’re at the gates!”

_The outer walls have already fallen_, Reek realised. Along with most of their army.
Lord Bolton had gambled everything on his night-time ambush. There had been no preparation, no men to spare, for a defence should the attack fail.

A boulder barreled through the sky, collapsing straight into the stables. How could they have siege weapons? Reek stared and stared at the immense shadows, and then he realised. Giants. Not siege weapons, giants. He was felt… numb, with fear. Uncomprehending. Giants. There were giants storming the gates.

They were throwing the stones, throwing them with an immense, inhuman strength. Even from here, so far away, Theon could feel the tremors in the air as huge forces collided against the outer gate again and again. Winterfell’s gates were ancient, carved of old growth oak fourteen inches thick, reinforced with iron bars and steel hinges, but even they were failing against their inhuman might.

And then a dozen giants slammed forth, pushing and heaving, roaring in effort, and the gates fell.

The ‘northern coalition’ that poured through the outer gate didn’t look like an army at all. It looked more savage than that, more like a horde. There were no ranks, no formation, there was nothing but maddened warbands. The wildlings had chased and cut down the retreating Bolton men, and then they kept storming all the way to Winterfell itself.

The booming figures of giants stood twice as tall any man, but they were not like men. They were far too broad at the hip, too thick at the leg. Like hills, hills carved of flesh and clad in furs. They were too hairy; like beasts, beasts out of legend, set loose against the Boltons.

The inner walls would fall shortly. Maybe Lady Dustin would try to hold up in the keep, but it was useless. Reek could feel it in the air, everybody knew it. Lord Bolton had lost. They were all going to die.

Is this how it ends? Reek thought numbly. The castle stormed and razed – again – and every man and woman put to the sword?

Reek could have laughed.

He could hear the wildlings below, howling savage war cries as they climbed the walls.

Reek stood there on the balcony, frozen, with the wind whipping through his white hair. His hair used to be dark, once, but then it had greyed and turned white after Ramsay reshaped him into Reek. The whispers said that Jon had white hair now, too. Any second now, the Bastard King, Jon Snow, might be bursting through the gates, riding upon dragon or wolf or whatever the rumours were saying. Jon was a wildling king, now, while Reek was… something else. Reek wondered briefly whether they would be able to recognise each other.

No, Reek thought, as he gulped. His thoughts felt blank. Theon Greyjoy is dead. That smirking, dark-haired youth was dead. Reek didn’t know what he was anymore, but he wasn’t Theon. He didn’t want to see Jon Snow again, he didn’t want Jon to see him.

I should just jump. He knew he should. His life was worthless, and all he needed to do was step off the tower and fly. Of all the ways he had been thinking about dying, a long fall and a hard landing didn’t seem so bad.

There was nothing left for him in this world. Asha was dead – the Boltons had routed her men while reclaiming Deepwood Motte, and then afterwards Ramsay had gifted Reek his sister’s tar-smeared head just to mock him. The Crow’s Eye had taken the Isles, and murdered his father. His
brothers were dead. They were all dead. Theon Greyjoy was a ghost now, a dead man.

A while back, Lord Bolton had even sent a raven to the Crow’s Eye, demanding ransom for Theon, and his nuncle had replied with his own raven, asking how much it would cost for the Boltons to keep Theon instead. His nuncle didn’t even care enough to ask for him back.

*One more small step,* he thought. *One small step, before the wildlings reach me, that’s all I need…*

He raised his foot, hovering…

He heard her screaming. She was screaming, wailing for help.

Reek paused. Her cries cut through the wind – Arya was shrieking for somebody, anybody, to save her.

There were tears down Reek’s cheeks and he didn’t know why. Didn’t know why he bothered. It didn’t matter, nothing mattered. Still, before he even realised that he made a decision, he had turned and was shambling down the corridor.

The tower. Arya Stark’s bedchambers. Her screams. He could hear the rabble of voices as he loped up the stone staircase. “Chains!” a gruff voice called. “Bring the bloody chains!”

“Hurry!”

“Where’s the oil? We need more–”

“Please don’t! Please, by the Mother’s mercy, you can’t–”

“Orders from the lord, m’lady. Don’t–”

Reek burst through the doors. These chambers… the same chambers where Ramsay had defiled her, where Ramsay had played all of his wicked games… the winds sheering through the windows sounded like Ramsay’s ghostly laugh.

Everything blurred, in the moment. He glimpsed Arya on the floor, with heavy manacles around her wrists, fastening her to the bedpost. Chains fastening her to the thick support of the four-poster bed, rattling against oak. The men were fetching lamp oil…

“No!” Reek screamed. “No, you can’t!”

Bodies moved to block him. He threw himself at the nearest man – Halvert. Reek was all skin and bones, and maimed flesh. There was no muscle on him, no strength in his arms. The Bolton man staggered backwards, but it was like assailed by a feeble, old man.

Still, Reek scratched and clawed with bloody nails, trying to push his way through.

“Bloody Reek!”

“What’s he doing her–”

“Get him off me!”

*Oomph.* Something solid and heavy collided with his jaw. Reek staggered, but he couldn’t feel pain. He lashed out with maimed hands, all the while screaming near-nonsensically. “NO!” Reek howled. “Don’t! Get away from her! Get away!”
Strong, gauntleted hands gripped his shoulders, yanking him backwards. A Bolton man slammed their fist into Reek’s chest.

He could see Arya’s wide eyes, staring at him with horror. “Get away!” Reek protested. “You can’t, just… don’t…”

Another blow rattled his skull, his world spinning. Reek couldn’t even… wasn’t strong enough…

Her marriage bed, that same bed where she had been… all of those soft hideous velvet pillows and sheets were soaked in oil. The soldiers were piling kindling from the fireplace at the doorway. Arya was shaking the chains, trying to pull herself free, and Reek tried to push forward. Her hand was outstretched, reaching for him, and Reek just tried to hold it…

He tried to grab her. He just wanted to hold on to her.

He saw Dirt Dalton ready a matchbox, holding the flint ready to strike over a candle.

The world was drumming as fast as his heart. Reek stared at Dirt Dalton, the man’s hands fumbling slightly with the flint. “Don’t…!” Reek begged. “You can’t.”

He did. The spark flashed.

The candle hissed into life. Dirt Dalton lit another two candlesticks, before passing them around and throwing the fire onto the bed and into the pile of kindling.

The fires were crackling, fizzing and sparking for more. Growing into life. The flames were hungry like rabid dogs, blazing even despite the cold wind shaking the tower.

Flames fluttered from both corners of the room, but they were already jumping to the drapes. Then the Myrish rug over the stone floors, and then the bed.

Arya was shrieking. She was shrieking. Reek was screaming too, but he couldn’t hear any words.

It took two men to drag Reek out of the chambers – hoisting his frail body upwards and dragging him away. He flailed and scratched and squirmed but it wasn’t enough.

The Bolton men were already stomping down the staircase, moving quickly as the fires crackled to life behind them.

The sight of Arya – slender, frail and broken Arya – thrashing against the bedpost haunted Reek’s eyes.

The hissing was turning into a roar. Smoke billowing out through the doorway. They soaked the floors and stairs in lamp oil. The entire West Tower could be consumed. The door was blazing, the flames spreading down the tapestries over the snows.

The Bolton men finally released Reek. They dropped him onto the stones, like discarding a hunk of rubbish, and a heavy boot kicked into his chest. Reek could only stare upwards from the floor, mouth agape, at the flames and smoke hissing above of him.

He heard laughter. They were laughing at him, laughing at his expression. He was Reek, the court jester, and they laughed at him.

“Remember, boys,” one of the men said behind Reek. “The wildlings did this. The wildlings killed Arya Stark.”
The fire was roaring now like an animal, hissing so madly. The only thing that Reek could hear was Ramsay’s laughter.

The tower was blazing, the heat so intense that it scorched his face even from the bottom of stairs. Burning ash snowed down the keep. They had left the Lady of Winterfell to her bed, Reek thought numbly. Death by fire.

“Grab that thing,” Halvert ordered, pointing to Reek in the same way he might point at horseshit. “We got our orders.”

Reek was a trembling wreck. He was pathetic, mutilated lame excuse of a man. No – less than a man, a thing. Reek, reek, it rhymes with weak…

She was the only one in this twice-cursed castle that had ever treated him as a human. The only decent human among them. She was a better person than Reek could ever be.

They left her to burn.

The Bolton men were stepped towards him, moving to grab him. Reek was left paralysed, looking upwards at the burning, howling tower. Ash and soot flickered down the stairwell, burning sparks fluttering down into Reek’s face like painful kisses.

The whole castle was mad.

And suddenly Reek was running. Running upwards, clattering over the stairs and into smoke.

He heard the bark of laughter behind him. “Oi! Where do you think you’re going?”

Reek didn’t care. He just kept on running.

A blazing tapestry crashed off the wall, showering sparks all over the stairwell. Fires fluttered upwards, but Reek kept on running. None of the Bolton men moved to follow him – they were just laughing at him. Laughing at his desperate attempt to die by running into a burning tower.

Smoke, so much smoke – he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t see. Everything was just black and hot, flames dancing over the stones. The walls were on fire, and the flames were spreading upwards to the ceiling. He couldn’t hear a thing; there was absolutely nothing but the howling crackle of the fires.

No, he realised suddenly. I hear her. He could hear screaming. She was screaming.

The tower shuddered and Reek almost toppled, but he clambered upwards and kept on running. He tried to push his head to the floor to escape the smoke – crawling – on his hands and knees.

The doorway. The doorway was on fire. Reek couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t think, but…

But she is screaming.

There was no decision. She was screaming, and he need to go through.

He braced himself, and barged through the blazing timbers with all the might his broken body still had.

Pain. So much pain. He felt the fire bite against flailed skin, burning tendrils whip his arms and chest, the sparks catching his rags and white hair. He was on fire – his shit-stained clothes were burning, the flames lashing his skin. His rags had been soiled with piss, shit and blood, and they
were burning.

Reek could have screamed, but he couldn’t even breathe.

There was soot everywhere, burning ash scorching his face. He squirmed and mewed, rolling over the floor like a mewling babe, trying to strip off his clothes. The fires had engulfed the entire chamber, howling all around him. Like one of the seven hells themselves had overflowed, to consume these horrible chambers.

It felt like the fire was scouring his flesh bare.

*This is the first time I’ve been free,* he thought suddenly. He didn’t know where the thought came from, but it jarred his mind. The first time he had ever been away from the Boltons’ control, out of those rags. The first true decision that Reek had ever made for himself.

It hurt, it hurt so, so much, but he kept on crawling through the fire.

He saw her. The air was so hot that it was flickering, but he could see her. Arya was still chained to the bedpost, flailing and trying desperately to swat the fires away from her. She was screaming, weeping, trembling – eyes bulging so madly they might pop.

The flames snapped around them, like a pack of dogs barking hungrily. The walls, the bed, the lady’s vanity, the closet full of fine dresses, and the furniture – it was all on fire.

“’It’s alright,” Reek heard himself saying. “’It’s alright, I’m here, I’m here…”

She reached for him desperately, hand engulfing his. Their hands were touching. It felt like the first true human contact Reek had felt in months, years. Nobody hitting him, just holding him.

Even despite his flesh screaming, he could *feel* her. He could feel her crying, could feel her against him. His heart was fluttering like he had never known, and then suddenly she was clinging onto him for dear life.

Frantically, he tried yanking her away, but then he felt metal jar. The chain on her other wrist rang. She was still bound to the burning bed. The mattress and sheets were on the floor, where she had tried to throw them away to shield herself.

Wide eyes wet with tears stared up at him. “Theon…” Arya gasped.

He was left naked, covered in ash, his scarred and tortured body pressed up against hers. “It’s alright,” he gasped. “I’m here.”

His head was foggy. Suffocating. Couldn’t breathe, smoke burning his lungs. The ceiling was shuddering. The fires burning away at the roof. He didn’t know which death would come first – he didn’t know if they whether they would burn, choke, or be crushed by the debris – but he knew it wouldn’t be long now.

They both turned to stare at Arya’s skinny, manacled wrist. Her skin was mutilated and blistered from where she had tried to drag herself out of it, but the Bolton men had clamped her so tight.

Hands groped at the steel links, as if he could tear it apart. He didn’t have even have enough fingers left for a proper grip. Even the metal burned, it must have been so painful for her. “I’ve got you,” Reek gasped. “I’ve got you.”

He could feel the burning bed creaking as they both tried to pull. Trying desperately to pull her
The steel was solid. The bed post was hard oak; solid and thick, it would not snap. The wood was charring, but old wood like that burnt slowly. Her body would burn before the oak did.

Every heartbeat was pure, frantic panic.

What about her arm? Reek gripped her arm, squeezing. There was no time to be gentle. The metal was too strong, the oak was too thick, but what about flesh and bone? He needed to snap the bone, or cut off the hand.

The bed was already on fire, the flames creeping closer even despite her desperate attempts to push the mattress and sheets away. I need a blade, Reek thought desperately. I need a sword, or a knife – maybe even just a poker.

There was nothing but fire. Nothing but hell.

They dragged the four-poster bed away from the walls as far as it would go, trying to hide under it as they pulled. They threw whatever they could to form a barrier against the flames. There was too much smoke, too much hot ash blazing against his face. He needed a tool, just something to give him a bit more strength.

There’s nothing sharp, he realised. They hadn’t allowed sharp objects into Arya Stark’s room, not since she had been found bloody, with a sewing needle on the floor. There were still bloody scars across her wrists, where the maester had ministered to her. He grasped her arm, braced it against the bedpost.

Could I lever it? Break the bone, drag it through? Maybe just pull it enough to snap…

She was shrieking, wailing in agony. It was her arm. Reek could have screamed, with both pain and frustration.

I need to do this, he thought desperately, pushing his weight into it. I need to… I can do this… I have to…

… I just have to be the hero…

The tower rumbled, the first supports already quivering. He looked down into her eyes, and he realised that he couldn’t. He looked at her, and he just knew.

The chains were tight. She was trapped. Their skin, their flesh, was their prison.

I can’t do it.

The flames crackled and laughed, mocking him.

“Run,” Arya gasped, tears running down her eyes. “Just run. You can still get out… go!”

Time seemed to freeze. She was on the floor, frail and innocent, bloody and maimed, the flames and ash spitting at her. She needs me, he thought. I can’t save her, but she needs me.

“No,” Reek shook his head. “I don’t want to.”

“You have to–”

“I’m not leaving you.” He knelt down by her, pressing up close.
“Please,” she wept. “Please, Theon, just ru–”

He wrapped his arms around her tightly, hugging her as tightly as he could. “My name is Reek, my lady,” he croaked as he wept. “Reek.” It rhymes with shriek.

Fire was a horrible death. It was slow, gruesome and agonising, and he would feel every moment of it. Reek had seen it before. He had seen men watching their own skin slough from their flesh, melting and dribbling like tallow, screaming and shrieking, right up until their eyes popped. Burning was like being maimed, being eaten alive by the flames. He could hardly imagine a worse way to die.

“W-w-why?” Arya stuttered.

Reek gulped. “I won’t allow let you go through it alone.”

I hadn’t been able to help her before, but he couldn’t… I need to…

There was a heartbeat of stunned silence, and then Arya hugged him back. They both cradled each, dropping to the floor in the middle of the blazing room. The ceiling was alight like a sky of burning red – spewing ash over them.

“Jeyne,” he heard Arya whisper in his ear, through desperate sobs. “My name’s Jeyne, I…”

“Jeyne,” Reek repeated. “Jeyne.”

Reek held her so tight, like he could smother her with his body and take the flames for her. His body was being scorched, but he could hardly feel it. He was on top of her, trying to shield her from the ash.

Outside, he heard the storm howl against the fire’s roar.

This was never how I wanted it. Any of it. I just wanted a family, I wanted to prove myself. I wanted to belong. He had never wanted the tarred corpses of children, or dead and bloated drowned men, or the charnel-prisons of flayed skin and blood.

He never wanted to disappoint his fathers – neither of them, Ned Stark, Balon Greyjoy – or his brothers – Robb, Rodrik, Maron, Bran and Rickon. He had wanted the north and the Iron Islands. He had wanted to be a man. They had warned him, they had given him a chance. He could have been a good man, but he…

I deserve it. I deserve Reek.

Still, then he looked down at Jeyne’s wide, beautiful eyes and, well, maybe there were worse ways to die.

They held each so close, like lovers embracing, pushed against the smoking stone. They were both crying, and Reek could taste the salt of her tears on his scorched lips.

Reek could have laughed. It was romantic, even; the Prince of Winterfell and the Lady Stark, holding each close as their castle burned.

No, not romantic. There was nothing romantic about it. Still, it was all Reek had to hold on to.

She wasn’t shaking any more, she wasn’t screaming. She was still weeping into his shoulders, but they weren’t fighting it. He didn’t want to die fighting. He wanted to find whatever peace a
creature like him deserved.

“I… I don’t…” Jeyne wept, before she gulped. “The mother used to say that the Seven were kind. Gentle. That all our sins are washed away, they’d welcome you into their light.”

Reek only nodded, barely able to hear her panicked mutter into his ear. The flames licked at his toes, and Reek tried to curl up as small as possible. The red priests said that death by fire was a clean death. A pure death. He wasn’t sure where that thought came from.

The Drowned God had renounced him. It seemed urgent – he needed to find another deity quickly. The Drowned God was cruel, the Red God was harsh, and the Old Gods were silent and distant. Reek just wanted something better, something kinder. “The Mother’s mercy,” Reek croaked. “The Father’s judgement.”

“I tried to be good. I tried. The Father will judge me as good, won’t He?” she murmured desperately.

“He will,” Reek gasped. The fires were crawling closer, so hot even the stones burnt. “You are.”

“The…” Jeyne yelped in pain as ash fell from the ceiling, before she gasped, “The sisters said that fair maidens and heroes hear singing when they die.” Her frail voice nearly shattered. “… I loved singing.”

Reek’s vision blurred in blackness. His head felt delirious with agony and fear, but trying to think of a song. There was nowhere to hide, the flames were coming for them – they were burning up through the floor now. A song, Reek thought, she deserves a song.

In the moment, there was only one tune he could think, the only one that scorched and dry lips could gasp out. “… The-the Dornishman’s wife,” Reek gasped, shivering, “was as fair as the sun, and her kisses… her kisses were warmer than spring…”

Jeyne didn’t react, she only shuddered into his shoulder. Reek took a deep breath of smoke, and wheezed out, “… But the Dornishman’s blade…” A coughing fit broke his words, spluttering them out. “Dornishman’s blade… was made of black steel… and its kiss was a terrible thing.”

“The Dornishman’s wife would sing as she bathed.” Crash. The ceiling collapsed, dust and ash hissing everywhere. “… In a voice smooth and soft as a peach. But the Dornishman’s blade had a…!” The groan of timber supports beneath them, the tower wobbling… “… had a song of its own, and a bite as cold and as sharp as a leech!”

Reek didn’t even know why he was singing, why he was so desperate to force out the words out of his throat. The song was an absolutely horrible, horrible one – such an inappropriate song for the circumstances. It felt jarring, incoherent, but now, now Reek could think of nothing else to sing.

It was supposed to be a merry, bawdy chanty thing, to be sung in taverns among friends. It was supposed to celebrate life, it wasn’t meant for… for…

“But as he lay on the ground, darkness around, the taste of blood on his tongue… his brothers knelt by him and prayed him prayer…!” Reek felt the flames roll their barbed tongues over the scarred skin on his back. Like being whipped by invisible tendrils. Reek bit back a scream, strangling out the words. “… and he smiled and he laughed and he sung!”

“Brothers, oh brothers, my days here are done,” Reek choked, as Jeyne wept into his shoulder. “The Dornishman’s taken my life…”
Jeyne’s arm was clenching around him, so tight it was choking. “But what does it matter…” The fires inching closer, the pain. The pain! “But what does it matter, for all men must die…!”

They couldn’t scurry away any further. There is nowhere to hide, there never was. Reek squeezed her hand, even as he shuddered and coughed and cried, and even as the white agony began to eat – for a moment, for a single moment – he remembered what it was, to be home.

Gods, gods, gods. The fire... It was all around him, in the floor, in the walls, in the air... The fire was like a huge monster, a giant slobbering yellow monster as it opened its maw, licking at his skin and beginning to eat. “… and I’ve… and I’ve tasted… tasted th… the… ahh! Oh gods, no, no… Theon! AHH! THEON—”

The flames swallowed them.

---

The Battle of Winterfell, “The Battle of the Snows”

Date: 301 AC

Place: Lake on the fields outside Winterfell, the north

Combatants:

The northern coalition:

- Free folk
- Assorted wildling clans and warbands.
- House Manderly,
  - House Woolfield,
  - House Whitehill,
  - House Poole,
  - House Waterman,
- House Locke,
- House Flint,
- House Umber,
  - House Mollen,
  - House Moss,
  - House Lake,
- House Mormont,
- House Glover,
  - House Bole,
  - House Woods,
- House Forrester,
- House Karstark (nominally).
- Northern mountain clans:
  - House Burley,
  - House Flint,
  - House Harclay,
  - House Liddle,
  - House Norrey,
  - House Wull.
**House Bolton**

The north, led by House Bolton:

- House Cerwyn,
- House Dustin,
- House Hornwood,
- House Karstark,
- House Ryswell,
- House Slate,
- House Stout
- House Condon,
- House Tallhart.

The riverlands:

- House Frey,
- Factions of Houses Bracken, Blackwood, Vance, and Ryger.

**Strength:**

The northern coalition:

- 12,000 wildlings,
  - Including 500 giants, fewer mammoths,
- 6000 northmen,
- Sonagon.

House Bolton:

- 8,000 northmen,
- 2000 Freys under Ser Aenys Frey,
- 1,500 rivermen, largely Freys, rallied by Ser Walder Rivers.

**Commanders:**

- King Jon Snow,
- Tormund Giantsbane,
- The Weeper,
- Val of Whitetree,
- The Lord of Bones,
- Ser Wylis Manderly,
- Jeremy Locke (betrayer),
- Lord Greatjon Umber,
- Alysane Mormont,
- Robett Glover (betrayer),
- Old Torghen Flint,
- Hugo Wull,
- Morgan Liddle,
- Brandon Norrey (betrayer).
LORD ROOSE BOLTON,
SER AENYS FREY,
SER WALTER RIVERS,
LORD RODRIK RYSWELL,
LORD RAMSAY SNOW.

Prelude:

The northern coalition declares an alliance with the free folk and declares rebellion against House Bolton. The coalition begins a campaign to rescue Lady Arya Stark and take Winterfell in the name of the Starks. King Jon Snow leads hosts from White Harbour and Castle Black, in a slow westerly conquest of Bolton and Bolton-allied lands. The coalition slowly approaches from the Dreadfort in the west, to allow them time to rally to more houses to their cause, to combine with forces from Glover, Mormont, Umber and northern mountain clans, and to integrate the free folk hosts with allied northmen. King Jon Snow’s ice dragon makes the coalition's armies seemingly unstoppable.

This, however, grants House Bolton plenty of time to prepare. Roose Bolton consolidates his power in Winterfell, and the northern coalition’s eager search for allies allows Bolton the opportunity to slip his own sympathizers into enemy ranks. House Bolton successfully manages to separate and harry many of their enemy forces, gradually weakening them during their march. The Battle of the Weeping Water highlights several weaknesses in the northern coalition’s armies and within their command.

Ramsay Bolton breaks away and disappears with his own force of men, loyal to him alone, to seek an advantage against Jon Snow and his dragon.

After the destruction of the Twins, reinforcements rallied in the riverlands, led by Ser Walder Rivers and the remnants of House Frey, ride north to assist House Bolton.

Battle:

The northern coalition prepares for siege against Winterfell, encamped on the plains a half-day’s march away from the castle. The winter snowstorms threaten the march, and the army is plagued by command-level personality conflicts and conflicting secondary objectives, leading to a state of uneasy tension and potential conflicts within the host of the allied coalition.

News arrives of a naval assault against White Harbour. The command is torn, uncertain about their course of action. Debate is derailed by the spread of false information by Bolton sympathisers within the allied host.

Miscommunication, false information and false orders are spread throughout the camp at night, exploiting the simmering instability within the northern coalition's forces. The Bolton forces emerge from Winterfell under cover of darkness and march quickly against the encamped host.

Robett Glover, in command of the scouts and outriders, deliberately neglects his duties. The camp is given no warning of the ambush.

False allies turn their blades within the camp, burning tents and inciting mobs. The mammoths stampede, and assassins strike. In the chaos, nobody can tell which party is responsible.

Unbeknownst, Ramsay Bolton (masquerading as the Dragonguard steward ‘Harlow’) effectively poisons Sonagon’s meals over the course of months. Ramsay’s loyal men, the Bastard’s Boys, are smuggled into the northern coalition’s numbers. Ramsay Snow poisons the Dragonguard at their
posts, and spreads false information and then ambushes a wounded Jon Snow as he attempts to rally Sonagon.

The chain of command is left uncertain by King Jon Snow’s disappearance. Traitors have crept inside the command’s ranks, all the while the first wave of the Bolton ambush collides with perimeter forces. Amidst attack, tensions between northmen and free folk boil over. The Weeper – believing that Ser Wylis Manderly and his men are among the betrayers – kills the heir to White Harbour and all his knights.

Cavalry led by Ser Walder Rivers pierces the coalition's bulwark, while Roose Bolton leads from the rear. Superior discipline from the Bolton men against the camp’s disorganised state proves devastating.

The coalition's perimeter fighting lines break, all the while the high command struggles to determine leadership. The command’s indecisiveness is fostered and exploited by traitors within the ranks, until Lady Val of Whitetree proves vital in establishing a command, subsequently rallying the allied forces to counterattack. The joint efforts of Tormund Giantsbane and Lord Greatjon Umber succeed in holding the line, while Val re-musters their men.

The storm continues to grow. The snows begin to work against Lord Bolton, routing his cavalry and hindering his infantry, and spoiling his plan for a coordinated attack. The Bolton ambush flounders in the poor visibility and broken communication lines.

The arrival of the giants starts to turn the battle. The Weeper manages to break Ser Walder River’s cavalry charge.

Jon Snow and Ramsay Bolton fight on the ice amidst heavy snows, but Jon is bleeding, injured and outnumbered, and loses his connection to the near and desperately ill dragon. Ramsay captures him, and attempts to hold him hostage. After turning the tide of the battle, Val of Whitetree musters a score of raiders and turns to rescue Jon. The Bastard’s Boys are routed, Ramsay defeats Val, but Val kills Ramsay as she falls.

The Bolton ambush fails, and their men forced to fall back. Despite severe losses, and the efforts by Bolton sympathisers to spread confusion in the ranks, the northern coalition wins by pure numbers. Wildlings lead the front ranks, breaking the Bolton men in the snows.

Once his defeat becomes clear, Warden of the North and Lord Paramount Roose Bolton surrenders non-violently.

The wildling forces under The Weeper, Tormund Giantsbane, and the Lord of Bones hound the fleeing Bolton forces through the snows, chasing them down. Winterfell is left undermanned, and the castle falls easily to wildling warbands in the morning of the following day.

The fighting begins after the hour of ghosts, lasts all night, and continues until noon the next day. The storm does not subside. Extreme casualties on both sides.

In the fall of Winterfell, Arya Stark is murdered. Her tower is set alight. Other highborn hostages, including Lady Jonelle Cerwyn, Lady Berena Talhart and Lady Walda Bolton, are massacred and mutilated. The deed is blamed on blood-lusted wildling warbands.

Casualties:

- ~7,000 of House Bolton and allies.
- ~13,000 of the northern coalition.
• Lady Arya Stark.

Result:

• Pyrrhic victory for the northern coalition.
• Jon Snow takes Winterfell, regardless.
• Ice dragon is left sickly, state unknown.
• Several highborn hostages are murdered. Nobody who was capable of testifying that Arya Stark was an imposter survives the battle, with the exception of Lord Bolton. Lord Bolton does not testify, and her identity remains undiscovered.
• Extreme tensions within the northern coalition.

The Attack on White Harbour

Date: 301 AC

Place: White Harbour, the Bite

Combatants:

House Manderly:

The Defence at White Harbour:

• 26 Manderly war galleys,
  • 19 participating in the blockade, another 7 tied up in port during their rest-shift.
• 6 requisitioned merchant vessels, including the Merry Midwife,
• Garrison of ~500 men-at-arms,
• ~1,000 militia and volunteers.

The free folk:

• Between 3,000~6,000 spearwives, old men, and young boys; the families of raiders, and refugees from the Wall.

Mercenary Fleet:

• 10 dromonds, formerly part of the royal fleet,
• 17 war-galleys, formerly part of the Redwyne fleet,
• 21 assorted sellsail vessels,
• ~6,000 mercenaries, sellswords and pirates.

Commanders:

• Lord Wyman Manderly,
• Ser Mardrick Manderly,
• Ser Garth Woolfield,
• Robin Flint,
• Ser Bartimus,
• Ser Jorah Mormont,
• Mother Mole.
Aurane Waters, the Lord of Waters,
Ser Lothor Brune,
Oswell Kettleblack,
Salladhor Saan (betrayer).

Prelude:

After the Scouring of The Twins, the Lord Paramount of the Trident, Lord of Harrenhal, and Lord Protector of Eyrie and the Vale of Arryn, Petryr Baelish, offered support and coin towards Lord Paramount Roose Bolton’s efforts against the King-Beyond-the-Wall Jon Snow. Lord Baelish’s coin helps House Bolton to remain strong, to maintain their levies, and to ensure that their bannerman loyalty despite the northern coalition’s conquest of Bolton territory.

Lord Bolton planned a simultaneous assault on both the northern coalition forces in the field, and their primary seat of power, White Harbour. Lord Baelish sponsors the White Harbour attack.

The naval raid was part of a coordinated attack intended to pursue several objectives at the same time; the recapture of Sansa Stark, the destruction of the northern coalition's seat of power, the capture of hightborn captives, the distraction the ice dragon away from the primary battle should efforts to kill or disable the dragon fail, and to more broadly defeat the northern coalition and its allies on two separate synchronous fronts.

Lord Baelish, partly motivated by strong suspicions that House Manderly was behind the disappearance of Sansa Stark and Ser Jorah Mormont, financed the assault from the background. Lord Baelish also heavily funded efforts to sabotage the dragon, as it was an obstacle against Lord Baelish’s own ambitions towards the north.

Aurane Waters, former Master of Ships to the Iron Throne, now pirate lord of the Stepstones and self-styled Lord of the Waters, leads the assault against White Harbour, commanding dromonds and galleys stolen from the royal fleet and the Redwyne fleet. Mercenaries, sellswords and oarsmen staffing the ships were recruited from the Stepstones, Tyrosh, Myr, Lys, and Braavos. Ser Lothor Brune and Oswell Kettleblack commands the mercenary fleet’s ground forces on Lord Baelish’s behalf during the assault.

A large number of free folk refugees were being housed in the city, led by the Mother Mole, the leader of the Cult of the White Dragon. Some several thousand free folk, primarily the families of raiders and clansmen, arrived from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea to White Harbour over the course of several months.

Salladhor Saan, on assignment for King-Beyond-the-Wall Jon Snow, joins up with the mercenary fleet as it was recruiting in Braavos. Upon hearing of the attack on White Harbour, Saan joined the pirate lord’s fleet, pledging apparent loyalty.

Lord Godric Borrell of Sweetsister was offered an alliance with the north by Sansa Stark. Lord Borrell provided early warning of the attack to Oldcastle as the mercenary fleet passed the Bite.

Battle:

Warning from Sweetsister sent by Lord Godric Borrell provides some time to build a defence. Timing coincides with Sansa Stark’s arrival in White Harbour, and her companion Ser Jorah Mormont joins to lead the defenders at the harbour.
The mercenaries attack with overwhelming force, and their fleet makes short work of the freshly commissioned navy of White Harbour.

Sellswords and sellsails overwhelm the outer harbour’s garrison. The Merchant’s Quay and the Fisher’s Port are swiftly lost, and the Manderly men retreat to the inner harbour. Meanwhile, the cityfolk run to the Wolf’s Den and the New Castle for shelter. The sellswords push up through Fishfoot Square and to the gates of the Castle Stair, burning and razing the city as they go.

Manderly soldiers at New Castle manage to hold, but the city itself is left defenceless. The White Harbour defenders can only hold out at a few locations, while the rest of the city burns. The sellswords are given free rein to loot and pillage and raze as much destruction as possible.

The defence at the inner harbour collapses, but the sellswords fail to break through to the Wolf’s Den. The sudden disappearance of their commander, Ser Lothor Brune, causes the attack to stall.

The sellswords attempt to take prisoners of the smallfolk, and capture refugees taking shelter at the Old Mint and Sept of Snows. The mercenaries try to force their captives back to the ships, but they encounter unexpected resistance from the free folk refugees in the city. Riots are triggered in the streets.

As the sellswords pierce further through the city, the fighting dissolves into mass pillaging and looting. The leader of the free folk refugees, Mother Mole, raises the wildlings into a frenzy. The mobs force the attackers to fall back.

Meanwhile, Salladhor Saan, captaining a single ship among the mercenary fleet, waits until Aurane Waters is fully invested into the battle on the docks, before changing his banners to support King Jon Snow, and proceeds to ambush the other vessels from behind. Several dromonds are captured as such, devastating the mercenaries. In the confusion, several other vessels botch their retreats, and are seized by the mobs on the harbour.

The sellswords are pushed out of the city, and Aurane Waters is forced to retreat on his flagship, the former Lord Tywin, with half his force and twenty-four ships, remaining.

The battle lasts from early morning until dusk. Even after the fleet’s retreat, large groups of sellswords are left abandoned in the city, and the riots continue to rage. It takes two days for the Manderly garrison and reinforcements from the surrounding area to restore order.

Result:

- House Manderly victory, although with very heavy damage to the city itself.
- All twenty-six Manderly galleys in the harbour are destroyed or damaged, along with all six requisitioned merchant vessels, but twelve enemy hulls are captured, including the former Sweet Cersei, a flagship-class, four-hundred-oar dromond, and the Lioness and the Queen Margaery, eighty and one-hundred-and-twenty-oar class dromonds respectively.
- Large number of casualties among the free folk.
- Sansa Stark remains uncaptured.

Aftermath:

The attack leaves White Harbour and its docks heavily damaged, with the breakout of fires along the inner harbour and core merchant districts. Riots are triggered between free folk refugees and White Harbour civilians.

As the mercenary fleet flees through Bite, Lord Godric Borrell smothered of the Night Lamp at
Sweetsister. Shipwreckers and lampers associated with House Borrell carry dummy flares along the beaches. At the lord’s orders, the lights of Sisterton are dowsed.

The fleeing mercenary fleet under Aurane Waters lose their bearings in the night, and significant elements of the fleet are foundered against the rocks of the Three Sisters. Less than a quarter of the assembled fleet makes it out of the Bite.

A large investment by Petyr Baelish is spoiled.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes:

Well, I try to avoid doing this, but there's been enough comments to justify a blanket response, I think.

Winterfell was never going to fall easily. The Boltons were always going to find a way to fight back, and it wasn't even just the Boltons this time. You had Roose Bolton, Petyr Baelish, and the conclave of maesters - some of the best players of the game in all of Westeros - all coming together to decide that Jon Snow and his dragon needs to die.

Regardless of Jon's leadership ability, political acumen, his age - that type of opposition is not something you can brush past. That's the type of resources and sabotage that would hurt absolutely anybody.

Littlefinger has ambitions on the north of his own, and Jon was ruining them. The best outcome for Littlefinger was if the Boltons and Jon would both kill each other, leaving the north vulnerable for Littlefinger to swoop in. Littlefinger thought that Jon was going to win too easily, however, and so suddenly there's a lot of Littlefinger's support going to back the Boltons to even the odds.

The maesters are regarded as completely independent, but there have been more than a few times when they have pulled the strings behind the scenes. One of the big reasons that Roose was able to recruit so many traitors was because every northern house had a maester in it, who was subtly leaning against Jon. After all, maesters serve the realm, while Jon is the leader of wildlings. The maesters are the closest thing to dragon-killers that Westeros knows - they don't like dragons, they are responsible for the Targaryen dragons dying. The maesters have manipulated wars and poisoned dragons before, and they fully capable of doing it again (see the maester conspiracy).

And then there's Roose Bolton, professional backstabber with a few decades more experience than Jon. Roose was always, always, going to find some vulnerability, any vulnerability, and then stab a dagger into it.

It's like chess; imagine a competent-but-still-beginner player going up against a grandmaster. If the younger player starts with enough of a material advantage, then the grandmaster is not guaranteed to win. However, it is absolutely certain that the grandmaster will still find a way to make the other guy bleed for it.

As for Ramsay, well, he got involved because Roose needed somebody who: a) has
experience with poisons (which Ramsay does - see Domeric); b) is a good liar (which Ramsay is - see Theon); c) has investment enough to be dependable for a high-stakes task (which Ramsay does, actually) and d) is a very, very good murderer (which Ramsay very much is). Ramsay fits the qualifications of someone who could do very well in those circumstances.

Just because you don't like the character, don't pretend that he is totally incompetent. In the books, Roose tolerated Ramsay, not because of any emotion, but because Ramsay was very good at killing all of House Bolton's enemies. In the books, Ramsay has captured three of the strongest castles in the realm (Hornwood, Winterfell, Moat Cailin) and defeated much larger forces to do so. Ramsay has cunning enough to assemble and lead his Bastard's Boys, and singlehandedly go from being a disregarded bastard to the Lord of Winterfell. That is not incompetent; Ramsay is exactly the sort of person that Roose would exploit for a task like infiltrating an army. After all, there's nothing for Roose to lose if it fails, but everything to gain.

In the books, Ramsay has been well-established as a major foil for Jon and I can all but guarantee that book-Jon will have a lot of trouble with Ramsay too. Just because the show did a lot of things wrong, doesn't mean that you should cross it all out just because of 'twenty good men'. Don't conflate them.

And, while I'm at it, in the books Ramsay's weapon of choice was a falchion. He only ever used a bow in the show. Ramsay was described as being very strong and ferocious with a blade, although with little skill and proper form. More like an animal with a sword. There have been over a dozen reviews so far saying "you powered up Ramsay by making him a swordsman - he should be a bowman!" which is just, no, not true.

This is very much the books, not the show.

Again, thanks to Diablo Snowblind for his beta/editing work, check out his Gundam: Iron Blooded Orphans story.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Returning home, but bitter victories filled with suspicion...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The King in the North

Even after the battle, it wasn't over. In a fairer world there would have been a moment to rest, a moment to think. But the chance never came; the challenges kept coming, there was never a moment to breathe, and that just made everything more tiring. Like Jon had to force himself to keep on going, to pick up the pieces even after it all collapsed, trying to stop everything from shattering.

The storms faded, but they never quite broke. The snows never stopped. The winds were still buffeting the towers, the snow blanketing the land. The world outside Winterfell's walls became smothered in white and cold. The clouds above were grey, and dark.

Lady Barbrey Dustin and the last of the Bolton garrison had managed to hold out for the better part of a week by barricading themselves in the crypts, and it took Jon most of that time just to find his feet again.

There were a hundred schisms in the wake of the battle. A hundred crises that he couldn't handle, a hundred emergencies that just overwhelmed him. Reports were coming in daily of skirmishes as far south as Cerwyn, as warbands of the free folk pursued the surviving Boltons. Jon was left frail and injured, left behind, trying to sort it all out.

The first time that Jon finally laid eyes upon Roose Bolton, the Lord of the Dreadfort was behind bars, in bloody rags. Rattleshirt hadn't been gentle when they captured him; Lord Bolton hadn't resisted, but the wildlings had still stripped him of his armour, beat him with the butts of their spears, and frogmarched him through the cold into Winterfell's prisons. Then they had beat him again before putting him in chains.

And yet, despite it all, Roose Bolton didn't twitch. The man's face was bloody, his left eye sealed shut with swollen bruises, chains on his wrists and ankles, but he was still, straight-backed, and composed in a corner of the stone cell. Most injured people couldn't help but tremble – it was a reflex, and yet not for Roose. He didn't even twitch. That sort of eerie, inhuman calm made the whole room uneasy.

Roose Bolton was behind bars, beaten and in chains, and yet it was like Jon still felt the weight of his wounds more than Roose.

There was a long moment of silence as they both stared at each other. It was the first time they had ever seen each other, the first time that Jon had laid his own eyes on the man who'd brought him to the edge of ruin. Jon was still staggering with every movement, bloody bandages still wrapped around his torso under his furs. The snows, his injuries, the battle and the fallout had left Jon's face pale and sickly, while Roose's was bloated and red.
They looked at each other, unnerving pale blue eyes against barely restrained grey.

"Is this the interrogation?" Roose asked finally, his voice a croak. His calm eyes took in each of them in turn. "I suppose it is time."

Jon felt his hands curl into fists. That voice, that calm, calm voice... So much anger, pounding through his body, he could barely breathe. He needed to say something, but that rage...

"This one is still too smug by half," Rattleshirt growled, bones clinking as he walked up next to Jon. The Lord of Bones had a bloody brow, and a bone dagger in his hand. "Let me spend some time with him first. I'll make him talk."

"Excuse me? 'Make me talk'?" Roose said, managing to sound mildly amused. "I'm curious, how exactly are you going to do that?"

Rattleshirt growled, and would have lunged at Roose, if not for Tormund holding him back. "You want to fucking bloody see--!

"Enough of this," Tormund ordered, glaring at Rattleshirt. "This fucking leech," he spat at Lord Bolton's face. He didn't even twitch. "loses his bloody head, that much is certain. Don't let him provoke you any more than that."

Rattleshirt scowled angrily, but Jon's gaze flickered behind him. Lord Greatjon Umber stood by the doorway, with pure, silent hate. The Greatjon's silence felt more dangerous, more murderous, than when he was roaring bloody fury.

"Why, Roose?" Lord Umber said, slowly. His eyes were on the prisoner, narrowed and dark, all his hatred focused on the man behind bars. "For all this time... for all those months I rotted in the Twins, locked in the same cell as my own son's headless corpse, I wanted to ask that one question."

He took a brittle breath. "Why did you betray us, why did you kill Robb Stark?"

Roose's bloody lips twisted, like he could have smiled. "I never expected to see you again, Jon. Not with my own eyes. You look... well."

"Answer." The Greatjon's voice was lower than a growl.

Roose shrugged, his pale blue eyes still and calm. "The boy was a weak fool, he and his Tully mother and his Westerling whore. He led us all to the brink of ruin, in wars and lands that didn't concern us. Ironborn in Winterfell, ironborn in Moat Cailin, wildlings at the wall, winter howling from the north, crops rotting in the fields for lack of men to the harvest, and he had us marching on Lannisters. He ignored my advice, and he played the part of a foolish boy to the last. Tywin Lannister simply made me an attractive offer." He tilted his head. "I saw a chance and I took it. I am a pragmatist."

"I... proclaimed him my king..." The Greatjon's hands trembled, his eyes bulged. His breath was faint, almost strangled. "Three times, Roose. Three times... the Boltons have risen against Winterfell. There will never be a fourth. You will be the last."

"So it would seem." Roose Bolton said, his voice a croak, but his posture uncaring. He didn't even flinch.

Jon ignored it all. He couldn't talk. He couldn't think. He didn't trust himself to open his mouth. He could only stare, his hands trembling.

Rattleshirt stepped forward, bones clattering. He had jagged bone blade in his hands, holding it like
a saw. "I see no point in drawing it out," Rattleshirt growled. "Do you want to do the honours, or should I?"

"He has crimes he needs to answer for," the Greatjon muttered. It was weird to hear the Greatjon speaking so quietly, so low. "Confessions that he must give."

"Aye, I get that," Tormund agreed, as Rattleshirt spat. "And he can he either give his answers and lose his head swiftly, or maybe he'll decide to be stubborn and lose his arms and legs first."

Rattleshirt grinned evilly, like nothing would please him more. "Not the arms and legs," the Lord of Bones snarled. "I'd start with the fingers and toes first, and I'd shred him inch by inch. Let him see his body being cut down slowly, as I make a necklace from his bones. I'll cook his own meat and make him eat it. He will do whatever I want him to, I promise it."

Roose raised an eyebrow. His eyes were on Jon, unblinking. He didn't even look at Rattleshirt. "And then will you cut off my cock and force me to swallow it? I'm guessing needles in my eye as well. You'd probably pull out my teeth – brutes like you tend to think that's the height of torture. Do you think that more pain equals more compliance?" Roose croaked, that half-smile still playing over his lips, like this was all just a little joke. Rattleshirt didn't reply. "Low cunning. No imagination. I have been on the other side of the knife more times than you have. There is nothing you can do to me that I haven't done myself. I have seen torture, and all the ways to resist it. I have made songs of the screams of better men than you."

His pale blue eyes were still boring into Jon. "Defeat is a state of mind more than a circumstance, boy. You can never be beaten if you do not let yourself lose." He turned to glance at Rattleshirt. "So go ahead, wildling; work your trade if you wish. The worst comes to it, I think I will just bite off my tongue or choke myself until I die."

Nobody replied. If looks could kill, Roose would have been burnt alive. "But my confession isn't the point, is it?" Lord Bolton mused. "You don't really care about what confessions I have to give, they are irrelevant. You just want to hurt me, to punish me for my crimes. Will my torment make you feel better? Will it ease your minds? Which is fair enough, really; who am I to judge you for taking that satisfaction? But at least be honest with yourself for your reasons."

The voice was a croak through cracked lips, but still so soft, so gentle. Even when he was in chains, Roose had a way of silencing the room as he spoke. He's smiling, Jon thought hollowly. He's smiling.

"Nevertheless," Roose said after a pause. "It will not be necessary, for I will cooperate with you completely. Pray tell, what do wish to know, Your Grace?"

He did as well. Lord Bolton answered absolutely every question without hesitation. He didn't shift, he didn't stammer, he didn't even begin to resist in the least. Questions were answered exhaustively, with details expounded on to the second and third degrees and beyond. The lords spent the full day down in that cell, nothing but questioning him. Afterwards they walked outside the prisons and bellowed at each other. Men-at-arms scampered off to search out the men and women who'd been named.

Jon could hardly even twitch, after it all. Traitors. He just felt numb. His mind was spinning. More traitors than I ever...

Winterfell felt like a ruin, or maybe a crypt. There were bloodstains in every room, a mountain of corpses piled in the courtyard. Women, serving girls, and stableboys had been butchered when the castle fell. His own army had been filled with bloodlust.
Jon himself hadn't even been present for the taking of Winterfell; he had been found unconscious and half-dead in the snows. He had only woken up, bloodied and pale, in the castle's dining hall as it was being used as infirmary.

They had won; House Bolton was defeated, Jon could walk – or limp, rather – through the halls of Winterfell. And yet he had never known such a bitter, foul victory.

Early the next morn, Jon found himself back in front of Roose Bolton's cell again, staring through the bars at the leech lord's pale eyes.

"Your Grace." Roose even bowed as far as the manacles would allow. "How may I help you?"

Jon could hardly speak. His throat… it jammed. The heartbeats passed in pure silence. They were alone, just two men staring at each other in the cold and dusty prisons beneath the keep.

"Do you have more questions, Your Grace?" Roose asked eventually.

Finally, Jon spoke. "Tell me how," he said lowly.

"How what?"

"Everything." There was so much anger, hate, pounding through him his voice almost cracked.


There was no reply. Lord Bolton pulled himself closer, as far as chains allowed. "If you're looking for some kind of meaning, Your Grace," he whispered, "then I have little to offer you. I did it because this is war, and it was my job."

Jon was trembling. His fists were actually trembling.

Roose leant back.

"As far as specifics go, it was… it was a tedious effort," Lord Bolton said with a sigh. "From the moment you crossed at Eastwatch, I knew that I was likely facing certain defeat. Your appearance was really quite vexing, I admit. My moves against House Stark, my appointment as Warden of the North, they had been calculated risks which left me in a quite unpopular position. I had really been gambling on a long winter to freeze any movements against me, a stretch of peace and quiet in the north – I needed some time to let the resentment bleed away while I solidified my power. Your appearance – your wildlings, your dragon – occurred at the absolute most inopportune moment for me. I could not predict it, I had no preparations for it.

"I had hope I could maybe recover, maybe rally a divided north in time to oppose you," Lord Bolton said with a sigh. "But then once I heard that you were Ned Stark's bastard, of all people, then I realised I stood no chance. Not by traditional methods. From that moment onwards, I retreated my men and pulled back into damage control. There was no real option otherwise for me – but did you really think I would just let you come and usurp my position?"


"You really think so?" Roose tutted, and shook his head. "Millennia ago, the Red Kings and Kings of Winter came to an… agreement. The Boltons bent the knee, but the Starks would never take that for granted. Never take advantage. The Dreadfort was what kept the restless loyal to Winterfell; we kept our blades sharp, while the Starks united. The mailed fist, to the gloved hand."
"If a restless lord were to refuse Winterfell's welcoming hand, then they would know the Dreadfort's blades. That was the partnership that built the largest and oldest kingdom of Westeros. Even the most pricklish of the Kings of Winter knew to appreciate the alliance; they learned that my family was too useful to extinguish and too powerful to neglect. That has been the rule of this land since time immemorable — so long as the Starks stay strong and put the north first and foremost, then the Boltons are their sturdiest ally." Roose tsked slightly. "But if they don't... for any Stark who breaks that pact... and then, well, the collection of skins that we keep beneath the Dreadfort becomes slightly larger. Your brother broke the rules, so I did my civic duty by putting a dagger through his stomach. His skin now rests in my dungeons too, next to a few of the more foolish of the old Kings of Winter."

His voice... it was patronising. The edge of his vision blurred with rage, but Jon didn't speak. Robb. He couldn't speak, Jon didn't dare open his mouth. He didn't know what he would do if he did.

"As a matter of fact," Roose continued slowly, "My plan was to make life as difficult for you as possible, for as long as possible. Defeating you in the field was desirable, but I would be satisfied with starving you out as winter came. I resolved myself to accept any victory, no matter how bitter, so long as you were dead by the winter's end. I knew that I could not defeat you through conventional means, and so I was forced into my gambit."

"Ramsay." Jon's voice was a growl, the name like a curse.

"Ramsay." Roose nodded. "Among others. There were other attempts made, but Ramsay was just the one that got the furthest." A pause. "Truth be told, Ramsay was never critical to the plan — I had nothing to lose if Ramsay failed, but I had everything to gain if he succeeded. My own plans would have proceeded with or without his."

The thought of Ramsay's blade hacking into her chest flashed before his eyes. Jon had to take a deep breath just to calm himself.

"The core plan was relatively simple, actually," Roose was talking, so easily, almost like it was conversation. "You had a dragon that could stop any army, but you only had one dragon. It could only physically be in one place at a time. Thus, I had resolved that I had to attack you from multiple fronts.

"Two simultaneous assaults; one against White Harbour, one against your army. Not even a dragon would be capable of stopping them both."

He paused, like he was waiting for a reply. Jon didn't give him one. After a long silence, Roose continued.

"I expected that at the first word of an attack, you would fly off on your dragon with all haste to White Harbour's defence, like the chivalrous, bold and foolhardy boy I believed you to be — much like your brother. In doing so, you would leave your army unprotected, and mine would assault it at night," Roose explained. "If I was lucky, you would have arrived too late to save the city, and you would have ended up losing on both fronts. Even if I was unlucky, you would obliterate one of the assaults from dragonback, but then the other one would have still stood a reasonable chance of success.

"I would have been content with either victory, truth be told. You would lose either your infrastructure or your army, and your efforts would be crippled either way. Without your army, it would become impossible for you to hold all of the land you had already conquered. Without White Harbour, your alliances with northern lords would fracture, but more importantly you'd be
unable to provide for your wildlings. Winter would come, and your army would starve. Maybe even turn against you. It would have bought me time – time enough to consolidate my position, to position my agents, perhaps time enough to assassinate you."

Jon struggled to even process the words. His voice was just so cold, emotionless. Even mocking. "Afterwards, circumstances became harder to predict," Lord Bolton mused. "but my odds improved regardless. I expected that as you became desperate, you would be forced to use your dragon more aggressively by razing castles and holdfasts freely – which would be devastating, true, but it would also turn the masses against you. As Aegon experienced in Dorne to his torment; if you act the tyrant, then people will oppose the tyrant to their last." Lord Bolton smiled faintly. "Every castle you raze, every pile of corpses, and, well, that just makes my reign look all the better in comparison, does it not?"

"In any case, sooner or later, I believed it would just become a matter of logistics," he explained softly. "Winter would come, and the snows would freeze both our efforts. Your wildlings would starve, you would lose your control, they would raid the smallfolk and the lesser lords, and then any hope you had of free folk reconciling with the northmen would shatter. Nobody would support you, nobody would ally with you, and, in true northern fashion, winter would damn you. All I needed to do was stay in the game, shielded behind the walls of Winterfell, shielded by your sister, and watch it all happen."

He stopped, took a breath, and thought about it. "Yes," Roose decided. "That is the 'how' of it. Do you have any questions?"

The air turned dead. Jon's eyes twitched. He had never felt such hate before. It was a hatred so intense he couldn't even speak, like all the fury was jamming up his body.

_He surrendered_, Jon thought. _Roose Bolton bloody surrendered_. After everything he had done, the man could have at least had the pride to die in battle, like ten, twenty thousand better men already had.

"You are going to die here," Jon promised, his voice cold.

"I am well aware," Roose sounded like he could have shrugged. "I never claimed my plans were perfect."

Another silence.

_His capture is a victory for us_, Jon tried to tell himself. _It meant that Roose could be judged, that they could bring the north to order_. He wasn't a martyr, he was a hostage against any that might still fight for him. Lord Manderly had already sent word that they wanted Lord Bolton alive; to be tried and to answer questions.

And yet still, Jon just looked at those pale eyes and imagined them bleeding. He imagined them screaming. That vision… it was so, so close. _I want him to scream._

"Tell me about Ramsay," Jon demanded, after a passing of minutes.

"Ramsay's solution was the optimal one," Roose admitted. "Many of my headaches would have vanished if Ramsay had been capable of removing you or your dragon. I encouraged Ramsay's efforts to that end."

_Optimal_. Ramsay's phantom blade still hovered at Jon's throat. "How?" Jon said lowly. "What poison did he use?"
This time, Roose did shrug. "I haven't the foggiest."

"He's lying. "Tell me the poison."

"I told you, I don't know it." Roose paused. "But should I take from your questioning that you don't have an antidote?"

"I could bring Rattleshirt back in here," warned Jon, throat strangling. "I will let Rattleshirt have you."

"Go ahead. And – who knows? – if your 'Rattleshirt' is capable enough, then my answer may even change." Roose sounded doubtful. "But it won't change into anything more coherent or honest."

Jon's eyes were unblinking, trying to look for any sign of weakness. He saw nothing, not even a twitch. "Ramsay handled the poison, not me," Roose said. "Ask him yourself."

"He is dead."

"He is?" Roose sighed. "What a shame. My son was a brute, yes, but he was always a very useful one."

Trembling. Jon's hands were trembling. He had to grip his knee, forcing himself still. He saw her falling to the ground, red blood and golden hair.  

Focus. Jon took a deep breath. Just focus.

"What of my wife?" Roose asked in a mildly curious tone. "Does she still live?"

No. Walda Bolton, Walda Frey, was one of the highborn who'd been killed in the castle, when the free folk broke through. Jon didn't reply, though; he let the question linger in the air.

"Why did the maesters side with you?" Jon demanded finally. They had discovered of at least two different maesters, from Hornwood and Ramsgate, who had assisted the Boltons when by rights their loyalty should have been to their lords. They were being kept in the higher levels of the dungeons, alongside Lady Barbrey Dustin and the few other prisoners. A half a dozen maesters were being imprisoned, in all.

Another ring in the chain that choked me.  

Roose shrugged again. "Because they are intellectuals, perhaps?" he suggested. "And any learned man would choose me over you."

Focus. Don't rise to the barb. Jon didn't want to press Roose on any subject, not right now – for now Jon just wanted to probe him, to see which subjects Roose was willing to answer and which he deflected. To try and understand.

"Who attacked White Harbour?" Jon demanded.

"Oh, sellswords, pirates and such. Mostly from the Free Cities, a large portion from the Stepstones. There was little time to hire any of the larger mercenary companies, so I had make do with enough of the smaller ones. They were just hired blades that were willing to sack a city for coin."

That answer – he answered the question, but not the full question. He was subtly trying to avoid more questioning by providing unnecessary details. "You couldn't have paid for them yourself," Jon said slowly. "You never had the gold, you never had the opportunity."
"A large portion *was* from the Dreadfort's vaults, actually." Lord Bolton actually managed to sound insulted. "But you're right. I had… hmm, let's call them sponsors."

Jon was sure he didn't visibly react, but Roose still smiled. "Are you surprised? You shouldn't be – the dragon was a threat to the status quo, and nobody wanted a beast like that flying around. The beasts caused the realm enough grief during the Targaryen's civil war. I was the first line of defence to stop it, so my efforts received… I suppose *charity* is the right word." He cocked his head. "All the while you were reaching out to House Manderly and the other northern lords, I was reaching out for support as well – to the south and beyond."

*He's a good liar.* "Who?"

"Many different sources. The crown promised support, but they were too distracted to ever provide it. Your scouring of the Twins was an unexpected move, but hardly a setback. Men only believe what they can see, and the trickle of support I had from the south before your flight became a flood. Your power made you sloppy, and arrogant, and, it brought me many benefactors. I received more from the Reach, as a matter of fact – House Hightower sent two cogs, loaded with weapons, arms and currency, in contribution.

"After your… *Frayed Crossing,*" Roose's lips twitched, "the riverlords were left panicked that any of their castles could be next, and so I bargained for aid. The remnants of House Frey received unexpected support. But, by far, the biggest benefactor was from Braavos – the Iron Bank was very generous."

Jon bristled at that. "You're lying," he growled. "I'm in negotiation with the Iron Bank. They wouldn't have moved against me."

"Really?" Lord Bolton said doubtfully. "But that's how the Iron Bank operates. The Iron Throne of the Seven Kingdoms owes them a great debt, and you threaten the Seven Kingdoms. Therefore, you threaten the Iron Bank. Every time a king or conqueror threatens the Iron Bank's interests, all of their enemies suddenly receive an influx of funding. Empires come and go, but the Iron Bank takes their due. Do you think I'm ruthless? I'm *nothing* compared to those bankers, stamping their sheets of parchment."

Jon had received the early messages from White Harbour. They used blunt words – like death, devastation, destruction. Tens of thousands – smallfolk and refugees, not even soldiers – were dead in the city alone, but nobody had yet been able to count them all.

_This man orchestrated all of it. He masterminded such chaos without ever even going near._ It was mass murder through parchment, dark wings and dark words, and Jon held his 'sponsors' just as responsible.

"Who?" Jon growled. "I want you to list all your accomplices, right here."

"I told you last night."

"*Do it again.*"

"Very well." Roose nodded. "Well, House Glover deserves special mention. Robbett Glover was very helpful in his job as commander of the outriders–"

"Robbett Glover. *And* his brother?"

"Oh yes, Galbart too. I made contact with Galbart first, actually, while he was at Ramsgate – he accepted the deal I offered, and passed on my letters to Robett." He paused. "Did you find the
They had. Roose had logged all of his ravens in an exquisitely organised filing system, including letters supposedly written in Galbart Glover's own hand. Jon didn't reply, though. He would not answer a single question Lord Bolton asked. *Do not let him turn this interrogation around.*

"From the mountain clans, there were quite a few allies of mine," Lord Bolton continued regardless. "Brandon Norrey lost two daughters and a son to wildling raids, he was quite easy to convince that your free folk were bad for the realm. Clan Norrey supported Bolton from the moment the Wall fell. Old Torghen Flint has fought against wildlings half his life, while The Harclay had very strong links to the Night's Watch. I offered them all the same promise; that I could stop the wildlings plaguing their land.

"Aside from the mountain clans, let's see…" He raised his hand, chains rattling, to count on his fingers. "Jeremy Locke of Oldcastle refused the marriages that Lord Manderly was trying to force onto his family, but he couldn't protest safely. He chose the options I offered instead. Lady Lyessa Flint was a scared pregnant woman, who wanted the security I offered rather than the wrath of a dragon. Lord Woolfield was trapped underneath Lord Manderly's thumb. And of course House Umber…"

"The Greatjon did not side with you." Jon was unable to hold his tongue. *The man is a liar.*

"The Greatjon didn't," Lord Bolton agreed. "But his uncle, Mors Umber, the Crowfood, did. Lord Umber came back from the Twins a shade of his former self, unhinged and disturbed from captivity – many of the Umber petty lords have fought wildlings for centuries, and they thought their liege mad for siding with you."

"You're lying." Last night, when Roose gave the same accusation, the Greatjon had been in a fury. "Mors Crowfood would have never betrayed the Greatjon, not after Last Hearth."

"Last Hearth?" Roose looked confused. "Do you mean when the wildlings razed the castle?"

Jon bristled. "The Bastard's Boys razed Last Hearth. Ramsay Bolton did that, not me."

And Roose smiled. Actually *smiled.* "Prove it."

Jon could have exploded. His hands clenched so tight his nails almost cut through skin. "It seems to me more logical that it was your wildlings, Your Grace," Lord Bolton noted, innocently. "After all, the wildlings breached the Wall, and immediately afterwards Last Hearth, the northernmost castle of our lands, was razed and pillaged. You say it was my bastard son, and yet he was at Winterfell at the time, by all accounts. Many and more can attest to it."

"You dare…?" Jon snarled. Rewriting history, twisting all the facts…

"I apologise, Your Grace." He held up his hands, chains rattling. "But frankly, it doesn't matter what I think happened, or even what you think happened. What matters is what the *realm* thinks happened. Who will history judge as the villain, or the champion?"

Jon had seen the letters that the Bolton's maester logged. All the while Jon's campaign had been ongoing, Roose Bolton had been sending ravens to the northern lords, spreading his own narrative of events. They had been subtle lies, a web that Roose weaved like a spider.

"And Mors Crowfood thought the wildlings responsible too," Roose continued, in quiet mocking. "Mors, a man present for the attack, believed it had been wildlings. He thought that wildlings had murdered his family, but then you hoodwinked his nephew into blaming someone else. Mors
couldn't confront you over it, of course – not while your armies and dragon were on the move – so instead he came to me."

*He's lying,* Jon told himself. Still, the lies came so easily from his tongue.

Jon had to wonder – the Crowfood had taken a spear to the gut during the Sack of Last Hearth, and it had been sudden. It was unlikely that Mors actually had a good view of the assailants. *How many men might have died, just because an old man might have misidentified the attackers in the dark?*

Jon had only met the Crowfood twice, both years ago, but the letters from House Forrester said that the castellan of Last Hearth had recovered. Mors hadn't been with the army, but he had been rallying soldiers from Umber lands. The Greatjon had been in a fury at the charge against his uncle, but then there were Umber men-at-arms who confessed to where their orders came from.

Jon wasn't sure. Some part of the chain of command had been hijacked, but he wasn't sure which part, or how much of it.

*It was Roose. Even from the beginning, it was him.* Those unblinking eyes as pale as ice stared back at him. *Every alliance I ever made, Roose Bolton was there to corrupt it.* The amount of work that had gone into sabotaging him was staggering. A war in the shadows, a false war, waged by quills and golden dragons, all the while Jon had been waging a real one with blades and dragonfire.

"Go have a look at my letters, Your Grace," Roose said softly. "I assure you I kept them all – every betrayer that worked against you put their name to writing. *Please,* take them – use them to punish those responsible."

Jon had seen the letters; the Boltons had kept every letter and then some. Too organised, as if Jon had been meant to find them. Copied in triplicate, filed and organised by date, and stamped with official seals. If the letters were to be believed, then about a third of the lords under Jon had accepted promises or sabotaged him in some way or another. Some of the betrayals were small – like promising the Boltons they would deliberately hold back on the number of men they were committing to the war – and other betrayals were major – like northmen turning their blades against others in the camp.

Maybe they were genuine, or maybe Roose Bolton had just spent a long time crafting a fine web of lies, and this was just another way the man meant to trap Jon.

Roose was telling the worst type of lies – he was telling truths and lies mixed together, and his face didn't even twitch.

Jon tried to relax his grip. "Enough," he growled. *Focus.* There were more questions that Jon had to ask. "What did you do to Bran, to Brandon Stark?"

"How queer," Roose mused. "I was going to ask you the same thing, I assumed that you killed him, in the same way you killed your sister."

That did it. Jon finally snapped. "YOU DARE?!" Jon roared, composure broken. His fist crashed against the bars. His knuckles rang against iron, the sound ringing out. "YOU BLOODY DARE?"

The bars were between them, and Jon didn't have the keys to the cell on him. He kicked his chair to the ground, groaning and pacing. Roose didn't twitch, but his eyes were glittering. *He's trying to provoke me,* Jon cursed. *The more unsettled I become, that's another small victory to him.*

And it was working. Jon's breaths were hoarse, his fists screaming to punch something.
"She's dead, isn't she?" Roose's voice was a whisper. "Your sister died, your wildlings caused it."

Arya. Jon didn't even know how it happened. Somewhere, as men shuffled through the mountain of corpses, somebody began calling for Arya Stark. It had taken two days before they realised, and they turned to look at the wreckage of the West Tower. It would be even longer before they could dig out the charred corpse.

My wildlings. The free folk had been berserk, and swinging torches...

That wound should have hurt, but Jon couldn't feel it. There were too many wounds, too much pain, like he had been stabbed a dozen times. He just felt numb.

They still hadn't fully identified the bodies. There were many dead, many women. Wives and babes in particular; Lady Jonelle Cerwyn, Lady Berena Talhart, Lady Walda Bolton, and Lady Arya Stark...

Wildling raiders were renowned for targeting the women first.

"So what did you do to your brother, Your Grace?" Roose continued. "After all, Last Hearth is only ten leagues from Castle Black – your army was very much in the vicinity. Do you really claim to be ignorant? I'm sure others must be asking the same question."

Lord Bolton's voice was so soft. "And Brandon Stark was a threat you, was he not? A trueborn child that might steal the position you fight for."

Jon knew what Roose was doing. What he had done. He remembered the letter that the mountain clans had 'come across' – the letter where the Boltons offered surrender. There would be more letters, which would have found their way to other houses.

Anybody who heard about those letters, who heard about the disappearance of Bran, then the death of Arya... they would come to their own conclusion.

Roose had been writing his narrative for a while now; framing Jon as responsible for Last Hearth, painting him as a conqueror and tyrant, a liar, usurper and kinslayer. A bastard. The death of Arya Stark would clinch the matter for many people.

Even when Lord Bolton lost, he still found a way to win.

He did this, Jon cursed. Even months ago, it had been the reason that the Boltons had sacked Last Hearth. The Bastard's Boys deliberately hadn't flown banners, deliberately left few alive. He framed me for Bran's death and I wasn't even aware. Even when he lost, he planned his defeat just to hurt me too.

And Arya. Bright, wilful, wild Arya. She had been married to a monster, held captive for months, and then burnt to death as she hid in the tower. In Winterfell, they described Lady Stark as a meek, timid and fearful girl, and Jon could only wonder with horror at what his sister had suffered to break her spirit such.

Ramsay would have tortured her, a little voice in Jon's head whispered. She was strong, so Ramsay broke her.

Nobody had heard anything from Bran for months. If Ramsay had truly gotten him too, then his brother was likely dead as well.

Jon's breaths were strained. He stared at Roose, and... by the gods, that hate. Jon had never felt a
hatred like it.

I want to hurt him. I just want to hurt him. Make him feel it too.

The blood rushing through Jon's body, drumming against his ears, sounded like Ramsay's laughter.

"I will bring back Rattleshirt," Jon promised. "I will bring worse than Rattleshirt. This is the only time that I will ever ask these questions nicely. I will take the truth from you, regardless of what else I have to take."

"Go ahead," Roose replied. "And will that make you happy? To hear my screams?"

Yes. Very much so, actually. Still, somehow, Jon just couldn't imagine Roose ever screaming. Jon's eyes narrowed.

"Why?" he asked finally. "Tell me why. Why are you doing this, why go so far? You have nothing to gain by being difficult now, you've already lost."

"I told you," Roose said, as if were obvious, "I will take whatever victory I can get. I may not be triumphant, but I can still be spiteful."

Jon could only stare. What happened to him, what was broken inside of him, for there to be any man to live that was just so... cold? Empty? Jon had known plenty of killers, but even the most blood-crazed warrior would be unnerved by that soft voice, and the complete and utter disregard for life.

The man is madder than Ramsay ever was.

"Still, do you know a secret, Your Grace?" Roose continued, while Jon was left frozen in anger, still as a statue. "If you want to know who I was working, who plotted your downfall, then... well, there are many responsible, but if you wish to know my greatest accomplice, you need only look in a mirror."

Jon's arms were trembling, fists clenched so tightly it hurt.

"I played you," Roose said, his voice a whisper. "You had an easy victory, and you let me turn it into a near defeat. It was your own incompetence that saw your army destroyed. I think you would have been completely destroyed too, if not for the snows. I think that you only survived that night by sheer chance.

"And I think that if I had been leading your army, then I would have won this castle without issue."

Jon had never, ever wanted to hurt somebody as much as he did right then. It's what he wants, he told himself. He wants me to lose control.

"The north is already starving, Your Grace," Roose said slowly, as Jon could only glare, teeth grinding together. "I can promise you, the granaries have already been spoiled, the last of the harvest is gone, and winter is already upon us. The west has been ravaged by ironborn, the north and east abandoned and pillaged, the smallfolk and petty lords have fled before your wildlings. Robb Stark lost our armies to the south. Ten thousand men of working age, and you lost us even more. Lords and knights and heirs, the cream of the north, lost. How many great houses will even remain after you punish your traitors? White Harbour burns. Our lands are barren, there is no more coin, and no one will trade with us. Winter is coming, and the north is ruined."

That wasn't a lie. None of it was a lie. Jon was so painfully aware that those words were all true,
however distorted. "You have… however many tens of thousands of wildlings coming south, but we can't even feed our own people. They say that this will be the longest winter in a generation. How do you hope to maintain this fragile independence of yours, without trade and produce from the south?" Roose scoffed quietly. "You may hate me, you may despise me, but I can promise you something; I could have kept the north fed."

Jon didn't reply. There was a smirk on the man's swollen face. "Mine was a quiet and peaceful rule. My reign was born in blood, yes, but only after your brother took ten thousand men to their deaths down in the south. I killed Robb Stark with my own hand, I did, but I saved the north from his war by doing so. There had been no need for further conflict; there were no wildlings pillaging the countryside, or dragons devouring villages." Jon twitched. "And yet, you ruined it all when you opened the gates and you came south."

"That's not true," Jon growled.

"Which part? You didn't open the gates, or you didn't come south?" he scoffed. "Go outside and count the bodies, Your Grace. Go look at your sister's corpse."

Jon's voice guttered in his throat. He thought of the white walkers, but he didn't, he couldn't reply, and Roose Bolton's eyes flashed like a predator sensing weakness. "I believe you had the best intentions, I'm sure," he said nodding, "but you asked me what I wanted, so allow me to answer… when this all done, when the cold winds blow and castles of the north turn to charnel-houses and the trenches overflow with corpses… I want you to look in a mirror, 'King', and ask yourself, really ask yourself – is the world better for all I've done?"

He was met by silence. Jon turned stiffly and limped away, staggering heavily with his wounded side. He heard Roose chuckle behind him, the noise like nails scratching over bone.

Damn him, Jon cursed. Damn him to seven hells and more, damn him to the fire, damn him to the Others. Whatever the worst torture there is, he deserves it and more. Damn him, damn him, damn him.

Roose had been behind bars and in chains and Jon had been the one interrogating, yet somehow Roose Bolton still managed to get inside his head.

As he left the dungeons, Jon passed an old man in grey robes rattling and pleading at a cell door, his chain chiming around his neck. Jon ignored him. Every maester with the northern coalition had been placed in chains and locked up, save one. There had been too many ravens sent, too many missing letters. Nobody was sure who was responsible, but not a single maester could be trusted, not any more.

Outside, the wind still hissed. The storm had cleared, somewhat, but the snows hadn't stopped. The sky was spitting clumps of snow, the winds were still hard enough to shake the keep. As he pulled up his hood and stepped outside, he saw a pile of corpses littering the courtyard, a hill of the dead already peaked with cornices of snow.

Over a week later, and they still hadn't cleared even half of the bodies.

Jon saw the spires and burnt towers of the Great Keep. Winterfell looked charred and blackened, even under the layers of ice and sleet. Black and white. The castle looked so different to how Jon remembered it, but still so hauntingly familiar. A burnt memory.

He needed to take deep breaths to control all that frustration. The anger. Jon hadn't known what he wanted from Roose Bolton, but he should have known he wouldn't get it.
"Snow!" a voice called for him across the yard, and he heard urgent footsteps. Toregg was looking for him, running with three other men. All were armed. "Snow, where did you–"

"Alone." Jon's voice was cold. "I needed to be alone."

"Aye, well," Toregg scoffed, glancing behind him as he panted. There was noise in the distance, sounds of shouting. Jon tensed. Another schism? "The dragon is over the walls. Come quick."

Even from the opposite end of the castle, Jon heard a great moan from the godswood, and then a creaking of trees. Sonagon. The free folk were already scattering, the giants in the courtyard wailing. Birds – snow shrikes, robins and ravens – burst from the woods. Jon was already striding quickly towards the ruckus, wincing so badly with every lopsided step.

Jon saw a flash of white wings over the top of the Guest House, followed by an immense boom of the beast dropping downwards.

He was running. He could hear the growling as the dragon twisted restlessly, crashing through rubble and trees with every pained movement. Sonagon's wings were flapping, the huge beast trying to clear a space for itself.

The godswood was the largest, most isolated area of the castle; three acres of old, packed earth and humus and moss, a grove that had stood untouched for ten thousand years. Even in the centre of one of the largest castles in the realm, the godswood was a small forest. It would have been an ideal place for the dragon, if not for all the densely-packed trees. Instead, the huge beast had to push its way through the chestnuts, hawthorns, oaks, ironwoods and soldier pines, clearing a place to curl over the frozen pond.

Once, the godswood had been a place for rest and meditation, but now the air was filled with sounds of immense trees splintering and men shouting.

As Jon got closer, he could see the white mass of scales writhing. He heard pained moans and pants, followed by a gagging noise so loud the earth rumbled.

"Get everybody back!" Jon ordered, but his voice was barely audible over the roar. He saw great plumes of cold mist rising. "Get them back!"

He was close enough to the hot spring pools to see Sonagon; the dragon's jaws were open as it gagged, the great tail whipping. Globs of frozen ooze splattered from its throat, bursting over an oak tree. He is puking, Jon realised quietly. As Sonagon heaved, frostfire spewed from its jaws.

Jon saw black and yellow bile splatter and hiss out of the dragon's throat. The great dragon made a pained noise, so loud and high it caused his eardrums to ring.

He moved to comfort it, but Toregg placed his hand to stop him. "Stay back," the Dragonguard warned. "Your dragon trampled two men outside the walls and didn't even notice."

Dammit. Jon had never seen Sonagon so weak; it felt like the dragon's stomach was burning. The poison. "We have find a way to treat him."

"How?" Torregg asked, looking baffled. "How the hells are you supposed to treat a dragon?"

Jon didn't reply, but his jaw clenched. It had taken two days to even rouse Sonagon from the lake's edge, and another two to herd the dragon towards Winterfell. From the looks of things, even the very short flight over the castle's walls had robbed the last of Sonagon's strength.
Another great sentinel tree crunched, roots tearing from the ground, as Sonagon twisted. He was lucky that the dragon hadn't destroyed the heart tree itself as it tramped through, but even the ancient weirwood was now missing many of its red leaves. The bloody face on the white bark stared mournfully out over the pools, where Sonagon panted and writhed.

Steam from the hot springs shimmered in the air, crackling against ice. The dragon's tail splashed across the water.

Finally, Sonagon's sharp spasms started to settle, and it collapsed in between the broken husks of trees. The dragon's convulsions of pain could be destructive, but they would die as its strength faded. The dragon was weak, still falling in and out of consciousness; barely even able to breath.

They needed to keep the dragon out of the open, especially while it is sickly. Toregg was already shouting orders, assigning men to seal the godswood. The gates of the grove were to be shut and barricaded. Nobody was to be allowed anywhere near the dragon. Sonagon is strong, Jon told himself, his body would burn through the poison sooner or later. He will recover, surely.

Still, Sonagon hadn't been eating. The dragon's body was trembling, spasming as it tried to fight against the weakness. The dragon's muscles felt like lead.

Sonagon's wounds were fairly minor. The spear to the eye was less than a flesh wound, it would heal. The rest amounted to a few shallow scratches, but the poison was something else.

Jon stared at the great beast, feeling his own gut wrench. Nobody knew what poison Ramsay Bolton had used, there was no treatment that any healer could offer. Either the maesters didn't know, or they refused to tell. His dragon was suffering and there was nothing Jon could even do to help.

"Pass word to Rattleshirt," Jon ordered stiffly. "Task him with finding out what poison was used. Whoever he needs to question, do it."

He felt Sonagon rumble – a low and weak growl as its serpentine body curled. Jon just went stiff as he stood and watched. "It's not safe for you out here, Snow," Toregg warned, his voice low. All men kept weapons close to hand. "We don't how many more might be…"

His voice trailed off. How many more traitors might still be biding their time. Jon's hand moved to hover over the wound on his torso, where the assassin's blade had cut straight through. He had spent the days after the battle being nursed in a bed of the infirmary, and his control over Winterfell was less than a thread. He couldn't even walk through the grounds for fear of a dagger, or an arrow.

Everywhere he looked, he saw dark gazes lingering at him. The air felt so tense it was simmering.

Sonagon is just vulnerable as I am, Jon thought quietly. A dragon was only fearsome while it was in the air, untouchable and unstoppable. Every other time, every time it rested or grew lazy, it could be hurt. A week ago, Jon had been strong and powerful too – but that power had been all too easily stripped away. Power evaporated like a shadow on the wall, or dissolved around a single, unexpected blade.

There was no more Dragonguard to protect Sonagon, not anymore. Every single member of the Dragonguard travelling with the host, bar Toregg the Tall and Ser Alek, had died that night.

The north had known many bloody battles, but that one would surely go down in history as one of the worst. There was were as many men that died to the weather as they did in the fighting. Out of
their eighteen thousand men, over two thirds were dead.

Alysane Mormont had died trying to hold the perimeter. Hugo Wull had took an arrow through the chest, and died bleeding out three days later. Jeremy Locke had been found dead on the ice. Many and more were still missing, or injured. The lack of supplies and the overflowing infirmary in Winterfell meant that more were still to die.

And Val… No, Jon cursed. *Don’t think about Val. Not now.*

There had been schisms all while Jon had been on a hospital bed – the Greatjon and Tormund Giantsbane had been the ones to hold the army together. Clans Harclay and Knott had already broken away altogether to return to their own lands. As had Houses Forrester, Woods, Mollen, and many of the Mormont bannermen. Jon had been unconscious, he hadn’t even been able to stop them.

Personally, Jon suspected that more would have left if the snows had allowed them to leave. For the ones that remained, the castle was like a melting pot, set to boil over.

The remnants of the Bolton host had mostly been slaughtered, though some few had fled south for Cerwyn. Only a precious few had been taken prisoner.

And the word of Arya Stark's death had spread like wildfire. *How long, how long before the entire north is thinking 'Jon Snow's wildlings killed Lady Stark'/?*  

The memory of pale blue eyes haunted the edge of his vision. *We need order again.* "Send word to the Greatjon and Tormund. Call the Weeper's warband to return," Jon said quietly. "Have them gather up the accused."

"The accused?" There had been many, many accused. "Which accus—"

"All of them." Jon ordered, and Toregg grimaced. "As many as we can find – any with doubt to their name. Any traitor who marched in my army, I want them in chains." He paused, thinking of Roose's smug pale eyes. "The suspicion is a worse of a poison than anything, so we will cleanse it. There will be a trial."

"Hells, Snow..." Toregg shook his head. "I don't even know how many men my Pa can still round up to follow orders. You start this and we might have to arrest half this bloody castle."

"Ser, I am in no mood to debate this." Jon's voice was like ice. "See it done."

He didn't take his eyes off Sonagon. He could feel the dragon's pain, ringing at the back of his mind. Still, there was nothing he could do to help Sonagon, not right now. Jon could barely even help himself.

---

**Lady Stark**

Pure, feral panic.

She didn't know how long it lasted; it could have been hours, it could have been days, could have been weeks – there was no way to tell when her vision was blurred with tears, her heart skipping like it would burst from her chest. She ran until her side was a black stone, she ran some more, she vomited into a ditch, and she kept running, she just kept running until she found a street that wasn't gripped by battle.
Sansa crawled into the mud beneath the foundations of a brewery, hiding among the rats. *Hide, just hide.* She ran, had slipped away in the chaos, but there was no telling how many sellswords were still looking for her.

Outside, in the streets, White Harbour burned and raged.

It was dawn when she finally emerged – barefooted, filthy, and ragged. The fires were extinguished, leaving only charred remains, but the streets were still heaving. It felt like the city was convulsing and spewing around her like a drunken man. Sansa hesitated, but she couldn't hide any longer. Instead, she turned and moved hesitantly towards the plaza at the city's heart.

She saw crowds of men, women and wailing babes; smallfolk, all swarming around the gates of the Castle Stair. She looked down the hill, into the city. Fishfoot Square was a Lord's Port was a ruin. It looked like there was still fighting to the outer wharves; she could see sprawling groups of men and plumes of smoke. Broken husks of ships filled the harbour.

All throughout the city, bloody corpses littered the streets, left where they fell. Everything smelled of smoke and blood. It made her want to retch, but her stomach was so empty.

"All wildlings!" a voice boomed from a cluster of men-at-arms. They looked scared, clutching their tridents tightly. "All wildlings are expelled from the bloody city! Clear the streets! Savages clear the fucking streets!"

Sansa could only watch. It sounded like riots in the farther streets – wildlings facing Manderly men-at-arms. The surviving sellswords must be trying to flee the city on foot. Nearby, Sansa saw that the Old Mint had been burnt into ruins. All of the smallfolk had nowhere to go, they could do nothing but huddle around the steps to the New Castle, begging for aid. The castle didn't open its gates.

The whole city felt dazed. Broken. There was nothing Sansa could do, no one to approach, no one to look after her; she was just another face in the crowd. Just another of the filthy, powerless smallfolk.

She didn't cry. Maybe it was just dehydration, but she refused to cry. She found a place for herself beneath a statue of a merman in the plaza's centre, and waited.

It was dusk, when she saw the columns of men-at-arms flying banners push the plaza. She saw the crossed keys of House Locke, the woolsacks of House Woolfield and the eyes of House Flint marching through the streets. Reinforcements from the nearby lands had arrived, but it seemed only a pitiful few of them. There were a few cavalry, men garbed in hauberks of mail and plate – knights who cleared a path through the crowds and trotted into the New Castle. Sansa tried to call out to them, but her voice was lost in the cacophony of smallfolk.

It was a long night. The wailing of women, the cry of babes filled the air. Arguments. Fights.

The next morning, someone in the castle finally must have realised that the smallfolk desperately needed food, water and shelter. She saw a convoy of men coming down the Castle Stair, bringing blankets and rations into the crowd. The smallfolk were all so desperate it was almost a riot right then, and Sansa had to fall back from the front or be trampled.

Still, she caught a glimpse of figure in a green dress, with brown hair bound in a long braid, guarded by men-at-arms while she passed out bags of onions. The young woman's eyes were bloodshot, nearly red – she had been crying. Sansa's heart nearly stopped when she recognised her. "Spring solstice, they played Fair Maids of Summer and we ate lemon cakes!" Sansa screamed at
the top of her lungs. "Your sister dyed her hair green, and we called her Froggy for it!"

A few of the women around her looked at her like she was crazed, but Sansa kept on repeating the words. She kept shouting, just hoping the words would draw attention. Finally, or maybe she was just lucky, Sansa saw the young woman step forward from the convoy, staring around at the hustle of filthy faces. Look at me, Sansa could have begged. I'm right here.

"Wynafryd!" Sansa shouted. "We ate lemon cakes, it was at the spring solstice. I braided your hair!"

Even from the distance, even through the mass, she saw Wynafryd Manderly's mouth hang open. Sansa hadn't been sure if anybody would even be capable of recognising her, but Wynafryd did.

"Sansa?!!"

After that, everything was a whirl. She could have collapsed. Men-at-arms stomped forth to drag Sansa out of the crowd.

There were questions, many questions, to which Sansa gave dazed answers – but honestly she just wanted to get something to eat. It started with Wynafryd staring at her like she was a ghost, stammering as she tried to explain it to the men. Soon there were more people, knights and smallfolk staring at her – some with disbelief, others with suspicion. One knight tried to insist that Wynafryd was mistaken, that Sansa was crazed, right up until she recounted the names of every single member of the Manderly delegation to Winterfell four years ago.

She had spent a long, long time in the mud under that filthy brewery preparing all the knowledge she could remember, anything that could prove her identity. She needed every last scrap of it.

New Castle hadn't been breached in the fighting, but it felt like it was just as much of a shambles as the city. There were wounded men littering the main hall, the infirmary overflowed into the hallway. There were arguments from the Merman's Court, shouting matches in the corridors, and soldiers running around like chickens; still terrified but they didn't know what to do.

Wynafryd clung to Sansa's arm, trying to drag her through it all. "Sansa?" Wynafryd gasped. "By the Seven, it's been so long. Where have you been, how did you get here? How could you…?"

Sansa tried to explain, she did, but she could barely a say word through all the panic and confusion around her.

"The wildlings are in riot!" a voice bellowed. "They refuse to leave the city!"

"The Commoner's Quarter is in flames!" another voice called. "We need more men, men and water!"

"To the sword!" an old, toothless lord demanded. "Put the wildlings to the sword."

**Of all the ways that I wanted to return, this is not one.** Not when tensions were so high, not when she was so shocked she could barely think. Maybe Sansa could have talked to the lord in a private audience, but it looked like the castle was dealing with a dozen crises at once. She caught a glimpse of Lord Wyman, standing, not sitting, before the throne of the Merman's Court. He was obese, a red-faced lord even fatter than she had remembered, bellowing bloody murder and staggering for breath while a plump, blonde-haired woman was weeping on the floor.

"Traitor!" a voice called.
"Where is King Snow? The dragon should be here!" another bellowed.

"The wildlings are decapitating the prisoners! Hundreds are marching on the Merchant's Squares!" A red-faced man-at-arms called. "An old woman is marching at the front with spikes of severed heads!"

"Corsairs fleeing the docks!" a knight bellowed, clambering to be heard. "Corsairs fleeing for the plague wharves!"

"To the sword!" the toothless lord shouted, stomping his foot. "Put the traitors to the sword!"

It was all so hectic. There was nothing she could do about it, so she didn't even try.

"Salladhor Saan!" that was a voice Sansa turned to see, made distinctive by the accent of the Free Cities. She saw an aging, slim man with tanned skin, wearing boiled leather and silks and a bright green cap, trying to call for attention. "Let the king know he has no better ally than Salladhor Saan – no greater friend, none more loyal! Salladhor the Saviour! I demand audience with the king!"

Wynafryd was pushing through the throng, and Sansa heard her name being called. More and more attention was turning towards her. Sansa just went numb, answering every question they asked and forcing herself not to be overwhelmed.

"The king!" a woman called over the clamour. "The king must–"

"She's a Lannister!" she heard one voice exclaim. "The Lannisters attacked us!"

The world was spinning. Sansa was so hungry, so thirsty. She could barely understand anything. She shook her head, just trying to clear the fogginess vagueness. More and more were turning towards her, her name was spreading through the Merman's Court. Some demanding to know where she came from, others were calling her a fake.

There was no chance to answer any of them, not truly. Her words would be wasted in the moment. Instead, Sansa only said, "I fled from King's Landing, and I ran north. I arrived in port moments before the battle." She repeated the words dumbly to any that shouted at her, forcing herself to stay detached. *It is too dangerous to mention Littlefinger, not right now.*

The room exploded.

Questions.

Accusations.

Questions.

Screams, but not at her. Men were screaming at other men, more bodies still rushing into the hall.

Questions.

Men-at-arms were marched into the Merman's Court, and then there were men, hysterical with panic, being marched out.

*More questions.*

At the end of it all the world was spinning, and attention turned away from her and the lords were screaming at each other, Lord Wyman attempting to bellow over the cacophony, trying to restore order. Sansa would have stayed, but went she went numb and Wynafryd was already dragging her
away. "Come, my lady," she hissed. "It is not…" her voice trailed off and Sansa didn't press her. Wynafryd shuffled her upstairs, and dragged her into her bedroom.

Wynafryd gave her stale bread and water, and tried to dress her, tried to clean the grime off her face, but there was no time for a proper bath. Sansa was reminded of how Arya would always run off and get filthy before noble guests arrived, leaving her mother in a fluster to try and clean her. Sansa tried to ask of Arya, but Wynafryd wouldn't answer. There was banging on the door. They were already demanding to see her, more voices demanding Sansa answer their questions. Wynafryd reluctantly dragged her downstairs, back into the chaos.

So many unknown figures all boomed across the Merman's Court, she could hardly make sense of it. She answered what little she could, and listened to what little she could understand. Sansa caught fragments of words being yelled, like "wildlings", "treachery", and "battle". At some point, Wylla left the hall, trembling.

So much information she had to digest quickly. Wildlings south of the Wall; the north caught in a civil war and an invasion. Mercenaries amassing on the roseroad against King's Landing, and a storm in Oldtown. The northern coalition, the Bolton ambush. King Snow fighting a battle in the snows, and the only raven White Harbour received said that the wildlings had taken the castle.

"Send her off to Winterfell," she heard Lord Wyman proclaim later towards dusk. The grossly fat lord looked sickly, wheezing for breath. Wynafryd was still clutching on to Sansa's arm, but the daughter of White Harbour was crying too. "King Snow must know."

There had already been a supply convoy set for Winterfell, to bring arms and food that were said to be sorely needed in the wake of the battle. Sansa was to go along with it.

Less than a day later, there was a wheelhouse rumbling into the castle's courtyard, and a small force of mounted men were very hurriedly trying to push her on her way. To Sansa's mild surprise, Wynafryd came too, along with her sister, Wylla, and their weeping mother. Wylla Manderly was older than Sansa remembered – she was now nearly a woman grown, still with that green hair tied into a braid, but her eyes were fierce. Wynafryd tried to comfort Sansa, but Wylla glared suspiciously at her. Sansa saw Wylla snapping at her mother, crying and hissing angrily as they were shoved into the carriage. They loaded the wheelhouse to the brim with tents and supplies, loaded for urgency rather than comfort.

"We are to go to Winterfell with all haste. The snows could soon seize the roads, and we must get through before they do," a plump, fresh-faced knight explained from outside the wheelhouse – Ser Mardrick Manderly. "Winterfell has been taken, my – my lady."

_They didn't know the honorific to use_, Sansa noted. There had been many who called her an imposter, or a traitor. They needed King Snow's judgement, and Lord Wyman didn't think White Harbour was secure. Still, the news of Winterfell made her heart flutter. "What of my sister?" Sansa demanded. "What of Arya Stark?"

The look on his face told her everything she needed to know. _Oh. _"I… I am sorry, my lady."

_Oh. _Sansa knew that it should have hurt, but, honestly, she was just too numb to even feel anything. _Three years, _she thought, _it's been three years since I've even last seen Arya. My sister was wed and murdered without me even knowing._

Wynafryd was chattering – jabbering in the way nervous young ladies did – but Sansa just felt too cold.
The last time I saw Wynafryd, she thought numbly, she was only a few years older, but she was so kind. We ate lemon cakes, we danced and played with each other. She showed me how to stitch a merman. I begged Father to let Wynafryd stay, but Lord Wyman... was Lord Wyman looking for a match? Did Father turn him down? We hugged, and Wynafryd promised to return often and I thought Wynafryd a better sister than the one I had.

Looking back, Sansa wished she could have slapped herself.

They were escorted by a half a hundred knights and men-at-arms, along with twenty, thirty wayns filled with supplies and pulled by oxen. There still heavy snows around the barrowlands, but their escort pushed the beasts hard to make good time. She could feel the wheelhouse buffeting in the winds, the snows howling outside. The worst of the storm had past, but several times Ser Mardrick shouted from his horse outside the wheelhouse, warning that their convoy might well be left stranded until the weather broke.

Sansa half-expected that they would be trapped, as if the gods themselves were intervening to stop her from seeing Winterfell again. Still, the sturdy horses managed to push their way through, and the wheelhouse rattled on through the snow.

The wheelhouse wasn't very big; it felt like a coffin, and their escort a funeral procession. All of the occupants braced themselves in uneasy silence. She barely said a word unless spoken to. Wynafryd held her mother's hand, but Wylla just glared at them all and huddled in the corner.

Finally, they were on the trade road following the White Knife and she was told they were only two, three days away, but Sansa couldn't see through the haze of snow. They stopped at a minor Woolfield holdfast briefly, but the other nights they slept in tents and in the wheelhouse on the road. Ser Mardrick pushed their way forward even past dusk, for as long as the horses and oxen would allow.

They weren't heading towards the kingsroad, Sansa noted. She had had expected them to cross the White Knife. "The Cerwyn lands to the west of the White Knife are not secure," Ser Mardrick explained when she asked. "We will take the coming roads through Hornwood lands instead, and cross near Peddler's Crossing. Slightly longer, but we will keep the river to our left."

That route would also take them very close to Bolton lands, but she was told that the armies had already passed through. It all belonged to the King Snow now. The journey was long and uncomfortable – Ser Mardrick refused to stop for anything more than the bare minimum, and snows didn't cease. They passed through a few villages, but Sansa saw nothing but barred doors and snow-smeared thatch houses.

To the very end of the third day, they finally reached the crossing, and the men needed to drag the wayns over the uneven and cracked stone bridge. They made camp near the frozen water, and she was told that Winterfell was less than a day away, though she couldn't recognise anything through the flurry. Early the next morning, as the wheelhouse rocked, Wynafryd suggested that she needed to dress herself for meeting her half-brother again, and Sansa just nodded.

She approached the trunk of lady's clothing slowly, and picked her dress in the same way a knight would choose his armour.

Sansa clad herself in white fur and silver. The cloak was like none other she had ever seen; a thick, white and rich white that was so heavy and warm it was nearly suffocating as it draped over her shoulders. It was a gift that the wildlings brought to House Manderly; the furs of a snow bear from beyond the Wall, one that could stand twelve feet tall, Sansa was told, but she struggled to imagine it.
Her dress was white samite with a light saffron lining, and Wynafryd braced the corset up so tightly it was suffocating, while Sansa braided her hair in silver hairnet. She had spent a while staring at herself in the looking mirror. She looked beautiful, with her bright red hair and pale face, but also older, more mature. All Sansa could think about was how much she looked like her mother.

That could have been a thought of pride, once, but now there was nothing but sadness. *I am Lady Stark now.*

The final leg of the journey felt so tense it was suffocating. Wynafryd ran out of things to say, and her mother wouldn't stop sniffling. They all sat in uneasy silence against the wheelhouse's jostling, the windows shuttered against the gale.

*I will see my bastard brother today,* she thought. *Perhaps I will see a dragon too.* She had heard all of the talk, but she still couldn't match the words to the Jon Snow she remembered. Still, there was no running or hiding now, and no matter what happened Sansa resolved that she would be ready for it.

The coach had trundled over the snowy roads for miles, and then finally she heard the sound of clattering wheels as they hit the cobbledstones of Winterfell's road. *The winter town,* she remembered. That was where the cobbles began. The wheels clattered as fast as her heartbeat. Sansa wanted to stick her head out of the window to see Winterfell again, but she couldn't trust herself to look. She kept the windows firmly shuttered against the howling winds.

Even when the coach stopped in the courtyard, it took several deep breaths to compose herself before she opened the door. The Manderly knights trumpeted her arrival. The snow hissed around her face, and Sansa's first sight was of the dark and cold walls standing high, icicles hanging like swords.

*By the Seven... Winterfell looks so different.* There was smoke in the air, and tents had been erected all over the yard. The thick oak of the East Gate had been smashed through, torn from its hinges, splinters scattered in the snows. The towers had collapsed, the guest house was a burnt-out ruin, the Guards Hall looked destroyed and crudely rebuilt, and absolutely everywhere rubble, arrows and debris littered the courtyard. Winterfell looked burnt, broken and turned savage.

"My apologies, my lady," Ser Mardrick said with a grimace. "The battle is still fresh, there was fighting here not a week past and they have not disposed of... well, please avert your eyes."

Sansa could have snorted. *There is no need to hide the corpses from me, ser,* she thought.

If she had thought New Castle was in shambles, then Winterfell felt like a broken ruin. There were tents and bonfires sprawled over the snowy courtyards – an army camped in the grounds outside rather than inside the castle.

Sansa had resolved herself, *promised* herself, that she wouldn't flinch, gasp or turn away no matter what she saw. She had heard all of the rumours, all the whispers, and she vowed that she would face them all without a flinch. That promise became very hard to keep to keep when she saw the massive beasts of brown fur, muscle and tusks lumbering in the courtyard.

*Mammoths.* Giants and their mammoths, camping outside the Great Keep of Winterfell itself. They were the biggest creatures she had ever seen. Many of the White Harbour knights stared open-mouthed at the sight, staring at the immense humanoids towering over them. Sansa forced herself not to gape. One of the giants roared when a mounted knight trotted too close, a cracking wail splitting the air as it stomped its huge foot. The knight's horse reared back, sending the man
tumbling into the drifts.

*This is a different place now*, she thought, staring at it all. *The wildlings and the Bastard King rule Winterfell now. Where is the dragon, though?*

The stairs of the keep were so familiar from her childhood, but she had never seen them smeared in dried and cracked blood. They had never felt so cold either. So many of the windows were broken. The hissing snows were all around them, the Manderly knights escorting them in a tight procession. Sansa saw the eyes of wildlings glaring suspiciously at them. *White Harbour brought food and aid, but they still look at them like they're the enemy.*

Wynafryd clung to her arm tightly. "Welcome home," she croaked under her breath into her ear. Sansa didn't reply.

Despite how she kept her posture rigid, her heart was beating wildly as they escorted her into the hall. The men lingering the corridors to the Great Hall weren't knights; they were rough figures in hides, and they all kept spears or axes close to hand. *The battle may have been a week ago, she thought quietly, but there has been fighting here, more recently than that.*

"Lady Sansa Stark of Winterfell!" the crier called, when the great doors of oak and iron opened. "For her half-brother, King Jon Snow of the North!"

The Great Hall. It had once been so familiar, now it felt so foreign. The rafters along the roof were charred – it looked like it had been burnt and then repaired. Once there had been eight long trestle tables that could seat five hundred people, but now those tables were gone and every man inside was standing up, and armed.

A hundred eyes were on her. She heard the mutters, but the cavernous hall still felt quiet. Her gaze turned upwards to the raised platform at the hall's far end, where her father had once supped with noble guests. The lord's table was gone, and now there were a score of savage figures that had to be wildling chieftains. There were few lords, but she did recognise Lord Greatjon Umber, who looked so much thinner, and darker, than her memories. His arms were folded, his face a scowl.

Looming over them all, there was only one who was sitting. *He is sitting on father's seat,* she realised suddenly. On Winterfell's throne of ironwood, weirwood and steel; a thing of silver and white and dull grey looming over the hall – the seat of the old Kings of Winter. He was sitting on her father's throne.

Her eyes focused solely on the dark figure, looking down on her. A figure with white hair, slouched on the weirwood seat, resting one cheek on a closed fist. Staring at her. *That is not Jon,* Sansa thought instantly. *Gods… It is an imposter stealing Jon's name.* For that moment, she wasn't sure whether to be horrified or relieved. She let nothing show on her face.

She stepped forward, walking the distance. Her eyes never left his, her mind reeling. So long had been spent preparing for this moment, bracing herself. *So a wildling king must have stolen Jon's identity to trick the northern lords into supporting him?* It made sense – Jon must have died at the Wall, few people would recognise Jon in any case, and claiming to be a bastard of Ned Stark gave the imposter some legitimacy.

*But that means he will likely have me killed if I expose him,* she realised. Perhaps this king was panicking, expecting that his ruse could now be foiled. Perhaps that was why his soldiers were so tense, holding their weapons so close. *He will expect me to call him a fake, to denounce him.*

*So what is his plan here? To kill me? To name me an imposter instead?*
She kept on walking towards the stranger, feeling the air stiffen around her. No, she thought. Neither of those options were very good. The Bastard King had already won. So what if I don't? What if I verify his identity instead, and greet him like a brother?

Sansa could pretend to greet him like a brother – she could even greet him with more kindness than she had ever shown the real Jon.

Her head spun, deliberating a hundred different possibilities with every step. Yes, Sansa thought. I will be useful to him. Telling the truth would gain her nothing, so she would have to go along with his ruse. She would treat as if he really were her brother, and he would pretend too. Sansa would become indispensable to the wildling king, the perfect way to maintain his act, so long as he treated her as if she was his kin.

He would become reliant on her, on her lie, and she would have power over him. She felt relieved – she felt like she had a plan, she felt she had control.

She walked closer, measuring the man up. His posture was slouched, but tensed and wary. His mouth pursed, his eyes narrowed. The white hair gave his dark eyes and pale skin a ghostly look. Definitely not Jon, Sansa thought surely. This wildling king is too old.

Her footsteps ticked across the hall. The King Snow wore black – a thick black shadowskin cloak and dark grey chainmail underneath. White hair against black clothes, clashing with her red hair against a white cloak. He is handsome, Sansa decided, in a grim and well-worn way. His face was too gaunt and his eyes too dark to be typically good-looking, but he had good cheeks and a strong chin. Maybe he could even look fair, if he smiled. Perhaps she'd be able to seduce him, but it was too soon to make that decision.

Sansa was already rehearsing what she would say. 'Jon! My brother, it's truly you!', perhaps, and then her voice would crack as if she was about to cry. She was still debating on whether she would break down in tears, or if she would rush to hug him. Or maybe she would bow, that might be better – the respectful, emotional sister. It was all about making the right impression, particularly to those watching.

She was close enough to see his eyes. He looked restless, with dark bags under his eyes and lines at the corners. He had grey eyes. Sansa paused, and a flicker of a frown fell over her face.

No, she thought firmly. The memory of the raven-haired youth flashed across her gaze. The hair, the face… it definitely wasn't Jon.

She stepped closer, trying to trace his features. No…

The King Snow stood upwards, staggering slightly. Her eyes glanced to his leg. He didn't step forward to meet her, but he bowed his head in a polite, respectful nod.

Jon?!

Sansa could only stare. Her whole body froze. Neither of them spoke. There was something in his gaze, as if he were greeting a ghost.

"Lady Stark," the king greeted, and his voice choked slightly. "Sansa."

Her mouth opened, and for once she didn't know how to reply. "You… Your Grace," Sansa stammered finally. She didn't bow.

That moment stretched out for what felt like an eternity. Neither of them said a word after that, just
looking at each other like strangers.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes:

Well, this chapter has been something of a pain to write. Originally, this chapter and the next were a single one but, for various reasons, I had to cut them into two. As such, expect chapter 36 to be coming very quickly.
Chapter 36

Jon

He broke his fast on dried, salted bacon, and a turnip he snatched from one of his men. Hardly the feast of kings, but it was all so hectic that Jon had to eat while walking.

Outside, around the steps of the Great Keep, he could see the castle stirring. Crowds of men were slowly moving through the main hall. Jon lingered at the edge of the balcony, half-hiding out of the way as he watched.

The stitches on his side were bleeding again. Jon could feel the blood welling in the wound, threatening to dribble down his torso, under the furs. His side felt fit to scream, every time he moved his leg.

There were footsteps behind him. Tormund Giantsbane walked with his arms folded, his white beard speckled with snow. "Snow!" Tormund called for him, keeping his voice low. "We're ready for you, Snow."


Tormund looked at him expectantly, but there was nothing more to be said. Jon was already walking away, wincing so badly with each step he walked lopsided. Tormund stuck closely by his side, heavy footsteps next to his. Ever since the battle, over the course of a long, long week, the number of men that Jon could actually rely on had fallen to single-digits.

The castle was simmering. Jon knew that Tormund's raiders would all be on high-alert, watching for any moves to cause disturbance, on any side. Jon just felt stiff as he limped down the steps.

Every man they passed had a white stone on his chest. Without the Dragonguard, Jon had been forced to rely on men of the Cult of the Dragon to secure the Great Keep and the godswood. It wasn't the most reliable protection, but it was the closest thing Jon had.

This has to be done now, he told himself. Even over a week after the Battle of the Snows, they were struggling to pick up the pieces.

The mood in the Great Hall was sombre, tense. He saw the Greatjon glowering at the edge of the throne, while Tormund took the other side. Jon needed Toregg's help just to climb up the stairs, and he couldn't help but breathe a deep sigh of relief when he removed the weight from his legs.

It was a sign of weakness, he knew. Jon was still injured, he hadn't slept in days, and the vultures were everywhere.

"Snow," the Greatjon muttered to him. "We need to—"

"Did you find them?" Jon said sharply.

Lord Umber hesitated. "Aye," he replied. "We got them."

"All of them?"
"They're in chains now."

"Then bring the first one in," Jon ordered.

The whole castle was still reeling from the battle, but Jon couldn't let the tensions simmer. Every man, every chieftain, highborn or commander that could still walk had crowded into the hall. He saw hundreds of eyes filling the hall and flooding the podiums, all staring at him.

The room was still. All those gazes, they felt accusing.

No, Jon thought. This has to be done now. They need to see justice.

His army had nearly been destroyed by sabotage, distrust and treachery. The recent White Harbour reinforcements helped, but tensions remained. The anger was still dangerously high, still volatile.

The guilty needed to be punished, that was certain. They needed order again. Jon had agreed to hold the trials in the way of the free folk – where the accused would be walked through a public forum, and the chieftain would pass judgement openly, before the whole clan. Everyone could air their grievances, witnesses could come forward, and justice would be done, for all to see.

Four men-at-arms pounded spears against stone. The doors opened, and Jon heard the rattle of chains as Robett Glover was walked through.

He was wearing chains, frogmarched at spearpoint, but he didn't lower his gaze. His brother, Galbart Glover, Master of Deepwood Motte, walked behind him. Galbart wasn't wearing chains, but the men-at-arms still shadowed him closely.

There was a long pause, as they stood before Jon. A few wildlings in the crowd jeered, but others hushed them silent. Robett met Jon's gaze, while Galbart was staring at the ground.


Both brothers had been accused, in days past, but Robett was the only one on trial now. He held himself well, for a man facing death. "Guilty, Your Grace," Robett said, his voice gruff and loud. Galbart's shoulders were shaking.

Jon wasn't surprised. There was little for him to deny, and scores of witnesses. Robett had been the commander of their outriders, and all the outriders had reported that Robett had deliberately sent them away, letting the Boltons strike without warning. Robett had claimed it had been the king's orders – for the scouts to move south urgently to search for a missing caravan. There had been nobody on the plains to blow the warhorns when the Bolton army came through.

Still. Justice had to be seen to be done, for all to see.

"You willingly and knowingly participated in the Bolton attack?" Jon demanded.

"I… I abused my duty. I was ordered to clear the scouts, and I did." His eyes were hard. "I stood back, but I did not raise my blade against any man. I had no part in the violence, I committed no murder."

"I do not see the difference. Men died by your actions. You must have known the ambush was coming, did you not?"
"Only hours before it arrived," Robett explained dourly. "There was another man, called himself Gregor, but others knew him by different names. I only knew that he worked for House Bolton. He was pretending to be one of your soldiers. He tapped me on the shoulder and ordered me to do it, and stood by acting like my guard as I did."

"You were not forced." That dark growl was the Greatjon, his eyes bulging. "Do not claim to be a victim here."

"I was not," Robett admitted. "I could have overpowered the man, or alerted others of him. And yet the Boltons had my wife and children, Your Grace. I received the first threat from him months ago – telling me they wouldn't be harmed so long as I followed instructions when they came. Otherwise, my wife Sybelle, my son Gawen, my daughter Erena – they would have been flayed alive."

Jon shifted in his seat, glaring. "That is your excuse, for condemning many more to certain death? You allowed the Bolton army to ambush us without warning – a warning that would have saved lives."

"Aye." He gulped. "And it did save lives. It saved my family."

There were rumbles in the crowd. Robett grit his teeth and pushed forward. "I did not think the ambush would be so bad! I expected a raiding party, or something that the bulwarks would have held against. I did not think the attack I allowed could have threatened us, not with the dragon."

"You believed treachery would be inconsequential?" The Greatjon stomped his foot. Others in the hall were muttering accusations too.

Robett nodded. "But that is an excuse. I am guilty – I knew the crime and I committed it." He took another deep breath. "And I would do so again. They honoured their deal. I thought my family would be doomed, but they are still alive."

Jon believed him. He held himself with honour – he had prepared and resigned himself to this. Jon looked to a northmen serjeant, and the man nodded. "We received word from Deepwood Motte," the serjeant admitted. "Sybelle, Gawen and Erena Glover have all been released unharmed. Roose Bolton did honour the deal." Damn him.

"Were you aware of any other traitors in the camp?" Jon demanded of Robett Glover.

"I was not. I thought I was the only one."

"And what of your brother?"

"He had naught to do with it." Robett's voice turned sharp. "Lord Bolton lied on that count. I hid the blackmail from Galbart, I was ashamed. My brother didn't know anything."

The letters that Lord Bolton had said otherwise, but they had found no witnesses to implicate the elder Glover brother as well. The parchments, the handwriting and the seal could well be forged. Lord Bolton had reason to lie, Jon reminded himself, to try and trick me into persecuting innocents as well.

The crowd was chanting. The northmen were more reserved in their judgement, but for the wildlings it was clear. Damn him, Jon cursed. It would be easier if Robett was cowardly, and yet he held himself with honour. Too many had died that night because of him, Jon couldn't do anything less. He knew the mood in his castle; there would be riots if he pulled back in judgement now.
"For the lives of your family, you knowingly condemned thousands of others. Robett Glover. I sentence you to death."

Galbart looked ready to fall apart, shaking and trying to restrain himself. There was no outburst, just a hard and grim nod from Robett.

An honourable sentence, Jon remembered saying those words. He would swing the blade himself, he had promised, and his family would be protected and provided for. Robett didn't respond.

"His brother is just as guilty as he is," Rattleshirt growled to Jon. "They planned it together, they must have. The man knows he's dead, but he can still lie to save his brother."

"We have no evidence against Galbart," Jon said. He turned to the men in the hall, and raised his voice slightly. "But neither will Galbart Glover walk free. He will remain in Winterfell, under supervision. Robett Glover's family will be brought to Winterfell too, to remain as hostages. I will take many of the lands sworn to Deepwood Motte, and give them to distinguished warriors of the free folk. House Glover will rue its betrayal, I promise you."

Rattleshirt was still fuming – the Lord of Bones had lost more men than anyone trying to hold the bulwarks against the surprise attack. Jon wondered how many others would agree with Rattleshirt's assessment of Galbart.

Jon just felt numb. That look in Galbart's eyes haunted him. Still, it wasn't over. No weakness, not now. The spears thudded again, and the next traitor was brought through.

Brandon Norrey of Clan Norrey still had defiance in his eyes, spitting against the men who escorted him. He was brought along with three of his sons, and two other leaders within Clan Norrey. One of the men spat "Fucking wildlings!" into the hall.

Jon had hoped Lord Norrey's sentence would be easier. Clan Norrey had worked with the Boltons more than most; helping to smuggle Bolton men in the camp. Several of Clan Norrey had dressed themselves in furs, pretending to be of Rattleshirt's warband, and they had executed the ambush against the giants. Afterwards, The Norrey had started screaming to the clansmen that the wildlings had betrayed them, and many otherwise loyal men had believed him.

His charges were levelled against him, and Brandon Norrey spat on the floor and said, "Aye, I did it."

"What did the Boltons offer you?" Jon demanded.

"Protection. The north," he turned to glare at the Greatjon. "We loved the Ned, we owed him much and more, but not this. Never this. You are all fools if you think those wildlings can be trusted. They are savages, rapers and murderers and you – Lord Umber, you should know that better than most."

"Just looking at some of Snow's savages sickens me," the Greatjon growled at the man. "But you're the goddamned fool, Norrey, if you think the Boltons are any better."

"This bastard, the Ned's little girl—!" The Norrey's eyes widened fit to bulging, he almost shrieked in fury. He struggled and writhed and spat curses until a man-at-arms laid him low, with a punch to the gut.

"I've heard enough," Jon announced, his voice hard. "For your crimes, Brandon Norrey of Clan Norrey, you are sentenced to death. I declare your clan attainted. Your sons shared in your crime, and will share your fate."
His sons screamed protests, but they would share their father's sentence. They'd willingly assisted in their father's betrayal. Their entire clan would be stripped of their holdings, their fief given to the free folk. The Norrey didn't flinch when Jon passed his judgement, but his sons wept. "And what of his crimes!" He slammed his finger at Rattleshirt. "How can you punish me, you bastard, and turn a blind eye on the crimes of those around you?"

"The free folk have renounced their old ways," Jon said, raising his voice to cut off any defiance, "Their days of raiding smallfolk will never come again, and they received amnesty for all past crimes when they crossed the Wall."

"You say that?" The Norrey howled, stepping forward. The men-at-arms had to stop him. "You dare to say that! My daughters! Two little girls of twelve and eight!" He tried to lunge forward, squirming against the grip. "They were raped and mutilated by a *wildling in an armour of bones!*

Jon paused, posture cracking slightly. By his left, Rattleshirt's eyes narrowed, but he didn't object to the accusation. That was the reason Clan Norrey had been against him from the start? *Dammit. I did not know that.*

*It can't make a difference,* Jon told himself. There was nothing he could do. Nearly all of the wildlings raiders had kills to their name, and were many who'd stolen women. *If I punish Rattleshirt, I'd have to punish a thousand others.*

Still, Jon's eyes lingered on Rattleshirt for just a moment longer. "… They received full amnesty," Jon said finally.

"YOU BLOODY BASTARD!" Brandon Norrey shrieked. "You fucking bloody bastard! They were my girls! It only happened a year ago! *He* butchered them! *He's wearing their fucking ribcages around his fucking waist!*"

Jon winced. Rattleshirt's armour, Jon remembered vaguely, was made out of the bones of the people that he'd killed.

They had to drag The Norrey away, still spitting curses as his sons struggled, or wept. *His clansmen will have to stew in the prison cells,* Jon decided. The mountain clans were different, their loyalty to their lord was stronger than most – a loyalty more akin to that of family, rather than house. Jon would take the guilty's heads, but others could well kill themselves trying to take vengeance. Still, there was nothing else he could do. Clan Norrey had knowingly, wilfully, betrayed them all, and they would pay the price. From root to stem, if need be.

The Greatjon had to excuse himself, he was shaking with rage. The Lord of Bones smiled hesitantly. "Huh. Never knew who their father was," Rattleshirt admitted sheepishly, before resigning himself to the very back of the room. Jon's glare followed him. *Damn him.*

The others in the clan, first cousins and lesser relations, were questioned further, cross-referencing with the stories of other traitors. They answered the same as Robett did; none of them knew of any other traitors in the camp – as far as each had been aware, they had been the only Bolton spies. A hundred little mice, scurrying about, each thinking that they were alone in the world.

It wasn't over. The spears thumped again, and more traitors were brought out.

Lord Cregan Karstark was brought out, even though he was one who Lord Bolton hadn't named. Cregan Karstark stood in front of the hall, and Jon called for testimonies from men who had been near Karstark during the battle.
Nobody was quick to step forward. As far anybody could tell, the Karstark men hadn't betrayed them. When the battle happened, the Karstark men had fought 'loyally' to the coalition.

*Of course they did,* Jon thought. *Cregan Karstark's loyalty is clearly tenuous, but Roose Bolton would have known we'd be suspicious of him.* The Boltons hadn't even tried to bring House Karstark into their scheme.

Jon dismissed the unsupported charges, and Cregan left without a sentence. Still, Cregan glared at Jon darkly as he was walked away. Arnolf Karstark, Cregan's father, had fought and died for House Bolton during the battle. *Cregan Karstark may not be a traitor, not this time,* Jon thought sourly, *but he's no friend. Lord Karstark's guard won't be disappearing anytime soon.*

Four more 'trials' followed; each one of them very guilty. Lord Ethan Whitehill stood accused of smuggling Bolton men into the camp and sneaking supplies through White Harbour; Mandon Slate, heir to Blackpool, and his men were accused of setting fires in the camp, Lord Hoster Moss accused of assaulting free folk patrols, and Old Torghen Flint accused of deliberately spreading discord.

Lord Moss was the only one who tried to deny his charges, claiming he never knew what his men were doing. The others pled the same as Robett when they admitted to the charges; that they didn't know that anybody else was involved in the plan. Roose Bolton recruited traitors to raise havoc in the camp, and didn't tell any of them who else was in the scheme; none of them that could point the finger at anybody else.

It had been nothing short of masterful, the way the Boltons had organised them.

And each one had their own reasons; Lord Whitehill was fuelled by suspicion of Jon and the new religion that the wildlings brought, Mandon Slate feared for his family, while Old Torghen Flint had just spent too long fighting wildlings to ever abide them. Not a single one had betrayed them for greed or personal ambition. They had been fuelled by fear – or by duty, as they understood it.

Jon shifted in his seat. The sentences would remain the same; they would all be executed. Regardless of their reasons, it could not be forgiven.

"There were more than this, you know that, right?" Tormund muttered to Jon quietly after Lord Moss was dragged away weeping. "I don't know who, but I was in that camp. There were far more saboteurs in that camp than what we're seeing now."

"I know," Jon replied, his voice a whisper. "Not all the betrayers are with us; there are more trials to be had. Ondrew Locke, Malcolm Woolfield, Mors Umber and Lyessa Flint must stand trial." Jon shook his head, remembering that night. "And other traitors likely would have died in the snows. We can only guess how many."

Still, they had only managed to 'catch' the traitors that were very obviously guilty – so many others had managed to slip away in the confusion. *If there aren't witnesses that can finger them, Jon knew, then everybody else will deny being involved to their dying breath.*

Roose Bolton knew it too. *The letters.* Jon suspected that Lord Bolton had honestly confessed as to who the actual traitors were, but had also thrown a few other names in there for good measure. Many more, perhaps. Enough to muddy the waters, to make everything a bit more doubtful and to spread as much suspicion as possible. If Jon were to punish everyone that Lord Bolton had named, there would hardly be an army left to command.

Trying to sort out the lies from the truth was the hardest part. *Damn him. Damn him.*
Perhaps harsh interrogation of the maesters would yield some answers, but Jon had his doubts. Everything he had found so far was indicating a higher influence coordinating them all. Strangely, Jon thought of Luwin. *Would he have opposed me too*?

It was already getting late, but he could hardly tell through the thick storm clouds that were beginning to rumble once more outside. Jon was sitting tense in his seat, so upright he might snap. He had to force himself to stay stoic.

The spears thumped again, and the last traitor was brought out. Jon's stomach lurched, while the men in the hall shifted.

Lady Leona Manderly was weeping, tears staining her yellow dress. She was a plump, homely woman with blond hair that was now more like a straw heap. Her eyes were red, bloodshot. She looked so haggard, her face somehow both flushed and ghostly pale with snot dribbling down her chin. She could barely breathe, she had to be half-carried, half-pushed. Last he had saw her, Lady Leona had been poised and well-dressed, however nervous, but now she looked like a wreck.

Both her daughters, Wynafyrd and Wylla, entered with her – the daughters weren't on trial, only the mother was. Wynafyrd, sharp-eyed with long braided hair, supported her mother as they walked, arms wrapped around her mother's. The younger daughter, Wylla, followed behind from a short distance. From the red in their eyes and their cheeks, both girls had been crying.

*I had to do it*, Jon cursed. He had already promised that all traitors among them would be tried publicly. And then another traitor arrived along with the convoy from White Harbour, the day before. *This one is a mother where the others were fathers, but it can't make a difference.*

"Lady Leona Manderly, of House Woolfield," Jon said, taking a deep breath. *Give me strength*. The hall turned quieter that it had been. "You are accused of treason and conspiring with the enemy. How do you plead?"

She was too busy sobbing, her daughter had to shake her to respond, before croaking out the words. "G-Guilty, Your Grace."

They would never have even discovered Leona's treachery, if she hadn't broken down and confessed it all herself in a fit of weeping panic, in the aftermath of the assault on White Harbour. She had been working with Lord Bolton from the New Castle itself. Ever since the Manderly maester was arrested, Lady Leona and the castellan had taken over the maester's duties at the ravenry. And then, every letter that the city had sent out, Lady Leona made a copy of, and relayed it to Winterfell.

The Boltons had a spy in White Harbour all along, passing information straight to Winterfell.

*And of all the names that Lord Bolton had admitted to, Leona's hadn't been among them, Jon remembered. Lord Bolton hadn't given her up. Perhaps he thought we would never have believed it.*

"Tell me what you did, Lady Leona," Jon ordered, though he already knew.

"I…” Leona sniffled. "I forwarded ravens to Winterfell, Your Grace."

"How many?"

"I do not… I don't know. As many that concerned you, I was told to forward anything that could be useful," she croaked. "The castellan would log the parchments, I made a copy."
"You were working with the Boltons?" She shakily nodded. "Did Roose Bolton approach you with a deal? Did they hold a hostage over you?"

She shook her head, still sniffing. "I approached him. I sent a message to Winterfell."

There were stirs in the crowd. "Why?"

"I… I…" the woman looked like ruin, barely able to stammer out the words. "I just wanted…" she gulped, between sobs. "I wanted to protect m-my family."

The Greatjon stepped forward, looming imposingly. "You fucking what?"

Her eldest daughter, Wynafryd, moved to cover her mother against the Greatjon defiantly, as if the Greatjon could charge the woman at any moment. Wylla just lingered back, her eyes wide and twitching. "It's…" Leona stammered from behind her, looking everywhere but at Jon. "You don't understand! It was only a few letters!"

"Those letters gave away all of our troop movements, my lady," Jon said darkly. "The Boltons knew exactly when and where we were coming."

Even from the beginning, Lord Bolton had known straight away of absolutely every alliance Jon was trying to make, every troop movement, every order he had given. At a certain point, Jon thought fouilly, it must have become easy for him.

"I…" she was gasping. Her head was swivelling desperately, looking for help from the crowd, but finding none. All glared at her. The air was thick with condemnation. "It was… my husband. My children. I… I…" Tears in her eyes. Jon wished he could scream at her to stop crying and face him. "I didn't want…"

"Your husband was with that bloody army!" a White Harbour knight shouted to mutters of agreement. Ser Mardrick, from a branch of House Manderly. Jon couldn't bring himself to speak. "You put him at risk!"

"No, I… no…" Leona looked ready to keel over. "I made a deal," she gasped finally. "He promised he wouldn't hurt my husband… my family… if I helped him."

Damn him. DAMN HIM.

Wylla Manderly started trembling, fists clenched. Voices murmured accusingly. It was a lame excuse, but Jon knew the real reason she had done it. "You don't understand!" Leona wailed, after a passing of moments. She was weeping, insensate. "They said that he would be safe, but they said he would be safe with Robb Stark too! I lost my husband for nearly a year at that horrible place – he could have died at the Twins! My girls lost their father! I couldn't, I couldn't take it…"

"Mother…" Wynafryd whispered, moving to hold her. Wylla didn't step close, she didn't budge. The daughters were both crying, but their expressions were so different.

"It was only some letters," Leona cried. "I didn't think it would make any difference – not with a dragon, we were going to win regardless – but just in case!" She gasped for breath. "Just in case we didn't win. Just in case the… the dragon betrayed us…!" She shrieked the words, finally managing to stare at Jon. Her eyes were filled with pure fear. "They said that the wildlings couldn't be trusted, and I… Lord Wyman was gambling everything, but I… just in case it didn't go, I wanted to give my family a safety net!"

The fool. Damn him and damn her. "That's all it was, just a safety net. Just in case. But it didn't
really matter!" Leona insisted. "It shouldn't have made any difference at all, because, well, the
dragon!"

*I saw her, Jon thought softly. I saw her, I noticed how disturbed she was. I was just too busy to even
focus on her. Leona had thought victory with Sonagon was guaranteed, so therefore her own
betrayal would be inconsequential. And Lord Bolton would have encouraged that mindset, wouldn't he?

*If that was the attitude within my army, then no wonder Lord Bolton screwed me.*

"They were burning septs!" Leona pleaded, her voices nearly nonsensical through the panic. "The
wildl– the free folk were burning septs and worshipping dragons! They said that they were
sacrificing men to the dragon, bleeding men to the trees, and there were so many horror stories,
and…" She collapsed to the ground, taking deep gulps of air like she could barely breathe. "I just
wanted to protect my husband!"

Jon winced. Wynafryd moved to support her mother, but something snapped in the air.

"You killed him!" Wylla Manderly screamed, recoiling back. She was pointing her arm at her own
mother, her slight frame quivering. "You killed father, you killed father!"

Leona Manderly stiffened, trembling, as she stared wide-eyed at her daughter. Leona would have
fallen to her knees, if not for Wynafryd holding her half-upright. The mother was sobbing, and
Wylla was still screaming. "YOU KILLED FATHER, YOU–!"

"Take her away!" Jon slammed his fist on the throne's arm.

Wylla was shrieking all the while that Toregg dragged her from the Great Hall. The young
woman's red and wide eyes locked on Jon, thrashing in grief and rage. "Kill her, kill her, KILL
HER…!"

The doors slammed shut, and Jon could only feel a bone-deep exhaustion, while the men in the
Great Hall muttered amongst themselves, a low chorus of voices.

Leona Manderly and her daughters had only discovered that Ser Wylis was dead after they arrived
in Winterfell. They had come to bring their mother to trial, and discovered on arrival that their
father was dead. Nobody had put it to writing, the maesters were all in chains. No one had even
told Lord Wyman yet.

Jon's head felt like it was spinning. *Focus. Do not let yourself be moved just because she's crying.*
"Did Ser Wylis know of your actions?" Jon demanded, but she was on the floor in hysterics.
"Answer the question; did Ser Wylis know?"

"No! He would never, he…" Her voice stammered, breaking down into wheezy gasps and sobs.
"… I didn't mean… I never wanted… Oh gods… I… I… I'm sorry, I never wanted…!"

"Did you ever meet with anyone else, any other conspirators, anyone working with the Boltons?"

She shook her head frantically. "*It was only letters, it was only…!*

"Did you ever send letters, anything concerning us, to anywhere other than Winterfell?* Like
Braavos, or King's Landing?* He could feel the question churning in his gut, so violently he wanted
to scream. *Who else was Roose working with?*

She shook her head, sobbing madly, and Jon stiffened. *She knew nothing. She was just a tool.*
The only sound in the room were her sobs. Nobody was chanting, not for her. She's a fool, Jon cursed. A traitor, but not a malicious one. Still, Leona's treachery had been more damaging than many of the others he had judged. Lord Bolton could never have planned his assault without her.

"… I cannot make final judgement at this time," Jon said finally. "I will withhold a sentence and deliberate for the time being. Lady Leona, you are excused for now. You will stay here, in the Great Keep, under guard."

She was such a wreck that the men had to carry her out. Wynafyrd's glare never left Jon's eyes. Even when all the others were moving away, the daughter of White Harbour, and new heir of the house, walked forward, and stood before Jon's throne. "I will not condone my mother's actions, Your Grace," Wynafryd said quietly, her voice thin, like a thread at the edge of breaking. "But you will not execute her."

"Lady Leona committed treason," Jon replied coldly. "Thousands may be dead because of her. Do you expect me to forgive that because she is a woman?"

"I expect you to treat her kindly because she is my mother." With that, Wynafryd pulled up her dress and walked away, her jaw clenched.

Jon could feel the weight of the eyes of those men, still in the hall, weighing on him. Judging him. "Lady Manderly," Jon called after her. She stilled, without turning. "Your grandfather sent your mother here to die. She was sent to Winterfell to be tried for treason, and Winterfell's punishment for treason is death." She turned then, eyes wide, staring at him as though she'd never seen him before.

No weakness, Jon reminded himself. All your fault, a mad voice howled.

"Even with your defence of her, even if your grandfather were here to speak for her, your mother's crimes are clear." Jon warned. "I will deliberate on a final judgement, I will speak with her further, but she will pay a price for her treason."

"I simply…" She gulped, nearly stammering. He could see the sweat beading on her brow, the paleness of her skin. Her whole body began to tremble. "I merely ask… Your Grace, that the punishment not be death. That… is all."

Jon slowly nodded, attempting to keep his voice hard. It was… difficult. He could feel his throat beginning to go hoarse from overuse. "You are dismissed, Lady Manderly." The hall slowly started to file away, and few left feeling satisfied. Jon just left numb. I will have to behead over a score of men on the morn. He would kill more men, so many more men in the executioner's yard than he had during the actual battle.

Sooner or later, Jon thought, I will have to pen a letter coursed for White Harbour, to inform Lord Wyman of his only son's death. He honestly couldn't even imagine the lord's reaction. His memories flashed, and he remembered the breaking of the Frey delegation, in the middle of the Merman's Court.

Jon could have screamed.

"Rattleshirt," Jon called to the wildling, one of the last men remaining in the hall.

"Aye?"

For a moment, Jon just stared at him, eyes glancing over suit of bones. "We will… speak with the
other prisoners after the morn on the morrow. I want you there."

The Lord of Bones just grinned in a sickly way, and shuffled away.

Jon dropped out of that horrible weirwood throne and limped away as fast as his lopsided gait would take him, wincing with every step. Jon limped quickly up the stairs, Toregg on guard, passing the bloodstains on the walls.

He retreated to the lord's solar – his father's solar – but it wasn't over. It was already dusk, and the castle was still hectic. He heard the angry barks and snaps outside as the accused was escorted through the keep. There were knocks on the doors behind him, demanding attention. One more urgent issue to see to. **One more judgement I must give**, he thought hollowly, **one more traitor.**

Lord Bolton had kept a tankard of mulled wine under the desk. Jon yanked it and took a large gulp, just to calm his nerves. It tasted foul, nearly made him gag. "Bring him in," he ordered to Toregg, without turning.

This was one trial that Jon didn't dare hold in public, this one he had tried to keep as quiet as possible.

The Weeper barged through the solar door, spitting curses. Jon could feel his glare on his back, and he slowly turned. Tormund's men had escorted the Weeper, and the wildling warlord looked furious. Jon gave Tormund a look, and the door was shut.

"Boy," the Weeper spat, snow still coating his furs. "What the bloody hell is this?"

"Weeper." **No weakness. Not here.** "You stand accused of murder."

Behind him, Ser Alek of White Harbour crept through the doorway, his face pale and his eyes wide as he stared at the Weeper. The young knight was trembling slightly, Jon noticed.

The Weeper only snorted. "Oh bugger off, Snow."

Tormund and Jon shared a dark look."Do you deny it?" Jon growled. "You murdered Ser Wylis Manderly and over a dozen of his knights, Weeper."

"Snow," the Weeper said, like a talking to a child. "I murdered a lot of people that night. I helped **win the bloody battle for you.**"

"There is killing, Weeper," Jon said. "And then there is murder."

Still, it was true – the Weeper had more than distinguished himself on the battlefield. Jon had heard that the Weeper nigh-singlehandedly broke the cavalry charge, and took their commander's, Ser Walder River's, head himself. He'd been one of the first men to breach through the gates of Winterfell. **And yet, still, he committed murder too.**

Ser Alek was standing as far away from the Weeper as the room would allow. The knight of the Dragonguard had been a wreck ever since the battle, ever since he had been the only survivor of that boathouse. The only Manderly man to survive, and the Weeper only spared him because Ser Alek wore a white dragon on his hauberk. "You took his head!" Ser Alek shouted. "Ser Wylis didn't do anything to you, he wasn't a traitor and **you took his head!**"

The Weeper snarled, snapping around. "I could have taken yours too, runt," he snapped. "Don't make me regret that one."
"Enough!" Jon barked, but his eyes were on the Weeper. He didn't have his scythe, and that was a small mercy. Jon couldn't even imagine how hard it must have been for Tormund and the Greatjon to confiscate the Weeper's weapon. "Tell me why, Weeper? Explain this to me."

The Weeper shrugged. Not even a hint of guilt. "I thought he was an enemy. I'm still not sure that he wasn't."

"Ser Wylis did not betray us."

"So you say. But his bloody wife did, didn't she?"

"There is no evidence against Ser Wylis." Jon's voice was a growl. He stepped forward, meeting the Weeper's mad eyes. "The Manderly knights fought loyally. White Harbour is our strongest ally. Why did you do it, Weeper? Walk me through it."

The Weeper's lips twisted. The whole room was tense; only Jon, Tormund and Ser Alek facing off against the Weeper. "It was a bloody battle, Snow," he said after a pause. "There were assassins, it was an ambush. You were missing, maybe dead – I didn't know. I saw there was a battle, and then folk screaming that the kneelers had betrayed us. So I grabbed my raiders, and I marched into the boathouse to demand what was going on."

Nobody spoke. The Weeper grunted. "That fat kneeler – Ser Wylis – he was there. His guards drew their swords when they saw me, but I decided to let that one pass. I walked straight up to him and demanded to know what was bloody going on, and then that fat man goes on and gives me this bloody smug, smartass reply."

"It wasn't a smug reply!" Ser Alek cried. "Wylis didn't know – he was actually asking! He said 'what are you talking about?!'"

"Well, it sounded smug to me," the Weeper grumbled. "At that point, I figured these kneelers were clearly responsible, so I handled it."

Jon stared speechless. "So… So Ser Wylis picked a poor choice of words," Jon said slowly, "and you decided to kill him for it."

"They could have been traitors, Snow," the Weeper said, with another shrug. "I didn't have a chance to find out for sure."

"They were not traitors, Weeper, and you murdered the heir to bloody White Harbour!"

"Fine." The raider rolled his eyes. "Let's say I believe that. Whatever. It was a battle, Snow, a bad one. Sometimes it happens. I'd reckon every single warrior out there has seen men stab at their allies in the dark, or shoot arrows at the wrong side. Sometimes you just get confused."

Jon wasn't even sure how to reply to that one. His mouth stammered. The thought of Lady Leona's desperate gulps for breath flashed before his eyes. "How many men died?" Jon asked finally, turning to Ser Alek.

"Fourteen," Ser Alek said instantly, glowering. "All knights of White Harbour, Ser Wylis' personal guard. There were six other raiders with the Weeper, but he still killed nine himself. He sliced them apart singlehanded."

"Aye," the Weeper agreed. "Those guys were fucking soft summer pansies."

Wylis' guard would have been the heirs, the second sons, of the most powerful Manderly
bannermen. Ser Alek looked, half-crazed, ready to snap. Jon's head was spinning. "Are we done here, Snow?" the Weeper demanded. "I got a warband ready and waiting for me down there, and there are bunch of fleeing men that I ain't planning on letting get away."

"Weeper…" Jon said blankly, almost disbelieving. All our food, our weapons, our supplies, our allies… The wealthiest family in the north. "Can you truly not see how much of a problem this is?"

"I don't see a problem at all," the Weeper grunted. "If that fat fool's fatter father wants to take vengeance against me, then fine – let him try. I'll go to that bloody castle myself and explain why that'd be a poor idea."

Ser Alek looked horrified. He turned to Jon, begging. "Your Grace! He was the lord's son, my liege lord! I swore loyalty to you, but I swore myself to House Manderly too, and he…!" Ser Alek gulped. "Lord Wyman will demand – he deserves – justice!"

Jon hesitated. Damn him. "Ser…" he said slowly. "… there was a lot of chaos in that camp. The enemies deliberately spread discord. The Weeper was not the only man who turned his blade against others in the heat of the moment."

By the gods… Would my father curse me for saying those words?

"It… it was murder!" Ser Alek stammered, appalled.

"It was bloody war," the Weeper scoffed. "I mean, 'murder'? What a load of fucking kneeler shit. There were a lot of sons that died in those bloody snows, are you going to demand 'justice' for all of them?"

Jon turned to him. "Weeper," he warned. "You are not helping your case here. Have more respect, show more remorse."

He spat on the floor. Jon twitched. "Bugger that. I've been real good to you, Snow. I've been loyal, I've fought for you. Ever since I met you in those woods, I've been working with you – you owe me for that. You promised the free folk that you'd take us south and protect us, and there's me keeping the others to their fealty too." He stepped forward. "Was I wrong?"

Damn him. Damn them all.

Ser Alek looked between them, agape mouth agape. "There must be justice. I…" He stammered, with another gulp. "I demand trial by combat, Your Grace." The knight turned, trying to face off against the Weeper. "I made the accusation, and I will stand as House Manderly's champion. I will fight to avenge Ser Wylis."

The Weeper stopped, and the guffawed. "Aye? Alright, aye!" the raider barked. "Alright, I'm happy with that, runt. Give me my scythe and let's deal with this one quickly."

Jon could have groaned. "Ser Alek," he said lowly. "Please retire to your quarters."

"Your Grace–"

"This matter will be resolved later. Leave."

Ser Alek looked like he had been slapped, but he turned away. Jon was pacing, stepping back and forth across the solar as he cradled his head in his hands. Damn him. "If that boy wants to die for his dead friend, then I'm happy for it," the Weeper called.
"Ser Wylis had a wife, Weeper," Jon replied tiredly. The day had drained his strength. "Two daughters."

"Lots of folk have daughters, ain't nothing special about that," the Weeper grunted, "and everybody dies occasionally, no need to make a big fuss over it."

Jon stiffened. "Leave."

His hands were shaking. Damn him, Jon cursed. Damn him and damn them all. Damn myself too.

The Weeper barged out the solar. Tormund lingered, looking at Jon cautiously. Jon didn't even know what to say.

"Every man has a right to justice," Tormund said, breaking the silence. "If the fat lord objects, let him take it against Weeper. Trial by combat, you call it? The free folk way is similar enough, when you get down to it. If the young boy wants to fight, then let him."

"The Weeper would win, Tormund," Jon groaned. "The Weeper is one of the best fighters I have ever known. He's the only man I know of to survive trading blows against a white walker." Myself included. "The Weeper will cut down Ser Alek in a heartbeat, and that would be salt in Lord Wyman's wound."

Tormund didn't disagree. The wildling hesitated. "How many men follow the Weeper?" Tormund asked finally.

Jon knew what he was really asking; how much of a problem could the Weeper be? "I don't know," Jon replied honestly. "He commanded over four thousand raiders at one point, but I don't know how many still follow him. But it's more than that – there were a lot of the free folk who were unhappy when I forced their fealty. There were many that only ever chose to follow me because the Weeper did it first. Anybody who doesn't trust me, trusts the Weeper. He's a very influential figure among the raiders."

"How influential?" Tormund pressed.

"I don't know," he admitted. And I don't want to test it, either.

Jon's hands were shaking, his world strained, his body raw. The stress he felt – physical and emotional – had never felt so hard.

Finally, Jon had to ask, "How many men know of Ser Wylis' murder?"

Tormund paused. "Well..." he paused, considering the words carefully. "The Weeper's raiders are the only witnesses alive who saw the deed. And that Ser Alek of course." A moment of hesitation. "Lots of rumours are going around about it, though – but I don't know how many could actually say for certain."

Jon felt like a bastard for even thinking those thoughts.

"I need time to think," Jon said finally, pushing himself to his feet and hobbling to the door.

"Hells, you've been running yourself ragged," Tormund grunted. "How bout some rest instead?"

"I'm fine, I just--" he stopped and winced, cursing slightly as he jerked his leg too fast. The stitches, Jon cursed. The stab wound from the assassin's blade on his lower torso was not healing well. It needed rest and recuperation, but Jon had none to spare. He hadn't even been able to eat enough.
Jon's jaw clenched, his body staggering against the doormake.

"Dammit, Snow." Tormund moved towards him, as if Jon might topple. "Rest yourself."

"I'm fine!" Jon snapped clutching the doormake. "I just need--" Jon hesitated, and then relented. "I need a walking stick, Tormund – can you have one of your men fetch one?"

*And just hope that nobody sees me limping around like a cripple.* Jon's command was hanging by a thread as it was, the sight that their king might be lame could certainly snap it.

Not long afterwards, and Jon was hobbling up the stairs of the west wing – past the old rooms where the Stark children had once roamed. His cane thumped against the steps, tapping with each step. There had been corpses even here, and black drag marks were the soldiers had pulled the bodies down the stairs.

The thought of Leona Manderly's red and weeping face flashed before his eyes. He wondered how many of his men were ruthless enough to demand a death sentence for a grieving widow, and then he tried to imagine himself swinging down the blade…

The ruins of the West Tower weren't far from here, and the bedchamber where Arya had tried to hide while the wildlings stormed the keep…

It was all too much.

"Dammit!" Jon screamed to the empty halls. "Dammit! Dammit!"

His fists collided against the stone walls, so hard it hurt. He kept on punching until his knuckles were bloody, and the pain started to numb.

He could have torn this whole cursed castle down with his bare hands, and it wouldn't be enough. It wasn't enough.

The winds were outside were still fierce, and from the great keep it sounded like Ramsay Snow's ghostly laughter shaking the castle. Jon could feel it ringing in his ears, Ramsay's blade against his neck…

That moment in the snow. He relived it a hundred times. The images flashed before his eyes, all vivid in red and black. Jon kept on punching the wall.

Finally, Jon stopped, picked himself off the floor again, and kept on limping down the corridor.

He headed towards Sansa's old room, the chambers on the far end. Under Bolton occupation, it had been held by Lady Walda Bolton, but then it became another infirmary. Jon's hands were still shaking, he had to force himself into the room. Val.

Jon walked in and saw Val lying unconscious on bloodied sheets, her breaths hoarse and shallow. Exactly where he had left her. Val's skin was milky pale. The room stank of dried blood.

*It was the cold,* Jon thought. The prolonged exposure, bleeding out in the elements, threatened her almost as much as the blade had. Severe shock, the maester, the only one they still dared to trust, had called it. Val had been alive when they found them in the snows, but she still hadn't woken up yet.

Ramsay's blade had sliced her from shoulder downwards, severing straight through her right breast, hacking into the shoulderbone. Mutilated skin had been stitched together, but it still looked as bad
a wound as any Jon had seen. He could see the ugly gash, the tear under the bloodied sheets, like a solid chunk out of her shoulder. The maester hadn't been able to say if she'd survive, but then warned that she could well lose the arm even if she did. An infection now would kill her as surely as any sword, if the hypothermia didn't first.

Jon had never seen Val so frail. She was always so bold, so fierce, so strong. Lying on the bed now, she was a pale and weakened thing.

Val had been awake but near-delirious for a while; moaning in pained fever dreams. She had been made to fall unconscious, as drank of the scant few precious stores of milk of the poppy, and the maester stitched together her hacked flesh. Jon hadn't even been able to talk to her, unable to form any words.

She had been barely clinging to life for over a week, yet Jon had only visited her four times. Jon had to force himself, drag his legs through the corridor, just to come to her bedside, because it hurt so much.

"She's alive," Jon told himself. Val was breathing and Ramsay was dead in the snow. Still, no matter how much he reminded himself, it didn't feel like much of a victory.

"I'm sorry," a voice said quietly, from behind. "I didn't know what other room to go to."

Jon didn't jump at the sound, but his shoulder stiffened. He turned to see Sansa, sitting upright and alert behind the doorway. Her eyes were on his, and then slowly looking up and down, between Val and him.

They looked at each other like strangers, tensing in each other's presence. Every time he saw her, Jon's instinctual reaction was to think of Lady Stark, her mother. They looked so alike it was jarring.

Sansa. Perhaps it is a trade – I lost one sister, but the gods returned to me another, he thought. I lost the little sister I loved and played with, in return for the sister that shunned me. It was a cruel thought, but he was feeling too bitter to care.

She was looking at him, waiting for a reply. It was the first time that Jon had even been alone with Sansa, and only the third that he had seen her since she had arrived in Winterfell two days ago. Everything had been so busy, so urgent, that there had never been a moment. Or maybe I just didn't want to face her.

Jon blinked. It was dusk. She was in Val's room, Sansa's old room. Sansa hadn't been assigned new chambers. Another of the many things that he had let pass into oversight.

"It's… it's fine." Jon didn't shake his head. He didn't know what to say to her. "Where is the maester?"

"He went for some more milk of the poppy," she explained. "The guards followed him."

"Ah." The single word hung in the air. Maester Henly was a young maester with honest features, the only one that Jon had been forced to trust so he could treat Val, but every move the maester made was still done under escort, and watched.

"I was told to keep the fires warm for her." Sansa's eyes drifted towards to the unconscious woman. "She is… Lady Val, yes?"

A nod. "Just Val."
"You were close." It wasn't a question, but Jon nodded again. Her eyes slightly widened. "Oh. I'm sorry."

"She's clinging on." His voice was low. *I couldn't even come to her bedside.*

There was a long, long silence.

Sansa was so, so different to what he remembered. He remembered a young girl full of polite courtesies, who loved to sing, loved to dance, who longed for all the comforts of a southron lady. She loved the harvest feasts, the masked balls, the mummer's shows. The woman before him was... harder, more jaded, with sharper eyes and fewer smiles. Her hair was shorter and darker, worn downwards rather than in a braid.

The eyes were the most unnerving – it was like Jon half-expected to hear Catelyn Stark's cold, chiding voice every time Sansa spoke.

*I never expected to see her again.* Somehow, he didn't think she expected him either.

The only sound in the room was crackle of the flames, and the wheeze of Val's unconscious breaths.

Her gaze was guarded, suspicious. He noticed how she always kept two steps between them, as if he might lunge at her at any moment. "Tell me something, Your Grace," Sansa said finally. "I spent a full day explaining myself to Lord Umber and the others. They demanded to know everything about me, for me to describe everything that happened at King's Landing. Even now, some still call me an imposter, a traitor, or Lady Lannister."

"When things go wrong, when the unexpected happens, people look for someone to blame," Jon said lowly. "Tensions are high."

"They are," Sansa agreed. "I came prepared for it, since I knew they'd be suspicious. And yet you never questioned me at all."

"I did not."

"Why is that, King Snow?"

*Because you look just like her. It was like seeing a ghost.* "You are my sister, Lady Stark," Jon said instead. "We grew up together."

"We did. And yet this is already the longest conversation I can ever recall us having," Sansa agreed. "Do not feel obligated to pretend otherwise. I do not expect warm feelings from you."

For a second, he was caught off-guard with the bluntness. They had been estranged as children, distant, but never that cold. Jon blinked. "Then why are you here?"

A humourless ghost of smile passed across her face. "Where else should I be?"

Jon stopped and stared. "What happened to you?" he asked finally, "Sansa?"

"You first," she challenged, and then hesitated, "Jon."

He paused, and then scoffed as he sat down on a chair by Val's bedside. Slowly, hesitantly, he began to explain. He told her about joining the Night's Watch, about taking the black, about the Great Ranging. He explained about Craster's Keep, the Fist of the First Men, about meeting Qhorin
Halfhand and joining his expedition to scout out Mance's army. He talked encountering Rattleshirt's men, being ordered by Qhorin to abandon his cloak, to infiltrate the enemy's army. He told her about the white walkers attacking them at the Frostfangs.

Perhaps Sansa didn't believe him, but there wasn't a flicker of doubt or surprise on her face as he mentioned the Others. She was too guarded to let any emotion through. Jon didn't mention anything about Ygritte.

When it came to Sonagon, he became more vague. He didn't want to speak of the undead ranger, or the greenseer, or the children of the forest. He only told her the broad terms; of uniting the free folk, the attack at Hardhome, of flying the dragon over the Wall at Eastwatch.

Sansa just stopped and listened. The hours ticked by, the logs burnt.

It was the hour of the ghosts when Jon finally went quiet, and it was her turn to speak. Her voice was low, soft in the still air. She told him of going to King's Landing, of the Hand's Tourney, of father's sudden decision to flee the capital and then King Robert's death in a hunting accident. The Stark men murdered, Ned Stark imprisoned as a traitor, Arya disappearing, and Sansa begging for mercy for father's life. And then Joffrey taking their father's head, on the steps of the Sept of Baelor.

Her voice didn't even waver. After that, it was the Battle of the Blackwater, then Queen Cersei's madness and being married to the Imp, and then Joffrey's wedding. Being smuggled to the Vale by Lord Baelish, sheltered by her aunt until Lysa was murdered, engaged to Harry the Heir and then her betrothed murdered when she was kidnapped. Ser Jorah Mormont rescued her, fleeing across the Bite…

*She has been set to marry to four different men, Jon thought quietly, and then they all either died or betrayed her.*

*We both took the long route home.*

"The attack on White Harbour," Jon said eventually. "You were present for it."

"I was." She nodded. No emotion, not from her. "Ser Jorah saved my life."

"Jorah Mormont," Jon repeated. "I knew his father."

"Jorah died nobly. Tis a small thing, but it would be good to tell his aunt the same. Let his family know that he did try to redeem himself."

Jon just nodded quietly. He didn't even know what he could say to Lady Maege. Alysane had left behind two children, by the tell of it.

The air was so tense between them, the words were so awkward. She was the last of his family, but they had to force the words out, struggling to even talk over the chasm between them. "The attack on White Harbour," Sansa continued, "has Lord Bolton answered for that?"

"He planned it," Jon admitted. "As a way to destroy me from the rear, with funding from the Iron Bank."

With that, Sansa shook her head firmly. "No. Lord Bolton has been lying through his teeth. It was not the Iron Bank – it was Littlefinger who supported him."

"Littlefinger?" Jon frowned.
"Lord Petyr Baelish. The same man that smuggled me from King's Landing." Jon was confused, but she explained. "Former Master of Coin, Lord of Harrenhal, Lord Paramount of the Riverlands, Lord Protector and Regent of the Vale. Littlefinger is what we call him. He is the man who betrayed father, who started the war, who tried to destroy you."

Jon felt lost. "What? Why would he--"

"Littlefinger would burn the world down, if only so he could be the king of the ashes." Her voice turned dark; the first emotion he had really seen from her – anger. "I think Littlefinger never really wanted the Boltons to win, but the best option for him would be if you and the Boltons destroyed each other in a long and bloody war. That is what Littlefinger does; he turns chaos into profit. He wants the north, and then the Iron Throne, and he thought me the key to getting it."

He almost stammered. "There are letters that we took from Roose Bolton," Jon said slowly, "that say the Iron Bank offered him funding."

"Are those letters forgeable?"

"Perhaps," Jon admitted.

"Then they are fake," Sansa said with a nod. "Lord Bolton is trying to play you. He doesn't want you to have the Iron Bank's support – that would make your reign more stable. It is far better for him if you believe the Iron Bank is your enemy instead."

"And you are sure?" Jon insisted. "That this man… this Littlefinger is responsible instead?"

"I am." Sansa's voice was definite. "I know how Littlefinger thinks."

Still, for a moment, Jon wasn't sure if she hated or admired the man. There was something of both in her voice.

"I… I will consider it." Jon didn't even know what else to say.

"Do more than consider," Sansa replied coolly. "Take my advice; the realm will be a better place if you fly to the Eyrie and scorch Littlefinger off the map." She paused. "But your dragon. I heard that it is in the godswood, but I have not approached it. It is sickly?"

"Poisoned," Jon said darkly. Sonagon had been puking globs of frozen ooze from his stomach just days past, the dragon was still writhing from whatever poison they had used. "Boltons' work."

"Then just be careful," Sansa said lowly. There was a flicker of nervousness on her face too. "One mistake. That's all it takes to damn you. Just one."

He didn't reply. Nobody had told him just how it easy it was to make the mistakes. The thought of his father's severed head, or his brother's mutilated corpse, flashed in the still air.

Unwillingly, Jon's gaze flickered towards the sealed window, rattling slightly in the wind, beyond which he knew lay the burnt ruins of the West Tower. Even now, the cinders still plagued Winterfell's spires. Sansa caught his glance, and they both knew what he was looking at.

"… You never asked either," Jon said slowly. "Do you blame me?"

She hesitated, for longer than he would have preferred. "No," Sansa said. "I do not. You were not the one that abandoned her, not the one that dragged Arya off to be married, not the one that trapped her here. You were not the one who killed her. It was Cersei. Cersei, the Lannisters, and
"Then why is my stomach still churning with guilt?" Sansa's eyes flickered back to Val, so still she could be a corpse. "You loved Arya more than anybody," she said lightly, her voice softening for the first time. "I know you did. She was more your sister than mine."

"That's not--"

"You tried to save her, and it wasn't you who killed her." Sansa insisted, and there was a sharpness in her eyes. "I will tell the northern lords that too, I promise. I will support you."

He had to blink to stop the itch in his eyes, taking a deep breath. What time is it? It felt like the hour of the wolf or later, the dead of night where everything felt stiff and sluggish. "Sansa you don't have to…" His voice trailed off. Do what? He wondered vaguely.

"I do." She stood up from the chair. "Winterfell is my home, and I will not let them take me from it again. Do not let them take this from us." Her mouth curled, her jaw set. "We've both lost too much to be here. You are king now. Do not let them."

He shook his head, blinking and rubbing his eyes tiredly. "I am king," he said, humourlessly. "I never wanted this, I didn't want any… I…" Jon's voice flickered, casting another glance towards the window. "I am a better fighter than I am leader."

"Then fight," Sansa said, her voice low. "That's all you've got to do. Just fight."

The silence dripped by slowly. Jon had to turn away, forcing himself towards Val's body, as still as the grave. The entire day had been exhausting, draining his strength, but it wasn't over. Jon couldn't let it be over.

"I… I should go, my lady," Jon said eventually. "I will see you are prepared a room."

"As you wish, King Snow." Sansa gave a small curtsy, a light movement something so automatic it felt aloof.

She opened the door for him, and he hesitated before crossing it. "It was… It was good finally talking to you, Sansa."

"It was." She nodded, and then bit her lip. "Do you know that I didn't recognise you at first? You changed so much, you look so different. I thought you were a stranger sitting on father's chair." Sansa cocked her head. "Tell me something, did you recognise me?"

"Yes," he replied truthfully. "Very much so."

"Perhaps you shouldn't have," Sansa said quietly. "Neither of us are the same children are the same children we once were."

She hesitated. "We're… We're different people, Jon, and I think it's okay to embrace that. Do what you have to do, King Snow."

He didn't know how to reply. He didn't. Jon just nodded as he walked out of the room, casting one final glance at Val, lying bloody in the bed.

Jon took a deep breath as he walked out into the hallway, the tap of his cane against the stones. He felt raw. He felt so weary that all he wanted to do was lie down and fall away, but he couldn't. There is no rest for a king.

I chose this, he thought as he sighed. Dammit, I chose this.
He kept on walking down the hall, his mind spinning with so many different visions. The bodies he had walked over, the men he had sentenced. The only sound he could hear was the tap, tap, tap of the cane.

Jon hadn't even realised he had made the decision until he was hobbling back down the steps, out of the west wing.

There were five guards – all free folk raiders – lingering tiredly in the clearing at the bottom of the steps with spears in their hand. They all straightened, looking surprised, as Jon stepped down the steps. "Send a message to the Weeper," Jon ordered to one of the man. "Find him. Have him meet me in the godsdwood right away."

"King, you shouldn't--"

"Now."

They scattered around him, but he was no mood to explain himself. Jon also took a hemp hood off one of the men, and he slung it over his head to hide his hair. As he limped down towards the main hall, he saw another group of raiders guarding the main hall. "Who goes there?" one of the men called as Jon approached, raising spears. The guards were on edge. It was only when Jon came closer that they made out his features, and stiffened.

"Find Toregg of the Dragonguard," Jon ordered. "Have him bring Ser Alek to me in the godsdwood at all haste."

"Tormund said that nobody was to leave the keep," a raider hesitated.

"I gave you an order, ser. Now."

Jon was already walking away, through the great double doors. The whole castle felt eerily silent at this hour. He crossed the yard, towards the outhouse leading down to the dungeons. There were five men guarding the prisons, the doors sealed. Jon had to bang onto the wood, and then order them to give him the keys to the cells. The men looked flustered by Jon's sudden arrival, but he was already sweeping past.

The dungeons felt eerily silent. As he passed, Jon saw Lady Barbrey Dustin staring up through the bars, looking at him like he was a ghost limping through the cold and dusty hallway.

He reached the cell. The keys jangled against the lock. Roose Bolton was wide awake, even despite the hour. The prisoner's chains rattled as Jon opened the cell door, his eyes narrowing. "You're back," the leech lord said. "Do you have more questions, You--"

That was the only thing he managed to say, before Jon swung his walking stick straight into Roose's skull. Heavy oak crunched against flesh and bone.

Not even a moment of hesitation. Jon's whole body was screaming to hear the man's scream. There was much rage that he just felt cold.

The cane cracked into the man's skull and then clattered the stones, but Jon was already lunging. Roose tried to squirm, yet Jon's hands were already wrapping themselves around the man's throat. His knee collided against Lord Bolton's stomach.

A cry – a snarl – broke Jon's lips, but otherwise he didn't say a word. There was nothing to say. There was no reason behind it. Jon just really, really wanted Roose Bolton dead.
He grabbed Roose by the neck and he forced him downwards, slamming his skull into the stone. Whacking the man's head off the wall. Hammering his face into rock with all of Jon's might and fury. Over and over again, each time gasping as Lord Bolton's head thumped against the stone, until blood smeared and teeth cracked.

Roose didn't scream. He hardly even gasped.

Even after the man's face was a bloody pulp, he was still twitching. Jon was on top of him, his knee jammed into the man's chest and his hands on his throat. Jon squeezed and wrung Roose's neck so hard he felt his throat crack.

The chains jangled, as Roose's body flopped.

Afterwards, Jon let Lord Bolton drop, before taking a deep, deep breath. I needed to do that, Jon thought with a sigh, staring down at the corpse. Had to be done.

There were already armed guards running through the dungeons, shouting to know what was happening. Jon cast one final look at the corpse beneath him, the man who had nearly damned everything, before turning away. "Roose Bolton strangled himself in his cells," Jon explained simply, wiping the blood off his hands.

"Wait, h–"

"He strangled himself," Jon repeated. "Do you understand?"

The free folk on guard blinked. "Ah. Yes, of course, yes – Your Grace."

Jon winced up his cane again and started limping away. "Then deal with the body. There are hungry dogs in the kennels, are there not?" Lord Manderly had wanted Roose alive, but Jon simply couldn't find it in himself to care. The man needed to die, and Jon needed to feel it. "When Rattleshirt arrives in the morning," Jon told the guards, in full earshot of the other prisoners, "tell him that he has full permission to do whatever it takes to draw the truth from the others. He is to start with the maesters."

Wide and pale eyes stared at him through cell's bars as he left the dungeons.

Afterwards, Jon pulled his hood up again and crept outside, moving through the snowy night towards the godsdowd at north-western edge of Winterfell. He walked quickly, keeping his distance from the bonfires of the camps sitting in the grounds. He could feel Sonagon snoring, coiled through a mess of broken trees, his body resting over a ruined pond, twitching slightly while the dragon slept. In the distance, he could see the ruined glass houses, and slight puffs of steam billowing from the hot springs. The heart tree loomed over it all.

The Weeper was already waiting for him, at the rusted iron gates surrounding the godsdowd. The Weeper had his scythe over his back. The air was so quiet, even the flurry of snows seemed tamer, less frantic.

"Snow?" the Weeper demanded as Jon approached. "I got your message. What the hell is so urgent?"

He didn't reply. Jon turned, and he could see the figures of Toregg the Tall and Ser Alek shuffling through the snow towards them. Both men were armed, both squinting to see through the darkness. Even in the pale and fragile light, Jon saw Ser Alek's features turn ghostly white as he recognised the Weeper.
"What--" Ser Alek gasped, and then gulped. "What is he doing here?"

"I invited him, ser," Jon replied, leaning on his cane. "You challenged him to trial by combat, did you not?"

"I… I…" the knight froze. The Weeper straightened, step forward to stare at Ser Alek with folded arms. The man was shivering as he mustered about his courage. "I did. There must be justice, Your Grace."

"Aye," Jon agreed, bracing himself. "There must be."

Then, without even another word, Jon picked up his walking stick and swung it like a club. There wasn't even a moment's hesitation before the solid wood collided against the Weeper's face.

No warning, the raider couldn't even react. His arms had been folded, and he didn't see the blow coming. Jon just heard the crack of the man's nose beneath the impact, and he staggered.

Jon was already swinging again. In the torchlight, he saw mad, bloody eyes staring at him in shock. Crack. Another impact against the Weeper's skull, and the raider dropped. "Is this what you wanted, ser?" Jon demanded, turning back to a dumbfounded Ser Alek. "Is this the justice you wanted?"

"You bloody--" the Weeper gasped, blood pouring down his face, just as Jon lashed out again. There wasn't time for the man to draw his weapon. Another solid impact took him down to the snow.

The Weeper tried to recover, but Toregg was already there to stop him. The taller man pushed the Weeper to the ground, just as Jon whacked the cane into his jaw once more.

Jon heard the crack. *His tooth,* Jon thought. In a fair fight, Jon would have been soundly defeated. Still, all it took was one sudden impact over the head with a heavy stick, and afterwards it wasn't much of a fight.

The Weeper seemed to lose consciousness out for a few heartbeats as flailed madly in the snow. He recovered his senses, spitting and cursing, but Jon gave him no chance to fight back.

"Is this the justice you wanted?" Jon demanded again, while Ser Alek paled and sputtered. He hit the Weeper again. Crack. "Does this make you feel better?" Crack. "*Is this what you wanted?*"

The last blow was so hard that the walking stick slipped out of Jon's fingers as his hand jarred. The Weeper screamed, sputtering blood and trying to thrash, but Toregg kept the man's arms pinned behind his back. Jon turned to face Ser Alek, before turning back and kicking the Weeper in the stomach. His leg jarred, and Jon nearly tripped while the Weeper wrestled.

Ser Alek didn't reply; the knight looked frozen in the snows, like a rabbit quivering in fear. Jon picked up his bloody cane, and held in outstretched to the knight. "Take your vengeance, ser," Jon ordered. "*Go on.* Hit him. Beat him. If this is justice, then *take* it."

The knight was sputtering, his mouth flapping. The Weeper screamed a roar like an animal, trying to squirm. Jon slammed the butt of the stick into the wildling's stomach, a cry of pure rage breaking Jon's lips.

"I gave you an order!" Jon snapped, and Alek flinched. "Whatever vengeance you want – whatever
Wylis' death deserves – take it now. *This is your chance. This is justice, is it not? He killed your friend, and you wanted to beat him?*

The knight was staring at him like he was mad. "And – after tonight – you forget about it," Jon growled. "Do you understand me? After tonight, you will never mention it again."

"You-you-your…" Alek stammered.

The Weeper almost succeeded to squirm to his feet, but then Jon hit him again. The Weeper was a tough man; he didn't stay down for long, even despite all of Jon's strength behind each blow. A sharp cry burst from Jon's lips, and the thought of Lady Leona flailing on the ground flashed before his eyes. "Lord Wyman will *never* know how his son died, ser," Jon snapped, pacing in the snow. "Ser Wylis was killed by Boltons, and that is the only truth you will ever speak of. There is nothing to be gained by saying anything else, and any *justice* you require – any punishment, any retribution – that happens tonight. So swing the damn stick if you need to, but *do you understand me?*

Alek could have said something, but it was drowned out by the Weeper's howl. "He deserves it," Jon spat. "He does. He's a violent bastard and he killed Ser Wylis for no other reason than because he was angry. It was murder, it was, and the Weeper killed your friends, but that doesn't matter because I still need him. I need him, and I need White Harbour." Jon shook his head, jaw clenching. "Lord Wyman will never know and you will never speak of this."

There was a pause, waiting for a reply. Jon threw the cane onto the snow at Ser Alek's feet. "So hit him as many times as you want," Jon warned. "But either pick up the stick or walk away now."

The man was twitching, wide eyes looking desperate. After a long, tense moment, a flash where their eyes met, Ser Alek chose to walk away, nearly stumbling over the slush.

There was no breath of relief. Instead Jon just screamed wordlessly into the night – all of that rage, pain and guilt bursting out of his chest. Jon's hands were still shaking. He just felt like hitting something again.

The Weeper was still trying to struggle against Toregg's grip, but his movements were haggard, his throat coughing blood. Jon picked up the cane, hobbling on it as he took the weight of his leg.

"You were right, Weeper," Jon said finally. "I do owe you. I likely wouldn't be here if not for you, you have helped me… many, many times. It's because I owe you that much, that you get a second chance."

He motioned for Toregg to back away. Jon knelt down, and whispered in the Weeper's ear, "And if you ever put me in this situation again," he snarled. "*I smash your fucking skull.*"

Jon shuddered as he tried to calm himself, nodding at Toregg. The Dragonguard looked nervous too, but he let the Weeper drop and sag into the snow. "Get him to the infirmary. The Weeper will stay as a *guest* in Winterfell as he recuperates," Jon ordered to Toregg. "In the meantime, Tormund will lead the Weeper's warband. I will talk to your father shortly. *And Tormund will bring the Weeper's raiders into line. I need to get the wildlings under control too.*"

He was already limping away, leaving the Weeper bloodied and sputtering in the snow behind him.

Winterfell was a melting pot, and Jon had to cool it. The Weeper was better off in an infirmary bed than he was leading warbands right now. Jon returned to the Great Keep, to his father's… to *his* chambers, but he couldn't rest. He was pacing over the open balcony even as the snow flurried into his face. Jon didn't mind the snow. The cold gave him focus, clarity. It kept him
awake.

As soon as the storm clears, he thought, *I need to write a raven for White Harbour*. He would need to write a letter with the list of those killed by the Boltons, but also declaring the return of Sansa Stark, the Lady of Winterfell. That was the only victory that gave him hope.

*I can keep the Weeper under control*, he thought with a sigh, *Lord Wyman will be furious, but so long as his anger and grief is in the right direction the alliance will not break. I could grant Leona Manderly a belated sentence, but her and both of her daughters will need to be stay in Winterfell as ‘guests’*. Lady Leona's betrayal gave him justification, Lord Wyman wouldn't be able to object. Jon needed to take hostages from all the northern families. Just in case the White Harbour alliance did turn sour, then House Manderly was the first that Jon needed to secure leverage over.

He would have to refuse the betrothal to Wynafryd that Lord Wyman had offered. Lord Wyman would need something to distract, to placate his rage. The lands of Hornwood, perhaps.

He needed to be careful. He couldn't allow a single house, however useful, however loyal, to gain too much power. Not if their loyalty could be turned. *The highborn are just as untrustworthy and as dangerous as the wildlings*, Jon thought foully, *just in different ways*.

The north was not at peace, there would be more battles still. What if the Ryswells of the Rills, the Tallharts of Torrhen's Square, or the petty lords, still refused his new rule? Would he have to march on them, even as winter raged? The Wall desperately needed men to hold it, while Moat Cailin was presumably still under Bolton control. There were still ironborn raiders along the Stony Shore and Sea Dragon Point. There were pirates to the east. He needed to deal with the Bolton's southern allies. He needed to visit Braavos. He had no idea how Bullden's search to find Rickon was proceeding, he hadn't felt Ghost's presence in days. There were still hunting parties pursuing the white walker. The exodus of the free folk south of the Wall was still on-going, the Others still plaguing refugees while the search parties hunted for survivors north of the Wall. Had the wildlings of the Frozen Shore been evacuated? The clans that were still lingering in the Frostfangs? Jon honestly didn't know how many of the free folk Mance and the other chieftains he'd left north might have assembled by now. Fifty thousand? Sixty?

There were reinforcements on the way to Winterfell, led by Lady Maege Mormont and Sigorn of Thenn. With them, he would have more men that could keep the peace. Jon didn't know how much territory he had lost in the fallout of the battle, but it had to be secured before the snows settled. The allies that had already left them had to be brought back into line, and those few that had stayed neutral had to be forced to accept the new regime.

He didn't even know where to begin.

*And the force besieging the Dreadfort*, Jon thought bitterly, *has until Sonagon recovers to secure a surrender – else that castle will be destroyed by dragonfire, hostages be damned*. He needed the men more than he needed a castle, or the prisoners.

A haze of torches flickered below him, but the rest was all pitch black. Jon couldn't see the ground; he couldn't see the frozen fields spewed with bodies, or the charnel-pits of corpses. He had ordered men to deal with the bodies, but they would be burning all those corpses for weeks.

He thought of his father and Robert's Rebellion, and he wondered what Robert Baratheon had felt after arriving in King's Landing after the Sack – after receiving the throne only when a devastated city and a mountain of bloody bodies were spewed around him. Jon had never imagined that feeling before, could never have even visualised the experience. 'King' was such a bitter title, a bitter reward – a reward that only a man like Roose Bolton could relish in. *No wonder King Robert*
The keep shuddered with the wind, as the storms still stirring over the plains. It wasn't over. It was never over. One battle was done, one 'victory' behind him, but the true war was still to come. Jon was left standing in the scorched castle, the capital of a war-torn and ruined north, just trying to think what he could do.

Jon was still standing hours later, watching the night turn slowly towards the break of dawn. He was huddled over the balcony, thickly wrapped in furs as he watched the men in the tents below begin to rise.

…

A wolf's howl broke over the plains outside the castle – a long, slow and pained sound. The very sound caused his body to freeze, a shiver running up his back as heard the cry echoing through the snows. The sound was strangely mournful, weak and weary against the wind, but he thought he recognised it. A wolf?

Wolf howls in the night weren't uncommon, but this felt different. His whole body stopped, tensing as he tried to listen over the wind. The silence went so long that he thought he might have imagined it, that his sleep-deprived mind was hallucinating, but then he heard it again. That long, sombre sound, reverberating on the wind…

AAAaaaAH-OOOWOOOOOOOOo000000… AAAaaaAH-OOOWOOOOOOOOo000000…

No, Jon realised, straining to make out the sound. That's not a wolf. A direwolf.

Jon was already backing away from the balcony, feeling his fingers twitch.

It is coming from the north, he realised.

There was a figure in the hallway; her wide eyes meeting his. Sansa was awake too, carrying a candlestick in her hands. She can feel it too. "Is that…?" Sansa whispered, her voice so low, like she was afraid to break the fragile silence.

Jon didn't reply. He hesitated for a long moment, but then turned to walk away. Instinctively, he tried to reach out to Ghost, but his friend was so far away, and he felt little. The direwolf was asleep, in what felt like the midst of a distant, icy forest. It wasn't Ghost. That howl was different, but it felt so familiar. Could it be Shaggydog? But wouldn't Shaggydog be with Rickon, or maybe they weren't on Skagos after all? Could Grey Wind or Nymeria have somehow survived? Or could it be another wild direwolf? Sum–

He broke the thought off, and shook his head. Maybe I'm fooling myself. Maybe it's just a normal wolf. Or maybe…

He stepped down the stairs, half-staggering with every step, as quickly his limp and his cane would allow. He could have called for men, but he didn't. Not when it might just be a false alarm, not when he wasn't sure what he might find. Instead, Jon threw the hood over his head to cover his hair, and he walked out the servant's exit towards the back of the kitchens.

The sun was only just starting to rise, a dim haze of light through clouds. The army in the tents started to rouse, only a few patrols across through the grounds.

Jon hesitated, but he could still hear the phantom echo of the wolf's howl lingering in the air. With the ruckus of men in the background, it was hard to focus on it. He was already striding north, he passed the shattered glass gardens and the slanted Broken Tower. His heart was beating quickly,
but he forced himself to stay calm.

The North Gate was sealed – it had been for weeks; the Boltons barricaded it, and his men hadn't cleared it, and now snow drifts were piled before it. Jon was panting slightly as he staggered through the snow, looking for men on the walls and guard tower. He stood alert for any sound at all, begging quietly to hear the noise again.

He heard it. The wolf's cry. It was quieter this time, but closer. A lone wolf crying for attention, howling outside the gates.

"Halt!" a distant man's voice bellowed suddenly, from above. "You take another step and we put an arrow in your skull, girl."

It wasn't addressed at Jon. There was shouting on the wall, movement from the battlements. He heard voices; and then a strained, high-pitched voice came from the other side of the walls. Jon was already running, pushing his way up to the guard tower.

A haggle of men lingered near the battlements. A voice was shouting something, but the words were lost in the wind. He could feel the gale around him, buffeting against the stones walls. "Should we blow the horn?" he heard a voice ask.

"Just chase her away," a gruff man grunted.

"She could be a scout. I've seen clans use children before – the brats can get closer than adults can."

Jon saw a man pulled back on a recurve bow, and shaft notched. "Put an arrow in her," a wildling ordered. "Maybe not the head, but mak–"

"Stop!" Jon ordered, clattering as he stepped out. "Stop!"

"Who the hell are y–" a narrow-eyed man began to demand, but his voice froze as Jon pulled down his hood and the recognition flashed. Jon's bone white hair was better than any crown.

"Lower your bow. Now," Jon snapped, his hand instinctively moving to Dark Sister. "Who is it?"

The men looked stunned, but Jon saw white stones on a few of their chests. "Um… eh… a looter, y-Your Grace," a man gulped. "Little rat has been stalking around the gate. She had been about to climb the walls too, when we spotted her."

Jon blinked, glancing downwards over the granite battlements at the fields of snow. There was a girl standing before the oak gates, shouting upwards. She was slight of build, huddled underneath a ragged, hoarfrost-coated cloak. A smallfolk?

Winter Town had been deserted as his army approached. Everyone had but the hardest or the most desperate of the smallfolk had fled before the wildlings. The girl below looked fraught – she was shouting, crying for attention. *The men had been threatening her with arrows, but she hadn't run.*

The wolf's howl had been strained, desperate, too.

"Open the gates," Jon ordered.

"We were told–"

"She's a single girl. Open the gates."
The men scattered under his tone, and Jon was left pacing. He felt uneasy. He turned, looking
down from the eighty-foot drop, with a quiet grimace. The girl had been trapped in the elements,
huddling against the razor sharp wind.

It took over a dozen men to finally heave the gates open through the pile of snow. As the North
Gate finally creaked open, the wildlings were holding spears. The girl didn't run, even though Jon
saw her wide eyes glaring with fear. One man pushed his way forward, but Jon held him back. The
girl had a strong gaze for one so frail and weak, even as shivered.

"I don't care who you are. I don't care if you are flayed men or worse," she said, gulping and she
walked forward. "I don't care what you might do to me. Just save him. Save him."

She was staring at him with such fear, her eyes glancing around at the wildlings. She had wide
green eyes, wispy brown hair that seemed grey with frost, and a face so gaunt she looked all skin
and bones. "Who are you?" Jon demanded, standing back cautiously.

Her voice nearly cracked, teeth gritting and hesitating. "Meera Reed," she said finally. "Sworn
spear to Brandon Stark."

Jon could only stare. No…

In the distance, over the snow drifts and towards the frozen wolfswood, he heard the wolf wailing.

He made his decision so quick it was nigh-automatic. "Send word to Toregg the Tall," Jon ordered

The girl – Meera – was staggering. "He was freezing," she gulped, raising a trembling hand to him.
"I couldn't carry him, I couldn't…"

He heard a clanging. Jon glanced downwards, and he noticed a ring of iron – a broken manacle –
chiming around Meera's ankle. His head was spinning, trying to understand. Could it be?

It wasn't safe to leave the castle alone, and even less safe to bring uncertain men with him. The
grounds outside of Winterfell's gates were still unsecured, there were still likely roving groups of
soldiers left scattered in the snow. But, at that moment, Jon just didn't care. "Where?" he snapped,
so sharply it caught the girl off-guard. "Where?"

She couldn't reply, too busy wheezing, but her hand raised to point to the north, towards the trees.
Jon was already striding away, jogging lopsided through the snows. "On me!" he bellowed to the
men. "On me!"

If it's true…

The snows were three-foot-deep, Jon had to force his way through the hard-worn, frozen ground.
He broke off the road and headed straight north, into the woods of pines and chestnuts. The men
were breaking out of the gates, shouting after him, following him – all the while the snow geysered
around them. "Bring horses!" Jon bellowed. "And dogs! Move!"

The forest was so thick and dark it could swallow a man whole. The wolf – the direwolf, it was –
needed to howl, it needed to howl, but he couldn't hear anything. The going was hard, but Jon was
desperate. He forced his way to the edge of the trees, head snapping around, searching for any sign.

The memory of a different time flashed before his eyes; a different age – back when Jon and his
brothers would play hide-and-seek in these very woods. Before the snows, before the death. Back
when they had been summer children…
"BRAN!" Jon bellowed at the top of his lungs. "Bran!"

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he had misheard, or maybe this was a trap. Maybe this was another of Roose's Boltons schemes, to lure himself outside the walls and there were assassins in wait. Maybe he was too late. Jon didn't want to believe – he didn't want to let himself believe…

But still… his brother…

He heard the wolf's wail again, and it was so close.

The last time he had even… Jon thought back to that moment when Bran had been bedridden, unconscious, just before Jon needed to leave for the Wall. He remembered Catelyn Stark's cold gaze, and Summer's wail while the pup lay over base of Bran's bed.

The vision of a pale and broken Bran, unconscious in bed, couldn't leave his mind. They hadn't been sure if Bran would survive at the time. That had been the last time Jon had seen his brother, the day he had left home…

*I wanted to show him the Wall. I wanted to say goodbye.*

Men were shouting behind him, but Jon didn't care. He kept on pushing forward, limping deeper into the wolfswood. He saw the tracks where Meera had run through, and he followed them. The girl had been desperate, cold, but running for aid…

He saw an ancient gnarly oak tree, and there was massive wolf curled into its roots. A direwolf, with silvery grey fur and sharp yellow eyes. The last time Jon had seen Summer, the wolf had been the size of a large dog, but now it was as large as a pony. Frost and dried blood coated its furs. The wolf wailed, mewling piteously, but it didn't move.

There was a small figure in the roots, huddled under a rotten blanket, and the great wolf hunkered down over him, lying protectively, hackles raised. The direwolf lay over the boy, thin and emaciated, fur ragged, but still the size of a small horse. The direwolf was trying to warm him, sharing what scarce little remained of its body's heat.

Jon felt the same twitch – the small shiver over his skin – that he felt every time he met another warg. Summer stared straight at him, quivering, but didn't move.

"Bran…" Jon gasped, before finding his voice. "Bran!"

The small figure wasn't twitching. The boy looked older than what Jon remembered, but still so, so small. Older, but with the baby fat stripped from his cheeks and his auburn hair turned dark. Hoarfrost coated his skin, ice sticking to his brow. The vision of a young, lively boy who loved to climb flashed before his eyes.

But it was him. It was *him*. 

Men were running behind him, shouting, sprinting to keep up. Jon could only grip his brother's limp body, hugging him so tightly. He felt so cold, so frail, like a broken little doll.

*How long has he been out in the cold?* Jon cursed. *How long has it been since his strength failed him? How far had the boy – a cripple! – managed to fight before he finally collapsed?* With no shelter, no fire, the snows could smother even the strongest man, and his brother was only a little boy…

Then, he felt his brother shiver, and frail, tiny hands clenched around his shoulders. Jon could have
sobbed, the tears freezing on his cheeks.

*You Starks are hard to kill.*

---

End of Part 2
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

The Maiden and the Mother...

Part 3 - The Convergence

The Maiden

She could hear the sound of children playing – sweet innocent voices ringing in the clear air. Cobblestones of pale pink marble paved the gardens and courtyard, and terraces overlooked the pools and fountains of the Water Gardens. Nymeria was shaded by blood orange trees, standing on the fluted pillar gallery leading to the triple archway.

The Water Gardens were pleasant in autumn. The days were hot and the nights cool, the salt breeze blew in from the sea, and the lily-coated, scented fountains and pools looked so lovely. Nymeria had such fond memories of the Water Gardens – she remembered playing in the pools herself along with Sarella, Tyene and Arianne – all the while her father and uncle would watch and laugh. Arianne used to be so vibrant and passionate, eager to play pretend elaborate scenarios and determined never to lose, while Tyene stuck closely besides Nym, both of them terrors at the games, while Sarella would just splash everybody all playfully. They had all been closer than sisters, and the memories of laughter and pleasant summer days still echoed in her head.

She could understand her uncle’s love for the Water Gardens. It was such a sweet and innocent place. A refuge from the world.

But it is a place for children, Nym thought, sighing. And now I'm all grown up.

She plucked a dried grape from the ceramic bowl, rocking her hips slightly as she walked across the red terrace, shaded by the palms. Nymeria had picked a sleek samite dress that hugged her form, showing the yellows and reds of her family’s colours, and sleek enough that her tanned skin shivered slightly in the cool air. She would have worn a shawl, but she favoured the sleek fabric; it made it obvious that there were no weapons hidden on her body, and sometimes obvious was useful.

Two men-at-arms with halberds, stood stiffly as she crossed the bridge towards the pavilion. Nymeria gave one of the men a soft smile, causing the young guard to blush. He had sandy hair and a clean-shaven chin, with small dimples on his cheeks. He's a new one, she took care to note. Usually Doran preferred older and seasoned guards around him, but the new guard was young and foolish enough to be distracted by a pretty face. Nymeria made note of it, just in case it could be useful. Her father had taught her to use every advantage.

She saw Prince Doran Martell on his usual seat in the evening shade beneath the lemon trees, his face passive. He didn’t turn to face her. Instead, he just sat on his cushioned seat, soothing his bloated feet in cool water, looking out over the tranquil trees and pools. He looks old, Nym thought
sadly. The news – or rather the lack of news – concerning Quentyn had drained the last of the strength from him.

The Prince of Dorne has a soft heart. She would have felt sorry for him, except Dorne had no need for a soft-hearted prince.

“Well met, nuncle,” Nymeria called, flashing him a sweet smile. “It has been so long since I’ve been in these gardens.”

He paused before replying. “I remember a time when you and your sisters would splash in the pools,” he said, sounding wary, before turning his gaze away. “How was your journey?”

“Eventful. I docked in Sunspear three days ago.” That was a lie, Nym had actually arrived, discreetly, a fortnight past. “Did you hear the news, nuncle? The queen is going mad.”

Prince Doran took a long, deep breath, shifting his feet in the bowl of perfumed water. The rim of his golden silk robes were drenched. “So I hear. The whole realm says the same, and I have lost contact with my friends in the capital since the Red Keep has come under siege. The ravens say her brother tormented her to the edge of insanity.”

“Imps are wicked creatures, are they not?” Nym laughed, with more humour than he had. “I find that madness is a slow venom. Slow, but very effective.”

She sat down cross-legged on the chair opposite him. Doran cast her a wary look, heavy wrinkles over his eyes. He looked old, older than ever, but his attention was solely on her eyes. He knows me too well. She picked up another grape. “I travelled all the way to King’s Landing, only to be barred at the gates,” Nym chuckled. “The queen revoked Dorne’s seat at the small council. I think my presence may have insulted her. Something about no snakes allowed in her court, can you imagine that? Oh, that was surely the first sign the woman was crazed.” She squeezed the moist grape gently, feeling it ready to burst, but didn’t eat it. “Still, mayhaps, I was fortunate. If I had been allowed in, I would be a hostage right now, just like the poor Tyrell queen and her little king.”

And if I had been taken hostage, Cersei would likely be dead, she thought viciously. Nym had brought with her a dress lined with poisons and daggers, and the Lannisters deserved cruel deaths. But now, she mused, I find that we might be better served with Cersei staying alive. Oh, how quickly things change.

Not so long ago, Nym and her sisters had been all arrested and confined to the Spear Tower of Sunspear for conspiracy to treason. But not long after that, Arianne, Obara, Nym, and Tyene had met with Doran in his solar, to discuss the Dornish plot to rebel. It had seemed a good plan too; Arianne would go north to join with Daenerys and Quentyn as they landed with the Golden Company, Obara would escort Myrcella and Trystane back home, while Nym and Tyene both went ahead to King’s Landing via sea. They had all been convinced that their long-awaited revenge would be theirs soon enough. But that was when we assumed it had been Daenerys invading the realm, she thought, not this ‘Aegon’. How quickly my nuncle’s plans fall apart.

Nym felt sorry for Doran, she truly did. His son Quentyn was missing, and Arianne was in the middle of a war.

Doran always waited a good few seconds before replying. Even when he spoke he thought of every word carefully. “I have not received news from Arianne in near a fortnight. Have you?”
“I have not. Arianne was last at Storm’s End, was she not?”

He nodded, unhappily. “Tis not going to plan,” Prince Doran said lowly. “What of your sisters?”

“Oh, Tyene stayed behind with the High Septon. I’m sure she’s doing well there. Tyene gets along well with holy men – my sister is certainly pious. I thought that I was better served returning home quickly with news, nuncle.” She finally ate the grape, smiling sweetly as it burst in her mouth. “And as for Obara, well, I’m not sure, I have not spoken to her,” Nym lied.

“Obara is at High Hermitage, along with Ser Balon Swann, to bring the Darkstar to justice,” Doran replied. *Ah, so he had asked only to see if I would answer.*

“How grand, Gerold Dayne should pay for his crimes. But is House Dayne of High Hermitage still sheltering that fiend?”

“It appears so. I have sent Areo Hotah to bring him to justice.”

“Ah. I thought that the Water Gardens was lacking the captain's presence.”

There was a pause longer than usual. Doran’s eyes linger on her. She smirked, and something in her gaze spoke volumes.

They both knew the smalltalk was meaningless. Their eyes were fixed on each other, trying to measure the other’s stance.

“Nymeria,” Doran said finally, “whatever you are planning, do not.”

Nym threw her head back and laughed, loud and clear. “You wound me, nuncle. We want the exact same things, do we not? We want to protect our family, to protect Dorne. And we want justice.”

“We have different interpretations to what that word means.”

“So we do,” Nym agreed. “I was willing to go along with your plan before, nuncle. My sisters were as well – we were all eager to assist. I love my family dearly, nobody wants a strife between us. When you told me about the Targaryen alliance you prepared, about Daenerys and her dragons, I was so, so relieved. I had never been happier to learn I was wrong, to learn that you were not the slouch you pretend to be.” A touch of sadness entered her tone. Prince Doran didn’t speak, he only stared. She still heard the sound of children’s cries behind her. “But that plan has not come to pass; neither Daenerys nor her dragons are coming. Instead, I hear that you have two Dornish armies amassed at the Prince’s Pass and the Boneway which are not marching. You have Lords Yronwood and Fowler standing idle.”

“They are waiting on a word,” Doran said slowly. “They are waiting for dragons.”

“Arianne has already negotiated an alliance.”

“I do not call that an alliance,” he said foully. “The Imp twisted her arm and left her no choice. This Aegon expects Dorne’s friendship, but gives nothing but promises.”

“This Aegon could be your nephew,” Nym noted. “Elia’s child.”

“He could be,” he said chillly. “Or he could be a pretender exploiting her death, how would I know? Aegon Targaryen was a babe dead for eighteen years, and now he just returns?” Doran shook his head. “My daughter writes well of him, but I will not commit to a failed cause. I will wait, and see if this Aegon is right about Daenerys coming to support him.”
Nym’s smile turned waxy. Please, nuncle, she begged. I thought you had a spine. “Wait,” Nym repeated. “That is all you do, is it not? You waited for your sister's killers to die rather than taking revenge. Do you consider that a victory?”

“They are dead. Tywin Lannister and his creatures rot in the ground.”

“And it only took seventeen years. It wasn’t even we who killed him. In another fifty years, absolutely everyone involved with those murders might be dead, and you will consider that a victory?”

He didn’t reply. Nymeria picked up another grape, squashing it in her fingers. The juice was cold. “While you waited, Prince Viserys died and Daenerys was lost to the edge of the world. You waited for a betrothal that never happened. Decades wasted by waiting,” she pressed. “And now you wait for Quentyn to come back, when he never will.”

His eyes turned dark at the very mention of his son’s name. “Mind your tongue.”

“Apologies, nuncle. No disrespect meant,” she lied. “I am just tired of waiting.”

“Enough of this. What do you want, Nymeria?”

“I tried it your way, I truly did. But your plan has failed, nuncle. Without Daenerys, the victory you imagined is no longer possible. We must try a different approach, and seize the opportunity before us.”

He didn’t reply. He just stared suspiciously, thinking. The guards standing behind his chair looked tense. Nymeria leant forward on her seat. “It seems to me that the queen’s madness is doing more for our cause than dragons ever could. Tyene reports that Cersei is falling towards the same depths of insanity as Aerys.”

“And?”

Nym smiled. “Why not give her an extra push?”

There was no reply, but she saw the shift in his features, the tightening of his lips – the prince knew what she meant. She could see his gaze darkening. “King’s Landing is balancing on a knife edge, I’ve seen it myself. The Tyrell queen is being held hostage, while their lands are plagued by ironborn… The Lannister-Tyrell alliance is collapsing. If Queen Cersei does something really drastic, then it all breaks down and the High Septon becomes sure to renounce her – Tyene is working her magic there,” Nym said softly. “And we hold Myrcella, do we not?”

Doran’s hands clenched. “No.”

Myrcella Baratheon was currently at Starfall, where her escort had been halted indefinitely. Originally, the little princess was to head to King's Landing, but then news of the Golden Company made traveling north too dangerous. After the Faith's revolt and the Red Keep locked down, Ser Kevan wrote to Doran asking him to keep Princess Myrcella secure and in Dorne, lest her presence in King's Landing turn a dangerous situation even more volatile.

Ser Kevan is afraid, Nym thought. King Tommen was being held hostage by his own mother, and Faith was at the gates. Cersei had quite successfully pitted Lannister, Tyrell and Faith against each other. That left Myrcella in Dornish hands.

“The little princess,” Nym sighed, “what a poor girl. I do feel sorry for her, you know. I hear she's sweet and innocent. It's not her fault that she was birthed into the wrong family. But then again,
daughters so often suffer for their family's sins, do they not? I feel like Lannisters deserve a taste of their own medicine.”

“She is betrothed to my son.” His voice was dark, low.

“Surely you cannot possibly still wish to marry Myrcella to Trystane?” Nym said, incredulous. “Why would we bind ourselves to a losing lion? No, Trystane’s betrothal is a union that it is best…severed.”

“Nymeria,” Doran warned, “we will not hurt children.”

What arrogance it is, Nym thought. A commander will send countless sons and fathers to their deaths in battle, but suddenly daughters are forbidden? Why is it that boys are allowed to die in war, but girls are not? “Justice is balance, nuncle,” Nym said in a low voice. “They brutally murdered a daughter of Dorne. I can think of no more fitting punishment against them.”

“No. Never.” Doran’s voice turned into a growl. “We spoke of this before. The answer has not changed.”

Ah yes, she remembered that ‘conversation’ well. One time, after the Red Viper’s death, the Sand Snakes had been ready for war: Obara had advocated an invasion, Nym suggested assassination, and Tyene favoured rebellion. Doran had replied by imprisoning them all. The Sand Snakes had forgiven the prince for that after he had shared his secret plan, but now his plan had failed.

This time was different. Nymeria and her sisters had come to a compromise that they were all happy with. I want you to be in agreement too, Nym begged silently.

“We will never have a better moment, nuncle. We must act now or we could spend another two decades waiting,” she insisted. “Have you forgotten that Cersei tried to arrange the assassination of Trystane too? She had his ambush planned, she meant to blame it on the Imp while Ser Balon performed the deed. Cersei plotted to murder your son to free her daughter from their betrothal. Isn't it justice to return the favour?”

“You speak of vengeance, not justice.”

Nym thought about it. “Either one will suffice, truth be told.”

“Your father would be ashamed of you right now,” Doran muttered, his face twitching. “Myrcella is eleven years old. Have you truly forgotten your own childhood, when you would play in the pools right there? Oberyn would never harmed an innocent girl.”

“Yes, well…” Nym shrugged. “My father is dead. He died shamefully and unfulfilled, and I don’t want the rest of my family to share his fate.”

“You sound determined.”

“Very much so. I will not wait, nuncle.” Dorne will not wait.

“Very well.” Doran paused, and then shook his head, coming to a decision. “Captain,” he called to one of the guards. “I am done here, bring me inside. Fetch me Maester Caleotte.” He glanced at her. “And then arrange a guard to take Nymeria to the Shield Tower. She is to be kept there under arrest.”

Nym sighed. “Again, nuncle? I had really hoped we might find common ground, but do we have to do this once more?”
“Do you give me a choice? You talk of murdering a child, an innocent under our solemn protection. You are my family, my brother loved you so, but you will not leave the Water Gardens.”

“I really, really wanted you to stand with us,” she said sincerely. “Please, let us talk about this. It is a good plan – a way to make sure our enemies destroy themselves. We hurt Cersei where she is most vulnerable; her family, her alliances, and her sanity. It is a way to keep Arianne safe.”

“I will not discuss the murder of children,” he said firmly. It took two men to help the Prince of Dorne to his gouty legs. They had to carry him away. My uncle has no heart for doing what is necessary.

A big bulky man stood over her suspiciously, holding a spear. She gave him a smile, and then ate another grape. Prince Doran was already having a frenetic talk with the maester as he rounded the corner, and left her sight. I tried, sisters, I truly did.

Nymeria spent the rest of the day watching the pools of the Water Gardens, under guard but with every comfort. Prince Doran refused to allow her another audience. At nightfall, she was escorted back to her chambers. The palm breeze rustled in the cool air, causing her to shiver. The lanterns glowed over the cream spires and arches, making everything seem so serene. Tis a beautiful place.

There were half a dozen men to escort her to her room now. Nym didn’t protest, or object. Instead, she just walked inside of her airy chambers she slipped out of her dress. She slowly dressed herself in leather and wool inside, wrapping a dark cloak around her neck. Nym searched for the blades she had brought with her, but found them missing. Doran must have given orders to confiscate my daggers, she thought, amused. Not that I need them.

She knocked on the door, opened it and then sweetly asked one of the two men standing guard out front if he could bring her a cup of tea for the night. He hesitated, but nodded and said he’d find a servant.

Then, as the man bowed and left, Nym turned to the other guard and whispered, “It is time. See it done – quiet and bloodlessly.”

That guard bowed and left too. Nym sat back and waited. Let no one say that I did not try to do this reasonably.

Not long later, the guard returned, knocked on her door, and bowed as he entered. “My lady,” the man said respectfully. “We are ready.”

“Ryden, you are an absolute dear,” Nym said with a beautiful smile, flicking her hair. “Any objections?”

“Few, but we can handle them. We support Dorne, my lady. Unconquered and unbowed.” Ryden banged his fist against the sun on his breastplate. Then he handed Nym a pair of matching sheathes from his belt. “And I believe these are yours.”

She took her daggers back, and placed them over her hips. The dual blades were long and sharp, curved and slender. As she left her ‘prison’, the guards all bowed their heads. My father always taught me the need to be prepared. “The maester’s quarters first,” Nym ordered. “There are ravens to be sent.”

The Water Gardens were still and quiet. It was the hour of the bat, few were moving. Nym had instructed her men that they needed to move swift and subtly.
She saw Maester Caleotte was still awake, moving restlessly between the ravens as she walked towards the rookery. His old, wrinkled face paled, his mouth stammering. Nym’s smile was sweet, reassuring. “Lady Nymeria,” the old maester gasped. “You are under arrest.”

“No, maester,” she said apologetically. “You are.”

The maester staggered backwards looking at the guards flanking her. “What is the meaning of this?” The man demanded. “Captain Ryden, your prince gave you an order!”

“I serve for the good of Dorne,” Ryden said stiffly, stepping forward. “Not Doran. It has become clear that their interests are not in line.”

Caleotte gasped, staring around in shock as he backed up, his chain tinkling. The courtyard was so quiet, but figures were stirring slowly. There was no rush, no panic – just men moving systematically from room to room of the Water Gardens. It had been prepared long before Nymeria had even stepped into Doran’s sight. “Please do not fight it, I beg you not to run,” Nym said reassuringly, waving Ryden to secure the room. “I do not wish to hurt anyone.”

“How could you…?” Caleotte stammered.

“Oh, it was quite easy. After Areeo Hotah left, I simply made arrangements concerning the prince’s personal guard. There are many in Dorne that are unhappy with my father’s death, and my nuncle’s inactivity. Many who feel slighted by the Iron Throne.” Ryden moved to push Maester Colemon into the wall, but she motioned for him to be gentle. “Our prince has always been reclusive, and the Water Gardens are isolated. *Men will not be loyal to what they cannot see.* I had servants placed sleeping draughts into the stew of any guards not on our side. The patrols are asleep, and we will seize the castle without a bell being rung.”

“Doran is your prince!” the maester protested.

“That’s a title which means very little if the people with swords do not wish to follow him,” Nym said, sadly.

Doran had once had all of her sisters imprisoned when he disagreed with their intentions. Later, after Arianne had found Doran’s trust, the Sand Snakes had been persuaded to forgive and join forces, but they did not forget. Obara, Tyene and Nym had devised the backup plan together; to seize the Water Gardens discreetly, should the prince’s plan fall through. *We would never allow Doran to do the same thing again,* Nym thought. Still, she felt so remorseful that it actually had to come to this. *He should have listened.*

There was sounds of a scuffle on the terrace below. Nym heard the muffled grunts of a man who tried to protest. She saw servants running quickly, but the guards were sealing the rooms and hissing for people to stay silent. *Please do not disturb the children sleeping,* she prayed.

Caleotte was trembling, but he didn't try to protest against the men with spears. All around him, the ravens cawed and fluttered, while Nym took the old man’s arm and pulled him to one side.

“Prince Doran…” the maester gasped. “What will you do to him?”

Nym felt insulted by the accusation. “Nothing! He’s my nuncle, he’s a kind man, I will allow no harm to come to him.” She shook her head. “No, but the prince is old and sickly. His legs are stiff with gout, and he needs men to carry him out of bed. Why not grant him more bedrest?”

The maester’s eyes were on her, and she could see the realisation dripping before his eyes. “Who helped you?” he said slowly. “Was it Ladybright?”
“I have no idea what you mean,” she said innocently, but the truth was yes. Alyse Ladybright, the lord treasurer at Sunspear, was one of three that Doran left behind to manage Sunspear in the prince’s absence. Alyse had also been a very close confident of Oberyn’s.

“This won’t work, Ser Manfrey—”

“... is already taken care of; he turned sickly after drinking from a bad batch of wine, I’m afraid.” Caleotte stared in horror. Nym frowned. “Incapacitated, not dead. Manfrey Martell will have an extreme case of the shits and will be bedridden for weeks, but he won’t die. Ricasso is old and blind, I’m sure he won’t be a problem.”

Both the castellan, Ser Manfrey, and the seneschal, Ricasso, at Sunspear had already been sorted – discreetly, of course, and disabled rather than killed. Nobody could stop a coup if nobody even knew one had happened.

Nymeria doubted that any would even realise what had happened here tonight, at least not for a while. So far as the realm was concerned, Prince Doran was still in the Water Gardens – ruling Dorne from his chair, and sending ravens and orders out to his kingdom – while his stewards managed Sunspear. Sooner or later, the news otherwise would spread – but if she was careful then Nym might have a good few weeks before that happened. Maybe months, with a bit of luck.

It will be time enough, in any case, she thought.

She walked around the room, inspecting the birds. Slowly, Nym picked up a scrap of parchment from the pile, making note of the correspondence. Captain Ryden’s stare alone kept the maester pressed up against the wall. The old man was still stammering. “This is treason,” he managed.

“Hardly. I consider it more a leave of absence. We are all loyal to Dorne here,” Nym replied, and Ryden nodded. “No, this is a kindness. It has become clear that Doran lacks the resolve to do what is necessary, and so my sisters and I will remove the responsibility from his shoulders. We will allow Doran an early retirement – he has long been most comfortable watching the children play in the Water Gardens.”

And Arianne will be upset, Nym thought, but when all is done, she will understand. Obara was already in position, waiting on the signal. Nym dabbed her quill in the inkpot and leaned poised over the parchment. The black ink dribbled from the sharp point, dark blots splattering over the table like blood. Nymeria kept the message short and concise.

“See it done” she wrote. Three little words, but as dark as the raven’s wings.

Maester Caleotte was still making noise, trying to protest, but she barely heard him. Nym spent a long time staring over the letter, just thinking. After a moment’s thought, she added another line. Six more words, but they made Nym grin.

“And blame it on Tyrion Lannister.”

For Elia, Nym told herself. For her babes, for justice, and for Dorne. Blood for blood.

-------

The Mother

It was eleven days until the Mother’s Day, the third new moon of the year – a day designated for the celebration of all those blessed by the Mother’s hands. This time last year, Tommen had gifted
her a cluster of flowers he had picked himself from the godswood, and there had been a special sermon held in the Royal Sept, in which the Queen Mother had taken a seat of honour.

This year, though, Cersei was expected to shame and surrender herself, her family, on that same day. The deadline of seventy-seven days was fast approaching, and no doubt the High Septon had chosen it to coincide with the Mother’s Day deliberately. A day blessed by the Mother.

Over two months she had been trapped in the cursed keep, barely even leaving Maegor’s Holdfast, and the mood had only become more dire.

Ser Kevan Lannister walked through the Great Hall with his head raised and his gaze hard. He was clad in full regal armour, with a gold-leafed breastplate showing the Lannister’s lion, and a red cloak draping from his shoulders and swirling from the floor. His pot belly was tucked in by a belt fastened so tight that it must have been suffocating.

Ser Kevan and his guards had left their swords at the gates, but they didn’t remove their helms. He didn’t bow either, and Cersei’s eyes narrowed. He should bow. The lack of courtesies spoke volumes.

There was a long, long moment of silence, as Ser Kevan cast his eyes over the ghostly Great Hall. The cavernous room was hushed, and the few onlookers hovering between the plinths never said a word. Nobody was allowed to speak in Cersei’s court. Their eyes were desperate, pleading silently at the Lannister envoys. Ser Kevan and his five men were the first new faces permitted to enter the Red Keep in two months.

At the base of the Iron Throne, Ser Robert Strong loomed.

Finally, Cersei spoke, and her voice was low, calm and dead. “Nuncle,” she greeted. “Why do you dawdle while the traitors stand at our gates?”

“Niece,” Ser Kevan’s voice was just as cold. “Where is the king?”

“Retired for the night.” This is how he speaks to me? “I am Queen Regent, you will address me as such.”

“Where is Queen Margaery, Cersei?” Kevan demanded. “Does Margaery still live?”

Insolence. “The traitor Margaery is imprisoned,” said Cersei, “awaiting her trial, and she has already confessed to her crimes.”

“Gods damn you,” Ser Kevan barked a curse, shaking his head. “Her trial? Cersei, enough. This has to end.”

The hall shifted slightly. Cersei could see her guards – her men – stirring at the doors. “Mind your tongue, nuncle,” her voice was a whisper, so quiet Kevan could barely hear.

“Queen Margaery is not facing trial, Cersei.” Ser Kevan took a step forward. “Your seventy-seven days is nigh at end, and in just over a week the Faith Militant will be barging through the doors. You will either face trial, or you will be brought to trial. The keep will be stormed and the High Septon will accept no surrender after that.”

“Then you must stop them. Are you not Lord Marshal, Warden of the West?” Her eyes narrowed. “You lead His Grace’s armies, ser.”

Ser Kevan shook his head. “You must concede. The High Septon will not allow this, and neither
will Lord Tyrell.”

Cersei shifted on the metal seat, but she couldn’t stand. Her body was hunched, draped in coils of red velvet. *Ser Kevan is weak. Why, by all the gods, was my nuncle fated to stand here and not my father?* “You would allow them to break through the gates?” she said incredulously “To ransack the Red Keep itself, to break the seat of royal power? You are letting the Faith seize the Crown, nuncle.”

“I do not see what choice I have,” Ser Kevan replied coldly. “What choice have you left me?”

“Why not grow a spine and do your duty?” Cersei spat. “You’re a Lannister. They stand in open defiance to our throne. House Tyrell plots blatant treason with this puppet of a High Sparrow – and you continue to delude yourself–”

*“By the gods, Cersei!”* Ser Kevan snapped, and the queen even flinched. She had never heard her nuncle’s voice break in such anger before. Ser Robert Strong tensed, ready to move should Ser Kevan take another step. “Lord Tyrell is not the enemy! The High Septon is not even the enemy! The greatest enemy to the king is sitting in that bloody chair!”

The words caused her to bristle, pure rage swelling from her body. Her eyes were murderous. *One nod, she thought, that’s all it would take. I only need to nod, and Ser Robert Strong will smear Kevan’s skull over the tiles.* Her champion had done it before. “You forget your place, nuncle.”

“So do you.” Ser Kevan shook his head. “If Lord Tyrell wanted this castle, or even this city, then he could have taken it. I have spent the last two months begging – begging! – Mace to be considerate, but he cannot allow this stalemate last forever. The High Septon most certainly won’t.” His shoulders were stiff. “At a certain point, they will break down the gates and consequences be damned. Do not pretend as if you have the men to hold the walls.”

“I have enough men to hold swords,” Cersei warned. “And I gave Mace Tyrell an ultimatum of my own – if he breaches the city, then his daughter, his son, his family will die long before I will.”

“Mace Tyrell does not need to breach the city. The city will let him in. The city likes him more than it does you.” Ser Kevan’s teeth grit. “And what of your own son, the king – do you count him among your list of hostages?”

* I will not let them take Tommen. He was the only thing she had left. She would die before she lost her only son. “I will protect Tommen to my dying breath,” Cersei warned, her voice a growl. “You are a fool, nuncle. You are such a fool the Imp may as well place you in motley.”

“Dammit, you–!” His eyes bulged, and he took a step forward. *One more step, Cersei thought. One more step against the throne, and Ser Robert will kill him.* She didn’t know what would happen after that, but she wouldn’t allow Kevan one more step. “I do not work for Tyrion!” Kevan snapped. “Neither does Lord Tyrell. There is no conspiracy, this is delusion! This is Aerys!”

“Mind your place, nuncle,” Cersei whispered.

His eyes turned to Ser Robert’s hulking figure, standing as still as a statue, and he paused. “… Surrender, niece,” Ser Kevan said finally. “Surrender Tommen and Margery, unharmed, and I can still calm Lord Tyrell. I can persuade the High Septon of a merciful sentence – nobody wants to see more war in the realm. You must surrender.”

*Do not tell me what I must do.* “The Imp is playing you–”

“There is no Imp here!” Kevan barked, nearly bellowing. “Tyrion Lannister is three hundred
leagues away, raiding my homeland. I am now the Warden of the West, but I cannot even leave King’s Landing to stop him! Mace Tyrell desperately needs to return to his own lands too, but he cannot leave his children behind.” The man had a pained expression. “Cersei, you are not thinking clearly.”

There it is. He considers me delirious, a mad woman sitting on a man’s chair. Cersei had suffered it all her life. It would have worked, she cursed. We could have forced the Faith and the Tyrells to fight each other, we could have played our enemies off against one another. If only Kevan Lannister had a spine, if only men would listen to her.

She hadn’t been able to rally any more men to her, not with the whole city in stalemate. Ser Kevan had taken the title Warden of West after Devan Lannister’s death, and westerland lords chose him over her. Cersei had fought tooth and nail to secure the Red Keep, to secure her son, but it wasn’t enough. Enemies were all around her, yet supposedly ‘loyalist’ men had still abandoned her, all because she was a woman.

This is Tyrion’s doing. She could see her brother’s mutilated grin every time she closed her eyes.

There was a long quiet, so long that the entire hall went deathly still. Cersei took a deep breath, just to focus herself. This is my uncle’s final chance. “Ser Harys Swyft,” she said finally, her voice low, “your own goodfather. He is dead, Ser Kevan.”

Ser Kevan froze, his face twisting into a scowl. Not surprised, only angry. “Damn you Cersei,” he cursed. “How could you–”

“I did not have him killed, nuncle,” she said harshly. “Rather, Ser Harys was found dead two weeks past, in Maegor’s Holdfast itself, with a crossbow bolt through his gut.”

Ser Kevan didn’t reply, but his eyes narrowed. “Before that,” Cersei continued darkly, “It was Ser Boros Blount – he is on death’s door right now, after working as a food-taster and ingesting poison in a meal meant for Tommen himself. A meal prepared in these very kitchens.

“Two of my own handmaidens have disappeared in the last four weeks, nuncle,” she continued, “and three of my guards were picked off – one ambushed from behind, one with a crossbow, and the other one his stomach gutted with a blade. I had Lord Qyburn inspect the bodies – the wound that kill them came from an upwards thrust; the attacker was of a child’s stature.”

“Cersei…” Ser Kevan pleaded.

“One of the Redwyne twins – Horas Redwyne – he is dead too, but not by my order. Rather, the boy had snuck out of his chambers, snooping through the keep, he must have seen something he wasn’t supposed to, and an attacker killed him,” she explained stiffly. “First it was Grand Maester Pycelle and our Lord Hand, and now fourteen more bodies have joined them. An assailant is stalking these very halls, trying to reach me, and my son. How many bodies must there be before you realise it?

“Don’t you understand, nuncle? This is him – the Imp is in these very walls.”

Ser Kevan didn’t reply, but she saw his face grimace, biting his lip. “I locked the gates to keep him out,” she growled. “I barred all the exits, there’s been nobody in or out, but he’s still here. Just like when he killed father, and now he is going for my son.”

“Cersei,” Kevan said slowly. “Tyrion Lannister is in the westerlands, waging war against Casterly Rock. He leads a force of sellswords hounding my lands, threatening to even sack Lannisport. Ser
Benedict writes--”

“The Imp is playing Ser Benedict for a fool!” Cersei could have screamed. “Who else do you think it is? How else do you think he knows who favours poison and crossbow, with reason to hurt my son? No, the Imp is here – snooping around in secret tunnels and crawl spaces – and it must have been the Tyrells who let him in. He is playing you all for fools.”

Ser Kevan gaped at her. “I will not allow him to get my son. Even if I must keep Tommen locked in his room, even if I must keep this whole castle locked down. So no, nuncle, the gates will remain sealed until the Imp and his plans are stopped, once and for all.”

Her shoulders were shivering, and she had to flex her hand just to calm herself. “I have given you your orders,” she said, lowering her voice again. “Arrest the fraud of a High Septon, force the Faith Militant to disband. Only then will the gates open, and we can focus on these sellswords and the mummer’s dragon my brother has arranged.”

His jaw was so tense, teeth grinding together. “I will get to the bottom of the murders, I swear I will,” Ser Kevan said carefully. “If there has been foul play, I will find out. Nobody – not myself, not Lord Tyrell – is going to allow the Golden Company to take this city. But if you surrender now, I will be able to ensure a compassionate sentence. The High Septon can be convinced. Every man and woman in this castle can walk free out of the gates.”

“I will send them over the walls by trebuchet before I allow the Imp to win,” Cersei promised. “And Mace Tyrell’s family will be the first to drop from the towers. The Imp wants to see me ruined, I will not trust his catspaw.”

Ser Kevan froze, glaring. “You have no support, Cersei. None.” He doesn’t even address me as queen.

“I have the Red Keep. This is the last bastion of the king’s rule left in the city, and your negligence could see it ruined. You forget your duty, nuncle.”

Kevan shook his head. “My duty is to my king, my family and my realm, but those interests do not align with yours.” He paused. “Once, during the Defiance of Duskendale, my brother was forced to sit outside the castle for over a year – unable to act in fear of harming the king, frozen in a stalemate that near-ruined the realm. Tywin could not act, not while the Darklyns held a blade to his liege’s throat, but that inaction cost him so much. I will not repeat his mistake.” His eyes were grim. “In eleven days’ time, when the Faith comes to tear down those gates, I will not stop them. I will help them, and gods damn you for making me.

“So no – House Lannister does not stand with you, Your Grace. House Lannister is in agreement with the Faith and House Tyrell.”

I could kill you. I need only say a word, and you will not walk away. Ser Robert Strong was ready and waiting. For a moment, there was nothing Cersei wanted to do more.

She didn’t, though. Ser Kevan waited for a reply, but Cersei gave him none. He stood and waited, but then he saw her expression and turned to walk away. Her guards held blades closely, but none blocked him. Her nuncle deserved to die for his defiance, but he was still the strongest voice commanding Lannister men in the city. Matters could become troublesome if Ser Kevan didn’t walk out again.

Still, he is a fool. If only Ser Kevan had been willing to act, then maybe it would not have turned so bad. She had allowed her nuncle to enter the Red Keep to negotiate, but in her heart Cersei had
known it would be pointless.

_Ser Kevan is just too weak._

There was a long stretch of frantic, panicked silence as Ser Kevan left. Cersei didn’t stand up from

the throne. She needed to stay sitting down on the damnable seat, to hide her swollen stomach from
the court. She could not allow anybody to find out the pregnancy, she had taken great care to try
and hide it, to stay out of view.

Even after all this time, even despite sickness every morning and constant queasiness, Cersei hadn’t
the heart to drink moon tea and rid herself of the babe growing in her stomach.

*This bastard may be the only chance I have to break that cursed prophecy. If I birth four children
instead of three, then the fortune Maggy the Frog set for me will be shattered._

Ser Oswell Kettleblack, upjumped sellsword and traitor, and yet Cersei was still bearing his babe.

It was all so bitter she could have laughed.

“I must beg you to forgive Ser Kevan, Your Grace,” a kindly voice said carefully, as the white-
robed figure stepped up to Cersei’s side. Lord Qyburn’s eyes were soft, compassionate, and Ser
Robert Strong shifted to let him pass. “I’m afraid he’s under a great deal of stress. There has been
recent news from the westerlands; the caravan carrying Ser Kevan’s wife Dorna, his son Martyn
and babe Janei was ambushed less than a moon ago, as they fled from Casterly Rock to Cornfield.
There is no news yet of any survivors, and the brotherhood without banners is thought

responsible.”

Cersei paused, thinking of the wrinkled lines across Ser Kevan’s brow. She had never seen her
nuncle so disturbed, so frustrated. “The brotherhood without banners,” she repeated slowly, “is in

the westerlands?”

Qyburn nodded. “I’m afraid so. Lady Stoneheart has been moving west ever since Riverrun.”

_They’re targeting Lannisters_, Cersei thought, feeling numb. Lady Stoneheart, the hangwoman,
had been picking her targets with cold precision. The brotherhood without banners had been born in the
riverlands in the wake of the War of Five Kings, but, as the new war emerged, the outlaws had
moved to pillage and raze those they deemed responsible. The outlaws razed the Saltpans to seven
hells, they hunted down surviving Freys, they even raided Riverrun itself, and then they brought
similar destruction to the west.

“It is the Imp,” Cersei muttered, and she knew it to be true. _Why can they not see?_ “Tyrion is

behind those outlaws, he’s exploiting them just as he did with the Vale clansmen. He’s using them,
setting them to pillage and raze while his army moves west.”

_Of course it is him_, Cersei thought, cursing herself for not realising it sooner. A _roving group of
outlaws would be the perfect tool the Imp would use to hurt my family a bit more. This Lady
Stoneheart likely works for him too._

“As you say, Your Grace.”

Finally, Cersei dared to ask, though she feared she already knew the answer. “What of my

brother?” she asked. “You have made inquiries into Jaime?”

Qyburn’s voice was soft. “I know only what the birds have been chirping, Your Grace,” he said

apologetically, “and yet whispers have been spreading that Ser Jaime was taken by the brotherhood
as well. I’m afraid your brother was captured by both the Hound and Brienne of Tarth, and is said
to have been executed by Lady Stoneheart.”

He paused, trying to measure her reaction. She did give him one. “One whisper said that they
pushed Ser Jaime off the cliffs at Acorn Hall,” Qyburn said lowly, “but I have not been able to find
a soul to confirm.”

Cersei just nodded.

She had refused to believe it for so long. For a long time, she had clung to the hope that Jaime
would return, bringing reinforcements from their scattered army that might save her. Her beautiful
knight would return to protect his sister and his son. But then the weeks had turned into months
without sight or sound of her brother, and Cersei’s heart had turned to stone.

_We were supposed to be together forever; Jaime and I had been joined for life._ And yet Tyrion had
stolen that joy from her as well. First it had been Cersei’s mother, then her son, her father, her
brother… Cersei knew what he was doing. The Imp was going to kill her whole family, but leave
her for last.

_There is no creature more accursed and wicked than a dwarf._

Qyburn was still talking, gently chattering away while Cersei stared down at the doors on the other
side of the hall. “I know that Lord Tyrell is feeling very… stretched, as well. The news from
Oldtown has caused many of the Reach bannermen to become restless. The city is said to have
been left devastated in the storm, but I cannot tell to what extent the reports have been
exaggerated.” He grimaced quietly. “My apologies, Your Grace, but with the siege and our
movements restricted, I do not have the same sources of information that I used to.”

There was no reply. Lord Qyburn sighed, and continued, pacing around the steps of the throne as
he talked slowly. “Fear of for his daughter’s life has held Mace Tyrell at bay, but that will not last
much longer. Without Ser Kevan’s support, then we have none of the westerland lords with us,
Your Grace. Ser Kevan has seized control of the gold cloaks in the city too,” he warned. “And,
regardless, both Lord Tyrell and the High Septon maintain a strong presence in the city, and both
their forces greatly outnumber his.

“I hear that the Faith Militant continues to grow; a thousand knights have joined the Warrior’s
Sons, and many times that number Poor Fellows.”

A city in stalemate. All around her, it felt like the kingdom was falling apart. The Golden Company
had been making great progress, because there was nobody capable of stopping them. _Exactly as
the Imp planned_, Cersei cursed, _I tried to break free of the web but I only got myself entangled in it_.

“Kevan’s inactivity has doomed us all,” Cersei muttered.

“Not yet, Your Grace,” Qyburn whispered. “We are not doomed yet.”

“It proceeds?” she asked, and her master of whispers nodded.

“It proceeds very well,” Lord Qyburn said with a smile, but he said no more than that. _We can’t
speak of the plan here_, she told herself, _not in the court, where there are still those who might
overhear_. Still, that glimmer in Qyburn’s eyes gave her hope.

She knew that he had been scurrying through the tunnel, twice, thrice a fortnight, bringing captives
from the city by the score – whores and other lowborn women that she doubted would be missed.
The Red Keep had so few serving women left now. She didn’t know, or care to know, his reasons
for needing so many women. She only knew that he needed captives to… process. Preferably
women, and in some quantity for his work. Still, Cersei had seen the results of his efforts, and she was more than happy to finance them.

*I am a lioness,* she thought, *even if my nuncle is toothless, I will bear fangs myself.*

“Escort me to my chambers, Lord Qyburn. Your work in the Black Cells is all the more urgent.”

“Very well, Your Grace.” She winced slightly as she stood up, the pain in her stomach causing her to grimace. “And I will prepare a poultice to ease your back – I know what a burden sitting in that chair is.”

“Much obliged, my lord.” *He is the only true ally I have left.* If not for Lord Qyburn’s gentle hands, his skills and knowledge, Cersei might truly be doomed. She wrapped his arm around his, stepping down the dais from the Iron Throne. Ser Robert Strong walked close behind.

*One week left,* she thought. It would be a coin flip whether or not their preparations would be done in time.

*I will not let them have my little boy. I am doing this for you, Tommen.*

Cersei knew that not even Maegor’s Holdfast itself was safe. The Red Keep had degenerated into a tense and frightful place. The cells were overfilled with hostages, many of the doors were locked, and even her own guards never walked anywhere alone. There were shadows everywhere, threatening to strangle her.

The highborn hostages couldn’t be trusted, nor could the servants. Lord Qyburn had to prepare the meals for Cersei and the king with his own hands, to avoid poison in their meals. There had been attempts to form riots by their noble ‘guests’ themselves, and the threat remained of the Faith Militant. Many times now, soldiers with grapnels had tried to sneak over the walls under cover of darkness, to rescue hostages.

King Tommen had to stay locked up in his room constantly; the whole tower was sealed while only a precious few even allowed through. Her son wailed and begged, trapped alone in his chambers for weeks on end, but he didn’t understand.

Not even Cersei could walk freely through the castle. Everywhere she went, Ser Robert Strong was a constant shape behind her. Her champion was a hulking, tireless figure clad in steel so thick it could have been used to plate a war elephant. The voiceless knight was stronger than a dozen men, and nothing short of an army could threaten her while Ser Robert was by her side.

It should have made her feel reassured, but it didn’t. If they couldn’t hurt her physically, Cersei knew her enemies would just find another way to get at her.

*One week left.* Cersei knew she would need every single day just to prepare.

“Lady Margaery,” Cersei whispered as they walked. “Have the men resume their efforts with zeal, we must draw a confession from Margaery quickly. *Prepare* her, for her trial.”

“As your say, Your Grace.” Qyburn bowed.

Cersei’s one reassurance was that Margaery was surely despising their captivity more than she was. The little whore was locked in the Maidenvault – a place that was too good for her – but Qyburn had handpicked the guards to watch over her and question her.

It was a long day, and a restless night. They barred the door to the queen’s apartments, and Ser
Robert Strong stood and waited outside like a golem.

She slept in an empty bed, and she despised sleeping alone. Cersei thoughts lingered back to Taena Merryweather – warm and shapely, beautiful and trustworthy. She had been the last person to share Cersei’s bed, the last solace Cersei had. And then Taena had been the first victim, the first body to be found, along with her husband and the Grand Maester. The Imp murdered her just to hurt me, Cersei thought, stirring as she tried to sleep. The pain had yet to fade. Another happiness that my brother stole from me.

Cersei didn’t actually manage to sleep, but she was still shook by the sound of ringing from the gates early in the morn.

Even before she walked out of her chambers, she knew there was something happening. The drawbridge was raised, but she could still see activity on the streets below. She always could, now. The Faith had been camped outside the castle for months, swarming the streets like rats. A permanent garrison of barefooted mongrels, outside her very gates. They even had raised cloth and straw effigies of topless wantons not too long ago, lifting the caricatures up on sticks in an attempt to shame her.

Now the streets were moving, bells ringing attention. We’re not under attack, then – they wouldn’t alert us so. Another messenger perhaps? Did Kevan return? Unless her nuncle’s stance had changed, there was little to renegotiate.

Cersei had to dress herself, for there were no handmaids left to tend to her.

She wrapped a heavy, red velvet shawl around her shoulders, so long it covered down to her knees. The cool early winter air was cold enough to justify it, and the shawl was thick and loose enough to disguise her pregnancy, at least to anyone who didn’t step too close.

Ser Robert was in the exact same position as he had been the night before, waiting to escort her down the stairs.

As she walked through the main hall, she saw Ser Meryn Trant – the last Kingsguard still serving – while he hesitated in the hallway. He still wore his white and silver armour, but his rich, wool cloak was looking rather more grimy since the washerwomen’s rounds had ended. “Ser,” the queen called. “What is happening?”

“They have spread orders to clear the streets, Your Grace” Ser Meryn replied, looking hesitant. He had never been the best of the Kingsguard, she thought, but he knew where his loyalties lay. “A convoy of Warrior’s Sons wishes to bring a messenger through the gates.”

“Really?” She frowned. “The Faith has blocked all messages to the castle.” The flea-bitten fools even had archers poised to shoot down any ravens coming to or from the keep. Not that it had actually stopped me, as the secret tunnels under the Red Keep remain undetected.

“The High Septon decreed that this one is allowed through,” Ser Meryn explained. “They must see it as important, Your Grace. Should we allow it?”

Cersei considered it. The Faith had been very diligently trying to completely cut the Red Keep off from the outside world. Ser Kevan had spent weeks pleading with High Septon to be allowed through. “Do so,” Cersei ordered. “But under heavy guard. Double the patrols on the walls – it may be a trap or a distraction – and alert Lord Qyburn when this envoy arrives. No more than four are allowed through, and bring them straight to me before the Throne – do not let any out of your sights.”
That damnable iron seat again. Still, she had to sit on it – she would not let herself be seen as anything less than in control when they arrived.

They rang the bells as the drawbridge was lowered, and again when it raised. Still, the wait until they actually passed through the gates and walked to the holdfast was excruciating. Cersei wouldn’t pace or twitch, though – she sat rigid like a statue in the cavernous, ghostly Great Hall.

Four men in bright inlaid silver armour, polished to perfection, were walked stiffly through the doors, none of them were allowed swords on their hip. A seven-pointed star was engraved onto their breastplate, they wore rainbow cloaks clasped with silver stars.

Her eyes narrowed. They didn’t bow. Why do they refuse to bow?

One of the men – a clean-shaven man with wrinkled eyes – stepped forward. He was withered stork of a man with a stern, sad face like it was carved from gnarly wood. “I am Ser Bonifer Hasty of the Holy Hundred, serving the Noble and Puissant Order of the Warrior’s Sons, my lady,” the knight said by way of greeting. “I was given explicit orders by the Most Devout not to lower my head in your presence. The Faith honours King Tommen Baratheon, but it does not recognise the legitimacy of your regency.”

She tensed. My lady. Another barb meant to hurt her. That disrespect alone was enough to kill him. And yet the Warrior’s Sons could well intensify their siege if I do take his head. The Swords and Stars could well become more aggressive. The High Sparrow will likely demand retribution, and it is too early for such rash action. Cersei still needed more time.

“I know of you, Ser Bonifer. Ser Bonifer the Good, as you call yourself,” Cersei replied coldly. “You served for Renly, and then you served Stannis. You submitted to the rightful King Joffrey after defeat, and then you abandoned that duty as well to join a rebellion uprising. You seem to enjoy treason, ser.” The wages of treason should be death.

She expected him to grimace, or to fluster. Instead, Ser Bonifer only nodded. “I serve what is right and what is just, my lady – as the Warrior commands me to,” he said solemnly. “I thought that was Stannis, once, but I was mistaken. And yet the Crone’s lantern has cleared the fog from me now, and I serve in the Light of the Seven.”

“You serve a fraud, ser.” Her eyes narrowed. “You have spent months outside my gates, keeping them closed. Nothing in or out, that was your sparrow’s ruling. So tell me, why do you break that rule now?”

“Out of respect for your loss, my lady,” he replied grimly, and nodded to his man. One of the knights was holding a box, keeping it at arm’s length. “The Most Devout wanted you to see this message as exactly as it arrived.”

The Warrior’s Son stepped forward, carrying the box gingerly. A heavy box of ebony and silver, smooth and extravagant. The knight placed it solemnly at the foot of the dais to the Iron Throne, and then backed away.

Cersei’s gaze went dark, but she didn’t step up from her seat to take it. She did not want to reveal her bloated stomach, she would not stand up for these pious fools of knights. She waited until Lord Qyburn scampered across the hall, to lift the box up and bring it to her. The air was silent for a few long heartbeats as Lord Qyburn scampered.

That box, Cersei thought slowly, a hint of recognition coming to her. I’ve seen that box before.
There was a parchment fixed atop the lid, the envelope left open. Qyburn picked that up first, unrolled it, and brought towards her. They’ve already read it, Cersei knew, looking at the gaze in the Warrior’s Son’s eyes. The knights were all tense with anticipation as the dry parchment reached her hands.

She didn’t recognise the handwriting, but her heart skipped as she saw the name signed at the bottom.

“My dear sister,” the curled letters read. “I promised you that I would hurt you. I said that a day would come when you think yourself safe and happy, and suddenly your joy will turn to ashes in your mouth.

“Now you know the debt is paid.”

It was signed, “Tyrion Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock.”

There was no visible reaction, but Cersei’s hands couldn’t move. She just froze, as if her blood had turned to solid ice. “It was brought on a galley from Dorne, my lady,” Ser Bonifer was saying as Lord Qyburn bent down the box, the old man’s back causing him to wince. “They paid the captain fifty gold pieces to deliver it straight to your hand. We intercepted the vessel as it arrived in port.”

The lid opened with a creak. As it opened, she saw Lord Qyburn grimace as soon as he looked inside. Her master of whispers gave something that sounded like a sigh.

Lord Qyburn lifted up a bleached white skull, padded inside the large, felt-lined box. Cersei just stared woodenly, and then she noticed the locks of golden hair that were also shoved inside.

The skull was far too small for an adult. A child’s skull; the flesh picked clean off it and the bone so white it could have been polished. It had perfect white teeth that seemed to sneer.

Cersei couldn’t breathe. The world turned.

*Dorne. It came from Dorne.*

*That hair…* The locks of hair that filled the box. Cersei remembered her daughter’s silky golden hair, she remembered stroking it, brushing it as her baby fell asleep in her lap. She remembered Myrcella’s smile, her laugh, so bright and full of life.

Empty eye sockets stared back at her.

It had been over three years since she had last seen her little girl, and now the skull was sneering at her. *You let them take me,* the toothy smile mocked, *you let the Imp take me away from you.

Couldn’t… breathe. Throat jammed, fingers twitching. Her hands clenched the Iron Throne so tightly that one of the blades nicked her wrist. Blood swelled, but she couldn’t even feel it…

All eyes were on her, staring at her so intently, but she couldn’t even…

*That box,* a small part whispered in the back of her brain. *That’s the same box we used to send the Mountain’s head to Dorne. My daughter’s head.*

*They used the same box.*

She could have screamed, wailed, but her throat wasn’t working. The hall was spinning, the sky was collapsing.
Vaguely, somewhere in the distance, she heard words. Lord Qyburn’s voice was weirdly sharp, demanding answers, and the Warrior’s Sons recounted the others letters they had received. Even when the skull was set back into the box, she could feel it staring at her. Myrcella’s empty gaze was on her, her eyes accusing.

The walls were melting, the ground breaking, her heart dying…

And Cersei was left frozen.

A force of men had been besieging High Hermitage on the order of Queen Cersei and Prince Doran’s, voices were saying, to bring Ser Gerold Dayne to justice. To punish the fiend that had maimed the princess’s face and murdered Ser Arys. The small force of men led by Obara Sand, Areo Hotah of prince’s personal guard, and Ser Balon Swann of the Kingsguard, to bring the Crown’s justice.

Ravens from Dorne said that House Dayne of High Hermitage had refused to surrender the Darkstar to Obara Sand and Ser Balon Swann at first, but then Areo Hotah arrived with more reinforcements. After a short standoff, High Hermitage conceded. They opened the gates, and Ser Gerold Dayne was surrendered by his family.

Areo Hotah, Ser Balon and Obara Sand came to collect him. The Darkstar tried to resist, but he was outnumbered and overpowered.

And then Obara Sand switched sides.

Obara Sand ambushed Areo Hotah from behind while the Darkstar attacked Ser Balon. There had been a fight, a battle breaking out in the courtyard. The Darkstar overpowered and decapitated Ser Balon himself.

Obara Sand had fought Areo Hotah off until the Darkstar could join that fight as well. As the captain of the prince’s guard tried to match two against one, the Sand Snake put her spear through the captain’s back.

Afterwards, Obara Sand and Gerold Dayne joined forces and rode very quickly to Starfall, where Princess Myrcella was being held. They arrived before news of what happened at High Hermitage could follow them. Together they walked through the castle on the Prince of Dorne’s command, and they killed Princess Myrcella in the middle of Starfall itself.

“Armies in the Boneway and the Prince’s Pass have started to move north,” Ser Bonifer was saying. “Ravens have been flying from Sunspear. Dorne has declared open rebellion, my lady.”

Obara Sand. Somewhere through the haze of indescribable emotions, that was the name Cersei focused on. Obara Sand – the bastard daughter of the Red Viper. Her father had fought as the Imp’s champion, and then he had the bastard daughter kill Cersei’s little princess.

“We understand that this must be difficult for you, and the High Septon is not unsympathetic to your loss. The Faith recognises your right to mourn,” the knight continued. “There will be candles lit for Myrcella Baratheon, and the High Septon will pray for the Stranger to take her gently to a better place. And I bring a message from Ser Kevan Lannister too, who offers his very deepest apologies, and urges you to be reasonable—”

“Reasonable? Reasonable?!” she said shrilly, the first words she said since the box opened. She was gasping for air, barely able to breathe… “He killed my little girl!”

Ser Bonifer paled. “I assure you, my lady, that the High Septon will never allow such monstrous
act – the Most Devout has condemned the murder–”

“Kill them.” Her voice turned as sharp as a knife.

The Warrior’s Sons blinked, but Cersei was looking at Ser Robert. “Kill them,” she ordered.

Lord Qyburn grimaced, rubbing his eyes. Ser Robert took a slow step forward, and the knights backed away. They were clutching at empty scabbards. “Your Grace, I am a messenger – I came under a banner of truce!” Ser Bonifer screamed. “You promised safe passage, you–”

“Kill them!”

“Stop! By the rights of hospitality!” Ser Bonifer screamed to the giant knight. “In the name of the Fathe–”

Ser Robert didn’t even need to draw his sword. The Warrior’s Sons tried to flee, but the hulking white-cloaked man lunged with startling speed. So fast that the stones cracked under his massive weight, a solid boom of metal against rock as the iron boots hit the ground. A hand like a sledgehammer shot out, and suddenly goliath fingers were wrapping around Ser Bonifer’s head.

Ser Robert’s arm jerked, and Ser Bonifer flopped.

She heard the crack of bone. The stones cracked as the man’s skull exploded over the hall.

Another of the Warrior’s Sons tried to stop him, but then he swung a single, massive backhanded swipe from the gauntleted fist. The man’s neck cracked.

The final two tried to run, but they weren’t fast enough. Ser Robert was already lunging, yanking the first Warrior’s Son by the neck and hoisting him physically off the floor in a casual swing. The other knight barely managed to skitter a dozen steps away, before the body of his colleague was being slung into his back like a rag doll.

Cersei heard their shiny armour clinging together like a broken bell.

They both crumpled to the floor, and Ser Robert walked, slowly, towards them. One of them looked dead, but the other Warrior’s Son was squealing, begging for mercy in the name of the Mother. He was squealing right up until Ser Robert raised a massive steel boot, and stomped down on the man’s face.

“Your Grace,” Lord Qyburn said slowly. Not angrily, or even shocked, just… disappointed. “That may have been ill-advised.”

She didn’t care. Four bloody corpses were left smeared over the stones, Ser Robert Strong’s boots stained with red. Cersei didn’t even blink. Her gazed was focused entirely on the box, and that smiling, sneering skull…

“‘Ther!’ Myrcella screamed, gap-tooth mouth grinning. “Mother! Look what I got!”

She held a butterfly in her hands, her tiny little fingers clenched around her. The four-year old had been so determined to catch one, and so eager to show it off.

The babe was so energetic, so youthful. She couldn't quite pronounce ‘Mother’, instead she’d skip the first syllable. Cersei’s little girl was grinning so brightly, so proudly, as the bright red wings fluttered. Cersei heart swelled, it felt like her chest could have burst…
“Your Grace,” Lord Qyburn was saying, though she could hardly focus on the words. “We must…”

“Mother!” Myrcella called, running for her. “Mother!”

Even as a child of five, she was so beautiful and courteous. She grinned as she did her curtsies, but Myrcella was so eager she stumbled slightly as she lowered her head. Cersei could only laugh, kneeling down for her little girl. Her daughter’s emerald eyes were glowing, as she clutched a wisp of red fabric. “The septa helped me stitch it,” Myrcella said sheepishly, holding up the needlework, “but I made it for you to wear.”

It was the worst sigil of a lion Cersei had ever seen, in truth – it looked more like a crumpled dog, and the gold thread was stained red from where the needle pricked her fingers. Myrcella so wanted her to wear it on her dress, but Cersei had to wear the golden clasp instead. Still, the queen kept that handkerchief tucked into her dress, close to her skin, all through the feast…

While most girls were stitching favours for boys or gallant princes, Myrcella only ever stitched for her mother or her little brother.

“May the Mother’s blessing be upon you,” her daughter giggled, just like the septa told her to…

“You Grace!” Lord Qyburn was shaking her shoulder, just trying to get her to respond. “Your Grace, the Faith will expect its messengers to retu–”

“Leave me,” Cersei said, her voice so low and her shoulders so stiff. Lord Qyburn didn’t move, and Cersei’s voice broke. “Leave me!”

Lord Qyburn backed away. Cersei took a long gaze between the silver box and the bloody tiles, and then her arms shook. She stood up herself, storming away…

“I don’t want to go to Winterfell,” her little girl squirmed, a strong and stubborn child of seven. “It’s cold up there. I hear they have snows during summer.”

“You’ve never seen the snow before, my darling,” Cersei chided, tucking at the collar of her dress.

“No, but I heard the septa talking about it. She said that the seven hells were cold, filled with ice and heretics,” Myrcella said, “and that the north is half as bad. Do I have to go?”

“I’m afraid so,” Cersei sighed. She hoped that Myrcella would never have to see snow at all, that her summer would last forever. “Your father insists.”

The girl pouted. “I had bad dreams about the north. They scared me.”

“None of that now,” Cersei tapped her on the head, frowning. “You’re princess and you’re a lion. You don’t show fear.”

She turned around to pick out Myrcella’s dresses, while the girl folded her arms unhappily.

“Well, will we see Uncle Tyrion?” Myrcella asked suddenly, her voice turning hopeful. Cersei froze, face twisting into a scowl. “I like him!” the girl protested. “He makes me laugh” …

She nearly collapsed. On to the floor, shivering. There were tears down her cheeks, and she couldn't stop them. Her shoulders shaking, her body trembling. Couldn’t move, couldn’t…

“Myrcella’s phantom voice called. “Mother…!””
Her daughter's cry was drowned out by the Imp’s cackling laugh.

Her stomach was churning, the unformed babe felt like it was writhing. She was doubled over in grief and pain. *He did this*, Cersei thought. *The Imp did this. He killed my little girl.*

Her demon brother was laughing at her, making his cruel jests. “My sister,” Tyrion’s voice mocked in her ear, “I returned your box for you, but the rest of your daughter just didn’t fit inside of it!”

*It was him, him and that sparrow of a septon, those treacherous snakes, all the fiendish cutthroats, fools and flatterers dancing on his strings…*

“Your Grace,” Lord Qyburn said nervously, hovering behind her. The master of whispers looked more lost than he ever had. “I apolog– um, there’s another parchment inside the box. Another letter.”

He was holding out a different leaf of paper. Cersei could barely see straight through all the tears, but she needed to know, she needed to…

She grabbed the parchment and stared at it. This one was written in a different hand, a different writer. *It's my brother’s handwriting, it is.* Cersei recognised Tyrion’s jotted scrawl anywhere.

The parchment read, “*Release the rightful Queen Margaery immediately, dear sister, or I will take even more from you. This is your final warning.*”

Cersei stared. Her hands tightened, crumpling the parchment in her fist.

*It was him. Him and that dolt of a Lord of Highgarden, and the little whore…*

*I knew it. I knew it was.* Her hands curled so tightly her nails pierced the skin. *They killed my daughter.*

“Where is Margaery Tyrell?” Cersei demanded, so loud that Qyburn flinched. “Where is she?”

“Your Grace, mayhaps–”

“Where is she?” Cersei bellowed, her bloody hands gripping Qyburn’s white collar. Her palms were bleeding from the jagged edges of the Iron Throne, but she didn’t care. She couldn’t feel it. “*I want to see her.*”

“The Maidenvault, Your Grace,” Qyburn gulped. “I will have her brought–”

“No.” Cersei’s voice was a snarl. “I want to see her.”

She was already storming upwards, swaying slightly as she walked, her shoes nearly tripping over her long, red shawl. Lord Qyburn called after her, but she couldn’t hear it.

It was the first time in nearly four weeks that she had left the Maegor’s Holdfast. The bright sunlight was nearly blinding, her shoes tapping down the stone steps. The guards on the door looked stunned and confused as she barrelled past, but Ser Robert Strong trailed behind her in long, slow steps.

The Maidenvault was a long-slate-roofed keep built behind the Royal Sept, pale and proud overlooking the cliffs at the east side of the Red Keep. Two tall carved doors blocked the way, each one showing images of the Maiden herself – that gentle smile sneering at her.

Cersei tottered up the steps, her brother’s cruel laugh still echoing on the wind. The doors were
locked, she cursed, and likely barricaded too. “Open up!” she demanded. “In the name of the king!”

A hatch opened on the door, and she heard the rustle of weapons. “Who goes th–” a gruff voice bellowed, but it stopped as the man saw Cersei. “Your Grace!”

“Open up. Let me see her.”

She heard the clatter of heavy bolts shuddering. They opened with a groan, and a corridor of half a dozen men in tattered armour looked at her. The corridor was a tip – the marble floors of the hallway littered with splats of ale, chicken bones and scraps of rotten food. A flicker past through their gazes with the sight of her, many glancing down to her swollen stomach, but the hulking figure of Ser Robert kept them back.

“Where is Margaery Tyrell?” Cersei demanded.

“In the whor–” a man with sandy blond hair hesitated. “In Rhaena’s Chamber, Your Grace.”

Cersei was already stepping forward, moving up to the spiral staircase. Qyburn was behind her, ordering to the men. “Go back to your duties,” he snapped, panting slightly as he chased after his queen.

There was a man on the upper landing – a gruff and broad figure with cheeks scarred by pox and a ragged beard over his chin – flinching in surprise as Cersei came stepping up. Craster, Cersei recalled vaguely. The door to the chambers was locked and sealed by a slab of timber, and she noticed improvised… tools piled up before it. Lengths of wood, leather belts, and a few chains.

Craster stood by the marble hearth, where an iron pot filled with water bubbled over the fire. “Margaery,” Cersei demanded, deep breaths to calm herself. “How have you been questioning her?”

“You– Your Grace?”

“How?” she snapped, “Describe the methods you’ve applied.”

The man paused, stepping backwards slightly. “Lengths of cloth soaked in boiling water, squeezed around her face,” Craster said cautiously, motioning to the pot. “Leather belts, occasionally, but softened to avoid welts. We give her nothing but vinegar in her drink, sometimes the boys swapped it out for piss. One time, Raff tied her to the bed, and whipped her with a stick wrapped in wool. You said not to leave lasting marks, Your Grace.”

“I did.” Her eyes turned to the pot of boiling water. “And the questions?”

“Lord Qyburn instructed us what to ask, and the answers she needed to give.”

“Does she give them?” She glanced around the pile of tools, eyes searching for one with the sharpest edge.

“Sometimes,” Craster nodded. “Not reliably enough. But we’re working on it.”

“Not fast enough.” Her gaze settled on the iron poker sticking out of flames, its edge glowing red hot. “Leave.”

There was a pause. “Leave!” Cersei snapped. “All of you leave, now!”
On the edge of the steps, Lord Qyburn looked disapproving, but he didn’t move to stop her. Cersei pulled the iron poker from the flames, flinching slightly as she touched it.

Daena’s Chamber had been a lavish room of white marble, but now it was stripped bare – the windows were shuttered and slammed, the silk drapes ripped from the walls and the Myrish carpet torn from the floor. The marble remained, but there was no luxury left – the queen-sized four-poster bed was lacking a mattress, no pillows allowed.

And Margaery Tyrell was standing upright, wide eyes fixed on the door, as Cersei came barging through.

The young woman was pale and gaunt. Her once silky brown hair was like straw, her unblemished skin was covered in ugly, red welts. Lips that had once been red and plump were dry and cracked. There were no silk or satin dresses for her, not here – instead Margaery only a dress that once might have been fine, but now it was torn and stained. The shoulders of her dress were ripped, and her trembling hands had to clutch the fabric to cover her modesty.

The whole room stunk of piss and shit and tears.

*She is not more beautiful than me. She was never anything more than a little whore.*

The girl’s mouth stammered. Her gaze flickered between Cersei’s wide and crazed eyes, Cersei’s bloated stomach, and then the red-hot poker in Cersei’s hands.

Even just seeing Margaery again… so much grief and rage pulsed through Cersei’s body that her vision blurred.

Her hands tightened around the poker, the burning end hissing quietly. Margaery backed away, stammering to speak.

Cersei brandished the poker, gripping it like a sword. “Tell me what you did,” Cersei said quietly, “You were working for him, and I want you to admit it.”

Margaery’s mouth hung open, and for a few seconds Cersei thought maybe the girl had lost the ability to speak.

“You’re mad,” the little queen croaked.

Wrong answer. Cersei’s body flushed with pure, mindless rage. A cry broke her lips as the burning poker struck out.

Margaery staggered backwards, but the burning edge came so close it clipped Margaery’s wrist. She shrieked, squirming. “Get away from me!” Margaery howled. “Get away! Somebody help! Help!”

“Admit it!” Cersei roared furiously. “You will confess, you little slut!”

The feeling… it was like gripping a sword. She had always wanted to hold a sword. I want to do this myself.

The woman fell to the floor, whimpering and squirming. Cersei lashed out again, swinging the poker in mad strokes. Cersei tried to lunge, yet Margaery scampered out of the way.

*Release Margaery,* Tyrion had demanded in his letter. *Why was the Imp so concerned for the little slut’s safety, unless they were working together?*
A vision flashed before Cersei’s eyes. The wedding. The little whore had been laughing and smiling, dressed smugly in silk and sapphires, all the while Margaery watched Tyrion drop the poison into Joffrey’s cup. They had planned it together from the beginning. Margaery had distracted Joffrey with her low-cut cleavage, while Tyrion did the deed.

Margaery might have been trying to form words, but they were lost in a shriek of pain.

She cowered against the wall, all the while Cersei held the poker’s edge against her pretty little face. “Admit it! Admit it!”

He killed my daughter. Tyrion was trying to intimidate her, to her cow her into surrendering. He hopes that I will be so lost in grief and fear that I’ll release Margaery. It wouldn’t work. Cersei wouldn’t let it work.

They had been working together all along.

The little whore raised her hands to cover herself, and the poker clipped against them with a hissing of burning flesh. Margaery wailed. “You killed my son! You killed my daughter!” Cersei screamed, standing over her. “Admit it! Admit what you did.”

Tears streaming down her cheeks. Margaery’s face was red and twisted with pain. Her dress was falling off her shoulder, her modesty forgotten about. “You evil fucking spiteful bitch!” Margaery wailed through the pain. “You fucking bitch!

She shrieked. The words… they sounded like Tyrion’s voice. Cersei’s hands lashed out, and the poker stabbed straight into Margaery’s shoulder. The girl convulsed, smoke hissing.

Cersei expected her to fall down, and yet Margaery lunged like a wounded animal.

One second she was on the ground, and then the next the little whore was leaping at her. The poker was knocked straight out of Cersei’s grasp, and furious hands lunged for her.

The world spun. Everything smelled of burnt flesh. They both landed against the stone floor together with a painful thud, squirming and wrestling.

“You bitch!” Margaery was wailing. “You bitch! You bitch!”

The girl was desperate. Cersei was caught off-guard but her hands struck out, a clenched fist that caught the bitch’s cheek. Shrieking, Margaery toppled. Cersei kicked her in the ribs, in the breasts, once, twice, thrice, but frantic fingers grabbed her foot, her dress, and pulled her down.

They were both on the ground. Margaery’s arms were skinny, her body frail. Starved and tortured for two months. Even off-guard, even pregnant, Cersei could overpower her.

Yet Margaery kicked and screamed, thrashed and hissed. Squirming with all her might just to push Cersei away.

Cersei’s hands were tried to grip her wrists, to hold her down, but them her knees whacked into Cersei’s side. She staggered, and lunged for the throat instead.

Margaery was beneath her – on her back like a common little whore – while Cersei’s hands wrapped around her neck. She kicked and she thrashed, but Cersei squeezed. She had never squeezed so hard in her life, there had never been anything she wanted to do more…

It felt like her brother’s neck.
Margaery’s hands were thrashing, squirming at Cersei’s face. Her nails were like claws, gouging her. Cersei felt the red worms tear at her cheeks, at her brow, she blinked at the blood swelling over her vision. A knee slammed into her stomach. But she couldn’t move her hands.

Cersei was screaming while Margaery gurgled – the bitch’s hands tearing and scratching at her cheeks and eyes, her forehead and lips. There was blood spurring downwards, dripping against the floor as Margaery choked.

The little queen’s face turned red, and then darker. Her cheeks plumed purple, and her movements became more jagged, more desperate.

Cersei’s grip didn’t slacken.

It was only when Margaery finally turned still, that Cersei dropped. She was lying bloodied on the floor, tears and blood dripping from her chin. Her hands moved upwards, and she could feel the scratches gouged by the woman’s nails. The scratches went deep, they would scar.

Margaery died with her face bloated and eyes ready to burst, and yet she had left Cersei a ruin. The queen could hear Tyrion’s howling laughter echoing around the room.

Her stomach was writhing. Cersei felt blood, dripping down the inside of her legs.

As she heard footsteps scampering back at the steps, Cersei was still on the floor. Lord Qyburn looked between Margaery’s still corpse, back to Cersei and her bloody face.

“IT was him,” she gasped. “IT was Tyrion. He did this, he did this.”

“My queen…” the spymaster knelt onto the floor beside her, wrapping his arms around her shoulder. Blood against his white robes. “It’s alright, Your Grace. We can handle us…”

“My son!” Cersei wailed, through the wheezy sobs. “My daughter! They killed my…!”

Qyburn nodded, holding her so, so gently. “They did, Your Grace. They did.”

She could feel his hands patting against her back, his body cradling hers. “But we have solution, Your Grace. We have the ultimate solution,” he whispered soothingly. His head turned, to stare at Margaery's wide-eyed body. “My skills… they have improved. Joffrey, Myrcella, your father, your brother…. we could bring them back, Your Grace. We could bring them all back.”
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

The Father and the Stranger...

The Father

He could see the army of men stretched out over the distance, their banners bright against the green and brown landscape. There was a winter chill in the air and grey clouds to the west, but the sun was bright and the morning air crisp and clear with the sound of boots and warhorns.

The Golden Company was camped along the roseroad, a few leagues south from where it joined with the kingsroad. The road was wide and muddy, the trees hacked away and the twisting path through the woods carved by a stream of travellers and carts. Normally there would be caravans, peddlers and horses moving up and down the path, but today there was nothing but quiet, and a tense frenzy in the foreground, where soldiers felled trees of the kingswood to build stakewalls, battering rams and stonethrowers.

The kingswood was thick with oaks and pines, and the Golden Company hacked them down by the hundreds. They were now so deeply encamped and barricaded into the road that it would take a force many times their number to scatter their position.

To the centre of the sprawling camp, all around the cloth-of-gold command tent, flew a forest of banners. Looming over them all was the three-headed dragon, riffling in the wind. For the first time in a generation, the red and black banner of House Targaryen was flying over Westeros.

"We are only leagues away from King's Landing, Lord Connington thought. They hold the Blackwater against us, but we hold the roseroad. It was a strategic position; no more caravans from the Reach could get through to the capital, and Mace Tyrell could not pass back to his own lands – not while the main force of the Golden Company blocked the path.

Still, Jon rode twice around the encampment, inspecting every inch of the fortifications. The Golden Company were professionals, and set a good camp. Even Arthur Dayne would be proud. There can be no mistake, not here.

A sound boomed through the air. A horn, signalling the return of one of the Company's forward parties. Jon kicked and sent his horse into a canter, and was waiting for the troop of men as they came through the bulwarks. They were flying a banner of a black ploughman on brown, one that, until a few fortnights ago, he hadn't seen in years. River's party, Jon realised. They've returned.

Jon glanced over the column of men as they approached. They had sent Ser Tristan Rivers to the riverlands with fifty soldiers over a moon's turn ago, and he had returned as Lord Tristan Darry, with three hundred mustered men in tow. Now the man was returning again, with twenty of his picked soldiers, all mounted cavalry. The men trotted through the bulwarks, and Jon approached their commander, giving a single nod.

"How many are there?" Lord Connington demanded from atop his grey palfrey. There was no waste of smalltalk or greetings.
Lord Tristan Darry paused and scratched his red whiskers. Once an exiled sellsword bastard, now legitimised and married into the newly-reformed House Darry. It had been one of the Imp's better notions, Jon was loath to admit. *House Darry lives again.* Married less than a moon ago, Tristan's lordship remained tenuous. The man hadn't even had the time to sleep under his new roof, had been forced to leave his new Frey wife behind after a single bedding. Still, it was one of the threads in the rope that was steadily gaining them the support of the petty lords.

"I reckon no more than thirty thousand," the new lord decided. "We saw them amassing on the Blackwater, I spoke to a few smallfolk running from the capital. Thirty thousand across the river, and far more Reachmen than anything else."

"Not so many," Ser Marq Mandrake argued by his side, his pox-ridden face twitching. "I saw the same host, and my scouts got closer. There were closer to twenty than thirty, I say, but they would not admit it themselves – the rose lord keeps his ranks wide to try and bloat his numbers. I suspect that much of their bulwark guard were scarecrows wearing helmets, trying make his army to appear more imposing than it is. Entire pavilions of empty tents, false fires at night, by my reckoning. Mark my words; say two and twenty thousand."

"We will assume five and twenty," Jon said firmly. Many of their scouts had been similarly unsure. *Mace Tyrell leads the forces, but the care and cunning in their tactics reeks of Lord Randyll Tarly's hand.* It was not an encouraging sign. "But I want better numbers as soon as possible, and have your scouts log all of the banners they can see. Tell me exactly who we are facing."

"Aye, my lord." They both nodded.

"What of news from the riverlands?" Lord Connington demanded of Lord Darry. "Did you beseech House Mallister?"

"Aye. The new Lord Mallister is a boy of twelve," Tristan said foully. "Too busy pissing his pants in fear of ice dragons to join behind the rightful one. We'll have no support from him."

"Pity." *But not unexpected.* "That means both Mallister and Blackwood refuse to support us."

"None of the riverlords are rushing to join with the usurper either," Will Cole, another serjeant, noted. "There is little will left to fight left in the riverlands."

Lord Connington nodded. The riverlords were more occupied trying to feed their people, and exhausted by earlier wars. Still so long as they weren't joining their enemies, he would take that as a victory. *The Golden Company still holds Harrenhal and Darry,* he thought, *with nominal support from Piper, Ryger, Vance and Mooton.* With the Twins razed, and the remnant of Frey strength gone north, the Lannisters most certainly had no remaining support from the riverlords. House Tully had been well-liked, and their former bannermen would not bestir themselves to aid Lannisters.

Riverrun itself was said to be poorly held, with a token force of the Golden Company led by Old John Mudd moving to besiege it. Their advance parties had split the Golden Company of a good portion of their strength, but they had proved very effective. Old John Mudd had went towards Oldstones, Jon Lothston held Harrenhal, Lord Laswell Peake was besieging Bitterbridge in the Reach, while the force with Ser Franklyn Flowers went further west. While the bulk of their numbers successfully held Mace Tyrell's army in position, their vanguards had made good progress through the riverlands and the west.

The discussion continued, and Jon pressed the men on everything they had seen. They were
gaining ground. They held Storm's End, and the stormlords were scattered. The Golden Company had support from both Rosby and Stokeworth in the crownlands, and Lord Stokeworth was already preparing the way for their siege. Gorys Edoryen was at Evenfall Hall, focused on drawing House Tarth to their side.

Stannis Baratheon had not returned any of their ravens, but so long as the Broken King was harrying the shipping of King's Landing then he still served their cause. Jon planned to isolate King's Landing from any that might come to the city's aid, by land or sea. Jon meant to enclose the city and tighten the hangman's noose, once the Tyrells were scattered.

*Force the enemy to lose ground and influence, cut them off from allies, wear them down from multiple fronts*, Jon told himself, *it is the only way to defeat larger numbers.* Fight with patience and discipline – two traits that he had trained himself in for decades, but his enemies were apparently lacking.

"Find me the king," Lord Connington ordered to a page. "He must be updated."

"He was entertaining Princess Arianne at the pavilion, my lord," a young knight said, bowing.

*Of course he is.* It was a bitter thought. *The princess of Dorne should have stayed at Storm's End; women have no place at a battle.* Aggravingly, she had insisted on coming with the host. Lord Connington nodded brusquely, and the men returned to their duties. He twisted around and kicked his mare into a trot, making for the great Targaryen banner in the centre of the camp, overlooking the Golden Company's host.

With every step, he was adding up and weighing the numbers in his head.

*Twenty-five thousand against us,* Jon thought. The Golden Company had started the campaign with less than ten thousand mercenaries, while the usurpers holding the throne had legions. Still, the numbers were shifting. *Slowly, more and more of the realm rallies for us.*

He turned to stare out over his men, over the sea of tents and canopies and banners. The red-on-black dragon of Targaryen flew the highest, but it was surrounded by the pure gold banners of the Golden Company, and alongside flew the griffins of Connington, the ploughman of Darry, the three keeps of Peake, the purple maiden of Piper, the bat of Lothston, and black sheep of Stokeworth. Many of the exiled knights and lords had their own banners, banners of lands and fiefs lost for decades, which were finally flying again.

The most recent banners that were only just being raised included the sun and spear of Martell, the gates of Yronwood, the hawk of Fowler, the vulture of Blackmont, the leopards of Vaith and the sword and star of Dayne.

Jon saw a dark-skinned woman waiting for him at the king's pavilion, but it was not the princess. Obara Sand; Princess Arianne's bastard cousin. Rather than the elegant, fair features and silky hair of Arianne, Obara was a squat woman, her hands thick with callus. She had a squashed nose and hair braided like a heavy chain, with a spear slung over her back. She wore boiled leather rather than silk. "My lord," Obara greeted stiffly.

Jon's eyes narrowed. He glowered down on her from atop his palfrey. "Where is His Grace?"

"A raven has arrived for your Halfmaester, and the news seems to have excited His Grace," Obara said with a nod of her head towards the maester's grey tents. "There is much talk of battle, but words are wind, and steel is steel." She met his eyes coolly. "When are we set to march out, my lord?"
His attention shifted to her hand; her fingers were stretching and curving, ever so slightly. Ghost reflexes, already set to clasp around the haft of a spear. He returned to her gaze, and she met his. *This one is too eager to fight by half.* "That is a decision for the king to make," Jon replied stiffly, already turning his horse away.

It still bothered him that, of the force Doran Martell had committed, Obara Sand had been assigned its commander. Lords Yronwood or Fowler would be far more respected, but instead it was the bastard woman that Jon had to deal with.

"They are amassing against us and we do nothing," the Sand Snake accused after his back.

*Mind your place.* The horrible woman would likely want to lead from the front lines too. Lord Connington was riding away, but he turned to her with a rearward half-glance. "I will not see an advantage ruined by rash action." His eyes narrowed into a warning glare. "We will move when the time has come."

"Dorne is waiting for war, my lord," Obara called after him, keeping her voice low.

*Let Dorne wait.*

Another Dornish bastard was waiting for him on the way to the raven's tents, and Lord Connington's mood fell further. This bastard was wearing a white cloak. "His Grace is waiting," Ser Daemon Sand said respectfully, bowing low. He was lithe and tall figure, with a handsome face, sandy hair and sharp eyes. "He sent me for you. There is urgent news that the king is wishes to share."

Jon didn't reply. He had to suppress his glower, as he looked down upon the Dornish knight. He kicked his horse into a trot through the camps, and Ser Daemon walked after him.

*Ser Daemon Sand, the Bastard of Godsgrace – said to be one of Dorne's deadliest swords, the Red Viper's former squire and the princess' sworn sword,* he reminded himself. And yet the very sight of the man still caused Jon's mood to sour further. *Another of Prince Doran's demands, to give this bastard a white cloak.* Jon would have refused the Ser Daemon for his status and repute alone, and yet King Aegon had happily given the man a place in his fledgling Kingsguard.

*A Kingsguard consisting of Ser Rolly Duckfield and Ser Daemon Sand,* he thought foully. Both knights were frustratingly lowborn – but that was an issue King Aegon could not be swayed on. At least Duckfield was a solid man of the Golden Company, but neither of them had the standing to serve as Kingsguard.

It seemed like half the prince's escort was Dornish nowadays – it was the princess' doing, Jon knew. *We bent over backwards to accommodate Dorne and they still want more.*

And yet Dorne was far too valuable an ally to risk. The first of the Dornish banners had marched ahead through the Prince's Pass under Obara Sand to join them. Five thousand Dornishmen had already joined them, with more to come as the Dornish lords continued raising their banners.

*But the war is moving fast, and will they be able to come quick enough?*

"Any news from King's Landing, my lord?" Ser Daemon asked as he strode to keep pace besides Jon's palfrey. Obara Sand was trailing behind them. As he rode through the clamour of the war camp, the men in his path shifted and lowered their heads.

"Yes," Jon said haughtily, not deigning to look down on the knight. "To be discussed with the king."
Five and twenty thousand against us. Give or take three thousand, perhaps.

After splitting their forces and suffering casualties in battle, only four thousand six hundred men of the original Golden Company remained with their main host. Their numbers had been bolstered by more sellswords, and allies recruited from the stormlands, riverlands, and crownlands. Now, with Dorne committing their strength behind them, the force on the roseroad stood at fourteen thousand strong.

Fourteen thousand against twenty-five. Hardly the best odds, admittedly, but they weren't unworkable either. The men around King Aegon were all seasoned and well-motivated soldiers – soldiers that had joined them for a reason. The defence around King's Landing was far less organised. The rose lord had drawn upon many of the semi-skilled smallfolk from the city, and Lord Tyrell's bannermen must be feeling the strain.

Lord Tyrell cannot be feeling as confident as the numbers might suggest, Lord Connington thought, considering he's trying to puff up his own numbers to intimidate us. To keep wide ranks, dummy tents and false fires at night – all tactics to make an army seem larger than it truly was. It could be effective, it could well work against inexperienced enemies. But the rose lord underestimates the Golden Company.

He heard the squawking of ravens in cages, and there was already a haggle of commanders and serjeants gathering inside the tent. There was arguing from within, but Jon could catch only scattered mutters. Something has happened.

Jon moved to dismount the horse, struggling slightly with the reins. Ser Daemon Sand extended his hand to help him down, but Lord Connington ignored it. His gloved hand remained clenched, his face hard as he dropped from the stirrups. Ser Daemon faltered, confused, at the slight, but he stepped back while one of Aegon's Dornish squires escorted Jon's palfrey to the nearby commander's stables. Obara and Daemon Sand walked inside, following Jon's flanks.

He nodded at Black Balaq standing by the entrance, while Lysono Marr lingered around the corner. Pykewood Peake, Brendel Byrne, Denys Strong, Lorimas Mudd and Humfrey Stone were all present – along with a few of their new allies; Lord Clement Piper, Ser Ronald Vance, Lord Casper Wylde, and Tristan Ryger. The riverlords stood uneasily at the tent's rear, grouped together and slightly apart from the mercenaries.

The raven's tents reeked of bird shit, and Haldon Halfmaester scurried in the background to see to the letters. Princess Arianne was not visible, for which Jon was pleasantly surprised. He didn't like the way she tried to cling on around the king.

He almost didn't see the Company's commander, but Harry Strickland was sitting atop of a low crate, shouting loudly as he rested his aching red feet upwards. "Too dangerous, I say!" The captain-general called to the men in the tent, not noticing Jon yet. "We must still gather more allies to our cause before risking the city!" the Golden Company's captain-general proclaimed. "Let more flock to the Targaryen banner, let the rose lord come to us."

"We must strike while the fires are hot," protested Ser Lymond Pease. "We have a proven and battle-tested force, our soldiers eager fo--"

"My Lord Hand," a loud and clear voice called, and all others stopped. Jon saw silver gold hair glinting even in the faint light of the tent, and a bright smile looking at him. King Aegon sat at the far end of the tent, cross-legged. "You made it. It seems that an impromptu war council has formed. Do you have update from the roads north?"
The king had let his shining hair grow out into a mane, reaching to his shoulders; sometimes he kept his hair tied back in a ponytail, but today it hung behind his ears. He wore a long and loose gold-trimmed satin shirt of Lysene cut, with a shawl bearing his house's colours wrapped around his shoulders.

*By the gods... he looks like Rhaegar.* The likeness still made Jon's stomach lurch every time.

"Your Grace." Jon bowed in his saddle, digging his spurs into urge the palfrey forward through the large tent. "Lord Tristan and his party have returned. They report no more support from the riverlords, and between two and twenty or thirty thousand men across the Blackwater. I favour five and twenty."

There were no surprised glances, just nods. "Five and twenty..." Ser Denys Strong muttered. "Even after his losses, Mace Tyrell commands a sizeable host."

"Mace Tyrell and Ser Kevan both," Jon said with a nod.

"We will not be able to defeat those numbers," Lord Clement Piper warned, a short, fat, bowlegged man with bushy and wild red hair. House Piper was one of the few that had joined them against the Lannisters, to resume the riverland's war, but Jon still had his doubt over the man's commitment to Aegon. "There could well be more flocking to them too."

"But Mace Tyrell will be desperate," Harry Strickland insisted. "And his bannermen must be growing unruly. After what happened to Oldtown, they need to return to their own lands."

"He will not leave his son and daughter behind." Lord Connington shook his head. "He cannot move until the crown is secured, he is trapped in King's Landing no matter the pressure."

Behind him Lord Tristan Darry stepped into the tent. "What happened to Oldtown, my lord?" Tristan looked confused, turning for clarification. "I have been travelling, I received no word." He paused. "The ironborn assault?"

The mood shifted slightly, Jon saw eyes become a bit more sombre, and hesitant. "A hurricane, by the tell of it." Pykewood Peake explained gravely. "A great storm from the Redwyne Straits – they saw the clouds from Bitterbridge."

"Yes, a hurricane or a great wave. I heard once of a tremor that sunk an entire island of the Basilisk Isles," Lysono Marr, the spymaster, reported in his soft, silky voice. "The reports I read now tell tales of similar destruction. The first word arrived not four days ago, and the second two days later. Refugees are swarming towards Highgarden itself, but I have lost touch with many of my usual contacts."

"The Hightower," Lorimas Mudd said lowly, looking to the spymaster for confirmation. "That is the only thing the reports seem to agree on. They say that the Hightower has collapsed."

*By the Gods...!* Lord Tristan gaped, and the others nodded with a quiet grimace. Every man in the realm knew of the Hightower, the tallest structure in the Seven Kingdoms. Jon had never even been to Oldtown before, never seen the Hightower with his own eyes, and now it seemed he never would.

"The Gods indeed," Lysono agreed. "We are all ants before them, are we not? In any case, Allyria Dayne of Starfall writes of refugees fleeing the city in droves, and claims that every ship between Brightwater Port and the Torentine has been wrecked in the winds. The city flooded, and hundreds of thousands are said to be dead in the streets."
"What of the ironborn?" Lord Tristan asked in horror.

"Their fleet was scattered in the same storm, it seems, though reports are conflicting. The ironborn assault either happened during the storm, or shortly before it. Insanity, by all accounts." The spymaster smiled apologetically, tapping his painted fingernails against the table. "I'm afraid there are few more details than that which I can make sense of. In the storm's wake, all letters and responses I've seen have been patchy and panicked. It should be noted, however, that – as far as I can tell – there have been no ravens from House Hightower or from the Citadel, at all."

"The Citadel has the largest rookery in the world," that was Haldon Halfmaester, frowning deeply as he listened from the far corner.

"Not anymore it doesn't." Ser Brendel Byrne, a broad and scarred man, stomped his foot and guffawed. "Aye, divine justice, I call it. The Tyrells support an illegitimate ruler, and the Father Himself opened the heavens to smite them."

"That is a cruel jab, ser," King Aegon said harshly, speaking up for the first time. The whole tent went quiet. "Many innocent smallfolk died and suffered, I will not have that in my name."

Brendel Byrne stammered, but Aegon only shook his head. "Regardless of their lord's loyalties, the people of Oldtown did not deserve a hurricane. Compassion is a virtue of the Father, ser, not cruelty."

The tent stiffened. Lord Connington stepped forward. "Others are calling it the Drowned God's will, or sea gods, or blaming it upon demons summoned by the Mad Maid's witchcraft. My favourite was one blaming the winds and waves on the Bastard King's dragon, flapping its wings," Lord Connington said harshly. "But I put no trust in storms, nor the hedge tales of smallfolk. Nevertheless, the fact remains that it was a disaster and that Lord Tyrell must return to his lands. Focus on what matters."

Aegon nodded, his voice solemn. "I do not envy Lord Tyrell's position. And I have no wish to obstruct the man from returning to help his people. I will happily allow his forces to pass." He paused. "As soon as he bends the knee to me, he will have my full support in helping the people of Oldtown."

Lord Connington allowed himself a small smile. "That is an offer we should make over raven, Your Grace. And we will offer it to his bannermen too. His eyes glanced towards Lysono, and the Lyseni only smiled softly.

"All the more reason for us to stay put," Harry Strickland declared. "Mace Tyrell needs to get through us, and we need to get through him. He is bleeding power right now, so we might as well let him bleed."

"You have a point," Aegon admitted, rubbing his chin.

Obara Sand shook her head, stepping from the eaves into the tent's centre. Her very presence caused many of the knights and serjeants to bristle. "I cannot claim to be upset to hear of Oldtown's destruction. It was a damnable city. But we do not know how much of Highgarden's strength may remain. They could well rally and march on us from the west," Obara Sand said, her sharp eyes fixed on Aegon. "We stay here, and we may end up trapped by larger forces from both sides, Your Grace. Now is the time to push the spear."

"Then we should turn west, for Highgarden itself!" Pykewood Peake insisted. "A cripple holds Highgarden; the forces of the Reach lie scattered. We take Mace Tyrell's seat, and the strongest
force left loyal to the throne is destroyed. The crown will have zero out of seven kingdoms left."

"It is not Highgarden that concerns me," Lord Connington warned. "What of the knights of the Vale that are coming to the Lannister's defence?"

The room grimaced. They had all seen the spymaster's reports, they had read the ravens; the Lords Declarant of the Vale had rallied for defence of the crown. "There may well be fifty thousand soldiers from the Vale of Arryn coming to support the capital," Black Balaq agreed, in his deep and low voice. The Summer Islander was a man of few words, but they were always heeded. "When the Valemen arrive, we will be crushed by the might of Tyrell, Lannister and Arryn."

"Then we attack before they arrive," Obara insisted.

"How do we know they're not already mustered?" Pykewood Peake demanded. Lord Peake and his brothers would far rather attack Highgarden than King's Landing, Jon noted; the Peakes had been pushing for revenge against Tyrell since the first day. "If they've already arrived to reinforce the city…"

"They have not," Aegon said, sounding certain. "I have been assured that their armies have only just passed through the Bloody Gate, and are moving slowly south."

Lord Connington gave the king a glance, but he didn't press him. Not here. "The Vale…" Harry Strickland rubbed his whiskers. "They have avoided the war for this long. Can we buy them off, or offer a different alliance? I hear this Lord Arryn is a frail and sickly boy."

Again, eyes glanced to Lysono Marr for confirmation. Jon hated the need, but their spymaster was a capable man. "Robert Arryn is indeed," Lysono nodded. "But the Lords Declarant stand strong, despite their squabbles. It is Yohn Royce, Anya Waynwood, Horton Redfort, Harlan Hunter and Benedar Belmore leading their armies."

Lord Connington recognised those names. He didn't know Harlan Hunter, and Benedar Belmore was a fat and weak man who didn't belong in the group, but the others were not names to be taken lightly. "What of the coincounter, Petyr… whatever his name was?" Harry Strickland demanded.

"The Lord of Harrenhal," Lysono said smoothly, to the sound of a few guffaws. Jon Lothston and the Company had taken Harrenhal with negligible resistance, many weeks past. "Petyr Baelish, Lord Protector of the Eyrie. As I understand it, Lord Baelish has managed to cling onto his title too. He still stands as regent through Robert Arryn, but only under the Lords Declarant now. The Valemen expect Robert Arryn to die young, and there's a succession crisis already brewing in preparation for that day." A crease lined the spymaster's brow. "Ever since the Vale's heir-apparent was murdered, the politics of the Eyrie have become somewhat… messy."

_The Vale's heir. I killed the last heir to the Vale myself_, Jon thought. Ser Denys Arryn, Lord Arryn's nephew and the Darling of the Vale, had fallen to Jon's blade at the Battle of the Bells. There would be no love lost between him and the noble houses of the Eyrie.

"I was informed the same; I was told that the Vale may well be the kingmaker in this war," Aegon said quietly. "The Vale has bad memories of the Targaryen regime, and we have little sway over these Lords Declarant. Is that the sum of it?"

"It is indeed, Your Grace." The spymaster nodded. _Informed_. Somebody else had the king's ear, and Jon had a sickening suspicious who.

"We cannot allow fifty thousand soldiers to take the field against us."
"There will likely less than fifty thousand though," Humfrey Stone commented. "The Vale will not commit itself entirely. Twenty thousand is a better bet."

"However many they muster will crush us," Lord Tristan warned. "The Vale's armies are now second to none – they are the greatest power left in the realm. Every other realm was wounded in the war, but the Vale is untouched."

"Dorne is untouched too," Ser Daemon said surely. "Our spearmen will beat their knights. And Dorne has forty thousand spears to field."

"And how long will they take to muster?" Tristan argued. "And who will arrive first?"

"Dorne is ready to fight now," Obara insisted. "Five thousand spearmen stand with you now. Push on the assault."

"We stand between Mace and his own lands," Lorimas Mudd protested. "We have the prime position, why should we abandon that?"

"We need ships to take the city. We need a fleet–"

"What of the High Septon?" insisted Harry. "Give him time, convince the Faith to declare for the rightful king. Increase our offer to him – we will coat the Great Sept in gold if he brings the Faith Militant over to us."

"The High Septon has so far refused to acknowledge us." Jon cast a disdainful eye towards Obara, his voice foul. "And I am not so certain that will change. The attempts at bribery have been very poorly received."

There was no easy answer. Fourteen thousand men, pushing to take a city against far greater numbers. The campaign had been going well, but their enemies weren't folding either. They were caught in a war of attrition, both sides trying to break the other. *How long will it be before they break?*

Jon's eyes flickered downwards to his gloved hand. He tried to twitch his fingers, but couldn't. *How long do I have?*

King Aegon sat quietly for the most part, musing as he listened to the commanders' debate. His legs were crossed, his fingers fiddling as he leafed a small slip of parchment. He looked contemplative, but sure and confident. There were times when it was hard to even recognise him as the boy – *Young Griff* – that Jon used to know. The boy he raised. *War has a way of changing people,* he thought.

"There is another concern, my lords," Aegon said finally. He kept his voice low and the room quieted, all heads lowering respectfully. "The news that I summoned you here to share. I have received word from Casterly Rock."

He held up the slip of parchment. *Urgent news,* Daemon Sand had said. Jon caught the glances around the tent, eyes flickering towards him. "Casterly Rock?" Lord Connington said slowly. "The Imp?"

Aegon nodded, biting his lip, and Jon saw that the young king was trying to stop himself from grinning. "Aye. The letter arrived on the morn, but it had to be relayed through Bitterbridge and Storm's End." The smile finally broke out over his face, unable to hold it back. "Casterly Rock has fallen, my lords."
There was a moment of stunned silence. Harry gaped, while Jon's face just turned rigid. *How? How's that even…?*

Jon glanced at the parchment, and he recognized the seal instantly. Tyrion Lannister had taken to using the Lannister's coat of arms with the colours inverted – a red lion on gold – as his personal sigil. *A bloody demon lion on a field of gold,* Jon thought, but he also noted the similarities to the red lion of House Reyne. *Another act of spite against his father.*

Confused eyes glanced to the spymaster, and Lysono Marr nodded. "I am still waiting on further confirmation," Lysono admitted. "But yes, it does appear to be true. Lord Lannister is successful, and the Rock has fallen."

Jon's stiff hands curled as far as they were able, trying to clench into fists. *I sent the blasted Imp west expecting him to die.*

The words caused excited murmurs around the crowd. "You mean the Imp *succeeded?*" Ser Harys gasped. Jon could practically see him salivating with the thought of the gold of the Rock. "With *three thousand* men?"

"Impossible," Lymond Pease shook his head. "The Rock cannot be conquered. It has never once been taken, not since Lann the Clever in the Age of Heroes. How? How could he take it?"

"It was won with cunning rather than might, my lords," Aegon explained, grinning. "Lord Tyrion writes of a sly scheme."

"With trickery." Jon's voice was foul.

"The last I heard," Lord Tristan said slowly, looking around the room for confirmation. "The Imp and Ser Flowers had won victories at Ashemark and the Crags. They were heading towards Lannisport to raid the city, were they not?"

*Minor victories,* Jon thought with a scoff. The Imp hadn't the forces to take many castles, but he had focused on the towns and villages, and blockading the roads and bridges. Using harrying tactics rather than conquering. He had taken his cavalry through the minor roads and trails around headwaters of the Tumblestone, avoiding the Golden Tooth altogether. He then pushed south into the westerlands, and starting by easily conquering the poorly-held castle of the Crags.

As he pushed his way into the west, the Imp had turned raider. Burning bridges, robbing stables, and sacking grain houses – following in the Young Wolf's footsteps, even. Whenever the western lords mustered a larger force to meet him, the Imp would split off a portion of his own and leave the men behind to distract and delay their enemy. Not trying to win, all just to allow the Imp's main force to push forward. The 'battles' had been relatively bloodless, but the troop divisions and garrisons had still hacked away at the Imp's numbers. The Imp had lost at least a thousand men pushing through Ashemark alone, but the majority of those men had been lost to desertion or surrender rather than as casualties. *How many men did the Imp even have left to him?*

Lord Connington had been openly scorning Tyrion's efforts for weeks, although secretly he had been pleased. Those men had all been sacrificial, in any case. He had hoped that the Imp would be killed in a foolhardy but damaging raid against Lannisport, if not elsewhere on the campaign trail. *But Casterly Rock?!*

King Aegon nodded. "Aye, but Lord Tyrion went for the Rock itself. The castle had a strong garrison led by one Ser Benedict Broom, ready to oppose him, while Lannisport itself was mustering a far greater host than any he could beat. But Lord Tyrion still set up camp outside the
castle. He offered them a deal."

"A deal," Ser Denys Strong said incredulously. "A deal. He bought the Rock off them?"

"Quite the opposite," Aegon said, grinning, as he passed the letter to Lord Connington. It was filled with curled writing so small Jon had to squint to make the words. "Instead, Lord Tyrion approached under a truce and approached the castellan at Casterly Rock, a cousin of his named Damion Lannister. Lord Tyrion explained how he had been taken been forced to take shelter with the Golden Company, and he had no choice but to support them. He begged for mercy, and explained that he had no loyalty to this 'fake king'." The others looked shocked, but Aegon just laughed. He glanced around their faces, and continued. "Lord Tyrion said that he wanted to leave, but he had been indebted to their service. 'However', the Imp said," Aegon's voice shifted slightly in impersonation, "'there need not be a battle. The sellswords care only for gold – they will far rather accept the gold price rather than the iron, and for enough coin I could persuade their commanders to simply walk away from this war'."

"What?" Ser Brendel Byrne said, outraged. "He thinks so little of our banners?"

"'Persuade their commanders'?" Ser Harys guffawed. "He is the commander."

"It seems the castellan was more inclined to think of Tyrion as a glorified hostage that we were exploiting," Aegon was still chuckling. Jon only glowered. In the Free Cities, large sellswords companies accepted bribes all the time, but the Golden Company had never indulged in such practices. Our word is as good as gold. "And this castellan seemed inclined to accept the deal. After all, the westerlands was in no state to fight another war, and the whole succession of House Lannister is in question regardless. Tyrion tells me in this letter that his cousin Damion had his own ambitions for the Rock.

"In return for the Imp abandoning his claim to lordship and abandoning his rebellion, Damion Lannister was willing to open the vaults. Lord Tyrion was invited through the gates to negotiate – with a small escort under heavy guard – and he was offered two thousand golden dragons, to pay off the Company's commanders if they relented."

There were a few mutters of 'insulting'. Aegon was amused, and seemed to be enjoying drawing out the tale. Jon's eyes glanced over the letter, laid flat on the table in front of his prince. Judging from the small and dense prose, the Imp had written it all out in excruciating and smug detail.

"And so Tyrion left to bring this offer to these 'commanders' of the Golden Company, and then returned the next day to bring a counter-offer. Ten thousand golden dragons. Ser Damion hemmed and hawed, but the Rock's vaults were replete with gold, and so the castellan agreed to pay. The next morn, though, Lord Tyrion came back with a new term to their deal; his serjeants also wanted to ships for transport as well. And so back and forth Tyrion came and went in this increasingly fruitless negotiation, until I imagine this Ser Damion started to feel quite annoyed. But Ser Damion went along with it, because Lord Tyrion was so very desperate, and it also gave the Lannisport army more time to muster.

"However." Aegon's grin widened a bit further, and he took a breath. "All the while that the castellan and his garrison were counting gold, they didn't count the men so well. Each time Tyrion came through the Rock's gates he brought an escort of a hundred men who were forced to wait in the courtyard. And yet each time he returned to his camp, he only had ninety-five." There was a brief stunned silence. Jon read the letter himself, clenched his jaw, and passed the parchment on to Harry Strickland.

The captain-general blinked. "He left them behind? In the castle? How, surely someone would have
Aegon burst into laughter. "His men hid in the drains, my lord. Lord Tyrion ordered his soldiers to hide down the latrines with all the filth, and then wait. Tyrion tells me that he was once in charge of managing the Rock's drains, and more than familiar with the sewage systems and how often they were checked." Aegon's smile widened. "Within a week, he writes that there was enough of a force to climb out under the cover of dark and ambush the Rock's outer patrols."

"And so his men raised the gates from the inside!" Harry guffawed, looking at the parchment himself. "Before the storming the castle with his full force before anyone had a chance to resist. In the middle of the night! What gall!"

There was a stunned silence in the tent. "And that worked?" Lord Tristan asked.

"Even the largest castle is left helpless against enemies from within," Aegon explained, grinning. "The captain-general started to laugh first. "Nobody noticed five men in a hundred, not when it was done so slowly, and nobody thought to check the great drains of the Rock, I imagine."

Damn the dwarf. "A castle won by treachery," Jon said fouly. "I'm not surprised a creature like the Imp knew of all the nooks and crannies in which to hide."

"A battle won by cunning," Aegon insisted. "Lord Tyrion proves himself Lann the Clever's heir. The founder of his house himself would be proud."

"If Lord Tyrion truly holds the Rock..." Harry Strickland muttered in awe. "There's not a force in Westeros that could throw him out of it now. Even dragons would struggle to take that castle."

"And the gold!" Ser Denys Strong exclaimed, shaking his head. "The vaults are legendary, how much gold does he have?"

"Lord Tyrion doesn't say. But I have no doubt he will be counting."

"The Imp overreaches himself," Jon warned. "He sits in a large castle, without the men to hold it properly. His campaign in the westerlands was a wasteful one. He must have less than a thousand men left under him?"

"Near on a thousand exact," Aegon admitted. "It was not won without cost. But the reward is great."

I sent the dwarf west with three thousand. "Without the men to secure the surrounding area," Jon growled, "taking the Rock is pointless. You can expect that the Lannisport branch of House Lannister will have already set up siege lines. The Feastfires, the Sarsfields, the Lantells, the Kayces, the Lannys, the Lannetts, a score of other houses of the westerlands. They will all rally against the Imp, he's trapped himself in the Rock. A waste of a victory."

Jon could feel the attention of those in the tent shift to him. "My lord!" Aegon seemed confused. "He holds the most prominent castle in the west, perhaps the greatest fortress in the realm. Let them siege."

Harry Strickland leaned forward. "You should read the letter for yourself, Lord Connington," the captain-general explained mirthfully. "Lord Tyrion is sitting atop a full larder, and the Rock has its own wells. He can hold that castle for years. We sent him west to harry and distract our enemy, and that's exactly what he is doing."

Jon's eyes tightened. I am quite able to read. "And yet now we have truly lost three thousand
cavalry, for the remainder of the war,” Lord Connington said harshly. Mixed muttering answered him in the tent.

Jon knew that that the complaint was moot; he had been the one to order those men west. All to get the Imp away from my king. But he saw no reason to explain himself to the captain-general. Strickland was merely one step above from a common coward; a moneychanger, a dealmaker, not a warrior.

If only the Blackheart were still here. His mentor, Myles Toyne, the former captain-general, had been a different sort of man from the glorified banker standing before him. Strickland doesn't have the Blackheart's steel.

"When the news reaches King's Landing, Kevan Lannister will suffer," Ser Denys Strong said, leaning in from the tent's eaves. He was a veteran of two decades with the Company, with a lord's fortune of gold on his arms, but he sounded awed. "The 'Warden of the West' already has so little support from the western lords. And I imagine the Queen Whore of a regent will be tearing her own hair out."

Kevan Lannister... by all reports, Tywin's brother is having difficulty rallying his banners. Even the Lannister petty lords choose to ride out the winter.

It had been a blessing for the Golden Company's invasion. With Jaime Lannister's disappearance and the destruction of the Twins, the greater part of Lannister martial strength in the field had melted away, and returned to their hearths and homes in the westerlands. Such men would be difficult to rally again, especially as the Imp hindered any attempts to head east.

"So Lord Tyrion plans to sit tight in the Rock until the war's end, then?" Harry asked, and Aegon nodded. "It makes sense – the Imp's contribution to the campaign is effectively over. But what a contribution it was."

"And afterwards he will expect us to march west to rescue him," Jon said, but he knew he was being unreasonable. If any of his men had won such a victory, Jon would have sung their praises. But it's not one of my men. It's the Imp.

"No doubt there will be volunteers to do so, men who will be eager to claim the gold that Lord Tyrion prepares for us," Aegon declared, still smiling. "Casterly Rock will last at least a year in siege. If the besiegers do not bend the knee when King's Landing falls, then I will happily move to reinforce my Warden of West."

Lord Connington couldn't object, but his face hardened. I should have left the dwarf to drown. I pulled him out of the river, and the gods continue to curse me for it.

Aegon believed that Imp was helping him – and it was true, he was. But the Imp was helping himself more. Tyrion Lannister had squirmed his way into a place of command in the Golden Company, squirmed his way into the king's trust.

The Rock was more of a small mountain than a castle, Jon knew. Hundreds of nobles lived in the Rock – a structure that stretched for nearly two leagues, worming all through the mountainous crag overlooking Lannisport. Casterly Rock was one of the realm's greatest castles; what had once begun as a gold mine in the ages of the First Men had been quarried for thousands of years, growing and sprawling into something wholly different. Tunnels and mineshafts had slowly morphed into hallways and corridors, and eventually, a mountain-carved citadel-city, an impenetrable fortress, the home of the Lannisters and their closest branch families. If the Imp took it all, then he's taken the beating heart of the westerlands for himself.
Meanwhile, Lord Jon Connington's greatest contribution so far was a costly victory taking Storm's End from Stannis' skeletal garrison, and a few minor skirmishes through the stormlands. When history was being written, they would write instead of Tyrion Lannister and his daring campaign through the westerlands to take his rightful seat. The thought galled him.

Harry Strickland wanted to call for a toast, to a raise a glass for the little lord Lannister. Others were cheering the Imp's name. All the while Lord Connington stood stiff, and silent.

"Tyrion Lannister proves himself every bit the commander his father was!" Ser Denys Strong proclaimed.

*Yes, the Imp is Tywin Lannister's son,* Jon agreed. *For that alone, Aegon will rue him.*

"Princess Arianne was with me when news arrived, she has gone to inform Sunspear," Aegon said to the room, his voice clear and silencing the ruckus. "The lords of the west have so far refused to acknowledge Lord Tyrion's right, but this could change matters. Lord Tyrion gives us a victory that will embolden many – I hope that we can draw more support from the stormlands, riverlands and westerlands.

"And there is more," Aegon continued happily, "Tyrion took numerous hostages; several Lannister cousins of his, many prominent nobles of the west, many Lannister branch families. And, most notably, Lord Tyrion now holds Lord Edmure Tully, and Jeyne Westerling."

"Jeyne Westerling?" Lord Darry frowned. "The woman that the Young Wolf married?"

Aegon nodded, but it was Edmure Tully's name that seemed to cause the most stir. "Lord Tully?" Tristan Ryger demanded, the first thing he had said since Lord Connington arrived. Tristan Ryger had been a good friend to Edmure, Jon recalled. The riverlords looked shocked at the mention of their lord paramount's name. "Edmure truly survives?"

"He does indeed," Aegon said, nodding. "Lord Tyrion writes that Edmure was freed from his chains, and is in good health. I wish to spread that word as soon as possible."

Tristan Ryger blinked, but nodded. Lord Clement Piper seemed shocked. Lysono Marr grinned a sly smile. "I would reassert your efforts in the riverlands, Lord Hand," the spymaster purred. "I feel like we may be able to draw more support yet."

"If Lord Tully still lives…" Lord Clement Piper hesitated. "I would see him as soon as possible, Your Grace."

"Of course, I mean to ensure that House Tully retakes its rightful seat, my lord," Aegon said earnestly. "We will move Edmure as soon as we can ensure his safety from Casterly Rock."

And as soon as Lord Tully agrees to bend the knee to Aegon, Jon knew. Another achievement that the dwarf would take credit for.

"We hold Storm's End, Harrenhal, and Casterly Rock, Your Grace," Harry Strickland laughed. *He's celebrating like it were his merits that brought us here,* "Four out of nine realms are as good as ours. Aye, I feel a shift in the wind."

*This should have been my victory, my redemption. The Imp is stealing it from beneath me.*

"And what of the Lannister murderess still on the throne?" Obara demanded. She wasn't cheering, at least. "There are still five and twenty thousand men standing between us and the Iron Throne that aren't shifting."
"I will consider it," Aegon said. "Thank you for your wise counsel, my lords, but we must adjourn." There were nods and respectful bows as the men turned for the door. "Lord Connington, a moment?"

Jon stopped. Harry Strickland was still laughing, staggering on swollen feet. Aegon remained sitting, his shoulders stiff as the man thanked him and marched away. *Overconfidence is a curse in any army*, Jon told himself. It was when the battle seemed to be sure that you needed to be most careful. *My king still needs me now more than ever.*

How many lives could have been saved, if only someone had pushed a young Tywin Lannister away from Aerys' ear?

Jon looked at his liege, and he thought of the young boy he helped raise, and the handsome and gallant prince he had sworn himself to follow. *He holds himself so strong now.*

Jon could feel the gazes of several of the commanders linger on his back, until they stepped from the tent's threshold. It was only when they filed away that Aegon finally seemed to relax. The young man sagged slightly, moving to cradle his thigh. Jon knew the real reason the boy had been sitting down all through the meeting.

"Does it still hurt?" Jon asked, and his voice grew softer.

"A bit," Aegon admitted. He had to wear saggy, long-length shirts to hide the bundle of bandages around his waist. It was unhealthy for a king to show blood. "But Haldon says it will heal nicely."

*I should never have let you get hurt.* Still, that was a foolish thought; Aegon had insisted on leading the charge against Storm's End personally – and Jon had even been proud of him for it. Proud, but terrified. Jon had urged his king to stay away from the frontlines, to lead from the rear.

That battle had been the most costly one the Golden Company had fought yet, against the starved garrison left by Stannis Baratheon. They had been victorious, but the great walls of Storm's End hadn't fallen easily.

All it had taken was a single arrow, fired by some common soldier, and all had been nearly lost. *The arrow came far too close for comfort.* The shaft pierced straight through Aegon's hauberk, and into his upper leg. A few inches to the side, it could have punctured a major vein.

*The rightful king, the conqueror returned – my whole purpose, my redemption – could have died by a single stray arrow.* There could be a thousand more random, unpredictable arrows just like it, and yet the whole kingdom would be ruined if even one found its mark. It was a terrifying, sobering thought.

There was a moment's quiet, Jon's eyes lingering at Aegon's thigh. *To be a king was to be vulnerable, but no king could allow others to realise that too.*

"You look concerned, my lord," Aegon said finally. "I was wondering if there was something you couldn't say in front of the others?"

Jon pulled his eyes away from the bandaged wound. "It concerns the Imp," Jon said. "You should not encourage the dwarf so."

Aegon blinked. "Has Tyrion Lannister not proven himself? He has been our steadfast ally since before the landing."

"He has," Jon admitted, unwillingly. "But only as it serves himself. He could turn against us just as
easily. I would strongly recommend distancing yourself, to restrict his influence."

"I have already promised him Master of Coin, and Warden of the West."

"There are others who could take those roles, Your Grace." Let Harry Strickland take over coin-counting, just keep him out of my army. "Warden of the West might suit the Imp, but neither position will sate him for long. I know his type, he will constantly want more." Aegon looked unconvinced. "Lord Tyrion Lannister taints our cause, Your Grace. He is a kingslayer and a kinslayer."

"Kingslayer? Hardly – Joffrey Hill was no king." Aegon shook his head. "And, in any case, Lord Tyrion was convicted of his nephew's death in a court of shams. The only murder Lord Tyrion committed – one that he happily admits – is of Tywin Lannister, and that is a crime I am more than willing to pardon." A pause. "Do you deny that Tywin didn't deserve his fate?"

"Tywin Lannister deserved that and more," Jon admitted, but he pressed on, gritting his teeth. "But the Imp's reputation is a blight upon us." The smallfolk say the Imp controls you, that you are his puppet. "Men with that foul a reputation drive others away. The High Septon could have supported us, if not for the Imp. Regardless of his actions or justifications, think of how it looks."

"I will not let slander and rumour rob me of a good ally," Aegon replied firmly. "Tyrion Lannister has suffered such from birth. He has given me nothing but wise counsel and leal service – as much as you have."

Gods curse it, how much has the Imp already squirmed his way into his head?

I should have let the dwarf drown, he thought, as he had many, many times. If he had any feeling left in his fingers, Jon's hand would have hurt from how hard he clenched his fist. "And what of Myrcella, Your Grace?" He lowered his voice. "They say the Imp planned it, and that the Martells–"

"Tyrion Lannister wasn't even aware of his niece's death." Aegon's voice turned sharp. "And House Martell had naught to do with the murder – Arianne swears by it. Myrcella Hill was murdered by Gerold Dayne, the Darkstar, acting alone. Gerold Dayne is a wanted criminal and nobody has condemned his crimes more than Prince Doran has. I will not tolerate such lies against my loyal allies. Our enemies try to slander me, and I refuse to allow them."

I remember a time when I would have clipped 'Young Griff' across the ear for such a tone. Still, that had been before Aegon become a king, and Lord Connington wouldn't cross his liege. Even despite the anger flushing through him, Jon felt a flush of pride too.

Jon nodded curtly and unhappily, but he let the matter drop.

There was no choice. I gave Ser Franklyn Flowers very specific orders before sending him as the Imp's second in command, Lord Connington thought. Should the Imp prove untrustworthy, should I send word, Ser Franklyn is prepared – and now is time to put the knight into actions.

Jon knew that when he was gone, the Imp would want to replace him as Hand of the King. The Imp would be a worse fiend than Tywin, Jon had no doubt, and he would not allow that to happen. I may be dying of greyscale, but I swear it – by Rhaegar's memory – the dwarf will not outlive me.

He didn't say a word to Aegon of the thoughts and emotions writhing inside of him. Jon kept his face completely passive, allowing absolutely nothing to show.
"Walk with me, my lord. Let us talk privately," Aegon said after a pause, smiling again. "Let us go see the elephants."

Jon frowned, but he nodded. "As you will, Your Grace."

He stepped out of the tent, and the guards bowed as they left. Ser Daemon trailed behind them from a distance, while Jon kept close to his prince. Aegon couldn't quite hide the slight stagger in his steps from the wound.

The elephants were kept to pens at the very centre of the camp, the pride of the Golden Company. In battle they would be clad in steel plate and golden drapes, carrying canopies from which archers could perch. They had been a nightmare to transport across the sea, but there wasn't a warhorse in the realm that could stand against them. They were walking siege towers, trained and bred for battle.

From the distance, they were great shapes of grey muscle, each one standing taller than many houses. They were kept to large pens made of wooden spikes, half a dozen to each pen. Once, the Golden Company had three hundred of the beasts, but now there were only fifty-six remaining.

The Golden Company had first purchased the beasts from New Ghis, Jon recalled. Born and bred for war, and the Company had taken them to them quickly. Most of them had their tusks shortened into snubs, but for battles there were metal elephant blades to be attached to their tusks. War elephants were a fairly common sight around eastern Essos, but even now many of the Westerosi men could be found gaping at them.

The master of elephantry, a tattooed Volentene man named Talek Vhaeros, bowed deeply as he saw Aegon approach. A few of the elephants were bellowing, while keepers marched the beasts in formation around the camp, one pair at a time. Jon had given orders that the elephants were to be drilled alongside their cavalry, so that both elephant and horse would become accustomed to each other.

"Talek," Aegon called to the man. "I wish to see mine again."

"Of course, Your Majesty." Talek bowed. "Will you need your harness?"

"Not today."

Most of the elephants were kept in pens of five or six, but Aegon headed straight towards a single pen kept separate. Jon saw Ser Rolly Duckfield, standing outside the pen with his white cloak draped into the mud. The large man bowed as his king approached.

The king's young face lit up as he saw a group of elephants marching past – the keepers pushing them into formation as horsed men rode circles around them. "Magnificent, aren't they?" Aegon grinned. "They are such huge, gentle beasts."

"They are not so gentle in battle, Your Grace," Jon warned. Aegon walked forward towards the pen, while Jon lingered back slightly. "You have never seen a man crushed beneath them as they charge."

"Not in battle," Aegon allowed. "But in battle they follow orders, and they charge when they are commanded to. Outside of battle, they are remarkably intelligent. That old matriarch, she is called Shaela." Aegon pointed to a large grey beast, resting on the grass in the opposite pen. "Talek was telling me that she learned how to stamp her foot come feeding time, to make sure the keepers never forget. No one taught her that; she just learned by herself, and she taught all her children too."
Now, every elephant stomps their feet on the hour, so precise the keepers set their rounds by it."

There were times when Jon was still reminded of the boy he helped raise, the insatiably curious and bold boy. Jon didn't reply, but his heart fluttered. "Shaela is the oldest elephant we keep," Aegon continued, as he stepped by Ser Duckfield. "She's sixty-seven years old, with twelve children and grandchildren. Nearly as old as the Golden Company itself. She's too old to ride in battle anymore, but they keep her because she helps train the others. They didn't think she'd survive the ship journey, but Shaela is a stubborn old bitch."

Aegon opened the gate, and stepped inside the pen. Jon saw a massive grey beast shake its head, blowing a trumpet horn from its snout. "Your Grace," Jon warned.

"It's quite alright," Aegon reassured. "Come, Lord Hand."

The keepers all bowed to let Aegon pass. The elephant snorted and shifted to attention, its snout flapping and ears wafting. Up close, the beast was a mammoth standing near fifteen foot tall. So large it could lift my king in its trunk, or crush a man with a single foot. "He thinks I want to ride," Aegon laughed. "Very intelligent beasts. Telak trains them well."

The elephant dropped to his knees, waiting for Aegon to mount a saddle over its back. Aegon didn't, instead he just walked around to it, to scratch the beast behind the ears. The great ear flaps swatted at him. "He's a bull. The bulls are bolder and fiercer on the front lines, but most of the men still trust the females more. Typically, it's the males used for charging, and the females for bowmen. I counted; we have twenty-four cows, and thirty-two bulls." Aegon looked back to the grey beast, the snout sniffing up around Aegon curiously. The king grinned, but he didn't flinch away. "And this is the very biggest elephant that we keep. Telak swears by him, he's the best we have to offer. His name is Toyne."

The Golden Company names their elephants after distinguished fallen soldiers, Jon remembered slowly. Jon glanced up to the grey beast, thinking back to Myles Toyne, the Blackheart, the man who once mentored him. Aegon gingery walked alongside it, running his hands along its hide. "Come closer, Lord Hand," Aegon insisted. "It's alright, he's well-used to me."

Jon wasn't comfortable near any animal that might kill him by rolling. The bigger it was, the more distance he wanted between them. Still, Jon stepped forward further into the pen, right next to the wall of grey flesh. Telak and the elephant handlers kept a close eye on them, but they didn't object. Ser Rolly Duckfield was standing by the gate, his arms folded.

"You are very interested in elephants, Your Grace."

"I was told it was good to familiarise myself with them. I mean to ride him into battle, actually, from his back where I can stand high and clear for the whole army to see me," Aegon explained. "I think that Toyne will deliver me to the Iron Throne."

"I…" Jon's instinctive reaction was to object, but then he hesitated. On an elephant's back, you'd be an easy target for bowmen, he almost protested. Still, the elephants were also large enough to heavily armour, and strong enough to carry a carriage where a shield wall could be mounted. Aegon was right; it would be a good rallying point for their men, and a well-trained elephant could carry the king more safely than any horse could. "I think that's a good idea, Your Grace."

The Blackheart would want to see his namesake carry the king.

He nodded. "Toyne is Shaela's son, did you know?" Aegon continued, absently. "He also had three sisters, but only one remains. The other two were lost during the voyage." He paused. "They are
intelligent creatures. Talek tells me of how they still mourn their family sometimes, of how Shaela's raises her trunk to cry for her missing girls…"

Jon didn't reply, and there was a stretch of silence. They were alone now, both of them in the elephant's pen with no ears around. Aegon's voice lowered, turning low and solemn. "What happened to Myrcella was undeserved," Aegon said finally. "It doesn't matter if she was Myrcella Hill, Myrcella Baratheon or Myrcella Lannister – she was a little girl and she did not deserve to die like that."

"She was a threat to your crown, Your Grace." Jon's voice turned low too. "She was a bastard born by incest and usurpers."

"She was." Aegon nodded. "And I doubt Tywin Lannister would have thought twice about her death, if our roles were reversed. But I resolved myself to be better than those who came before me. I want to do right by this realm, my lord."

His voice was so earnest, so honest. "You will, Your Grace."

Aegon grimaced. "It still feels so strange to hear you calling me that. I keep on expecting that it'll become normal, but it never is." He paused. "And it feels even queerer for me to call you 'my lord'. When... When we're alone, is it ok if I call you Griff again?"

"It... it is." Jon nearly choked. He wanted to wrap his arm around the boy, but he wouldn't; not while the plague crawled up his wrist. Jon wasn't an emotional person, but Aegon brought out the best in him. *He's the son I never had*. "Aegon."

He smiled sadly, with that sad melancholic look in his eyes that reminded Jon so much of his father. "I know that there is little sympathy for Myrcella in my camp," Aegon admitted. "I know that they even cheer her death. But I trust Arianne when she says her family didn't do it, and I trust Tyrion when he writes that he didn't orchestrate it. Tyrion spoke well of Myrcella, and of Tommen, he always has. They were innocent children. Others might try to pardon the deed, but I will push to see the Darkstar punished for what he's done – it was murder, and that must have a price." Aegon sighed. "And neither will I allow any harm to come to Tommen when I take the Red Keep."

That caused Jon's eyes to widen. "Your... Aegon." Jon grimaced. "If Tommen lives, there will always be those who would declare for him." He pressed his lips together, trying to control his disapproval. "All it takes is one rebellion. Your realm will not be at peace so long as a potential usurper lives."

"I know."

"This realm has suffered many times because of false claims to the throne," Jon warned. "Do not allow a challenger to live, do not allow a challenger to grow. Tommen may be a boy, but he will grow into a man, a man who could seek revenge. Mercy is a fine ideal, but it is not worth the risk."

"There we must disagree." Aegon's eyes flashed. "Mercy is worth it. I told you; I want to be better than those who came before me. It may not be easy, but I want prove that I deserve this realm." He shook his head. "Cersei Lannister made her choices and deserves the axe, but the children do not."

Jon opened his mouth to object, but then closed it again. *This is what I taught him*, he thought. *I raised him to be just and honourable, I taught him of a king's rights and his duty. I taught him what it means to wear the crown, to sit on the throne. I wanted him to be a good king*. It was such a strange feeling to see the boy he raised standing so strong, to look upon a man he helped mould. *He learnt the lessons I gave him*. It felt prideful and terrifying at the same time.
He is not my son, but I will be a father to him.

Aegon was still running his hands down Toyne's side, scratching behind his ears. The great elephant's snout wrapped playfully around Aegon. "It is the Mother's Day in seven days' time, is it not?" the king asked finally.

"It is," Jon said finally. He didn't know what else to say. "A day of judgement."

"The Mother's Day. And the queen's trial," the young king mused solemnly. "I cannot remember my mother. They say that my mother was raped and murdered, but I…" He shook his head. "I was too young, I cannot place her."

There was no reply. They both just stood quietly, just the two of them and the elephant. "I do dream of her, though," Aegon added, with a glance to Jon. "Occasionally I have dreams… I remember her hair – she had the most lovely silky silver hair." His hand moved to fiddle with his own curls, absentmindedly.

"You are mistaken," Jon said lowly. "Elia Martell had dark hair."

"She did?" Aegon frowned. "Well, I suppose they were just dreams."

There was nothing but silence, and the elephant's snorting.

"I cannot remember my mother," Aegon said finally. "But I do mean to avenge her."

"Yes. Your mother and your father both. We have all gathered here to right those wrongs." Jon nodded, his eyes hard. "And I will put the realm to order for you, I swear it on Rhaegar's memory."

"I believe it." Aegon finally turned away from Toyne, holding himself straight. "In seven days' time, Cersei Lannister will be judged, and King's Landing may well schism. Mace Tyrell will want to be there for the trial, but I would rather take advantage of the distraction. Let us attack while their attention is divided.

"In seven days," Aegon said firmly. "I want to attack. For fire and blood, for the Mother's judgement."

There were so many doubts. The numbers, the odds against them… but still, then Jon looked into Aegon's eyes and he felt his resolve stiffen. "Yes," he agreed. "I think I could make that work."

Aegon grinned, violet eyes shining mischievously. "Good. Because there's another reason that I come so often to see the elephants," he shuffled backwards, further into the elephant's pen. The great saddlebags of supplies for Toyne were piled at the very back; the war elephant's armour all draped across the ground. "There's something else I wanted to show you."

It stunk of elephant dung. Jon frowned, stepping after him. Inside the pen, there was a corner shielded from view, the whole stable hidden behind the thick wooden fencing. "Your Grace?"

"I was told to keep it a secret until the right time came," Aegon admitted, as he bent down, "and it could not be stolen if nobody knows it is here. I set my Kingsguard and the men-at-arms to guard this pen not just because it houses the royal mount, but I could think of no better hiding place than trusting Toyne to watch over it."

From underneath a pile of drapes and plate mail, Aegon pulled out a long oak box, with a fine polished finish and a heavy iron lock on the clasp. Aegon grunting slightly as he yanked it out, and then he shuffled to pull out a small key hanging on a chain around his neck. Jon just blinked in
"It arrived three days ago," Aegon explained, clicking the latch open. "Ser Rolly Duckfield went to pick it up himself – very discreetly to not raise attention. Only a few people know of it, and I want to keep it that way for now. I would have told have you at the time, but, well, you were just so busy. There was never a chance for us to speak privately."

Jon stepped closer, frowning. The heavy oak led creaked open, revealing a box lined in felt and silk. "A gift from our friends in Pentos," Aegon admitted, his voice flushed with pride.

The silk unravelled, and a jewelled black sheath, gilded in enamel of dark crimson, gleamed in the dusky air. Aegon grasped it, and drew forth the finest blade that Jon had ever seen. A hand-and-a-half sword, Jon realised, taking in the long hilt, suited for a grip with either hand, or both at once. A bastard sword.

The metal was black, with the faintest traces of red that seemed to glow in the faint light. Its edge was as smooth as rippling shadows, and whispered in the air. There was a cross-guard, fashioned into the shape of two dragons, and, embedded into the pommel, was a ruby larger and brighter than any Jon had ever seen…

When the blade shifted in the light, he saw the carvings of flying dragons etched across the metal; the pattern beautifully intricate, but nigh-invisible unless he squinted. Easier seen in motion, in glimpses, rather than lying still – the etchings seemed to ripple, like the shadow of fire.

It was all flawless Valyrian steel, of such a quality Jon had never seen. A blade fit for an emperor.

"Is that…?"

"Yes, the weapon of my ancestors. My history." Aegon gingerly raised the weapon upwards, clasping his arms around it tightly. "The sword Blackfyre, to be wielded by Targaryen hands once more. With this I shall unite the realm, as Aegon did before me."

---

**The Stranger**

"Craster," a hard man grunted to him as they passed on the stairs. The guard wore a Lannister surcoat, but his armour was rusted and mismatched. "You on duty?"

He didn't reply, only glared. Craster wasn't a talkative man. He was a gruff, scarred and pock-faced sellsword that kept his face hidden under a rusted iron halfhelm. Even among the hardened sellswords and soldiers holding the Red Keep, they gave Craster a wide berth.

The other guard peered back at Craster as he walked towards the Royal Quarters, but he chose not to object. Craster was known for being unstable, and ever since the queen's siege began the Red Keep had devolved into a more… primal place.

Craster kept on walking up the staircase, heavy iron boots stomping against marble, and then onto Myrish carpets stained with mud. There were three other men standing at the top on the landing, leaning on pikes. The men wore Lannister armour, but their shoulders were slouched and they looked bored. Guards who had been standing on duty for hours on end in a deserted keep.

"Craster," one of them called, cautiously. Yellow Cock Tom, Craster knew. After months being trapped inside the Red Keep, they all knew each other's names. "What the fuck are you here for? It
should be Wilkin, not you."

"Wilkin is on the wall," Craster said gruffly. "It's me now."

"Says who?" Yellow Cock Tom demanded. "Wilkin was supposed to bring booze up."

"Take it up with the White Lord," Craster snapped. "He told me to guard the little bugger, so here I am. Standing guard."

The White Lord was the name the men gave for Lord Qyburn, the ruling lord of the Red Keep. The very mention caused the men to shuffle. Qyburn was the one who truly held power in the Red Keep now – the right-hand man of the queen. Qyburn was white-robed, softly-spoken with gentle features, but there was a ruthlessness in him that would put tyrants and warlords to shame. Not even the hardest, most brutal killer would ever object to the White Lord's orders.

All of the guards had heard the screams and sounds that came from Qyburn's Black Cells. Most knew only the broad strokes of what was happening beneath the Red Keep, but Craster had more of an inkling than most. The few remaining guards were given a loose leash, but it was well-known that any man who stepped out of line would join the 'studies' happening in the dungeons.

Lord Qyburn was the only reason that half the men hadn't deserted Queen Cersei yet.

Craster had been one of the ones to help move the bodies into the cells. All of the serving girls, the washerwomen, and the handmaids had slowly been funnelled into the Black Cells. Not a one had come out again.

It was already dusk outside, the light fading behind the barred and shuttered windows. On some nights you could hear the mobs and protests from outside the gates, but tonight it was quiet. Yellow Cock Tom moved to light a torch, illuminating the wide staircase in eerie torchlight.

"It's no fun without Wilkin's booze," Yellow Cock Tom moaned. "Fuck night duty – we have stand here till dawn and not a drop of booze." He cast a foul look at Craster. "Wilkin always brings the booze."

Craster didn't reply. He just folded his arms. Another man, Ben Rabbithole, scratched his bushy beard. "We could always borrow it from the other lot," Ben suggested, pointing up the stairs to the next landing. "I hear they got some ale."

There was another set of guards further up the stairs, and more guards still based at the bottom of the stairwell. Three groups of guards, all groups positioned to watch the others. The queen didn't have many men to spare, but she was still feeling paranoid. "Who's on duty up there?" Yellow Cock Tom asked.

"John the Hammer, I think."

"Fuck no, I'm not getting anything off him," Yellow Cock Tom shook his head, and sighed. "We'll go without booze."

They were all settling in for the night, lounging around with spears close to hand. Craster leant against the wall, a safe distance out of the way.

"It's better than being out on the walls, at least," the other guard, Little Pewty, noted. Little Pewty was a scrawny man with mousy eyes, who clutched his halberd a little too tightly. He had been one of the Mountain's Men. "You got thirty men to patrol every single foot of wall? In the cold and dark? I hear the sparrows are trying to clamber over more and more now, and you can bet the Bitch
Queen will have the head of any man who lets one of them slip through."

"At least on the walls we can keep moving," Yellow Cock Tom complained, scratching uncomfortably at his groin. Craster knew that Tom got his name after developing an infection on his member, from raping so many serving girls in the Red Keep. He was a short and fat, bloated man with a red face. "Here we're just standing. I can never fucking stand just standing."

The four guards were all resting around the landing of the Royal Quarters, surrounded by Myrish carpet and ancient tapestries. The chamber right there used to belong to Aemon the Dragonknight himself, Craster thought silently. Some of the greatest heroes the realm had ever known had walked over this floor. Little Pewty spat on the floor, a lump of yellow phlegm. "Hells, this is privilege, ain't it?" Ben Rabbithole laughed. "Being here makes us Kingsguard, right? We should all be knighted."

"Bugger that," Tom moaned. "I'd prefer to take Alyn's place in the highborn chambers. Did you know he gets to take one of those Tyrell girls every night? That's proper highborn cunt – he swears her scunny smells like roses."

Pewty's eyes widened, and then he laughed. "No shit? I thought those noble bitches were off-limits. Which Tyrell girl?"

"Maggy or Alla or something. The little queen's cousin, I hear. And the White Lord said it was fine to have a go, so long as you don't leave marks."

Megga Tyrell, he thought, a maiden of fourteen. Megga, Alla and Elinor, the queen's ladies-in-waiting, were all hostages too. But there was no reaction from Craster. A civilized man would be appalled, but there were none here.

He knew that another of the reasons the queen kept the loyalty of her guards was by allowing them their 'liberties' with the hostages. They had turned the Red Keep into a cage, and now the animals ruled. *How quickly civilization reverts to barbarity.*

Yellow Cock Tom, Ben Rabbithole and Little Pewty were still talking, laughing about the women they raped. Craster just stood stiffly and didn't participate. Craster looked bored, lazy, but he was listening to every word. "Well, if you really want to have a go," Little Pewty said eventually, motioning to the chamber doors. "How do you feel about little boys?"

Tom guffawed. "Bugger off," he laughed. "I'm not *that* horny."

There was something in Pewty's manner that suggested he had only been half-jesting.

Craster said nothing, and just waited.

Maegor's Holdfast was deserted. Skeletal guard duty, guarding an empty corridor all night. Nobody was around with them; the halls were ghostly quiet. It was the hour of ghosts when Yellow Cock Tom finally shifted. "Fuck," he grunted. "I need a piss. Back soon."

"Hells, the Queen Bitch will have your cock if she hears you abandon your post." Cersei's orders had been quite clear; she wanted a constant force of men watching the approach to the king's chambers at all hours. There were twelve men in total; a set of four on each landing.

"I need a piss," Tom whined, already stomping down the stairs. "Cover for me."

"You and your damn leaky cock," Ben Rabbithole groaned. Still, it was unlikely that anyone would come this time of night.
The queen's men are brutal and they are killers, he thought, but they're not well-disciplined. They were men that Qyburn had assembled, as well as the remnants of the Mountain's Men and the Brave Companions. In a battlefield they'd be formidable, maybe they'd be spectacular when set to razing and pillaging villages, but in a castle they just caused problems. Queen Cersei had overlooked all their flaws because they were 'loyal'.

Craster had done his part too. He had done what he needed to do, to fit in, to prove himself loyal too.

Craster counted the steps as Yellow Cock Tom stomped towards the privy. Little Pewty was pacing, while Ben Rabbithole sighed and turned to Craster. "So," he said, bored. "You're a quiet one, ain't you, Craster?"

Craster didn't reply.

They are poor guards. It took a very special type of man to be an effective guard – the type that could sit patiently for hours yet still respond in a heartbeat. The type that wouldn't falter, or pace, or grow distracted. It was a special sort of man that could stand in a deserted corridor for hours and still react to minor disturbances. Good guards are a rare breed.

King Tommen will be asleep right now, he thought. The only ones allowed into the room was Queen Cersei, Lord Qyburn, or the remaining Kingsguard. Ser Meryn Trant, the last Kingsguard still serving, would be sleeping in the antechamber outside the nine-year-old liege's bedchamber. The Red Keep was so short-manned that they could only dedicate a handful of men to stand outside the Royal Chambers during the skeleton hours.

Rather, Cersei had sealed Tommen's chambers with a very big lock, and also locked every door approaching his chambers. She kept her son locked in cage.

"I heard that you guarded the Maidenvault, Craster," Ben Rabbithole continued despite the man's silence, "Did you see the little queen? I got to ask – Raff the Sweetling was saying that Margaery had the tightest little pussy you've ever seen. Is that true?"

Craster paused. For a while, he wasn't going to reply. Then, he turned, and smiled softly. "You've got no idea," he said.

Ben Rabbithole barked in laughter. Little Pewty burst out into giggles.

Then, in a smooth motion, Craster drew a knife from his belt. In a single, practiced lunge, he covered the distance and slit open Little Pewty's throat. For a big man, he was very light-footed. Craster's fist shoved into Pewty's mouth so he could not scream.

Little Pewty died first. He was younger, more alert, and he held his weapon close. Ben Rabbithole was older and more tired, he didn't react as quickly.

Bodies tumbled together in the dark. Ben opened his mouth to scream, but Craster already drew another knife. He threw it in a single, smooth motion and the blade pierced straight through Ben Rabbithole's throat.

The man gurgled, gasping. Craster was already lunging, jumping to grab him before he hit the floor. Even with heavy boots, Craster's footsteps were strangely light. He lowered Ben Rabbithole to the ground gently, without noise, and held his mouth to stop him screaming or gasping as he choked on his own blood. Calm as still water, he thought, quiet as a shadow.

Two men dead. Yellow Cock Tom was infamous for taking long pisses, but he would still return.
I must act fast. Pewty dropped limply to the ground, and Ben's trembling faded away.

He walked up the steps cautiously, and he heard nothing. John the Hammer and his group of guards were already unconscious – a bit of sleeping draught in their ale had took them straight out. *It would have been easier if they had shared their ale*, he cursed silently. *But no matter.*

The stranger took a deep breath, as he removed the set of slender lockpicks hidden in his breeches. The door to the Royal Chamber bore a huge iron lock, but it took very little time for him to shimmy the latch. He had broken far more difficult locks than this. He felt the bolt thud open, and he opened the door so slowly it didn't creak. Even despite the iron boots of his disguise, he barely made a sound as he stepped onto the thick Myrish carpets.

The chambers were large, but they felt dusty and stuffy. The windows were sealed and barricaded. Cersei had become so paranoid that she restricted the servants to the quarters – even cleaners and housewives. They had sealed all entry, and kept the little boy Tommen trapped in his room.

*As if that could save him.* The stranger knew better than anyone; if an assassin *really* wanted you dead, they would find a way to kill you. There was no lock strong enough, no guards skilled enough, that could stop a well-motivated professional killer.

The stranger felt his heart race, but his hands were steel. He knew what he must do.

There was a bloated figure in shining armour strewn out over the antechamber. Ser Meryn Trant was sleeping in the antechamber of the king's room. The stranger heard the snoring, and stopped to inspect him curiously. Earlier in the morn, he had poisoned Ser Meryn's meal in the kitchens with a very slow-acting sleeping drug, slow enough to get through the food tasters. Ser Meryn was dead to the world asleep.

He considered killing the Kingsguard – it would be easy enough – but then decided against it. It would be more effective if Ser Meryn survived, and then had to explain to the queen that he had slept through it all. He would leave the guards outside unconscious, but alive as well – the more people who slept through the deed, the more allies Cersei would suspect. Her paranoia would grow all the more.

For a creature so cruel, Cersei was rather predictable. The more horrifying the crime, the more baffling the situation, the more she would blame her little brother.

Madness was like a weed. It was a prickly vine that could infest the gardens of the mind and choke any other thought. Madness thrived in confusion and darkness; in fear and suspicion.

*Perhaps that is what I am*, the man mused. He had been called a mummer, a magician, a juggler, a spider, a whisperer, but calling himself a gardener seemed the most apropos term. Someone who cultivates the landscape with a soft touch, to make sure the world became how he willed it. He had spent a long time and a great deal of effort cultivating and nurturing Cersei's madness, just as he had done in the past.

He thought back to the first bodies. Lady Taena Merryweather and Lord Orton Merryweather – they were how it all began. Grand Maester Pycelle had just been a bonus. Killing Cersei's lover and blaming it on both the Tyrells and the Imp had been a masterstroke.

Varys had killed more people since then; he had picked his targets with extreme care. For months he had stalked Cersei from the shadows, with actions and plots so subtle that no one even noticed them. Cersei had felt them, though – his constant schemes and unending shadowing were what truly convinced Cersei that there was a conspiracy afoot.
His little birds – children who could get close without suspicion and stab the knife upwards – inflicted a wound that was very easily blamed on a dwarf.

Perhaps they wondered how Varys had managed to escape the Red Keep, after freeing Tyrion all of those months ago. The truth, as it so often did, had been hiding in plain sight all along. 'Lord Varys the Spider' hadn't escaped anywhere – instead he just took another face and another name, blended in with the background. First he had been a serving woman, and then he became Craster, the silent and brutal sellsword.

Right now, he was no one. No one but a stranger working through the door. He heard a cat – a kitten – mewl in the darkness, and the feline shape brushed up against his ankles. There were three black cats in the room, all of them stirring around his feet as the stranger opened the door carefully.

In the huge four-poster bed, a small and frail figure stirred. "Mother?" King Tommen asked sleepily. "Mother, is that you?"

"No child," the stranger replied sadly. "I am not."

Tommen was awake. Varys saw a pale face in the dark, shuffling in fear. Tommen had grown since Varys had last seen him, but, somehow, he looked so frail and scared in the gloom. There was less baby fat around the nine-year old's face, his white blond hair was darker. How long has the boy been trapped in his chambers? he lamented silently. Why is it always the most innocent ones that must suffer the most?

He had no wish to scare the boy. He took off his helm slowly, and placed it on the floor. He raised his hands upwards, and crouched slightly to make himself seem smaller. It wouldn't matter much – 'Craster's' scars and pockmarks were but a mummer's mask, pigments and paints. His beard and wig were both filthy things, made for stage performers. It all added up to make him look fearsome.

"It's alright," Varys reassured. His accent disappeared and his voice turned soft. "It's alright. These are lovely kittens, Tommen. What are they called?"

"Ser Pounce," the boy whispered, shivering and wide-eyed. "Boots and Lady Whiskers."

"They're beautiful." Varys scooped up Ser Pounce in his arms, feeling the little cat stir. He gently ran his gloved fingers over the cat's slender form, caressing soft black fur. The kitten purred. "What gorgeous cats. They remind me of another kitten I once knew."

The boy seemed to relax slightly. Varys took another step forward. "That's Ser Pounce," Tommen admitted. "He used to chase mice outside, but now mother doesn't let us leave the apartment."

"I'm so sorry, Tommen," Varys said honestly. "You don't deserve this." In this world, the weak are always the victims of the strong, he thought bitterly.

Tommen frowned. "Who are you?"

"I'm a friend, Tommen." He extended his hands. "Here, I want you to hold Ser Pounce. Hold your cat, Tommen."

The boy was shaking. He looked ready to run, but he extended his hands to scoop up Ser Pounce from the stranger's hands. The black kitten was mewing, squirming. Varys so painfully remembered Princess Rhaenys' little kitten, Balerion. That cat had even tried to claw the hands of the man who choked her.

Tommen would have run, but he was trembling too badly. Varys placed a hand on the boy's
shoulder to try and comfort him.

"I want my mother," Tommen's voice cracked, quietly. There were tears in his wide eyes.

"I know you do, my child." Vary's other hand slowly curled around the sheathed handle in his belt. *This is necessary*, Varys knew. It had to happen – one more deed and the war was as good as won. Still, it wasn't easy for him.

He had done many evil acts over the years – evil acts in the name of a righteous cause – but *this*…

"I want you to something for me," Varys said softly. "I want you to close your eyes. Can you do that for me, Tommen? Just close your eyes.

The boy was trembling. "Close your eyes," Varys insisted. Tommen complied. He was such a meek little boy. "Close your eyes and think of your kittens."

In his arms, Ser Pounce meowed and squirmed as Tommen hugged him so tightly. There was a trickle down the boy's smallclothes. King Tommen Baratheon, First of his Name, stood shivering in the dark room, hugging his cat fearfully as he pissed himself in quiet fear.

"Are you doing that, Tommen? Are you thinking of your kittens? Just think of your cats. Name them for me – Ser Pounce, Boots, and…?"

"… Lady Whiskers…" the boy whispered.

His hand blurred, and a blade suddenly materialised in his grip. The knife flashed. One quick plunge to the heart with a sharp blade. Varys held the boy's shoulders tightly, and the child collapsed with barely a sound. There was no scream, only a weak, strained gasp.

Varys felt the sharp edge slice through a small, fragile ribcage. Blood spluttered, and he hugged the child until the spasms stopped.

He needed to take a strained breath to calm himself. *Still like water*, he repeated to himself. He was no stranger to murder – he wasn't even a stranger to murdering children. *Then why does this one hurt me so much?*

He thought of little Aegon Targaryen, brains smashed out on the floor.

*It will be more effective if it looks brutal*, Varys thought. He stabbed the little boy's corpse several dozen more times – long slices splattering guts and gore. Then Varys grabbed the corpse by the legs and dragged him around the room, to make it look like Tommen had tried to run.

He wanted Cersei to think her little boy saw a violent, grizzly end. Let her think that her child had died screaming and in agony.

He didn't mutilate the child's face, though – he wanted to be sure the corpse was clearly identifiable. *Let there be no doubt that King Tommen is dead.*

All around him, the kittens meowed and scrambled, pawing the dead body. Ser Pounce sniffed a lump of bloody guts.

*I must be getting weak*, Varys cursed. *This is only one more death. Why does it affect me so much?* There were many children in this war – Tommen was but one more causality, and a necessary one at that.
He dipped the knife in the blood, and walked up to the nearby wall. In slow, careful strokes, he started to write the letters, taking care to make sure he mimicked Tyrion Lannister's handwriting.

"I WARNED YOU, DEAR SISTER", Varys wrote on the wall, in big, bold letters painted by the king's blood.

King Tommen's death would win the entire war. With Tommen dead, the Lannisters lost all claim to the Iron Throne. The Lannister-Tyrell alliance was doomed, their armies would collapse. He supposed Stannis was now undoubtedly next in line for succession, but nobody would ever take Stannis for king. Not now – the Baratheon ship had sunk.

The realm would look further back, back to a Targaryen.

When the sleeping draught wore off, when the alarm was raised and when Cersei came upon her son, the queen would be left crazed in madness. Good; he wanted her mad. A queen so mad that she'd make Aerys look sane, and she would make everyone remember the good times under Targaryen regime instead. Varys knew exactly what Qyburn and Cersei were planning from the Black Cells, and he had resolved to let it happen. He would let Lannister and Tyrell destroy each other.

No matter how successful Cersei's retaliation was, it would all be pointless with Tommen dead.

One death, and Aegon's path to the Iron Throne was clear. The Seven Kingdoms would finally get the rightful and honourable liege – a boy raised from birth to take on the duty. A good and rightful king. This is what we have been working towards for decades.

He closed the door behind him. One of the kittens tried to slip out, but Varys caught it. He cradled the little creature in his hand softly as he placed the kitten back into the bloody room. It tried to claw at his wrist.

He passed the sleeping Kingsguard, and locked the door behind him again. He stepped over the unconscious men, and walked back down the stairs. He hid in the shadows as he waited for Yellow Cock Tom to walk back up, with his knife ready to slit that man's throat too. There would be several witnesses who would swear that 'Craster' had been in the Maidenvault all night, should anybody ask.

He thought of Serra's face as he walked away. He remembered his sister's soft smile, and bright violet eyes. Even as the fever tore through her body and her silver hair turned grey, she had such soft features. "Promise me, Viserys," Serra had begged, weeping. "Promise me you'll care for him."

Viserys. His sister had been the last person to ever call him by that name. There had been a hundred different names since then, but never the one his mother had given him. It was a name of a different life; before their family had been forced into another exile, before the children had been sold into slavery, and before the sorcerer had bought him and mutilated him for his blood.

Still, he had made the promise. Ever since then, he and his friend had spent decades working and toiling to fulfil his promise to Serra, and to right a century old wrong. I will see Aegon Targaryen on the Iron Throne, Varys thought, as it should be.

History would remember Cersei as the Mad Queen that brought down a dynasty, heralding the return of the dragonlords, and his would be the untold tale in the shadows – exactly as it had been in the past. His own role in it all would never be known. Some histories were better left forgotten. I have had a dozen names; I will be the murderer, the spymaster, the whisperer, the spider, and the
stranger – all and more, to put that child on the Iron Throne.

And I will spill the guts of a thousand children to make it so.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Warrior

“Father Above, forgive my sins,” Lancel muttered, lowering his head before the clay tablet. “Forgive my pride, and forgive my weakness.”

The High Septon said that a holy man had to learn to accept his own flaws; that sins were carved into men’s bodies at birth, and could only be purged by a lifetime of humility and prayer. Lancel had seen sermons before filled with pomp and glamour, septons wearing silk and crystals that would call upon the blessings of the Seven, and used words like ‘glory’, ‘duty’ and ‘divine right’. He had seen septons as fat as cows that lived as extravagantly as kings. That type of Faith was being crushed under the High Septon’s new regime.

The holy were expected to give charity, the septons were expected to serve the needy. Only through humility and service could they find divinity.

“I bow before your mercy, wisdom and judgement. I am but mortal clay – I have made mistakes, I have been weak – but I offer myself before you, humble and bare, and beg for your hand to shape me, that I may walk the path of righteousness.”

The High Septon’s sermons were quiet, holy affairs, where every man, woman and child was expected to kneel on the stone floor and bow so deeply that their heads touched the ground. The High Septon would speak softly about weakness and wickedness, and afterwards he would join each man and woman in private prayer. He would listen to their confessions. He would hold their hands.

“Warrior, give me strength to follow the path,” Lancel intoned. “I raise my sword in your service, and beg for the fortitude to overcome wickedness.”

He thought back to all the times he wished that he had been stronger; the actions that he should have done, the vows he should have upheld…

Once, Lancel had asked why the gods would create the world so, why they would let such evil into men’s hearts. The High Septon had taken Lancel’s hands and quietly explained that this world was a trial, a proving ground, to split the saints from the sinners and to see which men could rise up above the hurdles of the flesh. All men have same weaknesses, and it is for the worthy to overcome them, he had said. The Seven offered their light and redemption, but it was for all men to reach for it.

_We were all born wicked_, the High Septon had said, _but it is only through the Light of the Seven can we be redeemed._

_The High Septon is a pious man, a man sent by the Father to show us the way_, Lancel thought. It was so very telling of the arrogance, blindness and corruption of the nobility, that it had been the smallfolk – the sparrows – who recognised his wisdom and righteousness first. The High Septon was one of the precious few men that Lancel had ever known that was truly trying to forge the world into a better place, one sinner at a time.

“Crone, grant me wisdom,” he said softly. “For the path is dark, and I beg your wisdom to light the
Lancel thought of his own many, many sins. *I bedded the queen,* he thought blankly. A memory of horror. *The highest perversion. I made love to a married woman, my own cousin... the queen. And I kept it silent. At the time... Father help me, I had even been... proud? But now there is nothing in me but shame. She used me to switch Robert’s tankards, so that the king was drunk and insensate when he faced the boar.*

Maybe that was murder, maybe it was an accident, but it was still Lancel’s fault. The Father would know the truth of the matter. *Everything that has happened, it's all my fault.*

How many treasons had he even committed? He honestly didn’t even know anymore. By rights, he should be whipped, hung and condemned for what he had done. Perhaps he still would be, when the Stranger took him. But the High Septon had offered him a chance for redemption, and Lancel had vowed himself to the cause. A lifetime of pious service to make up for his mistakes. *Lancel the Repentant.*

As he stood up, his back still ached from where they had lashed the wickedness out of him. It was a good pain.

His chambers were bare, humble. A hard wooden cot, and a small carving of the Father by his bedside to pray to every morning and every night.

It was still very early, before dawn. As he did every morning, he stood up and scratched a chalk mark onto the wall. Then, he stopped to count the row of marks, just to be sure he wasn’t fooling himself. *It’s today,* he thought. For so long they had all been waiting for it. *But here it is – day seventy-seven; the Mother’s Day.*

He had donated the gaudy armour of his family to the Faith, to be sold for coin for the needy. Today, Lancel garbed himself in the bare and unadorned armour of the new Faith Militant. Rather than full metal, he wore only a simple steel plate and hard leather breeches and shoulder guards. He pulled a hemp surcoat showing the seven-pointed star over the top, with a longsword on his leather belt, and a rainbow cloak over his shoulders.

Rather than his boots, he chose thick sandals. Lancel preferred to dress himself closer to the Poor Fellows than the Warrior’s Sons. *Lancel the Repentant.*

In times past, the Warrior’s Sons had clad themselves in inlaid silver armour, swords with star-shaped crystals, but the High Septon said that such extravagance was unbecoming for pious soldiers. Instead, each Warrior’s Son was encouraged to dress more humbly, and sell their fine armour for food, blankets and iron for the smallfolk. *Why should one man have a fine engraved silver sword, when two dozen could have cheap iron swords for the same worth?*

It was a doctrine that had quickly spread. The smallfolk – the sparrows – in this war-torn land had been neglected for too long, but their High Septon had given them their voice.

The only thing that remained from the old traditions was the hair shirt that Lancel wore – rough, hoarse and uncomfortable, a sign of penitence that itched against his skin.

Three Warrior’s Sons stood outside of his door, all similarly garbed with shaved heads. Lancel nodded to his brothers in arms.

As he stepped out of his quarters, the Great Sept of Baelor looked so different from what it had been. It had once been a temple of wealth and lavish corruption. A temple to the gods, supposedly,
but designed more for the arrogance of kings. A white marble domed castle, with seven crystal
towers, mosaics and tapestries, and domes of glass, gold and crystal. Those were mostly gone now.

The Poor Fellows had stripped the lavish, wasteful expense of the wall, chiselling out mosaics and
leaving bare chipped walls in their place. It took dozens of men to remove the marble statues from
the doorways, to tear off the crystals. The Myrish carpets pulled from the floors and the stained
windows pulled out. Men with knives even cut off the gold furnishing from the parchments in
prayer books. The images of the Seven remained untouched, of course, but the High Septon had
been especially ruthless towards the monuments of Baelor and all the other tributes to human
vanity.

They had found traders from Braavos that had bought most of it for a decent price. The sparrows
ransacked the sept for every penny, and all of the profits went to helping the starving and hungry
of the city, or to arm the Poor Fellows taking up swords once again.

It had taken funding to re-establish the Faith Militant, the Swords and Stars of the Faith, and the
High Septon had financed it by stripping away the rotting lavish wealth. Like a butterfly emerging
for a dead husk.

This sept is a different place, Lancel thought proudly. Its halls were now used to house the hungry
and homeless, rather than useless extravagance. Lancel’s father had been appalled to see what the
High Septon had done, but he didn’t understand. Few of the highborn understood.

The concept of helping people was just so baffling to them.

In the marble plaza outside the sept, crowds and camps of sparrows still lingered. That horrible,
vain statue of Baelor was covered in the bones of holy men, given tribute so none could forget their
sacrifices. There were cloth tents raised, banners of seven-sided stars raised over the plaza.
Hundreds, thousands of smallfolk lingered around Visenya’s Hill. The High Septon had turned the
sept to what it should have always been; a congregation for the holy.

The cobbled roads leading up to the sept had been sealed, however. There were Poor Fellows
lining the paths, and they had raised gates and fortifications along the streets to defend Visenya’s
Hill and the sept. For a time, there had been a fear that the Great Sept might come under attack by
wicked men serving the queen. That fear had mostly passed, but the fortifications remained.

“Ser Lancel,” a sweet voice called behind him. “His Holiness calls for you.”

He smiled softly as he saw Sister Tyene waiting for him. Lancel’s time of pious service and hard
penance had left his face haggard, but Sister Tyene looked just as fresh and as beautiful as ever. A
test of my wicked desires, Lancel mused, but that was an unfair thought. Tyene was a soft, innocent
and meek lady; as lovely as the Maiden in plain wool robes. “Thank you, sister,” Lancel said with a
bow. “But please, do not call me ‘ser’.”

“Begging your pardon.” Sister Tyene looked surprised. “I thought you were an anointed knight?”

“I am. But I do not deserve to be,” Lancel admitted. “I was anointed simply because of my father
and my house, not for any act of great valour or worth. The title ‘ser’ should be reserved be for true
and just knights – I do not wish to shame the rank any more than it already is.”

She lowered her head, smiling reassuringly. “I understand, brother,” Tyene replied. “Come, the
High Septon awaits you.”

Lancel followed. Tyene Sand had arrived from Dorne months ago – the bastard daughter of Oberyn
Martell – but she came humbled and wishing to repent for her sins. She joined the High Septon’s new breed of Faith with open arms. Lancel had seen of her frequently enough at sermons, but they rarely had chance to interact; Tyene spent most of her time praying with the High Septon and the Most Devout, or giving aid to the smallfolk. A truly pious maiden, the High Septon had proclaimed of her, and welcomed her into the inner circle. The sept had offered thanks for her family’s contribution to the Faith.

Outside, in the courtyard, he heard chanting. The crowds were chanting the Prayer of the Seven.

“They have been congregating all morning,” Sister Tyene noted, her arms folded in the high sleeves of her robes as they walked. “We will have to clear them soon enough, but the people want to be here for the trial.”

“And is it confirmed?” Lancel still felt on-edge. “Is she truly coming?”

“The message two days ago said she would,” Sister Tyene replied. “Ser Bonifer will be escorting her from the keep. But if she does not, well, then the Father’s patience will run out and the Warrior’s duty will begin.”

Lancel only nodded. The raven they had received from Ser Bonifer said only that Cersei had surrendered, and that he would ensure that she arrived for her trial. Myrcella’s death has sucked the will to defy from her, Lancel thought, and his heart still ached with the thought of the little princess’ fate.

He glanced back to Tyene. The sister’s skin was milky pale rather than the typical Dornish brown, but her surname was still Sand. Tyene had been more appalled than anybody with news of Myrcella’s fate in Dorne, so much so she broke down into tears before the High Septon. Tyene is not responsible for her family’s actions, Lancel thought to himself. Tyene had come to King’s Landing and into the clergy to escape from her family – and Lancel of all people could sympathise with that.

Ser Gerold Dayne of High Hermitage was most certainly responsible for the heinous crime, but it was a matter of rumour and debate whether Obara Sand, House Martell or Tyrion Lannister had supported him. There had been ravens both confirming and denying it. Dark wings, doubtful words.

Yet today is day seventy-seven. If Cersei did not leave the Red Keep today, she would be tried in absentia, and on day seventy-eight the Warrior’s Sons would break down the gates and take her. To do so will put all of the hostage’s lives, Queen Margaery and even King Tommen included, in great peril, Lancel thought with a grimace. The only thing that Mace Tyrell, Kevan Lannister and the High Septon agreed upon was that was an option to avoid.

Maybe Sister Tyene saw the nervousness on his face. “Be brave, brother,” the sister said sweetly, placing a hand on his shoulder. “The Father’s justice will be done, and there is no doubt in my mind that the wicked will be brought to account.”

She led him to the High Septon’s chambers, at the heart of the sept. At one time, there had been silk and velvet tapestries on the walls, but without them the bare corridor felt more sublime, holier.

They passed a dozen Warrior’s Sons standing guard near doors to the conclave where the Most Devout were gathering, and more Poor Fellows beyond that. Lancel glimpsed three bruised and haggard black-haired figures standing in chains – the Kettleblack brothers, being prepared for their testimony too. All three of the ‘knights’ had dark gazes and red eyes.

He half-expected to join them as another witness, but Sister Tyene led him away from them,
towards a huge set of bronze and oak doors at the end of the corridor. The wood was scratched from where they had peeled the silver and gold decorations from it.

Lancel was twitching with nerves. Sister Tyene knocked on the door, and then bowed her head as she opened it for him. She didn’t follow.

Inside, Lancel was completely unsurprised to see that the High Septon’s quarters were bare. The wiry old man was on his knees, praying before a carved wooden statue of the Father, as Lancel stepped in. He didn’t say a word until the High Septon finished the prayer.

Then, Lancel bowed low. “Your Holiness.”

“Brother Lancel,” the High Septon replied. His voice was hard, gnarly, and he stood stiff like wood. He was not a royal figure; he stood tall with round shoulders, and a mop of a greying beard from his cheeks. “Today is the day. The Most Devout are already assembled and the trial will happen, with or without the queen’s presence. You will be called upon to give testimony.”

“I am prepared, Your Holiness,” Lancel replied. He didn’t stand up. “Let the Seven’s will be done. I shall speak the truth, the truth of both Cersei’s sins and my own.” As I should have done from the beginning.

There was a pause. The High Septon stood stiffly. “I know my duty, Your Holiness,” Lancel said, grimacing. “Cersei has avoided judgement for too long, and it is my part of my atonement to see her brought to justice. I will do so with my testimony, or with my sword if it need be.”

“Lancel, my son.” His Holiness’ voice turned soft. “There is no penance required from you today. I only wish to see if you are alright.”

Lancel would not lie to the High Septon. Small lies could lead to bigger lies. “I am nervous, Your Holiness.”

“That is understandable,” he soothed, speaking calmly and slowly. “The Warrior gave us all fear for a reason, my son, in the same way he granted us pain. Of all the weaknesses of the flesh, fear is not one to be ashamed of.”

Lancel’s felt his shoulders relax, but there was still a knot in his stomach. The High Septon took a step forward, and Lancel raised his head. The High Septon’s eyes were kind and understanding, in a way that they rarely were in public. Towards the sinners the High Septon was as hard as oak, but towards his followers the man turned gentle as a leaf. He was a man who would take the time to talk to those in need, to reassure them. Kindness is the Seven’s greatest blessing, he once said.

The quiet pause felt comforting, tender. The High Septon placed his hand on Lancel’s shoulder and pulled him up from his knees.

“When you came to me, you were lost. Tormented,” His Holiness said soothingly. “I showed you the path, but you are the one that walked down it. We all confront our sins and we pay the penance. You may be scared, but I believe you will do your duty, my son.”

My own father had never been so understanding towards me. “Will there be fighting, Your Holiness?”

“I pray not. But I will not dismiss the possibility, and the queen has proved herself willing to resort to any depravity. If it comes to it – no matter whom raises their blades against us – I have no doubt that loyal and pious men will fight for the Faith.”
“My brothers and I stand ready to, Your Holiness,” Lancel raised his hand to his breastplate, his fist over the seven-pointed star. “In the name of the Warrior.”

“At ease, my son.” Dark brown eyes inspected him coolly. “You stand so rigid I fear your shoulders might break. You keep your eyes forward and your gaze low, but you are blinking twice a heartbeat.” Lancel twitched. “Take a deep breath, and calm yourself.”

Lancel complied, but even standing in His Holiness’ presence made him nervous. He forced his fists to unfurl, and his body slouched slightly. “I received word from Kevan Lannister,” the High Septon continued, “begging me once again to release you from your vows. Your father worries for you.”

His jaw tightened somewhat, but Lancel was trying to keep himself calm. “I have made my choice, Your Holiness.”

“You have. And are you aware that you are now the rightful heir to Casterly Rock?”

Lancel didn’t react. “Jaime Lannister is missing and thought dead, but a sworn brother regardless.” the High Septon continued. “Tyrion Lannister is a convicted murderer sentenced to death.” Something in the High Septon’s gaze flickered. “Cersei Lannister may be as well, shortly enough. By rights, lordship of House Lannister would revert to your father, and you are Ser Kevan’s only heir.”

That was a painful thought. Memories flashed through him, and he stayed silent for a passing of breaths. Once, my family was so large, so full of life, but now… Lancel’s little brother Willem had been butchered by Rickard Karstark at Riverrun, while his other siblings Janei and Martyn had died along with their mother, in the westerlands at the hands of outlaws. All of them hung from a tree outside of Cornfield.

Janei had only been a babe, one that Lancel had never even had a chance to meet.

His cousins were falling like leaves from a tree in autumn. Between the hangwoman in the riverlands, the white dragon, assassins, the Imp… Once his family had been plentiful, but now the pride was being shredded. We Lannisters are falling like flies.

He focused on the High Septon’s eyes. “I took a vow, Your Worship.”

“You did.” He nodded. “And have you actually spoken to your father, since that vow?”

I have not. His silence was the only answer. The High Septon nodded.

“Ser Kevan fears that I am forcing you to stay here,” the High Septon said softly. “That you are my hostage against him.”

“That is not–!” Lancel’s jaw clenched. “I have made my choice, Your Holiness, and I have nothing more to say to him.”

“Ser Kevan loves you. It is a sacred bond between father and son, not so easily forsaken,” the High Septon intoned. “I have clashed heads with Ser Kevan many, many times recently, but I cannot fault his concern for you.”

You have been more of a father to me than he ever has. “My father…” Lancel hesitated. “My father is what is wrong with this world, Your Holiness.” The High Septon raised an eyebrow. “My father is a follower of the faithless; he considers himself noble, even, but he is a man who maintains and enables wicked desires and ambitions. He would have had me forced into a dreary castle, with a
wife I care nothing for, into a life where I have no fulfilment… just so he can help maintain the status of his family. A wicked status of pride and avarice.” Lancel shook his head. “I cannot forgive him for that.”

He was met by silence, and a contemplative gaze. The heir to Casterly Rock, Lancel thought vaguely. I never wanted to be Lord of Darry, let alone Lord of the Rock. A younger, more foolish Lancel would have killed for that position, but now it just all seemed… hollow.

“I pray and mourn for my brothers, my sister, my mother…” Lancel said. And my grandfather, both of them, my cousins, my friends… there are so many I have lost. “And I would seek justice against the fiends that murdered them, but, now, my place is here.”

“Are you steadfast in that resolution?”

“I am. I do not want to be released from my vows, Your Holiness,” Lancel said firmly. “I wish to honour them faithfully.” I want to be Lancel the Repentant, the holy warrior. I want to be strong.

The High Septon nodded slowly. “Very well. I will not force anything of you.” He paused. “Although, for the love that the Father Above honours us with, I would advise you to speak to Ser Kevan.”

“I have said all that I wish to say to him, Your Holiness.”

“You truly care so little of your family?”

I care. It’s my care that is the problem. “My family is a family of wickedness. I can only strive to separate and redeem myself from them.”

The High Septon didn’t reply, but there was a relaxing cast to his features, a kind look in his eyes. Like he agreed and approved. There was silence for several heartbeats. Every moment felt so tender, so intimate. The High Septon is the god’s voice on earth, Lancel, thought, I am speaking to the closest aspect of the Seven I’ll ever reach.

“Then tell me,” the High Septon said gravely, “how would you judge Cersei Lannister’s actions?”

Lancel hesitated, biting his lip. “I would think of the Mother’s mercy, Your Holiness. For all her flaws and her sins, I believe that Cersei deserves compassion.”

“Is that so? You had strong feelings towards her, if I recall.”

“I did. Once I longed for her, then I was shamed by her, and then I hated her. I hated myself too,” Lancel admitted. “But as I walk down a pious path, my hate fades and I start to pity her instead.”

“Pity her, really? She murdered the previous High Septon. She had her man try to murder me,” the High Septon said, with a slight scoff. “That fiend of a knight tried to suffocate me with a pillow in these quarters. She stands accused of crimes of the highest order; murder, conspiracy, treason, incest, infidelity. Violence against the gods themselves. Do you truly believe her deserving of pity?”

“I do,” Lancel said earnestly. “I believe there is no sinner so foul that they do not deserve pity.”

The High Septon stood silently and didn’t reply. “She is a mother, Your Worship. She is a weak woman consumed by desire, avarice and pride, but she loves her children, and I believe the loss of her son unhinged her. Grief and weakness drove her down a dark path, but I believe that even she could be brought to the Light of the Seven. In your judgement, I ask only that you consider the
Mother’s mercy, Your Holiness.”

The man’s gnarled features looked cast from stone. There was no reaction for a while, but then he nodded. “You grow wiser every day, Lancel. The path to true piousness is a long and arduous one, but I can see you walking it.” He nodded again. “Thank you for your words, my son, I shall consider them.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness.” He hesitated. “What of King Tommen, Your Holiness?”

The man raised an eyebrow. “Rumours have been spreading for years,” Lancel admitted. “And, well…”

His voice trailed away uncertainly. “It is ill-befitting to concern yourself with baseless rumours,” the High Septon chided. “Trust in the Crone’s wisdom.”

“I do. I try.” Lancel grimaced. “But one of the charges placed against Cersei is that of incest.” The charge that I bring. “And then with the rumours concerning her children…”

“Yes,” His Holiness sighed. “Of all the charges, that is perhaps the most troubling, and most difficult to judge. We know that she defiled her body shamelessly with men after her husband’s death, but did she during the marriage as well? From whose seed were her children born, and how can we make that judgement?” He paused. “Do you have opinion on that, my son?”

Lancel didn’t reply. There was a faint and grim, humourless smile across the High Septon’s lips. “Yes. I pray for clarity on the matter, but the Seven rarely make such matters obvious. You can be sure many others are asking the same; is King Tommen truly illegitimate?” Another pause. “The evidence to suggest so… it is not insignificant. Stannis Baratheon may be apostate, but the words in his letters cannot be so easily dismissed. Then, Eddard Stark’s strange execution.” The High Septon grimaced, shaking his head. “On the steps of this very sept. A transgression that never should have passed without punishment.”

Lancel didn’t know what to feel. He didn’t want to believe it true, but Cersei had already proven herself capable of anything… Nobody could deny that Cersei’s children looked more like Jaime than Robert. “And if he is illegitimate?” he asked cautiously. Then who is the true king? Will you renounce King Tommen? “… Then this Aegon?”

“Aegon Targaryen,” the High Septon tutted. “Did you know a ship arrived from Pentos loaded with gold, gems and silk as a ‘donation’ to the Faith in King Aegon’s name? I accepted the wealth, sure enough, and then dedicated it to our efforts, but they are fooling themselves if they think coin will affect my judgement.”

“I do not trust him, Your Holiness,” Lancel warned. Perhaps he was speaking out of turn, but the Father compelled him to speak his mind. “This Aegon is trying to take advantage of us.”

“There are many who speak highly of him. This young king is said to be bold and kind.”

“A mummer will always strive to appear fair to the eye,” Lancel warned. “But it is by the company he keeps that you should look for a judge of his character. He surrounds himself with mercenaries and rebels and worse. The Imp follows him.”

The High Septon stood quietly. Over the past months, it seemed like the clergy in the Great Sept was still split on the matter, and yet more and more were starting to cry out for Aegon Targaryen as the rightful ruler. Even many of the Warrior’s Sons were starting to speak out in favour of the returned dragon. Lancel had heard Sister Tyene speak fondly of him to the other septas once; when
our hour is darkest, the sister had said, and our kings prove themselves false, by the Seven’s blessings we are returned with the rightful liege. There were many in the sept saying the same.

“Cersei may be mad, but she is right concerning one matter; Tyrion Lannister is not to be trusted,” Lancel pressed on. The thought of that grinning, scheming dwarf flashed before his eyes. *How he exploited me for his own ends, manipulated me…* “The Imp drove Cersei to her depravity, and now he seeks to take advantage of it.”

“Yes; Tyrion Lannister is a kinslayer and a kingslayer, two crimes that the Seven will not forgive. I have not forgotten, my son.” The High Septon shook his head. “No, every time this ‘Aegon’ and his envoys beseech me for my blessing, I have replied with silence. I do not intend to change that answer, either.”

He paused for a long time, several heart beats passing as the High Septon mused. “You speak honestly, Brother Lancel, and my own feelings on the matter are similar.” he said finally. “Cersei Lannister committed grave crimes and for that there must be punishment. However, the weakness of women is well-noted, and I have no wish to be cruel. Whatever crimes his mother committed, the young King Tommen Baratheon is innocent of them – I will not punish the boy for his mother’s mistakes.” The High Septon nodded. “Very well. The Queen Regent has surrendered, and if King Tommen and Queen Margaery emerge unharmed then the Father can be just.”

*There is no evidence that Tommen was illegitimate beyond rumour and speculation,* Lancel told himself. “You would pardon her?” Lancel asked.

“Pardon? No. There must be a trial, and it must be open and fair, but I shall recommend mercy to the Most Devout.”

*Mercy.* Lancel’s heart raced with the word. Stripped of status, certainly, and likely exile too. Perhaps a walk of shame or some other penance. *But Cersei will keep her head, keep her life, keep her son.*

“Thank you for your consideration, Your Holiness.” Lancel bowed his head deeply.

“And thank you for your input. I am only mortal, these matters been troubling me greatly too. And yet I feel the Father’s wisdom in your words.” He placed his hands on Lancel’s shoulders. “Rise, my son. It is nearly noon, and I must pray before the congregation begins.”

“What will you have of me, Your Holiness?”

“I would like you in the courtyard, to greet the queen as she steps out.” Lancel blinked, looking shocked. The High Septon just nodded. “She is your family still. Whatever amends you must make to her, whatever you must say, say your piece as you escort her through.”

“I…” The thought of facing Cersei again – of looking into her beautiful, cruel green eyes – scared him, but he nodded. “I will, Your Grace.”

*Lancel the Repentant. That is the title I must work towards. I must be brave, just and pious.*

He exited the sept through the Warrior’s Door, nodding to the other knights already waiting. There were already septons coming out the Father’s Door and septas the Mother’s Door, taking position on the upper steps. Lancel hesitated, but he walked down the steps towards the great statue of Baelor.

A small force of Warrior’s Sons were already herding the crowds back, and Lancel made to join them. He saw Ser Wylard the Pious, a brown-haired, broad and stocky knight nodding to him.
“Brother Lancel,” greeted Ser Wylard.

“Brother Wylard,” Lancel returned.

The Warrior’s Sons stood in groups of seven, lining the road and the streets. From atop of the steps, the commander of the Warrior’s Sons, Ser Theodan the True, standing tall and strong over the courtyard.

In the distance, he could see the shadow of the Red Keep looming at the far end of the city. The air was cool and crisp, but the sun was bright. There was nothing to do but stand in formation, to wait and pray. *Please, Cersei*, Lancel begged silently.

The crowds started to sing hymns to the Seven as they stirred. The hours felt so tense, so nerve wracking.

“The queen’s carriage approaches!” the cry came finally, splitting through the verse of the Warrior.

From the top of the hill, Lancel finally saw the royal wheelhouse rumbling up the Street of Sisters. It was a huge, rumbling carriage clattering over the cobblestones, painted lime green and the lined with gilded leaf. The wheels were iron-rimmed, so loud that Lancel could hear the rumble even over the din of the crowds. The windows were covered in velvet drapes, and doorway marked with the crown of the Iron Throne.

The banners proudly bore both the lion of Lannister and the stag of Baratheon – four flags on the front and back hanging limply in the windless morn. It normally took a dozen horses to pull a wheelhouse that size, but now it was being driven by only eight palfreys. None of the horses looked particularly healthy, either.

He saw the gleaming armour of Ser Bonifer the Good and his knights, riding at the front of the column. *Ser Bonifer has returned*, Lancel thought with a sigh, and his heart eased at the sight.

There had a been a fear of riots on the streets, so the High Septon allowed Cersei twenty guards as well as the Kingsguard to escort her. To her credit, she had complied. The score of mounted riders all wore Lannister red cloaks, escorting the wheelhouse closely. The escort looked tense, tight, even from a distance. The mounted men carried swords instead of lances. Lancel could only see a single white cloak leading the escort – perhaps Cersei only had a single Kingsguard left – but he couldn’t recognise which man it was from a distance. They were all helmed and wearing face-guards.

From Visenya’s Hill, Lancel could watch as the procession moved down the Hook, past the Plaza of the Guards, and slowly cobbled towards Sept Road. As they reached the far end of the street, the palfreys neighed and strained to pull the carriage up the incline.

Watching it creep through the city towards them felt painfully slow. “Justice for Queen Margaery!” the cries came. “Cersei the Wicked!” another shouted. “Queen Whore!”

From the minute the Holy Gate opened, there were Poor Fellows lining the street. The crowds stirred. Streets lined with people – men, women and children. Behind the procession, the Poor Fellows walked in sandals with iron swords, ringing bells and chanting. The sparrows lined the road, and the crowd broke and followed as soon as the carriage cobbled past.

The sound of those iron wheels clattering up the stones slowly sounded agonising, echoing and tense.

Lancel was thankful that crowds let the procession mostly unhindered. He saw some hurling
spoiled fruit and stones, or insults, but most seemed more restrained. It was by the Mother’s mercy that were no mobs. Lancel didn’t wish to see Cersei shamed or tortured any more than necessary.

Many were jeering, but Lancel felt only sorrow. This is a good thing, he thought, taking a deep breath. The queen has relented – as bitter and as forced as it may have been – but she has come to face judgement. She would face penance, but this is the only way she may ever be redeemed before men and gods.

Judgement before a trial of seven of the Most Devout. The High Septon would not accept a trial by combat, he knew.

“Brother Wylard,” Lancel called, keeping his voice low. The other Warrior Son looked to him. “When she reaches the courtyard, could you please have your men keep your distance? I wish to greet the queen alone.”

Ser Wylard paused, and then nodded. “As you wish, brother.”

“Seven bless you.”

The carriage reached the plaza of the Great Sept, where the procession was greeted by Ser Theodan the True. The knights took over the escort, calling out to Ser Bonifer the Good and exchanging brief words and nods. For a while, the only sound were horses neighing uneasily. Lancel could see the horses of the Lannister men skitting restlessly. Those horses must have been starved and tortured, trapped in the Red Keep for over two months, Lancel thought.

Finally, Ser Theodan nodded. “Clear the way!” his strong and clear voice called. “Clear the way for the queen!”

The crowds rushed forward eagerly. Lancel heard the cry of “whore, whore, whore!” starting to rise, but the Warrior’s Sons weren’t gentle as they pushed the smallfolk away. The bells started to ring, and more and more started to pour down the marbles stairs of the Great Sept. Lines of septons and septa filled the left and ride of the stairs, robed figures standing solemn. The whole realm will be watching this trial, Lancel thought, and the High Septon wants to make the judgement clear and transparent for all to see.

There were no smiles or nods from the guardsmen as they passed. They all sat tense, grim and dark faces under their helms. Lancel recognised the Kingsguard at the front by his stout body shape – Ser Boros Blount sat stiffly on his horse, while the mare beneath him tottered uneasily. Ser Boros Blount, the last and least of the Kingsguard, Lancel thought foully. A once noble order ruined one by one and dragged into shame – so very representative of the Seven Kingdoms themselves.

“Queen Cersei of House Lannister!” A crier announced. “Accused of murder, conspiracy and infidelity! Coming before the High Septon and the Most Devout, to face judgement in the Light of Seven and by all laws of man! Let it be known that no man, of any standing, may escape divine justice!”

“Whore, whore, whore!” a small group of determined men in the crowd were still chanting, despite the Poor Fellows trying to extinguish the cry.

The creaking of that wheelhouse seemed sad as it came to a halt. A lavish coffin. Cersei, I’m sorry.

The driver – a hooded man in a dark cloak – lashed the palfreys four times to get them to stop. The carriage was still. Nobody said a word. Even despite the jeers and chants from the crowd all around him, the air seemed still. Lancel took a deep breath, and stepped forward to the steps.
The door didn’t open. *She’s scared*, Lancel thought. Scared to show herself so vulnerable. Underneath it all – beneath all the pride, avarice and the paranoia – Cersei’s true weakness was that she had always been so scared to leave herself exposed.

Lancel kept his voice low. He stepped forward, and knocked on the door. His knuckles rasped three times against the wood. “Cersei,” he called, not unkindly. “My Queen. His Holiness is waiting for you, you must come out now.”

There was no response, but Lancel could hear footsteps inside the wheelhouse. Pacing. None of the guards twitched.

Lancel grimaced, feeling his heart flutter. He couldn’t help but think back to the beautiful, confident woman who had once taken him to bed, or the proud and fierce cousin he had once known. *Why did it have to come to this?*

After twenty long heartbeats, Ser Wylard stepped forward. “Cersei Lannister!” the knight shouted impatiently. “Step forward!”

*Do not make this more difficult than it needs to be*, Lancel begged. But still, there was no reply.

Brief moment of hesitation, before glances turned to the commander of the Warrior’s Sons. Ser Theodan’s hand went to his sword cautiously, looking around at the wheelhouse. The men were standing like statues. “Queen Cersei!” he bellowed. “You are under arrest by the Faith of the Seven, and to be brought to trial. You must remove yourself from the carriage!”

No response. Lancel could have groaned. Ser Theodan turned to give the order men to break down the door, when suddenly the handle lurched. The door creaked open, and there was a figure swaying in the doorway.

She was wearing a red dress and a golden shawl.

The crowd cheered too early. None of the knights cheered, they just stared.

It was Cersei’s dress. Lancel recognised the dress instantly. But it wasn’t Cersei.

**His mouth was agape. Cersei’s dress…** One of her finest – red velvet and gold trimming, long sleeves and a sleek collar, with a golden silk shawl and lavish pearl-tipped shoes. Lancel remembered the dress so, so clearly; a dress that Cersei had worn at her prime, in all her glorious beauty, a dress so expensive it was worth a lord’s ransom in itself. *The dress Cersei wore for Joffrey’s wedding.*

At first, Lancel thought that he was staring at some beggar woman, taken from the streets and dressed as a queen.

The woman wearing the dress was a hag. She was the ugliest woman Lancel had ever seen. Her skin was sickly pale, with purple veins bulging over her body and face as white as milk. She was scarred – long, bloody wounds all over her face and shoulders like a butchered pig, and discoloured red skin across her neck. Her throat looked crushed, her skin oozing. She was short and thin, but her body was so bloated and limp it seemed the tight corset was straining to keep her upright. She had dark hair, rough like straw and crudely netted in a bundle with rubies sewn into it. There was expensive Myrish perfume oozing off her, but it couldn’t cover the foul, torpid odour wafting from her, like rotting flesh.

**A corpse dressed in finery.**
Slowly, the hag took uneven, jerky steps down the stairs. She was limping, staggering with every step, gasping. Twitching in ways that no person ever should. Her mouth stammered, but no words came out. Her hands were trembling, fingers flailing at empty air.

The Warrior’s Sons stared. The silence fell slowly, and nobody seemed to know how to react. He saw the knights gaping, shuffling backwards.

Lancel felt the terror creep up his spine. Slowly, very slowly, he started to recognise her features. Even underneath all the wounds and mutilated skin, Lancel recognised her cheeks, the dainty nose, the curve of her chin…

“Queen Margaery?!”

And just like that, the world broke.

She lunged. The creature that looked like Margaery Tyrell dived at him, bloody fingernails clawing.

She was stumbling, but Lancel was left so shocked he couldn’t react as she dragged him to the ground. Her mouth was gasping, trying to speak. Her bloodshot blue eyes were so, so wide – crazed, panicked, terrified.

The world dissolved into nothing but horror.

Lancel heard Ser Theodan scream something. He couldn’t make out the words over his frantic heartbeat. He felt the thing’s nails scrape against his breastplate, clawing murderously. Her fingernails snapped, leaving a trail of black, gooey ooze across steel.

The impact still knocked Lancel back, but Ser Wylard jumped to restrain her. Queen Margaery thrashed and squirmed against the big and broad man trying to hold her down. People were screaming, shouting…

Something twinged in the air, like a signal. At once, all of the Lannister guards moved at once. Their horses were screaming as the men thrust themselves forward.

*The fools*, Lancel thought vaguely. *We outnumber them fifty to one.* Still, these men didn’t seem to care.

Bodies clashed together around him, the Warrior’s Sons were caught off-guard by the sudden ferocity. It was like they went from passive to murderous without even a warning. He heard swords clanging together, men thrashing. Lancel was still on the cobbled ground, staring upwards at the abomination that looked so little like Margaery.

She was a small and lithe figure, and yet it still took four strong knights to hold her down. Lancel gaped, but the Warrior’s Sons were being pushed backwards, their voices breaking in panic…

There was a crunch of flesh and bone. Lancel blinked, and then suddenly the Margaery-creature’s hands were crushing Ser Wylard’s neck. Blood splattered against the red dress, and then she yanked with a strangled hissing sound.

The knight’s body went limp, blood gushed, and then his head bounced off the ground. *His head*, he thought with pure horror. *She tore off his head with her bare hands.*

It was such insane strength for a small woman. Unnatural strength, the men couldn’t even hold her…
All around him, it was all chaos. He glimpsed a white-cloak stained with blood. Ser Boros Blount’s sword flashed, hacking forward with a strength and ferocity the man had never had before.

“Surrender!” Ser Theodan’s voice bellowed. “Surrender! Restrain them! Restrain them!”

Lancel was skittering backwards on the ground, unable to pull himself away. He tried to shamble to his feet, but his rainbow cloak tangled around his heels. Two knights drew their swords and charged forward, almost jumping over Lancel to charge at Margaery.

The first blade plunged through Margaery’s chest, sending a necklace of pearls clattering to the stones. The second blade severed her left arm at the shoulder in a smooth, clean stroke.

There was no blood, there was nothing but black gunk dripping from the wounds. Margaery didn’t even seem to feel it. She didn’t stagger. Her other arm lashed out, so viciously that it took a knight off his feet.

They didn’t fight like men, they didn’t fight like humans – they felt like more animals, like monsters of pure bloodlust and anger erupting from wheelhouse, surging through the crowds. Men running, screaming, howling, fighting…

“Hold them!” someone was bellowing. “HOLD THEM!”

*Her lips,* Lancel thought vaguely. Margaery’s lips were black and cracked, smeared in makeup, but he could see her mouth moving up and down. She was trying to speak, trying to say something, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t breathe, her throat had collapsed, her mouth could only flop…

The same words. Her lips moved in the same pattern, trying to scream the same words.

Men were hacking at her with swords, but they couldn’t put her down. A sword through her breastbone, sticking out her back. Another sliced against her shoulder, and then into her stomach. Yet she kept flailing and tearing. She wouldn’t die, she wouldn’t fall…

A sword plunged through her wrist and hand, and then it jammed against bone. Even with the blade skewered through her arm, Margaery yanked it from the knight’s hand. She lashed the sword around, clubbing a knight over the head with the crossguard. His skull caved inwards like a crushed melon, and he twitched on the cobbles.

Lancel saw another knight hack the head off a Lannister guardsman in a smooth strike, and yet the headless man still lunged at the knight with his blade. Not even decapitation could stop them, even severed arms were still wriggling on the cobbles.

Margaery was on the ground, her body hacked to oblivion. One arm was missing, the other hand a black ruin, but she was still moving, still trying to fight. A spear plunged through her leg, but she was still trying to crawl.

She was crawling towards Lancel.

Her eyes were fixed on his, her mouth still gaping. He lay across the ground. He couldn’t run, he could barely breathe, but Margaery was crawling on top on him – black ooze dripping from the hundred wounds across her body…

Lancel would have screamed, but his throat jammed. The creature thrashed and squirmed, trying to wrap her ruined hand around his neck. She was trying to strangle him, even without fingers. Trying to squeeze his throat. The knights were trying to pull her off him, but the abomination wrapped her remaining limbs around him, squeezing so hard it hurt.
It was as if murdering him was the only thing she wanted to do, the last thing she needed to accomplish with her existence. As if killing was the only thing she could do.

Lancel could see her lips, he could see the words she was trying to scream. Her voice was a whisper, so low and so wheezy he could barely even make it out…

“… Kill…” Queen Margaery croaked. “… Kill me…”

He was so close that he could see the whites of her crazed eyes, the bloody tears weeping down her cheeks…

And then a Warrior’s Son finally managed to slice her neck apart with a desperate slash.

Even as her head dropped and bounced, her body didn’t stop thrashing. Lancel’s eyes were still on Margaery’s mouth, watching with horror as the head rolled over the stones.

“Kill me,” the decapitated head mouthed. “Kill me.”

Lancel screamed.

All around him, there was a stampede of footsteps. The Warrior’s Sons were forcing the creatures backwards, but the bodies spewed over the white stones. They were each unstoppable; they didn’t feel pain, they couldn’t be wounded, they had no restraint. It took half a dozen men to overpower even one, and the pure panic was like a nightmare.

For every one that they managed to bring to the ground, it took ten Warrior’s Sons with it. They were attacking indiscriminately, without remorse, without hesitation.

There were screams, as another creature was finally brought low and a dozen knights hacked it apart with desperate frenzy. Even the hunks of flesh that were sent scattered were still wriggling.

He saw one of them fall without its helmet, and Lancel couldn’t even tell if the creature was male or female. It was nothing but a zig-zagging mess of scars and bloated skin.

He saw Ser Bonifer the Good – his shining armour stained red as he cut a bloody path through the scores of men. Through fellow knights. He is a good man, why is Ser Bonifer betraying his order? They could not be reasoned with, they could not be stopped…

“Bring them down!” Ser Theodan the True bellowed. “Bring them down!”

They were pushing up the steps… so much blood that the world looked red…

Even Ser Theodan himself had drawn his blade, to fight back a bloody grotesque that used to be Ser Boros Blount. The knight of the Kingsguard had half his helm hacked open and a sword embedded through his skull, but he was still swinging his blade in sharp, vicious lunges. The creature looked blind, its movements shambling, but its lunges were still so, so powerful…

Another Warrior’s Son blocked Blount’s strike, drawing the fallen Kingsguard’s attention away from Theodan. Once, twice, they clashed, and then the creature that used to be Boros Blount stepped forward into a powerful overhand. The Warrior’s Son screamed. His sword clattered on the stones, his arm hanging limp and broken.

The next strike hacked straight through the chainmail hauberk protecting the Warrior’s Son’s arm, tearing it off at his shoulder.
Lancel could only stare. It was less a fight, more a butcher’s block.

Blount’s last strike carved through Warrior’s Son’s steel breastplate, nearly cleaving the man in two. The blade shattered into shards, but the shambling Kingsguard fought with the broken sword and didn’t seem to realise. Grey substance of Ser Boros’ brain dribbled down his cheeks, one eye a collapsed gelatinous ruin.

There was nothing Lancel could do but lie on his back – the wriggling, headless body of the queen still on top of him – screaming at the tops of his lungs.

The Poor Fellows were trying to surge forward to help, but there were more who were fleeing senseless. Bodies were churning, stampeding into each other, men being trampled. The whole courtyard erupted into pure, mindless pandemonium.

There was nothing but madness, pure unending…

“The Stranger’s Gate!” a voice called, breaking in fear. “They’re coming through the Stranger’s Gate!”

The Stranger’s Gate – the empty and hollow gate to the back of the sept, through which the silent sisters would cart dead bodies for their last rites. Other people were screaming the same thing, but in the chaos… it was impossible to make sense of it all.

People were shouting, the direction of the crowd was starting to shift. Lancel felt the swell of footsteps from the west, men running in panic. Running away from something – there was more fighting towards the edge of the courtyard.

*How? How could Cersei do this? How could she recruit such soldiers? How did she get them through the siege on the Red Keep? How could she…?*

Then, Lancel saw more bodies; large, shambling shapes that were pushing in through the Stranger’s Gate. They bore no banners, they were clad in mismatched armour, but the way they moved, the way they fought…

They were not human. They were monsters wearing human skin, each of them was an abomination of the flesh.

*It was a distraction,* Lancel realised dumbly. Cersei sent that Margaery-monster and the wheelhouse as a distraction, to draw attention, to scatter the crowds and cause panic. There was another force of… of *creatures* attacking from the Stranger’s gate simultaneously.

Lancel wanted to be brave, and yet in that moment there was nothing he could do but scream. The black ooze of Queen Margaery’s blood still lathered his body. There were black shapes, shambling over the walls, swords hacking indiscriminately. No discipline to them, nothing but raw fury and bloodlust.

To his credit, Ser Theodan the True didn’t falter. The knight’s voice was strong and loud, even despite the black blood coating his silver breastplate. “Form up!” he bellowed. “Form up! Stand fast!”

Many were running, but the other knights were pushing into formation. The Poor Fellows were trying to stop the creatures, but they were being slaughtered. Lancel couldn’t even count the numbers, not through the avalanche of stampeding bodies and trampling boots.

Lancel caught a glimpse of one of them; it was a fat and bloated creature, its body dripping black
ooze from purplish skin that looked like rotten meat. It had an iron axe in its hand, but there was a large wooden barrel lashed onto its back. Some of them were carrying barrels as large as their bodies – great wooden kegs fastened to them like pack mules.

The Warrior’s sons were trying to form up, a wall of shields and swords across the steps of the Great Sept. Ser Theodan’s voice managed to cut through the orchestra of screams. “Form up!” the commander bellowed. “Bowmen! Ready! Archers!”

Knights were hoisting up longbows, notching arrows. Lancel saw the creature shamble forward, its back lurching over the weight of the huge barrel on his back.

“Fire!” Ser Theodan screamed. “Fire!”

Arrows arced through the air. Lancel heard the squelching of shafts through the flesh, and then…

*Boom.* Air flashed green, and a wave of heat roared. The explosion felt like the roar of a great lion, a whoosh of hot wind…

Lancel was on the ground, but he saw the knights all around him scorched in their armour. He felt the pulse of power, the smoke, the heat. He could smell burning flesh, he felt the heat sear against his skin.

He gagged, unable to breathe. In that moment, Lancel was back in the Battle of Blackwater, watching the whole world burn green.

*Wildfire,* Lancel thought with horror. *The creatures are crying casks of wildfire on their backs.*

The courtyard was burning. Burning bodies, burning flesh, even burning stones. Wildfire burnt through it all, making the air haze green and black smoke. All discipline collapsed as the green flames flashed.

The creature carrying the barrel had been obliterated into a crisp, but there were more. There were more pushing through the fire, more of them with barrels on their backs.

Lancel couldn’t breathe. He was flailing on the ground, in a trench of corpses. All around him, flaming bodies were burning screaming, their skin melting in their armour. He saw other bodies – some of the creatures were burning too, but they didn’t stop. Even as the flames scouring their flesh, the monsters were still charging, still hacking through bodies. Burning undead creatures that never halted, never flinched. Not even fire could stop them.

All around him, bodies were burning and smoking. He heard the sound of wailing, he could taste the pang of blood and tears on his tongue. All around him, he saw the seven-pointed stars of the Faith, smeared red and falling to the ground.

There were still more creatures pushing through the Stranger’s Gate, more monsters carrying casks of wildfire across their back.

“Stand fast!” Ser Theodan was screaming. Somehow, the knight was still managing to stand even despite the blistering burns across his body and face. “In the name of the Warri–”

*Boom.*

Another flash, even larger than the first. The shockwave sent Lancel sprawling, sending his ears numb. *It came from behind them.* Burning debris scattered through the air, burning men howling. The world was screaming. *The wheelhouse,* Lancel realised. The wheelhouse exploded.
Cersei didn’t just fill the wheelhouse with monsters, she must have filled it with wildfire as well. She prepared this moment for maximum confusion, maximum panic.

The whole courtyard was burning. There was nothing but fire – fire so hot that even the marble steps were melting. Nothing but fire and corpses.

*Hell. Hell is here. Cersei has released hell itself.*

They were still coming, still pushing their way into the Great Sept itself. The Warrior’s Sons were burning, the crowds trampling over each other trying to flee.

*I am Lancel the Repentant,* he thought foggily, through the blur of terror and pain. *Lancel the Warrior’s Son…*

Lancel turned and ran. He ran as fast as his trembling legs could take him, pushing through the smoke and flames. He didn’t know where he was running, he just needed to run anywhere that wasn’t here. *Lancel the cowardly lion.*

Behind him, the Great Sept blazed in green flames. The great bell of the Father’s Spire was sounding unendingly, like a thing howling in an endless frenzy even as the flames consumed it. Lancel could hear the explosions – the whoosh of air and fire as the barrels of wildfire burst open. He hear the seven marble towers collapsing as he ran, falling into the fire along with everything that was good and holy in the world.

The smoke hissed over the city like a black dragon coiling and thrashing in the air, spitting burning debris.

The streets were in pure chaos. The crowds were in a turmoil, mobs of sparrows and Poor Fellows surging around him and breaking into hysteria. A breaking tide of flesh, the stronger trampling the weaker to death. An animal frenzy shoving and trampling each other to escape…

Lancel’s rainbow cloak had been torn off sometime in the panic, he didn’t even know when. His breastplate was smeared in ash and blood, his whole body shuddering. His hands were still gripping his sword, through – his fingers so tight that he couldn’t even dislodge them. His arms weren’t working, his mind was spinning and all he could do was run and scream.

Visenya’s Hill was burning. The immense structure was blazing from a hundred different explosions, green flashes filling the air.

Everything was seething, he heard wordless cries of pain and anger, he heard sounds of a mob clashing against soldiers. He saw a mindless mob colliding against swords and spears – against soldiers wearing Lannister red.

Lancel didn’t even know who, how or what. He just ran.

The fires were spreading, the debris bursting from the blaze and spreading over the thatch houses. Green and red flames were spitting and hissing, the whole city starting to light ablaze.

Only vaguely, he was aware of passing the cobbled Street of Sisters, and he turned and he stared up at the looming Red Keep. The castle looked as red as blood in the smoke and ash. He saw the banners of the seven-pointed star, and he ran towards.

There were Poor Fellows on the streets, the force holding siege against the gates. He saw scared faces, heard the muffled voices of men demanding for answers. Panic, confusion everywhere.
“What happened?” a man screamed – a knight on top of a horse. A Warrior’s Son, his face contorted in fear. “The Great Sept, the Most Devout – what happened?”

“Monsters!” Lancel shrieked, his voice breaking. “MONSTERS!”

There was more fighting. Lancel could feel the fighting all around him, rippling from Visenya’s Hill and throughout the city. It was all heaving, screaming…

The knight was running up to him, demanding answers, but Lancel could barely even speak. He was too busy trembling, head darting back and forth as the world howled.

The screams. Lancel focused on the screams, and they were close. he heard the sound of an agonising wail from the parallel street. The Faith Militant looked horrified listening to the cries. Cries that were being silenced one by one, every shriek coming to an abrupt halt…

“Form up!” the Warrior’s Son cried, shouting to the Poor Fellows. “Form up in the name of the Seven!”

The Seven, Lancel thought, wheezing and sputtering hysterically. Cersei had chosen seven hells instead.

The earth rumbled. There wasn’t even a moment to react as the street exploded into splinters. A force more powerful than a bull burst out of the wall of a nearby house with blinding speed, sending broken wood and debris showering over the street.

He didn’t see the blow, but he felt it. He felt the collision of solid metal against a man’s skull; Lancel felt the squelch as a man was smeared over the cobbles.

Lancel could only stare as the giant loomed, armour so heavy that the cobbles cracked with every step. The figure was huge – nearly nine-foot-tall and armoured in metal heavier than any Lancel had ever seen.

It was a giant clad in white steel, wearing a white cloak dyed red in blood. Lancel caught sight of a faceless helm, and eyes as black as dread.

And there was a steel greatsword in its hands; it swung the blade’s mass like a storm, each of the giant’s steps like an earthquake. The greatsword was huge – the largest Lancel had ever seen, more like slab of solid steel, an anvil with a sharpened edge. The giant swung the sword more like a warhammer than a sword.

The blade screamed through the air, and a man was cut into two in a single stroke.

It was too much. Too much terror – it overwhelmed him and sent Lancel’s head blank. Lancel fell to his knees as if prayer, all the while the Faith Militant collided against nine foot of solid steel and fury.

A Poor Fellow’s body crunched beneath an immense boot. That sword swung, and suddenly two screams went silent at once. One man lunged at its back with an iron sword, but the blade just snapped against the giant’s armour.

They tried to charge it, they tried to flee. The giant was relentless, immovable, unstoppable…

Lancel couldn’t even process anything but the screams. Panicked cries and abrupt silences.

The Warrior’s Son, the knight, he was the only man ahorsted atop a great destrier. The knight tried
to charge against the giant, lance lunging, his horse rearing up and hooves trampling, but the steel giant didn’t even stagger. Massive hands gripped the horse’s neck, and suddenly the giant was slinging the horse and rider around like they were ragdolls.

Lancel could hear the horse’s screams, right up until it went silent with a crack. The giant swung the warhorse off the ground, so easily it was like swinging a child’s toy. It sent the horse’s corpse into a nearby cluster of men, who scattered under its mass.

First two men, then five, then ten. Over two dozen men, all fell before the giant’s sword, boots and fists. An entire street of Faith Militant, and the giant cleaved through them all so brutally it seemed casual.

It was a massacre right before his eyes – holy men dying by the dozens.

Lancel was left on his knees, face smeared with blood, staring upwards as the giant loomed. A blank helm stared back at him, totally emotionless. Lancel’s body stopped working, he could only tremble and quiver as the giant raised its steel boot upwards…

“Stop!” a voice called, and the steel giant froze, one foot in the air. “Not that one. Take him back whole.”

The giant lowered its foot. No hesitation, no pause. Lancel felt his bowels soiling himself in raw fear.

There was a man lingering at the edge of the alleyway, keeping his distance and out of sight, but his eyes sharp as he monitored. He was an old man wearing brilliant white robes, and a gentle smile on his lips as he looked out over the streaks of blood and gore.

“It is time to return,” Lord Qyburn, master of whisperers, ordered, hobbling forward across the bloody cobbles in slow, careful steps. “Spectacular job, ser, but carry this one with back you.” He turned to Lancel, and he could see Qyburn’s dark eyes gleaming. No remorse, no pity, nothing but pure fascination and zeal. “I feel like we may have a use for you yet, Ser Lancel.”

_The hells are empty_, Lancel thought hollowly. _All the demons are here._

The great gauntleted hand reached for him, and everything went black.

---

**The Smith**

Qyburn liked to hum as he worked. Despite his best efforts to lighten up the area, the black cells were still a dark and dreary place. Qyburn had taken some lavish, brightly coloured tapestries of greens and reds from Maegor’s Holdfast, in an attempt to brighten it all up. He had picked the happy cheerful, triumphant tapestries – ones celebrating great hunts or victories – and he placed dozens of candles across the walls and floor. Bright light and bright colours surrounded him as he worked.

Perhaps it was just personal preference, but he did remember Maester Ebrose once propositioning that men would suffer anxiety and seasonal disorder from being removed from the sun for long lengths of time. Qyburn had spent a very long time in the dungeons, perhaps unhealthily so, and he theorised that maybe the bright colours could offset the effects.

Lancel Lannister was left shivering, curled up in one of the cells before a great yellow tapestry
depicting the sun. The cell door was left open, and yet Ser Robert Strong stood on the other side of it. Lancel didn’t even try to run. The boy looked too shaken to even speak.

He had barely said a word, only whimpers, as Ser Robert dropped him into the dungeons.

Qyburn had made himself at home in the dungeons over his time here, even. It had been a daunting task, but slowly Qyburn had turned the sprawling maze of grimy cells into a decent workshop. He had run the dungeons of the Red Keep – from the upper floors filled with common stock, to the sealed black cells on the third level, to the torture chambers on the fourth. It had been difficult to even keep it all maintained, but, well, Qyburn was hardly the type of person to back away from a challenge.

Qyburn was humming as he shuffled around, gathering his tools. The workshop had already been stripped bare, but Qyburn could make do for now. “I hope you can pardon the quarters,” Qyburn said apologetically. “I usually have better apparatus than this, but, alas, I’ve already packed away most of my equipment.”

There was no reply. Qyburn cast an inquisitive eye over Lancel’s body, tutting quietly as he saw the faint lash marks across the boy’s back. Lancel had been stripped bare, his skin shivering in the chill of the dungeons. Young adult male, Qyburn thought to himself. Healthy, early-twenties. Subject is in good shape; a few mild burns, perhaps some head trauma. Signs of severe weight loss.

“Normally I do try to treat my patients with milk of the poppy too, to ease the process,” Qyburn continued, talking mostly to himself, “but I’m afraid I must offer my apologies there too – my last stores of the milk depleted some weeks ago.”

Strangely, though, that had been a mixed blessing. Qyburn had discovered that the procedure became slightly more effective the more pain the subject suffered, although he had yet to form a solid hypothesis why.

Lancel’s eyes were unfocused, his head drooping, mouth groaning nonsensically. A concussion, Qyburn mused. Unfortunate. Still, Qyburn tapped Lancel’s shoulder through the bars. “Can you hear me, Ser Lancel?” Qyburn asked. “I have no desire to be cruel, ser. If there are any steps I can take for your convenience, please do indicate. I am well aware that it can all be rather… unsettling.”

Behind him, Ser Robert Strong loomed before the cell door. Qyburn liked having the voiceless knight nearby, in case the patients became unruly. Ser Robert might well be the last of my creatures still walking, Qyburn mused. Months of work, and they are all gone in a single day. So many miracles of science, all sent to the Great Sept to burn or be hacked apart by fanatics. What a depressing thought.

Still, there was no doubt in Qyburn’s mind that Ser Robert Strong was also the finest of his works. Ser Robert Strong had been the first – the experimental subject, the one on which Qyburn perfected his craft. None of the others could even match Ser Robert’s… vitality.

Ser Gregor Clegane had been an exceptionally strong man. Even in death, that didn’t change.

“Well then, Robert, if you wouldn’t mind?” Qyburn said with a smile, and giant of a knight lurched into motion. Ser Robert’s armour creaked, as he bent down to grab Lancel. The boy tried to squirm, tried to wriggle away, but it was useless. “On to the bench now, Robert,” Qyburn ordered. “Place him and hold him steady.”

“No!” Lancel wailed, weeping, as the great knight levered him up. “No!”
“Now, now,” Qyburn tutted. “It will be easier if you don’t struggle. I understand this must be unpleasant, and I have no wish to make it more so.”

“You—” Lancel tried to scream, but his voice was cut off as Ser Robert dropped him onto the wooden board. A great metal hand slammed over Lancel’s chest, pinning him down. Qyburn was already bringing the leather straps, to fasten Lancel’s wrists and ankles onto the workbench. Lancel tried to squirm, but Qyburn had practice in tying patients down smoothly.

“To me, the most important thing in the world,” Qyburn said soothingly, as he tightened the straps, “is explanation. I am a great believer in awareness, in understanding – that is how we shape and comprehend the world around us. I do not wish to rob you of that, Lancel.” Qyburn motioned for Ser Robert to step backwards. “I want you to understand why you are here. I’m not a ruthless murderer – I want you to die with answers.”

Lancel’s eyes were dazed and his throat gulping. Qyburn cupped his cheek, trying to calm him. “I do hope you hear my words. I want you to listen to me, to make peace with what is happening to you.”

Qyburn picked up another strap of leather, and placed it into Lancel’s mouth and tightened it around his neck. The man tried to gag, but Qyburn’s grip was firm. Previous patients had bitten their own tongue off during the convulsions, and that had been unfortunate.

“I made a promise to your cousin, the queen,” Qyburn continued with a sigh, “that I would resurrect her family. I promised that I could bring back those lost to her. That I could change the world for her.” Qyburn thinned his lips. “And, oh, it would be spectacular if I had the chance as well. The greatest discovery in modern history – developed right here, and I was perfectly willing to share it with all.”

To think of all the good I could have done... we came so close. His voice was wistful, but then he shook his head. “Nevertheless,” Qyburn continued, “circumstances being what they are – I feel like that it is prudent for me to make my hasty departure. I shall be leaving both this city and the queen very quickly, I think, and Ser Robert will be escorting me. I do wish Queen Cersei the very best, but right now it seems… hmm, what’s the word? … unhealthy to stay by the queen’s side much longer.”

Queen Cersei would be furious to learn that Ser Robert – ‘her’ champion – had abandoned her, but no matter. Ser Robert had always belonged to Qyburn, not the queen. “And yet I am very grateful for the queen’s patronage,” Qyburn said honestly. “I very much doubt that I ever could have achieved my successes without the resources and finances she has provided me. It would be simply uncouth for me to walk away and leave her empty-handed, so I decided to apply my skills one last time, for her benefit.” He smiled at Lancel. “I wish to leave Cersei with one last example of my research – an example that she could demonstrate to the great lords of this realm, so she might still convince them of the possibilities.”

Lancel’s eyes were bulging, while Qyburn tottered around towards a plate of knives, scalpels and metal tools. “If Queen Cersei does manage to recover, despite her… difficulties, then I will be more than happy to return to her service,” Qyburn said, with a smile. “But, otherwise, I intend to be a very long distance away from King’s Landing. I hope you will be able to pass that message on for me, Lancel.”

After the grey sheep had taken away his chain, he had still been a young man, full of vigour and curiosity, so he had travelled the world, studying and researching all by himself. As he became older, his joints had started to ache, and he became less capable physically on his own. He realised that he needed the protection and funding that others could give him. Qyburn had worked for many
tyrants, mad men and fanatics – he did not care about their ambitions or the services they required from him, so long as they funded his work and gave him the freedom that he required. Qyburn happily rode with Vargo Hoat and the Brave Companions, because they had been willing to indulge the requirements of his research, where more squeamish men would not.

But still, whenever one of his employers fell, Qyburn simply moved onto the next. It was only practical, after all.

Qyburn had spent over half his life in Essos; from working as a scholar to magisters in Myr or as a healer in Qohor, he had travelled half the continent in his pilgrimage, his search for knowledge. And yet he had achieved more in the last year alone than in his other sixty. This last year under Cersei, it had been… *revitalising*.

Perhaps it was fate that he had achieved his life’s work back in the city he was born. Two years ago, Qyburn had harboured his own reservations when they received the offer from Dorne, but now he was so, so thankful that Brave Companions had agreed to return to Westeros on behalf of House Martell.

Qyburn himself had zero regrets about what he had done for Cersei, but he could understand that others might feel rather more… angry about it.

Qyburn had been right standing next to the queen, as they stood on the balcony of the Red Keep and watched the Great Sept of Baelor burn. They could hear the city screaming even from Aegon’s High Hill. Neither Qyburn nor Cersei had said a word.

As they saw the smoke, Cersei had just nodded, and Qyburn had left with Ser Robert to clear the sparrows outside the gates.

Lancel tried to scream through the gag in his mouth. Qyburn selected his instrument like an artist choosing his brush, slowly picking out a sharpened, fine length of metal.

*That was what it is, really,* he mused, *an art.* Qyburn was a man of science – a maester, a scholar – and yet still the actual practice felt more like art. It was an art he had spent decades trying to perfect.

His entire life had been coursed over forty years ago now, back when he had been a naive and ambitious maester studying at the Citadel. He had absorbed everything they had to teach about the healing arts, but the more he learnt, the more aware he became of how very much was still unknown. He had so many questions, that none of them could answer. It had been frustrating – the steps they refused to take, the questions they refused to ask. He must have dissected half the cadavers in the Citadel in pursuit of answers, but it hadn’t been enough. The first time he had truly realised what was lacking had been when he opened up a living body, a sickly man – a man on death’s door – and Qyburn realised the one organ that no disciple of the anatomy could find.

The soul. No matter how deep Qyburn cut, he had not been able to find the soul.

All of his life had been coursed around that single purpose. He had spent decades, all across Essos and beyond, trying to find a means of cutting deeper. It had become something of an obsession, truth be told; forty years and hundreds, thousands, of bodies – all just to uncover the key to it all.

*I am but a blind man shambling around in the dark,* Qyburn mused, *trying to sketch out the shape of something far bigger than myself. How could a man understand something he could neither see, feel nor touch?*
As a young man, he had been bold and fuelled by passion. As he grew older and greyer, his thoughts started to turn towards his legacy. His life’s work. As... undesirable as some of the necessities may have been, history would remember his work as one of the greatest advancements of the modern age. His discovery could save the world.

The tool he held was a long and straight length of iron, about two feet long, specially forged by a skilled blacksmith on the queen’s gold. Very light, very delicate, but strong. The edge was not sharp, but the point was. It was a needle, long and fine, engraven with a runnel for the capture of fluids.

At the sight of the metal, Lancel’s disorientated eyes focused and bulged. His limbs started to thrash, struggling against the restraints. He was gasping with muffled shouts, trying to scream through the gag in his mouth.

Qyburn paused. “Are you trying to speak, ser?” It didn’t really matter, but Qyburn removed the gag. He was simply curious as to what words Lancel had to say in this situation. The man sputtered. “What do you wish to say, ser?"

The poor boy was as white as a ghost, his eyes bulging so hard they could burst. “The Seven save me…” Lancel gasped, trembling. “In the name of the Father Above…”

“The Seven?” Qyburn chuckled. “Oh no, my dear boy.” Your soul is not going to the Seven.

Qyburn shoved the gag back in, wrestling with it as the young man squirmed. Then, Qyburn picked up the needle, and gingerly placed it over Qyburn’s stomach with surgical care. There was a special spot – to push the upwards the metal through the bowels straight into the liver.

Blood swelled, and Lancel thrashed. The ‘Seven’, Qyburn thought as he hummed. Honestly!

What a useless, primitive concept. Faith was the antithesis to understanding, to progress. Qyburn had absolutely zero regrets about blowing that temple up.

Qyburn moved with experienced care, every movement slow and purposeful. He went to pick up another needle. “The first stages are uncomfortable,” Qyburn admitted. “I must drain your body of its blood, bile, phlegm and fluid.”

He was already pressing in another metal spike, this time into the lungs. It took care, made all the more difficult by Lancel’s unfortunate spasms. He inserted another needle into Lancel’s back, near the vertebrate, and suddenly the convulsions stopped. Lancel’s pupils were still twitching, but his body was left paralyzed, unable to move. Pale ooze leaked from the boy’s spine.

The secret to success, Qyburn had found, was to keep the patient alive for as long as physically possible. A period of fermentation added to the quality of the final result. With enough precision and care, Qyburn had found that a living body could last weeks despite the harvesting of the humours, the needles in the essential organs.

There is no time to spend weeks with this one, however, Qyburn thought with a sigh. This time, he would have to push the task somewhat. Qyburn selected more needles, more blades.

Qyburn had larger and hollow needles for major arteries, as well as very, very fine needles that would pierce the cranium. All of Lancel’s fluids – his life – were dribbling down towards the jars on the floor. The sight was... well, it felt magical, actually. Somehow, all of those fluids mixed together to keep a body running – the complexity was wondrous. Every man is just a sack of water, really, Qyburn mused, the blood and bile and ooze is the key to it all.
Qyburn brought ceramic jugs to help collect the fluids as they dribbled down, but he stood ready to block the flows should Lancel lose too much. It was all a balancing act; he wanted Lancel to be on the brink of death, but not quite falling over the precipice.

“Your body is paralyzed,” Qyburn said, his voice a whisper, “and I know it must hurt, but your mind can still comprehend. Please, try to comprehend.”

Lancel’s eyes twitched, but his throat could only gasp. There were seventeen metal spikes, stabbed through his body, neck and skull at different angles. The fluids all leaked down the metal needles, and into the ceramic pots. Tubes of pig intestines ensured that waste was minimised.

Qyburn picked out another needle – finer than all the others. “I’m sorry,” Qyburn said with a sigh. “I leave this one for last, it is the most unpleasant.”

Very carefully, Qyburn brought the metal spike up towards Lancel’s face, and slowly placed it into the eyeball. It took a small hammer, a fair amount force, and extreme precision to push the needle upwards, straight into the frontal lobe of the brain. Lancel made gagging noise, blood sputtering down his cheek.

When he extracted enough, the fluids would be mixed together with Qyburn’s formula – transmuted and processed using hard metals, sulphur and salt. The blood had to be boiled, the spinal fluid had to be concentrated. Afterwards, it would be pressed back into Lancel’s body. After it was given time to settle in his bloodstream, more fluid would be extracted again. Ideally, the subject would be given food and water, kept alive for as long as possible, that the body might continue producing its humours. Regrettably, he could not afford that luxury in this case. With sufficient care, Qyburn could keep the process happening for a long time – constantly recycling and drawing out more and more of the person’s being. Draining them, piece by piece.

The flesh would incubate the substance, it would absorb the properties of the body, ready to be harvested and applied.

Eventually, after enough refinement, it would come together form a black ooze; a miraculous substance Qyburn called the Essence.

That was the secret that Qyburn had discovered years ago – that the soul was in the flesh. A person’s soul was attached to their body, the soul was dispersed through the blood, the bones, the muscle tissue and the brain tissue. There was no secret ephemeral force, there was only blood and bone. The secret to harvesting the soul was simply a matter of draining the body in the right way.

Lancel Lannister would have screamed, but he couldn’t with a needle in his throat. There was no practical reason for that one, but Qyburn simply preferred the quiet. The boy’s face was contorted in pain, unable to move, all the while his skin turned as pale as milk.

Qyburn patted Lancel on the shoulder sympathetically, and then placed a funnel into his mouth, and poured a special mixture down his throat.

There was power in the Essence. A concentrated and impregnated distillate of the humours. Something of the subject’s soul – their strength, their characteristics, their pain – would be absorbed into the black gloop. The Essence was life itself, the primal building block. The fuel of being.

“This is the first phase,” Qyburn soothed. “I know it hurts, but you just have to hold on. I promise – in the second, you won’t feel a thing.”
Qyburn left, to go boil himself a pot of tea. Time was limited; Qyburn had his secret escape tunnel already planned, already had set aside a pack filled with currency and reagents, and his research notes and materials. Nevertheless, he could only guess how long it would take the forces in the city to break through the Red Keep. King’s Landing had been suffering several dozen riots all at once, last he checked the windows.

Queen Cersei had refused to submit herself to trial, and the Faith Militant refused to yield. The only way the queen could retake control of the situation was if the Faith Militant and the High Septon were removed from the equation.

Cersei still had great influence among the Wisdoms of the Alchemists’ Guild, and Lord Hallyne had been all too happy to resume their efforts on the queen’s orders. Qyburn himself had inspected the alchemist’s formulas and the processes they used to develop their substance, and he found himself pleasantly impressed. At the Citadel, they derided the pyromancers and their practices, and yet what Qyburn saw was far more effective than the maesters knew. Qyburn had actually copied many of their secrets, and he later applied the same techniques to help develop his Essence.

Wildfire was capable of destroying the Great Sept, no doubt, but the difficulty had simply been how to apply it—how to move such large quantities of the substance into position? Qyburn had heard that Aerys had spent months positioning caches of wildfire throughout the city in underground cellars, but Cersei simply didn’t have that sort of time or freedom of movement. In any case, all of the caches that Aerys had left behind had already been recovered by the alchemists.

No, the only way to move sufficient quantities of wildfire into the Great Sept was if there were men to carry it. They required many large barrels of the substance to be carried through the several thousand Faith Militant and up Visenya’s Hill, to burn the Most Devout and the High Septon. It had to be quick; every enemy of Cersei’s would be gathered together for her trial.

Of course, no sellsword in the world would be willing to walk into certain doom with a cask of wildfire on his back, so Cersei had needed another breed of soldier. The queen needed a soldier without fear, without restraint, that could achieve the impossible. Qyburn had supplied. They had both excelled at their tasks.

The Alchemists’ Guild had developed the explosive, and it was left to Qyburn to develop the delivery mechanism.

It had surprised Qyburn how similar the alchemist’s practices were to his own. Where he worked with flesh, the alchemists worked with oils and pitches, which the alchemists theorised to be a distillate of ancient life. Qyburn had, out of curiosity, started mixing in wildfire along with his Essence, and it had produced fairly tremendous results. His first creations had been fairly frail things, but later he had created ones of remarkable durability. He created soldiers with burning blood.

He had resided in the city for but a single year, and yet the processes involved had become more effective, more powerful over that year, for reasons Qyburn couldn’t yet explain. Formulas and ‘spells’ that the Alchemists’ Guild had long dismissed were starting to become effective again, while Qyburn’s own art had one breakthrough after another. Everything had only recently become stronger, much more efficient.

Cersei had ordered one hundred of Qyburn’s creations, but Qyburn had overachieved.

He had managed to produce two hundred and twenty-six. Over two hundred unkillable, unfeeling and relentless constructs.
The Faith Militant never stood a chance.

Lancel’s blood was seeping out his body, his gentle spasms fading. “Are you still conscious, Lancel?” Qyburn asked. “I want you to be aware. I have never been certain how much intelligence can be retained after the transition, but I have high hopes for you. Look down Lancel, if you can – that is your body and soul, dripping out into these pots. That is your everything.

“I will not lie to you, ser. You are going to die,” Qyburn whispered sympathetically. “But it will not be for long. I will perform my process – I shall transmute your substances and your fluids into something eternal, and I will give you your life back. I will place your Essence back into your body, and it will reanimate your flesh.”

There wasn’t even a twitch. “You will be freshly dead, your body hardly decayed,” Qyburn continued. “Ser Robert Strong here was cobbled together from many damaged sources, he’s hardly the most… whole person. The other creations were formed in this workshop were also developed to be fragmented – I did not need intelligence for their purpose. They were designed to be crude things.

“But you… you will be nearly whole, I doubt I’ll need to supplement your body with any additional pieces at all,” Qyburn explained gently. “And so corruption will be minimised. I do hope that you that you will be able to retain your thought, your memories, your personality, even. I hope that, afterwards, you will still have the presence of mind to describe what it felt like.”

Qyburn was especially curious on that front; he was an insatiably curious man, but he had always wanted to know – what did it feel like to die?

Qyburn had made studious notes on all his experiments and studies. Occasionally, his creations would retain bits and pieces from their past lives. Some words or phrases, the infrequent twitch or mannerism – it was like they held echoes of the person or persons they once were. Sometimes, his creations would constantly repeat the last words that they said on death, reliving their over and over again.

Ser Robert had mostly certainly inherited the same violence and love of brutality from Ser Gregor, but the lack of intelligence also made him very compliant.

The simple soldiers were useful enough, but the true goal for Qyburn was defeat death itself. To resurrect a person entirely, their mind intact.

Through the Essence, Qyburn could achieve miracles. Dead flesh could be reanimated, even a tattered, stitched-together corpse could be given life again. He could give life to the dead. The bodies would move, possessed by the souls of those from which the Essence were extracted from.

Thanks to Cersei’s patronage, Qyburn had been able to drain dozens – hundreds – of bodies for their Essence. It had been trial by error in many ways, science by research. Qyburn preferred women – pregnant, if possible – for his work. Their parts produced an especially potent Essence. The serving ladies of the castle had proved useful and manageable, but more had been needed still.

The process had become more efficient over time. At first, it had required the draining of ten bodies for a single reanimation. There was little hope of the retention of the personality or mind in such cases. Ten bodies dead, for one resurrection – it was wasteful. But, still, over time, with practice and greater efficiency, he had narrowed it down to eight, six, three…

He theorised that, in time, as he came closer to reviving a body with only the Essence extracted from itself, he would be able to minimise the fragmentation and preserve the mind. His formulas
were constantly being re-evaluated and improved, especially as extracted and applied the insights that the Alchemists’ Guild offered him.

In the second stage, after their bodies finally died and every drip of Essence was extracted, their bodies were put to use. Their corpses stitched back together, and their bodies were prepared for reanimation.

In the third stage, when the Essence was returned to them, the dead and maimed flesh would be given life again. Even stitched-together and rotten skin would move again when the black ooze was pumped back through their veins. It was almost instinctive; like the flesh itself knew how to use the Essence. Or perhaps it was the other way around. He had yet to form a hypothesis.

The creatures Qyburn had produced in the dungeons for Cersei were tormented and basic things, each one possessed by the tortured souls of dozens of scattered people. They had been primitive creatures, incapable of rational thought, and very often violent and yet they still proved… simple enough to be instructable. Perhaps it was the one thing that every human shared; the desire to be commanded, to follow orders.

That, and the desire to kill. Every one of his constructs had reverted to primal, animalistic aggression.

But Qyburn was their master, their maker. They followed his will; perhaps his creations imprinted upon Qyburn in the same way new-born babe imprinted on their mother, the instinctive bond between progeny and creator. Or perhaps something of the residue of his own soul coloured his creations, a product of the hands-on process of animation. My creations had always belonged to me, he thought with a flash of pride, not to Cersei.

Qyburn picked up another knife, slowly rehearsing what he had to do to prepare Lancel for the second stage. The heart will have to be removed, soaked in Essence, and then reinserted, he decided. I need surgical cuts to the bowels to squeeze the Essence into the bloodstream, and certain organs must be removed. Much of the spine and gut will be damaged after the draining, they need to be scoured. Qyburn sighed. There had been so many breakthroughs, and yet his process still felt so… crude. These were still the early days of his research, all told.

“There have been others who developed similar practices to mine, you know?” Qyburn said conversationally. “Variations in places, yet similar ingredients, similar processes. I am not the first to walk down this path. The Alchemists’ Guild still possesses a formula for ‘eternal life’,” he scoffed, “that they thought defunct. I strongly suspect the Bloodstone Emperor applied very similar methodology to mine, and to say nothing of the blood mages in Gogossos. The Ancient Valyrians dabbled from time to time. I’ve traced many of the older practices to originate from Asshai, but in truth, I suspect that Stygai was the source of it all.

“Different applications, different usages, yes… but at the core…” Qyburn sighed. “They were all men who tried to walk in the same field. To defeat the Stranger.”

There was a pause. “I travelled the world in my youth, once. From Oldtown to Qarth, even to the edge of the Basilisk Isles. Just to try to make sense of all those lost histories, the legends and the curses,” Qyburn explained. “But it is that not the way of things? A man grasps for greatness, and all others try to pull them down. Revolutionaries discover breakthroughs, yet superstition and fear rules instead. History is written, and then foolish men try to unwrite it.

“Yet I am not a ‘magician’, Lancel. Those fools that rode with Vargo named me a necromancer, yet I scoffed at the term.” Qyburn shook his head. “No, I am a man of the sciences. I strive not only to perform miracles, but to explain them.”
There was no reply. Qyburn did not need one. He had grown used to talking and humming and singing to himself, in the darkest levels of the dungeons surrounded by his work.

*Ten thousand years ago,* Qyburn mused, *Westeros was changed forever when the Rhoynish brought the art of metal forging and smithing to the Andals.* A new technology that redefined everything. Qyburn aimed for something similar; a new revolution, as he reinvented the art of smithing flesh.

*Fleshsmith.* That was a term that the blood mages of Gogossos had used, back when they filled Old Valyrian prison colonies with mutilated half-human creations. Qyburn intended on reinventing the term.

*Of all the things they’ve called these practices… yes, I like ‘smith’ the best.* A workman who extracted and refined natural resources, who reshaped them into something new, something *useful.* A man who turned the elements into tools, a man who laboured to put the world to right, to purpose. A man who smithed metal could transform rocks into steel, into swords, and yet Qyburn could transform corpses into moving bodies, into soldiers. *What is that, if not revolutionary?*

The superstitious, the unimaginative and fearful – the grey sheep of the world – they would not squash Qyburn’s discovery. Not this time.

Fleshsmith. *Yes, I can work with that."

*Tis a new world.*

There was nothing but quiet in the dark cells, as Lancel’s blood and fluids dripped into the pots. Qyburn was already preparing his mixture.

“It will not be long now, Lancel,” Qyburn placed his hand on the man’s bloody shoulders, to try and soothe him into his passing. “When your heartbeat stops, your next life will begin. You will become just like Ser Robert here – strong and indestructible. You are among the first of a new form of life, redefining the natural order.”

Ser Robert twitched at the sound of his name. Even in his paralysed agony, Lancel managed to gasp harder, trying to squirm. His eyes were rolling in their sockets, like crazed things. Ser Robert still loomed at the base of the workbench, totally unmoving.

“Robert here?” Qyburn chuckled. “Do not be frightened of the silent knight, ser. He is… loyal.”

Qyburn paused, glancing between Lancel and up at Ser Robert’s faceless white helm. “Ah,” Qyburn said finally. “You know him, do you not? I believe you have a history?”

There was no response. Qyburn smiled softly. “Ser Robert,” he said in a low whisper. “Please remove your helm.”

The knight did so without complaint. Even in the gloom, Qyburn could see the greying necrotic flesh and tinge of green rot against the man’s skin. The knight was bald and hairless, and there was a thick and ugly scar across his neck where the head had been attached.

Still, even despite the scars and the damaged skin, even through all flesh that Qyburn had replaced and patched, the shape of features was still recognisable. Green speckled irises glinted in the dark.

Lancel choked. His pupils dilated, eyes twitching – they were the eyes of a man staring straight at his demons.
They were the eyes of a man who suddenly knew he was in hell. Lancel Lannister couldn’t even scream.

Qyburn only chuckled. “Why did you think I named him ‘Robert’, ser?”

The mutilated head of King Robert Baratheon loomed down at them, the man’s face totally emotionless.

The body of Ser Gregor Clegane, afflicted by the magical poison from the Red Viper’s spear, had been a fantastic test subject to work upon. The manticore venom had proven to be one of the components needed for his Essence; working with Ser Gregor had been a ground-breaking experience. Nevertheless, Queen Cersei had insisted that the Mountain’s head must go to Dorne. Qyburn complied, but he had been left with a headless corpse of a giant that needed a replacement.

Robert Baratheon’s head had been chosen as a matter of both practicality and convenience.

Qyburn had used his position to ransack the crypts of Great Sept for components – surprisingly, the tombs fit for kings had fewer guards than most common graveyards. Perhaps no other graverobber had ever dared to attempt those tombs, so they had never felt the need to secure them.

Gregor Clegane had been a man of incredible stature, most other skulls simply wouldn’t fit on his neck. Qyburn had needed another large man, and there could be no doubt that the former king had been a very big man too.

King Robert had been dead for some three years, but Qyburn found that the very high quality royal ointments and dressings that the silent sisters dressed the king in had done a remarkable job at preventing decay. There had still been a large degree of degradation, of course, but overall the head had been workable enough to use. He had sealed the crypt back up again, and nobody had even noticed that the king’s tomb had been robbed.

Qyburn had constructed Ser Robert to be a warrior. Qyburn had wanted a famed warrior’s head on his creation’s shoulders. King Robert’s skull met all of the requirements.

Plus, there was the symmetry that Qyburn had appreciated. *Who could be a better champion for Cersei, than her former husband?*

Ser Gregor Clegane’s body may have provided the base, but there were at least a dozen different other corpses that contributed body parts or organs to repair the various damage. Robert Baratheon’s own eyeballs had been rotted out of his skull, so Qyburn replaced them with the eyes of Tywin Lannister – for no other reason than he thought it was funny.

Still, for all that there had been other contributors, it was still very much Ser Gregor’s Essence that remained dominant. It was still the Mountain’s soul that powered Qyburn’s own personal soldier.

Lancel’s spasms were becoming jerkier, more desperate. Qyburn had seen it before; the man was falling over the precipice. *Alive one moment, dead the next.* “I will see you soon, Ser Lancel,” Qyburn promised. “Give my regards to Cersei. And to the Seven, if you happen to see them too.”

Afterwards, Qyburn went to pick out a knife to cut open the chest, and a crowbar to break through the ribcage. He handled both the tools with practiced ease.

*The Seven,* Qyburn thought as he chuckled. *The gods are dead. The new era will be an age of man.*

Still, he couldn’t help but think back to his youth, and the songs that mothers would sing in the orphanage. Qyburn was chuckling under his breath, and he couldn’t get the hymns out of the head.
Slowly, as he worked and hacked and laboured, he started to sing quietly in the dusty air.

“The Father’s face is stern and strong,  
he sits and judges right from wrong.  
He weighs our lives, the short and long,  
and loves the little children!

The Mother gives the gift of life,  
and watches over every wife.  
Her gentle smile ends all strife,  
and she loves her little children!

The Warrior stands before the foe,  
protecting us where e’er we go.  
With sword and shield and spear and bow,  
he guards the little children!

The Crone is very wise and old,  
and sees our fates as they unfold.  
She lifts her lamp of shining gold,  
to lead the little children!

The Smith, he labours day and night,  
to put the world of men to right.  
With hammer, plough, and fire bright,  
he builds the little children!”

Qyburn chuckled with the last line, but he wiped the scraps of flesh and gore off his hands and continued.
“The Maiden dances through the sky,
she lives in every lover’s sigh.

Her smiles teach the birds to fly,
and gives dreams to little children!

The Seven Gods who made us all,
are listening if we should call.

So close your eyes, you shall not fall,
they see you, little children!”

His voice was so, so soft, singing in the musky air. He thought of Cersei, of her dead babes, and the city that was roiling and burning above him. The mobs were likely already at the gates, the bodies slamming to tear the doors off their hinges…

“So close your eyes, you shall not fall,
they see you, little children.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, this chapter marks the one year anniversary of Dragons of Ice and Fire. Plus, I think it's a fairly fitting chapter for Halloween, so there's that. Coming up to the end of the King's Landing arc with the next one.

Thanks to Diablo Snowblind for his help with this one.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

The Crone, and the end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Crone

It was a pleasant evening beneath the shade of the kingswood, in a clearing by the elm trees overlooking the sandy dunes of the coast. A faint chill blew out from the Blackwater, but the sun was bright and warm. They sat around a small pavilion at the edge of the woods, the horses and ponies trotting freely on around the green grass between the wheelhouses, while the Tyrell rose wafted in the wind.

It was hardly the most luxurious place to spend so many weeks, but it was quiet and serene. More comfortable than that bloated keep in King’s Landing, to Olenna’s mind. They sat together around the table, sitting on barrels, eating lemoncakes and sipping juice.

“Where is the cheese?” Olenna demanded to her steward. She couldn’t recall the man’s name, or didn’t care to. “I specifically asked for there to be cheese on the platter.”

“Forgive me, my lady, but our stocks–”

“Should have been restocked the last supply run, if I recall.”

His face was pained. “My lady, the supplies–”

“I am seventy-two years old, son, but I can distinctly remember telling you to order more cheese,” Olenna said sharply. “Now what is your excuse for being deaf?”

The man grimaced. “I shall make inquiries, my lady.”

Across the table Margaery giggled, trying to catch the crumbs falling from her mouth as she laughed. “I swear, the way that they say ‘my lady’…” Olenna mused with a sigh as the servant shuffled away. “I would prefer it if they just addressed me as ‘you bitter old cunt’ – at least that would be more honest.”

“Grandmother!” the girl exclaimed, both laughing and sounding appalled. “It’s quite alright.”

“It’s quite not,” Olenna retorted, picking up a crystal goblet filled with wine. “First it was the crackers, now the cheese. I swear, another week here and I will have to forage berries and beetles. Living in the wilderness.”

The Queen of the Seven Kingdoms raised an embroidered napkin to her mouth, pecking at the platter of pastries. She was so young and delicate; cascading soft brown hair and golden eyes, red lips and bright cheeks. Margaery’s smile was the most beautiful, though; when she laughed she lit up the world.
Olenna felt like a withered old prune sitting across from her granddaughter. All of Margaery’s companions were young, bright and vibrant, while Olenna was a toothless and wrinkled crone, with a hunched back and pain in her hips that ached terribly. They were the future of the realm, while Olenna was a fossil from the past. Camping in the kingswood had been harsh for a woman of her age; the wind could grow something fierce and her mattress was like a wooden board.

And yet, still, there was no place Olenna would rather be than next to her precious little girl.

“I could always bring you food from the capital,” Margaery offered. Behind her, Megga and Elinor Tyrell were giggling as they picked flowers and knitted daisy chains in the grass. Margaery’s ladies-in-waiting were pecking from platters of food, and walking barefoot in the grass.

“Oh yes, wouldn’t that be glorious?” Olenna said, a smirk passing over wrinkled dry lips. “The Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, stealing food from the kitchens to feed her grandmother hiding in the woods. No, my dear, I think not.”

“Please, grandmother, if it’s uncomfortable you not need to linger,” Margaery said gently. “You always truly could return to Highgarden.”

She was a sweet girl. Every single time they had these little feasts, Margaery always showed quiet concern for her old grandmother’s health. “I am not dead yet, my dear.”

“Just do not feel obligated to stay on my behalf.”

“And leave you all alone in that viper’s nest of a city?” Olenna shook her head. “No, I shall eat the berries and beetles before that happens.”

Olenna had been camped by the kingswood for nearly two months now, ever since Tommen’s wedding. The official word was that the Queen of Thorns had returned to Highgarden, but rather her and a small retinue had lingered a few leagues away from the city. They kept away from the roads, hidden in the trees on the countryside. The Queen Regent has us all walking on eggshells, Olenna mused.

Still, needs must. Margaery was a strong young woman, and yet she still needed her grandmother’s advice on occasion. Olenna would not let Cersei steal that away from her so easily.

“Are you sure you are quite alright?” Margaery insisted. “I do worry for you, out here by yourself.”

Olenna snorted. “My child, I assure you I am alright. Left and Right keep me well secure, and it’s hardly as if I’m leagues away from civilisation.”

Left and Right were Olenna’s two personal guards – big burly twins called Erryk and Arryk, yet Olenna could never differentiate them. She had referred to them interchangeably as Left and Right for years. They were nice enough chaps; both standing over seven foot tall, broad-shouldered, strong-jawed and with thick moustaches. They were both very capable, but had a limited sense of humour.

Olenna was just a defenceless old lady, after all. She liked to have men like Left and Right around to keep her company. It was a fairly small camp, but she had fifty guardsmen and half as many stewards surrounding her, with six wheelhouses overloaded with supplies and cages filled with ravens. All of them trusted Tyrell men, very loyal and discreet.

Any fool could have seen that Cersei had been chalking with Olenna’s presence, while Olenna had wanted a quick wedding for her granddaughter. It could have been troublesome if Cersei had delayed the wedding indefinitely, but all it took was a few barbed comments and then there was a
ceremony happening for no other reason than to rid King’s Landing of Olenna Tyrell. Once Tommen and Margaery were husband and wife, king and queen, Olenna had quite happily backed off.

Still, Olenna had too much invested in the capital to truly leave Margaery alone. It was a better solution to stay close, and stay discreet. Margaery and her escort quite regularly took long horse rides out of the city, and she visited her grandmother at least twice a week without anybody but her most trusted companions knowing.

“I swear,” Margaery said with a sigh. “I treat Cersei with nothing but kindness, and she still glares at me like she wants to claw my eyes out.” She reached for another lemoncake. “I have been naught but polite–”

“Careful with those cakes, dear,” Olenna warned. “Do think of your hips.”

“Oh hush.” Margaery rolled her eyes, and picked up the sweet. “After the week I’ve had, I think I need these cakes.”

“Cersei is a prickly woman. I feel sorry for her sometimes; she was raised to lust for power, but she doesn’t know what to do with it when she has it. Like a housecat trying drag the body of a boar; it’s not going anywhere, but it is still for the best not to provoke her.” Olenna sighed wearily. “Oh, and Ser Osney Kettleblack is going to try to fuck you.”

“He is? How quaint.” Margaery laughed. “I’m sure that will go well for him.”

“Cersei has started scheming again,” Olenna explained. “We knew she would. She wants to shame you, she has ordered her little knight to get into your smallclothes. Ser Osney will want to take your dress off, and then a bunch of great lords might ‘happen’ to find you two in the act. Cersei means to see you charged with infidelity.”

“She means to accuse me of infidelity?” Margaery asked in quiet disbelief.

“Yes,” Olenna agreed dryly. “And to think I thought Cersei had no sense of humour.”

Margaery leant backwards on her seat, folding her arms. “Well, I assure you that Ser Osney will be disappointed.”

Olnna shook her head. “Don’t disappoint him too quickly.”

“Grandmother!”

“Humour the poor boy, Margaery,” Olenna insisted. “Flirt with him a bit, let him think he has a chance. Remember, he’s not very bright, the poor soul. Let us draw out Cersei’s scheme for a while, give us a bit of time.”

The girl scoffed unhappily, but she didn’t protest. “I take it this comes from Lady Taena?”

“Oh of course.” Olenna nodded. Lord Orton Merryweather was loyal to Tyrell over Lannister, but it was Lady Taena that truly had her eyes on the future. Taena of Myr was ambitious, intelligent and sultry – all traits that Olenna had learnt to appreciate, respect, and fear.

Every move that Cersei made, Taena dutifully passed back to Olenna. While Taena flirted her way into the queen’s trust, Olenna could read Cersei like a book.

Olenna knew that Lady Taena was also selling information to Doran Martell in Sunspear, but
Olenna allowed that so long as she was informed exactly what was being passed. Like any good prostitute, Lady Taena Merryweather was looking for more customers, more protection. Olenna didn’t judge.

Cersei believed that she had weeded out all the catspaws, but that was laughably untrue. On her small council alone, the master of laws Orton Merryweather belonged to House Tyrell, and the Hand of the King Harys Swyft answered to whoever ordered him in a firm enough voice. Even the master of coin – old, sickly Gyles Rosby – harboured his own disloyalties against the crown, while Olenna strongly suspected that the master of ships, Aurane Waters, was Littlefinger's creature.

The only truly concerning one of the bunch was ‘Lord’ Qyburn – the gods alone knew who Cersei’s spymaster answered to. Olenna suspected the Spider, but that may have been just an instinctive response.

*Between myself, Littlefinger, and Doran Martell, Olenna mused. I’m not sure if there’s anybody in King’s Landing who doesn’t have their fingers in at least one pot.* Still, that was simply the way the game was played.

“Let’s allow Cersei’s scheme to go forward, we don’t want squash it too quickly,” Olenna said firmly. “String Ser Osney along for now. You are playing your part beautifully, my dear.”

“It is becoming tiring,” Margaery admitted with a quiet grimace.

“I know.” Margaery was a saint for lasting this long; if Olenna had been the one alone with Cersei, the bitch likely would have been slapped already. “And yet so long as Cersei is on the throne and your father is sitting outside Storm’s End, there is not much we can do. Truly, is there any man in all the realm who has more experience sitting outside a castle?”

“My pa is doing his best,” Margaery said defensively.

“I know, dear,” Olenna waved her hand dismissively. “Yet it is not Mace that I’m worried about. Garlan is strong, Willas has his wits to him, yet I fear it is Loras who is in the most danger. If Cersei cannot target you, she will want to remove your brother from the picture, and a knight of the Kingsguard cannot disobey the Queen Regent’s orders.” Her nails tapped against the wooden table. “I knew that him taking that white cloak was a bloody fool’s thing to do.”

_Honestly, Olenna thought with a sigh, it feels like half my life has been spent trying to clean up after my family._ Her days were spent trying to look after the fools.

Margaery stiffened. “Cersei wouldn’t dare hurt Loras.”

“Those are dangerous words. *Never* assume that.” She shook her head. “No, we need to be safe. We need to find a way to take Loras out of commission, safely and without suspicion. An injury, perhaps.”

“Grandmother, you can’t–”

“It doesn’t have to be his injury,” Olenna said sharply. *Some battle wound that could knock Loras out of Cersei’s view, perhaps?* There were those that would be willing to play along with it. She would have to make arrangements. “I just want to make sure that Cersei thinks she has us where she wants us.”

Margaery opened her mouth to protest, and then slumped. *Clever girl.* “I do not understand why Cersei is so against us,” Margaery said with a sigh. “Is it truly just avarice?”
“Avarice, and a good dollop of paranoia,” Olenna said with scoff. “Ever since her brother escaped the Red Keep’s dungeons, the whole realm has been watching her spiralling. Her father was the one who always curbed her excesses, and Tywin is dead.” I never thought I would actually miss Tywin Lannister. “Did you know that they found golden coins of the old Kingdom of Reach underneath the gaoler’s pillow?”

“Truly?” Margaery frowned. “I mean… why?”

“Because I imagine that a signed confession with the Tyrell seal would have been a tad too suspicious,” Olenna said humourlessly. “No, somebody wants to frame House Tyrell for her brother’s crimes, and Cersei is all too eager to believe it.”

Even after all the preparations I took, the deals I made, Olenna thought bitterly, it comes back to Joffrey’s murder. Even in the most roundabout way possible, House Tyrell still ended up suffering Cersei’s ire for that deed. Framing Tyrion for the strangler in Joffrey’s cup had been so very convenient at the time, but it still came back to bite her.

Olenna mused on it for a while, and a thought came to her. “But perhaps we should encourage that idea. Let us spread the rumour that I keep a chest of old Gardener King gold coins in my possession, that I use to short-change tradesmen.”

“But you don’t.” Margaery frowned.

“Of course I don’t. I’m not a cunt. And what sort of fool would pay easily traceable, ancient coins for a murder?” Olenna could have laughed, but the situation really wasn’t funny. “Yet… nevertheless… Cersei is going to blame us no matter what we do or don’t do, so we might as well roll with it. Go on; let her think that this ridiculously incriminating evidence truly does lead back to me.”

“Grandmother,” Margaery bit her lip in worry. “We should not provoke Cersei. She is already suspicious enough as is.”

“My dear, it’s impossible not to provoke Cersei. Your very marriage to her son is provocation enough,” Olenna replied dryly. “But Cersei insists on playing this game, so very well, let us play.”

There was one lemoncake left on the platter. Olenna scratched her chin, listening to the wind rustling the trees, and the sound of the girls’ merriment ringing over the clearing. It was a soft, gentle moment. How many decades has it been since I’ve ran around barefoot in the grass? Olenna mused. Gods, to be young again…

“I know Cersei’s type,” Olenna continued after a pause. “She is incompetent so long as she’s comfortably in power, but she’s fire and fury while she’s fighting for power.” Much like her deceased husband, actually. “We want her to believe that she’s winning right up until the moment she loses.”

The War of Five Kings had been bloody and violent, but it looked like the War of Three Queens would be fought in the shadows.

The Faith Militant was growing in power, and King’s Landing was transforming into a pit of knives. Olenna knew that Littlefinger was scheming, Prince Doran Martell was shifting, and Varys would be weaving his web from whatever rock he had skittered under. The reports that Olenna had received from the east and north were causing her worry as well.

And yet nothing could be done until the power struggle around the capital was resolved. Cersei
would try to shame Margaery; to paint the young queen as a slut and an adulteress, to strip the crown away from her. Cersei was simple-minded in many ways; power and shame was the only way Cersei could think. So long as Olenna knew that, she could make sure that Cersei’s own trap would backfire.

Olenna looked at her granddaughter – her beautiful, sweet and intelligent granddaughter. Margaery was kind and good-hearted, strong and sharp. She would make a good queen, a better queen than Cersei ever could be. Even as a little girl, Margaery had learnt everything Olenna had to teach and more. Margaery had been born to be queen.

The only thing standing in Margaery’s way was one spiteful stepmother.

“She needs to think she’s in control. So long as Cersei is feeling confident then I’m not too concerned,” Olenna said softly.

“What concerns me, my dear, is what Cersei might do when she’s about to lose.”

They spent the whole day taking under the shade of the elm trees, taking about the news in the capital and discussing rumours and gossip. By the time dusk started to creep over the trees, the air was chilly but Margaery insisted on staying up until the last possible moment. Margaery hugged her grandmother tightly, and promised to return by the end of the week.

She never did.

The news of Stannis Baratheon’s return to Dragonstone made it difficult for Queen Margaery to leave the city after that. The alert increased, their movements were restricted. For a long time, Olenna was left stewing in her camp in the kingswood, quietly monitoring the situation in the capital.

Somehow, from that pleasant day under the elm trees, from those quiet words and playful laughter, everything turned sour.

…”

“My daughter!” Lord Mace Tyrell boomed. Her son was red in the face, trying to puff himself up with every gulp of air. Like so many men, Mace had grown to believe that louder equals stronger. “Where is my daughter, ser?”

Ser Mark Mullendore’s face was pale. He was a young man, with chiselled cheeks and a jaw that could have been handsome, if not for his face that was gaunt with fear. “The Red Keep was stormed early morn, my lord,” Ser Mark replied, his voice a fearful mumble. “They forced all Reach guardsmen and half the Lannister guardsmen to leave…”

Ser Mark was missing half of his left arm at the elbow – a cripple from an old wound. Still, Ser Mark had been the only man from the Tyrell household to escape the sack of the Red Keep. They had received the news patchily, all word coming from the city had been frantic and strained.

Olenna stood in the corner of the tent, scowling as she rested upon her cane. If looks could kill, Ser Mark Mullendore would be incinerated.

“Leave?” Mace shouted, pacing and stomping. “Leave?? You surrendered Queen Margaery?”
“We did not! The men tried to fight, but they… they surrounded us…”

They slaughtered the Tyrell guards and scoured the keep clean, taking hostages of the highborn, Olenna thought numbly. The exact same thing that Cersei had done to Stark, she did again to Tyrell. Olenna was trembling, gnarly fingers tightening around her cane.

Ser Mark’s voice was a whimper. The pavilion was dark and muddy, rain was splashing down outside and the whole field had been trampled in slush by thousands of boots and hooves. The camp had only been very hastily established, and the mud was so thick that Olenna’s bodyguards had to carry her through the slush. Both Left and Right stood by her side, cautiously trying to keep Olenna away from the rising chaos.

She was the only woman in the tent, her silk dress and shawl splattered with mud. All the men were wearing armour. Her son’s breastplate was squeezed so tightly over his gut that Mace Tyrell looked like a grape ready to burst.

Ser Mark Mullendore was left facing the great lords of the Reach; staring up at the furious faces of Lord Mace Tyrell, Lord Randyll Tarly, Lord Mathis Rowan, Ser Desmond Redwyne, Lord Arthur Ambrose, Lord Jowan Appleton, Lord Lorent Caswell, Ser Roger Bulwer, Lord Alester Crane, and Lord Ivor Vyrwel. Some of the most powerful men in all the Reach were gathered in the room, and they were seething with fury.

“How many were there?” Lord Tyrell bellowed. “How many?”

“I could not count… it was so quick, they stormed…” Ser Mark gulped. “At least five hundred.”

There were more still rushing into tent. Ser Bryan Graceford and Ser Jon Fossoway pushed their way through, more voices echoing in the din. “What happened?” Ser Bryan demanded. “Was it the queen?”

“It was,” Ser Desmond Redwyne muttered darkly, while others were still demanding answer of Ser Mark Mullendore. Voices were talking over each other, each demanding answers in angry voices. “How many escaped?”, the chorus of cries chirped, “Who was it?”, “What of my daughter, my sons?” …

“What of Ser Wythers?” Mace shouted, louder than the others. “What of Ser Willam Wythers?”

“Ser Willam fought valiantly, my lord.” Ser Mark was quivering, Olenna noticed. “The captain was standing side by side with Ser Loras, trying to hold them off at the Maidenvault. They were fighting, right up until that… that monster of a man… the giant in white armour… it came and it just… just…”

The faces staring down at him looked disgusted, Ser Mark trembling like a craven. “The other guests,” Ser Desmond Redwyne demanded. He had two cousins in the Red Keep, the twin sons of his liege lord. “What of the other guests?”

The man gulped. “They locked the doors, my lord, and trapped the guests in their rooms. By orders of the Queen Regent.”

The room was stirring. How many highborn daughters, sons and retainers had been in the Red Keep? Olenna couldn’t even count them all. Nearly everyone in the tent had family in the capital, there were so many sons and daughters working serving as retainers or attendants. Damn you, Cersei.

Mace was beetroot red. “This is an act of war!”
“Ser Kevan is coming to the city with all haste–” Lord Mattis Rowan reported.

“On whose side?” Lord Arthur Ambrose demanded. “House Lannister has betrayed us!”

“This craven,“ Lord Randyll Tarly said lowly, speaking up for the first time. The Lord of Horn Hill’s voice was dark and quiet as he looked down upon Ser Mark. He was clad in full battle armour, his steel dark and worn. “This cripple must be executed. He abandoned his sworn duty, and he ran.”

Ser Mark turned so white it was like his blood froze. “I did not,” he said, gasping. “I would never… I ran to warn you, to bring ai–!”

“YOU LEFT YOUR QUEEN!” Mace bellowed, his voice breaking in rage. “YOUR DUTY! MY DAUGHTER! YOU LEFT HER TO DIE!”

Ser Desmond had to place his hand to calm the lord down, while Ser Mark was dragged kicking and wailing and pissing through the mud. Olenna didn’t react. She just stood in the corner glowering.

Damn you Cersei. How could she even…?

No, that was a fool’s question. How could I not see it coming?

Cersei had been falling towards the cliff’s edge ever since the news of Tyrion Lannister’s return had arrived. Olenna had known Cersei had been crazed, but she never expected her to be so desperate. Not so quickly.

The deaths of Lady Taena and Orton Merryweather had caught them all off-guard. Olenna had lost her spy in the queen’s trust before any of Olenna’s plans could come to fruition. There had been no warning, nothing Olenna could prepare for. Cersei had lashed out with all the might she still had.

“Do we have the forces to take the Red Keep?” Mace asked finally, taking deep breaths, looking to Lord Tarly.

“Not yet,” Lord Tarly replied in a low and calm voice. “But we will have within a week. Our men are moving up the kingsroad as we speak.”

Mace Tyrell and his army had abandoned the siege of Storm’s End as soon as the news from King’s Landing reached him. The cavalry rode ahead at all haste while the bulk of their forces were still following.

Lord Tarly and his host from Maidenpool had been waiting outside the gates when Mace’s army arrived, and he met Lady Olenna by the King’s Gate. Olenna had been the closest, the first to the gates, but she hadn’t the men to do anything. There had been nothing Olenna could do but wait.

The Tyrell army was amassing in the tourney grounds outside the city. Nobody knew who they’d be fighting against, but the mood was grim.

The city was in a frenzy, there were mobs in the streets. The Faith Militant had seized the roads and declared the city under martial law.

An assassination attempt, against the High Sparrow himself. Cersei, you fool.

“Lord Redwyne is returning as well,” Lord Rowan reported. “His fleet was through the Stepstones, but the ravens caught up with him. Our ships are turning around, coming back to the city.”
“The ships of Royal Fleet have deserted,” said Ser Desmond Redwyne. “I hear that the bastard – Aurane Waters – has stolen the crown’s vessels.” His voice was foul. “Along with several of our own.”

“Aurane Waters could be going to fetch reinforcements, my lord,” Lord Ambrose warned. “Cersei must be planning to bring her might against ours.”

“We have the forces to crush the lion, my lord.” Lord Tarly had a low, hard voice like iron. “This is an act of war. We will destroy House Lannister for this.”


“Ser Daven is mustering their forces in the riverlands,” Ser Jon Fossoway reminded. “And Ser Kevan is riding back from the west. If they must, how many men might there be?”

Lord Tarly shook his head. “Impossible to say.” He paused. “But the lion is already broken, and Cersei Lannister breached the laws of hospitality. No realm will stand for this.”

“We could storm the keep,” Lord Lorent Caswell said firmly. “Say the word, and we will break down the gates and force her to answer for it.”

“And how will that safeguard the Queen Margaery’s life, my lord?” the Queen of Thorns said lowly, speaking up for the first time. Her voice was as low as a whisper. “How will that keep our families safe?”

The room hesitated, nobody meeting her gaze. Why are men so quick to attack, Olenna thought, but so slow to think?

“The city is only being fed from our grain,” Lord Ambrose said finally. “It is by our coin, our trade, our men that King’s Landing has survived. We need only stop our caravans and this city starves.”

Fools. “You have not answered the question,” Olenna challenged, hobbling forward. “How does that return our sons and daughters? Focus on that question.” Her eyes turned around the room. “We have already fought and bled and paid to earn the favour of the city, we have no need to besiege or starve it now. No, to do so would only serve to make us as unpopular as Cersei is.”

They squirmed uncomfortably, but none of them protested her. Lord Tarly was the only who met her eyes, giving a quiet nod. “Lady Olenna is correct,” he said simply. “A battle is very risky, it does not seem prudent while the hostages and the sanctity of the crown linger in the balance. Yet the troubling question remains.”

The air did become quieter with Lord Tarly’s words. Randyll Tarly was a sensible man. Her foolish boy seemed to deflate slightly, Mace’s expression pained.

“We own this city,” voices muttered from the tent, “if Ser Kevan Lannister tries to stop us we could crush him.”

“What of the High Septon?”

“Damn the blasted sparrow, he has no right to meddle in our affairs…”

“Have you been in the city? The smallfolk are marching through the streets in droves. Thousands of peasants with pitchforks, riled up into a fury.”
“It cannot be allowed, cannot be allo–”

The voices were talking over each other, each one shouting for attention. *Why do all men think louder equals stronger?*

The squabble reached fever pitch. Olenna ignored the words, and tried to measure their eyes. The words were noise, but it was the expressions that she needed to know.

*This is pointless.* “Let me have the room with my son, lords,” the Queen of Thorns said sharply.

All eyes turned to her surprise. “This is a war council, my la–” Lord Caswell tried to protest.

“And I am but a frail old woman, I fear my heart cannot take such talk,” Lady Olenna interrupted, with a heavy sigh. “Alas, concern for my grandchildren has left me so distraught, I need the comfort of my son. *Please*, my lords, let me have some time alone with my boy.”

There were a few glances, but none could protest. Olenna shot a motherly look at Mace, ordering him to stay put, while the great lords all trekked outside into the rain.

There was silence. Olenna and Mace were left alone, her son’s face still red and furious. Olenna knelt on her cane, motioning for Left and Right to guard the tent’s door.

“I will not allow Queen Cersei to have her way,” Mace protested finally. “This is an act of war!”

“It is indeed,” Olenna agreed. “But do you believe that escalation will turn out well for any of us? Do not dare the mad woman to do the unthinkable.”

His voice was so pained, so distraught, Olenna wanted to hug him. And yet she couldn’t; he was not her son, not right now – he was the Lord of Highgarden. There could be no coddling today. “It’s my *daughter*–”

“And it’s my granddaughter,” she said sharply. “Do not think that I’m any less furious about this than you are. But cooler heads, my boy.”

His great beefy hands clenched, but he nodded. His jaw was so clenched that the sags of fat on his face were trembling.

“Let us be sure that we’re fighting the same enemy.” Olenna took a deep breath, forcing her voice to stay steady. “Send your soldiers away, we want only the elite of our troops around us now. We want the veterans and the knights only.” *The cooler heads.*

“What?” Mace flustered. “I cannot–”

“The rest of the army is needed in *Oldtown*, to stop the ironborn,” she said sharply. “Do not let Cersei distract us from that. And the act would placate her – try to defuse the situation rather than intensifying it.”

His jaw dropped, trying to protest. “And belay that order to Lord Paxter; his need hasn’t changed, the Redwyne fleet is required desperately in the Arbor. The ironborn *must* be stopped.” *And pray that we’re not too late.* The situation in King’s Landing had already severely delayed the Redwyne fleet. Their ships had been trapped them between two different crises on opposites sides of the continent – unable to respond properly to either of them. For all Olenna knew, the Crow’s Eye might be readying to attack any day now.

“Those ships…” Mace shook his head. “If it turns into a siege on the city, if the Golden Company
attacks… we will need that fleet here.”

“We might,” Olenna admitted. Damn you Cersei. “But Oldtown needs the fleet now. Your son and daughter may be in the Red Keep, but your other bannermen have sons and daughters in the Reach. Do not lose sight of the greater war.”

The reports from the Arbor and the Redwyne Straits were worrying. Euron Greyjoy had been burning towns and villages by the dozens, and capturing thralls by the thousands. Matters were volatile, and they had to pull together rather than be tattered apart.

This is what Cersei is counting on, Olenna knew. Taking hostages was a stalling tactic – the Queen Regent intended on playing her enemies against each other.

Mace didn’t reply. Olenna was pacing, rocking on her cane as she stepped through the mud. “War is not fought without a purpose. A victory here is pointless if we lose everything else.” She shook her head. “No, we must walk carefully; the lords of the Reach will become unruly if we do not rush to protect their homelands from being ravaged, and then we will become unable to achieve anything. Remember the Florents.” If we stumble now… “First and foremost, we need to keep our bannermen on our side.”

She paused, considering it. “Yet the same applies to House Lannister,” Olenna said finally. “Do not engage the Golden Company. Let them put pressure on the westerland lords for us – Tyrion Lannister is not our priority right now.”

Tyrian Lannister, Olenna cursed silently. How in seven hells did Tyrian Lannister find the coin to purchase the Golden Company?

By all rights, Tyrian Lannister should be dead, and yet he continued to curse her. “The dwarf will be the ideal scapegoat, my lady”, that slimy toad had convinced Olenna, “I will ensure there will be no doubt that Tyron is the poisoner. The dwarf loses his head, and Sansa Stark becomes free to marry your Willas.”

That was a deal that had turned so bitter. More and more, Olenna was coming to regret the arrangement she made.

Mace bit his lip and shook his head, but he sagged. “Aye. Tyrian Lannister is but a dwarf,” he said with a nod. “And this Jon Connington a failure. You are right, they are not the threat; they will fail just as the Golden Company has always failed.”

I would not dismiss them so quickly, my boy, Olenna thought quietly. The news of Tyron Lannister and Jon Connington, returned from the dead and exile, leading the Golden Company… just the very ‘circumstances’ of it set alarm bells ringing in Olenna’s head. Still, now was not the time.

“For now, let us be sure that we’re fighting the same enemy. Let us try a softer approach,” Olenna insisted. “Firstly, we must come to agreement with Ser Kevan and the High Septon. Cersei wants us at each other’s throats, so do not indulge her. The High Septon must be handled with care.”

“Agreement?” Mace looked confused. Distraught and out of his depth. “Ser Kevan will support his niece. If he reinforces her…”

“I don’t think Ser Kevan will. He most certainly won’t if he has to fight us and the Faith Militant.” Ser Kevan was a sensible man, she didn’t think Ser Kevan had anything to do with this desperate scheme of Cersei’s. Ser Kevan was reacting to it as much as everyone else was. Olenna was pacing, back and forth, her cane tapping against mud as she thought. “We must back off from the
Red Keep. All of those ultimatums you keep sending to her are not productive.” She shook her head. “No, the time for threats is over.”

“But… but how does this return my son and daughter to me?” Mace protested. “All the peace in the world isn’t going to convince Cersei to release them.”

“The fast solution will not turn out well for. We need the slower one. We rob Cersei of her allies. We undercut her support, but we don’t give her a reason to do anything drastic.” Treat her like a feral cat, and pull the meat away slowly. Olenna paused, deliberating in a calm and slow voice. “She is a mother. She will protect her son. That is the leverage we must exploit.”

When she realised that her gambit had failed, that there was no future for Tommen, would Cersei concede? A sensible woman would, but Olenna had her doubts about the Queen Regent.

The thought of Margaery’s laughing, glowing face and golden eyes flashed before her. Olenna would not allow her darling granddaughter to suffer.

The army of the Reach was the strongest of the Seven Kingdoms, but no one realm could rule six. Reavers to the west, wildlings to the north, and mercenaries to the south, Olenna thought with a quiet curse, how long can our armies last when stretched so thin?

No, this required a different solution.

“And we need a fast ship, a few men that we can trust, and a very large pile of gold,” Olenna decided finally. “We shall send an envoy to Braavos, to the House of Black and White, and we will pay whatever price they require.”

“Wait, ho—”

“Let us hire a Faceless Man to solve this situation for us,” Olenna said, lowering her voice somewhat. “Until then, we do whatever we need to do to keep Cersei Lannister distracted and Margaery alive.”

No other assassin could be so certain. Olenna needed an assassination without risk of failure, without risk to the hostages.

If the Queen Regent died by some shadow in the night, then her sellswords would surrender and Margaery would be unharmed. The Many-Faced God would charge a steep price for the life of a queen. It would be insanely steep, so steep it might ruin them. Still, Cersei would ruin them, and the Faceless Men might be the only solution to the problem she posed.

Cersei, the Bastard King, the Crow’s Eye… Perhaps the House of Black and White could deal with them all. Perhaps we could get a three for one discount.

…

But it didn’t happen. First it was weeks, then months, as the deadline ticked away and her granddaughter remained locked in the castle. Olenna was left stewing in her tents, writing and rewriting letters, obsessively reading and scheming, but there was naught she could do.

She was an old woman, her back crooked, her hips aching, and her jaw toothless. Olenna could only watch as the city around her deteriorated beyond hope of control.

So much happened. The Bastard King razed the Twins, the High Sparrow made his deadline, and Aegon Targaryen, the ‘Young Dragon’, declared himself back from the dead. The Golden
Company was not heading for Casterly Rock as was first believed; it was coming for the Iron Throne. It was a crisis every day, the ripples spreading outwards.

Stannis Baratheon held the Blackwater like a stubborn weed that refused to shift, while the banners of the Targaryen dragon were growing over the stormlands like a cancer.

The news of the ice dragon set the riverlands and the crownlands to panic. Riots were sparking across the city, and the Tyrell army was left trying to juggle multiple enemies on different fronts.

Her carriage tottered away from yet another unproductive meeting with that blasted High Sparrow, down streets that were filled with refugees and peasants still flooding into the city.

“The end of times!” Olenna heard a preacher screaming from a street corner. “The ice dragon heralds the end of times! Pray to the Seven, for the hells have been unleashed!”

More and more were echoing the same cry. As Stannis blockaded the ships and Aegon Targaryen now held the roseroad, King’s Landing was set to starve. *Again.* Barely over a year after the last siege, and now the city was bracing to suffer a worse one. There would be deaths by the tens of thousands as the cold and the famine clawed in. *Winter is coming,* those annoying words the Starks loved to repeat.

“We are all facing the end!” the preacher screamed. “Repent! Repent before the end of times!”

Under the regime of the new Faith, the fanatics were ruling the city. Olenna did nothing but stare forward at the blank wall of her carriage, trying to think.

Garlan wrote that they had mustered nearly sixty thousand men in Oldtown, ready to crush Euron Greyjoy’s fleet, but Olenna still spent countless sleepless nights trying to prepare for it. Whispers said that Dorne was supporting Aegon, and that left enemies on every front. Even the greatest army in the world could be spread too thin.

*And with an ice dragon,* Olenna thought, *an ice dragon of all things…!*

Her son was walking around looking more frayed than she had ever seen him. There had not been a word concerning either Loras nor Margaery. Olenna’s precious flowers were both trapped in the dungeons of the Red Keep – with thick walls, armed men and an unstable woman keeping them from freedom.

The last envoy she sent to Braavos had promised to build churches to the Many-Faced God itself in both King’s Landing and Oldtown, and yet the Faceless Men still hadn’t responded. They refused to accept the contract, leaving Olenna increasingly unnerved.

*Somebody is blocking me,* she thought with growing suspicion, but she couldn’t pinpoint the source of her problems. The war, the siege, the stalemate… it all felt manufactured. Olenna had weaved enough schemes to be able to recognise when she was caught in the middle of a larger one. *But how to break free, how to escape when I can’t see the hands?*

Too many problems were stacking, and Olenna needed to remove them one by one. Time was running out, she needed a solution.

It was dusk, when she met the grim-faced knight in her pavilion. He was a tall and lanky man, with a bald head and a hard jaw. He stood almost as tall as Left and Right, but half the width of their solution. His sigil bore a black tower against red on his shield. He walked before the Queen of Thorns escorted by her two guardsmen on either side.
“My lady,” the knight bowed.

She didn’t bother with courtesy. “You are Ser Humfrey Flowers, correct?”

“I am,” Ser Humfrey replied.

“Bastard son of Gerold Hightower, half-brother to Lord Leyton Hightower, I hear.”

“I am,” the Bastard of the Tower replied coolly.

What is the smallfolk saying? Send a knight to slay a knight, and an archer to slay an archer. With a bastard terrorising the realm, perhaps there was only one choice.

“Good.” Olenna judged his expression; a hard man, of noble birth but subtle disposition. He knew the game, he had the upbringing, but those without the pomp of status tended to be more effective. Olenna quite liked bastards. Mostly. “And I have a task for you, ser. A duty that you must fulfil. You will answer to me and only me regarding it.”

He paused. “And what duty is this?”

No wasted questions. Good man. “You are to go north, to Winterfell.” She held up a letter from her desk, one sealed in pink ink. “Lord Bolton requests aid, and we will oblige him. Discreetly.”

Ser Humfrey Flowers’ lips curled. “The ice dragon.”

“What else?”

“From how I hear it,” Ser Humfrey said cautiously, “House Bolton is facing certain defeat.”

“Perhaps.” Likely. “But the Boltons need not win, they only need to delay,” Olenna said sharply. “We cannot fight enemies on two fronts, ser, and we cannot let the Bastard King and his wildlings come south easily. If House Bolton can delay the invaders until the start of winter proper, then that may be enough. We need more time. We will offer Roose Bolton whatever aid we can spare towards that end.”

His expression did flicker, his face guarded. “I need you to represent our interests up north. You must go to Winterfell, rendezvous with Lord Bolton, and to inform me of his efforts against the Bastard King.”

The knight mused on it for several long heartbeats. “And you are choosing me because I am expendable.”

“I am.” She didn’t insult him by denying it. “You are a bastard, nobody will miss your presence. Do not pretend to be insulted by that.” His face remained impassive. “But expendable is useful. You are a disciplined soldier of unquestionable loyalty, and you know what you are fighting towards. That is valuable. I would choose you over an army of a hundred, ser.”

“I’m flattered,” he muttered dryly.

“Don’t be. This must be discrete. A soft hand.” Her eyes were sharp, meeting his gaze. “Hightower could suffer the same fate as the Twins, if we draw the Bastard King’s ire. The Reach must not be implicated in the Bastard King’s war. Can I trust on your subtlety, Ser Flowers?”

King Jon Snow had already proven himself a man who would take vengeance. There was a long pause. Ser Humfrey’s eyes were grim, but he nodded. “I know my duty, my lady.”
“Good man,” Olenna said approvingly. “Pick a fast horse to take you north, and there will be cogs from Hightower. You must coordinate on my behalf with Roose Bolton.”

“With how many men?”

“As many as you can count on your hand, your choice of them,” Olenna replied. “But choose wisely. We can afford to offer coin and influence to House Bolton, not soldiers.”

He nodded. The talk continued for a while, and Olenna shared news of Walder Rivers mustering men in the riverlands. The north was a barbaric wasteland, but there were still some strings that Olenna could pull. There was only one goal; to delay and hinder the Bastard King. “And I will send word to the Conclave of the Citadel,” Olenna promised. “If any means exists to defeat a dragon, then you will have it.”

“I do not care to die against a dragon, my lady,” Ser Humfrey warned. “If the north is as grim as I hear, there may be little I can do there.”

“Perhaps is naught that can be done. Or perhaps is something we can achieve. You must find out.”

It was the dark of night when Ser Humfrey finally left. She would not be able to deal with the Bastard King and his dragon so long as their position was so weak and his so strong. A dragon could demand whatever it wanted of the Seven Kingdoms, Olenna thought, and right now we would not be able to resist. They needed to weaken the wildling army and regain the strength of the Iron Throne before any fruitful negotiation would be possible.

She could wait no longer for the Faceless Men. Cersei was still the most awkward hindrance that Olenna must deal with. Desperate measures are required. Olenna gave a set of orders to Left and Right, and they set about their tasks.

Within days they were marching back to her with a squirming shape hoisted over Left’s shoulders, and three figures trailing behind Right.

They met in a darkened alleyway at the edge of the King’s Gate. There was nobody around but drunkards and whores around a nearby tavern over a street away, and the edge of the Tyrell encampment to the west. “Did you find one?” Olenna demanded to Left.

“We did.”

The large man dropped a figure the size of a child onto the cobbles, but it was stockier than any boy. The man was a dwarf; a small but heavyset figure with a round head and a jutting forehead, dark blonde hair and dressed in clothes of muddy hemp and hair. Common brown eyes, and missing two of his front teeth. He was trying to scream through the gag in his mouth. Olenna just watched impassively.

“Desperate measures.”

“A group of hunters looking to collect the queen’s bounty brought him to King’s Landing,” Left reported in his low, burly voice, “but we intercepted them. He was a cobbler near Oldstones, he’s called—”

“No.” Olenna said firmly. “I do not want to know his name.” The name would only complicate matters.

Left paused, and then nodded. “As you wish.”

The dwarf was terrified, pale-faced and scared out of his wits. “Bring the dwarf here,” Olenna ordered, peering closer to inspect. The dwarf looked little like Tyrion Lannister, and yet… “Yes, he
will pass,” she decided. “Enough similarities are there.”

The dwarf tried to scream, but all that came out was a gagged noise.

She nodded to Left, and turned to where Right was waiting. There were three figures behind him; grizzled and hardened men with grey in their beards and dark shadows under their eyes. Olenna inspected each of them in turn. While Left had been searching out a dwarf, Right had selected the men. *The best Flea Bottom has to offer,* she thought dryly, and she could have laughed at the motley trio.

“If Cersei wants her brother,” Olenna said finally, looking at the men, “then we will give him to her. I will admit what Cersei already knows – that I have been working with Tyrion Lannister from the beginning. And yet, alas, the Queen Regent is too perceptive for me, my scheme is foiled, and I must surrender myself and the Imp. Do you understand?”

There were quiet nods. “You will escort me into the Red Keep, with this gentleman here,” Olenna motioned to the dwarf, “and I have no doubt that Cersei will come herself to gloat and inspect her brother. As soon as she steps within six yards, you are to put three quarrels into her heart.” Her eyes were hard. “No matter anything else, you put them through that bitch’s heart. *Right into her heart.*”

“Not quarrels, my lady,” Right said, bowing his head. “I figured they wouldn’t be able to sneak crossbows through so easily. I expect your men will be searched at the gates.”

Olenna nodded, and Right turned between the three men. “But this man here was the fastest knife-thrower in Oldtown.” He was an aging man with heavily bagged eyes, a bald head and grey beard. “His name’s Lightning Garth; he used to work as blade juggler for a mummer’s troupe once, then signed on to Lord Tyrell’s army. A bit more grey in his beard now, but he can still sling a dagger faster than an eye can follow.”

“Jolly good,” Olenna said in approval. ‘Lightning’ Garth looked more of an old geezer with a bloated gut than the young man the name would suggest, but he would do.

The man next to him was short and scrawny, with eyes like a rat. “Ferret here is from King’s Landing. A cutthroat by trade, but he’s magic with a dagger,” Right explained. The final man was a big, very fat man with huge hands like gnarly scarred hams. “While Jerry is from the fighting pits – he can wrestle bear his own hands, he doesn’t even feel pain anymore. Jerry will charge, and if he gets his hands on her, then Cersei is dead in a heartbeat.” Right turned back to her with a solemn nod. “All three of them can keep blades hidden where no man will find them, and as soon as Cersei steps close they *will* end her.”

“You wanted the best killers in the city,” Left noted. “These are them.”

“My lady,” Right said solemnly. “I must ask… are you sure want to do this?”

“I’ve made my choice, son,” Olenna replied curtly. “Get these three armour, get a rose on their chests, dress them like guardsmen. Three guards will do. They’ll pass and Cersei won’t look twice.”

*I am an old lady; even Cersei would allow a few men to assist me walking the steps.* She faced the three men. Not a hint of uncertainty in any of them, but Olenna had to be sure. There would only be one chance at this.

“Now, I will not lie to you,” Olenna said, her voice a croak, “you will *not* walk away from this. We
catch Cersei by surprise, you will kill her, but the guards around her will almost certainly kill you afterwards. They will not expect such a suicidal attack. If by some fluke, you do manage to escape – you will be hung for the murder of a queen, no matter how justified it may have been. The law is a bitch like that.” Nobody reacted. “However, I can promise that all of your families will be taken care of, and your sons will be fostered alongside knights. They will serve as squires to knights good and true, and perhaps they will hold lands of their own in time. Gold dragons to your loved ones, in return for your own sacrifice. Do you accept?”

“I do, my lady,” Lightning Garth said quietly, and the others nodded too.

“Good. I want you have the choice. I want you to know what you are dying for.”

*And I will die as well,* Olenna thought grimly, but there was no alternative. She was needed to walk the guards into the Red Keep. Olenna was old, but her granddaughter was young. *Cersei will die, I will die, but Margaery will walk free – a fair trade.*

She turned to the bound dwarf, the man still begging and weeping on the floor. She motioned for Left to remove the gag. “I apologise for this, my man,” Olenna said with a sigh. “And I’m sorry that I cannot offer you the same choice. Your role in this ruse is non-negotiable.” She paused, wrinkly cheeks grimacing. “I know that these are desperate measures, but this war has had many casualties already. Know that lives the of an innocent little girl and a gallant boy are on the line.”

“Please don’t… I didn’t do anything…!” the dwarf wept. “I’m not him, I’m not…”

“I know,” Olenna said with a nod. “But think of it like an act. A mummer’s role that needs to be filed. You likely don’t deserve this, you may be a good man, but I will never know. You are a dwarf, and I need a dwarf.”

“Are you sure he will pass?” Left said uncertainly. “If the queen recognises it’s not really her brother…”

“It won’t work,” Right warned. “His hair is wrong, and he’s too old.”

“It doesn’t need to pass, the queen just needs to get close enough to inspect. He’s similar enough,” Olenna said firmly. “A bit of oil and dirt will obscure the hair, and fear will excuse his wrinkles. The eyes are not the right colour and jaw the wrong shape, but once we cut the nose off he will pass from a distance.”

The dwarf flustered. “Wait, you’re going to cut off my *nose*?”

Olenna sighed, her voice apologetic. “Not just the nose, I’m afraid.”

She nodded to Left and Right. Left drew his sword. The dwarf screamed.

Right held the little man down against the stone, hand clamped over the dwarf’s mouth, while Left readied his sword to cut off the head. Olenna turned away, stepping back so the blood wouldn’t splatter over her dress.

She turned to her three killers. “We’re going to kill Cersei, do you understand?” Olenna said with quiet determination. “Whatever you need to do, whatever is required, we’re going to kill that bitch.”

The dwarf was screaming right up until the end, but Olenna would have happily killed a dozen dwarves to save the lives of her little girl.
And yet it was useless. Olenna sent off a tear-stained, pleading confession to the Red Keep, yet there was never a response. Olenna waited and waited for Cersei to reply, but she never did. Olenna sent off letter after letter, she tried to approach the gates, she tried to lure Cersei into her trap, yet no reply came.

All Olenna wanted was an audience with the queen. All she needed was to get her three killers close, but her ravens never returned. She could get no word over the walls. The dwarf’s head rotted and sneered at her from the corner of her tent, uselessly, and nobody came to collect it.

Cersei would not have ignored her offer. She would want to gloat – Cersei would want to be spiteful.

_Cersei never found out about my offer._ There could be no other explanation. Somewhere in between Olenna and the Mad Queen, her words were going missing. _Somebody inside doesn’t want this stalemate to end._

Olenna had promised Cersei her brother’s head, to out herself as the Imp’s ally, but she could get no word through the Red Keep’s walls. She never received a response.

_Someone is playing me._

She thought of Lord Qyburn’s sickeningly sweet smile, and a twisting suspicion churned in her gut. The new masters of whisperers handled everything coming to and from the queen.

It felt… it was infuriating. All of Olenna’s plans, her schemes – they all died before they could bear fruit. She felt useless, so useless she could tear out her own grey hair.

The day of Cersei’s trial approached, and there wasn’t even _time_. There was never enough time.

Mace was stomping, pacing around the pavilion. They had only just received word that army on the roseroad was moving. The ‘Young Dragon’ was finally launching his assault against the city. “The Golden Company—” Mace protested.

“–has to be stopped,” Olenna snapped. Her patience was gone, her voice was sharp. Her eyes were hard but frazzled, and there was no decorum left in her. “This city is already half-starving, we cannot retake any control at all if the city goes up in arms against us.”

Mace bristled. “Our armies will not run from a haggle of peasants!”

“Armies are not the deciding factor, boy.” Olenna could have screamed. “We cannot keep the population calmed by _force_ – we need food from the Reach. The Golden Company has bled us too much already, they must be routed.”

“You expect me to leave on the eve of the trial?” Mace yelled, outraged. “My place is here; my daughter is here!”

“He shook his head, his flabby cheeks wriggling. “No, Mother,” Mace said firmly. “I must be here for Cersei’s trial – I must be here when they take the Red Keep. Lord Tarly can lead our men against these mercenaries.”

“No,” Olenna snapped. “Do _not_ leave your army in command of Randyll Tarly. This must be your
victory, you must be the one to retake control.” Grow a spine and lead your men.

He only looked confused. Olenna wished he was small enough so she could still slap him over the ear. Can he not see the stakes that we are playing for?

Randyll Tarly would do a fine job as commander in the battle, Olenna had no doubt. In fact, that was exactly what she was concerned about.

Lord Tyrell’s control and influence was being frayed from every edge. The lords under him were restless and agitated, whispers were spreading. They were talking of his incompetence in low murmurs, and fearful uncertainty was turning towards anger. Mace had command of twenty thousand men in the city – all of them were being forced to wait while their homes in the Reach were being pillaged. Nobody was sure what had happened at Oldtown, but the only thing certain was that it had been a disaster.

There hadn’t been a word from Garlan leading their army, or from Lord Redwyne leading their fleet. Lords Hightower, Costayne, Beesbury, Shermer, Fossoway… so many lords had rallied to Oldtown, and even the lords in the capital had sent their heirs and second sons. None had returned so much as a whisper. The closest ravens had been from Highgarden, and her eldest grandchild Willas sent letters that had grown more and more desperate.

‘It is total devastation,’ Willas had written, in a shaking hand. ‘The city is flooded, the Hightower is collapsed and ironborn haunt the ruins. I have seen tens of thousands of bodies forced up the river. Corpses and debris dam the waters, and the Honeywine itself has overflown with blood. The refugees have been crazed, and the tales that they tell… I do not know what to do.’

Olenna had never known her grandson to sound so scared.

They had received only a single letter from Oldtown itself – a letter delivered by one of the white ravens of the Citadel, but bearing the Greyjoy seal. ‘Your city belongs to me, your army destroyed.’

the short letter read. ‘Surrender and bow before me, or suffer the same.’

It had been signed, “Euron Greyjoy, God-King of the Seven Kingdoms, the Drowned God Reborn.”

Such a ridiculous title might have been funny, but when the letter had been shared with their bannermen, there was no laughter.

Olenna couldn’t explain how it happened. Nobody could. So many garbled reports. The hurricane had destroyed Oldtown and the army of the Reach, but the ironborn survived. Even now, there was word of fighting in the flooded streets of the city.

Mace’s wife Alerie was a daughter of House Hightower. Olenna herself had been born in the Arbor; she had been there for her nephew Paxter’s birth, and had watched him grow into one of the greatest captains Westeros had known. And now Houses Redwyne and Hightower might well be lost.

The Hightower itself was said to be destroyed. Olenna had disbelieved the first raven, but then the fourth and fifth gave the same details, as did the fiftieth. It was one of the only things that the letters agreed on and all the rest was garbled and conflicting; reports of hundreds of thousands dead, their ships wrecked in the winds, and floods across the coast.

Half the tales had been crazed, the stories embellished and exaggerated. Nothing short of a natural disaster could account for the chaos they heard. Slowly, most sensible men were coming to accept
that it had been a storm without equal.

And yet some letters spoke of demons, or of a monster larger than an island. Most dismissed such talk as witless exaggeration born from panic, but Olenna had to wonder… the only monster around that she knew of was the Bastard King’s dragon. It was said to be even larger than Balerion the Black Dread. But was an ice dragon large enough to destroy an entire city?

Had the wildling king learnt of the aid the Reach provided House Bolton? Had Ser Humfrey been captured, and was this the Bastard’s King’s bloody reprisal? Or had the kraken and the white dragon come to an alliance?

So many doubts, and yet only thing that could be certain were the corpses washing up by the thousands, from Blackcrown to the Three Towers. All communication was in shambles, she could find no word of Garlan’s fate. Her heart wept for him, and the uncertainty of it left her body trembling at night.

The Citadel had the largest rookery in Westeros. For no ravens to have been sent at all… perhaps the maesters in the city had been put to the sword by that barbarian. The Crow’s Eye.

More and more, Olenna thought of that preacher in the streets. ‘The ice dragon heralds the end of times!’ he had screamed. ‘Repent!’

There were likely a thousand more like him now, screaming the same. The whole world was going mad.

Olenna took a deep breath, trying to focus. Priorities, she insisted to herself. “You will not be able to contribute in the city, Mace,” she said finally. “The High Septon is taking control of the queen’s trial. You are needed in the field – to fight the battle on the roseroad. You need to prove your power again.”

“We need a victory. Any victory would do.”

“You want me to waste time with this mummer’s dragon?” he said, aghast. “I do not care for this ‘Aegon’ – he is a fraud, the Imp’s puppet. But my daughter, my son, are in that castle on the hill.”

He pointed to the east, through the cloth of the pavilion and towards where Aegon’s High Hill loomed at the other side of the city. “That castle right there!”

“Aegon Targaryen will destroy us before we breach that castle!” Olenna snapped. “He has fifteen thousand men to destroy us, even before the queen can. Let the High Sparrow retake control of civil affairs, Ser Kevan will handle Cersei – you must prove your military might against the invaders. The defence of the realm falls firmly to you.”

Mace only stared at her, his face pale. “I am trying to recover a dire situation, boy,” she insisted. “Matters are grim, but we can still pull through this.”

And yet Olenna had heard the criers in the streets, the voices that were declaring Aegon Targaryen the rightful king. There were whispers spreading that their situation was divine punishment against the realm for supporting an illegitimate ruler. There were whispers in taverns that named the Baratheon regime false, and that a Targaryen was the only rightful king. Those whispers were like spark to kindling. Words are wind, but this wind is fanning the flames.

There had even been mummer troupes by the docks that had been performing plays where a dragon rose from the ashes to put the realm to order, and the false tyrants were brought to justice by a young champion of the people. Olenna herself had sat in the crowd of one such performance, and the smallfolk had cheered as the red cloth dragon emerged from the stands. Olenna could feel the dissent stewing in the streets, she could feel it simmering.
Olenna didn't believe in coincidence. Other lords had shrugged with such talk, but Olenna didn’t underestimate it. She put a stop to the mummer troupes and she had rounded up the criers. Her men gave them all the same question, and slowly a money trail started to appear.

Somebody had been paying those men to spread certain words.

Left and Right spent a week tracing the coin back to a money lender working by the flea markets, and eventually found a banker that admitted that he had been handing out coin to those who helped spread a certain message. The mummer troupes had been hired, their scripts written for them. An anonymous benefactor from the Free Cities had been paying a great deal of money towards mummers and criers that helped portray Aegon Targaryen as the saviour of the Seven Kingdoms. It had been confirmation of what Olenna could feel in her bones; somebody is playing us.

This was a war that Mace was not equipped to handle.

There were crises on every front. The news, the siege, the stalemate had sent King’s Landing into a frenzy. The Faith was growing restless, and riots were being sparked as the food ran out. People were starving, angry and scared.

Their men could barely even walk the streets safely any more. There had been a string of brutal murders and disappearances in the city; women and prostitutes that disappeared from around Flea Bottom and a gaggle of Reach guardsmen had been held responsible. Mace had tried and executed the men, but the tensions didn’t fade. King’s Landing was a boiling pot ready to burst, and all that rage was turning towards House Tyrell.

Lannister and Tyrell caused this mess, the whispers said.

If hadn’t been so grim, Olenna might have laughed. It was a jape – a bitter, humourless jape. Once, not long ago, the city had heralded House Tyrell as their saviours, but how quickly things changed. Perhaps it is a learning experience, she thought bitterly; the crowd that sings at your wedding and claps at your coronation is the exact same crowd that will jeer at your execution. People just love a show.

There was a long moment of silence, Olenna and Mace looking at each other. Their relationship had never been so strained. “I do not have the men for a secure victory against the Golden Company,” Mace said finally.

“Then have an insecure victory, for gods’ sake,” Olenna replied curtly. “We will move the men out of the city, perhaps we can encourage Cersei to finally leave her hidey-hole.”

“The numbers—”

“The numbers are as good as now as we’re going to get.” Olenna shook her head. “We will not survive a siege, not like this. We cannot allow Aegon Targaryen to reach the walls of the city. There is no more time, we must play the hand we have.”

“Aegon Targaryen,” he repeated, looking at her as if she was mad. “Oldtown is a ruin, and you worry about Aegon Targaryen? Forget the mummer’s dragon, Lord Tarly tells me repeatedly; our lands are at risk, we must return—”

“If you take your men away to Oldtown, then that the mummer’s dragon will have seized the Iron Throne long before you return,” Olenna chided. “No, the only thing that will save the Reach now is a united Seven Kingdoms – we need the force of the other realms behind us. We need to destroy Aegon Targaryen before that can happen.”
Priorities, she insisted to herself. One goal leads to another – remove Cersei, free Margaery, defeat Aegon, and we rally the forces needed to secure the Reach. And yet no matter how she tried to justify it, her heart pained with the thought of her family, her grandsons lost in the Reach.

Mace tried to protest, but his throat seemed to jam. “After the queen’s trial,” Olenna continued. “After you repel the Golden Company… only then we can gather the full force of the westerlands and the Vale to support us. We can still save Highgarden.”

“The Vale,” Mace repeated. The knights of the Vale were the strongest straw they still had to cling on to. “We’re certain?”

“Yes.” Olenna nodded. “The Vale lords are bringing thirty thousand men to support us. Their armies are marching as we speak; they’ve already passed the Bloody Gate.”

“The Bloody Gate?” he exclaimed, aghast. “That far? When are they to arrive?”

“The snows in the riverlands blocked the High Road,” Olenna admitted with a grimace. “Their armies have already been delayed. But they are coming.”

The Vale was the only army that could still save them, and they were coming in force. “With the Vale’s assistance,” she said firmly. “We’ll have the men to secure the capital, and our armies will be free to leave. And afterwards Queen Regent Margaery will appoint Petyr Baelish as Warden of the East.”

“I… wha…” Mace’s voice was stunned. “The coincounter.”

“It’s how the game works,” Olenna snapped, toothless gums sucking at her lips. Curses for having to turn to that slimy worm again. Matters were so dire that she had to resort to Littlefinger again. “Petyr Baelish was the one who rallied the Lords Declarant to support us, and for that service he expects a reward. Of all that he could have asked for…” Olenna shook her head. “Warden of the East is a military command, not a hereditary title or a lordship. Baelish will be kicked off that rank as soon as Robert Arryn comes of age in any case, but right now Littlefinger seeks a position to secure himself. Giving him that in return for support is a good bargain.”

She had spent weeks trying to hammer out that deal – trying to balance a hundred concerns and clashing interests. It had been like juggling knives or trading with vipers. Olenna had managed to forge an alliance between Kevan Lannister, the High Septon, Petyr Baelish – an alliance that might still save the realm.

The numbers are still in our favour, Olenna told herself. Even despite their losses, despite all the bannermen that had broken ranks, the Tyrell army still stood at over twenty thousand strong. With the Vale joining them, they would be over fifty thousand. With the Faith Militant by their side, there was an army that could match anything.

The Faith was on their side. All of their challengers – the Crow’s Eye, the Bastard King, Stannis Baratheon – were heretics to the followers of the Seven. The High Septon would oppose the false religions, and the Seven Kingdoms would fight against the mad men trying to destroy them.

Mace didn’t know how to react. For a big man, he looked stunned, lost. “We will save our family, my son,” Olenna insisted. “But we must focus on the priorities.”


His shoulders were shaking, staring at her with an expression she had never seen. A chuckle broke his throat, but there was no laughter in it. “The priorities!” Her son’s voice morphed into a shout.
“Of course, we cannot forget the priorities, Mother! Clearly, my son and daughter aren’t priority enough!”

Olenna almost groaned. *Not now... please, don’t... “Watch your tone.”*

“The priorities!” he snapped, stepping forward. “I could have broken through those *damn walls* months ago!” Mace boomed. “*You* were the one that told me to wait.”

“I told you how to protect our family,” she bristled.

His face was red, booming and shivering with sudden rage. “*You* said to send Garlan to the Reach! *You* said to let the Golden Company pass! It was *you*!” Her jaw clenched, but she didn’t reply. “*You* were the one that made this alliance, you were the one that brought us here!”

She didn’t reply, but her shoulders were stiff. *He’s angry and lost,* Olenna told herself. *He wants someone he can blame.*

“*You* were the one that pushed Cersei to this, you were the one who provoked her!” There were tears in his eyes. “This was all *you!* You did this, you ruined me, you spiteful bitch!”

*I only ever tried to protect my family.* And yet so many of her intentions had withered and died.

Olenna’s hands tightened on her cane. Mace stared at her as if he wanted her to scream at him, to argue back, but Olenna gave him nothing but a hard and silent glare.

Mace shook his head slowly. “You ruined me,” her son muttered, before turning around and storming out of the tent.

Olenna stood perfectly still for several long moments. She took a deep breath, and then she went about her business. She spent the rest of the day calming her son down, writing letters and making preparations, and ensuring that the Tyrell army would be there to oppose the Golden Company’s march.

And then, she retired to her quarters, she closed the door, and she broke down into tears.

…

Ash rained from the sky, and the world stank of burnt flesh and fear.

The city was on fire around her, and all of those thoughts echoed around in her head. Everything was burning, everything had fallen apart, and now there were only the ruins. All of the memories rattled around in her head, reliving it before her eyes. It was all she could think of, those months flashing before her eyes. Where did it all go wrong?

Great clouds of toxic black smoke gushed through the streets, and the smallfolk fled as though the hounds of the seven burning hells tore through the streets. She could see the marble spires of the Great Sept being devoured by green flames, chewing through stone and spitting blazing debris.

Even despite everything, she felt numb.

Her thoughts felt slow and fragmented in the clamour of the bloody moment. She couldn’t feel the pain, she couldn’t feel the burning in her throat. The smoke twisted and roared around them, spiralling into the air as if an immense black dragon had taken flight over the city. A dragon of black smoke and green flames, sending ash gushing with every flap of inhuman wings.
People were screaming, howling, writhing in frenzied panic. And yet Olenna just felt numb. She could barely feel at all, she couldn’t make sense of it. All of those plans, all of those ambitions… the hopes for her family…

*The gods are cunts.*

The Great Sept of Baelor was burning. The seven-sided stars of the gods were raining to the ground as ash. As she watched, timbers split and stone cracked, and the belltower of the Father’s Spire collapsed – setting the world to a ringing clanging chaos.

A strong hand was shaking her shoulders, a voice bellowing into her ear. Olenna could hear the words, but she couldn’t make sense of them. She saw a frightened face of Right – *Arryk, his name is Arryk* – above her, trying to rouse her from her daze. He was a big, strong man, and yet in that moment he looked as terrified as a little boy.

Her whole body was numb and pale, trembling in the guardsman’s arms as he fled for his life.

Olenna had been standing in the courtyard, watching from the crowd, as the queen’s carriage came through. The image of that thing – the thing that looked like her granddaughter – stepping out wearing Cersei’s dress… the memory of it seared Olenna’s eyes. Her beautiful darling granddaughter… her lovely sweet and clever child… dressed up as Cersei and sent in the queen’s place…

*That wasn’t Margaery. It wasn’t, it wasn’t… it couldn’t…*

The howling of the flames sounded like Cersei’s laughter. The fires were spreading. Visenya's Hill was lit up like a pyre – green flames and black smoke writhing around her.

And those monsters… the burning monsters thrashing and writhing and slashing like beasts from the darkest of the seven hells. Even as they burnt to cinders, they attacked and raged and burst down into the streets – indiscriminately tearing the smallfolk and the Faith Militant and the guardsmen apart.

Erryk and Arryk were the only things that saved her. When the fighting broke out before the sept, her two guardsmen carried Olenna away. In the explosion, Erryk had fallen somewhere to the flames, and Arryk was left so scared that he never knew what to do but run. The man just kept on running, sprinting towards the Gate of the Gods, trying to reach towards the Tyrell compound at the eastern edge of the city.

Everything was so hazy, the world was roiling. Between the smoke and her spinning head. Olenna could feel the ground rumbling, the stampede of panicked and fleeing feet. She could only vaguely make out the shape of Cobbler’s Square, hoisted over Arryk’s shoulder as he ran.

There were bodies trampling around her. Olenna could feel the swell of the mobs bubbling around her, the riots surging towards the Red Keep.

Across the plaza of the Street of Sisters, she saw the mobs barrelling against the black marble structure of the Guildhall of the Alchemists. She saw crazed men slamming against the doors, bodies trying to clamber up the stone parapets of the building, and mobs throwing stones through the shuttered windows, prying them open with their bodies. The Great Sept was blazing over the city, and men were shouting and stomping their feet in fury. The mobs were rallying, all their outrage focused against the Alchemists’ Guild – tides of bodies trying to push their way through the doors. It was pure chaos; the alchemists trying to bar the door, to barricade against the riot, but they were breaking and black smoke was rising across the rows of thatch houses.
Flea Bottom was on fire. The debris was spitting and flying far, and the wood and straw of Pisswater Bend didn’t stand a chance. The green fires were spreading out of control.

_Boom._ She heard the thud of great wooden arms, like drumbeats in the distance. In the skies, she saw black shapes soaring, shapes flying like birds.

She couldn’t… she didn’t understand what she was seeing at first. Then the first body smeared itself across the cobbles like a red berry, and she knew. _The hostages._

Flailing bodies soared through the smoky sky, flying from the direction of Aegon’s High Hill. Wooden limbs atop the Red Keep’s blood-red walls snapped out and then curled back, again and again.

The trebuchets of the Red Keep were launching the hostages from the walls.

The queen had kept her word; with the mobs at the gates, Cersei launched her hostages over the walls by trebuchet. Olenna could see the bodies crashing down from the sky, bloody and unrecognisable pulps smearing against burning stone.

_The Whores._ Olenna wasn’t sure where that thought came from, but it struck inside her head. _Those trebuchets were called the Three Whores._

It wasn’t logical, it wasn’t any sort of scheme. This felt like nothing but pure spite. _Madness._ Cersei had to know that, but she did so anyway. That could only mean she had nothing to lose.

_Loras. Loras, my boy…_ Was he flying through the sky, even now…?

A vision filled flashed before her gaze, of purple drapes and scores of lords and ladies across the throne room. The sound of a dozen singers chiming in the air, all the noises mixing with laughter. Olenna saw her granddaughter, dressed radiantly in purple and green with diamonds in her hair, holding onto the arm of her new husband, the boy king. For a brief moment, they did make the image of a good couple; Margaery was beautiful, Joffrey youthful and handsome.

Olenna remembered feeling that one moment of doubt. Perhaps Margaery could temper Joffrey’s violent inclinations. Joffrey was young, perhaps he would calm as he matured. Perhaps assassination wasn’t required. And yet, deep in her old bones, Joffrey had only ever reminded Olenna of the worst of the Targaryens – and such a creature could never be allowed to touch her granddaughter. While the rest were distracted by the foolishness with the Imp, Olenna’s gaze turned towards the great goblet of wine before the king’s chair, and she had the fake amethysts in her hand.

_This was it, this was the moment it all went wrong_ , Olenna thought numbly. Her eyes turned away from the young King Joffrey, towards Queen Cersei’s hard, wooden smile. Olenna so clearly remembered Cersei’s expression when her child wed. The queen had sat stiffly in her chair; her expression like stone, but the raw hate still seeping from the cracks. She had tried to hide it under the smiles and courtesies, but Olenna could tell; Cersei had despised their family from the very beginning.

_I dropped the poison into the wrong glass._

The man carrying her shuddered, tearing Olenna from the memory. The earth quaked, and then…

_Whoosh._

Everything went pitch black as cloud of dust and ash swept through the street, and a plume of
crackling green and red fire snapped behind her. *The Alchemist’s Guild.* Somewhere in the distance behind her, the hall of the Alchemist’s Guild detonated, and the world trembled. The flames burst upwards, the unnatural fire hissing like the crackling of demons. She felt the impact… the windows shattered, the air was sucked from the sky, and the people screamed – tens of thousands of frenzied voices blending into madness.

Burning horses were running mad through the streets, and men screamed in fear and fury. Flaming debris tumbled through the sky, igniting new conflagrations over the city. It was pure chaos, and Olenna just stared numbly.

Even amidst it all, the image of her beautiful little girl stepping out of that carriage couldn’t leave her gaze – the bloated corpse of Margaery haunted her vision.

Ash fell from the sky, and her guardsman heaved and grunted and coughed as he ran through the city, following the Street of Gods to the west. All around them, the rioting crowds of smallfolk tore the city apart. She saw a score of crazed, filthy men with knives and hammers fall on a patrol of frightened Lannister guardsmen and tear them apart. There was no law, there was no order, nothing but an animal panic in the tides of human flesh. Women wailed, babes screams, and riots of smallfolk on every street.

The Gates of the Gods were wide open, and mounted men poured through, riding into the city, trampling and bellowing through the streets. The rose banners of Tyrell flew high, but they were smeared with mud and dirt. All of the knights looked worn and bloody, their faces pale with fear as they stared out over the city. Olenna saw the banners; the wilted green rose, the squashed purple grapes, the fallen tower, the bloody huntsman…

The Tyrell cavalry was galloping back into the burning city, but they came broken and distraught, and defeat was writ across their features.

_The battle,* Olenna thought vaguely. _What happened to the battle?_

The knights were stampeding, fumbling, trying to take control of the chaos. The riots raged, the fires burning out of control.

In the ash and the smoke, there was no ‘us’ and ‘them’. There was naught but mindless panic and anger, tensions over-boiled and red cloaks clashing against gold against green against rainbow. The colours were smothered by ash, and there was nothing but black.

They were screaming, all of the men bellowing for order. Olenna tried to focus, but her head was spinning. She was coughing against the smoke. The old woman was a quivering wreck, barely able to breathe as Arryk finally collapsed to the cobbles from exhaustion.

Tyrell knights were riding around her, struggling to control their horses in the black smog. Olenna could only stagger through it, feeling dazed and hollow.

Her senses were blurring, Olenna felt like she was being torn away from her own body. The shock and the smoke, the pain and the grief… _Is this what dying feels like?_ she wondered faintly.

“My daughter!” a voice cried. “Where is my daughter?”

Her son. That was her son’s voice. She saw the heavy shape of her son, covering his mouth against the smoke and his gasping face red. He was clad in green armour, the metal plate chiming with every staggering step. So many shapes and so much noise blurred around her, Olenna struggling to make any sense of it at all. She focused on her son’s shape, her boy’s voice.
Around her, the city convulsed like a giant’s death-rattle. The shrieks of the smallfolk, the screams of the innocent, the crackling of the wildfire falling from the sky, it blended together into the howling screams of mad gods.

She heard their cries, men were screaming. The screams wrapped around her – cries of “Fire!”, “Help us!”, “Must retreat!”, “What do we do?” “My lord, the castle…!”, “They’re at the gates!”, “My lord, my lord!” …

So many men, running around like little children.

Strong hands grasped Olenna’s shoulders, meaty fingers clutched the frail woman so tightly it hurt. “Mother!” Mace shouted at her, his eyes wide and frightened. “Mother! Mother! What happened? What happened?”

Olenna couldn’t respond. *Focus, must focus. I need to…*

There was a heart-wrenching crack the collapse of wood and stone as a building shattered in the flames, sending black ash whooshing through the streets. Men screamed and horses bolted, her son yanked her by the wrist and tried to shelter her from the ash.

“Where is my daughter?” Mace cried, his eyes weeping. He was coughing and crying, trying to pull his mother away. “Where is Margaery? Where is Loras?”

“My son,” Olenna croaked, her vision blurring. “My boy, my boy…”

*Focus. Need to focus.*

It was all so black and smoky she could hardly see, but she felt his arms around her shoulders, hugging her so tightly. Her boy was trembling, crying into her shoulders the same way he did when he was boy.

And then the blade sliced through the air.

It started with a scream, and then two. There were short and sharp screams around them, and daggers plunging through backs. In the haze, they were just shadows writhing in smoke. The Tyrell men fell, blades slicing through the roses on their chest.

Olenna saw a bright red two-handed greatsword flashing in a downwards arc, cleaving through steel as if it were paper. There wasn’t a chance to stop them, there wasn’t even a pause. Shadows stepped out of the smoke, and red roses were dropping.

The red sword. That was the only thing Olenna could focus on in the moment. The red sword dripping blood.

Olenna would have screamed, but her throat jammed. Mace tried to twist, but it was too quick. Swift and efficient.

“My—” her son croaked, right before that red blade stabbed straight through his back and out of his chest.

His legs gave way and he collapsed. Mace was so big, so heavy, he fell to the floor and pushing Olenna down with him as he toppled. They both fell to the cobbled stones together, both gasping for breath as the blood oozed from his body. Olenna’s eyes watched her son’s red face gulp and gasp, his hands flailing like a baby as the red oozed from his stomach.
The assassins didn’t wait. There was no warning, no bargaining, no talk. They simply saw their chance in the chaos, and they took it.

Heavy steel bootsteps walked towards Olenna, but the man paused as the mother cradled her boy. He stood and he waited as she hugged her loaf of a son for the last time. Olenna’s head was spinning, all of the moments… the faces of her family flashing before her eyes. Near sixty years of protecting and caring for her family, so much laughter and ambition and hope for the future…

This is how it ends. Mewling and crying and in flames.

She might have laughed. To die on the Mother’s Day, in the arms of her son… along with her family…

The man was waiting, standing stiff like a statue above her. The red greatsword was slick with blood, the blade hungry in the smoke and his dull grey armour smeared with greasy ash. Olenna took a deep breath and raised her head, meeting the hard eyes looking down. The expression under the helm was unreadable.

If the man was expecting outrage, or desperate pleas for mercy, or senseless begging, then Olenna refused to indulge him. She focused on cold grey eyes with all the scorn she could muster.

“Well…” Olenna wheezed finally. “Get it over with, then.”

The red sword swung down.

---

The Mad Queen

Darkness, the vague crackle of fire, the trickle of blood in her lap.

The memories… as sweet and as painful as a blade…

“… mother, mother! Aren’t they so beautiful?”

It was time for her to break her fast with her son. And yet when she’d walked into the solar, her little king was holding three… kittens. She stared for a moment. Where had he gotten them? She crouched down and smiled, as her son broke his fast on warm black bread, fresh from the ovens and dribbled with honey. “They most certainly are. Where did you get them, my sweet?”

“Margaery gave them to me!” Her son was smiling with the wild exuberance of one who didn’t yet know that happiness wasn’t something everlasting. “She said that I could name them!”

Cersei’s smile turned, just a little, but she controlled her expression. Her baby’s excitement was almost infectious. She refused to let the Tyrell whore take away from her son’s happiness. “What are you going to name them?” she asked.

“Hmmmm.” Her son seemed to think as hard as she’d ever seen. He rubbed his cheek into the ears of the largest of the three kittens. “I’ll name him Ser Pounce. This one will be Boots. This one will be Ser Whiskers.”

“That’s a girl kitten,” Cersei said.

“Oh!” His eyes widened, and he gave the cat a firm rub between the ears. The kitten mewled contentedly. “I’m so sorry, Lady Whiskers!”
Cersei couldn’t help but smile. Just seeing her baby like this… restored her. Made her whole again. Made her remember what she was fighting for.

“A king’s kitten needs to be cared for. A kitten needs food, safety, and the protection that only a strong ruler can give,” Cersei said gravely. “The kittens are your newest subjects. Are you able to protect your subjects?”

The king considered that, licking honey off his fingers. “I will protect them all. I can do that, I’m the king.”

But who will protect you, save for me? Her smile wavered. This cruel, cruel world would surely devour him, just like his older brother, if she didn’t save him. Already, the Imp was no doubt plotting somewhere. Already, the Tyrells grasped so, and kept grasping for so much more...

She could not be his sword, but she could be his shield. She would protect him from the darkness.

All I do, I do for him.

The vision twisted, the scene turning away into something dark and sour...

She saw herself stepping into the king’s chambers, raising up her lantern as she unlocked the door. She was pale and scarred, and the blood of the dead dragged at the hems of her dress, as she stepped over the threshold.

The barricaded windows left the whole room in a shadowy gloom, and she heard the mewling of cats stirring from inside. Cersei’s heart was pounding in her chest as she stepped forward, and then her nostrils twitched at the sharp tang of blood in the darkness.

She raised the lantern, and moved like a ghost into her child’s room.

The chamber was a ruin, and black fluid stained the rugs. Chunks of meat and organs were strewn across the Myrish carpet. In the centre of the bedchamber lay a slight blond form, staring ever upwards. Around it, kittens mewed.

Those sweet little kittens were nibbling on her dead son’s flesh. Ser Pounce purred as he played with a lump of Tommen’s guts.

Cersei didn’t scream. Her throat clenched and her heart stopped, but she just stood and stared, the tower crumbling into rubble all around her...

‘I warned you, dear sister,” the bloody words loomed over the sky.

She didn’t scream, but her ears still popped from the howling of the world, the roar of fire and immense crackle of the flames...

Cersei saw a twisted old man with scabby skin and overgrown white hair sitting on the throne, and he was laughing as around him the world burst into green. She felt the heat on her skin, she heard the sundering of the earth, the blaze of stone and the hiss of metal bubbling – but the man didn’t burn. Even as the whole world was torched around him, the king rose anew. She saw him rising up from the smoke, his shadow growing and twisting into something larger, something fearsome...

Great wings of black stretched over the sky, and an immense body rose, reborn from the earth and the sea of fire.

It all blurred and faded away.
Cersei dreamt that she was sitting upon the Iron Throne, staring out over the cavernous and empty throne room that she had come to know so well. She heard the footsteps walking towards her, emanating from the shadows.

“I never wanted this for you…” a soft voice mourned from the pillars of the great hall. “I never wanted any of it – not this legacy, not for you to follow your father’s footsteps.”

She stared at the figure in hooded grey. “Who are you?” Her last word echoed up and down the throne room, youyoyoyouyou… “Are you the Stranger?”

The figure stood before the throne, and glanced over Cersei’s bloated form, the weight in her lap, the red sword by her knees, and the creature mumbling besides the throne’s foot.

“I am not the Stranger, Cersei.” The figure raised a pale soft hand, and pushed the hood back. “Have you forgotten me?”

No, I don’t… The words caught in her throat. A woman, with features that could have been anything from fifteen to fifty. A strange agelessness to her features. Cersei stared into eyes that were of molten emerald. She did know this woman, but it had been so long…

“Have you forgotten your father, your brother too?”

“Jaime is dead.”

“Is he?” the figure whispered.

“This is a dream,” Cersei said.

“Is it?” the figure whispered sadly. “Look at your hair, child.”

Cersei’s hand clasped a lock, almost unwillingly. Her hair was a dull blonde, almost grey, and as rough as straw. My hair…

In all of her dreams, her hair was as golden as the dawn.

“You were so beautiful, once,” the figure said, her words as soft as the grave. Cersei stared uncomprehending at the figure. Desperate. Who are you? But her voice locked in her throat.

“Your father was a hard man,” the figure whispered, “and tortured by his dreams. To dream of the things he could not have… always too afraid to let down his walls, to live his own dreams. So he pushed his dreams onto his children…”

There was a pause, a brief, quiet grimace. “And Tywin…” the voice said softly. “Tywin dreamt that his son would be a great knight, that his daughter would be a queen. That his grandchildren would rule, and turn the Seven Kingdoms into one. He dreamt his children would be so strong and brave and beautiful that no one would ever laugh at them.”

“I am a queen,” she told the figure, “I have a beautiful son.”

A tear rolled down the figure’s cheek. The woman raised her hood again and turned her back on her. “Goodbye,” she whispered. “I’m sorry – I’m so, so sorry.”

Cersei reached after her, but already the figure was moving away, her skirt whispering lullabies as it brushed across the floor. Don’t leave me, she wanted to call. Not again… but the figure vanished into the air as though she’d never been.
Cersei woke. She could feel the blood.

There was always that heartbeat after she woke – that moment of brief delirium before she realised where she was. That moment of blissful unawareness where everything still seemed right with the world.

And then she blinked, and reality dawned. The memories stabbed back into her heart.

“… Father’s face is stern and strong…” her cousin mumbled, his scarred and lanky body slumped over the stairs to the Iron Throne. “… sits and judges right from wrong… weighs our lives… right from wrong…”

Lancel Lannister had been repeating those words for so, so long. Cersei didn’t know how much time had passed, she had been falling in and out of consciousness. The ruin that had once been her cousin stood at the foot of the throne, dumbly reciting the Song of the Seven – saying the verses over and over again for what felt like an eternity. His voice was a quiet mumble in the background, blurring with the sounds of battle in the distance as he stuttered over the words.

“… right from wrong... the short and long... loves the little children…” The song, the lullaby, the only things he could say.

Cersei stared at him quietly. She had ordered him to stop, but the verses kept spilling from his mouth. He could hardly control his limbs, he couldn’t control his mouth. Ser Lancel Lannister was half-naked and dressed in rags coated in dried blood; covered in red scars of stitched skin, with bloated milky flesh and black veins running down through his body. His expression was blank, his bloodshot eyes vacant, and a faint line of drool dribbling from his mouth as he murmured.

It wasn’t Lancel anymore, it was just a mindless creature repeating the same words. Nothing but a broken shell, dissected by a surgeon’s knife and stitched back together like a rag doll.

“… Mother gives the gift of life…” his voice droned. “… watches over every wife... loves little children…”

His shoulders were slumped, his head drooped and his feet scraping across the ground. Sometimes Lancel would stagger and pace in circles, other times he would just stop and stand still, but he kept on repeating the words. The words of the Seven felt like nails over chalk, torturing Cersei in the gloomy din.

Of all the power she once had, of all the armies that once marched for her… the only thing left under her command was her useless little cousin. He was the very last one that still listened to her.

Qyburn had left, walking away through one of the secret tunnels. Qyburn had been her very last hope, and he just walked away. The only thing her master of whisperers left behind was Lancel. Useless, meaningless Lancel had been left standing in the dungeons, reciting those words. Perhaps that had been Qyburn’s jest.

Cersei sat stiffly on the Iron Throne, her eyes peeled on the door, with her little baby boy in her arms. She sat and waited, stroking Tommen’s hair, all the while Lancel lurched around the base of the throne.

The image of the cats devouring her son’s corpse replayed over and over before her eyes. ‘I warned you, dear sister.’

“… sees our fates as they unfold…” Lancel mumbled. “She lifts her lamp of shining gold... lead the little children.”
A crone. She was not a mother any more, she had no children. She was just an ugly, hideous crone waiting for death.

Tommen was still in her arms, so still he might have been sleeping. If not for the jagged knife wounds across his body, and his bloody guts staining her dress, Cersei might have been able to pretend he was asleep. Yet he wasn’t. My children are dead.

She knew that he was dead, but she still cradled Tommen and rocked him gently in her arms. He’s still my son, my precious baby. All that I have left. How long has it been since I ever hugged him? Maybe if she closed her eyes, she could pretend he might hug her back.

From outside, she heard the distant crackle of flames, and the thud of battering rams beating against the Red Keep’s gate.

Tommen was cradled across her lap, while a red longsword rested against the base of the Iron Throne, the sword’s pommel lying between Cersei’s knees. The blade was Valyrian steel with red and black ripples running down the smooth metal, and the crossguard forged into two golden lions’ heads with ruby eyes staring upwards. The sword was all gold and red and black, garnished in her family’s wealth. Widow’s Wail, Cersei thought hollowly, staring down at her son’s blade. A sword that Joffrey had named hours before making a widow wail.

Cersei had taken to sleeping with Widow’s Wail beside her, clutching it for protection and carrying it with her at all times. She had always wanted to carry a sword, but not like this. Nobody else could be relied upon, Cersei had nothing but the blade. It was the very last weapon with which to defend herself. Widow’s Wail. Joffrey had wielded it for an hour, Tommen never touched it at all.

Father should have gifted the other sword to me, Cersei thought, not to Jaime.

Cersei raised her head, to stare at where her father was looking at her from across the throne room. Tywin Lannister stood strong and proud, his arms folded and a disapproving gaze lingering in his eyes. Her father stood and stared at her with that cold, quiet judgement she knew so well.

It was not my fault, Cersei could have screamed at her father. It was Tyrion. It was always Tyrion.

Her brother was by her side, strong and handsome with golden hair and both hands, clad in golden armour. Jaime – her lover, her warrior – had stood beside her throne for so long, but now he was walking away. Jaime had abandoned her. Cersei could have called out to him, but she knew he wouldn’t reply.

Her mother was standing by the columns, a blurred image. Joanna Lannister was faded; her features obscured by a haze and Cersei couldn't even focus on her. Cersei could have screamed for her mother, but there would be no response.

All of the ghosts were silent.

She saw Margaery Tyrell and Sansa Stark – two sweet and beautiful maidens, giggling behind their hands and glancing back to the queen with silent derision. They were eating lemoncakes along with Melara Hetherspoon, and shunning Cersei from their huddle.

She could see Robert standing by the wings of the hall. Robert stood as he had been in his prime; a tall giant, armoured and muscled like maid’s fantasy, clutching his warhammer with both hands. He was standing next to Rhaegar Targaryen – beautiful and proud in black silk and rubies – and they were both looking to Cersei with open scorn.

The great hall was empty, but they were surrounding her. Her family, her past, her sins. They were
standing around her, staring and quietly mocking.

The crone. Cersei could see the Crone herself, the source of it all, standing at the very far corner of the hall and looming in the shadows. The other ghosts were blurred, but Cersei could so clearly make the twisted shape of Maggy the Frog.

The squat and warty woman was built like a warthog with crusty yellow eyes, no teeth, and pale green jowls. She was a hideous, ugly figure – the monster from a fairy-tale, her wrinkled face twisted in a quiet sneer and the faintest of smirks across her warty lips.

And that was the jape, a jest that had taken two decades for Cersei to realise. At the end, at the realisation of Maggy’s prophecy, Cersei was most hideous one of them all.

“... Maidens dances through the sky... in every lover’s sigh... smiles teach the birds to fly.... fly... fly...”

She stared down at her son’s wide, dead and empty eyes, and she could see her own bloody reflection in his irises. A monster from the fairy-tales.

She was a hag. Margaery’s fingernails had torn open Cersei’s cheeks, leaving gashes from her forehead down to her chin. Her face was clawed open, bloody and mutilated. Qyburn had attended to her, he had smeared foul poultries and bandages across her cheeks, but the scars were deep and ugly.

Cersei could not even look into her own reflection; the very image made her flinch.

It was more than just the face. Her whole body was fat and bloated. She could feel the dead baby inside of her, an unborn child killed when Margaery knocked her to the floor. Cersei could feel the pain in her gut, and there was blood dripping down the inside of her legs. Her hair was haggard like straw, her golden locks turning grey with stress and fear.

Her dress was stained red with gore, yet Cersei could not let go of Tommen’s bloody body. He still wore the nightclothes he had died in. She clung to her baby’s corpse so tightly it hurt, stroking his hair. Gold stained with red.

“... Seven Gods who made all...” Lancel’s voice sputtered. “... listening we should call... they see little children...”

The gods were all around her. The ghosts, the sins, the judgement... Cersei could see them surrounding her, as clear as the mockery in their eyes.

She was only waiting on the Stranger. She stared at the doors, and she waited for death. She waited for her little brother.

Tyrion is coming. She knew he was.

The prophecy had come true. Her children were dead, and the younger queen had struck her down. They only thing missing was her murderer, to wrap his hands around Cersei’s throat and finally finish it. Any second now, she expected to see Tyrion strutting through the door, his twisted face gloating as he swaggered in to claim her throne and her neck.

Her whole life was draped around her, vulnerable and exposed. So much effort and heartbreak spent trying to hold onto this jagged chunk of metal, and the sliver of gold atop her head.

She despised the blasted chair. Her hands and legs were nicked and bloody, covered in scabs and
blistering wounds from where had pricked and cut herself on the iron barbs. For so long she had coveted this seat, and yet the blades slashed and pained her.

Where did it all go wrong? Cersei thought quietly. Why did I fight for this? Maybe I could have surrendered, maybe I could have run. I might have taken Tommen and fled. I might have just left.

She could have left any time. Cersei could have taken Ned Stark’s offer; she might have fled to the Free Cities with her children and never looked back. Stark had given her that chance, and at that time Cersei had laughed at how foolish the offer of his was. Now that was the jest – that at the end of it, Ned Stark had been the wisest one of them all.

Widow’s Wail. It was a sword that her father had forged from Ned Stark’s own sword. A blade that symbolised their victory over the Starks. Widow’s Wail.

When Myrcella had died, Cersei had thrashed and raged and screamed. She had wept and wailed and fell to the floor. But then when Tommen died… she just felt nothing. She couldn’t remember even shedding a tear. She had already been dead inside. Cersei had known then that it was all fated. Nothing she’d ever done had mattered; the prophecy was real, and all that remained now was the coming of the valonqar.

In the shadows, Maggy the Frog was laughing at her.

She wondered how long Tyrion would make her wait. She wondered what cruel jests he would say before he killed her. “My dear sister, you look stunning!” the Imp’s phantom voice mocked in her ears. “Have you done something with your face? The blood and guts is a bold look, I must say. My, how you will revolutionise fashion in the capital!”

Maybe I should just let him. Maybe I should just sit and wait for death.

Tommen’s face was contorted in death, the edge of his lips raising upwards like a sneer. They were sneering. Even her father’s unsmiling face had sneered at her.

“… Smith labours day and night… Day and night… day and night… builds little children…”

The Imp’s words haunted her eyes – the words he had written in her little baby’s blood. “I warned you, dear sister,” his voice crackled in her ear, over and over again.

I warned you. If Cersei had any tears left, she would have cried. Instead, all that came out was a harsh cackle of laughter. She was laughing so hard each breath was like a sob. I warned you!

They should place those words upon my tomb, she thought, struggling to breathe through the chuckles. ‘Here lies Queen Cersei Lannister – I warned you’.

It was always the Imp.

“… stands before the foe…” the thing that was once Lancel muttered. “… us where e’er we go… sword and shield and spear and bow…”

She could hear the sound of screams and shouts, of loud crashes against hard wood. They were through the gates, they were charging against the Holdfast. Her men had tried to barricade the doors, but it wasn’t enough. Half of the queen’s men had already deserted, and the other half were only fighting because they missed their chance to run.

It could have worked. Maybe, if Tommen were still alive… maybe if Qyburn hadn’t deserted her… maybe if she even had a few more of his constructs still serving her. Maybe if the ghosts
hadn’t been so spiteful. Maybe she could have risen from the ashes.

‘Maybe’. Are there any words more haunting than ‘maybe’? The scheme that she had spent months working towards had succeeded – she had successfully destroyed the Great Sept and burned the High Sparrow alive. The Kettleblacks, the nobility, the septons and septas – all slain. She had judged those who would presume to judge her. And yet it was still useless, because Tyrion had still butchered her babes. She hadn’t broken free of the trap quick enough.

“Tyrion,” Cersei said quietly to the empty hall. “Are you there, Tyrion? I know you’re listening.”

But, still, the trebuchets had been primed and loaded, and the men had been given their final orders from the queen. If she lost, Cersei wanted to make sure everyone else lost too. All those hostages, all of those pretty little girls… they would fly rather than walk free.

She could feel the mobs at the gates, she could feel the boots charging down the corridor…

Any moment now. The Imp was going to strangle her, just as he did that whore. Perhaps he’d use her corpse as a bedwarmer, or he’d have her naked torso body mounted on a spike. There were no limits to an Imp’s depravity…

She had the sword. She refused to die so easily. She would skewer the little brother before she fell, one last act of spite. *Widow’s Wail*.

“Where are you, Tyrion?” Cersei demanded to the cavernous, gloomy hall. “I know you’re here. I know you are!”

There was no reply, nothing but Lancel’s incessant mumbling.

Cersei sat on the throne, staring at the door.

She could hear the heavy footsteps of boots, her whole body freezing with the sound. She remembered the tale Jaime had told her once – of Ned Stark being the first into the throne room, the first to find Jaime sitting on the Mad King’s throne with the king’s blood staining his blade.

*Who will be the first this time?*

And finally the great oak doors were pushed apart, armoured men storming through the doorway, blades in hand. The wood crashed against the stone walls, and Cersei heard the sound of fighting from the hall, the echoes of blades cracking together, the screams and grunts of the dying. The soldiers shambling through the doors were bloodied and worn, and they glared around the throne room suspiciously.

*They wear red.* Their swords swept side to side, men staring over the empty hall filled with ghosts. They looked wary and exhausted, wheezing for breath, but pale-faced under their helms and clutching their swords and shields tightly. They wore cloth-of-red tabards over plate and mail, marked with the roaring lion but the fabric stained with mud and dust. *Lannister* men.

There were fifteen soldiers – all of them bloodied men-at-arms who pushed their way through the heaviest fighting, Cersei’s dead heart pounded in surprise. *Not the Imp*.

The man at the front wore a lion’s head helm, one of the teeth of the gaping steel maw cracked from a blade that must have very nearly cut open his skull. Even from across the distance of the Great Hall, Cersei recognised the man instantly.

“Uncle,” Cersei called coldly, and she clutched her boy a little closer.
Ser Kevan’s eyes widened in horror as he looked upon the scene. The bloodied, pregnant and disfigured hag of a queen, cradling the dead king in her arms. “By the Gods…!”

The gods had nothing to do with this. The men looked at her with horror, stepping forward like boys approaching a demon. The ghosts faded away around them, the tapping of cautious steel boots filling the cavernous. None of them lowered their steel, a faint mumble of fear rising from the gaggle of soldiers.

“Cersei…” Ser Kevan growled lowly, his eyes turning to Tommen’s corpse. “What did you do? What did you do??”

“You refused to act, ser,” Cersei replied. There was no emotion. She was dead inside, as dead as the babe in her stomach. “So I acted instead. I destroyed our enemies.”

I did what was needed.

Ser Kevan’s gaze turned towards the lurching figure of Lancel, and his whole body froze. The men were mummuling, looking around the hall with quiet fear. The ghosts were staring at them.

“It is forbidden to bare steel in the presence of your king.” Cersei ordered, still cradling Tommen’s head. “Lower your weapons, your liege commands you. Bow before your king.”

“You… you…” Ser Kevan gasped, his throat choking. Lancel was still lurching by the side of the Iron Throne, his feet scraping slowly across the stone. “Lancel?” Ser Kevan shouted finally. “Lancel, is that you?”

Most others of Qyburn’s work had ended up scarred and disfigured beyond all recognition, but Lancel looked almost whole. The boy was recognisable even through the twisting scars and black veins. He looked almost fresh. Almost alive, if not for his blank expression.

Lancel didn’t reply. He didn’t even twitch. “Lancel, my boy!” Ser Kevan begged. “Lancel!”

“… close your eyes, you shall not fall… close your eyes not fall… close eyes shall fall not…”

Lancel mumbled. “… they see you… see you… little children…”

Kevan’s mouth dropped, his face bone pale. He looked like he might have screamed, but he could not breathe.

“Ser Lancel,” Cersei ordered. “Step forward.”


Lancel’s waist sagged, and his torso drooped against the stone. No hesitation, not doubt or disobedience. Nothing but perfect compliance to her commands. The perfect soldier. The perfect Lannister.

“Ser Lancel is a loyal subject, uncle,” Cersei said lowly. “He obeys me, learn from his example. Now lower your weapons. It is good you are here; your men must secure the Red Keep against the peasant mobs.”

“What did you… what did you…?” Kevan gasped. He looked scared to even approach. Lancel was bowed so deeply he was nearly doubled over.

“I did what I had to do,” Cersei growled. “They took everything from me, but I will take it back.
We must secure the Red Keep. We must find Lord Qyburn again – he has the skills that we need. You are still sworn to Tommen Baratheon, ser.” She clutched his body a bit tighter. “And your king still commands you.”

Ser Kevan didn’t reply. His mouth was wide, his eyes fixed on his son, and his gaze slowly turned towards Cersei, and then to the dead king.

“The proof stands before your very eyes. The proof of what we can accomplish,” Cersei said, motioning at Lancel. “The proof that the dead can be returned, that we can bring them back.” Cersei’s voice waivered slightly, and she grit her teeth. “I dreamt of it. I dreamt of them all returning to me.”

Her dreams… she could see the ghosts singing sometimes, she could hear the songs of screams. She had seen the skies turning black, and the dead returning. Her brother, her father, her children… House Lannister would rise again, she knew it would.

Lord Qyburn had promised it.

“Now your king commands you,” Cersei said finally, propping up Tommen’s head up to face them. “Do your duty.”

There was a long moment of silence in the cavernous hall. The only noise was Lancel’s muttering, and the distant howl of the fires.

“Arrest her.” Ser Kevan’s voice was queerly quiet, but then it waivered and broke into booming fury. “Arrest her! SEIZE HER!”

The Lannister men raised their swords and stepped forward. Cersei’s eyes widened. “No, you can’t – the king–” Another step – their eyes were so, so angry. Pale and furious gazes glowered at her from under helms. Can’t let them take my son, I won’t— “Stop them!”

I cannot, I will never surrender my son, never surrender him, never, ever, ever…

Lancel jerked into motion and staggered upright, his whole body convulsing. “See you… see you...!” Lancel mumbled, raising his hands to protect his queen. “… see you…”

The men-at-arms moved backwards, frightened and uncertain cries coming from them. “Lancel!” his father begged. “Lanc–”

Lancel didn’t have a sword. He didn’t need one. He shambled forward with sudden speed, slamming into a man and swinging his hands like clubs. The thud of bone against metal crunched through the cavernous hall, but Lancel didn’t even flinch. Bodies crashed, and bones cracked.

“See you!” Lancel howled. “See you little children!”

Crash. Lancel was surrounded by a dozen armed men, but there was no fear. No pause. He barged into a man so hard that the man toppled to the floor, his limbs flailing and raging. Fifteen against one, yet it was the fifteen that looked scared.

“LANCEL!” Ser Kevan screamed, and yet Lancel just lunged at another man-at-arms. His hands wrapped around the man’s neck, and Cersei heard the crack of a spine snapping.

Blades were slashing, screams of panic. Bodies charged forward, blades hacking down like axes. “No!” Kevan bellowed at his men. “Don’t hurt him! Don’t hurt him!”
“The Father’s face is stern and strong!” Lancel cried as he clawed out a man’s guts. “He sits! And judges right from wrong!”

Blood splattered, swords slashed. Cersei clutched her little boy to her chest with one arm, and with the other she fumbled for her sword, grasping for the handle. Her hands were trembling, hands jerking so hard that she nicked her own ankle against the black edge. Widow’s Wail…

“Little children!” Lancel cried between the spears and swords. “Little children!”

There was violence before her, and all Cersei could think of was protecting her baby. Her fingers wrapped around the pommel of the sword. I’m not ready to die, she realised suddenly. I’m not. I thought I was, but I’m not.

I must protect my babe.

It was pure shambling chaos; frantic bodies trying to wrestle Lancel’s relentless shape to the ground. Lancel’s arm snapped against a heavy shield, the bone splintering, but he didn’t even care. The men were panicking, forced backwards against Lancel’s fury and flailing limbs.

Cersei clutched Tommen tightly in her arms, heaved him upwards with all the strength she had, and she ran.

She skipped down from the Iron Throne, she turned and she sprinted as fast as her bloated and broken body could take her. Widow’s Wail was in her hand, but she couldn’t grip it firmly, she couldn’t swing it properly with her child’s weight over her shoulder. She gasped against the writhing agony in her stomach, but she didn’t pause. She just ran for her life, her heart racing in panic.

Can’t let the Imp take me. Kevan is working for the Imp, why didn’t I see it?

The longsword nearly fell out of her fingers as she staggered, but she didn’t stop. Widow’s Wail was a heavy blade to carry in a single hand, a cumbersome weapon for trembling fingers. She tried to cling onto both her baby and the sword, but they were sliding out of her bloody hands with every jagged step. She could barely even keep a hold of the sword, she couldn’t swing it…

“Cersei!” Ser Kevan boomed behind her. “Cersei!”

Her heels tapped against the stone, staggering and nearly falling with every step. Tommen’s limp weight was hanging over her shoulders, a dead weight that caused her to sway like a pendulum, but she didn’t stop sprinting. She pushed through the door and shambled up the stairs, nearly falling to her knees as she staggered.

Blood dripped across the stones with every step.

Cersei past the burst out onto the balcony of the Red Keep, son and sword in her arms, and she was already sprinting towards the top of the walls. She felt the smoke in the air and she saw King’s Landing burning in black and green.

She felt the sound of fighting throughout the city. She felt the earth rumble with sound of mobs. In the fury and outrage, the smallfolk turned out the Lannister soldiers – she could feel the drum of fighting all the way between Aegon’s High Hill and the Dragonpit atop Rhaenys’. Mobs of smallfolk were writhing, even as half the city blazed.

There was no escape, no way out of the Red Keep through the angry hordes. She could only hide, find a place for her and her babe to hide. Hide from the Imp.
The White Sword Tower loomed over the bay – a sharp and slim tower of four stories jutting from the walls of the inner keep. The pale white banners of the Kingsguard flapped limply in the wind, but the tower was deserted. It wasn’t even a conscious decision, but she was running towards it. She thought of all those times she had snuck into her brother’s quarters in the dead of night, those nights she ran to Jaime’s arms for comfort…

There were heavy boots behind her. Cersei just ran.

She could see the ghosts all around her, following her, wafting in the smoke. She saw Jaime shaking his head as he turned his back, she saw Tyrion’s evil sneer haunting from the shadows, and above them all she saw her father’s face glaring downward from the heavens.

The howl of the fires sounded like laughter. Tyrion and Maggy the Frog were laughing together.

…and the valonqar shall wrap his hands around your pale little white throat and choke the life from you…

There were bloody tears in her eyes, the red staining her vision and she could barely see.

Cersei shambled through the door towards the spiral stairs. She made it up half a dozen steps before she finally toppled. Tommen’s weight dragged her down, and she cracked against the hard marble stones. The pain in her gut caused her to writhe – tears stinging against the bloody cuts on her face as she tried to squirm.

The Valyrian steel clattered against the stone as she tripped, but her flailing fingers groped for it. Widow’s Wail.

She clung to her baby boy’s shoulders, trying to lift him off the ground but she couldn’t find the strength. She needed to run, needed to flee, but she couldn’t leave her son behind. She couldn’t let go, she couldn’t unhook her hands…

She heard footsteps stepping up the stairs to the White Sword Tower, a man panting for breath. Ser Kevan was following, her uncle staring at her with wide, white eyes as she crawled on the ground.

She wheezed for breath through the sobs, trying to pull her baby up from the floor, trying to shake him back to life. “We can save him!” Cersei cried. “We can bring my boy back! We must bring him back!”

Ser Kevan didn’t reply. He just stepped closer. “Don’t you understand?” she screamed through the bloody tears. “He’s coming to kill me… Tyrion is going to destroy me!”

There was a pause, and then Ser Kevan shook his head. “He already has,” her uncle said quietly.

That was the last thing she managed to hear, and then Ser Kevan lunged. Cersei could only gasp as fingers of lobstered steel wrapped around her neck. Her fingers curled, grasping against the hilt of Widow’s Wail, but it slid straight out of her grip. She tried to swing it feebly, but Kevan swatted the blade away with an elbow. Her family’s sword knocked out of Cersei hands, useless.

The longsword clattered against the stone and fell clunking down the spiral staircase, the steel chiming while Cersei squirmed. The widow wailed.

She couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t…

No. Cersei refused to die. She could not die, not before she saw the Imp for a final time. She would drag him into the dark with her.
A strangled cry broke her throat, and Cersei pummelled at Kevan. She beat and scratched and tore, but her uncle grimaced and pushed her down, redoubling the force, grunting from behind two hands. Cersei could feel her neck screaming, her vision darkening at the edges, but she refused…

Her fingernails scratched at Kevan’s helm, into his face, clawing desperately. Trying to find leverage, trying to draw blood…

*Couldn’t breathe, couldn’t…*

Her eyes veered over Kevan’s shoulder, and they bulged.

She could see him.

The Imp stood there, grinning saucily with mismatched eyes, standing beside a hole in the wall. He cocked his head, like some grotesque demon. “Now the debt is paid,” he cackled. He lunged at her, and her brother’s hands clenched over her uncle’s, and they squeezed.

Maggy the Frog stood above Cersei, screeching with laughter, as the crone’s gnarly, warty hands groped for her neck. “You were warned,” Maggy the Frog hissed, as she tightened her grip.

More came. More shadows – they were coming from the hallway, from the windows, from the walls. Her eyes swelled fit to burst.

She could see them. She could see them all.

The Tyrell whore, black-faced and ruined. She laid her fingers atop her uncle’s, clenched her fingers about Cersei’s throat, and squeezed. Eddard Stark, grim-faced and grey-eyed, with a weeping seam about his neck. Robert, fat and milky-pale, with entrails hanging from his gut. Her father, scowling and judging and decomposing. Her brother, blank and distant, with fingers pink and gold…

So many more. They were all strangling her… all of those hands around her throat…


Her struggles weakened. Ser Kevan grunted, and slammed her backwards onto the stone floor.

The smallfolk, the soldiers, those killed in the wars, those burnt in the cities. Hundreds, *thousands* of them. They were nameless shadows writhing around her – smoky hands gripping at her neck.

The dead had returned, but not her family, not her babes. All those she had killed, all those she had hated, all those she had feared. They had risen from the hells. They had come for her, all of them, together. They all sought her neck, laid their hands atop Kevan’s, and they squeezed.

Their eyes met hers, and they hated.

Strangled by a sea of ghosts, couldn’t breathe… couldn’t…

“Thank you for the crown, dear sister!” The Imp howled above it all. “I shall put it to the finest use.”

Cersei’s clutching fingers went limp, her lips stammered, and she stared in a wordless, choking horror.
Something cracked, and the world went dark.

---

**The Little Brother**

“Raise your shield!” the master-of-arms ordered, shouting above the sound of whacking wooden swords whacking together. “Step forward! Strike! Shield! Strike! Shield!”

Kevan complied, trading blows with Tygett on command. He followed the steps, just as the man commanded. Even as a young and fierce boy of nine, his little brother nearly got the better of him. “Keep your shield high, boy,” their mentor warned, as Tygett’s blade nearly broke his defence.

Kevan did so, but he blocked twice as often as he attacked. In the benches near the practice yard, Genna whooped and cheered with every clash.

“Kevan!” a hard voice ordered. “To me. I want to talk.”

At once, the fight stopped. The voice was firm and sure, and not even the master-at-arms protested it. The tone was so strong that there was absolutely no doubt it would be followed.

He saw Tywin looking to him, his brother’s speckled green eyes fixed in an unyielding glare. Even as a young man of six and ten, Tywin had a presence, a power, to him that none could match.

Kevan dropped his sword and he followed. Behind him, Tygett bristled. “How come you never spar in the yards, brother?” the boy demanded.

“How come you never spar in the yards, brother?” the boy demanded. “Because I deal with sharper edges,” Tywin replied smoothly, already walking away. “Go back to your wooden sword.”

Kevan couldn’t remember Tywin ever training with a sword, barely even picking up a blade. And yet, still, there could no doubt that Tywin was the best of them.

There was a fire inside his elder brother, Kevan remembered, a will that reshaped the world around him. Tywin seemed to simply wish it, and then he would see it done. Even Father struggled to challenge his eldest son.

“Father is planning on having you sent to Tarbeck Hall, to squire for Lord Walderan,” Tywin explained dourly, as they stepped towards the Stone Garden of the Rock. “Walderan offered for you to earn spurs next to Tion.”

“He… he did?”

“Aye, and I will not allow it.” His voice was grim. “Lord Walderan overreaches himself, he wants a son of Lannister as a hostage, not a squire. No, brother – I will not permit you to be taken to Tarbeck Hall.”

It would likely be another argument against Father again, another shouting match until Lord Tytos was red in the face. “I…” Kevan’s throat choked, trying to think of an alternative. “What of Lord Roger Reyne? He was looking to take a squire.”

Lord Roger was one of the finest warriors of the west. Ser Kevan would have been proud to squire for him, but Tywin’s gaze just darkened at the very suggestion.

“The Red Lion?” Tywin’s lips thinned, and the shadows of Casterly Rock cast a sharp scowl over his features as they walked into the castle proper. “I think not. House Reyne is too grasping by far,
and Ellyn Reyne made a mummer’s stage of Casterly Rock. They make japes of us, and laugh behind our backs. She and her house have much to answer for – they will get naught more than what they deserve from Lannister.”

Kevan’s mouth flapped slightly, but he didn’t know how to reply. Tywin spoke with such hostility towards a slight decades past, but who was Kevan to advise his brother on such a matter?

“No, I say that Ser Humfrey Swyft would be better for your knighthood,” Tywin continued without pause. “He is young and bold, not an old man. Ser Humfrey will see you trained with steel, while you’d only be serving wine for Lord Walderan. You should earn your spurs quickly, Kevan; this realm is changing and we must be ready for it.” Tywin turned to look at him, raising a doubtful eyebrow. “And you are too old to be playing with wooden swords, brother.”

“I…” I enjoy sparring with Tygett. “You are right.” Kevan nodded. “I will be more mindful.”

Tywin nodded. “Come, there is much to discuss,” Tywin ordered, turning around and striding away. “I hear news from Tyrosh that the Black Dragon is stirring again. An alliance has said to have formed in the Disputed Lands, and this Maelys the Monstrous,” Tywin said with a quiet scoff, “has murdered his cousin Daemon for control of the Golden Company, and chased his sisters into exile. There could be war in less than a year, and House Lannister will be ready for it.”

Even as a boy, Tywin had been strong. Tygett had grown to be a fury with a blade, Gerion had been taller and bolder, and yet Tywin was always the strongest. House Lannister had been in decline under Father’s rule, but Tywin brought their family to strength after strength.

The scene blurred, the memory fading. His entire life, all that time following. He had fought in over a half a dozen wars in his lifetime, seen dozens of battles, commanded thousands of men, and he had been behind Tywin every step of the way.

Kevan had always been the little brother.

Perhaps if Tywin were still here, none of this would have happened. Tywin had been the great lion, the protector of the pride. Tywin wouldn’t have lingered for so long outside the Red Keep’s gates, begging with Tyrells, torn in indecision. In cowardice.

Tywin had been the one born to rule, to lead; not him.

Ser Kevan just felt numb. He couldn’t even feel his hands as they squeezed around Cersei’s throat. His heart was drumming, his body was trembling, and there was just so much rage… he could do nothing but squeeze.

All of that frustration, the anger, the despair… it was like he could squeeze it all into Cersei through his fingers.

He couldn’t hear Cersei gag through the pounding of his blood. He couldn’t hear a thing. He squeezed until her bloody face turned purple, and he watched her eyes bulge. They felt like somebody else’s hands.

Kevan’s entire life flashed before his eyes in that moment. He remembered the best times in his life; the first time he saw his wife, the first time he held his son, the moment he felt his daughter’s fingers curled upon his. Cornfield wasn’t a grand castle like Casterly Rock, it didn’t have vaults of gold or great tunnels, but it was warm and homely, surrounded by fields of grain overlooking Red Lake. Kevan would have been happy settling down in his little keep with his family, with his wife and his twin boys, and his sweet little baby girl…
His brother had wanted the world, but Kevan had only ever wanted his family.

Tywin had loved his family too, but it had been a different sort of love. Tywin had idolised Joanna since the first moment he saw her as children. Their cousin had been beautiful and intelligent and radiant, the only woman in the world that could match Tywin’s strength of will. Tywin had gone nose to nose with his liege over Joanna, drawing the ire of his king as he courted her. Joanna was the only woman Tywin had ever had to chase, the only woman who could defy him.

Even after that incident with Aerys, Tywin had still loved her beyond all measure.

There had been a series of whores after Joanna’s death – most of them Kevan had provided, all under the utmost discretion – but Tywin had never married again, because no other woman could replace the void that Joanna had left behind.

Tywin had always judged Jaime as a younger version of himself, no matter the boy’s balking. In a manner alike, Tywin had only ever compared Cersei to Joanna. For so many years, Tywin had educated, empowered, and moulded them both that they might carry on his family’s legacy…

Both of the twins fell lacking to their father’s expectations.

“She drives me to despair, that girl,” Tywin had admitted to Kevan once; in a rare, rare moment that his brother lowered his guard. Tywin looked exhausted, slumping his shoulders in a way he never did except in the most trusted of company. “She challenges me on every front, and it seems half my life is spent trying to clean up her messes. There are times I wish I could just throttle that child.”

_They always said that I never had a thought that Tywin did not have first._

His hands finally slackened and Cersei dropped to the ground. Kevan stared in numb, quiet horror, and then stepped over the corpse.

_All I ever wanted was that small keep by the cornfields, with my flat-chested and homely wife, and my mewling children, _he thought hollowly. _All I ever…_

Yet his wife was dead, hung outside the cornfields along with his son and his baby girl. His brothers were dead, his cousins and his nephews…

The thought of his eldest son… his pride, his love… the thought of that scarred creature flailing before the Iron Throne…

He walked numbly up the stairs towards the top of the tower, to the chamber of the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. He shambled into the Round Room and the weirwood shield table, not even glancing at the central podium on which rested the White Book.

His hands were red with queen’s blood, red dripping over white. He ambled through the empty rooms as quickly as he could, wheezing with every step. To think that, once, Kevan had dreamt of serving here… dreamt of taking a white cloak of his own…

He stepped out onto the balcony, and looked down over the world. The city was a sea of smoke and fire, roiling in the distance so far beneath him. His eyes flickered, from one horror to the next.

Nothing remained of the Great Sept of Baelor. Flea Bottom, the Muddy Way, Merchant’s Circle, the Street of Steel, Cobbler’s Square… it was all incinerated. An ocean of viridian fire and a storm of smoke.
The Street of Sisters was consumed by a pit of fire, glowing like something bursting from the seventh hell. All around the former hall of the Alchemist’s Guild, there was nothing but an inferno, a hell of flames reaching for the sky.

*The city is destroyed.* Wildfire rained from above, and even from here he could taste the ash on his tongue. There was no sun, there was no sky. There was only a thick and greasy cloud of ash, looming over the pyre of the world.

In the distance, through the smoke and over the Blackwater, he could see the shadow of the army. Aegon Targaryen was already at the walls. The dragon reborn, and the lions slaughtered before its claws.

His family’s legacy began at the Sack of King’s Landing. Perhaps it was only fitting it should end the same way.

Everything that Tywin had ever built, everything he had ever worked for… it was all going up in flames. *I’m sorry, brother,* Kevan thought numbly. *I’m sorry!*

The thick black smoke blocking out the sun felt like Tywin’s shadow above him, looming over them all. Ser Kevan stood atop the tower, staring across the burning cityscape.

*We’re all going to one of seven hells anyways. Might as well as choose this one.*

He closed his eyes, and took a step forward off the balcony of the White Tower. The wind screamed in his ears, and the smoke and fire rushed up to meet him.

*I’m sorry, Tywin. I’m so sorry.*

Chapter End Notes

**Author Notes:**

Well, I tried to get this out for Halloween, but I'm a bit late. Happy Halloween anyway.

Quick note about the timeframe: the story started its divergence at around 20/10 299 AC. We are now on the 1/3 301 AC. There's been a few places where I've fiddled with travel distances and synchronicity, but overall I think I've kept the story fairly in-line. It also means that a large chunk of events around Winterfell and around King's Landing have been running pretty much simultaneous with each other. I'm planning on jumping back to Jon where we left him before the southern interlude, for the last arc of the story.

Overall, I intended on this book taking about 400,000 words (roughly the size of canon books), but it looks like I'm way over and it will be around 800,000. I'm not happy about that, but, in my defence, I can safely say that I have fulfilled the promise I gave on chapter 1 - this story has most certainly been written faster than the Winds of Winter.

I'm also planning on going backwards in time slightly at the very start of the next
book, to resolve events happening in Meereen.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

The taking of the Iron Throne, and the justice of the crown...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Hand of the King

It was a cool and grim day when the two armies met on the battlefield. The fields were green and the grass slick with dew, and the rosroad was left a muddy squelch by the stomping of boots. The sun was bright but a cold, sharp wind cut through the plains, and the oak and elm trees of the kingswood rippled in the faint wind.

The banners stretched out around Jon, and regiments of men partitioned into strips like a farmer’s fields. It was only very early morn, but they were all restless. Jon had forced himself to get some sleep the night before, but all around him he saw red and weary eyes.

It was the preparation, the wait for the battle, that was half as gruelling as the battle itself. The anticipation was like a bowstring shivering under the pressure, the arrow begging for release.

There was already some fighting on the fields and in the treelines – but only skirmishes really. Jon could hear bowstrings snapping in the distance, like the chirping of insects. The enemy’s scouts were clashing in the treelines against Black Balaq’s scouts; maybe a few dozen men testing the other’s bow range. The rose lord is probing us, and us them. Both sides were searching for weaknesses while they scouted out the fields and woods, but the bulk of the men just stood and waited on the road. Watching.

Jon Connington was on the rear ranks surrounded by the reserves, as he stood upon a platform to stare out over the field, built from barrels and wooden crates stacked on top of each other. Many of the company’s commanders stood with him; Harry Strickland, Lord Clement Piper, Lord Caspor Wylde, Lord Lester Morrigen, Lord Tristan Darry, Lysono Maar, Ser Ronald Vance, Ser Duncan Strong and Ser Pykewood Peake waiting in various states of unease. Squires and pages served wine and smoked mutton, but there was little talk and more silence.

“Watkyn!” Harry Strickland called to his squire. “Bring some of those pastries we have in the pantry. I feel the need for something sweet.” He looked to Lord Clement Piper, standing next to him. “Would you care for a treat, my lord?”

“I think not,” Lord Clement replied chilly. Connington glanced at Harry, but he didn’t speak.

“I can never stand going into battle on an empty stomach,” Harry tutted, as he swallowed a great gulp of wine. “I find that a bit of a feast beforehand helps it go a lot faster.”

There was no reply. The squire, Watkyn, tottered up a few seconds later, bringing a platter of pastries. Watkyn moved to offer Jon one, but then he met the lord’s gaze and quickly retreated.

“How long is the rose lord going to make us wait?” Ser Pykewood Peake complained, as he paced.
“As long as he chooses to,” Lord Connington replied, standing firm and stoic. “I am in no rush.”

He remembered Myles Toyne once japed that every battle was like a woman. Jon had bristled with the comment at the time, but there was some truth to it; every battle did have its own taste, its own experience. Some were quick and dirty in backstreets, but others were glorious, passionate affairs that defined a man’s life. Jon Connington had seen a dozen wars and as many conflicts, but only five true battles. This was his sixth.

His first, the Battle of the Bells, had been frantic, rushed and hectic – so crazed that it felt like the world was on fire. His men had charged through the Stony Sept to the panicked chiming of the bells, as loud as his heartbeat. They had kicked down the doors and ravaged every building in the town, and then wrestled and heaved with the rebels in the town square. Jon had been young then; full of youth and arrogance.

And, like any affair, the Battle of the Bells had left Jon shamed and bitter by the end of it. The battle that ruined me.

The Battle of the Roseroad had yet to begin, but it already had a different taste to it. It felt slow, careful, and more forceful. The two armies had spent days preparing, and they came together gradually. Jon was more experienced now; he led from the rear, surveyed the whole of the battlefield with his own eyes, and commanded from afar. Even with the first boom of horns and the stomping feet of men, Jon’s passions were cold and muted. His heartbeat barely even twitched.

It was slow and measured. The Reachmen wanted to get to Oldtown, and the Golden Company wanted to reach King’s Landing. There was no uncertainty; just two hosts of men blocking the other’s way.

They had been creeping towards each other slowly, barely half a mile between them. The army that abandoned their defensive formations to attack first would lose an advantage. So, instead, they both waited. Who will blink first?

“Lord Connington,” a squire called, running up the steps and bowing. “Lord Connington!”

The boy was young, with bright silver blond hair that was distinctive in any light. Oshio, Jon recalled as he turned and frowned. “Your armour is ready, Lord Hand,” Oshio explained, bowing deeply again.

Jon only nodded. He stepped down from the platform, and went to go get dressed. He forced himself to keep his gait smooth and calm. No rush, he ordered to his body with pure force of will.

He walked straight towards a large pavilion, marked by the red dragon of the king. All around him he heard the drumbeat of hammers; their blacksmiths had been working day and night. Even on the eve of the battle, there were still countless swords to be sharpened and platemail to be battered. Camp followers and washerwomen fletched arrows, and the last-minute whores would be walking bow-legged. The grounds were filled with knights strapping on metal, and squires rushing around frantically.

Lord Connington had been quite prepared to go into battle wearing chainmail and boiled leathers, but King Aegon insisted on having full plate commissioned for his Hand. Jon had conceded that full armour was prudent, he could not object.

There was a crowd as he approached the pavilion, and he saw the four white cloaks standing stiffly outside. Aegon’s Kingsguard had grown recently, with two solid additions named; Ser Tristan Ryger and Ser Olyvar Yronwood. Ser Tristan was young, but newly knighted and a close friend to
Lord Tully – an ideal companion to appease the riverlords. Ser Olyvar was the grandson of Lord Anders Yronwood, and a large and well-built man with a stocky frame. Both of noble blood, both of good standing – far better than the first two that Aegon chose.

There was a crowd around the pavilion, with Ser Lymond Pease and Ser Torman Peake both petitioning king’s attention. The white cloaks kept them all others back, but nobody dared to stop the Hand of the King as Lord Connington stepped through.

As he stepped into the royal pavilion, he saw the king being strapped for war, and Jon’s breath froze.

“My Lord Hand,” Aegon called, and Jon momentarily faltered.

King Aegon Targaryen looked like the Conqueror reborn. His armour was stunning; a masterpiece from a dozen smiths. King Aegon wore black steel with a golden trim, and his gauntlets, greaves and pauldrons bore jagged barbs stretching outwards; the metal so smooth the points rippled like fire and making his armour horned and jagged like a dragon’s scales.

The black was highlighted by a striking exuberance of gold, and the king wore a red cape and surcoat bearing his family’s colours. There were even ridges protruding from the back of the breastplate, steel shaped like stubby wings from his shoulderblades.

“Well,” Aegon said softly, a smile spreading over his lips. “What do you think?”

Jon blinked. His gaze flickered towards the helm lying by a stool – a black full helm shaped like a dragon’s maw – with great white diamond eyes. He had expected rubies, but instead Aegon’s armour was decorated in diamonds and dark sapphires. White and violet against black and gold.

It took five of the king’s squires to mount the armour upon him, struggling with the clasps and intricate fastenings. There were more cutlets, gorgets, spaulders, gardbraces and couters than Jon had ever seen – so much gilded steel fitting together seamlessly.

You could buy a castle for that armour’s worth. The king looked twice the size with it all strapped on to him. “It is… the steel will be too heavy, Your Grace.”

“The metal is very light,” Aegon reassured. “Cumbersome, yes, but I’m told that nothing will grant me better protection.”

Jon paused. “Is that another gift from our friends in Pentos?” he asked.

“Yes, Myrish workmanship, none finer,” Aegon nodded. Those magisters are paying a king’s ransom towards our campaign.

Aegon waved his squires away, and stepped forward. The plate armour was so expertly sized that all the metal didn’t even rattle. It looked more ceremonial over practical for what Jon was comfortable with, but on pure extravagance alone…

Aegon grinned, and he looked stunning. Young and handsome and bold. By the Gods, Rhaegar.

“You should get dressed quickly, my lord,” Aegon advised. “It seems restless outside.”

“More bluster than threat, I think, Your Grace.” He was still looking at the armour, trying to imagine Rhaegar wearing it. “It is a common technique; antagonise your foe by constantly threatening the attack. They are sending out scouts, they are moving their horses through their camp, but no charge comes. Nothing but bloodless skirmishes so far, but they hope to torture us
with anticipation."

“It is working,” Aegon said, quietly grimacing. “I have not slept soundly for near two nights.”

“And yet they are hurting too,” Jon said firmly. “They have the larger army, so why do they waste time with such games? No, let them taunt – I will not be the one to attack first.”

“The queen’s trial?” Aegon asked.

“Either today or tomorrow, I believe. I assure you that the rose lord will be distracted.”

“Very well,” Aegon said, taking a deep breath. “It is… I have never been this close to the Iron Throne in eighteen years. And many in the Golden Company have been waiting their entire lives. This moment, it’s just so…”

Jon paused. “Are you prepared, Your Grace?”

“I am.”

“We are still at a disadvantage in numbers,” Lord Connington warned. “We must counter that with patience and calm.”

“And do you fear I might charge against the enemy single-handedly?” Aegon retorted. His hand instinctively moved closer to his hip, hovering over the injury on his thigh. “Worry not, I learn from my mistakes. I shall by sticking firmly to the formation and the battle-plan. I know my place in this battle.”

Aegon’s gaze turned towards the far side of the tent, where Blackfyre sat upon a satin cushion, still sealed in its pine box. As many guards had been assigned to that blade as there were protecting the king. Aegon had yet to wield Blackfyre in public, but the moment was soon.

“Already the rumours of my sword have started to spread,” Aegon explained, a smile on his lips. “I have shown it to my commanders, and the talk is spreading through camp. When I ride out holding my family’s blade, the men will cheer and the enemy will falter.”

_They will indeed._ Yet Jon still couldn’t relax. “And where will you be riding?” he pressed.

The king chuckled. “You worry worse than an old hen, Lord Hand,” he teased. “Perhaps we should reconsider your sigil.”

He ignored the jest. “Your presence on the battlefield will help rally the troops, but do not lose sight of the risks. We must consider the stakes.”

Jon did not trust the gods. It would be the ultimate cruelty for them to come so far, but for the king to die in battle outside the gates of the capital. Jon had nightmares imagining that moment – Aegon’s death in some freak accident on the battlefield. Perhaps an arrow to the back of the head. _I must stop that from happening._

“Oh, I have,” Aegon said, turning solemn. “I know what we are fighting for, believe me. I have rehearsed the route with the Kingsguard, the commanders are all aware; I shall ride in formation from across the archers to the reserves, and then I shall do rounds of our camp with the royal regiment behind me. I shall reinforce the reserves, and ensure that every man can see my presence. When it comes time to charge, I shall swap my horse for an elephant and ride out with the second rank.”
“The fourth rank,” Jon argued. “The second rank will be too close to the arrow rain.” *I do not want you within fifty yards of danger.*

The king shook his head, long silver hair wafting. “There we must disagree,” Aegon said firmly. “I promised not to seek out danger, but you are fooling yourself, Lord Hand, if you think I will run from it either. I shall be in my proper place in the battle.”

“Your Grace—”

“No, Lord Hand,” Aegon said firmly. “I will not let the men view me as a cowardly king. There are times when I think you would prefer if I was sent off to the fall-back camp along with Arianne and the women.”

*I would, actually.* They had left their previous extremely well-fortified camp several leagues down the roseroad, and any not involved in the battle had retreated there. The Princess of Dorne tried to protest, but Jon had refused to allow Arianne or her companions on the battlefield. If the battle went badly, then the Golden Company would be retreating back to that camp too.

Jon could have argued, but he knew it was useless. The king was as stubborn as his father.

*Aegon Targaryen is a good man, strong and decent,* he thought. Sometimes, though, it seemed like decency was the bane for any king or commander. A leader couldn’t care about what was right or moral – a leader could focus only on what was necessary.

He heard shouts calling for the king. Aegon stood in his glorious armour, and moved to pick up his sword. He held up Blackfyre in both hands as if it were a holy relic. His lips were pursed, his eyes narrowed. “I shall see you on the battlefield, Griff,” Aegon whispered, trembling slightly in quiet apprehension, and then stepped out of the tent.

Jon was left standing alone in the pavilion, and he took a deep breath.

“You are more important than all others,” Lord Connington had told Aegon once, after the siege of Storm’s End, while the king lay pale and bloody in the infirmary bed. “Anybody else, myself included, is expendable and replaceable. But if *you* die, then this whole war is lost. The kingdom will be doomed, and your family will end. You risk more than just your own life.”

“I cannot expect men to fight for me if I won’t fight myself,” Aegon had protested, puffing his chest out even while smeared in bloody bandages. “I have a duty to them! The men under me deserve better than a craven of a king!”

“They deserve *nothing!*” Jon had almost screamed. “Your first duty is to the realm, not to a battle. And for that you *must* stay alive, my king.” His voice had flickered. “Every boy wants to be a hero, but a king must learn sacrifice. Sometimes we must sacrifice the boy too.”

Aegon opened his mouth to yell, but Jon cut him off. “Your own mother knew that,” Jon insisted, “when she swapped you for the pisswater prince. She took another babe into her bedchamber and left you with someone else, but Elia knew that you needed to survive.” *The act had been greatest thing that Elia had ever done for Rhaegar.*

Aegon’s face had twisted, his jaw clenched in agony, but he didn’t object. Then the maester had arrived to bleed and cauterise Aegon’s messy arrow wound, using leeches and a burning poker.

*He will be a grand king,* Jon thought solemnly. A king that will triumph over monsters. *And I must see him on the path.*
Lord Connington’s own armour was sitting upon a mannequin at the far side of the pavilion. It was good steel, fit for any lord on the battlefield, but shabby and bare compared to the king’s. The metal was painted white and red, with two dancing griffins on the breastplate and a full-helm fashioned with wings protruding from the sides. It looked bright and colourful – in his youth, Jon would have happily ridden in such armour.

*It is armour for a younger man*, he thought with a suppressed sigh.

Two of Aegon’s squires came through the tent. They were both boys of twelve or thirteen; one was Dornish, the other from some riverlord. One from House Fowler, the other from Mooton, Jon recalled vaguely. “His Grace instructed us to help you dress, Lord Hand,” the Dornish squire said.

Jon didn’t even turn around, still staring at his armour. “Leave,” he ordered.

“My lord, you will need aid to fasten–”

“Leave.”

The squires faltered, but turned and walked away. It was only when he was alone in the pavilion that Jon’s posture slackened.

Lord Connington had insisted on dressing himself in isolation – he had claimed it was his mediation before the battle, even. Plate armour was a bitch to fasten with only a single pair of hands, but Jon had managed so far with a great deal of struggle. The truth was that Jon couldn’t allow anyone to lay eyes on him without his gloves and his long-sleeved tunic.

As Jon pulled off his left glove, his skin crackled like stone, grey and black. He even couldn’t curl his fingers properly. He barely had any dexterity at all in his left hand – and even his right was turning stiff at as well. On his left arm, the dead, necrotic skin had reached all the way up to his shoulder, and now black veins were spreading over his chest.

Jon had kept the greyscale secret as best had he could, but it became more difficult with every passing day. Jon couldn’t hold a quill properly; he had to start dictating all of his letters to a maester to write. He had kept to a certain routine and kept himself aloof, such that nobody would notice that he could hardly grip.

Septa Lemore had been started to get suspicious, Jon knew, as he winced every time he dismounted a horse. Lord Connington had been forced to isolate himself, so none could recognise it like the Imp had.

*I might be able to hold a sword in the battle*, Jon considered, as he tried to flex his hands. *But only if I force my fingers around the hilt.* He most certainly wouldn’t be able to let go of the sword again. His fingers were as good as locked in position whenever they were moved. *My muscles are stiff and dead.*

It had been a year since the incident at the Bridge of Dreams now. Jon always knew that the greyscale would catch up to him, but he had prayed for more time than this. Some stonemen had ten years, but it looked like he would only have a few more months.

He cast another look at the armour. *One more battle*, he told himself. *Just a bit longer.*

It was a long and difficult exercise in frustration to force himself into the platemail despite one arm that was like stone. Jon had to squirm against the wall to push the hauberk on, and the gods alone knew how he was going to take it off.
He wore the armour, but he left the winged helmet behind on the stool.

Jon knew that he needed to start thinking about how it would happen. There could be a panic if the soldiers knew that an infected man was walking around their camp. Jon had taken care to wear thick gloves and keep himself isolated – but the Golden Company were veterans from Essos, and any world-worn man knew the threat that greyscale posed. They had all seen ships overcome by the plague, or the accursed villages of stonemen that haunted the Rhoyne. Greyscale and the grey plague occurred everywhere – from the damp Iron Islands to the jungles of Sothoros – but the waters of the Rhoyne were plagued by it more than most, and Volantis had struggled against its scourge for centuries. Mercenary companies were constantly offered coin by the Triarchs to cleanse the diseased lands with fire, but all but the most desperate sellswords refused such contracts. *If the Lord Hand is revealed to be plagued, then the men will start to wonder if the king is as well.*

Jon could not let that happen. Perhaps Lord Connington might fall in the battlefield, become a martyr to Aegon’s cause – except then his corpse would be collected and the silent sisters would recognise the disease, and the same problem would occur even after death. A better solution might be to just disappear, to walk off into the night and into the ocean – except then Aegon would suffer the eternal uncertainty over his fate.

*Just a bit longer,* he begged quietly to the gods. *I just need a bit longer, and then I’ll find a solution.*

As he finally stepped out the pavilion, he heard warhorns were blowing. It was past noon, the kingswood was tense, and he could feel the rousing of men.

“Lord Hand!” the Dornish page called, running through the sudden frenzy. “Your–”

“On my way,” Jon replied, breaking off into a jog as he rushed to the commander’s platform. The whole camp was rippling. The blacksmiths and farriers were finally packing up their trade, and rushing to retreat.

There were men flocking around the commander’s platform, but Jon forced his way through. “Is it time?” Jon demanded sharply.

“Black Balaq raised a flare,” Lord Tristan Darry replied. “The enemy is readying for a push.”

“Is it a feint?”

“I do not believe so,” Ser Pykewood said, peering through a Myrish glass as he shook his head. They could hear horns blasting across the field. *Then it is time.*

“Lord Tristan, Ser Duncan,” Lord Connington ordered, “take your positions on the left and right. Ser Ryger, move to support the cavalry. Signal Lorimas Mudd with the vanguard.”

The men nodded, and rushed off without another word. Jon took his position on the commander’s platform, grimacing slightly as he folded his arms. Next to him, Harry Strickland had his boots off to massage his feet one last time, while his squire fumbled to clear the platform.

The sun was high, and Jon focused on the battlefield as the enemy lines started to shift. They were stepping forward, thousands of men moving into position. It was a slow charge, a careful one.

Twenty-three thousand men stood against them – an ocean of bodies rumbling closer.

Ser Denys Strong, Ser Lymond Pease, Humfrey Stone, and Ser Lorimas Mudd led the van, Jon told
himself. Between his commanders, the seasoned officers had a lord’s fortune of gold on their arms. The Golden Company had fought more wars than most. They would not break.

Black Balaq commanded their archers and their bulwarks, and Jon had no fears concerning him. Black Balaq was meticulous in his duty, and had trained their bowmen to perfection. Already, the finest of their archers took their positions – launching arrows from great bows of goldenheart that had twice the range of any Westerosi bow.

The first wave of arrows rained from the sky as flickering shadows in the distance. Scores of bodies would be falling. And yet still, the flood of Reachmen never ceased.

Slowly, agonisingly slowly, the tides of men started to crash together. Lord Connington heard the bowstrings snap, like the rustling of a thousand leaves. The screams and war cries sounded like whispers on the wind.

They are all chanting different ballads, he realised. From the north, they were crying a Tyroshi marching song. From the south, they were chanting ‘Fire and Blood’. The Reachmen were shouting their own song – a sharp and rousing cry between the drumbeat of boots that Jon couldn’t recognise.

All of the noises blurred together, into one shapeless din.

Watching the battle from afar seemed so… distant. Subdued.

The first crash of men sent ripples through the camp, but Jon forced himself not to overreact. A battle wasn’t decided by the first wave or even the second. Wait, watch, he ordered himself, consider and then react.

“Signal the left flank,” Jon said to his frantic squire. “Move Ser Mudd’s command forward to assist the van.”

His hand felt numb. He couldn’t feel his grip; his fingers were stone. Still, he forced his hands around the hilt, and he didn’t let go.

“I see Rowan and Fossoway banners leading a cavalry charge on the north!” Lord Clement Piper called, looking through the spyglass. “Signal our horses to meet them.”

“Belay that!” Jon shouted sharply, causing Lord Clement to fluster. “We will not let them draw us into heavy battle. We have our battle lines and we will keep to them.”

“My lord, those cavalry could hurt our flanks unless we rout them!”

“Lord Yronwood is prepared to meet horses with spears,” Jon said firmly. “We hold the ranks and do not let them scatter us.”

He could see the Dornishmen shaping up to the west. Jon referred to Lord Yronwood, but he knew that, frustratingly, it was Obara Sand leading their front ranks of the spearmen. The bastard might be the only woman on the field today.

Even when the horrible woman fails me – and she will – Lord Anders Yronwood and Lord Franklyn Fowler will be more than capable of taking command, Lord Connington reminded himself.

“Unbowed, Unconquered!” the Dornishmen were booming, as their spears raised upwards. “For Elia, for Oberyn, for Dorne!”
On the front lines, the first charge seemed hesitant, careful. There was no great stampede of bodies, instead there were only two sides holding a wall of lances and daring the other to rush into them. The vanguard moved closer together step by step – long spears against long spears – all the while arrows rushed backwards and forwards overhead.

The bodies broke apart quickly, and it was less a great clash and more a frantic shuffle of spears and shield walls.

The conflict pressed against the centre hard initially, but then slowly spread outwards towards the left and right. Perhaps Lord Tarly was expecting the sellswords men to buckle in order to help the resist at the centre, but they didn’t. The Golden Company held position and waited for the fighting to reach them.

Lord Connington could see the battle formations writhe, but the lines bent and did not break. It was a dance of a thousand boots to the beat of warhorns.

The Tyrell forces tried to suffocate them, but the Golden Company held their formation. My officers are iron, Jon thought proudly, we will not lose in a contest of experience.

The first press was all on foot, a tightly pitched battle. The Fossoway cavalry harried them from the north, and then Crakehall cavalry circled from the southeast. The Tyrell forces have the numbers, it made sense for them to try to hold and encircle. This is a battle that will be decided from the fringes, not from the centre, Lord Connington decided.

Men were shouting to brace, but the enemy's cavalry didn’t charge. Instead they hovered just out of bow range – daring the Golden Company to follow – but no reply came. The Golden Company held their ground, and the mounted men didn’t dare to charge against such tight spears. Rather, their horses held position and waited for infantry to reinforce them.

From the hill, it looked as though the Tyrell were forming a glove to fit around the Company’s elliptical bulwark.

“We should signal a charge,” Ser Pykewood Peake insisted. “They’ve left themselves to dispersed – let us force a charge through their centre.”

Lord Connington considered it, counting to ten heartbeats. Never react instantly in battle, Myles Toyne had told him, always count to ten before any decision.

Then, Jon shook his head. “No. A charge could be effective, but it would leave us too exposed afterwards. Signal a slow retreat instead,” he ordered. “The centre falls back, the left and right supports them. Let us straighten the ranks.”

Ser Pykewood looked aghast. “Fall back? Why sacrifice position–”

“I’m in no rush,” Jon replied coolly. “Let us be patient, and let them charge against us.”

The orders were passed to the squires, who ran to the drummers and signallers. Fires were set up, and the warhorns echoed over the field to pass the instructions.

The Tyrells outnumber us by over nine thousand men, Jon thought. And yet Lord Tyrell must be eager to see us off – he is desperate to return to both the Reach and to resolve the situation in King’s Landing. The longer I delay him here, the more dire he will become.

The Golden Company knew the risks, but they would not give the rose lord the quick battle he needed. Instead, his men fell back, step by step, keeping their lances high and holding the Tyrell
The arrow shafts littered the fields like twigs around them – a field of wooden grass protruding upwards from the soil.

Lord Connington held no concerns on the skill of the Golden Company – they were four thousand six hundred of the most experienced mercenaries in the world, at the very heart of the army. They knew what they fought for, they had been working towards for this campaign for decades. Jon’s greatest worries were the other allies; there were five thousand Dornish spearmen, some three thousand men from riverlords and stormlords combined, plus another one thousand five hundred assembled sellswords from both Westeros and the Free Cities were being kept in reserve.

Jon felt confident in the Dornish, somewhat confident in the riverlords, but the sellswords were the greatest worry. They were unproven, unreliable and possibly even disloyal – as lesser sellswords were wont to be. Lord Connington had taken care to structure the ranks accordingly.

The Reachmen kept on their push, but they didn’t commit themselves either. Their charges felt hesitant; restrained, testing the response. Black Balaq and his archers did their jobs fantastically – his men with goldenheart great bows firing shafts twice as far any others, while crossbowmen worked with such synchronicity it was beautiful. Their bowmen were wildly superior, and already Lord Connington could see the enemy bleeding for it.

*Lord Tarly will be trying to find the cracks in our ranks before he forces the spear,* Jon thought. *But can we find the cracks in his instead?*

All before him, there were a thousand clashes happening at once. The battle was twisting before his eyes – a courante of a thousand boots, horses and swords.

The battle didn’t stop. It turned towards a slow battle fought with arrows rather than tides of men, occasionally some slipping forward. Lances and shields held the enemy back, and the bowmen’s strings never stopped snapping. Jon could hear the commands of the serjeants, chanting instruction to a drumbeat. “Notch, draw, loose! Notch, draw, loose!”

The commands themselves were completely useless, but they still had to be chanted. The serjeants needed to give the bowmen their pace, to maintain discipline and ward off fear.

*Force the Tyrell men back, keeping them hesitating,* Jon thought. The Reachmen could charge the Golden Company, but the iron-tight front ranks promised that they would suffer for it.

Even despite their numbers, the Reachmen were not feeling so confident that they could risk committing fully to a push.

The hours passed slowly, every man tense. They huddled into their formations, crouching behind shields and sticking to their ground. The fighting was soft and the casualties were very light – perhaps a hundred or so – but the battle never ceased. A squire brought Jon a lunch of dried meat, and he broke his fast standing upright.

Approaching sunset, he glimpsed the enemy ranks rippling. Jon recognised what was happening as soon as he saw the banners in the distance fluttering. Black Balaq’s horn came a heartbeat later.

“They’re preparing a charge!” Lord Connington shouted, victoriously. “Ready the ranks to brace, move the reserves forward!”

The commanders broke apart quickly and abandoned their platform. Lord Connington rushed to mount up a horse, in case the reserves needed to charge. Harry Strickland went to reinforce the rear
lines. There was no doubt, no panic; just experienced men going about their task.

*So Lord Tarly grows tired of this dance first,* Jon thought. His intention was a good one – a solid half a day fighting to wear out their defence, and then a heavy attack to exploit superior numbers. And yet still, a cheer broke through the Golden Company’s ranks as the horns blew – a great cry that seemed taunting in the still air.

*Come on,* the cheers mocked. *Come and fight us.*

Jon mounted up his destrier, and his three personal guards raised a griffin banner behind him. Dick Cole, Malo Jayn, and Caspor Hill were all ready and waiting to ride next to the Lord Hand, to relay his orders and to keep him from harm.

Men were banging against shields, and a great call roared. “A griffin!” the men bellowed. “A griffin! A griffin!”

Despite himself, Lord Connington felt his lips curl into a smile.

As the lines surged, the war cry of House Connington merged with the boom of a Tyroshi war ballad. It was a loud and rousing chant broken by stomping of feet, but Lord Connington could barely make out the words.

He glimpsed green and red banners as the Tyrell men charged forward as a single, unstoppable tide. Lord Connington almost – *almost* – could have laughed. *You blinked first,* he wanted to scream, *you could have kept with the slow battle and tried to grind us down,* but *you prove that you are the most desperate.*

Even despite himself, his heart was pounding furiously in the moment. Jon was bellowing orders, shouting the same words over and over again. “*Hold the line!*” he was bellowing. “*Hold the line.*”

The charge came in two parts; a pincer movement of mounted men tried to ride around their bulwark at the same time the infantry charged at their centre. *Trying to split our attention,* Jon saw the red huntsman at the centre, while the Tyrell rose flew over the cavalry. *So Lord Tarly himself is leading the infantry push.* That told Jon that the infantry was the true threat, while the cavalry was just a distraction.

Quite often, inexperienced commanders zealously over-defended against cavalry while dismissing the threat of infantry. A more foolish general might have fallen for the ruse.

*Boom.* The lines crashed together, and it was hardly possible to make sense of anything.

The warhorns reached a fever pitch. Men were surging forward, locking shields and wrestling. The frenzy was being pushed backwards, until even the first of the reserves looked ready to join the fray.

His personal guards were struggling to keep order around him. One of them – Caspor Hill – took a stray arrow that whizzed straight into his skull. The man collapsed without a word, and there wasn’t even time to look twice.

Horses stampeded, while behind him he heard the trumpets as the war elephants prepared to charge. *Not yet,* Jon cursed. *It’s too early to commit ourselves fully.*

The bulwarks needed to hold until the Reachmen faltered, and only then the counterattack could begin. “*Hold the line!*” Jon boomed. “*Hold the line!*”
“Fire and Blood!” a cry came, cutting through the orchestra of chaos. “For justice! For the realm!”

A new tone of warhorns droned through with the rattle of drumbeats and hooves. Jon turned, and he saw King Aegon’s light blazing.

Even in the fading sun, the young king shone like a beacon as he rode through the field astride a great white destrier. Blackfyre was in his hands, the blade shining spectacularly. The sword was like fire itself, burning through the battlefield.

Everywhere Aegon rode, their ranks bolstered and cheered. “Hold the line!” Aegon cried, sweeping through the ranks. “Hold the lines and push them back!”

This time, Jon really did grin. The men were cheering and stomping, every single one of them crying the same thing.

“Fire and Blood! Fire and Blood! Fire and Blood!”

Jon could see his cavalry sweeping over the battlefield, side to side. The infantry were pushing harder, coming together. Morale was everything in a battle like this.

The force of knights that Aegon led was the reserve horse – they bolstered and rode back and forth across the left and right, very visible from his own side, but it was only rarely that they collided with enemy lines. The emergency force, to respond wherever they were needed the most.

That is how much the king has grown, Jon thought with a stab of pure pride. Although the smallfolk often thought differently, it was not a king’s place to lead from the front. True kings contributed best from the rear; bolstering their forces forward, but keeping themselves safe from harm at all costs.

The push didn’t stop, but Jon could feel the tide waning. It was all so frantic and loud – Lord Connington couldn’t make sense of anything he saw or heard – but he could feel the flow of the battle around him.

Time and time again, the armies crashed against each other. Aegon swept back and forth, while Lord Connington watched as the arrows rained and rained, while the tides of men waxed and waned backwards and forward. Losing ground and holding it, charging and bracing.

It was a dance of tens of thousands of men scattered across the plains. A gruelling allemande that lasted hours, with footsteps dancing to the beat of war drums and bellowing orders.

He could feel the weariness in the air, the perfume of sweat and fatigue staining the ground. After a full day of fighting it became less a fight and more a dogged, weary brawl – the two forces grinding against each other hour after hour. Patrols and commands had to switch – men taking turns retreating to the reserves to rest and recover while the other ranks stepped forward to take their place.

It transformed into a battle fought by attrition. The Golden Company was falling backwards and losing ground, but the Tyrell army was bleeding more for every step.

And yet Aegon never stopped. He swapped horses three times and made a hundred laps of the battlefield, yet the king was relentless. It was exhausting work, but Aegon refused to break. So long as the king is riding, then the men have heart.

As night fell, the Golden Company’s counterattack finally began. Jon felt the change in the air. “Forward!” Jon bellowed, and others took up the cry. “Forward, forward!”
It was a dark night, a new moon black in the starless sky. There were great torches alit, filling the air with flickering smoky flames. The Tyrell forces had pushed too far, their men were left exhausted and weary. Perhaps they had expecting a lull after such a long day of fighting, but the Golden Company replied with force and renewed vigour.

Great horns blew over the field. He heard the trumpeting split the sky as the war elephants finally stepped into the field. They were giant shadows, strong and armoured. The grey beasts were clad in red and gold plate armour draping off their bodies and skulls, their eyes covered by steel plate. Metal elephant swords were fastened to their tusk – thick blades like a farmer's plough through a field of bodies.

The whole army rippled. They all knew the signal – as soon as the elephants stepped forward, it was time for the defence to fall back and the charge to begin.

Fifty-six war elephants entered the field, in such tight rank it was like a solid wall rumbling forward. Two Tyroshi crossbowmen stood atop each beast, protected by armored howdahs, unleashing one deadly salvo after another. The mercenaries moved with such perfect synchronization, switching between pairs to reload and fire as the iron rain fell.

And Jon saw him again. Aegon balanced standing proud and upright atop one of the elephants, with Blackfyre in one hand and a blazing torch in the other.

“For the realm!” Aegon Targaryen cried. “For justice! For fire and blood!”

The army’s cheer shook the ground. Jon’s head spun. Now is the time. “Push forward!” Lord Connington ordered. “Bring the reserves into battle! We flank the elephants from the west, force our way through!”

His destrier stirred and neighed amidst all the noise, but Jon forced the horse forward through the stampeding bodies. Both of his gauntleted hands were on his sword, his spurs digging into the horse’s side.

He couldn’t see anything in the wave of bodies, but he could feel the change in the flow. His men were pushing forward, the Reach soldiers were falling backwards. Even the bravest spearman would falter trying to fight back the wall of elephants.

All it took was a single crack, to shatter a shield.

He felt the moment their men crashed together, and the elephants didn’t stop. Company soldiers were pushing through the lances and shields, charging into their lines around giant stomping feet. Jon was mounted while most of his soldiers were afoot, keeping to the back. He never came within fifty feet of an enemy soldier, but he saw the corpses lying on the ground.

The soldiers had to stampeded over the bodies, mutilated every corpse into a bloody pulp under thousands of boots. The grassy fields were turned to red and brown mush.

He heard the Reach’s warhorns change tone. The drumbeats became quicker, more desperate, trying to recover. Jon watched as Ser Will Cole and Ser Torman Peake ordered hundreds of men to rush forward with sharpened stakes to recover their battelines. Swords were used as axes and shields as hammers as the beat the logs into the earth and sharpened them to points.

With a blast of the horn, Black Balaq and his archers set up a new position, while Talek halted the elephants. The great beasts were trembling and snorting, while men hacked all around them. The elephants were movable fortifications – better than towers when it came to securing the battlefield.
In the last hour, there had been more casualties than during the entire day.

The battle waxed and waned like the ocean. The Golden Company had fallen backwards during the day, but recovered ground and then some in the night.

All through the battle, Jon never even once swung his sword at the enemy.

The night blurred. Men might have collapsed from fatigue, but others were screaming warsongs to keep them awake. There were no more great pushes; instead there was nothing but frenzied skirmishes in the dark. It was a night of screaming and chaotic movement.

Come the first light of morning, Jon saw the Tyrell host retreat backwards towards the kingsroad. Jon abandoned his mount to lead from the ground and near the front. The stink of weariness filled the air – every face he saw was sweaty, muddy and bloody.

And yet men were grinning too, Jon noticed. Even when they were bloody and fatigued, the Company men grinned.

Their horses had to retire, and the backline moved to the front. Most of their men would need to rest, but more than a few of their veteran commanders would fight for days straight. Now can Lord Tyrell’s commanders say the same?

Harry Strickland took command of the battlefield, and he held himself capably. For all Jon disliked the coincounter, Harry did a commendable job of recovering the perimeter, fortifying the field and organising their ranks again.

Lord Connington only met Aegon again towards noon, near the rebuilt spike wall. “Lord Hand!” his king called. The young man’s eyes were bloodshot, and his black armour was shivering through nerves. “What of our losses?”

“I’d guess near three thousand, Your Grace, maybe five hundred of those as casualties,” Jon replied. Most losses would be from wounds or from panic, rather than death. “And perhaps four thousand of theirs.”

Aegon blinked, caught off-guard. “Then we are eleven thousand against nineteen.”

“Do not worry over the numbers, Your Grace. War is not arithmetic,” Lord Connington warned. “They cannot afford those sort of losses, and neither can we. Their men will be disheartened, while ours are vigorous. They have fled, and ours are standing strong.”

“We did not break,” Aegon said, the smile drifting over his face. “We held them off.”

“We did. We did not break during the day, and we hurt them in the night,” Lord Connington said. “They will hope to beat us by attrition, but I wager they’ll lose first.”

“Then let us go collect your winnings,” Aegon said, still grinning.


Later that very morning, the Golden Company set out again. The bulk of their men had to be left behind to rest and recover with the wounded, but Lord Connington and King Aegon took the most well-rested men to give chase to the Reach army. The enemy’s host had scattered – Hightower and Redwyne men had been left behind in the kingswood, and Black Balaq led the forces to hold them.

After the big clash, their armies split apart into half a dozen smaller skirmishes. It was not
organised, it turned messy and chaotic.

Lord Connington rode to join another battle at the crossroads between the roseroad and the kingswood; against Lannister and Tyrell men trying to hold their fall-back position and muster their men. Dornish soldiers were already in battle by the time they arrived, but then the king’s banners rose over the road.

Obara Sand would be leading the vanguard, along with Fowler, Yronwood and Vanth. Jon saw the flimsy few arrows shooting over the trees.

King Aegon rode with a heavy force of seasoned knights galloping through the woods. The red and black dragon flapped in the wind, and the resistance broke around it. The battle ended swiftly, with more frantic surrenders and deserters fleeing through the woods, rather than death.

As he passed, Lord Connington made note of a serjeant, Ser Brendel Byrne, rallying the spearmen, but Aegon was already pushing onto the next skirmish.

The whole morning was a frenzy of activity. A small village sat by the kingsroad, the whole place scattered with boots and discarded tents. The villagers had already fled, but it looked like Lord Tyrell had been using the village inn for his command. There was a futilely small garrison of Ambrose men still holding it, but the soldiers lay down their arms and surrendered as the knights charged through. Their commander – some knight bearing the red ants of House Ambrose – yielded and was forced onto the muddy ground at spearpoint.

“The rose lord is fleeing to the Blackwater!” Ser Pykewood Peake shouted, and a cheer rose from their men. Knights were riding circles, wafting the Targaryen banner around the king. “He runs!”

“Secure the ground!” Jon Connington boomed, cutting off all cheer. “No man rests until the area is secure! The rose lord could turn around just as easily, and I do not want to hear a single cheer or laughter until our position is secure.” He glared at Ser Pykewood. “There will be no merriment until our victory is guaranteed, do you understand?”

Some of the men faltered, but beside him King Aegon rode through the activity. “The Lord Hand gave you an order,” the king commanded, and his voice was stern too. Clever boy. Never start cheering too early.

Jon had once thought his victory at the Battle of the Bells was guaranteed, only for Ned Stark and Jon Arryn to snatch it from him. He would not make the same mistake twice.

They passed through the three small villages that morning, and they saw wide eyes of smallfolk staring upwards at the mounted men galloping through the woods. “The dragon has returned!” their criers screamed. “The dragon has returned!”

“The King That Holds the Sword!” another yelled. “Targaryen legacy returned – the Conqueror’s Heir!”

Aegon was wielding Blackfyre for all to see, and they were chanting his name. He could feel the energy in the air, the power that radiated from the sword. The sword was important – it made Aegon stronger and surer just by holding it. It shone and rippled like a blazing torch of shadow-fire in his hands. The smallfolk would be chanting Aegon’s name, Lord Connington knew they would.

Even despite Lord Connington’s warnings, their men felt elated. They were so pumped with vigour and victory that they rode long and hard through the kingswood. If it hadn’t been for the greyscale, Jon’s hands would have been trembling too. His fingers were locked into fists around the horse’s
Towards noon, their scouts reported the retreating shape of Mace Tyrell’s host over the horizon, but Jon knew that those men must be worn ragged; the Tyrell men had been fleeing all night after a long battle.

Despite his caution, many of their men wanted to ride out quickly to harry the retreating host. Jon had been deliberating it, but then Lorimas Mudd brought news of the Reach’s rearguard trying to hold a position on the kingsroad. Two and a half thousand men had been left behind to blockade the road and cover their army’s escape, and King Aegon mustered to meet them with strength.

Lord Connington saw the banners of Tyrell, Rowan and Redwyne stabbed into the earth. Now why those houses specifically? Jon wondered vaguely. It was strange to see the lord paramount’s own soldiers and strongest allies left behind in such a sacrificial position.

The Golden Company was scattered too, but King Aegon still managed to gather together five hundred knights, thirty elephants and over two thousand men to ride against them. The first day of fighting had been crazed and intense, but the second day was dogged and sprawled.

The fighting on the roads was hectic in the wake of the retreating army. Arrows snapped, soldiers marched, and horses screamed.

Aegon held himself beautifully. Thrice, Lord Connington raised his voice to shout orders, only for the king to beat himself to it. This time, Lord Connington took position at the rear, for King Aegon to lead from the front.

The Hand of the King could only stare as Aegon mounted upon Toyne – to lead a fury of knights against the blockade. Black Balaq was already in position; his goldenheart bowmen and Myrish crossbowmen holding themselves with supreme discipline to support the charge.

Jon watched from the rear as the Reachmen scattered under the fury of their elephants. It was a frantic brawl and a clash of spears and shields, but the Golden Company had the momentum from the very first push. Aegon himself led the front rank against the blockade, but the Reachmen had already scattered.

The Reach’s knights led their resistance valiantly, but the courage of men-at-arms broke down before their charge. The battle was short and sweet; and Lord Tarly sacrificed near two thousand men to ensure his escape.

Jon received news that that Harry Strickland, Ser Marq Mandrake, and Lord Anders Yronwood had all won their own victories throughout the kingswood.

The first day had been more or less equal, but on the second day it was a clear victory for Aegon Targaryen.

“Why does he retreat?” Aegon demanded, jumping off his horse. His brilliantly polished armour was now grimy with mud and blood. “They run for the Blackwater, why did they abandon the road so quickly?”

Jon was about to reply, but a shout beat him to it. “Your Grace!” a knight boomed from across the clearing. “Your Grace, you must see this!”

Lord Connington could have reprimanded the man for such a tone, but then his eyes turned to the horizon. They were clear of the trees of the kingswood, and they could finally see into the distance.
He felt the men ripple, and Aegon’s mouth parted open as he stared.

In the distance, over the shadow of the Blackwater, green and black smoke was rising into the sky. It was a pillar of greasy black climbing towards the heavens, blowing away from them over the coast. A solid mass of smoke, more than Jon had ever seen even from such a distance.

King’s Landing, Jon realised in shock. King’s Landing is burning.

There was a stunned quiet, but then the murmurs started to stir. The king looked to Jon. “What is that?” Aegon muttered in shock. “That smoke…?”

Jon’s jaw clenched. “I do not know,” he muttered lowly, before raising his voice. “But we have our priorities. We must secure the countryside and bar the rose lord from the kingsroad. Muster our forces, and approach slowly.”

Despite his words, Jon felt shaken. The city was in flames, and smoke gushed like the fires of hell. The smoke over the city kept on pluming for the entire day – greasy black and green, coiled like a dragon in the air. When the wind changed, a foul odour hovered over the lands, an unnatural stench like sulphur and salt that polluted the world for leagues around.

Jon had never known such a strong smell to travel so far. Even come nightfall, their scouts reported seeing blazes from over the walls. The fires blazed for an entire day and night.

King’s Landing burns. Even when they should have been celebrating their victory, the sight of that smoke set a dour mood over their camp. A blaze from the seven hells, one of the scouts muttered.

King Aegon wanted to ride forward to the city at all haste, but Lord Connington remained firm. “We hold position,” Lord Connington ordered. “And we let the city burn.”

The Great Sept was demolished in the flames, one of their outriders reported, and battles raged in the streets. Some said that the queen summoned demons to destroy the Faith. Others said that Stannis Baratheon attacked the city during the trial, and sacrificed the city to his Red God. One man was convinced that it was the Bastard King – that the dragon had brought fire and fury against the city.

Nobody knew for sure, they could only speculate.

Lord Casper Wylde, a man who had fought for Stannis on the Blackwater, was one who recognised the smoke. “Wildfire,” the lord said grimly, as he muttered out a prayer. “That’s wildfire right there.”

Aegon frowned. “Wildfire. The alchemist’s substance?” the king asked, and Lord Connington only nodded. “You can recognise it from only the smoke?”

“Oh aye,” Lord Wylde muttered. “I seen that smoke in my nightmares, Your Grace.”

Lord Connington himself had bad memories of wildfire, from Aerys’ reign. The Mad King had been obsessed with the cursed stuff.

The words caused the camp to darken. The alchemists and their cursed wildfire. If Great Sept burns, Jon thought slowly, then the queen is surely dead. Is that why Lord Tyrell retreated so quickly?

It took two days for Aegon’s forces to re-muster after the Battle of the Roseroad. Two frantic days
as the Golden Company crept cautiously through the countryside and farmland, towards the rush of the Blackwater over the horizon. Nearly every scattered remnant from Lord Tarly’s army began to surrender rather than resist after the second day, while Harry Strickland brought up supplies from the rear.

They saw columns of refugees fleeing the city. The smallfolk were fleeing in droves, while the Golden Company marched out of the kingswood.

Jon himself rode to the cliffs of the Blackwater Rush, to look upon the shadow of the city. It all looked black. From a distance, even the stones of the castle upon Aegon’s Hill were dark – the red was stained black from soot and ash. *Tis the Black Keep now*, Jon thought.

There was talk of besieging the city that night, but Jon demanded caution. They could not attack until they knew the situation in the capital, Lord Connington insisted. He would muster his army and move slowly, rather than rash action into the unknown.

The Golden Company was filled with seasoned officers, and yet still… the sight of that smoke had disturbed many sitting around the campfire. The smells seemed to linger in the air, a pungent odour more unnatural than anything he had ever tasted.

But on the third day, they saw seven riders trotting down the kingsroad towards them. Horns blasted, but it wasn’t an attack. The riders wore the armour of knights, but, instead of banners, these men flew a white flag. These knights had no lances, Jon noticed. Their eyes were grim, while Black Balaq met the arrivals on their perimeter and forced them to dismount.

“They say their names are Lord Mattis Rowan, Lord Arthur Ambrose, Ser Desmond Redwyne, Ser Roger Bulwer, Ser Bryan Graceford, Ser Lambert Turnberry and Ser Jon Fossoway, Your Grace,” Black Balaq reported, in his low and deep voice.

Harry Strickland frowned. “Those are quite some names.”

“What do they want?” Lord Connington demanded, as a gathering of serjeants and knights huddled around them.

Across the clearing, the Company men were binding the men’s wrists, just in case. “They were sent as envoys to bring a message,” Black Balaq explained. “Lord Tarly wishes to treat.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. “Lord Tarly,” he repeated. *Not the rose lord.* “His terms?”

“To meet in person, at first light on the morn.” The knight’s gaze turned to the king. “Lord Tarly wishes to meet you, Your Grace. He wishes to parley away from his army and ours – only six escorts to both him and you, he says, no more.”

Aegon’s eyes narrowed. “Is it trap?”

“Those men,” Black Balaq motioned to the highborn, “are to stay with us, until the parley is complete.”

Jon turned to look. Lord Mattis Rowan had a very sour look upon his face.

“If it is trap, it is a poor one,” Lord Connington noted. “He just gave us seven highborn hostages, and announced exactly where he will be. We could bring two dozen men, if we choose, and then we might capture or slay Lord Tarly.”

The king frowned. “But we won’t.”
“We won’t,” Lord Connington agreed. “Lord Tarly is desperate. His army was beaten, and his city burns. No, I feel this parley could be useful.”

There were mutters of agreement around them. “I agree,” Aegon said with a nod. “I will meet the Lord of Horn Hill. Where does he wish to meet us?”

Black Balaq repeated the message, and Lord Connington’s eyes narrowed.

*Is this Lord Tarly’s jape?* he wondered.

Early the next morn, King Aegon, Lord Connington, Ser Rolly Duckfield, Ser Daemon Sand, Ser Tristan Ryger, Ser Olyvar Yronwood, Lord Tristan Darry and Lord Clement Piper left to meet for the truce. Four of the Kingsguard and three noble lords – as requested, Aegon only brought seven men.

It left Harry Strickland in command, unfortunately, but Lord Connington ordered Black Balaq to take position with fifty of his best archers – just in case Lord Tarly’s intentions were duplicitous.

They set off before dawn, and followed the Blackwater north. As morning light rose, Jon recognised the fields overlooking King’s Landing.

“This is an insult,” Lord Tristan Darry muttered lowly as they rode. “To meet us *here*…”

“Perhaps,” Lord Connington admitted. “But perhaps it was just a matter of convenience. Lord Tarly needed a wide-open space away from the city – one with clear visibility and yet a distinctive enough landmark. It is a good a place as any.”

Lord Tristan didn’t reply, but his gaze was stiff.

In the distance, Jon recognised the hill of the Redgrass Field – the very site where the Black Dragon had fallen a hundred years ago.

*The was where the First Blackfyre Rebellion ended,* Jon thought quietly. The site of the Hammer and Anvil, where the Great Bastards had clashed, and where Daemon Blackfyre had fallen to Bloodraven’s arrows. This was where Aegor Rivers had picked up his half-brother’s sword, and where the Blackfyre crusade had begun.

The air was quiet as they saw the field. It felt solemn, even, riding through the long grass.

Despite its name, Redgrass Field was green now. Ten thousand men died here once, and they said that the field had been stained red with blood a hundred years ago. Maybe that was true, but after a century the field had turned back to green.

There had been pilgrims to this site, once, Jon had heard; pilgrims who paid homage to the Black Dragon. But now, it was nothing but a barren and downtrodden field approaching King’s Landing. They were a dozen leagues outside the city, but nobody had ever built upon this field.

Jon knew his history. He stared along the countryside, wondering if on this ground Daemon Blackfyre had clashed with Wyl Waynwood, and then the Knight of Ninestars, or the legendary fight with Ser Gwayne Corbray of the Kingsguard. He wondered where Bittersteel had fought Bloodraven, or where the Breakspear and the Anvil had launched their charge.

Jon saw the red huntsman of Tarly rising over a small group of men waiting for them. Lord Randyll Tarly was waiting upon a hill – perhaps that was the Weeping Ridge, the very same hill that Brynden Rivers and his Raven’s Teeth stood upon, as they showered the field in arrows and
delivered the fateful blow.

*This is a site of history,* Lord Connington thought quietly. He had no love for the Black Dragon, but he could not deny the legacy Daemon had left behind.

Despite his words, Tarly met them with only five guards around him. None of them were mounted.

The field was flat and open, but the riders still approached cautiously. Aegon was kept to the centre of their number, covered from sight and with his dragon helm to cover his silver hair. It was too much an opportunity to pass, but Jon hadn’t been able to shake the suspicion that this could be a trap, and the last thing he wanted was to expose his king to any bowman lying in wait.

Still, Lord Connington’s fears eased as he saw the lean and balding figure standing at the front of the bridge, grey-bearded and stern face, wearing boiled leather and a breastplate of grey steel. It had been nearly two decades since he had last seen the man, but Lord Randyll Tarly looked exactly the same.

*If Lord Tarly himself is here, then it is not a trap.* The lord would have sent a double rather than come himself.

His heavy-lined face was ageless, dark circles under his eyes and a jaw like an anvil. The Lord of Horn Hill wasn’t a big man – he was lean and short – but the lord held himself like one much taller.

“Lord Tarly,” Jon called coolly. *This is the man who has led the battle against me for the last week, killing thousands of my men.*

Doubtless Lord Tarly was thinking the same thing. “Lord Connington,” he greeted with an iron nod. “It has been a long time.”

“It has indeed,” Jon replied, pulling his horse to a stop and raising a curled hand. All hands were on weapons, but nobody moved. The dark red greatsword, Heartsbane, hung across Lord Tarly’s back, but the man didn’t reach for it. “Once we fought side by side.”

“I don’t recall ever fighting side by side,” Lord Tarly scoffed. “I recall a foolish young boy at Stony Sept, his army defeated. I crushed Robert Baratheon at Ashford and sent him fleeing, but you failed to capture Robert, and then Ned Stark tore your forces apart. If not for my reinforcements, I doubt you would have lived passed that day, Lord Connington.”

A younger man might have protested. Jon just nodded. “Yes,” Jon agreed. “I doubt I would have either.”

The vanguard from the Reach had most certainly helped the royalists retreat from the battle of Stony Sept in good order, although Lord Tarly himself had never attempted to take credit for that success. Lord Tarly sought victory, not glory – for that alone the Lord of Horn Hill had Jon’s respect.

There was a pause. Lord Tarly cocked his head. Jon met his iron gaze and did not flinch. “Yet you are no longer that foolish boy without a clue how to fight a war,” the lord conceded. “Time changes everything.”

“Truer words have not been spoken. Once you were a Targaryen loyalist, now you fight against their return.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Lord Tarly gaze turned, passing over the men. “Let me see your
Cautious eyes were peeled on the horizon, looking for the bowmen. Then, with a nod, Ser Rolly and Ser Daemon stepped aside. King Aegon pushed his stallion forward, and pulled off his dragon helm. The silver flowed from his crown, his violet eyes hard. “Lord Randyll Tarly,” the king said in a strong voice. “I am Aegon Targaryen, Sixth of my Name, the Dragon Returned, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men – the Rightful King of the Iron Throne.”

“A big name for a little boy,” Lord Tarly said, tutting.

“Mind your tone,” Jon warned. “You address your king.”

“Any boy can name himself a dragon. Why should I believe it?”

Jon opened his mouth to reprimand him, but Aegon cut in. “Enough. I care not for what you believe,” Aegon replied firmly. “I am the son of Rhaegar, born from Elia, descendant of the Conqueror himself. You forget your courtesies, Lord of Horn Hill, and battles have been fought over less.”

Aegon drew Blackfyre slowly, raising the brilliant black metal from its sheathe. “I wield the blade of the Conqueror, the sword of my forbearers. Look upon it, and do you still think to doubt me?”

*The second time that the glory of Blackfyre has graced Redgrass Field,* Jon thought. The sight of Blackfyre rippled in the morning sun. For a second, he was sure he saw Lord Tarly twitch. After a pause, the lord lowered his head. “My apologies, Your Grace.”

“Spare them, my lord, we both know they are bitter,” Aegon said. “You called us here to treat, did you not?”

“And what does your liege lord think of this meeting?” Jon demanded, looking over the men surrounding him. They were all Tarly soldiers, not Tyrell; and men-at-arms rather than lords or knights. “I half-expected to see Mace Tyrell here, or is the rose lord too soft?”

Lord Tarly paused. “The rose lord is too dead, my lord,” he replied after a moment. “Mace Tyrell perished in the riots of the city.”


This time, Lord Tarly scoffed. “Spare them. He was your enemy.”

“He was,” Aegon nodded. “But Lord Tyrell once fought loyally for my grandfather too. He was misguided, but I had hope I could have convinced him of the err of his ways. He was wrong, but he fought for his family, and for a king he believed to be legitimate – I respect that, at least.”

“Misguided.” Lord Tarly’s lips curled. “Misguided doesn’t come close, Your Grace.”

Jon looked to him with narrow eyes. “How did Mace Tyrell die?”

“His horse panicked in the fires,” Lord Tarly replied, without a hint of emotion. He was iron. “The smallfolk ambushed him, and ripped him apart. The mobs were incited by the burning of the Great Sept, and in its shadow they saw Tyrell as the enemy.”

“Oh.” Aegon paused. “What of Lord Tyrell’s family?”

“His mother, Olenna Tyrell, fell with the lord during the mobs. Queen Margaery died by Cersei...
hands, her body mutilated and unrecoverable. Loras Tyrell did survive – my men rescued him from the keep before he could be strapped to a trebuchet – but he was left crippled from his captivity. Both his legs broken months ago, Loras will never walk again.” Lord Tarly paused, turning between Aegon and Jon. “Mace Tyrell was grieving over the horror inflicted upon his daughter, mayhaps death was a kindness for him.”

“You do not sound too upset for Lord Tyrell’s fate,” the king commented.

“Lord Tyrell,” Lord Tarly said sourly. “Lord Tyrell may well have damned the Reach by his own incompetence. He failed to secure the city, he failed to find victory on the battlefield.” His head shook. “My lord neglected to heed my advice so many times, and not even my best efforts could save him from his failure.”

Ah, Jon thought quietly. Lord Tyrell lost the trust of his bannermen. He would not have lasted long after that. “And the mob tore him apart?” Jon pressed.

Lord Randyll Tarly just nodded. “The mob tore him apart.”

There was a moment of silence. All eyes were focused on the king, facing off against the Lord of Horn Hill. Aegon’s gaze looked solemn.

“Are you aware that Tommen Baratheon is also dead?” Lord Tarly said finally.

Aegon glanced to Jon. “We heard the rumours,” he admitted. “They say that the queen killed him?”

“The how of it is blurry. Perhaps it was Tommen’s own mother, or perhaps it was the mobs. I’ve yet to find a witness to attest to his death. Personally, my suspicion is that some of Cersei’s guards tried to abandon her, and they killed Tommen in their desertion,” Lord Tarly explained. “Likely, Tommen’s death sent Cersei over the edge, and she burnt the city down in grief. We found the boy king dead when we secured the Red Keep, and the queen dead as well.”

“Who killed her?” Jon demanded.

“I will tell you when I find out,” Lord Tarly said simply. “Her corpse was found in the White Sword Tower, though none recognised it at first. Cersei tried to run – running while carrying her son’s corpse – but some assailant chased her down. I have few answers to give, no witnesses have been found. Those moments were… crazed.”

“I have no sympathy to give for Cersei Lannister,” Aegon said, his tone turning solemn. “But Tommen’s loss was unfortunate.”

“Really?” Lord Tarly raised his eyebrows. “Let us talk frankly – Tommen sat in the seat you claim.”

“He did. And yet he was but a boy, and I do not hurt children,” Aegon argued. “The crimes were his parent’s doing, not his. I would have seen Tommen Waters deposed, but never murdered.”

“So you say,” Lord Tarly retorted. “Perhaps I’d be more inclined to believe that, if you weren’t allied with the man who murdered his siblings.”

“You insult our king in our presence?” Ser Daemon glowered, stepping forward. Jon grimaced, and shunned the man backwards.

“They say it was the Imp that killed Joffrey, and Myrcella, and Tywin,” Lord Tarly pressed, looking firmly at Aegon. “How I am to trust a man whose closest ally is a kinslayer?”
Curse the Imp. Aegon bristled. “My lord, Tyrion Lannister confesses to have killed his father in self-defence, but the children? He had no hand in those crimes. It was the queen’s madness that murdered her children, all the while Lord Tyrion is and has long been five hundred leagues away.” The boy’s jaw tightened. “Cersei Lannister would have blamed every crime in the seven hells upon her brother; those accusations are the ravings of a mad woman. And I consider such slanderous lies against a friend insulting, my lord.”

It was cleanly spoken. Lord Tarly looked unconvinced, eyes turning between Jon and Aegon. “Let us note, my lord,” Lord Connington said quietly. “That all of those were traitors to the realm, and such accusations are baseless.”

Jon’s gaze spoke volumes. Lord Tarly looked for a moment like he might have pushed the issue, but he held his tongue. The man is a pragmatist. “If His Grace says he was uninvolved,” Lord Tarly said finally. “Though the court of public opinion may yield a different verdict.”

Lord Connington shook his head. “If you planned this parley for naught reason but to trade barbs and veiled insults,” he said, “then I see no point in this discussion.”

“I planned to meet you,” Lord Tarly warned slowly, “because I have ten thousand men standing behind me on the Blackwater.”

“As do I, my lord,” the king retorted.

“Then we appear to be on equal footing.”

“Except your men seem to be losing against smaller numbers,” Lord Connington cut in. “We do not need to be here – we hold the kingsroad, your forces are bleeding. You could not defeat us in the field and your strength has fallen further. Your allies are lost and this war is as good as ours.”

“If you thought so,” Lord Tarly said through gritted teeth, “then you would not be here either.”

Jon was about to object, but with a slight shake of his head Aegon told him to let the comment drop.

“Do not hope to cow me, my lord,” Lord Tarly warned. “Have the respect to talk to me honestly. I do not deny it – your victory on the roseroad was a strong one, but do not pretend to be vastly superior. Your forces are weary too, if I opposed you from the city, rallied my men, then perhaps I could yet turn this campaign around. I could most certainly make you bleed for whatever victory you sought.”

Lord Connington was about to object, when Aegon raised his hand. “Aye,” the king agreed. “You most certainly could.” There was a quiet pause. “But if you believe you could truly do so, my lord, then why did you invite us to treat?”

Lord Tarly paused, and a bit of the aggression in his voice vanished slightly. His tone turned calmer, more resigned. “Because it has become increasingly clear to me that any victory won will be a bitter one. I do not care to fight a battle and sacrifice the war.”

“Indeed.” A smile crept over Aegon’s lips. “So let us assume you do manage to beat us. It will cost you ten thousand of your remaining men.”

“At least,” Jon added.

“Yes. And they are forces that I cannot afford to sacrifice,” Lord Tarly agreed. “This is not the final battle. The ironborn savage Oldtown, the entire Reach is at risk. My own son and heir was at
Oldtown, I have heard no word of him.”

There was a flicker in his voice, the first sign of emotion that Jon had seen. A father concerned for his son. “I will need my men to secure my lands,” Lord Tarly said finally. “I cannot afford to waste them here – that was something that Mace Tyrell never seemed to grasp.”

He is a pragmatist, Jon thought to himself. “I completely agree,” Aegon said, nodding. “Men’s lives should not be wasted in a pointless conflict. May I ask, my lord, what are you fighting for? Which king do you support now?”

“That… is a difficult question,” Lord Tarly replied carefully. “Let’s consider my options. By rights, after the death of the Robert’s children, the throne belongs to Stannis Baratheon.” Aegon looked ready to object. “His parentage is not in doubt, Your Grace.”

“Except that does not seem a sensible decision,” Jon noted.

“You are right. It does not,” Lord Tarly agreed. “Stannis is a traitor, a pirate, an apostate. House Tyrell attempted to reach out to him, and heard nothing but fanatical lunacy. The Faith would never support a follower of the Red God on the throne, and I cannot ignore the power that the Faith Militant still holds. To crown Stannis would be a wholly different manner of doomed cause.”

“So then let us assume Stannis has been disqualified for his crimes.” Jon paused. “Succession becomes very murky indeed.”

“Yes. Under normal circumstances, it would be a case for a Great Council,” Lord Tarly continued. “I would rally the greatest houses of the realm together, and the lords would deliberate the rightful succession. Perhaps it would be one of Robert’s many bastards that would be risen up, or perhaps some distant cousin. I imagine the maesters would have a field day tracing back whatever lineage or whatnot.”

“Or perhaps it would be some grasping great lord,” Jon said pointedly, “that’d try to steal the throne themselves.”

Lord Tarly turned to him. “Yes,” he accepted. “Perhaps.”

Aegon tutted. “And you would ignore the blood of the dragon, standing right before you?”

“I am not doubting your word that you are Rhaegar’s son,” Lord Tarly replied coolly. “What I question, is whether you can prove it to the lords?”

“Call your Great Council, my lord,” Aegon challenged. His hand went to Blackfyre. “I can guarantee you that I will prove it to the realm.”

You do not need to prove a thing, Jon almost objected. You can take it by might. Still, he held his tongue. Lord Tarly was looking to Aegon, and Lord Connington wouldn’t undercut his king’s position.

A humourless smile twitched over Lord Tarly’s lips. “And what a sham that would be?” Lord Tarly scoffed. “Any Great Council now would be a mummer’s court. Half the great lords are either dead or traitor, and we are facing invasions on every front. Some days, I wonder whether it will be the kraken or the ice dragon to reach King’s Landing first?” He shook his head. “No, even if I could assemble a suitable Great Council, how long would such a thing take? The Seven Kingdoms have no time to spare. We need a strong king now.”

Ah. Jon only nodded in agreement and Aegon’s eyes narrowed, but they both stayed quiet.
“Now then.” Randyll Tarly cleared his throat. “Perhaps I could still oppose you. Perhaps I could determine the next in-line; some bastard or cousin of Robert’s and raise him as king. Perhaps my armies could rout yours, and perhaps I could yet salvage something from this horrible situation.”

“There are many ‘perhaps’ in those statements,” Aegon noted.

“There are, indeed. And it will do little to unite the realm, and this war between us becoming more and more pointless.” Lord Tarly’s jaw tightened, eyes flickering. “No, I must look to the future.”

“More and more, we appear to be in agreement, my lord.”

“Then can we agree that the realm needs a king – one that can restore justice and order, make peace and right wrongs. If you could be that king, then I am prepared to bend the knee to you, Aegon Targaryen.” Jon could have sagged in relief. Yes! Lord Tarly’s eyes were hard. “And let us be clear, Your Grace; if you are not that king, then I will oppose you to my very last.”

“I understand perfectly, Lord Tarly,” Aegon’s voice was cautious, but Jon dared himself to hope. Lord Tarly was not a man to make such statements lightly. “What do you want?”

“I expect my lands put to rights. I want protection for my family, to recover my son,” Lord Tarly said firmly. “The Reach must be saved from the ironborn, the Iron Islands must suffer for their sins.”

“Yes, I swear to you that they will,” Aegon promised. “Piece by piece, I am reuniting this broken kingdom. Dorne supports us. The stormlands have fallen to us. The riverlands call for us. The westerlands concede to us. Swear to me, my lord, ensure the loyalty of the Reach and its houses, then I will name you Lord Paramount of the Mander.”

“And House Tyrell?” There was an edge to Lord Tarly’s voice.

“House Tyrell have proven themselves undeserving.” Aegon nodded. “Highgarden must bend the knee as well.”

“And I expect amnesty for all houses that fought against you under House Tyrell,” Lord Tarly insisted. “Amnesty for every soldier that fought the roseroad who concedes.”

“Of course,” Aegon replied. “They followed their lord’s order, the fault is not with them.”

“Aye.” Slowly and non-threateningly, Lord Tarly pulled Heartsbane from its sheathe. His chainmail clanged as he lowered himself to the green grass, clasping his hands about Heartsbane’s hilt in something resembling a prayer as it stabbed into the grass. “Then I swear fealty to you, on my honour and my house, King Aegon Targaryen.”

Aegon Targaryen stood upon Redgrass Field, and drew Blackfyre slowly. The rising sun was behind him, while he gingerly placed the black blade onto Lord Tarly’s shoulders. “Then rise in the name of the rightful king,” King Aegon commanded. “Randyll Tarly, Lord of Horn Hill, Lord of the Reach.”

Jon took a deep breath. Lord Tarly held the city, and the last of the Reach’s armies. Lord Connington appreciated Lord Tarly’s sort; the pragmatists that understood the greater game, and were willing to sacrifice.

Jon had absolutely no doubt that his oath would last too, for as long Aegon remained the best option for a pragmatic man. Every loyal right hand only stayed so loyal so long as the lord remained strong. Mace Tyrell likely learnt that lesson too late.
His heart was pounding. Jon could not allow himself to relax, but he could feel his shoulders twitching. After so, so long…

_The path to the Iron Throne is clear._

The talk lasted for another hour; it was mostly formality, agreeing to the terms. Afterwards, they barely said a word as they rode back to their camp, but Jon could see Aegon’s eyes widening. The smile played at his lips. “Griff,” the king whispered quietly. “Does this mean…?”

“Do not let your guard down, Your Grace,” Lord Connington warned. “Do not grow complacent now. This may yet be a trap.”

“Do you believe it is?”

“No,” Jon admitted. “I don’t think it is at all.” _But I dare not allow myself to hope._

He turned to stare out over the blackened and charred city. Even as they rode over the hills, Lord Tarly was already giving orders to open the gates and raise the red dragon of Targaryen back over the gates.

As the news that the Reach army had surrendered spread, the cheers rose from the men.

The soldiers were thundering, stomping on the ground with heavy boots. “The Young Dragon!” Ser Rolly Duckfield bellowed in triumph. “The Young Dragon!”

Jon’s hands would be shaking, if he could feel them at all. _I will see Rhaegar’s son on the throne, for so long…_

The men were breaking open their scant supplies of ale. They were cheering, but Aegon didn’t relax, even when they retired to their tent. The young man was pacing, frantically.

“Send the word to gather my procession, I expect every blade and helm to gleaming as we enter the city,” Aegon ordered. “And then bring parchment, and my seal. I must write my first royal declarations.” A grin broke across his features. “My _royal declarations_. Gods…”

“Can we trust Randyll Tarly?” Lord Tristan Darry said, more cautiously. “He surrenders too easily.”

“He doesn’t have a choice.” Lord Connington shook his head. “The only way he stands a chance of recovering the Reach is if there is a strong king on the Iron Throne. Aegon is the only option he has.” _The only option standing outside the city with an army._

“I do not trust a man who surrenders from practicality more than loyalty,” Ser Tristan Ryger said darkly.

“Better than a man who does not surrender at all.”

“And in return he will expect to be Lord of the Reach?” Ser Pykewood Peake asked. _His brother, Jon recalled, Lord Laswell Peake, had been vying for that position._

“Lord Tarly is a good option for the title, Your Grace,” Jon said with approval. “He is perhaps the greatest soldier in the realm, of unquestioned nobility. House Tyrell has lost its armies and respect, and none will oppose Tarly now. The cripple in Highgarden will either concede or resist, but he cannot win.”
“See it done. I shall write out the decree.” Aegon blinked, a sudden thought coming to him. “And the city. King’s Landing – my city – has burnt. We must move out quickly help the people – we must to bring supplies and aid to the smallfolk!”

Jon hid a smile. “Aye,” he agreed. “We must.”

King’s Landing had been starving for weeks, and the Golden Company had supplies to spare. They had confiscated all of caravans from the roseroad, and then Jon Connington needed to pen a letter to Rosby and Stokeworth for them to release the supplies they had hoarded.

The smallfolk would cheer for the dragon when they brought caravans of grain and bread to the hungry masses. None would remember that the Golden Company were the ones who had been starving them.

So much to do, so much to prepare…

Aegon seemed overwhelmed in the moment, but Lord Connington needed to ground him. The Lord Hand refused to act, though, until each of the surviving Reach lords gave their own public fealty to Aegon Targaryen. The very next morning, they met on the bridge over the Blackwater as the horses rode out of the city.

Lord Connington recognised the names: Lord Mathis Rowan, Ser Desmond Redwyne, Lord Arthur Ambrose, Lord Jowan Appleton, Lord Martyn Mullendore, Lord Lorent Caswell, Ser Roger Bulwer, Lord Erren Wythers, Lord Alester Crane, Lord Ivor Vyrwel, Ser Bryan Graceford, Ser Matthew Middlebury and Ser Jon Fossoway. Some came stiffly, others bitterly, most resigned – but they all came before his king.

From the surviving western lords, Jon noted Lord Quenten Banefort, Lord Tytos Brax and his son Ser Flement Brax, Lord Roland Crakehall, Ser Forley Prester and young Lord Steffon Swyft.

The Warden of the West, Kevan Lannister, had vanished during the battle, Connington was told, and the Lannister men suffered badly from the Faith’s retaliation. They had been blamed by the riots, and the fury of the mobs had been something to behold. None of the Lannister loyalists had the will nor the strength to fight, not after the atrocity of the Mad Queen’s reign.

They all gathered in the fields outside the Blackwater, to bend their heads before the king. King Aegon met them all by name, greeted them warmly, and told them to rise.

Jon kept on fearing that this could be some dream – some weird hallucination brought on by his disease. He had spent so long imagining the moment, he could scarcely believe it was true.

But it was. They were calling for him name. Aegon Targaryen, King of the Seven Kingdoms.

This was real – the red dragon was soaring, and the realm was bowing before King’s Landing.

The first time Jon approached the River Gate of the city, he saw crowds flocking around the harbour, while wide and fearful eyes stared up at the knights. Then, the Company unveiled caravans of supplies; grain, bread, mutton and fish, and suddenly the whole crowd started to stir.

“By order of the king,” the men said, as they handed out food to the starving masses on the portside.

By the time King Aegon arrived along with Harry Strickland and even more supply caravans, the smallfolk were chanting Aegon’s name.
Jon wanted to relish in the moment, to savour the sound, but he couldn't allow himself to falter. *There is too much to do,* Jon thought firmly. *I cannot slacken now.*

The king made his will clear, and the Hand set to work. Lord Connington ordered the Company to provide aid for the devastated smallfolk. They felled wood from the kingswood to work together to rebuild the burnt city, the soldiers sacrificed their own tents for the refugees. Several of the Company veterans even donated gold off their own arms to the people. “We must repair trust in the king,” Jon had ordered, and the mercenaries set about their tasks with a fervour.

*The Golden Company has been fighting for near a century for this moment,* Jon thought. He had never seen Homeless Harry Strickland march with such enthusiasm.

*We came prepared to lay siege to King’s Landing,* Jon thought, *but now we are here to save it.*

“We will fix this,” Aegon declared to refugees. “We will repair the damage together.”

The crowds had loved him for it. He was earnest and heartfelt, and not even more the cynical lord could question the passion that Aegon brought to the people.

The city itself looked like a charred wreck, but Lords Darry, Piper and Fowler were sent forward to build overflow camps for the refugees on the Blackwater. Even the remaining ships on the harbour had burnt from the ash spitting from the sky.

The kingsroad was heaving as the line of the Targaryen forces moved into the city. Jon glimpsed Septa Lemore riding to meet the king. Aegon stood tall and proud, but Jon noticed how the septa held the young man’s hand reassuringly as he faced all the people.

His people, Jon thought. Aegon had been raised for this – raised to care about the kingdom.

The Golden Company would help with the reconstruction simply because they wanted to be rewarded for it, but Aegon was doing this because he truly believed in it. Jon felt like a bitter, crusty old man when staring up at his young and idealistic king.

The king lingered at the docks with the crowds, but Jon took a few of the Company commanders forward to inspect the damage to the city. Seven of Lord Tarly’s men acted as an escort, and Haldon Halfmaester rode with them, in case of injuries that needed urgent care.

The gates were lined with Reachmen – the same men that they had just fought against – but they all lowered their heads.

The fires had burnt out, but the stink of ash and death still lingered over King’s Landing.

“Magister Illyrio has donated much already,” Halfmaester Haldon noted as trotted through the Mud Gates. “If we sent word, I have no doubt that the magister would happily donate more for a cause such as this.”

He nodded, but didn’t reply out loud. *I suspect that the ships are already on their way,* Lord Connington thought grimly. This was, after all, a perfect opportunity for Aegon to earn the trust of the people. *Perhaps the aid ships left Pentos before the fires even began.*

As they stepped forward, the city looked black. The first time Jon rode through streets of Fishmonger’s Square, he saw charred houses spreading over the horizon. Everything between the collapsed ruin of the Great Sept to the copper Dragonpit was a sea of ruins. The cheaper houses – the ones of thatch and wood around Flea Bottom – had suffered the worst.
Suddenly, all cheer vanished as the rode through the blackened streets. The mood turned grim.

“The Others take the Mad Queen…” Lord Tristan muttered, as he stared upon the charred husks of houses. They saw scattered black bones littering the streets.

Of the Alchemist’s Guildhall at the centre of the city, there was naught left but a ruin of scorched black – the fires had been so hot that even the stone had melted.

The Street of Sisters and Flea Bottom had taken the worst of the fires, many thousands burnt, more left homeless. The city’s heart had been burnt out, and the smell of ash of death soaked the ruins. Jon had never smelt such a thing before – he knew the rancid odour of battlefields, but he barely even imagined the pungent stink of flesh scalded by unnatural flames.

Both Harry Strickland and Ser Lorimas Mudd looked ready to puke as they rode through the black streets. Haldon Halfmaester was pale.

The last time he had been here, the Street of Sisters had been thriving with life. Now, it felt like a mausoleum of corpses. Not even the crows would feast upon the corpses left in the city.

They had piled bodies every hundred yards across the Muddy Way, and Jon noticed just how many of the bodies wore red cloaks. House Lannister had suffered badly in the outrage of the mobs.

Most of the corpses from Visenya’s Hill were nothing but ash – the wildfire had scorched even the bones of every soul in the Great Sept of Baelor.

Above them, the ruins loomed like a tombstone. Where once it had been bright marble and crystal towers, now it was nothing but scorched, melted rock. The entire hill was black.

“By the Gods,” Harry Strickland muttered, staring upwards at the wreck of the Great Sept. “What sort of blaze could melt stone? Have you ever imagined a fire so hot?”

He had not. Jon was not a superstitious man, but even to stand before the ashes of such a fire… it sent shivers down his spine. No fire he had ever imagined could produce such a smell.

The streets were deserted, like a ghost town. Near a good third of the city had been torched into ash.

There was a moment of silence, as the gazed around the Street of Sisters.

“In the Citadel,” Haldon Halfmaester said slowly, “I remember that an archmaester – a crazy man with a fondness for the occult – he once theorised that wildfire had supernatural properties.” The man paused. “He claimed that the Substance the alchemists produced would burn hotter when fed living bodies.”

“What?” Harry looked confused.

“It was as if the wildfire could be fuelled by burning souls more than solid matter, the archmaester claimed. Wildfire hungered for flesh, not wood, and it grew hotter the more lives it took. Very unique properties, he said. We laughed at him at the time, I thought it nonsense. We thought the pyromancers were blithering fools.” Haldon’s eyes glanced to the ruins of the Great Sept. “I may have to revise that view.”

There was no reply from the men. Thousands of men and women died upon Visenya’s Hill, in a great gush of green flames.
He remembered the last great fire of King’s Landing; in the Great Spring Sickness, when Lord Bloodraven ordered the pyromancers to burn the corpses piled in the Dragonpit. The flames had suddenly gone out of control, and a quarter of King’s Landing was said to have burnt in the aftermath. That blaze must have been barely half as bad as this one.

Jon couldn’t help but wonder… Mad King Aerys had been obsessed with wildfire. Even the Tragedy at Summerhall was said to have been linked to alchemist’s meddling. Aerys was said to have thought wildfire could save him, and many Targaryens in the past had been fascinated with it.

Jon clearly remembered being in the city on the early days of 282 AC, when King Aerys had ordered the wildfire to burn along the Red Keep’s walls to drive off winter. King’s Landing had been illuminated by green fire for a moon’s turn. The command had come from one of the Mad King’s dreams, Rhaegar had told Jon once; Aerys had dreamt that wildfire could burn away the seasons themselves.

_I must speak to any surviving pyromancers_, Jon decided. He mentioned as much to one of the Tarly serjeants, and the man replied only that very few alchemists had survived.

“We must prepare a procession,” Lord Connington ordered. “We will have a parade to escort King Aegon to the Red Keep. Set the men to work – clear all corpses from the Hook to the gates of the Red Keep. Wipe the throne room of blood, as quickly as possible. Make it presentable for Aegon to hold his first court.”

“My lord, there is a lot of blood—”

“See it done. It may not be much, but we must ensure this is a celebration,” Lord Connington commanded. “Give the smallfolk something to cheer for.”

The Young Dragon, to rescue them from the tyrant kings and the Mad Queen. The champion of the smallfolk, the true king come again. Like something out of a fairy tale. Jon did not want the sight of corpses damping that.

He cast one looked around the charred stone and cobbles, wondering how long such scars would take to heal. _King’s Landing has been rebuilt before_, Jon told himself.

But he couldn’t imagine it ever being so bad as this.

It was hectic day, but they had to move fast. By the time Aegon Targaryen finally entered the city, it was to the sound of cheering crowds, in front of a procession of knights riding down the street.

The Golden Company unfurled the largest, most glorious and colourful banners they had. They could not clear the stink, but the roar of trumpets blanketed out the noise.

Even amidst the destruction, the smallfolk gathered and gaped to see the armoured elephants moving in formation down the streets.

Trumpets every hundred yards, Jon had ordered. Banners of gold and red and black. It was all a blur.

After suffering for so long at the hands of Baratheon, Lannister or Stark, the realm accepted the dragon returned to the sound of jubilation.

_The Young Dragon_, Jon thought hollowly. He had not heard a crowd cheer so gleefully since Rhaegar.
And Aegon himself looked stunning, a dragon of gold and red, marched down the streets upon a carriage atop on an elephant's back. He held Blackfyre high and waved to the smallfolk. Great elephants trumpeted either side of him, and the whole realm cheered for the Targaryen reign reborn.

Knights held an immense banner of a red dragon on wooden poles – so large that it took seven riders just to carry it aloft. Their horses zig-zagged behind the king, and the banner swayed down the streets like a red dragon of cloth wafting in the air.

Jon’s heart was beating, as he rode his horse through the streets, standing stiff in the saddle and trotting in the shadow of the king.

The last time he had seen the Mud Gate, he had been exiled from it and frogmarched to a ship on the waterfront. Now, Jon Connington returned through it alongside the king to jubilee crowds chanting his name.

My king. My redemption.

It was a short journey from the Mud Gate, through the Hook and up to the Red Keep, but the journey had never seemed so long. Jon’s heart was pounding, trying to take in every moment.

Gold was marching through blackened streets, brightness in dark again…

It was all so much, Jon could barely breathe….

His eyes fogged up with tears, but he blinked and twisted his head away before anyone would notice. It felt like Rhaegar was riding besides him, his prince’s arms wrapped around Jon’s shoulders.

I did it, Rhaegar, he thought hollowly. I did it.

It had been eighteen long years, but it felt like his heart was finally beating again.

Even despite everything – despite the charred streets and the pungent smell, and the mummer’s parade of procession – in that moment, in that brief moment… it felt like bliss. Fulfilment.

The streets were charred, the gates of the Red Keep broken open, and dark blood stained the stones of the courtyard. They had dragged the corpses away, but the mess of battle still remained. It was not the glorious crowning that Jon had imagined, but it would do. The people were still cheering regardless.

And the Iron Throne. The Iron Throne loomed larger and more glorious than Jon had even imagined. Somehow, in his dreams, the throne had shrunken – but there it was, larger than life.

When Aegon stepped before the Iron Throne, the whole world went quiet. The boy gingerly walked up the steps, running his hand over the iron barbs…

And the boom of cheers from the Great Hall was so loud it was deafening. As loud as Jon’s heartbeat.

They had no crown to place upon Aegon’s head. That was an oversight, Jon admitted, but there was no High Septon to place it either. Instead, to represent the Seven, Septa Lemore stood by the king’s side and escorted him up the iron steps.

The true coronation would be later, once they found a crown, but instead Aegon had the almighty
cheers of the people, and he was grinning from ear to ear. The great doors to the throne room were wide open, and the crowd of knights and lords were chanting for their king as he took his seat.

“My people!” Aegon cheered from atop the throne. “My friends, my allies! My heart bleeds at the sight of this city, for how you have suffered at the hands of usurpers. I have no words to express my regrets, my sympathies, so instead I give you only a vow.” He took a deep breath. “I will repair this kingdom. I will prove myself worthy of the trust you give me, of the seat I sit upon!”

The crowd boomed, the ground trembling… “My family has suffered,” Aegon continued, booming, “there have been monsters and atrocities – believe me, I know. I know what it is to have everything stripped from you, to be left helpless in the face of injustice! But we are here – to fight for what is right and just, to preserve and to…”

Lord Connington had to leave the hall before Aegon’s speech finished, for fear he might actually break down in tears. His shoulders were trembling, his vision blurring. I cannot cry, Jon cursed himself, crying is weakness. It took deep breaths to force himself to keep his posture straight and his eyes hard.

Aegon looked so much like Rhaegar.

Young, handsome and chivalrous. No mummer in the world could match the sight that Aegon made upon the throne. He is truly Rhaegar’s son, Jon thought with awe.

_I am so close. Can you see me, Rhaegar, are you proud?_

In that moment, if Jon had just dropped dead, he would have died content.

Aegon was still speaking to the crowds in the throne room, but Jon excused himself. Jon lingered outside of the doors, staring up at the black walls of the Red Keep, when Jon saw a young squire and a procession of Company men running through the hallway towards him.

“My lord,” the squire gulped. “Lord Petyr Baelish has arrived in the city.”

Jon forced himself to stay steady. He took a deep breath, recovering himself. _I cannot die yet_, Jon thought firmly. _Not yet._

“The king is predisposed,” Lord Connington ordered. “I will meet with Lord Baelish.”

He nodded. Lord Connington gathered up his personal guards and a small escort of men, just in case. The squire pointed to the north of the keep – to where a gate had once stood, before the mobs broke through the portcullis and battered it down during the riot. The splinters still littered the courtyard, the portcullis was still leaning off its hinges in the archway.

That must be fixed. With the Red Keep in such disrepair, it seemed like any catspaw could just crawl in.

_Littlefinger_. Jon had never met the man, but he had heard much of the ‘Lord Protector’ of the Eyrie.

He saw the man himself waiting by the northern gate, escorted by ten men. All of Littlefinger’s escort were hardened men in boiled leather and grey chainmail and plate, and none of them had the look of knights. Littlefinger himself looked more a merchant than a high lord – he dressed himself in black velvet with a fine pale blue cloak, with a silver pin showing the falcon of House Arryn securing his garb. His collar was high, his hair combed backwards, with a pointed goatee immaculately trimmed. The man was well-groomed – infuriatingly so. Jon himself was still
wearing grimy armour that had gone unwashed since the battle, while Littlefinger kept himself
more pristine than a noblewoman.

*He is more of a woman than a man,* Jon thought. *I doubt if Baelish has ever gripped a sword. He
dressed himself with silk and perfume rather than steel.*

Littlefinger’s hands were crossed behind his back, standing straight as he turned to meet Lord
Connington. *He wears his late wife’s colours,* Jon noted, *but black as well.* As sign of mourning,
perhaps?

There was no sign of any grief on Littlefinger’s face, though. There was nothing but a soft smirk as
he looked upon the Hand of the King.

“Ah,” the coincounter greeted, stepping through the gateway. “Lord Connington, I presume?
Congratulations are in order, it seems, for such a victory. I heard the cheers from here.”

“Lord Petyr Baelish,” Jon replied darkly. “What good timing you have.”

His smile didn’t fade. “I came at all haste.”

“I’m sure you did.” *After the battle was already over, that is.* “And should I presume that the
knights of Vale rode with you?”

There are eight thousand mounted men readied at Brindlewood behind me, and another five and
twenty following from the Trident.”

Jon stiffened somewhat, but he forced his voice level. “What do you presume do with such men?”

“Well… That is the question, isn’t it?” The smirk turned waxy. “The Vale lords are sworn to
Baratheon regime. Why, the late Lord Arryn was Robert Baratheon’s most loyal supporter.”

“The Baratheon regime,” Jon said warningly, “is over, my *late Lord*.”

“So I hear. My heart *bleeds* for the fates of such children.”

“Look around the city, Lord Baelish,” Jon offered. “Does your heart bleed for the victims of the
queen’s insanity?”

“But of course,” the coincounter said with a nod. “We are the same, you and I. We both want what
is best for the realm.”

“I very much doubt that.” Littlefinger just smirked. Around him, the Company men shifted closer
slightly, but Littlefinger’s guards remained stoic.

“But it is a new age, is it not? King’s Landing burns – why I imagine this city must be so desperate
to accept any liege.” Littlefinger chuckled softly. “I heard of Tyrell’s unfortunate fate, and of
Tarly’s arrangement… it seems that line of succession matters little when circumstances are so
dire. You have risen your dragon up to the Iron Throne.”

‘*Your dragon*’, Jon noted. His voice turned to a growl. “King Aegon,” Jon said lowly, “is the
rightful king of the Iron Throne.”

“Oh, I would never argue *that.* But this coronation is all of… what? A few hours old?” His voice
was doubtful. “Can you understand why many of the lord of the Vale might feel rather upset over
that, Lord Hand? Why such proud lords might feel somewhat cheated by a king with such a
dubious claim of parentage?”

So that was his game. “Should I consider that a threat?”

“Merely an observation,” Littlefinger lied.

“I would warn you to watch your tone.”

“My deepest apologises, my Lord Hand.” Littlefinger lowered his head shamelessly. There was no
pride in this one – or a different type of pride, at least. “Tell me, may we talk in private?”

“I feel this is a good a place to talk as any.” Around him, the Company men stood ready. They
stood in the battered archway of the gate, standing atop the steps and looking out over the
blackened city.

“Very well.” Littlefinger nodded. “Then shall we talk bluntly? I feel like you are a man who
appreciates bluntness. It is quite refreshing, actually.” There was no reply from Jon. “I have over
thirty thousand fresh and readied men heading to this city, Lord Hand. Your men are weary and
the city is unstable. House Tarly may have declared for you, but, well, I suspect that allegiance
might shift again if one were to give the Reach lords a better option. Can you see how this conflict
has the potential that it might not go so well for you?”

His jaw clenched. “You come here to threaten war to me, in the gates of this castle?” Lord
Connington bristled. “I could take your head.”

Petyr Baelish only laughed, chuckling loud and clear. “You are welcome to my head, Lord Hand.
Its loss would be very unfortunate for me, but I very much doubt that any of the Lords Declarant
will mourn my poor skull. Perhaps Yohn Royce may even clap when he hears that I’m missing it.”

Lord Connington never replied, but his eyes narrowed. “However,” Littlefinger continued, “if I
do end up lacking a head… then, pray tell, who else will be able to convince the Vale lords to declare
for Aegon?”

There was a pause. “I fear you misunderstand my intentions, Lord Hand,” Littlefinger explained. “I
am not leading an army, I am not in command – the Lords Declarant are. I have no great houses
under my command, I have no soldiers. Truth be told, my titles and my regency are more a
formality than a status of power. The Lords Declarant will not miss my death, they will continue
without me.” He smiled. “The only things that I do have, however, is some scant modicum of
influence in the Vale, and custodianship of Lord Robert Arryn. Custodianship that I might deliver
to His Grace.

“So the question becomes… would you deal with me – a prideless man willing to negotiate and
compromise – or would you prefer to deal with five prideful and squabbling great lords of the
Vale?”

Lord Connington growled. “You mean to extort us?”

“Heavens no.” Littlefinger even managed to look insulted. “I just want to make sure that you’re
aware how much more useful my head could be for your king, if it were still attached to my
shoulders instead.”
Damn the coincounter. Lord Connington glared, but Littlefinger’s eyes glinted.

He spent the next half a day discussing terms with Lord Baelish. They sat in a cheap table of a guardhouse near the walls. Jon could not bring the man into the Red Keep, not when so many corpses had yet to be cleared. Instead, they sat in some guardsmen’s den, with scattered mugs and mouldy foodstuff littered along the floor. There was only one dried bloodstain upon the wall – a dark blotch nearly invisible on the dark stone.

Littlefinger offered wine to toast their new king, but Lord Connington refused it. It left a foul taste in his mouth, but Littlefinger had enough of a bargaining position to extract good terms.

Lord Baelish was willing to cut a deal; to convince the Lord Declarants to bend the knee, to bring Robert Arryn to Aegon’s court, in return for power and influence.

He was already the Lord of Harrenhal and Lord Paramount of the Trident – two completely hollow honours, and yet Littlefinger now wanted the influence to go with the status. He knew exactly what he was asking for; he wanted very specific lands and incomes, certain trading rights from the Vale. The entire conversation galled Jon. And yet Aegon needed the Vale’s support.

Littlefinger made sure that the Vale’s army deliberately moved slowly, didn’t he? Jon thought foully. Lord Baelish waited until the battle was over before picking a side to declare for. No matter who won King’s Landing, Littlefinger would have extracted the same concessions from them.

“You made a deal, didn’t you?” Jon said finally, his suspicion growing to certainty. Littlefinger had his terms all perfectly prepared.

“I merely want what is best for the realm, Your Grace,” Littlefinger said, softly. “I have been in such a difficult position recently; many of my investments have been spoiled, the Lords Declarant have been restless, Robert Arryn has been sickly, and the situation in King’s Landing seemed so…” he paused for a few heartbeats, finding the right word, “volatile. I merely wanted to ensure the best option occurred for the realm – and I am so glad that it has.”

Liar. “And what did the Vale lords think of you playing both sides?”


“And in return for keeping the Lord Lannister informed of the Vale’s politics, well, I just wanted to ensure there was a friendly face awaiting me in King’s Landing.” He motioned to Jon with a smile. The Hand of the King glowered.

Tyrion Lannister informed Aegon of the deal, Jon Connington realised, but Aegon didn’t tell me. At the Imp’s behest, no doubt. Aegon had been repeatedly unconcerned about the Vale’s reinforcements heading towards the capital – because the king had known that the Regent of the Vale had his own agenda.

“And what did the Imp offer you in return?” Jon demanded.

Baelish smiled. “Well, it was a trivial matter, really. A personal favour,” he admitted, trying to sound dismissive.


“It regards Lord Lannister’s unfortunate marriage to Sansa Stark,” Littlefinger explained, with a small shrug. “An unwilling betrothal, to be sure. Tyrion offered to have that marriage annulled, such that Sansa Stark might return from exile. He also promised that the next High Septon –
whoever Aegon supports as such – would be more than happy to perform the annulment.”

Lord Connington’s eyes narrowed. Petyr Baelish just smiled sweetly. “Lady Sansa’s mother – Catelyn Tully – was a very close childhood friend of mine,” he explained. “I simply want what is best for her daughter.”

“And you negotiated to free her from marriage with the dwarf?”

“What can I say?” Littlefinger shrugged. “I care deeply for the girl.”

When Jon eventually left, he made no arrangements for Littlefinger’s accommodation for the night. There were no rooms for guests prepared, and no stewards with the duty to see to them. Petyr Baelish could sleep on the streets for all Jon cared.

_We would have lost, if the knights of Vale had been on the roseroad as well._ Even in Jon’s triumph, the Imp still found a way to steal his glory. Being forced to deal with the smug coincounter made Jon’s shoulders stiff.

The blissful, delirious feeling of this morning evaporated quickly. _This is still my victory_, Jon told himself, _mine_. The Imp will be forgotten soon enough.

He returned to Red Keep, and found a serjeant to direct him to the king. Aegon was entertaining Lord Tarly and Princess Arianne. The lords’ solar had been ransacked, so Aegon had set up a meeting room in a steward’s quarters on the lower floors.

As Jon stepped into the corridor, he saw a short and curvy woman with dark hair and teary eyes, rushing out from one of the doors. Princess Arianne was dressed in flowing silk, jewels around her neck, and a low-cut bosom, but she was crying into her hands. The princess rushed by the guards and strode away from Jon without even meeting his gaze.

Lord Connington paused for a heartbeat, and then straightened his shoulders and stepped into the room.

The mood inside was grim as Jon stepped in. He saw King Aegon, Lord Tarly, Harry Strickland, the Kingsguard and an assortment of Company serjeants standing around the room. One of the serjeants, Ser Brendel Byrne, stood stiffly before his king with his head raised.

“What happened?” Jon asked, although he already knew. His eyes flickered to Ser Brendel Byrne, but then turned his gaze.


“We had to inform the princess,” Harry explained. “I fear the loss of kin is always difficult.”

“Oh.” Jon kept his voice measured. “How did it happen?”

Aegon nodded at Ser Brendel to speak. “It was at the crossroads, my lord, against Rowan holdouts from the main force. It was not much of a battle; perhaps two hundred men against our five hundred – but there were still bodies. Our forces were caught by surprise from bowmen hidden in the trees,” Ser Brendel recounted, and then shook his head. “It was battle, it was chaotic. Obara was leading from the front – she died with an arrow through the back of her head.”

There was a tut from Ser Lymond Pease in the corner. “All too easily done. Obara must have went too forward, left herself exposed.”
“She was brave,” Ser Brendel said. “She always led the charge.”

“A mistake.” Aegon sounded bitter. “A stupid mistake even when we had already won.”

“That is war, Your Grace.” Lord Tarly’s voice was cautious, stepping slightly towards the king’s side. “Too often it is but a roll of the dice.”

“Arianne was in tears.” Aegon took a deep breath. “I had not even realised Obara had fallen, and yet I gave a victory speech… I was celebrating…”

Jon might have said something cutting, but it would have been out of place in this room. “Obara Sand did her duty, Your Grace,” he soothed. “I was not on the best of terms with her, but none could doubt her bravery. Obara died fighting for what she believed, for the good of the realm.”

He glanced at the serjeant. “Aye.” Ser Brendel nodded. “I saw her fall, she was very brave.”

“I will give Arianne time to grieve,” Aegon nodded. “It is just so…”

“I am sorry, Your Grace,” Ser Brendel said, bowing deeply again. “If there was anything I could have done…”

“No, ser,” Aegon sighed. The young king was disturbed, even for that hideous bastard woman. “There is no blame upon you.”

“Leave us for now, ser.” Jon told the serjeant. “Rest yourself for the night.”

Jon escorted Ser Brendel to the door. Neither of them said a word, but Lord Connington patted the serjeant on the back. Ser Brendel didn’t reply, but he nodded to the Lord Hand.

I will not grieve the bastard’s death, Lord Connington decided. Obara Sand had been, would have been, a liability in Aegon’s court.

The room was still quiet as Lord Connington stepped back inside. Jon noticed Ser Daemon Sand’s glare, fixed firmly upon him. Thankfully, Lord Tarly moved the discussion along.

“We have matters to discuss, Your Grace.” Tarly’s words were careful – he had not settled in to how to act around his new liege.

“Yes.” Aegon nodded, taking a deep breath to focus himself. “Yes, of course. Continue, my lord.”

It was already late, and Jon knew it had been a long day. There had been many long days in a row. “Perhaps this would be best on the morn, Your Grace?” Jon suggested.

“The city does not get to sleep, Lord Hand,” Aegon replied. “And neither do I. Continue, Lord Tarly.”

“Half the city has been burnt to cinders – particularly from the Street of Sisters to the Dragonpit. The west and south edge are somewhat untouched, but fires spread quickly to the north,” Lord Tarly explained. “Flea Bottom suffered badly, but that area was no great loss. Still, the Street of Sisters, the Street of Seeds, the Street of Flour, the Street of Steel… so much of the infrastructure is torched. Cobbler’s Square itself was nearly lost. There are refugees by the tens of thousands, and the people mourn the deaths of the High Sparrow and the Most Devout.” No mourning here.


“Devastated, but some several thousand sparrows and Poor Fellows survive. There are fewer of the
Warrior’s Sons remaining, but the Faith is missing most of its central structure.” Tarly explained.

“An army without commanders in no army at all,” Ser Rolly commented.

“Indeed,” Lord Tarly agreed. “I fear the angry militia leftover is naught but a mob.”

“Then we must restore structure,” Jon said firmly. “We reinforce order by establishing the Most Devout again.” And we will establish our own septons and septas in their place, to elect the High Septon that we choose. We make sure the Faith finds its place again.

The fanatical Faith Militant could have been a threat to Aegon’s reign as well – and Jon actually felt grateful towards the Mad Queen for dealing with it for them.

Aegon nodded. “I spoke to many of the surviving Faith – they are angry, and rightfully so. They demand justice, and I will give it. What of the Mad Queen’s allies and conspirators?”

“She had few allies, at least few that I know of,” Lord Tarly replied harshly. “The pyromancers supported her, and most others were mercenaries. All Lannister loyalists surrendered quickly, and the Alchemist’s Guild was destroyed by the mobs. I have placed a bounty of ten gold dragons upon every surviving alchemist and loyalist to the Mad Queen – anybody involved with her will face a swift end, I promise it.”

“Good. I will not forgive such an atrocity,” Aegon declared. “From this moment onwards, the Order of Alchemists and all their practices are outlawed in Westeros. Have any surviving tomes or resources of the order thrown into the sea.” Haldon Halfmaester jotted a note of it – there was a long list of royal proclamations that were forming.

“And what of this spymaster?” Jon pressed. “What of this Lord Qyburn?”

“He survives,” Lord Tarly admitted. “He was said to have fled the city with the giant iron monstrosity of his.”

“Ser Gregor Clegane.” Aegon’s voice was venomous, furious.

Lord Tarly nodded, and there were murmurs in the room. “Yes. I know not how much has been embellished, but they say that the giant knight slaughtered over a hundred men singlehandedly.”

The Mountain. They had all believed him dead by the Red Viper’s blade, and yet apparently the Mad Queen had harboured him in secret. Jon didn’t know whose skull they had in Sunspear, and ‘Robert Strong’s’ face was said to have been covered, but no other man could be so large, or so murderous.

The thought of a man like the Mountain roaming the countryside was somewhat terrifying.

Aegon’s face was as angry as Jon had ever seen it. The Mountain, the man who killed and raped Aegon’s mother and sister. “Place a hundred gold on them both,” Aegon ordered. “And have hunting parties chase them down. They will be brought to justice.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

The king was pacing the solar, and he kept on pressing Lord Tarly on every detail regarding the siege, the queen’s trial, and the fire. Several times, the Lord of Horn Hill was forced to admit he was unsure – that so much had been clouded by doubt and panic. They weren’t sure about anything, least of all how Cersei had accomplished what she did.
Nobody wanted to say it, but the word ‘necromancy’ hovered over the conversation.

“The black cells were a butcher’s block, Your Grace,” Lord Tarly said grimly. “I would not recommend walking down there, it is a charnel-pit. Hardly a soul who entered them survived, we can only guess what that fiend did beneath this castle.”

The king paced. “What of the survivors from the keep?” Aegon demanded, eventually.

“Your Grace,” Jon warned. “It is late… it has been a trying day.”

“I wish to see the survivors now, my lord.”

Lord Tarly complied. He sent orders to escort the king to the guest chambers in the keep. The corridors were pillaged; tapestries stolen off the walls, even Myrish carpet torn upwards – many of the queen’s sellswords had tried to loot the Red Keep before fleeing.

The only two survivors from the black cells – Ser Lancel Lannister and Ser Loras Tyrell – were both kept in the haunted bedchambers that once housed highborn ladies.

Ser Loras was a wreck. He was unconscious and pale, lying atop a coverless bed with no pillows. The young man was ghostly white and frighteningly frail – his bones were knobbly bumps over under his skin, stretched taut over starved flesh. His hair might have been a different colour, but now it was grey. He was unwashed and stank of dust and dried blood.

Once, this man was said to have been a strong and valiant knight, a Kingsguard. In the last two months, it looked like Loras Tyrell had aged ten years.

Even when he lay down, they could see his legs were twisted and deformed. Broken bones that never healed properly. The king was silent as he hovered over his bed.

“From what we can tell, he fought against Gregor Clegane, Your Grace,” Lord Tarly explained. “And then the Mountain threw him against a wall. Loras’ legs snapped like twigs, and they were never given treatment during his imprisonment. Ser Loras was set to be thrown from a trebuchet too, but the queen’s men either changed their minds or never had the chance.”

Lord Tarly shook his head grimly. “Ser Loras is sickly and may not live much longer, but he was somewhat conscious earlier. Shall I try to rouse him for your questions, Your Grace?”

Aegon pursed his lips, and then shook his head. They left the broken knight on his bed alone.

The other one, Ser Lancel Lannister, also yielded nothing. Jon honestly wasn’t sure if they could even name Ser Lancel a ‘survivor’.

“Do not get close,” one of the men standing guard warned, as they unbarred the door. The guards were all holding swords or axes. “And do not try to reason with it, Your Grace. There is nothing in it but bloodlust.”

They heard Ser Lancel thrashing, the chains rattling furiously. They said that the chains had been rattling like that for days on end, never quieting. Aegon flinched as the door creaked open. Nobody said a word.

If not for the chains, Ser Lancel would have lunged at Aegon on the first sight. The irons rattled.

Lannister men had managed to restrain him first, but then the red cloaks fell to the mobs, and afterwards the Tarly men had recaptured Lancel. There were more chains that Jon had ever seen on
a prisoner before — but Lancel Lannister still writhed. He was a frail figure covered in scars and wounds, but there was no blood. The soldiers had hacked off both his arms at the elbows, and yet still, he thrashed.

An armless, insane creature. The stumps hadn’t been cauterised, Jon realised slowly, but they didn’t bleed.

“The Others take…” Aegon gasped in horror. “What is he?”

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Lord Tarly said darkly. “It is Lancel Lannister, we found men enough to identify him.”

“Is it…” The king paused. “Is he human?”

“That… that is a loaded question, Your Grace. I know he has been stabbed through the chest, but he does not die. We haven’t given him water or food either, and yet nevertheless he’s been fighting with all his might for hours on end. He does not tire, does not sleep. One of my men tried to inspect him more closely, and Ser Lancel tore that man’s face off. With his teeth.”

Jon’s eyes stared with horror. \textit{Just what did the queen do? What horror is this?}

“You… you restrained him?” Aegon asked quietly.

“With great difficulty.” Lord Tarly nodded. “He is the last of the queen’s monsters, the only one to be taken – mostly – whole. I mean to have a maester examine him, to discover just what it is we’re dealing with.”

“Yes,” Jon agreed. “Find out what \textit{this} is, and how to kill it.”

It was hideous. Whatever witchcraft this Qyburn had unleashed, Jon meant to find all knowledge of it and burn it out of existence.

Lancel Lannister was trying to mumble something, Jon noted, but it looked like the man’s jaw was broken and he couldn’t speak. Something in Lancel’s eyes looked like he was trying to scream.

They were silent as they walked away. “Increase the bounty to a thousand dragons for Lord Qyburn,” Aegon said finally. “He \textit{will} be brought to justice for the atrocities he unleashed.”

“Very well, Your Grace.”

The king looked pale and numb from the very sight. Even Jon felt shaken.

“It is very late, Your Grace,” Jon insisted. “We must retire.”

Finally, Aegon relented. The royal apartments were said to be too… messy, but there was still a pristine room for the king in the east wing of the castle.

Jon and Aegon walked together, footsteps echoing on stone. The Kingsguard escorted their liege diligently, but kept their distance as Aegon walked with Jon.

“I never…” Aegon muttered, keeping his voice low. For the first all day, his posture threatened to crack. “I never imagined such horrors.”

“That is Cersei’s doing,” Jon insisted. “Not yours.”

“And yet I must deal with them.” The king took a deep breath. “You were right, Griff. This is \textit{my}
duty. I must be king, I must fight against the monsters.”

Jon’s lips pursed. “Then we must see your coronation as soon as possible. The people need something to cheer for.”

“Yes. Very well.”

“Within the week.”

Aegon blinked. “So soon?”

“Aye. There can be no delay.” Your authority is still too fragile. “The realm must know you as king.”

“You… yes, you are right.” Aegon glanced at Jon, taking a deep breath and straightening. “And I heard that Lord Baelish has arrived in the city?”

“He has.”

“I apologise for not telling you of the arrangement, Lord Hand,” Aegon admitted. “Tyrion warned me to treat Lord Baelish cautiously, I did not wish to rely on anything he promised. The arrangement we made together was one best played close to my chest.”

That left a foul taste in Jon’s mouth. The Imp and the king, making secret plans together. “And I take it that Lord Petyr Baelish shall be named Warden of the East?”

“He will.” The king nodded. “If he can get the Vale lords to bow, it will be a title well-placed. Lord Baelish shall lose the title anyways, when Robert Arryn comes of age.”

Reluctantly, Jon conceded. From the deal they made, Littlefinger agreed that Robert Arryn was to be warded in King’s Landing, by the king’s side. They would expect the Lord of the Vale in the capital within the week, before any of the Lords Declarant could object. Once Aegon had Lord Arryn, the Vale would be forced to heel.

“Although I do mean to remove Lord Paramount of the Trident from Baelish’s name – that is a title that should return to House Tully, after Edmure swears fealty,” Aegon continued. “While Lord Tyrion Lannister shall be my Warden of the West.” Jon’s jaw tensed somewhat. “And Lord Randyll Tarly shall be Warden of the South.”

He could not protest those either. “And Warden of the North?” Jon asked.

“I would consider keeping Lord Bolton on as Warden of the North, if he succeeds in vanquishing the Bastard King,” Aegon sighed. “But that’s a fool’s hope. I’ve heard no news from the north, I can only presume that it has fallen to the wildling invaders.”

“It likely has,” Jon admitted, before adding, “But it is winter now, and the north shall suffer in winter more than we will.”

The mood turned even more sombre. They were approaching the king’s quarters, the Kingsguard leading the way. “Tomorrow will be a busy day, Your Grace,” Jon warned.

Aegon only barked a humourless chuckle of laughter. “It always is.”

They said farewell. Jon retired for the night himself, but he slept little. For too much of the night he sat on his bed, staring at his hands.
Aegon was to hold his first open court on the morn, to receive vows of fealty from whatever lords had yet to give them. Some lords would give fealty again, just to ensure their vows were witnessed in public. Already the petitioners were flocking — it was all frantic and chaotic, but it was the start of a new regime.

Jon looked down from the balcony, and the courtyard of the Red Keep was heaving. They filled the grounds like sheep overflowing into a pen, neighing and crying for attention.

There would be far more rewards and congratulations — the Golden Company was filled with exiled lords or bastard sons that expected to see their titles restored or lands granted to them. Bastards to be legitimised, inheritances to be claimed. Rosby, Stokeworth, Lothston, Peake, Strickland, Mudd, Strong, Darry, Massey…

An entire dynasty to re-establish. A thousand knighthoods to award, and a hundred lands and titles to reassign.

And the gallows. There would be no shortage of traitors to hang, Jon had no doubt.

Lord Connington met Aegon again in the king’s solar behind the throne room. His squires were running wild trying to keep up with a thousand demands, while the king was being dressed in velvet with gold trim. Septa Lemore stood over him, and the king fidgeted as she straightened his collar.

“How goes it out there?” the septa asked.

“Thriving,” Lord Connington muttered dryly. “The people want sight of the king, and we must give it to them.”

Aegon grimaced as the septa twiddled with his shirt. “They want more than just to see me. They want order again.” He sighed. “And they will want titles and lands from me. So many expect due reward.”

“And a few will try to take undue reward,” Lord Connington warned. “They will petition you, and you must appear firm, but take care not to make hasty decisions. Do not make any proclamations without consideration. There are many who might take to think advantage of a young king.”

“I know,” Aegon said finally, finally pulling free of the septa. His collar was high and tight. “Arianne warned me the same thing herself — she said that I appear an outsider, that I was vulnerable.”

Jon grimaced. Arianne was actually the one Jon had been warning him of. The Halfmaester stepped through the doorway. “Your Grace,” Haldon called, “we have ravens from houses—”

“Later, Halfmaester,” Jon ordered, dismissing the man as he kept his eyes on Aegon. There would be a scant few moments to talk privately. “Regarding Arianne,” Lord Connington warned, lowering his voice. “Lords Yronwood and Fowler are at the front of the procession. The Dornish mean to pressure you, Your Grace, and Arianne still has intentions of marrying you.”

“I am aware,” Aegon admitted, while the septa tightened his waistband. “And do not worry, my lord, I know the need hasn’t changed. When my aunt arrives from Meereen, I shall greet Daenerys warmly from the Iron Throne and offer both my hand and the kingdom on a silver platter. I will give her a dutiful husband and a kingdom, and she will give me children and dragons.”

There was quiet pause. “But until Daenerys arrives, I must remain unbetrothed.” Aegon shook his head. “My duty must be to preserve the Targaryen dynasty, not to the Dornish.”
Jon blinked, caught off-guard by the strength in his voice. “Yes,” he said approvingly. “That is exactly right.”

“Your Grace,” a squire called. “The Kingsguard shall be ready to escort you out in shortly.”

“Thank you, Martyn,” Aegon called, and then turned back to Jon. “Actually, my lord,” the king mused, “I was debating on arranging a match between Lord Tyrion and Princess Arianne. A union between Dorne and the west, to heal rifts and strength the realm.”

Jon blinked in surprise. “Arianne and the Imp?” he said, aghast. “Your Grace, you cannot…”

“For what not?” Aegon paused. The Halfmaester tried to call them again, but they dismissed him. “Tyrion and Arianne are of an age, both of noble birth and unquestionable status. A reward for two of my strongest allies – a very strong alliance between Dorne and the west just when we need it the most.”

For a second, Jon’s mouth hung open as he tried to speak. “Aegon, you cannot give a Lannister rights to Dorne…”

Before the king could reply, there were other shouts calling for them. Aegon grimaced. “Go see to them, my lord,” he ordered. “I must see to court, but we will talk later.”

Yes, we will, Jon thought aghast. Tyrion Lannister betrothal to Arianne Martell? It’d be…

Haldon Halfmaester was waiting outside with a large stack of parchments. The Halfmaester looked tired and frayed. “They came during the night,” he explained. “The rookery is… in disrepair, my lord.”

Jon’s jaw clenched, flickering through the pile dismissively. He did not have time right now for any letters from Rosby, Acorn Hall, Crow’s Nest, Maidenpool, Bitterbridge, Saltpans…

He stopped. There was a parchment marked with the red lion, a letter from Casterly Rock. That letter, Jon tore open hungrily.

The letter was short and succinct. It wasn’t written in the Imp’s hand.

‘The cat is in the bag,’ the letter read, ‘the bag is in the ocean’.

It was written in Ser Franklyn Flowers’ big, unwieldy handwriting.

Jon burst into a grin. Jon reread it three times, the better to savour the letter. His smile was so bright and gleeful that the Halfmaester looked unnerved. “My… my lord?” he asked confused.

“Good news, Haldon,” Lord Connington replied, recovering his posture. He quickly scrunched up the letter and pocketed it before anyone else could read it. “Just some good news.”

Tyrion Lannister is dead.

‘The cat’ was code that Ser Franklyn and Jon had agreed upon, to refer to the Imp. When the time came, Ser Franklyn had been set to kill the cat.

The Imp is dead! It felt like a weight off Jon’s shoulders, finally he could breathe.

There was little doubt it would have been over quickly. Ser Franklyn Flowers – the Bad Apple of Cider Hall – was the biggest, meanest sellsword that Jon had ever known. The Company men would follow Ser Franklyn, not the Imp. I hope the Imp screamed when Franklyn turned on him.
Why not announce it? Lord Connington wondered, before realising himself. No, there’s no point. The Imp’s sellswords were locked up in Casterly Rock – news in or out was very restricted. Until the siege dropped, nobody would even know that the Imp was dead.

It was a better option for Ser Franklyn to do the deed, and then pretend otherwise. For now, it benefitted Aegon if the realm believed Tyrion Lannister was alive in Casterly Rock. When the siege was dropped and the Rock opened, then Tyrion Lannister would be revealed to have died in very uncertain circumstances – a perfect inglorious end to the creature.

The dwarf deserved to be drowned.

Jon was feeling so elated he might have skipped. Another of Aegon’s enemies, removed from the king’s path.

The king was sitting upon the throne as the petitioners were prepared. Jon approached him carefully, and whispered in his ear.

“I have had time to reconsider the betrothal, Your Grace,” Jon said with a faint smile. “And I think it a splendid idea. Lannister and Martell together will be a strong match, Your Grace.”

Tis exactly what the grasping Dornish deserve, to put Arianne in her place. Betrothed to a dead drowned dwarf.

Aegon grinned, looking down at Lord Connington with surprise. “I’m glad you think so, my lord,” Aegon said. “The war may not be over, but we must secure our allies. And, considering it, there is one well-deserved reward that we have not yet discussed.”

They were opening the doors to the hall, guards taking position. “Whose, Your Grace?”

“Your own,” Aegon said, grinning. “One of my first decrees that I can be certain of; I mean to return to Griffin’s Roost their rightful lands and titles, and I shall name you as the Lord Paramount of the Stormlands.”

Jon froze. “My lord, you should not…”

“It is well-deserved,” Aegon said firmly. “And House Baratheon is as good as extinct, but who can question House Connington’s heritage or right? This is your king’s command, my lord; take Storm’s End as your own, my lord, I will need you to bring order to the stormlords.”

“There is no scion of my house, my lord,” Lord Connington protested quietly. Nothing but a branch of traitorous second cousins, nearly all now held captive at his reclaimed seat.

“Yet you are still young,” Aegon insisted. “I promise to arrange a suitable betrothal; but I can think of no better man for the task. My grandfather took most of your lands, but I mean to see them restored. Is Griffin’s Roost not adjacent to Storm’s End? You may claim both castles, you deserve no less.”

Jon didn’t reply. His eyes flickered towards his gloved hands. “Very well, Your Grace,” he said, somewhat reluctantly. It would be a moot point.

They opened the doors for the petitioners in the king’s court, but Lords Baelish and Tarly were at the very front of the queue. Both of them came before Aegon with their heads held high, to bend the knee before the new dynasty.

Littlefinger was first. He was grinning from ear to ear as Aegon appointed him Warden of the East
before the whole court.

Afterwards, Littlefinger motioned for a man of his to stand forward, carrying a small chest before the throne. “A gift for you, Your Grace,” Lord Baelish’s voice was smooth. “A gift in honour of your accomplishments, and the justice you’ve achieved for your family.”

The chest opened slowly, and six dull red stones shone inside the box sitting upon velvet lining. They were large rocks, some of them cracked with age. Not rocks, Jon realised slowly, gems.

“Six rubies, Your Grace,” Littlefinger said pridefully. “Recovered from your own father’s armour, and washed down the Trident. It is my honour to return Rhaegar’s rubies to you.”

The whole court stirred. Aegon was left momentarily speechless, looking genuinely flattered. He thanked Littlefinger sincerely, shaking the man’s hand and then handing the rubies to Lord Connington.

“Six rubies, for the six realms that declare for you,” said Littlefinger, grinning. “The seventh will be had soon enough, I’m sure.”

Jon couldn’t protest, but he didn’t like the smirk on Baelish’s lips. He glanced down at the stones, and they were most certainly as large as the ones Rhaegar had worn. Still, where once the rubies had been bright crimson, the time and grime had turned the gems more black than red.

Lord Tarly came next, to repeat his own fealty before the Iron Throne. Perhaps not to be outdone, Lord Tarly brought a gift of his own – a long and slender red sword, with a rippling crimson blade and two lions with ruby eyes carved into the crossguard.

“A Valyrian steel sword, Your Grace,” Lord Tarly announced. “Once belonging to the falseborn Joffrey, but presented to you so that its legacy might be redeemed.”

Aegon stepped down from the throne, to accept the blade graciously. “Widow’s Wail, the sword was named,” Lord Tarly added. “It was forged by Tywin and gifted to Joffrey, but never wielded by either.”

It was a fine and rich blade, Jon admitted. Widow’s Wail rippled gloriously – gold and rubies shimmering in the light. The Tarly men must have recovered the sword when the castle fell, Jon thought. Widow’s Wail.

“Many thanks, my lord – tis a grand gift,” Aegon said, before pausing. “And yet it would be presumptuous of me to hold two Valyrian swords,” he mused, glancing down to Blackfyre on his hip. There were a few chuckles in the court. “No, this is still a Lannister family sword, and it is not for me to redeem it. I feel that this sword is a just reward to pass on to Lord Tyrion Lannister, to congratulate him on his contribution to our victory.”

Lord Tarly bowed. “As you say, Your Grace.”

I doubt that the dwarf has any need for a blade under the sea, Jon thought, but he held his tongue. He could not deny the impact it had upon Aegon’s image; it made the king look benevolent and fair to donate such a treasure to another for good service done. It would encourage loyalty in a way that not easily matched. Look upon the king – for he is kind, chivalrous and charitable.

There were more petitions, more vows and more gifts – but none as notable as the first two. Still, the mood in the court felt increasingly content and optimistic. It was like Jon could feel the realm knitting together with every easy smile and heartfelt laugh from Aegon.
This is what I wanted, Jon thought. All my life, this is what I wanted. The realm would rally behind him, and his king would be in good stead.

Jon had only the briefest of moments between petitioner to talk to his king. “My small council needs to be named,” Aegon said to Jon. Ser Roger Hogg, young Lady Ermesande Hayford and her retinue had just left the hall, after giving fealty and a tribute of fine wolf pelts to the king. “And I have three positions on the Kingsguard to fill, let alone Lord Commander.”

The Hand hesitated. “Lord Tarly would be a good choice for master of laws,” Lord Connington said. “And Lysono Maar could fill in the duties of master of whisperers.”

“I agree,” Aegon nodded. “And Lord Baelish has petitioned me to name him master of ships, I do not see how I can deny him.” The king’s hand was still cradling the chest of his father’s rubies. Six rubies to buy a seat at the table.

Jon’s jaw tightened. Damn the man. And yet it was hard to deny Littlefinger the position; with the royal fleet stolen and Redwyne fleet crushed, the Vale now had one of the largest fleets left to them. Littlefinger was rich and had a strong hand in trade – he would be capable as master of ships, Jon had no doubt. But the coincounter deliberately circumvented me and went straight to the king to gain it. Is there no end to his gall?

“Very well,” Lord Connington conceded, after a long moment’s pause. Littlefinger was another one who would have to be taken care of. “Lord Baelish can be master of ships.”

“And Haldon Halfmaester can serve as Grand Maester,” Aegon mused. Lord Connington open his mouth to object. “At least temporarily, my lord,” Aegon soothed, and Lord Connington relented. As far as he knew, all the Citadel’s archmaesters were dead or captured. “But what of master of coin?” Aegon asked. “I know that Lord Tyrion seeks the position again, but the Golden Company also promised it to our magister friend in Pentos? Both have served me exceptionally, it is hard to disappoint either.”

“Neither of those men are ideal,” Jon said foully. The Imp is a depraved fiend, he thought, and a dead fiend at that – while Magister Illyrio is a fat, opportunistic cheesemonger, and a foreigner to boot. “I would prefer Harry Strickland as master of coin, Your Grace, but you cannot–”

His voice was cut off, as Ser Willis Wode entered the throne room to give fealty. There were a hundred different matters to attend to – lands to be redistributed, pardons to be granted and positions to be named – it was hard to even keep track of them all.

Come afternoon, the court was finally closed without even a tenth of the petitioners seen. The king stepped out onto the steps and vowed to see them all within the week, but for now he had to retire. The king was pestered even as they walked up the steps to the rookery, voices calling constantly for Aegon’s judgment or notice, and then they stepped into the maester’s quarters where dozens of scribes were combing and sorting through letters and parchments scattered throughout the chambers. Cages of squawking ravens were being brought up the steps from their camps, and the stewards and servants were still working to establish their stations in the Red Keep.

The rookery was in disrepair. The tower had been pillaged by the mobs, and the Red Keep’s own ravens had died in the siege. There were raven corpses still rotting in cages. Haldon Halfmaester was there, trying to sort through all the mess and activity.

The first of Aegon’s decrees were already being sketched out, while the rest of the stewards, squires and scribes were trying to re-establish order.
Jon had to raise his voice to dismiss the petitioners from the room, while Septa Lemore brought Aegon a plate of roasted potatoes, meaty gravy with parsnips and salted beef. The septa handled the meal herself; until they established which servants were trustworthy, all of the king’s meals had to be prepared personally by someone in his inner circle.

“I have perhaps an hour before I must meet with my council,” Aegon said a sigh, picking up the plate. “And I mean to break my fast while I can. Is there news, Haldon, and can you talk while I eat?”

They’d caught the Halfmaester at a less than ideal time, but he nodded, the sweat of exertion beading at his brow.

“There’s more news than I care to guess at, and less than I care to believe, Your Grace. We’ve gathered what remains of Cersei and Qyburn’s correspondence and placed them there.” The Halfmaester nodded to a corner of the rookery filled with crates. “I will have the scribes peruse them, but the letters have taken much damage.”

“Do it as soon as possible, Haldon,” Aegon addressed his once-tutor. “I want to know who that fiend was working with, and where he went.”

“And how he did what he did,” Jon added. “Learn whatever you can of the arts that Qyburn employed.”

Haldon nodded, and then explained the news. The news.

Illyrio had set sail from Pentos, and would arrive within days. Allies from Lys were expected within weeks. The Iron Bank had representative in the city, calling for the king’s attention. Surviving maesters scattered across the realm were calling a gathering of their numbers; they were demanding to know what remained of their Conclave.

Lysono Maar entered the room with his own reports, filling in details where he could. Frustratingly, there was so much uncertainty around both Oldtown and Winterfell.

Instead, there were tales of refugees from the north, fleeing the winter and the wildlings, all along the kingsroad from the ruins of the Twins down to Darry. Dark rumours spread of the brotherhood without banners. Jon Lothston wrote of a pack of wolves a thousand strong haunting the lands around Harrenhal, preying on man and beast alike. Tales of some mad crone under a hill at High Heart proclaiming the end of the world, while a cloud of crows fit to darken the sky was said to have gathered at the Isle of Faces. More words flying on dark wings than Jon knew of, or cared to believe.

Aegon read what he could, and listened to the rest while chewing on salted beef. They had so many scrawled reports and writings from a realm distraught with war.

From there it got vaguer. There were letters from lands distant. There were rumours of a fleet emerging from Slaver’s Bay, and some eruption or explosion in the Smoking Sea. An outbreak of the Sailor’s Bane had been reported in the Stepstones. A Ghiscari attempt to resettle Gogossos had been ended by some unknown Sothoryi horror. Volantis was said to have dispatched its fleet to Meereen, with the city itself on the brink of civil war. A trader from the Saffron Straits had reported a cloud akin to a thousand shadows in the black lands north of Ulos. The very furthest letter they received said that the Golden Empire of Yi Ti had declared a state of emergency, and the Azure Emperor had sealed his borders against some sort of plague. There were so many mutterings of smallfolk and fearmongers.
Haldon was halfway through reading out a letter reporting of two Ibbenese whalers that had vanished in the Narrow Sea in queer conditions, when Strickland’s squire rushed through the door to alert them that the council room was ready.

The king gulped down the last of his meal, and rushed down the stairs with his Hand of the King. The Wardens of the South and the East were already waiting in the informal council. Harry Strickland joined them, reporting on coin and supplies as they walked. Armies needed mustering, alliances needed to be brokered…

“What of the Reach, Your Grace?” Lord Tarly insisted, as they stepped inside. “This pageantry is all well and good, but what of my son in Oldtown, and the kraken to the west?”

“I’d be more concerned with the actual dragon to the north,” Littlefinger retorted, folding his arms. “Of the two threats, the Bastard King poses the direst one.”

“The Bastard King has been reserved mostly to the north and his own concerns,” Lord Tarly argued. “But the Crow’s Eye threatens the entire realm. The Bastard King seems to care little for anything outside his crusade, while the Crow’s Eye terrorises our lands with impunity. No, the ironborn cannot be ignored.”

“I would say they are both threats that we cannot ignore,” Harry Strickland noted.

Aegon stepped between them surely, his knuckles tapping on wood. “These are all threats that we will deal with, one by one, my lords,” Aegon insisted. “Lord Tarly, you will have every aid to put the Reach in order. Your army must prepare to march south. You shall join with the forces of the Golden Company at Bitterbridge, then move on wards to Highgarden. I shall send Lord Peake to treat with Highgarden to see that the way is prepared, but Ser Loras will remain in King’s Landing under care.”

Under care, Jon considered, and as a hostage, should Willas Tyrell attempt to resist. The two last sons of Mace Tyrell were both crippled.

“What is to be done concerning the Tyrells, Your Grace?” Harry Strickland asked.

“When Willas Tyrell bends the knee, I will happily take him as an ally,” Aegon said surely. “And the longer it takes Lord Willas to do so, the more House Tyrell will forfeit in land and rank.”

Jon noticed that Lord Tarly’s jaw tensed somewhat. “And I shall write to Doran Martell, to have Dorne muster their forces from Starfall. There will be no priority wasted, my lord,” Aegon promised. Lord Tarly only nodded, keeping his expression guarded.

“The Golden Company will march west, towards Casterly Rock,” Aegon continued, nodding to Harry Strickland. “I trust the good captain-general to recover the west, and to relieve the siege at Lord Tyrion’s seat.”

“That campaign is half-won already,” said the captain-general, chuckling. “I expect Lord Tyrion to welcome me with a feast.” Not unless you happen to fish the Imp from the ocean, Jon thought quietly, but it’ll be a rotten feast. Jon might have chuckled himself, but he kept the spiteful jape hidden from his face.

“Aye. And when Lord Tyrion and captain-general rally the western forces,” Aegon said, looking back to Lord Tarly, “the armies of the west, the stormlands, the Reach and Dorne shall converge to stop the ironborn from all sides. There will be justice for the carnage the Crow’s Eye has wrought.”

He speaks surely now, Jon noted. The Hand of the King had nothing to contribute. The Lord of
Horn only nodded.

"I notice that you did not mention yourself in that plan, Your Grace," Lord Baelish said, keeping his hands folded behind his back.

"It is my duty to sit on the throne, and to salve wounds of the realm," Aegon replied firmly, "I must rebuild the capital, recover the riverlands and crownlands, and help the Faith heal from the atrocities it has suffered. The riverlands is a land fractured, but under Lord Tully they will come together again." The king nodded, and then straightened his shoulders. "And I shall lead the resistance against the Bastard King myself."

"Perhaps I may be of assistance in that effort," Lord Baelish spoke quietly. All eyes turned to him. "I have close ties to House Stark – I was a strong friend to Lord Eddard, and a close confidant to his wife. I have been keeping closely informed of the situation in the north, the Vale has close ties. I might assist in reaching out to this Jon Snow."

"Of course." Aegon nodded. "And the knights of Vale will be critical in defeating the wildlings and retaking the north."

"I would advise... negotiation," There was something of an emphasis in the way Littlefinger said that word, "as a first resort, Your Grace. Perhaps a political solution may yet yield fruit." He looked around the room. "Perhaps even brokering an alliance."

Lord Tarly shook his head. "So long as the Bastard King sits upon a dragon," he said, with a hint of foulness, "then there can be no political solution."

"I must disagree," Littlefinger insisted. "And negotiation seems like a prudent first step to attempt. I am willing to go to Winterfell as an envoy myself."

Jon’s instinctive reaction was to object, but then he paused. *If matters with the Bastard King devolve, he reasoned, then the Eyrie should be the very first disintegrated in dragonfire.* "I agree," Lord Connington said surely. "Lord Baelish should take point on that matter."

Aegon paused, looking between Tarly and Baelish. The king nodded. "Very well then," Aegon said. "I shall trust in the expertise of my wardens."

Lord Tarly didn’t look so convinced, a frown creasing his features. "Negotiation is hesitation. It will only serve to project weakness on our part, and it will grant the Bastard King more time to secure his invasion."

"I have to argue that point, my lord." The coincounter seemed to smirk. "The north is in the grip of winter, and wracked by storms. Jon Snow commands tens of thousands of wildlings, all with empty bellies which I expect will remain empty."

"White Harbour has been left sacked in a recent pirate raid; they have no trade, few resources left to them. It may be that for but a few food shipments, the white dragon can be kept tame until spring. More than enough time to secure peace by other means, should he prove intractable."

*Other means.* Jon noted that, stony-faced. *Baelish cannot be trusted.*

Aegon frowned, then nodded. "Do it. Treat with the Bastard King, ensure that we do not face an invasion from the north. I will leave it in your hands." He turned to the captain-general. "We have our tasks, then. Lord Strickland, the Golden Company will recover Edmure Tully and rally the armies from Riverrun to Lannisport." The king turned to the Lord of Horn Hill. "Lord Tarly, you shall have the command of the campaign in the Reach, to throw the Crow’s Eye back into the sea."
“What then?” he asked. “The Iron Islands must the pay for their crimes.”

Aegon hesitated, then nodded. “There will be no negotiation with Euron Greyjoy, he has made his madness quite clear. We will storm the Iron Islands, and put the butcher and all his allies to the sword.”

Lord Connington had nothing to comment. Lord Tarly is a capable man, Jon told himself. And Baelish is a viper, but even he has his uses. Aegon had passed the halfway mark – the majority of the Seven Kingdoms were his. Capable men would flock around him. Perhaps the king doesn’t need me anymore.

Jon tried to flex his right hand, but he couldn’t. What use was a Hand of the King that couldn’t move his hands?

Lord Connington stayed fairly quiet during the meeting, as Harry Strickland and Lord Tarly discussed logistics and troops with their king. The discussion went outwards – affairs in the Reach, the north, in the stormlands and riverlands, and then the crownlands…

The conversations continued onwards, even as the shadows lengthened and the sun darkened from yellow to red. At a certain point, Lysono Maar entered the chamber to give his own insights. There was talk of negotiating with the Iron Bank, of hiring sellswords and sellsails, and of purchasing supplies from Free Cities to feed the city come the dark of winter.

The talk slowly turned towards Stannis Baratheon on Dragonstone. The man was a pirate in the Narrow Sea, and sitting on the mouth of the Blackwater.

“Stannis Baratheon is not to be neglected,” Lord Tarly warned. “He has been crippled several times, but he has remained defiant regardless.”

“I have heard of Stannis,” Harry Strickland noted. “Defeated on the Blackwater, defeated in the north, and now turned raider.”

“And he has been targeting the Faith of the Seven in particular,” Lysono added. “Stannis has clashed with both Tyrell and Lannister, yet the Red God he brings has been growing... violently. The man has been enforcing his power over the houses sworn to Dragonstone – Celtigar, Bar Emmon, Massey and Velaryon have all suffered from him.”

“He has proven himself difficult,” Lord Tarly confessed. “Stannis does not lack for stubbornness.”

“How many men does he have?” Aegon asked.

“Not many men, but he has no shortage of good fortune,” Tarly explained dryly. “And fanaticism. Not the Redwyne fleet nor the royal fleet was able to shift him – in every naval battle, Stannis has the wind in his sails while the enemy fights a headwind. Demon’s luck, they say, and the fires on Dragonstone have been burning non-stop.”

Aegon shook his head. “We cannot allow such a knife at the throat of the capital…”

The Golden Company had been allowing it for months, while Stannis has been useful to them. They had happily taken advantage of Stannis so long as he was hurting Lannisters too. Now, Stannis was a nuisance to them as well.

“We will need ships to siege Dragonstone,” Harry warned. “And we are lacking such warships. An assault could be costly.”
Aegon grimaced. There was talk of building ships, or hiring sellsails, but he could feel the uncertainty in the room. “Stannis is a now more than ever a threat,” Lord Tarly warned. “To anybody who sticks to the Baratheon regime, Stannis is now undoubtedly the rightful king. He may yet find support from any who would still oppose a Targaryen.”

Harry flustered at that statement, but the Lord of Horn Hill spoke the truth. He was right, Lord Connington considered, perhaps some stubborn stormlord may yet declare for King Stannis…

Lord Connington stood silently, as slowly a plan took shape. I must see Aegon in good stead.

“Perhaps a softer approach is required,” Lord Connington said suddenly. “Perhaps we might negotiate with Stannis Baratheon instead.”

The room froze, all eyes turning to him. “I don’t think that would be useful, my lord,” said Harry, frowning. “Stannis has made his intentions quite clear.”

“I insist,” the Lord Hand said firmly, looking at Aegon. “Your Grace, let me go to Stannis Baratheon myself, as an envoy in your stead. I will go under a banner of truce, and negotiate an armistice with Stannis.”

There were a few objections, but Lord Connington remained firm. Harry Strickland looked confused, and Lord Tarly’s gaze narrowed. Aegon’s eyes widened. “My lord…!”

“Stannis is a fanatic, Lord Hand,” Harry warned. “He is not like to respect a truce – he’d be more inclined to burn you alive.”

Yes, he would. “I must insist, Your Grace.” Jon said firmly, looking at Aegon. “Let me do this. Let me be your Hand.”

Aegon hesitated. His lips pursed, but the young man trusted Jon more than any other. “Very well, my lord,” the king said finally. “You shall go to Dragonstone as my envoy.”

Lord Connington just nodded. I am so, so proud of you, he thought silently.

The meeting ended fairly quickly afterwards, and Jon said little else.

The capital had been taken, and now the realm had to be secured. East, west, north, south – they would be dispersing to every direction, and he had his own role to play. He strained his fingers slightly, and grimaced. His hands were turning to stone.

His shoulders were stiff, but he was resigned. It had to happen sooner or later. Still, Jon might be able to benefit King Aegon even in death.

He would be able to give Rhaegar’s son this final service.

As they exited the solar, they went their separate ways. Aegon had another hundred kingly duties to attend to, and Jon had a few final preparations to make. Lord Tarly waited for Lord Connington in the corridor. The lord’s eyes were narrowed, suspicious.

“What are you intending, Lord Hand?” Lord Tarly demanded of him, looking to Jon cautiously. “What do you hope to achieve negotiating with Stannis Baratheon?”

“Achieve? Nothing.” Jon’s gaze flickered down to his right glove. “I merely intend to approach Stannis, and to shake his hand.”
The Battle of the Roseroad

Date: 301 AC

Conflict: War of the Five Monsters

Place: the kingswood, the crownlands

Combatants:

Aegon’s Forces:

~14,000 men:

- 4,600 Golden Company,
- 5,000 Dornishmen,
- 1,500 assorted Westerosi and Free City sellswords,
- 3,000 riverlands and stormlands.

The Golden Company,

Allies:

Crownlands

- House Stokeworth,
- House Rosby,
- House Massey.

Riverlands:

- House Darry,
- House Piper,
- House Ryger,
- House Vance,
- House Mooton.

Dorne

- House Martell,
- House Yronwood,
- House Fowler,
- House Blackmont,
- House Altyrion
- House Vaith,
- House Dayne,
- House Jordayne,
- House Qorgyle,
- House Santagar,
- House Toland,
- House Uller.

Stormlands
- House Connington,
- House Wylde,
- House Estermont,
- House Morrigen,
- House Cole,
- House Penrose.

**Lannister-Tyrell Loyalists:**

~23,000 men:

- 17,000 Reachmen,
- 4,000 westermen,
- 2,000 crownlanders.

Reach:

- House Tyrell,
- House Tarly,
- House Redwyne,
- House Hightower,
- House Rowan,
- House Caswell,
- House Ambrose,
- House Ashford,
- House Fossoyay,
- House Merryweather,
- House Crane,
- House Bulwer,
- House Vywel,
- House Graceford,
- House Mullendore,
- House Wythers,
- House Appleton.

Westerlands:

- House Lannister,
- House Crakehall,
- House Prester,
- House Marbrand,
- House Banefort,
- House Brax,
- House Swyft.

Crownlands:

- House Ryker,
- House Wendwater,
- House Staunton,
- House Chelsted,
- House Brune,
- House Hayford.
Commanders:

- King Aegon Targaryen,
- His Kingsguard; Ser Rolly Duckfield, Ser Daemon Sand, Ser Tristan Ryger, Ser Olyvar Yronwood
- Jon Connington, Hand of the King, commander.

Golden Company composition:

- Harry Strickland, captain-general,
- Black Balaq, commander of the archers,
- Lysono Maar, company spymaster,
- Talek Vhaeros, master of elephantry,
- Lord Tristan Darry, formerly Rivers,
- Ser Marq Mandrake, serjeant,
- Ser Pykewood Peake,
- Ser Torman Peake,
- Ser Brendel Byrne, serjeant,
- Dick Cole, serjeant,
- Will Cole, serjeant,
- Caspor Hill, serjeant,
- Malo Jayn, serjeant,
- Lorimas Mudd, serjeant,
- Ser Lymond Pease, serjeant,
- Ser Denys Strong, serjeant,
- Duncan Strong, serjeant,
- Humfrey Stone, serjeant.

Allied Commanders:

Riverlands:

- Lord Clement Piper,
- Ser Tristan Ryger,
- Ser Ronald Vance,

Dorne:

- Obara Sand,
- Lord Anders Yronwood,
- Lord Franklyn Fowler,

Stormlands:

- Lord Casper Wylde,
- Lord Lester Morrigen.

…

Of Mace Tyrell’s forces:

- Lord Mace Tyrell,
- Lord Randyll Tarly,
- Lord Mathis Rowan,
Ser Desmond Redwyne,
Lord Arthur Ambrose,
Lord Jowan Appleton,
Lord Martyn Mullendore,
Lord Lorent Caswell,
Ser Roger Bulwer,
Lord Erren Wythers,
Lord Alester Crane,
Lord Ivor Vyrwel,
Ser Bryan Graceford,
Ser Jon Fossoway,
Ser Matthew Middlebury.

Of Kevan Lannister’s forces:

- Lord Quenten Banefort,
- Lord Tytos Brax,
- Ser Flement Blax,
- Lord Roland Crakehall,
- Ser Forley Prestor,
- Lord Steffon Swyft.

Causalities:

- 1,500 men under Aegon Targaryen,
- 3,000 men under Mace Tyrell.

Aftermath:

- Fighting lasts two days, but the battle is interrupted by the Great Fire of King’s Landing,
- Strong Targaryen victory,
- Many close Tyrell allies are defeated during a hasty retreat,
- Mace Tyrell perishes after the retreat, and Randyll Tarly takes command,
- Death of Tommen Baratheon and destruction in the capital forces the loyalists to concede,
- King Aegon Targaryen takes the city and Iron Throne without further conflict.

The Attack on the Faith,

i.e. The Trial of the Mad Queen, the Day of Demons, the Great Fire of King’s Landing

Date: 301 AC

Conflict: War of the Five Monsters

Place: King’s Landing, the crownlands

Combatants:

Queen’s Forces
Garrison of ~80 men holding the Red Keep:

- Queen loyalists,
- Remnants of the Mountain’s Men, the Brave Companions,
- Mercenaries,

Qyburn’s Monstrosities:

- 224 necromantic creations,
- Ser Robert Strong,

The Alchemists Guild and pyromancers.

**The Faith**

~1,500 Warrior’s Sons,

8,000 – 12,000 Poor Fellows,

A large number of supporters within the civilian population itself.

**City’s Defence**

City Watch:

- 4,400 gold cloaks, many semi-skilled,

Kevan Lannister’s forces:

- ~1,000 Lannister loyalists,

Tyrell garrison:

- ~1,000 Reachmen,

**Commanders:**

- Queen Cersei Lannister,
- Lord Qyburn,
- Ser Robert Strong,

... 

- The High Septon,
- The Most Devout,
- Ser Theodan the True,

... 

- Lord Kevan Lannister,
- Humfrey Waters, Commander of the City Watch,
- Olenna Tyrell.

**Causalities:**

- Queen Cersei Lannister,
Olenna Tyrell, Kevan Lannister, the High Septon, all of the Most Devout, and all of the witnesses in the queen’s trial,
Majority of the Warrior’s Sons upon Visenya’s Hill,
Near all the Lannister men,
The Alchemist’s Guild,
Uncountable number of civilians within the city.

The ‘Battle’:

The death of Tommen Baratheon drives the Queen Dowager to insanity. Lord Qyburn and Lord Hallyne the pyromancer support the plot,
The desecrated body of Queen Margaery Tyrell is sent forward as a distraction, while Lord Qyburn’s undead creations storm the Great Sept with casks of wildfire,
The queen’s ambush burns and devastates the Great Sept on Visenya’s Hill,
The necromantic creatures terrify the defenders, sparking mass hysteria,
Fires spread throughout the city, extreme riots are triggered,
The crazed mobs target Lannister and Tyrell men under the immediate presumption that the crown had declared war against the Faith,
The Alchemist’s Guild is stormed by the mobs and the casks of stored wildfire ignite, devastating the Street of Sisters,
The Red Keep is stormed by both Kevan Lannister and the mobs. The commanders lose control of the situation,
The queen’s garrison slaughters hostages before they fall,
Ser Robert Strong singlehandedly routs the Faith’s blockades, captures Lancel Lannister,
Mace Tyrell and his forces return from the Battle of Roseroad, to be ambushed in the panic.

Aftermath:

A third of King’s Landing is destroyed,
Refugees line the edge of the Blackwater in droves,
Queen Cersei and King Tommen are both discovered dead,
Kevan Lannister’s body discovered after several days, Mace Tyrell and his mother are found dead in the streets,
Lord Qyburn and Ser Robert Strong escape through hidden tunnels, to destinations unknown,
Alchemy and pyromancy is decried and outlawed, and a standing bounty placed upon all of the Mad Queen’s supporters,
Lancel Lannister is captured, as the last of Qyburn’s creations,
Lord Randyll Tarly surrenders to Aegon Targaryen in order to restore the city,
The Golden Company brings aid and King Aegon is hailed as their saviour,
Magister Illyrio of Pentos wholeheartedly supports such efforts. The relief ships arrive very quickly.

Chapter End Notes

Author Notes:
Well, this chapter was my longest yet. I feel fairly disgusted with myself for writing something so long.
Just to clarify; Jon has been pretty much uninvolved with the war around King's Landing simply because he wasn't present. The whole realm knows about the ice dragon, there was a whole lot of panic about it, but then Jon simply chose not to get involved with anything south of the Neck. He had his priorities in the north.

Let's say that, after the Twins, if Jon and his dragon had stayed south and started a campaign in the riverlands - he likely would have drummed up some support, Sonagon would force and frighten others into bowing, and then Jon might have ended up in the running for the Iron Throne. When Cersei went into her explosive spiral, it might have been Jon with an army and a dragon outside of King's Landing to pick up the pieces. Military-wise, Jon and his dragon could have done it easily - it would be all the political problems likely to threaten him.

Instead, Jon wasn't there, and so Aegon was the one with the army and the opportunity to take the Iron Throne (exactly how Varys and Illyrio planned for him). Aegon has been specially designed to be the young and likeable king by Varys and Illyrio - Aegon has a devoted PR team that's been working wonders. It has literally been Varys' and Illyrio's whole plan from the beginning - to raze hell and discord in the kingdom (originally intended by means of a Dothraki horde, but that part failed), to then push the Baratheon regime to collapse, and then to introduce Aegon as the better alternative.

Meanwhile, Jon decided to focus all his attention on securing the north, at the same time as Euron has been (literally) raising waves in the Reach and Aegon has been marching up the kingsroad. For Jon's part, that was probably a good decision - if he had really been so distracted with a simultaneous campaign in the riverlands, then the Boltons would have had even more of an opportunity to backstab him. Not to mention, there would have then been even more set against Jon, with sabotage coming from the likes of Varys, Illyrio and all the vipers around the capital.

Right now, they are the three big players in Westeros; Euron, Aegon, and Jon - sitting at Oldtown, King's Landing and Winterfell respectively. Three kings, and one queen on her way.

Also, there will be a hiatus over Christmas. I'm looking to get one or two chapters out before then, but then I'll be stopping for a while.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the wars, and those left behind...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Onion

“You’re free to go,” the white-haired, dour-faced castellan said, stepping into Davos’ narrow chambers. “Pack up your belongings and exit by the dusk.”

“I do not have any belongings, my lord,” Davos replied. He had lived as a ‘guest’ at New Castle for so long; he didn’t even own the clothes on his back. The salt-crusted furs that he had arrived in had likely been burnt by the washerwomen.

“Then I’d expect you to exit sooner,” the man said curtly. “Just be ready to leave.”

Davos blinked. “Leave,” he repeated. He kept his voice low. “Leave to where?”

“Wherever you choose. Your rights of hospitality have expired, and once you leave these gates you are no concern of ours.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” he agreed, before walking off. The castellan likely had better things to do.

Davos sat on the edge of his bed, staring after the castellan’s back. He never moved. Ser Wylan Whitwick was a sharp-spoken man with a sagging gut, one who seemed to enjoy enforcing his order on everyone around him. Davos knew his type well; the sort who would boss others around just so they could hear the sound of their own voice. The servants never liked him; they sniggered behind his back. Ser Wylan was the son of some petty lord in the city, who had been raised to knighthood for some favour his father provided.

Davos had tried to learn about the state of affairs in White Harbour, he had talked to the serving folk to find out all he could. He had heard that House Whitwick was a family of candle-makers in the city, who had bought a lordship after illuminating the New Castle in high-quality tallow candles. Ser Wylan became castellan of the New Castle itself more for his supreme organisational skills, rather than any act of great valour or bravery.

Perhaps that is where I went wrong, Davos mused. I might have become an onion farmer rather than a smuggler. Perhaps I’d have become the onion lord through that means.

His eyes glanced down to the stumps of his fingers – pale white skin over gaunt hands. More and more, he was missing his bag of fingerbones, likely long-buried on some sandy strand or another of the Blackwater Bay.

Even down in his cells, he’d been able to hear the commotion from above. The New Castle had
been in an uproar ever since the battle, the servants frantic, rushing to a dozen tasks all at once every day.

The fighting hadn’t reached inside the castle itself, but every man and woman of the castle had still heard the clashing outside the gates. The riots as the green cloaks, the smallfolk, and the wildlings turned on one another.

The battle had been over a week ago now, yet some embers took a while to cool. Even now, he could hear the echoes of shouts, coming from the higher levels of the New Castle.

A servant came by his door shortly later, looking at him with confusion. “Whitwick said that you were leaving,” the young serving woman stared at him.

“It appears so.” Davos grimaced. “Tell me, Sera, what’s happening in the castle? I hear the commotion.”

“The ram is butting heads with the merman, milord,” the serving woman frowned. “I hear Lord Malcolm Woolfield of Ramsgate is up in arms over the sentencing of his sister Leona. They say that Woolfield betrayed the dragon for the flayed man, that they’re all traitors. The lord is to bring the house to court, I hear the wildlings are set to raze Ramsgate to the ground.”

“I… I see.” Davos recalled, House Woolfield, had mustered men very quickly, to support White Harbour as soon as the news of the attack reached them. There were many Ramsgate men in New Castle presently. Davos had thought Ramsgate a close ally to the Manderlys. It was a turbulent time for northern politics, it seemed.

Sera looked nervous. “The Candle Knight said that I was to change your linens, milord.”

Davos shook his head. “I’m not leaving, Sera.”

“Whitwick–”

“I will talk to Ser Whitwick,” he replied. The girl grimaced and walked away, while Davos stayed perfectly still as he quietly considered his options.

There were very few of them.

Ser Wylan returned about an hour later, walking briskly to Davos’ room. Davos was still sitting upright on his bed. “Are you ready? I shall find you an escort to the gates.”

“I want to speak to the lord,” Davos demanded.

Ser Wylan sneered. “The lord,” he said haughtily, “has more important matters occupying his time.”

Lord Manderly was grieving, the whispers said. The lord of White Harbour was said to be locked in his chambers, weeping and pigging out on pies, left distraught over the death of his son. His son and heir had fallen in battle, the rumours said, his own daughter-in-law a conspirator against their family.

“What of King Snow?” Davos asked. “Where is the king?”

“None of your business. Now stand up, Onion Lord.”

Once, Davos had even plotted on how he might escape. He had rehearsed possibilities; how he
might sneak away, or stowaway on a ship. He had longed to leave. Still, to leave like this… “I have
no coin on my person,” Davos said carefully. “I have no rations, no horse, no shelter – I am in a
foreign land, and I am like to starve by the roadside if you expel me like this.”

Ser Wylan scoffed. That ugly cast to his expression; the curl of his lips spoke volumes. Why is that
my problem? his gaze asked.

“Stand up from your bed,” Ser Wylan ordered, “or I shall have the guards remove you.”

Davos’ lips pursed. Davos had honestly lost count of how long it had been since Hardhome. First,
he had been captive at Eastwatch, then White Harbour. “I have been here for months. Why are you
removing me now?”

“Why would we keep you?” Ser Wylan replied, his voice foul. “You arrived as the king’s hostage,
but there is no use to you. There is no one to pay your ransom, no one who cares to retrieve you.”

“I have a family,” Davos replied. Three sons and a wife, the last time I checked. “My wife keeps
lands on Cape Wrath. I am the Lord of the Rainwood.”

Ser Wylan scoffed. “And I could be the King of the Seven Kingdoms by the same token. Having a
madman name me such does not make it so.” Ser Wylan shook his head. “We would place your
ransom at a cart full of onions, but your family couldn’t even afford the trip to deliver them.”

Davos grimaced. “I am the Hand of the King.”

“Aye, and your king refuses to even return our ravens, and we have no more birds to send. Stannis
has no power, not anymore, and to keep you is pointless. No, ‘Lord Hand’, whatever value we
thought you might have, you have none – and the Lord Manderly is no longer inclined to wait for
your ‘king’ to respond. Frankly, we need to free up your room, more than we need whatever
copper your wife might offer. You are not worth the meals we feed you.”

His voice was so scathing that Davos might have recoiled. Still, he kept his gaze level. “I see.”
Perhaps a more glib lord might have been able to convince House Manderly of his own worth by
now, but Davos had too blunt a tongue. “I would like to speak to Lord Manderly again.”

“I think not. Stand.”

There would be no ship to take him, Davos knew. Lord Manderly meant to discard him, like a
piece of garbage. Or a rotten onion. To expel me out into the wilderness now, in winter, is certain
death. “Does the king know that you are doing this?”

“The king has more important matters to attend to,” Ser Wylan replied curtly. “Now will you leave
or will you have to be thrown out?”

Davos bit his lip. Wouldn’t that just be typical? he thought. I might be the first hostage in history to
refuse his release. “I will need salted fish and water,” Davos decided finally. “I’m not much of a
huntsman. Surely the good Lord Manderly would allow me supplies for the road, as a parting gift?”

Ser Wylan rolled his eyes, like he was unwilling to part with any scrap of tuna. “We gave you too
much already. A less merciful lord would let you leave by the gallows, ser.” Still, Ser Wylan
nodded, and allowed Davos a knapsack of rations from the castle’s kitchens.

Davos stood up and followed the castellan down the corridor, brushing past a pair of women
bumbling under a huge pile of bloody clothes. Nearly a year of captivity, Davos thought, but at
least I get a set of laundered clothes and a free knapsack at the end of it. If he could convince Ser
Wylan to part with a blanket as well, Davos would consider that a victory.

Ser Wylan barked orders at a serving woman – Wylda – to prepare a small bag of supplies. Ser Wylan didn’t know the woman’s name. At this point, Davos was more familiar with the serving staff than the castellan was.

“What of the others I came with?” Davos asked, as they walked. “What of Ser Justin Massey, of Stonedance?”

“The one-armed boy?” the castellan frowned, nose wrinkling. Ser Justin had lost his arm, from an infection from the wound he had taken beyond the Wall. “He is due on the gallows on morn.”

Davos stopped. “What?”

Ser Wylan glared at him to keep walking. “House Massey did reply to us,” the castellan explained. “And the Lord of Stonedance – Lord Gormon – informed us of the boy’s crimes. They would not pay a ransom, instead they paid to see justice fulfilled.”

Lord Gormon? Davos paused, and then frowned. “Gormon Waters,” Davos said, aghast. “Ser Justin’s bastard cousin. He is no lord, ser, he would have you kill the rightful heir to his house! He steals Ser Justin’s seat!”

“Aye? Then he’s a legitimised bastard now.” Ser Wylan shrugged. “And we hear differently. Ser Justin was accomplice to Stannis’ crimes – he supported kinslaying, treason, and murder. They say ‘Ser’ Justin burnt innocent men alive himself.”

“He lies! Check with any other—”

“We did,” Ser Wylan replied. “And they say the same. His family would prefer retribution over return – ever since Stannis Baratheon himself turned on Stonedance; he raided Massey’s Hook and put its inhabitants to the sword. There is no love for any supporter of Stannis, not among the remaining members of House Massey.”

Davos’ face was pale. Justin Massey had been a young man with pink cheeks, blue eyes and a mop of pale white-blond hair. He had been bold, always smiling, and glib tongued. They need to free up rooms, Ser Wylan had said. “Be advised, ser,” Ser Wylan continued, “that the same crimes could be attributed to you too. Be grateful that you are not gracing the gallows as well.”

Davos’ jaw tightened. He didn’t know how to reply, so instead he just nodded.

Wylda returned with a few cooked and salted salmon slices, wrapped in leaves, a canteen of water, and half a loaf of bread. Ser Wylan gave a few sharp orders, and a man-at-arms stepped forward to escort Davos down the Castle Stair. Davos did not ask for a blanket.

“Farewell, Onion Lord,” the castellan mocked behind him. “Get out and don’t return.”

Has there ever been a more shameful dismissal? Davos thought with a quiet grimace. They didn’t even care enough to spit on him.

As they walked outside, there was snow in the air, and frost coated the white steps underneath. The whole castle was writhing with guards and men-at-arms, and a layer of white frost coated everything. Davos saw the lumps of stone and charred outhouses – the damage from the attack was still sorely visible.

This was only the second time he had ever seen the grounds of the New Castle. Throughout his
captivity, he had been confined to the keep. His legs pained from lack of exercise, his whole body felt so rough that even a brisk walk caused him to ache. His hand moved to his torso, hovering over the scar he had received from a blade of ice, at the ill-fated Battle of Hardhome.

He saw a scuffle happening between green cloaks carrying tridents and two knights bearing the white wool sacks of Woolfield. The guard pushed Davos’ away, and towards the gates.

Davos’ gaze turned to the horizon – towards the pale cliffs of White Harbour. They were capped with cornices of snow, and icicles like swords hang heavily from them. He did not know these lands, he had never walked through them. He didn’t even know which direction to start. He’d be more confident on a ship, but there were no traders in this port. There was nothing but warships on the harbour.

Davos took a deep breath, trying to think of a solution. His breath puffed coldly into the air. There was only one he could think of, but it was a bitter one. “I could man a ship’s sails,” he said finally, looking to the guard escorting him. “Or as an oarsman. Surely one of your captains need experienced hands? Could you take me to the harbour?” Davos could work on a northern ship – even just to get as far as Sisterton.

The guard only shook his head. “The castellan says no,” he replied simply. “Orders are that you leave the city and don’t come back.”

“Where I am supposed to go?”

“Wherever you choose. You’re free.”

_Free to die._ Perhaps the hangman was too expensive, but expelling him be eaten by wolves would cost little. Davos wanted to head south to his family, but his wife was a thousand leagues away. With a boat, Davos would risk the journey – but on foot?

The man was holding his trident tightly. If Davos tried to run, the three metal prongs would cut him down.

“I have no livelihood in these lands,” Davos said numbly. “You force me out of those gates and I’m like to freeze to death out there.”

Davos had seen the northern snows. He was under no illusions – he would die by himself. Hardier men than him would freeze in this weather.

The guard shook his head again. “I have orders.”

_Of course you do._ The men who would wrap the noose around Ser Justin’s neck would have orders as well.

As they approached the postern gate down the Castle Stair, the guard seemed to take pity on Davos. “Every season, you get refugees that leave the fields and travel south come winter. There are wayhouses open for any man,” the guard explained. “Head west, keep to the cliffs and follow the path to Acorn’s Field. Follow the cut across the trail towards the woods – you’ll see a holdfast at Argos’ Crossing by the stream less than a day from the city. House Oakham always has its doors open for any traveller, they’ll be others there as well. The lord will give you food and hearth for the night, maybe in return for some chores.”

Davos blinked, but nodded gratefully. Any advice was welcome – even just the thought of walking through a land such as the north made him nervous. “And after that? What if I were to head south?”
“There’s the Mud Path that runs down the coasts of Neck, across the cliffs over the marshland,” the guard explained as they walked. “Plenty refugees leave the north altogether for the snows – there are winter huts every league down that way. The swamp-dwellers, Houses Cray and Fenn man the roads, but they let travellers pass, so long as you don’t make trouble. Follow the stream once you pass Toothen Tower, and it’ll take you towards the kingsroad, but I wager that they’ll be plenty other refugees making the same trip.”

The guardsmen signalled for the men on the walls to raise the portcullis. Davos heard groaning of the winch. “This winter,” the guardsmen continued. “I hear that all the refugees are taking shelter in the ruins of the Twins. They say that there are three thousand vagrants massing at the Broken Crossing.”

Refugees. From what Davos had seen, there would be no shortage of men and women fleeing the north. It was a far cry from a lordly journey, but a refugee column was still safer than travelling alone. Davos would take whatever he could get. Maybe it could get him back to his wife. “Thank you, friend.”

“Don’t,” the man-at-arms replied curtly. “I would just rather not have to kill you if you try to return. Consider yourself banned from the north; leave and don’t come back.”

They stepped through the gate and across the archway, and Davos stared out over the city. Even over a week after the battle, so many were still homeless, and they slept huddled together in the ruins of Fishfoot Yard. The harbour looked white and clean from the snows now, but Davos knew that beneath it half the buildings by the wharves were still charred black from where the fires had blazed.

The shipyards and the Inner Harbour had been near-demolished. The flotsam from the broken ships had been washed up against the beaches, and men had even dragged the broken husks of ships out of the water, to build shelter from the wrecked wood. The whole city felt raw, tender. It reminded Davos of a beach full of crabs, scuttling and scavenging between wreckage to find shelter.

They had not enough dry wood to burn the bodies, and perhaps nobody cared to dig a charnel pit deep enough. Instead, all of the corpses were carted together by the wharves, weighed down with stones and old fishing nets, and thrown overboard to the seas. Davos remembered seeing similar practices in the aftermath of the siege of Storm’s End when they were piling up the bodies. “Looks dirty now,” an old fisherman had explained at the time, “but pretty soon, all those bodies in the water are going to be attracting fish aplenty. You’ll get the waters teeming with everything from pike to sharks, coming to take a bite. There’s no better bait for big game. A good fisherman waits for a bit, gets his harpoon ready, and we’ll eat yet because of the dead.”

It was impressive, perhaps, how there were always some who managed to take advantage of even the most morbid situations.

Davos was still staring out over the ocean, when he saw one of the sharks swaggering up to him, flanked by a swarthy-skinned retinue. Davos’ shoulders tensed, as Salladhor Saan opened his arms wide and grinned toothily. “Old friend!” the pirate called. “It is good to see you again, Davos. I hoped I might meet you.”

He did not reply. Salladhor Saan. Davos had heard he was in the city, but…

The Pirate Prince of the Narrow Sea was not wearing silk or gossamer, but Salladhor’s attire had still improved considerably than the last time they had seen each other at Eastwatch. Salladhor was wearing a thick sealskin cloak and a hard leather shirt, but his cloak was pinned with silver and he had oyster earrings hanging from his lobes. He wore a wide-brimmed hat that sagged off his head,
ornamented with what looked like shark’s teeth cresting the hat. He wore it with such swagger, such confidence.

Salladhor was still smiling. He walked with three men escorting him – large, tanned men with a foreign look to them, and heavy muscles like sailors. Davos pinned them as pirates without any introductions needed.

“My good man,” Salladhor said to the guard, grinning and lowering his hat. “Allow me a chance to catch up to my old friend here?”

The man-at-arms hesitated. “Ser Wylan told me to walk him out the gates.”

Idly, Salladhor flicked something sliver through the air. The guard caught it. “As you say, m’lord.” The man-at-arms bowed, and then turned to walk away.

Davos was left standing next to Salladhor, while the three pirates surrounded him. He had seen the coin. Silver, he noted. I’m not even worth gold.

“Davos! Old friend!” Salladhor said happily, stepping forward to hug him. “It is so good to see you again.”

Davos’ voice was rather less enthusiastic. “Salladhor,” he greeted carefully. “Good tidings, my friend.”

The last time they had seen each other, it had been at Eastwatch – while they both wore rags. There had been barely restrained fury in the pirate’s gaze. Salladhor had wanted to kill him, for convincing him to join Stannis.

Somehow, smiling and cheerful Salladhor felt even more terrifying than glaring, furious Salladhor.

“Good indeed!” Salladhor laughed, wrapping his arm around Davos’ back. For an aging man, Salladhor was still fit and spry. “I never realised how cheerful the white snows could be before, but this northern weather is really growing on me. Come, let us walk together.”

It was not a question. Salladhor led the way down the steps. “Where are we heading?”

“To the docks,” the pirate replied. “I hoped to show you my new ships.”

His ships. Salladhor had left Eastwatch at the king’s leave, on a single salvaged cog coursed for Braavos. Salladhor had returned to rescue White Harbour. He had named himself the city’s saviour, and perhaps duly; by the tell of it, the pirate’s intervention had most certainly been critical during the battle.

They said that the invaders might have breached the New Castle itself, if not for the pirate taking a bite out of their backs. Davos hadn’t witnessed the battle himself – he had been locked in his cell, but during the battle the jail’s corridors had overflowed with all the guests and infirm lords seeking shelter.

There was a swagger in Salladhor’s step. Davos was tense, half-expecting a dagger between his ribs at any moment. “That guard,” Davos said cautiously, “he named you a lord.”

“That I am,” Salladhor said with good cheer. “I am Salladhor of House Saan, the first of my house. A northerly house, a house of noble footing, sworn to Manderly – I have the piece of paper and all. My liege lord was too distracted to sign it, but his cousin signed it for me. A nice paper, very crisp.”
“I… I see.” After a pause, Davos risked, “Lord of what, exactly?”

“Lord of the Bite, Protector of White Harbour – and admiral, in His Grace’s service.” Salladhor’s grin could have scared fish. “As for my actual holdings, well, that is still to be negotiated upon – but I feel like I could raise a modest keep on the beach somewhere. Perhaps an isle off the coast.”

*Once you were lord of the Narrow Sea, under Stannis.* “A northern house. You are not a northman.”

Salladhor laughed, loud and clear. “Why, I have adopted their ways, old friend! I feel a surge of patriotism towards my new king. Loyalty, even charity!” Salladhor shook his head. “No, I have invested myself into this land, there shall be no greater ally than I! I feel like making a coat of arms of my own is in order – a banner of my own to fly above my ships.” He bit his lip, musing as he walked. “Perhaps my sigil should be a silver fork on black, for my grandmother? Perhaps a marble spire, in honour of my birth city of Lys? Or perhaps a broken heart on blue, for the losses I have suffered? Or maybe even a headless stag in the water, for the vengeance I will take against the king that tried to ruin me?”

There was laughter in his voice, but his eyes were sharp. “Or a shark,” Davos suggested lowly. “You could take a shark for your sigil.”

“A shark…!” Salladhor mused, and then chuckled. “Yes, I do like that, actually! A blue shark on black! You *do* get some monstrous beasts in the waters of the Bite, after all.”

*Yes,* Davos agreed quietly. *You do.*

There was no dragon on the bay today. The Seal Rock was empty, and nobody in the city had seen the dragon for over a week.

They were approaching the stone harbours of the piers, where guards were patrolling to keep the smallfolk back. There were still lumps of rubble littering the streets, and broken chunks of buildings where the stonethrowers had demolished the wharves. The Manderly guards lowered their heads to Salladhor as he walked past. The pirate walked surely, and all the men knew him. For all Davos knew, Salladhor was leading him to his ship to drown him in the icy water.

“And how did you earn such recognition?” Davos asked after a pause, not breaking step.

“For leal service, of course! For brave action in battle, for initiative, and for the donation of twelve vessels to His Grace’s navy. I captured twelve cogs and dromonds from the enemy during the battle, all of which I was happy to surrender, in return for deserved reward.” Salladhor caught his glance. “I was docked in Lys, you see, when I caught word of a fleet of ships that were heading north. They were recruiting mercenaries and allies – all for some seahorse bastard who considered himself a Targaryen, who thought that he could capture a dragon. And I thought to myself – Salladhor, you old dog, *this* might be an opportunity! No risk, no reward, yes? A chance to prove my intentions to the king.”

Davos considered his words carefully. “You already have family and lands of your own – in Lys,” Davos noted. “Why would you care about a lordship in the north?”

“Why?” He even seemed confused. “Because the north seems a land of opportunity, my friend. My family has agreed, they are quite interested in new alliances and enterprises in this cold land. I even have a pack of bastard nephews and a thick chest of Saan silver to watch over now, can you believe it?” Salladhor laughed. “I like to get in early behind the winning horse. Or dragon, as it may be. It
is an *honour*, to lead the Dragon King’s navy.” He tipped his huge, flamboyant hat to Davos, with a long, satisfied smile. “There is great profit to be had here, I think.”

*And a chance for revenge,* Davos thought. Salladhor was as cold-blooded as they came. The pirate thought that a conflict between King Snow and Stannis was inevitable – and Salladhor wanted the chance to hurt Stannis.

When King Snow led an invasion on the south, there was no doubt that Salladhor truly would be his most merciless admiral.

*There was a certain type of person,* Davos considered, *that, no matter the circumstances, will always find a way to rise to the top. Some men would float rather than drown in an ocean of bodies.*

“I have Valyrian blood myself, you know,” Salladhor continued conversationally. “My grandfather — *magnificent* man – was a prince in his own right. ‘The Last Valyrian’, he named himself, when he fought alongside Maelys Blackfyre on the Stepstones. Samarro Saan was one of the Band of Nine, the man who crushed the Tyroshi fleets and captured the city walls. I consider it a privilege to serve myself beneath the rightful king, the last dragonlord, King Snow.”

“King Snow has no such blood,” Davos muttered. *He is no rightful king.*

“Oh, he makes no comment himself as such,” Salladhor cocked his head. “But it is, well, fairly obvious. I know a rumour going around that the king was born from an exiled Targaryen princess that Ned Stark rescued during the war. A rather less romantic tale is that there was a fling with a daughter of Velaryon at Harrenhal, or some Dayne lady who jumped from a tower. Now, myself, I have never really heard of House Dayne sharing ancestry to the dragonlords, and yet I’m told that they did have a drop or two of Valyrian blood. Most curious. Others insist that the Lord Stark birthed King Snow on a fisherwoman from the Sisters, a woman who must have been a dragonseed, but my personal favourite is a theory that I heard in Lys — that Ned Stark harboured a lost Blackfyre princess.” Davos glanced at him. Salladhor shrugged. “It explains why his lord father kept the mother so tight a secret, and the timelines do fit. Although I must admit a personal bias — to me, House Blackfyre has always been the most deserved claimant to the throne.”

*Yes,* Davos thought. *The Saan family has a history of supporting pretenders.*

On the water, Davos saw a small vessel returning to port with a dead whale in tow, and blinked when he saw a seal sitting *inside* the open-hulled boat. The furs that the whalers were wearing were heavy and roughly cut. *Wildlings? Do wildlings keep pet seals?*

They stepped on to the docks, walking across the Lord’s Port towards the waterfront. Two huge vessels sat at the very front of the wharves — they were immense three-decked dromonds, as large as any Davos had ever seen. The biggest had at least four hundred oars, so huge that hardly even fit on the pier. Paintwork chipped and hacked, it looked like it had taken some damage, but it was still a grand vessel.

Salladhor had captured it from the invaders, but how did any sellsail get a ship like that?

Davos could still see the chipping out engraving on the hull, but the letters that had been scratched away were still readable. Davos needed to squint, silently mouthing out the words. *‘Sweet Cersei’,* the markings had read, before the name had been crudely scratched through.

*The flagships of the royal fleet.*
On deck, there were men climbing the rigging and furling the ropes, preparing to set sail. They were flying a flag showing a white dragon from its masts.

“Oh, but I blabber on about royal lines and bloodlines… although it reminds me of a question that I must ask you. What is your view on the matter?” Davos stood quietly. “Tell me honestly, Onion Lord,” Salladhor continued. “You can see my own loyalties clear, but who are you still loyal to?”

They stopped walking, standing on the wooden pier. Salladhor’s guards shadowed Davos closely. Davos hesitated, heartbeats passing uneasily. “No lying, now,” Salladhor chided. “You’re a poor liar, Davos, and I will react very poorly to the attempt. Tell me honestly; in your heart, who do you still serve?”

He took a deep breath. *I am still Hand of the King. I still have my duty.*


There was a brief pause, and then Salladhor laughter, loud and clear. “Of course you do! Even after all this time, even after so long in a prison cell… You know fine well that I could gut you right now, but you still claim for the man!”

The guards picked up on Salladhor’s cue, and then the other pirates started chuckling too. “You are one in a million, Davos Seaworth – I might push you off this pier right now, except then I would feel as if I’m losing something precious. The world would be a darker place for it, I think.”

Davos didn’t know how to reply to that. Salladhor motioned to his men. “Come, bring him to my cabin. Let us share wine, old friend – it could be the last time we do.”

“What do you want from me, Salladhor?” Davos demanded. “And should I take it that it was a coincidence that you were waiting outside the gates when I left?”

“Oh, I may have bribed the good castellan a few gold pieces, to release you early,” Salladhor admitted. “But yes, I have an offer for you, Onion Lord. We have a history together, do we not?”

The memory of Hardhome flashed before his eyes; shipwrecked and bleeding on the black ice, as Salladhor gutted a Baratheon guardsman with a bloody knife, vowing revenge against Stannis, vowing to rape Stannis’ daughter and queen…

Perhaps Salladhor was remembering the same moment. “I do regret the words we shared at Eastwatch, old friend,” the pirate said, as they walked swiftly up the gangway. The slight rocking of the dromond in the waves caused Davos’ stiff legs to stumble, but Salladhor moved gracefully. “That was a… dark time for me, but I did not want to leave matters between us on that note. Every day, I grow older and greyer, and it seems that I have fewer and fewer old friends left.”

He led the way into the captain’s cabin. Davos followed quietly, unsure of what to say. The cabin of dromond was wide and lavish – filled with silver baubles and thick black and red drapes. The wooden planks were still fresh, new from the shipyards, but books and torn parchments littered the floor. There was the image of a roaring dragon painted red on the wall, smeared in what looked like blood.

“Forgive the decorum,” Salladhor said foully, moving behind the oak desk. “I have yet to redecorate from the previous captain. He grew somewhat obsessed with dragons. No elegance.

“And speaking of the previous ‘Lord of Waters’,” Salladhor continued, with a slight scoff, “I have spent the last week offering deals to the mercenaries that joined under his fleet – I tracked down the men left stranded across the coasts and the Sisters. They were all mercenaries who came here
for war, men who took me for an ally, and who I stabbed in the back – but I offered them all the same deal. Join me, in my fleet, I said, and I will convince the northmen and the wildlings not to eat you alive. They all have a reason to hate my guts, for sure, and yet they accepted eagerly. It is almost funny, is it not? They came here to attack this city, and for a few words and a drop of silver, now they are the ones helping to rebuild this city. They have the most to prove as well, so they work the hardest.”

“Men are rats,” Davos muttered, remembering what Salladhor once said.

“Men are rats,” Salladhor agreed. “But what do old loyalties matter, when there is work to be done? Times change, my friend.”

A tall and dour-faced man knocked on the door, and a sailor stepped in wearing sweat and salt stained leathers. “I have your wine, Admiral,” the man said, holding a large bottle.

“Thank you, Humfrey,” Salladhor nodded. He brought out two crystal goblets, offering one to Davos. “When we were on deck, Onion Lord, did you perchance notice the domed building, with the charred roof, to the north of the city?”

“I did.” Davos cautiously took the glass of wine.

“That was the Sept of Snows, once a church to the Seven – the largest in the north,” Salladhor explained. “But then the mercenaries set it alight, and now it is the Sept of Snow. The wildlings own that building, they’ve anointed it to the Ice Dragon.”

Davos blinked, and his eyes widened. “Wait… what?”

“In the aftermath of the attack, the wildlings overpowered the city guard. House Manderly tried to force the wildlings out, but then this Mother Mole and her spearwives returned that order. They took control of half the city – seizing the Wolf’s Den, the Old Mint, and the Sept of Snows for their own numbers. Since then, tempers have cooled somewhat, but the wildlings still refuse to leave and the merman dares not force them. Mother Mole has torn down the statues of the Seven, and replaced them with a totem raised to the ice dragon, the god of winter.”

“Lord Manderly allowed such?” His voice was appalled. “That – that is heresy!”

As soon the words blurted out of his mouth, he realised why Salladhor looked so smug. “You think so? Even though your own king did the same at Dragonstone? When the Red Woman burnt your precious Seven?” he said, half-mockingly. “That very same fanaticism is running rampant in this city.” The old pirate’s smile widened. “You should spend some time among the smallfolk, ask what the wildlings did with their prisoners. Or, should you feel adventurous, you may visit any of those white trees these northmen like to worship. Such simple justice has an elegance of its own, I feel.”

Davos grimaced. The pirate chuckled, and took a large gulp of wine. “If there is one thing that I have learnt, Onion Lord,” Salladhor chuckled, “it’s that people are exactly the same. Fire and ice, snow and ash – what’s the difference?”

Davos didn’t believe that. There was a difference, there had to be. “But now nobody dares to poke the wildlings any further,” Salladhor continued, “and so it is the wildlings that take the lion’s share of the rations. It is the cityfolk who have had their houses burnt, and so it is now they who must turn to the wildlings for aid. Every night, Mother Mole holds a sermon to thousands in the Sept of Snow, and for a few bundles of fish the crowd grows bigger every time.”
Salladhor’s smile widened. “More and more of the city is converting, Onion Lord. Even those who used to pray to the Seven now turn to the dragon for salvation.”

His voice was mocking, like it was a victory over Davos. He didn’t quite know why, but it made Davos uneasy to think of the wildling’s faith spreading like that. The smuggler’s fists tightened. “You lie.”

“I do nothing of the sort, old friend.” Salladhor took another drink of wine. “What can I say? When the nights turn dark, people need faith, I suppose. Perhaps I, myself, should go with the tide and take a white stone on my chest.”

Salladhor was no believer. The pirate was to the faithful what a barracuda was to a shoal of herring. “Where are you going with this, Salladhor?”

“I just want to show you how things change, my friend. We are both old men now – the pirate and the smuggler; criminals, lowborn and vagabonds, the fiends to the ‘civilised’ world.” He chuckled. “My knees grow stiff and my joint aches, my hair is more grey than blond – but even I know that I must adapt. That is how I survive.

“Can you adapt too, Onion Lord?” he asked. “I spent much time thinking of it, and I realised – you have more a reason to hate Stannis and his Red Woman than anyone. He stole your sons from you, he abandoned you in the cold water. Do we not have a common goal together?”

No, we very much do not. Davos held his tongue, but his feelings were written on his face. “I have heard word from the stormlands, old friend,” Salladhor said softly. “Do you remember that small wooden hut on the Cape Wrath where you left your wife and young boys? The carpenter’s daughter that you married, and your two youngest sons?”

Davos very much did. His wife Marya. Steffon and Stannis Seaworth, two children of nine and six that he had not seen in over two years. Salladhor shook his head. “King Stannis abandoned the stormlands, and he made no move to protect any of the lands he had granted,” the pirate explained. “The holdings of House Seaworth have been seized by this ‘Aegon Targaryen’ and his sellswords, and your king most certainly made no move to protect them. The lands of Cape Wrath were the very first to fall in the Golden Company’s landing.”

Davos’ heart pounded, unable to speak. He had feared, and yet… “If you went south, you would find your home held by some petty mercenary granted lands by the Young Dragon. Perhaps your wife is sitting beggared in a village somewhere, or perhaps she is dead in a gibbet.” Salladhor’s voice was even sad, sympathetic. “But there is no home for you there, Onion Lord, not anymore.”

He lies, Davos thought. He lies, he lies, he must. And yet those thoughts had been haunting him for months, and it was confirmation of everything he feared likely. Davos knew that the Golden Company truly had landed across his own lands, and he knew that Stannis had been restricted to Dragonstone. Marya would have been defenceless. Any loyalist of Stannis would not have been treated kindly by the pretender dragon.

Davos couldn’t breathe, he froze. He tried to picture his wife’s face, tried to imagine her – but it had been so long. Davos had hardly had a chance to know his youngest son, Stannis.

I named my youngest son for my king. Surely King Stannis would have protected his supporter’s families?

And then Davos remembered the letters White Harbour had received, concerning Claw Island,
Salladhor reached across the table, to pat Davos’ hand. “So, in honour of our friendship and past we have shared, I offer you a deal,” Salladhor continued. “You would find only ruin in the south, but there is an opportunity right here. Serve me as one of my captains, Davos.”

The smuggler was left speechless for a moment. His whole body tensed. Salladhor gave him a soft smile. “The past is a tragic thing, my friend. But any good seaman must look to the future. None know the oceans better than you,” Salladhor explained. “Any navy would be lucky to have you, and I will convince the merman lord of that. I would take you, Ser Davos, into my own house myself – provided that you bend the knee before King Snow, and you pledge your undying loyalty before his crown.”

*Pledge my loyalty.* Even despite a year’s worth of captivity, his loyalty was the one thing that Davos had refused to concede.

“I have already made that vow once,” Davos said hollowly. “And I am not dead.” *Not quite yet.*

“You have, and you are not. But I hope you are not so old that you cannot change,” Salladhor replied, leaning back in his chair. “Consider your options. Serve the King Snow the same as you served Stannis, and he will reward you for it. You too could make House Seaworth a noble house on the northern coast – take some pretty wildling wife for your new bride. Take several, even, I hear the wildlings are more flexible about such things.” Salladhor raised his glass with a laugh. “And when the ice dragon flies south and a new regime begins, we shall begin again with it.”

“Come, Onion Lord. Why not walk a new path with me?”

There was long, long stretch of silence. Davos stared down at his missing fingers, and then at the bloody dragon painted on the wall. *I made a vow.*


A heartbeat of silence. The pirate lowered his glass. “That you are,” Salladhor conceded. “That you are.”

Neither of them spoke. Salladhor drained the last of his glass. “What a pity,” he mused. “Such loyalty is valuable, I would reward it well if it was in my service. You might reach greatness, Davos, if only you could walk away from the one you have latched to. You say that my sigil should be a shark? Well, yours should be a clam.”

The good cheer in his voice was evaporating, and his tone turned sharp and cold. “I can see it in your eyes,” the pirate said sharply, “you still intend to return to your king, don’t you?”

*I do. Stannis needs me, on Dragonstone.* The thought of his king all alone, with only that Red Witch whispering in his ear…

Melisandre would lead Stannis into doom. Davos knew that she would.

Davos grimaced. “Please… Salladhor… in honour of the friendship we once shared,” Davos begged. “Let me travel south. I need only a small ship.”

“You would rejoin your king?” Salladhor snapped. “You want me to help you return you to the man I have vowed to ruin?”

“I do.” Davos slipped off the chair, and down onto his knees. He had no pride. He knew what was
at stake. He would beg and plead for one last charity from the old pirate. “We were friends for so many years, just give me a chance. I’d only need a small dinghy – just something that I might sail south on.”

“In honour of our friendship, you say?” Salladhor mused on it for several heartbeats, and then shook his head. “In honour of our friendship, Davos, I think I will grant you a raft and a paddle instead. And then I shall follow behind you on my dromond, while watching you row.”

---

**The Sand Snake**

They met on the sandy wastes underneath the starry sky – which felt quite appropriate, actually. The sands of Dorne shone eerily under the gloomy light of the stars, beneath the mountains pointing towards the sea star leading the way. She walked through the dunes stretching out to the coast, and the ground was littered with ferns and brambly weeds clinging to rough stones and sand. There was a sharp breeze cutting in from the ocean and whistling over the rocks, but Nymeria pulled her shawl close to her chest as she walked.

Planky Town was far to the south, and the mountains of Ghost Hill to the north, but there was nothing around but dead wastelands for leagues around.

Nymeria would have brought guards, but the man she was meeting was feeling skittish. He had demanded to meet alone, unarmed, and there likely wouldn't be another chance. She kept her two daggers close to her chest, hidden beneath her robes, but she hoped she wouldn’t need the blades. She stepped out over the expanse and sighed at the spectacular view.

Nym was prepared to wait all night, but it wasn’t long waiting until she saw the lone figure riding down from the hilly outcrop.

Ser Gerold Dayne looked haggard. The last time she had seen him, it had been at a feast at Nightsong; Ser Gerold had been dressed in rich velvet and gossamer, and he had tried to slip his hand down Nymeria’s dress.

Now, the Darkstar was wearing sweat-stained boiled leather, and Nym was the one who had just fucked him.

“Ser Gerold,” Nym called, with a soft smile. “It’s good to see you well.”

In the faint silver light of the moon, his purple eyes were dark, narrowed and angry. The veins were throbbing on his forehead, his jaw tense. Underneath his hood, he had shaved his head. Once, the Darkstar had a mane of long, silver locks fit to equal any crown, reaching to his shoulders. Now, Ser Gerold had shaved his scalp bald, the better to travel unrecognised. He looked less a prince and more a vagabond.

“You dare??” the Darkstar growled, not dismounting his horse. “That is how you greet me? You lied to me, whore!”

Nym tutted. “I had hope we could discuss this civilly, ser.”

“Civilly?” he snapped. “I’ve been hunted from one end of Dorne to the next. From Starfall to Tor they’ve hunted me across the red dunes. Dorne screams for my head!”

“You did kill a girl, ser,” she reminded, gently.

“On your orders!” Ser Gerold snapped. “For the good of our land!”
“Nevertheless,” she sighed. “You were the one to swing the sword.”

Nym had heard that he had done rather more than that, actually. Obara had been present at Starfall too, but Nym’s sister had only stood and watched while the Darkstar did the deed. He dragged Princess Myrcella out of her chambers and through the castle’s hallway by her hair. The girl was said to have screamed and thrashed, tearing her fingernails against the stones as she was pulled along the floor by her beautiful, bloody gold curls. Prince Trystane had tried to rescue her, but Darkstar kicked the boy to the ground. He dragged the princess into the courtyard, and then beheaded her for all the world to see.

The princess’ retinue had tried to object, but Darkstar killed them all. The battle at Starfall had been quick and bloody. Overly bloody, for Nym’s tastes.

*The Darkstar served his purpose,* she thought, *but did he really have to be so dramatic over it?*

Ser Gerold had expected Dorne to cheer. Sunspear had replied with condemnation instead.

“I was supposed to lead a revolution!” the man growled. “You promised me – you and your sisters. You said that I would swing the sword, and Dorne would cheer for me! We were meant to lead a rebellion together!”

“The plan needed to adapt.”

“The plan.” Ser Gerold spat, a thick glob landing at Nym’s sandals. “You promised that I would lead a crusade, whore. Instead you left me with the blame!”


Nym had been quite prepared to kill Myrcella Lannister, and to rally a rebellion around the deed. The Lannister murderess in the capital would be outraged, Dorne would go to war, and Prince’s Pass and the Boneway would be standing ready to repel all invaders. They had wanted a rebellion, and having the Prince of Dorne order the death of the lion princess would be a good way to start one.

Originally, Nym intended for House Martell to claim responsibility for Myrcella’s death, and Cersei would have been convinced that ‘Tyrion Lannister’ persuaded them to rebel.

But, alas, circumstances made mockery of all their planning. They had not accounted for Aegon Targaryen, and, as it happened, the young king was rather more squeamish than they had anticipated. Aegon had been clear; *someone* needed to be convicted for the young princess’ death, and Nymeria could not risk Arianne’s standing with the king. Ser Gerold had simply been a convenient pawn to lay the blame on.

As far as the official narrative was concerned, it was the Darkstar who killed Princess Myrcella, acting alone. The unofficial narrative was that the Darkstar had been working for the Imp. The Sand Snakes and Dorne as a whole had rid their hands of any involvement and left Ser Gerold, quite literally, holding the sword.

*Admittedly, perhaps he’s feeling rather upset with that,* Nym conceded.

“They were hunting me!” the Darkstar boomed. “My family has disowned me, Starfall has condemned me! Sunspear has put a bounty upon my head – I had to flee on foot with riders from Godsgrave were chasing me down.” His jaw clenched, his hand moving to the sword at his side. “I knew those men – Ser Harmen Drinkwater and Ser Marren Briar. I trained with them, rode with them, matched them in tourneys.
“And then I had to slew them, and steal their horses. They were good men, soldiers of Dorne, and I killed them.”

Nym didn't reply. She had heard about that. Lord Alhyrion had been furious over the deaths. Ten riders had been sent to bring the Darkstar to justice, but only eight had returned.

He took a deep breath. Something in his eyes seemed crazed. “What I did, I did the deed for the good of this land.” His voice was venomous. “You needed someone to swing the sword, so I stepped forward. I took that girl’s head for you.”

“You did what needed to be done,” Nym agreed.

“And you abandoned me for it,” he spat again. “Nobody else was brave enough to do it, but I was. I did. And your sister left me in the red sands to die.”

“It was a sensitive matter,” Nym soothed. “Dorne rejoices, and yet appearances must be preserved. Princess Arianne’s standing with Aegon could not be threatened.”

“Arianne.” The horse shifted beneath him. “Twice now, I have betrayed Arianne for you.”

Yes, Nym thought with a nod. You have been very useful.

During Arianne’s aborted rebellion, it had been Darkstar that revealed the princess’s intentions to the Sand Snakes, and the Sand Snakes who pressed Darkstar into sharing it with Doran too. The idea had been simple; Arianne attempted her coup, Doran would stop it, but – in the fray – a sword would have sliced open Myrcella’s skull regardless. It would have been a mess, and both Doran and Arianne would have been implicated in the murder of a royal princess and a knight of the Kingsguard.

If only Darkstar’s sword that day had been a few inches deeper, Nym lamented. It all could have gone much smoother.

Still, the Sand Snakes had informed Doran of Arianne’s intentions, and afterwards Nym, Obara and Tyene had been restored in the prince’s good graces. Doran invited them all into his solar and revealed his own plan. Fire and blood, he had promised.

And here we are. There has been fire and blood aplenty, I suppose.

“I am sorry, ser,” Nym said sadly. “But the official story must stand, to pardon you would jeopardize that. Not all heroes can stand in the sun; I hoped you would understand.”

His face was murderous. She saw flicker of rage pass through his features.

That was all Gerold had wanted, Nym knew. The Darkstar wanted to wield Dawn, he wanted to be the next Sword of the Morning. He wanted to hold the most brilliant blade in the world, to be the hero who married the princess. That was the hook that had led Nym manipulate him.

But Ser Gerold was from the branch family of House Dayne; he would never have been permitted the sword Dawn, even if he was worthy enough. Instead, Nym had flirted with him, seduced him; ‘if you are the one who leads us to independence again,’ she purred into his ear, ‘the champion to avenge Dorne… then they will grant you the sword’.

“I understand fine,” Gerold growled. His hand went to the hilt of his blade. “You lied. I should take your head for this betrayal, whore.”
She shook his head. “Why, Gerold… I’m the last friend you have left,” she lied. “Who else will support you now?”

He hesitated, but his eyes lost none of their fire. “We have all sacrificed to be here, ser. We have lost so much, we have all taken risks.” The image of the Great Sept exploding into flames… “But my sisters and I will still support you,” Nym continued. “We just must do so more subtly. There must be… a pretence.”

She paused, cautiously stepping closer. “Tell me, ser,” she asked, “would you be willing to take the black?”

From atop his horse. The Darkstar’s eyes were aghast. “What?”

“Consider it,” Nym insisted. “Surrender yourself, and there will be a sham of a trial. None will admit it, but Dorne is sympathetic to your deed. If you confess to the murder, then I guarantee that the prince will allow you to take the black.”

“Confess?” Darkstar snapped. “It was not a crime, that Lannister whelp deserved to die!”

“Nevertheless,” she sighed. “You could go to the Wall, but it wouldn’t be for long. There’s much happening in the north, and Dorne could use an agent up there. I hear that there are many opportunities on the Wall; opportunities that a man of your skills might exploit.”

Darkstar looked appalled at the very suggestion. “And the Bastard King,” she continued. She had the offer rehearsed, a sales pitch. One last use that the Darkstar could provide her. “I hear that Jon Snow is kin to you; he is the son of Ashara Dayne. You could approach him, with blood and history to share with him – while you’d be an exile who killed a Lannister. You might earn the Bastard King’s trust. You might bond with Jon Snow, get close to him.”

There was still no reply. “And then you might put a dagger in his back,” Nym said softly. “If you kill the Bastard King, then I guarantee Aegon and Doran will grant you a full pardon. You’d be returned from the north with honours. Just imagine it – Ser Gerold Dayne, the Darkstar, the Sword of the Night, the Dragonslayer.”

Nym had very high hopes that Gerold might be taken with the idea. It would have been the perfect way to tie up loose ends, a perfect opportunity. Nym had even been willing to sleep with him again, to ensure the lovestruck man-child would be compliant and entranced with the opportunity.

But there was no awe on his face this time; the anger and suspicion on Ser Gerold’s face didn’t fade. “Once bitten, you snake of a whore.” He shook his head. “No, I am done dancing on your strings.”

Nym could have sighed. What a shame. “And Jon Snow is no kin of mine,” Ser Gerold continued. “He is not Ashara’s babe. That is just a ridiculous rumour – I have no idea why the late Lord Dayne even allowed such talk to spread.”

Nym paused, frowning. “Truly? He’s not?” she mused. “The common consensus is that Stark got Ashara with child at Harrenhal, and hid the child to hide his dishonour.”

The Darkstar scoffed. “His brother, Brandon, did,” the knight said. “But that babe was stillborn, and female. My father was captain of the guard at the time, and I was a page at Starfall – I saw Ashara’s dead baby with my own eyes. Jon Snow is no Dayne; Stark already had his bastard with him when he arrived at Starfall, along with a wetnurse and Ser Arthur’s bloody sword.”

Is that right? How queer, the rest of the realm seemed to believe that Jon Snow was Ashara’s lost
son, born from dishonour. Then again, there had been a few differing reports. Nym shrugged. “Very well. But there are still opportunities in the north for you.”

“Never,” the Darkstar growled. “I will pave my own path from now on, and all of Dorne shall rue my fury! You should not have lied to me, whore.”

Nym could have rolled her eyes. “And how do you expect to do that with one tired horse, and every knight in the realm chasing you?”

He hesitated. “The realm is at peace Darkstar, or soon will be,” Nym continued. “There is no need for more blood. You simply need to step aside now.”

“I will never surrender,” he snapped. “Unbowed, unconquered – I am Dorne.”

“Then you jeopardise everything you’ve already sacrificed for,” Nym retorted. “I thought you loved your country.”

That caused his eyes to flicker. “Instead, let us take a moment to consider your options,” Nym argued. “You could keep running and fighting this quest of yours, for… whatever reason again?” She frowned. “Or, why not just leave? Sail across the sea, for a very comfortable retirement in Lys.”

“Retire,” he snarled.

“Or join a mercenary company, if you wish for excitement. Form a mercenary company, if it pleases you. Find glory, or riches, or love. There’s a whole world out there.” She raised her hands. “Are you sure you want to keep biting away at this corner of it? What’s the point?”

His face was hard, but Nym caught the flicker in his gaze. “You served Dorne well, Gerold,” she continued. “And this ending is unfortunate, but I don’t wish for anymore bad blood between us. Too many good Dornishmen have bled already – and how many more Dornish sons will you have to kill if you stay?”

“Then retract the bounty on me!” he snapped. “Grant me a pardon!”

“I cannot do that,” she shook her head sadly. “Doran is firm, he overruled me. I’m sorry, but there is naught I can do.”

There was no sound but the wind hissing over the sands. The Darkstar howled – a sharp, scream of fury – and then drew his sword. His horse shifted as he raised the blade, threatening to bring the sword down upon her.

Nym’s eyes were soft, and she meekly raised her hands. “Kill me if you wish,” she whispered. “But it will bring you no joy.”

He screamed, a wordless cry of fury. She stood calm. He won’t do it, Nym knew. She could play Darkstar like a lute. He was nothing more than an overdramatic man-child obsessed with living up to the Sword of the Morning. She knew all his strings.

“Fix this, Nymeria!” he bellowed.

“I cannot.” Nym shook her head. “I have but one deal to offer you; there is a ship waiting in Planky Town, the captain is very discreet. He will take you anywhere in the world. There is a chest of gold waiting for you, and none will follow. You need only disappear, Darkstar. Vanish into the night’s sky.”
His eyes flickered. “My family, my legacy…!”

“Please,” Nym begged. “Hasn’t enough Dornish blood been spilled?”

It took a while, but eventually she managed to talk Darkstar down. Ser Gerold’s shoulders slumped, but he accepted. Lys was beautiful this time a year, Nym told him. She also said that he need only lay low until the tempers cooled, but that he would be nearby for whenever Dorne needed him. She implied that this exile might only be temporary, that he might yet return.

Reluctantly, Darkstar agreed. He rode away and agreed to be in Planky Town by the morn.

Nym watched him leave for a time, before turning and walked away, her sandals brushing over the sand.

She met Captain Ryden half a mile away, waiting for her with two sand steeds. Nym took her time strolling back. “How did it go?” Ryden asked her.

“He refused to take the black,” Nym said, sighing. A pity, but not unexpected. “So we go to the next plan.”

“Oh,” Ryden said, and then nodded. “The ship to Lys?”

“Yes. He’ll be in Planky Town on the morn,” Nym confirmed. “Are you prepared?”

The man straightened, one fist slamming against his breastplate while the other one went to his sword. “I am, my lady. I will not allow the murderer to walk free.”

*Father always told me to be prepared.* She walked closer to her guard, swinging her hips with every step. “Be careful, Ryden,” she said softly, her voice thick with concern. “The Darkstar killed the last Captain of the Guard, do not underestimate him. Areo Hotah had been as formidable as any, but Darkstar killed him.”

“He will not take me by surprise, my lady.”

“Just be wary. Ser Gerold may not be the brightest, but none can deny his skill with a blade. Instead, keep your distance, wait for him to board the ship – use a bow, and a poisoned arrow.”

Ryden was young, but bold and handsome. He had served Nym so well these last few months. “I understand. For Dorne.” He stepped closer to her, his hands moving to her waist. “And for luck?”

Nymeria giggled. “Why, of course.”

They kissed passionately under the night sky. Captain Ryden wrapped his hands around her, and she stroked the sun and spear on his breastplate.

They bid farewell, and promised to meet up shortly. They would elope and leave Dorne together, on the ship to Lys and, from there, the east. Ryden went to Planky Town, while Nym rode back to the Water Gardens.

*Only a little bit more blood,* Nym thought to herself. *A few more bodies to drop in the Sea of Dorne, and a few loose ends to be tied.*

There would be no sympathy for Gerold Dayne – after all, the fiend had beheaded a little girl.

The gates were quiet as she rode back into the Water Gardens. Spearmen hoisted the portcullis open on her approach. There was only a skeletal guard duty still operating; all others had already
There was little activity in the terraces. The pools had never felt so dead. A bad case of the pox, or so the realm believed, had driven the locals away. A few young girls were sickly, and the prince had sealed the Water Gardens to quarantine the sickness.

The lie had served its purpose, and care had been taken to preserve their isolation.

The palm trees swayed in the cold breeze, and howl of wind rippled through the blood orange trees as she stepped through the terraces, beneath the fluted pillar gallery.

The waxing moon shone in the sky, a faint sliver like a bloody dagger reflecting from the pools. She heard the whisper of torches in the moonlight, but otherwise the Water Gardens was as still as the grave.

Most had already evacuated, there were but a few final touches to be made.

Nym’s men would be burning letters, but otherwise leaving everything intact. She felt fairly proud of what she had accomplished here, actually. There had been no bodies, no bloodshed – all of Doran’s loyalists had simply spent a bit of time locked in their quarters.

My nuncle insists on call this a ‘coup’, Nym mused. But no coup in history has ever been so polite. And now it is over.

She stepped up the limestone steps towards the apartments, and a man was standing upright outside the prince’s chambers. “My lady.” The guard bowed.

He was a young man with sandy hair and dimples on his cheeks, and Nym always rocked her hips and smiled when she spoke to him. A sultry smile was better than gold when it came to ensuring the loyalty of young men.

“At ease, Liam,” Nym soothed. “Is the prince awake?”

“He has been restless,” the guard, Liam, replied, “and reading. The prince requested more books from the library, my lady.”

“Oh really? Which books?”

“Septon Barth’s Genealogy of Dragons, my lady,” Liam said. “And Archmaester Gyldayn’s History of the Seven-Pointed Star.”

Hmm. Light reading, for my nuncle, Nym mused. Her uncle always had kept an impressive library. “You are dismissed,” she ordered. “Go gather your belongings, Liam, we leave on the morn.”

“Should I call for another man for the door, my lady?”

“What’s the point?” Nym chuckled humourlessly as she stepped into the chambers. “He cannot walk anywhere.”

A bedridden old man. Has there ever been an easier ‘prisoner’ to keep?

The candles were burning low inside the room, a strained flicker of shadows filling the silent room. His chambers were filled with warm drapes and thick rugs.

“Good evening, nuncle,” Nym called. “May I come in?”
There was no reply but silence. Nym entered regardless, and her smile faded.

Doran was awake and lying atop his bed, the exact same place he been for weeks.

Nym had never seen her nuncle so haggard. There had been no servants to dress him in silk or wash him; instead Doran wore the same crusty robe, pale yellow like piss. The room stunk of old sweat and sealed windows, while Doran had gone unshaved and was growing a bush of ragged hair. He was propped up by cushions, with piles of books and old tomes littered around him.

Doran's gout had flared up, and was causing him agony. The guards had needed to carry him to the latrine twice a day, but there had still been times he had soiled the bed.

There was a moment of silence as Nym walked in. The Prince of Dorne never looked up from his page.

Nym had tried to make it comfortable for him, she truly had. Any comfort we can give, give to him, she had ordered. They had given him every book he requested, but they had still needed to restrict his information and contact with the outside world.

Neither of them spoke. The sight of him so dishevelled sent shivers down her spine. He was an old man, locked in his room. A cruelty that shouldn’t have been necessary. Perhaps I should have visited more often, she conceded.

She walked gingerly towards his bedside, glancing over the sprawled pages and scattered pillows. She didn't know what to say. “Good evening, nuncle,” she greeted. “Are you well?”

There was no reply. One thing that did catch her eye, though, was a wooden figurine in his fingers. It was small, smooth and worn dark wood, fiddling in his grasp as he stared blankly at the pages.

“Is that a raven?” Nym asked finally, hoping to make smalltalk.

For a while, she thought he would not respond. “A crow,” Doran replied quietly. “A crow. It was my sister's.”

“Oh.”

The little wooden doll could fit in the palm of his hand. “My mother herself carved this for Elia,” Doran muttered, filling the uneasy silence with a quiet voice. “When she was a girl, Elia used to have these night terrors of a giant crow, she used to wake during the night, scared and confused. She told me of the same nightmare over and over again; of a giant bird dropping her from a tower, and crowing at her to fly…

“Many nights, mother was away, so Elia would run shaken into my room for comfort. When Mother returned, she carved Elia a totem of a crow for her bedside, so that she might look upon it and never be scared…”

His voice trembled. Her heart bled for her uncle, it truly did. He was an old man, with nothing but his memories, his books, and the ghosts of his past. “When Elia left for King's Landing, she left this behind… said that was she done with the bad dreams…” Doran muttered, still not even looking up. “And for ten years I buried this crow behind my cabinet. I could not bring myself to look upon it…”

He took a deep breath, wrinkled hands grasping around it. A toy carved for a little girl’s fingers.

The moment was so painfully silent. Nym didn’t know how to reply. “I wish I could have met
“Do you?” he said bitterly, fiddling with his crow. “You don’t know the first thing about her. And perhaps neither did I. Elia was a kind soul, an innocent. She would smile when nobody else understood. My mother spent half her life at court, and Elia wanted to follow in her footsteps. She grew up on tales from the capital, she longed to go to King’s Landing herself… My mother encouraged her; she wanted her sons and daughter to travel…”

His voice trailed off, barely a whisper in the dark. His face looked pained. “Your mother,” Nym said carefully. “You barely talk about her.”

“They are bitter memories,” Doran replied quietly. “I think about her often, I think about what she would have done. Mother arranged the match between Rhaegar and Elia, but died before she could hold her granddaughter. She loved to travel, she loved to explore… she was near twenty years the elder, but she served as Queen Rhaella’s lady-in-waiting, along with Joanna Lannister. The three of them were the closest of friends.”

And how things change. Perhaps if the mothers had still been around, Robert’s Rebellion might never have happened. “You obsess over the past too much, nuncle,” Nym said. “These memories are tormenting you.”

“What do I have left?” Doran retorted. “All I have are these books, and my memories.”

Nym did not reply. She bit her lip, struggling to think how to soothe him. She did not like to see the man so distraught – he had been like a grandfather to her.

The silence reigned for a few heartbeats, the candles whispering in the darkness. “There were always rumours that the queen and her companions used to dabble in the occult,” Doran continued in a mumble. Nym’s eyes widened in surprise. “Some said they read alchemist tomes together, that they experimented with magic, even. Rhaella and Joanna were both willful, curious minds bound by duty, and Mother… well, the gossip-mongers liked to whisper that Mother was the one who taught them; that the Princess of Dorne stayed in court at the queen’s insistence, despite the king’s protests, to spread dark arts she learnt in Essos.”

“Truly?” Nym said with a scoff. Her father had taught Nym bits and pieces, but Oberyn had a low opinion of the magic preserved by the alchemists. She had heard that the Targaryens oft liked to dabble in alchemy, but she had not known about the others. The Queen, the Princess of Dorne, and the Lady Lannister were quite a trio of names to be so close to each other.

“Aye.” Doran nodded, still staring at the wooden crow. “I even asked once if she knew any magic, but Mother only laughed. But the three of them were like sisters – they wanted their sons and daughters to marry – Jaime and Cersei were offered to Elia and Oberyn first, before Rhaegar to Elia. Rhaella had to spend years pressuring Aerys into accepting the betrothal with Elia, but Joanna and Mother were both eager to see their sons and daughters joined.” Doran looked at her. “Tywin refused, but if only Joanna had lived… Do you ever think about how your own father might have ended up married to the woman you despise such?”

“I do not,” Nym’s voice was chilly. “But thank the heavens that lunacy was stopped. House Lannister deserves all it has wrought.”

“Quite,” Doran muttered darkly. “You should reflect on the past more, Nymeria.”

“And you should think on the future, my prince.”
There was a humourless chuckle of laughter, like a sob. “You have no…” He took a deep breath, regathering himself. “Then did you know that Joanna Lannister served as King Aerys paramour while she was the queen’s lady-in-waiting?”

That caused Nym to blink. “What?”

“It was a rabid rumour at court,” the prince explained. “The whole realm knew that Tywin and Aerys clashed over Joanna, and even in the years before her marriage… It was the height of scandal, but few people ever knew. The queen most certainly did, but I hear Tywin willfully blinded himself to it. Joanna was an ambitious woman; she enjoyed playing Tywin and Aerys off each other, and making both men seek her.” Doran shook his head. “Tywin and Aerys were the best of friends at one point – Tywin was even the one who knighted Aerys during the war of the Ninepenny Kings – but then their competition over Joanna…”

Slowly, the smirk grew over Nym’s lips. That was how the feud between them began, she realised. “And then Tywin won,” she noted, “and the king was forever slighted.”

She knew that Aerys had been insistent that Rhaegar would never marry Tywin’s daughter. The king had been insistent that Tywin would never have another victory over him, and the relationship between king and Hand would have devolved from there.

“It was never much of a victory,” Doran explained. “Aerys was already married. But Aerys’ and Rhaella’s marriage was an unhappy one, forced onto them by their father Jaehaerys. Tywin tried to squash such talk, but still the rumours flew – they whispered that Aerys was the one who took Joanna’s maidenhood.”


Doran didn’t seem to share her amusement. “Perhaps. And Joanna certainly made an influential position for herself, even after being dismissed from Rhaella’s service. But Aerys never lost his attraction to her, Tywin grew ever colder, more prideful, and then the game that Joanna began to play… it became dangerous, very quickly. Ruinous, even. The two most powerful men in the realm started butting heads over her, each trying to claim her as their own.” He paused, and whispered. “It set the stage for more than you can know. Had Joanna not died when she did, we may have had a wholly different manner of rebellion.” He cocked his head. “Do you still think it is so funny, Nymeria?”

Her smirk didn’t fade, but her expression turned somewhat stiffer. “Why are you telling me this, nuncle?”

“Because my mother… your grandmother… she was the one who helped keep Joanna’s indiscretions a secret,” Doran said softly. “The Princess of Dorne protected Joanna when no one else would. All your life, you have been raised knowing Lannister and Martell as mortal enemies, but I… I still remember a time when things were different.”

Nym bristled slightly. “Does that excuse Elia’s murder?” she object. “Or her babes? Does that make it all better?”

“No,” Doran admitted, his shoulders slumping into the pillows. “Nothing does.”

In the bedchambers, the candles whispered. A few of the books scattered to the floor as Doran slunk further into his bed.
“We are avenging her,” Nym said finally, as the silence stretched painfully long. “We are avenging Elia.”

“Are you?” Doran’s voice was a quiet scoff.

The heartbeats were slow and stiff. The candles flickered.

“Yes. We have won, nuncle. Cersei Lannister died ruined and grieving, her family finished. A new king sits upon the Iron Throne, and Arianne by his side.”

“I heard.” He said nothing more than that.

So the maester already informed him. It had been a tense time. The losses were painful, and the Great Fire of King’s Landing was said to have wreaked devastation, but Aegon was victorious.

Doran should thank me, even.

I did this for my family, Nym thought sadly. Doran hadn't been strong enough, so Nymeria took over. She had made all of the plans, and she kept so much of the news away from him, for fear of causing her nuncle more distress.

And yet I always knew this day would come. She took a deep breath.

“So it is over, nuncle,” Nym said finally. “You are free to go.”

There was no reply.

“All of my men are leaving,” Nym continued, “and your guards will be given their posts back. Maester Caleotte will be here in the morning to escort you again. There will be no more locked doors. You are in command of the Water Gardens again.”

Still, he stayed quiet – but Nym saw his hands clench. “You are, of course, free to imprison anyone you choose,” she said. “But all of the ‘conspirators’ will simply be gone.” Doran had no names, he had seen few faces. Besides Nym, her nuncle wouldn't even know who had been responsible for his incarceration. “I, myself, feel like a trip across the Narrow Sea is in order. Volantis seems like a good destination. It has been a long time since I saw the city of my birth. “You are the Prince of Dorne again.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.” Nym nodded. “I told you that I would never harm you, nuncle.”

The silence reigned. Doran's grim eyes finally turned to look at her, his gaze meeting hers. “You mean to pretend like none of this even happened.”

“That was the intention,” she confessed.

His wrinkled face tightened. “And you think you can commit treason so easily?”

Nym scoffed, leaning back on her chair. “Treason!” she tutted. “Very well, if that's how you name it. And I admit it; I have kept you prisoner in your own home for the last two months, while I sent out commands in your stead.”

There was a cold, dead fury glowing in her a nuncle's eyes.

“But,” Nym continued, stressing the word, “nobody else has even realised. Things have been going
quite smoothly without you, actually.”

That caused him to flicker slightly. She saw the twitch even despite how Doran tried to keep himself composed.

“As far as the realm is concerned, your health took a turn for the worst, and you have been sickly,” Nym explained. “All visitors have been turned away, and all letters have been forged. There’s been a few close calls, I confess – I think Lady Rykker is growing suspicious, and Lord Allyrion was insulted – but between my men and friends in the Old Palace we’ve kept the realm turning.

“And it worked too. It was… successful, even.” The words came with a bitter scoff. “Arianne joined with Aegon, Dorne declared support, and the Young Dragon now sits upon the Iron Throne – and Dorne was his strongest ally.” Nym forced a smile. “Congratulations, the regime you wanted to topple.”

Again, it was met by only silence. Doran was staring at her, his pale eyes on hers.

“Now, I did have… contingency plans in case things went sour,” Nym confessed. “But it seems none are needed. We won, so I shall be going.”

She stopped, and waited for a reply. Doran spoke slowly. “I do not believe that you are a fool, Nymeria,” he said finally. “But do you think I’m so soft that I’ll forgive you for this, niece?” He shook his head, and his case was dark. “You deserve to hang, for what you've done.”

“I expect you to think of your position, nuncle.” I expect you to stop and deliberate, like you always do. “Half of Dorne already believes you are weak, and the lords beneath you are vipers, my prince. Can you imagine the loss of influence if news got out that you were held hostage in your own home for months, by a bastard woman?” Nym tutted, and shook her head. “They would laugh at you, rather than weep for you. You’d lose all respect, all trust in the strength you wield.”

Their prince had been detained, but nobody noticed nor cared. “If you ever admit how I took control of your own house so easily, your rule would be as good as over.”

Doran’s face was guarded, his eyes so hard that no emotion crept through. “And I expect you to think of your daughter, Arianne, in the king’s court,” Nym continued. “Would you really sacrifice the position your daughter is in, all for your own petty pride?”

He turned, stiffening at her name. “Arianne?”

“I am working for Arianne, nuncle. We came to an agreement together. She needed you to act, and we could not trust you to make the right decision. I love my cousin dearly; while your hesitation put everything at risk. So Arianne told my sisters and I to act, and we did.” That was a lie. “I did this for my family.” That was not.

It was a falsehood – Arianne had no knowledge of their plans – but it was not one that Doran could easily confirm. His daughter was five hundred leagues away, and Doran would not trust such sensitive words to raven wings. Even Doran did hear the truth from Arianne, the doubt would constantly nag at him.

Still, Doran seemed more shaken by that than anything. His posture cracked. “You lie…” he gasped. “She would not…”

“She would not what?” Nym challenged, with a bark of laughter. “Betray you? Start a war?”

The memory of Arianne’s last coup flickered between them. Doran was shaking.
“You were a liability, nuncle,” Nym said sharply. “You and your waiting.” Her jaw tightened. “My father tried to force you to act. Oberyn walked into that trial by combat to draw a confession, to try to force you to act. You own hesitance killed Oberyn, but even your own brother's death wasn't enough!”

She took a deep breath, to calm herself. “I hope you enjoy the Water Gardens until the end of your days, I truly do,” Nym said finally. “You said once that the Water Gardens were your favorite place in this world. I do not expect you to forgive, I just want you to understand.” You belong here, rather than in the Old Palace.

To be honest, Nym would have had more respect if Doran really did burst into anger or rage against her. Instead, there was only a slow nod. Show some passion, nuncle, Nym begged, or is it all dead?

“What of my son?” Doran asked eventually, and Nym tensed. How did he hear, who told– “Did Trystane witness the murder of his betrothed?”

Oh. He was speaking of Trystane. “Trystane is still at Starfall, nuncle. I’m told that Trystane did not see the execution, but he was in vicinity of it. He is upset, but he cannot be a child forever.”

“No.” The single word lingered in the air for several heartbeats. “The girl's murder is just something he'll have to live with. He was close to Myrcella, Nym.”

“Then he must learn the truth,” Nym said firmly. “She was the enemy, and her death was as necessary as Cersei’s.”

His jaw clenched. Angry but resigned. “We have achieved everything that you wanted, nuncle,” Nym insisted. “The Lannisters are ruined, their reign collapsed. Arianne will yet be queen, Dorne is secure.”

Doran just stared blankly at the wall. Why is the death of Myrcella so hard for him to accept? It was necessary.

“I had hoped you'd have more respect for the care I've taken, nuncle,” Nym pressed. “I assure you; no Dornish blood had been spilt by us.” That was a lie, but only a small one. There had been a very few mishaps that had needed taking care of.

“Only the blood of children instead,” Doran said foully.

“For vengeance,” Nym insisted.

“And is this vengeance?” Doran demanded. “Are you satisfied now?”

Nym paused. “Almost,” she admitted. “Only a few more bodies to make sure.”

Doran spat onto the rug, frowning at her. “Who else is left?”

“The queen’s conspirators.” Nym said carefully. “Her supporters, the last allies.” And a few loose ends, she thought, thinking of the Imp. “But, most of all… Gregor Clegane.”

With that, her nuncle stiffened. “Ser Gregor Clegane is dead. We have his skull.”

“I thought so too,” she admitted. “But we were fooled. I know not whose skull graces the mantelpiece of the Old Palace, and I don't how he survived my father's poison, but the giant knight was sighted at King's Landing. Cersei harboured him, and he lives, nuncle. Hundreds saw him
fighting through the streets of the city.”

Her voice turned dark. “And Ser Gregor is the first on the list of who I must still kill,” she continued. “Along with the man who preserved him; Lord Qyburn the spymaster. He must burn too.”

There was anger in her voice. It was rare for Nym to show any real emotion, but the rage crept through.

“Why?” Doran asked, keeping his voice low and his eyes guarded.

Her hands trembled. Nym hadn't wanted to tell him, but…

“Because Obara and Tyene are both dead, nuncle,” she admitted. “And I must have vengeance for them too.”

The news had archived only recently, but it hadn't quite sunk in yet. Nym expected to cry and wail with the deaths of her sisters, but she had yet to shed a tear.

They both died in King's Landing. Arianne had written to her with news of Obara’s fate in battle. Tyene had been at the Great Sept, one of many. Nym had been hoping that Tyene might have survived, but Tyene had never missed sending regular reports south. Silence could only mean death. Both of Nym's sisters died in their quest for justice.

There was moment of silence after her admittance. Then Doran burst out into laughter.

Nym looked with horror. Doran was laughing; loud, choked chuckles…

“You dare??” Nym screamed.

“Of course you need revenge!” Doran choked. “You must avenge your sisters! Against Qyburn and all his allies, yes? Brutal destruction for them all?”

She had never heard her nuncle's voice break like that. Her hands clenched so sharply it hurt.

“Yes.” Her voice was a snarl. “I must kill their murderers.”

“But why stop there?” he challenged, through great sobs of chuckles. “Surely there are more you can blame?

“And perhaps you will fall in your own vengeance, but Elia or Sarella will be there to pick up the spear for you!” His voice nearly broke, the books falling of his lap with his shudders. “Perhaps in another eighteen years, when Trystane is prince of Dorne, even young Loreza shall be sitting before him and declaring vengeance.

“Be sure to have children of your own, Nymeria. Perhaps you could stretch this crusade out to last a whole century.”

Nym stared in horror. Sarella… “My sisters are dead. This is no jape, nuncle.”

“Oh, but it is.” He shook his head, taking a deep breath. “Ellaria spoke the truth; she was the only sane one of us…” Doran was shaking, his voice barely a whisper. “Do you know who is truly responsible for your sisters’ deaths?” Doran challenged. “He is lying right before you.”

Her face twisted. “What are talking about, nuncle?”

“It was me,” Doran muttered. “I killed Obara and Tyene.”
Nym scoffed. “You did not light the fire—”


“They chose to go.”

“For my revenge. You never even met Elia, Nym, you never knew her – neither did your sisters. It was my crusade that you adopted.”

“You insult us, nuncle,” Nym growled. “Tis our family, and our choice. My sisters and I chose this.”

“No, I did.” His voice quaked. “I am more responsible than Qyburn Rogare is. Look at me.”

“You are not…” Her voice trailed away. Nym blinked. What did he just say?

There was a silent heartbeat. Nym met his gaze. “… How do you know that man's name, nuncle?”

Nym asked lowly.

Not even I was aware of his family name. I never knew he had one; none of the letters contained it.

What did Doran know?

“Because Qyburn worked for me,” Doran replied.

My nuncle was delirious, he couldn't truly be saying…

Nym's instinctive reaction was to reach for her daggers. “What??”

She met his gaze, and his eyes were wide and dead. The candles flickered and whispered in the silence.


Doran took a deep breath, trying to stop his body shivering. “Everything,” Doran repeated. “Everything.”

The word lingered in the still air.

“Did you know that once… seventeen years ago… I once harboured Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen in Dorne?” Doran said finally. “Once, after the rebellion, I was deliberating declaring for them. Oberyn went to Braavos to meet the exiles. We made a betrothal with Willem Darry, we negotiated a deal with the Sealord… it came so close… Jon Arryn himself even came to Dorne to talk us down. He brought Lewyn’s bones to us, to try to talk us down.

“Oberyn had wanted an immediate rebellion,” Doran muttered. “We had a plan in place – to rally the Free Cities in support of the exiled Targaryen, just as Maelys did with the Ninepenny kings. We had alliances with Tyrosh, Braavos, Pentos, even Myr… Oberyn urged me to declare for them, but, in the end, it was something that Jon Arryn said convinced me to wait. ‘Viserys is just a boy’ he said, ‘no boy can be a conqueror’. I told Oberyn the same; that Viserys must grow to a man before he can lead a war.

“For a long, long time, I waited for that end. Oberyn made the preparations for war, but I pretended to be weak and submissive. I harboured the two Targaryen children myself in secrecy, on an isle on the Broken Arm, for many years. They were smuggled from Braavos and sheltered in Dorne with
“none knowing.”

*You did what?* Nym thought with surprise, but she didn’t dare to interrupt.

“They thought I was weak, but I called it patient. Waiting for my king to come of age.” He breathed brittle. “Later, I intended for Viserys to move through the Free Cities, to rally support. I meant for Arianne to go to Tyrosh, to meet with her betrothed. I meant for a war.” Doran’s voice was pained, like a confession. “If not for that Pentoshi cheesemonger outbidding my efforts, things might have been so, so different.”

Nym blinked. She had not known that. Another failed plan, from two decades spent planning. Her heart was beating, but she just sat and stared with sharp eyes.

“The plan changed over the years. Gods, how many different scenarios did we go through? Oberyn became impatient, but I wanted *perfection*. Support from the Free Cities was stolen away from me, and eventually I decided that there was only one thing that could overthrow a crown, the one force that not even the Conqueror dared to challenge; the Faith.”

“Where are you going with this, Doran?” Nym pressed, keeping her voice low.

“I know of the one you call Qyburn,” Doran admitted. “He came recommended to me from the advice of the Archon of Tyrosh. The Brave Companions distinguished themselves fighting in the Disputed Lands, and I decided that I needed similar skills in Westeros.

“The Brave Companions came to Westeros on *my* orders, Nymeria. They were one of many that did.” Maybe he saw the surprise flash over her face. “They collected coin from Tywin Lannister, and then from Roose Bolton, but also from me. I simply paid a bit more gold to give additional orders on top.

“And I spoke many times with Qyburn. I knew of his reputation, I knew of his penchant for necromancy, but he was a capable man. I had use of him. He helped coordinate so many of my efforts.” He turned to her. “Did you think I was *idle* for eighteen years?”

Nym’s hands tightened. “And towards what end?”

“Towards countless torched septs and murdered holy men,” Doran whispered. “Towards destruction across the riverlands and beyond, the butchery of septs and smallfolk. I paid mercenaries to do it. Very few ever where their orders were coming from, there was to be nothing to link back to me – I needed intermediaries like Qyburn to arrange matters. I needed to provoke an outrage without compare, and the War of Five Kings was the perfect opportunity. I financed the mercenaries, I financed the sparrows who rose to oppose them. I set the fire, and fanned the flames.”

Nym’s eyes widened in shock. “That was you??”

“What did you think my plan was, all these years?” Doran challenged. “I wanted the Faith to declare the Baratheon rule illegitimate. I wanted Tywin Lannister to die trying to hold on to his crown against an uprising. I wanted the Faith to devour him. And once the Baratheon rule was condemned, the rightful crown would revert back to a Targaryen. Back to Viserys – who would be married to Arianne. I only needed to destabilise the realm and wait.

“And I never spoke word of it to my children…” Doran whispered. “Because I was ashamed of the steps that I took. Ashamed of how many needed to die for my war.”

“How many?” she asked.
Doran only shook his head. “More than I ever cared to count,” he said hollowly.

He planned it. Suddenly, so many details came into focus, so much made sense.

Doran had sent Tyene to the capital, and she had been welcomed by the Faith with open arms – because House Martell had already been a benefactor of the sparrows.

It had only been as the New Faith grew that Doran realised that he needed a Targaryen in Westeros at all haste. At the same time as the sparrows flocked to King’s Landing, Quentyn had left for Daenerys. He planned it.

Her head spun. Nym took a breath to gather herself. “Qyburn,” she said firmly. “Tell me of Qyburn.”

“I was the man behind Qyburn. I thought business with him was concluded when the Brave Companions did their task, but he wrote to me from Harrenhal and offered a new deal. A new arrangement. He told me that he had found a position after treating Jaime's wound, that he could earn a place in the queen's trust. That it was a new opportunity for us both.

“I did not know what he was planning, I did not expect the offer – but I was pleased when it came. I severed ties with all the other mercenaries once their tasks were done, but… Qyburn. He was different. I thought he was good fortune.

“So I gave him use of my contacts, I fed him intelligence to give to Cersei – it was because of me that Qyburn earned his position as master of whisperers.”

“He was your spy on the Red Keep,” Nym realised breathlessly. For so long, Doran had alluded to having friends in the capital, men who passed information concerning the queen. Her nuncle had refused to share any names, but it was information that could only come from someone close to the queen.

Doran nodded. “Yes.” There was pause. “Qyburn was the one who warned me of Cersei’s plot to assassinate Trystane.”

Nym didn't reply. She remembered that; Cersei planned to kill Trystane, and to blame it on the Imp. The gods had a dark sense of humour.

Heartbeats passed in silence. “Qyburn gave me much from the queen's private circle,” Doran said. “And I gave him information that made him useful. My contacts became his contacts. It was a mutual relationship. I thought that I was exploiting him.”

There was no reply. Lord Qyburn had caused the greatest disaster King's Landing had ever seen. Tens of thousands had died upon Visenya’s Hill.

And it benefitted us spectacularly.

“And it worked.” Doran sounded numb. “It worked. This is what our revenge tastes like.”

Slowly, painfully, Doran started to chuckle again. He was laughing, gasping with deep, strained breaths.

“All those bodies, all this time…” Doran laughs. “And it was me. Do you wish your revenge against me?”

Nym only stared with shock. The silence reigned in the gloomy room.
He started the Faith uprising. If not for the High Sparrow’s crusade, Aegon would never had won.

If not for Qyburn and his atrocities, House Martell would never have had its revenge.

*And my sisters would never have died.*

Nym's fingers roamed across the hilt of the dagger under her cloak. Her throat jammed, she didn't even know how to reply.

“Go on,” Doran challenged. “Take your revenge. That is you *want*, isn't it?”

There was another long silence. Nym's eyes narrowed. *Very well then.*

“There was news from Meereen as well, my prince,” Nym said suddenly. Her voice was cold.

“Quentyn is dead. He died in Queen Daenerys' court.”

Another failed plan.

There was no shock in Doran's eyes, not really. The prince had been preparing for Quentyn's death for months.

And yet still, the confirmation felt like a dagger to the heart.

“No…” he muttered. “No…”

Her eyes turned cold. There was nothing more to say. Sometimes the truth was the greatest cruelty in the world.

She stood up to walk away. Behind her, Doran was shaking; his posture collapsing. There had been no news from Meereen for months, but then Sunspear received a message from a trader from Lys relaying word. They had received news of a Dornish prince who arrived in the queen's court, and died trying to steal dragons.

*I wanted to avoid telling him*, Nym thought. *I wanted to spare his feelings.*

“My... my boy...” Doran gasped. “My boy. How... how did he...?”

“Quentyn died painfully, and unfulfilled. He died trying to make you proud. Another failed plan of yours.”

The prince of Doran had never looked so old, so frail...

She walked away slowly to the doors, keeping her shoulders stiff.

“There will be no more locked doors, no more men banning you. You in charge again.” As she exited, she left the door open wide, just to make him suffer. “Enjoy your pools, nuncle.”

Even she walked out onto the terraces, she heard Doran crying bring her. “It was my fault...” he sobbed. “I sent Quentyn to die...”

“Have a pleasant evening, nuncle.” Nym's voice was cold. “Sweet dreams.”

She left him in the flickering candles, surrounded by the ghosts of all his memories and all his family.

Nym spend the night in her own chambers, pacing restlessly. Once, she stabbed her blades against
the stone wall, hissing and spitting, just to try and relieve some of the frustration bubbling in her chest.

When she finally went to sleep, the memories of Tyene and Obara haunted her dreams.

Early the next morning, she was shaken awake by the sound of alarms. Footsteps were running outside, men banging on her door. Nym slept with the daggers under her pillow, her whole body clenching as she shot awake, seizing them by reflex.

“What happens?” Nym demanded, rushing out the door. “What happens?”

Two guardsmen breading the sun and spear of Martell were standing outside, their faces pale under the helm. “It's the prince, my lady,” a man, Liam, reported. “He's vanished.”


The man shook his head. “None. We think he walked away.”

*Walked away?* Nym almost gasped. *How could he...?*

Doran was crippled with gout. Every step her nuncle took was agonizing to him. How could he escape?

She looked around their faces, and they were all nervous. “His quarters are empty,” the guard said with a gulp.

Nym clutched her daggers tightly, and stepped quickly onto the terraces. “Search the grounds!” she snapped. “Find him!”

*How could Doran escape?* she thought, feeling the panic seep through. Even if the prince could stagger out his room – he was an old, crippled man. Where could he go? The gates had been sealed, the walls patrolled, and the Water Gardens isolated.

The door to the prince’s chambers was open, exactly how Nym had left it. *There was no way,* Nym cursed. *How could he possibly run...?*

Men were shouting, panicking. There was confused frenzy, men bellowing as the morning sun rose over the archways.

Nym felt her heartbeat started to rise, and then she saw the scrap of pale yellow cloth, torn and snagged on the terrace balcony.

She felt her heart stop as she turned to stare down at the waters beneath the blood orange trees.

They found Doran, Prince of Dorne, lying face first in the shallow pools of the Water Gardens, his body floating among the lilies.

---

**The Squire**

They said that the Battle of Rosby wasn't much of a battle, but it felt like one to Olyvar. It felt like the end of the world. He felt the screaming of his blood, the horse's hooves thundering beneath him, the steel shivering in his hands...

He saw the whites of his enemies’ eyes, he saw the red pluming from bodies around him, and the arrows whizzing from the sky. The shafts seeming to fall in slow motion before frantic eyes,
moving so sluggishly he could watch the tail feathers rippling in the wind. Olyvar had been in bigger battles before, true enough, but the battle beneath the gates of Rosby felt… more personal, more frenzied, more intimate.

Nothing but a few hundred men, stomping and rolling around in the mud.

In his previous battles, there had been thousands standing beside him; there had been walls of battle-hardened swords and spears and floods of armoured warhorses and lances. The Battle of Rosby was different; Olyvar had never charged against so many with so few. He had never led the charge.

After all that blood, that adrenaline, that fury…

It felt unreal to be standing in the mud, mere hours later, watching the village kids scavenging arrow shafts and broken blades up from the ground. All of the bodies had already been carted away.

It was dusk over Rosby, a village barely more than a waystop in the road with a small limestone keep crouching over the crossroads. Less than half a day ago, there had been battle here. There had been so many boots that the ground turned into a muddy slush.

Olyvar remembered the mud. Already his memories were blurring from the pure frenzy of it all, but he remembered the mud. That was what stuck out in his mind through the blur; the squelching of wet and trodden earth beneath him. The mud and blood.

“Come on,” the Bloody Lord Stokeworth said, tapping him on the back. “Let's get you a drink.”

Olyvar only nodded. There was a scratch over his forehead where an arrow had whizzed past his skull. Olyvar honestly couldn't remember it happening. The whole castle felt… numb. Shaken.

He let the Bloody Lord Stokeworth pull him up from the mud, wrapping his arm around Olyvar’s shoulders. The tall, grim-faced man stank of sweat and blood. “Cheer up, kid,” Ser Bronn of the Blackwater laughed. “Take my advice; forget about the bodies, start thinking of the payday.”

*How could the man be so cheerful, so merry?* Ser Bronn of the Blackwater, the Lord Protector of Stokeworth, earned his nickname. He was called the ‘Bloody Lord’, presumably because of all the men who had cursed ‘that bloody Lord Stokeworth!’. Most men would have chafed under a nickname like that, but Ser Bronn embraced it.

“Wish I had a whore,” Ser Bronn said wistfully, as they stepped through the gates. Olyvar could still see the marks and splinters where the battering ram had collided. “Need a whore to celebrate. Still, the only whore around these parts that I know is Old Mildred down by the river, and I ain't that horny.”

Olyvar didn't reply. They passed bloody stone corridors, mud trekked through the hallway, and the sounds of injured men screaming. Rosby Keep didn't have an infirmary, so instead they used the main dining hall. They didn't have a maester anymore either, but there was a barber who knew how to dress a wound and an old woodsman who knew his poultices. Twenty-two men had taken arrows during the battle, and four were on death's door.

“Besides, I reckon Mildred will have a queue tonight, judging from how many of the boys were heading in her direction,” Ser Bronn mused, despite Olyvar’s silence. “With silver, though, maybe we’d get some farmer's daughter to open up her legs. Should definitely get you a whore.” Olyvar glared. “You need a woman after your first battle.”
Olyvar would have bristled, if he had the energy. “It wasn't my first battle.”

“Really?” Lord Stokeworth looked surprised. “It seemed like it was.”

Olyvar's jaw clenched. “I killed five men, ser,” he objected. “More men fell to my blade than to anybody else's.” Olyvar had been all fury during the fight, charging harder than he had ever done before. *That red helm shaking, swords sparking, horses screaming*…

“Heh, don't get me wrong, you did well, kid,” Ser Bronn said with a nod. “You definitely fought better than most. But I could see you trembling like a first-timer as you were doing it.”

There was no reply, but Lord Stokeworth didn't seem to need one. They trekked into the lord's solar – *Gyles' old solar* – and the Bloody Lord Stokeworth was already shuffling through the old oak cabinets looking for a drink.

“I reckon it's the first-timers who fight the hardest, actually,” Bronn continued regardless. “The newbies are the ones trying to prove themselves, the ones so drunk on fear that they'll charge with everything they've got. Trust me, by the fourth or fifth battle they're going to be far more cautious, far more likely to hang around the fringes rather than join the push.”

Ser Bronn found a decanter of Dornish red wine, half-hidden under the desk. Olyvar never knew that Gyles drank. Even months after Lord Rosby's death, this was still more Gyles' castle than Olyvar's.

“Enough of this,” Olyvar growled. “We need to discuss strategy, we need to get ready to move out.”

“Kid, those men out there are exhausted, they ain't going anywhere,” Ser Bronn scoffed. “They got a bit of blood on their swords, they're going to want to whore and rest.”

“There's a battle happening at King's Landing right now, we need to—”

“Right now,” Ser Bronn insisted, slamming two glasses down onto the table, “we need to drink.”

Olyvar stared. There was crackle of a fire in the background, but otherwise the room was quiet. Just him and the Bloody Lord Stokeworth, and a decanter of Dornish red.

“You saw the smoke,” Olyvar said finally. “There was a lot of smoke coming from the capital.”

There had all seen the black and green tower of smoke rising from the capital, staining the sky like an oilstain. Even in the middle of the battle, the men had stopped to gape. King’s Landing was leagues away, yet even across all that distance Olyvar had never seen so much smoke in his life. The night was dark now and the wind had shifted, but Olyvar couldn’t shake the sight of that pillar of smoke.

“I saw it,” Bronn said, his eyes narrowing. “And I recognised it too – that was wildfire. My guess is that Cersei is up to her old tricks again, same as she did on the Blackwater. Bloody alchemists keep on making more of the stuff. You're right; likely Aegon is at the city gates right now. Cersei probably started launching barrels of wildfire from the walls, but my guess is the soldiers lost control of the stuff and the fires spread into the city. I bloody warned Tyrion that was like to happen; you can't trust most men to stay calm and level-headed in a battlefield, you certainly can't trust them to handle the alchemist's green piss.” Ser Bronn soon his head, tutting. “But maybe Aegon has breached the walls, or maybe they've been routed. Fucked if I can tell.

“Yet if we head off ourselves, now, we’re not going to help. We’d just get in the way, cause a bit
more confusion. Quite possible that our own allies would mistake us for enemy reinforcements, or maybe we’d just upset whatever battle plan is happening.” Bronn shook his own head. “No, rushing off like fools ain’t going to help anybody. I’m going to sit tight in Rosby, and I’m going to wait for word. I’m going to be sure I'm doing the right thing before I do the stupid thing.”

Olyvar opened his mouth to object, and then closed it.

“Seriously, kid, your hands are trembling,” Bronn insisted. “No use to anyone like that. Drink until the tremors stop.”

Olyvar almost didn't reply. He bit his lip. His hands were still trembling. After a long moment, his shoulders sagged in resignation. “How can you be so calm?” Olyvar asked lowly.

Ser Bronn dropped into the opposite chair. “Done this before, kid.”

Kid. Olyvar was twenty years old, but he looked younger. It seemed like he had always been the kid. Olyvar had squired for a king three years his younger, but Robb Stark had still seemed the eldest. *I am still the kid*, Olyvar thought numbly.

Part of it was his plump cheeks and clean-shaven chin, another part due to his inexperience with arms. Olyvar's father, Lord Walder Frey, had been extremely old even when Olyvar had been born, and his mother had died in childbirth with his sister. For most of his childhood, Olyvar had been warded and raised by his mother's cousin, Lord Gyles Rosby. *There were just too many Freys around the Twins*, he thought sourly, *my family constantly looking for places to shove the extras.*

Gyles had been more a father to Olyvar than anyone at the Twins; Gyles had been so kind and understanding, never pressuring him or expecting anything of him, but the Lord of Rosby had also been very sickly for decades. Gyles had been better with a quill than a sword, and there had never been anybody to train Olyvar at the martial arts. Olyvar had been a man grown and he hadn't ever picked up a sword proper. His brothers, half-brothers and nephews were all knights or squires, they would mock him relentlessly.

Benfrey and Willamen had been the banes of Olyvar's life. Ever since the incident with the stableboy, his older brothers had been far too busy mocking him to spar with him, or to teach him.

And Olyvar Frey had been so, so happy when his father negotiated for him to squire for the Lord of Winterfell, and then the King in the North. Lord Walder Frey had wanted his problem son to finally have a knighthood, and arranged for Robb Stark to give him one. ‘*No other knight would take you*’, Willamen had sneered, ‘*I hear Robb Stark isn't even a proper knight*’.

No, Robb Stark hadn't been a knight. Robb had been a *king*.

*Robb never mocked me*. Despite how Lord Frey twisted his arm, Robb Stark never treated Olyvar with anything other than kindness. Robb had been young and bold and handsome, with dimples in his chin and beautiful curly red-brown hair…

Olyvar had been more loyal than anyone, he had chanted Robb’s name first and loudest, whenever he’d had the chance. Never had Olyvar felt more driven, more *whole*, than he had when he was by Robb's side, fighting Robb's war. All Olyvar ever wanted to do was keep on polishing Robb's armour, to stay close to his king.

*And here I am*. Olyvar thought, staring at the Dornish red, *fighting my own rebellion against the crown. How did it go from there to here?*

Olyvar would have followed Robb anywhere. *I should have followed Robb that final time.*
“For all we know,” Olyvar said slowly, “Aegon Targaryen might be dead already. He might have lost.” And then my fight is doomed.

“Might have done,” Bloody Lord Stokeworth admitted, taking a large gulp from his glass. “In which case, we're buggered.”

Olyvar glared at him darkly. “Maybe they need reinforcements. They could need help, even a few more men might turn the tide.” Even a single squire might have saved the king…

“If Aegon and his ten thousand plus men have already been beaten,” Ser Bronn scoffed. “I don't think that the two hundred and twenty-seven men out there are going to make much difference.”

“Two hundred and twenty-six,” Olyvar said reluctantly. “Big Tom from Ram’s Bend died from his gut wound.”

“Two hundred and twenty-six,” Bronn repeated dryly. “Well, no offence against Big Tom, but I don't think his contribution would have made the difference.”

Olyvar just grimaced. Earlier today, he had been fighting for his life. Now he was left feeling helpless and unsure. The phantom adrenaline through his veins was still causing his hands to shake, fingers clutching at an imaginary sword.

“Take my advice, kid,” Lord Stokeworth insisted. “Settle down, get drunk, stop yourself from shaking. We ain’t going to hear anything about what's happening at the capital, not today. Maybe not tomorrow either. We'll find out either when the runners come through here, or until someone thinks to pen a letter.” He held the glass up, a dark smile spreading across his scarred face. “We’ll talk war in the morning, when the blood has cooled down a little bit.”

Reluctantly, Olyvar took the glass. How, by all that is holy, did I ever end up in rebellion alongside a man like him?

Olyvar thought back to their first ever meeting, when Ser Bronn of the Blackwater had stomped into Rosby, escorted by grizzled sellswords. “So,” Ser Bronn had cried, swaggering through the castle’s hall. “You're the ward of Rosby? I hear you don't like Lannisters.”

Barron had been the one to bring Olyvar the offer from the Imp; the offer of revenge for the Red Wedding and his liege against the throne that orchestrated it. Stokeworth offered to stand side by side with Rosby, under the banner of the Young Dragon returned. Bronn promised rebellion to the crown, and a big bag of gold when Aegon took the throne. The Imp had provided names of everybody who had been involved in the Red Wedding, and promised Olyvar that none of them would avoid justice under King Aegon.

Olyvar had been motivated by a single thought; what would Robb Stark do? Olyvar had wanted to be brave like Robb, wanted to do right by his king's memory.

Olyvar took a deep gulp of Dornish red.

Barron downed the glass quickly, and then jumped to his feet. “Shit, I nearly forgot,” he sighed, walking to the door. “Hold on, be back soon.”

Olyvar stared. Barron shuffled out the door, but he was back quickly. The sound of mewling and wailing caused Olyvar to jump.

Ser Barron returned carrying a restless babe, bundled in his arms and pressing up against mud and blood-stained chainmail. It was a fat, pudgy baby of one or two years old, with bright pink skin and
a wispy crop of light blond hair on its nearly bald head. It was snivelling, wiggling in the Bloody Lord's grasp.

“You brought your baby here?” Olyvar demanded incredulously. “To a battle?”

“Well, I could hardly leave him with his mother, now could I?” Bronn scoffed. “The dumb cow keeps on forgetting to feed him. Say hello to little Tyrion Tanner.”

Tyrion Tanner was a plump and squirming babe, very fat for a baby. Olyvar had heard of him; the babe born from half a hundred men, Olyvar thought, and his mother's rape behind a tanner's shop. “Tyrion,” Olyvar said slowly, “Tanner.”

“Lollys wanted to call him Tywin,” Ser Bronn said, as if that explained everything.

The Bloody Stokeworth sat down across the table, with a baby bouncing on his knee and a bottle of Dornish red in his hand. “Come on, kid,” Ser Bronn insisted. “This is a celebration, and I want to finish this bottle. Dornish red shouldn’t go to waste.”

Little Tyrion Tanner didn't stop mewling, stubby fingers groping for attention. Bronn just swatted the babe over the head, playfully, as he refilled the glasses.

“To the new king,” Ser Bronn toasted. “May this one last at least a year, this time.”

Olyvar didn't reply. House Stokeworth and House Rosby, joined together in defiance against the rest of the crownlands.

Olyvar liked to think his contribution had been significant, but he had no idea. He had little sense of the greater war, he was in charge of nothing but his little corner of rebellion. He had spent most of the war trying to overcome petty squabbles, trying to convince men to follow him, and trying to keep control of Rosby against the many who, perhaps rightfully, tried to evict him.

Trying to train the enlisted smallfolk how to wield their spears and shield had been an exercise in futility by itself.

Olyvar had only had two dozen or so men-at-arms willing to follow him, and then they raised a militia of local boys. A militia that was good at holding pitchforks and polearms and trying to look fearsome, but less reliable at using them. Olyvar's greatest contribution to the war effort was the toll and barricade on the Rosby Road, where his men had been confiscating caravans for whatever pretence the serjeants could come up with.

They had demanded imaginary paperwork as an excuse for stopping goods going to the city, and many, many disgruntled merchants and peddlers had to be forced away.

No supplies or reinforcements had been allowed to King's Landing through the Rosby Road. We help keep pressure on them, Ser Bronn had explained, we want to make sure the capital is simmering. It had been a quiet rebellion, so slow that it took a while before anyone even realised they were rebelling.

Lord Stokeworth had more soldiers than Olyvar did. Ser Bronn of the Blackwater had been gathering his militia for much longer, and he recruited and commanded them with far more skill and experience. All the while Olyvar had been fortifying and defending the road, the Bloody Lord Stokeworth had been leading raids and ambushes across the countryside all the way up to Duskendale.

Olyvar went through the numbers in his head. He was good at counting, Gyles had taught him
stock-keeping more than fighting. Over three months of rebellion, ninety-seven caravans seized, a hundred and fourteen members of the Rosby militia and two hundred and eighty-two soldiers of House Stokeworth. Of those combined; eighty-seven had deserted them over time, forty-two had suffered wounds to various degrees, and eight were dead.

He would have to recount those numbers again, after the most recent battle.

Big Tom, Wyl, Andrew, Jon from Ass’ Stop and Jon from West Hook, Turnip, Pate and Watt… Olyvar could name absolutely everybody who had died in his little war. *I tried to do my part,* Olyvar thought. *I wanted to help avenge a wrong.*

*I wanted to do what Robb would have done.*

Olyvar had tried to give his personal condolences to the loved ones of everybody who died, but then he realised how tortuously useless and meaningless his apologies were. Apologies changed nothing. There would likely be more deaths yet from injuries in the coming weeks, and how many more would die in the months and years as their livelihoods and professions were left destroyed?

He didn't know how many men there had been on the enemy’s side, but he suspected similar numbers. Perhaps a few more desertions, a few more deaths. Olyvar had discovered that men were far more likely to desert in battle rather than die. Battles were decided more by the morale of their soldiers rather than their lives.

*It's easier when they're all just numbers.*

Olyvar took a deep gulp of Dornish red, drinking it down so quickly he nearly choked. Tyrion Tanner was chewing on the wooden desk, while Bronn was already refilling the glasses.

The Dornish red was thick and rich, causing Olyvar's head to spin…

It was hard. Even when dealing with tens to hundreds of men, it was difficult. Robb Stark had to deal with thousands to tens of thousands of men, and Olyvar had never appreciated truly just how difficult that must have been.

“That's right, kid.” Ser Bronn even sounded sympathetic. “Drink until you stop the tremors. Now you know why soldiers need lots of ale.”

*The commanders need it even more,* Olyvar thought. “How many battles have you seen, my lord?”

“No clue.” The Bloody Lord Stokeworth shrugged. “Can’t remember. They all blur together after the first dozen or so.”

Olyvar took another drink. *I fought at the Battle in the Whispering Wood, my first,* he told himself, *and the Battle of the Camps. I fought at Oxcross, and then the Battle of Ashemark, and then the Storming of the Crag.* “I fought through nearly all of the Young Wolf's campaign,” he said slowly. “This was my sixth battle.”

“Good for you.” Ser Bronn seemed amused. “But there's a difference between fighting in a battle and *fighting* a battle, kid.”

*The image of muddy earth, of bodies wrestling, of pushing and shoving, stabbing and screaming… The red helm, and the roar of horses…*

There had been a few notable skirmishes in the Rosby-Stokeworth rebellion. The Bloody Lord Stokeworth clashed with House Ryker men from Duskendale heading south; technically House
Stokeworth lost that battle, but the Duskendale men had been forced to retreat too as their supplies burnt. There had been another force of House Tarly and House Mooton reinforcements heading south from Maidenpool, but they had been too large to stop so Lord Stokeworth let them pass.

One time, a troop of gold cloaks and some Crakehall men had come from the capital to Rosby to demand they release the caravans, but Olyvar and the militia had seen them off. There had also been bandits razing farmhouses to the east for which Olyvar had mustered men to chase away. Those bandits had worn red hearts on their chests, and a family of six had burnt to death in their cottage before the Rosby men found them. Olyvar later found out that those men were sworn to the Broken King, Stannis Baratheon. Two fisherman’s daughters were kidnapped and taken back to Dragonstone, while another six burnt.

Today had been the biggest battle, by far. Nobody had expected it, not when word had arrived that Mace Tyrell was finally marching on the Golden Company. There had been no warning, there had just been hundreds of men appearing on the road one dreary morning. Lannister, Tyrell men and City Watch – red, green and gold cloaks.

They had come not to negotiate, not to squabble, but just to storm Rosby Keep. No talk, no warning.

Memories of that moment were repeating over and over again. They were outside, slamming against the gates. Men screaming, panicking, and Olyvar's voice bellowing. “Ready the horses!” he had screamed. “We charge out against them!”

He tried to be brave, but every man in the keep thought they were going to die.

If not for the Bloody Lord Stokeworth coming to Rosby's aid, then Olyvar would have lost. If not for the sight of reinforcements, the Rosby men would have thrown down their blades and abandoned the fight. Instead, it had been the gold cloaks who had ran as their courage broke.

Olyvar remembered mud underfoot, and the red-helmed knight charging against him. He remembered the lance in his hand, his arm lunging, pushing his palfrey to meet the destrier. The knight with the red helm had fought bravely, lunging and parrying, but Olyvar had been raw emotion and desperation…

*King Robb may not have knighted me, he thought, but he taught me how to fight.*

“That knight in the red helm,” Olyvar said finally. “The man I killed. He was leading them, wasn't he?”

“Well, he had the fanciest armour, and the best warhorse.” Ser Bronn nodded. “So aye, I'd say he was in command. Nice job with that one, by the way. It looked like quite a fight.”

“I don't even know his name,” Olyvar muttered. The knight had been strong, fierce, and a fury with his rapier. “Who was he?”

“Not a clue.” The Bloody Lord Stokeworth looked at his expression, and then sighed. “Hold on, kid, I'll go find out for you.”

He pushed up from one his chair, and stomped out the door, leaving Olyvar sitting to stew in silence. Tyrion Tanner was on the floor, squirming and trying to find something to chew. The baby nearly reached Olyvar's boot, but he pulled his legs away.

Not long later, Ser Bronn returned and scooped the babe back up. “Spoke to one of my guys,” he explained, “and he said they were being led by one Red Ronnet, the Knight of Griffin's Roost. Ser
Ronnet Connington.”

Olyvar stared in horror. “Connington?!”

“Aye,” Ser Bronn said with a grin, dropping back into his chair. “The cousin to the Hand of the True King. Or second cousin or whatever. He used to be the head of his house, before Jon Connington came back from the dead. Good job.”

“I killed his kin!”

“No, you killed the claimant to his seat,” Ser Bronn said, stressing the words. “Plus, you killed him, which means Lord Jon isn't going to be labelled as a kinslayer. That's important, and this is a victory for you.”

Olyvar didn't know how to reply to that. Ser Bronn was already pouring another glass.

“Red Ronnet stayed loyal to the Iron Throne despite his cousin's return,” Bronn mused. “But I reckon that Mace Tyrell still didn't trust Ronnet in their army just because it was his family they were fighting against. While the rest went south to face a dragon, they must have sent Ronnet north to take Rosby. You take Red Ronnet's armour and warhorse, you take the Lord Hand’s gratitude… hells, I've seen men made for life for much less.”

"Only if the Golden Company wins.”

“Only if,” he agreed, as he bounced the babe up and down absentmindedly. “But I've gambled on worse odds.”

“They say that King Aegon has fifteen thousand men,” Olyvar's voice was low, his head starting to buzz. He took another drink. “And that Mace Tyrell has thirty.”

“Damn, what is with you and trying to count everything?” Ser Bronn chuckled. “There ain't nothing more useless than counting. War ain’t maths, soldiers aren't numbers.”

*I'm well aware.* The image of the red blade and muddy ground… “And what happens if they do lose?” Olyvar said slowly. “What will you do if the worst happens?”

Ser Bronn mused over it, and took a gulp of Dornish red. “Depends,” he said finally. “But I'll do whatever it takes to survive.” He poured another two glasses. “If I need to, I'll throw myself on the floor and weep like a little babe before the queen or anybody else. I'll beg and I'll sob and I'll say that they held my wife and child hostage, that I never had a choice.” He smiled faintly, bopping Tyrion Tanner on the head. Olyvar couldn't imagine the Bloody Lord ever crying. “Or maybe I'll go out and I'll take the head of every traitor I can find. I'll go for Stannis, I'll go for the Imp, I'll kill as many as physically possible and I'll drop all their heads before the queen as an apology. She'll probably appreciate that more than tears.”

Olyvar hesitated. “Will my head be one that you drop?”

“Don't obsess over it,” Bronn said dryly. “Worst comes to it, I'm ransacking Stokeworth for all its worth, and I'm getting on the first ship out of here. You'll find me and little Tyrion in the Summer Islands somewhere, with a pretty girl by my side and a tan.”

Olyvar didn't have anywhere to run. His entire life had been between Rosby and the Twins. “What of your lady wife?” *Lady Lollys Stokeworth, the dimwit woman raped a hundred times behind a Tanner’s shop.*
“Meh.” Bronn shrugged. “Tyrion’s easy to carry, but there’s no point bringing her.”

“You… you like the baby,” Olyvar said uncertainty.

“I do actually,” Ser Bronn said, sounding surprised himself, still bouncing the child on his knee. “I like the little bastard, the bugger.”

Olyvar remembered one of the guards betting coin that the Lord Stokeworth would ‘drop’ the babe of his horse somewhere. ‘What sort of man would let a bastard of his wife's rape grow up under his roof?’ the guard had said, ‘from what I hear, the Lord Stokeworth ain't the sort to let a child like that live for long. That babe is going to take a fall on its head soon enough, mark my words’. Apparently, that man lost his bet.

Across the table, Bronn took another gulp. “Your hands are still shaking. Take another drink. It helps, trust me.”

Olyvar did. “I must be going soft,” Ser Bronn mused. There was still blood smeared across his grey armour. “I suppose this is what being a proper nob does to you, it makes you soft.” A smile cracked over his dark features. “And I like you, kid – soft load of heartbroken mud that you are. You're decent on a horse, and honest enough that I don't have to worry about you stabbing me in the back. Take my advice; don't think of the bad, think of what might happen if we win. I told you; we could be in a real good place here. Proper lordships and all.”

*Both of us stole our houses,* Olyvar thought, feeling a bit woozy. *Neither of us have any right to our seats.* The Bloody Lord Stokeworth had killed the former lord, his brother-in-law, in a joust.

Meanwhile, Olyvar wasn't even a member of House Rosby, he had no right to the castle, but he had still been raised here. Gyles Rosby had never taken a wife either – he had never had an interest in fathering a child – but it was well-known that the former lord had wanted Olyvar to be his heir. With Lord Stokeworth's help, Olyvar had seized control of Rosby Keep and its lands.

“We both allied with Aegon real early,” Bronn continued. “The king will have to reward that well. I'm looking to move up from Stokeworth myself, but you could easily be made the rightful lord of Rosby. Or more, if you push it. You’re young and loyal, Aegon will do well keeping you sweet.” Bronn nodded, yet his tone turned serious. “But just take my advice, kid; take a new name. Make a new house. If word spreads that a Frey is sitting comfortably, then the brotherhood without banners is going to be knocking on Rosby's door any day now.”

Olyvar's hands tightened. “Not every Frey deserves to die.” He thought of his brothers, his sisters, his family that tried to protest the Red Wedding…

“Deserve got nothing to do with it,” Bronn said, shaking his head. “It's real unhealthy to be a Frey in these parts right now. The hangwoman has seen to that.”

“Almost as unhealthy as it is to be a Lannister,” the words splurted out of Olyvar’s mouth.

“Aye. Almost,” Bronn chuckled, his eyes glancing to Little Tyrion.

Ever since the Red Wedding, the hangwoman and the brotherhood without banners had inflicted brutal redemption upon House Frey, one by one. And then the Bastard King had inflicted retribution on them all at once.

Olyvar felt drunk, his head woozy. “I never stopped thinking about that night,” he admitted, his voice pained. “The Red Wedding. I was there. My half-brothers locked me in the tower during my sister’s – Roslin’s – wedding. Walder Rivers threatened to kill me unless Roslin went along with it,
I was a hostage to force Roslin into the plan.” There was no reply. “And I spent that night screaming and banging on the door, and I…”

A single night that defined everything after. The night that had damned the Freys.

His voice trailed off. Ser Bronn didn’t push him. Roslin, his sister – his pregnant little sister… Olyvar hadn't even been able to save her.

“A week after it was over, Black Walder gave me a horse,” Olyvar said finally, “and told me not to come back. I rode for Rosby and disavowed my family. Gyles took me in.”

For a few months after, he’d recuperated in silence at Rosby. And then the Bastard King had entirely obliterated the Twins, innocents and guilty alike. The Bastard King clearly wasn't one to be dissuaded by hostages. If there was any moral to that story, Olyvar couldn't see it.

He took another drink. His head was starting to buzz. Nothing but two men and a baby sitting in a poorly lit room, getting drunk on Dornish red.

“Why are you doing this?” Olyvar asked after a while, slamming his glass down on the table. “Fighting. Why did you start this rebellion, what for?”

Bronn shrugged. He seemed drunk too. “A castle, vaults of gold, a pretty wife… the usual.”

“You've got a castle.”

“Aye, a small one though. I got silver too, but not much gold.” He glanced at little Tyrion Tanner. “And I got a wife, I suppose, but she's hardly pretty. I want more.”

*My lord father wanted more too.* Olyvar had never wanted anything except to be at Robb Stark’s side. “You want another wife?”

“Well, I was promised double,” Bronn chuckled, “but probably best to get rid of the wife I've got first. I think that after I'm named lord of my new castle, I'm going to see how much of a bribe it takes to annul a marriage. I've never fucked Lollys, could never stomach it, and I hear that's all it takes for annulment. Maybe I'll get a Summer Islands woman with long legs as my second wife, but I'll be lord of my own rights.” He moved the glass to his lips, and then paused. “And I suppose that’d leave Lollys up for grabs, if you're interested. You could have both Rosby *and* Stokeworth.”

Olyvar didn't dignify that last bit with a response. “*But why?*” he demanded, voice cracking. “It'll never be enough. Why do you need more, and why did so many have to die for it? Is it really just for power, is that all you care about?” *Is that all my father cared about…?*

The Bloody Lord Stokeworth smiled hollowly. He paused, absentmindedly letting Tyrion sip from his glass.

“I was born in Gulltown, you know that?” Bronn explained after a while. “Well, outside of Gulltown, really. I'm told that my mother was pregnant when they put the noose around her neck. Never knew what she did – but it was probably whoring, thieving, the usual. Anyways, they dropped her from the gallows, and then I dropped out of her.”

Olyvar gaped. “Are you… is that a jest?”

“Not a clue,” Bronn admitted. “That was the story I got told, but I never did find out whether or not the bugger telling it was messing with me or not. Could be horseshit for all I know. Still, they called me ‘the Unlucky’ in the orphanage until I was twelve, right up until I beat another boy to
death with a broom handle because I was starving and the boy stole my turnip.” Bronn chuckled. “You think dying for a lordship is bad? Imagine dying for a turnip.

“But after that, I ran, and I stowawayed on a ship coursed for Oldtown. Never got there, though; the crew found me and threw me overboard. That was the day I learned how to swim.”

Olyvar stared speechless. Tyrion started to cry again, and the Bloody Lord rocked him absentmindedly. “Anyways... the point is that I had nothing,” Ser Bronn explained. “I had less than nothing; I owed everything I got. So I picked up a dead man’s sword, I started traveling, and I just wanted something. I want to be one of the guys that folk owe things to, for once.”

“And... and that's it?” Olyvar demanded, slurring his words slightly. “No other reason, you just want to have lots of stuff?”

“Pretty much,” Ser Bronn nodded. “It’s that ‘want’ that’s kept me alive. I’m not that good of a swordsman, not really, but I can still kill much better men just because I want it.

“You see, that's the bit about war that nobody understands. It doesn't matter about numbers, doesn't even matter about skill – it's all about want.” He barked out a dry chuckle. “Does that make any sense, or am I just drunk?”

A bit of both, Olyvar thought, staring at his glass. The bottle was nearly empty.

“Your turn, kid,” Ser Bronn said, draining the last of the wine into two more glasses. “Why did you declare for our glorious King Aegon?”

“You know why,” Olyvar muttered.

“I know you're pissed at Lannisters, don't like your old family either,” Bronn said. “But seems to me, if you really want to stay loyal to your Young Wolf, then why not go north and join the mess his half-brother is making up there?”

Olyvar shook his head. “Jon Snow is no king of mine.” The thought of Roslin, pregnant and dead in the ruins of the Twins, haunted his vision. “Robb Stark would have cursed what his bastard brother has done.”

Olyvar had seen the Bastard King’s letter. At this point, most of the highborn in the realm had, like as not. The kingdoms had been set to panic after the Scouring of the Twins, and the letters from White Harbour that had come not long after had been copied and passed between every maester in the realms.

Some had declared vengeance against the dragon, others had retreated and cowered in fear. Some had even cheered for the obliteration of the Twins, but more had panicked with thought of who might be next. Olyvar heard that Lord Jonos Bracken had evacuated Stone Hedge entirely for a time, certain that the dragon would target House Bracken next. Olyvar lost count of the number of lords convinced that it was doom upon them all.

White Harbour had declared rebellion in alliance with the Bastard King and his dragon, and the rumours had sprouted like mushrooms in the rain. Even high lords spoke of the north in hushed whispers, they said that there were dragons, giants and monsters, wargs and witches in the Bastard King’s army – wildlings that practiced cannibalism and blood sacrifices before heart trees, or savages that would cut off their own faces, or make necklaces of human eyes.

As the months passed, the fears eased somewhat, but it all felt so fragile. The realm was left tense, watching the north in apprehension for the ice dragon passing the Neck again.
It had all left him numb. Olyvar had loved his family almost as much as he had hated them. To burn the guilty with the innocent, to burn hostages...

The thought of Roslin, his own sister...

His fingers fiddled with the glass. Bronn was looking at him intently. A different world, a different choice, and maybe I would have ended up fighting this man, Olyvar thought. Maybe Robb might have attacked King’s Landing, and Ser Bronn would have fought against us for the Lannisters.

“And it's all my fault,” Olyvar admitted. “Everything that happened. My fault.”

Bonn stayed quiet. Olyvar took a deep breath. “I alone could have stopped the Red Wedding.”
The Dornish red was making Olyvar’s head spin. “I was there when Black Walder first suggested the idea to my lord father. I was in the room, I was there. I tried to protest it, but they dismissed me to my chambers. That was my chance.” His voice nearly cracked. “If I had ran away that night, I could have stolen a horse and rode to Robb to warn him. I could have prevented it right there, but I…” He grimaced. “But I thought that I could dissuade them. I didn't think they would actually do it, but… but… after that night, they started locking me in my room. They realised I wasn't going to along with the plan, they didn't give me another chance to stop it. I was there, I was kicking and screaming and useless all through the night…”

That memory… even after all this time, it still hurt. I was locked in my room, all the while my king was being murdered.

Bonn sat quietly. Olyvar's voice was breaking, but he couldn't stop talking. “I had my chance,” Olyvar gulped. “I could have saved him. I never should have left him. I was his squire, I… the Frey alliance fell apart, Steffon was demanding that we leave, but I could have…”

I could have stayed, Olyvar thought, I could have fought. But instead I let them take me away because I was angry. Robb had married Jeyne Westerling, and Olyvar had been furious.

Everyone had expected Robb to choose Roslin. Olyvar had been unhappy with that thought too, but then he had grown to accept his king marrying his sister. Olyvar and Robb could have been brothers, it meant Olyvar would have stayed by Robb's side.

But then when he married Jeyne…

Robb was delirious on milk of the poppy, Olyvar told himself. Robb hadn't been in his right mind. He had been recovering from an arrow wound, and grieving from the news of his brothers. Jeyne Westerling took advantage of him, and Olyvar could never forgive her for that. It had been Jeyne Westerling’s fault, not Robb’s.

No, it was my fault. If only I warned Robb of my family's plot, Olyvar thought. If only I had stayed by his side. If I only I had taken that arrow for him at the Crags, if only I had been his squire…

He was my king and I would have walked through the hells for him. But, somehow, I couldn't disobey my family for him.

There was a moment of silence, as the drunken memories overwhelmed him. Olyvar had to blink through the haze. “It was my fault,” Olyvar said finally. “I had my chance and I did nothing. So I joined with Aegon because I didn't want to lose another chance. I didn't want to do nothing.”

Bonn sat in silence, dark eyes lingering on him. “Take a deep drink, kid,” he said, his voice strangely soft. “If it still hurts tomorrow, drink again then too.”
Olyvar did. The Bloody Lord emptied the last of the decanter into Olyvar’s glass.

The wine was thick and rich, overwhelming his senses and making his thoughts blur. In the quiet, whispering room, he could feel himself slipping away… His mind wandered. He remembered. The memories, as sweet and sharp as a blade… the moment where it all went wrong…

“Jon… Jon…”

Olyvar could only stare, caught in endless self-recriminations, while the faint light dappled through the narrow windows of the stone keep. His king was moaning, insensate in his bed, wracked by nightmares. They had cleared out the entire infirmary for the king, but Robb’s personal guard stood stiffly and quietly around the room. The only noise was their king’s pained murmurs.

Behind him, the door opened quietly, and two women walked in. One older, the other younger, but both were carrying metal plates of water, poultices and fresh bandages.

“He has been muttering senseless for half a day,” Ser Wendel Manderly warned, his arms folded and his beefy face creased with concern. “He’s half-delirious.”

Lady Sybell Spicer nodded. “The wound won’t kill him,” the aging Lady of the Crag replied. Olyvar didn’t even turn to look at her. “But his fever runs hot. Milk of the poppy for the pain, plenty of water, and a calming salve his humours. Be certain that he drinks every night.” She laid out tankards of milk and water on the bedside, along with something pungent he couldn’t recognize. She saw Olyvar’s gaze rest on it. “It’s a purgative,” she explained. “A family speciality – my grandmother was something of a healer herself.”

From across the bed, the Smalljon Umber peered down at the concoction, his gaze suspicious. This recently after the battle, tensions were still high. The sworn guard of the king were all staring at Lady Sybell and her daughter.

She just met his gaze, and scoffed. “Do you think I’m a fool, ser?” Lady Sybell replied, rolling her eyes. She snatched up the tankards, and took a small sip from each of them herself. She pointed to her purgative. “It is calendula, chasteberry, ginger and garlic, no more. It’ll calm his stomach and help ease the fever. Have your maester confirm there is no poison, or use a food-taster if you wish – but I would not put my family’s life at risk. I want your king to recover swiftly more than anybody, so that you all might move on.”

The Smalljon muttered that he would test the concoction, but most seemed happy enough. House Westerling was resigned; the Crags had put up a decent fight, but now the small castle was occupied by Robb’s own soldiers. Lady Sybell was a sharp, severe woman with a matronly air to her, brushing past the armed men in the infirmary. “Jeyne,” the lady ordered. “You see to his wound, replace the bandages.”

“Yes, Mother,” she replied meekly, stepping towards the bed. Olyvar stepped forward too, to help twist Robb onto his side. Robb was so pale, a cold sweat sticking to his skin.

The arrow had pierced through Robb’s gauntlets, straight through his forearm. It had seemed a minor wound at the time – Robb had screamed in pain, but he had been able to keep fighting with his other arm, like some hero of legend. Robb had made it all the way to the main hall of the Crags – standing strong and firm to accept the castellan’s surrender even despite the arrow in his arm.

It was only after an entire day when the blood loss made Robb woozy, he collapsed and the infection took hold.
We should have treated it earlier, Olyvar cursed. They should never have let the fever grow so bad – they all knew the stress that Robb was under. His gut wrenched at the sight of his king like this. No, I should never have let Robb get hurt.

His king was still mumbling in his sleep, eyelids twitching in some dream. “Jon…” Robb was muttering. “I don’t… I can’t….”

They were silent, as Jeyne Westerling wrapped fresh wool around his forearm, tightening it with straps of leather. Olyvar’s hands were on Robb’s shoulder, holding him steady as gently as he dared.

“Who is Jon?” Jeyne asked quietly.

“Jon. Jon Snow. That’s his bastard brother,” Olyvar eventually said. His only brother, now. Word from Winterfell had arrived scant days ago. The news of Bran and Rickon had hurt Robb as much as the arrow.

“Ah.” Jeyne was quiet for a bit. Robb mumbled something insensately. “Is Jon with the army?”

“No, he’s serving at the Wall,” Olyvar shook his head. “Robb doesn’t speak of him very often, but…”

His voice trailed off. She only nodded understandingly. Jeyne was a shy and slim girl, her eyes constantly darting towards to the ground when she spoke. She wore a leather apron over her dress, dressed more like a serving girl than a highborn lady. She was meek and pretty, though; with chestnut curls, a heart-shaped face, and doe brown eyes. Not especially beautiful, but she had wide hips and good curves.

Olyvar remembered thinking well of her, at the time. Jeyne helped to care for Robb whenever he could not. Sometimes they would even take shifts by his bedside. Often Grey Wind would stay with Robb too, but other times the wolf needed to roam. One time, when Olyvar fell asleep in the chair next to the bed, he woke up with his head propped by a pillow.

All Olyvar had wanted was for Robb to recover, so he could it make it all better.

“Run…” his king muttered in his sleep. “Must… come…”

Jeyne finished re-bandaging the wound, gingerly resting the king’s arm across his chest. The old bandages were foul, red and black – the arrow wound had been weeping again.

“What the ironborn did to his brothers…” Jeyne whispered, soft and hesitant. “I am so… I shall light a candle to the Father for them.”

Olyvar nodded. “Aye,” he whispered. The north prayed to the Old Gods, not to the Seven. Olyvar wondered if that was better or worse.

He supposed that the campaign would soon be returning to Winterfell. Olyvar felt scared of what that might mean. Robb needed to return to his own lands, but how would the riverlords react to their new king abandoning them? The north was defended by the Neck, but the riverlands were exposed on all sides.

They might curse Robb if he leaves now. And my father, Olyvar thought with dread. How will Lord Frey react if King Robb chose to abandon the war and go home? The riverlands had risked much when they hailed Robb as their king.
Olyvar felt helpless. He felt useless. So useless. His king was in pain…

“The cold… Gods, the cold…” Robb was mumbling. “… Sword… Sword in the darkness… the watcher…”

Jeyne leaned in, and laid a wet towel over Robb’s forehead, stroking it down flat. “Mother’s medicine works well,” she said. “His fever should break soon.”

“Aye,” Olyvar nodded, but his jaw was still stiff.

She glanced at him. “You care for him, don’t you?” Jeyne said gently, and Olyvar almost flinched. “You’ve stood vigil by his side constantly. You are good to treat your king so.”

“I’m his squire,” Olyvar said simply, hiding his grimace. “It’s my duty.”

She smiled, her hand gently touching Olyvar’s shoulder. “He must be a good man to deserve such loyalty.”

“He is,” Olyvar agreed. “The best.”

Jeyne tended to his linens. Olyvar dropped into the chair by the bedside. The moments ticked by slowly, but Robb’s mummers never ceased. His king was shivering, slightly, and then jolted in his bed. His king was awake. “My Grace!” Olyvar straightened to attention instantly. “What do you—?”

“Jon…” Robb muttered, eyes unfocused. “Blue eyes… they’re after them… Jon…”

No. His king was still… not asleep, but not awake either. The mummers were growing. Why were Robb’s thoughts circling around a brother a thousand leagues away? Jeyne looked down at him, her lips pursed.

“What are you seeing, Your Grace?” she asked gently, holding Robb’s hand to calm him. Olyvar blinked.

In the distance, Olyvar could hear Grey Wind howling in the courtyard of the Crags below. Robb was delirious from the milk of the poppy, but he was still moving and talking, squirming in his bed. “I see… ice. I see wings. I see wings, and ice… endless ice… and Gods…” Robb braced his arms against the bed, as he tried to stand. “I… I can’t be – I can’t stay here.” Robb coughed, trembled, and fell back into the bed. “My family, need to help my family.” His strength gave out, and he sagged back into the bed, panting. “The north… my family needs me…”

He’s delirious, Olyvar thought with a grimace. Jeyne rested her hand on his cheek, whispering sweet nothings in his ear and trying to calm him. Olyvar remembered wishing that he had been brave enough to cradle Robb like that.

“Dragons…” Robb murmured in his sleep. “Dragons, gods… the dragons…!”

Every eye in the room was on the king, but nobody said a word. They felt uncomfortable, like they were eavesdropping on their king’s private dreams. Olyvar helped Ser Wendel Manderly and Robin Flint as they gingerly poured the concoction down Robb’s parched throat. True to Lady Spicer’s word, the purgative seemed to soothe him, and he fell into a more content lull.

It was nearing dusk, the shadows through the windows growing long. They all stood guard around their king, but Olyvar could feel the weariness filling the room.
Eventually, after a long quiet, Jeyne stood up, and bowed to the men. “It is late, good sers,” Jeyne said. She smiled softly at Olyvar, and her hand gently rested on his shoulder. “You should retire for the night as well.”

“King Robb—” Olyvar tried to protest, but the Smalljon Umber nodded as he yawned.

“You are no good to him running ragged,” Jeyne protested, shaking her head. “I will see to it that His Grace is cared for.”

... 

Olyvar blinked repeatedly, jerking to consciousness again. He shook himself out of his memory, trying to focus through the fog in his head. He knew that dream, he had relived it frequently. **How much suffering might have been prevented, if only I kept Jeyne Westerling away from my king?**

He was back in the solar at Rosby – leant over the desk in the gloomy stone room. The only sound were the sweet whispers of candles, and the faint gargles of the baby beneath the table.

Bronn took a long gulp, and then stared forlornly at the empty glass. Little Tyrion was mewing again, groping for attention. “Well shit.” Ser Bronn sighed. “I knew I should have packed more wine myself. My own bloody fault for taking milk for this bugger instead.”

Olyvar only nodded, still trying to focus through the whispers and memories hissing around him.

The baby seemed to perk up, a wail splitting from his little mouth and his face turning red. “He’s a greedy little sod,” Ser Bronn explained, pulling his chair back. “But I suppose I better go. It’ll be a headache all night if I don’t put this bastard to sleep.”


“What, I don’t seem like the sort to carry a baby around with me?” His mouth twisted, and then his lips burst into a smirk. “Hells, you’re right. I was quite prepared to leave him in a farmer’s field a year ago. But, well, the bastard has grown on me.”

Olyvar didn’t know how to respond to that. The Bloody Lord Stokeworth was a tall, grim and dark man with eyes like a killer and scars across his cheeks, and Olyvar still blinked to see such a man pampering a pink and mewling baby.

“Mind, if I wanted the bastard dead, I could have just left him with his mother,” Bronn commented as he stood up. “The cow doesn’t feed him, she cries even more than he does. It was his grandmother that forced Lollys to have him, but Lollys would have smothered him with a pillow if she had her way.”

“Lollys…” Olyvar muttered. He was too drunk, he couldn't stop himself… “Raped by half a hundred men behind a tanner’s shop?”

Bronn pursed his lips, like biting back a smirk, but he just nodded. “You’re awfully interested in my boy?”

“No, it’s just…” Olyvar floundered, head spinning. “… It’s just that my father had two dozen children and half a hundred grandchildren… and yet Walder Frey never gave any of them half the attention you give him…” **Why is the thought of a caring father so alien to me?** “He’s not even your blood.”
Ser Bronn paused, scratching his whiskers. “Have you ever had a bastard?” he asked finally. “Ever thought about one of the buggers yourself?”

Olyvar shook his head. “Never liked the process.”

“Probably for the best – they ain’t worth the hassle.” Bronn chuckled dryly. “I’ve had enough whores that maybe I’ve got some bastards running around, but I’ve never met them. Babies are queer things. Little Tyrion here is the first I’ve ever had to deal with.”

“Tyrion,” Olyvar repeated. “Tyrion Tanner. The Queen Regent must have hated you for naming him that.”

“It did get me in a bit of trouble,” Bronn conceded, but his smile widened. “And maybe I poked the lioness. But I just couldn’t resist, it was too…”

His voice trailed off. Bronn grimaced, and Olyvar frowned. “Too what?”

“Too funny,” Bronn admitted. “That was the jest, you see, it’s… well, Lollys wanted to name the bugger Tywin.”

Olyvar stared uncomprehendingly. The Bloody Lord Stokeworth seemed torn, for one drunken moment. “Alright, bugger it,” Bronn said finally, dropping back down on his chair again. “Can you keep a secret, kid?”

Olyvar only blinked. “Suppose it’s not really a secret, anyways,” Bronn continued. “Useless, really, but if you want a laugh…”

“You’re talking about the baby?” Olyvar said, confused.

“Aye. Born from rape during the riots of King’s Landing,” Bronn said, the smile still playing at his lips. “Except it wasn’t half a hundred men, that bit was bullshit.”

Wait, what? That was the tale parroted around constantly – in taverns men spoke of Lollys’ rape. Many even laughed and chuckled over it. The dimwitted girl, and the bastard by a mob of smallfolk. Olyvar blinked, trying to understand. He met Bronn’s gaze. “Wait, then… it was just one man?”

“Aye, that’s what she says,” Bronn nodded, pinching Tyrion’s chubby cheek. “And I named this baby after his father’s uncle.”

The room went silent. The fires crackled in the backdrop, and Olyvar only stared. He was too drunk to understand, too slow to grasp it. Ser Bronn burst out in a bark of laughter.

“It was the riots of King’s Landing, you see,” Ser Bronn explained. “Hell of a time. Stannis was approaching the city with half the armies in the realm, but city turned in a battle before he even got there. The queen and the Hand were tormenting each other, the city was starving, and the whole place was a boiling pot of shit, simmering fit to burst. You had loaves of bread being sold for a gold dragon, and manhoods being fed to goats. Then the day of riot, well, the princess was shipped off to Dorne, the queen was fuming, and some bright fool started slingning manure at the king on the way back. That was the moment it all went to shit, actually – moment it all went wrong. When the cracks started to show. We probably wouldn’t be here right now, if it weren’t for that fool throwing manure, and the prick of a king setting his dog onto the crowds.”

Olyvar didn’t understand, but he listened raptly. “You had some Lannister cousin vanishing without a trace in the riots, and the High Septon ripped apart by the mob. We all thought that the
Stark girl was dead too, and Tyrion… well… the Hand of the King pulled young King Joffrey down to his knee and slapped the bloody shit out of him. Beaten by a dwarf right in front of the whole court – gods, Joffrey turned red.

“Lollys was there too, she vanished in the mob. Her mother was screaming bloody fury, but everyone else was more distracted with Sansa Stark.” Bronn shook his head. “Hells, I was there – and I didn’t even think to wonder about whereabouts Joffrey sulked off to afterwards.”

Olyvar’s mouth slowly dropped open.

“The way I understand it,” Bronn explained slowly. “Lollys managed to slip away all by herself – but with her clothes ripped she looked like just another lowborn woman. Lollys ran to the Red Keep, but it was Joffrey that found her first. Little shit was on his way down to the gates with that crossbow of his, wanted to try it out on some smallfolk. Just happens to see Lollys and comes up with a more interesting idea, catches her before anyone else. Him and two Kingsguard – I figure it was Boros Blount and Mandon Moore. Bunch of thugs.”

“Are you…?” Olyvar’s head was spinning, just trying to understand. “… Why?”

“Buggered if I know.” Bronn shrugged. “But Joffrey was a prick. He enjoyed stripping and beating women when he was angry, and he was really angry. Tyrion had already taken his last plaything away from him; Joffrey must have wanted to lash out, and Lollys was the weakest target around. There were even talk going around that Lady Stokeworth was trying to set up Tyrion to Lollys – so maybe Joffrey thought that it would be revenge against his uncle’s future wife.”

Olyvar’s back straightened upright, eyes widening. Was this a joke, some jape he didn’t understand…?

“A lion taking a lamb’ is what Lollys repeated to me,” Ser Bronn said softly. “Apparently, that was Joffrey kept saying, the cunt, while the Kingsguard pinned Lollys down and stripped her clothes off. Afterwards, Lollys was so distraught every single time she had to step into that keep again, but everybody just thought the girl was a dimwit.” A chuckle rose from Bronn’s throat. “Fuck, I heard that she was so terrified to even leave her room after that, but I never wondered why. No one realised what was really traumatising her.”

Across the table, Olyvar sat speechless. Little Tyrion was still crying, squirming in Bronn’s grip.

There was long moment of silent. Bronn stared down at his cup. “Really wish we had more wine,” he lamented.

There were shivers down his spine. “How…?” Olyvar exclaimed finally, stammering. “I never heard… who knew about it, did they…?”

“Very few knew. I don’t think the queen ever found out; neither Lollys nor Joffrey were like to tell her. The two Kingsguard dropped Lollys off barenaked behind the tanner shop afterwards, and then she was picked up by the gold cloaks. She was too stupid and shaken to speak.” Bronn shook his head. “Tyrion definitely never found out – it wouldn’t gone down well if he had. Joffrey had only done it to spite his uncle.

“It was Lady Tanda, Lollys’ mother, that kept it all hush-hush,” Bronn explained. “At first, she tried to deny any rape altogether, tried to claim that Lollys was just unwell – all the while Lollys was weeping hysterically in her chambers. Lollys was forbidden from drinking moon tea, though, because this was a royal bastard.”
Lollys would have smothered the baby, Olyvar remembered Bronn saying. Lollys was raped, and then forced to curtsy before her raper. She watched while Joffrey was heralded as being young, bold and noble – a king.

Lollys wanted to name the babe Tywin.

“But Littlefinger, Petyr Baelish,” Bronn continued, leaning backwards and raising the wriggling child up, “he definitely knew. Lady Tanda ran to him for help, and Littlefinger was the one to convince House Stokeworth to keep quiet. I think he was where that ‘half a hundred men’ tale came from too, the bugger. Littlefinger insisted that nobody could know, but the gods alone know what he was playing at. I don’t have a clue what he was planning.”

Bryn smirked faintly, looking at the babe. “Hells, I only found out after I married Lollys, and after her mother’s death. I would have dropped the baby off in a field somewhere, if not for that little nugget spilling out.”

“Is this…” Olyvar paused, shivering. Is this real? Is there any proof?”

“None,” Bronn chuckled. “Just the word of a dimwit cow of a woman. That’s what makes it funny.”

“She could have lied,” Olyvar said disbelievingly. “She might have made it up, or was mistaken, or…”

“Could be,” Bronn nodded.

“How old was Joffrey, even? The king could have only been around thirteen.”

“Old enough. He was the same age his uncle was, the first time Tyrion married a whore,” Bronn laughed. “Lannisters grow up fast, I suppose. I told you it was funny.”

‘Funny’ was not the word Olyvar would use. The ward of Rosby looked shocked, his mouth stammering drunkenly. “And I guess that answers your other question too, about why I decided to keep little Tyrion around. At first, I thought he might be useful – a little bargaining chip just in case I did have to suck up to Cersei.” He sighed wistfully. “And, I mean, it’s a bit disappointing, you reckon? The Bitch Queen never even had the chance to meet her grandson.”

Olyvar gaze turned slowly towards Little Tyrion Tanner, bouncing on his adopted father’s knee. Olyvar stared intently at the baby’s features; pale wispy blond hair, the chubby cheeks, and the dark blue eyes…

“But, like I said, he’s grown on me, the bastard,” Ser Bronn said fondly, pinching the babe’s cheeks. “My own little prince.”

The baby started to wail again, demanding food. “Prince Tyrion Tanner.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, there's a bit of a history behind this chapter.

The Davos POV was originally intended to go in chapter 41 next to Jon Con, so I
could show the two Hands of the King next to each other. Of course, the last Jon Con chapter already became way too big, so Davos got cut from it.

The Nym POV was originally planned to include in book 2, but I had it written early and moved it forward.

The Olyvar POV was one that I planned and wrote a long time in advance, when I intended it more as a bubble episode; not much plot development, just a POV closer to the ground with limited characters and a different perspective, so I could focus more on the impact and aftermath of all these wars. If you've seen the Breaking Bad episode, "Fly", then that's more what I was going for with Olyvar's POV.

All of three POVs have been grouped together to focus on aftermaths, actually. A much slower chapter rather than the crazy ones that we've had recently.

Mind, I did want to this to be Winterfell chapter with Sansa, Jon and Bran POVs instead - but that hasn't been finished yet. It's taken a bit longer than I had hoped to get it done, and I'm not sure if I'll have a chance to finish the Winterfell chapter before Christmas now.

Basically, the chapter that I wanted to upload isn't done yet, so I pulled this together just so I would have something to give. Scream at me for that, if you wish.
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Rebuilding Winterfell, and restoring House Stark.

Sansa

It was very early morn, and Sansa heard the commotion spreading through the castle. The snowstorms were still stirring outside and the walls were vibrating from the winds buffeting against the keep, but she still felt the heavy footsteps and the cries of alarm.

*My brother.* What a strange thought. *Is it truly him?* Sansa had faintly expected that she’d be always able to recognise her family on first glance, but she couldn’t – Bran was a stranger to her, a ghost from her past. Sansa could only stare at his face, trying to link it to the boy who haunted her memories.

It had been over three years since she last seen him. She remembered a plump little boy, lying unconscious in a bed on the edge of death. Now, he was less a little boy; his face was gaunter, his auburn hair was greyer.

And he was so, so pale; she had never seen a child so frail. He looked little like a prince or a lordling, he was more a frail rag doll that had been left in exposed in the elements.

“Severe exposure. He is starved, with many cuts and bruises,” the maester was rambling. “I must urge caution in feeding him, for the shock that it might do to his organs. And his ankle is broken and unhealed – the flesh is swollen, and I fear his tumours may be congealed. His legs are non-responsive, but I hear that is an old injury?”

*Yes, he is a cripple.* Bran. *My brother.*

The maester was talking nervously in the background, but Sansa’s eyes were peeled on Summer and Bran on the four-poster bed. The men all gave Summer a wide berth, but the wolf was reserved. Jon had been hugging Bran as he carried him in, but Sansa couldn’t let herself embrace her brother. She couldn’t feel such emotions. She needed to stay detached, stay focused.

“I want to talk to the girl,” she demanded suddenly. “Meera Reed. Where is she?”

Bran lay unconscious, Meera was the only one who could give them answers. One of Jon’s men – Toregg the Tall, they called him – stood stiffly by the adjoining door with his arms folded. “The king is speaking with the lass. Said not to be disturbed.”

“I’m his *sister,*” Sansa bristled.

“Said not to be disturbed,” the wildling repeated bluntly, arms still folded.

He would not let her pass, and Sansa did not know enough leverage to force him. *Is Jon deliberately keeping me away, or is it an oversight?*

Outside, the hallway was roiling, and Sansa heard a score of lords each trying to press their own
questions, shouting over the another. She heard the footsteps and hissed whispers from all the way
down the stone staircase. There were dozens of men, most of them either petty or minor lords that
Sansa couldn’t even name.

From inside the other room, she heard the Greatjon’s boom even through the walls. The shouts
were hectic. “How did he get here??” his voice boomed. “What happened at Last Hearth??”

Sansa had seen the girl as they brought her in; Meera had looked little like a highborn lady either;
she was short and skinny for her age, with mud brown hair and a flat face. She would have passed
more for a common girl – perhaps a huntsman’s daughter. She had been frail and trembling too.

*Is this a trap?* Sansa kept thinking. *Was it some sort of scheme, trying to put an imposter in
Winterfell?* Was this Meera feeding them false information, trying to make herself seem distressed
and helpless? Sansa couldn’t see how, but just the timing of it… she couldn't shake the suspicion
that it was all a ruse.

Outside, voices were calling for witnesses from the assorted lords, for any who might testify to
Meera’s and Bran’s identities. Her head was spinning. Sansa knew that rumours and whispers had
named the wildlings responsible for Last Hearth. The testimony otherwise was valuable. If Meera
confirmed that the Bastard’s Boys who sacked Last Hearth and Winterfell, not wildlings and
ironborn, then those were two crimes that might do wonders to dissuade any who still harboured
Bolton sympathies. *If Bran could attest the same thing, then …*

As soon as Sansa stepped outside of Bran’s chambers, there was a gaggle of lords and highborn
waiting for her with uneasy expressions. A dozen of eyes peeled on her, the murmurs growing.
Perhaps they thought she had more answers than they did, but Sansa could not admit to being out
of the loop.

“Is it true?” a lord demanded, a broad-chested man with a shaggy beard. He spoke with a very
thick accent like one of the northern mountain clans.

“That depends on what you’ve heard, my lord,” Sansa replied, keeping her voice cool.

“Forgive us, my lady,” Lord Gregor Forrester said carefully. He was a big man and tall man
himself, but his voice was much more hesitant. “But there has been talk – we need answers. Is it
truly Bran Stark?”

She bit her lip fractionally. “Yes,” Sansa said. “It is. My brother lives.”

The group stirred. Sansa recognised Lord Gregor Forrester of Ironrath, she also knew Ser Ian
Poole, the heir to Laketon, and she suspected another to be Lord Rickon Holt of Westwood, but
there were others around her she could not place. *Minor lords, all, she thought, but notable enough.*

“The boy was on death’s door,” an old man said. “They say he will not live much longer.”

“Are you sure it is truly him?” another pressed, talk loudly over the others. He was a short and
stocky figure under furs. “I heard it was a ruse, a Bolton decoy.”

“The maester says he will live, and it is my brother,” Sansa confirmed, looking between them.
“And I can recognise him surely.” Sansa forced a smile, but her heart was beating too fast to really
feel it. Her brother. The thought didn't feel real. “By the grace of the Old Gods, Bran Stark has
returned to us.”

“He has a direwolf, I saw it!” Ser Ian Poole proclaimed. “Only Stark children have such a beast.
*Summer,* its name was.”
Sansa recognised Ian Poole more clearly than the others – he was Jeyne Poole’s cousin, and had been a frequent enough face around Winterfell in Sansa’s youth. He had the same dark hair and brown eyes as his cousin, but he had grown and earned a knighthood in the time Sansa had been away. Jeyne disappeared in the capital, she thought, likely dead in an unmarked grave along with the rest of Father’s household, right next to my childhood. Not everyone came back from the dead.

“His direwolf is indeed proof,” Sansa said, nodding.

“Praise the Old Gods,” a voice muttered, but Sansa did not catch who.

“You do not have a wolf,” an aging lord noted suspiciously, his mouth nearly toothless. “And neither does King Snow.”

“My direwolf is dead, my lords,” Sansa replied smoothly. “Yet the king’s wolf is very much alive – Jon’s wolf simply not present at the moment.” Where is Ghost? she wondered. She hadn’t thought to ask.

“Robb Stark took his direwolf everywhere,” the broad-chested lord noted.

“Jon is not Robb.”

“He is not.” Those words lingered in the air.

Sansa’s smile turned wooden. “Forgive me, I’ve been away some time,” she said carefully. “Lord…?”

“Mollen,” the broad-chested lord said, his voice a rough drawl. “Lord Norvel Mollen of Brandon’s Crossing.”

An Umber bannerman, but otherwise Sansa knew little. I know that some of House Mollen were betrayers in the Battle of the Snows, she recalled. Half a dozen Mollen men had lost their heads recently, but the lord of the house had remained unconvicted.

“It is my pleasure, my lord,” Sansa said sweetly, giving a poised and practiced curtsy. Politeness is armour.

“Our apologies,” Lord Gregor Forrester said, lowering his head too and stepping back fractionally. “We forget our manners. I am Lord Gregor of House Forrester, with Lords Rickon Holt, Anders Overton,” he motioned to the aging man, “Alger Bole,” the short and stocky man, “and Ser Ian Poole.”

“It is an honour.” Take care to remember them – Sansa couldn’t afford to be a foreigner here. Her eyes turned to the seventh man; a long-faced, middle-aged figure who stood on the fringe of the group and said no words. He was dressed as a lord, but he had not been introduced. “And may I have a name?” she asked to the final man.

There was a hesitation, but the man forced a smile. “Lord Edric Ryder of Rillswater, if it pleases you.”

She heard a quiet scoff. It sounded like Lord Holt scoffed ‘for now’ under his breath. Lord Edric Ryder stood like a black sheep among the group, his face guarded and his shoulders stiff.

Ah, but House Ryder is sworn to House Ryswell, who fought alongside the Boltons, Sansa realised. Lord Edric Ryder must have fought against them, but he bent the knee when Winterfell was taken. One of relatively few who did, from what Sansa heard.
She looked between their expressions, and there was no celebration. These men were feeling too nervous and uncertain to cheer for the prince’s return. Nobody could cheer, not when so many questions and doubts hung over their heads.

“Pray, how may I help you, my lords?”

Lord Forrester stepped forward, glancing around the others. “We have… concerns, my la—” He paused. “Forgive me, but should I address you as ‘my lady’ or ‘my princess’?”

Nobody spoke for a long heartbeat. There was a barb to the question, the implications… Was House Stark still King in the North, or was it Snow? Nobody was certain, everything was doubtful.

*That is to be decided.* And quickly, but Sansa couldn’t give a wrong answer now. She needed to deflect the question rather than answer it. “Surely there is no need for such formalities among friends, is there?” she said sweetly.

“I’m afraid there is,” Lord Forrester said gravelly, and eyes glanced around at one another. “Allow me to be blunt, because I fear many others will be asking the same. *Who* is the King in the North, my lady?”

“In his declaration,” Lord Anders Overton noted lowly. “Jon Snow declared for House Stark – for the rescue of Arya.”

“He did,” Sansa replied, locking eyes with the man. “And what happened to my sister was a tragedy.”

“It was indeed,” Lord Holt quickly said.

“And realm *cheers* for the victory over the Boltons,” Ser Ian Poole added, “and for the return of yourself and your brother to Winterfell.” Gazes flickered towards Lord Ryder, who said nothing.

“But the question,” insisted Lord Mollen, “remains. What does King Snow intend now?”

“I do not presume to know the king’s intentions, my lords.”

“And that is the problem, my lady,” Lord Forrester replied. “Because neither do we.”

There was a pause.

“I serve Stark, as my family has done for millennia,” said Lord Rickon Holt in a low voice. “If the boy is alive, then he should be the King in the North.”

Sansa’s smile was waxy, but her voice didn’t waver. “Forgive me, but, if I recall, Jon Snow is the rightful king, as legitimised by King Robb.” She had heard of that letter in White Harbour, but the subject was murky.

“That was a letter of arguable credibility, based on the presumption that his brothers were dead,” Lord Mollen insisted. “And a proclamation I hear that he did not accept.”

“A Snow is not a Stark,” Lord Overton argued. “By all rights of succession, Brandon Stark should be king before Jon Snow.”

Lord Bole opened his voice to object, but the talk was turning too heated. “Please my lords,” Sansa soothed. “It is too early days to make such statements.”

“Excuse us, my lady,” Lord Forrester said firmly, shooting the others a sharp glance. “I fear
patience is frayed and we are all tense. And yet…” He grimaced. “Please could we speak in private for a moment, my lady?”

Sansa paused, and then nodded. “As you wish, my lord.” She and Lord Forrester stepped aside towards a corner by the stone staircase, to talk privately. The others were left stewing on the centre of the landing, muttering and glancing back towards her.

For a big man, Lord Forrester’s voice and tone was surprisingly gentle. “Thank you, my lady. I hoped you could put doubts at ease.”

“Whatever I can do,” she tilted her head. “Your companions seem unsettled.”

“Winterfell is unsettled,” Lord Forrester replied. “Every house in the north is unsettled – we have been ever since the dragon started to fly over our lands. And the Battles of the Snows… well, the storm has yet to calm, the bodies still lie thick on the ground, and every living man is left stewing and doubtful.” He paused, and shook his head. “If Brandon Stark is truly returned…”

Sansa nodded, keeping her eyes soft. “You worry for your lands and kingdom. But I fear this talk could sow discord when we need to harvest unity, my lord.”

“There are… issues that need to be addressed,” Lord Forrester admitted. “Bran Stark’s appearance – and your own – has only brought to the surface what was already simmering.”

“Indeed.” Sansa met his gaze, choosing her words carefully. “I love my younger brother dearly, but he is a cripple and a young boy. Jon is a proven battle commander and a warrior.”

“That is true. And you would hear few objections if Jon were to take the crown himself.”

There was an edge to that phrase, Sansa considered. A quiet warning, perhaps. The unspoken objections were always the most dangerous. “And do you feel such dissent?”

“I… the north is a land divided, my lady.” There was a quiet grimace. He nodded his head to the group of lords standing on the landing. “Lord Mollen over there lost family at Last Hearth, but many of his kin blamed the wildlings not Boltons. He did not know who was responsible, there was only fear and doubt.” She did not speak. There was quiet for a few heartbeats before Lord Forrester nodded at the other lords. “And Lord Holt was so terrified of the dragon that he agreed to take a wildling bride from Snow, but he did not do so happily. Lord Overton did not even support Robb Stark as king, and then he thought his liege lord mad when Manderly made an alliance with the King-Beyond-the-Wall. Many wanted vengeance for the Red Wedding, but there were also many who were torn between fear of the invaders. Many who wanted to rebel, but many who did not ally easily behind a figure such as Jon Snow.”

“A figure such as Jon Snow,” Sansa repeated. “Could you explain that comment, my lord?”

For a second, his face looked pained. “The king… he is not the easiest figure to approach, my lady,” Lord Forrester admitted. “Nobody knew him, nobody expected him. He came south of the Wall leading an invasion and a dragon. He brought with him armies of savages, a pagan religion of fanatics, his very name is a harbinger of ghost stories from beyond the Wall made real. He is a bastard, an oathbreaker, a sorcerer. He controls animals, he has unearthly powers – the tales they tell of him…!” The lord shook his head. “What sort of man could trust in such a figure? I will not excuse the crimes of House Bolton, but to many the Boltons were the devil we knew versus the devil we did not. The Boltons were a familiar evil, and the ‘Bastard King’ a terrifying unfamiliar one.”
House Forrester, Sansa thought slowly, is a prominent sworn house to House Glover. Men from Forrester had served as scouts and outriders during the Battle of the Snows.

“I… I see,” she said carefully. “Do you harbour grievances against King Snow, my lord?”

He hesitated. “I will not do you the disservice of falsehoods, my lady. My lands have been plagued by wildlings since time immemorial. When Jon Snow came south of the Wall leading an army of them, there was not a lord in the realm who didn’t feel dread.”

“Jon Snow has fought for the north, not against it,” Sansa argued. “And the wildlings have kept to his peace.”

“So he claims,” Lord Forrester agreed, nodding. “But we still need to know for sure.”

She measured his gaze. He had a blunt face and honest features. For a tall and powerful man, there was a flicker of fear and uncertainty in his expression. The uncertainty was the most dangerous.

“And do you feel that that there could be dissent should my brother and half-brother clash over the crown?” Sansa asked after a heartbeat.

“I feel that this is indicative of the question that the realm has been asking from the beginning,” Lord Forrester said. “For what does Jon Snow fight – his own power, or the north?”

Sansa had no reply to give. She just nodded. “Thank you for your words, my lord.”

There were others who tried to approach her, asking the same questions, raising similar concerns. Sansa could only give them hollow platitudes, all the while trying to read their mood. She had to excuse herself, and she walked woodenly to find her half-brother.

Her head spinning with the possibilities. Jon could remove Bran from the legitimacy easy enough. Perhaps a few would try to raise a fuss, but it didn’t really matter – the wildlings controlled Winterfell, not the northern lords. A cripple and a child would get little support regardless, but the question was whether or not Jon would…

What if Rickon was still alive too? There were rumours… would Jon Snow depose both his half-brothers? Sansa couldn’t say for certain.

As for as the laws of north went, the matter was so tangled that every man could come to their own conclusion. It was arguable whether or not Robb had even been a true king – Robb had never even stepped foot in the north with his crown, he had never sat on the throne of Winterfell, had never been crowned a King of Winter. It was arguable whether Robb’s decree was valid, or if he had the right to legitimise, or even whether Stark was a house of lords or of kings.

The law is useless, Sansa thought slowly. The law will be rewritten to suit whatever Jon Snow decides. All that mattered was power and perception. What the realm would accept, and what they must be forced to accept.

But are Jon and I on the same side?

A guard pointed her towards the lord’s solar, and she entered hesitantly. Sansa straightened her dress and brushed her hair back behind the door, but there was no time to be properly dressed in finery. She straightened her shoulders, rehearsed her lines silently, and knocked thrice on the door. “Enter,” a voice called.

Sansa stepped through, and curtsied deeply. King Snow was sitting behind an oak desk – her father’s desk – while he drummed his fingers against something resting on his lap. “Your Grace,”
Sansa greeted. “My heart skips to see my brother again, thank you so much for bringing—”

“Spare it.” King Snow’s voice was short and sharp. He looked tired, worn; his eyes red and his shoulders slumped. “You came with purpose.”

It was not a question. Sansa straightened up, and bit her lip. They were not friends, Sansa considered. They were close, perhaps, but even all through their childhood they had never been friendly. She met his gaze, and she decided that they were both far too emotionally-exhausted for the pretence.

“Winterfell is asking about Bran,” she said simply. “Wondering what happens now.”

There was no reply. King Snow’s grey eyes were focused on her, his expression guarded.

“I can see two ways how this can go,” Sansa said, after a good few heartbeats of silence. “Option one, you crown yourself King in the North, and you make a new house. House Snow, if you desire. You set yourself king of this new kingdom of yours, and Bran Stark is the rightful Stark and Lord of Winterfell.” She paused. “You must leave a rank and inheritance for Stark, to appease the northern lords.”

Jon scratched his whiskers, a fuzz of white hair growing from his cheeks. “And what of this second option?” he asked in quiet voice.

“That you legitimise yourself as King Stark, you take Winterfell and Robb’s crown.” Sansa’s voice was low. “And then you’d suffer whispers that you are an usurper for the rest of your reign.”

*He will take the kingship himself,* Sansa thought. She knew he would. There was nothing standing in his way, and few to object when he did. There was a thin smile on his lips.

King Snow raised the item in his lap carefully. He was holding a silver and white crown in his hands, showing it to her.

It was a slender and smoothly crafted coronet, carved from white wood lined with silver inlaid, the tips of the prongs shaped into growling wolf heads. Or perhaps they were supposed to be dragon maws – the carved wood was so fine and smooth it was hard to make out details.

Sansa blinked. “Ah,” she said, nodding.

He shook his head. “No. There is a third option,” King Snow said softly. “This is for Bran. He should be king, not me.”

She held herself from reacting, but she nearly flinched with surprise. “I’ve already made the decision,” he continued. “I have already had my chance to accept Robb’s will, but I denied it then and I do again. Bran would be better to unify the north than I would be. The northmen will accept him more than they would me.”

“I… I…” For a heartbeat, Sansa was left speechless. “And the wildlings?”

“The free folk follow me, and I will follow Bran,” Jon said. “The law is clear – the trueborn son comes before the bastard. He is the King in the North, and I the King-Beyond-the-Wall; so I will swear fealty and secede my ‘crown’ to his. You are right; it’d be the most efficient way of unifying the factions.”

*But you’d still be the most significant commander in King Bran’s realm.* As Regent? Hand of the King? Sansa’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “And you just happened to have a crown prepared for
“The crown is from White Harbour,” he explained, as he slid the coronet over the desk. “Lord Manderly had it forged for me, but I never wore it.”

She stepped closer, peering down at the crown. “Why did you never wear it?”

He smiled softly. “It never seemed prudent,” he admitted. “I thought about it, but the crown is meaningless to the free folk and it would have been divisive to the northmen. If I had worn it, then the northern lords might have bristled at the sight, and… well, it just didn’t seem wise. Why create one more issue to dispute?” He paused. “Lord Manderly and I argued that point in length, but we decided… we resolved to wait until Winterfell was taken to decide the matter.”

Her gaze flickered. “So you’ve decided?”

“I’ve decided.” King Snow… Jon… was staring down at the crown too. “It may be too large for Bran now, but he will grow into it.”

Just like that? Sansa thought with confusion. You’d surrender so much power just like that? The throne of Winterfell is there for the taking. You’ve sat on it already, the crown is on your lap. “Robb’s will–”

“–was written under false assumptions.” Jon shook his head. “I… I indulged the idea, but I said from the beginning that I am not King in the North. No – this is Bran’s inheritance, not mine, and I would crown him king.”

Jon

He saw an expanse of ice, a frozen hellscape that stretched to the ends of the earth. There was nothing around him but darkness and jagged ice.

The world was frozen. Jon stood upon a frozen lake, staring across at the abyss. In the starless night sky, he heard the flapping of great wings somewhere in the black. There was movement in the dark, but he couldn’t make it out.

Jon looked at his hands. On his left hand, he had five fingers again, and no pale cauterised stump of a little finger. This is a dream. Just a dream.

A ghostly blue light surrounded him, but Jon could not see the source of it. He could see nothing but shadows, until he caught the pinpricks of light – the reflection from eyes staring back at him.

Jon took a step forward, walking across the crackling ice. The shadows parted around him.

He could see them. First they were shapeless, then they took form. He saw the face looking back at him; a hard grey gaze like stone, and a smooth face like carved from bark. Qhorin Halfhand stood silently before him, regarding him with calm, expectant eyes. Jon walked past him, and neither of them said a word.

Standing behind Qhorin, Lord Mormont had his arms folded and his lips pursed; his gaze was more judging. The old Lord Commander disappeared into mist as soon as Jon stepped close.

There were other shades, all surrounding him. Jon saw the figures wearing black cloaks; Dalbridge,
Ebben, Stonesnake, Pyp, Bowen Marsh, Sweet Donnel Hill, Jeren, Hake, Rast, Donal Noye…

He saw Maester Aemon, walking blindly in the dark. Ser Alliser Thorne stood with a sneer on his lips, and blood seeping down from the cut across his neck.

He knew why they were here. He knew it in his bones. Jon kept walking, and the field of dead men walked around him.

There were more figures than just sworn brothers; he saw Alvin Whaletooth, Harma Dogshead, Hunting Seal and all those at Hardhome. Half of them wore white stones, pleading for Jon to protect them.

He saw Furs, standing with a smirk across his cold lips – besides Hatch, Ewan Bole, Black Maris, Rolf, Urwen, Stiga, Gregg and all the Dragonguard who had died on the ice.

He saw Wylis Manderly, Hugo Wull, Alysane Mormont, Jeremy Locke…

Brandon Norrey, Robett Glover, Ethan Whitehill, Mandon Slate, Hoster Moss, Torghen Flint…

There were more. He saw Harlow – Ramsay Snow – doubled over as he laughed in hysterics, his face twisted in rage and fury, but no sound from his throat. Jon saw Lord Bolton standing tall, a doubtful expression in his pale eyes. He saw a hundred knights with crimson hearts on their chest, and swords that were all burnt out. He saw the blue-eyed king – Stannis Baratheon – clutching his bloody stump of a hand and staring with scorn. Jon saw the young, nameless squire who had looked so much like Bran, still clutching that dagger and staring upwards with fearful eyes.

Most of the shadows were nameless. Most were faceless too. There were more men surrounding him that he couldn’t even keep track of, more faces looking at him than he could ever recognise. More names than I could ever know.

Friends, enemies and bystanders, all standing together, looking at him.

Some of them Jon had killed with his own hands, some had died around him, but they had all died because of him.

He saw Ygritte, broken and smeared at the bottom of the abyss he had pushed her down. She was still trying to climb up despite her broken body.

He saw Val, bleeding out in the snow beneath him and clutching her chest. Jon knew that it was wrong – he knew that Val wasn’t dead yet – but she was still here. He stared at her but there was nothing he could say or do to make it right.

He saw the scorched ruins of the tower, and the charred and unrecognisable, faceless little girl that had died inside of it.

He saw women and children in the ruins of Mole’s Town. He saw families dead in the forests and the snows. He saw all of those wearing white stones on their chests, praying for salvation. He saw piles of corpses from all the battles – the Battle of Hardhome, the Battle of Weeping Water, the Battle of the Snows, from all the wars he had waged.

Jon saw a mountain of frozen bodies, piled in the ruins of the Twins.

Thousands, tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands… More names than he could ever learn.
By the gods, Jon thought, staring around the dreamscape. Did I really kill so many?

Somewhere behind him, Roose Bolton was laughing silently.

The scene blurred, the ice cracking beneath him and the darkness...

Jon didn’t gasp as he woke up. There was a cold sweat across his brow, but he didn’t tremble. The first time he had those dreams he had been shaking, but now Jon just blinked, took a deep breath, and pulled himself off his bed.

He did not know the time, but it felt like the hour of the ghost. Jon did what he did every time the nightmares came; he pulled on his cloak, he picked up his walking stick, and he limped out of the door and kept on walking. The only sound in the gloomy corridors was the deathly whispering of the fading candles, and the tap of his stick against stone with every step.

He walked aimlessly, but Jon found himself moving towards the West Tower. The roof of the entire wing had collapsed, and snow scattered across black and charred timbers. They had barricaded off the wreckage, but Jon could feel the wind hissing through the burnt-out walls of the keep.

Winterfell barely looked the same. Jon walked over the scorched floor, gazing around the castle and hardly even recognising it. The fires had been so hot that even the stones had warped. Winterfell had been one of the most magnificent castles in the realm; old, majestic, and as strong as they came. Jon could think of very few castles – Casterly Rock, Storm’s End, the Eyrie, possibly the Red Keep – that could match the scale of Winterfell.

Now, the castle was twisted, stained by fire, snow and blood. The corpses had been dragged away, but Jon could still see the dried bloodstains across the corridors down to the Great Hall. They had cleared the keep of bodies, but there were still dead men littering the rest of the grounds in Winterfell. The North had known more than its fair share of bloody battles, but by Jon’s reckoning the Battle of the Snows would go down as one of the bloodiest.

Thousands of men had died in the ambush. Thousands more had died in the fields, caught by storms. More still died breaking the gate. The Boltons had stained the ground with blood for every inch that they fell.

All of those deaths, Jon thought restlessly. Perhaps in my dreams I’ll eventually count them all.

He wondered how many bodies that truly was. If we piled them, how high would the tower rise? If we continued, would we be able to make a brand new Wall out of corpses?

Sometimes it felt like every death was a little bit of a stain on the soul.

Come dawn, Jon found himself standing in the frozen inner courtyard of the Great Keep, great icicles dangling from the arches around him. The walls sheltered him from the wind, but Jon could still hear the distant howl of the snows.

“King Snow,” a voice called from behind. Jon turned, to see a short, scrawny man limping through over the steps.


The wildling looked at him with guarded eyes, staring out from beneath the giant skull helm. “Lord Rattleshirt now, I think,” Rattleshirt said with a scoff. “Lord of House Bone, perhaps. What do you reckon – you see me in a keep drinking mulled wine in furs coats like you southerners?”
All wildlings that followed Jon would receive citizenship in the north. Jon finally had the great lords of the realm to accept it; the gates would stay open for all refugees and none would stop them from coming south. There would be lordships and titles to the most notable of the free folk leaders. Many would scowl and spit – but that was the price for peace.

Some northern houses still opposed him – most notably House Ryswell and House Dustin. Lord Ryswell had died in the snows and Lady Dustin was a prisoner, but Barrowtown and the Rills still stood defiant. Yet they wouldn't stand for long, and the Bolton loyalists had been crushed at Winterfell. There would be no more great hosts of men to defy him.

Jon turned at the soon-to-be Lord of House Bone, keeping his posture guarded. The thought of the two Norrey girls lingered at the forefront on his mind.

Lord Bone’s shirt barely even rattled anymore. His armour of bones were coated in metal – Rattleshirt had found a metalsmith to coat his bone suit in molten bronze. The metal giant’s skull helm glinted slightly in the faint sunlight through the clouds. His armour was now lined with wool and cotton to stop the rattling, and furs that made Rattleshirt look more lordly and heavyset than he ever had before.

“I’m thinking of taking the name Lord Vaast Bone,” the wildling continued, rambling as he paced. “Vaast – after my father. I know, I’m the sentimental sort. Maybe some little castle by the coast would suit me well. I heard that the Weeper has his eye on claiming Karhold, I don’t see why I can’t get a similar castle. Why not that Dreadfort for me? Surely there’s got to be a bunch of castles empty with all this lot dead.”

Jon paused. There was something of an edge in the man’s voice. “What do you want, Rattleshirt?” Jon asked after a heartbeat.

The man’s gaze met Jon, the shadows of the giant skull glaring at him. “More wondering what you want, myself,” Rattleshirt said. “I see no reason why you shouldn’t get a castle too, Snow. The biggest castle, even.”

Jon did not reply. “I gave you my vow, and I’ve upheld it. I’ve followed your law, I’ve respected your peace – but you tell me right now, Snow,” Rattleshirt said, his voice turning dark. “I swore that I’d kill you when you broke your promise to the free folk.”

“And I haven’t.”

“Not yet. But if you give away my fealty – give away your kingship – to a crippled fucking boy then I’d call a betrayal.”

“Careful now.” Jon’s hand curled tighter around his walking staff. “That’s my brother you’re talking about.”

“Your crippled brother,” Rattleshirt snorted. “Crippled half-brother. You can’t seriously expect us to bow to a broken kid like that, can you?”

You've never bowed to me once. “You chose to give your fealty to me. I get to choose who I give my fealty to. Brandon Stark is the rightful king.”

“Not of us!” he growled. “Not of the free folk! Fuck Snow, why would you even want to bow? You’re the power here. You have the army, you have the dragon. Nobody would go against you. If you bow to someone as weak as that, then just think of how weak that makes you look.”

Jon’s hands clenched. “That kid doesn’t deserve a throne – you do,” Rattleshirt snapped. “So take
your bloody castle, Snow. This is your castle.’’

He could have snapped, could have recoiled, but Jon kept his voice and gaze cool. “You expect me to steal my brother’s inheritance?”

“Steal? I call it claim. I doubt you’d even need to fight over it. Just say the words – ‘I am King in the North’ and you really think he’s going to object to you? That anyone is going to object to you?”

He shook his head. Jon turned, already starting to walk away. “I’d have no right.”

“Fuck right. How about deserve?” Rattleshirt called behind him. “Don’t we deserve to have a strong king instead of a crippled boy? Nobody will thank you for bowing, Snow.”

“If you want your castle, then you’ll bow,” Jon said simply as he walked. “That is the price for peace.”

“Whose price?” Rattleshirt demanded.

“Mine.” He paused, and then turned around. “Oh, and Rattleshirt?” The wildling glared. Jon kept his voice slow and calm. “If I ever hear you speaking such of my brother again, I will kill you.”

*And I would enjoy killing you too. Perhaps the world will be better off when I do.*

The wildling didn’t reply as Jon walked away. He didn’t care about what Rattleshirt thought, but how many of the other free folk would be thinking the same thing?

*No, it has to be Bran,* Jon decided. Crowning Bran would appease the northern lords, while Jon would still keep power with the free folk. The northmen could not object to Bran, and most of the free folk wouldn’t care either way. Jon had to think of the long-run, of the future of the realm. *There must be a Stark in Winterfell.*

Power came with its own costs. Lord Bolton had taught him that.

His brother had been back in Winterfell for barely a day, and yet Jon was already planning the coronation. The news could unite the realm, and there could be no delay.

Jon took a deep breath and flexed his neck, feeling the flecks of snow drifting down on his hair. Morning light was faint through the stormy clouds. The sun was rising, and it was time. They’d be waiting for him in the Winter Suite.

Jon’s leg felt stiff as he headed up the granite steps towards the Great Keep. He saw servants bow towards him deeply, fear and awe in their gazes. Even just walking up the stairs attracted so much attention that Jon’s hand stayed on Dark Sister.

He stepped into the hallway, and then up the spiral staircase. He knew these corridors. He knew them well, but it had been so long since he was last here. He spent his childhood growing up in the keep, playing with Robb and other children. He could pick out Arya’s old room, Robb’s, Sansa’s. His father’s. *Mine.* The bastard’s room had been the smallest, on the far side of the wing.

The Winter Suite was at the other end of the Lord’s Household, the highest wing of the Great Keep. The wing held two dozen rooms, four noble guest rooms, the king’s room, the lord’s chambers, and the lord’s solar. King Robert had stayed in these rooms, Jon remembered, in the king’s room almost as large as Lord Stark’s quarters. The lord’s solar stood adjoined to the lord’s chamber, a great study of oak and stone dominated by a huge circular table.
His father would meet Winterfell’s guests in his solar, Jon remembered, but the Winter Suite was reserved for only the most noble of gatherings. It was a high-ceiling, large granite chamber, with doors leading out onto the west balcony overlooking the courtyard. It was filled by a heavy stone table built like a slab, with seats that could sit three dozen men. The doors were solid oak reinforced with steel, but the chamber itself was rarely used as it had no fireplace or heated pipes through the walls.

The Winter Suite, where the Kings of Winter had held their councils.

Jon had heard that Theon the Hungry Wolf commissioned the Winter Suite during the Hundred Year War. Chimneys, hearths and piping were vulnerabilities, and King Theon had wanted a war chamber which no spy could ever infiltrate. It was a room of solid granite, built like a siege bunker in the middle of the Great Keep. A secure chamber, but with no heating. Theon’s paranoia meant it was the coldest room in the castle.

Now, for the first time in three hundred years, there would be a Court of Winter under the name of the King in the North.

The guards lined the corridor, bowing to him. Jon had been in the Winter Suite before, but he never been allowed in during his father’s formal meetings.

He heard the voices, he heard the mutters as the doors opened. Every man in the Winter Suite wore furs tightly, standing stiffly over the slab of a stone table. They had gathered every notable northern lord and lady in Winterfell; some who had arrived with Jon, others who had bent the knee when the castle fell.

Lord Greatjon Umber towered at the far side of the table, his arms folded stiffly. Surrounding the table, there was Lord Gregor Forrester, Ser Mardrick Manderly, Lord Cregan Karstark, Lord Rickon Holt, Lord Anders Overton, Lord Alger Bole, Ser Ian Poole, Ser Garth Woolfield, Eric Burley, Bennard Waterman, and a dozen other petty lords that Jon couldn’t even name. There were even those who had fought alongside House Bolton; like Lord Edric Ryder, Lord Harwood Stout, Kyle Cordon, Barthogan Rose, Lord Errold Stonehull and others that Jon couldn’t recall being introduced to.

Ten days ago, perhaps they might have met on the battlefield. Now, they were standing uneasily in the chamber before him. The air was stiff.

It was so cold that a fine layer of mist hovered with every breath. Galbart Glover isn’t present, Jon noted quietly. Despite Jon’s explicit orders, the Master of Deepwood Motte had still excused himself from the assembly. Lady Leona Manderly wasn’t present either, but her eldest daughter – Wynafryd – was standing meekly towards the edge of the room next to her cousin, Ser Mardrick.

There were quiet mutters that silenced as Jon stepped in. The guardsmen stamped their spears three times to announce him, and the chamber went stiff. “Jon Snow!” a man boomed. “King Beyond the Wall!”

He almost missed her, but Jon caught sight of Sansa, huddled in a white fur cloak at the end of the table. Her red hair shone like fire in the room of grey and white, her face stiff and poised. Sansa was the youngest one in the room; the fairest, the most beautiful. Even while most others wore boiled leather and chainmail, she was clad in furs.

The sight of her caused Jon to freeze fractionally. His sister looked at him quietly, giving a curt nod. Jon’s eyes were wary, looking between all the faces surrounding him.
Lady Maege Mormont stood beside the doorway, still wearing her ringmail. Lady Mormont and the reinforcements from Bear Island and the northwest had arrived just last night, and had barely had time to settle yet. The Lady of Bear Island nodded to Jon as he stepped through, and scanned the room.

“Lady Mormont,” Jon greeted, turning away from the rest of the room. “Thank you for being here. I’m glad you could make it.”

“Of course.” She nodded, stiffly. “I am sorry to have missed the battle, Your Grace.”

_The battle where your daughter died._ “We will discuss that later, my lady.”

The stone table could sit three dozen, but there were still too many in the room to each take a chair. _They’ve left my father’s seat vacant – the big, pronged oak seat at the back_, Jon noticed. _The seat for a king_. Jon didn’t take it, instead he stepped behind the one nearest the door.


“King Snow,” Lord Umber replied, grizzled eyes narrowing. Was it just him, or was there a question in there?

“My noble lords,” Jon said, turning to the gathering “I am glad we could finally have this assembly. You all know me by reputation if naught else, I’m sure. Many of you I have fought besides, some of you I have fought against.” His gaze turned towards Lord Stout, Lord Ryder and Lord Rose, before flickering away. “But you have all bent the knee to the peace I offered you, and so you are all here.”

“Lady Barbrey Dustin is not present, Your Grace,” Lord Harwood Stout noted, his voice foul. He was a haggard and one-armed man, with grim eyes. All of the former Bolton-loyalists had dark expressions, huddled together quietly.

“Lady Dustin,” Jon replied, “has not bent the knee. And so she has no place being here.”

There was no reply but silence. Lady Dustin would stay in her cell until she conceded, or until Jon named a new lord of House Dustin. Every highborn captive had been forced to surrender the Bolton cause and pledge loyalty before they were released, and even then under heavy supervision. There were only a few diehard loyalists like Lady Dustin that had so far refused to surrender.

“What is to happen with us who followed House Bolton?” Barthogan Rose asked grimly. The Master of the Red Knife was a Bolton bannerman, a tall and grim man with a fresh scar across his cheek. He looked more like a grizzled sellsword than noble lord. “And our lands and holdings. Has a judgement been made?”

“That depends.” Jon cocked his head. “Are you guilty of any crimes, ser?”

No reply came. Barthogan Rose kept his eyes guarded, and Lord Edric Ryder shuffled backwards slightly. Jon just scoffed under his breath. “Your ranks and holdings will be judged on a case by case basis. I expect each of you to make some concession – as retribution for your poor choice of loyalty.” Jon said stiffly. “But until a decision can be made, you will keep the peace – and your cooperation will be noted. I have accepted your surrender, but any further defiance from you now will not be well-received, my lords.”

Jon looked between the gaggle of men standing in the corner. “Do you understand?” Jon pressed. “I require confirmation.”
There were nods, and mutters of “Yes, Your Grace” from the men. Jon just nodded.

Truth be told, Jon bore little hatred towards most of the Bolton’s supporters. They would all lose lands and ranks, but they would keep their heads if they pledged their loyalty now. He had, however, sentenced all traitors in his own camp mercilessly, and he had set a standing judgement of execution towards any man who had participated in the Red Wedding – but the others had committed no crimes.

Most of the men who followed House Bolton had stuck to their liege lords and their vows; most of them did not participate or conspire towards the Red Wedding, but in its aftermath they had followed the Warden of the North – whose son was married to the heir apparent and rightful liege lady, Arya Stark. As damnable as their lord paramount had been, Jon could not fault them for loyalty.

Unless they participated in the Red Wedding, he added silently. In that case, I very much can damn them.

His eyes lingered on Barthogan Rose; Jon would have to find enough witnesses to identify who exactly had been at the Red Wedding, and who gave the orders. Some present would have been oblivious, but others were not.

Heartbeats passed in uneasy silence. The memories of the battle were still fresh, and enemies on the battlefield were now standing in the same room. “We are all busy and it is cold,” Jon said finally, breaking the silence. “I mean this court to take stock, but I will not keep you long.”

“What is the meaning of this, Your Grace?” Lord Cregan Karstark said loudly, with a slight sneer on the honorific. Lord Karstark stood to the front of the table, his arms resting on the stone. “And will your savages be joining us?”

Jon didn’t react, but his eyes narrowed. “The free folk will not be. This assembly is for only the northern lords for now, to share matters of state.” He looked around the room, measuring reactions. “We are, after all,” he continued, “an independent Kingdom of the North again.”

There were no reactions, but they all stiffened somewhat. Jon turned towards Sansa, looking at her for confirmation. “As – you have no doubt heard – Bran Stark has been returned to Winterfell. My brother, the son of Eddard Stark, is alive,” he said. No mutters, only nods. “There have been rumours that he is on death’s door. I mean to dispel such talk; Bran Stark is healthy, and safe, within this very keep.”

Lord Mollen raised his voice cautiously. “Yet he is a cripple.”

“My brother is strong,” Sansa spoke up. “Legs or no, Bran is strong to survive the ordeal he has been through.”

“Aye, I do not doubt that,” Ser Mardrick Manderly commented. “And will Prince Bran be joining us?”

“I’m afraid not,” Sansa replied, nodding to Jon. “Prince Bran is weakened, he needs his bedrest.”

He saw everyone in the room glance towards him, looking at him half-warily and half-expectantly. Jon paused.

I could do it, Jon thought, one last time. I could declare myself king. King Snow. Or even King Stark. I doubt Bran would object if I chose to legitimise myself. He would probably even support me.
… No, Jon thought after a second thought. It just didn’t feel right. *I am a Snow, not a Stark.* There was no joy down that other route.

A half-smile flickering across his lips. “You are mistaken, Princess Sansa. *King* Brandon will not be present,” Jon said finally. “But Bran shall be crowned as *King* in the North before the week’s end. Let the realm raise the direwolf banner again.”

At that, the room did stir. There were a few mutters of surprise that rose around the table. Jon saw Lord Karstark’s face twist unpleasantly, while Lord Umber seemed to hesitate.

“And what of you?” Lord Forrester asked quietly; a tall man standing next to Sansa.

“I was *King-Beyond-the-Wall*, never *King* in the North,” Jon reminded. *King-Beyond-the-Wall* for *all of a year*, he thought silently. “And I will relinquish that title to King Brandon as well. I will renounce my claim to kingship in favour of his.”

There was a moment of silence in the room. “… I see.” Lady Maege hesitated. “What does that leave you, then?”

“I do not know. Perhaps I will take a new holding, a new house. Something *Beyond-the-Wall* – *Lord* of *Hardhome*, perhaps.” *A position I could use to bring order, to unite the realm even if it’s not under me.*

“Such as *Lord Paramount Beyond-the-Wall*?” Lady Maege pressed.

Jon nodded. “If King Brandon wishes it.”

Some of their gazes looked confused, flickering between him and the others. Voiceless mutters raised around the chamber, but Jon didn’t react to them. He stood stiff. *Let the whole realm know that I am no usurper.*

The Greatjon grunted. Jon thought he saw the man’s expression relax slightly. “You are not what I expected, *Snow,*” the Greatjon said after a pause. “Or should I call you *Lord Snow,* now?”

*Lord Snow. Once* Ser Thorne mocked me with that name. “Nothing is official until the king proclaims it. I shall give my fealty to Bran at his coronation,” Jon said, before allowing himself a smile. “Although I suppose I will need to think of a new name for my house.”

“Indeed.” Was it him, or did the air in the solar seem to soften more comfortably? There was something of a grudging approval in the Greatjon’s eyes.

“Hear, hear!” Ser Mardrick called, slamming his hands together. “*Brandon Stark, King in the North!*”

There were mumbles. Sansa picked up the cry, her voice clear and firm. “*King in the North!*”

Besides her, Lord Forrester repeated the cry, and then Lady Wynafryd, then Eric Burley and Ser Ian. Others were still mumbling, or stood quiet.

A few lords, like Lord Stout, looked guarded and suspicious. “The king is only eleven years old,” the one-armed lord said stiffly. “He will need a regent. And do you intend to suggest yourself, *Lord Snow*?”

*Is that accusation in his voice? Does he think me duplicitous, that I intend to seize power through the regency? Stubborn fool.* Still, Jon hesitated. He couldn’t give an outright denial, when in fact
he might make a very good choice for regent.

“If I felt I could serve the realm by acting as regent,” Jon said carefully, “then I would take on the duty. But that decision is for king’s choice to make or the high lords of the north to approve. I would never force myself into the role.”

Lord Stout stayed guarded, but he seemed to accept the answer. The Greatjon nodded approvingly, while Lord Karstark looked quietly fuming.

“This realm must be put to order at all haste,” Jon continued. “We are standing in what King Robb fought for, we have what the realm lost for three hundred years; an independent Kingdom of the North. I mean to ensure the safety and prosperity of this land, and I will do whatever is required to see the King in North, the Stark on the Winter Throne.”

“As your puppet king?” Lord Cregan muttered under his breath, not quite a sneer. His voice was low, but the room was quiet and the words clearly audible.

A few lords bristled. “While the king is indisposed, I mean to appoint a council of great lords to speak for him,” Jon replied stiffly, refusing to even look at the man. “We shall fill a council to sit in this very chamber.”

“And who will decide them?” Lord Karstark pressed, and the room shifted. “Your Grace?”

“Careful with your tongue, Cregan,” the Greatjon warned.

“I shall make the nominations, my lord.” Do not rise to his barbs, do not let any emotion show. Lord Bolton had been calm even as he died. “As shall the high lords of the realm. And it shall be for the king to approve them.”

“An intermediary council,” Sansa spoke up suddenly. “As Brandon’s sister and next of kin, it is well within my right to approve such. King Snow and I are in full agreement in this matter.”

“As am I,” Lady Maege said firmly. “And as are Lords Umber, Manderly and Glover.”

For a moment, it looked like Lord Cregan was about to say something scathing, but he held his tongue. The men standing around Lord Cregan kept their distance, leaving him isolated in the corner of the room. Lord Karstark was speaking too boldly, even the men who might agree with him looked nervous.

“And… if that is agreed… there is another matter that I must have of you, my lords,” Jon said, moving away Karstark. He slowly pulled out a curl of parchment from his furs, unfurling it on the table. “This room represents perhaps the greatest gathering of aristocracy in the north. I vowed to bring the Boltons to justice and deliver House Stark to its rightful place, and I have. And now I mean to fulfil another of the promises that I declared.”

The parchment was crisp and pale yellow, with slightly blotted squiggles across the page. The few scribes with their host had worked very quickly to sketch something up with all haste; it was hardly a thorough document, but it would do.

“This parchment,” Jon explained, “is a decree to allow all refugees north of the Wall citizenship into our lands. They will each receive amnesty for all crimes committed before they crossed the Wall, to be accepted under the trust of King Brandon Stark. An unconditional pardon, for every free folk who accepts the king's trust.” A few bristled. “I wish for every lord and lady currently present to put their seal and signature to parchment, to show your own acceptance and sign it into law.”
There were no reactions, but a few stiffened. “From now on,” Jon continued, “there is no excuse. No more will the free folk be driven from our lands, and no more will they thieve and pillage.”

“Aye,” Ser Mardrick Manderly said. “My liege lord has contacted as many highborn as possible. They agreed, some more willingly than others.”

The Greatjon grunted. “I lost two daughters to wildlings, and here I am agreeing to let them settle on my land,” he said in fuming growl.

“If it is the price for peace, I will sacrifice land myself.” Lady Mormont glared at Lord Umber. “Provided, of course, that they are held to the same laws as the rest of us.”

“They will be.” Jon nodded. It would be a tough sell, but the only way it could work. “There will be no more raiding. No more stealing women. The free folk will bend, and we will appoint lords from them that will enforce the law.”

Jon met the Greatjon’s eyes. His mouth tightened, but he nodded stiffly. The Umber lands were the furthest north of them all — in all likelihood the Umbers would suffer the most from the free folk settlements.

Others hesitated, but he still saw the reluctance in their eyes. “Surely such a decree requires a king’s approval?” Lord Ryder said cautiously.

“It does, it has been written in the name of Brandon Stark, King in the North. I shall present this petition to the king — with the seals of the northern lords attached,” Jon said coolly. “But the king is indisposed, and I mean for this to be immediate law. I wish for every lord here to understand, so that none can claim ignorance; there will be no conflicts on your lands.”

“You speak of our responsibilities,” Lord Cregan simmered. “But what of the wildlings? What of when they steal wives and daughters, are we not allowed to act?”

I could expel him from the room for such a tone. Still, Jon wouldn’t allow Cregan to disrupt them such — to force him out would only make Jon appear the tyrant. “Rest assured, I shall be having a similar conversation with the free folk leaders too,” Jon replied. His gaze was level, unflinching. “But I mean for the law to be clear; any crime that a free folk commits must be dealt with as it would be for any citizen of the north. Trial and prosecution, that is your duty as lords.

“This parchment — this is but a formality, a written record to show that you accept such. And to outline the consequences of what will happen if you breach this accord.” His eyes searched the room. “I do hope there is no uncertainty here.”

The room hesitated. “And this paper,” Cregan dared, grinding his teeth. “You are forcing us to put our names to it? We have no choice in the matter?”

“You always have a choice, my lord. Walk out of here if you wish.” Jon’s voice made that option clear. “But what you must ask yourself — ‘is this a choice that I want to make?’”

Defy me, Jon vowed silently, and the pile of bodies will have to get a little bit larger. This was the easy way, but other way would be far more unpleasant.

How many men would be willing to die for their principles? How many lords would refuse to put aside their grudge against the wildlings?

And how free folk would insist on their grudge against the kneelers? Jon had no illusions, both sides were as bad as each other.
But there would be peace, even if Jon had to kill every single lord in the room to achieve it.

Gazes flickered to Lord Karstark, but nobody said a word. Finally, Sansa stepped forward, and she was the first to put her name to the parchment – Lady Sansa of House Stark, along with a blob of wax squeezed by a wooden stamp of the direwolf’s head.

Next, it was Lady Maege and then the Greatjon. All protests fizzled and died as those two lords stepped forward. Lord Karstark looked like he had been force-fed a lemon, but he grit his jaw and signed the parchment.

“Thank you for your cooperation, my lords,” Jon said finally. “I will not detain you. Lady Stark, Lord Umber, Lady Mormont and Ser Manderly – a moment of your time?”

The other lords started to file away, but those five lingered. Lady Wynafryd looked between Sansa and Ser Mardrick, but then reluctantly moved out of the room. Lord Umber had his arms folded, peering down at the parchment spotted by signatures. “Just like that,” the Greatjon muttered, in a voice that was quiet for him. “Amnesty. We sign a piece of paper, and you think a thousand year old grudge will disappear just like that?”

“I think it’s a start,” Jon retorted.

“Aye. And we have been discussing it,” Lady Mormont said. “I suggest that we extend our kingdom Beyond-the-Wall, to formally recognise those lands as our own.”

“I agree.” Ser Mardrick nodded. “Come spring, we can see about resettling the wildlings in their former lands – with defined territories, and protection and fealty paid to Winterfell. Our kingdom might double in size.”

Come spring, Jon thought dryly. And how long will that be?

And yet still, the optimism from him was impressive. Perhaps the thought of possibly rich, untouched northern lands might sweeten the alliance. There could even be benefactors willing to invest towards such a thing, if Jon sold it right.

“Yes,” Jon agreed. “Beyond-the-Wall is a rich, vast and untapped land. It would take time to settle them again, but it will be worthwhile.” There was a pause. “However, we cannot do so in winter, and we certainly cannot do so while the threat of the Others looms.”

“The Others,” Sansa repeated, her eyes flickering.

That caused the room to glance. No one said it out loud, but Jon caught the whiff of hesitation. Do they still not believe me about the Others? It was frustrating, but expected; so few northmen had witnessed the Others, and Malvern was keeping a very low profile.

Ser Mardrick looked ready to question or object to the assertion, but Lady Mormont interrupted. “The Wall must be defended. That is certain,” she said, raising her voice. “We can see about sending soldiers from the north to the Wall, to reinforce the men of the Night’s Watch and the free folk. For now, we must simply hold the Wall, while we prepare for the campaign.”

“And what campaign is that?” said the Greatjon. “If what the wildlings claim is true, then we have enemies on all sides. We are in rebellion to the Iron Throne, they will come to take back the north. We have ironborn ravaging the coast. We are to expect bloody white walkers to attack from the north as well?”

Forget the rest, Jon might have cursed, the Others are the true threat. Sansa met his gaze,
measuring his expression. “Lord Umber is right,” she added. “The north is still in turmoil. We are in no state to begin any campaign in the north amidst so many other problems.”

“Winter has barely begun,” Lady Mormont agreed. “Yet strife has already left our granaries and treasury depleted when they should be full. Even without the Others, the winter itself threatens to destroy us.”

Jon grimaced. Their situation was precarious enough as it was. “The Wall is the only thing defending us, but the Others are already testing its boundary.” Jon sighed. “But you are correct, my lords; we must put the north to rights before we can do anything.”

How long does it take for a kingdom like the north to recover? he cursed. How long do we have?

Sonagon was still sickly, and until he was recovered Jon could not rely on the dragon. Perhaps Jon never could.

“We must address multiple problems on the multiple fronts,” Sansa muttered.

“My liege lord must deal with the Woolfields and the traitors in White Harbour,” Ser Mardrick said, “but I will arrange for men take and hold Moat Cailin from the Bolton garrison.”

“Lord Reed and Greywater Watch will assist in that, no doubt. The crannogmen have proved their worth.” Lady Mormont nodded. “Lord Umber, can you rally the men to support the Wall?”

“Aye,” the Greatjon grumbled. “I don’t know where I’ll rally them from, but I’ll get them.”

“The last message from Lord Steward Sam Tarly said that the Wall is being supported by free folk fighters,” said Jon. “Mance Rayder is in command from Castle Black – but I’m told that over half the castles are now garrisoned and the sworn brothers stand at three thousand strong. More, with the allied free folk clans and the forces under Sigorn of Thenn.” Jon's voice was still grim. “But I will rest happier the more men that we have to the north, as soon as possible.”

He looked around the room, eyes hard. “I want ships from Bear Island on the Frozen Coast, and I want every northern lord ready at all haste. We must mandate conscription, my lords.” Ser Mardrick's eyes widened. “For men and women both. Every person in the north must be readied to fight throughout a long winter.”

There were a few feeble protests but Jon allowed no arguments. He had already made his decision.

After that, conversation turned towards logistics. When they were to set out, their food stores, how long until they could hold the coronation. Everything was urgent, there could be no delay…

The conversation was long, and tiring. It was evening when they retired. Too much was in flux, too much had to be nailed down. There was a certain type of insidious panic that seeped in when everything seemed urgent.

Without a strong command, any action could be plagued by indecision, he thought. Jon could not do it all by himself, he needed the ranks beneath him, and he needed the order. Perhaps Lord Manderly would be a good regent – he had proven himself loyal. The Greatjon would be a stronger military leader, but Lord Manderly had more of a head for politics.

“We have our duties,” Jon remembered saying. “See them done.”

There were bows and shuffling talks towards as Jon’s tone turned final. While the others stepped out of the Winter Suite, Lady Sansa lingered by Jon side, tilting her head.
There was a moment of silence. The cold chambers felt so empty without the bodies and muttering.

“Do you care for drink, Your Grace?” Sansa offered finally. “Or is it my lord?”

“Technically it’s still ‘Your Grace’, I suppose,” Jon said with a sigh, “until I bend the knee and swear to Bran, and afterwards then I will be ‘my lord’.”

“I shall have a servant fetch a decanter, and some glasses,” Sansa said, walking towards the door. “You look stiff.”

“Dealing with these lords makes me appreciate the wilderness more, my lady,” Jon replied, finally dropping down onto a chair. His leg was aching.

“Indeed.” Sansa’s lips twitched. They were warmer in each other's company, less stiff than they had been the night before.

As Sansa returned, Jon looked at her curiously. “Well then,” he said awkwardly. “Do you think the northern lords will be a problem?”

“Perhaps. I find that anyone can be problematic, if they put their mind to it,” she replied. Jon made note of the deflection. “Galbart Glover was absent. Where is he?”

“Mourning his brother’s death, I believe.” Robett Glover had died stiffly, holding his head up high as Dark Sister came down.

“Ah.”

There was a stiff, forced silence.

“Lord Cregan Karstark is a problem,” Sansa said finally. “He was deliberately disrespecting your rule in front of the other lords.”

“I am aware,” Jon admitted. “But he has no power. House Karstark is on a leash.”

“Then he was testing the leash; trying to see how far he could question you.” Sansa shook her head. “Appearances are everything, Jon. Perhaps you were right not to force the point then and there – that could have made you look insecure. But you cannot do nothing, either.”

Yes, Jon agreed, isn’t that the dilemma which every ruler faces – to find some balance between grasping and brittle, or between merciless and hard? “Do you remember how Father used to handle disrespectful bannermen?” Jon asked. “Can you recall when Father’s power was challenged?”

“I…” Sansa hesitated, and then frowned. “I cannot.”

“Neither can I,” he admitted. “I cannot recall that it ever happened. It must have, surely, but I can’t remember Lord Stark ever even raising his voice.”

“He always seemed quiet,” Sansa agreed.

“Yes. He was always honourable, kind and well-liked. He must have been pushed at some point – surely some bannermen found something to object to in his decisions? – but I can only assume that Father handled it quietly; that he took care of such unruliness in private.”

“He used to take his children aside, one by one,” said Sansa, and she nodded. We have such different memories of our childhoods, Jon noted. “Very well, then.”
The servants brought wine, in a small sealed barrel. Jon noticed how every serving woman was escorted by a wildling guard with a white stone on his chest. The serving woman bowed hesitantly to both him and Sansa.

“Karstark was right about one thing, mind,” his sister continued. “What do you intend to be? Regent? Hand of the King?”

“I…” I have not even come close to figuring that out. “It doesn’t matter, so long as I’m in a position to secure the north. The free folk don’t care for ranks.”


He frowned. “You mean a small council?”

“The Kings in the North called theirs the Court of Winter. It gathered in this very room.” Sansa hesitated, bending down to fumble with a satchel that rested beneath the table. “And if we are truly returning to the old kingdom again…”

She lifted out of her satchel a book, a dusty tome. It was a chunky book filled with yellowing parchments bound by leather. The ink was old and faded, every page well-thumbed. “The Ranks and Government of the Northern Court,” Jon read the title, squinting to make it the faded words.

“Yes. I’ve already made a list.” There was a bookmark in the tome – a slip of folded parchment filled with scrawled, jotted notes written in Sansa's smooth hand. “And I suggest we go through it.”

It was a long list of notes and tightly curled writing – with certain points highlighted in intricate care. Jon raised an eyebrow. “You did all of this?”

“You are not the only one,” Sansa said dryly, “who does not have time for sleep.”

He looked over the notes, with scribbled names and dates. It detailed the composition of the ranks in the Winter King’s court, and how they had evolved over the eons. Jon had to squint to make out the words. A thousand years of northern parliament, summarised in a sharp list.

The very first positions listed were the ancient ranks of thanes and jarls – from the old culture of the First Men, but the Court of Winter had evolved over time. The North may not have been conquered in the Andal Invasion, but the Andal culture had still seeped across over the eons. The jarls and thanes had slowly been replaced by lords and masters.

Jon inspected the list closely, his lips moving silently as he scrolled down the words. “There are more positions here than the seven of a small council,” he noted.

“The small council was a Targaryen invention,” Sansa explained. “They restricted their court into only seven members; the Targaryens liked to consolidate power heavily between only very few trusted members. The Kings of Winter kept their own court and government and, historically, the Starks have been more decentralised.”

Jon nodded, still looking over the list. “So then a position like the Hand of the King?”

“It would vary between king to king,” she explained. “But there were typically two roles that fill in the same function to a King in the North.” She pointed on the page. “The King’s Claw, and the King’s Mercy.”

“The King’s Claw,” Jon mused. The emblem illustrated on the parchment was that of wolf’s claw, hanging as a chain around a man neck. “Dragons have claws too.”
“They do. The King’s Claw was designated to represent the king on the battlefield, and the King’s Mercy represents him in civil matters,” she explained. “The Mercy stood for the king during judgements, while the Claw led his armies at war. Two different ranks, and occasionally there could multiple of each – whereas the Targaryens kept only a single position.”

“And these other titles…” Jon frowned with slight confusion, looking through the blotted notes. “Minister of War, Minister of Seas, Minister of Justice, Minister of Tithes, Minister of Commerce, Minister of Harvests… I have never heard such titles.”

“They’re historical; they have never been used since the days of the Old King, when Jaehaerys the Councillor successfully forced the Winter Court to disband,” Sansa explained. “It was part of the common law that Jaehaerys introduced. Ever since, the Targaryen regime has not allowed their sovereign kingdoms to keep local government, and the governing positions that they did introduce were bastardised versions of those used by the previous Seven Kingdoms.” She paused, her eyes widening at the choice of words. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean…”

“You don’t have to avoid the word ‘bastard’ with me, Sansa,” Jon said gently, before returning to the parchment. “So on here… to name a Minister of War and Minister of Seas…” They were made with the respective jotted notes ‘to ensure the king’s forces stand ready, armed and strong at all times’ and ‘to ensure that the king’s royal navy is maintained and strong’. Jon deliberated for a few heartbeats. “The Greatjon would be a good choice for Minister of War, and Lord Wyman for Minister of Seas.”

“They would,” Sansa paused. “And should I assume that you intend to take the rank King’s Claw?”

“And I take it you intend to be the King’s Mercy?” Jon retorted. Sansa blinked, opening her mouth to object. “Come on, Sansa, you had those two choices circled up front for a reason.”

There was a quiet grimace. “Well, I was going to make the suggestion with rather more tact than that…” she chided softly. “But yes, it would be good for the eldest child of Lord Stark to take a position of prominence. Even if it is only ceremonial.”

Jon could have snorted. He had no doubt that Sansa wouldn’t allow the rank to be ceremonial. “Alright very well. To be approved by the king, I take it?” he said dryly, and Sansa narrowed her eyes but nodded. “Then what of regency? Bran is underage, he will need a regent. You are the eldest living member of his house, Sansa.”

Sansa shook her head. “I am only fifteen myself. Technically I am below age as well. And regardless, I am merely a young girl who knows little of the ways of politics, of unproven status – they still call me Lady Lannister,” she replied with a gentle scoff. “What of yourself, Jon – you are Bran’s eldest family member?”

“And the Bastard King, wildling and deserter,” he retorted, shaking his head as well. “To take regency myself would be seen as presumptuous – and it would leave Bran exposed to all the Cregan Karstarks of the north that would name Bran a puppet king.”

Sansa didn’t protest it. “Then that means regency must go to a great lord of the realm. A unifying figure.”

No one that anybody could object to, you mean? Still, Jon nodded. “Then that would be Lord Umber or Lord Manderly,” he said, “they are the two strongest and oldest lords of the realm.”

“No,” she said firmly. “It would be unhealthy to raise either one of them so far above the other.”
“Sansa!”

“Don’t act like you weren’t thinking it, Jon,” she replied stiffly, but there was a flicker of smile on her face. There was a pause. “What of Howland Reed?”

“The Lord of Greywater Watch…” The suggestion caught Jon off-guard. “Father spoke highly of him…”

“He did,” Sansa agreed. “Lord Reed is experienced, and has served your war well from how I hear it. Lord Reed has singlehandedly defended the Neck against all foes, leading the resistance for House Stark. Surely he would take the duty of regent?” Jon didn’t look convinced. “Howland Reed is a loyalist, Jon, but he’s also something of an outsider. Someone who might bring balance.”

Jon shook his head. “I have never even met the man, Sansa.” The Lord of Greywater Watch was famously reclusive; Jon heard that very few convoys through the Neck were even allowed to know Greywater Watch's location.

“Nor me. But we could invite him to Winterfell to change that, surely?” she pressed. “Bran likely would not be alive if not for his daughter, we owe him a debt. Lord Reed must come to Winterfell.”

Jon grimaced, but he could not dispute the point. “I make no promises, not until I meet him,” Jon said. “But I will consider it.”

“Very well, yet the other nominations must come quickly.” Sansa pulled out a new sheet of parchment, and an inkpot. “There are royal declarations to pen, Jon.”

Jon didn't twitch, but perhaps she saw the hesitation flicker in his eyes. He reached for one of the wine glasses. “Shall we call a maester?” she asked.

“I feel we can fumble our way through without one.” Jon replied, taking a deep gulp of wine.

They went through the points one by one, and a list of lords, lands and ranks. There were about two dozen houses that had been allied with the coalition, two dozen that were against them, and another four dozen or so were left somewhere in between, to various degrees.

Jon had already picked out the worst of the traitors – Norrey, Slate and Woolfield – and he intended to make an example of them. Sansa quietly scratched those houses of her list.

They sat huddled together over the scraps of parchments. Somehow, it felt like the quiet talk with his sister was more productive than every great assembly of lords he had ever sat through.

One of King Bran’s very first proclamations would have to be to pardon Jon for deserting the Night’s Watch, Sansa insisted. And then Bran must accept Jon’s fealty, grant citizenship, and to grant lands and status to all the deserving free folk leaders. There were around fifty thousand free folk that needed to settle, and maybe four dozen leaders to be given status.

Sansa made notes as he listed them; House Giantsbane, House Rayder, House Thenn, House Sixskins, House Sealskinner, House Bone… She paused fractionally as Jon said House Weeper, but didn't object. The Weeper would recover from the infirmary bed and Jon intended to keep the Weeper by his side.

*My brother has only just woken up.* Jon wouldn’t dump all of this on him, not now.

“Most of the titles will be ceremonial for now,” Sansa explained. “But there are lands enough we
can give as rewards. Lands belonging to Bolton will have to be *completely* reassigned, they should be the first granted to your free folk."

“To keep them separate from the northmen?” Jon asked, and Sansa nodded. “So we grant the free folk lordships from the Bolton former bannermen.”

“Perhaps naming them as masterly houses, rather than lordships, even,” Sansa suggested. “Many free folk have little experience in governing – naming a Master of the Dreadfort, for example, not a lord, would be less objectionable.”

Jon considered it. Masterly houses were similar to the southern practice of landed knights, but the difference between a master and a lord was not so great in the north. Houses like Glover or Tallhart were as powerful as any lordly house, but there was a slight difference in rank.

“A lord owns land in his own right,” Jon mused, “but technically a master is only a custodian who manages the land for Winterfell.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Both muster men and dispense justice, but a master has no right to local law and taxation. Historically, masters would have a seat on the Winter Court, while lords only stood in the interior.”

She already had half the governing bodies sketched out, Jon noted. Sansa had given it much thought. He looked through the list, slowly understanding her reasoning. “You mean to consolidate power to Winterfell.”

She nodded. “As the Conciliator did during his reign, and I saw similar moves made in the Vale. Piece by piece, force them to answer Winterfell.”

He pursed his lips. “I cannot have a political dispute tying us down, Sansa. This country must prepare for war.”

“Yes, but politics and war must go hand in hand.”

Jon mused over it. “I agree with filling the council in Winterfell,” he said finally. “But we cannot rob commanders from our armies either. We need trusted commanders in the field.”

They pondered over it. There was a flicker through the parchment, and quiet jotting of notes. Sansa read quickly; she barely even moved her lips. “What of reintroducing the wardens, then?” Sansa suggested after a moment. “The Winter Court acts as central government, the wardens after the unifying commander in their area.”

“Wardens? Like Warden of the North?”

“The Iron Throne reduced the wardens to only four – of the East, West, North and South – but it was based on an existing practice.” She flickered through the book. “The King in the North named more than that…”

She turned towards a thumbed page, a crude map of the north designated into territories. There was a list of names; Warden of the Southern Marches, Warden of the Eastern Hills, Warden of the Bite, Warden of the Western Coast, Warden of the Northern Mountains, Warden of the Wolfswood, Warden of the Stone Isle…

“The unifying commander in their field,” Jon mused. “Men we can appoint to protect their own territory.”
“And wardens are appointed at the discretion of the king, from any rank,” Sansa explained. “A warden is as great as any lord, but they can be named as required.”

Jon saw the reasoning; remove petty squabbles by reinforcing a hard chain of command. “We could remove the power from potentially troublesome local lords. Force them to Winterfell’s command by appointing wardens instead.”

“Exactly. Then what of martial law, if we could appoint an emergency command…?”

The talk continued. There was an order forming from the mess of chaos, a structure that Jon could agree with. Sansa wanted noble and influential council, but Jon wanted to see a strong command of generals.

It was all about power. They had to ensure that the power was in the right positions and moved in the right direction.

The servants came with another decanter of wine, and the pile of parchments increased from two into dozens. There was a mess of papers spilled out over the stone table, some even scattering onto the cold floor.

Jon looked at the list, reading through the tiles; Minister of War, Minister of Justice, Minister of Seas, Minister of Commerce, Minister of Harvests, Minister of Tithes. Then there was Master of the Interior, Lord Treasurer, Lord Marshal, Lord of the Guards…

“There is another position,” Sansa said finally, as she looked through the book. “What of Warden of Winter? Read this…”

He bent over the page, and he saw a sketch of two men standing before the dais of the throne of Winterfell. They were bowing to a king in an iron throne; one man holding a branch of oak and the other a branch of holly. ‘Warden of Winter and Spring’, the heading below read. ‘Wardens named on a seasonal basis. Where other wardens are assigned to territories, these wardens are appointed to fight the elements. Warden of Spring to rebuild in springtime, to ensure food and grain throughout the kingdom, and to keep the kingdom strong. Warden of Winter to protect refugees during wintertime, and to ensure safety and shelter from the cold, to drive away all threats.’


“It makes sense.” Sansa nodded. “For the north, fear of winter has defined our culture more than anything. The Winterfell might have been a city in its own right, but the north could never sustain such a population,” she explained. “And Warden of Winter would largely be a ceremonial title, but then during the darkest nights of winter there is none more important.”

She was staring at him pointedly. It is all pretence, Jon thought. All of those ranks and titles – nothing more than to empty ways to flatter yourself.

“What does it matter what I call myself?” Jon retorted. “Lord… King's Claw… Warden of Winter… I will do the exact same job regardless.”

“The titles have a power of their own. This is the history of our kingdom; men will respect that.”

“It has been archaic for hundreds of years, Sansa.”

“But it helps justify your role, Jon. It will make the realm more comfortable with the position you give yourself,” Sansa insisted. “Sell it in a different light; we are not losing to a wildling invasion, we are returning to our own realm. Our culture. It’s important.”
Jon hesitated. The list of positions that she was filling was becoming long. “The realm fears that wildling and the dragon will destroy us, so show them the opposite,” Sansa mused. “Rebuild the north instead.”

She made jotted notes as they talked. There was a structure to be built, an entire system to be evaluated and established.

White Harbour would mint their own currency, silver coins that would pay for their kingdom. They would send an envoy to the Iron Bank to beseech a loan, reinitialise trade with Braavos. They needed admirals and captains for their fledgling navy. Sansa wanted to reach out to Lord Borrell of Sweettisister, and to establish tithes to raise coin that could hire sellswords.

There were other decrees that Jon insisted on. He wanted to designate reservations in the north for the giant clans to roam, and a king’s law to forbid the hunting of the old races. “There are so few of them left,” Jon argued, “we must to offer protection to giants, mammoths and the children of the forest.”

Jon also wanted decrees to extend the king's protection and tutelage to any with the potential of skinchanging. They would invite all wargs to Winterfell, and strictly outlaw the prosecution of any with abilities. That made Sansa bite her lip somewhat, but she did not protest as she made the note.

By the time they were finished, there were two dozen or so fledgling laws and proclamations scattered over the cold stone table. Jon could only assume that a scribe would rewrite them into a more official format later.

“Are we done?” he asked with a sigh.

“I… I think so. For now.” She took a deep breath. “I must return to Bran. Yourself?”

Jon sighed, and shook his head as he stood up. “I must see to Sonagon.”

“Ah.”

_I have no time to sit by Bran’s bed._ Still, Jon needed to protect his brother. He could not relax, not yet. Jon had not been able to sit by either Bran’s or Val's bedside. Not because of lack of love, just lack of time.

He staggered slightly pushing the heavy chair backwards. The cold in the Winter Suite had left Jon's leg stiff. He fumbled slightly reaching for his staff, and Sansa glanced at him.

“Hold on, let me…”

“I've got it,” he replied sharply, clutching his staff. The oak clattered against the granite floor. “It's quite alright.”

Sansa hesitated, but she stayed back. Her gaze glanced down to his walking stick. “That reminds me,” she said finally. “Hold on, I'll be right back.”

She left the chamber swiftly. He heard her pacing down the corridor briskly, but then she returned shortly after. When she stepped back in to the Winter Suite, Sansa was carrying a long and slim white cane.

“A gift,” Sansa offered. “I had a man cut it from the branches of the heart tree.”
Jon took the cane. It was smooth carved white wood, about four foot in length. At first, he thought it white oak, but then he recognised the distinctive texture of the wood. “Weirwood?”

“Call it a symbol of your status,” she explained, with knowing eyes. “None could fault you for carrying a sceptre – a mark of the office.”

His eyes glance down to his leg. *Ah, a mark of the office.* A sceptre, rather than a walking stick. *Appearances are everything.*

He took the cane gratefully. Jon smiled softly. “I’m really glad you’re home, Sansa.”

She smiled too. There was a pause, an uncertain hesitation, but then she reached in closer for an embrace. They hugged for the very first time that Jon could remember.

Sansa left to go see Bran, but Jon had another task. He had dragon to tend to.

Still, he glanced down at the list they had made, and there was a large question mark left hovering over House Karstark. He thought of his brother, and he made the decision quickly.

Jon steadied himself, and left the Winter Suite. He walked down the stairwell and out into the courtyard of the Great Keep. Snow was falling, and the steps were made treacherous by a fine layer of black ice. He walked slowly, his weirwood cane tapping with every step.

The courtyard was heaving with bodies. They cleared the snow every hour, but the drifts of white were still piling up.

Jon heard the distant thunder of giants gathered around the godswood to the north. The giants were camped around the dragon, with the Cult of the Ice Dragon patrolling the godswood. To his mild surprise, the giant matriarchs had proved extremely capable herbalists, providing mixtures and poultices that seemed to help even a dragon’s stomach.

Jon glanced around, and then headed east towards the castle’s outbuildings.

He found Lord Cregan Karstark by the stables, as the lord prepared his bay horse. There were two of Karstark’s sons and more free folk watching him at every turn. “My lord,” Jon called to Karstark. “I hoped that we could clear the air between us.”

The lord looked startled by Jon’s presence, flinching with the sight of him. Jon only smiled, stepping in towards the stables. “At ease, my lord. I only wish to talk.”

Cregan’s face twisted, his eyes glancing down to the cane Jon walked with. Jon approached slowly, pausing to pick up a saddle for the lord’s horse. “Do you mind, my lord?”

“What do you want, Your Grace?” Cregan said stiffly.

“I wish to offer you the chance to make peace with each other, to reach common ground.” Jon paused, extending the saddle for Cregan to take.

The guards stood at the entrance, but there was nobody else around by the horse’s stall. “Common ground,” Karstark repeated. “I have been nothing but loyal to you.”

“Well, you’ve never disobeyed,” Jon conceded. “But that is not quite loyalty. I’ve been thinking much on the traitors that stood within my army. For instance, Brandon Norrey and his clan. And it occurs to me that the Norrey did have valid reason to be resentful, but he never shared such with anyone. If only the Norrey had aired his grievances, I might have resolved them, and how much
loss could have been prevented?” Jon shook his head sadly. “We are alone, my lord, we might speak privately. Let me hear your grievances.”

There was a long silence. Lord Karstark kept his face guarded, but Jon could see the rage in his eyes. “You may speak without consequence, my lord. I only wish to talk.”

“My grievances?” Cregan choked. “My father died outside these very walls.”

“Yes,” Jon sighed. “I lost my father too.”

“It is not the same. Arnolf Karstark will go down as traitor’s death, but he did naught but was best for his family.” His face twisted. “I’ve yet to even recover his body. My family is ruined thanks to you, and I lost two sons at the Battle of Last River. I lost them to wildlings — wildlings who held me and my family hostage for months, wildlings that sit in my keep. Wildlings that tortured me and my kin.”

“Yes.” Jon nodded. He idly reached out to stroke Karstark’s horse. “And can you see any resolution to our problems?”

“That depends. Can you bring the dead back to life? Can you restore Lord Rickard’s head?”

“I cannot,” Jon said simply.

“Then there is naught to say.” Karstark’s eyes narrowed. “I am your loyal subject, Your Grace. I have committed no treason against you, I’ve upheld the oath I gave you.”

The oath the Weeper forced out of you. “Yes,” Jon admitted. “You have.”

“Then you have nothing to reprimand me for.” His jaw tensed. “I apologise if my tongue was too blunt during the assembly.”

Has there ever been a more hollow apology? “You are right,” Jon said with a sigh. “But do you know what I think? I think you were just trying to disagree with me in the assembly. I think you know that you cannot defy me, but you make things as awkward for me as possible. You won’t defy, but you can still sow dissent in subtler ways. You can still wait for an opportunity.

“And I feel like you are determined to oppose me, my lord. You are ‘loyal’, I cannot fault you there — but I think you’ve resolved yourself to simply make my life difficult.”

Lord Karstark bristled, glaring. “I have done naught wrong.” He growled, backing down cautiously. “I have broken no oaths, and I will do not anything to risk my family. Or my wife.”

“Very well, my lord,” Jon said with a sigh. “I am sorry that we came to such ends.”

Cregan stiffly lowered his head. “Are we done, Your Grace?” Cregan growled. “I have my duties — there is a charnel trench waiting for me outside. Perhaps I’ll yet find my father’s body there.”

Jon just nodded. “As you will. Do not let me detain you.” He cast one final look at the lord and his horse, and then walked away.

As he left back towards the keep, Jon heard Lord Karstark mount up his horse and ride away out into the snows. Jon did not turn, and he waited until Cregan was at the centre of the courtyard, trotting towards the walls.

Then Jon closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and reached out. He extended his mind straight into
Cregan Karstark's horse.

The bay mare twitched. Jon pressed in sharply, and then the mare recoiled. He felt the pain, like a dagger through the flesh. The horse screamed. He heard the shouting, he felt Karstark thrash with the reins, and then…

Even on the other side of the yard, Jon heard the scream as Karstark fell to the stones. He felt the painful oomph from the horse's hooves clattering.

Footsteps were running. Jon opened his eyes and kept on walking, without even breaking stride.

On the other side of the castle, Cregan Karstark fell from his horse and died.

There would be over three dozen witnesses to say that Cregan Karstark's horse slid on the ice, and the lord broke his neck. Jon very visibly hadn’t even been present, there was nothing to implicit him in such a death. It was an accident, nothing more. Alys Karstark was now left a young widow, and another dissenter had been removed from Bran’s court.

_I should have done that months ago_, Jon mused. Perhaps there were others who needed a fall off their horses. He thought of Rattleshirt, and he wondered how much use the Lord of Bones still had.

Perhaps Cregan Karstark would be another figure to haunt Jon’s dreams but, at this point, he just didn’t care.

---

**Bran**

It seemed as though he had been falling for years.

_Fly_, a voice whispered in the darkness, but Bran did not open his wings. Instead, he let himself fall, soaring down towards the earth. He thought of a little boy made of clay, baked until he was hard and brittle, dressed up in a lordling’s clothes and then pushed out into cold storms. Bran could have abandoned that little clay boy, he could have flown away, but he didn’t want to. He did not want to leave the broken boy behind.

The ground was so far below him he could barely make it out through the grey mists that whirled around him, but he knew how fast he was falling and he knew what was waiting for him down there. Even in dreams, you could not fall forever. He would wake up the instant before he hit the ground, he knew. You always woke up in the instant before you hit the ground.

The world was twisting, roiling all round him in a vague darkness. Fragmented thoughts and visions, flitting past the edges of his sight. Unconscious, and yet not wholly unaware. A sensation he’d nearly forgotten, that of warmth. Scattered mumbles, a susurrus of half-formed mutters; a few familiar, most not. And then there was a caw, and the hazy sensation of falling.

He was tumbling through the void between the stars, falling into an ocean of light that wreathed a roiling nothingness of pure black, drawing in the light forever. He was drowning in a circle of stars, staring out over a horizon of white roots weaving through a blood red sky.

_The only difference between flight and falling is where you want to land_, Bran thought with a breathless gasp. He opened his eyes wide and let himself drop.

Bran gasped, found himself standing in a grey waste, the corpse-light of a guttered dawn dimly
washing over the world. Snow like ash, greasy and foul was falling from the sky. He saw five walls of pure black stone a thousand feet high, guarding the way north from the shores of a sea that flowed like blood. Banners of blue and sapphire wafted limply in the wind, falling and burning.

Bran found his eyes pulled to the east, and through the filthy snow, across the reach of the world, he found blue eyes staring back at him. Too many to count, too many to comprehend. He saw a creature like a mountain, a glacier…

And somewhere beneath it all, he sensed something pounding like a drum, the black heartbeat of the world. He sensed a lidless eye larger than the sky open beneath the land, stare into him, a power beyond mortality roiling and tensing, setting to flense his soul from his bones.

A harsh sound cut through the air, and the world went dark.

He was standing at the bottom of the ocean, standing at the bottom of a scar in between continents. He saw the earth silently hiss and crack and seethe as the world’s hot orange blood poured forth. He sensed power wafting forth from that burning blood, more power than any man could ever wield. It was coming forth in torrents, like the breaking of an ancient dam releasing an endless flood.

He saw a black mountain shrug itself free from the sand, shaking off the ghost of sleep as it rose into the vast ocean above. Bran looked up and saw a hundred more; a hundred twisting black shadows with eyes. They were swimming, exulting in the power, soaking it in.

A burning red eye the size of a rowing boat focused on him with sudden ferocity. It started to swim a little closer, reaching out with tentacles as long as rivers, inquisitive and grasping.

Bran didn’t flinch. He didn’t look away. Another cawing noise rang out, and the world faded to an alien scene. He just stared mutely, as the visions swam past him one after the other.

He saw a red city resting at the foot of a mountain that reached for the sky. The statues of a thousand dead gods loomed over the plains as a great battle raged between swarthy riders with bells in their hair and the legions of the dead. He saw the horselords break, he saw the city fall. He saw silent figures with blue eyes walking over the grassy plains.

He saw a titan guarding the way to a city of fog and lagoons, falling as a man in black armour laughed, and laughed…

He saw cities of harpies and tigers and elephants and slaves, all burning and screaming together.

He saw legions of men with skin scorched into stone, rising up from the waters.

He saw a lifeless city of red sands, of shattered walls and collapsed pyramids. A city of ashes, left frozen and barren.

He saw a stone man standing stiffly as the world broke apart into flames and darkness, and great black clouds of ash spewed over the waters.

He saw a burning eye in the middle of a smoking sea, all the while the shadows danced.

He saw flames and frost circling around each other, destroying everything in their wake. It was dance; a dance of the elements, of the seasons…

A dance of destruction.
Heartbeats became eternities and eternities became instants, and then he was rising upwards again. Great wings of black consumed him – the three-eyed crow was there, lifting him up into the skies.

He saw glaciers as high as mountains cover all the land, paving the world in a blanket of ice. Bran looked north, to the curtain of light at the end of the world, and then beyond that curtain. There was nothing below him now but snow and cold and death, a frozen wasteland where jagged blue-white spires of ice waited to embrace him. They flew up at him like spears.

"Don’t you see?" the three-eyed crow boomed, air whooshing beneath giant wings. "See why you need to fly!"

“Yes,” Bran agreed. “I see.” But it is only a dream. It cannot hurt me.

“Then choose. Fly or die.”

He saw the rising spikes rising up to meet him. There were bodies skewered over the frozen spikes, impaled on the edges – the bones of a thousand other dreams. He remembered this; it was the first ever vision the three-eyed crow had ever shown him.

This time, Bran knew why they were here. The three-eyed crow had done this before. The crow had dropped other dreamers onto the spikes, to test whether or not they would soar. How many other dreamers had the three-eyed crow dropped to their deaths? How many had there been before me?

Bran didn’t let himself fall. He had a choice. This time, he just pulled himself away.

The world blurred, and the wings of shadow disappeared around him.

It was like a veil had been dropped, like Bran could sense a little more of the nature of the three-eyed crow. As though it no longer kept up the effort to maintain the pretence of mortality. He saw the world around the bird roil like a black mirror.

He saw a thousand eyes floating in the space around the bird, each a window into some far off, incomprehensible scene. He saw a pale lord with a birthmark like a bloodstain, kissing a girl with silvery hair and blue and green eyes even as she laughed at him. He saw them studying over moth-bitten tomes, and he saw the girl slit a peasant’s throat and dab the blood over her skin. The pale lord gaped in horror at first, until slowly, his eyes began to glitter with curiosity. He saw the pale lord, decades older, wearing furs of black. The man waited in silent regard at the foot of a glacier, watching, still and silent as a child of the forest emerged from a tunnel, beckoning him forth.

Bran saw a black-haired boy with blue eyes in a bed of salt and rock, writhing as a bird whispered to him and told him how to fly.

He saw a mutated, merciless being of bark and blood with a thousand and one bloody eyes staring back at him. There was no mortality left in it, no compassion, no mercy. Bran didn’t want to go with such a creature.

“Pity,” the three-eyed crow whispered hoarsely, and then suddenly everything swept away. Only a dream.

All of the visions, all of the mists, shuddered and swirled around him and ripped away like a veil. Everything faded, and Bran felt the real world again. He felt light, and sound, and movement, warmth and cold.

Bran tried to call for help, and the sound of a wolf’s bark filled the air.
He was on four legs, and covered in fur. His nose twitched the unfamiliar air, and then he saw the body of a little boy before him. He was looking upon a little child, left unconscious and wrapped up in thick blankets.

Oh, Bran realised. His memories returned sluggishly. He remembered what it had been like to feel the cold spreading over his skin, and everything turning stiff and dead. Bran remembered his body freezing over.

He saw the world through a wolf’s eyes. All the sights were blurred and faded, but the world was alight from all the sounds and scents burning around him. It was hard to truly comprehend anything from an animal’s perspective; everything was defined more by instinct than sense.

The direwolf was anxious, twitching. Guarding the foot of a great bed, glaring at the unfamiliar faces. At one point the direwolf even had to growl to keep the strangers away as too many of them gathered in a tense huddle.

And yet, in another way, everything was so, so familiar. This was home, and he could still feel all of the memories coated through the chambers.

Bran saw his own body, lying in his bed. This is my bed, Bran thought numbly, my bed.

He remembered the last time he had laid in this bed, in this room, looking down at his own body from the outside. It had been after the fall, as he lay on death’s door. That had been a lifetime ago – when he first saw the three-eyed crow in his dreams. Fly, the crow had croaked to him, you must fly.

Bran didn’t want to fly anymore. He wanted to be home.

The direwolf mewled, and twitched. It hadn’t been a conscious decision, but when his own vision had gone black amidst the snows, Bran had instinctively retreated into Summer’s skin. Now, life was returning to his own body, and he had to return. You must wake up, Bran. You must wake up.

Bran slowly extended himself, reaching out back to his own body. His heart started to race as he felt his own skin creep back to him. He felt his consciousness oozing back towards his body, filling up his skin like honey dripping into a container.

The little boy’s eyes flickered, and his body started to rouse itself. His body was trembling; even despite the warmth Bran felt numb. Everything was so sluggish, so hard to think…

His eyes twitched open slowly, and he saw a face framed by red hair sitting over. She was sitting by his bedside, curled over her lap. She was stitching, stitching for him.

Mother, Bran thought. Mother?

Mother hadn’t been present the last time he had woken up. Bran had looked for her, but his Mother had already left before he awoke from his coma. She went south to chase after Father, and Bran never saw either of them again. He wanted to see his mother again.

His head pounded, his blurred vision spinning. He tried to call out to her, but all that came were the slurred words.

“… ‘Othur…”

At once, she twitched. It looked like she had been falling asleep by his bedside, but at the sound of his voice, Mother jumped. “Bran!” she called. “By the Gods, Bran…”!!
It wasn’t Mother. Her voice was different, her face younger and her hair darker. Bran had to blink, trying to recognise the young woman draped over his bed. It was another ghost.

Sansa. *Is that Sansa…?*

Bran would have called out, but his throat croaked. His arms trembled, trying to grip something. “Don’t move, Bran…” she soothed, placing a warm hand over his cold head. “I’ll fetch you some water, but you must drink it slowly. Stay still, Bran, stay still…”

He felt Summer resting on his bed, curled up protectively like a great grey guardian.

Even when he was lying down, the world wobbled. *It wasn’t a dream, Bran realised. *This is Winterfell, this is home.*

His stomach lurched so violently he could have puked. His throat was rough like leather, everything was spinning. He couldn’t feel his arms, or his legs. *My legs, Bran thought with a blink. I haven’t felt my legs in three years.*** And yet, somehow, he still tried to move them every time he woke up.

*This is Winterfell. How? What of the Boltons, and the wildlings, and what about…?*

*Meera. Where is Meera?*

Bran felt almost delirious, but he could feel Summer lying next to him – the great wolf’s snout nuzzling at Bran’s fingertips, his wet nose against Bran’s palm. Summer wouldn’t let anything happen to Meera. Summer thought that they were safe.

He felt soft hands wrap around his shoulders. Sansa looked older than he remembered – like a woman grown. He remembered a young girl with red hair bobbed over her head and wide eyes, but the woman over him was lean with hair worn downwards – dressed curtly and looking as mature as any lady. She hugged him so tightly, gripping his shoulders and Bran could barely breathe.

He tried to squirm, to ask a hundred questions all at once, but all that came out was a strained gurgle. “It’s alright, Bran…” Sansa whispered. Her eyes glistened with tears, her voice nearly breaking. “It’s alright.”

There was nothing Bran could do but lie on his bed, staring up the stone ceiling and feeling his heart pounding in his chest.

“How…?” Bran croaked finally. “… Where…?”

“It’s Jon, Bran,” Sansa whispered, slowly raising a goblet of water to his lips. “Jon took our home back.”

*Jon. Jon is here too?*

He had never expected to see his family again. Somewhere, after all those months wandering the wilderness, or all the time trapped in that dungeon by the Bastard’s Boys, Bran had lost all hope that he would ever see his family. He had lost all hope that he might ever wake up in Winterfell again.

To be here, to be in this room again, with his sister… his sister!… hugging him and crying into his shoulder…

It was all too much. Bran blacked out again.
When he woke up again, his sister was still by his side. She had a pile of parchment on her lap, and a book propped open on the tableside by an inkpot – it looked like she was writing something, her quill blotting over the page.

Bran took deep breaths, trying to focus. Sansa held his hand, and promised to fetch him so toasted bread and jam. Small meals, she kept on insisting. Bran was so hungry that his stomach didn’t even have the strength to growl.

There were other figures – other men that stepped through the doorway. They were all foreign figures wearing worn boiled leather and worn chainmail, with gruff expressions. Bran didn’t recognise any of them, but he focused on the one person he did feel. He focused on his sister.

Through his third eye, Winterfell felt heaving all around him. There were hundreds – thousands – of pinpricks of consciousness, all of them bustling with activity as dusk fell.

Slowly, awkwardly, Bran managed to croak out questions, and then were answers. The Boltons are defeated, Sansa told him. There had been a battle, a very recent battle, but the Boltons lost. The Starks were in exile no longer, they had justice for Robb’s death. Jon managed to recover Winterfell for them – his half-brother made an alliance with free folk beyond the Wall, he formed a coalition with northern lords and defeated House Bolton. They were safe, Sansa insisted. Meera was safe, she was just fatigued as well.

“What of Arya?” Bran heard himself ask. “Where is Arya?”

Sansa didn’t reply, she just turned quiet. Oh.

As nightfall stretched, there were more visitors. They came cautiously, and as the door flapped open and close Bran glimpsed armed guards standing very stiffly outside his chambers. There were sounds like men were being searched for hidden weapons before they were allowed to enter; everything sharper than a matchstick was confiscated before any were allowed to even stand outside his room.

Then, Bran heard a dozen footsteps marching up through the corridor. Bran felt a man with a large retinue walking towards his doorway.

He heard the distinctive, uneven beat of a lurched gait – of a wooden staff tapping against the stones. Sansa stood up, she stood to attention, even. Bran blinked, and he was staring straight at the door as a stranger with white hair stepped through the doorway.

Bran’s body shivered, a tremor ran down his neck. Bran stared at the man through his third eye, and the man stared back. He is a skinchanger too.

The whole room turned hush. The man was dressed like some warrior king – a man with bone white hair and thick black furs wrapped over chainmail. None others were allowed swords, but he had a black blade hanging from a scabbard on his waist. His expression was gaunt, his jaw stiff and his eyes hard. Bran stared, and then looked between the hard and ragged men that he walked with. Wildlings from beyond the Wall, Bran thought, King Snow.

It was only when the white-haired man’s gaze softened that the recognition clicked. His eyes were grey.

“Jon?” Bran gasped in the silent room.

Sansa looked different, but Jon… he looked like a different person. White hair. They both looked at each other. It was like neither of them even knew how to act.
“Bran,” his half-brother replied, in a whisper. There was a long, pregnant pause, and then Jon turned to his retinue. “Do not crowd him,” King Snow ordered in a hard voice, and the men stepped backwards. “Give my brother his space; none are to see him until either I or my sister allows it. Keep all others back.”

There were mumbles. “Aye, King Snow,” Bran heard one wildling mutter, bowing his head. Jon forced them to clear the landing, and then stepped into Bran’s chambers and shut the door. It was only when the door slammed shut that Jon’s posture finally slackened, his shoulders slumping. “Bran…” Jon whispered. He didn’t seem to know what else to say than that, but he crossed the distance and hugged the boy tightly.

Bran was left speechless, struggling to understand. King Snow, they called him. The King-Beyond-the-Wall.

“I wanted to see you when you woke up,” his brother whispered. “I tried… I tried to see you before I left…”

Bran didn’t reply. “I’m sorry that you had to go through everything by yourself,” Jon admitted. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t there.”

*Four years, Bran realised. It was closer to four years than three now. We waited four years to see each other again.*

There were tears swelling in his eyes. Bran took a deep breath, head spinning. He opened his mouth to speak, and he just choked.

Slowly, Sansa reached out to hold Bran’s hand reassuringly. Jon stepped forward, bending down to hug his brother. He knelt by Bran’s bedside, and Bran was shivering as his arms reached around him. Jon’s hand moved to his scalp – to russ up Bran’s hair, just like he used to do when they were small.

It felt different; Bran’s hair was overgrown now – his hair was ragged and unkempt, reaching down to his shoulders. Jon’s fingers were stiffer, and when he raised his hand Bran suddenly realised that he was missing his little finger to a pale stump.

Bran was crying. He didn’t know when the tears began, but even the casual movement like touching his hair caused him to breakdown in tears. “Meera,” Bran said, gulping, “can I see Meera again?”

“Of course you can,” Jon replied, and he stepped up to pass on the order. The men outside jumped to fulfil Jon’s commands.

Meera arrived not long later, escorted by two wildling men. Meera looked pale, dishevelled and skinny without her thick, mouldy cloak. She had swapped her crusty worn leathers – leathers she had been wearing for months – for a hair tunic and hide breeches; they were clothes more fit for a young stableboy, and she wore them awkwardly. Her shoulders were tense, her eyes guarded, but her mouth opened when she saw Bran.

Meera was cautious, she looked between Sansa and Jon hesitantly as she stepped in the room, but quickly walked to Bran’s side. She held his hand too, and Summer whimpered as he sniffed at Meera.

“Thank you for keeping my brother safe, Lady Reed,” Sansa said, lowering her head. “Winterfell owes you a debt.”
Meera didn’t reply right away. Her eyes flickered towards the wildling king. Meera asked Jon about Jojen, asked whether anyone had found her brother, and Jon replied that he had not, but he promised to make inquiries. Meera’s eyes looked at Bran as if there was something else she wanted to say, but she held her tongue.

It was very late, the hour of the bat or later. Bran could hardly speak, and the room was just so… Bran couldn’t even describe it. His heart was beating so fast.

The room was warm, stuffily so. After being in the cold got so long, Bran half-forgotten what warmth felt like.

Sansa finally suggested that they should retire, and Jon offered Meera the room next to Bran’s. Rickon’s old room. Bran never wanted to let go of Meera’s hand.

Everything was spinning. Bran needed to sleep, needed to collapse, but for a moment he was scared that if he closed his eyes, he might wake up from this weird, surreal dream.

As soon as his eyelids flickered shut, the world dissolved. Bran fell into unconsciousness without even remembering snoozing off.

The world shifted, and lurched.

Bran gasped, suddenly finding standing upright himself on his two feet. Standing upright on two good legs. His legs.

He was in the ruins of a great castle – a castle larger than any he had ever seen, in the middle of a great stone courtyard, rimmed by walls of white and rose flowstone crusted in hoarfrost. The towers were great pillars rising up to the sky, and he could see the runestones of the First Men etched onto the stone. Bran stared at the ghostly, frozen ruins of the abandoned structure, sensing a hidden power beneath.

“This is not where you should be, Bran.”

This is another dream. Bran didn’t even need to turn around, to know that the three-eyed crow was perched behind him. Why is the crow doing this, why is he so desperate to pull me away?

“I don’t even know where this is,” Bran replied.

Some ancient castle, frozen over and decayed? He was in the green somewhere, beyond time and memory.

“Not here,” the three-eyed crow cawed, its voice disapproving. “Where your actual body is at. You do not belong there.”

I do. “There must always be a Stark in Winterfell.”

“Not you,” the three-eyed crow replied. “You have a different fate, Brandon Stark.”

His fists clenched into balls. There was so much Bran wanted to shout, wanted to scream. Why did you lead me away? Why did you to lie to me? Why did you let me get trapped? Why am I so important to you? Instead, the only thing that he said, “I’m home now. I’m with my brother and my sister.”

The crow cawed, and the cry echoed over the frozen ruins. “You should have come to me. There was a place waiting for you. I could have shown you a power more than anything you can possibly
dream of.”

“I only ever dreamt of going home.” Bran shook his head. “All I wanted was to be with them. You wanted to hide me away.”

The crow tilted its beak. “They are beyond help, Bran.”

“Why?” Bran had to force himself not to scream it. “You’re powerful, so powerful, you saved me from the Other. You could have saved my father, you could have saved Robb. You could have helped Jon. The Starks protect the north. Isn’t that what you want? Who is going to stop them, if not us?”

The crow was silent for a time. “I have oft wondered at the folly of man,” it said quietly, yet the yard seemed to churn, unseen roots writhing like snakes beneath the soil. “I have struggled to understand why they each seem to believe that their story is the world’s most important – it is a matter of perspective. The perspective to see that your family’s wars are of less importance than you can possibly imagine. I would have saved you from it all, given you the wings with which you could fly away.

“From the moment of your birth, Bran,” the crow cawed harshly, “From the moment of your birth, you were marked with the potential to become more. To fly on the currents of the storm of time, to see all that ever has been or will ever be. To become more. I did not want you to waste that potential in such petty squabbles.”

“Petty squabbles?” Bran said, aghast. “It’s my family, my home!”

“A bird only needs the sky for his home. And what sort of bird,” the crow flapped its wings agitatedly, “doesn’t dream of flying?”

Bran’s lips curled. “You lied to me!” Bran snapped. “You hid the truth from me, you tried to keep me in the dark.”

“I told you everything you needed to know, Bran. I showed the path you must walk, and I never wanted you to be side-tracked.” For a brief moment, the crow’s voice blurred. The harsh crowing dissolved – and it turned into Eddard Stark’s voice. “The cold winds rise. I told you that you were a winged wolf, bound to the earth by chains.”

Bran tensed. The air was shifting – a phantom mist hovering around him. The mist was writhing, forming ghostly shades standing like statues encircling him. Bran saw Mother, Father, Robb, Jon, Sansa, Arya, Rickon... all the figures from his childhood; Ser Rodrik, Old Nan, Hodor, Hullen, Jory, Theon...

All the ghosts of Winterfell, dozens of them, were surrounding Bran. The crow’s voice became louder, booming. “Those that you cling to... your friends, your family. Your history, your home, your attachments. They are the chains, Bran,” the greenseer’s voice boomed. “They are the tethers that bind you to this earth, that leave you the winged wolf unable to leave the ground. You must cut them off.”

All of their faces were stiff and solemn. Bran stared at his mother and father, at their faces he had nearly forgotten. “Cut them off,” Bran replied. “Like you did?”

“Yes,” the greenseer agreed. “Like I did. Power requires sacrifice.”

That was why you did it, Bran thought quietly. The crow didn’t care, he was just trying to isolate me. He wanted to sever me from my family, from my friends, one by one.
“You could fly, Bran.” The three-eyed crow was growing larger – shadows shifting around its feathers as it expanded to as large as a vulture. “You might soar, if not for the chains that you bind yourself with.”

Bran paused, and bit his lip. After a heartbeat, he shook his head. “Then I am happy being chained.”

“Broken legs and all?” the crow challenged.

“Broken legs and all,” Bran agreed. He could still feel Meera’s touch on his hand, her phantom grip around his fingers.

“Are you steadfast in that resolution?” it cawed. Bran nodded, and the crow shook its beak. “Then you are useless to me,” it croaked. “A pity, I had such high hopes.”

The crow was growing large still – wrapping the shadows around its body. It was as large as a dragon now. A great dragon of dark wings and shadows. Bran felt the gusts of wind sweeping through the yards, so powerful he could barely even stand. The crow was monstrously large, sweeping away the castle with every flap of immense wings.

And then the crow seemed to breath, ruffling its wings as roots writhed and power poured. The flowstone towers stabilised, and the visions disappeared. The crow opened its beak, staring into Bran even as he gasped and trembled.

“The old powers are rising,” the crow cawed, eyes glittering darkly. “And with their return tremble the foundations of the world. The realms of man will not survive. Let alone your family.” The crow’s voice seemed to lower, no longer sounding from its beak, but echoing from everywhere, a thrum coming from all the land, like the commandment of a forgotten god. “All that I do, I do to ensure that man survives, no matter the dark pit or remote isle or high range to which we must flee until that rising tide wanes.

“When the chains break and die – and they will,” the three-eyed crow’s deafening, deep voice intoned. “When you feel them snap… perhaps you may yet call out to me again.”

Wings flapped, and the stone brushed away.

Bran’s dreams went black.

The next morning, when his eyes flickered open again, he was still in his room. Bran took a deep breath, unable to shake the phantom shiver of unease that clung to his skin.

“It was a dream, he thought, only a dream.

Sansa was still by his bedside. She had slept on that chair all night. He only saw her briefly, though, because she had to leave shortly after he woke. They held each other’s hands, and she kissed him on the forehead, but she then grimaced and apologised. She had to go, Sansa explained, there was some assembly or meeting happening, something that Sansa had to be present for. Bran didn’t want her to leave, he tried to grip her fingers, but she still pulled away from her hand.

Sansa left him, but Meera returned to sit vigil by his bed. Meera seemed to relax more; just her, him and Summer in the room together. There was colour in Meera’s cheeks again, Bran noticed, she seemed stronger.

“Is this…?” Bran muttered, voice trailing off.

“It is.” Meera nodded. “The Boltons lost.”
“My brother beat them,” Bran said dumbly. “They’re gone. My family won.”

Meera shook his head. “No. The wildlings won.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“No, it’s not,” Meera warned. He saw the same expression she had worn last night. “It has been a long time since you’ve seen your brother, and I’ve never met him. I don’t know him, and I don’t trust him. Maybe you shouldn’t either.”

“He’s my brother…”

“They’re wildlings, Bran,” she warned darkly, and Bran realised why she was so unnerved. *Wildlings – the same as we killed in the Nightfort.* “Be careful. I don’t like the look of the company that King Snow keeps.”

Bran didn't reply. He remembered the Nightfort painfully clearly. He knew why Meera couldn't relax. It felt like they were all on edge, trying to pick up the pieces.


They stood awkwardly in his chambers, feeling so out of place. Meera was pacing, her hands twitching for her missing spear. Summer nuzzled against Bran; the great wolf’s snout resting against his side, trying to keep him calm.

It was evening by the time Sansa returned. She walked briskly, carrying a bundle of parchments under her arms. “What's going on?” Meera demanded to his sister. “What's happening?”

Sansa hesitated, biting her lip. “You should come with me,” she said after a pause. “There's something that you must see. Both of you.”

“My legs…” There was no Hodor to carry him.

“I shall find a platter, and men to carry it,” Sansa promised. “Hold on, I won't be long.”

A platter. Bran was too used to being carried on someone's back.

In the end, they used one of the chairs from the dining hall to seat him, and two crisscrossing lengths of a timber braced underneath it for men to carry him. Bran wasn't that heavy, but it still took four men to lift him and his seat upwards.

It was awkward and jerky, and the men cursed quietly under their breaths as they tried to balance him. Bran didn't understand why they wouldn't just lift him piggyback, but Sansa wouldn't hear it.

She wrapped him tightly up in a wolfhide cloak, and promised that it would be a short trip. Bran had to focus to keep Summer calm, as the men struggled and heaved to carry him down the narrow spiral staircase.

Winterfell looked so different, and by the time they reached the main hallway there was a crowd of people gathered to watch him. The stone corridor was filled with an ocean of shaggy, unkempt faces. *Wildlings.*

Sansa walked closely to his left, while Meera clung on to his right, with Summer prowling in front. It turned into a procession of bodies coming out of the doors, so many staring at him that Bran's breath froze.

He saw all the men carrying weapons. There were four men carrying his seat, and another thirty plus clutching axes as they pushed the crowd back. They were rough with their movements, snapping orders in harsh voices.

It was all so loud, so hectic, so frantic… Bran remembered stories that Old Nan told him – stories of cannibals that would carry their guests through parades, on their way to the cooking pot.

It was snowing outside, with tents and bonfires littering the courtyard. Bran wrapped himself up tightly against the cold, while heavy boots stomped through the muddy slush.

He saw the godswood up ahead, and then he felt the ground tremble. Summer barked and snarled at the sight of enormous bodies, looming by the gates. Meera gasped, and Bran might have screamed.

They were massive beasts of fur and muscle, standing upright with knuckles that traipsed across the ground. They were so large they could lift a man in a single hand.

Giants. Bran’s head went blank staring in pure horror…

One of the giants roared – a booming cry revealing a toothy mouth that might swallow him whole. Summer was snarling, and the great wolf had never looked so small.

Sansa was still holding his hand. “It's alright,” she soothed.

There were giants in Winterfell, camped around the godswood. Is this what Sansa wanted to show me?

With a shout of words he did not recognise, the immense humanoids parted before his escort. Bran was left shaken, trying to understand…

The platter was carried through the iron gates and into the trees. Bran glimpsed the white hair of Jon, clearing the way, and dozens of wildlings lining the path. They all wore white stones on their chests.

He saw the godswood he once knew, the trees half-buried under a flurry of snow. They had to push their way through the snow, and Bran was left trying to match the broken trees and tattered branches with the forest he remembered. He heard the crackling of ice against the hot springs, and the rumble of all the men milling around them.

Everything was white, buried in snow. Summer howled, an uncertain sound ringing in the frozen air. Bran heard the whoosh of the geysers, like a great breath from the earth.

He felt Meera gasp, and her hands grip his so tightly it hurt, but Bran couldn't see anything. He stared ahead, uncomprehendingly.

Then, the earth shuddered.

At first, Bran mistook it for the landscape; like a giant rocky outcrop as large as a small mountain strewn through the woods. It was only when the rocks shivered that he saw its form. It was buried in snow and obscured by the trees, but then Bran made out the size of it.

It was moving, panting in deep, rhythmic breaths, shivering slightly in the snowfall.
The pure scale made Bran's head go blank. It was a wall, a mountain, of flesh. He saw white and pale red, curled around the frosty weirwood.

Slowly, Bran managed to make out details. He saw scales etched like steel, huge horns, and a snout as large as a building. It was resting with its head half-submerged in the warm pools, its jaws parted slightly and cool mist hissing between giant teeth. It bathed with its mouth open, water from the pools gurgling between its teeth.

Bubbles foamed around its scales, while ice flowered across its curled, hulking body.

Bran could only stare. Summer was still howling and yelping, the direwolf panicked. Bran's could feel it in the air, he could feel the air charged by the very presence of that monster.

It was like the monster felt him too. It shifted and stirred as Bran approached, the trees and earth cracking. Jon had to rush forward to calm it down, to keep it still. Jon's hands moved to its jaw, whispering gently.

A dragon, Bran realised with horror. A dragon!

Sansa held Bran's hand a bit tighter. “I wanted to show you…” she whispered. “This is how Jon united the wildlings. This is how he retook Winterfell.”

A dragon. Bran had barely ever imagined something so big.

There was a silence in the ruins of the godswood. A thousand questions flickered through his head, but Bran couldn't even speak. He could only stare upwards and gape.

A hundred eyes were on him, an entire procession focused on him. Bran blinked, and slowly shifted in his seat. He felt the ripple pass through the crowd, and one by one he saw men moving.

He watched as the men started to lower themselves to their knees.

Finally, the first question formed on Bran's lips. “Why… why are they bowing?” he gasped.

“Because you are Robb's heir,” Sansa whispered. “You're the King in the North, Bran.”

His head went blank.

...

After that, presumably they took him back to the castle. He faintly remembered people speaking to him, but Bran couldn't recall what anyone said.

They called him 'Your Grace’. The words seemed so weird.

Sansa was fussing over him, straightening his collar, calling for water and kindling for the fire, but Bran just felt numb.

There were stuttered questions and uncertain answers, but Bran could barely even concentrate. His head was spinning, fixated on the presence, the feeling, that the dragon had radiated. It had felt like pure power.

“Your coronation, Bran,” Sansa was saying. “You should be crowned quickly.”

Coronation. It was such a strange word. Bran heard everyone saying it, but it was like he didn’t quite know what it meant.
It was nightfall by the time he saw Jon again. Even when Bran left, Jon had still been tending to the
dragon. Come dusk, Bran was exhausted, and his room felt so tense and quiet as Jon knocked on
the door.

“Bran,” his half-brother called. “May I... can we talk?”

Bran only nodded. There were still a dozen men standing guard outside, while Jon limped into the
room. His brother lurched with every step, balancing on a white weirwood cane.

The only sound in the room was the cackle of the fires, and the soft snoring from Summer curled
up at the foot of his bed.

“Your leg,” Bran muttered, not sure what to say.

“It's recovering,” Jon replied. “It's an old wound that was nearly gone, but then I took a blade in the
recent battle.” His hand traced across his upper thigh. “Yet it will heal too. It just needs time.”

Bran's eyes glanced to his own legs. “Not all wounds do.”

“Not all,” Jon agreed. “But we still learn to live with them.”

Gods, Jon looked so different with white hair. His face was different too; cheeks gaunter, eyes
older. It was so hard to match this gaunt and white-haired man with the raven-haired boy Bran
once knew.

King Jon Snow – King-Beyond-The-Wall, the Bastard King, and the dragonlord of winter.

Bran didn't even know what to say, and silence reigned in the room for several long heartbeats.

“They say that I'm going to be king,” the boy said finally.

“You are.”

“They will call me King Bran the Broken.”

“Why not Brandon the Immortal?” Jon countered. “You've survived so much, Bran; you've come
back from the dead more times than I have. You will survive a crown too.”

There was no reply but silence. Bran had been through a lot, but why did the thought of a crown
scare him as much as anything had?

“You are the eldest living trueborn son of Eddard Stark, brother and heir to King Robb Stark,” Jon
said softly, moving to sit by the bed. “Robb declared himself King in the North, and that passes to
you.”

“Robb was never in the north as king.”

“Robb wasn't. But you are.”

I am next in line to a newly resurrected, unstable throne. Half of the lords hadn't even agreed to
northern independence, and the other half had died for it.

Bran knew all that, but still the thought of someone placing that crown on his head made him
shiver. I don’t want to be king. No one ever prepared me to be king. Robb chose to be king, not me.

But what could he do? Deny the kingship? Go back to being lords of Winterfell instead of King in
the North. He could do that. *I am going to be king*, he thought, *I could do whatever I want.*

But that would mean bending to the Iron Throne, he knew. It would be surrendering to the people who murdered his father, his brother, his mother. Half the lords of the north would revolt if he tried to do that. Again.

Jon was sitting on the edge of his bed, waiting for a reply. Bran sat on silence, stewing over it.

*I might be the first King in the North crowned to Winterfell in over three hundred years,* he realised. *The first king to sit on the throne of Winterfell again.*

He would have to stay sitting too, because he could never stand.

“I don’t want to do this,” Bran said, fingers twitching.

Jon looked down at him, his pale eyes softening somewhat.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do,” Jon said, but he was lying. “We can discuss this later if you want.”

“I don’t want to do it at all,” Bran said.

Jon hesitated. “That’s your right too,” he said. “But please think carefully about such.”

“I am. What if I pass the crown to you?”

“Bran…”

“You should be king, not me. You retook Winterfell, not me. You have the army, you have the dragon, I’m…” *I’m broken.* “I can do that too, right? I could name you my heir, and forfeit the crown to you.”

Jon twitched. “You could.” His fingers fidgeted at with his hand, somewhat uncomfortable. “But please don’t. I’m not a Stark. You could bring the realm together, but I would drive it apart. I shouldn’t be king.”

“You called yourself king.”

“Not of Winterfell.”

“Robb named you his heir.”

“Only when he thought you were dead.”

“Nobody wants me to be king.”

“Who told you that?”

“Nobody,” Bran replied. “But I can still tell. Everyone wants you to be it.” *They want Jon the Conqueror. The first Dragon King of Winter. Not Bran the Broken.*

“Everyone.” There was a hollow smile on Jon's lips. “Everyone but me, Bran. I don't want to be king, I never did.”

The room turned silent again. Bran didn't know how to reply. Jon said the words like an admission. “I took my crown because there was no other choice. I never enjoyed it, I never wanted it, perhaps
I was never even suited for it,” Jon explained softly. “But there's a choice now, and I…”

His voice trailed off into the quiet. Jon grimaced, reaching out to cradle Bran's hand. “…I know it’s scary, Bran. Believe me, I know. But you’ll grow into that crown, and you’ll be a much better king than I ever could.”

His hands were so rough. Bran looked down, and saw Jon's cauterized stump of a missing little finger.

“So what are you going to do?” Bran asked, keeping his voice low.

“I'm going to protect the north,” Jon replied. “I think that's what I'm meant to do.”

Bran sat quietly for a long time, simmering in the gloom. He spent a long time thinking on it, remembered all that time he has spent trapped…

“I could just force you to be king,” Bran said finally. “I could hand the crown over to you and order you to take it.”

“And I could just hand it back.”

Bran blinked. “You could do that?”

“Course I could. I’d be king.” A smile split Jon's dark features. “And a king can do anything. I’d then order you to take the crown.”

“Well, I could order you to take it right back.”

“It’d be the most confusing coronation in history, I suppose,” Jon chuckled. “Seeing who could pass the crown between us the longest. The guests would get very upset.”

Despite himself, Bran laughed too. Jon looked ten years younger when he grinned, more his real age. When was the last time I laughed?

Jon's arms moved downwards, to wrap around Bran's shoulders. “You’ll be a good king, Bran. A great king,” Jon said softly. “I promise it. You're wiser and stronger than I was at your age.”

“I…” he muttered after a pause. “…I won’t even be able to stand to be crowned…”

“You don’t need to stand. You’ll be seated. In father’s chair. Someone – perhaps the Greatjon – will place the crown on your head, and all the lords will come and bow before you. That’s all.”

“And they’ll have to carry me.” Lift me like a child in front of everyone.

“You’ll be seated before the ceremony begins,” Jon explained. “You’ll stay seated, and they’ll come into the hall.”

“To pretend that I’m not cripple.”

“Just to make it easier. You’ll have Summer by your side, and Sansa and I will be there too.”

The thought of the direwolf being next to him did make him feel better. Summer would keep Bran strong. Bran didn't know when the coronation would be happening, but they were talking as if it was soon.

Bran nodded. “What of Meera?”
“She will be there too, of course.” Jon paused. “Meera Reed saved your life, didn't she?”

Bran nodded. “Then I will reward her well for her service,” Jon promised. “Her and her family. I shall have scouts search down her brother, whatever happened to him, and I think Lord Reed himself will be coming to Winterfell.”

“Father said that Howland Reed saved his life from Arthur Dayne,” Bran recalled, and then nodded firmly. “Yes. I want to meet him.”

Jon chuckled. “Why the interest in the Reeds?”

Bran’s mouth tightened. He didn't even realise the decision he made before the words came out of his mouth… “I want to ask Meera to marry me.”

Jon bit his lip, but he didn’t seem surprised. “You’re sure? You’re very young. She is six years older than you.”

Bran nodded, trying to be as firm as possible.

“Meera Reed is the daughter of a very old and loyal house. I doubt anyone has reason to object.” Jon mused, before looking at him seriously. “… But, let us wait, before making the betrothal. I’ll brooch the possibility with Lord Reed, but there's no reason for an immediate marriage. Wait for at least four years.”

Bran squirmed. He loved Meera. Her smile, her brown eyes. Some days it was all he could think about. Meera had carried him, stood by his side, even when there had been no one else.

“Why?” Bran said stubbornly. “I love her, why wait?”

“Because you’re very young.” Bran opened his mouth to object, but Jon continued. “And it will be a few years before you’re able to consummate a marriage in any case. And because Meera is the only girl that you know – how do you know it's really love, or is it just fondness towards your female friend?”

Bran hesitated, but then fell silent. “You’re king now,” Jon said. “You’re going to have plenty of marriage proposals.”

“Nobody is going to want to marry a cripple.”

“Hardly. And it’s their fault if they don’t. I know that Lady Maege was talking about bringing her daughter Lyanna to Winterfell – she’s about your age. And Lord Wyman has a young daughter too.” He seemed to hesitate. “But you’re too young to be wondering about marriage. It’s not something you should do lightly, and, for a king, personal feelings are so rarely involved. We all have to do what is best for the kingdom.”

Bran stewed on that for a while. “Do you have someone you love?”

At that, Jon seemed caught off-guard. Bran saw a flicker in his gaze, something he could not recognise. “Yes,” Jon replied, somewhat stiffly. “I think I do.”

There was sadness in his voice. Bran remembered the three-eyed crow’s warning, he remembered the crow’s promise that the chains would snap. The vision of ice and darkness flickered before Bran's eyes. He remembered all those months trapped in the dungeon at Thistle Hall.

This is what I chose. I chose her.
“Yes,” Bran said finally. “I will be king. I want to protect my home, and I want do it for Meera.”

“As you say, Your Grace.”

*Your Grace. They will all call me that now.* “And you’re a prince,” Bran said after a moment’s thought. “You’re my brother, you should be Prince Jon Snow, the next in line to the throne.”

Jon’s face flickered. “Bran, I’m a bastard, not—”

“Nope.” Bran shook his head. “You’re a prince, and you can’t argue with me because I’m king.”

Jon sighed, but there was a smile lingering on his lips. “Very well Bran,” he relented. “Prince Jon Snow.”

They pulled in for another hug, and Bran sloped into Jon’s arms. He smells like father, Bran realised. For that moment, Bran never wanted to let go.

“But Rickon must be next in line before me,” Jon said after a pause. “We’ll bring Rickon back.”

“Rickon is alive? With Osha?”

“He's on Skagos,” Jon explained. “Lord Manderly found a boy who tracked them. I've sent men to recover Rickon, but there's fighting against the Skagosi and they have been delayed by the storms.”

The very thought of seeing his brother again… Bran wanted his family back. “You could fly to Skagos,” Bran said. “On your dragon.”

“I could. As soon as Sonagon recovers.” Jon nodded. “But Ghost will find Rickon first, and the men are sailing around Skane as we speak. They will find him, and I will go to collect him.”

He knows exactly where his direwolf is. *Jon is like me.* Bran took a long, deep breath, struggling to even speak for one moment. There was so much he wanted to say, or ask, but the one thing that came to his lips…

“Promise me that we won't have to run again,” Bran said finally, twitching with nerves. “I just don't want to have to run anymore.”

Jon leant over and kissed him softly on the forehead. Just like father used to do when he was very had been very little. Bran had grown out of being kissed like that years ago, but suddenly he didn’t mind.

“Yes,” Jon whispered. “I’ll keep our family safe. I promise.”

It was pitch black outside and Bran could hear the howl of the wind, but they sat and cradled next to each other. They talked softly, with the sound of the crackling fire hissing in the backdrop.

Bran wanted to close his eyes and pretend that the last three years were a long, bad dream. He wanted to forget all those nights he had been hungry in the cold, all those nights trapped in the dungeon. He didn't want this moment to end.

It was only the sound of stomping boots up the staircase that broke the moment in his room.

“King Snow!” an urgent voice called. “King Snow!”

The sound caused Bran to flinch. Jon's voice turned sharp. “I said that I wasn't to be disturbed, Toregg.”
The man looked flustered, as he stepped through the door. “It's from the scouts, Your Grace.”

Jon was already on his feet. “Attack?”

“No, it's a… a disturbance on the perimeter.”

Bran pulled himself upright, trying to see out the door. He saw men rushing up the staircase; they wore soaked wet furs, out of breath like they had been running up the stairs. There was a frantic bustle, shouts rising from the guards in the corridor.

Jon was already marching out, leaving the door ajar. Bran caught snatches of the cries from the men.

“The corpses, your Grace, we found–”

“Missing–”

Jon's voice turned sharp, cutting through the noise. “I gave you strict orders to dispose of all bodies; your task was to see it done quickly!”

They reached the top of the stairs, the voice were more audible. “The snows are over six foot deep out there, Snow,” a wildling protested; a great, heavyset man with a white beard. “And the corpses buried at the bottom of the snow drifts, and scattered across a lake! We couldn’t even find half of them.”

“And how were we supposed to burn so many?” another man complained. “The trees are frozen solid.”

Jon glared. “I told you to burn them or hack them – that was your priority. Destroy the bodies.”

“We did our job. We made progress; like you said, hack the bodies apart,” the wildling retorted. “But there were a lot of bodies and it was bloody hard work. We couldn't get through them quickly, not in this bloody weather.”

The bodies? Bran thought with confusion. The men looked on edge, uneasy. The battle was said to have been ten days ago, and the snows hadn't ceased. The battlefield was strewn all across the lake two leagues away, all the way up to Winterfell's gates, Sansa had told him.

“It was our patrols that found them missing,” the scout explained, voice quivering. “We had charnel trenches that we were filling up, and then they just vanished. Along with every man on guard duty.”

The bodies vanished? The men looked nervous, and Bran caught the glances between them. He saw Jon suddenly turn stiff, his hands clenching.

“We had fifteen thousand or so corpses to burn,” the other wildling said. “We were doing hundreds a day, but we never got through a quarter of them.”

He took a deep breath. “How many?” Jon demanded. “How many corpses are missing?”

They looked hesitant, glancing at each other. “All of them, Your Grace. They’re all gone.”

Author Notes:

Well, hope everyone had a nice Christmas. I'm planning to upload these next few chapters
Also, because I’ve seen a few reviews that have spectacularly missed the point, so just to make it clear; the reason that Jon has faced all of these problems is because of all the wildlings beneath him. More broadly, it's because of the circumstances of this war.

Let's suppose that all the way back in chapter 10 or something, what if Jon decided not to approach the free folk, and he chose not to unite all of the clans around the dragon. Rather, he could have headed straight for the Wall. In that situation, maybe Jon found his own way to get back south of the Wall with Sonagon - and after that Jon would have received a much less suspicious welcome from the north. Jon might have set about the exact same actions - fighting against the Boltons, declaring for House Stark, bringing the dragon into the war - and in that case he wouldn't have been treated the same way.

Even with a dragon, the politics of war is important - and politics is all image. Jon might have been viewed as a lost son fighting for justice, people might have cheered for the dragon instead of cowered, he could have built a nobler reputation, and then it wouldn't have been so easy for the Boltons to work their smear campaign.

But instead, he came south with the free folk behind him, and Jon became viewed as the Bastard King. That is not a good reputation.

To the realm, Jon wasn't fighting for northern interests, he was leading an invasion against them. He wasn’t a saviour, he was a huge threat. The north responded in the exact same way that they have always done to King-Beyond-the-Walls and wildling invasions; fear, then anger, followed by a determined campaign to break the invaders.

To be honest, that's not even an unreasonable response. The free folk are full of people like the Weeper or the Lord of Bones that have ensured they deserve their reputation. They come south and their first instincts, the instincts of their culture, is to start pillaging. Jon may have been trying to change the wildling traditions of raping and raiding, but he hasn't completely succeeded. It's not possible to completely succeed, there's too much cultural inertia behind it. Asking wildlings to stop raiding is like asking British people to abandon their cups of tea, or Americans to give up their guns - even in the face of literal doomsday, they didn't want to do it.

The northmen were very much justified in wanting all of these savage killers off their lands, and Jon soaked up all of that bad reputation himself.

But, thanks to the presence of the dragon, many of those disgruntled and angry northmen cowered to Jon - but loyalty through fear is not the same as loyalty.

People were too scared to oppose him, yet instead you had a large portion of 'allies' who started half-assing their contributions to Jon's campaign, and another wave that set about trying to discreetly sabotage him. Allies were only alongside the wildlings because they didn’t feel they had a choice, the saboteurs had a field day. The Battle of the Snows was the culmination of all of those efforts.

Roose Bolton saw the weakness in Jon's army that Jon never noticed, and he shoved a dagger in. Just like Jon did in canon regarding the Castle Black assassination that was brewing, Jon
became too distracted with what was ahead of him that he didn't look behind.

So then, was Jon wrong in allying with the free folk the way that he did? Did he waste his time with the wildlings? Well, perhaps. It has certainly made a lot of trouble for him - but on the other hand, if Jon hadn't have brought the wildlings south, then the Other's army would have become that much larger. The Wall would be less secure, and there would have been a whole other set of problems for him to face.

That's part of the point that I wanted to emphasize - there's no 'ideal' solution. The situation was far too complex and too messy for there to be a perfect way through it.

Take the Scouring of the Twins, for example. That was a very good military move by Jon, it has had huge benefits. After Jon destroyed the Twins, he scared off every other realm from intervening directly in the north's war. All of those people that would have otherwise moved to stop the dragon suddenly backed off and tried to keep their distance. The Boltons lost their strongest ally; the south tried to cut ties. It was only because Jon destroyed Twins that he managed to form the north collation, and make the alliance with White Harbour.

But the disadvantages to it were the moral repercussions. Tactically, destroying the Twins was a good move, but Jon is not a sociopath; he can't watch a whole bunch of people dying and not feel guilt. Jon saw a lot of collateral at the Twins, and that seriously disturbed him - and afterwards he started taking steps to avoid doing such again. If it had been Tywin Lannister in the same situation, then there wouldn't have been the freakout afterwards; Tywin would have destroyed the Twins and a whole bunch of other castles and not felt a thing.

Unfortunately, there's a reason why all of the Tywin Lannisters and Roose Boltons of the world tend to be successful; men without restraint have a distinct advantage over men that do (at least in the short term).

That's the lesson that Roose Bolton taught Jon. Whether or not it's a good lesson is very debatable.

There's no 'good' choice there, no flawless leader whose actions lead to the best result every single time. You can compare and contrast to Aegon in this story, who has done pretty well for himself - but that's only because Aegon has made absolutely zero actual decisions of his own. Aegon has relied very much on all of the people around him dealing with stuff for him, while Aegon's hands and conscience remain clean - even despite all of the heinous acts that have unknowingly been done in his name, all those murders and atrocities which were very much required to get Aegon to where he is.

And, at the other side of the spectrum, there's Euron, who has no conscience whatsoever. Jon's smoothest and easiest victory would have been if Jon had followed suit and copied Euron's approach to war. That has been explicitly laid out in the story.

There's no perfect action; there are only different consequences and how to deal with them.

Also, very, very special thanks to reader Achrmy, who commissioned this amazing piece of
fanart for the story. Kudos as well to artist Ed Mattinian; there's been a few reviews asking for more descriptions of Sonagon and the size of the dragon, and I think this piece of art really nails it. Much appreciated.

It's been placed as the image on the first chapter of this story, and on the TvTropes page for Dragons of Ice and Fire.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

The prelude to the Battle of Ice and Fire...

Ramsay

The butcher’s blade hacked down through her furs, straight through the bitch’s shoulder and down into her chest. He felt the squelch of flesh and skin splitting jar his grip. Like skinning the fur off a dog. She didn’t scream, there was no sound except a strained gasp.

And then, a heartbeat away from ripping open her ribcage, Ramsay froze. His lunge stopped, his sword embedded in her chest, and bloody grin flashed over his face. It would be too quick, Ramsay thought suddenly, hands jolting to a halt. Cutting out her heart would be too quick.

Ramsay wanted her to die slowly. He wanted to watch the metal edge slicing into her chest, he wanted to hear the blood hissing, wanted to see the red pluming over white. The wildling bitch was wide-eyed and fearful, her body squirming beneath his, his sword piercing downwards…

There was that beautiful moment when she was falling, and she realised she was going to die. He wanted that moment to last forever. Ramsay loved that moment; he loved savouring the look in their eyes.

And then her knuckles tightened around her blade. Even before Ramsay could retract his lunge, the wildling’s sword slashed upwards, straight into Ramsay’s stomach.

The world went dead.

There was no pain, not at first. There was nothing but faint confusion, a blunt shock. It didn’t feel like a knife, it felt more like a hard punch to his gut. Huh, Ramsay thought dumbly. They’ve never done that before.

His eyes looked downwards, and he saw his own intestines pouring out of his stomach. He saw the short blade skewering straight through him.

“Oh.”

That was when he felt the pain. He tried to thrash, but all his blood and guts were splashing out of him. Ramsay could only spasm, his limbs thrashing…

Ramsay fell backwards in the snow, feeling all warmth fizzle away. Faintly, in the distance, someone was yelling. He felt the pain, he felt his body howling and spasming and dying.

It’s not fair! Ramsay could have screamed. It’s not fair – I was so close. I was so close to seeing her die! He really, really wanted to see her eyes as she died.

His vision went black. No, I can’t die like this. The Bastard King… I was so close…

It was so hard to think. His thoughts were blurry, turning numb and fading away. He couldn’t
concentrate, he couldn’t…

All feeling bled out of him, his life draining away along with his guts. Ramsay felt himself hitting the ice. Ramsay felt himself bleeding out of his own body, and into the abyss.

It was all dark, and empty.

…

And he kept on falling. Falling all the way, breaking through the earth. There was no light, no sound, only the numbest of feelings – a tingling on a phantom limb.

He tumbled into the nothingness, and then he landed. Landed in dark water. Everything went cold and black. So cold he couldn’t even feel it. All light vanished and there was nothing. He felt the splash as he broke through the veil.

He was naked. No, not only naked, he was nothing.

He had no arms or legs, he had no body to squirm with. He couldn’t fight, he couldn’t resist. He felt like nothing but a blob, a lump of nothingness oozing away in the current.

He had no limbs, no skin, no eyes. He felt exposed, turned inside out. Like a flayed man drowning in ice cold water.

Oh, Ramsay thought dumbly. I’m dead.

It was so… so… unfortunate. He hadn’t expected the wildling bitch to stab upwards like that. Ramsay wanted to scream, wanted to rage, but everything felt stiff. Cold. So hard to feel anything. Is this what death is like?

He had heard that in the south they preached of seven hells, but Ramsay had never given the afterlife much thought. Ramsay had never really believed that death was possible, not for him. It didn’t make any sense; how could he just die?

He was in a river. It felt like a river, at least – but with no eyes and no skin it was hard to tell. He felt submerged. He could feel the current around him, he could feel the sensation of movement of dragging him away. It felt like he was bobbing along on a slow and steady stream, drifting away into nothingness.

There were other presences around him. Ramsay could sense them, even without eyes or ears. He couldn’t explain it, but he knew they were there. All of them were dead people – friends and foes alike – slipping away down the river.

He felt the shiver in the water each time another person splashed down. Up above, they were still dying, so many dead men tumbling downwards in a great gush of death.

He tried to thrash, but he could do nothing. If he had a body, his heart would have been racing and his limbs thrashing, he would have been screaming and cursing. But Ramsay had nothing, he was nothing.

Nothing but blind and hollow beings, floating away. A river of dead souls, oozing at a snail’s pace. It was a slow current, painfully slow. Perhaps the river was jammed by the blockage of all those dead people.

This is how I die? Ramsay thought, with the phantom sensation of panic. Just… disappear into the
Ramsay had stared down a dragon without fear. He had laughed as he stood against an army. Ramsay didn’t feel fear, fear was for other people – but that thought… the thought of just disappearing was the first truly terrifying thing that he ever encountered.

_I was so close, so close…_

He wanted to cling on, he wanted to rage and thrash…

_I can’t die. I can’t…_

That moment of helplessness… it felt like he was back in the cottage, watching his mother pick up a knife. Ramsay was reliving those memories, those moments of utter helplessness. He had been helpless once, and he vowed never to be helpless again. Never to be trapped, never to be weak…

_Fight. Need to fight. Need to scream. Need to claw my way back, need to claw out their throats._

_Can’t die yet. I’ve got so many left to kill._

He couldn't fight it. It was too big to fight. He was nothing but an ant caught in a flood.

Then, he felt the current shudder. He felt cold. He felt a tingle down his phantom spine. He felt the cold pluming over the river, sharp thorns of ice spreading outwards. The river of death was being frozen, dammed by the ice.

It was freezing. The river was being frozen, and all the souls around him were left hovering in icy stasis.

He could feel the souls all around him, coming to a halt as the icy tendrils took hold. The cold seized him, dragging him backwards…

…

His whole being trembled, frosty daggers piercing phantom skin, like it was pulling him inside out. There was an agony that pierced down to his very core.

The image of a bright, blue sun seared against his soul. He shuddered, and the fire was so cold it burned.

…

Light. He saw light again. Ramsay might have gagged, but he couldn’t feel his throat.

Everything was dazed, blurred. The wind howled around him, he could hear ice crackling. He saw the faint blaze of torches, clouded through the slurry of snow. He heard hissing wind, and there was sounds, movement. Sounds of lumbering shapes, of bodies breaking through the ice.

Ramsay's numb body jerked into motion, his limbs scrambling to pull himself from the bottom of a deep drift of snow. He saw the moon above, like a bulbous, bloody dagger hovering in the sky.

His body was convulsing, he couldn’t control it. He couldn’t even feel it. The pain was agonising, an inhuman pain like nothing he had ever imagined.

Ramsay shuddered, and then suddenly he saw the light.
There were two pinpricks of light, gleaming in the dark. Two blue eyes were staring down at him. Ramsay felt the cold reach his soul.

The world changed. Everything turned blue. His vision shot into focus, all the colours blending into a bluish tint. There was no more pain, no more panic.

Ramsay's body lurched upwards, clawing itself out the snow, but Ramsay could hardly feel it. Everything felt… muted. Everything that was once so bright and so sharp now felt numb.

He could see in the night, as clearly as if it were the bright of day. Everything was glowing blue, shining so bright it was stunning. The whole world looked surreal, frozen and picturesque in the snows.

Above him, the sky was on fire – blue shimmering lights flashing before the stars. The northern lights flowed and glimmered in the night’s sky above him. Ramsay would have gaped, but he couldn’t move his jaw.

All around him, he saw the bodies climbing out of the snow.

Ramsay's stomach was wide open, his guts spilling out, but he couldn't feel pain. Curls of frozen intestines were left dangling from his stomach. His body was frozen so solid that his joints creaked every time his limbs moved. It should have hurt, but Ramsay couldn't feel it. He felt like a passenger in his own skin. He couldn't move, he couldn't even twitch, he couldn't scream.

The snow was so thick that he had to scramble to get on top of it. His limbs felt stiff and cumbersome, his arms and legs starting as if they a mind of their own.

He couldn't feel anything; there was nothing in the world but cold and eerie invisible blue light.

*What happened to me?* Ramsay thought with numb horror. *I was dying, I felt it. But then... it was like something scooped me out of the abyss and forced me into my skin.*

Hoarfrost clung to his skin, he could see ice creeping over his eyes. *My body is dead, but I’m still here.* He didn’t know how, he didn’t understand why.

He saw them. He saw the other body moving upwards, their skin slick with frost. There were dozens of them, hundreds, *thousands*, staggering up from the snow, one by one. Some had missing limbs, even missing heads, but they still moved. It was the dead of night, but the frozen lake was squirming.

And Ramsay could see their souls; he could see the souls of the dead, trapped in their frozen prisons of flesh.

He stared forward numbly, and two of them he recognised. He saw Watt and Lems – two of his own Bastard’s Boys, staggering up from the ice. They were dead, one from the wildling king’s blade, the other from the dragon. Ramsay tried to call out to them, but he couldn't. They both staggered past him, their eyes unfocused.

It was like all of the others were blind, but Ramsay could still see. He didn't know how, but he wasn't looking through his normal eyes. Ramsay couldn’t explain it, but it was like he could see more than just the physical, like he was looking out of another eye.

He didn't understand anything; he felt weak, useless.

The thought of the Bastard King flashed before his eyes. He remembered his mother, his father, his
brother… everybody who made him…

*I need to move. Need to move. Need to hunt. Hounds and sheep. Remember what you are. Remember the rage.*

He could feel the fire, the *emotion*, burning against the cold. He could feel the flames trying to ignite even in the dead, cold husk of his body. He was trapped in his skin, feeling his memories rage all around him. It was torture; like burning to death in ice.

If Ramsay had a mouth, he would have screamed.

*Move. I need to move. This is my body, mine, I need to….*

Ramsay focused with every fibre of his being, every ounce of rage he could muster… and he felt his own dead fingers twitch.

The raw exhaustion required almost sent him to his knees. It took everything he had to fight the cold, just to move his dead muscles. Just to make his fingers twitch of his own volition.

‘*You are aware,*’ a voice said suddenly, cutting down to his soul. ‘*How strange.*’

The voice wasn't speaking the Common Tongue, but Ramsay could still understand it. Ramsay shuddered.

He saw it. Ramsay’s necked twisted up robotically, his body bowing unwillingly. He stood before a god. A being of pure, brilliant blue light.

It stood like a statue, perhaps some sculpture made by a master carver. Its skin was as slick as ice, but it was shining – it was radiating energy, so much power than the air seemed to crackle around it. When it moved, the world twisted, it’s every motion unnaturally graceful. It was glorious and terrifying, cruel and beautiful. A god of ice.

And there was something of mild amusement on its shining face. Beneath all the ice, Ramsay saw a figure like a young boy with bright white hair staring back at him. He could have been a young man, but he was frozen in body of ice. Immortalised.

The Other cocked its head, and Ramsay’s body lurched upwards to face it. It prowled, pacing around him. It walked across the snow without leaving a footprint, but there was a slight lurch in its step.

*It’s doing something,* Ramsay realised with a flush of rage. It’s *controlling my body.*

‘*You can see, can’t you?*’ the Other mused. ‘*All of these,*’ with a lazy motion, it flickered at all of the other shambling bodies, ‘*they are all as good as blind, but you’ve still got some vision. You can see me.*’

It stepped closer, inspecting him like one would a curious insect. Its voice was so soft, almost singsong. ‘*And you are angry. Angry, is that the right word?*’ the Other noted curiously, cocking its head to the other side. ‘*That’s rare, but it happens occasionally. For some, the emotions don’t quite die, they try to hang on to them.*’

Ramsay couldn't move his mouth, couldn’t respond.

‘*Tell me,*’ it sounded genuinely puzzled, ‘*why do you refuse to let go of that hate?*’
Because it's all I am. The hate is all I have.

‘Ah.’ The Other nodded. ‘But isn’t that miserable? That’s what confuses me, you see – wouldn’t you be more content without it all?’

Ramsay stared in horror. His jaw was frozen shut, but the Other still responded. *It can read my head. It's in my head.* His whole body might have recoiled, but the Other was controlling him, inside and out. *No, no, no!* Ramsay wanted to scream. *They’re my thoughts, my body, my hate! You don’t get to touch them!*

‘I see.’ The Other paused, and then seemed to shrug. *It makes no difference, regardless. Believe whatever you wish. The fire will die, sooner or later. Come now, thrall, your new life awaits.*

Ramsay’s body lurched. His legs jolted into motion, every step jerking. The Other moved so gracefully, but Ramsay’s body was jerking.

*You are now immortal, free from pain and time. In return, we expect only your skin,*’ The Other stepped forward, turning to stare around frozen lake. *‘A small price to pay for eternity – this is a gift.’*

*The only gift I want is a dagger. You can’t do this, you can't control me like this…*

The air was alive. He saw the bright blue light shimmering in the sky – waves of energy pulsating through the night. The storm was howling, but Ramsay couldn’t feel it. The only thing he could feel was the energy vibrating from the Other, a power that seemed to chime in the air.

Like singing. It felt like the cold was singing, a song for the snows.

*‘Come now,’* it ordered, and the corpses started to trundle forward through the snow. *‘Our task awaits. My brothers are calling for me.’*

Visions flashed before Ramsay’s eyes. Commands, orders pushed straight into his head. Ramsay saw a vision of the Wall, and of the cold simmering on the other side of it. *Why? What? How?*

The dead were already moving, but the Other lingered. The dead men were heading north. The Other only paced idly across the lake, looking around as more and more rose from the snow. Its every movement was graceful and smooth, like a cat.

The air was so cold that pine trees cracked open. The winds were howling, the snows so fierce they could cleave skin. It was weather that no living man could survive in. And yet, still, Ramsay barely even noticed. He felt nothing.

*‘You,’* the Other said, looking towards Ramsay again. He felt icy fingers pushing through his mind. *‘You know the route. Tell me of it.’*

*I don’t… I don’t want to help you, I don’t want to do this…*

The Other only tutted, and invisible hands reached into Ramsay’s skull.

Images flashed. He visualised forests, roads, the goat tracks. All of the paths that Ramsay used to roam, all of the hunting trails. The Other was looking through his memories, stealing it. *It’s stealing my memories,* Ramsay realised in horror. *Stealing my body. No… you can’t… stop…*

The Other didn’t even seem to notice his struggles.
At an unspoken command, the wights changed direction slightly. Ramsay had hunted through the wolfswood and the northern mountains all his life. Ramsay knew the wilderness better than most, he knew all the secret roads. The Other was using that information to command his soldiers via unspoken orders.

The Other need only will it, and the dead obeyed. They couldn’t do anything but.

And all the while it pushed deeper into Ramsay’s head.

The memory of the dragon flashed before his eyes. The great white monster were memories of awe and envy in Ramsay’s head, but the Other seemed to scoff. ‘The beast is but a relic,’ the Other said, ‘it is a fragment of fire tempered by the ice. The ‘dragon’ is no threat, merely an inconvenience.’

No, the dragon can hurt you, Ramsay thought. It might torch your army from the air. The dead cannot stop it in the skies.

The Other seemed to agree. With an unspoken command, the wights started to scatter into smaller groups – taking shelter in the snowstorm and the trees. They were staying dispersed and spread out, so the dragon wouldn’t be so effective. ‘Like I said, an inconvenience. Show me more.’

More images flashed. Everything that Ramsay had learnt of the dragon’s hunting patterns, its behaviour, its flight. The memories of the greyscale poison Ramsay had used floated before the Other’s cold gaze. The Other seemed interested.

And then Ramsay remembered Jon Snow. The Bastard King. Those were memories of pure hatred and jealousy. I wanted to own him, Ramsay thought, I wanted to destroy him. I nearly did.

‘I know of that one,’ the Other noted, lingering on the memory of the Bastard. ‘He slew one of my brothers with a cursed blade. But it matters not, we are more than our bodies.’ Its voice was patronising. ‘And Death is naught but an illusion.’

Tactics, numbers, routes. Everything that Ramsay knew of Snow’s army, its strengths and its weaknesses. The garrison at Castle Black, their fortifications, their watchtowers. Ramsay had spent so long inspecting them himself, plotting his own campaign. The Other seemed to have use for that intelligence too.

You’re heading north, Ramsay realised. You are heading for the Wall.

‘We are. The ‘Wall’ has stood for too long – it is another inconvenience. It must fall.’

The Other took it all from Ramsay's head. Ramsay didn't want to help it, but there was no choice. He couldn’t fight back, he had nothing to fight. It was like the Other was a part of him now. It’s in my skin, Ramsay realised. It's possessing my dead flesh.

All of the old legends that Ramsay was once told came back to him. The white walkers. The Long Night. The cold winds rising, and the Last Hero.

After a few long moments, the Other stepped backwards and nodded. ‘Thank you, you have been most useful,’ the Other said. ‘Still, I wonder, can you answer a question of my own…’

Ramsay’s body just stared, unable to twitch. The Other cocked its head again. ‘Why do you fight? Even now, I feel you trying to resist, and I just don’t understand…’ Even beneath its inhuman gaze, the frozen young boy looked confused. ‘Why struggle? I have been so wondering about that myself, unable to make sense of it. Just… why?’
You want to destroy us. We fight for what we are. Hounds and sheep.

‘Destroy?’ It even seemed appalled by the suggestion. ‘Never. Ice is preservation, fire is destruction. We do not wish to destroy.’

You’re going to kill us. Turn us into slaves. That is destroy.

‘No. It is not. Kill. Why would we bother ‘killing’ you?’ Its aura shimmered and crackled, and Ramsay slowly realised that was laughter. That was how it laughed. ‘You are brief, you would kill yourselves. We do not care – what does the winter care for the candle?’

Ramsay could see its intentions, clear as day. It was focusing on Castle Black, and the Shadow Tower, and there were thousands of dead men under its command. It was going to march north and kill everyone on the Wall. It wanted to open the gates, to let them all through. How many Others are there?

He saw blurred shadows, visions of an army. This Other was the vanguard, the forward unit, the one that managed to slip south before all the rest. It had pushed its way through the Wall, in an attempt to clear the path for its brothers. It has done the same that I did. The Other had lingered behind enemy lines, as it waited for an opportunity. It saw a chance and it took it.

A tremble past down his phantom spine. For so long, Ramsay had believed himself to be the ultimate predator, the most dangerous of them all. Ramsay had wanted to be the hound, not the meat.

The Other stepped forward, looking at him quizzically. ‘If we wished to ‘kill’ you,’ it explained, ‘we would have done so eons ago. Instead, we even built a wall so you might live and die all by yourselves.’

There was nothing but confusion. Ramsay froze, trying to understand. Built a… Built a wall? You built the Wall.

‘Of course.’ Its voice was confused, as it looked through his memories once more. Images of the Wall flashed before his dead eyes. ‘Did you really think that mortals built something like that yourselves?’

That didn’t make sense. Bran the Builder raised the Wall, or so the legends said. Why would you build something and then step behind it?

‘You mortals became… irritable to us.’ It shrugged. ‘So we built a wall to keep you out.’

Keep us out? Keep us out? All around him, the dead were still walking and the storm howled, but Ramsay was frozen in the spot. The Other kept him still, trying to fulfil its own idle curiosity.

‘I was mortal once,’ it said conversationally. ‘All my brothers were too. I regard that time as the most unfortunate of my existence, I am glad that my briefness is over. I am content with the form they gave me, and I do wish to spread it. But we are moulded from human flesh, there can be no… what do you call us? There is a name you apply?’ Icy fingers pressed downwards. ‘Ah, there can be no ‘white walker’ without human. We have no reason to want to end all mortals – why would we destroy what we’re created from?’

It was human once? As if to demonstrate, the white walker pushed a memory before Ramsay’s eyes. The scene was vivid and yet blurred. He saw a vision of a little babe, left out in a snowy forest. The baby was sacrificed, and then shadows emerged from the dark trees to collect it. A ceremony, a payment, a tithe. Then why… why destroy the Wall now?
'It's time has passed.' The Other shook its head. ‘We were quite comfortable with the agreement we came to, but our king is insistent. There can be no pact this time.’

I don’t understand.

‘I told you,’ it chided, ‘Ice is preservation, immortality, and fire is destruction. The fires are rising again, and soon this whole world may be set ablaze. You broke the balance, and so we must set forth to counter it. We must bring order again.’

Fires. Ramsay felt visions… no, more like feelings. He felt the Other showing him something; he felt blistering heart and scalding cold. A heart of fire and a heart of cold, resting and simmering at opposite ends of the world.

‘If not for us, this earth might be set aflame,’ the Other said softly. ‘Our king has set us forth to preserve all before it turns to ash. We are here to save the world.’

Ramsay could only stare blankly.

The Other looked down upon at him sympathetically. ‘Do not worry if you do not understand, thrall. Your understanding is not required. For now, I require only your flesh. It is time to move.’

With a dismissive shake of its head, the Other turned and glided away. Ramsay felt the commands pierce into his skin, his legs pushed into motion.

Ramsay tried to object. He tried to fight. But his body lurched, his limbs moving without his control. He could not scream, could not curse, could not howl. He could do nothing but stare outwards through blue, frozen eyes. His body was dead, his flesh milky pale.

He started to march through the snows; another dead man in an army of thousands.

A prisoner in his own skin, while his own body shambled like a puppet on strings.

Melisandre

The sunrise was beautiful from the towers of High Tide. It was a glorious sight, to see the great flames burning over the horizon. The narrow sea itself glowed red like blood. The winds hissed with the waves, the smell of salt thick in the air, and sky shone such vibrant, passionate crimson. It was a moment of power, that brief time in the morn where the whole world could witness the glory of R'hllor.

Her red dress rippled, her hair flew free behind her, and the Red Woman shone like a torch in the morning.

_Melony, Lot Seven_, a faint voice echoed to her. Her hand twitched, moving to touch the ruby on her neck. The ruby was already overfilled, but even now it was soaking up a bit more power from the sunrise. It was burning so hot it might have scorched her flesh, but the pain helped to focus her. Even now, even as she stood in the light, she could feel those dark memories of her time beneath the shadow. “Never again,” she whispered to the wind.

All around her, the isle of Driftmark was alive and frantic in the morn.

The steps of the castle were rough and warped, stained black from dragonfire over a hundred years
ago. Once, High Tide had been the crowning jewel of House Velaryon, the castle raised by the Sea Snake himself, a monument to house all of the treasures that Corlys Velaryon recovered from the far east. Then, much like House Velaryon itself, a once proud structure had been destroyed and fell into ruin.

During the Dance of the Dragons, House Velaryon supported the blacks, and the greens had torched High Tide from dragonback. The towers had melted, the keep was set ablaze, and the treasures ransacked or destroyed – and the Driftwood Throne itself burnt into ash. Still, at the war’s end, enough of the castle survived to be habitable, and other parts were repaired piece by piece, but the wealth was well and truly lost. High Tide was left mutilated and scarred, and House Velaryon never had the coin again to restore it. The Velaryons had instead retreated back to their old and damp ancient castle of Driftmark, and they carved a replica throne to try and replace the seat that was lost.

All around her, the ancient ruins were being looted and pillaged for all they were worth once more. *This will be the end of House Velaryon,* Melisandre thought with a sigh. It was a pity that she had to finish what the dragons started, a century and a half ago.

So far as she knew, the only scion of House Velaryon remaining was a single bastard turned pirate, last seen haunting the inlets of Lorath.

Beneath her, the castle of High Tide was screaming. Melisandre took a deep breath, glancing downwards at the scuffle breaking out on the grounds.

“All your father did was serve Stannis,” Ser Narbert Grandison growled, dragging the boy away. “You betrayed your House!”

“Don’t do this!” a young boy wept, his silver hair patchy with blood. The men were not gentle as they dragged him away, his fingers clawing at the sand. “You can’t do this… you can’t… I serve Stannis… my father died for Stannis!”

Monterys Velaryon was a young boy of eight, and the last scion of his house. He was a slender child with wide eyes and fair cheeks, and the distinctive silver hair of his ancestors. Melisandre’s eyes narrowed as she watched Ser Narbert Grandison and Malegorn of Redpool drag the boy away. She might have cursed.

“Gentle. I ordered them to be gentle.”

Young Lord Monterys was still screaming, while Ser Narbert grabbed him by heels and dragged. “My father fought for Stannis,” Monterys wept. “… he died for Stannis!”

“‘Aye,’” Ser Malegorn agreed. “Lord Monford was a good and true man. And then you betrayed his memory.”

With that, the knight’s boot slammed into the child’s stomach. Melisandre winced quietly, pacing faster down the steps. “You bent the knee to the usurpers!” the knight growled, kicking the boy again. “Your father gave his life on the Blackwater, and then you surrendered to wicked–”

“Ser Malegorn!” Melisandre snapped, as she swept across the courtyard. “Restrain yourself, ser.”

Monterys was gagging, unable to speak. The knight looked abashed. “My lady…!”

“I gave you a task, did I not?” Melisandre barked, feeling a spark of anger flare. “Such brutality is not what I commanded.”

Ser Malegorn lowered his head, dropping to a knee. On the floor, Monterys Velaryon was wheezing, coughing blood. “Forgive me, my lady,” the knight said, pale-faced. “But… the boy’s weakness, his dishonour… it makes me sick.”
“He is but a boy. He does not see the path.”

Others were being dragged out of ruins as well. Melisandre saw serving women, boys and grey-haired men struggling against the king’s men. Some tried to resist, but the knights were ruthless. *Imprison all that you can, their king had ordered, and put any who defy to the sword.*

House Velaryon had tried to resist their duty. After the Blackwater, young Lord Monterys and his shrew of a mother had bent the knee to King’s Landing. Even when Stannis returned to Dragonstone, they did not embrace their former lord and true king. Stannis had given them a chance to return to his trust, but they chose treachery and cowardice instead.

The king’s men had torched Driftmark Castle. As the battle around King’s Landing distracted the crown, the Redwyne fleet and their blockade retreated, and Stannis’ navy was left free to start the offensive once more.

Driftmark Castle had been the first to fall – their depleted guard did not stand a chance against Stannis’ hardened forces. The king ordered that the castle would be given to the flame, set alight as funeral pyre for all those traitors. It had been a beautiful sight.

As Driftmark fell, the young lord tried to flee and hide in the ruins of High Tide, but Melisandre had tracked him through the fires. Ser Rolland Storm had led the king’s men, but Red Woman herself came herself to ensure there could be no failure.

She knew there would be no danger to her person. There were no fighting men left here, just women, children and old men trying to hide.

Lord Monterys was weeping, crying into the sand and muttering deliriously. Ser Narbert moved to pulled him up, but Melisandre motioned him back. The Red Woman knelt into the sands next to him, one hand on the boy’s shoulders and moving her other hand to her ruby. *Calm yourself, child,* she willed, and she felt the small flicker of power from her ruby. Not a lot, just the lightest of touch. It bled away a bit of the excess heat from the ruby.

The child’s sobs choked. His eyes widened, his body stiffened. No noise came from him, Monterys did naught but stare and gape.

Melisandre reached across, and cradled his face. “You have a purpose, my child,” she whispered. “A glorious purpose. Go towards that light, do not resist.”

There was no reply. The knights pulled him to his feet – gently – and then clamped him in chains. The boy did not even squirm. *Melony, Lot Seven.*

Melisandre might have taken a deep breath, but she kept herself stoic. *Sometimes,* she thought, *even such distasteful practices must be employed.*

Heavy boots stomped around her. They had brought chains for a hundred prisoners, and every knight carried a set of manacles on their waist. Many were screaming and wailing as they tried to resist, and there wasn’t a fire in the world with enough power for Melisandre to calm them all.

A knight wearing a pure red cloak stepped towards her, scared cheeks showing underneath a grey helm. Ser Rolland Storm, the Bastard of Nightsong, bowed his head to her. “High Tide is subdued, my lady.”

“Good,” Melisandre said with a nod. “Put them all in chains, ensure that no harm to come for them.”
“All of them, my lady?” Ser Rolland hesitated. “We were only after the lord.”

“Valyrian blood must be strong on this island, ser. There are likely distant relations, cousins and bastard sons among them – we need any with the right ancestry,” she countered. “Take them all to Dragonstone, and we will sort out which are useful ones there.”

His scarred face darkened. Many of the other knights were devoted without, but Rolland Storm was more suspicious. He was a loyal soldier to his king, but he had been left at Dragonstone during the campaign north. Ser Rolland had not witnessed the ice dragon. “You said that only one was required to wake the stone dragons,” he noted. “One sacrifice, one boy with king’s blood. Originally, Edric Storm was only one who was to burn.”

“I did,” Melisandre replied coolly, as she brushed her hair backwards and stepped forward, “but the king requires a large dragon, ser. There can be no chance of failure this time, so the sacrifice must be substantial.” She cocked her head, measuring his expression. “It is like any trade – the more you pay, the higher quality the result.”

“And yet one thousand people?” he demanded.

“Yes. One thousand persons of king’s blood, sacrificed together,” Melisandre explained with a light smile, as she turned and walked away. “It is called the Great Rite, ser; a ceremony to raise the Red God and his chosen.”

Ser Rolland didn’t reply, dark eyes staring at her back. The knight had tried to cling onto his seven false idols, but he had recently converted to the True Faith. His loyalty to the Red God was still tenuous, and many of those who lacked conviction still doubted the Great Rite. But it is happening nonetheless, Melisandre told herself, I saw it in my fires.

The very thought put a tremor down her spine with excitement. It will be glorious.

Stannis Baratheon knew now what he must do to forge Lightbringer. He would awaken a weapon of fire through blood. One thousand men and women, all of them with the blood of kings, to be sacrificed to the Dragonmont together.

With one sacrifice I can perform miracles, Melisandre had told her king, but with a thousand I might reshape the world.

Melisandre knew it was the right path. Ever since the king had set his course, her powers had increased dramatically. The Red God rewarded her, granted her the gifts needed to see it done. The Great Rite had come to her in a dream, and she knew now what must be done to ensure the Battle of the Dawn.

One thousand men and women was a steep price, but it was nothing compared to the fate of the world.

Every man under Stannis had sacrificed to see it done. Every night since returning from the north, Melisandre had held a bonfire in the courtyard of Dragonstone, where she showed them all the glory of R’hllor. She showed them the path to divinity, and they gave her devotion.

The Great Rite was the culmination of the goal that they had been working towards for a long time.

One thousand places. They had filled their numbers up quickly, but there was still a long way to go. Many of the houses sworn to Dragonstone – Houses Celtigar, Bar Emmon, Massey and now Velaryon – all had Valyrian ancestry and so their blood was viable. Stannis had set out to reinforce his power over the narrow sea, to rebuild his force and fleet, and to fill Dragonstone’s dungeons
Stannis had even sent seven men to Lys, to search out Edric Storm and the men that Lord Seaworth had squirreled him away with.

Many are not the purest bloodlines, Mel admitted. Not the finest sources of king’s blood – some of them only linked way back to the days of a thousand kings in Westeros. For the numbers required, they had to look towards the more tenuous claims to royalty, even searching out smallfolk of dubious ancestry. Still, there were a thousand sacrifices needed, and they were getting closer to that number with every raid, every conversion, every hunting party scouring the land.

The cells of Dragonstone were already overfilled.

Melisandre lingered at High Tide to watch the sunrise a bit longer. The Great Rite will be glorious.

Ser Rolland was left in charge of escorting the prisoners back, but Melisandre rode away with her personal guard, riding over the cliffs of Driftmark across the sandy coast shaggy with ferns and thistles. A cold breeze blew from the west, bringing with it the tang of salt and sulphur. She saw the large galleons docked on the coastline, and the crowned fiery heart on their sails rippling in the wind.

Five ships were waiting for her, their hulls open as the loaded up cargo gathered from towns on Driftmark. So many from the island were being forced onto the ships in lines – their pale blonde hairs glinted in the sunlight, like the links of freshly forged chains snaking into the ship’s holds.

Melisandre saw Lord Axell Florent, the Hand of the King, standing on the beach. The lord was clad in fox fur and heavy russet over his chain mail, sweating in the sunlight. Lord Axell bowed deeply to Melisandre’s approach, his nose nearly touching the sands.


“May His light bless you,” Melisandre nodded. “You came with purpose?”

“I am instructed to escort you back to Dragonstone, Your Eminence.”

Ah. She looked around the ships curiously. “Something has happened.”

“His Grace wishes your council,” Lord Axell explained, before grimacing. “Forgive me, but the king, well, he is… perturbed.”

Stannis wanted to see her, and he was not happy. Melisandre hadn’t known about it, but she just gave a knowing nod as if was all expected. A prophet was not allowed to be surprised. She allowed Lord Axell to take her arm as he escorted her up the gangway.

The other ships lingered on the beach, but Lord Florent’s flagship, the Bountiful Harvest, pulled up its sails, lowered its oars, and set off as soon as she stepped onboard. She watched the sandy beaches and sharp cliffs of Driftmark disappear as the boat rocked with the wind.

Most of their ships were formerly of the Redwyne fleet, Melisandre knew, but they had been captured by Stannis. There had been many frequent skirmishes in the mouth of the Blackwater and the coasts of Dragonstone recently. Stannis had fought half a dozen battles at Dragonstone in as many months.

In their fifth battle at sea, Melisandre had used fire to cloud the Redwyne officer’s minds, to make them unable to respond properly. Their enemy’s command floundered, their discipline broke, and it
allowed for Stannis’ weaker forces to capture their galleons with ease.

So much of Stannis’ strength had been rebuilt through Melisandre’s renewed powers. With her aid, they had captured ships, made more and more and conversions. Not even the Redwyne fleet or the Tyrell army had been able to stand against the Red God’s gifts, and in return Stannis gifted more and more to the Red God.

A fair trade. That was all R’hllor asked.

The galleon creaked and groaned in the waves, men scuttling over the rigging and a slow, uncertain drumbeat from the rowers below. The ship lurched, and Lord Axell grimaced.

“Forgive the journey, Your Eminence,” the lord said finally. “Our navigator has been having difficulty… well, the weather throughout the bay has been unstable. Even the tides have been off.”

Melisandre didn’t reply. She stood at the rear of the ship, and her eyes turned to stare towards the west. Usually there would be gulls gliding over these coasts, but all the birds had fled. Melisandre was too far to see the blackened ruins of the city, but dark clouds lingered over the distant horizon. On good days, you could see the blackened walls of the Red Keep.

Occasionally, there were rains of ash sweeping the Blackwater, or localised storms through the bay. Ever since the night of fires in King’s Landing, there had been queer weather for leagues around.

Melisandre’s power was stronger now. After the great fire, she had grown even further. Sometimes, it was so powerful it was suffocating.

She remembered that night with such vivid detail; they had all watched the glow of the fires of the horizon, but Melisandre had felt it. She had felt the roar of the flames, the howl of fires unleashed. It had been like glorious beast coming to life, laughing and trembling with joy and hunger. Fires more glorious than anything she had ever imagined.

_Thousands of men and women burnt in holy flames._ Even from so far away, Melisandre had felt the power searing upwards.

That had been the night when the last of the believers of the Seven on Dragonstone had conceded, and everyone who remained had converted to the Red God. One more time that Melisandre’s powers and prophecies had been proven true.

_We prayed for divine aid, and R’hllor smited the unbelievers with cleansing fire. How could anybody question His will after that?_

Even now, she could feel it on her skin, her body shivering. Even near a fortnight later, that energy lingered; it had left the entire bay charged with power. Mel’s ruby was hot to the touch even when idle, but she barely felt the heat anymore.

It covered her skin like a shadow, a layer of invisible ash across her body. Whenever she closed her eyes, she could feel it, touch it, even hear it crackling around towards her…

“We are here, Your Eminence,” Lord Axell reported suddenly, and the spires of Dragonstone loomed above her. Melisandre blinked, wiping her skin, trying to focus. _How long did I faze out?_

She didn’t let her perturbation show, but the ruby at her throat hummed gently.

_I am growing in strength_, she told herself. It felt like it had during her apprentice years, and she had
yet to fully embrace and control it. Sometimes the power felt overwhelming.

It was dusk as she rode up to the grim and great gates of Dragonstone, the twisted black stone shaped like a dragon’s maw. Stakewalls and trenches of old siege lines littered the approach, but the spiked black stone was as impenetrable as ever. A thousand gargoyles glared and sneered at her, while her horse trotted to the gates.

Men from the watchtowers let loose a smoky flare, and she heard the rumble as soldiers started to winch the portcullis and the gates open. The dragon’s throat was growling.

The setting sun felt almost as holy as the rising sun, Melisandre considered. The sunset glowed red behind her, making the black stone of the castle gleam like blood. The carved eyes of dragons glared down at her, their maws open in an unyielding growl. Their eyes were hungry, starving.

“All hail Her Eminence!” Lord Florent boomed. “The Prophet of Light, Lady to our King, High Priestess of the Dawn!”

She held her head high, and rode into the great dragon’s maw. The darkness under the archway loomed.

The shadows bristled before her, a faint susurrus of whispers on the wind. Melisandre pulled up her cloak, and swept forward through the spiked portcullis. The castle was a powerful place, she could feel its energy. It left her skin tingling, tremors running down her spine.

Melony, Lot Seven, the shadows whispered. Melony…

… Please magister, she’s just a girl… Don’t hurt her, don’t hurt…

Melony… Don’t cry Melony… You’re not allowed to cry…

Melisandre tensed. Sometimes, the shadows were quiet and other times they were restless. They could be generous, kind, teasing, mocking or cruel. Sometimes they even liked to remind her from where she came.

They are just shadows. They serve the light. The shadows were the Lord of Light’s imprint, his will upon the earth.

The courtyard was filled with bodies. The men all halted their duties to bow before the red woman, and she shone like a torch before the great castle of grey and black. Each one bore the red heart on their chests.

Ser Richard Horpe was waiting at the front; a hard-faced man bearing a black moth on his red shield. He was clad in black and red armour, with a pure red cloak draping from his shoulders down across the stones. “Your Eminence,” Ser Richard bowed. “May I escort you?”

“You may, Lord Commander.” Melisandre took his arm, with a sweet smile. She could still feel the whisper of the shadows behind her, but she ignored them. Not now.

The knight nodded, tensing. Melisandre could feel the whirling emotions within him when she touched his skin, but he kept his face stoic.

“Tell me, ser,” Melisandre asked. “You spend much time with His Grace. How is he recovering?”

“The king is… restless, Your Eminence,” the knight replied carefully. “Learning to fight with your off-hand is no easy feat; I have spent much time sparring with him. His Grace wishes to hone
himself for battle once more.”

“Yet he is devoted?”

“Sleepless, Your Eminence.”

Good. Sleep was for the dead. “And what of his daughter?” She lowered her voice somewhat. “How does the princess fare?”

At that, Ser Richard hesitated. “Princess Shireen is confined to the Sea Dragon Tower,” he replied. “None but that fool of hers are allowed near. I feel that the king has become overly protective of the young princess.”

Now that is not so good. For a few heartbeats, the only sound was the chime of boots on the stone steps. “But he is certain, ser?” Melisandre insisted. “You have seen no doubt within His Grace?”

“None, Your Eminence. King Stannis longs for another battle, to see justice done.” The knight’s hand moved over the burning heart on his chest. “As do I. I failed my king once, but I will never fail him again. When His Grace goes to battle again, I shall be his shield.”

She believed him. Many of Ser Richard’s friends had fallen in battle against the Bastard King, but Ser Richard himself never had the chance to cross swords with the man on the ice. They said that the Champion of Night’s swordsman ship had been flawless, and Ser Richard had pushed himself hard to match.

Lord Commander Richard Horpe was a strong and lean figure with a chiseled jaw and a hooked nose. Once, he might have been a member of the Kingsguard, but the fat king had passed him over to please his traitorous lion queen. Instead, it had been Queen Selyse that named Ser Richard as the first of the Godsguard.

Loyal and devoted soldiers of R’hllor, the Queen Selyse had insisted to the king. Where all others have lost their path, the Godsguard will light the way. They could be your sworn soldiers, Your Grace; faithful warriors sworn to protect the True Faith, and their Champion of the Dawn. The white cloaks have been tainted, their order disgraced, so we must form a new one. Let the Godsguard wear red cloaks instead.

Stannis had taken slowly to the idea, but Melisandre encouraged it. The Godsguard were named as the protectors of both the Lord of Light and the King.

They had chosen Stannis’ Godsguard from only the most devout of their knights. There were ten places on the Godsguard to fill – ten was a holy number to Red God, as opposed to the seven of false idols. Ser Richard had fought vehemently for the honour of being the first. Ser Richard had even killed one opponent, Ser Morgarth Follard, in the mock trials that they hosted in the castle; while besting Ser Lambert, Ser Perkin, Ser Malegorn, Ser Narbert and Ser Corliss, and then fighting Ser Rolland Storm to a standstill in the finals.

Ser Richard was a man of longing, Melisandre thought. He longed for glory, he longed for blood, and he longed for another chance to fight the Bastard King. The battle at Hardhome had set off a fire within him, a fire that she had been sure to cultivate.

They walked towards the sharp black spire of the Stone Drum, and into the great black cavern of stone. The tower rumbled slightly in the wind, she could feel the black stone vibrating, and wind whistled through all the twisted statues and archaic corridors. He led her by the arm towards a great spiral staircase shaped into a twisted wyrm, an immense serpent coiled through the keep.
The walls were so thick that they might have been underground. She felt candles flicker around her as she passed, and she felt the hiss of the flames. The fires were hungry today, demanding; the invisible shadows were trying to call her attention.

There was a crackle of flames behind them, and Ser Richard flinched.

“Are you scared, ser?” Melisandre asked curiously, and the knight’s jaw clenched. “Do you ever feel scared at the thought of the wars to come?”

“The night is dark and full of terrors, Your Eminence,” Richard replied dutifully. “But none can daunt me as I carry the fire of R'hllor. I will not freeze.”

She smiled softly.

They arrived at the Chamber of Painted Table, on the top floor of the tower. It was a great round room filled with four tall windows overlooking north, south, east and west, and bare black walls. The ceiling was high and spired, with gargoyles lingering in the edges of the archways. From the chamber, they could see the bonfires across Dragonstone; alight like glorious stars in a black sky.

Queen Selyse was waiting for her at the top of the staircase. The queen nodded to Ser Richard, and then bowed deeply before Melisandre. Selyse wore rubies in her hair, and a great ermine cloak shaped like a heart around her shoulders.

“Your Eminence,” the queen gushed. “May His light shine upon you.”

“Your Grace. May His will clear the path.”

The painted table filled the centre of the room, sitting before the raised throne at the centre of Dragonstone. The map of Westeros was filthy; smeared and painted to mark the different factions. Stannis had wanted to visualise their progress. They had spread salt and grit to mark Euron Greyjoy’s territory, rust and metal cuttings to mark Aegon Targaryen’s conquest, and then sheep’s blood across the Bastard’s King campaign. The north was smeared red from the Neck upwards; the Reach, Oldtown and western coast was doused in salt; and across King’s Landing and the east there was a trail of metal scrap.

Westeros had been conquered by three kings, all the while Stannis was trapped on an island off the edge of the map.

Melisandre walked before the throne, lowering her head. The chamber turned quiet. The king had taken to staring at the painted table constantly, to remind himself of the kingdom that he had lost. Stannis didn’t sleep, he hardly ate; his face was so gaunt that it looked like skin draped across a skull.

And yet he hadn’t been idle. Stannis had spent every waking moment exercising, training or plotting. He had taken to sparring with his Godsguard, or marching his troops in regular drills through the castle. No weakness, no slack.

Stannis looked like a harder man, darker features like carved from iron. A Valyrian steel axe hung on his hip, and he had taken a curved steel hook on the stump of his right wrist. The smith had offered to forge him a fake hand, but Stannis refused. I will not pretend, Stannis had commanded. Give me a hook, not a hand.

The Valyrian axe was Harridan’s Claw, the ancestral weapon of House Celtigar that had been looted from Claw Island. It was a hooked blade of Valyrian steel, extravagantly forged like a crab’s hook with a wide pommel.
It was the weapon that had supposedly slayed the giant sea crab Harridan that had terrorised the narrow sea in the Age of Heroes. The founder of House Celtigar, Celt the Wanderer, was said to have been a Valyrian exile swallowed whole by the monster, who used the axe to hack through the giant crab’s shell from the inside. The tale went that Celt was raised as a king for his feat; he built his castle upon the crab’s corpse, a land that later became Claw Island. In other tales, Harridan had been a foul-tempered dragon, or a giant fish, but they all agreed that Harridan’s Claw had been its bane.

Stannis might have sold Harridan’s Claw away as he had the other treasures of Claw Island, but Melisandre encouraged that he take it from himself. A king needs a weapon, she had said. Ser Richard had agreed; _an axe is a good weapon to learn to use in your off-hand_, the knight had argued, _it requires only simple movements, and yet strong enough to break a man’s defence_. A good weapon for a one-handed man, and Valyrian steel had no equal.

So far, the only enemy that Stannis had used it on had been one Desmond Redwyne, the captain of a captured galley who had been executed on deck during the third battle of Dragonstone.

Melisandre looked discreetly through the room. The chambers were still and empty. The king sat tense, and quiet, shoulders slumped in his throne. “What happens, Your Grace?” she asked finally.

“You once foretold that fate comes in threes, Your Eminence,” Queen Selyse intoned. “We have received three letters.”

There were a bundle of parchments lying on Stannis’ lap. In his gauntleted hand, the king was re-reading a gilded pale parchment with a red seal. “Ah,” Melisandre said cautiously. “The mummer’s dragon?”

The king held up a golden letter, his hand clenching into a fist. “The fake king sends an envoy,” Stannis growled. “Expects me to bow.”

“Lord Jon Connington,” Selyse explained softly. “The Hand of the False King. He is to arrive on Dragonstone to negotiate, and he expects hospitality.”

“I knew the man in my youth. Jon Connington. Arrogant fool, more of a deviant than Renly ever was.” Stannis looked fuming, his voice dark and dangerous. “Negotiate! He comes under a traitor’s flag, and he expects hospitality?”

“I’d be more inclined to give him a stake, and a bonfire, Your Grace,” Richard Horpe said darkly. “A traitor deserves no hospitality.”

“He is a stormlord, a man sworn to Baratheon.” Stannis shook his head. “It is an insult.”

Now that was curious. Melisandre recalled seeing a stone griffin in her flames, but the vision was foggy. Why would the Hand of the King come himself, why did Aegon send someone so prominent? Surely any negotiation would be a mummer’s court – or did Aegon Targaryen truly wish to forge an accord? “Perhaps this Jon Connington could be converted, Your Grace?” Melisandre suggested softly. “If he comes, perhaps it is opportunity, a chance to show him the light. We are all blind until we see the light.”

“They are all traitors.” Stannis shook his head, scraping his hook into the armrest of black stone throne. “And they grow more treacherous every day. While the abominations sat on the throne, well – _that_ was dubious. I could understand that; a good man might have followed Joffrey and his ilk, under the delusion that the boy was rightful. Perhaps those men had been misguided and not mutinous. But now the Lannisters are dead, my brother’s fake sons are dead, and _none_ have an
“excuse. How can they still delude themselves?” His eyes flashed, and his hook slammed into stone. Metal rang. “They chose a mummer’s dragon over me?”

“Dishonourable men would choose any option but the righteous one.” Melisandre shook her head. “They follow false idols, Your Grace.”

“They claim he is Aegon Targaryen.” That news had left Stannis as infuriated as anything. “What is next; will a vagrant walk barefoot off the street, and be hailed as Baelor the Blessed? There is no proof, no evidence to his claim – but he is still raised as king!”

The hook was grinding against the dark granite armrest.

“Fear and greed, Your Grace,” she said sadly. “The boy’s sponsors have paid enough gold for men not to object, the name he takes is only pretence enough. Meanwhile, you speak the truth, and they fear you for it.”

“They follow false idols, Your Grace,” she said sadly. “The boy’s sponsors have paid enough gold for men not to object, the name he takes is only pretence enough. Meanwhile, you speak the truth, and they fear you for it.”

“Then every man of his realm is dishonourable,” Stannis said darkly. “By every right, that throne is mine – but once again it is stolen from me by this mummer’s game.”

Stannis crunched the letter up, throwing it the painted table. It bounced off the Fingers and landed in the peaks of the Vale somewhere.

“It will all be irrelevant in the end,” Selyse soothed. “The Lord of Light–”

“The Lord of Light.” Stannis’ eyes narrowed, focusing on her. Queen Selyse shifted slightly. “The Lord of Light continues to disappoint. I burnt the leeches, and named them. I cleared the path – I gave the sacrifices and still you ask more.”

“Have I not fulfilled my promises?” Melisandre challenged. “Has any of the events I have foretold not came to pass?”

It had been their first act when they arrived back on Dragonstone once more; they burnt leeches again. The last time they had performed such, it had been during the height of the War of Five Kings, and Stannis had named Joffrey Baratheon, Balon Greyjoy and Robb Stark to the fire. Stannis had commanded that she perform the same ceremony again, and Melisandre had obliged.

They had burnt the leeches filled with king’s blood. Stannis had wanted to clear out all the pretenders from his path to the Iron Throne, and their supporters as well. This time, they burnt six leeches; Tommen Baratheon, Myrcella Baratheon, Cersei Lannister, Jaime Lannister, Margaery Tyrell, Mace Tyrell had all been named to the fires.

Melisandre had promised their deaths, and true enough it had happened. The Red God’s will provided.

“Yet it’s not enough.” His vision darkened. “Will I have to name half the realm to the fire? Do I have enough blood in me?”

Melisandre shook her head sadly. “It cannot be overused,” she admitted. “This war must be won by you, not by leeches.”

Stannis had wanted all of them to die, thinking that the realm would be forced to name Stannis as king when all pretenders were dead. Of course, at the time, they hadn’t known of Aegon Targaryen.

After the night of the fires, Stannis had been overjoyed to high of Cersei’s and her son’s deaths. He
had believed that they would have no choice but to turn to him. That elation turned into fury with word of Aegon Targaryen’s coronation instead.

In truth, the leeches had caused very little. Melisandre had simply foretold their deaths beforehand, and then allowed the king to burn the leeches so that it seemed like the Red God was directly responsible. It was a deception, but only a minor one; the Lord of Light had still been responsible, even if it wasn’t direct.

Stannis fell quiet, his eyes narrowing as he stared at the painted table. The great map of Westeros was smeared in every colour but his. Queen Selyse and Ser Richard stayed quiet, lingering at the edge of the dais. The Red Woman stepped forward, cautiously stepping up towards the throne.

“You need only forge your sword. The leeches, the power I offer – they are assistance, nothing more,” Melisandre insisted, “Lightbringer will be the saviour.”

“The Great Rite.” His voice was hollow. “There is no other choice.”

“It will be glorious,” Selyse harped.

She saw the doubt in his eyes. Even now, Stannis hadn’t fully accepted the option. It was a necessity, she knew, but even after seeing the Champion of Night he still hesitated. She had seen that it would come to pass in her flames, but that flicker of lingering uncertainty caused Melisandre worry. The champion must be convicted.

“Your Grace, the Champion of Night – the Bastard King – he is likely sacrificing men by the thousands,” Ser Richard said darkly. “I can only imagine how many he has already slain for his master. You cannot win a battle if you do not swing the sword.”

Stannis gaze turned to glare at him stiffly. “Yet you say I am supposed to be the saviour, and you expect me to burn a thousand innocents?” Stannis shook his head. “No, what of my duty?”

_Those are the Onion Lord’s words_, Melisandre cursed. Lord Seaworth may have vanished, but his influence still lingered. “It is not supposed to be easy, Your Grace,” Melisandre insisted. “We all must sacrifice towards it – that is the purpose.”

Queen Selyse nodded in agreement, carefully walking towards Stannis’ other side. It was a position once held by the Onion Lord. “Every soldier in this keep shares the same fears,” Selyse said, but she was parroting what Melisandre had said to her. “Some will have to sacrifice blood relations, sons or daughters or cousins and others may even walk themselves willingly. We are all expected to perform the distasteful deeds necessary to obtain sacrifices.” The Red Woman’s eyes inspected the queen, searching for doubt. She saw none. “Every believer in this castle must contribute something, and it will all go into the Great Rite. The hardships we face now only makes the fires stronger.”

Stannis took a deep breath. He looked between the three of them – his knight, his sorceress and his queen – and they were all convicted. Stannis’ court was filled with holy men. Melisandre stepped forward, bowing and going to her knees before his throne. She lowered her head at his feet, her red dress spilling over the stones.

“Have I led you wrong, my king?” Melisandre whispered. “Have I not fulfilled everything I promised?”

_You would not be here without me. The powers I wield have served your interests many, many times._ In return, they all must serve the Lord of Light.
“You have.” Stannis’ gaze darkened. “And yet your promises remain frustratingly vague, Witch.”

“You Grace…”

“And there has been too much you have not told me,” Stannis argued. “For all your claims of divine wisdom and light, too often you leave me in the dark.”

“I am but a servant.” Melisandre shook her head. “Only the Lord of Light knows all.”

“Then serve me by explaining your god’s will in this.” Stannis through down another letter before her – a red letter. The words were High Valyrian, written on crimson parchment.

Melisandre flickered. The Red Temple of Volantis, she recalled, used such a parchment. Melisandre would have picked it up, but she did not want to admit that she couldn’t read Valyrian. She could speak it, but nobody had ever taught her to read it.

Thankfully, Selyse stepped forward. “That is the second letter, it is from Volantis,” the queen explained, “and it is as troubling as the first. It came by courier from Pentos; it was forwarded by a magister and intended for the fake Aegon’s eyes. Our blockade intercepted the vessel instead.”

“I see.” Melisandre nodded, eyes flickering between the queen and the king.

“Daenerys Targaryen has invaded Volantis,” Selyse said grimly, “and has set half the city ablaze.”

The statement was met by silence. Daenerys Targaryen…? What, how? Melisandre had to struggle to hide the uncertainty from her face. Never appear surprised.

Still, she had to know… “Why Volantis?” she asked finally.

Stannis scoffed gruffly. “Your fires did not tell you that?”

“Not clearly, Your Grace,” Melisandre admitted. “Events further away are harder to focus upon. Why invade Volantis?”

“Ships,” Stannis replied. “Daenerys Targaryen is coming to Westeros, she needs a fleet. Volantis has ships.”

Oh. Melisandre remembered the frequent visions she had seen – the visions of snow and ash. She had not been able to interpret such sights.

“She requires many ships, I hear,” Stannis continued. “It is said she has legions of slave soldiers that she freed, the slaves that worship her. She brings Dothraki, Lhazareen, Volantene and Ghiscari and many more. Volantis sided against her in the war of Slaver’s Bay, and so Daenerys’ first port of call was to break them. She razed their city, freed their slaves, and took their armada for her own.”

For a heartbeat, Melisandre’s composure might have cracked. She so clearly remembered her own time in Volantis, before she fled further west. It was a cursed city. “And now,” Stannis growled, his tone growing darker. “She is coming for her homeland with countless ships and legions of barbarian supporters,” the king’s voice flickered, “and three dragons.”

Melisandre didn’t speak, she couldn’t. There had been rumours, many rumours, but the fires had been so frustratingly vague…

It is the distance, Melisandre cursed. The art of far-scrying had been one that had eluded her during
her own informal apprenticeship. Some seers could see to the other end of the world, but Melisandre’s magics had always been more localised. Her strength. Her weakness.

“'It has been confirmed,’” Ser Richard said sourly, “'Three dragons. Young dragons, I hear - they were said to have hatched only three years ago.’”

“Every pretender has dragons, it seems,” Stannis said, growing angrier with her silence. “Everyone but me. Read the letter. They say that her landing will be Nymeria’s thousand ships come again. They say that she is Aegon the Conqueror reborn. How am I supposed to survive against such opposition?’”

“'Lightbringer must be forged.’”

“'Lightbringer,’” Stannis repeated, rolling the word over his tongue like an ill-tasting morsel. The last Lightbringer you gave me shattered in my hand.” His face twitched, his fingers curling. “'You promised me stone dragons. First it was one sacrifice required, and now a thousand?’” The stone hook was trembling, rattling against the black stone. “'Explain this to me, Red Woman.’”

The queen tried to intervene. “Your Grace, surely—” Selyse tried, but Stannis just waved his wife away.

“'Quiet,’ he snapped, and then turned back to Melisandre. “'This is for her. There is more. The Red Temple of Volantis – Red Priests of your own order – have declared for Daenerys Targaryen. They declare her Azor Ahai.’”

Melisandre winced.

“'Read the letter,’ Stannis commanded. “'The High Priest Benerro was the one who penned it. They raise banners in Daenerys Targaryen’s name, they declare her their saviour.’”

She remembered Benerro. They met once, back when Melisandre approached the Temple of the Lord of Light in Volantis on her way west. She had never met a more terrifying spellbinder; his flames had scorched her skin, he had nearly killed her. The Fiery Hand that served Benerro had tried to hunt her down, and Melisandre had been forced to flee the city.

She had chosen Dragonstone, the furthest place she could find free from the reach of the rest of her order.

“'Tell me again of the wisdom the Lord of Light gives his servants. Why do these servants come to a different conclusion than you?’”

“'Even the Red Priests can err,’ Melisandre replied quietly. “'And the temple of Volantis lost its way long ago. Benerro is deranged and delusional. They are mistaken.’”

Stannis eyes narrowed. He leant back in his seat, and then stood up slowly. His footsteps down the dais were slow, measured.

“'You said that I was the Champion of Dawn and him, the Champion of Night. Mortal enemies, you named us,’’ Stannis said lowly. His gaze turned over the painted table, leaning across the Blackwater Bay. “'But what does that make Daenerys Targaryen, then? Is she his ally? Is she mine? What am I to make with this, how does this fit into your prophecy?’”

“I know not.” Melisandre was forced to admit. “I know only my purpose, I know what the fires have told me.’”
“Then have the damn fires speaking louder!” he snapped. “First wildlings and an ice dragon, and now legions of slaves and three dragons. I am caught in the middle with nothing!” His hook slammed against the table, taking a notch out of the cliffs of Durran’s Point.

Selyse hesitated. “Your Grace, the night is dark and full of—” she started, but she was silenced by Stannis’ glare.

Melisandre kept her voice measured and soothing. “You are the rightful king, Your Grace. You are the champion. You saw it in the fires yourself, with your own eyes. You know it to be true.”

“All that I know,” Stannis replied stiffly, “is that there are apparently two people in this world with dragons under their command – and I am not one of them.”

There was a long quiet.

“Have I ever told you,” the king muttered eventually, “how much I despise your bloody prophecies?”

Selyse’s face paled. “My king, that’s blasphemy—”

“Enough, woman!” Stannis barked, and the queen flustered. He recomposed himself, taking a deep breath, and turning to stare at the map of Westeros. “Good odds say that Daenerys Targaryen will be stopping at Dragonstone first,” the king said finally. “Or she will be passing through nearby. Aegon Targaryen will be rallying against me now. While the war in King’s Landing waged, while my enemies were distracted, I stood a chance…” Stannis shook his head. “But I do not have the ships, do not have numbers, do not have the support.”

It was met by silence. Melisandre heard the pained quiver in his voice, the iron trembling. “Nobody said that path would be easy,” she said, walking behind him and placing her hand on his shoulder. He felt tense.

“Spare me such drivel,” Stannis said curtly. “Give me counsel of use.”

“They are distractions, Your Grace. The Champion of Night is still the greatest threat. The Bastard King. Jon Snow.”

Jon Snow. The very name made Stannis’ scowl deepen, his eyes twitch. The king’s shoulders were so tense he was trembling. Silence reigned in the chamber, a long, uncertain quiet.

“Jon Snow… Jon Snow… Is it fate, perhaps, that I must fight against Ned Stark’s legacy?” he muttered. “A bastard born from the tourney at Harrenhal, a cursed place and a cursed event if there ever was one.”

Selyse nodded, her lips curling in distaste. “All bastards are born from wickedness and betrayal,” she agreed. “And Jon Snow was sinful at birth. Even his own mother, Ashara Dayne, jumped from a door rather than carry him.”

Stannis paused, and then shook his head. “No,” the king said grimly. “The more I hear of Jon Snow’s birth, the more convinced I become that he was birthed from the rape of Lyanna Stark, by Rhaegar Targaryen. He is a dragonseed.”

Melisandre didn’t react, but she saw Ser Richard’s eyes widen in shock. Queen Selyse flinched. “What?” the queen cawed. “How could that, how… how…”

“Your Grace, are you…?” Ser Richard began, but then trailed off. Are you serious? he was going
to ask, but Stannis was always serious.

The king turned to look at them through the corner of his eye, still leaning over the table. “I was there, when Ned Stark returned to King’s Landing from Dorne bringing news of Lyanna’s death. He had the babe with him at the time, but he tried to keep it out of sight. Robert and Ned reconciled after the Stark girl’s death, and Stark admitted that he birthed the bastard on some camp follower – Wylla, I think her name was – but even then the rumours swirled that he was actually Ashara’s babe. I recall thinking that the newborn Jon Snow appeared the wrong age – he seemed too young to have been conceived at Harrenhal, and too old to be born during the war as Ned Stark claimed. But it was a… a busy period, I thought little of it at the time.” The room was left speechless.

“Now? I am sure that Jon Snow was born from Stark’s sister instead, and that his uncle lied to protect the baby.”

Stannis looked at Melisandre. “It was the visions that you told me of last week that made me realise,” he explained. “Do you recall?”

She did. Stannis had asked her for more information on the Bastard King, and she consulted the fires. “The woman in the bloody bed,” Melisandre said quietly, “surrounded by blue roses?”

“Aye. The brown-haired woman. You thought that she could be his mistress, but she was his mother.” Stannis’ eyes were hard. “Lyanna Stark. Rhaegar once gave her a crown of blue roses.”

_Was that so?_ The visions had been foggy, yes, but it was troubling that Melisandre could have misinterpreted one to such an extent.

Queen Selyse stammered. She tried to speak, but her mouth flapped open. Stannis pulled himself up, and nodded solemnly. “So aye, Jon Snow _was_ born from wickedness – a wickedness even more foul than any. He is a bastard born from rape, the grandchild of the Mad King, and the son of zealot. Born by his mother’s death and his uncle’s folly. It is little wonder that Ned Stark tried to get rid of him by banishing him to the black.” Stannis shook his head. “If only the man had gone one step more and drowned the babe in the sea.”

The history and bloodlines of this country were all foreign to Melisandre, but even she had heard of Rhaegar Targaryen. The dragon that stole a wolf, and ignited a war. Westerosi spoke about Rhaegar Targaryen in hushed tones.

_It makes sense_, she realised. A child of king’s blood from the most exceptional line had travelled beyond the Wall – the Great Other must have found Jon Snow, and recruited him to be its champion. Jon Snow’s blood could have awoke the dragon he rides.

“And so Daenerys Targaryen is his aunt,” Melisandre said quietly.

Stannis nodded. “If blood runs true – and I can only assume it must – then she will come to support her nephew. Is she my enemy too?”

“She is.” Melisandre nodded. _Ash and snow_, she remembered. _Did the Great Other have a second champion?_ She would not be surprised if it did.

The king paused, pacing. Selyse still looked speechless, struggling to gather herself. “Show her the third letter,” Stannis commanded. “Read it.”

Richard Horpe picked up another parchment from the throne. This parchment was white, with a grey seal. Melisandre hardly even needed to look at it to know what it contained. “The Champion of Night,” she said. “He is on the rise.”
“It is from White Harbour,” Ser Richard read. “It announces that Winterfell has fallen.”

“We must gather more pig’s blood,” Stannis said grimly, nodding to the table. “Paint the whole north in blood. Half the realm has already fallen to him.”

“Your Grace, the Battle of Ice and Fire approaches,” Melisandre warned. “You will face him again soon enough.”

“And the north declares for him!” Stannis scoffed. “He is evil incarnate, and yet he still has more support than I?”

“Malignance so often portrays itself as benign,” she replied smoothly. “And evil is talented at acting an ally. They will rue it in the end.”

“He must be the priority,” Richard Horpe agreed. “Even more so if the Dragon Queen comes to him too. This battle is more than just mortal men, that has been proven.”

“The Red God’s will shall be–!” Selyse harped, and Stannis lost his patience.

“Leave us!” Stannis snapped at the queen. “Clear the room. Ser Richard, wait below.”

Selyse flinched like she had been slapped. The queen hesitated, but Melisandre gave a soft nod. Selyse curtsied, spun on her heels, and strode away. Ser Richard walked with her, and Stannis glared at them both as they left.

They were left alone in the chamber of the painted table. Melisandre bowed. Stannis’ left hand twitched to the axe, running his fingers along the engraving. Harridan’s Axe. The axe that killed a sea monster.

Melisandre remembered what happened the last time they had been alone in this chamber together. “How may I serve, Your Grace?”

“Hmph.” Stannis turned and stared at the dirty map. There was a long moment of quiet contemplation. “The fake dragon on the throne… a kraken in the west… and a mad queen to the east.” Stannis tapped his fingers against the edge of Cape Wrath. “I cannot survive against such opposition. I need to remove enemies again.”

“The Great Rite remains the only solution,” she insisted.

Stannis pursed his lips, and hesitated. For a brief heartbeat, doubt roamed across his features. “I will not be able to gather a thousand sacrifices, if this is the opposition I must face,” he declared finally. Melisandre noted the slight avoidance. “No, I require more immediate aid from your Red God.”

“As you wish.” Curses. “But the leeches are not–”

“Forget the leeches, other means.” His eyes were dark. “Perhaps there is only one way to deal with false kings. I need a soldier to take care of it.”

Melisandre paused, but she did not react. She kept her features stoic, even as Stannis glared. “You can provide one?” he demanded. “Like you did before?”

“…” Melisandre steadied herself. “I can.”

Like I did before. A tremor went down Mel’s spine, but she hid it from her face. Stannis stared
firmly. “I was too weak after the Blackwater,” Stannis said firmly. “But my strength has recovered. Of all the aids you given me, the one you provided with Renly remains the greatest. I need such again.”

*I can.* But the very thought… “Who?”

“Jon Snow. The Bastard King. You say he is my greatest threat? Then let us deal with him.”

“You cannot kill him.” Melisandre shook his head, her long hair wafting. “It has been fated that you must face him again, so therefore any assassination attempt is already doomed for failure. It would be a waste of power.”

“Damnable prophecies,” the king cursed, his face twisting. Stannis frowned, musing over it for several heartbeats. “Then what of the allies he surrounds himself with?” the king said finally. “Is there any prophecy concerning *them*?”

That caught her off-guard slightly. “There… there is not?”

“Good. If we cannot kill the Bastard King, we can weaken him, yes?” he challenged, and Melisandre could not object. “If we could kill his supporters, his allies – *that* would slow him down. Give me time.” Stannis pointed to the white letter, and the list of names that were written beneath it. “Umber, Manderly, Mormont, Glover, Reed – all those houses that have been deceived by him, the lords of such must die.”

That… that was a steep request. “All of them, Your Grace?”

“Yes. It should be no trouble for one of your creations, yes?” Stannis demanded. His eyes were still suspicious, keeping himself guarded. “If the lords die, that would dissuade any others from joining with him. It could cripple the alliance he has made. Can you do this?”

Melisandre bit her lip. Her king was already growing sceptical of her. *If I refuse, the Great Rite itself may be in peril.* If Stannis’ conviction failed, the entire world could be doomed.

And yet what he was asking… “I think I can.”

“Then I am ready.” Stannis straightened, his hand moving to his belt. “My chambers…”

Melisandre shook her head. “No, save your strength, Your Grace.” Melisandre curtsied again, lowering her head and hiding her eyes. “I… I have other means.”

A flicker of confusion past his face, but Stannis just nodded. “Very well,” the king said with a nod. “Just see it done, *High Priestess*.”

There was no lust in her king’s eyes. The last master had that had used her this way had done so as much for pleasure as he had for magic – that had been the whole reason the master kept her in his household, to exploit her body, her gifts. Stannis was far more focused on the practicalities.

Queen Selyse knew, of course. The queen had been quite encouraging between the mating. *There is no greater honour,* Melisandre had said, *than giving our bodies to the Lord of Light.*

Melisandre took a dozen steps down the staircase, and took a deep breath. She had to pause on the stairs to recover herself, to focus. She hadn’t wanted to do this again, the strain it took…

All around her the torches flickered and hissed, as soft as a dream of half-forgotten places. They were hungry tonight. Melisandre could feel them, she could feel them hovering around her.
There had been two sons Melisandre had birthed for Stannis. One for Renly, one for Conrose Penrose. The first had been essential, but its success had left Melisandre overconfident. The second had been a mistake, however; it had strained her severely and left her weak. Melisandre had been forced to make excuses, reasons why she didn’t dare it again...

Opening up your own body to such a force was a perilous thing. The risks were… immense.

But I am stronger now, Melisandre thought. I can risk it again, surely?

All throughout the castle, the Stone Drum rumbled in the wind. She could hear Stannis above her, pacing around the painted table. There was much relying on her gifts, Melisandre didn’t have the luxury of choice.

It is dark night; there is power in the air, magic in the stones, she thought. Such crafts were almost as easy in Dragonstone as they had been in Asshai. It is an ideal time, a night of power…

The torches flickered, and Melisandre gasped. She felt the tingle on her skin. She felt the invisible hands fluttering over her, stroking up her thigh.

Melony, Lot Seven, a phantom voice whispered. They wanted to remind her, a quiet barb in the words. Wanted to remind her where she came from, and what she owed.

It had been the very first bargain she made. Back when she had been Melony, so, so long ago. She had needed an escape, a means to slay the cruel masters that owned her. A way to escape. She had been trapped in the darkness, and the fires had offered a bargain. They offered her power in return for her womb.

Melisandre stood still as a statue for long time, preparing herself. She touched her ruby. I will do it. One more time.

The ruby sparked slightly. The shadows hissed and fluttered, circling around her in excitement. They were invisible to all others, but Melisandre knew – she could feel – that they were there.

She stepped stiffly down the spiral staircase, and she could feel all the voices around her…

You promised…

We gave you strength…

Power…

You promised…!

The shadows must have their due. The fires needed to be fed.

Melisandre steeled herself, trying to block out the whispers. She tried to ignore the tingling across her skin. The candles flickered, every shadow stirring of the gloomy corridor. Every stone gargoyle and dragon leered at her. The ruby on her throat was throbbing and burning, and sometimes it clenched as tightly as the slave collar she used to wear.

One son, she thought quietly. One more servant, to fulfil the Lord of Light’s will.

A man in red was waiting at the lower level of the steps. The Lord Commander of the Godsguard stood stiffly, oblivious to all the invisible shadows that were writhing around him. Ser Richard
Horpe was young, strong and devoted. *He will suffice.*

“Ser Richard,” Melisandre called. “I require your assistance.”

The knight seemed confused, and Melisandre stepped closer. “My lady…?”

Unbeckoned, she wrapped her arm around his, standing closely beside him. She cocked her head, and Ser Richard blinked.

She raised her hand, and slender fingers caressed across the heart on his chest. “Your god needs your assistance.”


“Escort me to my chambers, ser.”

“Aye,” he said again. The ruby around her neck started to hum, singing in unhearable chimes.

The shadows were restless, impatient. She could feel them around her, hovering over her shoulder as she and Ser Richard walked through the gloomy corridor. They followed her so closely, whispering on her skin. *You promised*…

*The deal… you made a promise…*

*Melony, Lot Seven…*

*We gave you power… now give us life.*

Melisandre’s chambers were next door to the royal quarters. Once, Visenya Targaryen had slept in the very same room she now kept. Melisandre slept closer to the king than the queen did. Ser Richard hesitated at the sight of her bedchamber, the great dragon’s heard engraving looming on the stone door. “Your Eminence,” the knight choked. “I know not—”

“Hush, ser.” She placed a finger on his lips. “You do not need to know a thing.”

The shadows were already curling around Ser Richard. She could see shady tendrils wrapping around him.

They entered the chambers. Melisandre stepped forward, and carefully started to unfasten her dress. The knight stared, entranced.

She had a fine body, she knew she had. Her buttocks were firm and round, her breasts full and plump, her legs smooth and long and her hips wide and soft. Her beauty glowed like fire, and Ser Richard stared and gaped. Like a moth to a flame.

Her silk gown shrugged off her shoulders. Melisandre didn’t turn around, but she wrapped her hair backwards. For the briefest of moments, her skin looked scarred, haggard and worn like leather, but then she blinked and her flesh was pale, soft and unblemished. *Melony*, a cruel shadow hissed, *Lot Seven.*

Melisandre hesitated, but she did not try to resist. The light was the master and the shadows the servants, but even the servants needed their due. That was the deal she made.

“Quench the torches, ser,” she ordered.

“E…Excuse me, Your Eminence?”
“Quench the torches.” She raised a hand, pointing to the brazier. Each candle holder was shaped like a dragon’s skull, their eyes glinting. “This must be done in the darkness.”

“As it pleases you, Your Eminence.” Ser Richard used his gauntleted hand to squash the flames. There was a hiss, and the candles fizzed out one by one.

Suddenly, darkness reigned. Melisandre grit her jaw, as she felt so many hands roaming, groping and pinching her skin. They were fierce, painful, dominating…

In her more youthful days, Melony would have screamed.

Ser Richard was there too. She heard his fumbling fingers unclamp his breeches, shrugging his shoulders. He stepped forward and tried to kiss her, but Melisandre raised her hand to block his lips. She could not see anything, but she felt his warm breath. She did not care enough about him to kiss him.

“Your Eminence…” he gasped, as her hands gripped downwards to his manhood. Her fingers were hard and uncaring, wrapping tightly and pulling. She wanted to see this done quickly.

She was completely naked, he was half-armoured. Hands grabbed her breasts, and fingers squirmed beneath her thighs. Melisandre didn’t grimace, didn’t moan, but her fingers tightened and her breaths turned hoarse.

The shadows were all around her, tendrils writhing in the black. What once was a whisper turned into an immense, voiceless roar. A howl in the dark, a power that caused the bed to tremble.

Ser Richard gagged, his body spasming…

The darkness was squeezing him, invisible hands clenching around him, wringing him dry like a damp cloth.

_It has to be in the dark._ “Let us light a flame together,” Melisandre breathed, gripping the knight by the waist and dragging him backwards into the bed. The tendrils were writhing. Her hands were like hooked claws, his skin tender flesh. Darkness fell with them.

The shadows danced.

---

**Jon**

The panic spread slowly, oozing through the castle like a gelatinous blob, filing the corridors with loud uncertain shouts. At first there was disbelief, confusion, and then doubt, but slowly it settled towards fear. _Fifteen thousand corpses, gone._

The horns were blowing, calling men to arms, but it was the silences that were most worrying. They were all on edge listening for the blasts of scouts returning, but none came. They had sent out outriders and received no responses. The perimeter parties and guards in the field had all fallen quiet.

In previous battles, the threat had been immediate and the chaos instant. This felt different; it was a slower, more looming danger. It took time before they started to realise.

Jon broke into a loping gait, half-sprinting down the stone corridors as fast as his weirwood cane
would take him.

All around him, Jon could feel the snow and winds buffeting against the castle, and rumble of footsteps pounding within. The walls were quivering, so furiously that even the torches on their brackets were shivering.

The fires hissed and flickered, shadows dancing around the rumbling bodies of the great hall.

They were ringing the bells of Winterfell, the great clapper chiming three times. Jon moved quickly towards the great hall of Winterfell, and he heard the ruckus spreading within.

“Find me those bloody horses!” a lord boomed. “Where are our mounted men?”

“The walls, we need to reinforce—”

“What of Cerwyn?” that was Ser Mardrick’s voice. “We have men at Cerwyn!”

“How many?” another voice called. “How many are there?”

Jon’s guards pushed a path for him through the hall, he saw the shadows heaving in the gloomy room. It would be morning soon, but the world was still dark through the thick clouds churning in the sky. The very tension on the air made it hard to breathe, like it was all suffocating. Jon felt the tremble down his spine, he felt his skin curl.

*It’s the fear.* Very few of these men had fought the dead before. Some of the free folk reacted better, but the others were left struggling to keep up.

“To arms!” Jon boomed, racing through to the centre. “Gather all men to arms, and have criers through the camp. We need torches and fire. *Call your banners!*”

“Where is my daughter?” Jon heard a woman voice, high-pitch enough to cut through the other noise. He saw a blonde-haired woman, Leona Manderly, standing in the chaos and looking lost. “Wylla? Wynafryd?”


“It’s not the bloody Boltons!” Tormund snapped, his face red from shouting so hard. “There’s a fucking white walker out there!”

Even now, Jon heard the squeaks and gasps of scared protests. They didn’t understand, they hadn’t seen. “White walkers?” Galbart Glover exclaimed, his voice strangely high-pitched, as he looked around from the corner of the room. “Why are all these people saying *white walkers*??”

“Enough!” Jon roared, loping up to stand from a top of the dais, next to the throne of Winterfell. “*Listen to me.*” The hall quieted slightly, and guardsman banged spears against the stone. “There is a white walker outside our gates, and it has just resurrected thousands of corpses. We need fire and obsidian – fire for the wights, obsidian for the white walker.”

The hall exploded into protests and questions. Jon struggled to stay calm, even as looked like scuffles were breaking out. Hundreds of men were crowded into the hall, all demanding answers. “Where are they?” a voice called. “Where~”


“The dead don’t feel pain!” Jon shouted, calling for order. “They don’t feel cold, they never get
lost. They follow orders instantly. We must assume that every dead body on the lake has been raised, we must ready ourselves to fight.”

“What of the villages?” that was thick voice – Edric Burley, from the northern mountains. “Our lands are undefended!”

“We killed these bastards once,” the Greatjon growled, pushing his way forward. “Now we have to kill them again??”

“Quiet down, you sods!” Tormund shouted, but it did little. The great hall was roiling with fear.

Curses. “We have reserves of obsidian arrows and spears – find them,” Jon hissed at his guards. A cart of assorted obsidian had been with them from Eastwatch, to White Harbour, to Winterfell – part of a very limited supply. Dragonglass was in very high demand. “Toregg, I place you on arming our best. We do not have many arrows – they must be spread around and used with care.”

A few had already pre-empted him, they were already moving. He saw Toregg the Tall raise a spear with a jagged tip of dragonglass as example, and Tormund had an obsidian dagger on his belt. At the rear of the hall, Rattleshirt was lurking with another dragonglass spear in his hands.

All eyes were on Jon as he stepped over the sea of faces. His eyes lingered on Leona Manderly in the crowd, while men were pushing backwards and forwards. His hand lingered on Dark Sister, feeling his hairs stick on end.

These men had never fought the dead before. Wights were a different sort of enemy; even the most experienced soldier could be caught off-guard by them. Ours need to learn fast.

“The white walkers surround themselves with their soldiers – walking dead, the wights!” Jon shouted over all the noise. “If we want to kill it, we must push through the wights. We must surround it, do not allow it another chance to escape. This only ends when we kill the Other itself.”

So many voices were shouting all around him. The Greatjon was booming, Lady Maege calling for his attention, while Galbart Glover hesitated at the far side of the hall, looking stunned. The lords were flocking around the dais, and all the while the hall rippled.

*The hunting parties had been tracking Malvern to the north,* Jon cursed. Malvern had been out of sight for so long. *When did he come this far south?*

Towards the wings of the hall, Jon glimpsed brown hair and green eyes peering at him. Meera Reed had crept down the stairs after him, eavesdropping on the commotion. Sansa was with Bran, and many of the non-fighters had already fled to the dungeons and crypts for fear an assault could be coming, but Meera had a spear in her hands. Jon never knew where she got the spear from.

“This can't be happening.” Ser Mardrick Manderly exclaimed, pale-faced. “White walkers? White walkers?”

“Snow, are you sure–” the Greatjon growled.

“Listen,” Lady Maege hissed at him, a thick gauntleted hand gripping Jon’s shoulder. “I do not hear the horns from our walls. If they were going to attack, wouldn't they have done it by now?”

His eyes were dark. Jon shook his head. “They're not attacking *us.*”

Winterfell had strong walls and it was full of seasoned soldiers. The castle wouldn't break easily, and Jon's army was fortifying it. The Others were intelligent and calculating; to attack Winterfell
would be wasteful. No, there was a far more strategic target for them.

Jon knew it even before the scouts came back. Several dozen men had left, but only five had made it back. The snows were too thick, the winds too strong, and the army of the dead ghosted around them. The five scouts were huddled before the throne, trembling with every step and nearly falling to their knees as they dropped. “We saw them,” a white-faced scout reported, shivering to the bone. “We saw them in the trees, they were… I don't what they were. They were heading north.”

“They are heading for Castle Black,” Jon said, gritting his jaw. “Call the banners, urgently. We must give chase.”

At once, the hall exploded into objections. Outside, the snows were roaring, and inside the fires were hissing.

“Give chase?” Ser Mardrick said, aghast.

“The weather…” Lady Maege protested, her voice cut off by half a dozen others. “The snows!”

“The dead may be able to march through the cold, but the living can't,” the Greatjon warned, lowering his voice. “We'll lose half our men to the weather alone if we set off through these snows.”

He is right. A march would be a disaster, Jon knew that it would.

The snows were at least five foot deep out there. It would grow deeper, the further north they went. Horses would be useless, entire armies could be buried. Only the hardiest man could move in that sort of weather, but every step was perilous. It drained your strength, bit by bit. When the flurries hit, even a dozen yards outside the gates and you’d be lost and blind, while the winds could cleave flesh off as surely as a blade.

Up in the hills, Jon recalled, they say that autumn kisses you, but winter fucks you hard. If we leave this castle now, exposed to the elements, we'll surely be fucked.

But what choice is there?

“How many are there?” Jon demanded, looking to Tormund. “How many corpses have walked away?”

He saw the grimace around the group. “Up to ten thousand, maybe less.” Tormund shook his head. “A lot. I don’t know.”

After the Battle of the Snows, the garrison at Winterfell stood at eight thousand. More people were dead than not.

“The Night’s Watch won’t be able to withstand such numbers,” Jon warned. “These are dead creatures – they don’t feel pain, they don’t feel restraint. Whatever weaknesses they once had, now they have none. They are the perfect soldiers.”

“If there are ten thousand of them, how can we…?” Lord Forrester protested.

“How strong are they?” the Greatjon demanded. “These dead men, what are they like? Are they stronger, weaker, dumber, what?”

“A wight is strong enough to tear a man’s head clean off,” Tormund warned. “Stronger than they once were, and surprisingly fast too. Their only weakness is in their joints – they’re clumsy when
they move. And they’ve no regard for their own skin, it makes them sacrificial.”

“And fire,” Rattleshirt added. “They burn with only a spark.”

The Greatjon scoffed. “How the bloody blazes is any flame going to survive out there?”

“The snows will hinder them too, surely?” Ser Mardrick suggested. “What of raids and ambushes – we might whittle them down, take advantage of our terrain.”

“You don't understand!” Jon almost screamed. “Every time you fight them, they could gain numbers. Every corpse, every man that dies – that’s another body for them. Their army is slow, but it is unstoppable.

“But they won't be targeting just the armies.” Jon’s gaze turned, picking out the northern mountain clansmen, the Umber lords, and the wildling chieftains. “They follow none of our laws, they have none of our sentiments. They'll go for the villages first – for the old, the women, the children. They'll target the settlements and the refugees and their numbers will keep growing!” He saw wide eyes staring at him. “A few of them are manageable, but a horde??”

The memory of the Frostfangs haunted his eyes.

The northern lords looked unnerved. Barthogan Rose’s face twisted, and Eric Burley gulped.

“Your Grace…” Leona Manderly muttered, looking across the hall. Lady Maege and the Greatjon shared glances.

Jon took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. Focus. “There are refugees flooding the Gift. There are villages and holdfasts scattered from here to Castle Black – they are the ones in the most danger. We must move and stop it quickly.”

Jon could feel it on his skin. He could feel the presence of the Other permeating the air, and eerie and unnatural energy that said the world on edge. Was Malvern still close? It felt like it was.

The white walkers were like a rolling snowball. So long as it was kept restricted, it was manageable – but once it gained in momentum, it avalanched. We never managed to hunt Malvern, Jon cursed, and this is his revenge.

With Sonagon it wouldn't have been so much a problem, but now the dragon disabled…

“Dragonglass!” Toregg was shouting. “Get your dragonglass – two arrows and a spear to every commander, pass it between your best men.”

“The roads are blocked, our horses won’t make it…” the Greatjon warned. “We might not even be able to catch up.”

So many thoughts swam through his head. Jon felt a tingle down the back of his neck, and he turned to see a great wolf lingering at the edge of the halls. The crowd murmured and stepped back at the sight of Summer, and Jon stared straight into bright golden eyes. The direwolf held a knowing gaze, and its hackles were raised.

“It is the living, versus the dead,” Jon said finally. “We have stop them quickly, or the dead will win in the long run. We have to slay Malvern before his army grows any bigger.”

“Aye,” the Lord of Bones spoke up suddenly, standing across the hall. “But armies ain’t going to work out there, we need a raid. We need to push through the fodder and go straight for the Other
itself. We need only the best and the strongest.”

“He’s right,” Tormund admitted. “We got mammoths that can push through any weather, and we got arrows enough for a few dozen damn good archers. Men might be trapped out there, but the giants could push through. We finally know where Malvern is heading, we finally got a chance to stop him.”

“And if it doesn’t work,” Maege warned, “we’ll lose whatever chance we have.”

Murmurs filled the air. Jon nodded at Rattleshirt. “See it done,” he ordered. “Ready the warbands and the giant clans.”

“If you truly need fire to kill these things,” the Greatjon muttered, “then they’ve got one hell of an advantage in this weather.”

Jon didn’t reply, but his eyes turned to the shuttered windows. The keep was shivering right now. An open flame wouldn’t survive long in the snows, and yet they needed an army of torches to fight wights.

Rattleshirt and a few others left the hall quickly, but then the doors blew open as another wildling scouting party barged through. A cold wind shrieked into the hall, every torch rippled, every shadow dancing and rippling. “We got numbers!” a man declared. “Two thousand figures on the bucket trail, another thousand on the kingsroad, and more in the woods. They’re spread real good, but all moving north.”

Tormund gripped his maul a bit tighter, spitting curse words in the Old Tongue. “They're heading to the Wall, it’s going to–!”

With all the torches and gloom, for a second it looked like a the Greatjon had two shadows looming from him. “The bloody Wall needs to survive on its own,” the Greatjon snapped. “We can't help them, we can't even–”

Jon’s head was spinning, trying to decide. The only options he saw were bloody ones, but whose blood…?

“What of the dragon?” a voice growled. Jon recognised a man with a smiling scar across his cheeks – Barthagon Rose. “The dragon – why can’t the dragon–?”

“Your fucking master poisoned the damn dragon, you cunts!” a rough voice snapped, and bodies rolled while shadows stirred.

It was hard to concentrate. Jon’s instincts were screaming, it felt like… it felt like the power the white walkers had exuded, the aura that put every living man on edge.

Summer started howling and barking, great yelps of panic from the direwolf. The hall was in an uproar. “Enough!” Jon snapped. “Gather our forces, we move out–”

Jon saw the black shape moving, but his eyes past over it. In the moment, it looked nothing more like a trick of the light. A flickering shape in a crowded hall so brief he could barely focus on it.

The torches hissed and sputtered.

And suddenly a black arm materialised from behind the throne. It seemed to pull itself from the shadows and into the foreground, and suddenly took form. A shadow without a body. “Order!” Ser Mardrick was protesting, oblivious, “Order, I sa–!”
Before anyone could even react, the shadow flourished a blade.

And a sharp wispy edge skewered through Ser Mardrick Manderly's chest.

Jon saw the knight’s platemail cleave open, he heard the hiss of blood. It was naught but a rippling shadow, its body as fluid as black ooze. Ser Mardrick only managed to make a brief gurgling noise, as the near-invisible edge cut through him.

The knight crumbled to the floor and the shadow… it was standing there, in the centre of the crowd.

It was a man, a naked figure standing tall. A man’s shadow given form. The hall froze in shock, and then exploded.

He heard a woman’s shrill voice scream.

The shock, the surprise, the stab of fear… it all raced past him in an instant. Jon didn’t understand, he didn’t know what was happening, but his body was moving and every instinct he had was screaming. Jon hands went for Dark Sister, but others already had weapons drawn. Even before Ser Mardrick fell to the stones, the Greatjon tried to tackle it, but the shadow blurred.

It moved so fast Jon couldn't even keep track. One heartbeat it was standing still, and then next it hands lunged. Lunged straight for Galbart Glover.

The Master of Deepwood Motte had his mouth hung open, unable to react in time.

Jon heard the splatter of blood, and the hiss of smoke.

“Run!” Jon screamed, the first voice breaking the frantic hush. The shadow didn’t even need its blade – its fingers just plunged into Galbart’s chest, like scooping out his heart.

Galbart was collapsing to the stones, and footsteps raced.

Two men dead in a matter of moments. Jon tried to lunge, but Toregg grabbed his shoulder, yanking him back. Soldiers lunged, blades struck out. The shadow flourished its own sword and lashed.

The sword was a wispy thing, so faint it could have been a water dancer’s edge. Every time it swiped, Jon heard the hissing of smoke through the air. The sword cut left and right, cleaving through solid plate like a hot knife through butter, and another two bodies fell.

Tormund Giantsbane dived at it, swinging his maul with a single hand, trying to push it down. The maul hissed through the shadow’s chest and met no resistance. Its body was wispy like smoke, reforming around the attack. Its hand struck out, but Tormund toppled downwards and ghosty fingers lashed against his shoulder.

And then the Greatjon attacked from behind. The lord never had time to draw his sword, he didn’t need one. Instead, great arms struck forward, as if scooping up the shapeless attacker in a massive bearhug.

The shadow twisted. Suddenly, it was solid again – and black hands grabbed a hold of the Greatjon’s arms. There was a brief clash, but the huge lord was held in place, so easily. It was strong. Inhumanely strong, powerful enough to halt the Greatjon with a single hand.

It paused, seeming to enjoy the moment. Jon couldn’t see a face, but he could imagine a little smirk
passing through it. The body posture, its stance… the shadow was mocking. Black hands tightened, and the Greatjon screamed in pain.

A man as large as the Greatjon shouldn’t have made a sound like that.

Jon gave it no chance to turn around. He darted forward and swung Dark Sister. The sword swiped straight through, hitting nothing but air.

Its hand lashed out, a dismissive backhanded swipe – more powerful than any had the right to be. Jon felt the impact on his shoulder, knocking him off his feet. Jon clattered down the steps, his staff sliding across the stones.

He felt heat. Even just from its very touch, the hand… the black hand itself was burning.

He saw it as it turned. It was a man. A figure with a hooked nose and a sharp chin. The face was unfamiliar, but all the details were obscured through the wispy smoke. With every movement, its body twisted and reformed like smoke.

It raised his blade and hacked at the bodies around it. Jon flinched, feeling the sword sweep towards him, but a hand gripped Jon’s collar and yanked him backwards. Jon scattered over the stones, toppling down the dais, while a figure with a scar across his cheek charged at the shape. The men held a shield instead of a sword, trying to bash it, but then with a single strike the wooden shield snapped in half.

Bodies were running, clashing, stirring. Men were trying to flee, others were trying to help. Men were screaming, dogs barking. It was chaos, all the while it hissed with every move it made.

Toregg intervened from behind, stabbing an obsidian spear through its chest. The shadow never even seemed to notice. Instead, its hand hooked down, and Toregg’s blood splattered.

The Greatjon tried to recover, tried to lash out. His face was twisted, screaming in rage. The shadow blurred around his body, and then suddenly it was holding a blade again. The edge skewered straight through the great lord’s stomach.

The Greatjon gasped – a queerly weak noise from such a large man. From its body language, the shadow could have scoffed as it kicked the Greatjon to the ground.

Jon was left lying on the floor, staring upwards with shock. It was strong, fast, and weapons didn’t hurt it. Its grip burnt. The shadow was standing next to the throne of Winterfell, every stone splattered in blood.

In few dozen heartbeats, eleven men were already dead.

Footsteps were running. Jon heard a direwolf howling. The shadow turned fractionally, to stare down at Jon, and it paused. Jon was left defenceless, but it didn’t target him.

Instead, it turned and went straight for Maege Mormont. The lady swung her mace upwards to meet it. Jon heard the hiss.

The shadow blade cut straight through the iron mace, and then onwards through the Maege’s neck. A lump of metal and a decapitated head fell to the ground at the same time. The metal was glowing red where the edge had cut through it. Maege Mormont died with a look of absolute shock on her face.

It turned, looking for the next victim. He saw a blonde-haired woman on her knees, trying to shake
a fallen knight with a gouged-out chest, and the shadow turned too. Leona Manderly gulped, with tears smearing down her face.

“In the name of the Seven,” she whispered. “By the Mother, I–”

The shadow slashed lazily. Lady Leona’s head cut open into smoke and gore. Footsteps were pounding; men racing from the hall, blockading the entrance. Everything spinning. Jon heard growling – Summer was standing off against the shadow, distracting it, but the direwolf seemed afraid to even go near. Run, Jon begged, gasping too hard to speak. Run.

Hands gripped his shoulders, someone was trying to drag him away. It was the girl, Meera Reed – she had her arms on him, trying to pull him up to his feet. “Move,” Meera hissed in his ear. “Move!”

The shadow figure paused, looking idly around the bloody scene. Searching for more targets. After a long moment, its gaze settled on Jon.

He had Dark Sister in his hands. Jon was on his knees, but there was no time to stand up. The shadow blurred, he heard the hissing of a burning blade.

Summer lunged it at from behind, but the shadow knocked the direwolf down with a single hand. There was a pained yelp, and Meera shot forward her spear, but the shadow swept around her. The girl was knocked to the floor, and Jon lunged with Dark Sister…

The Valyrian steel hit nothing but smoke. Jon’s leg gave out, and he clattered downwards. Already, the shadow was reforming, raising its sword high in an executioner’s slash. It never made a noise, but its face – on its wispy face, it looked like the man was roaring with silent laughter.

The blade came down.

Jon heard the hiss.

He gasped, but no cut came. Suddenly the room was filled with black smoke. He heard crackling flames, smoke howling, and shadowfire screaming. The shadow was above him, face contorted, body shivering. A white spike protruded from its chest, cleaving through its body…

It exploded. A cloud of black plumed everywhere, smearing the bodies and the stones. There was nothing solid left of it, only black dust. A foul taste hit Jon’s mouth. Ash, he realised dumbly. It’s ash.

Meera was standing in its wake, her face coated black and her eyes wide. In her hands, she was gripping half a white wooden cane, splintered at the edge. The weirwood cane, Jon realised. My cane. The wood had snapped in half when Jon fell down the steps, but the edge broke into a point. Meera recovered faster than he had. She must have snatched up the broken cane to stab it with.

There was a shock silence. All around him, everything was black and red.

He heard sounds. People were screaming. Wounded men were croaking, bodies were gurgling with blood. Tormund was staggering, while the Greatjon was on his back, gurgling as he grasped at the wound through his stomach. Jon saw dead bodies littering the throne of Winterfell.

Everybody he had been talking to; alive one moment, and dead the next. Snuffed out like a candle. Fires were hissing, the wind shrieking…
“What was that?” Meera screamed, her hands trembling. The weirwood clattered from her hands, and the edge was left charred and smoking. “What was that?”

Jon stared at the weirwood on the ground, and then down at the smear of ash over the granite stones. It was a shadow. It was an assassin. It was…

“It was fire,” Jon gasped finally. “And it could only be killed by weirwood.”
The God-King

The Starry Sept was a grand, ancient structure. It was forged of black marble walls and high arches, gleaming with painted glass windows on seven-sided spires and a great dome housing the gilded effigies of the Seven. It was an ancient building, a millennium older than the Great Sept of Baelor, and its mosaics showed images of the heroes that had been ancient since long before the Targaryens stepped foot on Westeros. The Great Sept had been made to honour the dragons, but this sept remembered the ‘heroes’ like Hugor of the Hill, Argos Sevenstar, the Falcon Knight, Qarlon the Great, Ser Gerold Grafton, and the Hammer of the Hills. The men who had first brought their seven-sided god onto foreign shores.

They said that the Starry Sept was the finest temple in the realm, perhaps only second to Great Sept of Baelor or the Temple of Highgarden. Now, the Great Sept was a cremated crater, and Euron intended that Highgarden would soon become a mausoleum of the damned.

To his surprise, Euron discovered that he actually quite liked the Starry Sept – once he had removed all of the septons, of course. The Heavenly Dome was indeed a structure fit for a god, thousands of years old and securely built, extravagant in its wealth. He had taken the Starry Sept as his palace, and any god needed a temple.

Euron stood barefoot and bare-chested on the marble floor, staring up to the mosaic of the night’s sky painted onto the dome, as a smile played about his lips. Euron wore only a set of leather breeches, naked from the waist upwards except for his eyepatch. His hair was still slick with salt, and the smell of dampness lingered around him.

“Do you not think it is amazing, brother?” Euron mused as he walked. “How quickly everything changes?”

Across the pews, Aeron Greyjoy, High Priest of the Drowned King, moved to his knees. His brother’s eyes were on the floor constantly; Aeron never dared to meet Euron’s gaze. His voice was deep, solemn, and afraid. “As you say, Your Worship,” Aeron intoned.

“Hm. Take Qarlon the Great over there.” Euron pointed to the painted marble engraving of faded colours, showing a muscular man on his knees, raising a seven-pointed star to a hilly sky. “In his day, he was called Qarlon the Butcher, Qarlon the Fool, Qarlon the Dragonfeed. He was a would-be conqueror that brought his empire to ruin after challenging the dragons. And yet, now, two thousand years later – Qarlon the Great is honoured as the last defender of the Faith on Andalos.” Euron shook his head, still smiling. “The septons proclaimed that he was great, so there he is – Qarlon the Great. Their seven gods wanted their hero, and history was rewritten at their will.”

“False gods, all, Your Worship,” Aeron said stiffly. “They were deluded by false idols.”

Euron pitied Aeron sometimes; his brother was such an… unimaginative man. It was a curse that so many in his family had shared.

On his brother’s forehead, the brand of the kraken was still raw. It had been a crude metal brand – a lump of circular steel and prongs twisted into tentacles, heated over the flames until the kraken
glowed red like blood. Euron had offered his disbelievers forgiveness, but only if they branded themselves with his mark.

Aeron had been the very first to press the burning metal against his own skin.

His brother was a tall and gaunt man, still struggling to recover from his captivity onboard the Silence. Aeron’s bones protruded from his skin, like veiny parchment stretched over a skeleton, and his legs were so frail he needed two walking sticks to move. Without his beard and with his head shaved bald, Aeron looked like a different man. He looked two decades older than he actually was. The mutilated, scorched skin on his forehead was prone to weeping, often oozing blood and pus down his features.

Yet Aeron wore now silk and gossamer rather than rags – long white robes that were too loose for his body, garments that flowed across the marble like tentacles. The old priests of the Drowned God had roamed the beaches and lived like hermits, but Euron insisted that wealth should be taken by the holy. The Damphair had seen the err of his ways; he had witnessed Euron’s godliness, and Euron had rewarded him. *He is to be the prophet to my god*, Euron mused, *and it feels good to have a brother again*.

One by one, the Drowned Men had all converted to the new religion that Euron offered. The Cult of the Kraken, some named it. The Acolytes of the Drowned God Reborn.

Every night now, faithful and the converts ate like lords – but the unfaithful of the city were left to hunger. Converting the hearts of an entire city became surprisingly quick once he controlled the stomachs.

Euron grinned, swaggering forward to place his hand across Aeron’s shoulders. Despite everything, his brother still flinched slightly with his touch.

“History is malleable, brother,” Euron chucked. “Do not linger in it. We shall destroy the past, and seize control of the future.”

Across the dome, both brothers watched as the workers stepped forward with large hammers to demolish the priceless marble engraving of the Qarlon the Great. Men who had once prayed in this temple were now destroying it with hammers and chisels. All around him, the Starry Sept was being transformed.

The sounds of stone chipping and clanking filled the great dome. They were rebuilding the Starry Sept in Euron’s image. They had roped workers from across Oldtown, pressed them into the sept – his followers had captured masons and stoneworkers by the dozen. Euron had ordered that all signs of the Seven should be struck from these walls, but he saw no reason why what remained couldn’t be reappropriated to his new image.

Seven-sided stars had become seven-sided tentacles. The statue of the Warrior, of course, had been reshaped and carved to Euron’s own likeness. The statue of the Maiden had been reshaped to look like Daenerys Targaryen, the woman who would become his queen. Now, the statues of Euron and Daenerys stood at the front of pillars, both of them wearing metal crowns fastened with mortar onto marble. The other statues had required a bit more of creativity.

The Father became Balon Greyjoy – the brother who had set him on the path – and the Smith became Victarion Greyjoy – the brother who would bring his bride to him – but they were both put at the far back behind Euron’s statue. He was debating getting rid of those two altogether, actually. The Mother was recarved into a topless, weeping wanton with no mouth – to glorify Euron’s ship, the Silence. The masons had done a grand job in shaping the hooded figure of the Stranger into that
of a faceless man bearing tentacles wrapped around its body, and a bulbous eye on his chest.

The difficulty had been with the Crone, however. Euron had been torn as to what he should honour with it, but eventually he had decided when he noticed how easily the Crone’s hooked nose could become a beak. He ordered the masons to carve the hunched back woman into a bird. Make it into a statue of a crow, he had commanded. Even now the workmen were still chipping away, refashioning the woman’s face into a stubby beak. Euron was the Crow’s Eye, after all.

A few of the masons had resisted, and others had tried to incite rebellion. Once, a group of workers had started plotting assassination, and sharpening chisels to be used as daggers. The glass candles quickly saw such things brewing, and their punishments had provided the proper incentive for the rest.

Those who wept too much had their eyes pulled out, for what use did a man that wouldn’t see god’s work done have for eyes? Still, Euron wouldn’t refuse any the chance to see the glory of the new faith rising in this hall; hanged men had been be left to stare from the rafters above, and disembodied eyes left in rows atop tables to gaze unblinkingly upon the holy.

Euron’s gaze lingered on the statues. Even sacred objects – especially sacred objects – could be transformed. In another thousand years, perhaps nobody would even remember the Seven. Euron would see it so.

The city of Oldtown wasn’t so old anymore. That city was dead. It had been devastated, aye, but now it was rising again, harder and stronger. The old reign fell with the tower, and Euron’s command was growing. The whole city had witnessed his power.

He had decided to follow the example of the dragon conqueror, and to rename the site of his arrival. Euron had commanded that the city of Oldtown would now be called God’s Arising.

“What do you think, brother?” Euron demanded, nodding at the statue that used to the be the Warrior, but now had a kraken carved onto its chest. “Does it fit my likeliness, or should I have the stonemason executed?” Euron cocked his head, staring at his brother curiously. “As a holy man,” there was a quiet sneer on the words, “surely you must have an opinion on my temple?”

Aeron hesitated, biting his lip but trying not to squirm. “I have seen the Drowned God’s will,” the High Priest intoned. “I do naught but serve.”

Only months ago, he was trying to incite a rebellion against me, Euron considered. Now, he leads my sermons. By the gods, faithful men are such fascinating creatures. “The last priests that walked these walls,” Euron teased, “they thought they knew their god’s will too.”

Every septon that had been in the sept had been executed when it fell. Euron had beheaded the septons and built a monument in the courtyard of their skulls, and then he had stripped the septas and gave them to his men as whores. “They were blind to the true divinity lying beneath them.”

“Aren’t we all?” Euron chuckled. “Blind men scuffling around in the dark, as a man I knew once phrased it. The light itself is meaningless, but what matters is the will to see more.”

Aeron stood straighter, old bones creaking. Euron turned around, and cupped his brother’s gaunt cheeks with both hands. “What of you, brother?” Euron demanded. “Will you be my prophet, or are you but another blind man that doesn’t deserve to keep his eyes?”

“I will serve,” Aeron whispered.

Euron’s grin widened. “Then will you see with me?”
The Drowned Man gulped and then nodded. Euron laughed, as he motioned at a nearby slave to pour them two cups of shade of the evening. Wonderfully, the Citadel had possessed its own stocks imported from Qarth, enough to sate him for months. Him and his chosen few.

Aeron had been forced to see divinity on that night, and now he didn’t try to resist. His brother wouldn’t admit it, but the shade gave him an insight, a clarity into the divine workings of the world that ordinary mortals could scarce comprehend. They both gulped the blue wine down together.

“Glory to Sh’Caegloth,” Aeron intoned, his eyes widening and his body sagging as the shade of the evening took hold.

Sh’Caegloth. Euron had chosen to name the kraken after a Stygian word – it meant ‘The Awakened’. The first of the Old Ones to emerge from a millennia-long sleep.

As the shade of the evening flooded his body, Euron could feel it. Even now, he could feel the power of the ancient kraken looming in the waters. Ever since the ceremony at Oldtown, there had been storms circling the bay and high tides across the coast – the weather itself distorted with the ancient’s presence.

He could feel it. He could feel it stirring; a massive, inhuman power, bubbling with rage like a simmering volcano…

Aeron nearly sagged with the pressure, the blue wine staining his lips. Euron just laughed, stumbling over the marble floors like a drunkard. All around him, the sept was filled with ghosts. Ghosts of drowned men, a hundred thousand eyes twisted in terror.

Mere weeks ago the waves had swept through the city. The bridges had all collapsed, leaving those on the inlet isles stranded while all others ran for cover. The Starry Sept was one of the few buildings sturdy enough to hold against the floods. The smallfolk had taken shelter within the sept, and they had been huddling like sheep when Euron’s reavers broke through the doors.

The entire city was still trembling, trying to come terms with its new fate. The city of God’s Arising was only just being born and, like all births, it was a messy, bloody thing. Destruction always preceded creation.

Euron sat on the crystal throne of the Starry Sept, grinning from eye to eye as he stared into the domed heavens. *This city is but the first*, he told himself. *Only the first to fall.*

Across the horizon, he felt Sh’Caegloth stir. Controlling the kraken had proven more difficult than anticipated, but he was getting there. The ancient beast was well and truly bound, and slowly, piece by piece, it was falling to Euron’s will. The ancient magicks of Krakenbinder were powerful, irresistible.

*The proof of my divinity.*

The God-King’s good mood lasted right up until he saw a slave escorted through the hall of his temple. It was a squirrely man formerly a steward of the Citadel, but now he had kraken brands across his neck and arms. He walked with a limp before Euron, his hooked nose black and oozing. The slave was trembling, and Euron could see failure written across his face.

“Your Worship,” the slave muttered. “I bring news from the commander of the guard.”

“Speak,” Euron ordered.

“The…” The slave had to gulp. “The lord is unsuccessful, Your Worship.” The slave gritted his
teeth, body spasming with raw fear. “Lord Goodbrother returns from Citadel’s vaults empty-handed. He and his men are yet making their way through the city.”

There was no immediate reaction. Euron paused, turning to look at the rubble that once was the statue of Qarlon the Great. “Did you know that in older times,” Euron said slowly, “the Andal warlords would execute any messenger that brought them bad news? It was a means of deterrence, you see – they wished to discourage any from sending bad news.”

“Your Worship…” The slave might have pissed himself in terror.

Euron pointed to the brazier hanging from the walls, and the flames flickering away. “Brand yourself once more,” Euron ordered, “and pray that my rage dissipates once you do.”

The slave did as well. He staggered over to the brazier, trembling, but squeezed the burning metal against his skin once more without obvious hesitation, screaming as flesh bubbled and boiled. At this point, Euron had ensured that every man and woman feared him more than they feared death itself. He had made his wrath known. Once you hold their fear and their lives, Euron mused, their hearts and minds follow.

There were other supplicants that came to see him. Ironborn reavers came to claim rewards or settle disputes, and lords and merchants came to beg for food or favours. To the former he gave nearly whatever they wished, but to the latter he gave nothing – not until they branded themselves with the sigil of the kraken. After an hour, the sept reeked of char. It smelled like victory.

Yet none of it could expunge the foul taste of Lord Goodbrother’s failure.

By the time the lord himself arrived up the seventy-seven steps into the temple, Euron went to fetch his sword. The God-King was still bare-chested, laying Red Rain across his legs, softly stroking the blade while Lord Gorold Goodbrother walked in with his head hung, his shoulder slumped. Euron’s face twisted with the sight. Failure, is there anything more revolting?

“Your Worship,” Lord Goodbrother said, lowering himself to the stones.

“Where is my book, Lord Goodbrother?” the God-King of Westeros demanded, pacing over the marble floor. “Have you disappointed me once more?”

Lord Gorold twitched nervously, bowing his head to the marble steps. “Forgive me, Your Worship…”

“Forgive you?” Euron turned around, glaring down from atop the steps. “So then it is your fault?”

“No, I… I tried…” His head sagged, sweat dripping down his brow. “I failed you, Your Worship. I worked to the best of my ability, but it was not enough.”

Clearly not. “Ah.” Euron nodded, stepping down the steps slowly. “Then the problem is simply incompetence, not insolence?”

Lord Goodbrother’s face was pale. He bowed his head further, but he didn’t dare protest. Euron allowed his lips to curl into a blue smile. At the base of the steps, Aeron lowered his head. “Lord Goodbrother is a loyal subject, Your Worship.”

“I’m sure,” Euron mocked. “Loyal.”

Loyal only because I hold his entire fate in the palm of my hand. With a single thought from Euron, Hammerhorn might be literally wiped off the map, and everyone knew it. Sh’Caegloth had ensured
“Tell me what happened, Lord Goodbrother,” Euron commanded.

The lord gulped. “We tracked the vaults as you commanded. The dungeons under the Citadel – where the old scrolls are located. We interrogated the archmaesters for the tome’s location, forced them to surrender their keys,” Lord Gorold explained. “Except the door was barricaded from the inside, Your Worship. They tried to set fire to the chambers as we were breaking through.”

“Who tried?” Euron demanded.

“I do not know,” Lord Gorold admitted. “Whoever they were, they killed themselves in the blaze. Their corpses are unrecognisable.”

Euron paused. Perhaps one of the inner members of the Conclave had committed suicide, and attempted to burn the evidence with them? It was possible, and Euron had been wondering how many of the old guard of maesters still existed. Most maesters didn’t know the history of their own order, but relics of the past still lingered. The knights of the mind, he mused.

One of Euron’s first acts after taking the city had been to drown near all of them in the saltwater; from the archmaesters down to the chainless acolytes. Every man of the Citadel they could gather had been executed, save for a useful captured few.

“But we believed it likely that the lower levels remained untouched from the fire,” Lord Goodbrother continued. “The walls were stone and the fire did not spread down to the private vaults. But the lock was left warped, its mechanism jammed, and the stairs collapsed. We had to excavate the route downwards, it took near a fortnight to break through. And the stone, the black stone didn’t cleave easily…”

Yes, it wouldn’t, Euron agreed. The lowest vaults of the Citadel were made out of fused black stone, the same sort that the foundations of the Hightower were built from. It was unnaturally hard stone, a remnant of an era long past. “And that is where you failed,” Euron said sadly, shaking his head. “You assured me there wasn’t a problem.”

“I didn’t believe there…” Lord Gorold hesitated. “I didn’t think there was. But the vaults were empty when we got there, Your Worship. Somebody had already taken the book from the pedestal.”

Now isn’t that a problem? Euron’s smiling eye lingered on the lord, but all the while his other eye was glaring. His fingers slowly played with Red Rain, his hands running over the razor-sharp edge. The lord was staring at Euron’s feet, pale pink toes spread over the marble.

Perhaps I should kill him, Euron considered, judging the lord quietly. How useful will his death be?

“We found other books,” Lord Goodbrother pleaded. “The rest of the archives, old manuscripts, they were intact…”

“I do not care for other books,” Euron snapped. “I gave you command to bring that one to me – Blood and Fire is the only tome that interests me.”

“Forgive me, Your Worship.” Once, Gorold Goodbrother had been a strong lord, but now he was cowering in Euron’s presence. “Forgive me… The book was already gone…”

“Who stole it?” Aeron asked, with an unsteady step forward. “The maesters?”
“They plead ignorance,” Lord Goodbrother confessed. “We ask questions sharply, they say they knew nothing of those vaults. Even the surviving archmaesters claim they were archaic.”

Unfortunately, that was likely true. Euron was quiet, contemplating silently. “What of your glass candles?” Aeron asked uncertainly, looking between Euron and the lord. Slowly, the High Priest limped up the steps. “Your Worship, could your powers track it…?”

“The glass candles see naught but darkness,” Euron said with annoyance. “It seems that our thief has blocked the candle’s vision.”

That was yet another source of irritation, made all the more frustrating that he had sacrificed the man who used to scry for him. Euron himself wasn’t so skilled with the glass candles. He had tried to pinpoint the book, but it was lost in shadows.

“Blocked?” Aeron asked, blinking. “Is that… Is that possible?”

“There is a technique to it. It is an uncommon skill, but not a particularly difficult one,” Euron replied with a shrug. “To hide from light, you need only cloak yourself in darkness.”

Still, there were only a limited number of people who knew of the art of cloaking from scryers, Euron considered. Unfortunately, all of the people on that list could be troubling in one way or another.

Lord Gorold and Aeron glanced to one another, their gazes filled with uncertainty. Euron paced, staring between the marble statues as he thought. “The gates are sealed, the walls patrolled. We secure the surrounding area,” Euron decided. “So perhaps the thief is still in the city. Search the town. Find that book, Lord Goodbrother. I named you Lord of God’s Arising, are you not?”

“You did. But our forces…” The lord gulped. “Forgive me, but the militia – I have doubts over their loyalty. We have not rebuilt our numbers, too many of our men are untested.”

Another frustration, something else that Euron had sacrificed. His position in the city was made all the more tenuous ever since he had been forced to kill near eight thousand of his own men. The ironborn had tried to bolster their numbers from converts in the city, but it wasn’t the same. Not yet.


“I… I shall strive to do so, Your Worship.” Lord Goodbrother kept his eyes low.

Euron’s smiling eye narrowed. “Strive,” he repeated. “Perhaps the issue here is motivation, rather the capability?”

“Your Worship, I –”

“You have twelve daughters, do you not?”


“Eleven. Pity.” The eldest was a mother herself, he recalled, the youngest barely a girl. Euron cocked his head, stepping forward to embrace the lord. His arms wrapped around the man’s shoulders, but Lord Gorold did not react.

“Every day that you disappoint me,” Euron whispered finally, “I will rape one of your daughters.”
Lord Goodbrother’s face paled.

“Starting from the eldest, working down. I will have one of them every night until that book is mine,” Euron promised. “I will leave the girls alive, but each of them will take my seed and raise my bastard. For every night that you fail me, you will raise a living, breathing reminder of that time you disappointed, Lord Goodbrother. Do you understand?”

The old lord couldn’t speak, but he managed a scared nod. “And then, on the twelfth night, I will begin to rape your sons. Your proud boys, I will leave them broken and ruined.” Euron’s gaze turned slightly towards Aeron, who kept his head on the floor. “You have three sons – triplets, I believe? They will take me to night fourteen.”

Just the look in Lord Goodbrother’s eyes, that dread… it was glorious. He knew exactly what would happen if Euron was challenged. He knew the devastation that the God-King could summon.

“And so on the fifteenth night?” Euron mused. “On that night, I will have to rape you.” Euron chuckled, patting the man on the back. “It will not be a pleasant experience for you, my lord. Do you understand?” There was no reply. His eyes narrowed. “I require a response, Lord Goodbrother.”

His voice was weak. “I understand,” he whispered.

“Then you have a fortnight, to fix your mistake. The earlier the better, for your family’s sake.” Euron turned to walk away. “I want that book, Lord Goodbrother.”

It was the same threat that Euron had given to the survivors from House Hightower, and the other great houses of the city. Everyone who had been in the Hightower itself had perished, including Lord Leyton, but many of the highborn – women and children especially – had taken refuge in the city itself before the battle.

One time, Ser Baelor Hightower had thought to challenge him, attempting to incite a rebellion as the eldest surviving heir to Hightower. But then Euron had taken his sister, the Mad Maid Malora, in the middle of the Starry Sept itself. While her family watched. Euron had promised that it would happen again and again for as long as Ser Baelor tried to resist.

He was told that she was now showing the first signs of pregnancy.

Euron watched as Lord Gorold walked away, shoulders sloped and hands shivering. The lord might try to run, but Euron would see his intentions as soon as he made that decision. The threat of the glass candles was one of Euron’s greatest weapons; as far as his ‘allies’ were concerned, Euron was considered omniscient. The illusion was important.

Which makes it all the more troubling that someone capable of blocking the sight is in the city, Euron considered.

“Walk with me, Aeron,” he ordered. “Come.”

His brother picked up his canes and hobbled after him. Euron walked straight towards the balcony, staring out over the moonless night sky, and the bonfires burning in the city below.

At dark night, in the gloom, it looked almost… peaceful. Like a black ocean at rest. There were torches and camps in the middle of the plazas, and stone strewn over the streets. Smallfolk and soldiers were left scavenging through wreckage, and buildings flooded streets. The canals had been flooded and damned by all the debris, the cobbled streets were left wrecked, and scores of cityfolk
homeless.

Even now, they were still finding masses of bloated, unrecognisable corpses washing up on the coasts.

Closer to the waterfront, barely any building larger than a hut still stood. The harbour had collapsed, the centuries-old wharves had been scoured away by a single lash of a gargantuan tentacle. Any ships that could potentially be repaired had been dragged to shore, and wreckage was being salvaged into crude hulls. Even now, men were scurrying over makeshift piers. Soon, Euron would have something of a fleet again – a poor fleet, but it would serve.

The city of God’s Arising was being born anew.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Euron whispered quietly. “Remove the safety and the wealth, remove the civilisation, and you see something else. Something raw.” Something pure.

Aeron didn’t reply, his eyes were fixed at Euron’s feet. In the ruins of the city, merchants who had once lived like kings were scouring beaches for scraps of rotten food.

To the south, he could see the ugly ruin of the Hightower still staining the horizon. A great skeletal structure that stretched across the water, a stony corpse lying horizontal. The debris was so thick that it had jammed in the bay. Euron’s men had taken to using the ruins of the Hightower as a makeshift bridge from the Battle Isle to the mainland. The Tower Bridge, they called it.

On the Battle Isle itself, all that remained of the tower was a jagged stump of stone. Half the cliffs of the isle had collapsed with the tower, and what remained at was stumpy chunk of rock jutting upwards. The foundations of the Hightower were surprisingly still largely intact – a labyrinthine black stone structure that the ironborn were rebuilding as a fortress, and a prison.

After the Drowning of Oldtown, they had captured so many survivors. Highborn soldiers, sons and daughters, wives and fathers – hundreds, perhaps thousands, were being held in the Hightower’s primordial foundations.

The threat remained; obey my rule, Euron had offered, otherwise the kraken will return.

First he had started with the highborn, and then the city watch itself had been forced to serve Euron’s interests. After that, many of the cityfolk had been conscripted or enslaved. He held enough hostages and enough fear to ensure compliance.

“Lord Goodbrother spoke truly, Your Worship,” Aeron said after long quiet. “Your Worship, our forces are depleted, our men stretched thin.”

“Then we must recover them. Look down at the plaza, what do you see?” Euron pointed to the bonfires, the refugee camps. “There are our men. And women, and children. They will be our army.”

“They are greenlanders. They are our enemies, we destroyed their home, stole their riches.” Aeron frowned. “They cower, Your Worship, but they will not comply. They will never follow you, not willingly.”

Oh, you poor simple-minded fool, Aeron. Have you no imagination? Euron turned and sneered. “Then is that not your purpose, High Priest? To show them godliness. This a city of lost sheep, give them faith again. Convert them, as you yourself converted.”

His brother looked nervous. “My sermons are growing, there have been believers…” Aeron
grimaced. “But there is dissent as well. They are waiting for a sign of weakness, for a chance to spark a rebellion.”

“Let them wait.”

“Your Worship…” He sounded pained, his tongue stuttering. “And what of the dragon’s forces assembling at Highgarden? We hold Three Towers by a thread, Blackcrown is burned… and Brightwater Keep is manned by only a token force. We haven’t the men.”

*A dragon.* Euron only laughed, which made Aeron all the more worried. “We do not have the ships, we do not have a fleet anymore. The garrisons left behind on the Arbor have surely fallen.”

The High Priest gulped. “Forgive me, Your Worship, but even the Iron Islands lacks the king’s presence, Pyke surely notices your absence. We have no grip on the land we hold…!”

“I don’t care about land.” Euron’s voice turned sharp. “And ships could not interest me less. Are you still so narrow-minded, Aeron? Has the shade of the evening done nothing for you?”

Aeron faltered, scared. Euron turned, pointing again at the glimmer of the bonfires in the below the temple. “What I want… they only thing that I need… is out there. The people.”

“Those people are starved and terrified.” His voice was weak.

“Good,” Euron laughed. “I want their hearts and minds. I want their love, I want their hate, I want their devotion. I am their God first, their king second.”

He had always known this would be the difficult stage. The Battle of Oldtown had been so worthwhile, but it had also left Euron’s own fleet crippled. Where once he had a fleet of legions, now there were only a handful of ships remaining to him. It would take time to rebuild his forces and to enforce his new rule over the area.

The kraken helped, but it had to be used sparingly. Euron had allowed Sh’Caegloth to stew and simmer unseen in the depths, while he quietly tested and practiced his control. The danger was familiarity. Men became accustomed to what they could see. The more they witnessed divinity, the more they were capable of preparing for it. Uncertainty and fear were two of his greatest weapons; two advantages that could be lost by overuse.

And so Euron had kept his kraken out of sight, and he had blocked all contact out of the city. All the witnesses were left crazed by panic, and it became harder for anyone outside to verify the truth. Euron wanted there to be doubt – scepticism was a god’s best friend. It gave him impact. It gave him time.

*So much to do,* Euron thought with a sigh, as he watched the flickering lights. *So little time.*

It was working, piece by piece. His ironborn ruled the city, near every maester and septon had been given to the ocean, and the Cult of the Kraken was steadily growing. After every disaster, fanatics were born.

More and more men of Oldtown were carving the sigil of the kraken onto their foreheads.

Euron stared out over the city, and wondered how long it would take. *My queen,* he thought quietly. *Wait for me. I am coming.*

A cold chill blew in from the bay, and finally Euron chose to go inside. Aeron was stammering, his body sagging with every step as he tried to keep pace. Euron walked confidently, listening to the rattle of chisels around him.
He walked straight past the stonemasons, and the men all stopped and bowed. Euron stared over the mutilated effigies of the Seven, where the workers were carving the Stranger’s cloak into a kraken’s tentacles and reshaping the Crone’s face into a beak. Euron stared at their progress, and then frowned. “What is that?” he demanded.

The mason stammered at his presence. “A crow, Your Worship. Tis a crow.”

“I told you to give it three eyes,” Euron scoffed. “An eye on the forehead too. It should have three eyes.”

The men nodded, and promised that they would. The misshapen crow stared back at him blankly. *I'll put that statue in the corner,* Euron decided. *He deserves to watch.*

There was the sound of a cane as his brother caught up. Aeron was already wheezing, out of breath. Euron reached a decision.

“Put your sermons to use, Aeron,” Euron ordered. “Rile up the militia and the believers, let them know to search for this missing book themselves.”

“Your Worship, that might cause…” His voice trailed off. What were you going to say? Riots? Panic?

“Good. Let us use the resources we have, let’s find a use for their fear. Let the city know that the book is important to me.”

His brother stiffened, and then nodded. “As you say, Your Worship.”

Euron turned, and strolled away. Aeron looked pained for a long time, but finally his brother had to ask.

“Forgive me, Your Worship,” Aeron called with a gulp. “But why is the Targaryen book so important? There are many books. Surely this one is not worth the difficulty…?”

“This book is special.” Euron turned, raising an eyebrow and shaking his head. “It is… call it something of an instruction manual.”

“Is there not a duplicate?” Aeron asked. “The maesters… surely they would have made copies?”

“Not of this one.” He scoffed. “This is a blood-soaked tome that the maesters have kept for over two hundred years, only a single copy was allowed to exist in the deepest vaults.”

His brother hesitated, but the confusion was still thick in his eyes. “And this… this was why you invaded Oldtown?” the Drowned Priest said dumbfounded. “For a book?”

“Well, it wasn’t the only reason,” Euron admitted. “But yes, it was one of the motivations.”

Aeron still looked confused. *Poor man.* “The book is titled *Blood and Fire.*” Euron said slowly. “More oft, though, the tome is known as the ‘Death of Dragons’.”

It was a field of study that many, many people would be interested in nowadays, and this tome was perhaps the most notable work on the matter. Euron laughed, and turned around. “Yeah, I’m going to need that book quickly.”

He left Aeron standing on the marble mosaics, blinking and looking lost.

Euron spent the rest of the evening staring out over the city from his quarters, hypnotised by the
sleeping fires of the city. When he went to bed, there were two weeping highborn maidens, both barely past womanhood, waiting for him manacled to his bedpost. When he eventually fell asleep, he dreamt of a great smoking abyss beneath the ocean, and tentacles writhing in the dark.

He was awakened early by the faintest rays of dawn, and by the singing of the candles. Euron grinned.

*It is now. My friend arrives.* Euron took a deep gulp of shade of the evening.

Euron threw a cloak over his shoulders, leaving it unfastened, as he stepped down towards the temple hall. He walked straight outside through the oak and silver doors, blinking against the morn’s sunlight.

The world was beating, ribbons of power like veins bleeding into the sky from the charnel-pits. The Starry Square was filled with supplicants come for their morning bread, and he saw the world in shades of blue and red.

At the sight of their God-King, the crowds writhed. Some of the people were cheering, others screaming.

From Euron’s personal guard, Mall the Monstrous looked shocked to see him out in the open. All of Euron’s Grotesques were out in force, securing the temple grounds. And yet among them, he saw ghosts. Men with cloven shoulders, men with shorn ghostly arms, and Mall standing with shards of spectral bone jutting from his ear. They were standing atop the steps, oblivious to their own brutally mutilated corpses. Euron grinned, standing amidst the ghosts only he could see.

“Your Worship,” the great, deformed man asked. Mall was a fearsome man clad in mismatched armour. “What happens, why are you–”

His voice was cut off by a cry of alarm from the Holy Gate. Euron only laughed, the shade burning in his blood. *The dead are walking,* Euron thought, grinning from the ear to ear as the crowds below roiled.

Bells were ringing from gatehouse. At first it was confusion, and then panic. Euron heard the thud of metal, followed by a painful squelch. There were the twangs of bowstrings, but they didn’t seem effectual. Suddenly, the cries were cut off by a solid crush, of something big and heavy against wood. Euron heard the gates splintering under tremendous force.

“Under attack!” an ironborn cried. “Under attack from the plaza!”

Even in the sleepy hour, the noise and clamour started to spread. “What’s happening?” Aeron demanded, hobbling from the temple. “What is happening? How many?”

“Stay back, Your Worship!” Mall the Monstrous boomed, clutching his warhammer as he tried to push Euron to safety. Euron just shooed him away, too busy laughing.

“How many?” Aeron demanded, as another crack of a battering ram against wood filled the air.

“One!” the cry came, as guards surged. “There’s one, it’s… it’s… oh God…”

Thud. The sound of a steel boot crashing through solid wood. He heard the chiming of arrows bouncing uselessly off thick metal plate.

It sounded like a battle spreading up the Steps of the Gods. A very one-sided battle. “One??” Aeron gasped.
“No,” Euron chuckled, folding his arms. “There’s actually two.”

He saw an ugly grey steel helm rising up the stairs. A faceless titan wearing a tattered grey cloak, a stained and torn rag that might have once been white. Guards surged forward, soldiers raising weapons. They shouted for the figure to halt, but received naught but silence. Euron could have stopped them, but he didn’t. He wanted to watch.

A giant blade swept outwards, cleaving straight through a pike, and then iron chainmail and through flesh beneath. Two ironborn fell, flesh and gore smearing over the seventy-seven steps. The figure didn’t even break stride. Euron’s men tried to fight it – one of them stabbed a spear into the creature’s back, but it didn’t pierce the steel. Euron only chuckled as the golem crushed the man’s skull with a single hand.

“Stay back, Your Worship!” Mall the Monstrous roared, his warhammer swinging, uneven legs loping. “Stay bac–”

Clang. The warhammer chimed against the creature’s head. The steel armour was beyond thick, it was like a walking castle of iron. There was a shallow dent in its skull, but the golem didn’t even stagger. Its fist lashed out, and suddenly Mall the Monstrous had never looked so small. Bone crunched, the warhammer fell.

A man like that could put Victarion to shame, Euron mused, as he started to walk down the stairs, brushing past bodies and ghosts.

“Your Worship!” Aeron screamed behind. “Your Worship!”

“Stay back!” one of his guards shouted. “Protect His Worship.”

They tried to pull him back, but Euron just stepped out, half-naked, into the fray.

Up close, it was huge. It stood nine-foot tall; it had the body of a man, but such a thing couldn’t be called human. The steel sword raised high, like an executioner strike above Euron’s head. The God-King just opened his arms wide, and laughed.

The golem froze like a statue, mid-lunge. The whole courtyard turned still.

Eleven bodies and a shattered gate littered the approach. There had been no warning, no alert – nothing but a beast of man suddenly stepping out of the plaza and breaking through the gate. Euron could hear the ramble from outside – of the crowds of smallfolk staring at the bloody path the golem had carved. The mob was stirring at the broken gates and the God-King was exposed, but Euron wasn’t concerned.

“Well?” Euron shouted beyond the frozen golem. “You have my attention. Come on out now.”

“Your Worship…!” a guard intervened, but Euron waved him back. The golem wasn’t here to kill him, rather somebody was trying to make a sales pitch. ‘Look at how poor your current men are’, Euron mused, ‘look at easily my man pushes through them’.

There were a few heartbeats of uncertain silence, and then finally a single, unremarkable figure stepped forth from the crowd; a balding old man with slumped shoulders in a cheap brown cloak. A man that had been waiting in the Starry Plaza; he likely snuck in while his golem provided the distraction.

He looked like a scholar or a septon, perhaps; a grandfatherly figure with kind, aged eyes. He walked carefully, stepping through the splinters of the gate, brushing over the broken shafts of
arrows. The golem lowered its sword.

Lord Qyburn paused, looking between the armed men and the bloody stairs. He lifted up the hem of his robes, and he bowed his head deeply before Euron. The golem waited, still and silent as a grave.

“Your Grace,” he said smoothly. “Forgive the intrusion, but I feel like an audience is deserved. I wished to make myself known, and I hoped that you might respect an entrance of strength.” He took another step. His voice was cautious, careful. “I hoped we might come to terms with each other. Perhaps we each have abilities and resources that the other might benefit from?” The old man took another step. “Perhaps a partnership between us might prove… fruitful?”

Nobody spoke, all eyes were fixed on the mountainous golem. The answer to so many problems. Lord Qyburn the Necromancer had finally arrived in the city. Euron smiled, still feeling delirious from the shade of the evening.

“I knew you would be coming to me,” Euron giggled. “I dreamt it.”

Sarella

This city is going mad, she thought. Sarella ran through the ragged cobbled streets, hearing the clatter of iron boots behind her.

“Stop!” a voice cried. “Halt!”

Sarella didn’t stop. She darted through the maze of alleys, jumping over the debris and flotsam littering the path. Wrecked houses and shops were smeared across the streets; many of the stones walls had survived, but the roofs had been torn off by the water. It left the streets and alleyways feeling haunted, surrounded by the broken husks of buildings. She could scarcely even recognise the city anymore.

Ahead of her, a wall had been half-collapsed in the flood, and Sarella jumped over it so smoothly her cloak barely touched the stone. Behind her, bells were ringing.

“Halt!” the watchmen cried. “Stop in the name of the God-King!”

The voices bore Reachmen accents. The men wore the uniforms of the City Watch of Oldtown, but the rose on their breastplates had been scratched off. It wasn’t ironborn chasing her; these men had likely fought against the ironborn. Two months ago, these men would have arrested anybody who proclaimed loyalty to the Crow’s Eye.

But that was two months ago. Two months. It felt like a lifetime.

Heavy boots scattered through grimy puddles. The stones were slick with rain, a light drizzle filling the air. Sarella was panting deeply, but she didn’t stop. Two months ago, she had been an acolyte at the Citadel. Now, she was being hunted. They were all being hunted.

Euron Greyjoy had given every man woman and child in Oldtown only a single choice; concede or suffer.

The bells were ringing. She was light and lean, she was a good sprinter. Not even Nym had been able to outrace Sarella over the red sands when they were young, and Obara had joked that she was
half a horse. Her fondest memories were running over the beaches with her father and her sisters, roaming through caves in search of lost treasure. Sarella could outrun any guard in the City Watch, but the difficulty was if they surrounded her. The guards were ringing heavy bells, were calling for more support. Sarella would not be able to run forever.

*But what choice do I have?* she cursed. *Find a place to hide? Take shelter in some winesink?* It all depended on whether they had recognised her as a girl, or if they thought they were chasing a boy.

Her heart was racing, feet pounding. She didn’t understand why they were chasing her, not really, but these men seemed desperate to catch her. It was as though all of the guardsmen had just turned fanatic, nearly overnight, amidst the ironborn occupation. The whole city was crazed under the kraken’s shadow.

*Maester Yandel named Euron Greyjoy as the Bloodstone Emperor come again,* she recalled. She hadn’t understood what that meant at the time. But then she saw men carving krakens into their own flesh.

Boots clattered, bells chiming mad. *This whole city is mad.*

Sarella didn’t stop running.

She had seen Pate again. Pate the pig boy. She had taken refuge with the resistance, a ragtag group secluding themselves in a rundown tavern in the slums of the broken city – as they waited for news. Sarella had heard whispers that Brightwater Keep had surrendered to the ironborn, but they were truly waiting on word from Highgarden. Waiting for help from their lord paramount. Sarella was with the resistance of Oldtown; she had been keeping her head down and disguised as just another homeless wench – a thieving Summer Isles beggar – when she saw Pate the pig boy step through the door.

Pate hadn’t changed. She didn’t know how he was still alive. He was pale, soft and pasty, with a spotted face and wide, droopy eyes. Sarella was on the search to gather more support, and Pate was hardly the fighter that the resistance needed. Still, she had known Pate from their time as novices. Pate was sweet, gormless and innocent. She remembered a scared boy from her first days at the Citadel, and Sarella wanted to help him.

She didn’t understand what happened. The memory flashed before her.

Pate had walked into the tavern, and he had paid twenty golden coins for the last remaining horse. *Twenty.* That should have been Sarella’s first clue, but she assumed he must have stolen the money from somewhere. The horse was a ragged old mare, but the barkeep was still scared to give it up. Pate hadn’t recognised her at first, not until she stepped out of the crowd and grabbed his wrist. Her dark hand was shaded like teak against his pasty skin.

“Forget the horse,” Sarella whispered into his ear. The boy stiffened. “It’s useless, the gates are sealed.”

He hadn’t replied. Sarella tried to pull him into a corner, but he held steady. “Pate,” she hissed. “It’s me, Alleras—”

Pate hadn’t even hesitated. He had moved so fast her eyes could barely follow. She had seen the flash of a blade.

And then everything went mad.

*He tried to stab me,* Sarella realised only later. She felt the cut on her shoulder where his knife had
nearly cut open her jugular. She had never imagined that *Pate* could move that fast. If not for the stranger suddenly tackling him to the ground, she knew that she would likely be dead.

The tavern had been cramped and overfilled with restless refuges, it had been a mob. Sarella had seen the cloaked figure hacking at Pate with a short sword but Pate – *Pate!* – moved too fast. Pate parried the blade, stopping the larger man with only a knife. Two of the patrons had tried to intervene, but then Pate’s blade flashed and two bodies were falling downwards. Sweet, innocent Pate had killed two men with such ease it was unreal.

It had been a scuffle. Sarella fell to the rotten floorboards and scampered away, but she had seen Pate screaming after her. Pate had his mouth open, but it wasn’t Pate’s voice.

“*Thieves!*” Pate had shrieked, but it was a high-pitched, scared female voice. A distressed, helpless voice, even as Pate slit open a man’s throat. If she hadn’t have seen him, Sarella would never have believed that such a voice could come from him. “*Sneakthieves! Treason! It’s the resistance! Guards! Guards!*”

Sarella had sprinted out of the door, and Pate gave chase. Pate’s legs were short and his stomach podgy, but he ran faster than she could have ever expected. Not quite as fast as her, but almost.

The guards had arrived quickly from all the screaming. Suddenly Sarella was running for her life, and she didn’t even understand why.

She had lost sight of Pate in two streets back – he had disappeared into the shadows somewhere – but the guards were still chasing her. She was still running.

She was running towards a city square. Sarella saw the seaweed-coated statue of Leo Longthorn standing stiffly at the edge of an abandoned bakery and a ransacked forge. Once, this was a plaza filled with trader’s stalls, but now it may as well have been a mausoleum. The ironborn had hacked off the head of Leo Longthorn, and hung the corpses of dissenters from his arms instead. The windows were all shuttered, the shops were dead.

She knew where she was; Thorn Square. The guards were running after her, but Sarella couldn’t keep running. There was no choice.

She slid across the slick stones and into the brambles, her hands snatching up the bow and quiver. A weapon was too dangerous to carry on her person, but she had hidden the goldenheart longbow here weeks ago. As soon as her hands gripped the smooth, sleek wood, it felt like she was whole.

Her father had taught her how to shoot, but her mother had gifted her the goldenheart bow on her very first visit to Oldtown. It felt like the bow was as part of her. Sarella moved so fluidly it was like water; an arrow notched onto her bow, the string quivering…

The bowstring snapped.

And suddenly one of the guards fell, with a wooden shaft straight through his eye. *Like coring an apple.* It was pure muscle memory.

The other guard didn’t stop running. Sarella fired again, but in the moment her aim was off. The bowstring was damp and her fingers slipped. The second arrow pierced into his shoulder, but his other hand was swinging a sword upwards. He didn’t stop running. She saw wild, fanatical eyes screaming at her.

“*The God-King!*” the man screamed. “*For the God-Kin–!*”
Then, the guard’s body shuddered as a slender blade slipped straight through his neck. Blood gushed, flesh ripped.

It was a bravo’s blade. The guard thumped to the cobblestones, rain drizzling around him.

Sarella took a deep breath, body shuddering. Her hands were shaking, but her fingers notched another arrow without hesitation.

“At ease,” a voice drawled from across the square. “Easy, Sphinx.”

She might have sagged. She knew that voice. “Leo.” She took a deep breath, staring at the two dead bodies. “Lazy Leo.”

The young man’s eyes gleamed in the dark. He moved swiftly, stepping out of the shadows and walking to pick up his blade. The former acolyte of Marwyn the Mage looked like he always did; handsome and pale, with ash-blond hair across his brow. Leo was dressed in satin that might have once been green and gold, but it was hard to see any colours though the layers of mud and grime.

“You’re a woman now,” he noted, nodding at the cheap and worn dress she wore.

“I was always a woman.”

“I always knew.”

“Is that why you kept staring at my breasts?” she retorted.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Leo scoffed, as he pulled his blade out of the guard’s neck. “There’s hardly anything there to stare at.”

She scowled, holding her bow close. “Move. We need to run.”

She turned and ran, a light jog down the wharfside. Leo frowned in irritation, but then scattered after her. Already, Sarella was missing wearing breeches. At the Citadel, she had worn doeskin breeches and a snug brigandine, but she had been forced to wear a dress again when she needed to disappear. The dress just made everything so cumbersome.

They left the bodies of the watchmen where they fell, in the middle of the square. She turned to stare backwards, looking at the man with a wooden shaft protruding from his skull. “Was he the first you ever killed?” Leo asked as they ran.

“Aye.” Sarella took a deep breath. She had killed a man with barely a second thought.

“Don’t worry. It gets easier.”

“Apparently true.” Her eyes lingered on him. “That was damn good throw with your blade.”

“Truthfully, I was aiming at his knee,” Leo admitted. Sarella turned, trying to gauge whether or not he was japing. She couldn’t tell. “I knew that man. Morren – his name was. Or Mullen or Morrey or something like. I did not want to kill him.”

“He was a guardsman?”

“He once arrested me for drunken nudity,” said Leo, winking, but she ignored the jibe.

“And he betrayed his city.” She didn’t stop running. There were still bells ringing behind her, but the sound was moving in the other direction. “What is the City Watch doing?”
“The best that they can.” A rare crease of unease lined Leo’s features. “They are forced into servitude. The ironborn have been moving hostages – women and children – to the ruins of the Tower. They all have families that will be the first to suffer if they disobey.”

“So they surrender instead?” Her eyes narrowed.

“They do what they must.” Leo shook his head. “If there is any unruliness in the city, any riots, any protests to his rule – the Crow’s Eye has threatened to bring his monster back. They must keep the peace or else.”

She didn’t reply for a while. The gates were sealed, she considered, the people trapped in the city. Too many ironborn had survived the disaster that night, while that monster had devastated the Reach army and the city.

Sarella had seen the battle herself. She had nearly drowned in the waves as the mountainous black mass rose from the bay. She couldn’t explain what it was, she had scarcely even been able to process it at the time. It had been a monster of the sea – a beast of such scale that it beggared mythology. And it was still out there. Somewhere.

*Any fleet that comes to save us is doomed for defeat.* There wasn’t a ship on earth that could challenge something that big. No city could hold against it. It had devastated the army of the Reach, massacring the tens of thousands who’d been manning the walls, the beaches, the ships. Sarella couldn’t even say how many had survived, but she doubted if any near the front lines stood a chance.

In the aftermath, the city was left splintered. The bridges collapsed and one half of the city was left isolated from the other. The chain of command had been annihilated, and the city had fallen into bedlam instead. Oldtown had been so shaken that the ironborn seized what remained with ease. They stormed the Starry Sept, and it had been a bloodbath.

The resistance had formed in the days after, from the remnants of the Reach’s army and the city’s highborn – but then it was promptly shattered the very first night it met, and then the second, and then the third. Any attempt to plan a coup, no matter how hidden, was met with merciless brutality until the people of Oldtown dared not to even speak his name, terrified it might draw his wroth.

The message had been made clear; no assembly of defiance could happen in the city without the Crow’s Eye somehow knowing of it. The smallfolk whispered of demons, while the highborn muttered of turncloaks, but Sarella knew. *He must be able to use glass candles.* The resistance scarcely stood a chance if that were true, but some few still tried. The rest had caved to an unholy fear of the Crow’s Eye.

Originally, it had been Baelor Hightower, the Brightsmile, that led the Oldtown resistance, but then he conceded and surrendered in despair. A knight of Redwyne had taken up the banner of defiance for a week, but then he had ended up swinging from the spires of the sept, alive and screaming as hungry crows pecked him to death. Then a fisherman on the wharves had tried to lead a mass escape, but the Crow’s Eye had been waiting for him. Sarella heard now that Garlan Tyrell was still alive and still fighting, but whether that was fact or fantasy she could not say.

Sarella and Leo kept on running, until they finally stopped for breath in a grimy alleyway. Her eyes narrowed on Leo, a hint of suspicion in her eyes. *Can he be trusted?* They had grown somewhat close under the tutelage of Archmaester Marwyn, but the Leo she knew had been arrogant and malicious.

Sarella took care to keep several paces away from him, with her goldenheart bow held tightly and
her eyes peeled on the bravo’s blade on his belt. Too many friends had betrayed her today.

“Your father,” she said after a time. “Morwyn Tyrell. He commands the guard.”

“My father does,” he replied, his voice chilly. “My father is more trapped than anyone.”

“Disputable.” She cocked her head. “The City Watch has gone mad.”

“They’re scared.”

“Then they’ve gone mad from fear.”

Leo did not object the point. “My mother, my sisters,” he said grimly, “are all locked in the ruins of the tower. And my father was forced to brand his flesh.”

“And yourself?” There was a lingering suspicion in her voice. “You are not trapped.”

“You think this is the first time I’ve run away from home?” he scoffed. Moryn Tyrell was the uncle of Lord Mace Tyrell, an old and influential figure in Oldtown. Leo was his youngest and unruly son. Leo and his father had oft been at odds with each other; Lord Morwyn had banished Leo to the Citadel years ago, but even then Leo hadn’t stopped whoring, drinking and gambling.

“I looked for you that night,” Sarella said stiffly, keeping her bow close. “You vanished before the battle.”

“Aye,” Leo nodded, taking a step forward. She took a step back. “And be thankful that I did. Else I wouldn’t have been able to save your life.”

She scoffed, forcing all weakness from her voice. “I had that man handled.” Morren or Mullen or Morrey or whatever his name was.

“I do not doubt it.” Lazy Leo took another step towards her. “But I was not speaking of him. I was speaking of before. In the tavern.”

She paused. Her eyes flickered to his cloak, a black cloak. It had been so fast she hadn’t seen the face of the man in the tavern. She had only seen the black cloak as a figure tackled Pate to the ground. “That was you?”

“It was.”

Her father had always warned her not to believe in coincidences. She stiffened. “Were you following me?”

“No. I was following him, the pig boy.”

“Pate.” He used to hate being called the pig boy. “Explain yourself, Leo. Why did Pate try to stab me?”

“That wasn’t Pate.”

“It looked like him.” Leo nodded, and Sarella bit her lip. “Then who was he?”

“I don’t know, but it was wearing Pate’s face,” Leo retorted. “Not a him. I thought there was something different about the pig boy, I had my suspicions that night.”

“Why?”
“Because Pate the pig boy was always scared,” Leo said foully. “The pig boy was a trembling craven, but then – months ago – he stopped trembling. Stopped being scared at all. Oh, Pate acted the same, but he would smile a bit longer and his eyes were a bit sharper. That was what got my attention.”

Sarella didn’t reply, but her dark gaze flickered. “And then, on that night,” Leo continued, “Pate disappeared as well. I tried to scry him, but he vanished from the glass candle’s sight. So I followed him the old-fashioned way, and I saw the pig boy sneaking around the lower levels – it was going to the vaults.”

Sarella was quiet, digesting it in. The snideness in Leo’s tongue had faded from what she had once known. He was less aggressive, less cruel in his barbs. “You call Pate an ‘it’,” she noted slowly. “Why?”

Leo pointed to his bravo’s blade. “Because it doesn’t feel. I stabbed it straight through the chest, twice, and it didn’t even seem to feel a thing. Two clean cuts to the gut, and yet there is no blood on my blade. It was stronger, faster, and the way it moved… you saw it too.”

She had. It hadn’t moved like a human. “And I’ve been following it,” Leo continued. “It didn’t eat, didn’t drink, didn’t sleep. It has been hiding out in a slum for a while, waiting for a chance to leave the city. I followed it, waiting for it to get out in the open. Thanks to you, I saw my chance in the tavern. I took it.”

That was a lot of work just for a suspicion. The city was in chaos, yet Leo had fixated on Pate above everything else. “Why?”

“Because I could only assume that the vanishing pig boy must be related to the Crow’s Eye,” Leo explained dourly. “And I wanted to find out what it was after. I wanted the chance to cut that satchel off its shoulder.”

He swept his cloak to one side. Beneath his arm, there was a hefty leather satchel rest under his shoulder. The straps had been cut clean off – that was an old purse-snatcher’s technique. Cut the straps, grab and run.

Suddenly, a bit more of that moment made sense. Pate had screamed ‘thief’ as she ran away.

Sarella raised an eyebrow. “You stole this?”

“It was already stolen. Why else would one creep into the vaults, and emerge carrying this bag?” Leo shook his head. “No, our stranger had been waiting for the right moment to steal it. It disguised itself as Pate, lingered around the Citadel, and waited until everyone else had evacuated. It used the battle as a distraction.”

Sarella frowned. “If that’s true… it implies that this ‘stranger’ knew the Crow’s Eye was coming.”

“Yes,” Leo agreed. “Now isn’t that curious?”

The only sound was the rain dribbling into the flooded streets. After a moment’s pause, Sarella lowered her bow, and extended her hand for the satchel. Leo handed it over, and unfastened the clasps.

The bag had a hefty weight to it. As soon it opened, she a dark brown cover; a ragged and aged surface, and pages of brownish parchment. “It is a book.”

“Aye. Stolen from the Citadel’s vaults.”
Her head spun. “The guards are looking for books,” she said slowly. “The Crow’s Eye ordered the militia to find one for him.”

He nodded. ‘The Drowned God commands you to action’, the so-called High Priest had proclaimed less than a week before. ‘Prove your devotion; return the lost book to the temple, and His Worship shall extend His benevolence’. With only few words, they had set the city to chaos.

Leo pulled his cloak over the satchel, protecting the dusty pages from the light rain. The tome had once been sealed with an iron clasp, but someone must have broken the lock. Sarella gingerly pulled it out, inspecting at the unmarked leather cover. “Do you know what it is?” she asked.

“No the foggiest. But if they want it, I’m inclined to keep it from them.” Leo’s gaze was dark. “The Crow’s Eye destroyed half the city for this book.”

The light was faint, so she roamed her fingers over the cover. There was a symbol etched onto the leather, Sarella noticed. At one time, it might have been painted, but the cover was faded and the paint flecked away. Still, she could feel the seal of House Targaryen imprinted on the cover, she could feel the dragon within its circle.

It took her a while to realise what was different on the sigil, but this three-headed dragon was headless. There were only three stumps on the dragon’s necks. A headless Targaryen dragon.

“I looked at it myself, and I could make no sense of it,” Leo noted. “But riddles are your specialty, aren’t they, Sphinx?”

She ignored the jibe. Sarella opened the tome gingerly, noticing the brownish stain that lined the edge of the parchment. The faded ink had been written in a careful hand, pages filled with characters that were still legible. There were no pictures that she could see, each page was filled with a solid wall of text. Sarella stared blankly.

Sarella could read High Valyrian, Old Ghiscari and Dothraki. She knew the bastard forms of Valyrian, was vaguely familiar with Lhazareen, and she could recognise several of the variants of the Asshai spelltongues. She had studied the runes of the First Men, though there wasn’t a person alive who could properly translate those. Sarella even knew something of the Summer Tongue that her mother taught her. Still, she couldn’t even make sense of the runes that filled the book. Some of the characters looked vaguely similar to High Valyrian, but it was more like gibberish.

“I cannot read it,” she said finally. “This is either a language that I do not know, or it has been coded in a cypher.” Or maybe both, she suspected.

“Can it be translated?”

“Perhaps.” With great difficulty. “But it would take time and I do not know where to begin. I do not know what this is, or why it is of interest.”

Leo’s lips curled. “Do you want to go back and ask the pig boy?” he sneered. “Or would you rather see if the Crow’s Eye cares to explain it to us?”

“I think not.” Sarella’s eyes were still fixed on the book, her brows frowning. “Do you have any glass candles left?” she asked after a pause.

“If only. I lost the last of them when the Citadel fell.”

*Then what other options are available to us?* She could run to her uncle, perhaps, but how would Doran even be able to help? How could anybody help against the powers Euron held? Half of the
major cities in the world would be nothing more than fodder for Euron’s monster. Perhaps refugees could flee inland, but how could anybody truly threaten him when a beast like that roamed the seas?

*I came to the Citadel in search of knowledge,* she thought slowly. *My father always told me to know my foe.* You cannot beat something unless you know it. Perhaps this mysterious tome was the only chance she had to get ahead of Euron Greyjoy’s power.

Leo was right. This was a riddle.

“You said that the stranger stole this from the vaults, yes?” Sarella said eventually.

“Aye.”

There were vaults littered beneath the Citadel’s grounds; it was often said that it was a labyrinth of libraries built into old quarry shafts webbing beneath the earth. Many areas were restricted, and every acolyte had been heavily regulated. Each archmaester carried a unique key that granted them access to private vaults, and the key of the seneschal had been passed down over eons. Maesters were keepers of knowledge; Sarella could easily believe that they might have locked something away.

“Then logically someone must have put it in the vaults. The maesters must have catalogued it at some point – someone in the Conclave must know its significance.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps none but the archmaesters do.” His voice was doubtful. “And any surviving archmaesters will now be under Euron’s care.”

She shook her head. “Not all of them.” Sarella pulled her gaze up from the pages, to the shadow of the fallen tower in the distance. “We must get this book to Marwyn.”

---

**Sam**

“*Dead!*” the crow cawed, as it fluttered down the tunnels to match his pace. “*Dead, dead, dead!*”

Sam grimaced, then let out a sigh as he hoisted the kettle of water down the steps. The crow had overheard him breaking the news to a distraught mother, and now the damnable bird kept on chanting that word. *Mormont’s crow,* Sam considered. Lord Commander Mormont was long dead in the wilderness somewhere, but his crow still lingered. Uneasy refugees flinched as the black wings fluttered passed in the wormwalks, screeching death.

“Tend to the bloody wounds first, Dalla,” Sam said. “And keep the hearth burning, these people need their strength.”

“As you say, Lord Steward,” Dalla replied with a soft hand on his shoulder. Her touch still caused Sam’s heart to flutter, but the thought of the task ahead quickly dampened it.

The infirmary was overfilled; the weak, the frail and wounded flooding out into the lower tunnels. Castle Black felt crowded fit to burst, and everywhere the Lord Steward looked, he saw suspicious eyes, gaunt and guarded faces. Last week, two giants had brawled over a bushel of onions. Three days ago, a woman had killed a man fighting for the last loaf of bread. The food in the ice tunnels was running low, and for weeks Mance had them all on half-rations. The snows had cut them off from supplies from Eastwatch, just as it had prevented the refugees from moving southwards.
Sam passed Red Jack Crabb, Rusty Flowers and Garse standing guard, as Brown Bernarr helped him carry the poultices and medicinal supplies and Small Paul carried the pots and pans, while four washerwomen carried bundles of blankets.

Thousands of people were left trapped in the castle, but it still felt eerily quiet as Sam traipsed through the wards. It was like people were afraid to speak.

“Dead, dead, dead!” Mormont’s crow echoed, and for a moment Sam wished he could strangle the bird.

The only sound breaking the gloom was the wailing of babes, or the haggard, throaty breaths of dying men. The very last of the free folk refugees, and they were a sorry and haunted lot.

Sam, Dalla and the others were only just starting their daily rounds, but it was all grim. Sam knew that two of the wildling chiefs, Two-Toed Dirk and Marv the Red Hand, were running a betting pool on who would die next.

From above, Sam could feel the ground throbbing with the storms, and the hissing of wind through the twisting tunnels.

Castle Black was well and truly snowed under. The snows above were so high they reached halfway up the maester’s keep. Over fifteen foot of snow, the last Sam checked. More than enough to bury a man, and to make travel impossible for all but the hardiest. Any exposed would be dead in minutes, not even the castle’s courtyard was safe to walk across.

Instead, all of the sworn brothers and all the refugees had to scuttle about beneath the wormwalks, like snow rabbits hiding below ground. Some days, the tunnels felt like crypts.

Sam clattered through with a pile of blankets on his back, a kettle full of lukewarm water sloshing in his hands. He trekked through the wards like a rag-and-bone man going about his duty. Sam went along the right, Dalla took the left.

It was the Lord Steward’s duty to see to these people, but Dalla… nobody expected her to be here, yet she here she was. Sam bore so much respect for her, the Lady of Castle Black, for helping him with these tasks. Dalla was a new mother herself, but she still found time to change bandages and empty bedpans.

“Dress the wound twice a day,” Sam told a free folk woman, as she cradled a hand with three fingers sheared off by frostbite. Her eyes were haggard, her cheeks sunken and grim. “Here, use this poultice, rub the ointment in to the joints. It’s ginger and honeyleaf, it’ll ease the sting.”

Sam forced a smile, but the woman didn’t react. “Three of the fingers are gone, but we might still save the rest of the hand,” Sam said, trying to be reassuring.

She didn’t thank him, but she took the medicine. She was an older woman with a face like leather, likely a spearwife in her youth. Sam didn’t know her name, he didn’t know anyone’s name.

He moved on, to inspect the splint on a man’s broken leg. Sam was no maester, but Castle Black didn’t have anyone else.

More and more, his eyes drifted towards Dalla, as she sponged down an ugly wound. Dalla is far too pretty to belong in a place like this, Sam decided. They said that her sister Val was the more beautiful one, but Dalla’s hair was soft brown instead of gold, and Dalla was sweet and tender where Val had been cold.
The air was quiet as rewrapped the wildling’s leg. Thankfully, Mormont’s crow flew off to screech elsewhere. The man grimaced in pain, but Sam pulled the bandages tight. The bone felt knobbly, and he could see where the flesh had congealed.

“I have your bandages for you, m’lord,” a washwoman said dutifully, approaching with a basket of grimy sheets. She was a mousy woman, with a bright white stone on grimy furs.

“Thank you, Gilly,” Sam sighed. “Here, take these bandages too and give them a wash. We’ll need to reuse them.”

“Yes, m’lord.” Gilly bowed clumsily, grabbing the rags and turning to walk away.

Sam gave the wildling a nervous smile that the man didn’t return. “The leg is healing well,” Sam lied. “Do you have a blanket, something to keep it off the ground?”

“Got one for my back,” the wildling croaked. “Only got one.”

Blankets were in short supply. Everything was in short supply. Sam had been forced to set a limit, one blanket per person. “Well, I’ll see about requisitioning you another,” Sam offered. “Just keep the leg rested.”

The man was clearly in pain. Sam could have offered milk of the poppy, but he didn’t. Medicine had become more valuable than gold.

Sam made a note on a parchment, breathing deeply as he waddled on to the next. There were hundreds, thousands, with some injury or another, and Sam doubted if there were enough bandages in the north for them all. He had to prioritise.

Of all the people he tried to help in a day, he doubted if one in ten of them would survive the year. For the rest, Sam was just attending to the dead.

“Lord Steward,” another woman begged of him, a scrawny woman missing her front teeth. “It’s my boy… the coughing hasn’t stopped. Do you have more of that ointment?”

The boy was four years old, but the mother looked younger than Sam was. The child’s face was white, each breath like a frog’s croak, and the mother looked on the brink of tears.

Sam hesitated. An infection of the lungs. He had hoped the illness would clear, but it had become obvious that it wouldn’t. “I can’t afford to give you any more, he almost said, there’s too little medicine left, and he is passed the point of recovery. “Of course I can. Honey, chamomile and thyme, to ease the swelling,” Sam lied.

Instead, he gave the woman a pouch of mushed nettles mixed with water. That ‘medicine’ was as good as useless, but the boy would be dead before the mother realised the difference. Sam didn’t want to admit that he had to ration supplies, and that her son was a lost cause.

The boy wheezed and croaked, cradled in his mother’s arms. She sung to him softly, but Sam forced himself to walk away. Dalla hugged the woman tightly and whispered comforts, but Sam turned away so they wouldn’t see the lie on his face.

There were times when this job felt like it was tearing away his soul.

Maybe Dalla noticed. “You gave that boy the best chance that anyone could have,” she whispered later. Sam didn’t reply.
Later, one starved spearwife offered to have sex with Sam in return for a turnip. He didn’t know what was more depressing; that the spearwife was desperate enough to make such an offer, or that other sworn brothers had apparently been taking her up on it. Sam told Dalla of it, who promised to take the matter up with Mance.

“I have the broth,” Owen announced, stepping down the steps, struggling to carry a hefty iron cauldron. It banged against every step, weak gravy spluttering against the wood. “They said I should bring the broth.”

Sam sighed. A rumour had spread that there were people sick with greyscale in the tunnels, and now all of the stewards passed on the job of feeding them to Owen the Oaf alone. “I’ll help you with that, Owen,” Sam offered, rushing to grab the other end of the cauldron. Owen only grinned dimly.

“Food is here, folk,” Dalla called, banging a pan. “Grab your dish and line up.”

They were already stirring. Every day there were more hungry stomachs and not enough broth. It was already more water than meat. “Praise to the Dragon,” a free folk croaked, and the cry was echoed around others wearing white stones. “Praise the Dragon.”

“Praise the Dragon,” Owen the Oaf repeated, just because he likely thought it a grand thing to say. Sam grimaced as he saw northmen glare at those words.

There were more than just free folk taking shelter in Castle Black now. Sam saw northerners from villages in the Gift that had been forced into Castle Black because they had nowhere else to go. Greybeards and children, free folk and northmen were all huddled into the wormwalks because there was no choice.

The cold winds were blowing, and the snows were the common enemy.

“I’d like to see the dragon again,” Owen the Oaf said idly, a goofy grin on his lips as they spooned out broth. “Do you think I could touch it this time?”

“I expect Jon would not object,” Sam replied. “But I don’t know when it’ll be back.”

“I dreamt it coming back,” Owen noted. “I dreamt it coming over the Wall.”

“That’s the wrong direction, I’m afraid. The dragon is already over.”

“No,” Owen wailed. “They were coming over.”

Sam was about to reply when he saw Dalla striding towards with four dishes in her arms. “Those at the back can’t walk too well,” she motioned with her head. “Grab a few plates, will you?”

Sam quickly filled a few extra dishes, balancing them on his arms. “I’m on it.”

As he trekked through the infirmary handing out dishes, he came upon a small and wounded boy – about thirteen years old – who was shivering uncontrollably and running a fever. Sam stopped, pausing to dab a damp cloth over his forehead and dribbling stew down his throat. The child sputtered awake, stirring, and shaking on the edge of delirium.

Sam recognised the boy; the patrols had found him in the woods weeks ago, with half a speartip embedded in his torso. The wound hadn’t killed him, but the fever threatened to finish the job.

The boy was trembling, so frail and weak.
“Easy,” Sam soothed, holding the child’s hand. “Do you have any family? Is there anyone I can find for you?”

It seemed like the boy was trying to speak; his eyes twitching unfocused, lips mumbling nonsensically. “What’s your name, child?” Sam asked. “Do you have a name?”

“… I… It’s…” the boy whispered. Sam leaned in, straining to hear. Even in the cold, the child was sweating and burning. “… fall… going to fall…”

Delirious, Sam thought sadly. He saw the child’s eyes; bright green pupils dilated. He was muttered incoherently. “It’s going to fall… fall…

Sam straightened, and sighed. If the boy had any parents, they were likely dead. Just another lost orphan of this war – there were a thousand more just like him.

Still, Sam hesitated, looking solemnly at the delirious child with the bright green eyes.

Behind him, Sam heard the first of the angry shouts as the stew ran out.

“Lord Steward!” a voice boomed suddenly, causing Sam to jump. “The Mance wants you!”

He heard the howl of wind as the latches swung open, footsteps thundering down the steps. A few of refugees jumped as the flurry of snow swept through the tunnels. Sam flinched, floundering to his feet and wheezing.

He pushed the pile of bandages into Gilly’s hands. “See to the rest, please?” Sam begged of her. “Keep them warm, make sure the sickly have plenty of water.”

The washwoman nodded. Heavy boots were striding quickly through the wormwalks, moving with urgent purpose. He tried to run for Dalla, but the woman just nodded.

“Go to my husband,” she said with a nod. “I’ll finish up here.”

Husband. Sam knew it was naught but a foolish crush, but he couldn’t help feel a surge of emotions when he thought of Mance and Dalla. She is sweet lady, that’s all. She reminds me of my sister.

Sam was pulling his cloak on, and tightening his belt. There was a steel dagger on his waist – not that Sam was any good at using it, but there were so many unfamiliar faces around that he felt more comfortable with it. On his other side, he had an old horn fastened by his buckle, and his small book of notes kept safe in a pouch. At Mance’s bequest, Sam had even taken to wearing a necklace of boar tusks wrapped around his neck, because apparently the free folk respected men who clad themselves in totems of their rank. Sam felt so silly wearing such a thing, but he did so anyways.

The man that met him was a tall and broad figure, with wolf’s teeth pierced through his ears and trophies of a hundred hunts on his person. A fearsome figure with tattoos across his cheeks and forehead, wearing a black cloak. “Lord Steward,” Wulf said gruffly. “The watchtowers lit a beacon, there’s movement in the woods. It might be more refugees.”

He approached along with Garth Greenspear, as well as two wildling men; Jax and Two-Toed Dirk. They were all wearing black cloaks crusted in snow.

Sam was already moving. He had to waddle quickly to keep pace with Wulf’s long legs. “Do we know how many?”
“Not yet.” They twisted down the corridor, stomping up towards the main buildings. All around him, there were wildlings wearing black cloaks.

Mance had found three thousand men who took the oaths and wore the black – three thousand free folk. There were only four hundred of the old guard remaining, and it seemed like that number was getting smaller every day.

As they stomped up through the barracks, Sam noticed Edd rushing around with pans of boiled water, while Grenn was instructing some of the new recruits on how to sharpen iron blades. Ser Endrew Tarth had been appointed as master-at-arms, and Duncan Liddle had been named as castellan, but all the other positions were being filled by wildlings with names like Marv the Red Hand, Andrik Bonestew, Brogg Big-Chin, Thundering Mammoth, or Marthe of the Antlers. Former chieftains that had chosen the black instead.

The rest were all unfamiliar faces.

“Varamyr!” Wulf boomed into the barracks. “Orders from The Mance. Get your bloody eagle in the skies, we need it over the wall!”

A bearded, skinny man in a ragged shadowskin cloak sneered at him. Varamyr Sixskins – or Varamyr Sevenskins as he now tried to insist – was a gaunt figure with a sunken face, hunched over in his furs and pelts.

“Do you think any eagle can fly in this weather?” Varamyr retorted, motioning at the howling winds outside.

“Then where are your wolves, dammit? Mance wants eyes in the forest.”

It looked like Varamyr muttered something scathing about what Mance wants, but Sam couldn’t make out the words.

There were twenty-two wargs in Castle Black, with Varamyr named as the unofficial leader of them – although Sam had quickly learnt that skinchangers squabbled worse than cats. Varamyr had one eagle, four wolves, a hunting dog, and a horse as his skins, but there was also a giant boar, a shadowcat, a snow rabbit, an owl, an auroch, and more wolves scattered around. At Eastwatch, more wargs were stationed, led by a woman who could skinchange into the body of an ice shark.

The wargs are useful, Sam considered. Troublesome in their own way, but none could deny their use. King Snow had named Varamyr and two dozen other free folk as Wardens of the Exodus, and they had succeeded in bringing many refugees south even in the most difficult conditions.

Still, the flow of refugees through the gates was now barely a trickle. Any remaining settlements north of the Wall had either been evacuated already, or they were beyond the reach of the Wardens and had gone silent. The last refugees they recovered had been brought through the gates three days ago, when two wounded raiders limped through the tunnel. Before that, the last had been a week ago when crazed men from the Valley of Thenn staggered through, raving of fathers eating sons and endless skirmishes with the dead. Before that, it had been a clan of cave dwellers muttering of even worse down in the Gorne’s Way, jabbering of monsters rising in the depths.

Mance persisted in the search, but hope was running low. Are there still people out there?

“Have Erik Bearclaw ready the gates,” Sam ordered. Keep your voice firm, he tried to tell himself. “And have Bedwyck prepare the horses in case we need to ride out to them through.”

“Aye,” Wulf nodded, stepping forward and bellowing commands. Sam saw Marthe of the Antlers –
a tall and grim man with sunken eyes – stand stiffly to attention as they swept past.

“Is it man?” a voice demanded of him, and Sam turned to see Henrik the Hog, a shout and stout man with a broken nose and dark eyes. Sam could barely make out the words through the wildling’s guttural accent. “Or worse?”

“We don’t know yet,” Sam replied meekly.

Sam tried to walk past, but Henrik grabbed a hold of his collar. Sam nearly squealed. “I know what I saw out there!” Henrik snapped. “I felt the ground rumbling out there, it was shaking… there was something…!”

“Get back, Henrik,” Wulf growled, with a hard shove. “Mance is calling us.”

“I know what I saw! I heard it!” Henrik wailed, his shoulders trembling. “There was something under the ground, they were digging something up!”

Sam grimaced, but did not reply as he walked away. A fortnight ago, Henrik the Hog had been the only survivor of a search party tasked to scout out the Frostfangs. It had not gone well. Henrik had returned to Castle Black raving and half-crazed. His jabbering report that the Others might be digging had caused Mance to send parties out across the entire length of the Wall, but they had found no sign of a tunnel. Mance had wanted to investigate further, but then the snows had cut off all efforts.

_We know that the Others are at the Frostfangs, Sam thought, but little else._ Reports from the Thenns at the Shadow Tower said that the white walkers were scouring the mountain – especially around the old free folk camp. The place where the Others had ambushed Mance’s army. None could get close enough to learn more, but it was a safe bet that the Others were resurrecting whatever corpses were left behind.

The winds caused the door to rattle. Sam buried his head under his hood and braced himself. The stepped outside of the building, and he was blinded by the flurry. The wood had been freezing over, so cold that even oak could snap. The steps had become treacherous, and Sam had no choice but to grab a hold Wulf’s shoulder to keep himself steady.

In the courtyard, a towering figure roared – a creature of shaggy fur pushing easily through the snow. The giant gripped a huge makeshift snow plough, shoving through the snow drifts with goliath force.

“Keep the tunnel clear, Wun Wun!” Wulf ordered. Sam’s throat froze every time with the sight of such a monster. “We might have men coming though!”

Wun Wun; the very first giant to take the black and join the Night’s Watch. Wun Wun was fifteen-foot-tall, so powerful he could singlehandedly man the lift’s winch. Sam was told the giant was friendly, yet truthfully Sam had always kept his distance. Wun Wun roared over the wind, shoving the snow plough forward – wooden stokes clattering over stones. A great gush of snow geysered into the air behind him.

All around him, Castle Black was stirring. The alert had gone up, the sworn brothers were on the move.

Mance’s command had reformed the castle. The gates had not been shut for months, but they were still patrolled while sworn brothers escorted every last refugee through. Mance had ordered fortifications to be built on the other side of the Wall, with watchtowers monitoring the northern
forest. A line of sentries was established to relay alerts, with every vulnerability patched. The
wildlings proved very good at identifying the Watch’s weaknesses.

Every castle on the Wall was manned and garrisoned again, with the exception of the Nightfort
which was still under reconstruction. Mance had even ordered ships to be built at Westwatch-by-
the-Bridge again, and then he had introduced new siege defences and garrisons of men that were
stationed upon the Wall itself.

It had been long and bloody, but it felt like the Night’s Watch was being rebuilt. It felt like it was
helping people again.

The courtyard was rustling, figures in black staggering through the snows. Sam heard the creaking
as the lift was levered downwards, and billows of snow swept over the cornices atop the Wall,
howling over the towers of the castle below.

Wun Wun was still manning the winch. Everything in the yards was flooded white, but black
cloaks were powering through. Sam drew his cloak in tighter, readying himself for the frigid ascent
up the lift. “Prepare the winch!” Fulk the Flea yelled. “Get ready to–”

UUUUUoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo. Suddenly, the boom of a warhorn split through the
air, long and slow and echoing across the Wall. That was Rory’s horn, Sam knew, the signal
 relayed from the other side of the Wall. The whole courtyard stopped, every man tensing to listen.
Waiting to see if there would be another one. There are two parties of rangers out there – both Tom
Barleycorn and Harle the Handsome are in the field, Sam thought, are they returning, or are there
more refugees?

UUUUUoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo. The second blast blared. Sam sighed. It was a symbol
of the times that wildlings approaching was no longer something to be feared. “We have more
coming, prepare blankets and hearths!” Sam announced. “They’ll likely be weak and col–”

UUUUUUUoooooooooooooooooooooooooo. The horn boomed again, long and
terrible, splitting through the snows.

The world froze.

At once, Varamyr was running. Sam heard wolves howling. Wulf’s eyes widened, and instantly
they were all rushing. “Seal the gates!” Wulf boomed. “Seal them! Seal the gates!”

“Get the people to the lower levels!” a wildling, Leathers, shouted. “Ain’t a practice, get them to
the vaults!”

Three horns. They had tried to make sure the men would be prepared; Sam and Mance had devised
a drill routine together. They had given every man their emergency stations, they had assigned
duties, and there had been regular practice runs. Sam heard the bell tower clattering, he saw sworn
brothers calling for fire.

This was no practice run. Best case, one of their scouts had overreacted, but in the worst case…

They all knew their duties. Sam saw Grenn rushing to meet with Mo and Haldur Two-Notch,
grabbing the banner of the King’s Dragonguard stationed at Castle Black. When the alert went up,
the first priority was for the Dragonguard to signal Jon Snow, so they could call upon Sonagon to
help them.

Everyone else was assigned either to the Wall, or to the gates. They had practiced it a hundred
times; all bowmen kept bows close to hand, spears and lances at the front lines, and the rest were
needed to run supplies and fortify buildings. The stewards, Sam’s command, were assigned as rearguard to protect the refugees. \textit{We have prepared for this}, Sam tried to tell himself above the pounding of his heart, \textit{we prepared for this}.

Sam’s breath was short in his throat. He was running, shoving his way through the snow. “Where’s Mance?” Sam called, and his voice turned to a squeak as the eyes of a score of wildlings fell on him. “Where’s Mance?”

One of the men – Tim Stone – pointed upwards to the vast heights the Wall. There was so much snow that Sam couldn’t even see the top.

“Wargs on me!” Varamyr shouted. “Get your beasts in position, get on the Wall!!”

He heard one of the wildlings – Leathers – shouting in the Old Tongue as hulking shapes rose from the snow. Most of the giants had left with Jon’s and the Weeper’s armies, but there were eight forest giants, including Wun Wun, that had lingered at Castle Black. All eight were best employed on the rear lines, Mance had commanded, to reinforce the gates and carry supplies. Wun Wun was by far the biggest of the bunch.

“Bowmen!” Wulf roared. “Bowmen on me! Dragonglass and fire, get your arrows!!”

They had assigned every archer to either shafts doused in oil or flames, or obsidian arrows. One dragonglass Bowman to every ten burning ones, with strict regiments in place. \textit{We prepared for this. We’re prepared.}

Still, his skin was crawling with fear. All it took was three horn blasts, and everyone was rushing.

Two dozen men with bows were running into the platform. Sam saw Garth Greyfather, Ulmer, Mathar, Dornish Dilly, Hairy Hal and Bearded Ben – the best archers in the Watch – pushing for their positions, but Wulf shoved the others out of the way as he herded Varamyr and Sam through. The Lord Steward belonged with the command atop the Wall, and Varamyr would be critical for relaying information that his many eyes and ears saw. The rest were all bowmen, but the lift wasn’t big enough for them all; any who couldn’t fit would have to run up the steps.

“Get them up there!” Fulk the Flea barked. “Wun Wun!”

Wun Wun roared as he winched the lift upwards. Sam heard frozen ropes straining, and icicles clattering around the frame. The great platform shuddered upwards, groaning and cracking with every movement. The lift was heavy and overloaded, but Wun Wun tightened the pulley hard and relentlessly. The journey up didn’t take long, but his heart was beating so fast it felt like a lifetime.

To the south, everything was blanketed white. Sam could barely even see the trees under all that snow.

“I feel them,” Varamyr gasped as the wind howled, his eyes glazed over as he walked in separate skins. “I feel them, they’re out there…”

Nobody spoke. Looking down, Castle Black seemed so small and frail.

“How many are we looking at?” Sam whispered with a gulp. “Got many could there be?”

“Not a clue,” Wulf replied. “But we’ve been overdue an attack for a long time now.”

Yes, the white walkers had been staying away from the Wall. Sam had heard of clashes with raiding parties, but there had been few signs of the Others moving in strength. \textit{But we’re prepared}
And finally the lift cracked into place, shuddering as the counterweight hit the ground. The platform was swaying in the wind, but the men were already rushing off onto the top of the Wall.

“What happens?” Sam called. “What’s happening?”

Atop the Wall, everything was heaving. Half-constructed wooden structures littered the ice, and skeletal towers were protruding outwards atop supports. It had been another of Mance’s strategies; to fortify the Wall itself with siege platforms stretching out over the northern edge. Bowmen would have a better position, dropping oil and barrels would become easier. For months, they had put the refugees to work chopping trees and cutting timber.

Still, the snows had delayed all those efforts. The new defences were only half-made, and now there were men trying to scramble over patchy platforms buried in snow and makeshift catapult perches.

Voices were lost amidst the howling wind, while men sprinted back and forth. Seven hundred foot off the ground, the winds were so fierce they could have swept a man straight off the wall. It was howling deafeningly through the wooden palisades, scouring over the ice.

“What happens?” Sam called again, but there was no reply. Instead, Wulf had to grab him by the arm and drag him across treacherous ice. The Wall was lined by trenches dug through the snow, forming makeshift barriers against the wind.

Sam saw Mance himself at the far end of the battlements, perched on a lookout point at the edge of the Wall. Flurries of shouting were all around him, desperate voices trying to make themselves heard over each other.

“To the west!” a man bellowed. “We got three watchtowers lighting flares now.”

“They’re coming fast, Mance,” a wildling warned. “From north and west.”

Mance’s eyes were grim. Sam saw his jaw tighten as he stared out over the wasteland of snow. “Get our people back,” he ordered. “Signal the retreat! Get them through the gates and close the damn doors.”

They wouldn’t make it, Sam knew. Maybe a few would get lucky, but the far lookouts never stood a chance. The watchtowers were temporary positions; a crucial measure to give the Wall warning, but those positions had always been undefendable. Mance had chosen to appoint sacrificial sentries to secure the refugee path.

“The dragon will be coming,” a wildling muttered, staring downwards as his hand moved over his white stone. “Salvation will arrive.”

“He will,” Sam whispered, but without the same conviction. One of their skinchangers could warg into a bat – as soon as the three horns blasted, the bat would be flying to alert the dragon. All the defenders had to do was hold until the flying reinforcement arrived.

Still, Sam couldn’t shake the doubt. The castle had heard that Winterfell had fallen, but little else. The silence was worrying.

To the north, across the snowy wastelands, Sam saw the dark tendrils of smoke fading in the forest. Perhaps the view was just being obscured by the flurry, but it looked like the forest was rippling.
“Varamyr!” Mance ordered. “Give me numbers. How many, where?”

Varamyr nodded, clenching his eyes shut to focus. The air was tense, all eyes fixed to the north.

“We all know the battle plan!” Mance boomed, his voice like iron. “We all knew they would be coming again. We will not fall!”

The sworn brothers roared, stomping feet. “Prepare the torches, and oil,” Mance ordered, pointing to the barrels hanging off edge of the Wall. “We will burn whatever wights they throw at us, but wait for my command! We will not show our hand too quickly, wait for maximum effect.”

He glared around the platform, sharp eyes looking for weakness. “But the wights are distractions. The true threat is the white walkers. Varamyr and his wargs will pick our targets for us, and then we will strike with dragonglass and flame.” Mance strolled between the files of men, of the archers preparing bows. “What do we fight for?!”

“The living!” the men chanted.

“Damn straight,” Mance growled. “And we must endure. For now and for a hundred years. They have all the patience in the world, and we will meet them in kind! Every arrow, every flame, every man must be rationed – not a single one wasted, not a single advantage lost.” He took a deep breath. “When will the Wall fall??”

“No today!” they stomped. Sam tried to shout as well, but it seemed like he was always too slow to join the chant.

Mance nodded, a thin smile on his lips. He was a tall and gaunt figure, the only man on the Wall without a weapon. The Lord of Castle Black wore a red cloak, even when all of his men wore black. Mance had not taken his vows, but he was still in command of the sworn brothers. Sam couldn’t imagine a better leader.

Sam stuck close to Mance’s side, keeping his head low to hide the fear. “And if any of our brothers are trapped down there,” Mance ordered quietly to Wulf, “if any sworn brothers have been taken captive – shoot them first.”

The raider nodded. Sam grimaced, but he understood the order. They had discovered that watchmen could allow the white walkers through, and that was something they couldn’t allow. Not again. Nobody else can repeat my mistake.

It was sobering thought. I wish that somebody had put an arrow through my own skull, Sam thought quietly, before I allowed Malvern to pass.

“Tarly.” Mance nodded at Sam. “You keep close to me throughout. You must be my hands.”

“Yes, my lord.”

His hands. Mance’s own hands were wrapped in wool gloves, but his fingers had never recovered from his torture and captivity. Nobody could doubt Mance’s strength, but his hands were crippled and the Lord of Castle Black could not hold a sword, or even open a door. On a few nights, Sam heard had Mance fumbling clumsily with a harp, cursing and groaning. Apparently the Lord of Castle Black had once been a master of it. I must be his hands, his steward. Sam had no qualms about such a task.

The weak noon sun shone behind them, and to the north the shadow of the Wall loomed across the world.
Below, they saw figures running to the tunnel, abandoning their posts north of the Wall. There was a long, tense hush, but then they heard a wolf’s howl split the through the wind.

“There!” One-Eyed Wulf screamed. “I see them!”

*I can’t,* Sam almost replied, but then he saw the shadows through the tree line. First it was one body, and then another, and then…

He recognised them from the way they moved. No living army could be so disciplined, could keep such tight ranks. There was a solid line of shadows emerging from the trees, bodies pushing over the snow.

The dead walked in perfect formation.

“By the gods…” Sam whispered.

“Sonagon save us,” a wildling muttered. Marthe of the Antlers was gaping downwards with horror.

The line of bodies did not stop. It was single rank that seemed to stretch for leagues – thousands of corpses emerging to face off against the Wall.

Sam gasped. They stretched for as far as the eye could see. An army that stretched to the horizon. Sam couldn’t even count them. A thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand?

“Do not be daunted,” Mance shouted stiffly. “This Wall was built to stand against their numbers. The dead might stack a million high, but they will not get over.”

*They’re finally here.* The white walkers were done picking off refugees, they were moving in strength. The Watch had been preparing for this. And yet the solid tide of bodies moving through the no-man’s land still caused a ripple of fear.

“Ready!” Wulf bellowed, and the bowmen jerked into motion. “Hold!”

“Do not fire!” Mance boomed into the wind. “Arrows themselves are useless, and there’s too much snow for flames to survive that distance. We will fight them when they get closer, be ready for a charge.”

A charge. But why would they charge? The wights were fearsome, but they still couldn’t cross the Wall. Sam frowned. *Surely the white walkers would just be wasting bodies if they tried?*

His heart was racing, but slowly, rational thought started to push in through the fog of fear. *In fact,* he thought suspiciously, eyes roaming over the army of the dead, *their whole approach doesn’t make sense.* The number of wights was terrifying, yes, but what sort of army used only a single rank? Were the white walkers intending on assaulting the entire length of the Wall simultaneously? Surely a better means would be to concentrate their soldiers against the actual castles?

“Something’s wrong,” Sam whispered.

“Aye,” Mance agreed quietly, his brow furrowing. “I see it too. Keep your eyes peeled, Tarly.”

All around them, men rushed into position. Suddenly, a sharp scream spilt the platform, and they all flinched. Varamyr gasped suddenly, clutching at his chest.

“My wolves,” the skinchanger wheezed, a sweat on his brow. “They caught two of my wolves.”

“How many are there?” Mance demanded.
Varamyr shook his head. “Lots. That’s only the first rank, there’s more dead in the trees. Not only men either; there’s dead animals there too – everything from wolves to mammoths to worse.”

_Worse?_ Sam thought foggily. _What could be worse?_ “What else?” Mance insisted.

Varamyr grimaced. “I don’t know. But I can smell them. You can’t smell that? It’s like… like…”

His voice trailed off, his face pale. “What are we dealing with?” Ronnel Harclay pressed, his voice breaking. “A hundred thousand? _Two hundred_?”

“Where are the white walkers?” Mance demanded, and Varamyr only shook his head again. He was pawing at his chest. The skinchanger looked as though he were struggling to breathe. “Find _them_, Varamyr. They must be with their army somewhere, locate them. It doesn’t end until we kill the Others themselves.”

Sam had no idea how Mance could stay so focused. The skinchanger looked pained, but he closed his eyes and entered his remaining bodies. Varamyr’s body slumped once more.

To the north, the line of wights came to a halt.

The wait was agonising. The rank of wights moved with purpose, but only at a snail’s pace, Sam watched the wights stepping closer. The distance, the height, the wind, the snow all obscured the details, but the black line was shuffling forward. Coming closer and closer…

If this was an attack, it was a slow one.

“What are they doing?” Sam whispered.

“They’re testing us,” Mance replied. “They’re scouting out to see what distance we fire at them, and searching for where our arrows are the most sparse. They’re keeping a long rank so that we can’t sneak out and flank them.”

That… that made a disturbing amount of sense. “So this isn’t an attack?” Sam whispered.

Mance hesitated. “This is a first wave. _They’ve_ got no reason to hurry.”

To the north, all eyes were on the line of the wights moving slowly. More and more sworn brothers were rushing in to the Wall, trying to fill up the empty positions.

“They’re within bowrange now,” Wulf suggested. “We could fire.”

Mance shook his head. “Not reliable enough range, and the wind is too strong. We’d hit less than one in a hundred. Hold your arrows.”

Kettles of oil were being propped atop the fires and empty barrels were being unloaded. The perches were being readied, and archers were wrapping rags around shafts in preparation for lighting their arrows. Mance huddled with his officers, discussing how to proceed.

“At three hundred feet,” Mance decided. “Do not let them any closer than that. We light arrows and fire down at three hundred feet.”

They weren’t that far off already. The whole air was tense, counting down every step. A thousand bowstrings were taut, watching and waiting.

Not then, the wights stopped at four hundred paces. Every bowstring was taut, but not a single shaft was loosed. The wights stood still like statues.
Slowly, agonisingly, hours passed.

This was not how Sam expected the invasion to happen. *Do they mean to torture us?* Sam wondered. *To kill us with anticipation?*

The wights were just standing there, at the edge of their range, taunting them. “When will the dragon arrive,” Sam heard a man whisper. “The dragon is coming, yes?”

After a while, Mance gave the order for the kitchens to bring some broth and stew up the lifts. “Nobody leaves their stations,” Mance ordered, “but let’s get these men warmed up. They must keep their strength.”

*We could be here a while.* The wind was still howling, drifts of snow blowing over the plains, but the dead didn’t move.

Sam stared north, eyes slowly roaming over the army of the dead, trying to understand. Around him, men were passing out metal dishes and readying campfires, but Sam scarcely paid attention.

“What would you do?” Sam eventually asked, looking to Mance. The man raised an eyebrow. “Let’s say that you were in the white walker’s position. You need to get across the Wall, how would you do it?”

Mance laughed humourlessly. “That depends what sort of timeframe I had. I could send climbers over the Wall, or I could build barges and cross at the coasts.”

“Let’s say the Wall was more than just physical. What if it was an actual barrier stopping you from crossing?” Sam argued. “You can’t go over, you can’t go around. You could only go through if invited.”

“Aye, that would have made it more troublesome for any raider.” Mance scratched his whiskers. “If it’s a spell, I’d need to find a counterspell. If it’s a barrier I’d search for a way to break it.”

“Like the Horn of Joramun?”

“Aye. Like the Horn of Joramun.” Mance’s eyes were grim. “Or a dragon.”

*If the white walkers have either, we are already doomed.* Sam shook his head, trying to dispel such grim thoughts. “What if you didn’t have a such a means?”

“In that case, I would have to bluff. I’d need to threaten my way through, to force the other side to surrender.” Mance’s eyes looked thoughtful. “Do you think this is an intimidation tactic, Tarly?”

*No, I don’t actually.* That was how Mance thought, but it wouldn’t be how a white walker thinks. Sam suspected that the white walkers didn’t even know the *meaning* of intimidation. Fear was alien to them. Still, Sam hesitated. “Perhaps it is.” His voice was doubtful. “Perhaps they are just–”

“White walkers!” a voice squealed. Varamyr lurched up suddenly, his eyes wide and crazed. “I see them, I see them!”

“Where?” Mance demanded, at the exact same time that Sam asked, “How many of them?”

“In the woods, coming south!” The skinchanger was spasmig, wheezing with every breath. “Seven! Seven of them!”

The air buzzed. Metal dishes dropped to the ice as men eased raced to grab their bows again. All
eyes were peered downwards, every man standing on the edge of a great icy gulf.

Varamyr was shaking, his eyes glazed over. “They’re… They’re…” the skinchanger spasmed. “…Oh by the gods… The gods…!”

“Varamyr!” Mance snapped, while two men grabbed a hold of the skinchanger. Varamyr looked so gaunt and small, screaming and shaking. “Varamyr! What do you see?”

He gave no reply. He was too busy sputtering and screaming with agony, shuddering with every pained gasp.

From the haunted forest, a wolf’s howl broke through the wind, but then it was abruptly silenced. Far below, the last of Varamyr’s skins had just died.

The skinchanger looked crazed, screaming incoherently. The men tried to shake sense into him, but he could only twitch and howl. His eyes are still glazed over, Sam noticed. Maybe one of his wolves is not quite dead. Mance tried to shake answers from the man, but there were none to be had. Mance cursed.

“Get him out of here!” Mance ordered, before turning back to the north. “Stay sharp! Find them!”

Three men had to carry the writhing skinchanger away. All eyes were pinned on the snowy wasteland, every arrow drawn and itching to be fired…

In the distance, across the horizon and the blanketed forest, a flurry of snow writhed and twisted above the trees. Great geysers of white plumed upwards, snaking their way south. Sam saw the frosted forest shaking. He could feel footsteps marching through the forest.

His eyes were fixed on the tree line, at the edge of the no-man’s land…

A faint mist was blowing from in the north, bringing with it the scent of cold and rot.

Sam couldn’t see anything, it was all too foggy. The white walkers are nearly invisible in the snow, he recalled. Something about their armour, something about their very forms let them almost become one with the world, indistinguishable from a distance.

But then he saw the trees shift. He saw the shadows of another line of dead, and then there were white shapes moving across the snow.

All around him, he felt the men squirm. Sam couldn’t see their bodies, but he made out the movements. Spiders, Sam thought with horror. There were ice spiders scuttling across the snows, unnatural insects of every size. The largest ones looked as big as aurochs, but Sam couldn’t even see the smallest. They blanketed the snow like a layer of cotton, uncountable and nearly indistinguishable. And then he saw the snowdrifts moving.

They are beneath the snow, Sam realised. They were more of them scuttling beneath the snowdrifts, so that all that could be seen was the wake of their movements. It left streaks of mounds across the snow, burrows slithering like snakes.

“The dead ones are weak to fire and the walkers are weak to dragonglass,” Garth Greyfeather muttered, his greybeard lined with hoarfrost. He pulled back on his longbow, fingers twitching. “But what are the spiders weak to?”

“Fucked if know,” Wulf growled. “Just shoot them. Just shoot them enough times until they stop moving.”
“The spiders are ice,” Mance said grimly, so quietly that Sam could barely hear. “Living ice. The spiders don’t leave corpses – their bodies melt after they die.”

*Melt into water.* Maesters had searched for evidence of ice spiders for decades, but they found none but tales and folklore. Even the farthest rangings had only found whispers of them. Sam thought of the stories he once heard as a child of ice dragons – great elemental monsters with blue eyes and translucent wings, that would melt into entire lakes when slain…

“Ice,” muttered Garth Greyfeather. “Then would dragonglass…?”

Sam breaths were hoarse, the air freezing in his lungs like a dagger in his chest. It was so, so cold.

Then he saw bigger shapes. Black figures on white. The bodies of giants rustling in the trees, taking formation…

“Fetch the spyglass!” Mance ordered. “The spyglass!”

Sam took a deep breath, trying to focus. The spyglass – Lord Mormont’s old spyglass, the one with the Myrish lens. It was a rarity on the Wall.

A runner fetched the gilded wood cylinder from the command tent and handed it to Mance, but the lord’s face creased in irritation. Mance’s fingers couldn’t hold it. “Tarly,” Mance ordered, and Sam hurried to grab it.

Sam unfolded the telescopic tube, and Mance motioned at him to have a look. Other men were using chunks of amber, or even just squinting through their hands to try to see.

Everything was white. It took a while to make out anything, the scope brushing over blurry shapes.

But eventually he made out the figure of a white shadow, gliding across the snows. It walked with impossible softness, like the wind given flesh. Its body rippled near invisibly, blurring into the world. Sam could only make it out by the outline it left in the falling snows.

“I see it,“ Sam gasped. “There! Through the trees!”

The other men clamoured to look. Sam’s breath was hushed as he made out its shape, and then there was a second white shadow, and then a third…

His breath froze as he saw the seven beings striding through the snow. Sam stammered, his head going blank with fear.

He remembered their shapes, he remembered the Other snapping Dareon’s neck like a twig…

“Dragonglass!” voices boomed. “Ready your dragonglass!”

The Others were coming closer, seven exposed figures stepping across the snows, closer towards the forward line of wights. The dead stood in a wall before them, but the Others were standing, exposed in the no-man’s land. “What are they doing?” Sam gasped. “Why…?”

The spyglass was snatched from him, but the white walkers were coming so close that the keenest eyes were starting to make them out. They were not quite in conventional bowrange, but the best archer might just be able to make that distance. It was borderline.

“Mance?” Marv the Red Hand shouted, pulling back on an obsidian arrow.

Mance hesitated, biting his lip. “Hold fire!” he shouted after a long moment of indecision. “We do
not have enough dragonglass to waste. If your arrows miss here, we’d have nothing else to shoot
them with.”

Unwillingly, the bows were lowered. “Is that the plan?” Aki the Wroth growled. He was a short
and mean man, almost a dwarf, but Sam was told there was none finer with a spear. “Wait until
they are at our gates?”

“If that’s what it takes, Aki.”

The winds were too strong, the snow flurried. They were all uneasy with the sight.

“What are they doing?” Sam muttered dumbly. Seven white walkers. “Why risk exposing
themselves?”

“They’re taunting us,” Mance said surely. “Trying to make us waste ourselves.”

“We could charge them,” Wulf suggested. “Charge out the gates and rout them.”

“We’d be fools if we tried,” Mance shook his head. “No let’s see what their game is. In the
meantime, ready the scorpions and the stonethrowers, I want them all loaded and primed.”

In the fields below, the lines of wights started to ripple. Bodies trekked out of the trees, and the
confusion spread across the Wall. The Others were standing still, while wights started to move
around them.

Suddenly a dead giant stomped out of the trees, carrying a huge wooden log over its head. The
sworn brothers could only stare.

A battering ram? Or a siege tortoise?

Yet it was neither. The giant wight dropped the log in the middle of the dead man’s land, and it
crunched into the snow. Other wights were shambling, dragging more chunks of wood from the
trees.

“What’s going on?” a voice demanded. “What are they doing?”

They are building something? Sam thought. A siege tower, maybe? But that didn’t make sense,
why built it there?

Sam could only guess, staring in dumb shock as he made out the shapes. Wights were propping the
log upwards, while other chunks of stone and wood were crudely placed into shape. Seven shapes.
Slowly, the Others stepped across the snow, and they each took a seat.

It is a table, Sam realised startled. Dumbfounded, a man handed the spyglass back to Sam.

“What do you see, Tarly?” Mance asked quietly, like he was hesitant to break the hush.

Sam didn’t know how to reply. The seven white walkers were all sitting around a crudely
fashioned table, propped up by wights acting as table legs.

Is this a parley? Are the Others inviting us to treat?

And then there were more wights surging forward, trekking across the snow. They all came to the
table, placing objects – twigs and stones, it looked like – before each white walker. And then Sam
made out the shape of a rotten boar, a dead animal with its skull exposed and its flesh peeling off.
He saw it stagger forth from the trees; the boar walked straight to the table, where it was dropped
on atop of it, and then walked to the very centre and lay dead.
Other creatures followed suit, filling up the table. Dead dogs and goats, even blurry shapes that looked like rabbits and squirrels. The boar lay at the very centre, unmov ing with its mouth agape.

_The pig at a centre of a feast_, Sam realised. The white walkers all raised stones as if they were goblets, like they were having a toast.

Sam’s mouth gaped, dumbfounded. Without a word, he held the spyglass out for Mance to see.

The Lord of Castle Black didn’t say anything, but his lips curled. “What are they doing?” a confused sworn brother asked.

“They’re… they’re having a tea party,” Sam said dumbly.

For a long moment, the only sound was the shrill scream of the wind.

The Others were sitting around a makeshift table in the middle of the dead man’s land, feasting on imaginary meals, raising stones like glasses, all the while the wights shuffled around them like stewards. A great noble feast, where every guest was tended to by a flock of servants. The wights were walking in circles, carrying gunk like it was food.

The Others weren’t eating it, Sam noticed, but they would lift each one up and wave it through the air like they were admiring it, before placing it back down for the wights to bring the next course. A pantomime, a mockery.

And several hundred feet away, a top the Wall, the sworn brothers could only gape and stare.

“They’re taunting us,” Mance said finally. “They mean to mock us.”

The murmurs filled the air. “Let’s shoot them already,” Marv the Red Hand muttered, “chase them off already.”

“I do not want to shoot to miss.” Mance hesitated, biting his lip. “It is better for us if they feel overconfident. Let them taunt, let them get comfortable.”

“Mance…!”

“If they want this to be a standoff, let them,” he said firmly. “It gives us more time for the dragon to arrive.”

That caused a few bodies to stir. Sam bit his lip, trying to size them. Why would the white walkers sit down before the enemy? They weren’t stupid, so what were they…?

“Look at them!” Wulf hissed. “There’s seven of them, and you say that each one controls thousands of wights? We might end this battle with only seven obsidian arrows.”

“Only if those arrows hit their mark,” Sam spoke up suddenly. “Mance is right, it’s still too far. We only have ninety-seven dragonglass shards. Ninety-seven – that’s only enough for a single decent volley.”

The words were met by mutters. Wulf looked back across the no man’s land, measuring the distance. “They are sitting down,” Ulmer said suddenly. “They’re overconfident. Could we sneak an assassin closer?”

“Stonethrowers, we need stonethrowers…”

Behind him, there was urgent talk about how to respond, but Sam was left staring at the Others,
struggling to understand. Mockery, Mance had said.

On their table, the white walkers continued to make a scene. All eyes were on them, and Sam stared, entranced. The Others were raising plates, pretending to eat, and making constant motions. Toasting, nodding, even rubbing their bellies. It was a parody; a man who had never stepped foot in a noble castle might think that highborn ate their meals like such. Why are they mocking us? Why bother?

No, it wasn’t mocking, Sam thought slowly. It felt more… humorous, even. Through the spyglass, all of their movements were exaggerated, every motion emphasised to the extreme. The scene reminded Sam of when his sisters had been young, and they had hosted imaginary feasts with their dolls…

A shiver ran down his spine. It was a game to them. An entertainment.

All across the Wall, men were growing uneasy. Mance was talking about sneaking up on them, but Sam was still staring through the spyglass, trying to glimpse the white walker’s expressions.

Laughter. From their body language, Sam could imagine them laughing.

“What are they doing there?” a bowman muttered uneasily. “They’re just… sitting there.”

“Maybe they’re stupid,” Matthar said. It might have jest, but there was no humour. “Or might just be bored.”

Bored. “Waiting,” Sam muttered suddenly, and then the realisation clicked him. “They’re waiting.”

Sam’s eyes widened in shock and horror. If they’re waiting, then that implies… “Mance!” Sam screamed. “They’re waiting!”

Mance frowned. “Tarly, what are you–?”

All eyes were on the white walkers to the north. Sam felt like a fool watching the pantomime. Every sworn brother was alert, but only focused on a single direction. “They’re waiting!” Sam gasped. “It’s a distraction, they’re distracting us–”

Suddenly the wind shrieked. We were all looking north, Sam cursed. Nobody was staring south.

Beyond the Wall, the seven white walkers raised their stones in a merry toast. Sam was already sprinting, darting into the trenches and pushing through the wind. He was running south, to the other side of the Wall.

And, to the south, he saw a black cloud burst growing against the endless white. It looked wispy, like smoke through the snow. He had never seen a cloud quite like it. There was no time to think, no time to understand, there was only…

Sworn brothers were stirring, but it was too late, not enough…

“Run!” Sam screamed, as the world exploded into chaos.

Pecking, angry bodies. They fell from the sky like arrows. Sam dropped in the snow and curled into himself. He threw his hands up to protect his face, but he still felt sharp claws tear into his scalp. His mind was going blank, the world was drowning out around him into chaos…
All around him, the Wall was screaming and squawking.

Sam heard Garth Greyfeather scream a curse as a black shade lunged at his eyes. They were struggling, blood spurting, and then black bodies were falling off the edge of the Wall…

“Get to shelter!” Mance boomed somewhere amidst the chaos. “Get to shelter, get to–”

The air hissed as a shape lobbed at Mance’s head. Sam saw white wings pitched black, and blue eyes. An owl, Sam realised. A dead rotten owl with blue eyes.

**Malvern.**

Ravens and crows cawed at him, rotten beaks pecking through furs.

Sam saw Ulmer swat a dove from the air, its bones crunching, but even its mangled body was still trying to move. Then, a hawk whooshed down, clawing at the bowman’s eyes.

An attack of undead birds. There were hundreds and thousands of dead ravens, crows, owls, falcons, hawks, robins, sparrows, magpies, pigeons and gulls – even bats and eagles. Most of the creatures were frail and poor fliers with patchy wings; all it took was a single good swat and they went down, but there were just so many of them. They were all pecking, clawing and scratching with fury of the dead.

*I knew that the white walkers could raise and control any animal. Why did I never worry about birds as well? How did the Other even manage to kill so many birds?*

“Fire!” Wulf howled. “Fire! Grab fire!”

Men were diving under their cloaks, trying to protect themselves from the onslaught of beaks and talons. It was all screaming, howling…

Some were trying to fight, but they were just slashing swords uselessly at a cloud of bodies. There were too many, they were everywhere. Sam didn’t fight, he just ran straight for the outbuilding, diving until the shelter even as he tried to pull a rotten raven off his scalp. Blood oozed down his forehead. His heart was like a panicked drumming in his ears. Sam felt a cry well up in a throat that didn’t even feel like his. The evil thing crunched in his hand and he threw it, where it collided against the wood, still squawking.

“Shelter!” Sam heard himself screaming. “Take shelter!”

It was useless. His voice wasn’t loud enough to break through the clamour.

He heard the shriek as the flock of crows caused a man to stagger. Sam could only stare as the black brother stumbled straight off the edge of the Wall. *A murder, Sam thought suddenly, a murder of crows.*

Fluttering shapes dived at him, and Sam had to slam the door of the outhouse shut. He heard rotten birds trying to peck through the wood, he could hear the scratching of dead talons.

Through the gaps in the wood, he saw fragments of the chaos outside. Flailing figures were writhing in the snow and ice trenches. Some men had grabbed burning sticks and torches, whirling with them and sending smoking bodies dropping. Others had abandoned swords and were swatting at the air with planks of wood. The birds were falling by the hundreds, but there were thousands.

“Hold the line!” Mance screamed, even as he wrestled with an owl. “Protect the refugees, hold
The birds shifted as one. Sam’s eyes widened in horror, but black shapes had already converged.

“No!” Sam shrieked. “No, don’t–!”

It was too late. There was a white walker controlling these birds. The Other recognised the man who held command purely by voice, and suddenly all of the birds focused their efforts. Mance barely managed to gasp as hundreds of shapes targeted him, their bodies buffeting against him, grabbing hold of his furs with sharp talons and flapping wings.

Sam saw his eyes widen in terror, he tried to run, tried to do something, but he…


And suddenly all of those wings swept him straight off his feet.

“Mance!” Wulf roared, lunging to catch the former King-Beyond-the-Wall.

Dalla. It was useless. There were too many, and then the wind howled and Mance was sent flying…

Wulf managed to grab Mance’s wrist, but the snow swept around them and suddenly both men were falling off the edge of the Wall.

Crash. Mance landed on to the stokes of the lift, a fifteen-foot drop onto solid timber. Sam didn’t see the fall, but he could hear something crack even across the distance. He crashed with such an oomph that Sam knew Mance wasn’t moving.

All around him, the birds hissed and screeched, but the flock was thinning. The wight birds were too fragile, their wings too weak. They were terrifying and there were swarms of them, but they were easily knocked out of sky. One solid hit was enough to cripple them. All across the ice, grounded blue-eyed shapes still squawking and squirming.

Sam’s heart was racing as he darted out of the outbuilding. Sam found himself staring down at where Mance had fallen. Mance was left strewn over the timbers of a lower battlement of the Wall, where the lift supports joined the ice. Mance’s skin and clothes were left shredded by a hundred talons. He may not have hit the bottom, but even from this height Sam could see the blood seeping from his skull and dripping down seven hundred feet.

Wulf had been even unluckier. Wulf had bounced off the lift’s frame, and tumbled all the way down to the Broken Tower below.

Mance. Mance! Sam might have screamed, but his throat jammed.

And then Sam’s eyes turned upwards, staring south. He could see the dark shadow over the horizon, he could see bodies pushing through the snows. They were already passed the ruins of Mole’s Town. A shadow of an army in the distance, rapidly getting closer. If this was the first wave…

Malvern. Malvern was coming.

The birds had fallen, but all around him he could hear shrieking and wailing.

“We got bodies to the north!” another howled. “They’re moving, they’re climbing…!”

“All around him, the sworn brothers were shocked and scattered. Perhaps not many had died, but many, many more were left clutching ugly wounds across the skull, or blind men with gouged out eyes. The panic was the worst; the sudden aftermath where all you could see was blood and terror.

We were not prepared for this, Sam thought suddenly. We were not prepared.

“Who’s in command?” a man cried. “Who has the Wall?”

Command. The command. Without Mance, they needed a leader. They needed someone to rally the defence. Normally that would be the First Ranger, but Harle the Handsome was leading a scouting party and they had yet to refill the positions beneath him. The most senior brother was technically Ser Wynton Stout, but he was infirm and witless. Perhaps Soren Shieldbreaker, the Lord of Oakenshield, or Morna White Mask of Queensgate could take command, but they were too far away. Mance had been acting Lord Commander, the one who brought them together.

The Lord Commander has fallen, Sam thought numbly, who is second in command?

Sam stared at the shadow of the undead army, and he remembered.

Oh fuck, Sam realised. It’s me.

There was a hiss of steam from the ice beneath him, as the piss streamed out from between his legs.

Chapter End Notes

I'm replying to a common review from last chapter here because it's annoying me slightly now; the idea that Winterfell has magical wards the same as Storm's End does, that's fanon. There is absolutely no evidence to support it, and direct evidence to the contrary.

In canon, it was specified that the oldest building in Winterfell, the First Keep, was built after the Andal Invasion, so Winterfell as a whole was most certainly not built by Bran the Builder. If there was a structure built at that time, 8000 - 6000 years ago, it has crumbled. Which makes more sense; most castles do not last several thousand years, so you can safely say that whatever hypothetical wards that could have been there at the Age of Heroes are gone.

Meanwhile, the idea that Winterfell and Storm's End were both built by Bran the Builder comes from an old, unsupported legend - it's basically hearsay about a mythical and dubious figure. GRRM has made it quite clear that rumours and the things 'smallfolk say' are not to be trusted.

And I've got no doubt that people will still try to argue the point (maesters can't be trusted, seems to be a common one) but you are arguing fanon. You are making up your own version of the story with no leg to stand on. Which would be fine in your
story, but I'm the only one who gets to decide which fanon goes in my story.

So yes, there are no wards in Winterfell, shadow assassins can waltz right in - the same way they can in near every other place.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

The Battle for the Night...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sansa

Her feet tapped across the stones, heels clattering as she tried to run. *It is this cursed dress*, Sansa thought with a grimace. She lifted the hem and bundled it up in her hands, but somehow the fabric still caught against her legs. Arya used to hate wearing dresses, but Sansa had never been able to understand why.

Now, she was awkwardly running towards the sound of screaming, trying to shove her way through crowded corridors, and Sansa understood why.

Wailing. Shouts. Screams. As she burst into the Great Hall all she heard was the panic, all she saw was frantic movement. She pushed through the screaming and the distraught sobs. Then, she saw red and black.

Her breath froze, eyes widening in horror. Corpses smeared in ash littered the dais of the throne, and blood was trickling down the steps. Scattered black bodies were lying twisted across the steps, like some brutal mural across ash-coated stone.

There was crying, sharp yells of anguish. “No!” a girl's voice wailed, “No, get off me, no…!”

She saw Wylla Manderly, thrashing against her sister’s arms. Wynafryd was embracing her, hugging her sister tight as she wept, but the younger girl was squirming red-faced and howling. “Don’t look…” Wynafryd gasped between the sobs, trying to pull her sister away. “Don’t look, don’t…”

*Their mother.* The thought sent all sorts of emotions writhing through Sansa. All around her, men were running. She heard guards shouting for weapons – but it was the panicked shouts of men that didn't know what was happening. More chaos than sense.

Sansa couldn’t see Leona Manderly, not at first. But then she made out a woman’s corpse collapsed at the throne, a body with its head half decapitated through the cheek. Sansa could see gore and blood, skull and brains…

The sight caused puke to rise in her throat. She could have gagged, but she swallowed it down.

Sansa had been with the other highborn women and children as they prepared to take shelter for possible battle. Sansa hadn't stayed long, but even by the time she reached the Great Hall the massacre was over. A bloodbath.

The world was spinning. Sansa was speechless, trying to understand. How could this happen? How could it happen so *quickly*?
Corpses. Thirteen corpses. What sort of assassin could kill so many, right in the middle of Winterfell’s Great Hall? Sansa could feel the tingling in the air – it was like the world was crackling with unnatural power, distorting the air and twisting it all…

“The white walkers,” Sansa gasped. “Did they do this? Where are they, where…?”

She didn’t even know who she was speaking to. Everyone around her was too busy rushing, or carrying bodies away. Wounded men were screaming. A great wordless roar filled the hall – a broad-chested, white-haired man was gripping his wounded shoulder, while he knelt over an unmoving body. A father crying over his son, screaming with anguish and rage.

The wound. Sansa stared at the wound on the white-haired man’s shoulder, but it looked like no wound Sansa had ever seen. It was a sword’s slash, but it was wrong; like he had been burnt rather than cut. The edges of his furs were scorched, the skin and flesh underneath blackened.

She saw a man staggering, clutching his arm. In his hands, he held a wooden shield that had been snapped in two. “What happened?” Sansa snapped at the lord. “What happened?”

The lord faltered. He was a tall and grim man with a scar across his cheek and an emblem of a rose on his chest. He looked stunned, and scared. “It was…” he gulped. “It was a shadow. It was smoke and ash.”

What?

“Maester!” a voice screamed. “Maester, we need a maester over here…!”

Bodies were stirring, footsteps rippling. Sansa turned and rushed, but she had to shove her way through the front to see. The Greatjon – Sansa saw him still moving, still roiling even as he held in his own stomach. The great lord was gagging, red-faced, while they tried to lift him up to the infirmary. It took four men just to hoist the Greatjon up off the floor.

Sansa didn’t even know how he was still alive. There were a few that were left alive with ugly wounds, but most seemed to have been killed instantly. Galbart Glover had his torso ripped open, Ser Mardrick Manderly looked dissected from behind, through plate armour and all. Maege Mormont was decapitated, Eric Burley mutilated, the Greatjon’s chest was sliced wide open…

A shadow. A shadow killed them?

The room was spinning. Focus, Sansa ordered herself. I can’t help them, but where do I need to be?

“Bran,” Sansa whispered after a single frantic heartbeat. “Bran…!”

She turned and ran without a second thought. If there was an assassin about, it was targeting lords. If there was a second assassin, then the King in the North could well be the next target…

But others clearly had the same thought. By the time Sansa reached Bran, he was locked in his chambers with fifty alert and nervous guards standing uneasily outside. Sansa was nearly not allowed through – they drew weapons at her approach – but thankfully a few of the men recognised her.

The door to Bran’s chambers was barred, but inside the room there were twenty more men standing guard around the little figure on the bed. All of them were holding crude white spears, Sansa noticed, or clutching white wooden stakes with uncertain expressions on their faces.

Sansa saw the girl, Meera Reed, standing over Bran with a half a broken wooden stick in her hands.
It was a makeshift weapon, but Meera was holding it like a spear. *Weirwood*, Sansa realised. Sansa would have asked why, but then her heart pounded as she saw the frail little boy lying still as the grave atop the mattress.

“*Bran!*” Sansa shouted, rushing to her brother’s side.

The boy wasn’t moving. For a heartbeat, so many fears surged through her… “*Bran!* What happe…”

Her voice trailed off as she noticed the pink in his cheeks. He was still breathing, she realised, but she had never seen a sleeping figure so still. Sansa blinked. *How is he asleep like this?*

“He’s fine,” Meera said stiffly. “He is out of his skin at the moment.”

*Out of his skin? What does that even mean?* Sansa felt so lost, her head spinning. So many questions whirled, but the one that came to the forefront… “You’re wielding weirwood,” she noticed, nodding at the crude spear.

The guards around her shifted. All of their weapons were crude; it was like they had hacked off branches of the heart tree as quickly as possible. Armed guards holding sticks.

“It kills them.” Meera composed herself well, but her hands were twitching. “Steel couldn’t hurt it, but then weirwood… that killed it.”

“What was it?” Sansa insisted. “Was that… was *that* a white walker?”

The girl shook her head. “I don’t… I don’t know.”

The girl. Meera was a couple of years older than Sansa, she was told, but Meera looked the younger due to her slight build and height. *But she had the same thought that I did*, Sansa realised, *she thought that Bran might be in danger, she ran to protect him.*

“Is there more of them?” Sansa pressed. “How did it get in, how…?”

Meera just shook her head, clutching her stake tightly. None of the guards knew what was happening. They were all just as lost as she was.

Everything felt crazed and confused. *Is this what the Others are capable of?* She had no idea why Jon had seemed so unnerved while talking about the Others – she hadn’t pressed him on it, but a part of her hadn’t truly believed it. Sansa had thought it fantasy, one of Old Nan’s tales. But this? This wasn’t the work of humans and it felt like the whole castle was left shaking.

It was dead. Whatever ‘it’ was, they said that Meera killed it. *But if there was one*, a voice whispered, *surely there has to be more?*

Her hands were trembling. She looked down at Bran, and the thought of that red and black floor…

*Focus,* Sansa ordered herself. There was no time to break down, not now. Perhaps come nightfall she would break down into tears and wail in fear and grief, but for now she had to focus. *What needs to be done?*

“Jon,” Sansa said after a pause. “Where’s Jon?”

“To the dragon,” Meera explained. “He ordered guards with weirwood and dragonglass to protect Bran, and then he ran to the dragon.”
If Jon didn’t linger, he couldn’t afford to, Sansa thought. Did he fear the dragon was in danger, or was he running for the heart tree for more weirwood? Sansa looked around the room, her eyes lingering on the guards. All of them were wildlings with white stones on their chest. All of the guards were holding weirwood, and some were clutching rough shards of black glass as daggers. Obsidian, she thought. The smartest among them had fastened obsidian shards to weirwood sticks, to form crude spears.

The sight made her think back to the tales that Maester Luwin had told. The children of the forest had supposedly hunted using both obsidian and weirwood as weapons, she recalled.

Sansa looked around the chambers, and she hesitated. Bran had several dozen guards surrounding him, and Sansa was useless waiting by his side. She refused to be another weeping woman. Jon hadn’t been able to linger, and neither could she. I must go to where I can be useful.

She gave one last look at Bran, before striding out of the room. Even despite herself, she twitched at every flickering shadow, every crackle of flame, every rustle of footsteps.

First comes panic, then fear, Sansa thought, but soon it will become anger, and then blame. Suspicion and accusations would not be far behind. How many would claim that this was murder, that the wildlings massacred a dozen northern lords? She needed to get out ahead of it, to stop it reaching that stage.

How much have we lost, how can we recover…?

Testimonies, Sansa decided. I need testimonies from the witnesses, I need to piece together what happened. I need men who can swear to what they saw. Bias worked best when it came quickly; the first explanation that was offered was the most well-established. She needed to paint the narrative, Sansa needed to be the first to pen letters to White Harbour, Deepwood Motte, Last Hearth and Bear Island.

The white walkers did this. How did they do it, what did they do…?

The Greatjon, she thought suddenly. He is still alive.

Sansa broke out into an uneven sprint, her heels clapping across the stones.

She heard the bustle from the infirmary, the sound of strangled screams breaking the clamour. Sansa pushed her way through, staring in shock. The Greatjon was on a stone slab, with blood swelling from his stomach. Two men tried to hold in his guts, but the blood was oozing out between their fingers.

“Maester!” a voice snapped. Sansa recognised Lord Norvel Mollen, an Umber bannerman, standing frantically by his liege lord’s side. They had to hold him down with leather belts to stop him thrashing, screaming in agony. “Maester! Do something!”

The young maester was fumbling, pale-faced. He was a young, clean-shaven man, with only half the number of rings on his chain that Luwin had. He looked lost. “I never…” the maester gasped. “I’ve never…”

He stared down at all the blood, and looked fit to faint. “Cauterise the cut!” a man shouted. “We need to cauterise the bleeding – heat a sword’s edge, quickly…!”

The maester stammered. “No, no, that’ll kill him, it’s too deep it’s…”

His was a weak voice amidst so much screaming. The lord lunged, grabbing the maester by the
collar. “Do something!”

“I…!” the young maester wailed. “I’m an apprentice, I’ve never…!”

Lord Norvel looked ready to burst. Sansa had to step in. “Anger does naught to help your liege lord,” Sansa said sharply, striding into the room. She glared at Lord Norvel, pushing the lord away. “Leave the room, if you cannot keep a cool head.”

Lord Norvel floundered. Sansa was as lost as anyone, but the secret to command was to not let that show. The illusion was everything.

“You two, keep pressure on the wound. Keep his blood in,” Sansa ordered to the two men. “And you two, hold him down tightly, do not let him tear the wound.” After that, she was at a loss for what to do next, but she blinked and recovered quickly. She turned to the maester. “And for his mouth… the…” Curses, I can’t remember what it’s called. “… the wooden stick that goes between his teeth?”

“The bit.” The maester nodded dumbly. “Stop him biting his tongue.”

“Get something for his mouth,” Sansa ordered, “and fetch rags, and boiling water.” She didn’t know why, they just seemed like a reasonable thing to have. The maester blinked in shock, but men were already running. “Take a deep breath, maester. Deep breath. What must be done?”

“Cauterise it,” a man-at-arms insisted. “A burning poker would stop–”

“That will not help!” the maester wailed. “It’s too deep! We… we must stitch it, give the flesh a chance to heal.”

“Needle and thread!” Sansa shouted, and a memory returned to her. She remembered when little Arya had sliced her hand open playing with a crossbow. “Maester Luwin kept a sewing bag – on top that vanity!”

They found it quickly, all the while the Greatjon thrashed on the top. There was a small leather bag of maester’s supplies for stitching flesh; wool bandages, a spool of fine cotton thread, and an iron needle slimmer than what Sansa used to work with, and a vial of rubbing alcohol.

Outside the room, Sansa heard endless stomping, men readying for war. The maester twitched. His hands were shaking so badly he could not even thread the needle.

The maester fumbled, and the Greatjon howled in pain. Sansa could have screamed in frustration. “Give it here!” she snapped. She licked the end and threaded the string through the needle, just as Septa Mordane had taught her a thousand times. “Just… just tell me what needs to be done.”

The maester breathed in relief as she took over, sagging slightly. “Clamp the skin. We must bleed the wound, keep it clean…”

She couldn’t even see the cut under the men’s hands, and the bloody furs. Lord Norvel shredded the Greatjon’s clothes with a sharp knife, and Sansa saw the cut. The edge had sliced open the man’s stomach from thigh to hip, like gutting a pig. She could see throbbing veins, she could see his guts pulsing in grotesque colours. Her resolve nearly failed with the sight of it.

“Wine,” the maester ordered. “Bitter wine.”

Sansa wasn’t sure if that was for him or the wound. The blood spurted over her dress, and the
Greatjon didn’t stop thrashing.

_It’s just like stitching cloth_, she ordered to herself.

“The peritoneum,” the maester instructed. “The inner stomach layer, you must stitch that first. It is under the outer tissue, you can see…”

She could see it. The flesh was different shades, layers of skin going inwards. Raw meat. Gods, she could see his guts, she could make out the coils of intestines. The skin was tender, torn muscles. Men were holding rags to squeeze up the blood, while Sansa’s hands pushed through the flesh and gore…

The Greatjon howled. He thrashed so hard the leather belts they held him with could have snapped.

The men had to heave the skin together, and Sansa was left with her hands inside someone’s stomach. “Do you have something for the pain?” she demanded, her voice nearly breaking. “Milk of the poppy?”

The maester looked lost. “The stores… there’s naught left.”

_Curses_. The Greatjon was thrashing so much, muffled screams whistling through his bit, and Sansa didn’t even know how to push the needle through. “The needle,” Sansa said finally. “I cannot get a clean stitch, it’s all ripped…”

“You may have to cut it open further,” the maester admitted. “Peel back the outer flesh, and pull the flesh together. Give the inner organs a chance to heal.”

Sansa stared in shock. Lord Norvel hesitated, and then passed his hunting knife to her. Too many people were crowded around the Greatjon’s stomach, nobody else could get their hands in. Sansa would have to slice his skin herself.

_Just like stitching cloth_, she insisted. _Just like cloth. Living, breathing, bleeding cloth._

“The cut… it’s into his intestines, maester,” she reported. Blood everywhere, chunks of flesh… “I cannot… I cannot stitch it all…”

“It will clot, my lady. And we will have to cut him open again to remove the threads.” The maester shook his head. “But for now the internal bleeding will kill him faster than anything. We can only stitch what we can, bandage the rest, and give him a chance.”

The doubt was thick in his voice. The maesters claimed to be able to reattach limbs and stitch internal wounds, but Sansa doubted if such things had high success rates. _He does not expect the Greatjon to survive_, Sansa realised, _and he is scared of what might happen if the lord doesn’t._

_Lord Umber is strong_, she told herself. _He is strong, he is strong._

Sansa squeezed the needle through red, tender meat. Bile and blood bubbled out around her fingers. The Greatjon’s movements spasmed, like a dying fish.

“Stitch outwards. Cross-stitch,” the maester added, and Sansa could have slapped him.

The first knot of cotton tightened, blood swelling up through the rip. She couldn’t even see what she was stitching through all the gore, she had to do it blind. _Septa Mordane always said my needlework was the finest she had ever seen._
The Greatjon’s skin was so pale, the flesh was squelchy. How much blood did he even have left? Even for a big man, he had bled a lot.

*We are all just bags of water. Cut the sack and the water dribbles out until there’s none left.* Sansa didn’t know where that thought came from.

The lord was gasping, wheezing to breathe. The wooden bit fell out of his mouth, and nobody thought to replace it.

“Lad… Lady Stark,” the Greatjon wheezed, his eyes bulging like he had seen a ghost.


His eyes were rolling backwards in his skull, his throat jamming. Like a fish flopping and choking…

“Awake, Lord Umber!” she shouted. *Faster, stitch faster.* She didn’t know why, but if he closed his eyes she didn’t think he’d open them again… “You do not have permission to die!”

He was trembling, his motions growing jerky. Sansa was hands deep in a pile of guts, and she just didn’t…

“Think of your sons!” Sansa ordered suddenly. “Your boys, your daughters. Think of *them.*”

He didn’t respond, but Sansa could only hope he was listening. Could only… “You have family. You have *children.* Think of them.”

It sounded like he tried to say something but the words choked in his throat. A man that big shouldn’t have sounded so small.

*He had children,* Sansa remembered suddenly. Lord Umber’s two daughters by his first wife had been lost to wildlings. His eldest son, the Smalljon, had died at the Red Wedding. His youngest son had been butchered at Last Hearth, and his two middle boys were missing. Once, House Umber had been a large family.

“Would they want you to die like this?” Sansa pressed hard, twisting in the needle as far as it could go. The needle was slender, but it still felt like pressing a four-inch knife through his guts. “We keep fighting for *them,* my lord; the ones that we’ve lost and the ones that still remain.

“Think of *them,* remember *them.*”

“My boys…” Lord Umber gasped. “Jon, Steffon, Kol, Mikael…” There were tears in the Greatjon’s eyes. “… Rebekah… Valerie…”

The maester was dabbing at the wound with a wine-soaked rag. “Pull the flesh together, Lady Stark,” the maester whispered. “Must be forceful, pull…”

Sansa pulled. Flesh clenched, the muscles throbbing in her hands. She could feel him trembling. The Greatjon was still mumbling his children’s names through pained breaths.

The maester grabbed another clay pot of wine, splattering dark ale over a new rag to wipe down the wound. “Bring that bloody wine over here, you dolt,” the lord growled through the pain.

The maester floundered, but the Greatjon’s arms were still bound. Lord Mollen grabbed the pot off
him, and then poured it straight down the Greatjon’s throat. Sansa tightened another knot on the thread, and it finally seemed like the flow of blood was stemming. “A second stitch, my lady,” the maester instructed. “Stitch the inner flesh and outer flesh separately.”

*I might have well just stitched up a corpse.* His stomach was thick and hairy, but it was all sorts of colours – black and red blood smeared over his chest, and his skin was swollen and jagged. It was as ugly a wound as any Sansa had ever seen.

*The Greatjon is strong,* Sansa told herself. If anyone could survive a blade to the guts, it was him.

“We must restore his fluids,” the maester ordered. “Water and salt. Keep him lying down, keep him still… he will not survive a rupture.” His face twisted. “Curses, if only we had leeches to drain the humours…”

The Greatjon was ghostly pale, wheezing with every breath. “He cannot breathe!” Lord Mollen protested.

“Blood in the lung.” The man raised his hands helplessly. “I cannot… his stomach…”

“La… dy Stark,” the Greatjon was gasping, straining with every word. “Lady Stark…”

Sansa’s head was spinning in delirium. Her hands were coated in blood, like butcher’s hands. It was so hard to think, the sight of all that *blood*…

“Will he survive?” Sansa demanded. “Will he survive? How can we help him?”

The maester just raised his shoulders and shook his head cluelessly. Sansa cradled her head in her hands to her forehead, blood smearing across her hair. He looked like a man on his deathbed – a bone white husk struggling with every tremor. Lord Umber was still staring at her with bulging eyes, struggling to speak. “… La…” he wheezed. “Star…”

Behind her, she heard footsteps approaching. There was a figure in dark furs – a wildling – lifting a burning torch from the brazier and working towards them.

“He said no cauterising,” Sansa snapped at him.

“I’m not.” The wildling shook his head grimly. “I’m waiting until he dies.” The man raised the torch, standing vigil. “We’re going to have to burn that body straight away. You don’t want him coming back.”

It was met by silence. Sansa blinked, unable to respond. The wildling stood stiffly, holding his torch patiently before the infirmary slab. The maester tried to shuffle backwards. “*Burn him?*” Lord Mollen gaped.

“Lad…” Lord Umber croaked suddenly. “… *Catelyn Stark*…”

Sansa tensed, and froze. *Mother?* The Greatjon was looking at her, wheezing, as he tried to speak. *What…?*

She knelt downwards, straining to hear through his haggard breaths. Lord Umber was conscious, trying to force the words out with his dying breaths.

“Catelyn… told us…” he groaned, whimpering softly. “… told us… *Stannis*…” His bearded jaw clench, trying to squeeze the words out of hoarse half-breaths. “Told us Stannis killed Renly… A shadow… She said a shadow…”
“My lord?” Sansa whispered, struggling to understand. Lord Umber seemed desperate to force the words out. Maybe his dying words.

“Stannis… Stannis’ shadow… Lady Stark told us so she said…” he wheezed, and his body convulsed in pain. Lord Mollen had to press to hold him down, but Sansa leaned in closer to hear the words… “A shadow with Stannis’ face, she said it was him…!”

“Stannis,” Sansa repeated blankly. “Stannis Baratheon?”

“… We didn’t… not even Robb believed her, but…” Lord Umber groaned, red eyes fit to bulge from his skull. “Same shadow… assassin…”

His whole body was twitching, but his hands clenched. Blood was swelling in his mouth, splattering from his lips as he coughed out the words. “Stannis!” he screamed. “Stannis did this!”

Stannis?

Sansa didn’t even know how to reply. The Greatjon seemed to sag, still sputtering blood with every breath. “Do not let him fall unconscious,” the maester warned. “Poke him, scratch him, slap him if you need to. Do not let him fall asleep.”

He groaned in wordless agony. Sansa pulled herself up from the floor, blinking with confusion. Stannis??

Outside, Sansa could still hear women wailing. The Manderly daughters were broken down in tears as their mother’s body was dragged away. The wildling stood with the torch, staring at the Greatjon with suspicious eyes. They were fighting, but the wound was too deep. Nobody expected that the lord would live. Not even her, truth be told.

The killer targeted the most prominent highborn in the hall, Sansa thought. Mormont, Manderly, Umber and Glover – they were strategic targets, Jon’s strongest allies. A shadow assassin.

“He has lost much blood, my lady,” the maester said to her. “His words were likely delirium.”

No, Sansa thought, I don’t think they were.

Stannis Baratheon. Sansa had heard that Stannis had fought and lost against Jon beyond the Wall months ago, but she knew no more details than that. Sansa’s most vivid memories of Stannis were of being locked in the Red Keep during the Battle of the Blackwater, watching the gushing green flames over the water. At the time, she had been both sure that Stannis would save her, and convinced that he would kill them all.

They said that Stannis had a Red Witch under his command. They said that he consorted with demons, and sacrificed men to the flames. A tremor ran down her spine as she looked towards the great hall. Smoke and ash, the man had named it.

Stannis did this.

Sansa felt numb. She could still hear the boots stomping and roiling, men preparing for battle.

Is Stannis aligned with the white walkers? she thought quietly. Is that why he had attacked Jon beyond the Wall?

A flush of anger rushed through her. If Stannis did this, then I will… Sansa thought with a gasp, unable to finish the thought.
Sansa was pale like a ghost as she staggered out of the infirmary. The thought of all those blackened corpses haunted her gaze… the two daughters wailing for their mother… the Greatjon’s blood as she uselessly tried to stitch up the wound…

It was all roiling around her. She wanted to collapse to the ground in a bloody mess. Instead, Sansa screamed – thrashing against the wall and leaving bloody handprints upon it. She screamed with such frustration, trying to force it all out…

“What the bloody hell is happening?” a voice croaked. She turned to see a short and wild-haired man staggering out of the infirmary on crutches. He was a haggard and beaten figure, with raw bruised face and bloody tears dripping down his cheeks.

The Weeper was glaring at her with beady eyes, but Sansa didn’t even know where to begin answering that question.

Instead, Sansa just recomposed herself, wiped the blood off her face, and walked away.

As she passed, she saw the other infirmary bed – where a greying blonde-haired figure lay. Lady Val of Whitetree had pale blue eyes, heavily shadowed, with a gaunt and haunted look to her. Her hair might have once been golden, but it was withering grey. Val’s right arm was left cauterised; nothing more than a stump at the shoulder. The scar that ran across her upper torso and through her breast was hidden by a snow bear’s fur cloak.

She and Sansa locked eyes with each other as she walked past, but Sansa couldn’t even tell what the wildling woman was thinking.

Sansa strode towards the main door, where the howl of the snows was deafening. The gates were propped up, and a bitter cold wind shrieked through the castle. She shouldn’t be out here, it wasn’t safe to move without an escort, but she needed to see.

It was past dusk already, the hour of the eel. Darkness was falling over Winterfell and the only light was the blurred torches writhing against the snow.

All across Winterfell, their army was stirring. All the while Sansa had been stitching flesh, Jon had been mustering for battle. Thousands of men were assembling in the snow-locked courtyard, all the while the snows howled around them like ice giants screaming in the sky.

She didn’t know what was happening, but she saw men armed with obsidian and weirwood running out towards the gates. Jon has called his warriors, she realised. Sansa stood and watched from across the snowbound castle.

“What happens?” a voice behind her called. She saw Lord Forrester standing there dumbly, looking lost. His eyes widened at the sight of the blood on her dress. “What…?”

A shriek of wind hissed, bringing with it the distant stomping of men and the gruff roar of giants. Lord Forrester looked so shaken he jumped with the noise. “Where is the king going?” the lord asked finally. “Where has he…?”

From the distance, she felt thunder shake the ground – a long, forlorn roar echoing out from the godswood. The dragon was roaring.

Sansa stared and then looked up to the writhing heavens above. “He has gone to slay a demon.”
The mammoth boomed beneath him, its great snout trumpeting as it charged forward. Every snowdrift, every great lope sent Jon’s bones rattling. For their size, the mammoths had short and stumpy legs, but the snowdrifts were no obstacle. It powered through wave after wave of snow without even seeming to notice, and it was all Jon could do just to hold on.

It was Jon’s first time riding upon such a creature. There was no saddle to hold, no harness. He could only grip tightly onto shaggy fur like rope, feeling the mammoth’s shoulderblades ripple beneath him. There was nothing but fifteen feet of solid fur and muscle under him, stampeding through the snow.

He heard the long cry of a wolf echoing through the snow. “Forward!” Jon shouted, struggling to be heard. “Follow the howl! Follow the howl!”

“Yun Yar is falling behind!” a voice behind him cried. “Yun Yar and his clan!”

“Keep together!” Jon yelled, signalling at Lun Leg Dar. The huge figures rumbled all around him. “Keep them together!”

All around, giants boomed as they bellowed orders, but they sounded more like animalistic grunts than any commands Jon could understand. The giants ran alongside their mammoths, struggling to keep pace with long, loping gaits. They moved through the snow using the mammoths to clear the way forward, each clan huddled together.

The snows could be over ten-foot-deep, but the giants would still be able to push through them. Lun Leg Dar – an immense, broad-chested giant clutching a maul – stormed besides them, occasionally grabbing the mammoth’s ears to steer it.

They had mustered in the black of night and set off before first light. It was past noon the next day now, but it was hard to see the sun at all through the thick, grey clouds.

They had to move fast. They had to stick to the tops of ridgelines and high places, where the snows were thinnest. As often as not they followed the tracks of the army of the dead. They stopped only when absolutely necessary, keeping a hard pace. They were heading north, but Jon couldn’t even recognise where the kingsroad lay. There was nothing but never-ending fields of white ahead of him.

Yet the wights have over a day’s headstart, and the snows are slowing us down, Jon thought with a grimace. They couldn’t keep this pace up for long. The Wall might have already fallen by the time they arrived. Across on the next mammoth, Jon heard Rattleshirt howling in the Old Tongue, smacking his spear across the mammoth’s hide to urge it forward.

Men on foot could never keep pace with the mammoths, but a few of them still tried. Free folk warbands and northern scouts were following in the giants’ wake, but the distance between the two groups was growing larger and larger.

At the front of the raiding party, Jon had ordered nothing but their best – armed with fire, dragonglass and weirwood. They had four hundred and fifty giants from two dozen different clans, with near three hundred mammoths. There were soldiers sitting seven abreast on each mammoth readying spears and bows.

There were perhaps a thousand plus more men trailing behind that could maybe catch up to them.
when the battle began. *If we make it in time.*

There was a structure to it, even despite the chaos. The male giant warriors led from the front, while the matriarchs trailed behind and kept the herd together.

The mountain giants were the only ones with experience herding mammoths, while the smaller forest giants huddled together more cautiously. Still, most of the mountain giants clutched crude clubs or giant spears, but the forest giants held immense bows of oak, like scorpions in their huge hand. The mountain giants were clad in strips of furs or leathers, but the forest giants had been more accepting of patchwork chainmail and modified iron helmets. It wasn’t the plate armour he had asked Lord Manderly to commission, but it would do.

The forest giants were the better equipped, more organised, with a harder mindset to battle. They were ready for war – great beasts stomping around the ground.

A few of the giants even dropped to four legs – loping forward on their long arms as they ran.

The men all kept dragonglass primed and ready, but Jon had ordered them to hastily ready weirwood too. Weirwood arrows and weirwood spears. Jon kept Dark Sister in his grip, but there was a burning torch in his other hand and a weirwood stake on his belt.

Malvern had likely summoned that shadow. That could have been the one of the Other’s powers. Nobody knew what the walkers were really capable of, but Jon refused to be unprepared. If weirwood gave them an advantage, then he needed as much weirwood as possible. They had hacked off near all of the heart tree’s branches in a matter of hours.

A shadow. Perhaps there were more shadows still stalking in Winterfell, maybe targeting his family. Maybe one had assaulted Bran as soon as he left. But Jon refused to cower and falling back was not an option – he would find the source of them and he would slay it.

Perhaps Malvern had wished to disrupt the pursuit, but Jon refused to allow the Others to win. He had been forced to set off from Winterfell’s gates even while the bodies in the Great Hall were still warm.

*But we’ve lost time,* Jon cursed. *They’ve already gained ground, and now we must play catch up.*

Rattleshirt had the right of it; they needed a raid – a fast and strong force to break through the enemy lines. They needed to slay Malvern itself as quickly as possible, and then hurry to reinforce the Night’s Watch. The mammoths could push through the snows, giants had the might to break the wights, and there were archers mounted upon mammoths prepared to pump Malvern full of dragonglass.

In the distance, Jon saw the grey wolf bounding through the snow. Summer had gone ahead of them, but the direwolf was leading the way.

*Bran,* Jon knew. He could see his brother in the wolf’s eyes. The direwolf was leading them straight to Malvern.

“Follow the direwolf!” Rattleshirt shrieked, and hollering a war cry that Jon couldn't recognise. “Eyes peeled, stay sharp!”

Jon would have much, much preferred to have Tormund by his side, or Val, or even the Weeper. But Tormund was senseless in grief over Toregg’s death, Val was in no shape to move, the Weeper could hardly walk, and it seemed like Rattleshirt would have to do.
Snow flurried into his face; even in the bright of day, it was still dark. Jon could see shimmer of light through the haze, but it was hard for any flame to survive. “Protect the flames!” Jon shouted. “Conserve your torches!”

Every man had a torch in their hand and a sealed lantern on their belts, but the fires were still struggling to survive.

A giant’s cry split the air. Leg Lun Dar was staggering, the giant’s great nostrils sniffing the air. Beneath Jon, the mammoth shivered. They were close; the giants could smell them.

Through the flurry of snow, they finally saw the black shapes shuffling through the fields. Summer howled, but Jon could recognise them by the way they walked. Wights – not many, but more and more were taking shape through the billows of white.

“Push through!” Jon boomed. “Push through!”

The lines crashed, and the mammoths didn't stop.

Mammoths trumpeted, the giants roared. *Malvern's rearguard, Jon thought as he led the way through, wights left behind to watch for pursuers.*

The bulk of Malvern’s forces must still be ahead, and now the white walker must surely know they were coming. The giants roared with some war cry in the Old Tongue, but the wights were silent as the grave as they collided.

Jon felt the mammoth stagger as a corpse was stampeded under trampling feet. There was nothing Jon could do but hold on.

*Boom.* With a single immense swing of a giant’s club, a wight was sent flying. Another tried to charge at the mammoth, but with a single lash of scything tusks it went underneath. The mammoth’s thickly-matted hide was almost armour against the wight’s awkward blows. A wight managed to jump onto the side of another mammoth, but then a wildling’s spear knocked it backwards.

Ahead of them, more and more dark shapes littered the horizon, contrasting against white. *We’re getting closer.* “Forward!” Jon screamed, to the boom of a hundred war cries. “Form up! Form up!”

“We push through hard and fast!” Rattleshirt howled, to the chanting of war cries. “You see the white walker, you kill it. Don’t hold back, just kill it!”

“Lordship and riches to the man who slays Malvern!” Jon shouted. “Whatever reward, whatever boon you wish, earn it by putting a dragonglass arrow through the white walker!”

The men were hollering. Giants were bellowing orders, pulling their mammoths into line. The mammoths were strong and they had immense stamina, but even they could not last forever. Already, Jon felt the beast below breathing deeply, its snout trumpeting. They had left with all the supplies they could grab, but they had been pushing their mounts and their men as hard as possible for hours.

It was a fearsome pace. Men had already died trying to keep it.

Giants and mammoths, free folk and northmen pushing through the snow. Already, Jon could see the shadow of the Wall looming in the distance.

Ahead of them, another howl filled the air – but it had shifted direction. The mammoths turned
slightly, and Jon made out the shadows in the distance.

A solid wall of fir trees lay ahead, their branches blanketed in white. Summer was ahead, darting into the forest. The white walker was there, Summer was tracking it.

*It is taking shelter in the trees.* Jon could have cursed – Malvern had taken a detour. The Other was a crafty bastard; it knew that the large mammoths would be at a disadvantage in the forest, and the white walker preferred to fight in the woods. *It wants to limit our options, wants to set the battlefield.*

*But what choice is there except to follow?* Jon thought. *We have Malvern trapped, and his wights are scattered.* The only way to win was to break through.

“*Forward!*” Jon boomed, raising Dark Sister high. Men were screaming and chanting in half a dozen different tongues.

There were bodies in the trees, more wights spilling forward to meet the charge.

All around him, he heard more and more giants clashing with the dead. They collided with booming roars that drowned out the wind. The first of their bowmen were setting arrows alight, flaming arrows spewing from the backs of charging mammoths.

It was all Jon could do to hold on, let alone fire a bow.

“*Keep together!*” Jon screamed. *Do not let them scatter us.* “*Keep together!*”

The trees were getting closer. The mammoth trumpeted, yet Jon could feel its uncertainty. It didn't want to charge into such tight-ranked fir trees.

*Push through,* Jon willed. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath, and extended himself into the mammoth.

The world blurred. The mammoth's mind was like none he had known before. It was vaguely similar to a goat, but so much bigger. Its skin felt blunt, heavy and long. Its senses were numb and focused; a half-domesticated animal well used to following orders. Its huge heart was drumming, its focus fixed on the herd. Jon pressed deeper into the beast’s skin, but it was just so thick that Jon wasn't sure if it even noticed. Its presence wrapped around Jon like a cloak that was far, far too big.

He pressed into the mammoth’s body. He could feel the snow beneath him, could feel the rumbling in his trunk…

*Forward,* Jon willed. *Forward.*

The mammoth increased its pace, causing the whole herd to trumpet. They were herd animals, they followed the one at the front. They were stampeding in a fury, each one so powerful the earth rumbled…

*Crash.* They broke through the trees, charging forward.

Sharp branches and twigs scraped against thick hide, causing every man to cover themselves with cloaks. Snow from the treetops splattered down on them, but the giants and mammoths pushed through.

He heard the groan of trees toppling, bark crunching in the tide. Jon had never felt, never imagined, a cavalry charge so chaotic…
The line of wights didn't stand a chance.

A giant roared. There were more and more dead bodies in the woods, wights waiting by the trees. Jon saw bodies bursting up through the snow, undead creatures falling from the branches.

He heard Rattleshirt’s cry, his mammoth rampaging as a wight jumped at the great creature’s head. Spears and burning arrows were snapping.

Fighting was all around him. Jon heard Leg Lun Dar roar as he snatched a dead man out of the snow and tore its arms clean off. The limbs were still squirming even as Leg Lun threw them at another wight.

The direwolf howled, closer and more urgent than ever. *Malvern. Malvern is close.*

In his own skin, Jon could feel it. He could feel the ache in his chest, the blade through his heart.

“Push through!” Jon boomed, but his voice could never be loud enough. “Push th–!”

The mammoth’s snout twisted, instincts causing its huge body to jerk. *Alarm.* Great footsteps were thumping across snow, a huge black body shoving through the trees. He heard the cries from the men behind him, he saw the scattering of arrows, but then…

*Bear!* It was a large black bear, its hide slick with hoarfrost and rot. Half its skull had been cleaved open, its frozen brain spilling out – it had no eyes, but it was still charging. The wight bear lunged out of the trees, lumbering straight at the mammoth.

Jon was in the mammoth's skin, ordering it to respond. The great beast’s instincts were to flee, but Jon forced it to fight. The mammoth roared, its tusks thrashing…

The bear was smaller than the mammoth, but it lunged with no hesitation. No self-regard, no restraint. Boom. The mammoth crashed into it, slamming the creature backwards with its tusks, but the bear was still clawing. Sharp, frozen claws snapped at the mammoth’s forehead, blood hissing.

Men shouting, trying to throw burning torches. The mammoth’s mind flooded with raw panic, and not even Jon could keep it under control. Its instincts were fighting him, thrashing against Jon’s control.

“Brace!” a voice cried. “BRAC–!”

The great mammoth reared upwards, kicking and stomping out. The bear staggered, but the mammoth couldn’t shake it off. Even as the wight bear was lifted physically upwards, it was clawing and snapping. Men were screaming, losing their grips and tumbling…

He fell. Jon gasped, snapping back to his own skin as he landed backwards into the thick, white snow. Five feet of snow cushioned his fall, but it was so deep it felt suffocating.

Jon's ears burst from the deafening roar of the mammoth slamming the bear against a tree, despite the cuts on its forehead. The whole world was quaking.

Jon's torch was left extinguished in the fall, and he could not light another one. Everything was too cold and wet. Their fires were failing. *Curse the snow.*

And all around him more and more dead were converging. They poured from the shadows, surging forward. Dark Sister swooped out, cleaving through a wight’s neck. The dead man was still moving, still trying to fight.
“Form up!” Jon screamed. “Form up!”

His voice was lost in the chaos. The noise was drowned out by a giant roaring as a dozen wights tried to jump on it. Leg Lun Dar thrashed like a bear fighting against an onslaught of rats. Crazed, relentless rats.

Hundreds of blue eyes shone through the dark. The woods were howling. Jon’s skin prickled, and he knew Malvern was close. He could feel the Other’s gaze on him, he could feel it staring through all those eyes.

There was biting pain in Jon's chest, a painful ache over his heart, but he pressed on.

Behind him, one of the giants fell, toppling to the ground. Another giant slammed its maul through the back of his fallen brother’s head, with no regard. They knew their foe; they knew to leave no corpses whole that could rise again. If they couldn't burn the bodies, they could smash and desecrate them. The men were dropping spears and swords in favour of axes and mauls.

Jon was at the forefront, fighting through the tide. Dark Sister slashed outwards, left and right, cleaving through frozen flesh…

Men were behind him, but Jon could only think on the wave of enemies in front. “Form up!” he screamed. “On me! Form up!”

The men were chanting. “Snow!” they cried. “Snow! Snow! Snow!”

Three dead bodies lunged at Jon, but Dark Sister slashed them down in a flurry of black steel. Half of the wights weren't even armed, Jon realised, and others were clutching sticks as makeshift weapons. They hadn’t been able to burn so many bodies, but scavengers had still picked much of the iron and steel from the battlefield. Malvern had raised his troops too quickly to arm them properly.

He saw many that were wearing Bolton crests, and others dressed as wildlings. Still, they all charged with no restraint, with nothing held back…

The snow was so thick that Jon could hardly walk. He could only shamble through the cold, blade lashing, while the wights were stumbling through as well.

It was less a battle, and more one giant chaotic brawl in the trees. He heard trees falling as the mammoths stormed forward. In weather like this, the bark on trees froze so cold they could snap and explode, even a solid push could topple an old pine.

“Push through!” Jon screamed, through pained, breathless wheezes. “Push through!”

Behind him, a mammoth finally collapsed to the swarms of wights, sending giants around it roaring in berserk rage. Bodies were crushed under clubs and feet, wildlings were heaving with mauls and spears. It would have been easier using fire, but their torches were being extinguished one by one by the snow and cold.

They couldn't kill the wights swiftly without fire, they could only crush the bodies till they couldn't move.

A flock of birds screamed death through the trees – crows flushed from the woods. Ahead of him, Summer howled.

Jon felt it coming by his hair tickling on end. He felt the way the air became colder by its very
And suddenly a wave of wights lunged from the snowdrift. Footsteps shoving through snows, staggering over tree roots. Jon didn’t stumble backwards, but a few of the men behind him did. Dark Sister sung through the snow, cleaving down rampaging bodies. Jon had a blade in one hand, and he wielded his extinguished torch in the other — swinging the wood like a club to knock back wights.

They were everywhere, blue-eyed creatures swarming. But where is Malvern? Jon cursed. Has the white walker already fled the trees?

Then he felt the air go dead. Jon didn’t realise what was missing, not until he realised that he couldn’t hear the men behind him. The sounds of their war cries and bellows went dead. The hairs on the back of Jon’s neck stood on end, and he turned around.

He saw the black and white figure standing like a statue in the snow.

Malvern wasn’t running anywhere. The white walker had doubled back to meet him. The Other slipped from the trees like a ghost, and half a dozen men fell with barely a sound.

The world hushed with its presence. For a moment, the only noise was the deafening beat of his heart. Malvern paused.

It was so cold it hurt to breathe. It was like Jon’s blood froze in his lungs. Giants were still roaring in the distance, but in that moment there was naught but silence. Its wights were charging onwards to push back the mammoths, but Malvern was there — standing in the middle of corpses — staring at him.

The white walker cocked its head. A single burning blue eye inspected him. Its body was half crystal ice, and half scorched black. Its outline rippled, frost crackling around its body. The world was distorted by its presence; all of the colours blurring together.

Camouflaged armour of ice. Even despite the blackened burns across its body, the Other’s armour caused it to blur. Jon took a deep breath, summoning every ounce of strength he had left.

The Other raised an icy sword, so cold that mist swirled around the edge with every lazy movement. So thin and sharp that it whistled through the snow. Jon gripped Dark Sister so tightly it hurt.

It took a step forward. It walked with a limp, Jon noted. They stood and faced each other, white blade against black.

Focus. Kill it. “MALVERN!” Jon screamed at the top of his burning lungs. “MALV–!”

The Other made a noise, a sound like the rustling of ice. Its blade swiped outwards so quick it blurred, and Jon staggered backwards. The slash was light, teasing. War horns were blowing, a direwolf was howling, but they were lost in the swirl of snows and swords.

Jon raised his blade. Every instinct he had was screaming at him.

One cut, Jon thought. I wield Valyrian steel. One cut is all I need.

“You,” the Other croaked suddenly. “I know you.”
Jon lunged. Blades cracked like glass chimming together. The icy sword parried Dark Sister so fast it was lazy. Jon tried to break the lock, but even with only one hand the Other was strong. Impossibly strong.

*Clash.* The blade of ice lashed out, and Jon’s instincts barely kept up. Dark Sister only just caught the edge, metal scraping against ice, but the blow still knocked him backwards.

*Ser Rodrik always said it was poor form to parry edge on edge,* Jon thought suddenly. But against a sword like that, what choice was there? The white walker’s blade could cleave through any shield. The icy sword was sharper and colder than anything Jon could even imagine.

The blade of ice left a crisscrossing trail of mist hovering in the air.

*It moves as fast as the shadow did.* The shadow assassin at Winterfell had been blindingly quick, but the white walker felt stiff and sharp where the shadow had been fluid.

The sword whooshed. It was fast, too fast. Jon only just managed to stumble away, but the razor edge came so close it sliced through the edge of his furs.

The Other made a sound like a tut. “You,” it repeated. Sounds from a throat that wasn’t built for human words. “You. Felt this blade before, haven’t you?”

The sword swung in slow circles, leaving a trail of mist with every movement. The scar on Jon’s chest had been aching for hours, the pain in his heart intensifying with every step the Other took.

He remembered the scene. He remembered fighting atop the ice, screaming his vows and lashing out with everything he had. He remembered Ygritte’s eyes, remembered the Other plunging its sword through his chest.

*It was this one. This was the one who stabbed me, all of those months ago. This was the one who left me dead on that glacier.*

“You were the one that killed me,” Jon gasped.

The bright blue eye gleamed. Its frozen throat made a crackling noise.

Vaguely, Jon wondered if he would see a shadow attacking him from the corner of his eye. Perhaps there were more shadow assassins lurking in the tree. The weirwood stake was on his belt, but he couldn’t reach for it. Jon didn’t understand; had the shadow worked for the Other? Had it been a different type of white walker? They had both exuded the same unnatural power, but the feeling was different somehow. It had been smoke and ash where the white walker was ice and snow.

The shadow assassin had caught him off-guard, but this time Jon was ready. Malvern wasn’t hiding anymore. Wights were running, snows were flurrying, but Jon’s attention was focused solely on the Other. He could do nothing less.

It lunged. Jon was ready for it. Dark Sister clashed.

The first blow nearly took Jon down, but he was ready for the second. It was strong, fast, but it had poor form. The blade hacked again and again – each strike was blindingly fast, but they were also clumsy. Immensely powerful, but a poor swordsman.

It had never been trained. It had never learnt how to fight, it had never needed to. It had never spent months scrambling through the snow, it had never hardened itself against a hundred foes, it had never fought life-or-death, with the rush of blood screaming in its ears…
Its movements were too fast, too strong – no human could compare. Jon could only match it with skill.

*Clash.* Jon parried, but the white walker blurred. It spun so swiftly its feet hardly touched the snow.

Jon nearly stumbled, but he kept his footing. Dark Sister never paused, not for a heartbeat. He barely even thought about it, it was like he was dancing on a tightrope. *If I trip, I’m dead.*

Dark Sister lashed out, but the white walker glided around the blade. *Too fast.* Jon remembered that moment on the glacier, uselessly slashing and hacking out. *Compensate. Anticipate.*

*I will not die. Not again.*

Clash. Clash. Clash. They danced over the snow, the sound of metal chiming like a bell. Faster than any human, more dangerous than any fight he had ever known. Jon’s muscles were screaming, just trying to keep up.

“Will not die,” Jon gasped, his words a growl. “I will not die!”

The Other made a crackling sound. “Mortal,” it mocked. “Brief.”

The white blade arced. Jon heard the hiss of the air, raising Dark Sister to block it. The metal chimed, vibrating so hard that it jarred his wrist. It hurt, but he couldn’t slacken his grip.

*Keep fighting,* Jon ordered himself. *Stay alive, keep Malvern distracted.* There were warbands behind him, Jon could only hope that they’d push through the wights. All he needed to do was keep Malvern in place, give someone a chance to fire a dragonglass arrow…

No matter what happened, Jon had to keep fighting.

*Never stop fighting. Never stop swinging the sword.*

“I will not die!” Jon screamed, kicking forward. “You will not…!”

The Other took the blow and didn’t even twitch. It was like kicking a statue. Jon ducked under a slash, slid in the snow, tried to swipe forward and lunge, but the Other swept backwards. It darted forward in the blink of an eye, and Dark Sister parried. Incredibly agile; just like fighting one of the children of the forest, but with a strength wholly beyond them.

Malvern didn’t make a noise – it was as cold and as uncaring as death. Jon was roaring, screaming, panting and fighting with everything he had. He was alive, howling like fire against the ice.

“You.” *Clash.* “Will not!” *Clash.* “Kill me again!” *Clash.*

Their blades locked. Valyrian steel screeched against ice, and his pounding breath was frosting in the air. Jon roared, pushing forward against Malvern’s blade, yet the white walker didn’t budge. Jon had two hands on the hilt, but Malvern was holding him back with only one.

“You,” the Other said suddenly, cocking its head. “Your purpose is over.”

*What?* The words were so strange, caught him off-guard. There was no time to think on them, the white blade arced again…

Jon stumbled backwards, but the Other didn’t lunge forward. It held backwards, rotating its sword in lazy circles. Playing with him.
Just like it had done before, Jon realised. When they fought on top of the glacier, the Others had teased him there as well. It had focused on me. “What do you want with me? Why?”

“Needed to bleed,” Malvern said. “You were the one that needed to bleed.”

His jaw clenched, eyes narrowing. The Other was pacing, and Jon kept his sword ready. “You tried to kill me.”

“We did not… did not wish to ‘kill’ you. We looked for you. Searched for a time,” Malvern said slowly, cocking its head. It took a careful, lurched step forward. “We needed your blood. Needed to awaken it.”

Awaken it? What is it…? Jon’s head was spinning, but those words… At the Frostfangs, did the Others target me specifically? Malvern’s voice was rough and inhuman, but it was trying to say something.

“Supposed to bleed out,” Malvern said stiffly, “not supposed to come back. We needed the blood, they said. King’s blood.”

King’s blood? My blood? Jon blinked, trying to understand. “Awaken it,” he repeated. “Were you trying to wake the dragon?”

Malvern made a sound like a tut. “Not supposed to come back.”

Jon heard movement. Behind him. He heard the crunch of snow, the patter of uneven footsteps. Wights, charging at him from the trees behind.

He twirled, swinging Dark Sister in a wide arc as a rusty axe slung at his head. Three wights, each dressed as Manderly men-at-arms. The Valyrian steel blocked the axe, but as soon as Jon turned, Malvern lunged.

The air whooshed. Jon dropped backwards to avoid the blade, and then the wights… The wights were on him. He saw the blue eyes gleaming as the blades hacked downwards…

And a grey shape pounced over him, knocking the dead man straight to the snow in a flurry of claws and teeth. Summer. Summer was there, the wolf tearing through the wights. There was no time to think, no time to react, the icy blade was swinging again. Jon heard it hissing through the air, he moved on instinct.

He barely reacted in time. Dark Sister sung, chiming against ice. Malvern made another tutting noise.

The direwolf was growling. There were wights charging from the trees, but Summer was behind him, protecting Jon’s rear. Malvern lunged again, but Jon lashed out and the white walker twisted backwards.

It tried to distract me, Jon realised. Malvern had stopped to talk while its wights took position behind him. It knew that Jon’s blade was fatal to it, it was trying to be cautious. Even despite its speed, it gave Dark Sister a wide berth.

Perhaps Jon imagined it, but for a heartbeat there was something akin to annoyance passing over the white walker’s icy features.

Clash. Their blades rang again, dancing together across the snow. Will not die, Jon thought. Just stay alive, just stay in the fight. Stay alive and wait for one opportunity.
He felt Summer swoosh by him. The direwolf twisted, lunging at Malvern’s back with fangs snapping. Malvern twisted with shock, and Jon darted forward. Dark Sister glinted through the air, swinging so close… so close! … even if his blade was just an inch longer…

For a moment, the white walker was pressed backwards onto the losing foot.

Then pain. The blue eye was screaming, and suddenly a solid impact landed into Jon’s chest. Its fist. Malvern’s fist collided with his chest, a blow so powerful it swept him up off his feet. Its hand was so cold Jon couldn’t even breathe.

Jon crashed backwards into a pile of snow, thudding against a tree, but Dark Sister was still held upwards. He heard Summer yowling in pain, and then the white walker was lunging, blade sweeping down. Jon was on his back, but he still swung Dark Sister to parry.

The air snapped. An arrow whooshed over his head, and suddenly Malvern blurred. The Other moved faster than Jon could blink.

The next instant, there was an arrow in its grip. A black-tipped arrow. The white walker moved so fast that it caught the obsidian arrow out of the air.

Voices were howling. Men screaming war cries. The raiders and giants were pushing through, and through the corner of his eye Jon saw Rattleshirt notching a second arrow into his bow.

Another arrow snapped. Malvern’s sword lashed outwards, deflecting the arrow on its blade. That was all the chance Jon needed to recover. *It is nervous*, Jon realised. The Other was inhumanly strong and powerful, but not even it could survive men armed with dragonglass from all sides. It was backing off suddenly, trying to retreat.

“Surround it!” Jon screamed. “Surround it!”

Malvern glared, but the wights were already rushing. Dead men lunged to defend their master. Jon was on his feet, panting for breath, but swinging Dark Sister as swiftly as he ever had.

Their blades chimed once more, but this time Malvern was losing ground.

*Force it into a corner. Surround it. Kill it. Kill it.*

With barely a thought, Jon reached out and grabbed a hold of his mammoth’s skin. The great mammoth was bleeding from a dozen bear scratches across its head, but it was berserk with rage. *Come to me*, Jon ordered. *Now!*

Men were running forward, trees toppling…

He heard the blare of the mammoth trumpeting, stampeding through wights.

Malvern cast a bright blue eye at Jon, darting backwards with inhuman agility. Wildlings were shooting arrows, but then a dozen wights stepped in to act as human shields. Blocking dragonglass arrows with their bodies. The wights were going mad – flinging themselves forward just to hold the raiders back. Sacrificing themselves to cover the Other’s escape.

The mammoth charged through, great billows of snow gushing around immense feet.

The white walker had been betting on their ranks falling apart. It did not expect the living men to force through.
“Do not let it escape!” Jon screamed. “Do not let it—”

It was too late. Jon saw the Other raise its hands upwards, and suddenly the wind itself responded. A great gust of wind whooshed through the woods, sending a flurry of snow hissing against Jon’s eyes. A cold mist was rising, a white cloud pluming from the ground. *It’s controlling the weather,* Jon realised.

The world was screaming as the cold mist rose. Everything was blanketed white. Malvern had cut his losses and ran.

The wights didn’t stop. Bodies were shuffling blindly through the trees, but Jon couldn’t see a thing. He was panting for breath; the exhaustion nearly took him to his knees. He could feel frozen blood sticking to his furs on his hip; he must have torn his wound open again. Jon couldn’t even feel the pain – his heart was pounding too fast.

A hand lunged at his shoulder, and Jon very nearly sliced the man’s head open on instinct. It was only as he saw the dull glint of the giant’s skull that he froze.

“Need to run, need to fall back!” Rattleshirt was screaming. “Fall back!”

Jon bit his lip, glancing to where Malvern had disappeared. The white walker left no tracks.

Summer was growling, the direwolf’s mouth was left blistered from where he had bitten Malvern. The Other’s flesh was cold that it had torn the fur off the direwolf’s snout. Everywhere he looked, the living were tiring, mammoths were going mad, but the dead never stopped…

A tide of dead bodies was rushing through the trees, the wind roaring all around him…

*We will not win in the long fight,* Jon thought with a grimace. Dusk was falling and they were already exhausted. Through the thick clouds, the sky was hazy pink like grey splattered with blood. They needed to fall back, needed to rest, but the dead were relentless. They could not survive like this, they could not pursue any longer; they needed to fall back and recuperate.

But the white walker would only grow more powerful. Every hour that Malvern roamed was an hour that the whole world was at risk. Jon cast one final look through the trees, before turning and running.

*Sonagon,* Jon willed, *I need you Sonagon.*

---

**Ramsay**

‘*Quickly now! Move, move!*’ the white walker called happily, as the dead shambled through the fields. ‘*Our brothers are waiting.*’

*It is eager,* Ramsay thought faintly. The Other seemed excited, even. Thoughts and visions flickered across Ramsay’s blue gaze, and his body could do naught but obey. Unspoken orders surged through him, and Ramsay’s limbs moved automatically. The white walker was in his skin, but Ramsay could see something of its senses too. The Other felt alien; its thoughts were inhuman, its vision coloured in shades of white and blue.

Above him, veins of ephemeral blue light flowed through the sky. The song of winter buzzed in the air and the clouds churn; like invisible hands were wringing the sky until snow and hail spurted
The white walker’s attention was focused on the Wall, on the sworn brothers. ‘Every man wearing a black cloak must die,’ the Other ordered. ‘And quickly. We must be the first. We must break the barrier before my brothers do.’

Visions flickered through him. The Others have a wager going to see which one could break the Wall first, Ramsay realised. They were competing to see which one could clear the way first. Malvern was giddy like a little child; he wanted to see his brothers again, he wanted to win their little bet. This is all a game to him.

It was already past dusk; the skies were black. He could see the flicker of torches in the distance, he could even make out the gleam of steel in the night. Ramsay’s body lurched forward into the battle, his cleaver in his grip.

‘This is the start of a new age. Our age come again!’ Malvern cheered. ‘And I shall be the first.’

All around him, men were fighting and screaming. Howling and dying. Ramsay watched dispassionately as men fought and died. Ramsay’s own arms were swinging, his cleaver hacking down and down like a butcher’s blade, but he could not feel a thing.

He saw men with painted faces and bronze disk armour trying to hold the way, but the wights pushed through them. The dead didn’t stop, even as scores of their number were torched into cinders by burning arrows. The wildlings were tough, but the wights attacked from all sides and showed no mercy.

An arrow thudded straight into Ramsay’s shoulder, but he didn’t even feel it. The blood in his veins was frozen.

Ramsay used to howl when he fought. He used to feel the flush of rage and bloodlust. Now he just felt nothing but the ghostly tingle of phantom limbs.

He saw a man screaming something in a tongue he did not know, swinging two short swords furiously. A wight fell against the wildling, but then Ramsay lunged with his cleaver. Right into the back of the man’s neck. Normally he would have loved such a death, but Ramsay felt nothing. Warm blood splattered, hissing against his frozen face.

Thenns, he remembered faintly. These wildlings were Thenns – Ramsay recognised them from his time with the Bastard King’s army. The wildlings had been camped on the kingsroad south of the hills when the wights ambushed them from all sides.

‘Do not let any warning reach the black castle,’ the white walker commanded. ‘Target the riders first, bring down any birds. Quickly now; our brothers are waiting for us.’

All around him, Ramsay saw black birds with blue eyes mustering in the fields. Malvern had been planning this assault for a long time, and now all of those dead creatures were converging against Castle Black.

I must stop this! Ramsay screamed. This is my body, mine, it can’t use me like this, it can’t!

If he had control, Ramsay would have torn his own blue eyes out of his skull in pure, seething rage. His soul was fighting and thrashing every single moment, but his body didn’t react in the slightest.

From atop the hills, Ramsay saw the shadow of the Wall looming like a mountain. The wights had been marching for nearly two days straight without even stopping, and they were already over
halfway to Castle Black. Even a man on horseback would struggle to make such a time, but the dead were relentless.

The Wall looked different. He had never seen it like this before, had never seen anything like it. The world was smothered by the pitch black of night, yet Ramsay could still the sky shimmering blue and the Wall was glowing red and green. The Wall itself was alight, illuminated in scintillating colours.

Above him, veins of magic threaded and weaved through the sky, but to the north they were cauterised by the Wall. The colours mixed together – green like rot and red like blood. It was as if someone had brought a jagged cleaver to the earth and hacked the land apart.

A barrier that reshaped the earth itself. Ramsay stared with amazement, struggling to understand.

Around him, the Thenns were scattered and falling backwards. The army of wights was dispersed out over leagues, but each one was perfectly coordinated. Ramsay saw visions of wights tearing through small villages, staggering through woods, or flapping through the air. I can glimpse everything that the Other sees.

To their rear, Ramsay saw images of mammoths and giants tearing through the snow. The bulk of their forces were ordered north, but the white walker itself lingered to their rear to harry their pursuers. The Bastard King, Ramsay realised. Snow is trying to stop it. Stop us.

Ramsay didn’t know what to do. The thought of being useless was even worse than dying.

The Other was… Ramsay sensed emotions that he could hardly even decipher. Frustration, perhaps, or something like irritation. The image of Jon Snow, fighting desperately amidst the snow drifts, flickered through Ramsay’s gaze.

Ramsay saw wight after wight being cut down by the Bastard King’s blade.

‘That one is troublesome,’ the Other grumbled. ‘His task is done, but he has the gall to linger. We should not have preserved him on the ice.’

For a moment, it felt like the white walker was in trouble. It was trying to kill Snow, but it couldn't. Ramsay didn't even think it was possible for a human to hold a white walker off in single combat.

Malvern had to retreat, but he bloodied the Bastard King’s force enough for them to fall back as well.

‘This is the tree-fiend’s doing, no doubt,’ Malvern thought irritably. ‘The cursed greenseer was likely the one to bring him back. Another inconvenience to our side.’

Ramsay didn't know what that meant, but he caught snippets of thought. The tree-fiend; a watcher inside a tree who had resisted them for a hundred years. The last of a legacy – the Others thought of him with scorn.

How could anyone resist such power?

To the south, a cold flurry churned over the northern edge of Long Lake. Ramsay saw the veins in the sky contract, the weather itself distorting to the white walker’s will. But its presence, Ramsay realised, it feels different.

The burning sense of the Other in Ramsay’s head felt softer – the blue light felt strained. It is exhausted, its strength is running low.
The Other wanted to kill Jon Snow, but the use of its powers left it weaker. It was even moving slower; its legs heavier and its movements more sluggish.

The white walker was monstrously strong, but even it had a limit. Ramsay could feel the exertion in its aura; the strain of manipulating the weather and so many bodies was mounting on it. It wouldn’t be able to keep it up for long. No wonder it was pushing so hard for a swift victory. But what if it grows weaker still? Ramsay thought, will I be able to retake control?

‘No,’ Malvern’s voice chided in his skull. ‘You won’t. Your flesh is mine, thrall.’

Ramsay couldn’t even think about ways to escape without the Other being aware of them. The white walker felt all of Ramsay's desperate thoughts of resistance, and it seemed vaguely amused by them. It was a special type of hell, darker than any he had ever imagined. To be trapped, useless, a puppet… he couldn’t even scream.

Behind him, Ramsay sensed the Other limping up the hills, its blue eye staring across the moonless night sky. Its gaze was focused on the Wall, staring out over the veins of the world. The air was singing, and the Other seemed to brace itself.

‘BROTHERS!’ it boomed, so intense that Ramsay nearly flinched. ‘BROTHERS! I AM READY!’

The words were unspoken, but they were so loud they pulsed through the world. For a long time there was naught but silence, but then Ramsay felt a twinge of a reply. It was faint, barely a whisper, but Ramsay could feel the echo coming from beyond the Wall.

‘You took your time,’ the wind whispered, the faintest susurrus on the storm. ‘We grow impatient, brother.’

‘Begin your attack now,’ Malvern returned. ‘I am ready.’

All around Ramsay, flocks of blue-eyed birds started to gather, flapping and circling on the wind. It was the dead of night, but Ramsay knew that dawn was coming soon. They were already nearing the Gift, approaching Castle Black. Up above, the barrier of red and green glimmered in the sky.

‘How long will it take?’ Malvern asked, shouting beyond the Wall.

‘Not long. But we will not suffer another failure.’ The voice was scolding. ‘You have your plan, and we have ours.’

Malvern only laughed. ‘I shall do my part. For the king.’

The Other pffted as it stepped down from the hill and strode towards Castle Black. The fields were littered with bodies. This is coordinated, Ramsay thought numbly. The white walkers were ready and waiting, assaulting the Wall from the north and south together.

The bastards. They don't get to do this, they can't… Can't let them, I must…

‘My brothers mean to break through themselves;’ the white walker said. In his mind’s eye, Ramsay imagined a young boy jumping up and down with anticipation. ‘But I shall clear the way first, and prove my worth to the king. That is to be your task, thralls.’

I'm not your thrall, Ramsay wanted to scream. I'm not. And yet his lips were sealed and his legs didn’t stop walking.

The closer he came, the brighter the colours of the Wall shone in the night.
Had his jaw still been his, just the sight of the Wall would have made Ramsay gape. He had seen the Wall before, but never like this. He could see the light, shining like a barrier in the sky.

The Other’s army pressed forward through the ice and snow, while Malvern itself lingered at the rear.

‘We cannot cross ourselves. Foolish magicks – they are old but still formidable,’ the white walker said distastefully. ‘But the enchantments themselves are fixed onto the foundations; once those break, the barrier collapses.’

Across from him, the wights collided against the first of the perimeter parties. The dead men flushed through the guards, hacking them down before a single horn could be blown. Ramsay felt one man try to run, but the Other chased him down using the body of a dead boar.

‘We end the sworn brothers,’ Malvern ordered, ‘and then tear it down brick by brick.’

Bodies were trekking through the snow. Ramsay could see the lights of Castle Black, but they approached under the cover of dark. The wight birds were in the air, flapping through the trees ready to tear down any ravens that passed.

*The bastards. They don't get to do this, they can't… Can't let them, I must…*

Still, the Other’s attention slowly turned back to Ramsay. The thrall was just one more wight in an army of them, but on the inside Ramsay was screaming. ‘Aren’t you a curious one?’ Malvern mused. ‘You are still trying to resist.’

**YOU BASTARDS! YOU BASTARDS! YOU DON’T CONTROL ME, YOU DON’T…!**

Malvern made a noise like laughter. ‘It will be over quickly. I have waited my whole… what is your word? … ah, I waited my whole ‘life’ to see the Wall fall.’

The Wall loomed above them, so huge the height of it was obscured by the clouds. On the other side of the ice and magic, Ramsay felt the faint echoes of white walkers ordering their troops into formation.

Behind him, Ramsay sensed the Bastard King’s army trying to regroup, but it wouldn’t work. They were too far away, they wouldn’t reach the Wall in time. The living needed to rest, but the dead did not.

‘If not for that one mortal, our victory might have been so much smoother. He is the tree-fiend’s weapon, a thorn against us,’ the white walker mused. Icy hands roamed through Ramsay’s memories curiously. ‘Perhaps that is something I share with you, thrall – you had a chance to kill that one too.’

The Bastard King. The thought of the man helped focus Ramsay’s hatred. He remembered the moment on the ice, with his blade at the Bastard King’s throat. *Fight, Ramsay willed. Fight!*

It didn’t work. Malvern’s grip was too tight, still looking through Ramsay’s memories. It paused with visions of the dragon, trapped on the ice. ‘Yes,’ Malvern agreed. ‘That was my mistake too. I was tasked with slaying the dragon, you see, and yet I allowed that ‘Snow’ to steal it from me. My brothers were quite unhappy.’

‘Then, we decided that one of us needed to be on the other side; one of us had to cross first to clear the way. That became my punishment – my penance for allowing the dragon to escape. I had to be the first to walk through the barrier. It was…’ The white walker’s hands lingered on the burns
across the side of its face, the black scorch marks that cut across its eye. The barrier had set Malvern on fire. ‘… it was an unpleasant experience.’

Up above, the green and red light swirled in the air. Malvern stared thoughtfully. ‘I do not quite understand your concept of emotions,’ the Other said finally. ‘But I think… yes, I think I will ‘enjoy’ watching the wall crumble.’

_It will not work_, Ramsay thought furiously. _It can’t. The Wall is too big, too immense._ The Bastard King had reinforced the Night’s Watch, and the relief force from Winterfell was on its way. They might be able to break the castle, but they could never dint the Wall. Even for an army of the dead, it would take an age to tear it down.

Malvern tutted. ‘Not so.’

Images flashed before Ramsay’s eyes. The white walker was showing him memories. He saw a battle – a slaughter – of thousands of men in jagged mountain peaks. He saw a snowy field, and a bleeding figure clutching his chest. He saw a buried giant’s tomb beneath the ice, with ancient coffins torn open.

He saw a great white horn, a horn carved of ancient pale wood.

And he saw an immense beast, buried underground. The Others had dug it up from the mountains. They had needed blood to awaken it.

Ramsay stared in shock. The reply felt smug. ‘For we have the weapon that the builder himself used.’

More visions flashed. They were creatures that had been extinct for millennia, but that was hardly a limitation to the white walkers. Their corpses had been buried in the north, and that was all the Others needed to raise them once more. Immense, frozen bodies sealed in the ice – monsters lost to history.

Night was falling. The first of their numbers were beginning their attack. Black shapes were flapping in the air, but Ramsay’s eyes were drawn to the other side of the Wall.

_‘They were the ones to build the Wall in the first place.’_ Malvern was gazing to the north, staring out over Castle Black. _‘It is only fitting that they be the ones to destroy it.’_

The roar rumbled from north of the Wall like thunder, a sound so immense that the earth itself quaked.

---

**Sam**

Darkness was crashing down across the Wall.

Sam felt the panic surging and the air screaming all across the Wall. It felt like the sky itself was pounding, racing like his heartbeat. The world blurred with the flurry of snows, all the while the sound of horns blared. There were more than three horns – it felt like hundreds of blasts, echoing and reverberating with the wind.

Sam was left quivering in a ball on the floor, clutching his bleeding scalp. All around him, blue-eyed bodies were still squawking, still trying to flap and claw.
He heard the sound of battle, but it was everywhere. The Others were pressing against the gates from the north, and to the south they saw the shadow of an army on the kingsroad, obscured by the faint setting sun.

To the north, it was already pitch blackness. The shadow of the Wall was so dark that they couldn’t even see the bottom of it. There were no torches in the army of the dead, nothing but vague shadows in the black.

*The Wall could resist any force from the north,* Sam thought, *but there are no walls on the southern side.* Two-Toed Dirk and Bedwyck were both leading men, already rushing down the steps.

His heart was racing as he huddled in the trenches. *How long do we have? How long before they break the garrison?* He thought of Dalla, her babe, all of the refugees… all of the men and women that couldn’t fight…

“Swords! Swords and spears, get to the castle!”

“Defenders!” Garth Greyfeather shouted. “Defenders to the south!”

“Stone-throwers!” Aki the Wroth screamed. “Men on me! Lift the stone-throwers up, we need them on the other side of the Wall!”

Men were rushing to hoist the wooden beams of the hefty mangonels. The northern edge of the Wall was littered with siege weapons hunched like wooden birds, each perched at the precipice and angled downwards. They were trying to lift them to the southern side; it took a dozen men just to lift a single catapult, and more to carry it through the narrow trenches. Sam was scattered on his knees, staring in horror. “… No…!” Sam squealed. “Don’t bother, it’s not worth it!”

It would take too long to move all their siege weapons across, too many were frozen in place in the ice, and they wouldn’t be useful enough. Heavy rocks didn’t have the range, and they’d become useless after the wights broke into Castle Black. Moving the mangonels was a waste of precious time.

The men didn’t hear him. They were still trying to lift the heavy weapons. “Don’t!” Sam tried to shout, his voice quivering. “Ignore the stone-throwers, we need to build barricades! We need archers and we need spears!”

They weren’t listening to him. *Why aren’t they listening to me?* Mance could have boomed orders and every man would just obey. Men were still fumbling with the siege weapons, but they didn’t have the time. *Forget the bloody catapults!* Sam tried to scream. *Get down there with axes and swords!*

Sam’s breaths were strained, hyperventilating. He couldn’t focus, he couldn’t…

There was no command on the Wall. The men weren’t responding properly, there was too much clamour. A chorus of panicked voices shouting over each other.

“They’re at the gates! They’re at the gates!”

“Drop the scythe! Bury all the bastards!”

“Spiders! Spiders!”

“Evacuate the castle!” Marv the Red Hand bellowed. “Everyone on me. Light the flare and signal
the evacuation! Get those people out of there!"

Evacuate. The thought of Dalla, Gilly, the babes, the children… No! Don’t evacuate, don’t…
“Don’t evacuate!” Sam squealed, as he shuffled to his feet. “Don’t light the flare, don’t–”

He made it half a dozen steps before he felt something sharp peck at his ankle. He felt pain, a
sharp beak lunging into his heel. Sam scattered straight to the snow.

It was a hawk – a nasty rotten blue-eyed beast with a crushed wing. It couldn’t fly, but it could still
waddle and lunge. It was on him, squawking and slashing, trying to claw through Sam’s boots. He
tried to kick, tried to squirm…

Half-crazed, Sam kicked it into a snowdrift and then scampered away.

Don’t evacuate the castle, Sam thought, through the craze of panic. There was nowhere to evacuate
them to except up the Wall, and the Wall wasn’t safe. To flood the steps with panicked men
and women trying to flee would be disastrous; they’d be easy targets and access from the top to bottom
of the Wall would be hopelessly jammed. The lift couldn’t carry that many, and the stairs up the
ice were treacherous by night.

And every death was another soldier for the Others. The refugees were wights waiting to be raised.

Don’t evacuate. But what else could be done if Castle Black was lost? The ice cells, Sam realised.
The best solution would be to barricade the refugees in the ice cells, to even lock them in the
prisons. That way even if they did die and come back as wights, they’d be trapped.

Sam tried to scream orders, but his voice wasn’t strong enough. He was nothing but one more
panicked voice in a chorus in them. “Don’t light the flare! Wait–!”

He wasn’t loud enough. Men lit the flare and blew the horn, signalling for the castle below to
evacuate. No, Sam thought in dismay. No…!

Disorganisation was the true bane in any disaster. Bad commands were worse than the enemy. The
men below would see the flare and assume that somebody had a plan. They would try to evacuate,
it would be a slaughter, and it was all Sam’s fault…

Sam’s head was spinning struggling to think. Noise all around him, he couldn’t concentrate. What
would Mance do? What would Jon–

Boom. The crash of a heavy object caused him to shudder. Sam could have screamed as the object
soared overhead.

“Catapults!” a man screamed. “They’ve got catapults–”

Crash. A heavy object crashed through the snow. It was all so dark, so chaotic, Sam couldn’t
even…

There were no lights to the north of the Wall. The dead were the only army that didn’t need light.
The Others were hidden by the shadows and the snows, but in the gloom Sam made out large
shadows pushing out of the tree line. Massive trebuchets, being carried and loaded by giant wights.
There was another boom, and something solid collided against the Wall.

More and more trebuchets were launching from across the dead man’s land.

At first, Sam thought they were firing boulders, but then he saw arms and legs soaring through the
sky. He heard men screaming, swords clashing against flailing bodies. Wights. The Others were launching dead bodies seven hundred feet in the air. Some of them missed, others soared too high and were sent shooting through the air to the south. Most of them shot too low and crashed against the Wall, but the white walkers had no shortage of bodies to fire.

The barrier stopped wights from walking through, Sam realised, but it didn’t stop physics. Flying objects still worked, and even when the bodies collided, crushed to pieces, the wights would still flail. It wasn’t the perfect attack, but it was a means to fire more soldiers south. A means to spread panic.

The white walkers had prepared this assault; those trebuchets had been built in advance. They knew the difficulties, they had devised solutions.

But how to stop it, how to fight back…?

Sam saw a blue-eyed corpse with its spine shattered and its limbs broken to pieces, but it was still trying to claw, trying to attack. The air was thick with the echoes of screams, the twanging of arrows and the thuds of siege weapons.

All around him, the panic was spreading. Too many men were abandoning their posts, running for cover, or rushing down to the castle. The ambush left them in disarray, trying and failing to react to threats on multiple sides.

Sam knew what had to be done. He knew what they must do. But the men weren’t responding to him, he was left squealing orders uselessly in the dark. “On me!” Sam cried. “On… on me! Defenders gather on me!”

It didn’t work. His voice wasn’t powerful enough to split the chaos.

“Mance!” a man screamed suddenly. Bearded Ben – an aging sworn brother clutching a pike in both hands. “Mance! He’s alive!”

Sam stared in shock, but the cry was spreading. At once, Sam was running, bleeding feet pounding through the trenches of ice. “Mance!”

Bodies were already gathering. Dornish Dilly risked the climb downwards, trying to hook a rope around Mance’s waist. The Lord of Castle Black was left spilled precariously over the wooden beams of the lower rampart, blood oozing from his skull. Sam had thought the fall killed him, but he was stirring.

There were too many men huddled around the Wall’s edge, Sam couldn’t push his way to the front. “Get back, all of you get back…!”

He heard the grunts. They were dragging Mance up from the wreckage. “Mance…! Mance!”

“He’s alive… is he alive…?”

“Wake up! Mance wake up!”

To the south, Sam saw the battle unfolding in the gloom, watching helplessly from seven hundred feet in the air. He saw the flurry of torches fighting against the snow. Malvern’s army was clashing with men over the horizon, a battle on the kingsroad. Sigorn’s host? Sam thought, heart in his mouth. It could be the force of Thenns from the Shadow Tower, or perhaps the northern clans had mustered men against the wights. Could the Thenns hold them back? Could reinforcements—
Crash. Another flying corpse thudded down, crashing so close it shattered through one of the wooden structures. The wight was left splintered on a broken wooden beam, pinned above them, its shattered body uselessly squirming.

Sam could see Mance sprawled out over the ice, with men trying to rouse him. He was alive, he was writhing incoherently, but he wasn’t awake. Blood was oozing from his skull, his eyes wide and mouth flapping open.

Sam prayed that Mance might recover, but the man was not fit to command. He might not ever recover. The Wall was without command, and the dead were pressing closer.

They were caught in an attack from both sides, and the dead had a supreme advantage in the dark and the snow.

*But where is Sonagon?* Sam thought frantically, like a drowning man clutching at the last straw of hope. It was a long way to Winterfell, but a dragon could cross it in a matter of hours. *Surely the message would have reached Jon by now, surely the dragon should be coming any moment now…?*

*We need to last until dawn,* Sam thought. *We only need to last until dawn.*

“*Bodies!*” a voice cried suddenly, splitting through the air. Ulmer was running, a bow in his hands and his quiver already empty. “*Bodies climbing the Wall!*”

“Drop the scythe, drop the–”

Another three wights crashed atop the Wall, while a score more tumbled through the southern air behind him. Two broke where they landed in the ice, spines snapping and still thrashing, but the third crashed through a snowdrift, and within moments it was up and raging amongst the men. More soared too low, and swatted like flies against the Wall itself.

Another wight bounced off a watchtower and scattered into the trenches in a hail of broken limbs. Sam saw its severed, rotten arm dragging itself by its fingers, still groping blindly as it tried to find a sworn brother to maul.

The boom of the trebuchets pounded through the world again and again, beating like endless war drums in the background.

It felt like the world was shaking. The ground was shaking, Sam could feel the vibrations in the ice.

“*Mance!*” Bearded Ben screamed. “*Wake up!*”

A concussion. Perhaps worse. Mance wouldn’t wake up, and Sam couldn’t wait for him. *What would Jon do?* he thought with crazed panic. *What would Jon do, what needs to be done…?*

Sam was already running. Too many men were running backwards and forwards, north and south, like a flock of headless chickens…

“*Climbers!*” a man from a watchtower screamed, his horn echoing. “*There’s hundreds of them, they’re climbing–*”

The voice was cut off as a heavy object ripped through the watchtower. Sam only heard the screams. He felt the quaking; the Wall itself was trembling and Sam didn’t know why.

Climbers. *That was impossible,* Sam nearly protested. *The wights couldn’t climb the Wall, there*
was a barrier. Yet more and more men were shouting alarms from up and down the length of the garrison. The sky was so dark, the battle had been raging for hours; Sam had no idea how many might have climbed.

He needed a weapon. They needed bowmen. Sam stopped to grab the bow and quiver from a fallen man; Marthe of the Antlers had died in a bloody mess after a dead hawk half-tore out his skull.

Beyond the Wall, darkness loomed. Men were throwing torches down off the precipice, but the light wasn’t strong enough. All Sam could see was black, writhing shapes. In the black abyss, Sam saw the shapes of ice spiders as large as mammoths, and glistening arms of huge trebuchets.

The Other’s army was assaulting in full force; they had archers and artillery barraging the Wall from the ground below. Covering fire, Sam realised. They were launching wights to keep the sworn brothers off-guard. They were providing cover for the bodies climbing their way upwards.

The ground trembled, like an earthquake rising… Men screaming all around him.

An icy arrow as large as a spear snapped upwards, so fast and powerful it tore straight through a scorpion and sent wood shattering. Sam had to duck as it sent splinters flying overhead. The Others had prepared the type of scorpions and stonethrowers that might threaten a dragon, he realised.

It was all coordinated. First the Others acted as a distraction for Malvern’s army coming from the south, and then they took advantage of the assault on the castle to attack in earnest from the north. They were attacking with everything they had.

And the climbers… Sam could see hundreds of rustling figures, moving upwards. Grapnels were firing upwards, ropes of icy chains. Men were rushing to cut them down, but the climbers were making progress.

It doesn’t make sense, Sam could have screamed. The wights couldn’t cross of their own volition. They could be dragged or carried or thrown, but they couldn’t cross any more than regular corpses could. How are these dead climbing?

Trembling hands fumbled with his bow, shaking too badly to notch an arrow. The first of the black bodies broke over the precipice, spears stabbing upwards. Dozens of them were falling, but the black brothers couldn’t stop them all.

Sam recognised it from the way they moved, he heard the scream of war cries. He understood how they managed to climb.

They aren’t wights, Sam thought with shock. Living men, fighting on behalf of the Others.

They were wildlings. They were screaming. He saw men clinging desperately to the fortifications, trying to lever their way up, thrashing and stabbing out madly with spears. Garth Greyfeather put an arrow straight through the eye of one wildling, but then there was another climbing over his corpse.

Living men. Had the wildlings aligned with the white walkers? Breathing, bleeding men who could have built siege weapons, ropes and weapons…

All around him, the fighting was spreading. They were climbing across a huge length of the Wall, the outer edges slipping past the fringes of where the sworn brothers were concentrated. Attacking us from all sides…

Crash. Another flying wight splattered in a hail of rotten flesh and bones. The earth was shaking…
A sudden boom echoed from the ground, a howl like the earth itself was roaring. A great gust of snow geysered upwards, pluming up from the edge. A dozen torches hissed out at once, white darkness dropped, and Sam felt the ice shivering…

The wind picked up, battering the defenders with a flurry of hail as hard as stones. An errant brother took a blow to the head and tumbled screaming over the side, while the others covered their heads with arms and shields and cloaks.

And then the climbers crested the edge.

He saw spears lunging at bowmen. They couldn’t stop all the grapnels in time. The battle had reached atop the Wall.

All around them, the storm raged and the earth quaked.

Sam saw a figure in an ice-covered cloak, slipping a spear straight through a black brother’s chest with a savage scream. The bow was in his hands, shaking in Sam’s grip.

“Stop!” Sam screamed, his muscles staining as he pulled back the bowstring. The wildling was panting for breath, doubled over in wheezed breaths.

The battle atop the Wall was all around him. Bodies crashing from the sky, wind howling...

The wildling pulled the spear closer to their chest, staggering upwards. Sam was about to fire, but then he caught sight of face under the hood. He saw the curve of the jaw, the cheekbones… it was a woman. Sam faltered at the sight. “Stop!” Sam howled, the arrow shaking.

A woman, clutching a bloody spear. Sam didn’t understand, too much panic, couldn’t think. Why are living men and women working with the Others, why help the dead…?

She howled at him, screaming bloody murders that were lost in the wind. Her eyes were crazed, Sam’s bow twitched. “STOP!” Sam screamed. “I don’t want to—!”

Twang. He fumbled his grip and the bowstring snapped. The wildling fell backwards with the shaft through her torso, red hair spilling out of her hood. Someone screamed.

Sam could have collapsed in shock. These were living men and women. “Fall back!” a man was yelling. Kedge Whiteye, howling at the top of his lungs. “Fall back to the trenches!”

A man’s voice roared in fury, charging with a spear and an ice-pick. Strong hands were dragging Sam backwards, and all he could do was stare. All around him, people were fighting and dying…

Sam didn’t know what was happening. All he knew was that this battle was being lost, and he couldn’t… he couldn’t…

Living men. I can’t fight, Sam thought numbly. I’m sorry Jon, but I’m not a fighter. I can’t fight.

The dead always win in the long run. Perhaps the Others were laughing right now. Sam turned and looked at the men spilling out, screaming bloodthirsty howls as they charged. Sworn brothers were holding the trenches, meeting them with shield against spear, swords against axes.
Sam knew what he had to do.

The bow dropped out of his hands and into the snow. He shoved himself from the grip of the men trying to pull him back. He ran forward. Sam opened his arms wide, his eyes fearful, and he stared straight at the man with the bloodthirsty spear.

All that panic… it was like it all just overflowed He had gone from fear, to panic, to a sort of animal horror, and now Sam just felt numb.

He was defenceless, exposed. The wildling was screaming, his spear flashing. Sam didn’t twitch, he didn’t fight, he just fell to his knees in the snow.

His eyes were wide, waiting for the spear tip through his skull…

And the wildling’s spear stopped, moments away from plunging through his gut. Sam caught the flicker of hesitation, the surprise, the doubt.

These were living men. A living man was different from wights; even the most blood-crazed wildling probably wouldn’t immediately slaughter a defenceless, fat man on his knees. Sam’s only defence was his helplessness.

“Move out the way,” the wildling growled, and Sam could have collapsed face first with relief.

Sam gulped. “No.”

“Move or I’ll gut you, you fucking crow!” the wildling screamed.

“No.” His head was spinning. He was closer now; he could see the wildlings’ eyes. They all had the same desperate, crazed look to them, the same pale faces. All scared and angry. “Why are you doing this? Why are you fighting for the Others?”

The wildling’s spear went to his throat, the tip pushing so hard it hurt. There was blood trickling down his neck. “You fucking dare–”

“Lower your weapons!” Sam squealed suddenly. The wildlings looked off-guard, but Sam was shouting at the sworn brothers behind him. “I am Lord Steward of the Night’s Watch, and I order you! All sworn brothers lower your weapons!”

And just like that the air faltered. There was the murmur of uncertainty and doubt. That moment was good, anything to stop the panic – even just for a heartbeat. To give us a chance to think.

Why are we fighting? Sam couldn’t understand it – why are living men working for the Others?

There was a breath’s pause. Attackers and defenders standing against each other, all weapons raised and hungry for blood, with Sam on his knees in the middle.

It was the look in their eyes, Sam realised. All the wildlings climbing the Wall shared the same look. They were scared men fighting for their lives. “Why are you doing this?” Sam screamed, looking between the gaunt and bloody figures. “What did the Others offer you? What did they promise?”

The wildling’s jaw twitched, but his spear didn’t waver. There was a brief moment, a gulp of doubt, a flicker of his eyes. “They said that they’d let us go. Let us go south,” the man admitted finally, “if we captured the Wall for them.”
Sam could have sagged. *They were prisoners! The Others sent prisoners to attack as the first wave.* Sam shook his head. “We’re not your enemy,” Sam pleaded. “Help me stop the fighting, you must. Help me recover this.”

The wildling at the front looked hesitant. Men behind him were pulling back bowstrings, but Sam held his arms out wide as if he could block the arrows. The air was screaming, the trembling didn’t cease, but the two groups were left standing off against each other on the frozen Wall.

“What are you doing?” a wildling demanded, a bald-headed man with a missing eye. “We’ve got to do this—”

“Don’t you bloody—” the first man snapped, but Sam saw the conflict in his eyes.

“We have to kill them!” another howled.

“They’ve got our families, Ryk!” the bald wildling snapped. “My family! It’s us or them.” The wildling glared around the sworn brother with pure, desperate hatred. “And they’re crows!”

The man made to lunge at Sam, and the sworn brother squealed like a pig. “We’re not!” Sam shouted, scrambling backwards and looking around the faces. “We’re not crows!” Sam was panting, head whirling… “Marv! Marv the Red Hand! What clan are you from?”

Behind him, the gazes flickered behind. Marv the Red Hand, a tattooed figure wearing the black cloak, blinked in shock. “Nightrunner,” the man grunted. “I’m a Nightrunner.”

“And Wulf!” Sam shouted. “What of you?”

One-Eyed Wulf hesitated, but he answered. “East coast. Antler man.”

“Look around you!” Sam screamed at the wildlings. “You face free folk! You face Thenns and Hornfoots, cave dwellers and river clans! *Free folk* who stand against the Others! Free folk wearing black, but they are free!”

Gazes flickered uncertainly. *These men had been prisoners of the Others, maybe for months,* Sam realised through desperate breaths. *Had they been captured after the first battle of the Frostfangs? They all looked tortured and starved. They didn’t know of the pact between free folk and sworn brother, they never knew of the peace that Jon had built.*

The white walkers held their families captive, forcing these men to assault the Wall.

Sam saw the wildlings falter. The man at the front – Ryk – they were looking to him. He was a tall and strong figure, Sam focused on him too. “You have families down there, families the white walkers are holding over you,” Sam pleaded. “But there are families on the other side too. There are women, children and babes. You have a choice, Ryk.”

*Please,* Sam begged. *This is what the Others, they’re using you as shock troopers.* “Now lower your bloody weapons!” he wailed. “We’re not your enemy – the only enemy here is the cold!”

Ryk looked torn. Other wildlings were screaming, voices rising. Men were calling for blood. “They ambushed us. They’re fucking crows!”

“We’re going to die if we don’t…!”

“They’re *crows,* Ryk, we have to—!”
“Ryk,” a voice called, splitting through the clamour. “Longspear Ryk.”

Sam turned, and voices went hush. Behind him, he saw two men walking forward, with a limp figure draped between them. Mance. He was awake; his eyes unfocused, his head sagging, but he was awake. “Longspear Ryk,” Mance repeated, with wheezy breaths.

The wildling jammed. His spear finally lowered. “Mance?!?” Longspear Ryk gasped, eyes widening in utter shock. “You’re alive? We thought the crows…”

The murmurs spread. The sight of Mance Rayder, former King Beyond the Wall, supported by black brothers…

Mance didn’t reply, only nodded. His head was sagging, like it took everything he had just to stay conscious. Mance was trying to stand, but his head was dazed. Sam took a great sigh of relief.

“Help us!” Sam shouted to the wildlings. Mutters were rising, but the fighting was stopping. The tide of the battle was withering away. Sam’s voice grew louder, more confident. “Help us defend the Wall, help us push them back. We’re all dead if the Wall falls.”

Sam didn’t understand why all of their gazes were still so dark. Sam was begging with everything he had, but he didn’t understand why they were so hesitant,

Ryk shook his head grimly. His spear clattered to the ice. “We’re already dead.” The wildling pulled down his furs, and Sam saw white veins snaking up the man’s neck. “They didn’t… they never trusted us. They didn’t let us go free without making sure…”

Sam blinked, peering closer at the skin. There was a wound in Ryk’s shoulder, two frozen bite marks in his skin. An ugly wound coated in frost. Oh.

He recognised those marks; Sam remembered when he saw them last. Poison – ice spider venom.

“They said that they’d give us the antidote if we took the Wall for them,” Ryk explained with a gulp. “The Others promised us the antidote, promised to let our families go – so long as we captured the Wall for them.”

Sam looked around the wildlings, and each of the wildlings had the same skin all similarly marked with white. Men with slow-acting venom seeping through in their veins. Slow enough that they could climb the Wall, but then die after they crossed. Oh, those bastards, he cursed. The cunning evil bastards. The white walkers had sent poisoned prisoners over the Wall as shock troopers.

“They lied.” Sam gulped and shook his head sadly. “There is no antidote. They just wanted you to cross the Wall and then die so you can be raised as wights.”

Sam took a step forward. These were tortured and captured, crazed and poisoned men. Sam saw mad eyes, and tears frozen across their cheeks. The bald wildling flustered, trying to object. “They said–”

“They’re lying!” Sam took a deep breath, mustering all the courage he had. “But you’re not dead yet. You can fight!” Nobody met his gaze. “How do you want to die? Do you want to fall as slaves of the Others? Or do you want to go down as free folk until the very end?”

Nobody replied. He saw men breaking down into tears. “You are free folk!” Sam pressed, turning between them. “Fight like it! Die like it!” He gulped. “All men must die, but we must fight too.”

He felt the change in the air. He felt their gazes on him, he felt the bloodlust start to die out. The
relief could have dropped Sam to his knees again. “Lower your weapons,” Ryk said finally. “Lower your weapons!”

“Our families—!” the bald wildling wailed.

“Lower your bloody weapons!” Ryk screamed. “Grab as many as you can, stop the fighting.”

“Help them!” Sam ordered to the sworn brothers. “Quickly now, help as many as you can up onto the Wall! Now! Before the white walkers realise we’re not fighting anymore. We’re not playing their game, we’re working together.”

Men were running. They were moving across the Wall, and the skirmishes were withering. Sam’s hands were still trembling, his heart was still racing, but he knew what had to be done. The men were staring at him for orders, rather than shouting over him. The white walkers had set the battlefield, but it wasn’t over. Not yet. *I must turn this battle around.*

The ground shuddered. The booming of the trebuchets never ceased, and Sam could feel the quaking growing louder.

Longspear Ryk turned and ran towards the woman with the arrow in her shoulder, kneeling over her. The red-haired woman. She was alive, Sam realised. Gasping and straining to breath, with ice spider venom in her veins, but she was alive. Ryk seemed distraught as he looked down at her.

“How long do you have?” Sam asked finally. “The poison… how long?”

Ryk shook his head, anger and grief roiling over his face. “I don’t know. Hours, maybe? I don’t know. I can feel it – my hands are growing numb, everything’s so cold.” He took a deep breath. “The Others… they kept thousands of prisoners – fuck, they were working us, *farming* us…” His hands clenched into ball, looking down at the woman beneath him. “There’s no antidote? You sure?”

“None.” That might have been a lie; for all Sam knew, the Others truly did have a cure, but he couldn’t risk spreading that thought around. He needed to focus, keep them focused. “How many are there?” Sam pressed. “The white walkers – how many do they have?”

“Too many.” Ryk was wheezing, still weeping as he wrapped the bleeding girl in his arms. “There’s no fighting them, we can’t…” Sam stepped closer. “I saw them. They dug up the Frostfangs, they found… it was the *horn*…”

“What?” Sam breathed.

“The Horn of Joramun. They have the Horn of Winter, they found it,” Ryk muttered. For a gaunt and grim man, he looked so scared. “There’s no fighting them, you can’t…”

The earth quaked, the rumbles growing louder. It had been trembling for hours. Sam stared out over the black precipice, and he heard the cracking from below, the ground churning. Like giants thrashing in the earth, writhing in the black.

Men were gathering around him, looking at Sam. It was the darkest hour of the night, and there were legions of dead pressing against the Wall. He could feel the earth vibrating – were the Others digging beneath the Wall? Or was this truly the Horn of Joramun?

The Others were holding nothing back – they intended to crush the Wall from both sides.

“The castle is overwhelmed!” a man yelled. “They’re pushing through–!”
Another crash of the trebuchets, bodies shattering against the ice. “We must take the fight to them!” Aki the Wroth shouted. “Break through their armies, scatter them!”

“Don’t be a damn fool!” Ulmer snapped. “There’s too many, we don’t stand a chance!”

“You can’t beat them!” a wildling wailed, tears in his eyes. “You can’t, you just can’t…”

“We must run! Retreat!”

Sam’s head was spinning, lost in the panicked shouts, the screams. The world was falling into madness, and he didn’t know what to do.

A sworn brother – Bearded Ben – grabbed Sam’s shoulder tightly. “We have to evacuate,” he hissed. “We’re ducks frozen in the ice up here. We’ve got to get off the Wall, retreat and rally our forces. We can launch a counterattack in the light of the morn.”

Sam hesitated, counting the frenzied beats of his heart before replying. “We can’t,” he muttered numbly. “The barrier is powered by us – by our vows, by our loyalty. That is the only thing stopping them from crossing. If we abandon our post then that’s as good as dropping our black cloaks. The barrier will fall and the wights will just climb across.”

Eyes stared at him in shock. “We’ll be bloody dead if we stay here and then they’ll climb across!” a man screamed. “They’re already through the castle, we can’t hold them back!”

He’s right, Sam thought. We can’t. There were too many wights, the walkers were too strong. They didn’t stand a chance against such forces.

What would Jon do? Sam wondered. Jon would rally their forces, he would bellow orders to their men. Jon would bring the fight against the Others, he would lead the push on the front lines and he would seize a victory from the jaws of defeat. Jon would be able to turn the battle around.

But Jon wasn’t here, and Mance’s brains had been scattered in the fall. It was all on Sam, they were all staring at Sam. I’m sorry, Jon, Sam thought. But I can’t be like you.

We can’t retreat, we can’t fight – what other choice was there? There was only one last thing that could be done…

“We need to surrender,” Sam gulped. “We must surrender.”

Chapter End Notes

There's been a delay due to work stuff popping up. Chapter 47 will likely be at the end of the month, unfortunately.
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

The cold winds are blowing...

Seventeen months ago...

The wind howled over the white world, and the silence crept slowly through the jagged mountain peaks. The children of the moon stepped through the cold and ice, overcast by stormclouds fat with snow.

The cold winds were blowing, and the sounds of battle echoed with the snowstorm.

'Forty-seven!' the white walker laughed. 'I have forty-seven!'

'And I’m on sixty-three – no, sixty-four,' another Other said smugly. Behind it, there was a thud of an arrow through flesh. 'And now sixty-five.'

'No fair!' it whined. 'You took all the best thralls...!'

'It’s the archers you need,' the Other returned. ‘Look at how they fall – the poisoned arrows work wonders against mortals.’

'How many do you have, brother?' It turned to the brother striding besides it, casually slashing its sword through the frenzied crowds.

It snorted. ‘As if I could count.’

It walked with nine of its brothers, all of them clad in frost and ice. They walked together as the winds roared and the blizzard seared through the frosty fangs of the mountains, directed by their will. The white walkers were figures of bright white and ephemeral beauty, wearing rippling armour with eerily sharp blades swinging in their hands. They strode over the battlefield like ghosts, bringing cold and silence with every step they took.

The white walkers had no identities, not really. They had no names, no sense of self – such things were alien to them.

It had heard of the naming practices of mortals, but it had never really understood such. What was the point in designating everything like that? Why bother naming something that was so, so brief?

They had been granted so many names that they all blurred together with the ages of the world. They had been called the white walkers, the children of the moon, the lost sons, the new gods, the soldiers of the woods, the Sh’Gargar, the pale plague, the guardians of the sleeping heart and the frost demons. Names were useless – there were only those who were brief, and those who were Other.

The mortals were like flickering candles, while they were eternal.
The battle was well underway as they came. Their creatures cut through the camp with ease, flanked by thralls of all shapes and sizes. There were undead wolves, hogs, bears, shadowcats, each of them decaying animals with bright blue eyes. Then, there were dark shadows looming over the rocks – the resurrected rotten giants lumbering into the battle.

The army of the wildlings – the greatest, largest gathering these mortals had ever known – was being torn to pieces from all sides. They watched the battle through a thousand eyes, and the white walkers giggled and pointed.

The white walkers glided over the frozen rocks, as the mortals screamed and shrieked. All around them, men were fighting and fleeing for their tiny little lives – but the clamour of noises might as well have been the chirping of insects.

‘They run!’ a brother laughed. ‘Look at how they run!’

‘Why do they have to be so noisy about everything?’ a brother whined. ‘It’s irritating.’

‘I bet you I can shoot down three at once with one arrow,’ a white walker challenged, as one of its thralls raised a large bow of crystal ice. ‘Three mortals, one arrow.’

‘I’ll take that bet. They’re not standing in a straight line, you can’t.’

The bowstring creaked, tensed by inhuman strength. The arrow was pure crystal ice. ‘Just watch…’

Twang. The arrow snapped. It pierced straight through the skull of one man, and into the neck of the one in front. The Others laughed. ‘Oh! So close but so far away.’

‘Hold on, best two out of three…’

‘Quit your foolery,’ another Other chided. ‘We have our task.’

‘Eighty-seven,’ its brother counted, as the bodies fell faster and faster. ‘Eighty-eight, eighty-nine…’

The mortals were running down the frozen river valley, the water oozing across the ice like milk, but the white walkers already had their trap in place. They attacked from over the mountains; firing arrows from the cliffs, and assaulting the camp with wights and ice spiders, but they had already larger bodies marching up the river valley to cut off all escape.

Across the writhing ocean of fighting shapes, there was a sharp roar. The boom of a large creature writhing in the flurry of snow. ‘The giant!’ the white walker called eagerly. ‘The giant is mine!’

‘It still only counts as one, you know.’

‘Nuh uh, something that big should be at least ten.’

The white-furred giant howled in fury, but the thralls didn’t stop. The Other only needed to will it, and a tide of dead bodies surged against the beast.

A mortal tried to charge at the Others themselves from behind, swinging his axe in raw desperation. The Others hardly even bothered to react; one of their brothers just waved their hands and an ice spider intercepted the would-be attacker. The man dropped, but the white walker caught him before he hit the ground.

The Other held the man tightly in icy hands, cocking its head as the mortal screamed. ‘Look at this
“one!” the Other laughed. ‘It has such a queer face – what are all those marks on its skin?’

‘Tattoos, I think they are called. The mortals paint themselves.’

Beneath it, the man’s flesh begun to blister from the cold of the Other’s grip. ‘Really?’ It frowned. ‘Why?’

‘There’s quite a lot of them like that here. Painted faces – perhaps different families?’ its brother noted. ‘I like to collect the thralls that look interesting.’

The white walker considered the words and then squeezed, dropping the pile of motleyed flesh into the snow. A brief thrust of thought, and another thrall was raised.

‘I prefer the animals myself. The men are so clumsy – the beasts and birds are better.’

‘Just watch for any with the Sight,’ its brother warned. ‘They use the bodies of beasts too. They are not worth the hassle.’

‘The Sight,’ one repeated. ‘If they have the Sight, then could we convert them instead?’

‘Perhaps. But only if they are young enough – only the fledglings, the children. The king does not like converting the adults, that causes too many problems.’

Yes, that had been the mistake of the old regime. The old king had converted hundreds, thousands, of mortals into ice, but sometimes that had brought queer ideas into their fold. They had created white walkers with leftover memories of being brief littered in their heads. There had been Others that had even… mingled. That had been their downfall – the last king had been prone to foolish mortal thoughts that had led the old reign to ruin.

‘See to your task, but just be mindful,’ responded a distant brother. ‘Capture the fledglings, perhaps, but if you find any adults with the Sight, end them and do not raise them after.’

It was more recently that they had started to only convert the fledglings. The children were converted, and they matured free from the taint of mortality. Blank slates, as the king called it. The king had begun to harvest from specific bloodlines, cultivating certain families, to form a better breed of Other. Fewer white walkers as well, but each one more powerful. The old reign had toppled, and their current king had taken the crown.

We are the master race. It was the fate of mortals to be thralls.

The white walkers stood and made idle chatter, as the battle of the mountains raged around them.

The white-furred giant finally fell, leaving a trail of crushed bodies behind it. The Other felt the spark of life extinguish in the giant’s body. The white walker reached out to seize its skin, but one of his brothers pushed ahead of him. The power of another walker surged through the corpse – stealing the thrall before it had a chance. ‘That body was mine!’ the Other wailed.

‘Too slow,’ its brother laughed, as the giant rose again with bright blue eyes. The dead giant surged with blue energy; the magic of the Others filled the vessel, moving its limbs as its own. ‘I am on two hundred now.’

‘This is not fair. You are stealing all the good bodies, leaving me with only the useless thralls.’

The tide of the battle was falling backwards, a stampede of bodies retreating down the Milkwater. ‘Should we start taking captives?’ a brother asked. ‘It would be nice to have some to breed.’
'Not quite yet. We need more thralls first. We’ll capture whatever is left alive at the end of the night, for now just end them.'

They kept on playing their counting game. After a long debate, they settled onto the rules; common mortals were only a single point, but the giants were worth five points and mammoths were worth ten. Any mortal that possessed the Sight was worth fifty. It was very doubtful there’d be one present, but if by happenstance they did see a child of the forest – then that would be worth two hundred points.

Even as they talked and laughed, their scores quickly started to reach thousands.

‘What of our target?’ it asked. ‘What is that one worth?’

‘A million. If you find it, that wins the game.’

‘But where is it?’ the Other asked, looking around its brothers. ‘Have we found any with the blood?’

All of these new thralls were useful, but they were truly on the hunt for their prize. It was here, somewhere, they knew it was – one of these mortals was important. Their king had given them their task, and they were all eager to see it done.

A thousand blue eyes scoured through the ramble of mortals. They were watching through every thrall. Frustratingly, they only had its likeness to search for; a young one, with dark hair and grey eyes.

‘I found it,’ a white walker said suddenly. ‘One of my spiders has found it.’

‘Are you sure? We’ve been mistaken before.’

‘I’m sure. The spider bit its leg, I can taste it. It has the right blood.’

Its brother shared a vision; of a dark-haired man in a sheepskin cloak trying to climb up a rocky cliff face, clutching onto the arm of a red-haired mortal. The spider had pressed its fangs into the man’s leg, and they could feel the power of its blood on their tongues. All of their thralls shifted direction at once.

‘Finally.’ Despite itself, there was a twinge of anticipation in its chest. The white walkers all set off, stepping gracefully across the frosted rocks. They had their target in their sights, and this time it could not get away.

It had been a long journey to get here. The king had ordered that they find the blood required, but it hadn’t been easy. They had gone south to search down specific members of an exclusive bloodline. They had not found enough traces of the blood in their own territories, and then they had no choice but to turn towards the watchers on the wall itself.

One of their mortal servants had helped point them towards their target. Firstly, the Others had set a trap, and they caught three helpless crows – three rangers scouting north. None of those had been suitable, but the white walkers had allowed one of them to escape. They let one run free, so it might run for help, so that the Others could then trap the search party that came next. They had needed to whittle the watchers down, and draw out their target.

The group that came next had been more promising. They had killed all but one; a single one that could have been suitable. And yet that mortal had irritatingly fled, eluding them and disappearing into the forest. The white walkers had searched, but had not been able to find it again. They
suspected the tree-fiend’s involvement.

Thankfully, after a bit of poking, a much larger force had come north next – four hundred mortals wearing black, camping on the ruins of the Last Stand. The Others had readied to assault the party of sworn brothers in search of their target, but then they realised otherwise.

They realised that the mortal they were after wasn’t with the sworn brothers anymore – that one had joined the larger gathering of the natives. The white walkers had changed targets, focusing their attention on the great host of mortals camped in the mountains instead. The Others refused to let the blood slip away one more time.

And now finally, they had their target in their sights. ‘It is running,’ the Other reported.

‘Will it escape?’

‘No. It has venom in its blood, it grows weaker.’ There was a pause. ‘But we should take no chances.’

The brothers agreed. The ten white walkers split up – with four of them continuing to harry the fleeing wildlings, another three circling around to cut off the target’s escape, and the last three following it directly.

They gave chase, but they didn’t rush. Why bother? They would move slow and steady, they would surround it from all sides, and this time the mortal would not escape.

The king commands, we obey.

‘It is heading up the valley wall.’

‘Then herd it in the right direction. Push it north. We need it up onto the glacier.’

With a thought, their thralls took position. Undead corpses turned to block off all escape, all the while the two mortals were still trying to run and slip away. They forced the mortals to turn around; forced them to try to head back north and circle around. The Others were already one step ahead.

Through the snowstorm, the Others saw them. They felt their warmth, the heat of their bodies. The two figures were running and panting, stumbling with every step, and the three Others followed from a distance. The white walkers glided across the snow.

The female was useless, but they were drawn to the male. It – he – was limping, growing weaker and weaker with the ice venom in his blood.

It drew its sword eagerly. ‘Shall we?’

‘Not yet.’ Its brother shook its head. ‘Wait for it to collapse first, it doesn’t have long.’

They watched from a distance, following with slow, careful steps. The mortals had nowhere else to run, as the ice fell away into a cliff of sharp blades. They heard the female scream something, there was a brief scuffle. And then the two mortals embraced, their lips mushing together. The white walker cocked its head, watching curiously.

Then the male pushed the female off the cliff.

‘What curious creatures these mortals are,’ the Other mused. The white walkers looked at each
other, and stepped forward.

The mortal had his sword in his hand, staggering to meet them with weak steps. The Others considered him like one would a queer insect beneath their foot.

It had dark hair that looked white with snow, grey desperate eyes, and gaunt cheekbones. Its lips were twisted, its jaw clenched, and its blade shaking in its hand. Young, scarcely more than a fledgling.

‘How queer. It wants to fight us.’

‘Is it the right one?’ the white walker asked, casually dodging a frenzied stroke.

‘I think so,’ it replied, blade in its hand. The mortal was screaming something – uneven, crude human words. ‘How can we be sure?’

‘Cut it open and see, I suppose,’ the Other said, as it idly swung its sword. The blow wasn’t even meant to hit, but the mortal nearly stumbled backwards. They waited for it to stand up again patiently, surrounding it. ‘We need its blood, yes?’

‘That is what we were told. Only certain blood can awaken the weapon.’

‘It’s not just the blood,’ another white walker called, pushing its thoughts across the mountain. ‘It’s the… the ceremony of it. Part of an old mortal ritual, the sacrifice that must be paid. Death and life.’

It inspected the man curiously. The venom was thick in its blood, draining its strength, but the man was still trying to fight. Its lunges were desperate and raw, but the white walkers glided smoothly around the frenzied attacks. ‘Are we ready?’

‘Yes. We are in position. Do it.’

The steel blade lashed out, yet the white walker dodged easily. ‘Aww… look! He’s trying to fight!’

‘Stop fooling around. Let’s just get this over with.’

‘But it’s funny!’ the Other protested, staring at the mortal with fascination. ‘Look at its face – is this ‘anger’? ‘Fear’? Are these the emotions that the king speaks about?’

‘Enough of this.’ The Other stepped forward, raising its sword. ‘Just end it alrea–’

The blade of ice swung downwards. It chimed.

The whole air froze. The mortal’s iron should have shattered, they expected the steel sword to break. But instead it was the blade of ice that rebounded. The white walker blinked in surprise.

And then the mortal’s blade lashed outwards. Straight through its brother’s chest.

The white walker shattered, breaking into a thousand shards of ice. Suddenly, its brother’s aura vanished, and across the mountainside a thousand corpses dropped still.

‘Cursed steel!’ the white walker cried. ‘It wields cursed steel.’

There was no grief for their fallen brother, only mild irritation. ‘Look at what you’ve done now,’ its remaining brother chided, pointing down to the broken remains. ‘We told you to stop fooling.’
‘How was I supposed to know the sword was cursed?’ the Other grumbled, suddenly taking the mortal much more seriously. ‘We have not seen cursed steel in eons.’

‘Just deal with it.’

The white walker obliged. With a flurry of speed, its blade plunged straight through the mortal’s chest, skewering straight through. Warm blood hissed, steam rising across the snow.

The mortal whispered some words, his eyes bulged, and then he fell backwards to the snow. There were tears in his eyes, salty water down his cheeks.

Red blood soaked into the snow, gushing from the wound.

The white walkers had no concept of ‘death’; they neither feared nor mourned it. Death was only an annoyance to them – much like the concept of life itself. And yet the king will be irritated that one of us has fallen.

‘It is bleeding on the ice. Start the ritual.’

The white walker raised its blade, to cut off the mortal’s head. ‘Do not,’ one of its brothers said suddenly. ‘Keep it warm, we may yet need it to bleed more.’

That caused it to grimace, but it complied. The white walker knelt down, gently moving its hand across the mortal’s chest. With a light brush of its fingers, the wound was instantly cauterised by frost, the skin turning pale. Its aura shimmered, fire against ice.

‘What delicate things these mortals are.’

The white walker exerted a touch of power, just to preserve the mortal on the edge over the abyss. It could not die, not yet.

‘Just like that? Is that what is needed?’

‘Take the cursed blade too. That has blood on it.’

It picked up the bloody sword gingerly, staring down at it in distaste. Even just being close to such a metal caused its icy skin to tingle – it could feel the aura of fire, blood and screaming clinging to the metal. The steel still carried the memories of burning torture. An evil weapon.

The white walkers jumped down off the edge of the glacier, easily gliding to the snow. It saw the red-haired girl, squirming out of the snow, still trying to crawl away. The mortal was screaming, tears freezing on its cheeks.

‘What shall we do with the other one – the female?’ another white walker asked as they walked. ‘It is still breathing.’

‘You said you wanted captives? She might have use.’

‘Bring whatever mortals you can capture,’ the white walker ordered, reaching out to all its brothers. ‘The weapon may not respond to our kind. Meet us in the tomb.’

They moved quickly. It wasn’t far; they had ensured the mortal had been in running in the right direction. There were caves under the glacier, old tunnels buried and forgotten.

There was a tingle in the air, a ripple of power. They had already spilled enough blood to fill a lake, and the old powers were responding.
Magic was death – magic was sourced from the energy leftover when mortals died, from the spark of power as they burnt out. If you killed enough of them, you could achieve wonders. Just as our creators did.

Behind them, ranks of thralls were marching, as they dragged screaming and wailing mortals into the caves.

‘Is it working?’ the Other asked.

‘I think it is,’ another said slowly, placing its hand on the ice. ‘Can you feel it in the air? The blood pours, and the weapon responds.’

They could feel it. There was a shimmer of power, a rustle in the ice. Old, old magicks – coming to life once more.

They saw the tunnels; their thralls were already in position. The white walker noticed the marks across the jagged ice flows, the ruins of old campfires and the littering of crude pickaxes. Once, these caves had been completely collapsed, but recently the natives had evacuated them.

The wildlings had been searching for the weapon too. Once, there had been a city built here – an ancient city of giants that was now left buried beneath ice and earth. The wildlings had tried to dig the ruins up, to search through the ancient tombs, but the Others had noticed too.

The mortals didn’t share their memories. The wildlings had been working using only folklore and hearsay, but their king had been there when it was buried.

The white walkers stepped through the great caves, into a cavern of ice and white stone. Wind echoed through the tunnels, screeching through winding passageways of ice. There was no light, no fire, but the white walkers needed none. They walked lower and lower, deeper through twisted frozen buildings collapsed under the ice. This had once been a tomb for ancient giants; but the foundations had sunk, the stone pillars collapsed and frozen.

They walked beneath a great stone archway, large enough for a mammoth. There were faded runes etched on the stone that were lost to time and frost.

They saw signs of the mortals’ search. All of the crypts had already been broken open and ransacked, but the wildlings hadn’t searched deep enough.

Great spiders scuttled across the tunnel walls, mandibles clicking as they searched through the ruins. With spindly legs and threads of frozen ice, the spiders pulled against a collapsed wall. The rubble cracked open in a cloud of dust, and the white walkers stepped through.

They could hear the humming, the vibrations through the ice. It was working – the weapon was awakening.

‘Be ready,’ the Other ordered. There were nine brothers – four of them armed with spears of ice, the rest readied and aimed huge greatbows. They used weapons of ice, forged the same way as their swords and armour. They had sung and twisted the ice into form.

They could feel it – the power in the air was old as the children themselves. The white walkers could see the magic in the air. Like all of the old magicks of its time, the weapon had been bound with blood. Blood was what controlled it, blood was what forged it. Blood was the lock and the key.

They stepped deeper into the ancient tomb, and they saw it. They saw the horn lying on its
It was a great white horn carved of ancient, petrified wood that was as smooth as bone. It was twelve feet long and wider than a man, with old runes etched along the rim, barely noticeable. It was bounded in dull iron, but showed no wear.

Completely smooth, completely untouched by time. The weapon that reshaped the world.

The Horn of Winter. The horn first crafted by the Builder. The Icebinder.

‘So this is it,’ the white walker whispered, running its cold fingers across the white wood. ‘This was the weapon that turned the war against us.’

‘The mortals rallied behind their magic and attempted resistance,’ it said distastefully. ‘But it was not the weapon that won. It was the old king’s folly that ended the night.’

‘Mortals could never beat us,’ its brother agreed. Their liege had told them so many times. ‘But they made their deal and forced us into their pact.’

The old king had been plagued by human thoughts. Plagued by fear, compassion and weakness. The Others could have won, but then the old king chose not to fight. Instead, the white walkers had been duped. It was a foul thought, a mistake they made long ago. It left a bitter taste in the white walker’s mouth – but it was a mistake that their new king sought to correct now.

The white walker held the cursed sword carefully, its edge still slick with the mortal’s blood. The pommel was carved into a wolf. Gingerly, the Other stepped forward and extended the metal, letting blood drip down onto the horn. Red splattered against white.

The room shuddered. They felt the ice crack.

Only the blood of the Winter Kings could activate it.

‘We have it,’ the Other whispered eagerly. ‘It is responding. This is what awakens them.’

‘And the beast?’

‘Buried above us.’ The Other stared upwards at the hundreds of years old mass of ice. ‘I can feel it stirring too. Is it enough?’

‘Not quite. We must awaken it fully.’

‘Then bring the prisoners through.’

The room was shuddering, every thrall stood alert. They were abandoning the fight against the natives – the battle was useless to them now. Instead, their thralls were shifting direction, and gathering across the glacier. They felt the ice above straining. ‘Should it not have awakened by now?’

‘Tis a horn. It must be blown.’

Their prisoners were being marched through, screaming as the ceiling rumbled. Men and women in dirty rags, screaming and sobbing against the dead bodies that held them. The white walker pointed at one man, and the thrall dropped him before the horn.

The mortal was wearing a black cloak. ‘That one first.’ it decided. ‘It’s a sworn watcher – we found it creeping over the rocks. The horn may or not require the black oaths, I’m not sure.’
The mortal was mumbling. Praying, it noted. ‘I do not speak their filthy language,’ one of the Others said distastefully.

‘I do,’ it offered. ‘I find their tongue… curious.’

There was a sound like a scoff, but the Other let it pass. Its brothers thought that curiosity concerning the mortals was queer, it knew. The white walker looked downwards and cocked its head. There was a long pause, struggling to push the cumbersome words out of its throat.

“Blow the horn,” the Other said, the words a croak. “Blow it and go free.”

The mortal was incoherent; frantic mumbled words it could not make sense of. Around it, its brothers were preparing weapons. ‘Ready the spears!’ they ordered.

“Blow the horn,” the white walker repeated, easily hoisting the man upwards with a single hand. The mortal screamed in pain from its grip. “Blow it.”

The Other had to force the mortal’s lips onto the mouthpiece. “Blow it. Go free.”

It was weeping, but it complied. As soon as the sobbing man breathed into the great horn, a thunderous cry echoed from beneath the ground.

It was a wail like the echo of a thousand souls, so loud that the earth itself shivered.

The horn that wakes the sleepers. That was the line in the oath the watchers themselves took, but they had all but forgotten what it meant.

The hornblower died quickly, with his body frozen solid from the the inside out. The man was gasping and sputtering; white veins snaking across his skin, his lips frozen to pale blue. The price that Icebinder required. The white walker let the body drop. “As promised,’ it said quietly. “You are free.”

At once, the white walkers were running. The air was alive with power, the horn was shaking.

The Horn of Winter. The ice dragon horn.

Eons ago, the ancient ice dragons had been used to build the Wall. The great beasts had been bound by the horn, used as weapons in the Long Night. The Others had hunted and controlled the dragons once, and then with the Horn of Winter they had been commanded by the mortals.

The old king grew scared, tricked into believing the mortal’s power was greater than it was. After the ceasefire, they built the wall to keep the two forces separate – the Others had allowed the barrier to be forged. The fool of the king had even surrendered the horn so that the wall could be raised.

And afterwards, the ice dragons could neither be allowed to live nor die. That was one of the terms of the peace. If they lived, the mortals would have used them, and if they died they would have belonged to the Others. Instead, the Horn of Winter was used to bind them – to put them into an endless sleep, to turn their skin to stone. The creatures had been bound and then buried, but they were not dead so they could not be raised as thralls.

The Horn of Winter remained as the last safeguard to protect the foolish pact.

The weapon had a history to it. At first, the horn had been built for the Winter Kings, and then it was entrusted to the care of the Night’s Watch, but later the king Joramun stole it on behalf of the
wildlings. It became the Horn of Joramun for a time; the weapon that kept the balance between north and south.

For a long time, the Others had believed the horn was in the possession of the last children of the forest, and the line of greenseers and tree-fiends that maintained the balance. They thought it hidden for a long time, beyond their reach.

But then, four hundred years ago, the horn had been unearthed once more – to bind yet another dragon. Afterwards they had buried the horn again, but then the wildlings and the white walkers tracked it down.

Finally, they had everything they needed; the horn, the blood, the sacrifice and the beast.

It was working. The dragon was stirring; the beast writhing against the prison of ice. It was pushing upwards. The Others could feel it, could feel the tide of magic erupting…

Boulders of ice were flying. They heard the roar – and then the blast of white icefire scorched through the earth.

This time, their king had promised, this time the dragons would be chained by the dead.

‘Slay it!’ the white walkers shouted. ‘Slay it and raise it anew!’

‘Let us play a new game!’ the Other laughed. ‘A thousand points to the one that seizes it!’

Thralls and spiders were pushing forward, ice crunching with a tremendous noise. The whole earth was bulging – the beast was trying to force its way free from the entire glacier of ice.

The white walkers stood ready with great spears, ready to finish the beast as soon as it emerged.

The image of the mortal flickered through its gaze – the mortal with king’s blood was still preserved on the edge of death in a pool of red snow. Its hair had turned white from the white walker’s power. ‘We are done with its blood,’ the white walker ordered. ‘Finish that one for good.’

At its command, thralls pushed over the snow, frozen blades ready. There was no rush; the mortal was still – not quite dead but not quite alive. The dragon was the Other’s priority.

The ice cracked, a surge of dragonfire exploded through the tunnels. The beast was alive again, thrashing with almighty fury.

A hundred thralls were disintegrated in a second, and the beast was still breaking through. They saw its snout – great white teeth snapping, horns crashing through the ice. Frozen greatbows took aim.

‘Finish it!’ the Other hissed. ‘Finish–’

Around them, they felt the wind whirl, they felt the power on the air. There was another aura – a foul, perverse aura that felt like rot and mould. It was in the air, possessing the storm and wind.

The world hissed, the weather itself fighting back against the white walker’s control.

‘It is the death-stealer!’ they cursed. ‘The greenseer, do not let it–’

It was too late. A fierce wind hissed across the ice, scattering their own forces. It was all around them, protecting the dragon. The tree-fiend was interfering, and the Others were hissing.
The age of the greenseers was over, but the last remaining one still had a few teeth left.

Their thralls were being cut down. The Other saw a vision of a black-cloaked figure pushing through the bodies, ravens cawing in the snow. It was going for the unconscious mortal, trying to carry him away. The cloaked figure wasn’t mortal, it was another remnant. A leftover that had no place in the new world.

Bodies were stampeding. The white walker saw an elk possessed by the greenseer, storming through the thralls. It was trying to run; a dead man carrying the half-dead man. The ground was rumbling…

What is the tree-fiend doing? What is he trying to achieve–

Crack. The ice snapped, and suddenly an immense body was storming upwards.

Arrows of ice loosed, and the beast roared, but it was still rising. They felt the whoosh of wind, great limbs extending outwards.

For a moment, the Other was left stunned by the sight.

‘It has wings!’ the Other laughed. ‘Is it supposed to have wings?’

‘Bring it low, bring it low!’

Fighting on the glacier. There were servants of the tree-fiend, pushing through their thralls. The greenseer was in the storm, trying to shield the dragon. Great arrows of ice fired like spears, so sharp they cleaved through scales, but it wasn’t falling. It thrashed and screamed, but it didn’t collapse.

The dragon pulled back its head, and suddenly the white walkers had to run for cover as white light scoured across the ice.

The remnant was still running onwards. The dragon roared, huge wings pounding and struggling to fly after four centuries of being buried.

Thralls were charging. The greenseer was all around them; wrestling against the Other’s powers, trying to control the dragon. The beast could not be restrained.

The white walker was on its feet, a frozen spear in hand. It ran, and it threw the spear so fast it was blinding. The Other missed the skull, but the dragon howled as the spear pierced straight through its huge wing. There was no time for a second throw, as the dragonfire scoured the snow in a furious blaze. Blades of ice stabbed through the air.

The beast’s snout dropped, growling and tensing. It was glaring down at the black-cloaked figure with pure fury. Across its horns, crows were flapping.

“Save him!” the black-cloaked revenant was shouting, hoisting the man over his shoulder. “It was his blood, you have to save him!”

The dragon boomed. Its tail whipped so fiercely a hail of ice scattered across the cliffs. The air thundered.

The bleeding man. The white walker didn’t have a thrall near enough to see exactly what happened, but it saw the dragon grab the mortal in its claws.
The Others were rushing, but the dragon was already flying away. With great whooshes of wind, the beast rushed into the sky.

Blue eyes watched it fly.

‘It has wings!’ the white walker laughed. ‘I did not know that the old beasts had wings.’

‘That one does. It is a relic of fire, a beast of a later generation,’ another said, shaking its head. ‘But it was too powerful. It was supposed to be weak after its slumber.’

‘I blame the death-stealer. That one has been a nuisance for far too long.’

The remnant was fleeing too, galloping away on a large stag. Their thralls tried to follow, but the greenseer was shielding its retreat. As quickly as it came, the power of the tree-fiend disappeared.

The Others gathered slowly, staring out over the devastated field of ice with their arms folded.

‘It must have been waiting, ready to interrupt us,’ the Other said foully. ‘What is the tree-fiend planning?’

There was a moment of quiet consideration. ‘It stole the mortal,’ it said finally. ‘Could it be trying to steal the horn back as well? It wants to use the weapon itself.’

‘Possibly.’ The white walker paused, and then made a decision. ‘We cannot allow that to happen.’

‘We cannot,’ another agreed, and it drew its sword.

The Other flicked its wrist, pushing orders to the thralls. It took four thralls to carry the Horn of Winter out of the caves, even as the tunnels were collapsing behind them. The beast had left a great jagged crevice through the ice from where it had dragged its way up, sending avalanches tumbling across the mountainside.

Above them, the northern lights glimmered in the night’s sky.

‘We are done with the horn, are we not?’ it asked, as it walked back towards the horn.

‘We are. The binding has already been undone.’

It raised the icy blade. ‘Then it is too dangerous to risk the mortals using this again.’

With a smooth slash of its sword, the Horn of Winter was cleaved into two. The white wood crackled and sparked, but the Other did not stop hacking until it was broken into jagged splinters. It felt like the aura of the horn was screaming as it snapped, all of those ancient enchantments coming undone under the frenzied strikes.

With a dismissive kick, it swept the wreckage of the horn away. It paused to pick up a single shard of the weapon, a single broken rune, before turning away.

‘Take the pieces,’ the Other ordered to its thralls, ‘and bury them in the deepest hole. Let none ever find them again.’

The thralls obeyed. ‘What of this cursed sword?’ it asked, motioning to the blade that the mortal had carried.

‘Bury that as well. Shatter it, if you can. Such magic has no place in the new age.’ The Other paused to stare between its brothers, and the devastation that littered the glacier. There were
thousands of captives after the battle of the Frostfangs, and even more dead bodies. ‘Our age.’

‘Tonight was a failure,’ another said foully. ‘We lost one of us, and our king will be upset that the beast got away.’

Yes, that was disturbing. Their king’s fury was something to behold. Their liege was coming south from the Eternal City, and the brothers had been given their task in this war. They had been charged with clearing the way before the king arrived, yet problems were stacking up.

‘It is a minor setback, naught more,’ the Other decided after a pause. ‘You four, chase after the flying beast. Hunt it, bring it low, and raise it again.’

‘Very well, we will see it so.’

‘Do not allow the tree-fiend to interrupt again,’ it said darkly, turning between them. ‘No more mistakes, do you understand?’

They paused, but then nodded. ‘And what of your task?’

‘We must dig. Dig deep.’ The Others turned to stare out across the jagged mountains, the broken shard of the weapon still in its grip. ‘Gather your thralls, we will need them all. That one was the closest to the surface – it was buried hundreds of years ago, but the others were buried millennia ago.’

‘The originals sleep too, and the binding is undone. The rest must be awakened as well, before they can die.’

Now...

**Ramsay**

He saw them. He saw their shapes in the visions that the white walkers shared. He could feel them in the rumble of the ground. They were huge, so large that the earth itself quaked with their roar.

In his mind’s eye, Ramsay saw immense serpentine bodies coiling, he saw great beasts clawing through the earth. He saw huge creatures of rotten flesh and scales, as large as castles, with blue fire burning in their throats and ice clinging to their skin. He saw dragons.

If Ramsay had any breath, it would have frozen in his lungs.

*These were the creatures that built the Wall*, the Other had said. It had taken the breath of ice dragons to raise the Wall. Once, perhaps they could have been magnificent creatures, but now they were mutilated, half-rotten, undead gargantuans.

Wyrms. Ice wyrms.

Ramsay remembered all the tales that he had once been told. Ever since the news of the wildling dragon arrived, Ramsay had even researched dragons and the old lore. Ramsay knew of the tales of ice dragons haunting Cannibal’s Bay, of the ancient sea serpents of the west, of the giant bones of Nagga that stood on Old Wyk.

He thought of the great fire wyrms of Valyria that had lived in the Fourteen Flames, from which
the dragonlords had first learnt their magic.

He knew that such beasts had existed, but the world had thought them long extinct. No, Ramsay thought with quiet horror, they were extinct – the Others had found their corpses.

The Others had dug up their bodies and raised them again. They were giant wights – great beasts powered by the white walker’s touch. Their bodies were missing chunks of flesh, with scales hanging off and bare ribs showing through flesh. Ramsay saw blue fire burning inside their bodies, unnatural light blazing from underneath rotten scales.

There were cold flames running through their whole bodies, enough power to make the world tingle.

Boom. He felt the tremble as one of the wyrms breathed. It was the biggest one, as huge as the world serpent pushing against the Wall. They breathed blue fire – breath ice cold and as foul as rot. A blue-tinged dragonfire that cleaved through the ice and earth. Every time it breathed, the earth shuddered.

*Five of them*, Ramsay thought numbly. There were five of them – one for each white walker.

The wyrms had no wings, but they were large. Larger than Sonagon, perhaps, but it was hard to tell. There was no sense of scale, only flashing visions and feelings. They coiled and moved like snakes, with long and muscular bodies and huge powerful tails that rose into fins. They had tiny, stubby little legs, and gaping mouths filled with more teeth than Ramsay had ever known.

Their scales might have once been white, but now they seemed a grimy grey.

Their backs were covered in spines – crests of yellow and black running down to their tails. Some of them had half a dozen horns jutting backwards from their heads, and others were hornless. When they moved, it was with earth and frost grinding across their scales, slithering and squirming.

_They are all different sizes_, Ramsay realised. The smallest wyrm felt around forty feet long, but the largest seemed over four times its size. He could feel them churning backwards and forth, grinding against the Wall. Carving their way through with their breath.

*How old must something be to reach that size?* Before it died, it must have been hundreds of years old.

The wyrms were burrowing, pushing under the ground, using their powerful tails and their ice breath to force themselves forward. They couldn’t even be seen from the surface; each swoosh of huge tails threw up immense billows of snow, and the tremors rumbled all up the Wall.

There were undead leviathans. They were on the other side of the barrier, but Ramsay could feel them through Malvern’s thoughts.

Malvern seemed entranced. Ramsay could feel the Other’s gaze fixated on the beasts, its mind swimming with images of them.

The Other watched them and laughed. ‘It was before my time,’ the white walker said through giggles of laughter, ‘but the king told us of the old days – back when the great beings used to roam. Back in the first days of our birth, in the Age of Giants.’

Beasts that once roamed thousands of years ago – during the time of the First Men. Maybe the ice wyrms had gone extinct during the Long Night.
Ramsay could only stare.

Suddenly, Ramsay understood the Others endgame. They were attacking the Wall from all sides; from the north and south, from above and below. The wights were needed to subjugate the Watch, but then they had larger creatures to break the Wall itself.

_The Others intend for the wyrms to undercut the Wall’s foundations_, he thought, stunned. _They are truly planning on collapsing it and walking through._

One of the wyrms shifted, and Ramsay felt the earth tremble. The Wall was rumbling, with shards of ice as large as boulders scattering to the ground. The Wall was a two-hundred-foot-thick block, a mountain of ice but Ramsay could still feel it shaking.

‘Quickly, thralls,’ Malvern ordered eagerly. ‘My brothers are going to break through, but I want to beat them to it. I want to open the gate first.’

The white walkers weren’t even bothering to attack the tunnel. Instead, they intended to carve a new one straight through the ice.

All around him, legions of wights were storming against Castle Black. It was very early morn; the first glimmers of dawn rising through the clouds. Even as the sun rose, the swirling snows left everything grey. Rotten bodies coated in hoarfrost pushed through.

Sounds of battle surrounded him. The Night’s Watch was still trying to cling on to the castle; there were crude barricades of tables, beds and doors blocking the road, with spears sticking out of the snowdrifts. Ramsay saw men still holding the line, dug into trenches in the snow.

But the men had been fighting for an entire night. The living were exhausted, but the dead didn’t know the meaning of the word.

_They’re going to win_, Ramsay realised. The Others had this in the bag. Perhaps they always had.

Ramsay could see the red and green barrier glowing over the Wall, and it was flickering. Weakening with every rumble of the ground and with every sworn brother that fell.

_How long will it take for the wyrms to break through? How long do the defenders have?_

With a jolt, Ramsay realised that he was rooting for the Night’s Watch. He didn’t care for the Bastard King’s army, but if Malvern _won_… Ramsay would be a thrall for all eternity. _Cannot let that happen, cannot let them control me._

Malvern pulled back its soldiers slightly, allowing more and more wights to gather for the second wave. A thousand undead bodies shuffled through the drifts, while the winds were so fierce that the snow was near horizontal. Hail and snow lashed against his skin, splattering against blue eyes. A flurry of arrows shot downwards from the towers, but they were scattered in the wind.

The wights had already broken through one barricade, but the sworn brothers had held them back with another. There were trenches in the snow filled with bodies where the defensive lines had collapsed, only to be rebuilt a few yards back. The sworn brothers were losing ground – wights were slipping through, and they were struggling to hold their line across the road from the Tower of Guards.

_Castle Black was perhaps the only castle in the realm without outer walls. It was simply not defendable from the south._
Ramsay saw remnants of the Thenns among the defenders. The host on the kingsroad had scattered, but survivors had run for Castle Black. There were men that had been running and fighting for an entire day and night, still trying to cling on despite severe fatigue. Their eyes were dark and bloodshot against the wights’ blue.

This was a losing fight from the very beginning. The Others waged war the only way they knew how; with overwhelming strength, the utmost methodology, and absolutely no remorse. Ramsay could even have been impressed by the brutality, if he had not been so furious.

I am not a puppet, Ramsay resisted. I am not. Still, it was growing harder and harder to gather those same feelings – his emotions were being quenched by the ice. The longer he spent under the Other’s influence, the more Ramsay could feel himself withering away. Becoming a drone. The fire will die, the Other had said.

Behind him, he could see a haze of light creep over the world. Dawn was rising, and in the morning light Ramsay could see more and more chunks of ice raining down from the Wall. His legs kept on shuffling, completely removed from Ramsay’s control.

There was a cleaver in his hands. The wight raised it high and charged against Castle Black.

Torches were flickering, voices shouting. The sworn brothers were swinging burning torches, and throwing flaming debris from the towers. Even in the cold, the wights burnt into ash with barely a spark. In front of Ramsay, wight after wight fell against the barricades, but they never faltered. They just kept on coming.

I still have intestines dangling from my stomach, Ramsay noticed faintly. The frozen coils of flesh dragged behind him through the snow.

A sharp scream filled the air, followed by a thud. In the tremors, a sworn brother lost his footing on the Tower of Guards, and then he fell from the height of it. He bounced off the ramparts and landed on the snow banks with a painful crack – his back broken, his spine twisted, but somehow he was still alive.

The man was screaming nonsensically as Ramsay reached him, and brought the blade down.

Another sworn brother – a wildling – threw an axe at Ramsay’s face. The weapon sliced straight across the side of his skull and cleaved off Ramsay’s cheek and ear, but the wight hardly even noticed. Ramsay knew that half his face was hanging from his skull, but he couldn’t feel it. The cheekbones of his skull were showing, but there was no blood except congealed mucus – his flesh was frozen solid, and his fluids were a rotten gloop.

Ramsay’s hands lunged, and he threw his cleaver at the wildling. It jammed straight through the man’s neck.

My muscles remember, Ramsay thought. Even as a wight, his body knew how to hurl a blade. Not all of the wights moved the same way – some of the dead bodies were more capable than others. Some of them knew how to fight, others could only flail. Even if Malvern pulled their strings, there was something of the former person left in each wight.

Ramsay pulled the cleaver out and charged forward. Arrows and stones were dropping around him, but there was no fear. The defence felt like it was floundering – maybe they were running out of arrows, or maybe just running out of will.

Ramsay reached the barricades just as they broke. Malvern ordered a dozen undead horses, oxen,
goats and cattle to charge straight through, and they splattered through the defences in a flurry of flailing hooves.

The Other had raised more creatures than just men. Malvern had scoured the forests and settlements for as many bodies as possible, resurrecting everything from horses to pigs to goats. Any living being that the white walker could catch. Ramsay could have gaped as he saw a chicken – a rotten chicken with bright blue eyes – struggling to flap its way through the snow drifts as it tried to peck and attack. A chicken was a near useless thrall for such a thing, but perhaps that was Malvern’s idea of a jape.

Next to Ramsay, wights were shambling in formation, blankly staring ahead. The wight next to him never had a weapon, so instead it was wielding a severed arm like a club. The arm was flailing too, fingers groping, even as it was being swung.

The solid line of wights pushed forward. Ramsay thought of ants – mindless drones following unspoken commands, soldiers serving the hive.

The sworn brothers fought like desperate men, but the wights were already pushing through.

The earth trembled with the wyrm’s writhing, and suddenly a great blanket of snow shook free from the Wall. Ramsay heard the screams as a dozen sworn brothers upon the keep were smothered by it.

A horn blasted, men shouting. The barricades had fallen, and sworn brothers were falling backwards to the castle. They had no walls to hide behind, instead the defence was broken and they had to try to hold each tower and courtyard separately. Ramsay saw men sealing up in the lower tunnels, trying to keep the dead out.

Above him, there was a solid line of bodies – a stampede – of men and women trying to flee up the stairs of the Wall. Every now and then, as the earth trembled and the snow avalanched, a scattering of refugees fell straight off the steps. The steps upwards were so jammed that no one could move up or down.

*Whoever is in command is doing a poor job of it*, Ramsay thought. The sworn brothers had only survived this long out of pure desperation, but now it was falling apart.

Castle Black was in a frenzy, but the wights pressed onwards. Dead men were scaling the towers, climbing up the stones themselves. Lines of wights were charging against the towers, forming human ladders of grasping bodies to hoist themselves up. Even as they toppled, the wights didn’t stop clawing.

“Retreat!” a man boomed. “Retreat to the keep!”

The dead were through to the courtyard, with Ramsay pushing on the front lines. The ones holding the battlements weren’t sworn brothers anymore; Ramsay saw women and children, old men and infirm warriors struggling to notch arrows or hold spears. Refugees armed with weapons, fighting as a last resort.

They were through the strongest of the fighting men, and now the wights had pierced into the refugees trying to hold the final line.

They were dropping like flies.

The earth quaked again, so fiercely that every man staggered. Ramsay heard the creaking of stone – the Lance, the tallest tower in the castle, was creeping and starting to lean dangerously,
threatening to topple in the tremors.

Ramsay’s blade hacked into a free folk’s head so hard that the skull cracked like an egg. If he had been alive, Ramsay might have loved this fight. Malvern had drained all the joy out of battle.

Ramsay was still trying to resist, but it was growing a more and more futile effort. Malvern was everywhere, controlling everything.

Like a god. The white walkers were near gods.

“We surrender! We surrender!” a voice called suddenly, high-pitched shrieking through the clamour. “Lower your weapons, we surrender!”

Ramsay saw him. There was a figure, swinging a grey sheet like a flag. It was the fat one, squealing like a pig at the top of his lungs. Ramsay recognised the figure from his time with the Bastard King’s army – Samwell Tarly. The Lord Steward of Castle Black was standing on the upper level of the courtyard, shrieking at the top of his lungs.

“We surrender!” the fat boy screamed, tears running down his cheeks. “Drop your weapons and surrender!”

And just like that the very last slivers of defence broke apart. Sworn brothers were shouting, calling for orders, but Tarly just shouted the same word over and over again, louder than anything else. “We yield!” he squealed. “We yield! We yield!”

The dead poured through, hacking and slashing. They gave no quarter.

Castle Black was done. It felt like Malvern was giggling. If Ramsay had control of his throat, he would have screamed. The craven! The fucking fat craven!

Ramsay’s body was shambling up the steps, breaking through to the upper level of the courtyard. The gates to the tunnel were in sight. Four men wearing black cloaks tried to bar the stairs, but then they threw down their weapons and fled. “Yield!” the cry wailed. “Yield! Yield!”

It was not a battle anymore. It was a slaughter. A murder of crows.

The wight heard voices – the sound of men squabbling. Two men were arguing, shrieking at each other in hysteria. Ramsay saw the fat steward, standing next to a scrawny wildling with a white beard and a black cloak. Other sworn brothers were milling around, screaming objections or just breaking down into tears.

Suddenly, Ramsay felt Malvern’s presence inside him. The white walker was instantly interested, looking out through the wight’s blue eyes.

“I don’t want to do this, I don’t…” the skinny one cried, trying to squirm. He was trembling in his shadowskin cloak, and then his eyes widened in horror as he stared up at Ramsay. Wights marching up the steps. “Don’t let them…!”

“We have to… we have to surrender!” the fat one wept. “We surrender, surrender!”

The scrawny man tried to run away, but then the fat man grabbed his cloak and yanked him backwards. Tarly had to tackle the other sworn brother to the snow. The fat boy was weeping incoherently, even as he stopped the other man from fleeing.

The fear… they stunk of it. Scared like pigs before the butcher. All around the courtyard, Ramsay
saw other sworn brothers raise their hands, and collapse in the snow.

“We surrender,” Tarly whimpered. “We surrender.”

Ramsay recognised them. They were the ‘leaders’ of Castle Black. The scrawny man that Tarly was sitting on was a wildling – ‘Varamyr Sixskins’ – and then Ramsay knew the Dragonguard Grenn, Eddison Tollett, Ser Wynton Stout, Ser Endrew Tarth, Henrik the Hog, and Duncan Liddle, plus a dozen more Ramsay could not recall.

They all had their hands in the air. They were all cravens. *Is this the best that the Night’s Watch has to offer?* Ramsay cursed. His father could have resisted better than this.

They were all begging, voices whimpering like pigs to be slaughtered. The wights were still staggering forward, raising their cleavers high. Ramsay’s legs surged, charging to attack.

“Please!” Tarly squealed. “We surrender, we surren–”

Ramsay’s arm raised, ready to bring the cleaver down…

‘Stop.’

Ramsay’s body froze like a statue. The white walker locked the wights’ limbs, and every body came to a sudden halt. Malvern was peering through Ramsay’s eyes, staring down at the Lord Steward on his knees. There was a cruel, vengeful emotion swirling through Malvern’s mind.

They paused. Lord Steward Tarly was three feet away, quivering as he stared up at Ramsay’s still body.

“We surrender,” Tarly pleaded through the sobs. “Just let the brothers live – we will help you cross the Wall. You could use us, we could help you… We surrender, take us prisoner, just let us live…”

For a long heartbeat, the only sound was the flurry of the snow and the rumble of the earth.

Malvern paused, considering it. ‘*Kill everyone not wearing a black cloak.*’

Ramsay didn’t move, but around him the other wights did. Half the wights were fixed in position in the courtyard, but the rest were surging forward, moving ahead through the keep. Dead bodies were slamming through the doors – crashing into the wormwalks where all the refugees were hiding.

“I said we surrender, *we surrender!*” Tarly was screaming. “You don’t have to, don’t have to…!”

The screams of women and children filled the air. The fat boy looked crazed, and all around him they heard the hacking of blunt blades.

A few of the sworn brothers tried to grab blades, but the Lord Steward still stopped them. “NOO!” the craven howled. “Don’t resist, don’t resist!”

Men were hissing insults, spitting curses at the Lord Steward that Ramsay couldn’t even decipher. The scrawny man beneath Tarly was sobbing. “You’re going to kill us all,” Varamyr hissed. “You’ve killed us all!”

They heard a newborn baby’s wailing, as a wight picked it up by the leg and swung the babe against a wall. The wights had no mercy.

True to Malvern’s word, they spared every sworn brother who surrendered.
Tarly broke down into tears, but he didn’t resist.

All around him, the wights hacked through women and children, but the fat one was still saying those words. “We surrender… We surrender…” he sobbed into the snow.

Ramsay was still poised with blade in the air, snow swirling around him. There was no emotion on Ramsay’s frostbitten face, but on the inside he was screaming. The craven, Ramsay cursed. The fucking pathetic craven.

“Open the gate,” the words suddenly came from Ramsay’s throat, a guttural sound. Ramsay had no control over them. Tarly stared up at the wight with shock. “Surrender. Open the gate.”

The Lord Steward gaped, gulped, and then nodded. “Open the gate,” he repeated, and then turned to the other brothers behind him. “Open the gate now! Do it!”

“Sam –” a man – Dolorous Edd, Ramsay recalled – tried to protest.

“Just do it!” Tarly shrieked. “We surrender, open the gate!”

Bodies hesitated, but they ran towards the gatehouse. Ramsay heard the sounds of shuffling, and then the groan of a heavy winch.

All around him, the fighting was dying. Castle Black was falling silent as the grave.

The gate creaked open, and the long and dark tunnel opened. Icicles were scattering off the roof, but the tunnel was pitch black. There were desperate men trying to hide and barricade themselves in the tunnel. Ramsay heard that same infuriating word, over and over – “Surrender,” they said. “Surrender.”

Slowly, the men dropped their weapons to the ground.

The wights stepped forward, grabbing the spears off the sworn brothers and forcing them into the wall with their own weapons. Nobody resisted; the men were either weeping, or they bore dead, haunted expressions.

It is over, Ramsay thought numbly. The Night’s Watch had lost. Castle Black was Malvern’s, the Wall was in disarray, and the tunnel was clear. Ramsay could feel Malvern’s eagerness; the white walker had just won its bet.

Perhaps the Bastard King’s relief force would still reach Castle Black in time, but that hope was fading faster and faster.

‘Search them,’ Malvern ordered suddenly. ‘Restrain them. Ensure compliance.’

Ramsay’s body lurched, stepping forward and dragging the fat boy backwards with a single hand. Tarly sagged under his frozen grip, and then Ramsay’s body bent over. The wight’s hands roughly groped, searching through the fat boy’s cloak for weapons. He had none.

“We’ll help you,” Sam repeated, his voice a fearful murmur. He was looking straight up at Ramsay. “We’ll help you, just don’t kill us.”

Behind Ramsay’s eyes, the white walker seemed amused by the very suggestion.

He felt the ripple in the air as the Other stepped closer. The wights were walking through the castle, and nobody resisted them. There were hundreds – thousands – marching from the kingsroad.
The white walker itself walked at the very rear, limping over the snow but barely leaving a footprint. The Other raised its hands and held them out, and Ramsay felt its aura flex. He felt the power ooze out of it, he felt its eye spark.

One by one, the dead bodies started to rise again.

There was movement through the keep. Mutilated corpses were standing up once more. Suddenly, bright blue eyes were glaring down from every rampart and window. The eyes of the dead were open – looking down at the courtyard from the towers and battlements.

The fat craven whimpered.

Malvern was walking closer. Its gaze was focused on Tarly too. Malvern had his sword in its hand, and the Lord Steward was on his hands and knees, face first in the snow. Bowing, praying.

The white walker wanted revenge, Ramsay realised. Memories flickered by him – the memory of walking through the Wall and being set on fire. Malvern remembered the fat boy; he wanted to hurt him for that.

From the Other, there was nothing but waves of satisfaction as more and more wights rose. Thousands of them, all of the fallen defenders and refugees. Too many to beat.

Death stood before the sworn brother, and the Lord Steward was on his knees. The wights stood in formation, pushing the other brothers back. Malvern slowly circled his sword, dragging out every moment.

“Look,” the Other said suddenly, staring down at Tarly. The craven only whimpered. “Look at me.”

Tarly didn’t move, and then the Other nodded. Suddenly, Ramsay’s body lurched – his boot slamming into the fat boy’s stomach at the white walker’s command. Tarly squealed, rolling in pain.

Finally, he looked up. The craven was crawling backwards, and the white walker took a step forward. It felt like Malvern was grinning, even despite the burns across half its body.

“I know you,” Malvern mocked, walking closer. It raised its blade. “Scared.”

The fat boy wiped the snot from his nose, and then nodded. “Yes,” Tarly agreed. “Terrified.”

Then, without warning, the fat boy kicked out to stamp on the skinny man’s foot. He kicked so hard that Ramsay heard the ankle crack, but Varamyr didn’t flinch.

From up above, they heard the cry of an eagle.

Malvern frowned, and then turned to look upwards.

They saw the shadows only for half a heartbeat. Suddenly, three shapes were tumbling down from atop the Wall. *Catapults?* Ramsay thought with brief confusion.

They saw it fall.

And then crash. Wood shattered. The three barrels hit the courtyard together, and exploded in a hail of splinters.

Without warning, the Other exploded. Ramsay heard it screaming as black rubble cleaved through
its body.

The blue in Ramsay’s eyes disappeared. The wight sagged.

All at once, every corpse dropped to the ground.

There was a brief howl of agony – a scream of pure pain, like fire itself piercing through tender flesh – and then Malvern shattered into a thousand shards of ice. A brief scream of inhuman agony, like burning to death a hundred times over in a single instant…

Everything went black.

…

…

There was shock, no feeling, only numbness. It was there one instant, and gone the next. The white walker shattered, and suddenly the ice that kept Ramsay anchored in place slipped away.

It’s dead, he thought numbly. Malvern is dead.

The world faded, Ramsay’s soul slipping away.

…

The river of death thawed, and the current took hold of him again.

He felt himself sag, threatening to fall back into the void. The ice had been holding Ramsay into his dead flesh, but suddenly it all evaporated and Ramsay felt himself draining away. Like piercing a hole in a bucket. It was all spilling out…

NO! NOT AGAIN! I CANNOT DIE AGAIN!

Ramsay grabbed a hold of his broken husk of flesh with everything he had. He thought of his family, his father, his mother… he thought of the rage, the anger, the hate. He clung on and he screamed with everything he had…

The world shattered, and flooded away – but Ramsay was holding on. His life, his body, his memories were an anchor and he couldn’t let go…

It was his hate. That was the only strength he had.

…

The corpse’s eyes opened. The world felt hushed and still.

He was lying in the snow, unbreathing. He couldn’t feel a thing, but he was aware. He was staring at the scene – but the blue light from behind his eyes had vanished. I am free.

It took everything he had – every fibre of his being, every ounce of hatred – just to make his arms twitch. It was difficult – so, so difficult – but Malvern wasn’t blocking him anymore. Ramsay forced his own dead flesh to move by himself.

His head lurched, mouth sagging open. Frozen eyeballs ground against their sockets. It was hard to focus without feeling. Hoarfrost covered his gaze, smearing everything. Unblinking eyes rolled, but slowly Ramsay managed to focus on the patch of frozen ground where the white walker fell.
Malvern had shattered without a trace.

All around him, the snow was littered in black shards of glass. *Dragonglass*, Ramsay realised. *It was dragonglass*. The splinters littered everywhere – even stabbing into Ramsay’s own skin. A splinter of glass about two inches thick was stabbing into his chest, and another into his arm. He couldn’t feel them, but they were there.

They had fired three barrels down from the Wall. Three barrels filled with dragonglass.

The barrels had landed straight into the courtyard; one barrel bounced off the gatehouse, another crashed through the keep, and the third broke off the steps. The barrels exploded on impact and rained rubble everywhere – not even a white walker could dodge.

*It had been a trap*, he thought. They had waited for Malvern to get close. The sworn brothers had surrendered – luring the white walker itself into the courtyard so they could kill it.

All around him, there was screaming. The sworn brothers had been in the courtyard too, they had been in range as the barrels shattered. There were men howling with pain with splinters of wood, rubble and obsidian sticking through their bodies. The tiny shards of glass went everywhere.

The keep was devastated. Ramsay saw corpses – all of those wights were still there, but they weren’t moving. The blue eyes had vanished. Where once they had moved with purpose and direction, now they were just... there.

Many of them slumped to the ground, a few of them were just milling around, one or two were walking aimlessly. The wights were puppets, but all their strings had been cut.

Bits and pieces of the person they used to be still remained. The wights were left as fragmented, hollow bodies.

Ramsay heard the sound of a man hurl, vomiting blood and bile on the snow. The fat boy – Samwell Tarly – he was still alive, but with a shard of glass in his side, and a cut across his brow where a chunk of rubble bounced off his head. Tarly had been huddled into a ball on the ground, but he was still lucky to survive.

Others weren’t so lucky. A few feet away from him, the scrawny man – Varamyr – had died with a wooden splinter jammed through his skull.

*They had been standing in the scatter range too*, Ramsay thought slowly. *They had been bait*. The catapults fired straight at them. The sworn brothers must have known that they weren’t like to survive.

Even despite the noise, everything felt hushed. Ramsay swayed, and then toppled backwards. He felt like a babe to trying to walk for the first time.

Across the Wall, the earth quaked. Without Malvern, Ramsay couldn’t sense the wyrms any more, but he knew they were still there.

*Move*, Ramsay willed. *I must move. I can’t lie here.*

The fat boy – Tarly. He was clutched over the snow, staring at the corpses surrounding him. The disintegrated pieces of the Other lay before him. Slowly, Tarly reached outwards, gingerly reaching for Malvern’s white sword that lay on the snow. Tarly yelped in pain as soon as he touched the ice-cold hilt.
Ramsay focused himself, and then dragged himself forward. Dead arms lurched, dragging the wight forward.

The fat boy screamed like a little girl as the wight suddenly grabbed his leg. Tarly’s eyes widen in horror – staring at Ramsay’s mutilated, frost-coated face. “How…?” Tarly gasped in fear. He tried to run, but Ramsay yanked him down. “Help! Don’t –!”

The wight grit its teeth. “Stop,” the wight croaked. Its voice was hoarse and throaty, the word barely decipherable. It was so hard to even force the air out of his dead throat. “Stop them.”

Tarly’s eyes widened, and Ramsay pushed the fat boy backwards with an oomph. Ramsay’s body was numb, but his arms were strong.

Ramsay knew what he needed to do. “They have the Horn of Joramun,” Ramsay croaked. “They have dragons – ice wyrms. Five of them.”

Tarly’s jaw dropped open. Ramsay wanted to slap him.

“The Others are using them, burrowing through the foundations. Undercutting it,” Ramsay pressed onwards. “You feel it, the tremors – that’s them. They mean to collapse the Wall. Stop them. Break them.”

The fat boy’s mouth trembled. “Wait…” he gasped. “You’re helping us?”

Ramsay could have screamed. Any other day, any other time, Ramsay would have cheerfully gutted the pig himself, but today it seemed like they were on the same side. Today, he needed all the help he could get to stop them.

It turned out that Ramsay hated the Others even more than he hated the Bastard King. He didn’t think such a thing was possible, but it was that hate that kept his limbs moving. “Stop them,” Ramsay hissed. “Break the wyrms. Hold the Wall. Kill the white walkers and their army falls.”

Tarly didn’t reply, his mouth was flapping. Ramsay groaned, but staggered upwards. His body was swaying, his balance gone, but he had to move.

All around him, most of the unchained wights had collapsed – though there were some few that were still moving. They didn’t have blue eyes anymore, yet they were still wights.

Ramsay was already running. The remaining brothers were stirring, and Ramsay didn’t want to explain himself. He grabbed a black cloak from a sworn brother, wrapping it tightly around himself to hide his dead features, and then staggered as quickly as his limp legs would take him.

He was already breaking into a fast, lurching stride – heading straight up the Wall. There was a splinter of obsidian sticking out of his arm. Ramsay knew what he had to do. The white walkers had to die.

He could feel the rage simmering in his chest, and it gave him strength. Cannot let them control me, Ramsay thought. I will not be a puppet! I will not be a puppet!

---

Sam

That moment flashed before his eyes, over and over again. He felt the whoosh of air, the wood
shattering open, and then the rain of rubble scattering over his head. Sam’s heart was beating so fast he couldn’t feel it, and his head so hysterical that words were nonsensical wails.

He had seen the white walker standing over him, in all its terrible beauty. He had seen that brief moment of surprise, just as the barrels crashed to the ground and the obsidian exploded.

*I’m alive.* Sam had set the trap, he had set himself as bait. *I’m alive,* he finally realised in surprise.

He had never expected to survive the trap.

Now, the Lord Steward was heaving, bile spewing from his throat. A chunk of rubble had embedded itself into his side, so painful he could barely breathe.

All around him, there were so, so many bodies. Castle Black was flooded with corpses.

Sam had gambled everything on the wights collapsing or disappearing – but instead they were just standing there, staring blankly. The wights were milling around, occasionally twitching or shuffling.

A few wights were walking, one of them had even talked, but the rest just seemed dazed and confused. Their eyes weren’t blue anymore, their gazes looked black.

All around him, the castle was devastated. Sam thought of those women and children that were hiding in the wormwalks as the wights stormed through. *I sacrificed them,* Sam thought numbly, *I just sacrificed every refugee in the castle as bait.* Potentially thousands – Sam couldn’t even begin to count.

The only easy way to kill an Other was to catch it by surprise.

The battle had been lost, Sam told himself, surrendering had been their only hope. One final chance to draw it in, one final resort to let them target the white walker itself. The wights were distractions, Sam had argued; the dead were an unending foe. The battle for Castle Black could only truly end when Malvern itself fell.

The Other had no reason to enter the castle personally during the fighting, but in the battle’s aftermath Malvern would choose to come closer to raise its army. So long as it had been hiding, it had been effectively unkillable – it needed to be lured closer before it could be slain. He had known that Malvern would need to raise its wights.

Sam had gambled that it would want the sworn brothers alive as prisoners to open the way. Sam had suspected that Malvern would want to gloat.

The plan had almost failed before it began when Varamyr lost his courage. They had readied the catapults atop the Wall and they had placed every chunk of dragonglass into three barrels. Still, there had only been one chance to kill Malvern, they had to be sure it was in position. There was no good line of sight in this weather – they had needed to rely on the skinchanger and his eagle to pass on the signal of exactly when to fire.

But Varamyr had turned craven, and tried to run. Sam had to tackle the skinchanger down and hold him in place, forcing him to do his duty.

Across from him, Varamyr was lying in the snow with a bloody splinter through his eye.

*It worked,* Sam realised, slowly becoming aware of the world around him again. *It worked.*
The courtyard was stirring, stunned gazes rising to stare at Sam.

The other sworn brothers had not known of the plan. Sam hadn’t been able to risk telling them – the panic and the loss needed to be real, that was the only way Malvern would believe it. Only a precious few had known of his intention, the rest had thought that Sam truly betrayed them.

*How many were killed? How many have just been lost?*

Edd, Grenn, Halder, Albett, Goady, Duncan, Tim, Arron – they had all dropped their weapons and raised their hands because they trusted Sam.

*How many did my plan kill?*

The air felt strangely still. Empty, as though the world had stopped. The frenzy of activity had vanished. Even the snows seemed calmer; the winds felt less vicious after the white walker’s death. All around him, wide eyes were staring at Sam, or looking at the lingering wights.

“They’re not moving,” a large man said dumbly. Small Paul was on his knees, staring up at the wights with a blank expression. “Not moving.”

Sam saw one wight – an old dead woman – that was left staggering repeatedly into a wall, over and over again.

The white walker had burnt away into nothingness. All that was left of the Other was a steaming outline in the snow, and a clump of shattered obsidian.

Before him, Malvern’s sword lay on the ground, a white-frosted blade so fine that it could have been a water dancer’s edge. The rest of the white walker had dissolved into burning ice, but the sword had fallen out of its grip. The sword was freezing, so cold that even the snow beneath it was crackling.

It radiated frost even from the handle, no human could hold it. Even through his gloves, Sam had lost a patch of skin from his hand just trying to touch it. If he had tried to grip it, he would have lost his hand.

A remnant of the white walker’s magic, lying before him – a blade so cold that iron would shatter beneath it. Sam could only stare, before pulling off his cloak and gingerly trying to wrap the sword up.

“The Father raise us above the turmoil o’ flesh, to hath and to hold in your light…” Sam heard the words in the background – a voice mumbling from the Seven-Pointed Star. Ser Aladale Wynch was on the ground gasping through sobs, reciting broken scripture. ‘… how art we lost, see us to the path… for the dark descent and up to reascend, give us the dawning light…”

The earth rumbled, causing him to stumble. His head reeled, and Sam felt dazed.

*We’re still under attack. Wyrms, that wight had said, but Sam could barely process the words. Wyrms?*

Sam heard a cry – an inhuman voice echoing. A great, furred giant was bustling around, roaring guttural words that Sam couldn’t decipher. *It is calling for someone*, he realised slowly. Sam counted another four giants that had taken shelter in the tunnel when the castle fell. There were the bodies of another two buried in the snow when barricades fell.

The giants seemed distraught, searching for their fallen clansmen. They barrelled through the
snow, kicking down corpses with frenzied blows. The wights never even twitched.

“Sam!” a voice said suddenly, a hand shaking his shoulder. Sam saw Edd standing above him, the steward’s face lined in worry. “Bloody hells, Sam, how did you…?”

Sam couldn’t reply.

“What happened?” another was shouting, staggering out of the tunnel. “What happened, where did it…?”

“Father judge us true, for in the Light of the Seven we are guided…”

“Halder…!” that was Grenn’s voice, shaking a body on the ground. “Halder, get up… get up…”

It was dead. Malvern was dead.

But there are more. There are more Others just like that one.

“Sam!” Dolorous Edd snapped. “What is happening here? The ground is bloody shaking and what is going on?”

Edd tried to shake him from his shock, but it was all spinning. The brothers, Sam thought. The Wall.

“Rollo!” a sworn brother was shouting, pulling up a dead body. “Rollo! Rollo, he’s alive – he’s moving!”

Sam turned to stare. The man’s friend – Rollo – had his stomach gouged open. He was a wight; his gaze was vacant and his breath was still, but his arms were still twitching and his mouth flapped open as if he was trying to speak. Sam didn’t even know the man, but Rollo wore a black cloak. He must have died and been raised as a wight, and then Malvern died moments later. His friend was still calling for aid, insisting desperately that Rollo was alive. The dead man’s mouth was flapping.

An echoing cry filled the air, and a giant’s footsteps rumbled. Wun Wun looked dazed as he stepped out from the gates, his head lowered to crouch underneath the beam. The giant didn’t know what was happening. “Dead,” Wun Wun cried. “Dead?”

Sam took a deep breath. More and more men were staggering up from the stunned castle. Voices were rising in pitch – cries for aid or screams of anguish. The earth rumbled with hysterical sobs.


It wasn’t over. The attack from the south had been stopped at great cost, but there were even more pressing against them from the north.

We have breathing room now, that’s all I have won. Room to breathe, to rally. Maybe that was enough.

The Others had the Horn of Winter. They have the weapon that destroys the Wall.

“Gather whatever survivors you can,” Sam said finally, his voice hoarse. “Get them out of here – evacuate the castle. Any that we don’t need must start running.”

Edd started at him in shock. Behind him, the sworn brothers were gathering, men creeping out of hiding places. “Find any survivors, get them on their feet,” Sam insisted, pulling himself up. “Get them out of here as quickly as possible.”
There was a cry of protest, but Sam’s voice broke into a scream. “Any man or woman that can still fight, form up!” he shouted. “But anyone who can’t – get out. Quickly, just run!”

Others were stirring; Sam saw Grenn clutching a blade, and Halder doubled over in the snow, and Ser Wynton Stout wailing nonsensically. Men were coated in frost and chunks of rotten blood. The shrieks filled the air.

There was a great roar – Wun Wun was staggering, confused and scared. It trampled through the snow, kicking down wights with immense feet. Men cowered, but Wun Wun was going berserk. The giant never understood what was happening; Malvern had disappeared so suddenly, leaving shock and pain in its wake.

“You fucking craven!” a voice screamed. Sam saw Ser Endrew Tarth, blood across his brow and his gaze crazed. The knight was drawing steel, staring at Sam. “You did this! You surrendered!”

The air rippled. Ser Endre screamed, and suddenly attention turned towards Sam. He saw Ser Byam Flint grip a sword, and then Duncan Liddle was shouting at him. “What happened?” the large man called. “The Other… you told us to surrender, you said surrender…”

Aye, I did. Ser Endrew’s eyes were furious, but Sam just felt numb. “Hey now, this doesn’t–” Dolorous Edd tried to stop him, but the knight shoved him out of the way.

“Our brothers, those people!” Ser Endrew’s blade pointed at Sam, threatening to skewer him. “They died because this craven gave the order to run!”

More eyes were turning to focus on Sam. Angry eyes, scared eyes, crazed eyes. Sam cowered, barely even able to…

“You’re right.” Sam could hardly breathe, his voice a whisper. “They did die because of me.” His head turned, looking between the other men. “And you’re alive because of me too.”

Others were shouting too, there were more creeping up through the keep. “You used us as bait!” a man shouted from the balcony. “You bloody used us!”

“They’re dead, they’re all…” a voice was wailing.

“Rollo!” a sworn brother cried. “Rollo, it’s me… it’s me…”

“You bloody dar–!” Ser Byam Flint looked ready to lunge at Sam, if not for Grenn yanking him back.

“Order!” Duncan Liddle shouted – the castellan was a broad, fierce man, pushing his way through. “Get back you sods…!”

“It was him, it was him…!”

I did what I had to do. I sacrificed the battle for a chance to win. Sam knew that it had been the right move, but still… the sight of all those dead bodies…

Without warning, Sam’s legs took a step forward. He stepped forward into Ser Tarth’s sword, so that the tip of the blade pressed against his chest. Sam could barely feel it. The knight looked shocked.

“If you’re going to kill me, just do it quickly,” Sam whispered. “Cut off my head and limbs so I cannot be raised again. And then afterwards you must promise to lead the defence.”
Ser Tarth was a strong figure, a fighter. Perhaps he’d be a better leader too. Still, the knight seemed to falter at Sam’s expression. “But if you’re not going to kill me, then back away.” Sam gulped. “It’s not over, not yet.”

All eyes were on Sam. “Not over,” Ser Endrew repeated, eyes wide.

“They’re coming from the north too. You can feel them. They’re going to break through the Wall and we must hold them back.”

“Break through?” Grenn said incredulously. “You can’t break through the Wall – it’s the Wall.”

“We need to retreat! We must retreat—”

“Seven save us, grant us your light…” Ser Aladale Wynch wept.

Behind them, the giant roared. Sam heard wildlings squabbling – voices in the Old Tongue rising around him.

“Run into the mountains,” Duncan Liddle said suddenly. “We run to the mountains, take shelter with the clans.”

Ser Endrew seemed to hesitate. Sam turned, staring at the brothers. Sam grimaced and shook his head. “No,” he said sadly. “Nobody can run.”

All the corpses and wights were watching them. A dozen voices split the air – cries of panic. The sworn brothers were all breaking down into hysteria. Sam saw hardened men, warriors, that were left shaken to the bone.

Weirdly, Sam felt like he was the most level-headed one there. Or perhaps Sam had already broken down so badly that he couldn’t break any more.

“How can we stand against—”

“We can’t stop them, we can’t…” a free folk wept.

“Defence?” Edd demanded suddenly, looking to Sam. “What in blazes are we defending against? What is out there?”

“Everything. Anything,” Sam replied, gulping. “We are the shield that guards the realms of men. The shield is cracked, but it’s not broken.” Not yet. “We must defend. We must hold.”

“It’s lost!” Ser Wynton cried. “The Wall is lost…!”

Wun Wun cried something – so fiercely that men around him scattered. “Dead!” the giant boomed. “Dead!”

_The giant doesn’t speak Common well enough_, Sam realised. Wun Wun never knew what was happening, never knew why people were shrieking – the giant just lashed out like a child.

They were scared. They were all tired, stressed and terrified out of their minds. They needed order. And it’s on me, he thought numbly, _I’m the one who has to give it_. Sam felt so scared he couldn’t even feel it, like the fear had soaked straight through him.

“Stop…!” Sam protested, but his voice wasn’t loud enough. “Stop, don’t…”

“Retreat, we need to…!”
Sam saw three men – Clubfoot Karl, Luke of Longtown and Grubbs – that were already pushing through the snow to run. Another man, Leathers, tried to stop them, but voices were raising, and weapons being swung madly…

Sam saw a shaggy-haired wildling – Thundering Mammoth – screaming bloody murder in words that were hardly coherent. Some were falling apart, others were howling…

“Bugger you, crows!” an old free folk woman screeched. “Bugger you all, you let us die–!”

Wun Wun stepped forward threateningly, raising great meaty hands. Scared bodies fumbling for spears. It was all breaking apart, tumbling around him.

Sam never even knew what he was doing. He was just moving.

And suddenly Sam was shoulder-barging straight into the giant. He didn’t even reach Wun Wun’s thigh, but he was running and shoving the giant’s leg, slamming into thick fur. For Wun Wun, it was like being charged by a witless midget, but it caused him to stumble slightly. The giant seemed more surprised than hurt.

“STOP!” Sam screamed, and finally it seemed like his voice was loud enough.

The air faltered, just briefly, and Sam took a deep breath. They were staring at him, all eyes on him…

“If you want to run, then I will not stop you! I cannot stop you!” Sam shouted, a quiver in his voice. “But if there is anyone in the south who you love, anyone, anyone at all who you want to protect, then we must stand until the very end!

“You fucking surrendered…!” Ser Endrew Tarth screamed, viciously swinging his sword into the air.

Sam didn’t even twitch. “I did what I had to do. Do the same.” All of those corpses, it felt like there was judgement in their eyes… “Perhaps we are already lost, but we must keep on fighting for them.”

Nobody replied, but their eyes were white. Wun Wun was looking down at him, grunting uncertainly.

“Tarly!” a sound cawed, black wings rustling. “Tarly! Tarly!”

It was the crow. Mormont’s crow, flapping around him. Half the castle had been slaughtered, but the crow had still survived. Dark wings flapped through the hush, causing every man to flinch. The crow was circling around the courtyard in panic, cawing in high pitched shrieks. Mormont’s crow.


They were all looking at him. Sam wanted to curl up into a ball and collapse – he wanted to block it all out and run to the library, to cuddle up behind some book. But he couldn’t. Instead, Sam found himself stepping forward, staring at them all. “What are our vows?” he said with a gulp. “We shall live and die at our posts. We are the swords in the darkness, we are the watchers on the walls.”

There was a brief pause. “We are the fire that burns against the cold,” Edd said suddenly, his voice joining Sam’s. “The light that brings the dawn.”
Grenn spoke up next, and others were mumbling. “The horns that wake the sleepers,” they chanted. The words were spreading. “The shields that guard the realms of men.”

Other people were still screaming, but more were joining in the chant. Even free folk were chanting the oath. Wun Wun recognised those words too, they seemed to calm him. Sam could have sagged, but he had to stay upright.

The crow finally stopped to settle on Sam’s shoulder. Its talons dug into his furs, beak pecking painfully at his earlobe. Searching for corn, no doubt.

Sam looked straight at Ser Tarth. “Do your duty, ser,” he whispered. “But I must do mine.”

After a pause, Ser Endrew finally lowered his blade. Sam almost collapsed.

“You can’t… you can’t let him get away with…!” Ser Byam Flint tried to protest, but Ser Endrew just shoved him out of the way.

Sam turned to stare at the north, at the pale light reflecting off the Wall.

It was morning, there was finally daylight. Sam could see the weak sunlight through the clouds, cold and crystalline, and the fog of the storm was clearing. The Others had always seemed slightly weaker in the light of day – the hunting parties all reported that Malvern shunned the sunlight. The dead lost a bit of their advantage in the light, now was the time to push back. *We must move quickly.*

“I want two teams!” Sam shouted to the stunned courtyard. “One team to secure the castle, and the other to start preparing the defence. Edd – you’re in charge of the castle, Grenn – you lead the defence.”

“They’re trying to run!” a voice – the wildling Leathers – shouted suddenly. He was at the front of a gaggle of men, trying to restrain a group of would-be deserters. “They’re trying to–!”

“Let them!” Sam snapped, looking down at the men from the upper courtyard. Clubfoot Karl looked like he had the fear of the gods pressed into him – men that scared were useless. “Run if you want, but you’ll never run fast enough.”

Voices murmured, but they obeyed. A few were still chanting the oath of the Night’s Watch to calm themselves. Sam groped down at the chunk of debris sticking through his furs, and he winced as he pulled the splinter out. It was a shallow wound, blood frozen against his furs. The wound would scar, but for now he could only bandage it.

*A benefit of being fat,* Sam thought woozily as he stared at the bloody shard of obsidian. Shards of dark rubble littered everywhere across the courtyard, along with the fallen wights.

“Edd,” Sam gasped. “The dragonglass. Pick up all the pieces of dragonglass you can find, we need it all.”

“Aye.” Edd nodded, pale-faced. He was already rushing off. “Aye, milord.”

Sam turned and stared. Swords, arrows and debris sprawled through the grounds. The castle was filled with thousands of wights, about half of them still standing and a few of them stirring. Sam tried to look for that wight with the severed face – the wight that had talked – but he had been too dazed to see where it had run off too.

Sam thought of the stranger – *Coldhands* – that had saved his life. Is that how Coldhands was
The wights. Do the freed wights have intelligence? Could they be recruited to fight the Others?

Across the courtyard, the wildling was still bent over the moving body of his dead friend, refusing to let anyone burn him.

Sam saw another sworn brother hack off a wight’s head, but it never even reacted. Its limbs were still twitching even as its head slashed open. Most seemed just mindless corpses now. But might another white walker retake control of the wights? They couldn’t risk it.

“Grenn!” Sam shouted. “Assign men, start disposing of these wights. Burn them if you can, cut off limbs if you can’t. Clear the castle of any bodies that the Others might raise.”

Across from him, men started to hack through the unchained wights. The wights didn’t resist, most hardly even seemed to notice. It was only a few that seemed show any traces of the men they once were.

“Who here speaks the Old Tongue?” a man cried. “Get those bloody giants under control.”

The giants seemed crazed. They were stomping through the courtyard, bellowing words that Sam couldn’t even recognise. For one horrible moment Sam thought that they might turn aggressive too, but then the noise spooked the crow from his shoulder – and Mormont’s bird burst into the sky. The raven shrieked some indecipherable caw, flapping circles around a giant’s face. The great furred creatures gaped at it.

Behind him, the earth shuddered.

Sam turned to look up the Wall, at the shower of ice and snow that was still scattering from the precipice. The defenders on the Wall had been trapped up there for an entire day and night, trying to withstand the Other’s siege.

How many? he wondered. There had been two thousand sworn brothers stationed in Castle Black, plus several times that number of refugees. At least half their men were trapped on the Wall, and yet in the castle it seemed like there were ten corpses for every survivor. How many have fled, how many can still fight?

What has to be done? Where do I need to be?

Supplies. They needed supplies. Sam stared around him, looking for the biggest men he could see. Need men that can carry things.

“Small Paul!” Sam ordered. “There is a crate of emergency rations in the kitchens, get it up the Wall.” Small Paul blinked, but he nodded. “Rusty, we need bandages up there, fetch them. And Halder…” Sam faltered as he turned – Halder was on the ground, with an arrow in his gut. He was in no state to carry anything. Halder was his friend, they had been recruits together, but Sam couldn’t even tend to him. “Arrows. Somebody else, carry the arrows.”

He heard the indecipherable grunt of the giants, the stomping. He needed men who could speak the Old Tongue, bring them into line… “Thundering Mammoth!” Sam ordered to a wildling. “Tend to the giants, get them into order!”

Behind him, Wun Wun wailed, showing a mouth of tombstone teeth. The other giants were huddled together, but Wun Wun was an outcast from them. Like a child, Sam thought. The giant was lost – it followed the man that seemed to be in control. An immensely big, lost little child.
“Barrels,” Sam said after a brief pause, shoving his way through the men. “We have barrels of nails and tools, get them to Wun Wun to carry.”

Sam had seen it on his way down – the platform and the stairs had been groaning under the strain. They needed supplies to have a chance to fix them.

Men were turning towards him, looking for tasks. More and more were shouting orders, bringing people into formation. “We need a supply chain, we need to move support up the Wall!” Sam shouted. “We need siege weapons. And oil – all the lamp oil that we have. Get it up the Wall.”

Men were already running. Sam saw Elron and Garse hesitate, a few gazes flickering to Ser Endrew. “What the bloody hell are you waiting around for?” Grenn snapped. “Get moving.”

“And rope,” Sam ordered suddenly. “Lots and lots of rope.”

They didn’t argue. They just ran.

A dozen men led by Ser Byam Flint were already abandoning post and sprinting away to the south, and more would likely follow them. Yet the Watch didn’t even have the manpower to hold the perimeter against deserters too, nor the time to try.

The men had been awake for over a day straight – a long and tiring day and a frantic and desperate night – but they couldn’t stop now.

Fighting men and women were gathering in the courtyard, while others were already fleeing out of Castle Black. The weather had faded somewhat, but the snows were still thick – Sam didn’t fancy their chances trying to flee on foot.

Still, they had just had to leave. The fewer dead bodies in Castle Black the better.

“We should send runners to Queensgate and Deep Down,” Duncan Liddle suggested. “I’ve had no word from them.”


“None…” Edd grimaced. “The storm, the attack… Malvern was trying to cut us off. What about the other castles?”

Sam looked around them. “If they have not arrived by now, they must be facing assaults of their own.” Sam hesitated. The quakes were nearby, they felt close. “But they’re focusing on us here. Who else is nearby – what of the Shadow Tower forces?”

Gazes flickered, and then slowly turned towards a man, a Thenn. His face was painted, he wore salvaged iron armour – one of Sigorn’s men. There were a few Thenns in the castle, all of them dark-eyed, fatigued and grim. “Lord Sigorn led us down kingsroad,” the Thenn grunted, in broken Common Tongue. “Wights attacked at night. Scattered – some of us ran to Castle Black, don’t know of rest.”

“What of Winterfell?” Sam pressed. *What of the dragon?* He didn’t dare to say the words out loud, but they were all thinking it.

Nobody could reply. Faces were scared, eyes flickering back to the Wall. “How many are there?” Duncan Liddle asked Sam, looking towards the north. “How many do they have; how many are they bringing–”
“The tunnel!” a man cried suddenly. “The tun–!”

Sam turned, and then suddenly the shudder rippled through the earth. Everything was shaking, so badly he couldn’t even stand straight. The world was being ripped into two, and the deafening creak of stone.

All eyes turned upwards as the tower – the Lance – finally collapsed. The great stone structure wobbled inch by inch, until the tower was toppling in an avalanche. Men were running. Sam heard the crunch – the tearing – of solid granite ripping apart.

When it crashed, the whole world boomed. A cloud of dust and snow whooshed.

Men were screaming. Sam heard the crackling, a great thurrump of ice scraping together. Men were running out of the tunnel, shouting.

The tunnel under the Wall had collapsed. A cave-in, the ice quaking apart.

All around him, it was like Castle Black was toppling like dominoes. The earthquakes were coming closer, the shaking growing fiercer

“Get up the Wall,” Sam breathed.

“Sam…” Edd warned.

“Get up the Wall, they need support.” Sam looked between them. “Edd, get this castle in order – Grenn, up the Wall with me.”

Grenn, the last of the Dragonguard still fighting in Castle Black. Grenn wore King Snow’s white dragon on his furs – Sam could only hope that the sight of him would help inspire any of Sonagon’s believers on the Wall. The dragon was coming, they had to believe that it was.

The whole Wall was quivering like it might collapse. If the Wall did fall… there would be so much falling ice it could smother whole cities. It would be the greatest avalanche the world had ever known.

He entrusted the white walker’s blade to Edd, but Sam was already pushing his way through. Voices were shouting – calling for order, for search teams, for evacuation. Sam was in the middle of it all, watching the world turn around him.

Sam started to run. Two dozen men followed him, with Small Paul hoisting up a large crate while Wun Wun carried two hefty barrels under each arm. Grenn was at the front, with a sword in one hand and a standard of the dragon in the other – waving the flag of the Dragonguard to signal men to follow. Sam wrapped a large coil of rope around his torso, all the while men struggled to clear the path.

A hail of ice blew off the top of the Wall, turning the world a hazy white.

He was running up the Wall, pounding up the broken steps coated in frost and snow. The stairs were treacherous even in the best of times, and now there was scattering snow across them and so many people choking the steps that even the wood was groaning. Men needed to fasten lengths of ropes to the timbers as guide ropes, but clearing the way upwards was a battle in itself. Panic was all around him; scared bodies clotting up the stairs.

He heard the creak of the platform, the lift moving once more. They could winch the barrels of lamp oil and weapons upwards, but the men had to climb up the steps.
With every tremble, it felt like the world might collapse.

Sam’s heart was pounding with every step. The Wall rumbled so badly that Sam almost fell. It took Small Paul to lift Sam up the broken stairs – the larger man had to throw Sam over his shoulder as he lost his footing. Wun Wun balanced so unsteadily that eight men needed to tie ropes around the giant’s hands to guide him up.

“Clear the way!” the men cried up the steps. “Clear the way!”

The white walkers had set a time limit. The sworn brothers were already playing catch up.

_We must rebuild. We must defend, we must fight._

Sam could hear the noise vibrating through the ice. It sounded like roars.

By the time they reached the top, the sun was climbing higher in the sky and moving south. Weak sunlight was spilling through, and the clouds to the north were churning. The trenches were thick with bodies, and with every rumble Sam saw geysers of snow billowing off the edge. Men were sharing cloaks, trying to hide and find warmth around weak fires. The rest had been left to the cold.

Even as he ran, Sam past wildlings with white veins snaking up their cheeks and frost in their hair. Men had collapsed weakly into hoarse breaths. _The poison_, Sam thought. The first of the poisoned prisoners were starting to fall, and the rest didn’t seem healthy either.

“Clear the way!” Grenn ordered in front of him. “Anybody who can’t fight, make way for people who can.”

Wun Wun stomped at the very front, the giant forcing people to push backwards with every huge step. The other giants were coming up the Wall as well.

“Get to the winch!” Sam shouted, looking around the crowd of wide eyes littering the wood. “They’re bringing supplies up on the lift, and taking wounded down. Keep the stairs clear for people coming up!”

Men were running, bodies scattering over the ice. Sam could still hear those booms – the crash of the white walker’s trebuchets across the Wall. _No, the trebuchets are useless_, Sam thought. The launching wights were terrifying, but the Other’s trebuchets had only ever been a means to keep the defenders off-guard. The siege weapons hardly even had the range, and they could not fire enough bodies fast enough to make a difference. _We can survive the trebuchets, we can fight back._

The sworn brothers were already setting to work– slinging ropes downwards to build a supply train. People were moving, Sam just had to make sure they were moving in the right direction. He pushed his way forward into the trenches, but all he could see was a field of black shapes buried in white.

“Where’s Mance?” Sam called, looking between the unfamiliar faces atop the Wall. “Where’s Mance, where is–”

“Here, Tarly,” a voice croaked, and Sam nearly collapsed with relief. Mance Rayder was swaying with every step and his head was wrapped up in bandages. His eyes were still dazed, but he seemed more focused. Mance had spent most of the night unconscious. _He’s alive_, Sam thought. He had half-expected to come up the Wall to find Mance dead.

“Mance,” Sam gushed, rushing to the lord’s side. “You’re alive… the castle is clear, let’s get you down –”
“I ain’t dead yet, Tarly,” he replied with a grimace, shaking Sam off. The man looked dazed and desperate. “Get the rest down before me. What happened? Dalla… my boy… are they…”

Dalla. Sam didn’t even know. Maybe she hid in the tunnels, maybe she died with the rest. It could be days before they sorted through the bodies. Still, Sam could not say that now, he could not risk it.

“She is safe,” Sam lied. “And the babe. Safe. It worked, we stopped the wights.”

Mance’s body sagged in relief, the anxiety draining from his face. By all the gods, Sam thought numbly, I am surely going to hell. Or maybe hell is coming for me.

“Malvern is dead, my lord,” Sam pressed, taking a deep breath. “We caught him. We can rebuild the defence, we can hold from the north.”

There was no relief. Mance’s gaze looked haunted. “Tarly… have you seen them?”

Sam faltered slightly. All around him, there were grim mumbles. Sam’s eyes flickered across to the northern edge of the Wall. Men were running or clinging on to the wooden beams. Everywhere he looked, Sam saw men scared out of their wits. Fresh reinforcements were pushing up from the stairs, yet there were crowds of people desperate to get down again.

The wildlings, Sam realised. The poisoned wildlings had broken down. There was no fighting; everyone seemed too grim and fatigued. Crowds of men were huddled together in the trenches, taking shelter from the wind.

The ground rumbled, and Sam heard the movement below. It was shaking like the beasts of seven hells, like the monsters that the Seven-Pointed Star spoke of – the unholy behemoths that would feast upon the souls of sinners.

Sam needed to see. He ran straight towards the great precipice at the edge of the Wall, panting for breath with every strained step. The rumbling was so fierce that his bones quaked, the wind stripping through his furs.

The view took his breath away. In the dark it had been naught but an abyss, but in the morning light it was all pure white. To the north, it was like he was gazing down upon a snowstorm.

At first, he could see nothing but great billows of snow from the ground. Then, he made out the shapes.

In the light of day, he could see them – he saw the earth coiling. Sam’s knees turned so weak he could have fallen off the edge. He suddenly understood why the world had been rumbling so fiercely.

The wight had spoken the truth. Wyrms.

Even from this distance looking down, they were huge. Immense beasts churning in the earth, husks of flesh that were twisting. A cold mist rose from the earth, and with every slight twitch great geysers of snows gushed. It was so hard to make out their shapes, but Sam could see the grey moving through the white.

Sam stared downwards, his jaw hanging off the Wall.

They moved like snakes, but their bodies were shorter and stockier than any serpent. They reminded him more of fish – eels, perhaps, writhing through the snow.
The clouds were too dark to make out any details, but Sam saw the blast of bluish light as great jaws opened. Something ignited in the clouds of steam wreathing the Wall’s base, the illumination of flames pulsing through so many teeth. Dragonfire swelled outwards. Frostfire.

The roar was like thunder. Every time the wyrms breathed, the Wall quaked.

Sam was shaking, vision blurring. The tremors were only getting worse, and Sam could see the damage that they had made. They had carved a great notch out of the Wall, working their way deeper and deeper.

“What are those things?” a voice broke. “What are they?”


Some creatures from a long-past age of the world. The maesters had theorised for a long time that ice dragons lived to the far north, across the Shivering Sea. The fire wyrms of the Fourteen Flames had been the first dragons of Valyria, and the sea serpents of the Sunset Sea were a part of ancient history. The white walkers had raised things that could not, should not, still exist.

They're burrowing, he thought in horror. Burrowing into the Wall. The Others still meant to break through.

Sam saw men on their knees. “Ice dragon save us… ice dragon save us…” a wildling muttered, clutching his white stone. “We pray for salvation, for deliverance…”

There were more than just wildlings praying now. Sam saw Dornish Dilly, Alf of Runnymund, Ulmer and Jake also on their knees – even men who had always resisted the Cult of the Ice Dragon were praying for it.

“It’s the horn,” a wildling muttered – Sam recognised Longspear Ryk, cradling a red-haired woman in his arms. He looked pale, his dark hair streaked in white. “That’s the Horn of Joramun right there.”

He could see them. The beasts were coiled at the base of the wall, churning and pushing forward with every fierce breath. Backwards and forth, rhythmically, working their way through.

Sam couldn’t focus. His breaths were hoarse, the sight left him shaken. “… Must defend, must ready…” he gasped. “We need reinforcements, reinforcements…”

“They ain’t coming,” Ryk snapped. “Don’t you understand? Nobody’s coming, you can’t fight them… you can’t…”

“They’re attacking the Wall exactly how Mance planned it,” the girl croaked suddenly. She was alive, but her eyes were fluttering. There was a bandaged wound across her upper arm, with an arrow shaft still jammed into her shoulder. “They attacked everywhere at once to keep you spinning, and they sent a group in advance to circle around. But they’re focusing on Castle Black – they want to crush you where you’re strongest. Bastards copied our plan.”

Sam understood. The whole Wall was going to tumble down.

But how long? How long have they been digging, how long until it cracks?

The Wall was over three-hundred-foot-thick, and ice wyrms were fighting against the barrier. Even for creatures that size, it wasn’t easy. They must have started after dusk, and they had been going a whole night. The tremors were only growing worse.
Another distraction, he thought. They had brought the wyrms in under cover of darkness, so that they’d have a whole night to dig through before anyone could even notice.

“…Hold the Wall…” Sam muttered, stumbling as he backed away. “We must…”

“We can’t!” Ryk snapped. “We can’t fight them, look at them! We have to run. Can’t stop them, we can’t…!”

Others were crying the same, shouts calling for retreat. Half their number had already fled – trying to run west or east along the Wall. Sam blinked, and took a deep breath. Focus… think… think of a plan…

“But if that’s true,” Sam asked slowly, “then why did they bother sending you across first?”

Ryk didn’t reply. Sam’s head was whirling, struggling to think… “Ready the defence!” Sam shouted suddenly, “Get the siege weapons! Bring them in positions! We need firing teams, we need…”

More were rushing – pushing their way to the precipice to see. A few of them were still cradling bows. “Forget the arrows!” Sam called, trying to raise his voice over the clamour. “We need rocks. Or big chunks of ice, anything that we can drop. And fire – we need lots and lots of fire.”

Men were staring at him, eyes wide. “They’re still wights,” he insisted. Big, big wights. “They will still burn.” Sam looked at them desperately. “We got barrels of oil – we need ropes and pulleys to hang them off the edge. We hold them in position, we drop them and fire when we’ve got a chance.”

“Barrels of oil?” Marv of the Red said, looking at Sam like he was a fool. “Look at the size of them – what are barrels going to do?”

“Maybe nothing,” Sam gulped. “Maybe everything. But we have to try. We have to fight back, we have to resist. Now move, we need to move.”

They were stirring, but not fast enough. Give them order, give them direction. “I need those mangonels over there,” Sam shouted, his voice a squeal. Sam turned and he pointed to random men specifically. “You, you, you and you start preparing rocks. Four men to loading and firing… and pulleys. We need pulleys.”

At the other side of the trenches, Sam heard the growls as the giants stepped upwards. The platform was wobbling, every rope vibrating.

“Tarly!” Duncan Liddle was running for him, with Grenn and the others close behind. “What’s happening, where–?”

Then, they heard the rumble. The Wall vibrated. A great roar blasted, long and solemn like a whale.

Sam nearly lost his balance. In the moment he didn’t know what was happening, but every instinct he had told him to run for cover. Suddenly a screech of cold wind hissed up the precipice.

A blast of cold scoured upwards, white fire breaking over the edge.

Sam collapsed. His mind went blank. Behind him, he saw an entire mangonel disintegrate into splinters, the whole edge of the Wall being shredded away. There was that rumble, an immense body crashing.
Dragonbreath – the same as Sonagon’s. But while Sonagon’s icefire was brilliant and white, the breath of the undead wyrms was bluish and foul, filling the air with the noxious stink of cold rot. It was everywhere, Sam could hardly breathe. Men were choking in it – foul air filling their lungs.

Anybody caught in that cold died before they could scream. It filled the air with putrid mist.

Sam felt the quaking, he felt the great shape rising…

An ice wyrm was pushing upwards. Its body was vertical, clinging against the Wall. It breathed straight up, polluted ice smearing into the sky. Sam felt it crash onto the Wall, its great jaws open wide. It was huge – longer and bulkier than Sonagon. It had no wings, but it was still rising. Its body was recoiling, using its tail to push itself upwards all the way from the ground.

Sam saw it. He saw teeth breaking through the snows, he saw blue light swelling in its throat.

Its scales were grey, and half its snout looked like it had been torn off. Sam could see its bones – black jawbones, with frozen greyish flesh patched with rot. Sheaves of scales were hanging from its body, four great horns tapering backwards from its skull.

Sam could see its exposed ribcage, he could see the blue fire burning inside of it. The ice wyrm looked like it had been mauled before it died. A dead, mutilated corpse of an immense, ancient beast.

And its jaws were open, its eyes bright blue. It was jumping. Sam imagined a snake springing upwards…

Strong hands grabbed him, yanking Sam away from the edge. “Fall back!” a man screamed. “Fall back, away from the–”

Everything quaked.

The wyrm breathed again, scouring the cliff’s edge of the Wall clean. Sam saw a brother lose both his arms in a heartbeat, his limbs bitten clean off by the cold. There was a straight line across the ice where everything just cleaved away.

The edge of the Wall was breaking apart. A hail of ice shattered downward.

There was a groan of wood – their wooden mangonels were straining, half of their fortifications were demolished. Large timbers were threatening to fall.

“There!” a voice cried. It was Sam’s voice, he was screaming. “We need rope, we need–”

There was another roar. The thump of immense bodies were coming closer.

He could see the wyrms moving upwards – they were clawing on the surface of the Wall. Sam had thought them as giant snakes, but suddenly Sam realised that they had legs. Tiny, stubby little legs, but they were clawed and strong. Sam didn’t know how legs that small managed to grip anything, but they were clinging to the ice.

Even despite their bulk, the wyrms were weirdly agile. Their bodies coiled, and they used their tails to move. They pushed themselves straight upwards, their mouths open wide. They seemed like creatures built for swimming or burrowing, but they were clamouring up the vertical surface all the same.

There were two of them climbing. The big one looked three times the size of the small one, but the
smaller one was climbing so much faster.

*The ice*, Sam realised in horror, *the surface of the ice is sagging*. At the bottom, the wyrmss had already gouged a great chunk out of the Wall.

Behind them, Sam saw the army of wights was waiting. They had been hidden in the dark, but he could see them now. The wyrmss would break the Wall, and then the wights would flood through.

Four hundred feet down the length of the Wall, another wyrm breathed. Even from this height, the cold flames smelt putrid like a rotten whale.

Sam was running, stumbling backwards for cover. Men were mad with panic, taking shelter in the trenches. Sam heard two dozen prayers; two dozen desperate pleas to whatever god might save them. The men were nothing but ants against dragons that size.

Sam fell backwards, stumbling through the snow to take shelter with Mance. He dropped into the trenches, all the while the rain of hail scattered around them. Men were huddling, trying to take cover.

All around them, men were scared witless – but they were looking towards Sam and Mance for hope. Grenn and the others from the castle pushed through towards him, while Mance hung close to Longspear Ryk and the woman.

It looked like Mance was having difficulty just keeping his eyes open, the concussion left his eyes dilated.

“How many are there?” Mance gasped.

“At least two, maybe three.” Ryk shook his head. “We heard them burrowing, never got a good look.”

“There’s five,” Sam said numbly, remembering the wight’s words. “There’s five.”

Five. Two of them were climbing, a third was waiting towards the back. They were big. The biggest looked over two hundred and fifty feet long, but it was hard to tell from above as they churned. Outstretched, the big one reached up at least a good quarter of the way up the Wall.

Sam heard the boom of frostfire at the base of the Wall. Even the ice itself was being scoured away by the force of their breath, and the earth shook with each clash. That was what collapsed the tunnels, Sam thought numbly. The beasts were carving a large gash across the base of the Wall – meaning to undercut the structure.

*Each one is a puppet, being used by the white walker for different tasks*, Sam thought. The small one was climbing – trying to take potshots at the defenders atop the Wall. The bigger one coiled before the gate of Castle Black, but its breath was so much more powerful. Sam couldn’t even see the northern gate anymore – the other end of the tunnel had been buried under heaps of debris.

The very biggest was the one at the back, but it was coiled so still it was hard to even make it out through the billows of snow. It was being kept in reserve.

Sam couldn’t even see the other two, but they must be there. Underground.

The men heard – they felt – the ice grinding. They could feel it all shaking beneath them. The wyrm dug on with stubby claws, heaving itself upwards.
The weapon that breaks the Wall. Only a dragon was powerful enough for something like that.

“How long do we have?” Sam said finally. “How long until…?”

Men hesitated. “I don’t know…” a voice replied, a free folk Sam never recognised. “They’ve been going for hours. Have you seen the gash they’ve made at the bottom? The Wall is chipping away.”

“Run,” Ryk croaked. “Just run.”

“We can’t defend against those,” another free folk. “We can’t save the Wall. We’ve already lost.”

“We must evacuate the Wall,” Duncan insisted. “Run to the hills, take shelter there.”

Sam turned to stare at him. “How are the hills going to save us when the Wall can’t?”

Nobody could reply. Run, he thought. They could run. But what happens next if we do?

“If we run here,” Sam continued with a gulp, “then the world is as good as lost. The Wall is the only thing that can even slow them down. We abandon it, and what do we hide behind next?”

“We’re dead if we stay up here!” Marv the Red Hand snapped.

“And we’re dead if we run back down too!” We’re dead no matter what. “The Wall falls, the white walkers break through, what happens? Their army – their army doesn’t stop growing, Malvern proved that. They break the Wall, winter comes, and the Others become unstoppable.” Sam’s voice was desperate. “We cannot fall back now, we must hold the line.”

“Hold the line?” a man choked. “We’re done.”

“Not yet.” Sam took a deep breath. “The Others – we have to target the Others themselves. We attack.”

Eyes stared at him incredulously. “The wyrms will collapse so long as we kill the white walkers controlling them,” Sam insisted. “That is what happened with the wights. They are giant puppets, we must go for the masters. Where are the Others?”

Sam looked around for any that could answer. “Anybody? Where were they spotted last?”

“They were waiting towards the rear,” Garth Greyfeather said after a pause. “Standing by the treeline.”

Yes, hiding out of sight. That was how the white walkers preferred to fight. “Then what if we send men down?” Sam insisted. “Their attention is distracted, so we send parties to climb down and circle around. Ambush the Others instead, catch them from behind with an obsidian arrow.”

“They’ll never get through the line of wights.” Hairy Hal shook his head.

“They will. We need to distract them.” Sam turned to Mance. “We need a bonfire. As large a fire as we can make. Anything we have to burn – we need it here.”

“And the men that need to go down there?” Grenn asked after pause.

“It’d be suicide, it’s…!”

“We need to run, we need to…”
Sam looked around them desperately. Nobody met his gaze, but then the red-haired girl gulped. “I’ll do it,” she croaked.

A few men muttered. She had half an arrow in her arm, but the wound was wrapped up. *It’s lucky I’m a terrible shot.* Ryk’s face paled. “Ygritte, you can’t…”

“We’re dead men anyways, ain’t we Ryk?” she snapped. Sam saw the white veins crawling up her neck. “I ain’t dying like this.”

“We have enough arrows for several parties,” Sam pressed, looking around for more. Volunteers to die, Sam knew. “It’s the only option.”

“I’ll go,” Garth Greyfeather said. “Fuck it, got nothing bloody else to lose.”

“You think you can climb down the Wall, old man?” the girl chided.

“Better than you can, aye.” Garth snorted.

There were mumbles. Others were stepping forward, and Sam could have sagged. “All men must die,” grey-bearded Ulmer said, shivering. “But all men must fight too.”

Ryk looked between them, and then nodded. Other wildlings – any who were strong enough. “I’ll go too.” He looked to Sam. “Give us a way down, and we’ll get down. I can make the climb one last time.”


“It’s a slow poison. I still got strength left,” Ryk said firmly. “Hells, I can’t even feel the cold anymore, I can’t feel my arms, and my skin… I’m colder than the snow already.” His breaths were strained. “But dammit, I don’t want to die like this, I want to die fighting something.”

Sam looked at them, glancing between them. Whatever the ice spider venom did, it was turning their hair bone white. The girl’s hair was half red, half streaked white. Everyone else was shivering with cold in the freezing air, but they seemed immune to the frost. Perhaps the white walkers got the dosage wrong, the men weren’t dying as fast as expected?

Others were stepping forward – Sam knew only a tenth of their names. Fulk the Flea, Spare Boot, Bannen, Alan of Rosby, Deaf Dick Follard, Black Bernarr and Kedge Whiteye. Toe-Toed Dirk, Leathers and Lemmy, One-Eyed Wulf, Bone Erik, Stuttering Andrík and Left-Handed Yoldo. Many of them were dying men or old men, either men with families or men with nothing to lose. Sam took care that they weren’t relying solely on the poisoned wildlings.

“Two teams – one go west, the other east. As many that are strong enough. Head half a league, make the climb down, and then circle around!” Sam ordered. All eyes were on him. “The rest of us will hold the Wall. We’ll keep the Others distracted, give you a chance.”

Eyes flickered to Mance too. He just nodded numbly. “You heard the commander,” Mance croaked. “See it done.”

They were running. They didn’t need many supplies, this was a last-ditch effort. Even hardened men were shivering with fear. They formed several parties of a dozen entrusted with only a single obsidian arrow. Sam watched men saying their goodbyes – shaking Mance’s hand, or hugging brothers that they had served with for decades. All around him, the air boomed.

“I always wondered what it was like climbing the Wall,” he heard a ranger – Spare Boot – murmur.
The man had been a sworn brother for near four decades, even with only a single leg. Sam never even knew his real name. “Might as well find out now.”

Sam watched Longspear Ryk hug the red-haired girl. They held each other close, whispering sweet mumbles in each other’s ears. Sam saw them share a brief, tender kiss.

Behind him, another chunk of ice cracked away. A boulder as large as a mammoth tumbled down to the ground.

_I just sent those men to their deaths_. The thought left him feeling hollow. Even in the best case, they would not return. But it didn’t matter, they needed the hope.

Sam took a deep breath. A distraction. They needed a distraction. They needed their jobs and they needed to focus on them. “Catapults!” Sam shouted. “If it can be repaired, get it firing. If not, hack it apart for kindling.”

“A bonfire?” Mance asked, reaching for Sam’s hand. The Lord Steward pulled him up wobbly.

“A big bonfire.” Sam nodded, and then turned. “Whatever we have that burns. Wood, oil, coal, furs – _anything_. Get it burning.”

They were already rushing. Men filled one of the wooden huts with kindling, and then set it ablaze. The flames started low and dim, flickering against the cold, but then the light started to grow. The fire was blazing into life, a red flower burning against the snow.

_We are clutching at straws_, Sam knew. Still – maybe if there are enough straws, and enough people holding on to them?

Men were running up from the castle, stacking up kindling. It needed to be organised, needed to move with purpose. They needed teams, they needed regiments, they needed purpose…

All around him, the fire was roaring, heat radiating off it. The whole hut was alight.

Sam saw two giants, straining to lift a stonethrower off the ground. “Form up!” Grenn was shouting, slamming his standard into the snow. “On me! Form up! Form up!”

The black, hissing smoke was rising upwards, fighting against the wind. Behind them, another breath of dragonfire scoured against the edge.

Sam’s head was spinning. Probability and numbers, odds and failures. His imagination was torturing him; _how long do we have, how long until the ambush parties reach the bottom? How long can we hold, how long until we collapse?_

All the while, the flames kept on growing higher and higher. The sworn brothers were throwing coals from the forge onto the fire, feeding it with everything they had. A great bonfire, right in the middle of the Wall.

Sam was giving orders, pushing them into the direction. One by one, turn a swarm into a shoal. Sam was shouting orders easier and easier, stuttering less with every shout. It was all about direction; get them moving in the same way. Drag the catapults, ready the defences, build a fire – men with a task were less prone to panic.

“Pots and pans!” a voice cried. “We need pots and pans, boil the oil.”

Sam heard the shaking, heard the scraping of ice. The wyrm was climbing. It was trying to reach
higher, trying to torch the top of the Wall itself. It was coming up again for another attack, its great tail thrashing against the ice.

The brothers dragged a metal cauldron up from the kitchens – a big iron pot that could feed a hundred. Sam saw thick tar bubbling in it like stews, while ropes were dragged across to the edge.

*We need pulleys to dangle the metal pot over the edge, Sam realised. We need hammers and saws more than swords or shields.*

Hemp ropes were being tightened – men were climbing over treacherous timbers to fasten them down. Brave men were dangling over a seven-hundred-foot drop, clinging to debris with their legs as they tried to wrap the ropes through thick gloves.

Around him, men were already dropping rubble off the edge, chunks of ice and stone bouncing into the white below. Perhaps it was clattering over the wyrm’s snout, but Sam couldn’t see it.

“Forget the small chunks!” Sam ordered. “Get away from the edge, help pull the stonethrowers–!”

Crash. He felt the ice tearing apart, and a great sheet calved from the Wall. Two hundred feet away, a blast of dragonfire seared upwards. The wyrm **s are moving backwards and forth**, Sam realised through the chaos. They’re trying to target the defenders across the length of the Wall.

The height was their only saving grace – if the wyrm s had a clear shot, the sworn brothers would already be dead.

“It’s coming back around,” Sam breathed, and then screamed. “Fire! We need fire! More fire!”

“Flaming arrows!” Hairy Hal shouted. “Flaming arrows on me!”

All around him, the fires were crackling like the howling of a demon, devouring more and more. Sam was stumbling, the smoke thick in the air. Archers were running, men dragging burning metal cauldrons across the ice.

Even now, he saw men clutching onto white stones. The hope was the only thing that kept them going, the only thing that made them fight. The only thing that kept them sane. “For salvation!” a man screamed in the smoke. “For the dragon!”

“For the living!” another voice boomed.

Sam was staggering through towards the siegemaster. The catapults were perched like birds, half of them already scrap. He heard the winching of ropes, hammering of nails. Sam’s gaze flickered around, siege for the siegemaster.

“Where’s Lothar?” Sam called. “Who is in command?”

“Lothar’s dead. A wight landed on him,” a voice grunted. Sam turned, and a small man was pushing his way towards him. “Don’t know who’s in command, but I’m doing what I can.”

Sam knew him – Bedwyck the Giant, a man so small he was almost a dwarf. Even as he talked, he didn’t stop hammering in nails. “Then you’re the siegemaster now,” Sam pressed. “Get these catapults forward, get the firing squads ready.”

Bedwyck shook his head. “Our big throwers can’t hit those beasts, they can’t angle that far down.”

“Can we prop them up, push them into position?” Sam pressed. “Stack them up, hang them over
the edge if we have to.” Behind him, he heard the screams as half a dozen men in the distance got caught by the ice breath. “What of the scythe? The metal scythe?”

The scythe was a great metal hook that was fastened onto a giant iron chain. It was designed to stop climbers; when it fell, it would sear across the front of the ice as it swung. Once upon a time, the scythe had been the anchor of a ship that had wrecked at Eastwatch, sharpened like a blade’s edge. In the history of the Wall, there had been but three times that the scythe had been dropped.

“We dropped it,” Bedwyck shouted at back at him. “Dropped it early last night.”

“How long would it take to pull it up again?” Sam demanded over the ramparts. “No, how long to rig up more just like it?”

All around him, there Wall was a frenzy of activity, but they weren’t running. It wasn’t mindless chaos. Even as the wyrms writhed and roared somewhere so far below, the Wall’s upper levels were filled with the clamour of tools, of men running with packs on their backs, men fighting the ice with axes. Sam saw regiments of donkeys dragging supplies across the ice, and giants winching ropes.

Bedwyck finally dropped off the catapult, looking at Sam with narrowed eyes. “What’s the plan here?” he demanded.

“Those wyrms. We’re going to drop absolutely everything we have onto them.”

Crack. Sam saw the flash of dragonfire two hundred feet away. To the west, this time. The wyrms were moving across the Wall, taking potshots upwards. They went east to west, and now they were coming back around.

More and more men and women were pushing up the stairs – a supply chain to ferry up manpower. Coils of rope were taut as they pulled heavy objects up the Wall.

“Axes on the ground,” Bedwyck ordered after the briefest thought. “We break apart the ice across there, we push it off with spears. Wait until they are underneath us, we drop a big chunk of the Wall onto them.”

“Do it.” The ice was already sagging, the Wall was already falling apart from the bottom upwards. *We need ropes and we need pickaxes, need bridges to hold the platforms together. The Others think us helpless against the wyrms, we must prove them wrong…*

Three men managed to carry up the anvil from Donal Noye’s old forge, strapping it to a heavy chunk of timber to form a giant pickaxe. They hacked an entire watchtower apart for it to be swung from. A second scythe, a makeshift one.

Another great crash – a breath of dragonfire that sent an entire mangonel flying upwards. Sam’s head turned blank, visions blurring…

*Anything that could be dropped, swung, or launched*, Sam ordered.

The scythe. The chain was hanging off the Wall, but then it was anchored into a big chunk of ice at the back of the Wall. *Crack the ice apart*, Sam remembered shouting. *On the signal – break it apart at the anchor, get ready to drop it again.*

*Drop the entire Wall on them, if we have to.*

Beneath them, they heard the wyrms roar, coming close with every rumble. The great bonfire was
hissing, oil bubbling in dozens of uneven pots.

His head spun in the moment.

At some point, several of Soren Shieldbreaker’s sons arrived from Oakenshield, but everything was moving too fast for Sam to even process it. He couldn’t even order them with his voice, only point them to where it seemed the men needed the most help. Sam remembered gulping down a mouthful of cold rations, while men passed around tankards of ale to keep them brave. The defenders were pulling themselves into formation, more and more arriving up the Wall.

More were rallying around them, screams echoing.

Spurts of dragonfire erupted against the Wall, and all eyes were peeled for the great beasts creeping forward. Like ants trying to dam a flood, but they were still building.

It was past noon, but Sam lost all sense of time. The panic was so thick he felt crazed.

Crack. He felt the shake as it hit the ice. The wyrm was getting closer, climbing up again. The bonfire was like a challenge to them, a beacon. Here we are – come on, try to put us out.

Sam could feel it. He could feel the rumble as it clambered upwards. The sputtering of arrows bounced off its scales, uselessly. There was crash of stonethrowers, of ballista being loaded. Desperate men were grabbing burning chunks out of the bonfire with their bare hands, to hurl the fire downwards.

Behind him, there was the rumble of a huge drum, groaning against the ice. It took three dozen men to push a huge wooden drum filled with ice across the ice. Sam hadn’t ordered them to do it, but it was a good idea. He recognised it; it was the huge wooden barrel that once held the latrine overflow atop the Wall.

Crunch. The wyrm was coming closer. Sam was running. Men were rushing, still trying to load up the drum with stones, ice and rubble as it groaned across the trenches.

“Ready! Ready!” Bedwyck bellowed. “Hold… hold!”

It was nearly up. The wyrm was fifty feet from the top of the Wall, squirming with every push. The men were heaving, struggling to drag the drum over the shattered ice drifts. “Hold! Hold!”

It took teams of men to yank the drum across the ice, desperately trying to roll it over the uneven ground.

Is it going to miss? Are we in position? There was no time to check, no time for anything. The wyrm was nearly up, the precipice cleaving away. The roar filled the sky.

Sam watched with his heart in his mouth as men poured oil over the drum, and lit it on fire.

Beneath them, the blue swelled, ready to burst… “Now, now! Drop!” Sam screamed. “Release!”

Axes hacked the ropes apart, and the burning drum shuttered. It groaned against the ice, starting to role…

Sam was already running. The blast of cold was bursting up, the drum was falling.

The flaming drum toppled straight off the precipice. It bounced off the Wall and crashed downwards with a solid thump. Straight into the wyrm’s head.
Ice groaned, the beast staggering. Sam didn’t dare enough look, but he heard the impact. The wyrm roared as it finally lost its grip. It seemed to fall downwards in slow motion, its long body peeling backwards off the Wall.

It dropped several hundred feet and landed with an earth-shattering crash. Even from atop, Sam felt the impact.

Men screamed. *We hit it, we hit it.*

“Is it down?” Macne demanded. “*Is it down?”*

“It’s still moving!” a man cried, dangling over the edge. “*Moving!”*

Sam risked a glance downwards. The drum had bounced off its skull, but he couldn’t see any real damage. It was flailing in the snow, but it was whole. *It’s a wight,* he thought numbly. *It’s already dead – it’s as hard to kill as any other wight.*

The other wyrm twisted upwards, trying to breathe. Men were running for cover, trying to flee from the edge.

“Prepare the next drum!” a man ordered. “*Ready the next one!”*

“More flames!” Sam shouted. “*More weight and more flames!”*

Sam could see yet another wyrm breaking from the ground. The fourth wyrm – it was smaller too, with only two stubby horns.

He suddenly thought of a family unit. A family of ice dragons; was that a pack, a drove? A den? A mother and a father, and three children; there were two big wyrm, and three smaller ones. When they had been alive, this might have been a family. These beasts might have been magnificent, before the Others touched them.

But now they were just rotting monsters, siege weapons against the Wall.

The defence atop the Wall was attracting more attention. The monsters had already gouged out a giant gash through the base, but still the Night’s Watch were dropping stones and debris. The bonfire was attracting attention.

*That’s right,* Sam could have screamed. *That’s right, focus on us.*

The Others didn’t like defiance, and yet the flames were growing like a burning beacon.

He saw them shuffling. Arrows and burning hunks of rock were launching off the edge, splashing into the snow against the regiments of wights. Smoke and steam hissed beneath him, the fire raging against the snow.

Suddenly, the big one lunged upwards. It crashed against the Wall, shoving its way up. It had horns – five great horns protruding backwards from its skull, and one horn snapped off. *The males perhaps?* Sam wondered vaguely. *The males had horns, but the females didn’t?*

And then icefire blazed, and Sam’s head went blank.

There were three of them, all attacking upwards all at once. The big one was going straight for the bonfire.

Men were already dropping lumps of flaming rubble. Flaming arrows scattered off its hide.
“It’s coming fast!” the spotter shrieked. “It’s comi–”

A wave of ice swallowed the cry. The stink of rotting flesh was noxious.

Scorpions thunked, but he heard iron bolts bouncing off its thick scales. Its mouth was outstretched, jaws wide enough to swallow a mammoth. Like staring down into the darkest pits of the seven hells. “Ready the scythe, ready the–”

Men scattered. Sam was running, and then the edge of the Wall seared back another twenty feet under an immense breath.

“Where’s the scythe, the scythe?” someone screamed. “Drop it, drop it!”

*It wasn’t working*, Sam realised in horror. The chain of the scythe had jammed with ice, they couldn’t hack it free. Sam saw men with axes and swords, slashing frantically to break the ice off the solid metal links.


The giant tumbled through the trenches. Three hundred foot away one of the smaller wyrms slid off the ice, but the big one was still coming for them. The wyrm was climbing, roaring…

*Boom.* A geyser of frost nearly swallowed them all, and the world went white.

He heard the hoarse gasp of its breath, like a whale with sore throat. The ice beneath him was shivering, straining…

The great rotten snout was breaking over the precipice. Sam could only stare with horrified eyes. His mind was overwhelmed by horror.

It was barely twenty feet away from him, an immense wall of flesh rising upwards. As large as a castle. Dead muscles were writhing. It was trying to twist its gigantic head around the edge, trying to breathe outwards.

Men tried to lunge at scales with spears, but they might as well have been fleas against a beast that big. A littering of arrows were jammed in between ice and mouldy flesh. Coarse scales were shredding against the Wall, grinding the ice away.

Black wings rustled around him. *Birds*, Sam realised dumbly. Birds were flapping, trying to peck at the wyrm’s bright blue eyes. Even its pupils were as large as cauldrons.

Its mouth opened. Sam saw blue light rising to swallow them…

“Wun Wun!” a cry screamed, and suddenly the giant was there, slamming forward. The giant had a barrel in its hands, throwing it straight into outstretched jaws. “WUN WUN!”

Wood snapped apart. Lamp oil splattered. Sam saw another man throw a burning torch, fire hissing through the air

Flames gushed. The wyrm staggered, twisting, and the giant roared. Wun Wun was tackling the wyrm, trying to push it backwards. Fire was hissing from rotten jaws, burning through dead flesh. The wyrm’s grip was slipping, tearing apart the ice beneath it.

“Now!” a man screamed. “*Now!*”

An iron chain chunked. A solid chunk of iron clattered around him, snapping against the wyrm. Ice
torn upwards, swinging like the world’s largest sledgehammer.

Sam could only stare, mouth agape.

Red and blue fire wrestled against each other, and the ice was breaking away.

The wyrm was falling backwards.

“Drop the flames! Drop the flames!”

Men were surging forwards, pushing blazing chunks of the bonfire. They used shields like rams, shoving the bonfire forward. Even as men were set alight and screamed in agony, they pushed the fire back…

Brave men, sacrificing themselves for a single push.

Burning debris scattered over the edge and into the ice. Great plumes of smoke and steam, ice and fire dancing.

The world was burning, freezing.

Sam couldn’t, couldn’t…

*Its head*, he thought numbly. The wyrm’s head was alight. They were weak to fire, but their ice breath simply made it so much harder for them to burn.

Sam heard the resounding crack as it fell. It was so loud, so much force, it felt like his was skull was going to split…

“It’s down!” a voice was screaming. *That is my voice*, Sam realised vaguely. “*Drop everything, drop everything!*”

It was on fire. The big one had lost half its head when it fell.

The men howled in pure, desperate emotion.

Wyrms thrashing below. More and more were breaking out of the ground, their bodies churning. The big one was ablaze, writhing as if in its death throws. Icefire sputtered from its jaws, but it could not extinguish the flames crawling up its head. The fire was chewing away through dead flesh.

It writhed, and crashed. Headbutting the ice.

Sam felt the crunch. Felt the Wall shudder, and tear…

He was running, and the cracks were spreading beneath his feet. Behind him, a dozen men wearing black cloaks were swallowed by white.

The ice was cleaving – a chunk of ice the size of a castle falling backwards. The Wall was tumbling apart.

---

*Jon*
He could see the Wall. The weak sun was rising over the horizon, fragile rays of lights spilling through the snows in the sky. Jon pushed across the frozen banks of the Last River and into the Gift, and they saw the shadows of Castle Black splopping against the white of the Wall.

Ahead of him, their vanguard was clashing with wights on the snowdrift. Sigorn of Thenn was leading the vanguard, five hundred warriors pushing through the blockade on the kingsroad, yet there were wights in every corner. Even in the very early hours of the dawn, Malvern’s forces were still trying to push them back.

*And the ground is shaking*, Jon thought grimly. Most of the men hadn’t noticed it yet, but the mammoths had. At first it had only been faint rumbles through the earth, but they kept growing stronger as his army marched further north. The tremors were rising in pitch, growing louder and louder.

Jon felt the clenching in his gut. The strangely repetitive booms had the feel of war. The trembles made him think of Sonagon. The dragon could shake the earth when he grew angry enough. It felt like there was something larger than Sonagon on the far side of the Wall, looming in the distance.

The mammoth was pacing through the snow, shaggy ears flapping. Jon was in his mammoth’s skin, and every instinct the beast had was screaming at him to run. To run south. To run anywhere but where they were heading. Somewhere in the mammoth’s mind, alarm bells were ringing – an ancient instinct. It felt like there was a natural disaster coming.

*We must reach Castle Black*, he thought, *and quickly*. The wights were doing everything they could to stop them.

He saw the shapes of bodies across the fields, blocking off the kingsroad. The wights were nearly buried in the white, but they were moving with purpose.

Jon raised his sword, crying a wordless war cry to signal the charge.

The horns of a thousand soldiers echoed behind him. The army was surging across the snows, with a line of mammoths and giants ploughing the way forward. Clansmen and northern lords, wildlings, wargs and giants.

“Push through!” Jon screamed. “Push through!”

He was met by a tremendous boom, the war cries of half a dozen languages melding together. The shouts of a thousand men, the cries of hundreds of giants, the booms of mammoths – a legion of boots thumping.

Sigorn was leading their front and Rattleshirt commanded the flank, but Jon sat towards the rear. Malvern was all too fond of ambushes and surprise assaults, and Jon had to be constantly ready to respond in any direction.

The fields of snow were blanketed in men and beasts. It was less a battle and more a prolonged skirmish. The relief force had made steady progress hacking down every wight they found.

Still, Jon heard the horns blowing, he saw the front ranks rippling. Thenns were screaming, auroch horns echoing across the field, as they had half a hundred times in the battle up the kingsroad. And then, without warning, the tide of the battle changed.

Jon was already urging his mammoth forward towards the thick of the fighting. A guard of Thenn warriors surrounded him, each one wielding bone longbows and obsidian arrows.
“Your Grace!” a short, heavyset man in hauberk cried to him. Jon recognised him; Andrik Knott, the eldest son of Clan Knott. “It’s the dead, they’re…”

The words were swallowed by the blast of a horn, but Jon could see. The blockades across the road were breaking apart. They’re retreating, Jon almost thought, but then he frowned. The wights weren’t retreating at all. They were just… dropping.

All around him, the battle was withering away. The sounds of frenzied fighting were falling away into confusion. Bodies were falling like rag dolls being dropped.

Jon needed to climb down from his mammoth to see; all around him men were huddled or gaping. There were wights in the snow, but they were just standing still. Weapons dropped out of their hands. Where once they had moved with purpose and coordination, now it was like they were broken. Jon saw dead bodies shuffling aimlessly, even as free folk brought axes to their heads.

“What happened?” Sigorn shouted to Jon. There was blood across the Lord of Thenn’s tattoos, and four gashes over his cheek where rotting fingernails had clawed at him. “What happened to them?”

Jon couldn’t reply. The giant Leg Lun snatched a wight up from the snow, holding it in the air and bellowing at it, but the dead body just sagged.

Their eyes, Jon realised. The blue had disappeared from their gazes.

He saw one body that was still walking – an old man with grey eyes was shuffling through the snow in circles. It looked like the wight was trying to say something, but half his jaw was dangling from his skull.

Jon couldn’t feel the tingling on his skin. Normally, he could sense the white walkers from the chill in the air that caused his hairs to stand on end, but now he felt nothing from the wights. Their gazes were empty. Malvern, he thought. Malvern is gone.

“Somebody killed the white walker,” Jon muttered, before turning to the men. “Where is it? Where?”

All around him, the soldiers looked uncertain. Nobody had seen it – Malvern must have died somewhere else on the battlefield. Perhaps there should have been a victory cry, but it was all so sudden and so abrupt.

Jon’s gaze turned towards Castle Black. Another tremor sent birds exploding from the nearby trees. Men were starting to mutter now. Jon saw one bat that seemed to be going mad, flapping and shrieking across the snowy plains.

“Castle Black,” he ordered lowly. “We must reach Castle Black. Now.”

“We are still half a day’s march away, Your Grace,” a Mollen bannerman warned him.

“Then march faster.” Jon was already kicking the mammoth into motion, the beast trumpeting to call attention. “Get the men into formation, we need to reach the Wall!”

All around him, all the eyes were grim and fatigued. They had slept for barely hours last night, only forced to stop when exhaustion made the mammoths collapse. The wights had been harrying them for the last day and a half, successfully delaying the relief force from reaching the Wall. And now they just stop?

The men were exhausted; they had been fighting tooth and nail for every step they took. The dead
had been assaulting them at every corner, holding Jon’s forces back along the kingsroad. Jon’s host had passed through the village of Creston, which had been slaughtered in the white walker’s wake. Every single man, woman and child had been massacred with frightening speed, but not a single body left behind.

In a matter of days, the dead had ransacked half a hundred villages from Winterfell to the Wall.

The horde of wights had been merciless.

The relief force now stood at several thousand strong, but there was no time to count them. More were joining up every hour – from petty lords pursuing the wights, to smallfolk seeking aid with the host of men. Jon had met up with mountain clan forces from the hills and also with Shadow Tower forces on the kingsroad, as well as dozens of petty lords that rallied quickly to stop the slaughter. Jon’s banner was flying high, rallying all the forces for leagues around them. Malvern’s army forced them all to flock towards him.

The dead had already devastated these lands, they were all left shaken and scared. Malvern had caught them all off-guard. *Within three days, Jon thought. A single white walker can do so much damage within three days?*

Perhaps it was ironic; clans Knott, Liddle and Harclay had all abandoned Jon’s cause, but now they were fighting beside him. Their lands had been terrorised by the plague of bodies, and right now Stark, Bolton or Snow didn’t matter. They were all against the dead.

“Snow!” Rattleshirt called to him, eyes scowling beneath the bloody giant skull helm. “Now, maybe my eyes are just playing tricks, but do you see that castle over there?”

He was pointing towards Castle Black. “What is it, Rattleshirt?”

“I’m pretty sure that it used to have more towers than that, Snow.”

Jon turned and started. It was distant, but they could see the shadows of the castle’s spires. *He’s right,* Jon realised. Castle Black was missing towers; entire structures must have collapsed. The Lance, Jon realised after a pause. The Lance had been the tallest and slimmest tower, standing at a third the height of the Wall, but now it had vanished from Castle Black’s silhouette.

Jon urged his mammoth to go a little bit faster.

Wights were still littering the snowdrifts aimlessly, and men hacked them down by the hundreds. They were left as mindless, lurking bodies – a few of them still moving, most dropping still. Still, Jon’s focus was on the Wall, and what lay behind it. There was a sinking feeling in his gut.

“Forget the wights!” Jon snapped. “Push through! Push through!”

All around him, the giants were staggering, the mammoths were tiring too. Jon didn’t dare push them into another fast march, but he couldn’t slow either.

The other mammoths were shaking, but Jon warged into his mount and he used him to keep the herd together. His was a great, heavy bull mammoth, with thick blackish fur and a single broken tusk that had snapped off against the wight bear. The giant that used to own him had fallen in the woods, but now the mammoth responded to Jon’s presence easily. Scratches and shallow wounds littered its hide, but it was strong. Jon needed to think of a name.

“Get the ranks into line,” Jon ordered to his haggle of war chiefs and warriors after a while. “Gather the freshest of our men, and the horses. Anyone that can make good time.”
“Fuck, Snow,” Rattleshirt grumbled. “Nobody in this lot is fresh. What the fuck are we facing at the Wall?”

“I do not know,” Jon admitted grimly. “But we must reach the Wall before nightfall.”

 Thankfully, the snows were calming, and visibility improved. In the distance, they saw a thick plume of smoke rising from atop the Wall. A large fire was burning. A signal fire? Jon wondered. A flare?

 They were marching through the Gift when they felt the Wall shudder. No mistaking it this time. Horses were neighing, giants crying. The tremors in the earth were growing louder, threatening to crack.

 And then he heard the howl of a direwolf in the distance, and moments later their spotters were shouting. The Wall was ahead of them; a mountain that seemed as white as a mirror in the south sun.

 And they saw the mirror crack. Every man was gaping upwards in absolute horror.

 A great chunk of ice was falling down from the Wall, slowly creaking its way onto the fields outside Castle Black.

 Crash. Even leagues away, they felt the shudder as the ice collided. Mammoths screamed.

 “… Bugger me…” Jon heard Rattleshirt whisper, his face bone white. Warriors were shouting, panicked cries in the Old Tongue.

 He could see the crack. There was a chink in the Wall. It looked small, but this was from a distance of leagues. Jon could hardly imagine how many thousands of tons of ice had just fallen apart.

 It was like someone had brought a hammer to it.

 He could feel the blows in the earth, growing in pitch, as a sledgehammer tore the Wall apart from the other side.

 “Faster,” Jon whispered, before raising his voice. “Fast march, now.”

 “What the hells did that—” the Lord of Bones snapped.

 “Do you think Malvern was bad?” Jon challenged, shouting down from his mammoth. “If that Wall falls, we must deal with worse. A lot worse. We stop it. Now.”

 Men were charging, northern cavalry pushing through the snowdrifts. Jon’s hands were shaking, but he couldn’t let anyone see how badly. His breaths were hoarse, and the sight of that notch across the Wall…

 He thought of Sam, Mance, Grenn, Edd, Pyp, Halder, Albett, Jake. Everyone he had once called brother. Castle Black… that was where it had all begun. Jon couldn’t let it end there too.

 They were marching towards the Wall. Jon was at the very front, with Sigorn of Thenn to his right and Rattleshirt to his left. Ahead of them, they came upon fields of women and children trying to push through the snowdrifts, trying to flee. Likely there were deserters among them too. They screamed and cowered as the relief force came storming through, but Jon’s focus was on Castle Black.
Above him, the smoke was growing thicker and thicker. An immense fire was blazing atop the Wall.

The castle was in an uproar. There were more corpses – more mindless wights being unceremoniously hacked down. He saw signs of a battle that were already being smothered by the snows. The white made everything look clean, but there were abandoned barricades in disarray, and frozen bloody smears across the white.

There were only very few archers poised on the Tower of the Guards as they approached, but horns echoed on Jon’s arrival. He urged his mammoth through the shattered gates, and then he was amidst a field of corpses.

Castle Black. In his gut, looking around the devastated castle, it felt like they were too late.

Jon was already shouting orders. “Support the black brothers!” he ordered to his men. “Hold the Wall!”

The Wall, Jon noticed. It looked like the thick of the fighting was happening atop the Wall. Black cloaks were crawling across the stairs like ants, even despite the cracks that were spreading downwards. The Wall was tearing itself apart, crushing the stairs and the wooden structures around it.

With a single thought, Jon’s mammoth lowered himself to his knees so that Jon could leap down from it. He had sword drawn, frantically looking around the courtyard for who was in charge. Men were rushing around him, but if there was an order then Jon couldn’t see it. There were unfamiliar scared faces, and black cloaks rushing frantically.

Where is Sam? Where is Mance?

Then, Jon saw Edd trying to shuffle the refugees away to safety. There was a wounded boy in the steward’s hands, a child with green eyes mumbling incoherently. “Get the barracks clear!” Edd shouted. “Get them out of here!”

“Edd!” Jon called, as his warriors filled the yards. “Where are they attacking from, how many do they have?”

Edd’s eyes stared at Jon with utter shock. There wasn’t relief on his face, Jon noticed, just fear. “The dragon,” Edd stammered, looking around. “Where’s the dragon?”

Not here. Sonagon is too weak to fly. Jon just grimaced, pushing Edd to one side. Another man gruffly took the wounded boy from his arms. “How many are there,” Jon demanded. “What do they have?”

“I don’t know!” Edd snapped. Above him, another immense block of ice was slipping down, groaning as it shattered. Like nails grinding against bone. “If there was ever a bloody time that we need the dragon, Jon!”

“Take cover!” a voice shrieked. “Take cover!”

A great lump of ice collided and shattered into a thousand crystals – lumps of debris bouncing off the stone towers. The whole world was swallowed by white. A cloud of snow and dust hissed over Castle Black.

“What is happening?” Jon screamed. “How are the Others doing this, what weapon do they have?”
“It’s… I don’t know – I don’t – but something Sam said, a wight talked…” Edd spurted through wheezy breaths. “Wyrms. Wyrms, digging up…”

There was a rumble, louder and closer than ever before. It sounded like a roar.

*Coming from inside the Wall. It was under the ground*, Jon realised. Wyrms. Wyrms?

Another block of ice fell, as large as a horse. It crashed straight through the Grey Keep, tearing apart the Wall. Around him, ravens were growing mad; their cages broken apart and the birds left squawking madly.

“This castle is lost!” the Lord of Bones shouted, grabbing Jon’s shoulder. “If another big chunk falls, this whole place is squashed.”

He was right, Jon knew. They needed to evacuate, to get clear, and yet…

“The Wall – how many are up there?” Jon demanded, but Edd could only shake his head. The steward was struggling to breathe, coughing through the icy mist filling the air.

Jon turned and stared up. There were still sworn brothers holding the Wall. *They are brave men, Jon thought, still standing strong, even atop the quaking Wall.*

There were monsters tunnelling, tearing up the foundations. Bit by bit, the Wall was collapsing.

All around him, men were caught by panic. Jon hesitated for barely a heartbeat. “Get in formation!” Jon boomed. “Hold the castle, reinforce the –”

The Wall shuddered, a great block of ice was toppling, groaning. It sounded like the ice itself was screaming.

*Crash.* The King’s Tower was shattered by a boulder of ice the size of a farmhouse. Debris rained – over the gates, rubble falling across the wooden stair up the Wall. Jon saw one man cut down as a lump of stone crashed through his head.

“Take cover!” Sigorn was howling. “Take cover!”

There were bodies pouring out of the lower levels, still trying to flee. All around him, the earth was quaking – they could feel it tearing apart. Scared men, running mad in the rumbling snow. Jon’s relief force was swarming across the fields, trying to pull the refugees to safety.

Jon ordered runners to make for Queensgate and Oakenshield, while the rest needed to get into formation, to prepare defensive lines. They needed formation, they needed to hold against the seven hells themselves.

They were staring up at the staircase up the Wall, watching it crack apart. Glacial blocks of ice grated against each other, the stairs torn away into splinters. In all likelihood, the men set to climb the Wall wouldn’t even make it halfway. *The men atop the Wall are trapped up there.*

*Even if we drive the Others back, how long will it take to rebuild, to refortify here?* Jon wondered. He was watching the greatest wonder built by man collapse in on itself. The work of millennia, crumbling.

“We need help,” Edd sputtered, through a coughing fit. “We need more than this… we need…”

“You got me,” Jon replied stiffly.
“Well, nothing against you, Jon,” the steward replied. “But we’ve been kinda holding out for the flying, ice-breathing kind of help.”

Yes, Jon did not doubt it. Jon had been calling out for Sonagon constantly, but the dragon was too weak to even move. It felt like there was tar clotting up the dragon’s limbs, sickness infusing every muscle. He could not even guess if or when Sonagon would recover. Jon had no more time to spare waiting on a saviour that wasn’t coming.

“Snow!” Rattleshirt barked at him. “What’s the plan here, what the hell are we supposed to fight?”

“Hold the castle, get those people to safety!” Jon snapped. “We push back against whatever they throw at us!”

“Snow, the Wall – THE WALL! – is falling –!”

“Prepare for a controlled retreat, Rattleshirt!” Jon nearly shrieked. “But get the people clear!” He took a deep breath and turned towards Sigorn. “Sigorn, ready our elite. We take the fight to them,” Jon said finally. “Ready any that are strong enough, we’re going through the Wall.”

“Fight against what?” Sigorn cried.

“The Others. It’s the only way to beat them – they want us to fall back, we push forward.” Jon turned around them. There was no time for fear, no moment for doubt… “Only the best of our forces, each armed with obsidian – form up, follow me. We push north and we hurt them. We target the walkers.”

Around him, Edd gaped. The Wall shuddered again. Vaguely, Jon wondered how many would be brave enough to charge through something like that. *I will have to lead from the front – it’s the only way that anyone will follow.*

“You can’t,” Edd gasped suddenly, hand on Jon’s shoulder. “The tunnel… the tunnel is collapsed.”

What? Jon might have cursed. “Is there another way through?”

“Well not right now!” Edd squealed, flailing in panic towards the collapsing Wall. “But wait another hour and you might have more luck!”

Jon looked frantically to the far end of Castle Black’s training yard, where the portcullis to the ice tunnel lay twisted and broken. The tunnel was collapsed. It was too dangerous to climb the stairs, and there was no way to get across the Wall. *We are sitting ducks like this.*

The stairs. Jon could see the stairs up the Wall – and they were falling to pieces. The platform of the lift had snapped off, the timbers splintering apart. Chunks of wood were falling down. There was no way up or down, no way through…

Whatever weapon was coming, it was big. Jon’s head was swimming with possibilities, trying to imagine a battleplan. They needed to push through – to rally and turn the Other’s strengths against them. *Push a dagger into the Other’s forces, maybe buy some time…*

If there was an army of wights waiting on the other side of the Wall, Jon knew how to handle that. He didn’t know how to handle whatever was breaking through. He felt lost, frantic in apprehension.

Jon pushed his way through the frantic bodies, and into the courtyard. The tunnel was collapsed, and the Wall cracking.
Behind him, what remained of the King’s Tower was collapsing in on itself, falling into rumble. Jon heard Sigorn howling some war cry, he heard giants struggling to control mammoths that were going mad. Horses were galloping, lost in mindless panic.

Another roar. Coming closer and closer, breaking through the earth.

Above him, smoke and fire hissed against snow. Jon could feel the chill in the air, the cold creeping through.

Jon was screaming orders, but his voice was drowned out by the earth-shattering groan of ice slicing against ice. The Wall was screaming, huge chunks grating together.

He gasped as he felt the dying howl of the Wall.

A tingle ran down his spine, Jon could feel it. He could feel the presence of the white walker’s oozing into the world. Unnatural power was seeping through the cracks, like water pushing through a dam. The Others were pushing through, faster and faster.

The barrier. The Wall was broken, the barrier was torn.

All around him, it felt like men were going mad.

Jon had never imagined the feeling – to be staring upwards as the whole world was tumbling down.

“Hold the line!” Jon screamed. “We hold the line!

A thud rocked the earth, and it was coming from beneath his feet. Men had already broken ranks, sprinting away as fast as scared legs could take them.

Jon was left frozen in the spot, in the middle of a devastated castle, watching the world end around him…

His heart was beating so fast he couldn’t feel it.

Thud. Another dull thump, of earth being torn apart. It was beneath him. It’s in the wormwalks, Jon realised. It’s through the Wall…

Crash.

…

Jon remembered that moment he had first seen Sonagon, that moment where his whole sense of scale had been crushed.

…

The earth was screaming, shrieking apart. A flash of blue flames, and a wave of cold…

The Shieldhall exploded.

Dark stone shattered everywhere, the old feast hall broke apart from the ground up. The oldest building on the castle, collapsing into splinters.

Old rotten timbers ripped apart like wet parchment – and Jon even saw the colours flashing through the air. Hundreds of shields of ancient knights, a fountain of heraldry and chipped paint. There
were hawks and eagles, dragons and griffins, suns and stags, wolves and wyverns, manticores, bulls, trees and flowers, harps, spears, crabs and krakens, red lions and golden lions and chequy lions, owls, lambs, maids and mermen, stallions, stars, buckets and buckles, flayed men and hanged men and burning men, axes, longswords, turtles, unicorns, bears, quills, spiders and snakes and scorpions, and a hundred other heraldic charges that had adorned the Shieldhall walls, blazoned in more colours than any rainbow ever dreamed of. They were all scattered and raining down across Castle Black.

Jon was nearly beheaded by a broken red and black shield that bounced off the wall by his head. Every man nearly fell to their knees.

He saw the light. Blue light flashed, and a wave of cold and mist–

Jon was running. He heard the crackle of debris as an immense body broke out of the earth, but he couldn’t see it. There was only dust and snow, panic and death…

It roared, and then Jon saw it.

Jon was staring upwards. A dragon. A dragon.

A dead dragon.

A monster was snaking out of the wreckage of the Shieldhall; its jaws open wide, black teeth snapping. Teeth like daggers, a gape that could swallow a man whole.

Grey flesh and a long, muscular body – swaying side to side as it pushed itself forward. It had scales and a dragon’s jaw, but it moved like some worm or snake. It was hornless, wingless, but with a crest of jagged spines running down its back.

It was long – long enough to stretch across the broken building, with its tail still trapped from where it had emerged. The beast was snapping, struggling to pull itself upwards.

It had a long, thick and flat tail like an eel’s that sent a wave of debris flying with a casual swipe.

Another dozen men died, just like that. Jon’s head was blank, struggling to understand…

A wyrm. He was staring up at a wyrm.

Its jaws, he realised. Its neck was gouged open, like its throat had been mauled. It must have died when huge teeth tore it apart. Jon could see the flesh hanging off its skull, he could see blue fire pulsing inside its throat.

The air was deafening. Jon couldn’t even make out the screams, they were swallowed in the moment. His head was spinning, sword trembling so madly it could have fallen out of his hand…

Bowstrings snapped. Arrows flickered overhead, shafts stabbing into rotten scales, and the beast’s head twisted. Jon recognised the movement; it reminded him of how Sonagon would pull back its head just before…

“Scatter!” Jon screamed, already running. “Scatter, take cover!”

The wyrm breathed.

He dived face first to the snow, but he still felt the cold scour against his back. Icy breath and a noxious stink of rot.
Jon saw a giant raise its club, only to be flash-frozen, scoured into icy shards under the force of its breath. The smell – the blast of cold air was so noxious that Jon could barely breathe. A smell so heavy that it coated his tongue, tasting of death.

There was a groan behind him, as the frostfire tore away the stones of the Tower of the Guard. The whole structure was screaming, falling apart with a bone-rattling crunch. Tower after tower, building after building was collapsing around him, being knocked down like dominoes.

Castle Black was being torn apart.

The wyrm was snaking away, coiling through the ruins of the castle. There was nothing but mad, frenzied panic. Jon had Dark Sister in his hand, pushing himself to his feet. He was already running, loping unevenly through the snows.

There was only one choice, only one thought that Jon allowed himself to think. *Fight, resist.*

“Avoid its breath!” Jon bellowed. “Surround it! Scatter, assault from all sides!

“Snow, we mus–!” Rattleshirt tried to protest.

“*Surround it!*” Jon snapped. “We need fire, we need torches. There’s a delay between breaths – wait until it recoils, then go for eyes and the throat.”

Men looked dazed, but Jon could give them no chance to panic. They needed to fight, needed to resist. “On me!” he screamed at the top of his lungs, raising Dark Sister. “On me!”

The wyrm was twisting around the keep, lashing out with sharp jaws and lightning fast lunges. The lack of wings was a disadvantage, but the wyrm was strong and agile. It was very different from Sonagon, but Jon could still recognise the similarities. There was something in how it moved – it was reptilian, fierce and aggressive.

A single breath could kill him in an instant. *Will not die,* Jon thought. He repeated the words like a mantra, thinking them over and over until he believed them. *Will not die.*

Another breath of blue cold scoured through the edge of the keep, but Jon was ready for it this time. It was twisting, spinning in a semi-circle to scour the courtyard white.

Two dozen men died, but then there were more readying flaming arrows, taking position in between lumps of the rubble. He heard Sigorn rallying his Thenns, warriors charging like zealots. Jon saw men wielding flaming torches, swinging them like slingshots.

“Now!” Jon screamed. “Fire!”

Flames hissed through the snow; a barrage of arrows that was weak at first, then strengthened as more men rallied.

Flaming arrows thudded into scales. *It doesn’t notice,* Jon observed, as he followed the battle. The wyrm had the same weakness as any wight; it was unfeeling, which meant its reflexes were very poor. Sonagon would have reacted to the pain with berserk rage, but this wyrm just twisted away.

Around him, a giant garbed in patchwork leathers roared through the snow, swinging a hefty wooden log as a club. The giant was crazed, swinging the log like a beast, but then the wyrm snapped the giant apart in a flash of teeth.

A single sharp lunge, then it jerked its head to send half the giant’s body soaring through the air. A
single bite spilt the giant into two – the lower half dropping to the ground, and the upper torso splattering off the Flint Barracks.

Spearmen were rushing up the burnt top of the Lord Commander’s Tower, hurling spears down at the wyrm’s body. *Not sharp enough*, Jon cursed. It was too big, its scales too tough – spears couldn’t pierce it deep enough. *We need heavy scorpions, we need more*…

Flames flashed – men were swinging lanterns like slingshots.

*More fire.* The fire was working – even a small flame would set a wight alight.

Jon could see the flames flickering and hissing across its rotten hide, but then there was a breath of cold air from its throat. The wyrm twisted around in a strangely circular motion, like it was trying to swallow its own tail, as it spat out jets of icefire across its grey scales. Polluted ice smeared across its own body, snuffing out the flames.

*It can use its own ice breath to stop itself from burning,* Jon realised. Its long body was crackling with ice.

The wyrm’s tail rippled, muscles tensing. Jon saw the way it recoiled, he knew that movement well…

“Take cover!” Jon screamed, a heartbeat before anyone else.

*Crash.* Rubble scattered overhead, the beast’s tail whipping straight through an outhouse. Jon dived downwards, but the men behind him were too slow.

The debris scattered like it had been launched from a catapult – stones fast enough to split skulls, splinters like swords. Jon was on the ground, feeling the death raining above him. Against a monster like this, there was no space for error. To be in the wrong position was to die in a heartbeat. *How many times can I dodge death?* Jon wondered faintly.

He stared upwards, watching the wyrm thrash. *Just a few more,* he decided. *A few more.*

“Surround it!” Jon boomed. “More fire, more fire!”

Jon couldn’t pause, he had to get closer. The bigger the beast, the more vulnerable they were up close. A dragon needed space to turn, distance over which to breathe.

*We can handle it.* It was a monster, but they could harry it, hunt it. They could surround it with archers, exploit its weak spots. Jon was familiar enough with dragons to know their vulnerabilities.

*It’s not as big as Sonagon,* Jon thought. It seemed barely a third of Sonagon’s size – around fifty feet from head to tail. *We can kill it, we can burn it. We can beat it.*

It would likely cost him hundreds, perhaps thousands, of men to bring the wyrm low, but that was nothing compared to the damage it would wreak otherwise.

And then he heard another rumble, and Jon realised that the Others had more than one. This was the first wave.

The wyrm was snaking away – taking shelter behind the timbered keep to avoid the bowmen. Men were running for shelter into the vaults, or taking cover in the armoury. Jon was already pounding up the stairs, chasing after it. Even despite its size it was surprisingly swift, hardly even using its stubby legs to move. It moved with its tail and its stomach instead.
“Bowmen on me!” he screamed. “On me, on m–”

His voice was cut off by the tingling on his neck. He knew that feeling, he knew the Other’s touch. *Behind me.*

Jon spun around, Dark Sister flashing – just as the white shape lunged upwards at him.

His blade cut straight through an ice spider’s abdomen, but the force of the creature still knocked him backwards. Jon stumbled, but he still managed to hold Dark Sister straight.

Around him, the shadows were stirring, and the air was clicking. Blue-eyed beasts were skittering across the ruins.

Ice spiders. *Where did they, how did they–?*

Across the keep, the wyrm breathed again. The undead monster was scouring through them, but ice spiders lunged from behind.

“Snow!” Sigorn was crying for him, blades flashing. Ice spiders were swarming against them. “Snow!”

*The tunnel,* Jon realised in horror. The ice spiders followed in the wyrm’s wake, they passed the Wall the same way the wyrm did. They were surging through the rubble of the Shieldhall – crawling out of the tunnel that the wyrm had carved.

Dozens of men were falling, but Jon couldn’t let them run away. It would be slaughter if they turned and ran.

“Single file, swords and spears!” Jon screamed. “Don’t let them surround you, force them back!”

They were everywhere. Some the size of dogs, others the size of horses. Beasts with eight spindly legs, sharp fangs, and blue beady eyes.

Jon was lunging, cutting straight through a spider’s limb. The wound wept white bile, but the spider didn’t even seem to notice. It was hissing, clicking, scuttling forward.

Dark Sister moved on instinct, slicing straight through fangs.

Ice spiders. The wyrms had torn the barrier, there was nothing stopping the Other’s anymore. The ice spiders were flooding through.

First it was ice spiders, soon it would be wights. The more tunnels the Other’s had, the faster they could move their troops across.

“Retreat!” Rattleshirt shrieked. “Retr–”

Jon’s fist took the scrawny man straight to the ground. Rattleshirt spurted as he hit the snow, but Jon could not allow that word to spread. *Retreat* – was there any word more deadly?

“Belay that!” Jon boomed. “Form up, hold them back, hold position! *Form up!***

Men were running. He saw Rattleshirt staring up at him with wide, disbelieving eyes. “Spears on me!” Jon shouted. “They have no armour, no defence – they attack fast but they die fast too. You want to live, you want to survive the night? Then *form up.***

Men were reacting, falling back to the lower courtyard. Jon saw men grabbing the scattered shields
off the ground, using them to block the lunging ice spiders. Against unarmoured and unarmed men, the ice spiders were pure death – yet a single warrior could hold back a dozen of them so long as he didn’t let them get behind him. The spiders preferred to attack from behind.

Jon was everywhere, Dark Sister flashing through the snows. He had done this before; he had experience fighting these monsters. It was the men around him that had to learn quickly.

*The spiders are the white walker’s hounds – they deploy them against fleeing foes,* Jon considered. *The Others are expecting us to flee.*

An ice spider jumped at him, fangs bared. His blade whirled, slicing straight through two legs, but it was still lunging at him. Dark Sister sliced through another leg, and it toppled. It was still trying to claw, even as the black blade pierced straight through its chitinous shell. White ooze gushed from the wound.

Around him, Sigorn of Thenn nearly fell back, but Jon was there to reinforce him. The Lord of Thenn was on the snow, staring up in amazement as Jon roared, cleaving through another spider.

“Single file, do not let them surround us!” Jon boomed. “Hold the courtyard, *push them back.*”

Across the keep, the wyrm roared. It was twisting back around. It was agile on the snow, but less manoeuvrable through the rubble. In the scattered rubble and debris, there were a hundred nooks and crannies to hide from its breath. The spiders were precision and the wyrm was mass devastation, and the Others were using them both in tandem. Jon had to react to both threats at once, else the other would overwhelm them.

“Archers to the bulwarks!” Jon screamed. “Ready the flames, set it alight!”

Rattleshirt was on his feet – his bone helmet lost somewhere in the battle. The scrawny man looked crazed, clutching his spear with both hands. “Snow!” he howled. “We have to run, we have to –!”

Dark Sister swung at him. Rattleshirt’s eyes widened in horror, his spear trying to lunge, but Jon was faster.

In a single lunge, Jon barrelled through Rattleshirt and sliced down the ice spider less than three feet away from him. The spider hissed in pain, its blue beady eyes were sliced apart, but it was still trying to bite right until a spear from a Thenn pierced straight through it.

Rattleshirt was on the ground, staring up in utter shock at the spider’s corpse. The spider had been less than a heartbeat away from killing him from behind. Jon saved his life.

Jon pulled the man up gruffly, and he had never seen the Lord of Bones so shaken. “Protect your damn flanks,” Jon hissed. “And get these men into formation.”

*Cannot run. Cannot die. Not now.*

“Hold the line!” he screamed, raising Dark Sister high.

It was mass panic, but others were repeating the cry. They were rallying around Jon. “Hold the line!” Sigorn shouted. “Hold the line!”

Jon heard the cry of a giant roaring the same, crude words bellowing in the Old Tongue. The whole castle was chanting, howling madly.
“Hold the line! Hold the line! Hold the line!”

Across the yards, they felt the roar. The wyrm was twisting around, rumbling closer…

Jon was already running, while clicking spiders scuttled through the snow. “Torches on me! On me!” he screamed. “Burn the Shieldhall down!”

Flames were being thrown – Leg Lun picked up an entire brazier and hurled it into the wreckage. Fires hissed from the demolished building, even as the ice spiders were still scuttling out of it.

It is the tunnel, Jon thought. The wyrm’s tunnel was a chokepoint, the only way through for the spiders. The soldiers quickly caught on to his plan and set the debris alight.

All around the castle, soldiers and sworn brothers were mustering.

_The Others expected us to run_, Jon thought. _They have not fought like this before, not against entrenched men who will not break._

Jon heard another shudder, another building falling apart under the dragon’s breath. It was the Silent Tower this time, collapsing over the infirmary. The wyrm was to the east, breaking through the lichyards and crushing the gravestones of the watch – the wyrm had nearly completed a full circle of the castle. The wyrm was tearing closer and closer, even despite the arrows and spears scattering out the flesh of its head.

It was turning, mist pouring from its jaws, trying to torch the entire army…

Yet the men weren’t backing down, they were fighting tooth and nail. They were clinging on, resisting with everything they had. Every arrow, every spear, every last ounce of desperation.

“Go for the eyes. The eyes!” Jon screamed, but the wyrm could not be stopped. The flaming arrows weren’t strong enough, they couldn’t close. They needed more flames – they needed to hack it apart.

Before he even realised what he was doing, Jon was running. He was running across the bulwarks of the keep, hurdling over the rubble across the merlons, sprinting as fast as his leg could take him up the steps.

Below him, he saw the gaggle of men – still chanting that cry. Giants were hurling chunks of rubble, bouncing off scales. The wyrm’s head lowered, trailing across the snow, preparing to breathe…

“Hold the line! Hold the line! Hold the–”

Blue light swelled in the wyrm’s throat, its throat gagging…

It was below him. There was no thought involved, no conscious decision. Jon just leapt.

He kicked off the battlements with his good leg, and the world spun. He was jumping, falling, straight towards the rotten husk of the wyrm’s skull. For that one moment, the whole world seemed to freeze. It felt so slow that he could count every broken arrow shaft jutting from its flesh, every giant tooth jutting from its jaws…

And then _crash_. Jon landed.

He felt his leg crack, but there was no pain. His heart was beating too fast for pain. His blood was
on fire, Jon could feel no pain.

He bounced off sharp, serrated scales, feeling them grind against his chainmail. They didn’t pierce, but they hurt. It felt like colliding against solid, jagged rock.

For one frantic moment, he threatened to tumble – but then groping hands found leverage against the wyrm’s crest. His leg pushed off the wyrm’s spines, holding himself in place.

He remembered the first time he had rode Sonagon; trying to hang on for dear life as the enormous beast thrashed beneath him. The wyrm was smaller than Sonagon, it was easier to grip. Sonagon could swallow a mammoth, this wyrm would struggle to swallow a horse.

And Dark Sister was in his hand. There was no thought involved, Jon just plunged the sword downwards with all his might.

And the black blade stabbed straight through the wyrm’s skin, piercing into its cranium. Valyrian steel – not even dragonbone could stop it.

All around him, people were screaming, and Jon was cutting its head apart. The wyrm didn’t react, like it couldn’t even feel him. Dark Sister was jutting out of its skull – but there was nothing but black, rotten blood oozing out of the wound.

*The head is the wrong target,* Jon realised too late. Wights didn’t need their skull – the undead could even move headless.

*The spine, I need to sever the spine.*

The wyrm jerked, and Jon threatened to fall. He was holding onto Dark Sister for leverage, but his legs lost their perch. He was dangling, swinging across the wyrm’s skull.

Finally, the blue reptilian eyes noticed that he was up there.

The head twisted. The world spun. Jaws snapped, trying to bite Jon’s feet off. He was writhing, clambering for leverage against jagged scales.

All around him, birds were flapping. Black wings were everywhere, clawing at blue eyes.

The wyrm was rising, rearing its head. Jon flailed like a rag doll, but that was all he needed for his legs to find a perch. Jon was gripping its scales and lunging backwards.

He heard the arrows twang around him. The men – taking advantage of the distraction, launching flaming shafts through the air. Jon twisted around, and stabbed downwards.

The black blade spilt through rotten flesh.

The wyrm was thrashing blindly, with Dark Sister piercing through the nape of its neck and Jon holding on with everything he had. He felt his sword jar, jamming straight through its spine. Dragonbones grating against Valyrian steel, thrashing as it tried to move.

The wyrm spasmed as if in its death throws. It was still moving, still thrashing, still sputtering frostdire, but it lost all coordination. Its motions were more desperate, more crazed. Even an undead body could not function with a sword in the spine.

He was dimly aware of fires raging all around, both blue and red. Smoking red from the blazing ruins, rotten blue from the wyrm’s maw. Jon could feel the hot and cold ash against his skin. Fire
and ice hissed and bubbled, writhing and wrestling.

It was working – the fires from the wreckage of the Shieldhall were spreading. *Just a bit more*, Jon willed, *just a bit more*.

Men firing arrows, the wyrm spewing dragonfire madly. It was all Jon could do to hold on.

All around him, the wyrm was going berserk. It didn’t die easy. Jon would have been obliterated into a frozen corpse, yet the wyrm couldn’t reach around far enough with its breath to target him. The wyrm was twisting, trying to bite its own neck. He could feel the wafts of frozen air, the backlash of fiercely cold dragonfire, the shards of ice crystals against his face.

And then he felt the pause, the moment that it ran out of dragonfire.

Now, Jon thought – reaching out to grab the skin of his mammoth. *Now!* Without even a pause, he seized the mammoth’s skin, and it reared. The great beast reacted beautifully, and Jon seized control without a pause. Men were running, jumping out the way, but the mammoth was suddenly rearing through. *Come to me*, Jon willed. *Charge*.

Suddenly, Jon was fifteen-foot-tall, stampeding on four powerful legs, trumpeting through the courtyard. The mammoth’s single tusk was lashing out like a scythe, tearing through the billowing snow.

The mammoth felt nothing but fear – yet Jon channelled all of that into berserk rage instead.

The mammoth charged, ramming the wyrm backwards into the flaming wreckage of the Shieldhall. Scales seared against its fur, but the mammoth was roaring. Even for a forty-foot-long dragon, the mammoth was strong. Knocking its backwards, its serpentine body flailing.

And Jon felt the flames bite against the wyrm’s dead flesh. It was burning, the fire spreading outwards.

The tail snapped, crashing through the wreckage and sending flaming debris showering over the grounds. It was on fire, burning from the tail upwards. Nearly the entire beast was in flames, but it was still thrashing. Jon felt his own body lose its grip, falling backwards…

It was spilling frostfire madly, teeth snapping…

Jon jumped straight off its neck. He couldn’t pull Dark Sister out in time, so he left the sword wedged into the wyrm’s neck. Instead he jumped off the blade and threw himself to the ground. He landed face-first against shaggy hide. The mammoth was there to catch him, already stampeding away.

Giant teeth snapped desperately, but the fires were burning through it.

The wyrm screeched so loud that everything went numb. It echoed through his bones, rattling his skull.

Jon’s ears popped, and suddenly he couldn’t hear a thing.

He saw soldiers tearing forward with axes and swords, hacking the wyrm’s flaming ruin into little pieces. The wyrm was down, being shredded by axe and flame. It was dead.

Jon’s head was spinning, his ears screaming, but he willed himself to drag his body upright. The
world had turned eerily silent, everything was shaking.

“Collapse the hole! Block it, anything!” Jon had to force himself to scream, but he couldn’t even hear his own voice. He could feel cold blood trailing down from his ears. People were shouting things – cheering – at him, but he couldn’t hear them. They were all screaming mutely.

“Formation! Get in formation!”

Through his mammoth, he heard the sudden increase in intensity, the rumbles pushing forward faster. One wyrm was dead, but there were more – there must be.

Another crack split across the Wall, he could see the ice creeping backward. Another wyrm was already pushing straight through it.

It was already evening, and the shadows of dusk were creasing across the white. It was a bloody red sky shining through the grey. Reinforcements, he thought. Where are our reinforcements?

The day had nearly passed, the bloody red sun was only a sliver on the grey horizon. Night was swiftly coming, and he could feel a deeper chill coming with it.

Above him, he was staring at Wall wobbling and groaning. They were coming through.

Jon’s hands groped for a weapon, but he had no sword – Dark Sister was somewhere in the flames, still jammed into the dragon’s burning corpse.

All around him, Castle Black was a ruin, consumed in soundless uproar. Jon couldn’t even focus, he had to cling onto the mammoth else he would have collapsed. The world was twisting, like his sense of balance had been set to madness.

Sonagon, he thought, for what felt like the countless time, Sonagon!

In his mind’s eye, he saw the dragon struggling to fly. Sonagon was howling in pain, long wings trying to flap…

Bran

He was in a hundred skins, and his heart was racing in each one. He was the sparrow flying across the Wall, he was the wolf sprinting up the kingsroad. He was a dozen mules clattering atop the Wall’s stairs, he was a score of mammoths charging through the snow. He was the fox and the hare in the woods, the bats and the bats shrieking from the trees – he was watching the battle through a hundred disparate eyes.

The air around him was bleeding, torn, like a great crack had been rent into the fabric of the world. Cold suffocating power was leaking through, making his warg-sense tighter, more desperate. The white walkers distorted the world by their very presence – turning nature to fear, to madness.

It was like the world was being smeared black and white.

Bran watched the battle from high above. He was a stone on the tide, another body in clamour. He felt billows of smoke and ash under his wings, steam and ice crackling in his eyes, and the bluish bursts of icefire scouring his skin…

Bran saw everything, felt everything, he was everywhere. He flickered between skins faster and
faster, trying to force a hundred frantic bodies into line. At one point, Bran had even possessed a
giant, managing to throw a barrel of oil into the monster’s jaws. He was in ravens and crows,
gouging out a hundred eyes.

But it wasn’t enough. Bran was watching the men fight in raw desperation, clinging on with
everything they had, but it just wasn’t enough.

He could feel it. Bran could feel the barrier across the Wall – like a curtain of red and green
shimmering from the sky. It was being torn, being shredded along with thousands of tons of ice.
The ice crackled as it shattered into a spectrum of bloody colours, but the monsters were tearing
deeper and deeper through straits of ice that had been buried for millennia.

He could feel them. The white walkers were seeping through, their power pulsing through the
cracks. They were reaching for him, icy tendrils spreading across the land…

The cold felt like a dagger in his chest, the frost like needles piercing into his skin. A hundred
thousand blue eyes were staring at him in the black…

Bran screamed. In the distance, a wolf howled.

The boy fell out of the sky, tumbling through consciousness until…

Darkness, thrashing, Bran was struggling. His vision was spinning, he couldn’t breathe, could only
claw and squirm. Rough hands were trying to hold him down, trying to suffocate him, choking the
life out of him…

And suddenly a soft hand took his. There was a hand on his cheek, fingers cradling his…

“Bran!” Meera gasped. “Bran, it’s alright, it’s alright!”

He could barely focus, but he heard Meera’s voice. His breath stiffened, heart calming…


He did. Bran’s vision started to focus, blurry images taking shape. His body was so stiff and heavy,
so many aches and pains. After spending so long flickering through a hundred skins, his own flesh
felt like a stranger’s.

But Meera was by his bedside, holding his hand. That thought helped to centre him, to give him
focus.

Her hand was still cradling his cheek, fingertips on pale skin. Around him, there were a dozen
unfamiliar men standing awkwardly in his room, all of them clutching weapons. Two of the guards
had been trying to hold Bran down as the boy started writhing. They were all staring at him in
tense expectation.

It took half a dozen deep breaths just to focus himself, slowly coming to terms with his
surroundings. He was in his room, and the waning sun was rippling through the shuttered
windows. Bran’s bed stunk of old sweat, and there was mucus clinging in his throat. Someone must
have poured fluids into my mouth as I slept, he realised. There was a moment of quiet horror as he
realised that his smallclothes had been fouled.

He stared at Meera, eyes widened. There were dark circles under her eyes, a slight tremble to her
hands. I spent too long out of my skin, Bran thought. She looked stressed and tense, like she had
stood vigil for days on end.

It took a long time to collect his head, to even make sense of the spinning, patchy images in his mind. His senses failed him, but he remembered the feelings. “It’s the Wall,” Bran said numbly. “The Others are attacking the Wall. They’re winning, Meera. They’re winning.”

“Fetch the princess,” Meera snapped at one of the guards. “Now. Tell me everything, Bran – how many were there, how far away are they?”

Bran could only shake his head, mumbling half-incoherently. How could you even count? They had been legion, endless hordes. “What of your brother?” Meera insisted. “How is the battle going?”

“He’s fighting. He’s fighting, but it’s not…” Bran took a deep breath. “Meera, they have monsters. Huge monsters. This… This is…”

She didn’t understand. Bran could barely even put it into words – how could you describe something like that? He was shaking with the very thought, trembling in stunned fear.

“Jon is fighting. He’s doing everything he can.” Flashes of blue fire and coiling bodies haunted his gaze. “But it’s not enough, it’s just not…”

There was a long, frightened pause. Bran’s eyes were wide and haunted. Meera bit her lip. “Reinforcements,” she said. “We can muster reserves, we can send aid.”

“They won’t reach him in time.” Bran shook his head. He looked to the window, and it was already nearing dusk. The skies were red, and night was falling. “He won’t survive the night, the Wall… the Wall is broken.”

He spoke too loudly. All around Bran, the guards were staring down at the boy as if he were mad. The Wall was a mountain – how could a mountain break? The thought was impossible. But it had; Bran remembered the screams of a thousand souls as it crumbled. Meera’s eyes were wide, her face pale, but she nodded. Meera believed him without even a pause.

“Hold still, Bran,” Meera said finally. “We’ll fetch Sansa, we’ll sort this out.”

“Sort it out?” Bran choked. ‘How can we sort it out?”

“I don’t know, we’ll think of something.” Her voice was curt. Meera looked worried. She never looked worried. “We’ll find a way, we’ll fight back!”

“The Wall is falling!” His voice was a shriek, and Bran hated how it made him feel. He felt weak, helpless – like a child. “It’s falling, it’s falling…” His hands were shivering. “We can’t stop it…!”

He could see everything, watch everything, but he couldn’t change it. The Others were just so powerful, so immense, and Bran…

This is the Long Night, he realised. This is the end of the world. You sweet summer child.

Meera was holding his hand. Her grip tightened.

“Look at me, Bran. There’ll be time for panic later, but right now – what needs to be done?” she pressed. Bran couldn’t reply. “What can we do?”
“I don’t… I don’t…”

“Do they have a weakness? Is there anyone we can call upon?” she pressed. She stared at him, bright green eyes on his. “Will the three-eyed crow help?”

The three-eyed crow. The boy shook his head, trembles running down his spine. “No. No, he’s… he’s resigned for this to happen, Meera.” Bran gulped. “The greenseer warned me that the Others cannot be stopped. And he was right.”

“Bran!”

“That is what he said! This is what he wants! The chains…” His voice quivered. “My family, my friends… he wants them to die so that I will go to him. He wants the chains to break.”

The three-eyed crow had given Bran a prophecy; everything that held him down would snap. The world would break away.

*Everything is going to be destroyed.* The greenseer still expected Bran would go to him, but only once he lost everything. *The Others are going to destroy my family.*

The thought of the Wall falling down, breaking apart…

His breath stifled, his shoulders shaking. “I… I…” Bran took a hoarse breath, wheezing, as he held back tears. “I’m scared, Meera.”

The words were a whimper, a quiet confession. He didn’t know what to do, how to do it, or even if he could do anything at all. He was a child, a useless broken child…

And yet Meera was holding his hand. She was holding his hand so, so tight. “I know,” the girl whispered. “I’m scared too.”

Bran didn’t know Meera even felt fear – she had always seemed so strong. No matter what; whether trekking through the wilderness, escaping from a dungeon, or dragging his limp body through a snowstorm, Meera could do it…

*Can a man still be brave if he’s afraid?* a distant voice from his memory asked.

*That is the only time a man can be brave.*

Bran’s heartbeat soothed slowly, and he forced his lungs to take a deep breath.

There was a long pause. A long and tender moment, and Meera never let go of his hand. “Do something, Bran,” she whispered.

“What can I do?” All of his powers, all of his strength… the Others outmatched it all. They outmatched the three-eyed crow too.

“Anything.” Meera’s voice was firm. “Everything. Do whatever you can do, and then do some more.”

*My brother is still fighting,* Bran thought. Jon must know how the battle was going. Those men on the Wall knew it too. There were thousands of men who knew their odds, but they were fighting regardless. Bran had been at the Wall in mind only, but those men had been fighting body and spirit, tooth and nail.

Bran stared at the window, where the fading red light of the sunset was leaking through the
shutters. It hurt, it was frightening, but he would be brave.

He thought of the tales that Old Nan used to tell him – those frightening stories of horrible terrors, tragic deaths and evil demons in the night. He had heard them all a hundred times, but he had never really understood them. The stories weren’t about the terror, weren’t about the misery; they were about how the nightmares could be beaten. They were about surviving.

Meera was still holding his hand.

*The three-eyed crow said that I had to save the world.*

He took another deep breath. *There is only one thing that I can think of that might save it now.*

“The dragon,” Bran said after a long, long silence. “Meera, you have to take me to the dragon.”

She stared down at him, blinking in surprise. “Bran, what of those shadows? There could be more of them,” Meera warned. “It’s not safe out there.”

He looked straight at her. “It’s not safe in here.”

She hesitated. “I need to go,” Bran insisted. “Can you get me to the godswood?”

For a moment, it looked like she wanted to argue, but she complied. The guards tried to object, but Meera forced them to let them out. They tried to argue her down, but Meera held a broken shaft of wood like a spear, and had to all but threaten violence before they conceded. There was no time for a platter, instead Meera was ready to carry Bran herself.

“King Snow told us to keep you safe,” a bearded guard protested.

“Then keep me safe. But do it in the godswod,” Bran retorted, trying to sound stronger than he felt. “I order you to take me to the godswod.”

Meera hoisted Bran to the door herself, until finally one of the guards volunteered to lift him instead. They were large and strong men, but they were still hesitating with every flicker of the shadows in the stairwell.

The man was broad and gruff, and he carried the boy bridal style out of his chambers. It might have been embarrassing, but Bran had far larger worries.

Daylight was fading fast, and he could feel it in the wind. The night would be a hard one.

They met Sansa as she was rushing up the stair. His sister’s hair was dishevelled, her clothes stained. She was wearing a leather apron over her dress – Bran had never even imagined Sansa in an apron before. “Princess,” a man called to her. “We didn’t want to, but he insisted…”

Her heels were clattering up the stones, looking between him and Meera. Sansa looked worried. “Bran, what is going on?”

“The dragon.” He gulped. “You’ve got to take me to the dragon.”

She looked like she wanted to argue, but Meera was already pushing her way through. They carried him down to the staircase and towards the great hall. Bran could feel the tension in every corner, the anxiety flooding the corridors. The doors were sealed as if men were afraid to walk outside.

He passed the window, and he saw the skies. The snows had faded, but the hissing winds lingered. It was unnatural weather, the skies were distorted. The clouds weren’t sailing across the sky,
instead it seemed like they were spiralling and churning. There was a power in the air – twisting the weather itself.

Bran looked down upon Winterfell, and the snows appeared black and red in the dark sunset. There were long and deep shadows drooping over the spires and merlons, and wicked gargoyles were sneering in the faded light.

Bran heard a roar – an immense, strangled boom shaking the trees from the godswood. The guards were nervous, fidgeting with their dragonglass daggers or weirwood spears.

“Bran, what are you doing?” Sansa whispered in his ear.

*I haven’t the foggiest*, Bran could have replied. He just knew he needed to try. “Do you remember the histories that Maester Luwin told us?” he asked Sansa. “About the children, about greenseers?”

“Yes.” She frowned. “Yes, of course I do.”

“Do you believe in them?”

At that Sansa hesitated. She paused for a few long heartbeats. “I don’t know what I believe. I’ll believe what I can see.”

*That’s probably for the best*, Bran considered, but he stifled before replying.

They were walking through the main hallway, and it took four to remove the barricades from the great doors. The whole castle had been sealed up tightly; every door barred and locked. Around them, footsteps were pattering – eyes were peering out of the gloom to see what was happening.

Sansa was staring at Bran queerly, something in her eyes. “The children of the forest,” Sansa said slowly. “Maester Luwin said supposedly they could see through the trees, they control birds and beasts.”

“And more,” Bran gulped. “They could do more too. They could dream of the future, they could travel through dreams. They could move themselves to distant shores, even travel through time too. It’s not just birds and beasts either, not at first… it’s like everything. There’s a man who can control the trees, Sansa, or possess the weather. The Others – they’re using the same powers. And I’ve had these dreams; I see men singing to the earth, and the world shifts. It’s all power, magic it’s like this spark, this fire, inside of people. I’ve felt it.” Bran was rambling. It sounded insane when he said it out loud, but it was true. “Everybody has a little bit of it, but I think that some people have more than a bit.”

The doors shoved open with a grunt. The snows had faded, but a thick blanket of white still smothered the world. Icicles like spears were drooping from a top the doorway, like the teeth of some monster’s throat. Sansa was staring at Bran, her expression guarded. *She thinks I’m insane,* Bran thought with a quiet grimace. *Perhaps I am.* “And I feel…” Bran continued hesitantly. “I feel like there’s more that I can do, I just… I just…”

“Bran, what are you…?” Sansa’s voice trailed off.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I just have to try.”

They stepped out into the courtyard, shuffling through a muddy slush of thick snow. In the distance, they heard another rustle of trees, of the agitated beast trembling.

Winterfell felt dead. All of the men had left with Jon, and the grounds were littered with tents and
campsites left barren and still. The yards felt weirdly empty without the giants stomping through.

It felt like a procession was forming as they stepped out of the keep. People were creeping out of the hiding holes, staring down at him. Some few were bustling forward, trying to find out what was happening. Murmurs were spreading. The broken king being carried in a stranger’s arms. All those eyes were on him.

Focus. Deep breaths. I can do this, I can do this…

There were a gaggle of men shouting angrily, the guards were already trying to push them back. Winterfell felt unnerved. Meera was twitching, holding her spear closely. Sansa walked close to Bran’s side, shoving off her apron into the snows and keeping her hand on her brother’s shoulder.

“Do you remember the other stories as well?” Bran’s voice was low. “The stories that Old Nan told us?”

“Those were just stories,” Sansa replied. “She was trying to scare us.”

Perhaps, but Bran remembered Old Nan’s tales clearer than he did Maester Luwin’s were. The maester always started his stories with ‘it was told’ or ‘supposedly’, but Old Nan’s tales had been certain. Bran remembered the story of the last hero – he had been thinking about that one a lot. *Oh my sweet summer child…* the ghostly voice echoed. *What do you know of fear? Fear is for the winter, my little lord, when the snows fall a hundred feet deep and the ice wind comes howling out of the north, when the sun hides its face for years at a time, and little children are born and live and die all in darkness while the direwolves grow gaunt and hungry, and the white walkers move through the woods.*

The last hero. He remembered the tale; it had been a band of heroes that had journeyed north to stop the Others, as Old Nan told it. He had set out into the dead lands with a sword, a horse, a dog, and a dozen companions, but the white walkers hounded them at every turn. One by one his friends died, and then his horse, and finally even his dog, and his sword froze so hard the blade snapped when he tried to use it. And the Others smelled the hot blood in him and came silent on his trail, stalking him with nightmarish beasts of death and ice. His companions all sacrificed themselves, one by one, so he could keep on moving forward.

Until finally the last remaining one – the last hero – came upon the hidden city of the children of the forest.

The children took him in. They sang to him, Old Nan said, they gave him life again. The children healed him, made him strong again. They reforged his sword and bandaged his wounds, and with the children’s help the last hero grew strong enough to finish the journey. The last hero finished his quest; he travelled to the furthest north to slay the Other’s king with his burning sword. The king died and his minions all vanished, and then summer returned to the world.

Bran never knew how much of it had just been a children’s tale, but if there was even a chance…

“Maybe,” Bran replied. “But Old Nan told me that greenseers could be healers.”

They saw the godswood, where a line of men barricaded the gates with spears and white stones on their chest. Men were unnerved, shouting words in a tongue that Bran couldn’t understand. They were all tense, and anxious.

For a while, it seemed like they wouldn’t let Bran pass, but then he heard his brother’s name being shouted. “Snow,” they were saying, amidst the mumble of gibberish. “Snow… Snow…”
Sonagon was sickly and unsettled, Bran understood. The dragon was shaking the trees, crashing through the godsdowood. Several times it had tried to take flight, but its wings were not strong enough to lift itself. Instead, it had grown more and more agitated ever since Jon left. Nobody was allowed near, but Bran needed to get closer.

He needed to touch the heart tree. That was the only way he could be sure.

Voices tried to protest. The dragon had become growing vicious and aggressive; it was not safe without Jon’s presence. Sonagon had killed one man already while they were trying to pray to it.

“It’s not safe,” Sansa insisted, and those words rattled through Bran’s head. Safe, safe, safe…

And yet it was already dusk. Night was falling across the world, and the shadows of the godsdowood had never seemed so black.

Meera and Sansa were arguing with each other, their voices tense with worry. Sansa wanted to take him back, but Meera insisted that he needed to try. Bran could barely hear the words – his heart was beating too fast.

Finally, the man dropped him in the snow, and Bran dragged his limp body over the snows. He was shambling on his arms, dragging himself with a pained gasp. Behind him, Sansa shouted something, but Bran never heard the words.

He felt the rumbling growl, as loud as an avalanche and rising in pitch. The clamour of the procession was waking the dragon to stir, snapping entire trees as it shifted.

At first, there was nothing but blackness in the dusk, the whisper of crackling ice around him. And then he saw it.

He saw the dragon’s bulk in the gloom, he saw icy white scales reflecting in the shimmers of the torches through the trees. He felt the rumble, he felt the world shaking – the dragon was trembling. It was sickly, with blackish lines running through its scales, and hoarse, fierce pants.

He could hear the bubbling of the hot springs, the splashing of the pools. The dragon was flexing, great nostrils sniffing the air. He saw its eyes; black eyes that shone in the gloom.

It was curled before the heart tree. Bran kept on dragging himself, twigs snapping and snow crunching beneath him. His heart was beating, wheezing with every strained breath.

The dragon was staring straight at him, he could feel its gaze on him.

Broken trees and logs were strewn across the woods, as well as lumps of twisted, jagged ice carved by the dragon’s breath. Bran was staring, and then he noticed the lumps of white, yellow and black bile littering the ponds. Puke, he realised dumbly. The dragon had been throwing up barely digested food. Hunks of meat and frozen bile splattered across the snow.

Bran was staring, and then he noticed saliva-coated fingers sticking out from the pile. He saw human limbs sticking out through the gunk.

His breath stifled, his mind flooding with panic. People. The dragon had been eating people.

They were sacrifices, Bran realised in horror. The worshippers had been sacrificing men to the dragon.

He felt the ice crunch under huge claws, he saw the shadow rising upwards. Waters were gushing
around the beast, the springs bubbling off its scales. He could see its eyes in the dark.

The dragon was staring straight at him, saliva dripping from huge jaws.

It snorted, a mist of cold bursting from its nose. Bran was left frozen, a crippled little child staring up at a man-eating mountain.

*When can a man be brave?* he repeated to himself. *When can a man be brave?*

He didn’t move, he didn’t panic. No quick movements; that would mark him as prey. Instead, the boy just slowly tried to wriggle closer towards the heart tree. He could feel the mammoth snout inching closer, he could feel the cold, hoarse pants against his neck.

*I need to help*, he thought desperately. *I need to do something.*

The heart tree was above him. Even when every other tree was wrecked, the dragon had avoided the heart tree. Bran was crawling, pulling himself over the roots.

The dragon growled, a low rumble breaking through its throat as immense teeth parted. It watched him crawl.

Bran’s hand touched the white bark and reached outwards. He reached into the wood, into the roots, into the soil. The bloody face was staring down at him. Its expression seemed expectant, solemn, cruel – like a merciless judge holding court, looming down over the damned crawling before the stand.

*Take me to beyond the green*, Bran willed. *Let me see. Tell me what to do.*

The roots reached out to grab him, like bloody white hands dragging him down into unfathomable depths. Bran was spinning, falling, flying and drowning.

The world twisted around him. He saw the inexorable march of the seasons, he saw the ages of the earth rise and fall. He watched mountains sprout upwards from the ground, he watched continents split apart, and oceans swallow islands. He saw two moons spinning through the sky.

He saw a king in a frozen crown, bright blue eyes staring out over a city of crystal white spires.

He saw two men, one white and the other black, standing against each other with swords in hand. Bright blue clashed against burning red.

He saw a wounded man in a ragged black cloak, crawling through the snows. All around him, spiders prowled – white fangs tearing at his cloak, trying to tear him down.

The vision turned, but Bran was fighting against the current. Bran could not be swept away by the tide anymore, he needed to control it. He needed to focus it. He needed to see.

*The dragon*, Bran insisted of the void. *How do I save the dragon?*

It felt like trying to control a storm – a writhing whirlwind of thoughts and memories, dreams and visions, pasts and futures. Bran pushed further and further, clawing his way up the roots.

A thousand mouthless red eyes stared down upon him. He could feel them all around him, silent sentinels trapped in prisons of white and red. They never said a word, but they were watching, judgemental and cruel.

*Show me*, Bran demanded. *Show me!*
Everything blurred, the roots caving in.

Chanting. Jeering. He heard laughter – the sound of a celebration.

The boy was suddenly standing in the middle of a gilded marble square; standing on a marble plaza overlooking gushing white waters. He stared at architectures he had never seen before, and great structures that he had never imagined. The buildings were covered in statues of horses, manticores, sphinxes, sirens and turtles, while dragon banners of a hundred different colours draped from the spires. Bran could only gape, watching the crowd of pale, ashen-haired men and women milling around him.

They were chanting something, but Bran couldn’t understand the words. He stepped forward, looking blankly around the plaza.

Above him, cloth dragons were wobbling down the cobbled streets, a whole drove of lords and ladies in silk and jewels were pointing and clapping. Fools and mummers were dancing around in turtle-shell hats. The smell of rich spices was thick in the air. It was a parade, he realised. Some kind of parade over marble terraces overlooking a great river.

In the distance, he saw a blackened palace, and there were fresh stains in the marble that might have been blood. Frescoes of water spirits had been shattered by hammers and covered by the banners of dragons.

Bran stepped onto the road, and he saw the centre of it. He stared at a man of rag and bones withering away in a cage of solid gold. He was a corpse in tattered finery, a broken prince, being carted down the middle of the street while silver-haired lords and ladies laughed and cheered.

The vision shifted. Bran saw the other side of the street. He saw children dragged out of their houses and slave collars clamped around their necks. He saw refugees hiding in the river’s shallows, living in swamps, or swimming through furious currents to try to escape. He saw men and women cowering in blackened ruins as death flew overhead.

He saw dragons feasting upon great turtles, tearing them up from the waters and ripping them apart.

He saw the ruins of a thousand massacres.

The sound of sobbing filled the air. There was a woman – a dying, disfigured woman, weeping for her lost love. Bran could hear the woman’s cries; sobbing cackles desperate for revenge. She pleaded and begged and cursed and wept. She staggered across a tattered bridge, watching a great city burn and the waters turning black with soot.

Bran saw the woman kiss the cold lips of a grey statue, and then the stone man came to life. Shadows danced, and a shrouded man took her hand and cradled her cheek with cold fingers.

She wanted revenge. They had granted her wish, Bran thought, but at a cost. A hundred thousand men died horrible deaths – a plague that spread outwards from the ruins and never stopped. Bran saw love turn into sorrow. He saw a shining bridge turn grey. A city of dreams, broken and ruined.

He saw legions of stone men shambling through the fog.

Greyscale, Bran realised. Garin’s curse, as Maester Luwin once named it. It originated in the waters of the Rhoyne, and it spread across the world. Bran saw it with his own eyes; it had been a Rhoynish curse – they poisoned the water, unleashing a plague that would punish the dragonlords for a thousand years. There were dead bodies under the water that still remembered, shapeless
phantoms haunting the fog.

Bran gasped as the visions broke away. The scene shattered apart, tumbling through a thousand fragmented lives. The survivors had fled, some of them took shelter in the west. The trees remembered, the trees stored their memories.

The boy was back in Winterfell, staring at the dragon writhing in the woods. The dragon roared – the sound sending a billow of snow sweeping across Bran’s face. Through the trees, voices were shouting for him; shrill cries breaking in worry.

Bran was still clutching the heart tree, trying to make sense of all those images. They showed me what I asked, Bran realised. It showed me the curse that plagues the dragon.

The dragon was pacing. Sonagon could sense the magic in the air too, yet the dragon wasn’t sure if Bran was a friend or foe. It felt like a roar of warning; the dragon was sniffing him, shuffling closer to inspect.

Bran’s hand was still on the tree, still channelling a wave of green visions. It felt like he was falling into the green, but the green was swelling up through him at the same time. Everything was distorted into colours – reds and blues more vivid than he had ever seen it before.

Bran could see it; he could see the foul tumours – the black – that was plaguing the dragon’s aura. It was caking like stone inside its body, stiffening its muscles and draining the dragon’s strength. Making it weak.

But if this is a magic curse, could magic also cure it?

Bran needed to reach deeper. He needed more power. Deeper into the earth, deeper towards the source of it.

Bran focused on the dragon, and he reached out towards the beast.

The dragon’s tail thrashed like a whip, recoiling suddenly. Bran felt flames – pure fire – swelling up inside the dragon’s mind.

The boy grabbed hold of the weirwood, and clung on for dear life.

Around him, Sonagon roared again, jaws snapping furiously. The godswood whispering around him, the dragon facing off against the tree.

He could feel the dragon’s pain, the poison congealing in its guts. Like tar filling its body.

Voices were shouting, footsteps crunching through the snow. They were running for him. Meera was screaming for him, but Bran couldn’t let go.

If magic has a cost, I’ll pay it, Bran prayed. Help me. Help him.

Save Jon. Save the Wall.

His world twisted away. Bran was in the tree, following the roots downwards. He was going deeper and deeper, feeling warm water sprouting up through the crevices of the earth. He could feel the grass and the snow, the ice and the soil, the water and the rocks. He could trace the roots and stone, ancient layers and currents that none could see.

He could see the power pulsing through the earth – ley lines of energy flowing towards a hub. Like
branches on a tree.

More power. Give me more.

Around him, invisible roots were twisting through the air, coiling around the dragon.

Sonagon roared, suddenly jerking. The dragon thrashed, sending a hail of stones scattering from the pool. An entire tree tore from the ground with a single whip of its tail. The beast was going berserk, claws raging, white fire swelling in its throat.

And then Meera was around him, hugging him, but Bran never let go.

Bran was following the ley lines deeper. Deeper through the earth, deeper into the past. He was channelling it, bringing it upwards. Bran felt it, felt it surging through him…

Something buried under Winterfell. Something powerful.

His awareness stretched. It felt like a simmering volcano resting beneath the castle. It felt untouched for so, so long but Bran pushed through the veil. He popped the cork, and suddenly it was all flooding up through the earth.

He felt it reacting to him, it was surging at his will. It was… he could hardly describe it. Words failed him, thoughts were useless. It was instinctive – as natural as every time he had ever slipped out of his skin.

“Heal,” Bran gasped, grabbing at that power. “I need you to heal.”

The magic rose upwards. It was swelling straight through him. He was channelling something ancient, something immense.

He couldn’t even process it. It was nothing but power.

A heart. A living, beating heart. Bran touched it, and it responded.

“Heal. The dragon…” The boy’s eyes were rolling, his breaths a hoarse gasp. “You have to…”

Sonagon stiffened, great nostrils sniffing. All around him, Bran felt the swell of heat burst from the ground. It was suddenly warm – as warm as the height of summer. A great bubble of heat rising from the earth.

Men were screaming, shouting in panic. They couldn’t know what was happening, but all around them they heard the hissing of ice. They could sense danger. They could sense the lightning in the air.

Bran didn’t understand either. He was touching something that was beyond him, but he was desperate enough to push through it. Like an apprentice working the forge for the first time, or a child climbing an unscaled mountain.

Bran didn’t know what he was doing, but he had to keep doing it.

Burn the poison out, Bran willed. Cleanse him… Heal him…

The water was boiling, the pools bursting into crackling steam.

The hot springs gushed, ice fizzing.
Men were on their knees, crying, yelling – and then a woman’s cry broke through the clamour. His sister was shouting something, but Bran couldn’t even…

Sonagon roared, and the earth shuddered. Steam rising upwards into the night, blanketing the dragon in pure, brilliant white…

“Heal!” the boy screamed. “Heal!”
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

For the dawn.

Mance

He remembered his childhood well. He remembered days spent whacking wooden sticks in the black training yards, or nights listening rapt to drunken tales in the mess hall. He had learnt a hundred curse words before the age of ten, and a thousand stories of the world beyond. As a boy, he used to sneak up the icy steps of the Wall and spend his evenings staring out over the edge of the world.

Beyond the Wall had fascinated Mance. Every faraway, forbidden place had. He had listened to every tale and song and dreamt of the world that lay beyond the horizon. For a long time, Mance had been so entranced by the wandering crows that he wanted to become one – to travel between every corner of the realm wearing a black cloak.

Mance had been born to the Watch, he had taken his vows as a child. His father had been the oath, his mother was the Wall, and his brothers were a thousand men in black.

*The Wall has been my life. My purpose and my bane.*

And now it was all falling down.

His head was still ringing even as the world quaked atop the Wall. The ice was fracturing beneath him, immense cracks splitting the Wall and widening by the heartbeat. The Wall was collapsing, the sound was like the crackling of a glacier at its limit. Mance was on his hands and knees, gripping a wooden post while the ice tilted beneath him. Enormous slabs of ice ground against each other; another section cleaved off, taking yet more men into the great white abyss.

He could hear their screams as they fell, their frantic scrambling for purchase.

It was madness all around him, but Mance could only feel dizziness, hunger, a vague sickness. He felt detached from the world, like his mind had already gone beyond.

*Thud.* Another slice of ice cleaved away, and the Wall lurched downwards.

The men were screaming, shouting, but Mance couldn’t. He was just watching, remembering. His whole life flashed by before his eyes.

*This is where I’m going to die,* he knew. He had always known. The Wall was his life.

He heard the groan – the shriek – as yet another wyrm broke through the ice in a hail of rubble. In its wake, avalanches fell from the Wall’s ruin. A thousand men were crying in helpless agony before the titanic beast. It felt like the ghosts of the Night’s Watch were wailing through the black air.

There was no stopping them now. The dam was punctured and the dead were flooding south.
“They’re coming up!” a man’s voice screamed. “Spiders! Spiders, they’re climbing up!”

Mance could hear the roars to the south – the first of the wyrms had already burrowed through, it was already tearing through the ruins of Castle Black while the rest were pushing their way forward. They had opened the way; there were uncountable swarms of dead bodies following in the wyrms’ wake, and fighting to both the north and south.

The Others didn’t stop. Even as the Wall was collapsing, the fighting never ceased.

He saw white shapes darting up the avalanche – the ice spiders surging up the broken Wall. They were climbing and there was nothing to stop them.

The Wall wasn’t a block of ice anymore – it felt more like a heap of icy debris collapsing in on itself. It was falling down, piece by piece, while the legions of the dead pushed against it. And the men of the Night’s Watch were still standing atop of it.

Mance’s head was dazed. His head had been spinning for hours, ever since his fall. The bandages around his skull were slick with frozen blood. His vision was blurry, he couldn’t focus properly, he could hardly keep track of anything – but he heard the noises. He heard apocalyptic screams echoing around him.

He was starved, fatigued and frantic, and it felt like the end of the world.

Mance heard the screeching as the icy monsters broke over the rim, sharp fangs tearing through men. It was a swarm of them – the spiders clambering upwards on spindly legs, dragging men down. The wyrms were burrowing under, while the spiders were climbing over.

It felt like a nightmare. The night was dark and the terrors were all around him.

The ice was sagging, threatening to drop. Tides of ice were falling northwards, collapsing from where the monsters had gouged the base away. They were seven hundred feet in the air and clinging on by their fingernails.

Men were running, clambering upwards to escape the precipice chasing them. Spiders were jumping up the waterfall of ice, fangs tearing them downwards…

“Formation!” Samwell was screaming. The fat Lord Steward was in a frenzy, skittering awkwardly as the cracks spread beneath his feet. Mance saw the men huddling at the southern edge clinging to the very last chunks of stable ice, trying to hold a semblance of order. “Formation!”

The Wall was leaning. It was broken into glacial chunks grinding against each other. It was an earthquake. All around him, the ice rippled like the waves of a turbulent ocean.

Mance could only stare.

It was the dark of night, but the stars above were bright. He could see the shimmer of the northern lights over the mountains. The view from atop the Wall always took my breath away, Mance considered. Every single time. He loved that view.

Beneath him, a spider as large as a cart snatched a man off the ice and crushed his skull under monstrous fangs. Sworn brothers were still trying to fight, but they didn’t have enough missiles left. There were no spears or catapults, no arrows, not even any stones left. The men had resorted to the Wall itself, hurling chunks of ice at the tide of spiders scuttling towards them. Like throwing snowballs at monsters.
Every man that was willing to run had abandoned their posts already. The ones that remained were prepared to die up here.

Mance remembered his own friends – Qhorin, Dalbridge, Qorgyle, Mallister, Old Henly, Dywen, Hobb. They were the figures from his past, lost to time. They had been recruits together, they took their vows together. His brothers. Few even remembered the old guard of the Night’s Watch now, but they had held the Wall.

*We held the Wall.*

In his delirium, Mance saw the Halfhand reaching down for him, helping him to his feet. Qhorin was staring down at him, judging. He knew what needed to be done.

Mance took a deep breath, before forcing himself up off his knees. He nearly toppled, but he could not let himself fall. Not yet.

The Wall was holding on, straining to stay upright. Mance took another uneven step.

Another crack, another mammoth chunk of ice…

“Get clear!” Tarly was shrieking. “Get cle–”

*Boom.* The thump of ice sent the whole world deaf.

Memories scattered through Mance’s head – broken shards left scrambled along with his brain. His life was fractured all around him. He remembered taking his vows, his red cloak, the first time he saw Dalla…

“Samwell!” Mance screamed. “Samwell!”

“Mance!” the cry came through the cloud of white. “Mance, where are y–”

Five feet away from him, the ice shattered apart. The precipice was falling backwards. Mance tumbled downwards, but then there were arms clutching him. Yanking him up from the edge.

Strong hands were pulling him up, and Mance took deep, frantic breaths.

Samwell was dragging him backwards, shambling away from the edge. His body used to be so strong, so hard, but now all he had left was a ruin. Ever since his imprisonment, Mance had been left gaunt and weakly, with fingers that couldn’t even play a harp. Or hold his own wife’s hand.

“We have to run!” Samwell hissed into his ear. “There’s nothing more we can do, the Wall…!”

Mance could barely hear the words. All around him, he saw free folk and sworn brothers. He saw them wearing black, he saw them pushing through the snow, clinging to the ice.

He saw his family; both the family he was born to, and the family he chose.

Beneath him, he felt the rumble of another wyrm quaking forward. The big one, the one the Others kept at the rear. The final monster was coming through, and it was *huge.*

He could see grey scales rippling in the white, wading through the army of the dead like an elephant through a sea of ants. Its body was crisscrossed in injuries eons old. It was long and lean, its body swaying backwards and forth, but so large that it might reach half the way up the Wall. Its jaws were open – revealing teeth that could swallow a ship. Blue fire was sputtering in its black throat, and its dead beady eyes gleamed like dull blue moons.
The Others fought strategically – they had sent the smaller wyrms in first to clear the way, and then kept the largest one to come through last. *It is the end of the world*, Mance thought numbly, staring. There was no fear, only realisation.

Mance knew what he needed to do.

“Go,” Mance croaked, pulling himself upright and forcing himself to talk through the vague dizziness he felt. His eyes were unfocused, but his voice was strong. “You go, Samwell. Run, Eastwatch.” Samwell looked ready to object, but Mance pushed the boy out of the way.

*Qhorin, give me strength. I must be as strong as you were. I must be oak.* “Brothers!” Mance boomed. “On me! *On me!*”

Eyes stared at him, men mad with fear. “Mance…!”

“Get another fire burning, that’s an order!” the lord snapped, his voice stronger than he felt. “Now, pickaxes on me, any man that can still break some ice.” Mance was pointing, hands flailing with wild movements. “From the stairs and outwards, start hacking away. Whatever rope we still have, we need it!”

There were frighteningly few men left. Most had already fallen away when the Wall shattered, but some were still clinging to the broken ice. *Crows are stubborn birds. We can still peck.*

“On me!” Mance cried. “*On me!*”

Samwell clutched at his shoulder, hissing in a high-pitched squeal. “Mance, you have to run!” he snapped. “The Wall is falling!”

*I know it is. That doesn’t mean it has to fall quietly.* “What I have to do?” Mance motioned backwards, looking at the snowstorm writhing to the north. “Any moment now, Tarly, that big wyrm is going to jump up at us again, they’re going to try to finish us off. And when it does, I’m going to be here ready to hit it in the face with the biggest fucking chunk of ice in the history of chunks of ice.”

Samwell gaped at him. Mance raised his voice higher, shouting at the black cloaks around him. “Get pickaxes and fire, start hacking. We need hammers to break those supports!” he yelled, motioning to the wooden structures that lined the southern side, and the broken lines of timber that still clung to the Wall’s structure. “We need those ropes – fasten them to the heaviest object you can find and prepare to push. On my signal, when that beast is beneath us! We drop the bloody Wall on it!”

Men didn’t know how to reply, they were jammed in stunned fear. Samwell’s mouth was still stammering. “Who are we?” Mance shrieked. “Who do we fight for?”

“The living,” Hairy Hal gulped, but it wasn’t loud enough.

*Who do we fight for?*

“The living!” they shouted, and more were turning towards Mance.

*Just a bit longer,* Mance begged of his body. *Just a bit.* He could not end like this, he needed to stay upright just a bit longer. *Who do we fight for?!*

“The living!”
“Then get to work!” Mance bellowed, and his voice left no room for doubt. “We’ll rest when we’re dead, but our Watch ain’t over yet.”

Bodies started to move. They were scrambling, men racing across the treacherous ice. Seven hundred feet in the air on an unstable structure, but they knew their duty. Mance was screaming with everything he had, summoning every ounce of strength they had.

They had to work quickly. Any moment might be their last, but they had to be ready for it. Mance’s heart had never pounded so fast.

“Axes on me! Axes, axes!”

“Spears!” Bearded Ben shouted, as the ice spiders hissed. “Spears, keep those beasts off us!”

Mance heard the clicking of ice spiders scuttling up the shrieking ice straits, and beneath him the darkness was writhing. Battles above and below, but even in the dark of night they were still fighting. We are still fighting, against all odds.

Mance had never felt prouder of his people. Both his people – the sworn brothers and the free folk. Samwell tried to cling on to him, but Mance pulled himself out of the Lord Steward’s grip. “You go Tarly,” Mance insisted, lowering his voice. “I can do this.”

“Mance, I can’t…” Samwell gulped.

“Head to Eastwatch. Get as many clear as you can, rally what you can,” Mance hissed. “Lead them. That’s an order. Quickly now – while you still can.”

For a heartbeat, it looked like Samwell wanted to say something. Maybe the boy wanted to protest or apologize or argue. His mouth flapped, the way it always did when Tarly never knew what to do. Mance saw the unspoken dilemma squirm across the boy’s face.

Then, the fat boy just turned and ran. He never made a noise, he never drew any attention to himself. Samwell just turned tail and ran away.

They needed working bodies to break the ice, but there was no place for Samwell here, Mance knew. They would all die in the collapse, but Samwell’s sacrifice would contribute nothing. Right now, they needed Samwell’s cowardice more than they needed bravery. There have been enough sacrifices already, Mance thought, as he took a deep breath. Perhaps there was none better than a craven at spiting death.

Mance couldn’t run. Mance needed to stay to keep the last dredges of the black brothers in line. If Mance ran, the rest would run too and they’d lose their final chance. This is where I must be.

They chose to follow Mance. That was his duty.

Dalla and his boy were down there, somewhere. His wife and his son were relying on him. Most likely they had already fled, but the Others would catch up to them if nothing was done. There was a trail of refugees that would be crushed by those monsters. Mance would happily give his life just to improve his son’s odds.

All around him, the groan of breaking ice was deafening.

“Light the fires!” Mance boomed over the unholy pandemonium. “Get the torches burning – I want hammers and pickaxes, and lots of fire!”
The air was crazed. Smoke and steam, screaming and slashing. The stairs were broken and tattered – the men could not climb down – but the wooden structures were still fastened precariously onto the flat of the Wall. Huge joints of oaken timbers, hammered into the Wall centuries ago and fastened by thick hemp ropes anchored into ice.

They were screaming at him, but Mance knew how to keep command. He was staggering, half-blind, shouting through the panic.

“Get those supports loose!” Mance ordered. “Tie those ropes to something heavy. On the signal, we drop them and we break the ice.”

Behind him, Bedwyck the Giant clenched his jaw. “We’re standing on the ice.”

“Aye.” Grim eyes stared at him, but Mance just nodded. “Aim for the monster’s head.”

Mance half-expected someone to challenge him, but they didn’t. Weary faces just nodded, and set to work.

They were scared, but they were fighting. They were moving quickly, hacking and lashing ropes.

He felt the shiver beneath him as a warhammer cracked through a wooden support. “Hold!” a man cried. “Not yet, not yet…!”

Mance stared out into the endless white, and he wondered what it would feel like to fall.

“Is this how you want to end?” Hairy Hal muttered to him. He was a shaggy, bearded man with a face lined like stone. Mance had known Hairy Hal for over thirty years, both alongside and against on the battlefield.

“Aye.” Mance nodded. “It is.”

Mance knew the men around him; Hairy Hal, Bearded Ben, Rory, Young Henly, Mawney, Ketter, Garth Greyfeather, Garth of Oldtown. Quort Harlesson, Wulf, Ivar the Restless, Red Rox, Kyleg of the Wooden Ear, Yvon of Whitetree and Big Asta. He saw men that he had known back when wore a black cloak. They were men that Mance had abandoned and fought against, men that he had shared cups with and laughed beside. Men he had betrayed or joined with. Men he had trusted or hated, bickered and conciliated with.

They were his brothers.

Across the Wall, the wyrm roared like thunder.

Suddenly, there were tears in his eyes, salt blurring his vision. Without warning, Mance was laughing – and the sound broke over the storm. The drumming of the howling wind felt like the chuckles of the laughter. Mance’s laughter was so sudden that they all jumped and stared at him.

Mance was watching the end of the world, and he was laughing.

“You see a jape?” Bearded Ben shouted at him.

“Perhaps.” It wasn’t really funny, but Mance was laughing regardless. It was all he could do to laugh. “All my life, I hated this damnable Wall. I wanted to tear it down. I became ‘king’ to break through it.” He took a deep breath through the wheezy chuckles. “And now it seems that I must die fighting to protect it.”
To the north, the wyrm was coming closer. It was moving slow and unstoppable, like a looming storm. They saw the blue thunder of its breath, the dragonfire thrashing through the Wall.

The Others were nearly through, the Wall was wobbling beneath them.

“Why not die for your people instead?” Bearded Ben asked finally.


He had a long life. A good one, all things considered. Mance had loved a beautiful woman and he had fathered a gorgeous son. He had worn his red cloak, he had tasted the Dornishman’s wife.

All around him, he heard the sounds of hacking and burning. Mance clutched a torch in his ruined fingers, holding it tightly. His fingers couldn’t grip properly, but he squeezed the wood with both hands like paws. The fire blazed in front of him, and Mance held it like a club.

Mance heard the echo of the monster’s roar, vibrating through his bones.

Behind him, he heard the hammers and axes breaking into a frenzy. Mance stood like a sentinel, burning torch in his hands, looking down at his death below.

“It’s coming! It’s coming!”

“Get those ropes fastened, get them–”

“Hammers! Hammers on me!” Bedwyck boomed, his voice like a giant’s. “Torches to the edge!”

Mance stepped towards the cracking edge. It was coming closer, an impossibly large beast snaking forward. The other wyrms had borne large crests of horns, but this one was hornless. It had grey scales spotted in yellow streaks, a giant gaping mouth filled with teeth as large as trees. It had to be at least a fifty-foot-wide at the shoulder, and easily over four-hundred-foot long. Before it, men were less than insects.

Mance was standing above it, with his pathetically small torch in his hand, standing side by side with his brothers.

The roar of the world was drowned out by his own heartbeat.

“Push! Push!”

“We need more, we need more–”

“Ready! Ready!” There was hacking, frantic tearing. Hammers bashing wood, pickaxes against ice. Like insects tearing away, termites eating through a structure.

The wyrm was slithering up over the mount of ice, rearing its head backwards. It was coming upwards. And we are going down.

The sight of that beast looming in the dark sent his heart fluttering. It was beyond huge, it was mountainous. That one moment seemed to last forever – the fire before him, staring down at the unending black hellscape of ice…

“Make peace with your gods!” a shaggy voice boomed – Mance never knew who it was. “For we will dine with them soon!”

The Wall was already hanging by a thread, it wouldn’t take much. “Push!” Bedwyck was
screaming, while teams of men rolled immense chunks of ice over the sagging slope. “Push!”

They were chanting all around him, stomping feet and beating weapons as they pushed. Men were heaving anchors off the edge, snapping supports, or hurling fire down into the abyss. He could feel the trembling beneath him, could feel the ice straining…

*Just a bit more,* Mance begged. *Just a bit more.*

The wyrm was rearing upwards, coiling and ready to lunge. Mance saw his whole life flash before his eyes.

“For the Watch?” Bearded Ben asked with a deep sigh.

Mance shook his head, his gaze flickering upwards. The clouds were thick, but the stars were there. The night was dark, but it would be morn soon enough. Mance knew it would. “For the dawn,” Mance muttered. “For the dawn.”

Around him, men echoed the cry. The tears froze in his eyes, but Mance never let go of his torch.

“For the dawn!” they screamed. “*For the dawn!*”

Mance saw the blue light, its immense jaws were opening.

Hammers swinging madly, then *crash.* Huge chunks of ice fastened to ropes, tumbling down the slope. The ice beneath him lurched. It groaned, shuddering…

“For the dawn! FOR THE DAWN!”

The whole world collapsed beneath him.

Mance had his torch in his hand, and he was running forward. Even as it all came crashing down, the Lord of Castle Black was jumping off the precipice, swinging his torch like a madman. Two dozen pinpricks of light were falling through the black, and the monster was rising up to meet him.

He felt cold air rushing around him, he felt the roar of the earth. *Aim for the head.*

The Wall fell with him, an iceberg dropping from above.

There had never been a greater avalanche.

In that brief, timeless moment, Mance wished he had his harp. Mance had always dreamt of playing a song as the Wall collapsed.

---

**Jon**

“Stand fast!” Jon howled over the shriek of falling ice, yelling at the top of his lungs in the dying of the light. “Stand fast!”

Fighting was everywhere. Their ranks were scattered and the battle was spread across the ruins of the castle, as the Wall tumbled around them. Great slabs of ice were twisting and falling, and dead bodies were sprinting through the gaps.

Jon’s voice was lost in the chorus – the cries of a thousand men trapped in pure, primal panic.
He saw a swell of flailing, grasping bodies clawing its way over the rubble. The wights were met by swinging torches and axes, and a flimsy wall of shields bashing like rams. The soldiers embedded themselves with their backs towards a broken stone wall, trying to fight off the dead.

The flames were sputtering around him, smoke searing his face as torches swung…

“Stand fa–” Jon boomed, but then his voice was cut off by a sharp horn. Behind him.

There was no thought involved, only instinctive reaction. The horn blared and men dropped everything to run. Jon felt the rumble of the huge shape behind him, and he was already dropping behind broken rubble. He huddled for cover in the debris that used to be the Lord Commander’s Tower.

Behind him, the world exploded into tainted ice.

The wyrm. Jon couldn’t even see the beast through the white mist hissing around him, but he felt it. Everything was blanketed white, but he felt the rumbling above him; it was slithering over the tatters of the Grey Keep.

Jon’s heart was beating so, so fast – staring upwards at the shadow of the dragon.

There were two of them now, both larger than the first. The wyrms were dragging themselves over the ruins, and there was naught that the men could do but run for shelter. They couldn’t fight them, they could only hide. The battle was changing and the men had to adapt. They had to follow both monsters’ every move, and every time the horn blared it meant that somebody saw blue dragonfire swelling in their throats. Each time, they had mere heartbeats to scramble for cover before the ice fire obliterated them.

For many men, the horn was the last thing they heard. Each breath of dragonfire threatened to destroy them all.

Frozen broken bodies littered the grounds, like grotesque ice sculptures sticking through the snow.

Jon’s hearing had returned slowly, but the sounds were still distorted. Muted, somewhat. The sounds made everything feel weirdly numb, like he was watching all of the visions pass him by in a dream. A nightmare.

Even as the stones were still crackling with cold, the dead were pushing on the assault. Dozens of men were slaughtered before they even had time to stagger upwards. The ground was so cold it was hissing – even just walking across it would bite off a man’s feet.

Half the wights weren’t even armed – but Jon saw a shrivelled, blue-eyed corpse tear off a man’s limbs with its bare hands.

Jon was crawling, struggling to stand. He needed to pull himself up with his arms from the enclave of rubble, hobbling on one foot. His ankle was broken. They had rapidly made a splint from a broken table leg and wrapped it with torn wool. He could see flesh bruised black, the joint knobbly.

Two wyrms. His relief force couldn’t hold them. They had fought with the fierceness of dying men, but Castle Black was already overwhelmed. They had been overwhelmed from the moment the Wall broke.

Jon was panting for breath, barely able to scream as strong hands pulled him upwards. A bearded man – Jon didn’t know his name – was lifting Jon backwards towards shelter. It was a man with frost on his beard, his ears lost to frostbite. A gaggle of defenders were still grouped around Jon,
still trying to fight.

The slabs of ice were as large as buildings, while the men huddled for shelter in the valleys of white.

The wights were everywhere, and growing thicker with every moment.

These were wights were different to the earlier ones. They were so old and decayed they seemed mummified. Their clothes had rotted off them, their skin was browning and tattered like parchment. They were frozen like hunks of meat that had been buried under ice. Most of them, Jon couldn’t even tell if they had been man or woman. Their fluids had drained away, their hair and skin was lost to frostbite – they seemed more like skeletons with padding than corpses.

Still, they were shockingly fast and ferocious, and they moved with no restraint. Blue eyes and mutilated bodies were everywhere – they were pouring out of the cracks in the Wall like an unending tide.

Vaguely, Jon wondered just how long these wights had been serving the Others. Centuries, at least.

He didn’t have Dark Sister, instead Jon clutched a chipped, iron axe he had snatched up from a frozen corpse. In his other hand, he cradled a wooden staff under his elbow, using it to hobble on a single foot. Jon’s leg screamed with every loping step, but he was moving. The adrenaline hadn’t worn off; he was so high with frenzy that he could barely even feel pain.

The dead were flooding through. They were coming through half a dozen tunnels, clawing up out of the ice. Half the wights must have been crushed crawling through the collapsing tunnels, but the Others had no shortage of soldiers to spare.

Once, there had been defensive lines – but the wyrms had shattered those in a single breath.

“To me!” a voice cried over the jagged rocks. “To me, to–”

“It’s turning, it’s turning–!”

“Breach!” a man screamed, so high-pitched it could have been a girl’s shriek. “BREA–!”

The sound disappeared under another flash of blue. Jon couldn’t even think as the wave of cold washed over him. Rational thought failed him.

Yet still the soldiers were clinging to the ruins, still fighting. There was nothing they could do but fight. They were ants hiding in the broken slabs of rubble, digging deep into the trenches.

Yet they were fighting. Every man had to fight or die.

“More coming through!” another cry came – a voice nearby. “To the east, east! It’s another one, another–”

Crash.

Across from them, an iceberg collapsed downwards onto the fields outside Castle Black. The white snow whooshed.

Jon was gaping upwards through the swirling mist, and he saw the bulge against the Wall. Another monster, a large one, coming straight through.

The Wall had fallen.
The other two wyrms were already pushing on ahead, leaving the castle behind them and heading towards the kingsroad. They are hunting down the fleeing men, Jon realised. Any soldier that tried to run was massacred in blasts of dragonfire. The Others didn’t want any to survive. Jon’s army was scattered with the snows.

Strong arms were grabbing him, heaving him towards shelter in the debris of the underground wormwalks.

“How many?” Jon screamed, barely audible over all the noise. “How many?”

“Another breach to the east, a third one!” that was Rattleshirt’s voice. The scrawny man looked crazed with fear as he ran towards them. The wildling had lost his plated giant’s skull helm somewhere in the battle. “Coming through! It’s coming—”

Jon saw it. He saw the flash of its icefire, he felt the quaking of its tail. Three of them, Jon thought with panic. There are three wyrms now. Their odds were falling with every heartbeat.

Then, Jon saw the smoke from men standing atop the Wall, he saw the ice rippling. There were men up there – standing seven-hundred feet off the ground, as the wyrm came rumbling through.

And then crash.

The whole world washed away as a tsunami of white dust flooded outwards.

The ground quaked so fiercely it was like the earth was jumping.

Standing next to him, three men were splattered under a chunk of falling ice. Another had his skull crushed by icy hail the size of boulders. Jon heard the sickening squish as red blood and gore spurted.

Jon’s mind went blank.

The mountainous heights of the Wall were collapsing. Even the deafening roar of the wyrms was being drowned out by the earth-shattering boom of the Wall.

He felt it. He felt an impossibly large chunk of ice falling against the great wyrm’s skull. It crunched.

Most of the ice was toppling northwards, but even the backwash of rubble threatened to swallow them all. They were caught on the very fringes of the collapse and it was still immense beyond words.

Jon was staring upwards, and suddenly he could see sky. Where once the Wall had blocked out the sky, suddenly Jon could see the horizon.

He couldn’t think. He couldn’t breathe. He could barely even describe it… the dread, the awe, the panic. The moment when even something as huge as the Wall fell apart.

All around him, ice was avalanching. Maybe men were screaming, but Jon couldn’t hear them.

Above him, half the wyrm’s body had been crushed by the falling Wall. The gargantuan beast had been left buried beneath a glacier’s worth of ice.

They didn’t run, Jon realised numbly. The thought was so sudden it stunned him. They didn’t run. Jon had been watching from below; the standing men on the Wall hadn’t ran away. There had been
time to flee, but they didn’t. It had been deliberate; they saw the wyrm coming, and they had chosen to drop everything on it. The men of the Night’s Watch had been standing atop the Wall to the very end.

*They didn’t run.*

Jon’s hands clenched.

“Blow the horns,” Jon said suddenly. Nobody heard him, so his voice broke into a scream. “*Blow the horns!* Rally the survivors! Find the breaches and block them!”

Frantic eyes, his feet hobbling. Men tried to grip him, but his voice… “Now! Stop the breaches, ignore the wyrms!” Jon screeched. “Hold the line! Hold the line!”

Men banging on drums, a chorus of frenzied screams and war cries.

He heard a cry – a Thenn warcry in the Old Tongue. Sigorn of Thenn must be nearby with his warband, Jon had to rally them. He was already hobbling as fast as his broken ankle could take him. The ruins of ice and stone felt like a maze around them, a labyrinth of haphazardly fallen rubble. “To me!” Jon screamed. “To me! To me!”

“Snow!” Rattleshirt was staring at him in disbelief, voice wheezing through frantic sputters. “We have to *retreat,* we have to–!”

“Retreat?” Jon snapped around to glare at the man. “*How?* If we leave these ruins, we’re easy targets for those monsters. They’d cut us down running.” Wide eyes were fixed on him, even seasoned warriors were scared out of their minds. “No, maybe we are going to die, but I’m not dying easy.”

Nobody replied, but they were all looking at him. Pupils were dilated, their faces gaunt. Jon had never known, never imagined, so much raw terror soaking through the air.

Jon could barely walk, he had no sword, but he knew what he had to. The broken ankle didn’t matter, he still had to be strong.

The Lord of Bones hesitated, but Jon gave him no chance to object. “Go left,” Jon ordered. “Go block that hole. Avoid the wyrms, just focus on stopping the wights.” His voice rose, turning into a cry. “Collapse the tunnels! Block the breaches!”

The cry was spreading, even as the waterfall of ice cascaded down around them. “Hold the line,” they cried, a chant of desperate voice. “Hold the line, hold the line…!”

Jon met Sigorn of Thenn as he was digging up survivors from the wreckage. Three dozen wounded men were trapped in the barracks where a slab of ice had fallen on top of them, but there was no way to get them out. Undead corpses were everywhere, fighting across the ruins. It was all they could do just to stick together.

“Rally the men!” Jon boomed to the Magnar. “As many as we can. On me, *on me!*”

The wyrms were large and powerful, but slow. They could retreat from the wyrms and take shelter from the dragonfire. It was the wights that were everywhere; swarming through the holes in the Walls, clawing over the ice. Jon’s forces needed to choke them, needed to pull together a defence.

His mind was reeling, trying to think of a plan.
There are only two wyrms, he realised. Maybe the Others had more, but he couldn’t feel them. Perhaps those two were the only ones left. Jon’s men were scared out of their minds, but he could only hope that fear would channel into desperation. Two wyrms – and they could be killed.

As soon as the Other’s army came through and became fortified, they would lose all hope. Still, right now the dead were vulnerable. This was the only chance to maybe cull the tide. There was no choice – Jon had to hold on, he had to keep fighting.

“Hold the line! Hold the line!”

All around him, snow swirled on the wind, the shrieking blowing out from the north.

They had to fortify. They had to hold for every single hour they could. They had to pray that a miracle would come with the dawn.

Jon had seen battle before, but around him… it was like witnessing the end of the world from the front lines.

The wyrms were already over five hundred yards away from the castle, moving in unison through the snows. They were swimming through the snowdrifts, already at the base of the kingsroad. Each beast was huge – as large as Sonagon, well over a hundred foot from head to tail. One of them bore four jagged horns, the other hornless, but they were both husks of frozen flesh and immense dragonfire. A single one could torch an army.

Two. Just two.

Jon could only scream for order, trying to pull the frenzied lines together.

A giant’s club knocked the skulls of three wights straight off, but the headless corpses were still crawling, still groping blindly through the snow. Jon’s axe whacked downwards into their spines, limping on his splinted ankle.

The wights are clumsy, Jon thought through gasped breaths. More clumsy than usual, even – they seemed to lack the dexterity to even clutch a weapon. Perhaps the Others were having trouble controlling their puppets? Perhaps some shredded remnant of the barrier was interfering with them? Whatever it was, it was the only reason the defenders had a chance.

Jon pulled himself out of his skin, using his mammoth to clear a chunk of ice out of the way. He was headbutting the debris with huge tusks, trying to clear the way. The mammoth trumpeted and reared back, rallying the rest of the herd towards him. Giants and mammoths were going mad with panic, he had to recover them.

He heard the screams in the Old Tongue, as Sigorn of Thenn jumped off the rubble straight down onto a huge spider’s back. All around him, the Thenns were rallying around their Magnar – hacking at the spider’s limbs.

“Hold the line!” the voices screeched through the wind. “Hold the line!”

“They’re coming over!” Rattleshirt screamed to him. “They’re coming over the Wall!”

Jon could see the shadows moving in the dark. A two-hundred-foot stretch of the Wall had collapsed in on itself, leaving only a pile of debris standing a hundred-foot high. The first of the wights were already climbing over it, coming down upon the defenders from above.

Endless legions were pouring out from the crack.
Defenders were running. They were piling rubble up to form makeshift walls, pushing broken ice as barricades. A dozen brave men stood on the turrets of the Silent Tower – the only structure still upright – shooting flaming arrows upwards. The lights flew overhead like shooting stars in the black, but they were men blowing against a hurricane.

Then, Jon felt something in the air. He felt his mammoth shiver, he felt the tremble down his spine. A sickly cold mist was oozing over the battlefield. Jon could feel it, he could feel it growing stronger.

He gasped, shaking himself back to his own body. The hairs on the back of his neck were tingling, he could feel the shift in the battlefield.

Instinctively, Jon’s head turned across the devastated courtyard, and the ruins of the keep. He could feel it coming.

“The tunnel breach?” Jon called to Rattleshirt. “To the centre?”

The Lord of Bones shook his head. “I got fifty men holding it.”

Jon was already starting to run, limping on his splinted foot. His leg screamed with every staggered step, but he didn’t stop. “Your men are already dead.”

He could feel it, he could feel its power. The cold, eerie power was forcing its way through the last tatters of the barrier.

Jon didn’t have Dark Sister – there had been no chance to recover the sword from the wreckage – but he held a stubby obsidian blade under his furs. The dragonglass was a short, stubby blade attached to a crude wooden pommel, slightly larger than a dagger.

Rattleshirt was cradling a dragonglass-tipped spear, and Jon saw another man holding a mere dragonglass arrow like a stake. All of his elite had carried obsidian weapons with them once, but Jon couldn’t even guess how many of them were still alive.

Obsidian. *We need more obsidian.*

The cold was coming closer, Jon could feel it oozing from the ruins of the castle. From the half-collapsed tunnel, he heard screams.

He saw what used to be the main gates of Castle Black. There was naught left of them but the debris of a gatehouse crushed under a frozen slab. The nine-inch-thick oak gate had been torn to splinters. The tunnel had collapsed earlier in the battle, but the wights had dug their way through with inhuman efficiency.

The crevice was as wide and as dark as the throat of a beast, a cold wind like an ice dragon’s breath sweeping through it. The debris had collapsed over the old entrance, and now they could only squeeze through a gap towards the ice, skittering down into a cave.

Jon heard shouting from the tunnel. “Fire!” a man screeched. “More fire!”

The inner gates had fallen, but the soldiers had set rows of sharpened spears as barricades. They had rolled heavy barrels to use as barriers, they had set flaming torches to burn the tide of the wights. The fifty men had been trying to collapse the ice, even as the tide of dead surged through.
The half-collapsed tunnel was a choke point. Jon was staggering around the corner, wheezing, staring through the flickering firelight reflecting across the ice. Ten good men might have held back a thousand wights from here.

But then he saw blue eyes shining in the dark, and his breath froze in his lungs. A white walker itself had entered the battlefield.

The defenders didn’t stand a chance.

“Retreat!” voices screamed. “Retreat!”

The battle was already over. It moved faster than any wight, Jon could barely keep track of it. They launched arrows, but the walker parried them with lazy strikes. It was coming through; it bounded over the barricade in a single leap, and then its white sword was flashing…

Jon saw them die. A dozen men, two dozen, three… it made no difference to the white walker.

It was fifty feet away, casually carving a bloody path through the defenders. They were screaming for reinforcements, but the Other was stepping closer. It was flanked by half a hundred dead shapes, following it through the long tunnel.

Men tried to pull Jon backwards to safety, but he shook them off. His eyes were wide, taking in the scene. They couldn’t stop the white walker; it was too strong, too fast, too…

*If we lose this tunnel…*

Jon turned, focusing on the Lord of Bone’s weapon. He kept his own dragonglass blade hidden under his furs. “Give me your spear,” Jon ordered to Rattleshirt.

The man bristled. “I need this—”

“Give it!”

With the briefest of grimaces, Rattleshirt threw Jon the spear. Jon snatched the obsidian speartip from the top of the weapon and broke it from the shaft. The jagged edge bit against his skin through his gloves, but Jon didn’t care. He was already crushing the chunk of dragonglass against the wall, grinding speartip into dust. Behind him, Rattleshirt groaned.

The tunnel was filled with fleeing men trying to run away, Jon had to shove his way through. Jon dropped his walking stick, and scooped up a handful of broken glass shards instead.

In the tunnel, the last defender died weeping, his head parted by a casual slash of the white blade. The white walker turned around and stepped down the tunnel.

Ahead of him, Jon saw light crackling in the black tunnel. They had broken a barrel of oil and lit a wall of flames as a last resort. Not even fire could stop it; the flames were being extinguished beneath the white walker’s footsteps. Cold mist crept through the tunnel, suffocating all warmth.

Jon hobbled on his broken leg, taking another step. Men tried to follow, but he turned and snapped. “Stay back!” he growled. “Stay back!”

The white walker was coming through, flanked by the dark shapes of wights. It walked slowly, tauntingly. It swung its sword with one hand, weaving slow circles through the air. *This is a game to it,* he thought. *They play games. Like children.*
He remembered the games that he and Robb used to play when they were young. The thought flashed before his eyes.

Jon took a deep breath. *So let’s play.*

“Snow!” a man shouted. “Snow, don’t—”

“Stand back,” Jon ordered. “Everybody keep back! Stay back!”

Jon was staring straight into the Other’s eyes. Those eyes were like the heart of winter itself.

He limped forward into the shattered tunnel. The white walker was watching him, while the rest huddled at the mouth of the tunnel, watching in shock.

The cold… it was so cold it hurt to breathe. Every gulp of air felt like it was searing his lungs. It took everything that Jon had not to fall to his knees.

*If I’m wrong, I’m dead.* He kept on limping forward, forcing himself to meet the Other’s blue gaze.

The Other cocked its head, looking at him curiously. Jon’s hand gripped his axe so tight it hurt. He held a useless iron axe in his left hand, and a chunk of broken glass cradled in his right. The obsidian blade was hidden beneath his furs.

His head was spinning, trying to count the steps. The Other walked slowly, prowling like a shadowcat.

They stopped ten feet away. Jon knew that the Other could cover the distance before he could even blink. His heart was beating so fast he felt delirious. *If I’m wrong…*

And then Jon bowed. He lowered his head and swung his leg forward. His splinted left foot moved forward, pivoting on his right heel. He pulled his right arm to his chest, his left swinging wide. A full regal bow, every motion exaggerated.

The silence was deafening. He held the position so long it hurt, heartbeat raising…

And then Jon straightened and flourished his axe, challenging it to a duel.

The Other stared, and then a strange crackling sound emanated from it. It seemed to laugh. It was laughing. Somewhere behind him, he could feel the stares of his men from the edge of the tunnel, watching with bated breath.

The white walker could have cut him down without a second glance. Jon was in no state to parry it – neither his body nor weapon would hold against it. The Other stepped forward, teasingly.

Come on, he begged. Come on.

Two knights meeting for a duel on the battlefield, bowing before each other. A duel; like when Aemon Targaryen met Cregan Stark in trial by combat – Jon and Robb had re-enacted that duel a hundred times. The white walker didn’t react. Jon took a deep gasp of air, and then lowered his head, bowing again.

Blue eyes inspected him. They were eight feet away. Every heartbeat felt like a lifetime…

Then, after the briefest pause, the Other bowed too. The white figure was smooth and graceful; left leg forward, right arm to chest, head bowed low. They were bowing to each other. It copied his actions, like a child mimicking the acts of a monkey.
And as soon as its head lowered, Jon threw a cloud of dragonglass shards into its face.

Tiny pieces of broken glass shimmering in the air, each one sparking against the walker’s icy skin. The white walker’s crystalline armour hissed, then it thrashed. The sound shrieking through the tunnel, resonating through his bones. The axe dropped out of Jon’s hand, and his fingers were groping for the obsidian dagger.

Burning. Its white flesh was smoking. Even the tiniest shard of dragonglass burnt them.

It was howling, thrashing, and Jon lunged like a madman. His dagger slashed upwards in a wild arc, and Jon lunged himself forward on his good leg.

The dragonglass shattered in his hands, and hissed in a billow of steam…

The Other fell and suddenly a thousand wights stopped.

Jon crashed to the ground, landing face first in the steaming pool of melted Other. He was wheezing for air, whole body trembling.

Take them by surprise. Their arrogance was their greatest flaw. *Children.* The thought bounced around his skull. *They’re like children.*

Footsteps running for him. It took three men to pull Jon up off the floor. He was a shaking wreck, and the Other was a smoking outline on the ice. He couldn’t even stand, they had to hoist him over their shoulders.

“Block this tunnel,” Jon wheezed. “Block the tunnel!”

All around him, the wights were shambling, their coordination lost. The men could hack them down, and they didn’t resist.

Rattleshirt was staring between Jon and the dead white walker, eyes wide with shock. “How did you…?” he stammered. “How did you know…?”

It was hard to breathe, he couldn’t stop shaking. “Saw it… saw their weakness…” His words were slurred through his breaths. Jon had seen their vulnerability at the Frostfangs; the very first time he had killed an Other. “… They like… they like to play…”

Behind him, men were burning wights by the droves, while they carried Jon backwards. His vision was blurred, feeling the rumbles shaking through the earth.

The battle was changing. Jon could feel it in the air, he could feel the wights shifting at once. It happened nigh-simultaneously; the legions of the dead were rippling.

The white walkers. Jon felt it in the storm, he felt the wind shuddering. They felt their comrade die.

He heard a screech.

They didn’t like that. They didn’t like it when one of their own died. The legion of wights seemed to falter, but then the moment passed. Something in the air shifted. As one, they seemed to change direction. Pushing forwards straight into the defenders. Then the ground shook.

Jon knew what was happening from the rumble in the earth, he knew it even before the scream split the battlefield.

“The wyrms!” a voice cried. “The wyrms are coming back around!”
“Take cover!” Rattleshirt shouted. “Take–”

The world tremored. They noticed, Jon thought with a gulp. The white walkers controlling the wyrms finally took note of the defenders holding the ruins.

The monsters were returning. The great wyrms jerked with startling speed, lunging backwards like snakes. Jon couldn’t make sense of it, but he felt the crash of the beast’s tail, he heard the geyser of snow spurting as they hissed.

As soon as the Other fell, the wyrms turned back around to avenge it.

His mind blurred. There was no thought, nothing in the moment but panic. He swivelled, trying to limp, and then there were men pushing him backwards into the corner of the tunnel.

He fell downwards, and cold air whooshed around him. It flooded through the tunnel and seared against the walls. The broken gatehouse shattered under a gale of cold fire. Right behind him, one of the men carrying him was swept off his feet by the surge of frost.

Jon’s body collapsed behind a chunk of rock, and suddenly he heard the hissing of impossibly cold breath. Breath so cold it was like fire.

They were all running, scrambling for cover like mice in a hole.

He couldn’t breathe. Noxious fumes choked his throat, the world swimming in the stink of cold rot.

Screaming around him, men with blistering flesh…

The dragon’s breath reached a crescendo of fury. Jon heard fighting, men collapsing under the surge of the dead. The wyrms were right outside, they were scorching against the mouth of the tunnel.

He couldn’t keep track of the battle, he could only crawl, face first on the cold ground.

It felt like there was ice in his lungs. He was screaming for air, but his throat could only sputter. His vision faded, his body going limp.

The first breath faded away, but then there was a second. And a third. He felt the crunch of ice, the shattering of stone. Frostfire danced around him, putrid mist billowing and ice twisting into jagged spires.

The two wyrms were above him, taking turns to pulverise the castle’s ruins into ice.

There was nothing Jon could do but huddle beneath his broken chunk of stone, cowering for cover against the dragonfire spilling around him. Jon felt mammoths going mad, men screaming in agony, winds howling…

The ice above him cracked.

The air was so cold, like a knife in his chest. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t…

The wyrms roared, crashing through for another assault.

His vision turned black.

…
And Jon felt air. He felt cool air whooshing around him, he felt power soaking through his bones. He felt… revitalised, like he was soaked in pure energy.

Jon felt wings. He felt white wings pounding furiously, he felt flying.

The sky roared.

Jon couldn’t even breathe. His body was a broken husk clinging to the wreck of Castle Black, but his mind was soaring through the sky. He screamed out mentally, and a familiar presence answered. It felt like an old friend rushing to his cry.

Sonagon flapped even harder, breaking through the clouds in a fury of wings.

The dragon was flying again. It was soaring on a wave of power, like a swell of energy crackling in the air. Sonagon felt… overwhelmed. Rejuvenated. Images, memories, of steam rising through red leaves flickered before Jon’s gaze, but he couldn’t make sense of them.

Jon’s vision blurred, and suddenly he was staring down through the dragon’s eyes. He was breaking through the clouds, and he saw the broken Wall. He saw entire legions of wights trying to squeeze their way over the broken rubble, and monstrous wooden trebuchets lurched like the skeletons of giant birds. The wights were as small as ants, the castle was buried under lumps of debris. He saw all the things he hadn’t noticed – like the watchmen still clinging to the Wall either side of the breach, and the line of dead bodies pushing their way through. The Others had abandoned all formation to attack.

He saw the scene from above, and suddenly it all seemed so small.

*Sonagon!* he screamed. *Sonagon!*

Sonagon was flying in fast, thundering a challenge. The sound of the dragon’s roar echoed through the Wall.

Just like that, Jon’s lips finally caught a gasp of air, sputtering through the mist. The barrage of dragonfire broke off. The wyrms were turning away, he could feel them abandoning their assault. Jon felt such unbelievable relief surge through his bones as he wheezed deep, deep breaths.

Three quarters of the men in the tunnel were already dead, but the ones that remained were staring upwards with wide, fearful eyes. Like rats cowering in corners.

“What’s going on?” Rattleshirt’s voice trembled. “What’s happening, what is that…?”

Jon did not reply, he could not. He was shaking too fiercely. He closed his eyes, trying to reach out towards the dragon.

The wyrms were turning to meet the dragon. The army of the dead was shifting, abandoning the assault on the defenders without a moment’s pause. The wights all changed direction at once, and the wyrms were rearing upwards. They were changing battle plans, converging to meet the dragon.

Wings swooped down, Jon could barely…

Jon didn’t know what happened. He couldn’t explain it, he couldn’t make sense of the flurry of memories from the dragon. Hours ago, Sonagon had felt half-dead with sickness, but now the dragon seemed… revitalised. The dragon’s muscles were screaming, its body was trembling, its presence was burning. The white dragon felt more powerful than ever.
Jon saw the battle from the sky. He saw the shadow of a cold army, pushing its way through the Wall. Sonagon’s wings swooped downwards, surging.

And white fire scoured over the rubble. Wights exploded into icy shards, corpses shattering in the cold.

One pass. Sonagon was swooping down over the breach – and searing through thousands, tens of thousands of the army of the dead. A few flimsy arrows tried to shoot the dragon down, but they were lost in the flap of Sonagon’s wings.

It felt like an explosion rocketing above Jon’s head. Around him, men were too afraid to even crawl out of their hole.

He saw shadows moving, he saw the Others willing their soldiers to react. The white walkers had planned this assault; they must have prepared for the possibility of the dragon. Sonagon could not allow them to surround him.

Take cover, Jon willed. The Others have ballista that might hurt you.

The dragon obeyed. Claws scrapped against ice, wings folded. Sonagon was gripping the southern face of the broken Wall like a bat, looming above them. The dragon burst out a roar, and then white dragonfire blazed. Sonagon was attacking from above, using the broken Wall itself to shield it from siege weapons at the rear.

Block the breach. Stop them climbing through.

Sonagon was all ice and fury. White breath arced, scouring spikes of ice across the debris.

Around Jon, men were screaming. Cheering. Jon was collapsed onto the floor, but he was struggling to breathe. His head was swimming – his sight switching between his blurry eyes and a dragon’s chaotic vision.

He heard the rumbles. The wyrms were moving, and Sonagon met them with a roar.

The sound echoed through the ruins, and the dragon saw pinpricks of heat crawling upwards. There were living men, still fighting, still holding the ruins.

Lure them away from the castle, Jon thought through ragged gasps. Lure them clear of the survivors.

Sonagon responded. The dragon clung to the wall as it clawed backwards, forcing the wyrms to follow on the ground. Sonagon had wings, he had the advantage in manoeuvrability. Set the battlefield, control the flow of the fight…

Vaguely, Jon was aware of hands lifting his body off the ground, carrying him limply up out of the tunnel.

There had been five wyrms originally. Sonagon could see the corpses; one of them a burnt husk beneath the castle, another obliterated by siege at the base of the Wall, and the titanic third crushed halfway through the Wall.

There were only two left now. They weren’t half the size of the largest one, but they were both big. One the monsters seemed about two-thirds of Sonagon’s size, and the other was maybe the same size as the dragon. They were built differently; the wyrms were big and bulky – they were thick and stocky like engorged snakes – while Sonagon was light and lean. But Sonagon had wings,
while they could only crawl.

The dragon perched on the broken edge of the Wall, its wings pulled in tight and its neck outstretched. The dragon roared, and mist burst from its throat. A challenge. The wyrms replied in kind.

One wyrm twisted left, the other turned right. *They mean to surround you, to drag you down.*

The smaller wyrm charged forward first. Its jaws opened, blue light swelling through greying flesh. Sonagon was dropping downwards, teeth snapping.

White fire blazed against blue. The wyrm was uncoiling, lunging upwards from the ground…

Jon couldn’t see the impact, but he felt the crash as they collided.

Sonagon dropped out of the sky and straight on to the wyrm’s back. Wrestling, wings flapping, claws gouging through dead meat, and its breath scouring against scales.

Men carried Jon into the courtyard of Castle Black, staring upwards. All faces were pale, eyes wide. Jon could feel the backwash of the cold breath even from here.

The second wyrm screeched as it jumped into the fray. Sonagon’s hind legs were still perched on top of one wyrm, but it turned to meet the second with a flap of wings and lunge of claws. Great bodies wrestled and squirmed, tails whipping around to drag the dragon down.

Even two against one, Sonagon never gave an inch.

Crash. The wyrm tried to wrestle, but Sonagon’s teeth clamped around the wyrms’ throat. They were locked in a frenzy of teeth and claws, of tails and wings, rolling over the ice…

Bodies wrestling, but neither dragon backed away. Jon watched with his heart in his mouth.

There were two of them, he thought. Only two.

Then Jon heard the rumble, he heard crushing of ice. An avalanche shattered through the mount of the Wall, he heard the crash of a tail whacking against the ground.

Behind him, a wave of white soared down over the scene, blanketing the world of white. Another body was moving again.

Through the clouds, Jon saw the greying flesh streaked with yellow. It was writhing and clawing. Stubby claws shuddered, heaving itself free of the ice.

It was huge, a gargantuan.

*No*, Jon thought with dread. *Two and a half left.* The wyrm that had been crushed by the Wall was not quite dead.

The monster’s skull was near gone, its neck and shoulders a splattered ruin, but its body was wriggling. The Others could animate even the headless corpse. Suddenly, the big one was thrashing again. The top half of its skull had been cleaved straight off, leaving only a useless bottom jaw hanging off its neck.

It had no eyes, no snout, no teeth, but it was massive – a hunk of mutilated flesh writhing blindly. The wyrms screeched.
Sonagon was fighting two against one, while the headless third writhed its way clear of the ice.

The dragon tried to pull itself away, but it couldn’t. Dead jaws clamped down onto Sonagon’s leg, holding it in place. Sonagon lashed outwards in fury, but the wyrms gave no quarter. Behind him, the ice avalanched as the huge dead wyrm wriggled free.

Sonagon met them tooth for tooth, but they were heavier, then were overpowering him. They leapt at the dragon, trying to tear him down.

With no head, the big wyrm couldn’t breathe dragonfire – instead there was only cold mist and eerie blue light pulsing from its open neck. It didn’t need even dragonfire, it was big. Too big for Sonagon to manage, the dragon couldn’t claw free under the hunk of dead flesh.

Bodies crashing, spurts of dragonfire against scales and claws and teeth slashing outwards. And then the big one was wriggling forward, its tail coiling around the dragon.

He felt the wave of panic from the dragon, its movements becoming more desperate…

Jon’s eyes shot open.

Suddenly, he was thrashing, pulling himself free of the men carrying him. Fighting all around him – they were trying to resist the wights, at the same time taking shelter from the dragon’s fight. The immense beasts wrestling felt like a storm given flesh.

“The siege!” Jon screamed. “The siege – we need flaming arrows, now!”

Men stared agape, but Jon was lifting himself up with his hands. His feet hobbled, his eyes crazed, but his voice… “Now, while they are distracted!” he boomed. “Support the dragon, support Sonagon!”

They didn’t react properly, not until Sigorn of Thenn repeated the screams in the Old Tongue.

Jon was already rushing – hobbling to the east where the dragon was trying to flap.

Sonagon didn’t go down easy. The big one was clamped over Sonagon’s lower body, while the dragon tried to claw its way free. Another wyrm lunged at its wings, but then Sonagon’s teeth snapped at its neck, and icefire shredded through half its skull. Even with half its head cleaved open, the wyrm didn’t stop.

They were wrestling, rolling over the rubble. The large wyrm had no jaws, it could not bite or breath, but it was so, so big. The headless wyrm was over twice Sonagon’s size, its body coiling around the smaller dragon. Choking the life out of the dragon.

“Support the dragon!” Jon screamed to the men. “The dragon!”

It was so frantic Jon could barely even make sense of it. All he saw were images flashing around him – teeth snapping, men running, voices screaming…

They nearly overpowered Sonagon, but then there were archers scrambling over the ice. Flaming arrows, falling like stars in the dark. They were firing, burning arrows sparking against the wyrms hulk.

Defenders atop the Wall – the remnants of the Night’s Watch. They had the same thought he did. Jon saw the slithers of defence still holding.
“Support the dragon! Support the dragon!”

All around him, it felt like the Others’ assault was faltering. Wights were staggering, their coordination lost. The men were rallying, pushing them back.

Men were rushing for spears or arrows, screaming for fire…

And then Sigorn of Thenn led two giants to hoist up a great length of broken timber from the wreckage like a spear, and men set it alight. The giants were loping forward with the timber raised, the men howling, and then they jammed it straight into the dead monster’s scales. Both giants were crushed as the monster wriggled, but the burning wood was jammed into its hide.

The big wyrm was burning. Pinpricks of fire were scattered across its hide, eating away at its muscles. It was burning.

Sonagon was roaring, clawing its way clear…

One of the smaller wyrms was trying to hold the dragon down, the other was coming back around. Jon was screaming, wordless cries breaking over the wind.

Thud. The crash of boulders launching down seven hundred feet. The defenders from the Wall – to the east of the breach. They had salvaged catapults; they were launching rocks, throwing torches.

The flames hissed against the frost, and then the dragon was breaking free.

All around him, Jon heard chanting. He saw men falling to their knees, a euphoria of voices washing over the ruins. “Sonagon! Sonagon!” they screamed, beating swords and stomping feet. “Sonagon!”

The great wyrm was a desecrated, mutilated corpse that was still wriggling. Sonagon ripped away from it, and then lunged down upon the smaller wyrm. It tried to breathe, but the dragon was faster.

The wyrm was shredded under a flurry of claws and white flames. In quick, clean and furious lunges, Sonagon tore its spine straight out.

The final one left tried to run. The Others were calling it back, trying to flee. With a single flap of his wings, Sonagon launched into the air… and then came crashing down on top of the undead wyrm.

The dragon roared so loud that the world shivered. A primal, victorious boom that would have sent a thousand lions running. The undead corpse was shredded by the icy blades of a single long breath.

“SONAGON! SONAGON!”

Even hardened warriors were on their knees, frozen tears trailing down bloody cheeks.

Jon felt his strength fail him, and then he was toppling face first into the snow.

The dragon was clambering upwards over the mount of ice, casually swiping through dead wights. It was wheezing for breath, but it was angrier than Jon had ever felt it. Sonagon was overflowing with fury, like a volcano erupting in its chest…

It was atop the ice staring down at the legions of dead soldiers trying to clamber upwards…

Sonagon breathed.
The world was consumed by ice.

**Ramsay**

Dead legs staggered through snow, and the snowdrifts were so deep his feet couldn’t even touch solid ground. He was half-walking, half-swimming, with the snow swallowing his body below his waist and the bloody black cloak sweeping behind him. A normal man would have collapsed from exhaustion by now, but Ramsay couldn’t even feel fatigue anymore. He couldn’t feel cold, he couldn’t feel a thing.

His tattered body just kept on going, pushing deeper into the wilderness beyond the Wall. The treeline of the Haunted Forest was before him.

Over the horizon, he saw the very first twinges of light, threatening dawn’s arrival. He saw the battle amidst the white haze, and howling wind buffeting against the ice.

Behind him, a trail of black cloaks were forcing their way north. The Night’s Watch’s counterattack was already underway.

Ramsay had stolen a black cloak from a dead body, and in the storm nobody had even looked twice at him. He had torn the dangling intestines out from his own stomach and wrapped a heavy wolfskin shawl around his cheeks to cover his mutilated face. Ramsay could not disguise the loping, uneven stagger of a wight, but that was easily mistaken for just another injured man among a crowd of them. There had been many in the motley bunch climbing down the Wall bearing battle wounds, frostbite, or even missing limbs.

Ramsay had snuck amongst the ranks of sworn brothers, and they had been too panicked to even notice the dead man amongst them.

It had been the fat one who gave the order – Tarly had ordered a raid party to climb down the Wall and target the Others. Ramsay had seen his chance and he took it.

It had been the dark of night, and they had all been unfamiliar, hooded figures atop the Wall. Ramsay had seen the parties as they assembled to head down the Wall. There had been two groups; one going east and the other west – Ramsay never knew the names of the wildlings that led either. Ramsay had chosen to go west.

The Wall had been in a state of utter devastation. They had trekked halfway towards Queensgate before making the descent, and Ramsay had seen the Other’s army looming against the castle. The white walkers had launched simultaneous assaults against every castle on the Wall, but the bulk of their forces were concentrated against Castle Black.

Nobody had spoken. The men around him had been deathly silent. Ramsay had felt the hopelessness in the air; he felt it in the silence. They all knew that the raid was a feeble counterattack, a last desperate resort. Absolutely everybody climbing down the Wall had been prepared to die. Everybody but Ramsay.

There had been well over four hundred in the party of watchmen and wildlings that climbed down the wall, but only one in ten made it to the bottom alive. The winds and the quakes had shaken them off, and their bodies had bounced off the ice like ragdolls as they tumbled.

Ramsay himself had fallen over fifty feet as his numb fingers lost their grip. The wight landed
roughly in the snowdrifts – he might have broken every bone in his body, but Ramsay never felt a thing. He never felt pain, he never felt fear – there was naught but dull, persistent rage.

The first chance Ramsay saw, he broke away from the rest of the men and set off by himself.

Behind him, the party of wildlings and sworn brothers were huddled against the snows, slowly trekking towards the forest. Even despite himself, there was something… impressive about their desperation. There was no hope for tomorrow, no future – there was nothing but a singular desire to kill before they died.

Ramsay could understand the feeling. The only thing that kept him going was the hatred pounding through his dying veins.

They were revenants fixated on a single purpose, a final assault.

_Do not let them control me, do not let them win._

The first clashes against the line of wights echoed around him. There were no torches, there was only a frenzied scrambling of clubs and spears in the dark snows. The men were as ravenous as wolves during the worst winds of winter. The dead were rallying, staggering to stop them as they broke through the trees.

He saw rushing blue eyes in the dark, but they passed him by. _They're targeting the living_, he thought. The Other’s soldiers didn’t look twice at a fellow wight, they didn’t even notice. The wildlings were naught but distractions; meaningless pawns to allow Ramsay to slip through the perimeter.

Ramsay was trekking onwards through the trees, his unbeating heart screaming for Other’s blood. Cold, dead fingers tightened on his axe.

The wight could feel them. They were growing closer, more vivid. He could sense their power in his air, he could feel their touch. The wight was unchained, but Malvern had left its mark. He could still _feel_ them.

Above him, blueish tendrils of the Other’s power wafted through the night. It was vibrating; their concentration was focused entirely on the battle for the Wall.

In the distance, he saw the lights of Castle Black through the breach in the Wall – the entire structure had collapsed, leaving a jagged V-shape carved through the thick of it. There was nothing being held back; the legions of the dead were flowing through.

A phantom shiver went down his spine as he felt the white walker’s power. The world around them was distorted by the rippling blue, they were radiating winter.

Ramsay could feel them, could feel their ice spreading over his skin…

_Don’t let them control me, can’t let them…_

’Why aren’t they falling yet?’ the Other’s thoughts past through the air, brushing Ramsay’s mind. ‘They should be falling.’

Ramsay was so close he could feel them, much in the same way he had done with Malvern. It was fainter now, but it grew stronger the closer he came.

’Any moment now,’ another replied, ‘surely they cannot last much longer.’
‘You said that hours ago,’ it whined. ‘They were supposed to fall already, why aren’t they?’

Ramsay focused on it, following it to the source. The wight was staggering woodenly, limping with crazed determination. His legs increased in pace, moving as fast as the snows and his stiff joints would allow.

Memories flashed through his dead eyes. Mother, Ramsay thought. Mother, give me strength…

He felt it becoming sharper. The white walkers were dispersed throughout the treeline, but they communicated via thought. He felt their auras rippling, their thoughts rising in pitch. He felt irritation. The white walkers were annoyed, he realised, they were squabbling like children. ‘This battle is ours, their resistance means nothing.’

‘Perhaps we should fall back.’

‘Fall back? We’re already through; they cannot last much longer.’

‘What of the beasts? Too many have been lost already, we cannot risk –’

‘Any moment now,’ the Other insisted. ‘They’ll collapse any moment now.’

‘Do not fall back. Press forward.’

Fighting. Fighting all around him, the raid party were pushing through wights. He could hear the warcries rising in pitch, breaking through the night. The men were worn ragged, they were exhausted to the point of collapse, but they weren’t stopping…

‘Brothers, be warned,’ an Other said suddenly, from the east. ‘The mortals are attacking; small parties of them coming north.

‘Attacking? You said that they would fall!’

An aura shimmered; it felt like the Other sighed in irritation. The white walker was stepping through the woods, and casually drawing its blade. ‘How bothersome. Why must mortals always make matters difficult?’

He could feel it. A skeletal wight moved to block Ramsay’s path, but Ramsay just barged straight through. Uneven legs broke into a loping sprint through the snow.

The wights were thick around him, but Ramsay was running. They were moving in the opposite direction, and Ramsay slipping by. *Ignore the puppets, go for the source.*

There was a battle behind him – the wildlings were being overwhelmed – but Ramsay didn’t even care. His focus was ahead of him, his hatred fixated on the otherworldly aura of blue and white.

*Do not let them… Do not let them…*

He saw it. It materialised out of the gloom, obscured by an armour of shifting colours. He saw it in all its ethereal beauty and terror. It was shaped like a man, but it felt like a snowstorm given flesh. The white walker’s eyes shone in the dark, focusing upon him. It felt like pure, raw winter – concentrated into a man’s form. It was so bright it seemed translucent; a young man in crystal armour, clutching a blade of ice.

Ramsay nearly staggered, feeling icy needles pierce his skin. It was trying to seize control, trying to take his body.
Burning blue eyes focused on him. It saw him trying to approach it, and the white walker laughed.

The Other cocked its head and it stepped forward lazily. ‘Thrall,’ it mocked. ‘What do you think you are doing?’

The wight nearly collapsed. It was all over him; the Other was trying to seize his body. Icy tendrils like needles pierced into his flesh, tearing him down.

Mother, Ramsay screamed. MOTHER!

The axe fell from Ramsay’s spasming hands. The Other stepped closer to inspect him. The white walker’s hand extended towards him, in the same manner one would reach out to grab a curious butterfly.

It tried to take control of him, but Ramsay was ready. The rage was burning through him, and his arm was lashing outwards…

The Other never even had time to be surprised. Ramsay’s fist struck it, and there were shards of dragonglass embedded into his wrist.

It was from the fat boy’s trap. The splinters of broken dragonglass had scattered everywhere, and Ramsay had been right in the middle of the shatter range. Ramsay still hadn’t removed the shards from his skin.

Suddenly, the Other’s arm was burning, and Ramsay screeched like a banshee.

The wight lunged forward, like he could tackle it to the ground. The Other tried to dart backwards, but the dragonglass…

Their bodies collided in the black.

He felt it screaming. It felt like winter itself was set alight, the shrieking filled the air. Ramsay’s broken hand punched straight between the Other’s blue eyes, and the dragonglasss smoked.

White icy flesh was bubbling around him, the broken dragonglass was hissing. It was burning and freezing all at once, but Ramsay couldn’t even feel it.

It underestimated him – it did not expect a ‘thrall’ to challenge it. The Others believed themselves superior, and that was their weakness.

Ramsay howled like a demon.

“You don’t control me!” he screeched. “Nobody controls me!”

The white walker was melting away beneath him. It evaporated into a smoking puddle, but Ramsay didn’t stop punching downwards. Thrall, it had said. It called him a thrall.

“I am Ramsay!” he screamed. “I am Ramsay!”

All around him, the wights sagged to the ground. Their master was lost, the blue in their eyes faded away. He heard the victory cry from the raid party, and then the men were storming forwards through the dropping wights. At their very front, Ramsay saw a girl with red and white hair – screaming bloody murder with a spear in her hands.

The wildlings were pushing forward on a suicide charge.
All around him, the storm hissed. The other white walkers were screeching, recoiling. *There are more of them. More to kill.*

Ramsay staggered, staring down at the scorched patch of snow that used to be a white walker. There was nothing but furious relief through his body. If there had been any fluid left in him, he would have pissed on its corpse. *You do not get to control me.*

His body swayed, he forced his limp torso off the ground.

He heard a crack. He looked downwards just as his own right arm broke off with a frigid snap. His flesh had frozen and cracked apart from where he touched the white walker.

There was no pain, only surprise. He stared down at his own severed stump, cauterised by cold at the elbow. *Oh.*

He tried once more to stand, and then wobbled. He heard his own ankle crack — it felt like he had ripped off half his foot when he tried to move it. The leather hide boots that he had died wearing were frozen tatters. His own joints were groaning, his dead flesh was cracking under him.

Regardless, the one-armed wight set off again, hobbling so badly he could barely walk straight. He still had one more obsidian shard, a small dagger-like splinter he had pulled out of his own chest. *One more.*

Throughout the trees, the white walkers’ thoughts reached a fever pitch.

‘*What is happening?’* one demanded. ‘*Where did our brothers…?’*

‘*Finish them!*’

‘*The tree-fiend, the tree-fiend –!?’*

They didn’t understand what was happening. The Others were losing control of the battlefield, and they didn’t know why.

‘*Free folk!*’ a girl’s voice shrieked, clutching a spear as they charged through the dead woods. ‘*Free folk!*’

Ramsay only watched. Men were fighting tooth and nail, as the dead man dragged himself through the battlefield.

The Others had overcommitted themselves to the assault, he realised. They had ordered their troops forward too zealously, sending them to attack before the Wall had even collapsed properly. Now, their assault was being repelled, and the rear lines were pierced.

All around him, the screeching of Others filled the storm. The wind was trembling, the clouds reverberating with their will. They were caught off-guard, trying to react.

Suddenly, a wall of wights stormed out from the black trees. There were hundreds of them, so many the snow crunched under loping feet. The blue eyes were flooded outwards. Ramsay screamed wordlessly, and ran to meet them.

His fingers clawed, his fist lashed outwards and pushed through one wight, but then another knocked him down.

Undead hands pinned him to the snow. Tearing and clawing at him. Ramsay kicked and screamed.
He howled and thrashed with everything he had, squirming on his back in the snow.

Ramsay tried to hold on, but the obsidian splinter was ripped out of his hand. He was flailing, fighting…

“Free folk!” the girl’s voice cried. “Free folk!”

There were hundreds, thousands, an unending stampede…

And then the world quaked.

Even from the other side of the Wall, Ramsay recognised the sound. He heard the roar break over the wind, he heard the whoosh of wings.

The dragon had arrived.

For the briefest of moments, the wights seemed to freeze. Ramsay took the moment, his legs kicking out, clawing his way upwards.

In the distance, white wings flashed through the breach. It was too dark to see any details, only the brilliant flash of white light. The dragon swooped over the breach, scouring the world in icy fire.

The dragon. Ramsay didn’t know how or why, but there was no time to pause, no moment to even think…

The wights were frantic, rushing around him. It wasn’t a battle; it was a huge, crazed scramble in the dark.

The wildlings were howling, storming madly…

Ramsay couldn’t make out any details, but he felt the Others’ auras bubbling and writhing through the night’s sky. It felt like the scramble was changing direction; the wights couldn’t react fast enough, they weren’t responding properly…

Around him, the white walkers were screaming so loud that Ramsay couldn’t even make sense of them. Their voices were the shrill scream of the storm.

The wights were losing coordination, they were stumbling with each Other killed. They were faltering.

He saw fires burning through the breach – smoke and steam hissing against the snow. A haze of orange light was burning over the horizon. He could feel the rumbles in the ground; it sounded like the dragon was razing unholy pandemonium on the other side of the Wall.

Wights all around him, trying to drag him down. Ramsay writhed and wiggled through the snow, pushing through rotten hands and grasping fingers…

The wildlings fought fiercely, but they were being overwhelmed. Another white walker was coming closer, carving through the battle with every step.

Behind him, the shadow of wings rose over the haze of the fire. The dragon was atop the rubble, climbing up over the breach.

Ramsay could only stare as the white light hissed over the battlefield. The dragon’s breath scorched over the no-man’s land, tearing undead bodies into frozen husks.
All around him, there was screaming. Howling. Cheering.

The hooded man told us that greyscale would kill a dragon. Ramsay and that Humfrey man had spent months plotting for the dragon’s death, they had been assured that the poison would work. How is it still alive?

There was no time to wonder. The Other’s push was broken, and the hordes of wights were flooding backwards into the woods. Rushing for cover against the dragon’s rage.

He saw the red-and-white-haired girl finally collapse to her knees into the snow. She dropped with a man’s arms around her, holding her tightly. There were frozen tears dribbling down her cheeks.

The last of the wildlings fell against the swarms of the dead.

Across the no-man’s land, entire legions of wights were being scorched into ice. Not even wights could survive the ice dragon’s breath.

Ramsay was finally overwhelmed by dead bodies piling on top of him and pinning him to the ground. A living man would have died a hundred times over already. His clothes were tattered, his skin was ripped bloody, the only thing left was the shredded black cloak draping off his shoulder across the snow.

All around him, the wights were retreating. The sun was rising, and they were falling back from the dragon. The white walkers were running away.

The battle in the trees was lost, but it had done its job. The Wall had resisted.

I killed them. I killed them...

The memory of the look in the Other’s eyes before it burnt made him giddy.

He felt the Other before he saw it. He felt it stepping closer, he felt its power bubbling. Finally, he saw the white walker materialising between the trees, easily cutting through the last tatters of wildlings. The white sword was hissing with blood, the Other’s eyes were blazing.

It surveyed the field, and paused slightly before turning to stride towards Ramsay. The undead corpse was pinned to the ground, staring upwards at scorching blue eyes. Its movements were purposeful, vengeful.

Anger, Ramsay thought, this is what anger looks like.

The Others were losing. Ramsay’s mutilated face twisted into a mad grin.

There was no mockery this time. The white walker just raised its sword to sever Ramsay’s head.

And a spear plunged straight through its back.

Black smoke hissed, the white walker’s white body was burning into nothingness. All of the wights around Ramsay suddenly turned limp.

One amazing speartoss – Ramsay never even saw the thrower, but it was a master’s strike in the dark. The spear was white wood with a black tip; it pierced straight through the Other’s spine and jammed into the snow. The white walker had disintegrated into smoke and steam before it hit the ground.

Suddenly, there were ravens cawing madly, black wings sweeping overhead. From the trees, the
woods were rippling. Shapes moving, materialising out of the trees. The sound of birds echoed around him, and hidden fighters were appearing from the shadows.

_They are cutting down the Other’s retreat_, Ramsay realised. The wights were scattered, and without warning inhuman shapes were attacking from the woods.

To the south, the dragon was raging – burning its way through the fields of wights left behind.

Hooves crunched over snow, the sound of a beast panting in the cold. An elk, Ramsay realised dumbly. A great antlered elk pushing through the trees, with ravens flapping madly around it.

Ramsay saw the black-cloaked figure knocking through the wights, and then pulling its spear out from the Other’s charred outline. At first, Ramsay thought that the men of the Night’s Watch were pushing on the offensive.

_That speerthrow_, Ramsay thought, _no human could make a throw like that_. It wasn’t human, Ramsay could just tell. There was no breath from under its shawl, its face was hidden by a dark hood. All Ramsay could see were emotionless black eyes looming downwards.

There was fighting and dead men all around them, but the mounted man turned to focus on Ramsay. It paused, before dropping off its elk. It kicked a wight away with a heavy boot, pushing through the snow.

“Come with me, brother,” the stranger said hoarsely, extending a cold hand downwards.

---

**Sansa**

The steam was still rising upwards in the air as the morning sun rose. The sluggish light shimmered through the white, smothering the godswood into a dreamlike haze. Sansa could only stare in shock and wonder.

It was suddenly so _warm_. It felt like a sauna – so swelteringly hot that she had to throw off her furs else she might cook. The steam caused her head to swim. The earth was drumming with heat, and all the snow was evaporating away before her eyes.

Sansa was running, heels squelching through the tepid, mushy earth of the godswood as she stared through the mists. The hot springs were bubbling so fiercely they were like geysers in the pools.

She wanted to call out, but the words jammed in her throat.

Her brother was lying by the roots of the weirwood. Meera had her arms around him, struggling to carry him upwards. Bran was unconscious, his eyes closed and his skin pale and sweaty. Sansa was running.

“Bran!” she shouted, but the boy didn’t reply. “Bran!”

“He’s breathing,” Meera said with a gulp, “he’s breathing, he’s just…”

Meera didn’t seem to know how to finish that. Above her, the red leaves of the heart tree were rippling in the billows of steam. The white bark of the weirwood was coated with dew – it seemed like the tree itself was glowing. The red had never seemed so crimson, the white had never seemed so eerie. The tree’s normally melancholic, twisted face looked like it was weeping with emotion.
So many questions spun through her head, but she could only... “What happened?” Sansa gasped. “What just happened?”

Meera couldn’t reply. She carried Bran out of the steaming trees, and three of the guards gingerly picked up the king between them.

All of Winterfell was stirring. The entire castle was filling the courtyards, stirring with shock and awe at the billowing steam. The castle was bathed in heat.

The sun rising from the east, spilling light over the white stone walls. Sansa was suddenly so warm she was suffocating – she had to pull off her jacket and strip down to her undervestments just to keep herself from burning. Sweat and moisture was slathered over her skin.

The dragon was gone. It had felt like an explosion – a huge burst of warmth. Sonagon had flapped away with an almighty roar, leaving the entire castle stunned in its wake.

The dragon flew north, she realised. It hadn’t even paused; it had just flown north with fury.

In the morning light, the godswood seemed like a totally different place.

Above her, she could see the blue sky. Where once the skies had been dark grey with stormcast clouds, now it was like something had punched a hole straight through to the heavens. There was no wind; the air was still and stifling.

Even as she stood and watched, the snows were disappearing. The trees of the godswood were already completely free of frost, burnt away by the heat swelling from the earth. The leaves were cracking, brownish earth and humus appearing from under the snow. The weather was different – the winds were gone, the clouds swept away.

It felt like a dream. *It feels like spring*, she thought. It felt like the warmth of spring had been unleashed all at once.

Sansa could only gape. All around her, she saw men trekking into the godswood and dropping to their knees.

As the sun rose higher, the mist started to clear but the heat didn’t fade. The whole castle seemed to be glistening in the morning light. The air was so warm, the skies were clear. It felt like the trees were rippling around her.

*The flowers*, she realised with shock. The flowers in the godswood were blooming. Mere hours ago they had been buried under snow, and now they were *blooming*?

Her head was searching for some rational explanation – some way to make sense of it – but she found none.

*What did Bran do? How?*

Leagues away, the fields were still buried by snow, and yet Winterfell seemed to be caught in its own micro-climate. A little bubble of summer. Sansa even climbed the walls so she could stare out at the snowstorms on the horizon, but those winds didn’t come near the castle. Winter was all around them, but it didn’t pass the castle’s walls.

As morning stretched onwards, it was so warm that men were walking across the courtyard barechested and barefoot. Every face she saw seemed stunned, confused and struck by awe. The murmurs were so loud she could hear the entire castle whispering.
There were whole crowds of wildlings and northmen milling outside Bran’s chamber, vying for a sight of the young king. Sansa ordered the doors sealed and the staircase patrolled, but the crowds weren’t aggressive, they were just… stunned. Sansa couldn’t even imagine what the rumours must be saying.

She didn’t understand what was happening. She felt as lost as a little girl.

Her brother was unconscious, but Bran’s eyelids were flickering. He was whispering in his sleep, but she couldn’t make out the words. Sansa kept by his bedside, but she couldn’t manage to calm herself. She found herself pacing uncertainly, glancing out the window much too often.

It should have been winter, but outside the skies above Winterfell were as clear as summer.

*I cannot panic,* she thought with a deep breath. *I must act.* She had to wipe the sweat from her forehead and dress herself in the lightest cloth she could find, before summoning a few of the lords and captains in Winterfell.

“What is the state of the castle?” she asked Lord Forrester eventually, as the lord bowed before Bran’s bedside.

“Out of its damn mind.” The large man sounded so lost. “They want to know what’s happening… by the Others, I want to know what’s happening.

“Any unrest?” Sansa insisted. “Any violence?”

“Not as such, no.” Lord Forrester grimaced, then added, “There’s a big bunch of wildlings that looks too much like a mob to me. They’re flocking to the godswood, chanting gods know what.” The lord shook his head, wiping his forehead. Even inside the castle, the heat felt suffocating. “I don’t know, they’re all…”


“There’s smoke rising from the crypts, my princess,” Lord Gregor admitted. “It smells like burning coming from the lower levels.”

“Smoke?” That caused her shoulders to stiffen. “Where?”

“I don’t know – the heat is coming from underground, and the crypts…” He shook his head. “It’s so hot down there that you can’t even get into the tunnels. Might be the stone itself is burning.”

“Put together a guard,” she ordered. “Assign patrols through every inch of the castle and grounds. Clear away anything that might catch light, and move our stores away from the lower levels. I need you to search the area for flames, and I want a full report concerning any risk of fire.”

Lord Gregor blinked. “Is that… is that likely, Your Grace?”

*I haven’t the foggiest,* she thought silently. “Due diligence, my lord. I hereby appoint you as Commander of the Guard.” She paused. “And stay alert for any discord in the castle. Any violence, any tempers flaring – watch and defuse whatever you can. Report to me directly.”

The lord bowed and then left, still blinking repeatedly. Sansa could not shake the fear that there might be a mob outside the door at any moment. How long will it take men to start sharpening pitchforks and muttering of witchcraft?
This weather… it wasn’t natural. It was unreal, it was…

She remembered those rambling words that Bran had told her, she was replaying them in her mind… They could do more too. They could dream of the future, they could travel through dreams. They could move themselves to distant shores, even travel through time too. It’s not just the birds and beasts either, not at first… it’s like everything. There’s a man who can control the trees, Sansa, or possess the weather. The Others – they’re using the same powers. And I’ve had these dreams; I see men singing to the earth and the world shifts. It’s all power, magic…

It was impossible, she had thought to herself at the time. And yet now spring was all around her and the castle was swollen with heat. How could she ignore what she saw with her own eyes?

There were ice creatures that could raise the dead. There were shadows that could travel through walls and kill people. Beings that could control the weather or possess animals. Her half-brother could command dragons, and her younger brother could summon spring. It was wondrous, it was terrifying, it was nerve-wracking, it was beautiful. Sansa’s hands couldn’t stop trembling.

It was magic, she thought with a deep breath. Actual magic.

---

The Battle for the Wall, the Battle of Ice and Fire

Conflict: The Long Night, the War for the Dawn

Date: 301 AC

Place: Castle Black, the Wall, the Gift

Result: Draw?

Combatants:

The Others

The living:

- The northern coalition,
- The Night’s Watch,
- Free folk,
- Northern houses,
- Northern mountain clans.

Strength:

The Others:

- Roughly a dozen white walkers,
- Over a million wights?
- Several thousand ice spiders,
- Five undead ice wyrms; Jormungandr, Nighogg, Fafnir, Ragnar, Norfi.
Approximately five thousand imprisoned wildling slaves.

Exact numbers impossible to discern.

Malvern’s minions:
- 8,000 wights.

The Night’s Watch:
- 3500 sworn brothers,
- Some thousand allied free folk clans.

Several thousand refugees sheltering at the Wall.

Prince Jon Snow’s forces:
- 3000 men,
- 500 giants and fewer mammoths,
- Allied clansmen and northern houses,
- Sonagon.

Over twenty thousand living men and women total.

**Prelude:**

The white walker Malvern forced its way south several months previously, and spent its time recovering strength and waiting for an opportunity. Meanwhile, a lull appeared in the conflict beyond the Wall as the Others halted their assaults and mustered their forces at the Frostfangs.

As the free folk exodus made its way south, the white walkers used their slaves to unearth the bodies of several ice wyrms left buried underground in a fossilized state. The wyrms were unearthed, and then raised one by one.

After a tumultuous civil war in the north, Prince Jon Snow retook Winterfell in the name of House Stark, but many corpses were left behind from the Battle of the Snows. Tensions in the north remained high, and the land was ravaged by severe snowstorms that originated from the northern mountains.

The dragon Sonagon was left in a critically ill state after Bolton sabotage and poison.

As roads and holdfasts became trapped by the heavy snows, Malvern emerged from its hiding place. The white walker travelled south, to resurrect several thousand bodies of northern soldiers left behind in the battlefields outside of Winterfell.

Alerted, Prince Jon Snow hastily gathered a relief force to give pursuit, but his efforts were delayed by an unknown magical assailant. The being of uncertain origin appeared in the throne room, and targeted the prominent lords of the northern coalition. Many grew to suspect Stannis Baratheon.

**Battles in the South:**

The first conflicts emerged across the kingsroad and the Gift. Malvern’s army rapidly targeted holdfasts and villages to build up its numbers. Severe fatalities, especially among smallfolk, were
inflicted across the north. The white walker headed northwards, focused upon Castle Black.

The defenders were severely hampered by the heavy snows. The wights grew in strength quickly, and cut a bloody trail.

Sigorn, Magnar of Thenn and Lord of the Shadow Tower, collided with wights on the kingsroad. The Thenn forces were defeated and forced to scatter.

Jon Snow led his relief force north from Winterfell, headed by giant clans and free folk warbands. However, the northern coalition forces were delayed by Malvern’s, and forced to retreat.

As the trail of destruction left by the wights widened, Jon Snow rallied more allies from the mountain clans and the northern houses.

**Assault from the North:**

While Malvern was heading north, the white walkers beyond the Wall marched their own forces south. Black rangers provided warning of the dead’s coming, but the Others emerged with a vast army against the Wall.

The northern assault happened slowly, with a show of intimidation from the Others. The defenders under Mance Rayder, Lord of Castle Black, mustered to resist.

However, due to the weather and Malvern’s own presence, Castle Black received insufficient warning of the second host approaching from the kingsroad. The ravens carrying such warning had been torn from the sky. The sworn brothers were caught off-guard by the large host of wights attacking their rear.

As Malvern’s forces assaulted the castle and made to capture the gates, the main bulk of the Other’s forces besieged the entirety of the Wall. They deployed heavy trebuchets and enslaved wildling captives to bypass the Wall’s barrier.

The Others launched attacks on every castle simultaneously to distract the defenders, but the brunt of their forces was targeted against the centre of the Wall and the sworn brothers’ stronghold, at Castle Black.

The commander of Castle Black, Mance Rayder, took a fall early in the battle and was knocked senseless, leaving command of the Wall to the Lord Steward, Samwell Tarly.

The initial assault provided opportunity for the Others to safely move their trump cards – five undead wyrm – against the Wall.

**Assault on Castle Black:**

The refugees sheltering at the Wall were hastily recruited to help defend Castle Black from the south. Nevertheless, the wights overwhelmed the defence and pushed through the castle.

Castle Black resisted for near an entire day, but the defenders grew weary and the wights remained relentless.

With no other choice, Samwell Tarly chose to surrender instead. The wights captured the castle and the gate, and the white walker itself was lured into the courtyard. However, Malvern was then ambushed by a barrage of dragonglass, and the Other was slain from siege weapons atop the Wall.

This marked the first confirmed death of a white walker.
With Malvern slain, the battle for the castle was won and its minions lost all control. Despite severe casualties, the sworn brothers withstood.

**Counterattack:**

The white walkers released thousands of poisoned slaves captured beyond the Wall to climb the Wall for them. However, due to the efforts of Samwell Tarly, and the presence of Mance Rayder, the slaves were persuaded to defy their masters.

These slaves were recruited into the defence instead, and forces were rallied to climb down the Wall and ambush the Other’s attack. Many free folk and sworn brothers chose to sacrifice themselves in this counterattack.

The Night’s Watch rallied the defence atop the Wall, resisting the Others. Siege weapons opposed the Others’ attack.

After Malvern’s defeat, the relief force under Jon Snow arrived at the Wall and reinforced the castle in good time. Castle Black was resecured amidst the battle.

However, despite this unexpected resistance against the Others, the undead wyrms could not be stopped.

**The Battle:**

The battle reached its culmination as the wyrms broke through the protective barrier of the Wall, and the forces of the dead flooded through.

The Wall’s structural stability was undermined, leading towards its collapse. The ice fractured and fell northwards, leading towards a wide breach and a great deal of debris.

Emboldened by the break in the Wall, the white walkers committed their forces into an unreserved assault.

The undead wyrms burrowed through the Wall, allowing the dead soldiers to follow. The defenders under Jon Snow rallied to hold the line at the base of the Wall, while sworn brothers commanded by Samwell Tarly struggled to hold the top of the Wall.

The defenders successfully destroyed two of the undead wyrms. The remaining three overwhelmed them, and the battle appeared lost. Castle Black was reduced to ruins in the Wall’s collapse.

It is the author’s firm belief that never, in the entire recorded history of man, has there been a more climatic and pivotal battle.

Despite the defender’s greatest efforts, the battle was only won due to the appearance of the ice dragon Sonagon at the brink. The King in the North, Brandon Stark, performed a magical ceremony before the heart tree of Winterfell to restore the dragon’s strength. Revitalised, the dragon flew north to its rider’s aid.

As the raid parties ambushed the Others’ rear, discord spread through the Others’ assault. The white walkers grew overconfident in their success, and they were caught off-guard by the defenders’ stubborn resistance.

With the death of multiple white walkers, the command of their minions was lost and their attack faltered.
The dragon, with the support of defending armies, successfully defeated the remaining wyrms. With their trump cards lost, the battle turned against the white walkers. The ice dragon’s breath helped to seal the breach through the Wall.

Unopposed, Sonagon took to the skies north of the Wall, reigning devastation against the army of the dead. Bloodied, the white walkers chose to withdraw.

As they retreated, the Others were harried by minions serving the ‘three-eyed crow’ of the far north. The ambushes were quite successful, inflicting further losses against the Others.

**Casualties:**

- At least three white walkers.
- Uncountable number of wights.
- Extreme fatalities among the Night’s Watch, including Mance Rayder and the majority of the Wall’s command.
- Extreme fatalities among the refugees.
- Severe fatalities among the relief force.
- Trail of devastation across the north. The north will not recover.

**Aftermath:**

- Samwell Tarly takes command of the Night’s Watch.
- Several hundred unchained wights are captured south of the Wall, some of them still moving.
- Winterfell experiences a freak weather anomaly.
- Marks the beginning of the evacuation of the north.
- The Wall is breached.

--- Extracted from ‘Notes upon the War of Change’, as recorded by Archmaester Marwyn in 301 AC. Assembled from witness testimonies. Unpublished.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Picking up the corpses, and the coming of the envoys...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jon

The long, jagged shadow of the Wall loomed over him.

Jon stood in the wreckage, staring out over a field of devastation while horses and donkeys toiled through the Breach. Axes and hammers chimed to clear the path, while the bone-carts were sluggishly labouring back and forth. Huge chunks of ice littered the horizon, and the corpses were strewn out over the snow as far as he could see.

The air was still, cold and musky. After the heart-crushing anxiety of the battle, after all the screaming and the desperate chaos, after all the fighting and dying… it felt unreal to be standing here mere days later amidst the desolate battlefield.

_I will grant a knighthood to every single man and woman who fought through that battle_, Jon remembered thinking. There was no doubt in his mind that absolutely everyone who lasted in the battle of Castle Black until morn deserved a title.

Jon had known more than a few battles now, but none of them even compared to the fight for the Wall.

The charred black skeleton of a giant wyrm loomed over him, skull half-crushed under a block of ice the size of a farmhouse. Its vacant eye sockets were staring right at him. Nobody had figured out what to do with the wyrms’ corpses, or how to even clear them.

Men worked in regiments to clear the no-man’s land. The sound of bells filled the air – every man kept ringing bells to stay in constant contact. No group dared to move away from earshot of the rest – the fear that the Others were lurking in the woods hung over them all. Instead, there were teams of mules and donkeys, and they had to refit ploughs into platters to drag the corpses clear.

Occasionally, buried amidst the snow and the ruins, they would find bodies that were still moving – dead men with pale eyes, left behind. Even days later, the undead were still lingering in the snows, or shambling aimlessly through the woods. When convenient, the unchained wights would be clamped in irons and taken away for study – but otherwise the wights were just beheaded and hacked apart out on the field. Gruesome frozen gore filled the bone carts, some of it still wriggling.

The bells clattered around him, as the teams moved methodically through the no-man’s land. Despite the clamour, the air still felt grim and quiet.

They were gathering bodies, and throwing them on a giant pile to burn. The pile already stood twenty-foot-high and near fifty-foot-long – a veritable hill of tangled limbs and cold faces. Jon had seen many horrific sights, but that pile of corpses was one of the most stomach-curdling.
Jon just stared hollowly at it all.

The world was grey and bleak. The snow had been stomped into a muddy slush that reached his ankles. His walking stick sloshed through the frozen mud as he staggered painfully on a broken ankle. Every step hurt.

Behind him, they needed giants to pile the bodies upwards, while chain gangs of mammoths were trying to drag the larger chunks of ice away. Someone was talking to him, asking orders or giving reports, but Jon couldn’t even hear the words.

He wondered vaguely how many had been crushed when the ice came down. In the castle, they were still searching for survivors in the rubble.

It was all so numb. There was nothing to be done but clear the wreckage and burn the bodies. It was bloody, gruelling and vaguely soul-destroying work.

Another cart rattled back, the mule straining to drag the overloaded cart of bodies. The men just worked in detached silence as they started dropping corpses onto the ever-growing charnel pile.

Then, Jon saw a flash of red amidst the white and grey. The hair of another corpse freshly dropped on the pile. He didn’t quite know why, but suddenly he was stepping forward and calling out to the men. “Wait, wait…”

His steps were staggered, limping heavily on a spear he held as a walking stick. The men looked shocked at Jon’s presence, wiping the frozen gore from their gloves onto their chainmail. “Your Grace?” a man gasped.

Jon didn’t have the time for them. His eyes were drawn to that coil of pale red hair, barely visible under the frost. Jon pushed forward to see it.

The body was unceremoniously dropped behind the mules. He saw her, half-buried under the pile of bodies. Her pale eyes were staring absently at the sky.

It had been so long that Jon’s memories of her had faded. He hadn’t been sure if he would, but he still recognised her in an instant. Her hair was much paler than he remembered, streaked by white, and her face was gaunter and grimmer. She looked older.

Her mouth was parted slightly, and he could still see the familiar crooked teeth. Her smile used to make her beautiful, but she wasn't smiling now.

His hand tightened around his cane. I didn't even…

Ygritte’s eyes were open, her face slack and pale in death. Jon couldn’t even see the wound that killed her.

Men were staring at him. “Your Grace…” a distant voice said nervously. “Do… did you know her?”

Jon did not reply. Words fell short, they felt so wholly inadequate and hollow. There was only a silence, and then Jon turned and limped away.

He never said a word as they dragged Ygritte's body away, dumping it onto the charnel-hill.

He stood and watched as they finally set the fires, making a funeral pyre out of the hill of corpses. He saw the flames hissing over the flesh, rotten meat bubbling and sizzling. It was a slow fire, a
difficult one – there was too much flesh and not enough kindling. As dusk fell, the men needed to constantly throw sticks over the fire just to encourage the weak flames to spread. The stink of charred meat stained the air.

Through the pyre, it felt like Ygritte's eyes were staring straight at him. He saw her hair in the whispers of the flames.

*Kissed by fire*, he thought with a silent prayer, closing his eyes.

The memories hurt him. He could not stay.

As the morning rose, Jon found himself naked in his room, staring at his scars. The dappled light of dawn filtered through the shuttered windows. His quarters had formerly been a groundskeeper’s hut for the lichyard of Castle Black and now it was one of the few buildings still standing. It was cold and cluttered, and filled with the musky smell of damp and cold rot.

The men were camping amongst the broken gravestones, still trying to salvage what little remained of the castle. Jon knew that he needed to get up, but he struggled to stand.

He ran his fingers over his body, inspecting his pale skin. The lines of old and new scars were strewn across his skin.

He felt the old scars from when he had first ridden Sonagon, the cut from the Weeper’s fists, and the knife wound from the Battle of the Snows. There was the ugly wound from an ice spider’s teeth, like two curved hooks that had jammed into his upper leg, and the muscles on his thigh still felt knobbly. He saw the burns on his palm, from a lifetime ago where he had once thrown a lantern at a wight to save the Lord Commander. On his wrists, he could feel the blistered flesh where the cold winds of the far north had swept past his gloves and seared his skin.

Around his neck, he could still trace the razor thin scar where the assassin’s garrotte had nearly choked him to death.

Other scars were smaller. A scratch from where he had cut himself making fire in the north. A thin line where a wight’s blade had grazed him. A scarred rash from where his riding leathers had cut into his flesh.

His skin was crisscrossed in wounds. He traced them all, and then stopped to pause over a faded cut on his shoulder. He couldn’t even remember that one – it was either from Hardhome or from the Frostfangs. There had been so many battles and so many wounds that he struggled to remember them all.

*Scars on top of scars*, Jon thought with a sigh, as he stared down at his feet. His seven pale toes were spread out over the wood. The stumps were smooth and pale.

There were more injuries that were more recent. His left torso was left bruised black and yellow from where he had fallen against the wyrm, and his ankle was swollen and knobbly at the break. It hurt to breathe, it hurt to stand. His right shoulder had dislocated when he fell, and it still ached painfully. His left arm was numb and swollen – he didn't have the same feeling in his hands.

Then, his fingers touched the misshapen wound over his chest from Malvern’s blade. The Other’s sword had been so cold that the flesh sealed quickly, but the wound itself had never faded.

Jon sighed. It felt like he had aged ten years in the last one.

It wasn’t healthy, he knew. A long year of hard living, travelling and fighting had stripped away
every inch of fat. He could see every tendon and vein running down his neck and limbs, like
craggy rope bulging out of a scarecrow. His bones creaked when he moved, his joints ached. His
flesh felt dangerously gaunt, like muscles wrapped around bare bones and withered skin dragged
across them.

>You're a fighter, Jon Snow. Those words echoed back to him. Jon sat on his bed in silence for what
felt like a lifetime, and did not move.

His only company was the great direwolf curled at the other side of the cabin. From time to time, it
reminded him of Ghost, but Summer had different eyes and different fur. The direwolf felt like
Bran; Jon could see something of his brother in its amber eyes. Summer had taken to spending the
nights curled up next to Jon in the cabin, for protection and companionship. Jon couldn't say who
was protecting who.

He wondered how many fights he had left in him.

Morning stretched onwards. He could hear the bustle outside, but he didn’t move. Eventually, there
was a cautious knock at his door. “Your Grace?” a voice called nervously.

They would be wondering where their commander was, he knew. His duties never stopped.
“Enter,” Jon replied curtly.

Two free folk in chainmail entered nervously, keeping their heads bowed. Jon did not recognise
either of them. If not for their tattoos, they could have passed for northern men-at-arms. They kept
their gaze lowered, while Jon sat naked on the dusty mattress.

“They are calling for you, Your Grace,” the man said with a grimace.

>Of course they are. It was a hard thing to finally admit, but there was no choice… “I cannot dress
myself,” Jon said stiffly. “Help me stand.”

Jon didn’t even try to hide his nakedness. It took two soldiers to dress him, and to support him on
his broken ankle. They tried to be respectful and hesitant, but Jon still had to sit bare-buttocked on
the bed while the man pulled his breeches up his leg, yanking them over his swollen ankle. Jon
grimaced as another man jerked the straps of the hauberk tight over his chest.

They also had to pick up Dark Sister from where it lay. Jon strapped the sword onto his belt, but
the leather grip had burnt away, the sheathing had been lost, and the pommel’s great ruby was
gone. The blade itself was intact, but everything else was burnt and filthy from the fire. He still
hadn’t even managed to wipe away all the stained ash and gore. All the ornament and decoration
was gone; nothing remained but dirty grey and black steel.

It had taken two days to recover Dark Sister from the wyrm’s corpse, and the sword didn’t feel the
same.

With his thick furs and armour around him, he didn’t look so gaunt or vulnerable, at least. Still,
even after they dressed him, Jon needed a man to half-support, half-carry him out of the cabin.

The injuries had stacked up, and Jon couldn’t even walk by himself. Still, Jon refused to feel any
shame.

Outside, all heads bowed deeply as he hobbled out of his quarters. Amidst the graves stood scores
of grim-eyed men, all camping on the snows and the rubble of the lichyard. They flocked around
him; many were bowing, a few were praying. Summer followed him, the great direwolf’s snout
nuzzling at his back.
Even at the battle’s end, there had been no celebration. This didn’t feel like a victory.

In the morning light, the sight of the Breach through the Wall never ceased to take his breath away. It was a jagged groove straight through the collapse – entire layered strata of ice were glinting in the light. Ice that had not been seen for millennia; Jon could see the different shades of ice going back in time, gleaming blue and white.

The gale from the north buffeted against the Wall, and the northern winds were forced and concentrated through the gap. The wind through the Breach was so cold that it could bite flesh clean off. It sounded like the Breach was constantly wailing. The army of men was camped in the ruins of the castle, and they were still trying to clear the mountain of debris.

It felt less like a war camp, more like a refugee site.

Jon remembered talking to Othell Yarwyck of the Builders a few days ago, one of the very last survivors of the old guard. Even the most optimistic estimates said that it would be the work of lifetimes to repair the Breach. How many lifetimes do we have left? Jon wondered.

The battle was over, but it felt like the strife was just beginning. Jon hobbled precariously through the muddy slush, looking over the makeshift fortifications.

Behind him, he heard a voice calling for him. A warhorse was forcing its way through the crowd, heavy hooves trotting through the snows. “Your Grace!” a voice called for him. “Your Grace!”

Jon didn’t turn around.

“News from the Shadow Tower, Your Grace!” Andrik Knott called, as he pushed his horse towards Jon’s side. “The messengers from the west arrived during the night – Soren of Thenn is in command at the Tower.”

Jon didn’t break step, or even look at the man. “Its status?”

“They came under attack; white walkers used captured wild– free folk –” The man gulped “– to attack the Shadow Tower. They claim that giant ladders were used to bridge the Gorge at night, while the dead were pulled across the Bridge of Skulls. They report significant casualties, but the castle held.”

His eyes flickered. “‘Held’?” Jon repeated. He could scarcely see how those ruins could have endured for so long.

“The Others abandoned the assault,” Andrik admitted.

At the same time they abandoned the attack on Castle Black too, Jon suspected. As soon as one assault was broken, the white walkers abandoned the attacks on all the other castles. They had been trying to capture the entire Wall all at once. “What of Eastwatch?” Jon asked.

“No word yet, Your Grace.”

That was the more concerning. Everyone was disorganised, but they still hadn’t heard from Eastwatch or any castle east of Rimegate. Jon gave orders to send scouts to find out, and Andrik bustled off. I must travel to Eastwatch soon.

There were too many urgent issues. Rattleshirt had already gone south into the Gift, leading his warbands to hunt down the lingering undead and to search for survivors. Every day, more weary men were returning to the ruins of Castle Black, but they numbered too few. Jon suspected that that
hundreds, if not thousands, of deserters had succumbed to the elements. It felt like half of Jon’s army had broken and fled somewhere amidst that horrible battle, and now he had to rally whatever was left of them.

He had also sent out scouts both west and east to search for other breaks in the Wall – Jon prayed that no other wyrms, no other white walkers had made it through, but he had to be sure. The Wall was still in a state of confused chaos.

Castle Black’s underground food stores, already critically low levels, had been collapsed by the wyrms. He’d sent out a hundred hunters to secure game, but only one in thirty had returned with any success at all. The Others had sent every bird and beast in the forest fleeing for the hills.

At Castle Black, their focus was on the Breach, and what could be done concerning the great notch through the barrier.

More were demanding his attention. Jon was already being pulled into discussions on how to defend the Breach, or how many forces they could recover. He had already sent Duncan Liddle to the northern mountains to secure food and aid, while Red Jack wanted to collapse and blockade the Breach, despite Sigorn’s insistence that they should push forward and hunt down the Others.

Sigorn Spiderslayer, he was styled now – in the battle, Sigorn had slain the largest ice spider in the Other’s army, a white spider so large that it brought down a mammoth. Sigorn had pulled out its fangs and now held them as daggers.

Jon knew that they wouldn’t be able to march anywhere. They had too few supplies, and far too many wounded; the men were starving, near all the dragonglass had been lost, and the losses to wounds and desertions were uncountable. It was all they could do to try and pick up the pieces.

Ser Endrew Tarth was leading the recovery efforts and searching for surviving watchmen – but frighteningly few were left.

Jon had once known everyone on Castle Black by name, but now there were barely a handful that he even recognised.

Above him, he heard the flutter of Sonagon’s wings across the castle, and then a crash as the dragon landed on top of the Wall. Sonagon wasn’t hungry, at least. The dragon had been gorging itself eating the dead, wights and all. After the battle, Sonagon had developed quite an appetite. After the battle, the dragon had been ravenous. Any corpse they didn’t burn, Sonagon had devoured.

Most of the time the dragon roosted up on the broken edge of the Wall, but it came down frequently enough to feast on the charnel pits.

Sonagon had taken its own battle wounds – bite marks from the wyrms’ jaws trailed across the dragon’s legs and wings, but they seemed shallow and Sonagon was recovering well. Jon still didn’t understand how Sonagon had recovered, but there had been little chance to investigate. He was surrounded by wounded and hungry men, and the threat of a second attack hung over them all like a headsman’s axe, waiting to fall…

Then, he was shaken out of his reverie by a bugler’s horn, and of footsteps pattering towards him.

“The party from Oakenshield has arrived, Your Grace!” a voice called, and Jon saw Dolorous Edd running through the muddy slush. “Lord Shieldbreaker and the Lord Steward have arrived!”

Jon stopped in an instant, and turned to the east.
“Take me to Lord Tarly,” he ordered. He kept his hand on the charred hilt of Dark Sister.

The ruins of Castle Black were jutting out of the avalanche of white. There was not a tower still whole, instead there were only lumps of stone broken by ice. They were still trying to excavate the wreckage and wormwalks; the last survivor had been two days ago, but the men still held to the hope of finding more.

Eddison led the way east, across the castle through a twisting pathway in the wreckage. Above them, a falling slab of ice had formed a precarious archway leaning over the collapsed Guard Tower – they had to crouch to make their way through the icy debris hanging overhead.

Even as they approached the shattered keep, men were still trying to break apart the huge slabs of ice into moveable chunks. He saw the trail of black cloaks walking forward.

Jon was surrounded by weary men trekking into Castle Black, their black cloaks stained white with hoarfrost. The ice stairs at Castle Black had been destroyed, and there had been no way for the men stationed atop the Wall to descend. Instead, the surviving garrison had to travel to Oakenshield to use the stairs to descend again.

A familiar broad-shouldered figure was walking with them. “Grenn!” Jon shouted, allowing himself a quiet sigh of relief.

There was no joy in Grenn’s gaze. There was nothing but silent horror as he gazed upon what little remained of the castle. “Jon. By the Gods, Jon…”

He glanced around the figures. There were so few left – all that remained of the men that held the Wall. *But one is missing.*

“Where’s Sam?” Jon demanded. Grenn met the eyes of one of the others, then grimaced.

Grenn pointed towards the broken Grey Keep, and the vaults beneath the shattered rookery. They had only just cleared the stairs to the lower levels. And the library, Jon thought. He should have known that Sam would retreat to the library.

Jon saw Lord Shieldbreaker calling for his attention, but Jon brushed past Grenn and the others. Shieldbreaker could wait. He limped down towards the vaults, grimacing with every step of the stairs. He had to be supported by two men-at-arms, else he would have collapsed.

*These chambers once belonged to Maester Aemon,* Jon thought with a twinge of sadness. There was barely anything left of them; the upper levels had collapsed, and only the vaults were mostly intact. Even the library was dark and half-collapsed, with chunks of ice scattered from the ceiling and books strewn over the floors. There was still no sign of Sam.

Jon passed an old, charred desk and collapsed shelves. *This was where the assassins tried to kill me,* he thought, as his fingers moved to his neck. Even months later, they had not cleaned up the mess.

A few steps later, he noted Mormont’s raven, silently perched atop a broken shelf. Somehow, despite it all, the bird yet lived. It stared at him through one eye as he passed, head slightly tilted.

They eventually found the Lord Steward at the far side of the vaults, over a chamber pot and puking his guts out.

Jon limped into the gloom, clutching the wall to support himself. He heard the heaving before his eyes focused in the dim light. Sam looked a weeping, broken mess. It had been a long time since
Jon had seen his friend, they had parted ways months ago. Sam was still a big person, but he could no longer quite be called fat. He looked starved and sleep-deprived. His eyes were red and lined with tired shadows.

The sound of quiet, choked sobs echoed in the air of the ruined library. In the light of day, Jon realised, this was the first time Sam had seen the ruins of Castle Black. The sight had caused Sam to vomit. His friend looked ill – physically ill with grief.

Jon was not surprised. The air between them was tense as Jon stepped into the underground room. There was no greeting between them, Sam didn't even turn around. “Leave us,” Jon ordered to his guards, and the men who had been helping him walk.

With a nod, the guards turned and marched out of the room. Jon clung to a shelf for support, and then shut and barred the door behind them.

The chamber was left silent.

“I killed them,” Sam muttered finally. “All of those men and women, I killed them.”

Jon took a deep breath. There was nothing he could say that would reassure his last friend, so he didn’t even try. Jon had heard about what happened in the castle – it had been a gamble, a gamble that paid off.

He hobbled on one leg towards a dresser, to pour a mug of water. Then, he realised that the water in the jug was frozen solid. “You did what you had to do, Sam,” Jon said simply.

Sam only choked. “All those people…”

“If not for you,” Jon said slowly, “the Others would have broken through the castle long before the relief arrived to help.”

“Maybe. Or maybe we would have held,” Sam gulped, dropping backwards onto the ground away from the pot. “Maybe they could have taken shelter in the vaults, maybe we could have blockaded the tunnel. If I had known how close you were, I could have done something, maybe I could have even bought more time…”

Jon hesitated. “Maybe,” he admitted.

Sam would spend his entire life thinking ‘maybe’. Maybe if I had been faster, maybe if I hadn’t been scared, maybe if I had known…

Jon knew those thoughts. He’d been thinking them ever since he’d first left Winterfell nearly four years ago. They were the surest way to damn yourself.

Sam finally turned around. He was sitting sprawled out on the floor, staring up at Jon. His eyes were desperate, half-crazed. His mouth stammered, trying to force out the words. “Dalla…?” Sam croaked. “Mance’s son…? What of…?”

He spoke like a man on the edge. He seemed afraid to even ask the question. Jon didn’t know how Sam would have reacted if he had to give the bad answer. For that moment, Jon whispered a silent thanks to all the gods that there was no need to lie. “They're safe, Sam,” Jon said softly. “They're safe.”

They had found Dalla and her unnamed son hiding in the treeline, taking shelter beneath an old oak near the castle. The child had a bad cough from the cold, but he was healthy. She had spent the
battle screaming and weeping, clutching her wailing babe as the ice wyrms writhed through the trees.

Dalla had been red-eyed and trembling as they brought her in – but nobody had even needed to tell her what happened to Mance. She had just known.

At that, his friend broke down into tears. Sam scrambled up off the floor and lunged for Jon in a mad, weeping bearing hug. Sam hugged him so tight it hurt, sobbing madly into Jon’s chest.

Jon didn’t cry, but he didn’t resist the hug either. His hands rose slightly out of reflex, then stilled. He was unsure if he should put them over Sam’s shoulders or not. After a pause, he chose not.

For a long time, they just stood there. He waited until Sam’s sobs slowly started to fade. Then, Jon cleared his throat.

“Tell me everything, Sam.”

Sam did. They dropped onto old, wooden chairs and started to talk. Sam started at the beginning of the battle and the first sightings of the Others beyond the Wall. They spoke in hushed voices, occasionally broken by a strained sob.

At the mention of the wyrms, Jon’s gaze darkened.

“Where did those wyrms come from?” Jon asked finally.

“The Frostfangs, I think. We knew that the Others were active there, we just never knew what they were doing…” Sam shook his head. “Those beasts might have been, what? Eight thousand years old…? Did the white walkers dig up their bodies?”

“They woke the dragons up, and they raised them,” Jon’s hand absentmindedly ran down the scar on his chest. “Sonagon was not the only one slumbering.”

“They were…” Sam muttered. “They were like something out of the stories. Ice wyrms. But I’ve heard of no records of them, I never knew such things could truly…”

His friend’s voice trailed off, while Jon’s mutter was low and quiet. “We forgot. Somewhere in the thousands of years, we just… forgot about them,” Jon continued distantly, as he thought of the stories Furs had once told him. “But there were tales, the free folk remembered.”

Sam didn’t know how to reply. His friend seemed lost for words. Jon hesitated for a time, then spoke. “That wight you mentioned?” Jon asked eventually. “The one that talked? Are you sure it said the Horn of Joramun?”

Sam nodded. “It did. It told me of the wyrms, that there were five of them.”

A wight that could talk was unusual. They had captured plenty of unchained wights, but only a very few showed signs of remnant intelligence. “What happened to that wight?”

Sam could only shrug. “I lost sight of it, I don’t know.”

Jon paused in quiet consideration. The Horn of Joramun – the Horn of Winter – was a dragon horn. Jon had suspected so for a long time. Bran the Builder must have blown the horn, and used the breath of the ice dragons to first build the Wall. Somewhere amidst the passing of the ages, the Watch had forgotten its own history.
Jon glanced around at the wreckage of Aemon’s library. *Eight thousand years*, Jon considered. Just how many times had the records and libraries burned, how many books had rotted in all that time?

The *Others must have the horn of Winter*. That was what they had been doing at the Frostfangs. How many more monsters could be buried up there? Why were they buried there? How much more history from the first Long Night had been lost to the ages?

Jon wanted to curse out loud, but he couldn’t. *Damn it all.*

The silence stretched outwards. “We beat them, though? The wyrams?” Sam eventually said. It wasn’t a statement, more a question. “Those monsters? We won?”

“And how do you know they were the only ones?” Jon replied darkly.

Sam didn’t reply. He only fidgeted uncomfortably, looking away from Jon.

*We don’t know enough*, Jon considered. *We don’t know anything about the Others, or what they’re capable of.* That uncertainty felt tormenting.

The memories of that night raced between them. That sheer, utter desperation. They had fought on a cliff’s edge, but they had clung on…

Jon sat with his head in his hands, replaying it all over and over again.

“What are you thinking?” Sam asked finally, with a gulp.

Jon was slow to reply. “I’m thinking that this winter might last for years, Sam. Half a decade, maybe more.” *Easily more.* The stories said that the Long Night lasted a hundred years. “Can you imagine trying to fight this battle for years? I’m thinking that the north is already starved and strained, and that we’re not going to last.

“I’m thinking that the white walkers are still out there, and that they’ll try again. They haven’t been rushing, their invasion has been planned. They’re overconfident, but with good reason.” Jon shook his head. “They have all the time in the world. The Wall nearly fell today, but tomorrow? How long can we keep this up?”

“Jon…”

“I cannot pretend that we have a chance. We’re fucked.”

Sam did not dispute it. The air turned heavy and silent, surrounded by the gloom of frozen books.

*We must prepare*, Jon thought. *This cannot happen again.*

“We must begin evacuating the Gift,” Jon said finally. “We start from the north downwards, and we move them all south. Evacuate everyone.”

Sam didn’t look convinced. “Evacuate?” Sam repeated. “Where?”

“Anywhere that isn’t here. Look at what happened with Malvern – that was one white walker. *One*. We cannot risk that happening again. All of the smallfolk, all of these people, they’re just more bodies for the Others’ army. We need to clear the battlefield. Maybe then we might hold them.”

“You mean to evacuate the entire realm?”

He nodded. “If that’s what it takes. I will do everything in my power to hold this Wall. But we have
to start thinking of what might happen if we can’t.”

First the free folk had to flee south, and now the northmen had to flee further south. *But what happens when we run out of south? How long can we run?*

Sam looked like he was about to object. He opened his mouth, and then closed it again. There was a pause. “You don’t think we’ll be able to stop them, do you?”

“They hurt us. I think that we barely held them with the Wall,” Jon said grimly, “yet the Wall is now broken. The next time? They’ll walk up, and they’ll only need to knock.”

Sam sagged in his chair. “We need…” Sam muttered. “We need a new Wall.”

“We need allies. We need all the allies in the world.”

There was a long, long silence. The only sound was the whisper of the torches, and the scuttling of distant rats in the dark.

“Wipe your eyes,” Jon eventually said, but softly. His friend had withdrawn into himself, like he was thinking, or remembering something. “Clean yourself up before stepping outside. It doesn't do to let them see weakness.”

Sam sniffled. “I know… I know…” He took a deep breath, and then rubbed his tired eyes. “So what happens next? If we can't rely on the Wall, then what else is there?”

“We need an army,” Jon said, and then hesitated. “The Others can keep on throwing dead bodies at us until the end of the days – the only way to really beat them is to destroy them. Find out where they’re vulnerable, and crush it.”

Sam nodded. He looked like he wanted to say something, but then hesitated. “In the stories…” Sam muttered, glancing around the shelves of books and tomes. “Some of the stories say that the last hero ended the Long Night by challenging their king to single combat?”

Jon only snorted, a humourless bark of laughter. “I wouldn't stand a chance.”

There was a quiet. With a pained grimace, Jon gripped the bookshelf and then pulled himself up. Sam dragged himself to his feet as well, extending a hand to support him. The Lord Steward took a deep breath, trying to centre himself.

*Sam doesn't look like the same boy I once knew either*, Jon thought quietly. Sam was scared, but he wasn’t freezing with fear.

“Start the evacuation, Jon,” Sam muttered, his voice so low and numb that Jon could barely hear it. “Broken or not, the Night's Watch will hold the Wall for you. Whatever we have left, we'll hold.”

Jon believed him. “You have your duty, Sam. And I have mine.” Jon wrapped his arm around Sam’s shoulder, as he staggered back towards the door. “Lord Commander.”

There was no immediate response, but Jon knew that he heard him. Perhaps in normal circumstances, there should be an election, but there was hardly a moment to spare and it felt pointless regardless. A choice needed to be made, and Jon felt comfortable making it.

His friend only grimaced. He didn’t ask for this, Jon knew, and he probably didn’t want it. But still it was not a choice, it was a duty – Lord Commander Samwell Tarly.
Sansa

“Are you sure that this is suitable, Your Grace?” Wynafryd asked, her hands fumbling slightly as she pulled the laces as tight as they would go.

“It’s quite alright, Wynafryd,” Sansa replied. Princess Sansa Stark of Winterfell, she mused as she looked out the tower window. What a queer name. They all called her ‘Your Grace’ now, but the honorific brought no pleasure.

Once upon a time, she had dreamed of that title. Back when she’d been but a girl, when she dreamt of being the wife of the prince, or even dared to dream of being the queen. But now I am the sister to a king instead – the Lady of Winterfell, of the Kingdom in the North, Sansa mused, silently weighing the heavy words on her tongue. They still didn’t feel natural.

The dress had come from White Harbour, but her handmaid had to knot the laces twice just to get it to fit. The silk dress had been tailored for a woman stockier than Sansa – a woman more like Wynafryd’s build; not fat, just with a rounder figure. It was far too loose on Sansa. Or more likely I am underweight, Sansa considered. The recent stress had caused havoc with her diet, and Sansa’s ribs felt reduced to the bare bones. She made a mental note to request more fatty foods at the table – it felt like she had been living off bread and turnips for far too long.

“You look do gorgeous, Your Grace.” Wynafryd Manderly said, stepping backwards and tilting her head slightly. “Silk looks good on you.”

“That’s very kind, Wynafryd,” Sansa said with a smile. To her, the dress was a horrid thing – silk and pearl and silver lace, with far more curls and loops than she preferred. Their kingdom was war-torn and poor; Sansa couldn’t shake the feeling that it sent a foul message for the princess to be dressed so richly.

And yet the dress had come as a gift from Lord Manderly, when he sent his daughters to Winterfell, and there had been no polite way to deny it. Still, the dress was suitable today. She would just try not to lift her legs.

“Please, could you prepare some wine in the solar?” Sansa asked. “I feel it would be good to share a drink with our guest.”

Wynafryd frowned. She was years older than Sansa, the image of a highborn woman, polite and respectful to a fault. “Forgive me, princess, is that appropriate?” she replied. “I thought the Council wished to speak with the envoy?”

“Oh, I have no doubt the great lords will talk at length to this banker. But before they do, I would like to offer Winterfell’s hospitality.” Sansa smiled. “I only mean to share cups with the man, Wynafryd.”

“But should we not wait for Prince Snow?” Wynafryd said. “Or my lord grandfather… I just feel it is presumptuous to make arrangements without…”

Her voice trailed off. Without permission? Sansa wondered. She tapped Wynafryd on the shoulder gently. “It is only a casual meeting, Wyna.”

She curtsied. “As you say, Your Grace.”

Wynafryd quietly finished Sansa’s dress, and then went to fetch her shoes – dainty, satin heels
tipped with pearls. Wynafryd wore blue and green wool with the symbol of her house on her overcoat, while Sansa chose lighter white silk. After a few attempts, she wore her hair upwards in a widow’s knot, but left it unadorned. It would not do to appear a young girl today, she decided.

“I shall not need you during the meal,” Sansa said gently. “You are excused for the rest of the day.”

“Are you sure? I do not mind –”

“Go to your grandfather,” Sansa insisted, placing a hand on her shoulder. “He comes to mourn your father and mother, you must be there for him. Your sister needs you too.”

Wynafryd hesitated, but nodded. Wynafryd had rarely let her grief show, though there had been times when the lady had emerged red-eyed in the morn, as if crying all night. In all the frenzy of Winterfell it had been hard to arrange proper funeral for any of the dead, even the hightborn. Sansa was sympathetic, but the Manderly girls had been left to mourn their mother alone.

The youngest sister, Wylla, had taken their mother’s death even worse. Wylla had locked herself into Arya’s old chambers and scarcely ever left. By contrast, Wynafryd seemed to be trying to stay busy, to keep herself distracted.

She is several years older than me, Sansa considered. Wynafryd was nearing her twentieth nameday. Once, Sansa had looked up to her, but so much had changed. More recently, it felt as if Wynafryd was the younger of them.

As Sansa stepped out onto the balcony, she saw the column of horses and carriages on the horizon, trodding up the muddy slush of the kingsroad. The banners of White Harbour and half a dozen other houses fluttered in the distance. Lord Wyman and company had finally arrived in Winterfell for the coronation of King Brandon Stark.

Wynafryd held the door open as Sansa walked out, holding herself stiff, stoic and composed. The silk lace drifted against the stone as her dainty shoes clipped over the corridor. She wouldn’t be able to walk outside in this garb, but it would do. A dress was to a woman what armour was to a knight.

I have to play the part now. The Royal Family of Winterfell; the lost princess, the crippled king, and the dragonlord bastard. Prince Jon Snow had not yet returned from the Wall, but Sansa had no intention of being window dressing as the rest of the kingdom fought for their lives.

In the distance, behind the banners and the wagons, she could see a column of downtrodden figures stretching over the horizon. The smallfolk were left to walk on foot, she observed. The Manderly knights were at the head of the line, being followed by uncountable figures – a mob of unorganized bodies, all of them flocking towards Winterfell, towards shelter. From so high above, it reminded her of cattle; dirty and brown and bedraggled,

They had been receiving more and more refugees recently. Even a week later, the warm weather around the castle was only just starting to fade – the air was still hotter than it had any right to be. It was no longer as swelteringly hot, and the geysers of steam billowing from the godswood had faded, but the frost was only just starting to creep back in. The scouts reported a bubble of heat spreading two leagues, and gradually fading away.

As the smallfolk flocked back towards the winter town, Sansa knew that they whispered of magic and the old gods.
From the north, Winterfell was still receiving more and more refugees flooding downwards along the kingsroad – all of them with haunted looks and whispering of cursed things. By the tell of it, the white walker had mauled half the villages between Winterfell and the ruins of Last Hearth, and now thousands – tens of thousands, even – of the refugees were making the long trek to Winterfell.

Sansa had wasted little time in summoning as many as possible to Winterfell, where they might protect them. The smallfolk in the fields were too vulnerable to the roaming dead.

So many petty lords and militias had been mustered to fight the white walker’s forces, and yet they had still had scarcely any word from the Wall itself. The battles to the north had lasted for near a week, amidst a fierce snowstorm that was only just settling. *Winter is here.*

Vaguely, Sansa wondered what Jon was doing right now. Any moment now, they expected to see the dragon flying over the horizon. Sansa prayed to all the gods that he would bring good news from the Wall, but she could not allow herself to hope. *No, I must prepare for the worst.*

The Winter Suite felt unusually warm and stuffy as Sansa trotted through the doorway, and plopped herself behind the stone table. The men-at-arms – each wearing white stones over direwolf sigils – bowed to her. The men were sweating under their boiled leather and chainmail. The whole castle was sweating.

A personal guard of the most seasoned and well-disciplined soldiers remaining had been assigned to both Sansa and Bran, to follow them at every moment. Tensions remained too high; they rarely left her side. Even when she slept, she had to leave the door open and two guards stationed by her bedside, to raise the alarm at any assassin in the night. She had not slept comfortably for weeks.

Sansa took a deep breath, gathered herself, and looked over the mess of parchments and letters strewn over the table.

Lord Forrester arrived before Sansa could even pour herself a glass of wine. Lord Gregor was wearing riding leathers under a thick white cloak, sweat beading over his forehead. It was barely dawn, but he must have just returned from meeting the party on the kingsroad. “Report, Your Grace.” The Captain of the Guard bowed. “Lord Wyman arrives with four score mounted men and knights, and a full baggage train.”

“Thank you, my lord. Who comes with him?”

“The lords of the White Knife. The envoy too, and various merchants. They also bring the prisoners and hostages you requested, as well as that pirate admiral.” Lord Gregor’s face twisted slightly. “And one ‘Mother Mole’ – she supposedly leads the column of wildlings of free folk and converts.”

Yes, Sansa mused. The Cult was growing drastically, and it was little surprise they were flocking to Winterfell. Many lords were already becoming uneasy with their numbers.

“And riders from the east come with Lord Manderly’s party,” Lord Gregor continued. “I met with them this morn. They claim that the Dreadfort has surrendered.”

Sansa raised an eyebrow. “Truly?” She poured a goblet of wine. “Surrendered?”

He nodded, passing her a grubby yellow letter from his pouch. It was written on charcoal by a rough hand, and stained by the elements. “Ser Marlon Manderly writes that the castle is in good order, it fell to a successful siege,” Lord Gregor explained. “He negotiated a surrender with a serjeant named Steelshanks. I’m told that the Bolton loyalists lost all will to resist after news of
Winterfell’s fall reached them. The Dreadfort is ours, with very few casualties.”

Ser Marlon? Sansa mused, before recalling. Ser Marlon was of the Manderly branch family from White Harbour, and the new heir to Lordsport after the death of his brother Ser Mardrick. Jon had spoken briefly but favorably of him.

“Capital. Have Ser Marlon garrison the castle, and then move his men west.”

“As you will, Your Grace.” If he bore any disdain towards being ordered by a fifteen year old girl, Lord Gregor did not show it.

“And arrange word to Castle Black at all haste,” she added, “a rider, alas; we have no ravens to the Wall remaining.”

“I will, Your Grace.”

Jon would want to be told quickly, she thought, but the snows will delay any movement. And yet still…the fall of the Dreadfort? They had received word only a few days ago that Moat Cailin had fallen to the crannogmen under Lord Reed, and now the Dreadfort followed. Its fall marked the total defeat of Bolton loyalists in the north. “Any word on the hostages in the Dreadfort?” she asked after a pause.

“None so far, I shall enquire.”

“Do so, but you must see to Lord Wyman’s party foremost, and clear rooms in the castle for his men,” Lord Gregor nodded. “Offer Lord Wyman our hospitality, and alert me as soon as this emissary arrives.”

“He already has, Your Grace,” Lord Gregor admitted. “He rode back with me, ahead of the lord’s wheelhouse.”

Sansa blinked in surprise, but perhaps it was to be expected. Lord Wyman’s convoy moved at a snail’s pace, and from what she had heard the envoy from the Iron Bank was an eager man. “Then invite him up.”

Lord Gregor bowed and then left. Sansa paused, taking a deep breath to collect herself. There were two dozen letters and tasks that lay before her, but the envoy felt like one of the most urgent. They were planning for Bran’s coronation within the week, as soon as the great lords arrived, but theirs would be a short-lived kingdom unless they secured the Iron Bank’s patronage.

Enemies on all fronts, she thought. What would Littlefinger do?

She had heard of the battles to the north, and the swell of refugees brought word Prince Snow’s victory and little else. The snows had subsided somewhat, but they were still struggling to even take stock of the dead and the damaged. They needed allies and they needed support.

But the Dreadfort has fallen, Sansa told herself. The last of the Bolton sympathisers had withered away or bent the knee, and finally House Stark was unchallenged in the north. If ever there was a time that the Iron Bank could make a deal, it was now.

She met the Bank’s envoy at the entrance to the Winter Suite, his head low and waiting by the stone doors. The guards were all suspicious and watched him closely, but the tall and gaunt man kept his eyes downwards, almost like a servant. Still, he was a servant wearing as much wealth as she was – he wore high-collared purple robes trimmed with ermine, and a brimless three-tiered hat. His tunic was gossamer with gold trim, and his beard was so long it almost reached his waist.
With her approach, the representative of the Iron Bank of Braavos bowed so deeply that his hat could have touched the floor.

“Princess Sansa,” Tycho Nestoris swooned. “The word of your beauty was not exaggerated – you look radiant.”

“That’s very kind, my lord.” Sansa smiled, extending her hand. “May I thank you for coming to Winterfell to talk, I am sure it couldn’t have been an easy journey.”

“Oh, not at all. The sights I have seen alone have made this journey worthwhile.” His face didn’t flicker. His voice was kind, but his eyes were calculating. Sansa recognised that look. “And I am not a lord, Your Grace. I am but a humble servant of the Iron Bank.”

“Nevertheless,” Sansa said, “Winterfell is glad to have you here. Please, do you care for a drink?”

“It would be appalling of me to refuse, Your Grace.” The guards opened the door for them, but nevertheless they stopped to search his robes for hidden weapons. Sansa smiled apologetically, and yet not a hint of affront reached Tycho’s features. For all he must have spent the last several days riding through heavy weather, the banker looked absolutely immaculate and composed.

Sansa nodded to a servant, who produced two glasses of wine forthwith, while Tycho stood back to let her sit down. “I do believe the Lords Manderly and Umber invited me to discuss terms at their council?” he noted. “It was Prince Snow that reached out to the Iron Bank.”

And you refused him for months. “Indeed they have. I was just hoping we could have a talk beforehand.”

“But of course.” He sat down opposite her across the heavy stone desk. “Should I consider this a personal talk, or a negotiation of state?”

She raised an eyebrow. “It cannot be both?”

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but I prefer to be clear,” the banker replied smoothly. “In many lands, it would be a grave offence to discuss such matters with someone outside of governance. You are the young king’s sister, but I am not aware that you hold a rank within his court?”

Perhaps that was meant to be a slight barb. It didn’t feel malicious, though, more probing. There had been no official rank assigned to Sansa – not yet, at least. “Then you may consider me the king’s advisor,” Sansa replied, without a flicker. “After all, what boy does not heed the suggestions of his elder sister?”

“But of course. I apologise. I must admit, though, I am uncertain of the hierarchy and customs within your kingdom. It is such a newly-declared country, after all.” Tycho smiled.

“We all serve my brother, King Brandon Stark of the North,” Sansa said, with a sweet smile of her own.

“As you say, Your Grace.” He dipped his head. “And what of your half-brother? What position does he hold?”

There was the briefest of pauses. “Prince Jon Snow leads His Grace’s armies. He is the commander of their ranks, the champion of the North.”

“And outside of the field? What role does the Prince Jon hold in your politics?”
“You are very curious about Jon Snow, my lord.”

“Well, it is curious, is it not?” He took a sip of the wine from the goblet, but Sansa didn’t touch hers. “Jon Snow; proven commander, famed warrior, eldest child of Eddard Stark, dragonrider and perhaps the most famous man in the north, if not the whole of Westeros. The White Dragon – the country has been aflame with whispers of him, such talk has reached even the Free Cities.” Tycho Nestoris glanced around the empty Winter Suite. “Why, if he had taken the throne for himself, I do not believe many would have objected, or that any would have been surprised. And yet, Jon Snow decides to raise his younger brother up instead – a crippled boy, no less. Now that is surprising.”

“Jon is not a trueborn son.”

“Nevertheless.” That single word hung in the air.

Sansa reached for her wine, holding the goblet but not drinking it. “Jon cares deeply about the customs and laws of the north, my lord. It would have been improper for him to be king, and he loves his family so. Brandon Stark is my brother Robb’s heir, and Jon would never take that from him.” She took a small sip of wine. Thick mulled wine – strong and sour. “There is no conflict within my family, my lord. We have naught but the best interests of House Stark at heart, and Jon was appointed the Protector of the North.”

“And the heir apparent to the throne?” Tycho pressed. “Forgive me, Your Grace, but I do hear rumours that Bran Stark’s injury will leave him childless.”

“King Bran is still a child.” Her voice turned slightly icy. She would not mention the possibility of Rickon, not here. “And we have nothing but love towards our brother.”

“But of course.” He lowered his head again, in quiet apology. “I only wish to understand the lay of the land, so to speak. This investment from the Iron Bank requires due diligence, after all.”

“How much has Lord Manderly petitioned your bank for, my lord?” Sansa asked, feigning ignorance. She already knew, but she wished to gauge his reaction.

“A loan equivalent to seven million gold dragons, Your Grace, or the value equivalent in gold or other hard specie.” Tycho took a sip from his wine. “The sum of the principal is to be paid across two years, but the majority must arrive quickly in time for winter. Lord Wyman was quite adamant on that point. All assuming that an agreement is forged, of course.”

“That is a lot of money.” Sansa agreed. More coin than Winterfell could take in twenty years of summer taxes, even without sending the Iron Throne its own dues. “And your terms?”

“The Iron Bank does not accept devalued coinage, nor any alternate payments outside the breadth of the contract. The loan comes with a grace period of five years or until the first harvest of spring –whichever comes sooner – with interest of seven percent per year adjustable with winters. The bank is to be granted a designated portage in White Harbour to which quarterly repayments will be made; we shall manage its transport towards Braavos ourselves. Too many previous customers have blamed their failure to pay on delivery, you understand.” He gave a soft smile. “And in addition, until the next state contract is officiated, there is a designated point five percent rate to be made in perpetuity.”

She raised her eyebrow. “Perpetuity?” she repeated.

“Forever.” He nodded.

Yes, Sansa considered, the Iron Bank was not one to slacken the noose. The rate of interest… it
was hideous, almost double the rate at which the Bank had lent to the Targaryen dynasties.

*If the Others don’t destroy us all,* she mused humourlessly, *the interest rates from the Iron Bank just might.*

But the north needed a lot of money right now. The Boltons had left Winterfell’s treasury barren, and to try to gather levies in the middle of winter was the height of folly. The land was devastated, there was already so few resources to spare. All the wars and the poor preparations for winter had left the north in dire straits. *And perhaps the biggest war is yet to come,* she thought with an internal grimace. *A war in the winter.*

Still, the joke was on Braavos – it appeared that they would be facing an endless winter, and so the North might never have to make a repayment at all. Vaguely, Sansa mused on just how much ‘ice demons’ would affect their premiums.

“I understand the Iron Bank has made no commitments,” she said coolly, without letting her expression change. *Perhaps we can use the Dreadfort’s treasury, if there’s anything left.*

“The matter is still under review, Your Grace.”

“By yourself?”

He shook his head. “By the archons of the Iron Bank, and in consultation with the Sealord of Braavos. The Iron Bank deals with countries, it is beyond any one person. My assessment of the north has only a minor rule to play in the proceedings, truth be told.”

Sansa didn’t believe that. You did not send a representative through a war-torn land with all haste for a ‘minor assessment’. “But you are here to review?”

“Simply to take stock of the situation – my superiors expect a first-hand account of the state before any commitment can be made. I am trusted to represent the Iron Bank in such… delicate matters.”

“I understand. We all have parts to play, do we not?”

“Of course.” Tycho nodded. “And you must understand the irregularities we are dealing with here. In any other circumstances, I do not believe we would have even reviewed your case as far as we have.”

“I see no reason why you wouldn’t. Ours is an old and strong kingdom.”

“But not rich. You have no great wealth of gems, or minerals, or metal. No vast farms, orchards or groves. If we were to lend the north such a vast amount, well, we must ask… how would you ever be able to repay it?”

“We export timber, stone and furs.”

“Very true,” Tycho said. “The north does have many trees with strong wood, and such fine furs and hides too. Your waters are bountiful with fish and lobster, and your silver and iron mines have been productive for a thousand years. But even in summer half your kingdom lies empty and fallow, and too much of your springs and summers are spent simply recovering from the winters. Yours is not a strong economy. You lack the gold to even mint your own coinage.” He shook his head. “It would take you a hundred years to repay the Iron Bank’s loan.”

“Is that not good for you? From what I understand, the Iron Throne is still paying off the debts made in Maegor’s time, but who cares? We need not pay the debt, we need only pay the interest on
them. A long debt is only more profitable for the banker.”

“Only if your kingdom lasts a hundred years,” he said grimly.

“Ours is the oldest kingdom in the realm, my lord. The Kingdom of the North was ancient long before there even were seven kingdoms. Winterfell has survived the last eight thousand years.”

“Perhaps.” A single non-committal perhaps, the man could have shrugged. “But the matter goes beyond finances. To say nothing of the contractual difficulties… understand that it is a great taboo for me to even be here. The Iron Bank is in contract with your enemy – we do support King Aegon Targaryen, after all.”

She had expected this. “And how many dragons does King Aegon have?”

For once, a grin split the banker’s face. “Indeed,” he conceded. “But nevertheless, a deal was made, and King Aegon is fulfilling his end of the bargain admirably. The revived Targaryen regime has accepted the debt of their predecessor, they have restored political and fiscal order, and they have already paid their first instalments towards Braavos. There is no reason for us to break our contract with them. For us to ally with their enemy is a severe breach of trust.”

“I feel like that is a short-sighted approach, my lord. Or perhaps it is too long-sighted.” She took another sip of wine, and then leaned over the table. “You are aware that my brother’s dragon is well over a hundred feet long, yes? Larger than Balerion the Black Dread.”

“So I hear. I would very much like to see it myself.”

“You will,” Sansa promised. “Tell me, if my brother flew south and demolished King’s Landing in dragonfire, then would Aegon still be making his interest payments?”

Tycho didn’t immediately react. His eyes did not widen, but his lips thinned. There was a long silence as the atmosphere turned icy. Sansa kept her gaze steady. “Is that…?” Tycho paused, then spoke lowly. “Should I consider that as a threat, Your Grace?”

“Not at all. I’m merely speculating on hypotheticals,” Sansa said smoothly. “For instance… consider this version of events; winter comes, the north is poor, and the north starves. All men need to eat, and I imagine that my countrymen will become quite desperate. And, of course, with no other choice available… the only place where we could survive is the south, is it not? Thus – if matters continue without aid – I fear that a conflict with King Aegon may become inevitable.

“It makes me think of rats in a pit, actually,” she mused, as Tycho stayed quiet, “so long as the rats are well-fed and safe, then they’ll be content. But if you starve and rile the pit, then those rats will tear each other apart.”

The representative of the Iron Bank didn’t reply, but his eyes were sharp. Sansa’s lips curled up at the edges, but it wasn’t a smile. “Let us work through that scenario,” she continued. “I think that a winter’s war against the south might become quite likely. Nigh unavoidable, alas. And perhaps we would struggle to conquer the south, but I rather think that we could do a good job in destroying it. I mean, could you imagine the devastation if my brother were to set his dragon loose? Like he did at the Twins, perhaps?” She said the words like they were a little jape, but there was no humour in them.

Tycho turned very stiff. He was looking in her eyes, and she was smiling like she’d just made a girl’s jape, but she really, really wasn’t jesting. “I was hoping this would be a calm, rational and civilised negotiation, Your Grace.”
“So was I, my lord – believe me, so was I,” Sansa replied, letting her smile drop slightly. “But I’m a realist.”

“Tell me, how old are you, my lady?”

“Oh no. It’s impolite for a lady to discuss her age,” Sansa chuckled. “But besides, you already know, don’t you? You just want to weaken my position by pointing out my youth. Would you rather dismiss me as a pretty face in a low-cut dress, rather than taking my threats seriously?”

“You said that they weren’t threats.”

“Forgive me. I slipped,” Sansa lied. “I am just trying to make sure you are aware that the north could really use the Iron Bank’s patronage. Elsewise, can you imagine the steps that we might be forced to take without it?”

“Spare me the doubletalk.” The banker’s voice stayed calm, low, but his tone turned cold. “What are you suggesting?”

“Keep the pit well-fed, my lord.” Do not fuck with the rats. “The Iron Bank has a vested interest in Westeros staying secure. Now, whether this King Aegon likes it or not, the north is part of Westeros. We do desperately need your patronage, lest the alternatives we might resort to are grim.”

Make a contract with us, or we might destroy your contract with the Iron Throne. She could think of no clearer way to say it.

“Now then,” Sansa said, as she leaned back in her seat. “Later today, I am sure Lord Manderly will invite you to his solar, where, along with many other great and noble lords, they will present an attractive offer in return for the Iron Banks patronage. The North is the closest neighbour to Braavos after all – I know that Prince Jon is even willing to vow that his dragon will be readied to protect the Free City, should you call upon it.

“We want your trade and your bank; Winterfell is very eager for an alliance with Braavos, and I am sure Lord Manderly will try to convince you of the benefits. Still, I know that you will be sceptical.” She gave another smile. “And so, I would like you to remember this conversation as well. Consider what might happen if the Bank refuses to support us.”

There was silence. Their wine cups were left near untouched; Sansa had been drinking only the smallest sips. Sansa counted the heartbeats. After a dozen, Tycho spoke. “You should know,” he said grimly, “the Iron Bank of Braavos does not respond well to threats.”

“It’s not a threat,” Sansa lied. “Just a hypothetical. Please, listen to Lord Manderly – I’m sure he will make a better case than a silly little girl like me.”

“I’ve been looking at her like she was a silly little girl. The Iron Bank understands war, Your Grace. We have a motto; war is business, and yet peace is profit.”

A loan can only be repaid if a country is at peace, Sansa mused. “I understand.”

“And perhaps we could convince the archons to support the independent Kingdom of the North,”
Tycho said slowly. “But, if there was another condition added to the negotiations, well, I feel confident that that could improve the outlook.”

She leant forward over the table. “What do you have in mind?”


Sansa paused. “Do you expect the north to cede its new independence?”

“That is between you and the Iron Throne. But if you were to make peace between your state and the Seven Kingdoms, then the Iron Bank will happily support both. I would then stake my life that your loan and alliance would then be approved. The full market of Braavos will become available to you.”

“Ah.”

There was nothing more to be said for a while. Sansa set her lips into a line and considered it. Yes, she decided, it makes sense from their perspective. The Iron Bank could only support both the North and the Seven Kingdoms if there was no conflict of interest between them. King Aegon would have to acknowledge the north as an independent state, to agree to their respective borders at the Neck.

It was… something to consider. The North would not kneel to the Iron Throne again, not now. The entire north had wanted to separate itself with Robb, and even now it held the same desire. Too many lines had been crossed by the southerners, too much bad blood had simmered.

Perhaps that left only two options; the Seven Kingdoms would have to conquer the North again, or the North would have to conquer the Seven Kingdoms. Or mayhaps there could be peace.

The silence in the suite stretched for near too long, as they both silently considered the future. “How much do you know of King Aegon, Your Grace?” Tycho eventually offered, tilting his head in a slight curious motion.

Sansa had to think for a moment. Events in the south had been hectic, and Winterfell was too removed from most ravens. There was too much she did not know – which she would never admit here. She pursed her lips, then spoke. “I have been kept up to date on his exploits. I know that Aegon is young, supposedly brave, and seemingly fair. He leads an army of mercenaries, he is very well-supported, and he claims to have come back from the dead. He has conquered the realm – well, a third of it.” Not including the bits that Euron Greyjoy and Jon Snow had conquered first, she added to herself. “And yet they also say he’s a pretender, a mummer’s dragon.”

“Words are wind. What is undoubted, however, is that King Aegon has achieved vengeance for your family by toppling the Lannisters.”

“That is true,” she admitted. And I pray thanks to the gods every night for that. Cersei Lannister was most certainly dead – and for that Sansa was grateful to Aegon. The Lannisters were ruined, and the whole realm was thankful. “But from what I understand of this Aegon, the Young Dragon,” Sansa continued after a while, “he is a man who considers himself the Conqueror come again. He will not be happy to accept only two thirds of his kingdom.”

“That may be so, Your Grace. But even Aegon the Conqueror was forced to concede Dorne’s independence during his lifetime. It is my hope that this Aegon may be practical himself.”

“And I trust that – in order to accommodate such a deal – the Iron Bank will throw their weight in approval of peace as well?”
Tycho nodded. “I believe that many of his colleagues will be very open to the idea. There are representatives in King’s Landing that will be urging the same. With all the difficulties that Aegon is dealing with on other fronts, yes, I think that peace between you could be very viable.”

Sansa scratched her chin in thought. She held nothing against King Aegon Targaryen, although she had no real vested interest in him one way or another. Some called him brave, but his alliance with the Imp and all those rumours of assassinations gave Sansa pause.

_Tyrion Lannister – my technical husband._ Just the thought of him dredged up too many memories, too many things she’d rather forget. Sansa was loath to even see him again.

_Yet the north has no real reason not to ally with Aegon,_ she considered, _so long as he’s willing to tolerate our independence._ The more she deliberated the notion, the more attractive it seemed.

Still, she let none of her thoughts show on her expression. Across the table, Tycho cleared his throat. “I can think of many reasons why the interests of the north and south align. For instance, there is the matter of the ironborn.”

Sansa raised an eyebrow. “Euron Greyjoy has proven himself a very dangerous man,” Tycho continued. “A man without conscience or restraint. The ironborn invade both your realms.”

“No, ours,” Sansa replied. “The reavers have been cleared from our western shores, there are none left but a few rogue bands on the Stony Shore.” _Which they are welcome to reave,_ Sansa thought in silent bitterness, _they might even find a couple of sheep left._

“Nevertheless,” he insisted, “the Iron Islands are a common enemy to Winterfell and King’s Landing both. They speak of the Crow’s Eye in hushed breath – they whisper of unholy powers at his command.”

Sansa allowed a smile. “Words are wind, are they not?”

“That is hard to say. Too few witnesses survive even to tell tales about him.” Tycho shook his head, beard swaying, his eyes grim. “But there have been far too many disasters to Euron’s name for me to dismiss them. Most certainly, the fate of Oldtown is the greatest calamity to befall Westeros in millennia.”

Sansa paused, carefully inspecting the banker’s gaze. He showed no sign of exaggeration; he was not taking the talk surrounding the kraken king lightly, no matter how fanciful. Tycho slowly cleared his throat. “Now, if the North were to assist the Seven Kingdoms against the ironborn, then that would go a long way to secure a happy resolution for all. It is to both your interests to see justice done against the ironborn, is it not?”

_Ah, how all the pieces fall._ Dragon or not, there was little doubt that Aegon would be far more concerned about Euron than he would be about Jon. Euron was expanding aggressively against Aegon, while Jon had made a point to leave the south alone, the Freys aside. And peace was profitable for the Iron Bank.

Sansa spent a long time in consideration, her mind racing through the possibilities. They couldn’t survive with enemies on all fronts. If they made peace with the south, destroyed the enemies in the west, and allied themselves with the east… yes, then they’d be able to focus solely on the true threat to the north. That could work.

_Still, what will be the best deal for us?_

“Tell me about Stannis Baratheon, my lord,” Sansa said suddenly.
Tycho blinked in surprise. “Excuse me?”

“You suggest to make peace with Aegon,” she said innocently. “But wouldn’t Stannis Baratheon be the true heir to the Iron Throne?”

“I would… I would not recommend such. The Iron Bank reached out to Stannis at one point, and we found him to be wholly unsuitable. A fanatic.” Tycho shook his head. “He is not a man that could bring peace to a troubled realm. And this realm is extremely troubled.”

“And yet Stannis sits on Dragonstone, does he not?” she asked, and Tycho nodded. “And how long will it take King Aegon to remove him from that seat?”

He shrugged. “A year, maybe more.”

“A year,” Sansa repeated.

“That is about how long it took Dragonstone to fall the last time,” During her father’s rebellion, she recalled, Stannis had been the one to capture the isle. How things come around again. “King Aegon will have to raise a fleet to besiege it.”

A year. The thought of those bloody bodies strewn before the Winter Throne flashed before her vision. The great hall stained black by ash. Sewing the Greatjon’s guts back together. A year isn’t fast enough. A day might not be fast enough.

Sansa pursed her lips, and leaned across the table. “Well…” Sansa mused. “I admit, that the offer you make is attractive, but Stannis stands as a severe concern for us.”

The banker looked off-guard; he hadn’t been expecting this turn in the conversation. “Perhaps you could relay a suggestion to Aegon’s ears?” Sansa suggested. “The north will be much more willing to negotiate, so long as Stannis Baratheon falls faster.”

Tycho blinked. “Yes…” he said with uncertainty. “That could be arranged.” He paused. “May I ask, what is Stannis Baratheon to you?”

Corpses before the Winter Throne… “A disturbance, my lord,” she replied simply.

“I had heard rumours that Stannis collided with Jon Snow beyond the Wall, but I was unsure of their credibility.”

“Stannis is simply an obstruction that I would see removed.” Her face gave nothing away. “Quickly, preferably.”

“I am sure that King Aegon shares your concern.” He smiled, slightly wooden. “Another common interest between north and south, it seems.”

There was a silence over the stone table.

“Thank you for your offer,” Sansa said finally, with a smile as she stood up. “I will have to speak with my brothers about it. In the meantime, I do hope you enjoy the feast Lord Manderly will throw.”

“I’m sure I will.” Tycho stood up as well, and then bowed. “This was… most helpful, Your Grace.”

“Likewise.” Sansa gave a sweet curtsying. “Oh, one more matter, my lord,” she said, as if she
forgot, “what have you heard concerning Daenerys Targaryen?”

“Daenerys?” Tycho frowned. “She has set herself up in Slaver’s Bay, I believe, she is ruling from Meereen as queen. Her intentions regarding Westeros are unknown, but presently she is not a concern.”

The banker had a very good poker face, Sansa noted, but he wasn’t perfect. “I understand.” She nodded. “But do keep me informed. And please give my regards to your colleagues.”

“As you will, Your Grace.” He gave another bow, and Sansa sat back down in her seat.

The representative of the Iron Bank turned towards the door. Sansa paused at the table. “Oh, and Tycho?” she called suddenly, just before he left. The banker froze. “The loan required from the Iron Bank has just gone up to a straight eight million. That is the cost of adding a peace agreement into the terms, and peace is profit, after all.”

Tycho Nestoris paused, but then left without another word.

Once he was gone, Sansa took a deep breath. There was much to consider.

Stannis Baratheon. If they were right, and if it had been Stannis who summoned that shadow, then presumably he might do so again. What if another shadow assassin appears during Bran’s coronation? she wondered. Or during the council? The guards in the castle all held weirwood stakes, but that might not be enough. They might not survive another one.

No, they could not risk another shadow like it – both Stannis and the witch that served him had to be destroyed with all haste.

A servant came into the suite to clean up. Sansa eyed the neglected wine on the table, then raised a hand to halt him. She drank her cup in a single gulp. Jumping at shadows, she thought distastefully as she swallowed and then took her leave. Her eyes flickered over all the hectic activity happening outside in the courtyard, but her mind was elsewhere.

Personally, she couldn’t shake the suspicion that Stannis had allied with the white walkers. The thought of all those unholy powers apparently at his call had caused her many sleepless nights.

Magic, she thought as she rubbed her eyes. Cursed magic. The armies she could understand, the people she could deal with, but the magic caused her head to spin. Magic made Sansa feel scared; it felt like a whole different game, one which she didn’t know the rules of.

What has the world come to – that I must try to plan for living shadows and ice demons?

Stannis had to be removed. The easiest way would be if Jon and his dragon razed Dragonstone from the air, with the support of Aegon and his army, Sansa considered. It would even be a good way to secure a peace between them, and to remove a threat. So long as King Aegon agrees to such.

“Tell me,” Sansa asked Lord Gregor Forrester curiously, some time after the banker had left. The former Glover bannerman was now serving as the captain of Winterfell’s guard, and had been reporting to her on the refugees outside Winterfell’s gates. “What is your opinion concerning Aegon Targaryen?”

The lord frowned. “The most recent one? Good for him, I say. I lost family and good men fighting the Lannisters alongside Robb, and this Aegon has naught but my thanks for avenging them.”

Sansa was not so easily convinced.
She would have to write some letters, put some wheels in motion. Sansa looked down at the pile of parchments before her. Another sleepless night, it seemed.

There were more who wanted her attention. The knights from White Harbour were pouring through the gates, to say nothing about the ‘dragon cultists’ filling up Winterfell. There was news of Lyra and Lyanna Mormont heading from Bear Island for the coronation, but Sansa was more concerned of Lord Reed’s journey north from the Moat. From the dungeons, Sansa was also told that Barbrey Dustin had demanded to see her, but Sansa had far more pressing concerns.

Outside in the yards, a short and leathery woman in furs, almost a dwarf, was preaching before the castle. Sansa could not make out the words, only the shrill, fanatic screams. The sound of the pagan sermon was an unpleasant backdrop to her morning.

Sansa was halfway through drafting a letter for King’s Landing when she heard the voices from outside. At once, her guards jumped.

“I wish to speak to the king, he is…”

“No entry,” a man-at-arm’s voice commanded. “Step back now.”

“It is I, Admiral in His Grace's service, you do not…! Keep your hands off me, you grunt, I demand…!”

“Move away from the –”

“I insist on seeing… Salladhor! Salladhor Saan!”

It sounded like a scuffle rising in the corridor. Sansa looked upwards, just as her guard stepped into the room. The belligerent guest was not leaving, it seemed.

“Let him through, ser,” she ordered.

The man relayed the order, and she heard an indignant scoff from outside. There was the beat of heavy guards’ boots, and the tapping of leather high heels.

Lord Salladhor of House Saan stepped before her. Sansa had seen the man before only briefly, but there could be no mistaking him. The former pirate was eccentrically dressed; he wore sealskin pantaloons, a thick cotton shawl, and a wide-brimmed floppy hat with a ludicrously colourful feather sticking from the tip. He dressed himself in bright purples and greens. He was a blustering figure, with a swagger in his steps. He was an older man with sun-tanned skin, white hair and laughter lines creasing his skin, but still spry and lean.

A pirate. Sansa had heard much concerning the man. Her hands were folded across her waist as he stepped into the suite.

He grinned brightly, showing teeth. The guards kept close to his side, watching every movement.

“Princess Sansa, I believe?” He bowed in Lyseni style, sweeping his hands low. “It is an honour to make your acquaintance. Why, you are as beautiful as the tales tell.”

“So I’m told, but I’m also very busy, my lord,” she replied curtly. “You have business?”

“Alas, I have travelled many leagues to be here, I come with urgent news for the crown. I wish to speak to the King Snow?”
“Prince Snow, rather,” Sansa said, and a frown flickered across Salladhor’s face. “And the prince is not present.”

Salladhor froze, with a waxy smile. “He assigned me my task, I must discuss matters with him…”

“Prince Snow is fighting a war,” she replied. “His task is to defend the kingdom, and it is mine to keep the kingdom running.”

The lord paused, and measured her eyes, before his gaze flickered around the empty chamber. Then, Salladhor smiled, and bowed again. “Forgive the intrusion, princess. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, I am but your humble servant.”

There was no shortage of ‘humble’ servants, it seemed. She didn't return the smile. “I know of you – Lord of the Bite, I hear.”

“Aye, and I serve as an admiral in His Grace’s fleet. Whatever the need, I am at your disposal.”

“Really? Did you offer Stannis Baratheon the same service?”

At that, his eyes darkened. His lips pursed, the fake joviality draining from his voice. “I assure you, there are none who will wreak worse vengeance against Stannis than I.”

“So I've heard.” She was cautious, inspecting him. “Tell me something, my lord – why did my brother spare your life after you fought against him?”

“So I could travel the Free Cities in his name. From Braavos to Lys, I have represented his interests. I have flown the flag of the northern coalition most proudly, oh yes.” He smiled again. “Have I not been a devoted servant to King Snow?”

“That remains to be seen.” Still, with a nod, she motioned at Lord Saan to take a seat. “But I find it hard to trust a man who earns his position through betrayal.”

“Betrayal?” He even looked confused. “Why, who has known the sting of betrayal more than I? I have not betrayed, I have suffered betrayals – Stannis betrayed me and stole my ships. He lied to me with false promises, tricking me into supporting his folly. It was Jon Snow that offered me a chance for justice, and which I eagerly accepted. I have given him naught but grateful loyalty ever since.”

“You backstabbed the fleet that attacked White Harbour, did you not?”

“Never! I was loyal to the north all along! I was docked in Braavos when I heard of Aurane Waters and his plan. I wanted to stop them – but alas I had only one ship against their half a hundred, how could I?” He shook his head dramatically. “So I had to join up with them – as a means to forewarn the north. I joined their ranks and I waited for an opportunity to cripple them.”

_That he did_, Sansa admitted. The attack on White Harbour had failed and the north had captured several large dromonds thanks to the pirate’s actions. Salladhor had ransomed his deeds to earn his new title. Still, that didn't mean she had to trust him.

He leaned back confidently in his seat, with a smug smile. “You were the one that arranged the deal with the Iron Bank?” she asked.

He nodded. “That and more. I spent many months scouting out opportunities for the north. My family in Lys is most prepared to do trade with the White Dragon.” He reached out and extended a scrap of parchment over the table. “And I think the most promising of my efforts…”
Sansa slowly looked at the parchment. It was marked by a blue rose on white. A winter rose.

“That is a writ securing the services of the Company of the Rose,” Salladhor said proudly. “I met with their representative in Braavos, I made the necessary arrangements on your behalf.”

She frowned and unfolded the parchment. “The Company of the Rose?”

“One of the most formidable in the Free Cities – the Company of the Rose dates back to the days of Torrhen Stark and the Conquest. They were founded by northern lords who chose exile over kneeling, and yet now they are quite eager to return to their homeland. Upon reaching Braavos, my first instinct was to seek them out.”

She inspected the writ, marked with small letters transcribed in a smooth hand. The ink was faded slightly, but it was still legible. It was a list of names and numbers. “They’re sellswords?” Her voice was doubtful.

“Old sellswords,” he clarified. “Sellswords with history and honour to them. They still bear the names of northern houses,” he added after a pause. “Their commander bears the family name Frost, and his second-in-command is a woman named Greystark.”

Sansa raised an eyebrow. Those were old houses that had reigned large in the north’s history, but it was doubtful that the exiles had any real lineage of note; in the Free Cities, any could pick their own name. Little doubt they had simply chosen a name with meaning. She looked over the parchment. “How many?”

“Four thousand, a fourth of those mounted cavalry. They have made their name in northern Esoss, as far as Ib. The Company of the Rose have spent many years fighting territory disputes between Lorath and Norvos, but – for the right coin – the sellswords are ready to abandon their contracts and return to their homeland.”

“For the right coin’?”

He shrugged. “Exiles they may be, but they are still mercenaries. They are interested in a free north, but they still need coin to move. Yet I promise you, there are none finer. I made the same offer to Lord Wyman; if the north can front the bill, my ships shall bring them to your shores.”

She worked over the writ, at the offer made. The Company of the Rose put a high price on their services, it seemed. It was a lot of coin, and they had also demanded their noble houses restored as well. The sellswords had supposedly quoted them a discounted price, at least, but Winterfell would still struggle to pay such.

And yet four thousand capable men could do much good. Winterfell had already introduced enlistment, but the north was still feeling the strain to fill their ranks. Too many good soldiers had been lost recently. Sansa was of the opinion that they should be looking for as many more as possible.

But it all comes down to coin, she thought with a quiet grimace. We need the Iron Bank.

Lord Salladhor was looking at her expectantly. There was a sigil of a shark on his cloak clasp, she noted.

“Four thousand,” she said finally. “Tell me, how many more mercenaries and sellswords could be hired?”

Salladhor scratched his whiskers. “That depends on how much you will pay for them,” he said. “If
the coin is right, then Braavos has a thousand captains that might sail for us. I could easily recruit pirates from the Stepstones, and Lorath has no shortage of mercenaries, warbands and cultists. We could reach out to the bearded priests of Norvos and the sworn axes that they train, or even to the Hairy Men of Ib. In the past, we might have sailed to Slaver’s Bay and bought soldiers in bulk, but alas that is no longer an option. If we were to buy every possible cutthroat and mercenary from Essos? Easily tens of thousands."

“Provided we have the coin.”

“Provided you have the coin,” Salladhor agreed, with a large grin.

If what Jon said of the Others was true, then the north would need all the manpower it could get. Eight million gold dragons might buy a lot of men, however. “You speak of the northern Free Cities,” Sansa noted. “What of the southern ones?”

Salladhor hesitated. “Many sellsword companies from Lys, Tyrosh and Pentos have already signed on with ‘Aegon’, and he is recruiting more every day. This Young Dragon has no shortage of coin, it seems.” He shook his head. “Still, there are many who have not been signed, and I have connections with most. If you are looking to bolster your numbers, then the Company of the Rose is a very good place to start.”

“And the matter of finance arises,” Sansa said after a moment. Her eyes narrowed, inspecting the pirate. “Tell me, what do you know of King Aegon Targaryen?”

The pirate snorted distastefully with the name. “I am likely more Targaryen than he.” He shook his head. “He is a fraud.” Salladhor paused, with a gleam in his eyes. “Are you looking to wage war against the fake dragon?”

“No. We must come to accords with the Iron Bank,” she said simply. “And the Iron Bank demands peace between north and south.”

“Ah. I would not trust Aegon Targaryen.” The pirate shook his head. “And peace will be difficult, princess – for there is a fleet mustering in the Bite. The ships of the Vale are moving north.”

Sansa straightened in her seat. “Excuse me?”

“I heard of it from a fisherman as I passed the Sisters, it was what prompted my return. Your friend, Lord Borrel, sends word.” He gave her a sly wink. “The lords of the Vale have been mustering their sails, and the Sistermen were forewarned. The first of their ships are likely already in the Bite by now – I believe the Vale means to establish a blockade over White Harbour.”

She had not been aware. Her first thought was; can this pirate be trusted?

Lord Salladhor met her glance. “Another thing that this Lord Borrel relayed for you – did you know that one Petyr Baelish has been named the king’s master of ships?”

She did not. Sansa could have cursed; Winterfell didn't have enough ravens left, they had been painfully removed from such news. They were relying on riders and messengers, but the snows hindered such. The north was always the last to know, it seemed.


“Is it not obvious? He wants you to be weak, and trade might make you strong. Aegon will not be so keen to allow you to deal with the Iron Bank, I think.”
Has Baelish allied with Aegon? Sansa could believe it. Still, Littlefinger didn't make alliances – he made stepping stones. What will Littlefinger do next?

“This blockade,” Sansa asked quietly, “how keen will they be on dragonfire?”

He chuckled. “Oh, they mean to harry the dragon, not oppose it.” Salladhor shook his head. “If pressed, Aegon will make peace, I have no doubt – but only as long as he intends to marry Daenerys Targaryen. He means to join his forces with hers, to take her dragons, and then to reconquer the north with her during spring. In the meantime, it is to his benefit if the north suffers a long and poor winter.”

We will see about that. “You speak poorly of him, my lord.”

Salladhor Saan shrugged. “I hear things. The tides rise and fall, the moon rises over the western sea, the captains conspire against the sealords, and the Free Cities scheme.” He paused, tilting the feather in his hat slightly before continuing. “There are whispers of Aegon’s backers; men of the highest wealth and power donating heavily to his cause. Many magisters in Pentos, Lys, and Tyrosh – some of the most dangerous and well-connected men in the east.” The pirate grinned broadly. “The king might as well be a cloth doll; it is his puppetmasters that are his true power. The Imp among them – the Lannisters were felled by conspiracy and assassination, not by might. They say the Imp used some Dayne bastard to kill his own maiden niece, to secure Casterly Rock for himself.” He leaned across the table conspiratorially. Sansa’s eyes flickered again to the sigil that Saan had taken; a shark stamped into the silver of his clasp.

“Did you hear that Nymeria Sand is to be executed for Prince Doran Martell’s murder?” Salladhor Saan continued loquaciously. “There was a coup in Dorne, all for the benefit of this king. They whisper that the Prince of Dorne was murdered at Aegon’s orders, that the Dornish lords were fooled. Oh, Aegon denies all knowledge – but that is the nature of Aegon’s reign. He is fool’s gold layered over bitter steel.”

Sansa let a few seconds pass in silence. Sansa clasped her fingers together, keeping her own thoughts hidden. She had heard of Nymeria Sand, but the reports were vague. Too many whispers and rumours, not enough facts.

And yes, the Imp was troublesome. The dwarf she had known had not been as obviously evil as Joffrey, but Sansa of all people knew how men could conceal their wickedness. Tyrion had killed his own father, and then most of his own family afterwards. If we ally with Aegon, Sansa couldn’t help but wonder, might Tyrion Lannister insist on upholding our ‘marriage’?

Aegon Targaryen seemed attractive, but her thoughts kept returning to those by his side; the Imp and Littlefinger.

Salladhor was leaning across the desk, looking at her intently. Despicable though he may be, the pirate had staked his status to the north, that was certain. And despicable men had their uses. Sansa considered him again, in more detail. Hmm, perhaps this man might be useful.

“What do you know of Daenerys Targaryen?” Sansa asked after a long pause.

Salladhor did not seem surprised by the change in topic. “Ah, yes. The ‘Queen of Ash’, they name her – after what she did to Yunkai. The war in Slaver’s Bay was a violent one, and this Daenerys is reportedly not one for mercy against masters. Afterwards, she flew against Volantis, raising a slave uprising in the city. The Triarchy promised her that the city would be ash before they let her ‘conquer’ it, and she took them up on that offer.” He smiled, with a light chuckle. “In Braavos and the northern markets, they hail Daenerys as a champion of the oppressed – but to the south and the
slave markets they curse her name and shiver in their boots. The Breaker of Chains, the Stormborn, the ‘Azor Ahai’.” He tutted. “The slave trade may never recover.”

“Really?” Sansa cocked her head. “Tell me, does your family keep slaves?”

“Not anymore,” he laughed. “With news of Daenerys’ coming, the head of House Saan, my cousin, chose to be proactive. He released all of their slaves early. I feel like many in Lys will be doing the same.

“Not that it’s done much good,” Lord Salladhor added after a moment’s thought. “The slaves in Lys were well-treated and cared for. But now instead of shelter, warm meals and soft collars, they have disease-ridden slums outside the city, filled with freedmen begging to be taken back by their masters. This campaign against slavery seems baffling.” The pirate shrugged, and shook his head. “But it is no matter to me; I am a northman now, after all.”

“Indeed.” Sansa mused for a while. “And this is the woman that Aegon intends to marry?”

“Yes, but only because he thinks that three dragons will be her dowry. He has made no secret of his intentions – Aegon wants word of his offer to reach her.”

Yes, that was Aegon's weapon. His publicity. He wanted to be known as the brave and just king, back from the dead, while Jon would be seen as the evil bastard and the savage invading the realm. He wanted to be Daenerys’ ally, while making Jon out to be her enemy. Sansa thought of all those romantic songs and heroic tales she had once loved. Vaguely, she wondered whether Daenerys loved such songs as well.

All Sansa knew was that Ser Jorah had believed Daenerys to be a good person. Jorah had thought that she would consider an alliance.

What would Littlefinger do in this situation?

“A thought occurs to me,” Sansa said after a long pause, “that surely Daenerys would rather marry with a dragon than against one? Why would Queen Daenerys choose a mummer's dragon to wed, when King Snow the dragonrider would be a much better option?”

It was met by silence. Then, a long and slow smile crept over the pirate's features.

It was the start of a long talk with Lord Salladhor. Sansa could feel the makings of a plan falling into place.

Yes, she felt like Salladhor would be useful. The pirate gave her honest counsel when too many held their tongues. So long as she knew what Salladhor wanted, she could use him.

Sansa lingered and quizzed him on the state of the Free Cities and his travels. In turn, he suggested that she travel them for herself; he even volunteered to introduce her to the magisters of Lys, to which she gave a polite refusal. Towards the end, Lord Salladhor asked her of her intentions regarding Stannis. She replied that Winterfell had vested interest in ridding the realm of him. The pirate seemed quite pleased by her answer.

Even as she stepped out of the chamber, her head was still whirling. She was sizing up alliances with every step down the corridor.

Daenerys Targaryen was perhaps the greatest, most influential figure in the world. The Mother of Dragons, the Breaker of Chains, proclaimed to be Azor Ahai. If Daenerys Targaryen chose to refuse Aegon, then the Young Dragon would be left utterly toothless.
Sansa didn’t know Jon’s feelings on the matter, but they were irrelevant. She knew that Jon had refused to marry Wynafryd Manderly – but Daenerys Targaryen would be a more powerful betrothal than a hundred Wynafryds. There could be no stronger ally to secure the north against the white walkers.

But how to make Daenerys see that?

And if Jon steals his queen, then what does Aegon have left? Sansa considered. They could destroy him, but Sansa was loath to create yet another enemy. Could Aegon be pushed to accept a different bride, another alliance instead?

Her head spun trying to think of daughters that the north might offer, of which northern brides might be a suitable match for King Aegon. She considered Wynafryd only briefly, and then dismissed the notion. After a moment, she realised there was only really one.

Shit, Sansa cursed, it's me.

It was an unwelcome thought, but something to consider.

A plan was forming. She didn't have all the steps worked out, but she could feel it taking shape as she stepped out through the warm doorway. Across Winterfell, the great wheelhouse of White Harbour was rumbling through the gates, flanked by knights and followed by scores of hungry refugees.

Sansa could still vaguely hear the shrill cries of the witch woman, but the congregation of dragon-worshippers had moved towards the godswood. Sansa was grateful for the temporary quiet in the yards.

The princess met Lord Manderly in the courtyard, but only briefly. There was little ceremony; they only exchanged a few courtesies and fewer words. Somehow, the Lord of White Harbour appeared even fatter and redder than what she remembered; the travel had left Lord Wyman looking sickly. He was here to bury his son and his good-daughter, and Sansa did not wish to distract him from that.

Behind her, both Wylla and Wynafryd rushed to hug their grandfather. Sansa couldn’t look, she had to turn away.

All around her, Winterfell was hectic. Everything had to be prepared for Bran’s coronation, and Sansa had to see it done. Where am I most useful, what is most urgent?

Her decision was made for her when she saw a line of chained men being escorted towards Winterfell’s dungeons. Despite herself, Sansa hesitated.

There was one task that Sansa still needed to do, but it was not one she looked forward to. Something she had been meaning to do for a while, but she had always put it off, like she would anything so unpleasant.

As the convoy unpacked, Sansa pulled up her dress and strode down towards the guardhouse of the lower levels. Her guards kept close by her with every step. Lord Salladhor of House Saan seemed to sense who was the most influential figure in Winterfell. The pirate kept close to Sansa, following behind her guards.

She met Ser Ian Poole and several White Harbour knights by the steps to the vaults, and they all bowed to her while the prisoners were escorted through. “Your Grace,” the knight greeted, and Sansa just nodded.
As she walked down towards the dungeons, the stone still felt warm to the touch. The air was filled with a stale earthy musk, warm and thick. Ser Ian noticed her fingers lingering against the warm stone slabs. “We are still searching for the source of the heat,” the knight said, with a hint of wonder in his voice. “It appears to be coming from below even the crypts – it is warmer the lower you go.”

Sansa nodded absently. “And the prison cells?”

“Serviceable, but swelteringly uncomfortable inside.”

*Good,* Sansa thought.

The rows of dank dungeon cells seemed quiet. Once these dungeons had been filled to the brim, but slowly, all of the prisoners taken from the Battle of the Snows had been dealt with, one way or another. Some went to the gallows, some had bent the knee, and some would be forced to take the black. Others had just been dismissed as unimportant. Only the most stubborn or suspicious remained. There were well over a hundred cells in the immense labyrinth of dungeons; but now there were less than a dozen still occupied.

Sansa stopped before a cell at the far end of the first level, and there she saw a tall and crooked old woman hunched on a stone slab behind iron bars. It was a large cell, but still rough and bare. The lady’s face was creased with wrinkles around her mouth and eyes, and her hair was brown and grey. Once, the lady had dressed in cloth-of-black trimmed in silver and kept her hair tied in a widow’s knot, the very image of a highborn widow, but after a month of captivity her hair was unkempt and her clothes were grey.

The Lady of Barrowton, Barbrey Dustin. She had once been a handsome woman despite her years, but now she was filthy and unkempt, every single one of her years plainly writ into the wrinkles of her face.

Sansa stared, and folded her arms. “Lady Dustin.”

In reply, the old widow spat on the floor at Sansa's feet. A guard made to whack the prisoner through the bars, but Sansa held him back with a nod.

“Lady Dustin,” Sansa said again after a moment, weighing her words. There was no point in smalltalk, she decided. “You were a Bolton supporter, you have been held as an accomplice to their treason. My brother offered a pardon if you bent the knee and pledge fealty. You refused such.”

Lady Barbrey only scoffed, keeping her voice dark. “I will not bow to that bastard.”

“My brother,” Sansa said haughtily, “Brandon Stark.”

Her lips twisted. “The little crippled puppet?”

*Bitter old hag.* Barrowton had lowered its banners, but its lady still remained defiant. Other Bolton lords had made concessions and returned to the fealty of House Stark, but House Dustin had been House Bolton’s most prominent ally. An example had to be made and, by all appearances, Lady Dustin simply did not care. Sansa’s eyes narrowed, letting the silence stretch out. “I have but one last offer to make you,” Sansa said. “You will renounce all titles and lands, and you will stay in Winterfell. In return for an indefinite stay of execution, we will allow you an honorary status and comfortable stay until your end of days. If trust is restored, we may allow you to return to your family in the Rills.”

Lady Dustin only sneered at her. “What family do I have left?” The woman pulled herself up,
scowling as she towered over Sansa. “Do you believe yourself in charge, little girl?”

“I believe that you’re behind bars and I’m outside of them,” Sansa retorted.

“That can quickly change.” The lady shook her head. “I will not surrender to the likes of you.”

“You do not have to. You have no children, no progeny, and we have already have selected the new heir to Barrowton – a cousin of your late husband, I believe. One Arnold? Arno? Arnolf?”

Sansa honestly couldn't remember – all the names had blurred. The man was of petty Barrowton nobility – to call him a Dustin branch member would be gross exaggeration. Still, it met their purposes; a probably-loyal man with any link at all to the main line of the Dustins was enough.

At that, Lady Dustin scowled. Her fingernails clenched. “Arnold Sparrow. A household knight, one of petty birth.”

Sansa only shrugged. The grand-nephew of the third son of a bastard, or some such. “Regardless, he secured Barrowton’s surrender. He will be raised to become the next Lord Dustin. He was very eager to accept such.”

Lady Dustin twitched. “Predictable,” she spat. “Never did like that boy.”

Sansa smiled thinly, but said nothing.

“So you have your next Lord of Barrowton,” Lady Dustin growled. “So what now? Will you kill me in this cell too? Claim that I took my own life?”

Sansa smiled, but there was no humour in it. “Do you know what I think, my lady? I believe you've decided to become a martyr.” She stepped closer to the bars, lowering her voice. “You still think that your own death might provoke House Ryswell into rebellion, so you've resolved to challenge us to kill you.”

She met her eyes. The older woman was defiant. Sansa respected that, if nothing else. “You’re wrong, of course,” Sansa continued. “The late Lord Ryswell, your father, is dead, and your remaining brothers have already accepted Jon’s deal. House Ryswell has had its rights and lands slashed – your family is a great house no longer. And you are useless to us.”

Sansa’s words were curt and cold, but Sansa had far too many other concerns over being kind. All she cared about was removing the last of her family’s defectors.

Lady Dustin’s gaze was murderous, she glared with quiet fury. “You cannot kill me,” she growled. “You need me. You need me to keep Barrowton. And I know too much, I know about your sister.”

“I need nothing from you.” Sansa’s voice turned frosty. The very mention of Arya made Sansa angry. *This bitch stood by and let my sister be married to that monster.* “You are a woman and a widow, my lady, and for that Jon might have spared your life. But I am not so kind. You will either bend the knee tonight or face the gallows on the morn. Goodbye.”

Lady Dustin looked like she might have screamed as Sansa turned and walked away. The princess of Winterfell didn’t look back. As he passed, Salladhor Saan gave the lady a lewd sneer.

Only two dozen steps down the corridor did Sansa take a deep breath. She was already counting up the cells, wondering at how many prisoners still remained. Sansa wanted as many as possible at Bran’s coronation, and the rest would be either set free, sent to the Wall, or executed.
This end of the dungeons was filled with new arrivals – the prisoners that had come from White Harbour. Sansa saw a heavyset man dressed as a lord being herded roughly into a cell. He was a fat, ponderous figure with a bright red face and dark blond hair. He wore a fine wool jerkin that was now grimy with dirt and mud. Sansa recognised the only lord from the ram’s head sigil on his surcoat; Lord Malcolm Woolfield of Ramsgate. Another to face trial.

Sansa stepped forward, and the heavy footsteps of her guards followed her. The lord’s eyes widened as he saw her. She wasted no time on greetings. “Are you a traitor, my lord?” Sansa asked.

“The only traitor here is you. You…” Lord Woolfield slammed in the bars, his voice breaking in rage. The guards around her flinched. “You murdered my sister! You and your bastard brother, Lady Lannister!”

“Your Grace, leave this fool…” Ser Ian Poole muttered.

Sansa ignored him. “Lady Leona’s death was no choice of ours, my lord. And your treason is more than that. You are to be tried before the Winter Court and the regent.”

“Tried? You dare to judge me, on puffed up charges?” His eyes bulged. “I have done naught, but every man who follows you ends up dead! Your brother is an oathbreaker and a bastard, you are Lady Lannister! Did you scheme it together? I pity the ‘King’ Brandon Stark, to be under the care of you—”

His voice was cut off as a man-at-arms slammed a gauntleted fist into Lord Woolfield’s nose. Blood spurted, bone crunched. Sansa scowled, but didn’t object. With a nod, she turned and walked away.

“Damn you and your brood!” Lord Woolfield brayed after her. “Damn you to—”

The guard hit him again, and the lord collapsed.

Sansa wondered briefly what Wynafryd would think to see her uncle treated so, but she didn’t dwell on that thought long. I must be heartless.

There were other highborn that she visited in the prisons, to bring the same offer. Each one looked ready to curse, whimper or weep. There was Mors Crowfood, Kyle Cordon, Lyessa Flint, Harold Slate, Ondrew Locke…

Sansa walked deeper into the stuffy dungeons, feeling the sweat on her brow. The further down she walked, the smaller the prisons and the hotter and wetter the air. The lowest levels of Winterfell felt more like a smoking cave than a dungeon, like walking down the throat of a sleeping dragon.

She looked around the cells, at the pale faces hiding behind the bars. Lords, ladies and highborn sons of White Harbour accused of treason, as well as merchants and captains with ties to the south accused of conspiracy. They all believed themselves innocent, they all thought they had been justified. They felt victimised, even, and perhaps some truly were. But how to discern the true traitors from the unfortunate fools?

Some had plotted against them, while others had just been manipulated. Sansa had to steel herself; this was no time for pity or mercy. House Stark had suffered many betrayals, and Sansa wanted to put a close to them.

She turned a corner, strolling to another wing of the dungeons. The stone was earthy and pitch
black, the corridor filled with flickering torchlight. It was so warm it felt like an oven. She heard the scurrying of rats in the gloom, scattering away from her guards’ boots. The prisoners here were all wearing grey robes, with chains around their necks. Most of them were old, fat or balding. They were all scared, staring at her with pure terror.

*Staring at me, like I’m a monster. Like I ruined their lives. Perhaps I did.*

There were times when Sansa could understand how Cersei became the way she did. It was an uncomfortable thought. *Why, in the name of all the gods, did I ever want to be queen?*

“The prisoners from White Harbour.” Lord Salladhor motioned to the cells as he stepped to her side. “Your will is my command – all maesters were removed from their duties and brought to Winterfell.”

She frowned as she counted them. There were too few. “Are these all? Where are the other maesters that we restrained?”

Salladhor could not answer. After a brief search, they found a gaoler who could. “The last maesters were removed a week ago, Princess,” the man said gruffly. “Executed. The Circle took them to the yards.”

Sansa paused, staring at the gaoler. *The Circle,* she recalled vaguely, *what the dragon-worshippers are calling themselves now.* The gaoler himself was a wildling, she noticed. He bore a white stone on his chest, and tattoos of swirling lines up his neck. A tall and gaunt, grey-haired man, with only a single hand. “Who gave that order?”

The man shrugged. “King Snow, I suppose.”

Jon had not made mention of that to Sansa, although it had been a busy time and he left hurriedly. *Why did they execute the maesters, did the men confess?* She had not been told such, and she never knew what had been done with them.

Sansa also made note of ‘King Snow’ – even despite Jon’s decree, there were many who had not dropped that title.

She looked around the gloomy cells. There weren’t many of them. Hovering besides her, Ser Ian Poole looked nervous. “Your Grace, what do you want to do with these men?”

“I’m told that I must make peace with King Aegon,” Sansa replied stiffly. “But before I can do that, I need to know exactly who tried to sabotage us and how. These maesters have answers that I want.”

Behind her, an old robed man wailed. “Please… you are mistaken… I never–”

The gaoler slammed his boot against the door, and the maester squealed. Sansa turned back to the gaoler. “We will question them again, right here,” she ordered. A few faces flickered. “I want there to be no misunderstandings, I will ask the questions myself.”

The man nodded, but some of her guard looked uncomfortable. “Aye. But Princess, you do not have to be here yourself for…”

“I do.” She wanted to know first-hand. Behind her, the gaoler was already preparing a set of sharpened knives. An iron poker glowed red in the nearby fireplace, she noticed.

Sansa walked closer to the cells. Somewhere further down the hall, she could hear a man’s
weeping. This must be done, she knew. *I must be heartless,* she repeated to herself, *I must be stone.* The thought reminded her of being Alayne Stone.

“You will tell me of all letters and ravens you relayed,” Sansa ordered to the cells. “Of all liberties you took without your lord’s knowledge, of all instructions that you received from the south.”

The doors groaned as the man forced the rusted lock apart. The sound of whimpers filled the cell. On a hunch, Sansa started with the maester who once served Ramsgate. He was a youngish man with auburn hair, a weeping mess, but Sansa made a point of not learning his name. She did not want to remember his name.

At one point, amidst the screaming, Ser Ian Poole excused himself from the dungeons, but Sansa could not leave. She did not trust the interrogators to ask the right questions.

Even under torture, the previous maesters had given them frustratingly little. The most they had admitted to was receiving a letter from Oldtown – a letter ‘encouraging’ them to think of the realm. The torturers had achieved little, Sansa noted; they had only extracted garbled messes from the prisoners.

And yet too many ravens had gone missing, too many letters had been misplaced. The maesters had sabotaged them. *But which ones? And who guided their hand?*

Ramsgate’s maester gave more of the same. He admitted that a rider with an Oldtown accent had once visited Ramsgate at night to speak with the lord, but he gave nothing more useful than that. When the one-handed gaoler finally drew his knife, the maester only wailed louder. “I don't know, I don’t!” he screamed. “If I knew I would tell you, but I don’t know his name – he never gave it! I never knew his purpose! *I don’t know!*”

Sansa’s lips pursed. Eventually, she had to leave and move onto the next. The maester of Lordsport had fully retreated into the farthest corner of his cell, managing to knock over his chamber pot in his gibbering fear. Sansa’s nose curled, and she hesitated. The dungeons were warm and swollen with fear and despair. It took deep breaths to focus herself. It was so hard to focus here. The air around her felt so desperate as the other maesters in the hall quivered and begged.

“You are wasting your time,” a voice said suddenly, from somewhere to her right. “The grey sheep know nothing.”

Sansa turned, looking at a prisoner in the opposing cell; a stocky, balding man. He was staring right at her with eyes that reminded her of a bulldog. He was wearing worn grey robes with an unkempt beard. His voice was rough and throaty.

She frowned. “And how can you say what they know or not?”

“Because most maesters are blind,” he replied with a croak. “They are trained not to ask. The Citadel looks unfavourably on true curiosity, most maesters are taught to forge their links, do their purpose, and no more.”

Sansa’s eyes narrowed, and then turned to her escort. “I know this one,” Salladhor said smugly, looking at the prisoner. “My men found him snooping around White Harbour, he had that chain hidden in his bag. Winterfell ordered the maesters to be clasped in irons, so I obeyed.

Sansa stepped closer to the man. “Do you know more than they do?”

“I do.” There was a slight quiver in his voice, but he held himself strong. He was short, but beefy. “I am not most maesters.”
“Then interrogate him next,” Sansa ordered to her guards. “And bring me his belongings, I want to see everything he was carrying.”

The maester grunted as the men-at-arms stomped through. He looked little like a scholar; he was thick-necked with a strong jaw, a heavy chest and a hard ale-belly. The man had huge, meaty hands, and fingers that looked more suited to breaking bones than gripping quills. And scabs and bruises on his knuckles, Sansa noted. It looked like this maester had been punching someone quite aggressively.

The guards did not let Sansa step too close. They were all being extra cautious, and the maester was clamped in heavy irons. After a quick search, they brought her the prisoner’s bag; a worn leather satchel caked in mud. She quickly rummaged through it.

Sansa saw the man’s chain on top of a pile of dirty clothes and travel gear. It was a long chain of many different metals, obviously how they had identified him as a maester. The air was quiet as she searched deeper through the bag; he had some blank parchments, a notebook filled with scribbles in some unfamiliar language, a pouch of silver, but then near the bottom she came upon a short metal rod wrapped up in an old blanket, along with a strange, plain mask. Then she found a ring as well; smooth and black, unadorned metal. Sansa held the ring in her fingers.

The others must have found the items too, but they hadn't realised their significance. It took a moment to click. The rod, the ring, and the mask – three pieces of artifice granted by the Conclave upon ascension. They were all smooth metal, and dark like polished iron.

“You are not most maesters,” Sansa agreed finally, holding up the ring. “You hold the iron ring, sceptre and mask – you are the archmaester of warcraft.”

The maester shook his head. “No, look closer. That is the Valyrian ring, that of the higher mysteries. I am the archmaester of magic. My name is Marwyn.”

Valyrian? At that, there were mutters around her. From an adjoining cell, Sansa overheard a gasp of shock. Her fingers wrapped tightly around the Valyrian steel ring. She could see the ripples in the metal now, dimly washed in the faint light of the dungeons.

“Indeed.” Her voice was a mutter. She stepped closer, inspecting the man.

The archmaester lowered his head, as if humble. There was a tremor of fear on his chin, and sweat down his forehead, but he kept his voice strong. All of Sansa’s guards stood poised and ready.

“And why is an archmaester of the Citadel in Winterfell?” she asked finally. She could think of many possible reasons, and all of them suspicious.

“I am seeker of truth, of knowledge, Your Grace,” he replied. “I came searching for truth.”

“And why is an archmaester of the Citadel in Winterfell?” she asked finally. She could think of many possible reasons, and all of them suspicious.

“I am seeker of truth, of knowledge, Your Grace,” he replied. “I came searching for truth.”

“Such as?”

“The dragon. Whispers of the white dragon reached Oldtown, and I headed north to see it for myself,” he explained lowly. “That was many months ago. I wanted to reach the Wall, except at the time the ironborn were on the warpath – I could not travel up the western coast so near the Iron Isles. Instead, I believed that it would be faster to sail across the cape of Dorne and up the narrow sea, to Braavos and then to White Harbour.” There was something in his eyes, he bore a haunted and fatigued look. “The journey north has proven… gruelling.”

She did not reply, and in her silence he continued. “Alas, I arrived north during the blockade, and remained trapped thereafter. No ship would take me from Braavos to White Harbour. It was only
after the battle that I finally found a smuggler to take me through. I arrived but a moon ago, where your… admiral found me.”

“He claims you were snooping,” Sansa said, glancing back to Salladhor.

“I was not. I wanted to come to Winterfell regardless,” he retorted. “I would have preferred the journey without the chains, but I always intended to introduce myself. You are Princess Sansa Stark, yes? May I please speak to King Snow?”

“I think not.” She stepped closer. “My brother believes that the maesters were part of an organised plot against him.”

“I do not doubt it, Your Grace. If they received instructions from the Conclave, they would have obeyed and not questioned why. But I am not like most who wear the chain, my lady.”

“We shall see.” She kept her voice impassive.

Archmaester Marwyn grimaced. “I can be useful to you, my lady. I will answer any question you have, I have knowledge to share.”

She looked down at his chain. Archmaester Marwyn had far more links in his chain than any maester she had ever known – Pycelle and Luwin included. She couldn’t even identify the materials in half of the links; there were many strange and obscure metals, including some that looked like wood or stone, or even bone. But why would an archmaester travel so far into hostile lands?

“Yes,” Sansa mused. “But that is the issue – how do I know you will answer truthfully?”

“I would not lie to you. I can…” His face was pained. “If only I could speak to King Snow? I would very much appreciate his company, I believe he will want to see me.”

Sansa did not reply, but she tilted her head. “I have studied much on dragons, and on dragon lore and tendering,” Marwyn continued. “I have read all the greatest scholars in the field – from Munkun and Vaegon, to Barth and Thomax. If King Snow requires guidance or aid with his dragon, I could assist….”

The last thing my brother wants is a maester near his dragon.

“Neither King Snow nor his dragon are present in Winterfell at the moment.”

At that, Marwyn grimaced. For a brief moment, he appeared flabbergasted. “When will they return? If you could allow me…”

“I think not.” Sansa reached a decision, and stepped backwards. She turned towards the gaoler. “Ser, please interrogate this man. Compare his answers to the ones the previous maesters gave, search for discrepancies.” She looked back at Marwyn. “Once we are confident he is telling the truth about his purpose, then we may talk further.”

The guard frowned. “It was Rattleshirt that tortured the last ones, and he left with Snow.”

Marwyn’s face paled. “Then find another to do the task,” she ordered.

“Please, Your Grace, you do need…” the archmaester begged.

I cannot afford to have a heart. What would Littlefinger do? Sansa turned and walked away. The guards slammed the cell door shut with an iron clank.
Behind her, Marwyn flustered. “Wait! Wait, don’t…” He gulped. “You saw one of them – a shadow? A creature of smoke and ash?”

Suddenly, Sansa stopped.

*What did he say?* She never said a word, and she kept the shock off her face, but she turned around slowly.

The archmaester had a pained look. “I made the deduction,” the man admitted. “There were rumours of such in White Harbour, and I overheard the men muttering of demons. And your guards each have *weirwood* stakes on their belts.” He motioned at the men, at the white wooden weapons they kept close. “There is but one reason I can think of why you would need such weapons.”

She didn’t react, but she didn’t walk away either. “I am right, aren’t I?” Marwyn grinned, revealing reddish teeth stained from chewing sourleaf. “You saw one of them? Did it kill somebody?”

Sansa took a deep breath, and then stepped back towards the cell. “Explain.”

“No.” She shook her head. That was a tactic; asking questions to probe what the interrogator was already expecting. A way to discover what they did and didn’t know already. “*You* tell me everything you know first.”

“That would take a long time.”

Sansa frowned. Marwyn hesitated, then took a deep breath. “Throughout history, there have been mentions of such. Beings of darkness, they come and go without a trace,” Marwyn explained. “The very first texts named them *As’ahad* – the Dark Folk. Each culture afterwards has given them a new name; they are the Red Envoys, the Servants of the Goat, the Doomborn, the Sh’Ragnar, and the Moonless Children. In the Common, perhaps they are best described as *wraiths.*”

He looked at the look on Sansa’s face. “Others might call them shades. Some old legends refer to them as the spirits of the cursed or the restless dead, but I cannot verify that as the truth. Some sources they take the appearance of the deceased or dying; they are like… reflections. Creatures of smoke shaped like men.”

“And you just *happen* to know so much about these creatures? Should I take that as a coincidence that you arrive at the same time they do?” Sansa did not believe in coincidence.

“I am the archmaester of magic, I have studied everything unworldly. I have written books on lost books,” he replied indignantly. “One very old text – a lost book transcribing the songs of the children – mentioned a weakness to *weirwood*. The *wraiths* supposedly could not pass through a *weirwood* seal. When I saw your *weirwood* weapons, I made the connection.”

“*Wraiths,*” Sansa repeated. “And where do they come from?”

“It varies. But in most texts? They are creatures born from a sorcerer – they are elementals given purpose. The *Maeligor Aracana* describes a pact created by the summoner, a bargain of sorts. As far as any can discern, it is a ritual of blood magic from a sacrifice. In return for being brought into our world and granted life, they are said to fulfil a boon for the sorcerer.”

*A boon.* Sansa seized on the word, as Marwyn rambled onwards. Somebody *had* sent that thing to Winterfell.
“The ancient Asshai’i spoke of them with dread, but so few of the texts from that period... The Bloodstone Emperor supposedly had an elite guard of ‘warriors of shadow’, and one cryptic tome mentions that they fell to earth on a falling star. The lore is not limited to the Shadow Lands either, such mentions crop up from Sothoryos to Valyria to the Jogos Nhai. Wherever men have walked, so have the whispers surrounding these beings. The lore has survived among the moonsingers, the first refugees of Braavos, the Church of the Starry Sky...” Marwyn took a deep breath, like to calm himself. “Forgive me, I am rambling, I... I did not believe that any still possessed the ability to summon the Dark Folk, I thought that the power was lost to the ages. But then again, with the ephemeralic convergence...”

Sansa frowned, struggling to keep up. “The what?”

“The Great Change – the ephemeralic convergence is a term I coined,” Marwyn explained, while Sansa looked baffled. “I believe it to be an alignment of the seasons, a movement of the world. The red comet was not the beginning, merely a symptom. I do not know how or why – I’m but an astronomer looking at the heavens. I believe it to be a global phenomenon, a resurgence.”

She didn’t understand. Marwyn needed another deep breath after talking so fast. “The magic is returning to the world,” he said. “Suddenly, things are possible that have not been seen for at least centuries. Or millennia. We are in the middle of a great shift, like the movement of continents.”

*Is the man mad?* She wondered. He spoke with the passion of a mad man. Around her, the guards looked confused.

“Consider it, Your Grace,” Marwyn insisted. “The Drowning of Oldtown, the Great Fire of King’s Landing. The Doom of Slaver’s Bay. You have seen it yourself; the dragons returning, the wraiths stirring, the cold winds blowing. Even look at this warmth in Winterfell.” He shook his head.

“These are not localised events – the alchemists of Qohor have once again begun to whet their steel with human blood, in Yi Ti they suffer plagues without precedent, across the Rhoyne the stonemen are mustering, and even as far as Qarth the warlocks are rising to power. Glass candles are burning again.” The man looked like he could have laughed. “I have seen such things – things that never would have been possible even a few years ago. The magic is returning to the entire world, and with it comes destruction. The *convergence*.”

Sansa blinked. Part of her would have dismissed such as nonsense, but the other part... “And these wraiths?” she asked quietly.

“They are born of powerful magic. Very, very powerful magic – and thus have not been seen for centuries. They are something I have only read about in the oldest stories. The shadows live in their own realm – the Dark – but a sorcerer of sufficient power might grant them access into ours. Supposedly the Asshai’i shadowbinders once opened up a portal into the Dark itself, but...” Marwyn shook his head. His eyes gleamed, seeming entranced by the very thought. “I have studied such beings, but I never imagined I might see one.”

He sounded excited. Sansa didn’t speak, but she was measuring his expression. “The wraiths...” he continued, clearing his throat. “The moonlight makes them visible, and weirwood can harm them. They can fly during the blackest nights, and can move with great speed. They are unearthly deities granted human shape, capable of expressing themselves as shadow and flame. Such things are not easily controlled, or contained.”

She still did not speak. He looked up towards her. “But I know of some wards – ancient spells that I traced from the foundations of Storm’s End in my youth. Wards that supposedly grant protection against incorporeal beings. I might reproduce such, Your Grace; they can protect a location from malignant magic.” The archmaester nodded. “If you have an enemy that summons wraiths against
you, I have spells that might offer protection.”

Sansa was suspicious. Marwyn quickly lowered his head, bowing as far as his shackles would allow. “Really?” She raised an eyebrow. “And what would you want in return for such aid?”

“Nothing, Your Grace. I only wish to help.”

At that, Sansa snorted. She shook her head, and stepped backwards. “And that is the point where I know you're full of bullshit.” The archmaester blinked. “Are you really such a saint, acting purely out of kindness? I was willing to entertain such talk of magic, archmaester, but do you really expect me to believe that you came all this way just to help? Goodbye.”

She stepped backwards, threatening to leave. At once, the archmaester jumped upwards. Guards flinched, pushing him back. “No… no!” He grimaced, frantic eyes looking around his cell. “I came for the dragon,” he admitted. “I came to study it, I wish to harness its power. Such a thing has not been possible for centuries, and I will do whatever I must for that chance.”

_He wants power_, Sansa thought quietly. She recognised that… that _fervour_ in his voice. Power in knowledge, perhaps. And yet that was understandable, and so long as she understood him then perhaps he could be used. Perhaps he was manipulable, as long as she bore his own ambition in mind.

_What would Littlefinger do?_

The archmaester probed her face, seeming to search for any kind of a cue. She gave him none, and he grimaced, desperate.

Sansa let a few moments pass, counting to ten silently. “Indeed,” she eventually said. Sansa paused curiously, letting her eyes see the man in more detail. He didn't look much like a maester, that was true. He looked like a village butcher or a portside dockworker. The way he talked, it reminded her of the Cult’s fanatics.

Still, her instincts were warning her, suspicions tingling on the back of her neck. She didn’t trust this man – she didn’t trust any stranger that came into her home – but…

If the last week had proven anything, it was that they needed to know more of magic. They needed to know how to fight it. If this man truly had answers… Sansa couldn't afford to ignore such an advantage.

Still, it wouldn’t do to agree too quickly.

“I will consider it,” she said finally, and then turned to leave. “In the meantime, enjoy your cell. I will see about having you moved in due time.”

As she left, her head was spinning. Marwyn shouted after her, but Sansa did not turn around again.

_Magic_, she thought. _Magic!_

There were so many thoughts scattered around her head, her feet paced over the dark stone. She was sweating – sweat patches stained down her back and under the arms of her silk dress.

Outside, the sun was so bright it was blinding. The whole courtyard was stirring, the gates churning with new entries; Winterfell was filling up with the convoy from White Harbour. Nearly all of them were wearing white stones. Sansa wondered vaguely just how many would be praying in the godswood tonight.
She would have gone to see Bran, but her brother was with Meera and Sansa didn’t want to interrupt him.

Mere months ago, she would have dismissed such talk of magic as lunacy, but she couldn’t anymore. She had seen a dragon in flight. An army of corpses had risen outside Winterfell’s gates. There was warmth rising from the ground beneath her, and nobody could explain why. *My half-brother is a dragonrider, and my younger brother is apparently a wizard.*

Vaguely, she thought of all those tales she had heard in court about Robb – of the wolf king that could transform into a beast, the man who commanded wolves in the riverlands. Sansa remembered the time she had spent with Lady, and the thought of her murdered direwolf still caused a pain in her heart. For a time, her direwolf had been part of her.

*The ephemeralic convergence,* Sansa wondered.

It was a long day, spent stewing over a hundred different concerns. Time was short and there was too much to be done. Sansa eventually found herself back in her father’s solar, studying a list of marriages between the wildlings and northerners that Jon and Lord Wyman had arranged some months ago. Soon she would have to determine who would sit in the Winter Court, who would be lords in the new north. She sighed and leaned back in her chair, eyeing the wine at her father’s desk. She wanted to gulp down the entire bottle just to calm herself, but she refrained. There was much she needed to talk to Jon about.

The coronation, she thought. As soon as Jon returned, they would hold Bran’s coronation. If Jon was not back shortly, they might have to crown Bran without him.

*My brother will be crowned king. I will crown him king.* It was a scary thought in so many ways.

In the distance, the swollen red sun drooped over the western horizon. Sansa stared out over the corridors and rooms that she once knew, and she thought of the days of lemoncakes and songs. The days of summer children.

It was only towards dusk when she heard the bells ringing. The sound was faint at first – a soft ringing from the gates. The noise started to spread, and down below people were running. Then, she heard a boom as the great bell of tower picked up the alert.

Sansa was already halfway down the stairs. She saw Lord Mollen running up to warn her. “It is from Cerwyn, my lady,” the lord panted. “A score of men approach.”

She was already moving. Cerwyn had been captured easily by free folk soldiers and the Bolton garrison surrendered, but they had received no warning. A few of her guards wanted her to stay in the keep, but Sansa refused. As soon as she stepped out into main hall, their outriders gave word.

A host of men were marching up the kingsroad, they reported. There were few cavalry among them, the majority were on foot but marching quickly. They were flying a lizard lion on their banner.

At once, Sansa breathed a sigh of relief. House Reed?

Sansa stood on the walls as the procession approached Winterfell’s gates. Just in case, there were archers readied. She saw the banners fluttering in the wind, showing lizard lions and snakes, toads and frogs, lilies and reeds, herons and fish, wildcats and aurochs. Houses Blackmyre, Boggs, Cray, Fenn, Greengood, Peat and Quagg, Sansa recognised. All of them petty houses of the Neck, many that she had never seen before in person – though the lords of the Neck were sworn to Winterfell,
they so rarely emerged from their marshes. Most houses made their banners out of wool or hemp, but the crannogmen painted their banners on weave and twine.

The crannogmen were all lightly armed, with three-pronged spears and half-helms. To a man their clothes were painted with dun shades of brown and grey and green. It was rare for them to leave the Neck in such numbers, but House Reed had answered Winterfell’s call.

At the front of the column of men, a carriage rattled through the soft mud. The carriage was more like a farmer’s cart, light and beaten. It was pulled by horses so small they might have been ponies, but the steeds were stout and steady over the ground.

At the very back of the convoy, Sansa noted a single wagon surrounded by a troop of guards, every man flying a faded Stark direwolf.

The column came to a halt at Winterfell’s gates, and a small procession broke off to approach first. The cart came with them. Even when looking down, Sansa reckoned she could see the shock in their posture at the heat surrounding the castle.

Sansa stepped down to meet them as the hefty gates creaked open. Two dozen men and the cart were waiting behind the portcullis, Sansa saw, led by a tall and grim figure at the very front. The man held a dark iron helm under his arm, revealing a head of grey hair, as he held a banner of a black lizard lion in his other hand. Suddenly, she noticed Meera Reed rushing out of the castle, running through the courtyard.

The portcullis opened, and slowly spearmen parted to allow Sansa to step through. The man at the front had the look of a lord, albeit a worn and weathered one. His grey hair verged towards auburn near the back, but he was not balding. He bore a shaggy beard and cragged, windburnt features, but most noticeable was his scar. A blade had gouged across his cheek and scalp, cutting through an eye. The worst of the wound was hidden under an eyepatch, but the injury was still raw.

*Lord Howland Reed has finally reached Winterfell.*

At the sight of Sansa, the lord stopped. His eye widened in shock, his face paled. Blue eyes, she noticed. She only just heard the gasp; “Cat?” he whispered in shock.

Sansa forced a smile and stepped forward. “Lord Reed, I presume?”

The lord just stammered. “By the Gods, I…” He shook his head, off-guard. “Forgive me… Sansa, you’re… you look so much like your mother.”

She did not reply. He stepped forward cautiously. “I heard that you were in Winterfell, but I did not…” He looked as if he had seen a ghost. Behind her, Meera Reed was pushing through the guards, but her gaze flickered right past the man at the front. “I am not… I am Ser Brynden Tully, the Blackfish to most. Brother to Lord Hoster, your mother was my niece.”

Sansa blinked.

After a pause, Brynden Tully drew his sword, and lowered himself to his knee. He took a deep breath.

The stranger – the *Blackfish* – was looking up at her expectantly. “Your mother, she made me vow to…” her great-uncle started and then grimaced. “I fought alongside Robb, my lady, I held Riverrun for him during the Red Wedding. When the Lannisters came, I fled north to search for you, my lady. Lord Reed sheltered and healed me at Greywater Watch, and we captured Moat Cailin together. As I did with Robb, I serve House Stark. I swear to you the same vow I gave your
Ser Brynden Tully? She hesitated, trying to recompose herself, and the tall man – my greatuncle? – turned and motioned to the cart at the back of the procession. “And we come bringing your father’s bones,” he said with a solemn nod, meeting her eyes. “Lord Reed held Eddard’s bones at Greywater, awaiting safe passageway. We can finally bring him home.”

Sansa suddenly wasn’t sure what to say.

Her eyes lingered on the cart flying the direwolf. There was a box in the middle of the wagon. A small box. Father?

Meera was rushing straight by Sansa, towards the carriage at the back of the group. “Father!” the girl called. “Father, what you are doing here, it is not…”

Lord Reed. Sansa’s gaze flickered for the man, but then her eyes turned towards the cart at the back. She didn’t know how to reply to Ser Brynden, so instead her feet stepped forward to see Lord Howland. There was no crack in her posture. The other spearmen stepped aside, and Sansa realised that all the men were shorter than her.

There was a figure in the cart, she saw suddenly. A gaunt man in the back of the cart under a pile of furs, being pulled by horses. He could not stand, and Sansa saw only his outline.

Meera pulled herself up to the cart’s edge, and suddenly there were tears in her eyes. “Father!” Meera cried, cradling a skeletal hand. “Father, what are you doing here… your health…?”

“My health shall last, my darling,” a breathy voice croaked. “I am where I must be.”

Sansa walked forward to see a sickly old man with green eyes, holding Meera tightly. He was whispering reassuringly in her ear, but there was a stutter in his voice and a tremble in his grip. He tried to pull himself up, but he hadn’t the strength and his throat broke down into wheezy coughs filled with phlegm and blood.

Then, Sansa saw the wound on his body. In the heat, the furs were loose on him, and she saw his figure. An ugly, crescent moon-shaped scar stretched from shoulder to thigh, as if he had been half-gutted. The wound was old and faded, the flesh had sealed with time, but the skin was still sickly pale and yellowish. A blow that had never healed properly, and the lord looked like he had been living on death’s door ever since.

Lord Reed followed her gaze to his scar. “It has been eighteen years,” he croaked softly, with an utterly humourless smile, “but Ser Arthur’s blade continues to torment me. I survived the blow at the time, but then days later the wound began to fester in the red sands. Your father had to carry me to Starfall. I have not been the same since.”

Lord Reed hugged his daughter tightly, cradling her in his arms. “I owe Ned so much,” he spoke in quiet, uneven breaths, meeting Sansa’s eyes from over Meera’s shoulder. “Without him, I would not be here, would not have even known my children. I could do naught for him but escort his bones, but I must do more for his children. House Reed is at your service.”

Sansa didn’t even know what to say.

He made a motion as if trying to bow while sitting down, but then winced in pain and gripped his stomach. Meera grimaced, then stepped aside. “Forgive him, Your Grace.” Meera looked to her, biting her lip. “Travel is very difficult for my father, he has relied much on Greywater to keep him…”
Meera’s voice trailed off. Sansa did not reply. The famously reclusive Lord Reed. He was struggling to even pull himself upright, and he needed Ser Brynden to help support him up in the cart.

Very sick, very wheezy, and very frail. He wasn’t even that old, Sansa realised suddenly. The lord might have only been middle-aged, but his sickness made him as gaunt as a corpse.

His eyes were lined with hollow shadows, but the orbs within glinted bright green. Even for a man so sickly, he had a cool, knowing gaze. Sansa was left speechless, but Lord Howland Reed finally managed to pull his head down into a pained bow.

“Princess Stark,” he wheezed. “I am here to see the king.”

---

**The Mother**

Near a week had passed, and yet she could still see the faint wispy haze of smoke over the horizon. Even after all this time, this strange southron city still smouldered. White Harbour – even burnt and half-broken, this was her new home, her people’s new home.

The charred silhouette of the harbour was visible through the open doors, as a thousand men and women filled the stone hall. “Salvation!” they chanted, feet stomping against the stone. “Salvation!”

In the distance, a fresh plume of smoke was breaking into the pallid sky.

Mother Mole stood on a podium made from the stump of a large oak tree and shouted at the top of her lungs. Her weirwood staff drummed off the marble to the beat of the chant. “For too long have we huddled in fear against the cold winds!” she screeched, above the jubilant cries. “For too long have we cowered before the creeping frost, for too long have we felt the frozen knives in our chests!”

The only reply was a voiceless roar. “For too long have we burnt our dead, in fear of the day that they would rise again!”

There were more people in her congregation than ever before, and every day it seemed like a few more. They all came before her.

“Who here has lost loved ones, friends and family to the white? Who here has suffered known loss?” she cried, and the crowd howled. “For the cold winds are rising, and the Old Gods make us but one promise! What do they promise?”

“Salvation!” they cried. “Salvation!”

The crowd filled the Church of Snows, stomping and screaming. They had stripped the temple of its pews, but there were still more men and women than could even fit in the temple. They were flooding from the doors and out onto the cobbles of Fishfoot Yard.

Once, this had been the ‘Sept of the Snows’, a place of worship dedicated to seven false idols. Now though, there were far more followers of the true faith in White Harbour than there were of the ‘Seven’. Those seven effigies had been ripped from the walls, their statues had toppled, and in their place stood a single white totem. They all stood before the image of a coiled white dragon carved from the trunk of a huge weirwood tree.
The dragon’s eyes and horns had been shaded red with blood, the white wood was stained with bloody handprints from where the worshippers had cut their palms to give tribute.

The sight of such a congregation still took her breath away. Even after all this time, even after all that the dreams had shown her, even after the bloody battles, she could still scarce believe it. As she hobbled down from the podium, there were dozens – hundreds – queuing to touch the dragon totem. Each one had a white stone on their chest.

Such a gathering would never have been possible beyond the Wall, and there would have been no way to feed them all. The free folk had never had anything even close to a city. But perhaps that is the reason the southerners always won, Mother Mole mused. For all their flaws and short-sightedness, she appreciated the… structures that the southerners had built around themselves.

This is a city of true believers now.

In her youth, cities had been a tale to tell the children at night, a dream for when the little ones were being tucked in. Castles and dragons, lords and ladies and cities. They had been things for dreams, fantasies for fools and children.

Aside from a small few like the Thenns or the cave-folk, the free folk had been wanderers. They had been nomads, a people of a thousand clans following the rule of their chieftains and warlords, their thanes and wise-men. Never before, not even under Mance, had the free folk united under a single banner. But now they were south of the cursed Wall, staring at horizons she had never imagined.

It is all changing.

The world’s nature was changing far beyond what men could merely see. The dragon had been like a stone thrown into a still pool, and where it walked the world rippled. Bloomed. Magic was returning to the world, revitalising it, and despite her old bones and rough skin she felt stronger than she had in decades. The aches in her bones had gone, the vague cloudiness of her visions had grown to a girl’s clarity. She felt like she had in her youth, when she had still been slim and strong.

“Salvation,” the believers chanted as they prayed. “Salvation.”

And while King Snow led the battle against the cold with sword and fire, it was to her to lead a different type of battle. Hers was a war of faith.

The witch hobbled down the steps, enveloped instantly by an escort. Most of her inner circle were female – spearwives or wise women – but there were a few men scattered about them.

Her gaze turned towards a brown-haired youth waiting by the stone columns, his face twisted with anxiety. She stepped towards the enclave to meet the youth. His hands were blackened, Mother Mole noted, as her leathery face twisted to a scowl.

“Is it done?” Mother Mole asked quietly.

“It is done.” The boy was young, she doubted if he was passed his fourteenth nameday. “As you say, Your Holiness, the false gods burn.”

“Your Holiness,” Mother Mole snorted, and she swatted the boy’s head with her staff. “Such kneeler’s titles, I have no use for them. Do not address me such again.”

He gulped. “Yes, um... Yes, Mother.”
“And your hands are stained with soot. That is foolish,” she chided. “Did anyone see you?”

The child shook his head. “No. Me and the boys stuffed straw through the windows, then threw burning rocks to light it. The whole building went up. We were out of there before they knew what hit them.”

That would be the sept by Lordsport, Mother Mole thought with approval. An unholy building now cleansed by fire. “And how many remain?”

“Oh, there’s the sept in Silver Street, and the other sept out in the city slums?”

She nodded. “Good child. We will not suffer such false gods here.” He extended his hand, and she kissed it with wrinkled lips. “May the Dragon bless you.”

He gulped, before backing away. The ones that she chose were all young, all loyal, and all converts. They were boys and girls that had grown up in White Harbour, and now she had tasked them to burning the city’s septs.

To use converts was important. Tensions with the fat lord were already high, and it seemed too risky if free folk were caught burning the southern gods. But for kneelers to be torching their own temples? That sent a wholly different message, one that would not be so easily linked back to her, or linked back to the Circle. If the men she sent were discovered – and they probably would be – then they would have the honour of being martyrs to the cause.

It had been a difficult effort. Mother Mole had arranged for the torching of septs – but it had to be done discreetly enough that there was no outcry. She did not want to risk the relationship with the mermen any more than she must.

It had been a slow cleansing. One by one, the septons and septas had been chased out of White Harbour.

King Snow would disapprove of what she was doing, she knew, but never mind. Jon Snow was oft distracted, and Mother Mole took care that he would not find out. For all his service, their prophet was still very young. Time would harden him, she did not doubt, and in the future he would come to understand – but for now it was for her to act in his stead. She would serve the gods.

She had seen it. Only true believers would survive the upcoming storm.

After the sermon, night was falling and Mother Mole and her Circle retreated out of the church. There were still lines of homeless clinging to city streets, but shelter was being built and Mother Mole had ensured that they were well-fed.

The Circle was finding ever more converts in the city. They had protected White Harbour where the Manderly’s own guards had failed.

She could walk near any street in the city now, and she would see a good proportion of people with white stones on their chests. Even the southerner merchants and traders were beginning to convert, and even the powerful Oarsman’s Guild had accepted the dragon. And every day, more snow fell on the city.

The wargs-chiefs Boroqq the Boar and the Owl Lord had returned to the city. With the Circle’s aid, they were now teaching the next generation of wargs from within the Church of Snows itself. Even some southerners had been found to have the Gift, and more and more powers were rising.

At Mother’s Moles bequest, the Circle’s wargs aided the city’s fishermen, whalers and patrols.
Now, by seal and shark, albatross and orca, the skinchangers were helping to guard and feed the city.

In the battle’s wake, White Harbour was being rebuilt. Not as it once was, but into something new.

The priestess headed back towards the ancient black castle clinging to the outskirts of the city. The Wolf’s Den was an old fortress nestled against the cliffs overlooking the bay – the battlements were sheeted in frost, the stone cobbles of the yard were cracking apart, and the keep was in the disrepair of generations. It had stopped being a castle a long time ago, and had been turned into a prison by the mermen, but now it had been taken over by the Circle in the days after the attack. The castle was heaving with the faithful and the desperate, refugees all.

During the battle of White Harbour, the refugees had taken shelter in the Wolf’s Den. Even a week afterwards, the free folk refused to leave. Mother Mole found that for the free folk to have their own castle in the city was… useful.

It was approaching the dark of night, and she could feel the power in the air. She found herself drawn towards the overgrown weirwood cradled at the heart of the castle. The weirwood’s branches had grown even through the crumbling walls and windows, and every red leaf seemed to be rustling in the still air.

She could feel the aura of the Old Gods surrounding her as Mother Mole stepped before the tree.

This was the very last heart tree left in White Harbour. She might have held her sermon in that ‘church’ of stone and timber, but this felt like the truly holy place.

“Mother,” Sigrid bowed before her, a long and lean girl with red hair. “We are ready for you.”

She only nodded. The others knew what was happening too. Around her, acolytes and apprentices were gathering around them. Her gaze moved to her apprentices, flickering from one to the next. Sigrid, Gunhilde, Arsi, Heltha, Solvi. There were almost two dozen girls who had the Gift, the fruit of her months of searching amongst the refugees.

They were the Circle.

All the while the warg-chiefs were training more skinchangers, it fell to Mother Mole to train more witches.

No – no longer was she just a witch. The world had changed, and so had she. Now she was the Gods’ priestess, an apostle for the Old God of Ice. And now, as she led the way to the godswood, as her fingers clenched about her carved weirwood spear, she knew that she had to show her apprentices the way.

There were three dozen women in total, ranging from girls barely past maidenhood to the grey-haired. They all stood silently around the tree, listening to the beat of Mother Mole’s cane as she hobbled over the cobblestone. There were a few men among them too, but she found that women tended to be more in tune with the elements. Males were inherently selfish when it came to power, but women shared more naturally. Men tried to seize power themselves, but women could act as conduits to the gods.

The moonless night was dark, and the heart tree was radiating. She could see the hunger in its twisted red face.

It was time.
“Bring another from the cell,” the Mother ordered.

They already had. Heartbeats later, she heard the sound of a scuffle, and three hardened spearwives dragging a bloodied young man over the broken cobbles. “Stop!” a voice begged. “Don’t do this… you can’t…”

He was shouting, squirming, even as her apprentices dragged him by his chains.

“The Lord of Waters will ransom me!” the fair-skinned sellsail moaned, struggling against his fetters. “I’m the son of Lorane Nermantes. I am the fleet’s Lord Navigator, my father will ransom me! You don’t need to do this, I have friends in Lys. Family! Gold, silver!”

“Pirate’s gold, murderer’s silver,” grunted Sigrid, pushing the young man to his knees before the heart tree. “Filth.” Her flame-haired apprentice looked to Mother Mole, eyes questioning. “Is he enough, priestess?”

“It is,” Mother Mole agreed softly, her eyes flickering over the young pirate’s form. “One more tribute to the gods.”

She looked around the room, and they were all tense with apprehension. You are ready, my apprentices.

The pirate was a fine-looking man, he couldn’t have been older than twenty. Fair of skin and blond of hair, with large blue eyes and even, smooth features. He might have been a woman but for the short hair.

There were many that had been left from the assault on the city. The remainder of the pirate fleet had fled, but many other mercenaries had been trapped without ships. Most had been captured in the city, but some few had forced their way out of the city and fled out into the countryside. The free folk quickly hunted those down.

They had all been sentenced to death, but Mother Mole saw no reason to waste their bodies on the gallows. She drew a bone sickle, as sharp as any knife, as the prisoner was forced to kneel.

Something in the pirate’s eyes widened in realisation, in fear. “No, no, you can’t–!”

“Bring him to the heart tree,” Mother Mole said, sickened by the kneeler’s begging. “And bind his mouth.”

Mother Mole took a deep breath, as she walked towards the weirwood. She muttered a quiet prayer in the Old Tongue, before turning to face her coven. “Tonight we give tribute to the Gods,” she proclaimed to the breathless air. “We are the Circle. We stand apart and above clan and tribe, family and chief. We are the shepherds who will guide our people into this new world. Where the God goes, it is our task to follow and clear the way.”

The old woman gripped her spear tighter, thinking of those that had been lost. They had given much to be here, and she would give more still.

“It is to us that the sacred duty falls. Fear not, for we are not alone. The Old Gods have returned, taking form and flesh to stand with us against the night without end. The God of Ice was the first, and there may yet be more. It is our role to show the people to the true path – that we may yet live to see the dawn. To see spring!”

There was no reply but a quiet, wordless murmur. Mother Mole turned to the pirate, bound by rope and held at the shoulder by her spearwives. His struggles were like a frenzied animal. His eyes
were wild, and blood wept from where the ropes bound him to the heart tree.

She studied him for a long moment before speaking. “This wretch, and all those that sailed with him tried to take that from us. They who have shed the blood of free folk must give their blood in turn. To the God.”

“To the God,” the girls intoned.

“To the God,” the spearwives agreed.

The man’s moans reached a fever pitch, screams hissing through teeth, through the rope in his mouth.

The acolytes stripped the man, smallclothes and all, while the spearwives bound him to the tree. At some point he took a blow to the head, and after that his resistance lessened. A small vat of weirwood sap was taken out, to prepare him in the Old Way. Her apprentices, let by Sigrid, painted him heart and lung, throat and leg, phallus and skull with the runes of the First Men.

She raised the blade and then paused. Slowly, Mother Mole handed the sickle to Sigrid, wrapped the young woman’s hands around the blade. The girl looked shocked, but she nodded and gulped.

“Sigrid, you are ready,” the old woman instructed. “This is your night.”

Sigrid approached the heart tree slowly. The night was tense, expectant. The apprentice took a deep breath, and gave a silent prayer.

Finally, Sigrid gutted the man with her bone knife, slicing the blade through tender flesh.

There was an art to it – cut below the stomach but above the intestines. The lesser apprentices collected the blood with a cured sheep’s bladder, then offered it to the heart tree’s mouth. The gagged screams reached fever pitch.

Slowly, Sigrid’s knife cut through skin, tracing the path of the runes. The air was deathly quiet besides the man’s muffled cries, hissing from between teeth.

The moment of death had to be prolonged, so the heart tree would better take in the essence of the sacrifice. First it was the chest, the intestines, the lungs, then the heart and finally the neck. The blood spilled onto the roots, and it took a long time before it began to still.

They watched the blood seep forth in tune with the crazed beat. It was like music. It reminded Mother Mole of a spring fawn, fiercely uncomprehending of what was happening. Like a spark that was about to burst forth into a fire. The kindling always resisted in the moment before it blazed.

She met the pirate’s eyes, and gave her silent thanks to his service. Not enough were so blessed as he.

After the blood was totally emptied, the knife cut deeper. The sickle flayed open the skin, they used a hammer to crack ribs. Now, the organs were to be stripped, so that each one could be given to the tree in turn. Astrid uncoiled the intestine, first the small, then the large, and placed them into the waiting hands of gentle Arsi.

Everything that the man was, offered and fed to the Old Gods.

Around them, the red leaves rippled in the dark. Nobody said a word, they just dropped to their knees before the bloody tree.
It was blooming. The weirwood was almost glowing in the evening dark, the bark shining like the moon, the leaves like the reddest star. Its branches rustled though there was no wind.

Something had changed in the year since the God’s awakening. Once, these hallowed traditions had gone all but extinct amongst the free folk, practiced only by the most isolated and savage of all the clans. But now, the rituals had more effect than ever. Mother Mole had been the first to rediscover them, as she sacrificed squirrels and rabbits to the tree in which she used to live.

The times were changing. The gods were rising, and they hungered.

“It is your time, Sigrid,” Mother Mole nodded to the flame-haired girl. “Lead the coven. Let us all meditate.”

Her apprentice gulped, then nodded. The rest lowered herself to their knees. One by one, Sigrid walked around the Circle, and dabbed their foreheads with the sacrifice’s blood.

The world went still. The heart tree was screaming, spinning…

*It is happening,* Mother Mole eventually realised. *They are Seeing.*

The circle of acolytes knelt in place, their heads lowered to the heart tree. Twitching. Sometimes as though in pain, but never quite recoiling.

And as Mother Mole closed her eyes, she saw the storm of souls.

It felt like the heart tree was burning. She felt the invisible fires lick at her face, but the flames felt cold…

Visions flashed before her. They saw an icy figure limping over the snows, they saw black shadows stirring. They saw the snows given flesh, a snowstorm whirling away at a great barrier of red and green.

Mother Mole saw a boy – a young boy – crying before a heart tree. On his head, he wore a bloody crown of white thorns.

She saw another dark-haired child with red eyes, screaming and thrashing as a black figure lifted him up off the ground and carried him away into the night.

She saw a black, frozen ocean under a bulbous moon, as a swell of waves threatened to break through the surface. The ice was cracking, breaking in the night. Something large was moving just under the surface of the oily water, it was like the whole ocean was churning.

And then she saw a shadow. A shadow of black and red walking through a hall of white, leaving black and red footsteps with every step it took. It was burning so hot that she could feel the heat against her skin, it was like the bonfire of a thousand souls surrounding her. The burning creature stepped closer, painting the hallway black…

All around her, acolytes gasped. A young girl lost the connection first, and scrambled backwards. The circle was breaking apart as the trance was shattered. Mother Mole felt the visions fading, but she tried to hold on…

She saw a group of faceless figures lowering themselves before a white throne. She saw a man with the heart of a tree inspecting a black tarnished crown in his hands…

The air split, and suddenly the vision broke.
Her eyes shot open, taking deep breaths. All around her, the acolytes shivered.

Before her, the red and white tree loomed. The bloody entrails across the branches were already shivering. The face carved into the weirwood looked like it was giggling.

There was a long hush, as the acolytes took deep breaths to focus themselves.

“You have done well, Sigrid,” Mother Mole said finally, her voice a gasp.

Her apprentice blinked, looking lost. “Mother… what was that?” she whispered, unwilling to raise her voice. “What did it mean?”

Mother Mole hesitated. That was always the most difficult question. The Old Gods granted them sight. Visions of the past, shades of the future, but to find clarity… to find meaning was another trial entirely.

The memory of that black shadow hovered over her, it was like she could still feel it against her skin. She remembered those visions; of that child, and of the throne…

“It means that we must go to Winterfell.”

…

Days past, and then weeks, Winterfell beckoned them, but the snows made travel impossible. Instead, the Circle had to wait for the Manderly convoy heading north.

She was followed by a host of true believers flocking to Winterfell. To have so many refugees in tow made progress on the road slow, but a mother could not abandon her children.

The road was long and hard. Despite the efforts of the Manderlys and the rearguard of the coalition forces, the snows had grown so deep that no wheeled carriage could pass and the wheelhouses and carts had to be refit for sleighs. There were not enough available horses left for the caravans, so it was pulled by a motley of gargons, oxen and mules. The progress was slow, while more and more refugees flocked around her and a supply train stretched for near half a league from White Harbour up along the frozen White Knife.

All around her, the north’s heartlands were in torment. Every village that they passed was in a panic, being mustered by the local lord, or failing that, a coalition commander. There were thousands of men and women that were being gathered to reinforce the dragon even in the depth of winter.

‘Conscription’, the southrons called it. To her, it looked more like farmers and cattleherds being forced to hold swords.

At the village of Blackpool, at a lesser crossroads near half the way to Winterfell, she arrived just as coalition forces were sacking the castle, to put Lord Slate into chains. The merman forces met little resistance as they demanded that the traitor be surrendered, House Slate’s own men abandoned their lord. Mother Mole watched as the lord and his family were frogmarched from their keep.

The supply train was trapped by the snows in Blackpool for close to a week, when word reached them of a rider coming south. The merman guards were the first to know, but Mother Mole heard not long afterwards. A knight – one ‘Ser Alek of White Harbour’ – had set off south to meet up with his lord.
From what Mother Mole gathered, this Ser Alek had once been part of King Snow’s Dragonguard, but he had abandoned the Dragon and resigned. Mother Mole would have had the man executed for such weakness, but Lord Manderly’s men took the knight away too quickly.

The rumours from Winterfell trickled south slowly. King Snow had captured Winterfell, and both his brother and his sister had been found alive. There was news of a coronation. They whispered of a great battle, and an army of the dead.

By the tell of it, the white walkers raised an uncountable number of dead as wights, and then marched north for the Wall. The North’s heartlands were a roiling chaos in the wake of the news, with word of uncountable slaughters having been committed by the Others further north along the kingsroad.

The men also told other darker stories. They told stories of a slaughter at Winterfell, with many dead. A creature of shadow and flame. *The demons of fire and demons of ice.*

Around the campfire, her apprentices chattered eagerly about such things, but Mother Mole sat quiet and unnerved, edging nearer to the fire than usual. It was far away, but she could still feel it in the distance. It felt like there was something powerful burning over the horizon, coming closer with every step.

As they made their way north, the stories they heard from travellers grew ever more queer. The column of refugees grew larger. It was not long after they passed Cerwyn that Mother Mole finally saw it.

Winterfell.

In the distance, the castle came into view as she crested the peak of a hill. The castle looked different from what it had been in her dreams, but that was oft the way of visions.

While all its surrounding fields were smothered white, Winterfell itself looked brown and green, surrounded by so many tents plopped amid the muddy soil that it made her think of a field of mushrooms after the rain. Her followers gaped and stared, but Mother Mole only pursed her lips. *Freak weather indeed,* she thought. She had to strip off the outer layer of her furs – within the span of mere leagues, the world had gone from winter to summer.

The snows around the castle had melted. The rest of the North was covered by over six feet of snow, but here at the castle the snow was simply gone. In its place was muddy, brown earth, but she could see patches of green – the grass was sprouting, flowers were even blooming. Her apprentices babbled excited questions all round her, but the Mother found herself devoid of answers.

It was like the stories her own mother had once told her, the stories of the children of the forest. They had told her once that the children could hold ceremonies to bring back spring. Stories she hadn’t heard since the days of King Redbeard…

*The youngest son of Stark did this,* she thought. Mother Mole could hardly imagine the power that such a feat would require. It was tremendous. *What sacrifice did he give?*

The dragon was not here, she could feel that instinctively. Still, there was some other magic sparkling in the air, radiating from the earth beneath the castle.

The wide gates loomed over her, as the Manderly carriages clattered through over the muddy cobblestones. There was such a crowd that the smallfolk were queuing outside of the gates to come
in, all the while they bustled around the roadside. The guards were trying to keep the smallfolk out – pointing them towards the winter town instead – but Mother Mole’s spearwives forced them to let her pass. The old woman hobbled forward, staring around this unfamiliar place.

The castle was huge, but it was stained by battle and unease. The yards past the outer gate were filled with hundreds of roaming figures as the Manderlys supply convoy was unloaded. She met Dormund, son of Tormund Giantsbane directing the refugees, but of his father or his brother Toregg she saw nothing. The free folk and the northerners in the yard largely separated into their own camps, casting one another distrustful glances. She could feel the hunger, the tension hovering in the air.

She could not see the giants, or any of the army’s commanders. Jon Snow and the dragon had already left, but more and more Mother Mole’s thoughts were turning towards Brandon Stark. King Brandon, apparently.

She was already through the yards. As soon as she stepped through the gates, she was drawn to the castle’s godwood, a bit further to the northwest. It was here it had happened. She could feel it. The traces of a magic more powerful than any she’d known. She took a deep breath amidst the godwood’s muddy soil, soaking it in.

Her followers mingled with a few of the castle's worshippers. They spoke of Bran Stark in hushed tones. A child that came back from the dead. A child that summoned spring, a boy who Jon Snow declared king…

“Take me to this young king,” Mother Mole ordered to her followers.

By her side, a spearwife hesitated. “Where is he?”

“Find someone who knows. I want to meet this boy.”

It did not take long before they found a man. Many of the southrons tried to dismiss them, but there were enough free folk around who bore Mother Mole in high regard. They found one of the king’s personal guards, a free folk bearing a white stone on his chest. He spoke hesitantly, and dipped his head before Mother Mole and her Circle.

“King Bran is in the keep, Mother,” he told her. The man spoke the Common Tongue in the gruff tones of one who had only recently learned. “He does not leave. The Princess Stark won’t let any near.”

Mother Mole scowled. She tried to arrange a meeting with this princess next, but the Mother wasn’t even allowed into the keep. Very few were, apparently. The thought was frustrating.

“What are we to do, Mother?” Arsi asked her nervously. Many of her followers seemed ill at ease in the shadow of such a huge castle.

“I must meditate. See to yourselves.”

She found herself stepping through the trees, drawn to the heart tree at Winterfell. Around her, the hot springs still bubbled and crackled, while a rustling of birds had taken refuge in the branches around her. She could still feel the lingering aura of their God – the woods themselves remembered the dragon.

Judging by the broken trees and the strewn earth, the dragon had roosted in these trees. She could feel it; the magic was still thick in the air from its presence.
It had been sickly, she realised. There was pain in its aura that poisoned the ground. Mother Mole could still feel a taint like rot hovering over the grass and trees. Something had happened, some dark power had poisoned it, but then…

Mother Mole lowered herself before the heart tree, and she suddenly saw the memory of a young child on the ground by the roots, as the world bathed in steam. She took a deep breath.

A young child. Brandon Stark. Young and crippled, powerful but untaught…

The old woman’s bony fingers clenched her staff tighter. Yes, she now knew why the Old Gods had directed her here.

She was here to teach this boy.

There was no time to waste, so much to do…

She knew that she must meet with him, but infuriatingly none were permitted. The castle's keep was locked down and kept on high-alert.

Mother Mole held her congregation in the yards below the great keep that night – to try and draw someone’s attention – but she received little. They set up their sermon in full view of the keep, and the grounds were filled with chanting and crying. There were well over a thousand of her followers filling up Winterfell, and yet many kneelers gave them naught but angry glares. None approached, but the southrons huddled in their little groups while the yards were filled by a mob of believers.

The southrons would be whispering in this young king’s ear, but Mother Mole wanted to make sure that Bran Stark heard her words instead.

*Mine is a war of faith,* she thought to herself. *It was not a war she intended to lose.*

As dusk fell, she was escorted back to a tent set up by the godswood, where the Circle made its camp. It had been a long day and her old bones were aching, she could feel the strain on her joints as she hobbled unevenly over the stones.

A figure was waiting for her, half-hidden in the corner behind an outbuilding.

“*Witch,*” a voice growled to her, and the Mother could have scoffed. Her spearwives instantly drew their weapons, but Mother Mole just shook her head.

“*Weeper,*” she replied in a croak, and she paused before she turned around.

The man was glaring at her with bloodshot eyes. He was an ugly, squash-faced man with beady eyes. The raider bore the appearance of a rabid dog even on his best days, but this seemed to be one of his worst. The Weeper’s face was bloody and black, and he had a new gap in his front teeth. He stood bare-chested in the warmth, revealing a chest of shaggy hair over old crisscrossing scars, with large bloody welts across his body.

The man tottered on two half-spears he used as crutches, while his feet shuffled stiffly. She glanced curiously to his legs, and then his face. The raider and warlord had been beaten to within an inch of his life, by the look of it.

“You always were a hard man to kill, Weeper,” Mother Mole noted, with a nod at his wounds. “I hope you killed the man who did that to you.”

The Weeper’s scowl deepened, feet awkwardly moving forward. “What are you doing in
Winterfell, witch?”

*Call me a witch again, and I will have your tongue.* Against any other man, Mother Mole would have made the threat out loud, but the Weeper was like to take such as a challenge. “I am here where the Gods want me to be.”

“Fuck the gods. What are you really here for?”

Mother Mole cocked her head, sizing him up. He was a short man, but he still stood head and shoulders above her. “I want to see the king.”

“He’s gone. Flew off on a dragon.”

“The new king.” Her voice was cool. “The boy, I hear.” At that, the raider grunted. “The ‘king’. A bloody boy.” The Weeper’s voice was foul. “I thought that was a joke at first – Snow surrendered to a cripple.”

“The Old Gods have a plan for us all.” In the distance, a horn from the wall drowned out her voice. She took a half-step forward, to hear him better. “Jon Snow serves their purpose, and he chose his brother as his successor. A brother likewise Gifted by the Gods. Look around you, Weeper, I feel the touch of the Gods in the air.”

The Weeper snarled. “Spare me the talk of gods and magic, I don’t give a crap.”

“Your blindness is your own.” Mother Mole snorted. “Would that you had taken a few more eyes from the crows, they might have even given you wisdom.”

The warlord’s snarl deepened as he approached her. She could sense her apprentices bristling behind her, alarmed. Even alone, half-naked and wounded, the Weeper cut an intimidating figure. Mother Mole glared her apprentices down, then considered the man as he paused a few strides away.

The Weeper was an aggressive man, but she could sense there was something different in his manner. Mother Mole had not seen the warlord this… talkative before.

“It is your turn, Weeper. Do you command in the castle? Where is your warband?”

His crutches fumbled as he tried to move, and the Weeper spat on the stones. “Fucking Snow took my fucking warband north with him,” he cursed. “I command nothing. It’s Tormund that leads the raiders in the castle.”

Ah. Mother Mole began to understand why the man was in such a mood. There was a pair of thin red trails running down his cheeks, coming from the corners of his eyes. “Worst part of it all?” the Weeper growled. “I hear that there was one hell of a battle up north, and I missed that. I’m left here twiddling my thumbs with these bloody things.” He waved his makeshift crutches, face twisted in a grimace.

“The Old Gods give us all a purpose,” the Mother replied softly.

“Spare me, witch. I’m not here for your ‘wisdom’.”

“No – you come to me because I’m a healer,” she retorted. “Isn’t that right, dearie?” He did not deny it, but his mouth curled. Back in the day, when she had been but a woods witch,
Mother Mole had made her living tending to wounds and fevers. She had lost count of all the limbs she had cauterised, the cuts she had bound, or the poultices she had mixed. Mother Mole had once lived in the roots of a tree, and all the surrounding clans had left her alone, in return for her tending to their wounded.

There were many a raider that were only able to grip an axe thanks to her. Or to walk without supports, perhaps. She eyed the Weeper’s legs critically. “Does it hurt?” she asked, pointing to his legs. “The bones look twisted.”

“Fuck off.”

“They might never heal properly, you know that?” she challenged. “But I could set them, aye. I could help a recovery. Better than any of these southrons could, that’s for sure.”

“Witch, you give nothing for free.” The Weeper scowled. But still, he hadn’t spat on her, and he wasn’t walking away. He was interested. “What do you want?”

“I assume you still have friends, Weeper,” she mused. “Old raider comrades, most like. Perhaps you have friends in the dungeons? I hear talk that there are prisoners in this castle.”

His bloody eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Why?”

“If I cannot go near the king, then he must be drawn to me. I shall hold a ceremony in the godswood tomorrow night.” She took another step forward. “And for that I need sacrifices.”

“The dungeons?” the Weeper mused, and the old woman nodded. “Aye, that can be arranged.”

“Grand. But one other matter…” In a smooth motion, her bony fingers reached for the necklace of white stones around her neck. She yanked at it with a small tut, and then extended her open hand to the Weeper. In her palm rested a single, small white stone. “If you want my healing, then you will wear a white stone.”

The warlord looked like he could have strangled her, but then he glanced down at his crutches, and he took the white stone without another word. Mother Mole felt a plan forming.

Winterfell was still filled with unbelievers, and it was her task to make them believe.

Mother Mole spent the night making preparations, gathering her Circle, and sharpening her ritual knives.

By the first of light of the morn, the Circle stood ready. They waited until late eve, as the sun started to droop over the walls, and then lighting great bonfires at the edge of the godswood. The smoke rose into the air, and already the worshippers were starting to flock before the godswood.

It will be a full moon, Mother Mole thought. That was good.

As the first shadows of nightfall stretched across them, she was ready.

The Weeper rounded up a few men with access to the dungeons, but Mother Mole ordered two dozen spearwives with them, to be sure. It had to be done quickly – they must take the prisoners from the dungeons before any managed to object.

Dusk was falling slowly, all while they rang drums and gongs to gather the congregation. The sound rang through the trees, and the godswood flooded with bodies as the sun fell.
Several of the Circle stripped naked and painted themselves white with ash, as they called the sermon to the forest. The acolytes of the Circle dressed all in white, standing before the heart tree. A bulbous white moon lingered behind the clouds, blessing their efforts.

The noise of drumming – savage and primal – filled the air. All around her, Winterfell was stirring.

“Mother, there are kneelers at the gates,” a spearwife reported.

“Do not let them stop us,” she ordered. “But do not draw blood. There will be no violence tonight.”

The kneelers would have little sleep tonight, she expected. The godswood was ringing with noise. The air was beating to the tune of barbaric drums, the sound of cries in the Old Tongue filling the dark, stuffy air. The music of the Gods.

*We are the Circle*, Mother Mole thought fiercely, staring at it all. Only a mere two years ago, half the free folk here would have sooner fought than mingle.

She found herself lingering by the gates, watching out over the rippling courtyard. For a moment she feared that they might have been unsuccessful, but then she saw a huddle of figures pushing their way through the courtyard.

True to his word, the Weeper provided the guests of honour for the sermon. The warlord was limping on crutches, cursing with every step as his raiders dragged a line of figures behind them. They were all dressed in rags and fetters – mostly men, but with a few women amongst them.

“Stop!” a southron knight shouted, chasing after the Weeper. “Stop! You can’t take them, Princess Sansa said that none—”

His voice was cut off, as the Weeper slammed his knuckles into the young man’s face. Blood splattered, the knight dropped, and the raider was already hobbling off on his crutches.

“I will tell the Princess!” he shouted, voice muffled by the blood. “You can’t take the prisoners, you can’t…”

The Circle’s followers were already grabbing the sacrifices, dragging them physically through the woods. They tried to scream, tried to thrash, but they were overwhelmed by the mass of bodies.

*Seventeen*, Mother Mole counted. Seventeen sacrifices will do. “Prepare them,” she ordered to her acolytes.

The air was crazed. The prisoners were so scared they were white as bone. One prisoner – an aging woman with dark hair – tried to thrash, only for the spearwives to force her to her knees on the carpet of humus before the heart tree. Some tried to plea, some tried to fight, others wept, but their cries were lost in the chorus.

Mother Mole stood upon a log, standing over the hot springs. “These men have been sentenced to die!” she declared to the crowd. “The southrons would give them to a headsman! But I will give them to the gods!”

The godswood roared. The face of the heart tree was illuminated by a hundred glowing torches.

It did not take long for the kneelers to react. Armoured men were stomping through the trees, moments later, each one bearing the sigil of House Stark. Under their helms, their features were dark and grim.
There were two dozen or so guards, but they were surrounded by spearwives lining the trees. The guards went straight for Mother Mole, standing by the heart tree.

“Stop this, woman,” the guard ordered. “These prisoners are not yours to execute.”

“Look around you,” Mother Mole challenged. “Do you really wish to defy the Gods?”

His eyes flickered to the scores of believers filling the trees, crowding around the hot springs. She saw the twitch. “If you want to bear witness, feel free,” a spearwife offered. “But tonight we will pay tribute.”

The guards all bore swords, but they would be fools to draw them here. In the godswood, the free folk of the Circle numbered at least a thousand. There were more women than men, but they all clutched spears. The guard paused in doubt, and his courage wavered in the darkness.

“I will alert the princess of this,” the captain of the guard warned.

“Please,” Mother Mole snorted. “Do.”

She turned her back, facing the prisoners. Seventeen in total. Nine were old men, three had the look of thugs, two were portly and fat – kneeler lords, perhaps. The other two were women, but Mother Mole knew none of their names. She had simply told the Weeper to take as many as would not be missed.

They were all conspirators, from what Mother Mole understood. They were maesters, conspirators, and Bolton loyalists awaiting judgement. Now, they would be tried by the Gods.

The sacrifices were stripped naked, pale flesh on the grass, and they were shrieking right up until their mouths were gagged. The beat of the drums never ceased.

“Arsi, Heltha,” Mother Mole ordered. “Fulfil the ritual. I shall see to the southrons.”

The northmen were already mustering outside of the godswood, looking tense and nervous. There were many weapons being readied, but none dared to enter the woods. A line of believers, men and women both, stood around the perimeter, each with white stones on their chest.

“Mother, the lords approach,” a boy called as he rushed to her, while Mother Mole hobbled along the path. “They demand we surrender.”

“Allow them through,” she ordered. “But no violence, not tonight.”

She could see them gathering outside the rustic iron gates, staring down into the path. The shadow of the heart tree was in the distance, the sacrifices were taking position.

Mother Mole did not know their names, but clearly they considered themselves important. She could have snorted. “My lords,” Mother Mole greeted, her voice sardonic as she hunched over her staff.

“Surrender the prisoners,” a broad-chested man demanded, his thick moustache squirming as he scowled. “These people will disperse.”

She snorted. “Is it not a rule of this land? That them who pass judgement should do the deed?” Mother Mole challenged, looking around them. “These prisoners committed crimes against the Gods, and so the Gods will take their lives.” The priestess then turned to the free folk, and her voice rose into a screech. “That is law on which this coalition was founded – justice for atrocities.
Blood for blood. These men committed grave crimes, and I am ensuring they are properly punished.”

The biting edge in her voice caused a few of the kneelers to flicker. She glared at them in turn, daring any to disagree.

Lowly, a quiet voice spoke up. “What do you hope to achieve?” a man muttered in a wheezy breath.

Mother Mole turned towards the speaker; a lord with a black lizard lion on his chest, barely supporting himself on a cane. One hand was across his chest, the other arm slumped over the cane. He was slight of figure with sickly features, a gaunt face, unkempt stubble, but sharp bright green eyes. He was staring straight through her, his gaze on the heart tree behind her.

“I serve the Gods. I feel their will,” Mother Mole retorted. “If Brandon Stark is what I believe he is, then he’ll feel it too.”

Behind her, the sacrifice was beginning. The night screamed. A line of spearwives stood against the guards at the gates of the godswood.

The northmen huddled, unsure of what to do. Mother Mole looked between them, searching for weakness. Most averted their gaze, but the sickly lord with green eyes stared straight at her.

Finally, she saw a flash of red hair, of figures striding quickly through the courtyard. Princess Sansa Stark walked briskly towards her, wearing a thick white cloak as her dress trailed over the cobblestones. The princess was young, but her eyes were narrowed and her lips pursed.

By her side, walked a tall and grim man, with his sword drawn. There was a sigil of a black fish upon his chest, and a scowl on his features.

“What is going on here?” the princess demanded, turning her eyes towards the old woman with the staff.

“A pagan ceremony,” another man muttered darkly, keeping close to the princess’ side. He was a heavyset figure, robed in dark brown hemp robes, with bulldog eyes and curled lips. “This is blood sacrifice. Crude magic, unlearnt.”

Mother Mole only tutted.

They stood facing each other – two dozen men against one old woman. Mother Mole’s eyes were fixed on the Princess Stark. Every hand hovered around weapons.

“You have no right to execute those men,” the princess said finally, her voice loud and clear.

“I serve the Gods, and I serve Jon Snow, my princess,” Mother Mole announced. “I mean no harm to you and yours, quite the opposite. It is my duty to show you the way, to serve you like I do your half-brother.”

Before the heart tree, Sigrid slit open the stomach of the first sacrifice. Blood gushed into the night.

The princess held herself well, but Mother Mole saw the girl grimace, averting her eyes from the heart tree.

Seventeen sacrifices. The Gods would feast tonight.
“Your Grace, give the word,” the man with the black fish muttered darkly. Under his helm, he bore only a single eye, glaring at the followers. “Give the word and we will end this farce.”

Farce. She might have spat. The first wave of energy was already swelling outwards, flooding through the trees. She felt it. Mother Mole shivered with its power, and she saw the sickly lord twitch where he stood.

“Can you not see it?” the old woman cackled. “In their death, they cut through the veil. For the cost of their lives – of traitor’s lives – they grant the touch of gods.”

It was all around her, spinning through the air. Show me, Mother mole begged of the Old Gods. Show them.

By his princess’ side, the captain of the guard drew his blade. He huddled close to the princess, as if Mother Mole might leap at her. “This woman is mad.”

Mother Mole only chuckled. One of her apprentices quietly handed her a bowl of fresh blood. Mother Mole slowly let the fluid drip over her forehead, but never looked away from the princess. “Your half-brother could testify to my Gifts, princess. Life is the currency of the Gods.” Her gaze turned, looking towards the man in the robes with the bulldog eyes. “Through sacrifice, I can achieve many things, many wonders. I can bring sight to dark night, the blessings of the gods – that of prophecy, and truth. I can see distant shores, I can see into the past, I can see a man’s sins. I can heal the wounded, I can promise protection in battle. The Circle offers you much and more.”

“But I do not like your price,” the sickly lord scowled, audibly wheezing between breaths. The short lord glanced back at the princess, fingers clenching about his cane. “Stop her.”

The man with the sigil of the fish obeyed, pushing forward. The spears of a dozen spearwives snapped to attention, but Mother Mole held them back with a glance. Suddenly, the tall man stepped closer, and the world came into focus around him… “I see your niece, black fish,” Mother Mole said suddenly, and the man hesitated. “She was dropped into the water with a hole in her throat and a sickness in her soul. A flame touched her and it burnt her heart black.” The man’s face flickered, suddenly freezing. All the while the visions swam in his shadow and took form… Mother Mole could see them. “But you saw her again, didn’t you? You thought it was a dream, but you saw your niece standing on the banks of the river – you saw her. It was why you lingered in those lands, you were searching for her.”

The visions kept coming. The fish-lord’s entire history and fate was painted in the shadows before her, Mother Mole could see it all.

The man’s eyes widened and his body stopped, teeth seeming to grit beneath his helm. Mother Mole smirked. “You did not dream it, ser. Your niece was walking that night.”

Behind her, Astrid cut open another stomach, and the world was spinning in power. Sansa was looking at the tall knight, and suddenly the girl seemed uncertain. The knight of the black fish seemed perturbed by her words, caught off-guard. Behind her, all of the Circle had their hands raised, opening themselves up to the power.

“Marwyn,” the princess demanded a pause, looking to her retinue. “What are they doing?”

“Blood rituals.” The robed man glared at the Mother, as he said the words like a curse.

It was swirling all around her, magic distorting the air. It was flooding outwards, the world soaked in power. Visions were swirling…
“I can see, Princess Stark.” Mother Mole extended her hand. “Do you not wish to see too?”

Her mouth tightened. “We are done here.”

The soldiers stepped forward, but the old woman raised her staff. *Give me more, give me…* “And what of your brother?” Mother Mole challenged, and then Sansa stopped. “I see a child, dark haired. Five or six, perhaps? He was thought lost, but he lives still. The Old Gods show him to me.”

A troubled frown creased Sansa’s face. They were looking at her for orders, but the princess hesitated.

Mother Mole took a deep breath, closing her eyes and trying to make sense of the spinning visions. “I see him, a boy with a beast’s heart. He has a black wolf by his side, growing more feral everyday. Your youngest brother is alive and well – he has been taken to a new home, I see him sheltered by a lobster’s claw. Your brother forgets, he has settled into a new life, a new family, a new home.” Her voice was rambling, struggling to breathe… “I see the boy standing before a heart tree upon a stony mountain, with bloody teeth. He hides in a land of rock.” *Show me more, show me.* “He holds a unicorn horn in his hand, he is staring out over the ocean.”

“Your Grace…” the captain of the guard looked to her. “Do not listen to this lunacy.”

The princess did not reply. Behind them, another sacrifice dropped before the tree. The woman died clutching her own guts.

Mother Mole met Sansa’s eyes. She could see images of her past – dark and stained by tragedy. The princess wanted to – longed to – know more of her family. *Show me more.*

Behind her, the acolyte slit yet another throat, and let the blood gush outwards.

*Show me the Starks. Show me her blood.*

“And your sister…” Mother Mole said, and suddenly Sansa froze like a statue. A vague vision flashed before Mother Mole, but this one was harder to make sense of. It was obscured, blurred. The Mother saw a girl with no face, a shadow. “The sister you knew is gone. You mourn her loss, but she cannot remember you. The dark-haired girl faded away slowly, lost in an unfamiliar place, surrounded by unfamiliar people.” Mother Mole took a deep breath. “Hers was a slow death, she faded away piece by piece.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re wrong, Arya did not die like that.”

“The Old Gods are never wrong,” Mother Mole snapped. “I offer wisdom.”

“Do not trust the wisdom of prophecy,” the sickly lord muttered, a dark look in his eyes. “There is none.”

“Then you are a fool.” Mother Mole’s gaze focused, and she saw something of the lord with the black lizard on his chest. She saw an image of red sands, and a sword of sunlight slicing through flesh, and a woman’s dying wail. Ten men fought to the death below as a woman screamed for them to stop… “I can see you too, squire. I see a pact made in starlight, you made a promise in blood. You never believed it, but you promised anyways, you swore by ice and fire to—”

*Enough!”* the lord snapped, pushing forward with surprising strength. “Do not let them –”

The night snapped, voices rising…. 
At the heart tree, another body fell against the roots.

The world was spinning, it was hard to even hold on….

“What’s going on?” a high-pitched voice cried over the din, a child’s voice. Mother Mole sensed him instantly.

Mother Mole saw Brandon Stark. Finally, she saw him. The boy was being carried on a platter lifted by two men, sitting head and shoulders above the crowd. He was young, with pale auburn hair, and wide eyes and gaunt cheeks.

As soon as their eyes met, she felt the tingle down her spine. There was immense power in the boy, beyond anyone she’d ever seen before. This was no mere Gift. His aura was glowing brighter than all others, like the sun in a sea of candles.

He could feel it too, she knew. He had been drawn by the ceremony – I knew he would be.

The princess’ face paled. “Bran, you should not be here.”

Mother Mole saw her chance. “I am here to show you the Old Gods, the true gods!” The Mother declared, raising her arms wide. “I am but a channel for them, a servant of higher powers. It is my duty to show them to life. Can you not feel them around you, Your Grace?”

She had been right. The king could feel it too, she could see it on his face. The powers were swirling through the trees – they were so thick in the air that Mother Mole reckoned even the ungifted must be able to sense them.

The wind was hissing, the night stirring…

“My powers are at your command, Your Grace,” she offered, lowering her head. “I can find the traitors for you; the Old Gods will reveal to me their sins. My powers are yours. For the glory of the Ice Dragon, for the promise of salvation, I serve. We serve!”

“Salvation!” the crowd behind her intoned. “Salvation!”

Yet another prisoner dropped to the heart tree.

She saw the hesitation, that flicker of doubt. Sansa Stark was glaring at her, sizing the old woman up. Perhaps trying to decide if she were friend or foe.

The robed man was the only one who dared to break the hush. “Do not trust this woman,” the fool, Marwyn, warned. He spoke with scorn. “I know her sort – soothsayers and wood witches. Parlour tricks trumped up by the ceremony. She offers naught but false prophecies and folly. She tells you vague whispers that sound like wisdom, but there’s no power to any of her acts.”

“No power?” The Mother’s eyes narrowed, glaring at the robed man. “You remain a fool.”

The very last sacrifice, a woman, died before the tree. A swell of power flooded outwards. King Brandon flinched.

So much energy…

Give me strength, she prayed. Let them see…

All around her, she felt the Old Gods replying, she felt them in the wind.
“Say the word and I will kill this hag,” a knight muttered to the princess, glaring angrily as he levelled his sword.

Mother Mole shook her head. “You stand before the Gods,” she spat. “Do you doubt what is before your very eyes?”

Mother Mole took a deep breath, summoned all the power she could, and willed the magic to life.

*Show them,* she begged. *They must see.*

There was much power in the air – both from the godswood and the dragon, she could feel it responding to her prayers.

The old woman pointed towards the tree, and suddenly a gasp spread throughout the crowd.

A thousand breaths inhaled, as the sound of wood creaking broke through the air.

Red leaves rippled in the torchlight, all eyes were fixed upwards.

The witch could have cackled.

The heart tree was *moving.* Its branches were twisting, the bark itself was rippling. The mouth of the red face contorted, opening its jaws wide. It was churning like a giant thrashing against its chains.

Red leaves scattered from its writhing branches, raining down in the night.

The godswood was frozen, all eyes staring up at the bloody tree churning in the ground. The roots themselves were snaking through the soggy earth, they were grinding beneath their feet. She could feel it rumbling in the ground below.

It was alive.

In an instant, the air went silent. All of that frenzied energy of the mob withered away. They were left staring up at the moving heart tree with bated breaths. *How could any object when they see the Gods themselves?*

Mother Mole took a deep breath. The act had taken much from her; exhaustion that nearly caused her to drop, but she couldn’t fall yet. She felt weak and elated at the same time, but she couldn’t fall.

King Brandon was stared from his platter, mouth agape at the sight. Mother Mole started to walk forward, hobbled straight before him.

“Your Grace,” she said and, with a creak of her joints, she lowered herself to her knees.

Slowly, the movements of the white tree started to fade, slowly settling back into position. They were staring at it, and nobody dared to approach. They were looking up at the weirwood as if it might uproot itself at any moment, like it might crawl from the ground.

The crimson face on the heart tree looked like it was grinning. *They saw it.*

Mother Mole’s focus was on the young king, and his reaction. The princess looked to her brother, blinking in shock.

“I’ve seen something like that before,” Bran finally whispered finally, so low she could barely hear
him. “There was a… a man, he could control the trees too. He controlled a forest.”

“I am but a vessel,” the Mother croaked. “The Old Gods merely work through me.”

Nobody spoke. One by one, the spearwives and acolytes followed Mother Mole’s example, and lowered themselves to their knees.

King Brandon blinked.

“Why are you here?” the princess asked finally.

“I have come to serve, King Brandon Stark. The Circle has come to serve. For the Gods.”

---

**The Priestess**

The darkness consumed her. It was everywhere; it was twisting around her, burning through her, raging before her eyes. They were swirling through the flickering shadows of her chambers, howling in the whisper of the flames. Smoke writhed over the four-poster bed, sweeping across the bookshelves and the mantelpiece. They were everywhere – shadowy tendrils contracting around her, squeezing the life from her body.

The dragon’s-head brazier was burning bright, but the light didn’t reach her. She was standing in the middle of an abyss, while the shadows screamed in fury. The Lord of Light had always sheltered her before, but now his light went dark.

She could feel it. She could feel the magic scratching across her skin, burning through her flesh.

The world blurred. She saw it in the dark, rippling like the shimmer on a pool of oil, the black blurring into shape. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t scream, couldn’t do anything but watch the world burn away…

Suddenly, she was seven years old again. She was a girl with dirty red hair, and heavy iron manacles rattling from her scrawny wrists. Her body was frail and bruised, with old scabs across her neck, hands and ankles from where the metal chafed against skin.

She was starved and skinny, her wide eyes staring numbly around the surreal and unfamiliar place.

The sky was grey. The sky was always grey here – the city stood in an endless dusk beneath the Shadow. Everything was dreary and cold; the waters were foul with ash, and the smog lingered over the harbour at night. In the light of high noon, the waters would glint black, but under the moonlight the river would shimmer green with phosphorus. The buildings around her were all ancient; they were large and heavy like tombstones, every structure carved from oily black stone.

Only one in ten houses were even occupied, she learnt later. Most were left over from the days of tattered glory. This place was like a mausoleum, a city of the dead. The girl had been crying every single day since they first carried her into that rickety hull filled with chains.

All around her, foreign men in purple robes crowded and heckled, their shouts slurred. They were all unnatural figures with pale skin and bluish teeth, their faces hidden beneath elaborate lacquered masks and cowls. At the time, she never understood what was happening – she just knew she was surrounded by monsters.
Her heart was beating, her blood screaming…

“Melony, Lot Seven!” the auctioneer cried. “Young and beautiful – hailing all the way from the Sunset Kingdoms! Look at her hair! She’s good for whatever you want from her, and young enough to learn! Melony, Lot Seven – starting the bid at two hundred cronas!”

Men were screaming. There were tears in her eyes, her body cowering behind the flimsy rags. Grasping fingers poked and groped at her, hungry hands trying to yank off her remaining clothes. The girl tried to run and hide, but then men grabbed the chains and dragged her backwards over the rough cobblestones of the plaza.

The bidding war was all around her. Hooded men were raising their hands eagerly, shouting in a tongue she could barely understand. She was the prize piece of the auction – it was her hair, she had realised later. Red hair was rare in these eastern lands, and every warlock, cultist and shadowbinder wanted her as the prize of their slave collection.

*Melony, Lot 7.*

Yet the girl’s gaze was drawn towards the man in grey, squatting in the tide of faceless bodies. He was exactly as he appeared in her nightmares; with black, lecherous eyes and bloated cheeks, running his slimy tongue over purple lips. The sorcerer’s gaze was fixated on her, staring straight through her as he outbid anyone else. She could see it in his eyes, he was determined to have her.

All around her, the world was drumming. The world was mad, swollen with fear. The only words that she could focus on… over and over above the howl of the crowd… “*Melony, Lot Seven*…”

Melony screamed.

…

In the chamber at Dragonstone, Melisandre could not breathe. The shadows wrapped their tendrils around her throat, all the while the memories flashed in the darkness. The images were as vivid as a nightmare.

They were angry, angrier than she had ever known them. The shadows writhed in fury.

All around her, her childhood flashed before her eyes. They were inflicting onto her the worst torture imaginable – her past.

She was a wreck. They had stripped the glamours away, and lashed the illusion from her. The hissing ruby around her neck was burning her, choking her. The woman could do nothing but crawl on the cold stone and scream silently with pain.

She wanted to howl so loud that she might topple the whole tower down, but their hands clamped at her throat.

She was on her hands and knees, and in the gloom her fingers were that of a rotten corpse. Old, bony and decrepit fingers.

“I’m sorry,” Melisandre gasped, her voice a hoarse choke. “I’m sorry, I didn’t…”

‘*Sorry?*’ the shadows hissed. ‘*Our brother is dead!*’

‘*You promised, you promised…!*’
‘Melony, Lot Seven…’

“I didn’t… I didn’t…” She might have wept, but her pupils were bone dry. She needed to take deep
breaths, trying to focus herself through the torrent of memories. The vow, remember my vow…

‘Melony, Lot Seven…’

‘You did this! You betrayed us!’

Deep breaths, struggling to focus through all the pain. “I serve the Lord of Light,” the red woman
prayed. “I am His servant, I am His vessel. His will be done, His name be hallowed – in His glory
we find justice, and in His light we fin–”

Crack. Their tendrils lashed against her back like phantom whips, retracing scars of decades ago.
Old wounds were suddenly raw again, searing against her. Melisandre would have yowled, but her
throat jammed.

‘You made a deal!’ the envoys hissed. ‘You grant us life, but our brother is gone! GONE!’

She flinched. Melisandre hadn’t even known that a servant could die, she hadn’t thought such a
thing possible. The shadows were the envoys of her god, the will of R’hllor. She had never seen
them this angry before, this raw. “It wasn’t my fault, I didn’t –”

‘He perished in his task. he perished for you.’

‘You promised him life, you promised, you promised!’

They could not be reasoned with. They were burning around her with rage, screaming in torment
for their fallen kin.

An envoy had travelled north, but it had not returned. The Champion of Night must have slain it,
but how Melisandre did not. All she knew was that they were furious.

It had gone north on her wishes, and now its brothers were blaming her.

They wanted to hurt her for failure, they wanted her pain to appease their fury.

The darkness blurred again, another nightmare coming into focus…

‘Melony, lot 7…’

…

“Priestess! Priestess, where are you?”

Vaguely, in the distance, she heard the sound of rasping against the hard-wooden door. They were
outside her chambers, irritated voices shouting into the barred chamber.

There was another voice, a woman’s. “Your Grace, you must not disturb Her Eminence so…”

“Disturb?” the voice said indignantly, as knuckles rasped again. “At this hour? I require the Red
Woman by my side.”

Suddenly, the shadows seemed to freeze.

There were more footsteps, those of heavy boots marching up and down the corridor. A haggle of
bodies was outside of her chambers, demanding her. Melisandre could see the glimmer of light through the crack beneath the door. There was faint sunlight outside.

She hadn’t even realised the hour, but apparently it was at least morn.

“Priestess!” the king’s voice demanded. “Damnation, what are you doing in there?”

Stannis and the queen were standing outside of her door. They stood in irritation, shouting for her.

Melisandre heard the mutters, like it was breaking through the trance. She didn’t know what hour it was, but her absence was already noted. Her chambers were sealed and it was rare for Melisandre to remove herself so. She rarely slept, and usually she was the first to be up and about on a morning.

For her to bar her chamber door was very unusual indeed, and it was all but unheard for Melisandre to refuse the king’s summons. Outside, the murmurs seemed perturbed.

They had no idea the scene on the other side of the doorway. The red woman was lying naked and unconcealed on the stone floor, while the shadows stood around her in warning.

A wave of panic flooded through her. They could not come in – not while the shadows roamed, not while she was so exposed. If they opened the door and saw her like this…

Another hand knocked, this time more nervous. “Your Eminence?” the queen called hesitantly. Selyse seemed scared to even disturb the High Priestess. “Your Eminence, are you there…?”

Melisandre couldn’t reply, didn’t dare to breathe.

In the distance, broken by the mutters, she heard a singsong voice. The fool must be in the corridor too, she could hear his bells chiming gently. “The shadows come to dance, the shadows come to play,” Patchface giggled. “Oh I know, I know, I know.”

Around her, the darkness shifted. Melisandre stared breathlessly at the outline of the door.

Then, a wispy hand wrapped itself around her throat. It didn’t squeeze, but she could feel it against her jugular.

‘Tell them to leave,’ the darkness warned.

Melisandre gulped, taking a deep breath to compose herself… “Leave me,” Melisandre called, her voice a wheeze. “Leave me, I must meditate.”

It was met by silence. Everything froze, as the darkness poised and waited….

She heard Stannis step closer. “Meditate?” His voice was incredulous. “Jon Connington arrives now, I need you now.” Clang, clang, clang – his iron hook rasped against the wood. “What are you even doing in there-”

They were stirring, tensing… “Leave me!” Melisandre snapped, her voice breaking. “Leave!”

Outside, King Stannis flustered. The crowd was murmuring. None of them had ever known Melisandre to speak to him such.

Connington, she remembered vaguely. Jon Connington – the Hand of the False King, coming as an emissary for the mummer’s dragon. Stannis had been expecting his arrival for weeks. Normally Melisandre would stand at her king’s side for such, but now she didn’t dare leave her chambers.
The Lord of Light was too angry at her.

*Please don’t come in,* she begged desperately. *Please, just don’t come in.* She couldn’t allow anyone to see her like this, she would lose everything…

Then, Stannis’ hook hacked against the hard oak so hard it chimed. “Sorceress!” the king snapped. “I order you to open this door!”

Melisandre might have wept. She was in near hysterics as the murmurs outside rose to a fever pitch….

“Your Grace, Her Eminence must have her reasons…” Selyse pleaded, but Stannis could not be persuaded.

Heavy boots whacked against stone. “Ser Richard, Ser Rolland!” the king boomed, stepping backwards. “Break the damn door down!”

There were mutters, hesitation. The Godsguard would be standing by his side, but they were slow to obey.

“Your Grace, if the High Priestess needs peace…” came Ser Richard Horpe’s hoarse, fearful voice. “Perhaps we should not intrude…”

The knight was scared to even enter her chambers again. *He should be.*

Outside, the voices blurred as they rose in pitch, Mel could only listen intently. An argument was rising outside her door, broken by the king’s firm voice. Stannis was bristling, but the queen’s men in his court were loath to defy their priestess.

*Please don’t,* Melisandre begged the Lord of Light. *Please don’t let them see me like this…*

In the backdrop, she heard the jester’s nonsensical song, as Patchface skipped obliviously through the argument. “The shadows play, the shadows play,” the fool was giggling. “They come to play, they come to stay!”

“I need my High Priestess, she must be by my side…”

“Please, Your Grace, the Lord of Light talks to her… let us not disturb…”

“This Connington…”

All around her, R’hllor’s envoys were staring down at her with unseen eyes. They were faceless and formless, invisible in the black. Their voices were the lightest whisper of the candle, their touch was as soft as smoke.

There were more of them than she could even count – they were in every crook and cranny, every corner, every shadow of the grand chamber. They were everywhere.

Outside, the voices were fading. She could practically hear her king grinding his teeth together, while his queen and her supporters urged him to respect the god.

“Damn your nattering,” Stannis fumed finally, as his heavy boots finally tapped away. “Have it your own way. I want guards outside of this door – and if she is not out of there by noon, I will be back with a battering ram.”

He was walking away. She could have breathed a sigh of relief, but there was also a stab of fear.
Melisandre could only listen in hushed breath, but she didn’t dare to even open her mouth. They were leaving. They were leaving…

“Bring this Lord Connington to the Painted Chamber,” the king’s voice ordered, growing fainter and fainter. “Let us see what this fool has to say…”

The king’s voice faded over as he turned the corner. The darkness relaxed fractionally, but Melisandre was still trembling. Her heart was beating so fast she couldn’t feel it. Despite everything, some part of her had wanted the king to barge through, she had wanted the shadows to leave her alone…

In the broken light under the crack of the door, she could see the silhouette of boots standing outside – two knights of the Godsguard were still standing less than a dozen yards away, on the other side of the barrier. Help me, she begged silently.

‘There is no helping you now,’ the darkness replied. ‘You must be punished.’

The lull was over. They were writhing again. ‘You belong to us…’

‘You made a deal.’

‘Melony, Lot Seven.’

‘This is your failure.’

The shadows contorted around her. Melisandre might have howled in pain, but her throat couldn’t make the slightest motion, shadowy fingers clenching at her neck.

Punishment. This was punishment. The fire would always take as much as it gave.

“I will do better,” she begged. “I will birth more sons, I will serve His will. I will perform the Grand Rite, I swear to it.”

‘You will perform it faster. There will be no mistakes, not again.’

“I swear it,” she whispered, lowering her head. Her wispy grey hair scraped over the stones. “I serve for the Glory of R’hallor, I shall do my duty. In His light I find purpose.”

The formless figure was staring down at her. It never replied, but she could feel its fingers stroking her skin.

I displeased the Lord of Light, she thought with a gulp. I deserve this.

‘You do.’

Invisible tendrils lashed against her back.

Her vision went black, her crooked body slumped to the floor.

…

She saw another scene, another memory. The girl was delirious and in chains, starving in the sorcerer’s basement. Melony’s body was covered in wounds that no person should ever suffer – the sorcerer had taken her blood, her flesh and her soul for use in his twisted rituals.

She was left wasting away in the dungeon, with only the light of a flickering candle to keep her
company.

Then a noxious smog blew in from the Shadow one night, and the candle went out.

The girl was starving. There was no sunlight in the dungeon, there was no food or company. The only thing to drink was the putrid waters of the Ash, as it slowly trickled down from the sewers above. The river through Asshai was slow and black; it had long since overflowed from its banks and it now oozed through the streets like treacle, or foul blood.

It was foul water. The Ash was polluted by all sorts of unnatural powers, and in it swam blind and deformed fish. The black waters were not fit for any mortal.

She didn’t weep, though. The sorcerer had grown drunk one night, and became tired of her weeping. He had carved out her tear ducts. Blood still dripped from her scabs on her eyes, red tears down a disfigured face.

*Melony, Lot Seven.*

She would have screamed, but her throat sealed shut. She would die in this dark, she knew.

It had been in the blackness of the shadow when she had felt Lord of Light.

R’hllor came to her in the form of a glimmer of light, a red heart that pulsed with her touch. She had held the wisp in her hands, and suddenly the shadows took form around her. Shapeless, intangible bodies filled her cell.

The child wasn’t scared, she had no fear left to give.

‘… *Melony, Lot Seven…*’ that unearthly voice croaked. She would never forget the very first time she heard them, when they first found her.

“Who’s there?” the little girl whimpered. “Who’s there…?”

She hadn’t been able to see it, but she felt its hands on her skin, she felt its whisper in her ear. She didn’t resist, she couldn’t. ‘*Melony… Lot Seven…*’

“Where are you?” The only thing she could see was black, even despite the red light clamped between her fingers.

‘*Here.*’

“Do you have a name?”

‘*Many.*’

The child gulped. “What do you want?”

There was a long silence. ‘*What do you want?*’

There was shifting, pulsating in the blackness of the room. The wisp of red light flickered, but it didn’t fade.

Slowly, her eyes managed to focus. She saw the outline of a figure before her. A featureless, translucent man on his knees, holding her hand through the chains.

Melony snivelled. “What are you…?” she whispered.
There was a long pause before the voice spoke.

‘*Once I was like you. Once I was lost. Once I was trapped in darkness and weakness. Once I was called Alexys.*’ Its hands wrapped around hers, but she could barely feel them. ‘*But now we offer you the same salvation. Now we serve the light.*’

That had been the night that the Red God found her. Rh’hlor’s envoys had offered her a deal.

…

She remembered that moment well. The first time they appeared. They had given her the power to escape the sorcerer’s chains, and in return she served the Red God. Melisandre couldn’t even count – how many decades ago had that been?

The Lord of Light freed her from the sorcerer, and they had granted her the power she so desperately desired. But He gave nothing without cost. She had always known the price.

No salvation without sacrifice. No faith without pain.

_I failed Him. I must do better._

Her head was spinning in agony, all the while the shadows clenched tighter and tighter. She could have gagged, could have wept, could have screamed…

…and then she saw them. In her delirium, suddenly they came into focus. It was like she was staring through the dark, looking at the shadows more clearly than she ever had seen them before.

They were beautiful lords cloaked in black. Each one was more beautiful than any prince, more noble than a king. They were dressed in flame-red finery under cloaks of black shadow. Their bodies rippled as they moved, swirling through the air. They were His servants, the envoys for her lord.

And then they stopped, and turned. Without warning, Melisandre slumped to the ground, their interest in her instantly vanished.

Something else had caught their attention. As one, the shadows shifted, they turned towards a single direction. They were staring out through the mortal barricades and out over the horizon. They were staring north.

‘*Is that…?*’

There was something different in the wind, something blowing in from the north. The room chilled slightly. Melisandre didn’t understand, but she felt the change in the room. The shadows stirred amongst themselves, tensing.

‘*Do you feel it?*’ a shadow whispered. ‘*I feel them.*’

Somewhere in the distance, it felt like a breaking in the world, as though a great lock had given way.

‘*Is it them?*’

‘*Yes. They are here. The barrier is broken?*’

‘*The cold comes for us.*’
Sorry about the long delay with this one, but real life has been difficult and it happens. Special thanks to Diablo Snowblind and Herraidous for their help with the chapter.
Val

The air of the infirmary was still and lifeless, pungent with the scent of lye and old blood. The only sounds were the faint pattering and thumping of boots outside, and the uneven breaths of a man on death’s door as he wheezed out strained words. They lay on opposite sides of the stone room, but she could hear every gasping word.

“I spy with my little eye…” the Greatjon muttered dozily, his eyelids flickering on the edge of sleep, “something beginning with ‘k’.”

In the opposing bed, Val stared up at the ceiling as she considered the puzzle. Normally she quite enjoyed riddles, but this one was a bitch.

“‘Keg’,” Val said finally, without even lifting her head from the goose down pillows, stained black with old blood.

The lord shook his head. “No.”

“‘King’, ” she offered.

“You see the king here?” The Greatjon harrumphed.

“He might have been carried past the door. Or maybe you’re just hallucinating again,” Val said with a shrug, and the movement sent a jolt of pain down her spine. The Greatjon only snorted.

It was just the two of them in the infirmary of Winterfell, both of them lying on blackened and bloodstained sheets. It was a chamber reserved for wounded lords and men of status, with only six beds in the room. Val wondered vaguely if all the other wounded men went elsewhere, in some smaller and more cramped room. Most likely there were others sleeping on the floor while the beds here went to spare. Previously, there had been some fat lord with an arrow in his gut sharing the room, but he had died and they had cleared his body quickly. After that, there had been a Manderly knight who broke his wrist in a spar, but he had recovered and left. The other beds had stayed empty.

Val knew that the Weeper had spent time in the adjoining chamber with some broken bones, but he was already limping about with crutches. Neither Val nor Lord Umber were fit to walk anywhere.

The Greatjon’s gut had been sliced open, while the left side of Val’s body had been hacked apart. Supposedly, both of them were lucky to be alive, but she sure as hells didn’t feel lucky.

There was naught to do but lie in the infirmary, the silence broken only by the occasional guessing
“Is it ‘crate’?” she said finally, as she lay in bed with eyes half-closed.

“That doesn’t begin with a k.”

“Well how the fuck am I meant to know that?” Val snapped, but without any real irritation. “I can’t spell, you know.”

Across from her, Lord Umber scoffed. “It was ‘knife’.”

Val rolled her eyes. “Fuck you and your letters.”

The time passed in silence. Neither of them wanted to be here – she didn’t choose him, and he didn’t choose her. Still, they were trapped in this room, and they had nothing but each other’s company.

His voice was a hoarse whisper, and hers was a throaty choke. Each night, she could hear the Greatjon unable to breathe – he would start wheezing for air as he struggled to stay alive. Every night was a strain. Sooner or later, Val imagined that she would have to listen to him choking to death. She had started to anticipate the moment when he would finally suffocate.

Val was better, fractionally. It felt like she had been through the worst of it and was slowly starting to heal. She was more coherent in the mornings, she was passing out less and less. She was moving on to eat solid foods, even. If not for the fever and the dizziness, she might even have been able to stand.

Those first days after the Battle of the Snows were blanked out from her mind, and the first weeks after that had been a blur of sickness and pain. When she had finally awoken, it had been in an unfamiliar place gripped by chaos, but slowly she was starting to feel whole again.

Feel whole, she repeated silently, adding a quiet scoff.

“Fine. My game, now,” Val said eventually, after a long moment’s thought. “I am alive without breath, and as cold as death. I am clad in mail but never chinking, and never thirsty but ever drinking. What am I?”

The Greatjon’s face twisted into a scowl. “Is that one of those white walkers you keep talking about?”

“Not this time.” Val shook her head. “Try again.”

There was a long silence as he contemplated. Val had to repeat the riddle twice, but the Greatjon just looked more and more confused. “Oh, bugger this game,” the lord groaned, and he sagged backwards into his bed.

Val allowed herself a smirk. Her skin was sweaty and clammy, her fever was burning high, but she had to savour the small victories. “A fish,” she said slowly. “The answer was a fish.”

“How does that even...?” he muttered, but then he realised the answer and gave a low groan. “Dammit.”

She could have laughed, but her throat was choked by a series of hoarse coughs filled with phlegm. A layer of sweat clung to her pale skin, and her once golden hair was turning stiff and grey.
“Alright, easy one this time,” Val wheezed, clearing her throat. “I move without legs, I push without arms, I whisper without words and I howl without a mouth. What am I?”

The lord looked baffled. He wasn’t good at this game. She let him stew for a while, before finally having mercy. “Wind,” she said. “I’m the wind.”

“Bugger it.” From across the room, the Greatjon rustled in his bed. He tried to move slightly, and then groaned in pain.

“The princess will be furious if you burst your stitches again,” Val warned.

His only reply was a low, angry growl.

There was a certain pattern to the days in the infirmary. Val didn’t know how long it had been – she had lost track of time. The servants came in with porridge or stew three times a day, followed usually by one of them puking shortly afterwards. The men outside rotated four times a day, but there was always at least two of them standing guard. That useless dolt of a maester visited once a day, mostly to change bandages. There was very little smalltalk.

Occasionally, after one of his spasms, the Greatjon would beg for milk of the poppy – only to be told each time that they had none.

The washerwomen changed the sheets once every two days, and they emptied the bedpans twice a day. Val, at least, was well enough to use a bucket, but the Greatjon couldn’t even pull himself upright without rupturing his stomach. The huge lord of Umber was left to soil his own sheets.

The air stunk of waste, foul blood, and despair. With all the heat, it felt like the stench was cooking.

There were times when it felt like death would be the easier option. Occasionally, Val wondered why she held on.

“So is this what you do beyond the Wall?” the Greatjon asked finally. “Sit around with these little word games?”

“Well, we never had all those fancy letters like you do. We didn’t have big castles to hide in, either,” Val retorted softly. “When winter comes and the forests freeze over, we find our own distractions.”

She remembered so many cold nights spent clinging to the fire and listening to a hundred tales and stories, playing a thousand little games. As a girl, they had been buried by snows twenty-foot-deep, and they could only huddle together for warmth and dream of spring. They would tell tales, trade lewd jokes or come up with riddles just to pass the frozen nights.

“Like raping and stealing?” Lord Umber’s voice was bitter, but Val didn’t rise to it.

“Sometimes,” she sighed. “Or sometimes we’d just make snowmen.”

“Snowmen?”

“Aye. Back when I was a lass, we used to make hundreds of snowmen in winter. Real big snowmen too, we’d build them all around the village.” Her voice turned wistful. “We used to use them to scare hungry giants away.”

From the other bed, the Greatjon lifted his head and stared at her as if she was japing. “Giants?”
“Oh aye.”

“Snow told me that those giants ate fruits and nuts.”

“They do. Mostly.” Val nodded. “But in winter? They’ll eat absolutely anything they can grab.”

The Greatjon’s head dropped back onto his pillow. He took a deep, strained breath. “How many winters have you seen?” the lord wheezed finally.

Val shrugged. “Eight, I think.”

“I’ve seen thirty. The longest lasted three years. That one damn near killed me.”

“I remember that one.” She frowned. “Well, I remember folk talking about it. I was just a babe, I think.”

“It was bad.” His voice was low, his breaths uneven. He muttered the words like a confession. “The hearth froze over, we had no food. That was when my father went out hunting. Left me with my uncles.”

“Aye, ‘went hunting’, ” Val repeated, with a sad grimace. “The same happens in the north too. They go hunting and they know they’re not coming back.”

The Greatjon gave a weak nod. “Long summer means a long winter,” he murmured. “Few years back, I started thinking if maybe this would be the winter when I’d go hunting. Oh, I thought about it – walking off and having to leave my boys…”

His voice trailed off into an uneasy silence. There was a long pause, before finally he managed to shiver and focus himself.

“Can’t even imagine what winter would be like further north,” the lord admitted. “You’d freeze your bloody asses off in the snow.”

Val just shrugged a shoulder, hiding her discomfort. She kept her eyes closed. “Well, Snow never seemed to mind my ass.”

The Greatjon blinked, and glanced at her. There was a pause, then he chuckled. Then his breaths were wheezes, and he clutched his bloody bandages as he choked.

They talked occasionally – mumbling in the hush of the ward. They were mostly talking to themselves, just as a means to stay sane. He told her of Last Hearth, and of the north. She told him of life beyond the Wall, of the clans, the hunts and the forests. Occasionally, the Greatjon would mention his sons, but his voice would always fall quiet afterwards. She knew that his sons were dead.

There were long stretches of silence broken only by the occasional murmur.

It was still in the room. Not peaceful, just… fatigued. It was like the bed and the wound had stripped away her strength to move. Val lingered with her eyes closed – not asleep, but on the edge of unconsciousness.

She had been sleeping too much, but she still felt constantly tired.

Sometimes sleep was her only refuge, but other times the waking was the worst. Every time she woke up, she would try to stretch her limbs.
There were times during the day that she never even thought about her arm, but each time she
awoke was like seeing the wound for the first time all over again. The sight of the jutted stump still
made her feel nauseous, it still made her head spin.

Val took a deep breath, as her fingers traced the scar running down from her shoulder and her
breast. She was covered in bandages, but she knew that underneath it all, the wound was vivid red,
raw and weeping. In her dreams she saw that cleaver coming down over and over again…

She could still feel her left hand, sometimes. Occasionally as she dreamt she would curl it.
Sometimes she would reach for something, and for half a moment she felt her fingertips.
Sometimes she could trick herself. She knew that it wasn’t there, and all that remained was an ugly
stump at her shoulder.

Val never regretted what she did, not even for a moment. If not for her, Jon would likely be dead or
worse. Still, there were times when she did regret surviving it.

Through the shuttered windows, she saw reddish sunlight. Val didn’t even know whether it was
dusk or dawn – she had lost all sense of time.

“Your turn,” she said finally. ‘Give a riddle.”

The large man was silent for a time. “I know one. Got told it as a child,” he muttered. “If you break
me, I do not stop working. If you touch me, I may be snared. If you lose me, nothing else matters.
What am I?”

Val thought on it for only a moment. “A heart,” Val said finally.

He grunted. “Close enough.”

Her fingers slowly traced the jagged scar over her breast.

Vaguely, Val looked for Jon. She wondered if he would ever come to her bedside, or visit her in
the infirmary. There had been a few other guests – Tormund, old free folk friends, and even
Snow’s sister had visited her once. Val had talked with Sansa Stark briefly, though the meeting had
been stiff. Lord Umber had been visited by plenty of other lords and men she never knew. But Jon
himself never came.

Val hadn’t even seen him since she woke up.

She could understand why, she knew he was busy. They had told her of the disaster at the Wall, of
the massacre in the great hall, and Val knew that Others wouldn’t wait. There was a war to fight,
and Val wasn’t one to pine over a man.

But still, deep down, his absence pained.

Instead, she could only lie in bed and think of riddles. She slept most of the day and lay awake at
night. During the hour of the ghost, she occasionally crept out of bed and tried to walk.

Over a fortnight of fever and lethargy had left her muscles numb. Her joints creaked as she walked,
and her scar pained. With only a single arm, she could not seem to find her balance. Even a few
steps left her woozy and pained.

As she slept, she would dream of falling backwards into the snow, as an icy blade sliced open her
heart. Other times, she dreamt of a great stone dragon, buried underground with white roots
wrapped around it. Once, she dreamt of an avalanche of snow tumbling down over the world.
The very next morning, she had a visitor. Val half-expected to see the young maester again, but instead she heard the tap-tap of a walking stick against stone. Uneven feet lurched slowly through the doorway.

Val perked upwards, just as a short, wrinkled crone stepped into the chamber.

“Lady Val of Whitetree, I hear,” the rustic voice grated. “They speak highly of you.”

For a heartbeat, Val wanted to throw something. Her phantom fist clenched. “Mother Mole.”

“That’ll be Mother Reverend to you, dearie.” Her voice was sharp, hoarse and throaty. “Prioress, if you feel so inclined. These southerners do like their little titles.”

The old woman was so short she could have been a dwarf, and she seemed shorter still as she stood over her weirwood staff. Mother Mole was a wrinkled prune with a mouthful of rotten teeth, with skin as weathered as a willow’s bark. The woman reminded Val vaguely of a rotting tree; the crone was hunch-backed and crooked, wearing hemp robes and a chain of white stones that rattled with every step.

Val’s eyes narrowed. The woods witch was followed by two spearwives, each one with a face like old leather. They were all wearing white; white robes, white staffs and white spears, with a necklace of white stones.

“What are you doing here, witch?” Val snapped.

“What I must. They told me to see to you.” Narrowed eyes peered down at Val’s bandaged shoulder, and the witch tutted. “Now what sort of fool bandaged that?”

There was something about the old woman that sent shivers down her spine. They might call her “priestess” now, but Val remembered when Mother Mole was a mad old crone who lived in a tree. No, this hag is still mad – the only difference is where she lives.

And yet still… “Are you here to heal me?” Val muttered, eying the old woman as Mother Mole creaked closer.

“I cannot bring the arm back,” the witch snorted. “But I can cleanse the wound, and ease the flesh. I have poultices that might stop the swelling and herbs that will fade the scar.”

“If needed,” one of the spearwives said suddenly, “we could sacrifice a goat to your well-being.”

Val shrugged, or tried to. “Bring the goat.”

Mother Mole stopped by her bedside and didn’t move. “How queer,” the crone chortled. “The last time we met, you told me to – what was it? Oh yes – ‘stay away from me and family, witch’.”

Val only glared. The last time I saw you, you were trying to bully me and my sister into converting.

Mother Mole had been pressuring Dalla to take a white stone, and Val feared what might happen if she persisted. Still, now, Val held her tongue.

“Have you changed your mind, dearie?” Mother Mole asked, a slow smile creasing her craggy skin. “Do you now want my aid?”

Her jaw clenched. “Yes.”

“I did not hear you.”
“Yes,” Val growled. “Please, help me.”

Mother Mole hobbled closer. “Healing is for the devoted only,” she chided. “If you want salvation, you must first embrace the god and the dragon.”

Slowly, one of the women placed a smooth white stone by Val’s hand. She only glared hatefully.

Across the room, the Greatjon watched without a word.

She knew it was expected, but Val couldn’t bring herself to reach for the stone. Mother Mole paused, and then tutted. The sound was like nails over bone. “You did provide pleasure of the flesh to the prophet,” the witch mused. “And perhaps he will be grateful if you survive. I suppose concessions could be made.”

_Bitter twisted hag._

Mother Mole dropped her staff against the wall, and then limped forward to croon over Val’s wound. With a click of leathery fingers, she pointed to her followers.

“Hold her down,” the woods witch ordered.

The women obeyed, and their hands were rough.

Despite herself, Val couldn’t stop the scream of pain as the older woman squeezed her flesh tightly. Gnarly fingers clawed at the sensitive wound, while they stripped off the wool bandages.

Across the ward, the Greatjon shouted something, but Val couldn’t make out the words. The witch ignored his protest.

Mother Mole squeezed her scar so tightly it hurt. The fingers were like claws. “After this,” the witch croaked, “I expect to see you in my congregation.”

Val could only grit her teeth and close her eyes.

The woman had all the warmth of a torturer. Val felt a mucus-like mixture smeared over the wound, followed by pain as a fine twine stitch pressed through the wound. A thorn-like needle poked and pierced into her. Those gnarly hands were all over Val’s shoulder, her torso, her breast.

First, they applied poultices and herbs, before being washed off with warm water and leaves. Then, Mother Mole mixed some foul-smelling gunk – like red and white ooze.

As soon as the substance hit Val’s skin, it burnt like poison ivy scraping over the scar. It was pure, burning agony, but heartbeats later it faded away. Val gasped as the pain disappeared, to be replaced by a pleasant tingling sensation over her skin. She could feel a soothing liquid wash over her phantom arm.

The two spearwives held her downwards, while Mother Mole wrapped Val in fresh bandages so tight Val struggled to breathe. “Give it time to settle,” Mother Mole ordered. “I shall be back in two days to rinse and repeat.”

Val’s head was spinning in so much pain she could barely think. Mother Mole then ordered her to drink something from a bowl, but the substance was foul and horrid. With a click of her fingers, the spearwives plied open Val’s mouth and forced the mucus down her throat. She gagged, sputtering out greenish substance that tasted like bile.
“What was that?” Val gasped.

“It will help, dearie,” the witch chuckled. “But I never claimed that healing was nice.”

They left the white stone by her bed as they walked away. Val wanted to throw it, but she couldn’t find the strength.

After she was done with Val, Mother Mole limped towards the Greatjon. “As for you, Lord Umber,” the witch croaked, “do you embrace the ice dragon as your saviour and salvation?”

The Greatjon muttered out a curse that Val couldn’t hear, but Mother Mole just seemed amused. “You are dying, lord,” the witch continued. “You know that you are. Can you feel the bleeding inside your gut, the haemorrhaging in your chest? Your lungs are clogging, and you will rot from the inside out. But I can cleanse the wound, I might save you.”

There was no reply but wheezy, unstable breaths. Mother Mole frowned, and one of the spearwives looked to her for confirmation. “Mother?”

“The man is weak,” the witch decided, “but perhaps he will make a better decision when he’s whole. Hold him down – I shall need warm water and fine twine. And a sharp knife.”

The women had to fasten belts around the Greatjon’s thick wrists and stamp on them. Mother Mole wielded the slender knife like a butcher.

Val couldn’t see, but she heard the squelch as the witch pulled out the stitches. She was cleaning and then refastening the wound with twine. For a large man, the Greatjon suddenly seemed so small. He was screaming in pain.

It looked like there was frighteningly little blood left in the man’s body, and the blood that oozed out seemed a darker shade.

They came and went all day, hovering around the Greatjon. At one point, Mother Mole pricked the Greatjon’s finger and then dropped a fleck of his blood into her mouth. Then, Mother Mole pricked the finger of one of her followers and tasted her blood, and then again on the second woman. The witch tasted her blood, and then nodded.

Afterwards, to Val’s shock, one of the spearwives extended her hand, and Mother Mole reached over and gingerly slit the woman’s wrist. A small needle pulled open the cut, and they used what looked like a rabbit’s intestine to funnel the blood – transferring the blood from the woman into the Greatjon. After a while, the spearwife looked faint and had to be carried away, with thick bandages held tightly around her wrist.

Val didn’t know what was happening, or what sort of unholy sacrifice this was. The lord himself had fallen unconscious. Still, the spearwives rebandaged the Greatjon’s wound and removed his sheets. The man was left naked, pale and bloody atop the rough mattress. The raw scar across his stomach made him look like a corpse.

Finally, Mother Mole limped away. “The great war comes, dearie,” Mother Mole croaked as she left, “it will be the living against the dead, and the holy against the unholy. You must pick a side.”

She did not reply. Val noticed that the guards outside had been replaced by spearwives wearing white stones.

Her shoulder was throbbing so painfully she could barely think. She collapsed into a restless sleep.
That night was the most painful she had felt in a while. The poultices on the bandages made the
wound feel raw again, and every nerve was screaming in pain. Val didn’t know what medicines
Mother Mole had forced into her, but it felt like they were burning through her body.

The next morning, Val was woken by yet another spearwife with a white stone, bringing a bowl of
soup. “Ice dragon bless you,” the woman said, placing the pot next to her.

It was only when she spoke that Val realised she wasn’t a spearwife at all. The woman had the
accent of a northerner, from south of the Wall. Yet she wore a white stone and twine necklace – a
convert.

With eerie realisation, she suddenly saw that the white stones were everywhere.

Val half-expected the Greatjon to be dead after the witch’s butchery, but he was still breathing. He
seemed weaker though, his breaths even more uncertain.

The following day, Mother Mole returned and sacrificed a goat before the Greatjon’s bed. They cut
out the beast’s heart and nailed it to the wall above him.

The days passed in pain. Despite herself, the fever did begin to break. The phantom pain in her arm
didn’t fade, but it became easier to breathe through the scar on her breast. The infirmary was still
swelteringly hot, but the sweat and the fever faded.

All the while Val started to heal, the Greatjon only seemed to grow worse. He was a big, muscled
man, but he looked like he was withering away on the bed. His black beard was shaggy like rope,
greying at the edges. Mother Mole visited him thrice, but each time the witch seemed disappointed
in the results. Every night, Val was mildly surprised that the man was still alive, but he was
clinging onto life like a drowning man to a shipwreck.

By the second day, Val started to walk more often, even despite hobbling with every step.

She needed to escape that torturous bed – she stumbled down the corridors of Winterfell and
headed outside.

The sight of the pale, one-armed woman stumbling around drew a few stares. Occasionally, Val
would meet some that she had been introduced to in New Castle. Some few knew her as Lady
Whitetree, but to most she was the king’s wounded paramour. Guards followed her, and she would
hear the whispers as she passed.

They told her not to leave the keep, but Val wanted to know what had happened at the Wall – with
Jon, Mance and Dalla. It seemed like nobody had answers to share.

Eventually, Val grew restless enough to step out of the gates, and she saw the yards of Winterfell
overfilled with refugees.

The grounds were covered in tents so thick it felt like a slum. A carpet of hide tents and bonfires
stretched out over the yards, even in the courtyard right outside of the keep. The earth was still
warm, but the lightest frosting of snow was starting to creep back across the walls. Val knew of the
Winter Town outside the castle, but it seemed like most of these people were cramming to take
shelter within the castle’s walls instead.

Val saw men and women, northerners and free folk, with gaunt cheeks, carrying everything they
owned in the sacks over their shoulders.

A guard tried to urge her to step back inside, but Val had been cooped up for far too long. She
heard a commotion by the gates, and she followed. The crowd was so thick that Val struggled to push her way through.

Every time a man bumped into her, she could have howled in pain. Her raw scar burnt like scolding coals on her skin.

She arrived just as an ox-driven cart rumbled through the gates. It was dragging three limp figures behind it, their bodies sliding over the stones. At first, Val thought they were corpses, but then she saw them move.

The crowd gasped at the sight, mutters rising.

Wights. The cart was dragging wights. Each one was grey-skinned, staring with empty pale eyes. Their legs were wriggling, even while they were dragged across the stones by a rope wrapped around their necks and waists. The ox seemed unnerved with their very presence, all while the crowd gaped and jeered.

The wights had no arms, Val realised. The men must have chopped off the creature’s limbs, just to be safe. The captured wights were being paraded through the crowds of Winterfell for all to see.

She watched as they hammered six foot tall wooden stakes into the ground, right at the very front of the gates. Each wight was hoisted upwards by a gaggle of men, and then their chests were dragged over the sharpened spikes – impaling the dead bodies up off the ground. Val heard the crunch of the rib cages as their chests were forced straight through the points. The spikes were lining the roadside, rotten bodies still being mounted. The wights were left to twitch as helplessly as pinned insects, their legs still flailing. Crucified but undying.

All around her, Val heard ringing bells, and voices chanting. “Look upon the creatures of the dead, look at what awaits you!” a woman’s cry screamed over the mob. “*These* are what we face. Only the Dragon may grant salvation, and only the Circle shows the way!”

“Salvation!” the worshippers chanted. “Salvation! Salvation!”

She saw people in the yards sickened by the mere sight of it. The rotten bodies made for horrifying sights – like living scarecrows, slaughtered bodies still kicking. The wights thrashed blindly, but to Val, something in their pale, lifeless eyes seemed lost or confused.

More and more carts were coming south, bringing with them hundreds of pale-eyed wights that had been captured in the battle. Along with them came a tide of refugees from the battles, all hungry and worn.

A free folk raider even dragged two of the wights through the Great Keep itself, so that all of the lords and ladies could stare at them in horror.

Val just watched it all unfold around her.

She still didn’t know what happened in the battle at the Wall, but she saw its grim aftermath trek through Winterfell’s gates.

A band of cavalry were trotting through the crowds, announcing conscription and calling upon both men and women to enlist. A ragtag militia was forming in the outer yards filled with weak bodies clutching pitchforks and scythes. The castle had announced that all men and women who enlisted would receive double rations, and suddenly there were more in the militia than there were swords or shields.
They looked like they might have press-ganged Val too, even despite the missing arm – if not for a guard recognising her.

She saw white stones everywhere, even on northern knights. The southerners would gape at the undead during the day, and then flock towards the congregation in the godswood at night.

It felt like Winterfell was changing. She could feel it in the air; it was as clear as the unnatural heat that burned from the ground. The people were scared, and everything they had once known was falling apart.

It was all overwhelming. There were dozens, hundreds, crowded around her, shambling and knocking into one another. Val staggered, but then a large woman shoved into her from behind. The pain seared over her wound, and suddenly she lost her footing. Val was tumbling, crashing down to the stones.

A scream broke her throat, but it was like no one even noticed.

They were all pressing forward to see the undead wights, and she was trapped in the middle of the mob.

Val tried to pull herself upwards, but she couldn’t manage it with only one hand. The mob around her was like a stampede, threatening to crush her. Bodies jostling into each other, stamping feet everywhere. Val tried to stagger to her knees, but then the flow of the crowd threatened to crush her…

“It’s alright, I’ve got you…” muttered a voice suddenly next to her, and then there was a hand wrapping around her shoulder. In his other hand, the figure held a three-pronged spear, spinning it to force the people backwards. “I’ve got you.”

Val was in too much pain to focus, but she felt the man’s grip. He lifted the one-armed woman up off the ground, pushing their way clear.

Val took deep breaths, trying to focus. The man wrapped her one arm over his neck, half-guiding her and half-carrying her back to the keep.

At first, in her delirium, she thought he was one of Winterfell’s guards, but then slowly she realised he was dressed differently. Instead of a spear, he held a pronged trident. He was short too; an entire foot shorter than her.

Instead of a grey wolf on his chest, he bore a black frog. His armour was dull grey leathers instead of chainmail.

Val blinked, and suddenly realised that she didn’t recognise the corridor they were walking down.

“Where are you taking me?” she muttered. Instinctively, she tried to reach for her weapons, only to realise that she had no blade on her belt. And no hand to grab one with.

The man didn’t reply. Val couldn’t struggle. He didn’t slacken his grip on her as he walked towards a door at the edge of the corridor. With the butt of his trident, he knocked twice.

“Enter,” a wheezy voice called, and the short man pulled her through.

“I have the woman, Lord Reed,” the man muttered, as Val stumbled through the doorway. Her head was spinning, she couldn’t focus…
“Thank you, Edwyle,” the wheezy voice replied. “Lady Val, is it?”

Firm hands guided her to a seat, and Val nearly collapsed. She was gasping for air, the pain itching over her joint…

“Deep breaths, my lady,” that breathless voice croaked, almost soothingly. “Edwyle, please fetch our guest some water.”

She felt a goblet wrapped into her hand, cool liquid dribbling over the brim. Her fingers couldn’t hold it, and it dropped out of her grip. Water spilled over her onto the floor and carpet.

Finally, Val managed to refocus herself and take stock of her surroundings.

She was sitting on a cushioned chair, staring across at an old man sitting opposite.

The man’s face was pale, his back hunched and his shoulders drooping. He had vivid moss green eyes set above gaunt cheeks – his skin looked discoloured and sickly. He was dressed in the pale leather and fine hides of a lord, and in his hands he cradled a walking stick.

There was a whistling in the room, rising and falling. The sound of his strained breathing, in and out.

“Who are you?” she croaked, tensing.

“At ease, Lady Val, I mean you no harm.”

His voice was soft, very soft – so low it was like a whisper, slurred slightly by his wheezes. He didn’t have the breath to speak loudly, instead she had to strain to hear.

“Edwyle, you may leave us,” he ordered.

“My lord, are you…?”

“Please, Edwyle.” With a great deal of effort, the sickly lord dragged himself to his feet, supported on his cane. Wheezy breaths followed every movement. “I am much better, thank you. You can wait outside.”

The man with the trident left. There was another set of eyes in the room, Val realised suddenly; a figure sitting so still she hadn’t even noticed him at first. Her gaze turned to the corner of the room, where a youth – looking around thirteen, fourteen years old – sat on a worn armchair.

The boy looked unwell too. He was not ragged and worn like the old man, but he had bandages around his shoulder. Both the boy and the old man shared a look to them – both with discerningly deep green eyes. Their pupils were the very darkest green she had ever seen.

Val didn’t know what was happening. The old man followed her gaze and smiled.

“Lady Val, I believe introductions are in order.” He finished tottering upwards, staggering to fetch her another cup of water. “I am Lord Howland Reed, and this is my son, Jojen.”

“Pleased to meet you, my lady,” the boy said stiffly, in a voice that sounded older than his years.

Val looked between them, staring with confusion. Lord Howland offered her another cup of water, but Val didn’t take it.

There was no hostility in his gaze – or at least none that Val could sense – but she was still on edge.
She was in pain, and the aggression slipped into her voice.

“Who?”

“Lord Reed,” the sickly man repeated, “Lord of Greywater Watch?” If he was looking for recognition, he found none. “Ah, never mind. I am a friend of House Stark.”

She scoffed. “That sounds like something an enemy would say.”

“Very true,” he admitted, with another smile. “But I suppose I can’t prove or disprove that, so I’ll leave it there. You do not have to sit so stiffly, my lady – I just wish to talk.”

You had your man drag me here. There were guards standing outside. She did not trust these southerners. Her pale blue eyes met his dark green, and her lips curled backwards.

“About?”

He paused, taking a sip from the cup himself. “About Jon Snow.”

“Why?”

“I would like to know more of him.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why me?”

“I’ve spoken to many around here, and they say that you know him best. You were his…” The lord’s voice flickered with uncertainty. “…His lover, yes?”

‘Were’. Is that past tense? she wondered.

She didn’t reply, but she glared like an angry cat. The boy – Jojen – he was staring straight at her missing arm, and that put Val on edge.

For a moment, Lord Howland seemed flustered. “Forgive me, this isn’t how I wanted to start this discussion,” he admitted. “Can I get you a drink? Something to eat?”

“I’m fine.” Val’s voice was a snap.

His gaze turned towards her stump. She tried to cradle it as she sat, but she could place no pressure on the wound.

“Does it hurt?” Lord Howland asked softly.

“They cut off my fucking arm,” she growled. “Of course it bloody hurts.”

“Language, please!” Lord Reed protested. “There are children present.” He shook his head, but slowly, as though he was tired.

Val’s eyes could have bulged. She stared at him as if this were some jape. The pain and confusion of being so out of control put her on edge. Something about Lord Howland’s soft wheeze caused her to growl.

The sickly man met her gaze, and then sighed. “Jojen, may you give us a moment?”

“Yes, father,” the boy said. He had the voice of a loyal son, and stood up from the armchair. Jojen Reed moved with a wince as he stumbled out of the room.
“I’m leaving too,” Val said curtly, nails digging into the chair as she dragged herself up.

“Please, my lady, don’t leave.”

“You going to have your little man stop me?” she spat.

“I don’t want to. But I might.” She glared at him. “What would happen if you fell down again, my lady?”

_Is that a threat?_ she wondered.

The man staggered on his cane, and Lord Howland carefully stepped around the table. “Hold on, allow me to show you something…”

There was a cabinet in the corner of the room, made out of old oak like everything else that wasn’t stone in the castle. The doors creaked as Lord Howland pulled them open, and then, with a long wheeze, he hoisted up a heavy clay pot.

“Here, consider this a gift,” the lord offered, panting. “A token of friendship.”

She did not step any closer. The man popped the cork from the pot, and a thick earthy smell wafted out.

“It will help,” he explained, despite her silence. “Smear this over the wound and it will help the rawness.”

She stepped forward and stared at the clay pot. It was full of brown mucus. “Mud.”

“Mud from Greywater Watch. I brought several containers of the stuff with me.” He stepped backwards, and the cabinet was filled with clay pots. “It won’t heal anything, but it will ease some of the discomfort. Please…” He motioned at her, as if he expected her to try some.

Val didn’t move, her eyes narrowed. Was this a jape?

“It will help,” he repeated. “I know how much the scar will chafe.”

“You don’t know a thing,” her voice growled.

“Is that so?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Aye. Don’t bother with this whole act.” _Bloody mud._ She stepped backwards. “How many arms have you ever lost, lord?”

“Oh, I think I know what it’s like more than most,” he retorted. “I’m not unsympathetic, Val.”

Without a pause, he unfastened the clasp of his belt, and then his tunic. Val glared, then the man pulled up his tunic, raising it over his torso. She saw pale flesh, a hairless skinny stomach.

And then there was a vivid red scar cutting across his torso.

The sight caused some of her anger to fade away. The wound was old and faded, the skin knotted together and long sealed, but the redness still lingered.

“You lost an arm. I lost a lung.” Lord Howland smiled humourlessly. “The blade that got me broke open half my ribs. I can feel it every time that I breathe. Eighteen years I’ve suffered with it.”
Her gaze flickered. She wasn’t sure how to reply.

“Take the mud,” he insisted. “It will help, if you have it in you to trust me.”

He let out a breath after a momentary silence, then tottered backwards, easing himself down into his seat again. Val quietly inspected the mud.

Moments passed. There was something about the man’s tone that seemed to fill the room with silence.

“My wound will never heal,” he said finally. “Neither will yours. You will never sleep comfortably again. Tis a cruel thing, but it happens. I’ve known some men that would rather choose death than debility, and there’s been times when I’ve understood why. I’ve found ways to live with it, but I will be short of breath until the day I die.”

Val didn’t speak. Her jaw was clenched, staring down at the mud. It was strange, thick with a reddish, syrupy liquid. It reminded her of blood.

Lord Howland leaned forward on his seat, closer towards her. “Still, let me tell you something that I wish somebody had told me eighteen years ago,” he continued. “That scar does not define you.

“I’ve lived with this half my life, but I still married a beautiful woman and fathered two gorgeous children. Oh, I will never hold a spear again, but it hasn’t stopped anything that’s truly important. I’ve had a good life regardless of this scar, and perhaps a longer one than I deserve.”

Lord Howland extended his hand, and gently took her hand. Normally Val would have flinched from a stranger’s touch, but his bony fingers were gentle and comforting. His grip was ginger – cradling her hand.

“The wounds we take do not decide who we are, my lady,” he said softly. “What matters is how we choose to recover from them.”

Val’s gaze dipped, and her aggression bled away. Lord Howland didn’t seem irritated at her, just… patient. Those green orbs were somehow both piercing and soft. He sat over the table, gently holding her hand, waiting for a reply.

“Thank you.” she mumbled as she finally pulled her hand away. “For the mud.”

He gave a weak smile. “Think nothing of it. Are you sure you don’t want a drink?”

“I’m fine.”

“Then may I ask a few questions?”

“On Jon Snow?” she muttered.

“Yes.”

She shook his head. “I can tell you nothing more than anyone could. There are plenty who can talk about him.”

“I do not trust most talk. I’ve already heard about what he’s done, but perhaps you could tell me what he’s like,” Lord Howland pressed. “Is he kind? Merciful?”

What strange questions. Val had to frown as she thought about them. “He tries to be kind, perhaps,” she said finally. “Doesn’t always succeed. And he can be plenty merciful until you cross
“Until you cross him,” the man repeated. “Then is he violent, does he lose his temper? Or does he
enjoying hurting people?”

Val frowned. “Jon is one of the best fighters I’ve ever known. He’s not the best, but there ain’t
many better than him.” She nodded. “And he does love a good fight. And, aye, he’s got a temper
too. But he doesn’t enjoy hurting people.”

“I see,” the lord mused for a while, bright eyes unblinking. “Then is he fair in his judgements? Is
he patient? Does he encourage free-thinking or does he enforce only his will?”

She hesitated. “Jon gets stressed more than anyone else I know. Sometimes I think it tears him up
inside.”

“Aye, I know the type.” He nodded. “What about outside of kingship? How does he treat his
servants, how does he talk to the people beneath him?”

Val could only shrug one shoulder. She looked up, feeling perplexment spreading across her face.
Lord Howland sounded genuinely invested. “What is your interest in him?”

“I… I am a friend of the family.”

“What does that even mean?”

“I was there at Jon’s birth,” he admitted. “I knew him as a babe.”

“Then shouldn’t you know more about him than I do?” she challenged. “He grew up in this castle –
closer to you than to me.”

“The last time I saw him, he was around three, maybe four?” Lord Howland’s eyes looked distant
for a moment. “I had to stay away from Winterfell for most of his childhood, and travelling is
difficult for me,” he explained. “That doesn’t mean I stopped thinking about him, though. I’ve
always wondered about the man that Jon Snow would grow to become.”

There was a pause. The lord cradled his chin in his hands, and took a deep breath. “But not even I
ever imagined him as King-beyond-the-Wall, let alone riding an ice dragon.” He sighed. “It is a
funny old world, isn’t it?”

That was one way to phrase, Val supposed. “Guess so.”

Why did Jon abandon his vows, why did he choose to become King-beyond-the-Wall?”

“What do you mean?”

“Surely another option would have been to bring the dragon to the Night’s Watch, not to the free
folk? He didn’t need to stay north at all.” Lord Howland scratched his whiskers. “So why did he?
Was it for power, ambition, love…?”

She hesitated. The memory of those days north still haunted her – the days when the cold had
stalked in the darkness and Mance’s host had been left scattered in the forest. Val and her sister
might well have died at Whitetree, if it hadn’t been for the refuge at Hardhome.
“He did it because there were people who needed him to,” she said finally, with a shake of her head. “We – the free folk, me, my sister, her babe – we probably would have all died if he hadn’t. But he never enjoyed being king.”

Lord Reed just nodded, his eyes thoughtful.

It was the start of a long talk. There was something in the lord’s demeanor that encouraged her to speak more, and Howland was a good listener. She told him about the first time she met Jon – all the way back in Mance’s tent – and afterwards when he had reappeared with white hair and a dragon. She told him of the uniting of the free folk, about the exodus south, about the campaign in the north from the Wall. For most of it, the lord sat and listened intently.

Val asked questions of her own too. Lord Howland could share more details of the events to the north. He told her that Jon had survived the assault on the Wall and that the dragon had been victorious, but Mance Rayder had fallen in battle. There was no news of Dalla in any of their reports, but Howland promised to secure word of her sister. Val just nodded.

Mance… she wasn’t surprised. He had never been one to run.

As dusk fell, Lord Howland had her escorted back to the infirmary. He also offered to arrange a private room for her in the castle, but she refused.

Val limped back to her sickbed. She was so weary from her talk that she fell asleep before she hit the pillows.

She dreamt of a battle to the north, but in her mind they were fighting water instead of men. The Wall was creaking like a dam fit to burst, with punctures piercing through the ice and great torrents of black water flooding out over the land…

When she awoke, she realised that they had left a jar of mud by her bedside. She drifted for a time, half-lucid, dreaming of braiding her sister’s hair with two good hands.

As morn drifted over her, she found herself listening to the Greatjon’s phlegmy snores, thinking of the strange conversation of the day before. She kept on replaying the questions that Howland had asked, trying to understand what his interest. The broken lord’s curiosity with Jon had not seemed hostile, and yet his questions had not felt normal.

The sound of Lord Umber’s breaths reminded her of Lord Reed’s gentle wheeze, but they were hoarse and rougher.

It was hours before the Greatjon woke, well into the early noon. For him, waking was not pleasant, Val suspected that he had soiled himself in his sleep again. The lord was still too weak to stand. He was barely strong enough to breathe – to move him would have killed him.

On the morn, either Mother Mole or one of her acolytes would visit, followed by a haggle of worshippers to change bandages or serve stew. Today, it was three women. As they worked, they would always chatter about the dragon and the faith. The women spoke with glossy gazes and hushed breaths, whispering of salvation and prophecy.

They even spoke proudly of King Brandon – the young boy chosen and blessed to lead them.

Once, Val knew that many had been upset with Snow kneeling to a boy, but then the miracle at Winterfell happened. That had caused plenty to change their opinions of the crippled king.

Most of the time, Val sat quietly and listened to the chatter. Something in their voices made her feel
like it was dangerous to object.

“What of the Old Gods?” Val asked a woman finally, more from curiosity. “Do you still pray to them?”

“But of course.” She even seemed shocked by the very suggestion otherwise. “But the ice dragon is an Old God. It is a god given flesh, a sign of deliverance. The Mother says that the weirwoods heard our prayers and sent forth a dragon to save us all.”

From his bed, the Greatjon made a noise. “What does that make the other dragons, then?” the lord asked in a quiet wheeze. “There have been dragons in the past. None from north of the Wall, aye, but plenty of the fire-breathing sort in the south. Most of them never looked kindly on heart trees. Were those gods too?”

“Evil ones.” The woman shrugged. “There are plenty of gods. I know naught of these other dragons, but I know our God Sonagon was sent to save us.” The washerwoman’s voice was certain. “It was foretold.”

The Greatjon only scowled, causing another woman to glare at him. “The dragon rescued us. His coming marks the end of days – you’ve seen it yourself,” she chided. “The proof of his miracle is all around you, how can you doubt?”

The lord chose not to reply, or perhaps he was too weak to argue. The women kept on jabbering, talking more and more of the dragon and its prophet. Some said that the battle at the Wall had been a victory, and others muttered it had been a devastating loss. They whispered that Prince Snow had singlehandedly defeated legions of dead at the Wall, that he had fought the Other’s king to a standstill in a duel. They said that dragon’s breath had repaired the Wall and raised it to a hundred feet higher. They also said that King Brandon would be coronated soon, and that Mother Mole would be the one to crown him in the name of the Dragon.

Val knew that at least the last one was false. No doubt Mother Mole would want to be the one to crown the king, but the lords of the north would likely revolt at such a sight. Instead, it would likely be the boy’s sister, the princess, to place the crown on his little head.

Nevertheless, Mother Mole would be standing nearby, Val did not doubt. The force of the Circle was quickly becoming too strong to disregard.

She had never met the child, but she felt sorry for the young King Bran, sometimes. Val had watched the kingship wear away Jon down to the bone, she had seen how gaunt and stressed it made him. Regent or not, a crown felt like a cruel thing to place upon a boy.

The spearwives left after changing their bedpans. The room was left in silence for a long time, as dusk drooped over the castle outside and inside the room.

In the infirmary, the only sound was the Greatjon’s wheezy gasps.

“Long live the king,” she whispered grimly to the empty air. Val wondered where Snow was now.

The Greatjon only took a shallow breath. “Damn this all to hell.”

“Problem?” she muttered.

“Where do I even begin?” He tried to pull himself upwards, but he couldn’t meet her eyes. “Do you believe that talk of gods and dragons?”
She hesitated. “They believe it. But if you’re going to pray to something, I suppose a dragon is as
good as anything.”

He made a scoffing noise. “They say this will be the Long Night. The Long Night. I didn’t believe
it, but we got dragons and demons, dead men and living shadows. If they say that’s a god, how can
I object?”

Val paused. “If it is a god,” she decided, “it’s a shit one.”

“Maybe all the gods are shit. Gods damn them all, how am I meant to…?” His voice was a broken
murmur. “I ain’t strong enough for this shit.”

“You got your gut slashed wide open and you’re still breathing. You ain’t weak.”

“I’m old.” His voice was barely even audible between his breaths. “Not enough strength left in me,
these bones can’t fight another war. Not another winter.”

It was strange to hear the Greatjon sound so tired, so small. His tone made Val feel uncomfortable.
“You ain’t that old.”

“I ain’t that young. Fuck it… I saw that… that thing, and I could do nothing.” He sounded pained.
“It cut right through me, right through my friends… and I can’t…”

His voice trailed off, the pants only growing deeper. The Lord of Last Hearth was lying breathless
in his bed, staring up at the greying pig’s heart nailed to the wall. “I can’t handle this… this magic,
I just can’t…”

He sounded lost. Lost, wounded and weak, all of that boisterous strength had bled away with his
guts. It was easy to be strong, but harder to stay strong after weeks of wasting away…

“I know,” Val muttered. She didn’t even know if he heard her, but there was nothing else to say.

“There are days when I wonder why,” he uttered the words like a confession. “Why even fight,
why even…?”

Why even stay alive, Val knew. Why bother fighting the pain, when it will only cause more pain.
She let the words slip away unspoken into the gloom.

Silence reigned in the dark room.

“Do what I do. Think of the people who are still relying on me,” Val whispered. “I think of my
people, my family, my sister.”

“And who’s that then?” the Greatjon wheezed. “My family are dead. I’ve outlived two wives and
six children. There are days when I wish I had died at the Twins, I didn’t even want…”

There was a strained sniffle between the gasps of air. Val couldn’t see in the dark, but she
suspected that the Greatjon was crying. He didn’t seem like a warrior anymore, he was just a large,
broken man weeping through choked breaths in his bed.

Strangely, she wondered about Jon. She wondered if he ever cried when no one was looking.

“What were their names?” she muttered.

“My wives… Shella… Rose…” He slurred the words, broken by rough breaths. “My boys… Jon…
Steffon, Kol… Mikael…” His throat froze, like he could barely even speak the words. The only
thing that came out were hoarse gasps.

*He is dying,* Val thought. Worse, it felt like the man had resigned himself to die. Suddenly, Val’s voice turned harsh. “Would they want you to die like this?”

There was no reply from the dark.

“Dying is a craven’s choice, Lord Umber,” Val said lowly. “If you love them, then stay alive and remember them.”

The air went still. It was the hour of the eel, as time slowly dripped away. The room was pitch black and uneasily silent, but she knew he wasn’t sleeping.

Instead, the only thing she heard were his strained, staggered breaths. She counted the breaths, each one threatening to gag and seal his throat.

“But it’s a riddle for you,” Val said finally. “Every morn I shall appear at your feet, every day I will follow you no matter how fast you run, and every dusk I will almost perish. What am I?”

There was long silence, and Val counted the breaths.

“A shadow,” he said finally.

“Aye, I knew you’d get one eventually, old man. Next one – the seas stand dry, the rivers do not run, these towns have no people, and these forests are still. Where are we?”

There was a pause. “Beyond the Wall.”

“Nope. Try again.”

She heard his gasp. “The Dothraki Sea.”

“I don’t even know where that is. Try again.”

He did not reply. Val counted to fifty, and then her voice chided. “Come on, old man. You haven’t answered the riddle yet. Where are we?”

The Greatjon made an indignant sound. He tried to shake her off, but Val kept on pressing for an answer. He growled in frustration, but Val just raised her voice and repeated the riddle. “We’re on a map,” he managed finally.

“Aye, that’s right.” She winced as she straightened up in her bed. “Come on now, I have more riddles.”

They sat awake all night, from the hour of the eel to the hour of the nightingale. Every time Val heard his breaths growing hoarse, she demanded another riddle from him. She did whatever she could to distract him from the soul-crushing hopelessness all around him.

The Greatjon didn’t die that night. She forced him to stay awake, to keep on talking, to keep on breathing just a bit longer. Whatever it took to survive one more night.

When morn came, he seemed to ease fractionally. The servants brought a great jug of water for him to gulp down, and when dawn came they both seemed to pretend the night before had never happened. The lord of Umber managed to move, barely.

She brought over the jar of mud, for his wound. Mother Mole’s foul ointments hadn’t worked, but
perhaps Lord Reed’s precious mud would serve better.

“You should try to stand up,” she offered. “It does no good to lie on your back. Try to stand.”

“Fuck, I can’t…”

“Then move your arms.” Val winced as she staggered off to her own bed. “Move your legs. Just try to build up your strength.”

Bloodshot eyes glared in anger at her, while Val limped over to his side. For a moment, it seemed like there was something he wanted to say, but then his mouth clenched. Val scoffed, and slapped him on the shoulder so hard that he groaned.

“Come on,” she ordered. “You’ve survived this long. You’d be a bloody fool if you die now.”

The man grimaced, but he didn’t object as she settled down next to his bed. There was more silence, as Val rested her back against the wall and looked at him expectantly. The lord grit his teeth and stared stubbornly up at the ceiling.

“… I spy with my little eye,” the Greatjon murmured finally, through a pained grimace as he started to flex his legs, “something beginning with ‘b’.”

Val rolled her eyes, but she smirked too.

They sat together for a long time. Most of it was spent in quiet, but it was a comfortable quiet. They shared riddles together – even the infuriating ones where the letters sounded nothing like the words. Gradually, the lord’s breaths became fuller, a little bit more even and a bit less strained.

Val closed her eyes and rested her head back against the stone wall. Absentmindedly, she flexed her phantom arm.

On the bed, the Greatjon seemed to reach a decision. He had spent a while with his eyes closed, the occasional flicker back to her. When he finally spoke, his voice was strangely low. “You said that you had a sister,” he said. “Before, you mentioned a sister.”


It had been several months since she had last seen Dalla, or her nephew. Dalla was now a widow, her son fatherless. The thought pained.

“Older or younger?”

“Three years younger.” Val paused. “Well, roughly.”

The man paused for a time. A frown creased his pale face. “You’re not sure how old?”

“Nope. My father never kept count.”

“And what about your mother?”

She just shook her head. “A woman, likely older.”

“You never knew her?”

There was something in his voice she didn’t recognise. At once, Val’s voice turned sharp. “Is this an interrogation?”
“Just answer the bloody question,” he growled.

She rolled her eyes. “No, I never knew my mother,” she said with a snort. “My pa would go through a woman a week. He went raiding once, got a lass and brought back me and Dalla.”

The Greatjon frowned. Val turned to glance at him. “My pa was the strongest chieftain around in his time,” she explained. “He was a named man – all the other clans knew of him, even the crows up in their nests. Oh, me and Dalla likely weren’t his only children, but we’re the only ones he decided to keep. I never much knew my father – he died to a Thenn’s axe back when I had pimples. What’s it to you?”

At that, he went silent. The man seemed to be contemplating something, but Val couldn’t even read his expression.

“Do you remember your mother’s name?” he said finally. “Or what she looked like?”

Val snorted. “No, of course not. I was a babe.”

She saw his eyes flickering. He didn’t speak, but she caught his gaze inspecting her through the corner of his eye. The man seemed strangely nervous, and for whatever reason it unnerved her and she looked away.

There was a long hush that felt almost expectant. Curiously, Val noted that his breaths had turned silent.

Eventually, Val turned back to him with a frown. “Your turn, old man.” Her eyes narrowed. “Why are you so interested in my family?”

The Greatjon never replied.

---

**Jon**

The wind roared in his ears as he looked down on the white world from the dragon’s back.

He was flying east, tracing the solid white line of the Wall over the arc of the horizon. The white land below blurred with every swoosh of Sonagon’s wings, and fine icy clouds traced the tips of the dragon’s wings. The dragon’s world was a tapestry of shades of blue, with the rare speckles of orange or red where men or game were walking the land below.

Sonagon loved to fly – the dragon seemed incandescent with the joy of flight, inhuman emotions roiling at the edge of his mind. He felt the dragon’s joy, exhilaration, fury. Sonagon felt like an ocean in a storm, it was all Jon could do not to lose himself. The dragon felt like it was compensating for the weeks spent grounded, pushing its monumentally powerful body as hard as it would go and revelling in the feeling.

Sonagon somehow felt stronger than ever before, the connection was so strong now that if Jon hadn’t been so accustomed to the feel of the dragon’s mind, he didn’t know what might have happened.

As far east as the horizon went, Jon could see signs of yet more battles along the Wall, all illuminated by the morning sun. The castles-along-the-Wall were all blanketed white under drifts of snow, but smoking with remnant fires or strewn with corpses and wreckage. Woodwatch looked
like it had half-collapsed, and Sable Hall had somehow ignited, with little left but cinders and a forlorn-looking field of tents outside the ruins.

At Jon’s urging, Sonagon flew over it all.

Sonagon had come to him with no saddle, so Jon could only fasten himself to the dragon’s horn and hold on for dear life. The wind swept around him, bitingly cold even through layers on layers of furs.

In the distance, the horizon curved around the Wall. Even through the dragon’s sight, he had to squint to see through the clouds, but he could make out the outline of the mountains of Skagos. He could smell the ocean, the salt wafting on the wind, along with the pang of something foul.

Eastwatch lay in the distance, and stink of death was thick in the air. The dragon was uneasy with the smell, and Jon urged Sonagon to fly high and safe through the cold clouds. Even if there were no heavy catapults atop the Wall, Jon took care to stay out of range.

Jon wasn’t quite sure what he was expecting – a horde of wights, perhaps, or perhaps a trap set by the Others. In his worst fears, he imagined seeing a second Breach through the Wall at Eastwatch. He could take no chances.

The scouts he had sent from Castle Black had not returned yet, but he could not wait for them. Jon had little idea what awaited them at Eastwatch, but he needed to find out. The dragon soared slow and steady, nostrils sniffing the howling wind for anything that seemed out of place.

Still, the Wall was standing strong. Jon could see the Wall’s edge as it broke into the water, and the castle of Eastwatch squatting unevenly on the cliff’s edge. As the dragon flew, the black water of the Bay of Seals came into sight, and upon its shores the sprawling landscape of the refugee camp by the Wall.

Sonagon descended, and suddenly Jon gasped as a familiar presence shot into focus.

Instantly, Jon felt paws rushing over snow, he felt thick white fur wrapped around him. His breath was hoarse against the cold, the world shaded in scents, smells and faded colours. He had eyes on the ground, staring up at the Wall. Jon breathed a sigh of relief, and he knew instantly that it was safe.

Sonagon roared, and flapped downwards to the shadow of the Wall. From the ground, he heard a howl echoing against the Wall.

There had been many battles here, Jon knew, but the fighting had ceased.

The last time Jon visited Eastwatch had been months ago – back when he had arrived along with the Manderly’s galleys, bringing hulls filled with supplies for the free folk. Then, Eastwatch had been an overcrowded camp flooding out from a fishing village, and the castle had seemed alive with excitement. A trail of refugees had been making their way south, and the future had seemed bright with promise. There had been a celebration then upon Jon’s return, but Jon had crept away from the festivities towards Val’s tent. They had made love that night, stealing kisses until morn hidden away from the world… He remembered her touch, her laugh, her breath…

The very memory caused him to tremble. That felt like a lifetime ago.

Now, Eastwatch looked dark and dreary under the shadow of the Wall. The first thing Jon saw was the sprawling settlement; the refugee camp at Eastwatch had tripled in size since the last he had visited. From high in the air it looked as large as any town, but as Sonagon descended it seemed
more like a slum buried in the snow. Where once it had been only cloth and hide tents, now there
were sheds and huts built onto the grounds outside the castle. Makeshifts docks had expanded out
over the coast; the bay was filled with all sizes of rafts, barges and ships.

In the black ocean, icebergs floated in the straits of Skagos, while the coast was blanketed in frost
and shadows. To the north, half the sea looked like it had been frozen solid, but the turbulent
waves still crashed against the rocks of the Bay of Seals. Still, Sonagon could sense the stink of
smoke and death lingering in the air.

The dragon circled the castle first, and then out beyond the Wall, and circled then over the bay
towards the shadow of Skagos. He was cautious as he slowly descended. There was no signs of the
Others, and yet there were no ships in the water. Every fishing vessel was docked, and the gates at
Eastwatch were sealed, he noted. There was no movement in the north – the refugee trail from
Hardhome to Eastwatch looked dead. The roadhouses and beacons leading towards Hardhome had
been abandoned.

By the time Sonagon finally landed in the castle’s courtyard there was already a crowd of refugees
waiting for him. The men and women were staring up at the sky and chanting in awe. Sonagon had
to roar and swipe its tail to clear the yard of people.

As soon as Jon touched solid ground, he felt a bounding shape rushing towards him. Despite
everything, a grin split his features – the first time he had smiled in over a week.

The white direwolf showed no hesitation in running towards the dragon. Ghost felt elated to see
him again, the direwolf was panting and barking. Ghost rushed to Jon like a puppy, nuzzling his
palm with his nose, while Jon’s hand brushed through the wolf’s mane. The wolf was so excited he
nearly took Jon off his feet, and his coarse tongue lapped at Jon’s cheek. Jon could have gasped –
being reunited with the direwolf again felt like finding a part of himself.

Ghost was larger than ever, as large as a pony. The white direwolf was whining in eagerness at
seeing Jon again, almost like the puppy he had once been. I should not have sent Ghost away, he
thought with a pang of regret. He should have kept his friend close.

All around him, the crowd gaped and murmured as Jon hugged his direwolf tightly.

But why is Ghost in Eastwatch? He had entrusted his direwolf to three of his Dragonguard, all of
them coursed for Skagos. Through their connection, Jon could tell that no harm had come to his
direwolf, but they hadn’t found Rickon and he knew little of the progress they made. Poor
progress, obviously.

All around him, the yard was filling with even more people. Wide-eyed refugees kept creeping out
of the castle, and their eyes were as much on him as they were on the dragon. Murmurs were rising
in the air. Sonagon stirred, nostrils sniffing.

“Who is in command here?” Jon demanded to the crowd, still clutching Ghost’s fur. Nobody
stepped forward.

“That would be me, I suppose,” a woman’s voice said eventually, moving out of the huddle. “Well
met, King Snow. They call me Torvi Icetooth.”

The name was unfamiliar, but Jon had long since stopped being able to keep track of all the
commanders in the coalition. Still, as soon as he looked towards her, he felt his skin crawl.
Sonagon recoiled suddenly, a dark growl emerging from its huge throat. She is a skinchanger, Jon
knew. He could tell instinctively.
“And you are?”

“Torvi,” she drawled. She showed no fear at the dragon’s growl. “Daughter of Porunn, sister to Jawi, and priestess of the Circle.”

Torvi Icetooth was a short and pale-skinned woman. At first glance, she looked stout and heavy, but she was wearing several layers of furs. Her eyes were a hollow grey, and her lips were tight and thin. Jon couldn’t even tell her age; her features were timeless, she might have seen anywhere between thirty or fifty namedays.

“Indeed.” Jon glanced around, searching for a familiar face. He found none. “Where is Cotter Pyke, Halleck, Gurn, or the Admiral of Seals?”

“Dead, dead, dead and turned craven,” she replied simply. “That leaves me in command.”

There wasn’t even a hint of care. There was no warmth in her gaze, just an emptiness like that of a dead ocean. Her posture instinctively put Jon on edge.

Still, with a mental push, Jon held Sonagon back slightly, and walked towards the woman. All around, people were gaping at him. **These people are scared.** The stink of hunger and desperation filled the air.

“What happened here?” he demanded.

Torvi just shook her head fractionally, and motioned for him to follow. “The dead happened. You come too late, King Snow.”

After a pause, Jon followed. With a mental urging, Ghost walked loyally by Jon’s side. With one hand, Jon clutched a spear as a walking stick, and with the other hand he held onto the direwolf for support. The free folk shuffled around him hesitantly, and all heads bowed as he limped passed.

Jon still saw a weirwood carving of a white dragon, sitting in a shrine at the edge of Eastwatch’s walls. Everything else in the castle was falling into disrepair, but the shrine had been kept immaculate.

From the ground, Jon suddenly noticed the shapes in the water. Misshapen lumps of wood were bumping off the docks and the frozen coast. The flotsam of a hundred shipwrecks was still bobbing between the crests of the waves.

There was a fine layer of ice creeping over the water, crackling against the waves.

The attack came from the sea, Torvi told him as they walked towards the castle’s harbour. The white walkers apparently never even tried to attack the Wall itself, but instead had targeted the refugee ships and the fishing vessels across the northern waters nigh-simultaneously. The attack stretched from Eastwatch to the shores off the isle of Skane to the northern coasts of Skagos, all the way to Hardhome. The Admiral of Seals lost many ships north of the Wall, their remaining forces had scattered to the four winds, and the dead were uncountable. **They were targeting the refugees,** Jon thought grimly.

“Attacked?” Jon asked. “Attacked how?”

“Dead things in the water,” Torvi replied, without any hint of emotion. The woman’s eyes were empty.

She took him towards the docks, and he saw what was left of the Eastwatch fleet. Even the
surviving ships looked torn half-apart. Torn apart from below, he noticed. Their hulls had been ripped open, leaving most of the ships as scrap.

“They came from the depths and gave no warning,” she explained. “Our ships were sailing from Eastwatch to Skane, and then we were ambushed by stoneborn longships on the water. There was a battle between men off the coast, the Admiral of Seals mustered the fleet to defend. And then the dead ambushed both us and stoneborn together from below. Not even one in ten survived.”

She kept her voice low, but the way she described it… “You were there?” Jon asked.

“Through my partner.” Torvi Icetooth nodded. “My sister swam through the battle, while I raised the signal to pull back.”

Jon was about to ask what she meant, when suddenly he saw movement in the waters off the harbour. A white fin emerged from the water, and the crest of a huge white creature cutting the waves. Jon’s eyes widened, but the woman just nodded faintly. “My sister,” she explained.

*She is a skinchanger, he thought, and her second skin is a shark.* The huge ice shark was circling through the shallows of the castle, at least fifteen feet long from nose to tail.

“And Hardhome?” Jon asked.

“Hardhome is lost, Snow.” For all the passion in her voice, she could have been talking about the weather. “They completely destroyed our defences. Anybody who remained there has been slaughtered.”

Jon stared out over the waves, at shadow of Skagos on the horizon. The Bay of Seals had never seemed so cold. “How many?”

“We evacuated most. But not all.”

*We always knew that Hardhome would be the first to fall,* Jon thought. The garrison on the peninsula had been too isolated, too far from the Wall to be defended. Still, its loss left a bitter taste in his mouth.

There were more answers he needed, but then suddenly he heard footsteps crunching over the frost and pushing through the following of refugees. Ghost reacted first; the wolf’s ears twitched at the movement.

“Snow!” a voice cried suddenly, and there were men running towards him. “Snow! Thank the gods you’re finally here.”

There were three figures, and two of them bore a pattern of white stones on their surcoats shaped into a dragon. Jon blinked as he recognised the two – they were from his Dragonguard; Eryn Whaletooth and Dark Gerrick. Jon’s eyes widened slightly in surprise, but perhaps he shouldn’t have been. *So this is how Ghost came to Eastwatch.*

It felt like a lifetime ago that he had sent Eryn, Gerrick and Bullden Horn north to search out Rickon.

The two men were tall and weary figures, and they walked with a dark-haired boy Jon didn’t recognise. Their chainmail clanked with every step. *Besides Grenn, these are the last remaining members of my Dragonguard,* Jon realised. Everybody else in his newfound order had perished at the Battle of the Snows or at Castle Black. Toregg had been killed by the shadow at Winterfell, and Ser Alek had resigned and returned to White Harbour not long after the confrontation with the
He inspected them; both young and lean men, but their eyes were shadowed and they looked weary. Eryn was panting for breath after running so fast to meet him. Jon extended a gloved hand.

“Eryn,” Jon greeted. “Gerrick.”

Suddenly, Ghost bounded up from Jon’s side, rushing to meet the dark-haired youth next to the men. The boy grinned brightly, eagerly rubbing Ghost’s neck like an old friend. For a moment, Jon looked shocked; he had never known Ghost to be so friendly with anyone but him.

Eryn noticed Jon’s expression. “Aye, we’ve been looking after your dog for you.”

“Who are you?” Jon demanded of the youth, but the boy gave no reply. Jon frowned, but the boy kept on playing with the wolf, fearlessly teasing Ghost with a chunk of dried meat. The direwolf snapped it straight out of his fingers.

“That’s Wex. The boy ain’t a talker, yet the wolf seems to like him,” Gerrick grunted. Dark Gerrick bore a deep, fresh scar on his cheek that Jon couldn’t remember. It looked like both men had seen battles. “Run along now, lad, we need to talk to Snow.”

Jon limped forward. Eryn shook his hand tightly, but Gerrick didn’t. “My brother?” Jon demanded, lowering his voice somewhat. “Did you find him?”

“No.” Eryn shook his head. “But we do know where he is.”

Jon looked between them, measuring their gazes. Neither man seemed successful in their task, that was true. Jon paused, eyes searching for the third man. “Where is Bullden Horn?”

“Dead,” Gerrick scoffed. “He died months ago. Damn stupid death too; we passed through a village filled with hicks that chose to object to the white dragon we wore. We fought them off, aye, but then some farmer’s boy slit Bullden’s throat and stole his horn. Bastard bled out before we could do a damn thing.

“I see.” Jon looked between them, then noted the quiet boy that had walked with them. Eryn averted his eyes uncomfortably, but Gerrick met his gaze. “It’s been months,” Jon said lowly. “I expected you to make better progress.”

“Yes, well, we lost the one guy who actually knew the lay of land on Skagos,” he said fouly. “After that, me and Eryn had to stumble around ourselves, with no idea what we were getting ourselves into.” He shook his head. “And this place is a fucking warzone – you have any idea how hard it is to find a single child in the middle of it?” Behind him, Ghost yelped as he played with the mute boy. “While caring for a wolf?”

His eyes narrowed. If I hadn’t sent you away, he considered, you’d have likely died on that lake. “Come with us, King,” Eryn offered. “We have much to show you.”

Jon followed, though his gaze flickered back to Gerrick. His steps were uneven lurches, but his hands stayed close to Dark Sister. Ghost seemed easy among the men, though, and Jon trusted the direwolf’s instincts.

Behind him, Torvi Icetooth hovered silently and followed.

“The Skagosi?” Jon asked, looking around the castle.
“Aye. They’ve been tormenting us for months.” Gerrick grunted. “The damn Skaggs have sent constant raids against Eastwatch, they turned this strait into a bloodbath.”

Yes, the Skagossons had refused to even consider the northern coalition, and their people held an ancestral grudge against wildlings. Throughout the civil war Skagos had remained neutral, but with a bias against wildlings. The stoneborn had long separated themselves from the mainland.

Lord Manderly had believed them to be irrelevant – Skagos had only hundreds of men to field, and brought far more trouble than they were worth – but the stoneborn tribes were tough, hardy, and fiercely independent. Skagos was nearly a nation unto itself. Any attempt from Eastwatch to negotiate with the stonelords had ended with decapitated heads on pikes being sent back with the next tide.

_I could have forced the stoneborn using Sonagon_, Jon thought, _but I didn’t want to distract the dragon with such a petty conflict_. Sonagon could only be in one place at a time, and they had needed the dragon against the threat of the Boltons and the south. Added on to that, Jon also never wanted to risk Rickon’s life by flying Sonagon into Skagos.

Instead, it had been the Lord of Bones who had volunteered to lead the efforts in bringing Skagos to heel, while their search parties discreetly tried to track down Rickon Stark. Under Rattleshirt, the fleets of Eastwatch had easily overpowered the Skagosi ships – there had seemed little reason for Jon to get involved until after they secured Rickon.

All around him, a procession was forming as Jon limped through the castle. Everything was grey, and Jon could feel the hunger and desperation in the air. _Too many mouths, too little food._

“The war against Skagos had been going well under Rattleshirt,” Eryn explained as they walked. “It was barely even a war, really. Our warbands set up camp on Skane and then we captured Driftwood Hall. We were set to bring the Skagosi to heel, just like you commanded.”

Jon did not reply, but his gaze flickered. “But then Rattleshirt left for Winterfell and the battle on Skagos really went to hell,” Eryn continued. “The ‘Admiral of Seals’ took command and _he_ bloody botched the invasion. The Admiral was too scared to risk any of his bloody ships, and our warbands got hit hard. We lost our camp on Skane, and they threw us off their isle.”

“We’ve been fighting against the stoneborn every other day for months,” Gerrick added. “They rallied against Eastwatch in strength when your dragon wasn’t around.”

_Perhaps that was Sonagon’s greatest weakness_, Jon considered. _The dragon couldn’t be everywhere._

“And then the Others came,” Jon noted.

“Aye. And then the Others came.” Gerrick’s voice was grim. “Both us and the Skaggs lost our entire fleets in an hour that night. We lost Hardhome in two.”

From the sound of what he was being told, the battle had been utter pandemonium. A slaughter. The type of battle that still haunted the air, Jon could feel the tension around him. They told him that Cotter Pyke had tried to hold the line and rally the fleet, but the ships of the Night’s Watch had been the very first to fall.

As their ships scattered, the Admiral of Seals had abandoned Eastwatch altogether. The admiral had taken the very last seaworthy ships and fled south, leaving the rest of the refugees to fend for themselves. Dark Gerrick spat at his name.
Hardhome hadn’t stood a chance, but Eastwatch never even came under direct attack. The very worst of the battle had been fought at sea and on the coasts of Skagos.

The Night of the Dead, they named it.

As the battle broke, the two Dragonguard had taken Ghost and fled from Skagos that night, stealing a ship and seeking shelter behind the Wall at Eastwatch. Gerrick had taken his scar fighting through four crazed stoneborn, all the while wights crawled out from the sea.

*We nearly lost the Wall here*, Jon thought with a curse, adding it all up. That the Others had pulled back from a victorious battlefield alarmed Jon nearly as much as the sight of a second Breach would have. *Do the Others truly care that little about winning?*

No, he realised, *the Others pulled back because they had already achieved their goals.*

Jon could feel the weight of the droves of hungry eyes staring right at him. They all wore white stones, every single one. *They prayed for salvation*, Jon thought. *These people have seen too much of war.*

Finally, Jon had to ask, “What of Rickon? I sent you north to find Rickon.”

“Oh, we found your brother,” Gerrick scoffed. “He’s safe, but we couldn’t even get close to him.”

With a bark of orders, Gerrick shouted something at a man inside the castle. Jon still could not understand the Old Tongue, but moments later he saw a naked body being dragged out over the stones. A prisoner, being dragged by two hefty wildlings.

The man wasn’t chained, but he was beaten and bloody as he was dragged from both arms. He was a hairy figure with a beard down his neck and chest hair so thick that it could have been fur. The man was short-legged and barrel-chested, but extremely broad and well-built.

Jon recognised the thick brow and craggy build instantly; the prisoner was stoneborn. Those of Skagosi blood were not built like other men – some claimed that they were from Ibbenese lineage, others argued that they descended from giants. They were shorter and broader than any normal man, with thicker brows and wider jaws. A queer folk of cannibals and raiders.

Even despite his bloody state, he was still trying to fight. The captive Skagosson was thrashing against the men who held him, snarling guttural, hoarse curses that Jon could not make out.

Jon’s eyes narrowed at the sight. The stoneborn was wrestling right up until Dark Gerrick kicked him in the chest.

*“This is Arago Stane, the heir to Driftwood,”* Gerrick introduced to Jon, as the man sputtered blood. *“We captured him on Skane.”*

“Captured him?” Arago Stane bore wounds over his shaggy body; some of them scarred over, others fresh.

“We took Driftwood Hall from them, along with this one. A few moons later his father took it back from us, but we still kept this Skagg.” Gerrick turned to the prisoner, looming over him. “You want to tell the king what you told us?”

It didn’t seem like Arago heard, but then the stoneborn spat a bloody gloop at Gerrick’s feet. The man muttered some curse word in the Old Tongue, and Gerrick kicked him again. *“Bloody Skagg,”* Gerrick cursed.
“Arago told us of a boy,” Eryn explained, looking at Jon. “A boy – two years back now. They found him wandering the stonelands, and he had a wolf with him. A large wolf too, and they say it was as feral as the boy.”

“Rickon,” Jon breathed. Lord Manderly had been right – Rickon truly had fled to Skagos. “Who found him?”

“Lord Magnar’s men. The wolf preyed on their peasant’s herds, the shepherds warned their Lord Magnar, and his men went tracking it. And then they discovered that the wolf had killed a unicorn too.”

From the floor, Arago Stane was glaring up at Jon viciously. There was raw hate in the stoneborn’s eyes, but Jon’s gaze was ice. “Not many unicorns left on Skagos,” Gerrick added. “But they’re damn tough creatures, bred for war. They don’t go down easy.”

“Aye. The unicorns are sacred to the stoneborn,” Eryn continued. “The Skagossions are vowed to protect them, their tribes shelter the last of the unicorn herds. For the crime of killing a unicorn, it should have been certain death for the boy and the wolf.” Jon raised his eyebrows in alarm. “But in this case Lord Bjarg Magnar chose mercy instead.”

“Why?” Jon kept his voice low.

All eyes turned towards Arago Stane. The stoneborn was on the ground, but listening intently.

Dark Gerrick drew a knife, and held it to the man’s throat. “Answer the question or I cut off your hand,” he warned.

There was a long pause. Arago glared hatefully. “The boy had potential.” The man’s voice was throaty and gruff with accent, his Common barely decipherable. “Had the Gift. Lord Magnar. Believed Gift more valuable than unicorn.”

*The Gift*, Jon wondered. *Skinchanging?*

“Aye.” Eryn nodded. “The rest say the same. Apparently Lord Magnar chose to adopt the boy as his own. The lord married his mother and took the child onto his own house.”

Jon blinked in shock. He looked down towards Arago, and the prisoner just nodded sourly.

“Married his mother?” Jon muttered with a frown. *Rickon’s mother is dead*, he almost said.

For half a moment, he wondered if maybe it was a different child. But then he remembered that spearwife Bran had told him of. The captured wildling from Winterfell’s kitchens who had smuggled Rickon away – *Osha. She must be pretending to be Rickon’s mother.*

Eyes were looking at him. Jon hesitated. “And Rickon is alive?”

“Alive and well,” Eryn replied. “He’s in Kingshouse, under the care of Lord Magnar. Mayhaps there’s no safer place on Skagos.”

“And we can’t reach him,” Gerrick added.

Jon knew of House Magnar. Theirs was the most prominent house on the isle, descended from the ancient Stone Kings. They were the de facto rulers of Skagos. *A house of cannibals and ill rumours*, he added quietly.
Kingshouse was the seat of House Magnar. That was both good and bad news. It was good because Rickon was presumably safe and defended, but bad because House Magnar was a sworn enemy. The stoneborn forgot nothing and did not bend from their ways. The Skagossons held grudges like none other; they despised wildlings, mainlanders, and Starks. Jon didn’t imagine that they’d be too fond of dragons, either.

*But Rickon is alive, Jon thought. I promised Bran that I would protect my family.*

All eyes were on him, but Jon needed to stop and think.

“How many other Skagosi prisoners do we have?” Jon asked finally.

“A few,” Gerrick replied. “Arago here is the most important, but we got about two dozen others in the cells. We also got Lord Crowl’s daughter, and two of Lord Stane’s wives.”

None of them in good condition, Jon expected. His eyes narrowed. “In what health?”

“Hell of a lot better than any of us would be on Skagos,” Gerrick retorted. “The stoneborn haven’t been half as kind to the ones that they’ve captured.”

He didn’t dispute the point, but Jon shifted slightly. “But have the Others attacked Skagos?”

It was Torvi that replied. “They have.”

“Then we must convince the Skagossons that they have greater threats than us.” He turned back to Arago Stane. “Get him up,” Jon ordered. “Wash his wounds, feed and clothe him.”

The men pulled Arago to his feet. The Skagosson was short – half a foot smaller than Jon, but he was wider and just as heavy. Jon stepped closer to inspect him. Arago’s jaw tensed, his gaze flickered, he looked up at Jon… and then violently lunged, jaws opened wide to tear out Jon’s throat.

Jon was ready for it. In a smooth motion, his fist collided with Arago’s throat. The stoneborn dropped and gagged.

“I’m trying to release you, ser,” Jon warned. “Do not be so fool to convince me otherwise.”

The guards looked shocked. “Release him?” a free folk gasped.

“Aye. He is to bring my message to Kingshouse, I will meet with this Lord Magnar,” Jon commanded.

The Skagosson was choking in pain, but still sputtering out curse words. Jon bent down slowly, and gripped the man’s neck. “It seems that Lord Magnar and I now share common interests,” Jon said lowly in the man’s ear. The soon to be freed prisoner stank of sweat and fish. “We both want to stop the Others, and we both want no harm to come to that boy. You will relay that message.”

“Snow, he’s killed four men trying to escape,” Gerrick warned, glaring at Arago. “I would not trust this one.”

*I am not trusting anybody. “Lord Magnar will meet with me, else he will meet with Sonagon.”*

Arago panted deep, hoarse breaths. Jon didn’t slacken his grip. Jon paused, curious to see if the stoneborn would try to attack him again. Arago chose not to.

“For every day that Lord Magnar refuses to treat with me,” Jon promised, “I will execute a hostage.
After I run out of hostages, my dragon will start destroying his settlements one by one. He will meet me alone and in a place of my choosing, or Skagos will suffer for it.”

The man’s eyes were black, and full of hate. Jon dropped him to the stones and limped away.

The crowd parted around him as he stepped back towards the keep. Ghost bounded towards Jon’s side, and the wolf bared its teeth fractionally at any who stepped too close. Fearlessly, Torvi Icetooth stepped next to Jon, easily keeping pace.

The woman was staring straight at him. “The Skaggs are not our problem, Snow,” she said in a low voice.

“I’m aware.”

“No, you’re not.” The skinchanger shook her head, and motioned towards the docks. “The problem is what our nets caught this morn, Snow.”

Jon frowned. “Bali, Tor,” she ordered. “Show him.”

Torvi motioned into the crowd, and moments later he saw two men carrying a hefty barrel over the stones. The figures were both broad, bearded and grim, and clad in sealskin and walrus hide. The air stank of salt and rot.

With a nod from Tovi, the two men dropped the barrel, spilling its slimy content out over the cobblestones. At first, the only thing Jon sensed was the noxious stink of decay. Water flushed from the barrel, along with dozens of squirming, slithery shapes.

They were all grey. The barrel was full of dead, rotten fish soaking in saltwater. Jon saw exposed fish skulls and rib cages, like the flesh had been scraped off. Salmon, tuna, anchovies, even a small shark. There were hundreds of them, all flapping and wriggling before him.

Round, blue fishbowl eyes stared blankly before him.

Jon didn’t blink. He only stared back.

Fish. Undead fish.

Around him, Ghost yelped and jumped backwards. Jon nearly recoiled as a mutilated salmon flapped towards him, biting at the sole of his boot. They were writhing like they were suffocating, flapping over the stones.

Jon blinked, and then looked at Torvi. She nodded.

“This is the reason why so many around here are going hungry, Snow,” she said simply. “We’ve still got a few boats trawling in these waters, but this is the only thing that they’re picking up. We’ve had net after net of this.”

He didn’t reply. Slowly, he lifted his walking stick upwards and swatted one of the creatures. It splattered in squishy gore, but the flesh was still wriggling under the spear.

“Aye. My sister is in the water, and there are more dead things like this.” For the first time, Torvi’s voice carried emotion and it was grim. “Not even my sister dares to venture deeper out to sea anymore. They’re everywhere, Your Grace.”

Fish. The Others were resurrecting fish now?
His hairs were standing on end. No, Jon thought slowly. The Others were looking for more ways to expand.

*They mean to kill the entire ocean.*

“Fish,” he repeated. “You mean fish *south* of the Wall?”

She nodded. The barrier, Jon almost protested. Even over the ocean, surely the barrier should have stopped them from crossing?

Then, he felt a tingling down his spine and a sinking in his gut. *But the barrier is already breached. They broke the barrier at Castle Black, so now it’s broken here too?*

He did not like this, and his thoughts were starting to twist in circles. One thought in particular was gnawing at the back of his mind. *Are the Others starting to look beyond Westeros?*

The more he considered it, the more it alarmed him.

Finally, Jon pulled his gaze away from the pile of rotten fish. “They’re only fish,” Jon said after a pause. “They cannot hurt us.”

He knew it was a lie as soon as he said it. Torvi just stared at him. She didn’t say anything, but he felt her gaze on his neck.

Jon limped up the stairs into the keep, where they could talk privately. Too many eyes were on him. “Where are the Others now?” he demanded. “Where did they retreat to?”

“To Hardhome,” she replied simply.

His frown only deepened.

Jon stayed the night at the keep at Eastwatch, although Ghost never left his side. Sonagon roosted uneasily in the yards outside, while a flock of believers surrounded the castle. Jon questioned Torvi on absolutely everything her sister had seen in the water, and the answers she gave only made him more and more uneasy.

“How many ships do you still have?” he demanded eventually, during the dead of night. The cold air outside was still but the flames were whispering around him. Jon had taken off his furs, but he kept Dark Sister close to hand.

“Very few. Only the ones that we managed to repair.”

“Prepare the largest ship we have,” Jon ordered. “We set sail at first light, Sonagon will escort.”

He slept for maybe an hour at most. The rest of the night was spent making preparations, counting heads and discussing options.

By the first shimmer of morn, Jon was already forcing his sore and battered body into motion. He was climbing onto his dragon again before the sun had even properly risen. Sonagon growled with agitation; the dragon was hungry too, but there was nothing for it to eat, not even corpses.

With a single beat of powerful wings, the air whooshed as the dragon took flight. As the sun rose over the east, the mountains of Skagos loomed on the horizon’s edge. Ghost howled as Jon flew away yet again, but Sonagon circled low around the Wall.

He would see Ghost again soon, he knew. The direwolf would come by sea, along with all the best
of the fighting men.

Down below, Jon heard the commotion as the warband gathered on the castle’s pier. About five dozen fighting men, all of them armed to the teeth with axes and spears. Torvi Icetooth captained the very last seaworthy vessel as it took to the water. It was a striped galley with its figurehead crudely recarved into jagged demon teeth. Once, the ship might have been painted yellow and purple, but now the paint was flecking off and the hull creaked like something from a ship’s graveyard.

Still, it was seaworthy, and the free folk had captained worse. He could see Torvi’s band stocking up the galley’s deck with arrows and harpoons, and every man on the ship was tense with fear.

From the sky, Jon watched his two Dragonguard bring Ghost with them on the ship. The direwolf had grown surprisingly comfortable among the men, and the black-haired mute helped urge the wolf on to the deck.

There was a good south-westerly wind blowing over the bay as they set forth, and the galley chopped through the waters. Jon led the way atop Sonagon, occasionally circling round to watch the black waters. As the ship broke through the swell of the waves, Jon saw a white fin circling the vessel.

The icebergs were thick in the water, and occasionally Jon heard crackling as the ship had to force its way through the ice.

The great expanse of the north stretched outwards before him. The coasts and the shallows were smothered white, but the waters of the Shivering Sea had never seemed so black. The ice was creeping outwards, Jon realised. In some places he saw ice stretching as far as a mile offshore, further north along the coast.

Even the northern ocean was starting to freeze, he realised, as Sonagon soared over the Wall with long, powerful flaps.

_Slowly now,_ Jon urged to the dragon. They had to be careful not to go too far ahead. _We must search, search for the dead._

The white walkers were out there somewhere, and they needed to find out where and how many.

Sonagon flew a long and slow arc over the Bay of Seals, and eventually the mainland was reduced to a sliver on the western horizon. He saw the mountains of Skagos come into focus, and then the jagged coasts. The rocks jutting upwards from the waters looked like stone teeth.

The wind hissed around him as the dragon flew over the coasts of Skagos and then northwards towards the isle of Skane. An icy sea mist was blowing over the island, so thick that Jon couldn’t see, but the dragon’s eyes had no issue in making out of the land below.

Jon closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and melded himself deeper into the warg-sense. He couldn’t see anything of the Others, but the dead were just as cold as the black waters and black beaches of Skagos, and Sonagon’s sight was poor at picking them out, no better than a hawk’s. _Lower,_ he urged the dragon.

Behind them, the galley crept through the waves in sluggish motion. The dragon flew so much faster than the ship, but Jon took care to circle around often. Jon could feel the progress of the vessel through Ghost. If the ship came under attack, Sonagon would be the only chance the men had.
The dragon flew as low as Jon dared, searching the battlefields. He didn’t see any wights, but there were signs of battle everywhere. There were broken ships washing up against the rocks, and flotsam sweeping over the desolate beaches. There was wreckage bobbing along with the ice in the ocean. As he flew inland, he saw abandoned settlements on the isle without any trace of life. There were small fishing huts of thatch and packed earth scattered across the coast, each one as still as the grave.

Across one beach, he even saw tracks through the sand and rocks leading up the cliffs. A trail of long, dragged footsteps coming out of the cold ocean.

*Dead things in the water,* Jon thought darkly.

Sonagon flew outwards, searching for life. The smell of old ash and smoke reached him, and the dragon followed. Jon saw an old earth and timber keep that must have been Driftwood Hall, but it had been burnt down. The fort was blackened in the spots not already smothered by white snow, it stunk of ash and charred wood. The surrounding villages on Skagos were all dead. Sonagon could see only shades of blue; all the heat of life had been snuffed out from the coasts.

Jon could only stare at the devastation. *The Others are expanding. Their campaign is only growing.*

The only signs of life were further inland, towards the mountains of Skagos. He saw a hustle of bodies over an old earthen fort, a slum of men and women taking shelter around the keep. The fort of Deep Down, Jon guessed, as Sonagon flapped closer. Upon sighting the dragon, Jon heard horns blowing from the keep and men panicking. Sonagon circled, and the stoneborn below scattered and screamed. A few of them fired arrows, but the shafts never even came close. Sonagon was hungry enough to want to engage, but Jon managed to pull the dragon back.

On the water, the galley from Eastwatch was halfway across the strait. Jon circled back, just to search the area for threats.

Then, Sonagon flew north towards the peninsula, towards Hardhome.

He knew this coast; he and Sonagon had flown over it many times before. And yet now the landscape looked so different caught in the throes of winter.

The first things Jon saw were the towers and defences he had spent so long maintaining. The stakewall around the settlement was still intact, and there were still rough wooden watchtowers pointing out from the cliffs. Sonagon sensed movement from the harbour, and for half a moment Jon thought that maybe they had been wrong – that maybe Hardhome had resisted after all.

But then Sonagon flew closer, and all the dragon smelled was death.

In the waters below, there was movement. In the shallows, there were black shapes lurking under the waves. Jon thought they might have been sardines or salmon, but the way they moved… he had never seen fish swimming in formation before.

Shoals of unnatural fish were swimming around the cape.

The Others were gathering their wights at Hardhome. They were raising as many dead as possible, on land and in the sea.

Jon didn’t dare attack – it was too dangerous to test the Other’s forces alone – but he circled in the sky and approached with caution. The dragon crept closer and closer, until finally he saw black shapes like insects scattering over the snow and cliffs.
There were thousands, hundreds of thousands.

The settlement at Hardhome – the wooden huts, the caves, the makeshift docks and the crude fortifications, the Others had stolen it all for themselves.

There was movement towards the coast. Why were they moving? The dead didn’t move without purpose. Were they building something? There were no vessels on the ocean that Jon could see.

And then Sonagon flapped over the cliffs and came into view from the cape. Even despite the wind, Jon heard a desperate scream break through the whooshing air.

The sound caused a shiver down his spine. The dead didn’t scream.

The dragon saw flecks of heat by the tunnels, grouped by the cliffside. Warm bodies surrounded by nothing but cold.

At first, he thought they might be survivors. They were screaming at the sight of the dragon. He saw them trying to run, but cold figures instantly pounced on them.

Jon’s hands clenched. Sonagon felt his rage and growled too. Slaves. The Others had taken slaves, Jon realised. There were living slaves in cages by the crags, guarded by dead men. The Others had taken captives and forced them into the howling caves of Hardhome.

At the sight of the dragon, the slaves were screaming and falling to their knees. Begging for him to save them.

All around them, the cape was filled with more dead bodies than Jon could count. It was difficult to even sense them; most stood still, more were buried by snow, and the dead blurred into the surroundings through Sonagon’s eyes. An entire line of corpses stood as sentinels upon the cliffs. It was only when they moved that he could make them out.

Sonagon flapped further inland, crossing over the cape. Suddenly there was movement everywhere below him. Beneath him, Hardhome was stirring like a hornet’s nest with the dragon’s approach. The stench was overpowering.

How many? Jon wondered. A few hundred slaves, and a few hundred thousand of the dead? It was hard to tell how many more living people could be in the winding cliffs. Caves that the free folk had carved as shelter were now being used as cages.

I can’t save them, Jon knew. It would be foolish to even try – even the dragon would be at risk attacking the Others where they were most fortified.

But what are the Others doing with slaves? Why do they even need living men?

The Others had taken Hardhome as their own camp. Mustering their forces, raising them and arming them. They needed living men to do what their wights could not; somebody needed to craft weapons and arrows for the dead, and the wights just didn’t have the skill for that type of work.

They are preparing for invasion.

Beneath him, the army of the dead stretched across the snow and rocks.

Then, Jon saw black shapes in the shallow harbour at Hardhome, looming under the water. At first, he thought that they were rocks.
Then, a rock moved. It shuddered, and rose towards the surface, breaking through the waves and crested the surface. All the dragon sensed was the rank stench of rot and salt, but Jon saw swollen raw flesh and protruding bone.

There were more of them. Jon saw dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of black shadows in the water.

Beneath him, the Others were already reacting to his approach. Sonagon stayed high in the sky, but down below the dead were taking formation. Jon’s gaze was drawn to the black shapes in the ocean, each one causing a tremendous swell as it rose.

The smallest seemed about thirty feet from head to tail, and the largest was four times that size.

At first, Jon thought of the wyrms, but these were different shapes. The wyrms had been elongated and serpentine, while these creatures were thick and stout.

He saw a finned tail rise from the waves, before it descended again. The shapes were moving out to sea.

Sonagon was about to follow when a rustling sounded below him, a wispy line of smoke breaking into the pallid sky. Rotting wings were hissing towards the dragon.

Jon could have cursed. Undead birds. Everything from swallows to eagles to owls. They probably couldn’t hurt the dragon, but there were lots of them, and they could most certainly hurt him.

Now was not the time to fight, he decided. He had come here to scout, not to attack. The Others were entrenched and Sonagon was at a disadvantage. Jon had wanted to know what the white walkers were doing at Hardhome, and now he had.

Jon took a deep breath, and willed Sonagon to turn around.

Still, a swarm of birds came too close, and the dragon scorched their little bodies with a sharp breath of icefire. A rain of tattered corpses fell from the sky.

The rest of the wispy cloud of birds followed them over the cliffs, but they didn’t chase the dragon out to sea.

Flying out over the water, Jon could still sense those black shapes moving under the waves. Occasionally one of them would crest, and he saw a crown of jagged bones and discoloured flesh. Sonagon wanted to fight, to kill, but Jon veered the dragon away.

They are ships, he thought breathlessly, but they were like no ships he had ever seen before. They had been stationed at Hardhome like a fleet at port, but then they fled to open before the dragon. They were bone ships without sails or oars.

The dragon flew straight to the north-western coast of Skagos, where he saw the galley dock onto the stony beach. He felt Ghost on the ground, pacing frantically. Jon was gasping for breath, both from the cold and the sight of Hardhome. The memory of all those cold shadows…

Sonagon landed on the hard, black beach with an immense crunch of rocks, just as the wildlings were dropping off Arago Stane. They gave the stoneborn a pig’s bladder of supplies and told him to run for Kingshouse. The Skagosi gave one final hateful glare, before running off at spearpoint.

Jon’s gaze was dark as he clambered down Sonagon’s neck. His legs were so weary and cramped from riding the dragon so long that he botched dismounting and toppled backwards straight onto his behind on the beach.
Two men rushed to help him, but Jon brushed them away with a grimace. He grunted as he pulled himself up, but his gaze was focused on Torvi Icetooth. “Did you see those things?” he demanded.

She nodded. “My sister did.”

He looked out to sea. He couldn’t see them now, but he knew they were there. Numerous black shapes, hidden under the water.

With a brief roar, Sonagon flapped into the sky without him. The dragon began prowling over the waves and growling, occasionally spitting bursts of icefire. But it was useless – the ships of bone and flesh had already disappeared from view.

Jon felt the sinking feeling in his gut, he knew it as soon as he asked…

“What are they?”

“They’re ships,” she replied. “But once they were whales.”

Whales. That was how the Others were killing fish. They had expanded into the ocean – they were raising fish by the bucket load. First, they kill one fish, they raise it and release it – then that fish kills another and drags its body back to Hardhome. All of those bodies in the water, creating more and more corpses and expanding ever outwards like a plague…

The largest were the skeletal bodies of whales, hunted down and hollowed out. Mutilated creatures with their skin and organs removed, large enough to carry more of the Other’s soldiers. That was what they were doing at Hardhome.

The Others didn’t care for wood or metal. There were only two resources that the white walkers used to construct anything; death and ice.

The Others were building their navy out of corpses. A fleet of bone ships.

Next to him, Dark Gerrick glanced between Jon and Torvi, trying to measure their expressions. Ghost was growling as he sniffed the ocean. The silence stretched outwards.

“What the fuck does that mean?” the man demanded.

Jon’s jaw clenched, but he didn’t reply straight away. Through his dragon sense, he saw them again. He saw the swells in the water, he saw them creeping under the black water.

Sonagon breathed downwards over the ocean in a shower of ice, but the creatures were already escaping down into the depths. The dragon might have dived down after them, but Jon warned the dragon not to swim in these waters.

The white walkers were already preparing for their next assault.

“It means that the next invasion will come from the sea.”

---

**The White Wolf**

Paws loped over barren rocks, as the direwolf bounded through the frosted crags.

It was a vicious landscape, bare and brown, devoid of greenery. The layers of the land were slanted
and haphazard, creased and folded, like the earth itself had been tilted on the wrong side. It felt like
the ground had been cleaved apart, then crudely forced together. Spiny knives of rock ran over the
hills, and cliffs as sharp as swords protruded from the mountains.

It was a land of ice and rock, illuminated by a bulbous half-moon lingering over the jagged snow-
coated hills.

Red eyes gleamed through the darkness, nostrils sniffing this unfamiliar place. The wolf took a
deep breath of fresh, wild air drifting off from the sea. It was a harsh, unfamiliar land – only black
mosses and thorny weeds grew underfoot between the pebbles and snow. The trees were stunted
and wind-battered things, barely bigger than saplings, scattered sparsely across the land. Only the
gnarliest and most weathered soldier pines and black spruces managed to take root between the
earthen crevices.

The stench of dead things wafted everywhere.

In the distance, he heard men moving, shouting. There was a frenzy by the coastline, the sound of
hacking and chopping. Dead creatures coated in seaweed with barnacles sticking to their skin,
staggering up the cliffs. They were foul things, each one putrid with rot and salt as they crawled
out from the waves. The very smell caused the wolf’s haunches to tense, white hair standing on
end.

Across the frozen water, there was a flash of bright light under the half-moon, and of immense
white wings flapping.

The wolf’s bonded brother was in the sky, he knew. His brother was flying on the monster, soaring
over the coastline and spitting ice down at the beaches.

The battle was all along the isle’s coasts, and slowly oozing inwards. The wolf saw a group of men
and women, encamped on a hilltop ringed by spears and torches, while all the dead things
staggered upwards from the black beach. The cold, moving corpses were dripping wet and swollen
with seawater, so deformed they barely looked like men.

The wolf wanted nothing to do with such a fight. It avoided the dead things wherever possible. The
direwolf was large and fierce enough to tear down one or two of the creatures, but against a horde?
Tooth and claws were poor weapons against the dead. This was a battle for men with axes and
torches, or for dragons with wings and icy breath.

Instead, the white wolf roamed outwards, scouting over the rocks. The wolf paced near the rocks
of the beach, and then he heard the many pattering of legs through the shallows. Sloshing sea ice
crackled and broke, and dead shapes emerged from the black water.

In the poor light, at first they looked like rocks. Moving rocks. They were scuttling upwards from
the sea.

The wolf sat on his haunches atop the hill, staring at the scene under the moonlight. The largest of
them were as big as boulders, the smallest were the size of pebbles. Their pocked shells were
coated in seaweed and barnacles, and they stank of salty rot. Their joints crackled stiffly with every
jagged movement.

As they scuttled, the wolf saw a multitude of pale blue eyes, and clicking claws.

The wolf stared downwards at the shoal of monstrous crabs scuttling from the waves. The direwolf
watched for only an instant, before turning and sprinting away as fast as it could.
Somewhere behind him, he sensed the dragon swooping low, scorching the entire beach into blazing white ice. The crabs made a bone-clenching shriek as they died.

*Run, Ghost,* his bonded brother willed. *Get away from the coast, just avoid them.*

The wolf was already fleeing, loping over the dunes and running inland. He could feel his brother’s anxiety, the unease that lingered through the night. The dead things had followed them – his brother’s pack had landed on the isle as darkness fell, and the dead had come not long after. The direwolf kept on running until it was a safe distance from the ocean, but the smell still lingered everywhere.

The stink of the dead was nearly overpowering, but then keen nostrils picked up a different scent hovering on the cold wind. The smell of something else fleeing the dead.

Another hunter, it knew. It could tell instinctively by the subtle scents in the air. The wolf searched, and then it found the site of an old kill. A dead thing shaped like a man had strayed too close, and a predator had ripped it apart. Every ounce of meat was gone, even the bones had been cracked open and the marrow lapped out.

The white wolf’s nose twiched. A beast had torn through the creature with great viciousness. This was another wolf’s territory.

Not long later, it found pawprints over the hard snow, and the wolf followed. He darted into a snowbound valley, and the smell was getting clearer. Powerful paws bounded up a stony ridge, and then he saw it.

There was a black wolf prowling on the canyon, overlooking the battle that spread across the dunes.

It didn’t smell his approach. The black wolf was too distracted by the dead, while the white wolf moved too quietly.

It was a large wolf, every bit the white wolf’s equal. Its fur was pitch black like oil, and its eyes shone dark green in the night. The smell of dried blood lingered around it, of a recent kill still on its fur. A hare, most like.

Then, snow crunched under paws, and the black wolf flinched. The two direwolves turned to stare straight at each other.

Their eyes met, burning red against dark green. Nostrils sniffed the cold air.

The scent was familiar, even despite how long it had been. They had known each other as pups. The white wolf still remembered the days living in the castle beside each other, of rolling around in the stables and being fed from cloths dripping milk.

*Brother,* the white wolf knew. He raised his tail and stepped forward.

Then the black wolf’s jaws parted, baring teeth. A vicious growl rumbled from the black wolf’s throat, it spun around, poised. Frozen blood clung to its mane.

The white wolf recognised him, but the black wolf saw only an intruder in its territory. A challenger.

*I am not a challenger,* the white wolf’s posture said, but the other direwolf didn’t relax. The white wolf approached carefully, but the black one was aggressive.
As it kept baring its fangs, the white wolf started to growl too. Both their hackles raised.

Perhaps both wolves were waiting for the other to back down, but neither did. Neither of them would submit, they both considered themselves to be the dominant.

The two wolves circled each other, claws sliding over the frost and snow. They were both growling, pacing with teeth bared and claws drawn. Sizing the other wolf up.

Once, the white wolf had been the runt of the litter, but time had made him large and vicious. The white wolf was the taller and longer of the two now, while the black one was broader at the shoulder, thick and stocky. The black wolf was feral – it had hunted in these lands, it had grown rough and fierce.

It had been too long since the white wolf hunted for himself. The white wolf had grown too used to the men feeding it. It had been a long time since he had faced a challenge for dominance.

All around them, the night writhed.

The two direwolves met in an instant, in a flurry of claws and a snapping of teeth. Black against white.

The clash was as furious as it was sudden. They both pounced as one.

Claws scraped across the white wolf’s hide, the black wolf’s teeth tried to clamp around its neck. The white wolf shook it off, leaping at the beast.

Too feral, too overeager. The white wolf was the more reserved. The black wolf was snapping and clawing, but the white wolf lingered backwards, waiting for the moment…

They parted backwards, and growled as they spun. The black wolf barked and yelped, but the white was quiet and vicious. Then, as sudden as the last, the wolves collided again.

They wrestled over the ice and rocks, their claws scrambling against each other. After the first clash the white one had been scratched, but in the second clash its teeth mauled at the black wolf’s rump. The beast yelped, but tried to twist, until they were rolling over each other. Thud – their bodies crashed against a jutting rock, but the white wolf was the first on its feet. The white wolf took the leverage and kicked the black wolf onto its back.

Its teeth snapped at the black wolf’s rear leg, gripping a hold tightly and dragging it backwards. The black wolf yowled in pain, but it still didn’t stop thrashing.

Yield, the white wolf ordered with a growl. The black wolf didn’t reply, it only snarled.

The black brother was wounded, limping, but it went berserk with rage. Teeth snapped ferociously, so fast the white wolf had to dart backwards.

Then, the white wolf’s paw clawed over its snout. Blood hissed over snow.

Yield!

Still, the black brother attacked. It was angry, more furious than any beast the white wolf had ever known.

It nearly caught him off-guard, but then the white wolf grabbed it by the hackles and dragged it down, like a deer. If it had been prey, the wolf’s teeth would have ripped out its jugular and torn
The black wolf cried in pain. The white wolf was mere moments away from tearing out its throat, when suddenly he saw it.

In those green eyes, he saw a young child. A boy, scared and angry.

The wolves were both panting, both bloodied. The white wolf felt his bonded brother staring through his own eyes.

Brother, his bonded brother thought. Rickon.

The white wolf didn’t slacken the grip of his jaws as he pinned his brother down, but he didn’t bite deeper either. Through its eyes, he saw the young boy thrashing and screaming.

Don’t hurt him, his bond brother asked of him. Don’t hurt Shaggydog.

The white wolf obeyed. He released his jaws from the black wolf’s throat.

In an instant, the other wolf scrambled to its feet. The black wolf turned and ran, sprinting over the plains. There was a stagger in its gait, limping as it scurried away.

The white wolf sprinted after it. The black wolf was running towards its other half, and the white wolf followed.

Behind them, on the coast, he felt the dragon change direction. Both wolves were running and the dragon followed in the distance.

The dragon roared like a crack of thunder, sweeping low. The dragon would often roar before a hunt, the wolf had noticed, to terrify its prey into running. Perhaps it was instinctual, or perhaps the dragon just enjoyed the chase.

The black wolf was running east, towards a peninsula on the coast. There, nestled into the cliffs, the smell of smoke and woodstock wafted over the dunes.

The fort stunk of earth and smoke. It was a crude structure sheltered by piles of boulders forming barriers, with the haphazard look of past rockslides. It was large and long, surrounded by rings of stakewalls and mounds of dirt and rock, but with no stone walls. At its very centre nestled a long timber hall, and few other large buildings. The squat buildings all had had only a single level, but they were long and low, surrounded by trenches buried in the mud. The whole keep was sunk into the ground – like a castle that had been half-buried into mud.

The wolf saw the mouths of grease-stained chimneys, sprouting straight out of the hillside and spewing smoke into the cold air. There was a sprawling an encampment of tents, tanner’s stations, firepits and watchtowers, all built around the main keep, sheltered by scattered wooden towers poking from around the fort.

It wasn’t the largest fort that the wolf had ever seen, and far from the grandest, but it looked hardy and well-fortified. A fort that had seen many battles.

The keep was so old that black and green lichen was crawling over the weathered stones, like they were slowly being absorbed back into the landscape. Above the wooden shieldhall, a great green lobster was painted onto the thatch roof.

Kingshouse, his brother thought. The name was meaningless to a wolf, but it meant something to
his human brother. The wolf panned its vision to take in the castle’s details, knowing that his brother was watching.

The black wolf was sprinting straight towards the fort. There were no gates or high walls, but it would still be suicide trying to charge over the rows and rows of trenches, embankments and spiked palisades. The wolf saw men with bows and spears waiting for them between the defences, dark figures almost invisible in the earth.

Soon, the white wolf saw movement. There was a group of men over the hills, another pack of two-legs clutching axes and spears. The white wolf heard hooves, and the scent of strange beasts. There were four-legged creatures galloping over the rocks like goats, each one bearing riders carrying halberds.

The four-legged creatures were bulky and powerful, larger than a direwolf. They were shorter than the other four-legs that men often rode, but they were much thicker and stouter. From their mount’s skulls, a single horn curved outwards like a sword. From the hill, the white wolf watched as the black wolf scurried behind them and kept running into the main keep proper.

His black brother had found a new pack, it seemed.

There were four of those mounted one-horns, but they moved swiftly and surely over the uneven rocks. More like goats than horses. They moved like creatures trained for battle, keeping their horns low and ready to charge.

The white wolf’s own other half knew as well. His bonded brother was watching everything from the wolf’s own eyes. In the distant sky, the white dragon roared again.

The white wolf couldn’t chase his brother any further, instead he had to lope away from the one-horned creatures. Those goat-like things looked fearsome and dangerous, being ridden by men clutching spears. The mounts were armoured – large leather hides draped across their bodies, making them seem even more bulky and formidable.

There were villages and settlements around the cliffs of the fort, but they were all deserted. There were rough harbours and fishing houses by the beach, but those buildings were abandoned and the ships were wrecked.

In the black of the night, the wolf saw a line of bodies snaking up the road, and towards the mountain valleys.

_Fleeing_, the wolf realised, _they are fleeing from the dead._

Like any predator, the dead things were hunting the herd of the living while it was vulnerable.

Over the hills and the fort, the black wolf howled.

There were half a hundred men on foot following the refugees up the road, all of them short and hairy with a queer smell to them. They smelt distinctly different to the other men the wolf had known. It was more earthy, sharp like flint. Each of these stony men looked broader too – they seemed twice as broad across the shoulders than most men.

They wore rock as armour, the wolf realised. The soldiers were each clad in a bulky cascade of leather pouches stuffed with rubble, while a few wore threaded armour of stone sheets bound in hemp. It looked like there was a rock shell around every man, as if each one of them was packed in stone.
All through the night, the battle raged. The dead were everywhere, hunting anything that moved.

The way that the dead things moved reminded the wolf of the termite hills he had once seen – so many insects spilling outwards, each moving seemingly randomly, but there was a purpose to them. The dead things were drones following higher orders.

By the coast, the dragon was burning through scores of dead, but the night was dark and the dragon could not be everywhere. The dead things were still slipping through from the water and onto the land.

The fighting was dispersed, muted sounds of battle ringing out over the hills.

The wolf crept closer to see the column of fleeing humans – females and pups – as they ran towards the mountains. They were hiding in caves that littered the pass, trying to take refuge from the night. The soldiers and the mounted one-horns were trying to hold the dead things back, but they were still pushing through.

The dead were targeting the weak and the defenceless, while avoiding the fighting men.

The sound of wailing babes echoed over the canyons. They all stank of fear.

The wolf knew these tactics. A wolf pack would use similar methods against a herd of elk. The dead things weren’t trying to overwhelm the living, they were trying to weaken them. They were targeting the most vulnerable, to chip the herd down piece by piece. These were continuous attacks, wearing them down and draining their fight.

And it was working. Already the coasts were littered with abandoned settlements, and the people were fleeing either to the fort of Kingshouse or to the mountain caves.

All around the earthen fort, smoke billowed in the night. There was a barricade of bonfires and torches surrounding the wooden structure, but the dead things were stalking the edges. They are predators, the wolf knew. Predators to all life.

The white wolf lurked in the darkness, staying away from the fighting, watching it all in silence.

Finally, as a pale dawn began to creep upwards over the horizon, the dead started to wither away.

The tide of the fighting changed. The dead creatures were sinking back towards the coast and into the waves, dragging with them the bodies of their prey. They had taken their meat in their night and now they were retreating to their lairs.

In the black, half-frozen ocean, huge shapes stirred under the waves.

It was a grim and cold morning as the weak sun rose.

Finally, the men in the stone roads started to pull back, retreating on sluggish feet towards their fort. The white wolf saw them trekking over the plains, stinking of sweat and fatigue.

The white dragon circled in the sky, a huge shape looming in the faint rays of morn. The sunlight could barely break through the clouds.

Then, the wolf felt his human brother approaching. He came over the horizon, followed by a mustering of humans with spears. The wolf recognised their smell; they were the humans that had travelled with it by boat.
Both camps of men had spent the entire night fighting off the dead things, and it was only in the first light of morn that their attention turned towards each other.

The wolf saw figures running. Short, stout men with clad in hide and stone.

Horns were blowing from the fort, alarms were raising. The stocky men looked panicked as they gazed up at the sky. The wolf heard a voice from the mounds echoing over the dunes.

“Wildlings!” a man boomed. “Wildli–”

The cry was drowned out by the beating of the dragon’s wings. Men were screaming, shouting as the dragon soared above them.

The dragon roared as it dropped downwards. The whole earth trembled. Two earthen watchtowers were demolished with a single swipe of the dragon’s tail. The air filled with white mist, and then a large chunk of the palisades blazed in dragonfire.

That was a warning shot, sent deliberately wide to scatter them. Their fort had survived the dead, but it was useless against a dragon.

The humans were panting for breath as they charged down the dunes, fumbling through the weeds with spears in hand, swords and chainmail clanging.

A stone-tipped spear whizzed through the air again, but the dragon was already circling back around.

A wildling stepped forward from the group on the road, bellowing words to the men holed up in their keep. An uneasy silence spread over the fort as every eye stared upwards in fatigued horror.

Eventually, after a long pause and plenty of muted panic from within the fort, the wolf saw something happen. There were short and grimy men with flinty axes and stone armour funnelling out of the fort. They were all broad shouldered and with far more hair than normal men, clad in so many layers of bulky armour that they appeared almost round. They were headed towards the raid party of wildlings.

The wolf saw them; two different packs meeting on the craggy field. They huddled in formation, back to back, as the dragon circled above them.

The wolf smelled fear. Something about that fear reminded the white wolf of prey that wanted to run but knew it wouldn’t escape. The men knew they were defenceless in their fort, so they were walking out to meet the intruders on the road, under the light of the weak noon sun.

The white wolf had no delusions; the dragon was the ultimate predator, not the direwolf.

The packs were facing off against each other on the rough road; leather, hide and spear against stone and axe. Those one-horned mounts shimmied, but they didn’t charge. Neither came close to the other, there was over a hundred yards between them.

And then the dragon dropped from the sky with a huge crunch, sending up a rain of rubble as it landed.

The white wolf had no fear of the dragon, but the roar was so loud that every hare for miles would have scattered. Testing them, the wolf thought, as the lines of stony men rippled and wavered, but didn’t break.
The humans were facing off against each other, huddling in a tight group while the dragon stirred and paced with irritation. With every lurching step, the ground quaked. The fear was so thick in the air.

The white wolf knew that scores of females and pups were hiding in the fort behind them. The fighting men were standing in formation, trying to protect their fort.

The dragon roared, delivering a challenge.

Finally, after what felt like an age, the four one-horns trotted forward. Four riders were approaching the dragon, all wearing threaded armour of grey stone plates, and then they were followed by the black wolf sulking at their rear.

Something was happening, a meeting of alphas. The white wolf lingered, watching from a safe distance.

Ghost, come to me, the wolf’s bonded brother asked suddenly. Come closer, I need your nose.

Obediently, the white wolf broke from his hiding place atop the hills. He loped down the plains, paws crunching over frost.

He saw his bonded brother standing on the dragon’s head, staring down over the road of snow and mud. The white wolf wanted to be closer to its other half.

“Lord Magnar, I presume?” his bonded brother called, voice loud enough to reach the ground even from the huge dragon’s head. It was looking down upon the group of four one-horns.

The reply was a guttural boom that the wolf could not understand, but his brother frowned. “Look around you, lord,” his brother replied harshly, white hair rustling in the winds. “I am not your enemy.”

The wolf crept closer, keeping behind the dragon’s bulk. On the other side of the dragon, the four one-horns were snorting and neighing, frightened before the dragon. Their riders had to wrestle to push them closer.

“Say that to my kin killed by your savages,” a hoarse, barely decipherable voice growled. “My ancestors will eat your bones, Snow, for unleashing this plague upon us.”

The wolf saw them. Four riders, all of them rough figures clad in stone armour. They were all hairy and unkempt, they stank of sweat, fish and beast. They were all staring up at the dragonrider, their eyes wide, their faces twisted.

They tried to hold themselves strong, but the wolf could still smell the fear wafting off them.

It was the man at the front that was doing the talking – he was a heavily bearded man, his beard so long it reached his waist, and with hair on his arms and hands so thick it was almost fur. He was short-statured, but extremely fat and stocky, barrel-chested with bow legs. The man bore a lobster on his stone breastplate, painted as green as lichen.

The wolf snuck closer still, close enough to make out his features. He had a thick brow, a bloated red face, and a necklace of teeth around his neck. They looked like human teeth. Then, a shiver passed down the wolf’s spine as he made out the eyes – deep, dark brown eyes.

The wolf knew it instinctively; this man was a skinchanger too.
Above him, the dragon began to snarl. His brother had to calm the beast, muttering quiet reassurances.

There was an uneasy silence as the four one-horns trotted closer.

“Look around you, Lord Magnar,” the wolf’s brother shouted. “Your villages are desolate, your ships are wrecked and your people hide in caves. It was not my army that did that – it is the dead that haunt your lands.”

“Monsters that have followed you.” The man’s voice was foul. “You and your wildlings brought those things to our shores.”

“Fool.” The dragon’s head snaked closer, long neck outstretching. The dragon might have swallowed them all, riders and mounts together. “If I wanted you dead, I would not be talking right now. I come to offer an alliance, Lord Magnar.”

The wolf hovered closer still, nostrils sniffing the cold air, and then it caught another scent. It was a different scent from the distinctive pang of the stoneborn. The wolf’s attention turned towards the one-horn at the rear of the four, the one being sheltered from view by the other three riders. There were more figures upon it, it noticed.

Every other one-horn carried only a single rider, but there were three bodies riding that mount. Behind the armoured rider, there was a woman sitting on the rear of the saddle, and a child was cradled in her lap.

The black wolf was keeping close to that mount, the wolf noticed. They were all surrounding the child.

The child was young, barely a pup, with dark hair and bright blue eyes. The child’s eyes were wide and staring, flickering between the dragon and the white wolf’s brother. His fear was wafting in the air, raw and pungent. Ghost sniffed again, and started to recognise the child’s scent.

The dragon followed the white wolf’s gaze. As soon as the wolf smelled him, his human brother knew it too.

“Rickon,” he called, pointing at the one-horn at the rear.

The child squirmed. The hairy man seemed to fluster. “His name ain’t Rickon.” The voice was gruff and throaty. “He is Stiv Magnar. My son.”

“He is Rickon Stark,” his brother replied with a snort, “and I would return him to Winterfell.”

“You think to steal my boy?”

The dragon stirred, breathing a cloud of mist. The child had his head buried in the woman’s furs, her arms wrapped tightly around him.

“I hoped we could be reasonable, Lord Magnar. I have no desire to fight.” His brother’s voice was loud and clear, but he didn’t descend from the dragon. “I swear to protect him. But this place isn’t safe for him, I will take him to Winterfell.”

“That den of wolves?” The man’s voice was foul. “Invaders, scum and mainlanders.”

“Look around you,” his brother challenged. “The dead are in your waters.”
“Skagos will survive as it always has. *Your* sort ain’t welcome here.”

The wolf could smell the hostility in the air. They were scared, but that fear didn’t break them. It made them straighten their backs, it made them jumpy. His brother’s eyes narrowed, and the wolf kept low to the ground, poised ready for a fight.

“This does not have to be a conflict between us, Lord Magnar,” he said finally. “I invite you to come to Winterfell, I offer you a seat on the Winter Court. You have done Rickon a kindness, I would repay that.”

“His name ain’t Rickon!” the man snapped. “You think I would go with you savages and monsters?”

“Come to the capital, represent your people. Together Stark and Magnar might find a new partnership. Winterfell is your *ally*.” His brother grimaced, let out a breath. “This is the Long Night, my lord. Have you not seen the dead dragging your people’s corpses into the water? All men must stand together against the cold.”

“Fuck you.” He spat on the ground. “And fuck the Starks. Skagos breaks to no one.”

“You are sworn to Winterfell, my lord.”

He shook his head. “Never. You lot waged war against us, but we never bent. Never in a thousand years has a Stark took tithe or blood price from Skagos.” He raised his voice louder. “This is my son now – I claimed him before the Old Gods, he took the rite and he became my blood. I will not surrender my boy.”

The wolf noticed how the bearded man was creeping closer, carefully urging his one-horn closer and closer towards the dragon.

“The dead are your enemy, not me.”

“From where I’m looking,” the fat, bearded man snapped, glaring up at the dragon, “you’re just as much of a monster as those rotten things.”

The wolf could feel his brother’s patience running low. His voice turned cold. His human half was gradually losing his temper.

“Look around. Consider your position.”

On the field, the stoneborn outnumbered the wildlings; there were near two hundred armoured men surrounding the fort, against the fifty men that had come by boat. Still, that hardly mattered at all while the dragon stood between them. There were two hundred of them, but the dragon would be able to slaughter them all in a single breath.

A unicorn might be a tasty morsel for the dragon.

The white wolf took care not to step too close. Any creature with any sense kept its distance from the dragon. Apparently, the bearded man had no sense, though – he was creeping closer and closer.

“Only a fool makes more enemies when you are already facing the greatest, Lord Magnar,” his brother continued. “The white walkers are out there, you have already suffered at their hands. We both have. I offer an alliance against *them*. Are you really so foolish to think me the greater threat?”

“You are *all* threats,” the other man growled. “None are welcome on Skagos. We will handle our
own land.”

His brother paused, jaw clenching. He seemed to reach a decision. “Very well. If that is your will,” he said finally. “Then give me Rickon Stark and I will leave.”

The man’s eyes bulged. “Steal my son?”

“I will take my brother home. His family – his real family – is waiting for him. That is not negotiable.”

The crowd of men rippled. The wolf saw weapons being drawn, arrows tensing. It looked like the child was snivelling, weeping into the woman’s shoulder.

The dragon took another step forward, and the one-horns nearly reared in panic. They were thrashing, struggling against their rider’s reigns.

“If any harm comes to that child,” his brother warned, loudly, “then I will destroy Skagos. All of it. I will destroy every keep, every village, and every house. I will wipe your people out of history from now and evermore. You will surrender him now or I swear by the Old Gods that you will all suffer for it.”

They were rippling, shaking with fear but ready for battle. The bearded man started trembling, his nostrils flaring. His face was reddening, filling with rage. “You are a fool, Bjarg Magnar,” the dragonrider shouted downwards. “I offer you protection and you choose lunacy?”

“You offer death!”

His brother paused, and then turned to the huddle of stony men behind the four riders. His voice rose, and cut through the air. “If any of you have any sense,” he boomed, “you will abandon your lord’s folly. I will spare any man who surrenders. You have families on this isle, I offer a chance to save them from the Others.” He focused on the child, and then on the woman holding him. “Osha, is it? I will protect Rickon, and that means removing him from this isle. If you care for his safety – and your own – come to me.”

The woman didn’t reply, but she was holding onto Rickon tightly, and stunk of nerves. The other riders stuck to a close formation around her, all of them struggling to control their panicking mounts.

The dragon loomed, and the wolf could smell the hesitation. Behind them, the wildlings were gripping weapons too.

“You dare?” the bearded man choked.

“If you will not see sense, then we are done talking.”

“Aye.” The man grit his teeth, hands tightening around his stone axe. “We are.”

Without warning, the man snapped.

He threw his weapon upwards, and his brother ducked backwards. The throw was far too weak; the crude stone axe clattered harmlessly off the dragon’s jaw. The dragon’s teeth parted, but the man was already shoving his one-horn into a charge. Its horn lowered, its hooves clattering.

He was roaring, as if he could single-handedly charge against a dragon. An aging, fat and bloated man, charging against a gargantuan monster. Behind them, arrows clattered off hard scales, while
the other riders were scattering.

The dragon opened its mouth. “Stop!” his brother boomed. “Stop!”

The bearded man didn’t seem to care. “We are the sons of stone!” he bellowed. He was screaming madly, riding against the dragon alone. “Never break!” he cried. “Never break!”

The wolf felt the air tingle, he felt something change…

The stoneborn screamed and charged. The wolf was only vaguely aware of Lord Magnar roaring, facing the dragon with furious, bloody eyes. He’s bleeding, the wolf realised suddenly. The man’s eyes were weeping thin trails of blood.

Then, a phantom pain ripped open its skull. The wolf barked, but the pain wasn’t his. It was his brother’s, he was clutching his head as the burning seared through his skull.

Shivers ran down the wolf’s spine, something invisible pulsated through the air.

An aura was reaching outwards, stabbing forward like a lance.

It was the bloated man, the wolf realised. He was a skinchanger. He felt swollen with power and rage, forcing forward with all the strength he had. For a heartbeat, blood spurted from his eyes, running down his cheeks.

The human tried to possess the dragon, the wolf realised. He tried to forcibly subdue it.

The dragon twitched backwards, growled, and then immense muscles twisted. The earth under the dragon broke.

It was over before the wolf could even blink.

There was no restraint. In an instant, the dragon went berserk.

Slam. Claws lashed forward and crushed the man into pulp. He was instantly smeared, mount and all, all across the stones. The earth thudded. The wolf heard a child wail.

Then the dragon roared so loud the world went deaf.

Suddenly, the dragon was crashing forward – its tail lashing, jaws snapping. A jet of white fire blazed, bursting through the earthen fort. The monster roared in pure, berserk rage.

The white wolf was already sprinting away, running for cover so fast his paws kicked up billows of snow. He heard many men doing the same. He could hear a few arrows and spears whistling through the air, but the dragon could not be stopped.

A single whip of its tail and two dozen men were crushed against the stakewall.

A claw slammed downwards and tore out half the side of the hill. Another twenty men went flying.

A cold light was glowing from between the dragon’s teeth.

It all exploded into chaos.

Men were screaming, voices howling…

With a single beat of its wings, the dragon jumped forward over all the fort’s defences, crashing
down onto the shieldhall atop the hill. Men and women ran like insects, they were all writhing and screaming as the dragon bit downwards. The dragon was tearing the roof straight off the fort, crushing through the wood and earth as bright white light glowed from its jaws.

“Stop!” a woman’s voice shrieked. “Stop!”

The voice screamed at the top of her lungs, but the woman could still barely break through the sheer pandemonium. The black wolf was barking, frantic…

“We surrender!” she bellowed. “We surrender!”

The white wolf was already a safe distance away, hiding in the ferns. It looked like his bonded brother was struggling to even restrain the enraged dragon.

The fighting gone on barely a moment, but already the ground was covered in corpses. The icy breath had torn through a corner of the fort, and the dragon’s weight had nearly collapsed the rest. The whole structure was shivering, about to give way.

The ‘battle’ was over before the bowmen even had time to notch a second arrow.

The woman was holding the child in her arms. The boy seemed hysterical with panic.

“We surrender!” she screamed again. “His name is Rickon! Rickon Stark!”

Eventually, his brother managed to soothe the dragon. The woman was shrieking at the men, “Lower your weapons!” she screamed at them. “Lower them! I am Lady Magnar, I order you! We surrender!”

The wildlings were trekking into Kingshouse, unopposed. They pointed spears at the survivors, all the while distraught cries and sobs filled the air.

A cold mist lingered over the fort, broken palisades and frozen corpses scattered everywhere. The wolf stayed hidden in the ferns, eyeing the dragon carefully.

The hardest part was convincing the dragon not to slaughter them all.

By the time his brother finally dismounted, the place was a wreck. His brother stood in the courtyard, as his soldiers pushed through the scattered barricades and seized the keep with ease. As the violence seemed to calm, the wolf crept back to his brother’s side, tail drooped low.

The woman lowered herself to her knees, face first in the mud before him. She was an older woman, long and lean with a face like beaten leather. The woman stood taller than most of the men around her.

“King Snow.” She did not raise her head, she kept her face pressed against the ground. The white wolf saw her gulp, heard her voice quaver. “Kingshouse is yours. House Magnar is yours.”

His brother’s voice was stiff. “Rise,” he said curtly. “You are Osha, are you not?”

“I am.” She was shaking. She still hadn’t risen. “Lord Magnar took me as his third wife, and he took Stiv – Rickon – into his house.”

“Why?”

Hesitantly, the woman raised her head, then shambled to her feet. “The lord was childless, he saw a Gift inside Rickon. He named Rickon as his heir.”
“I see.” His brother’s cold gaze turned to stare at the maimed body smeared over the road. There was barely anything recognisable of the fat man – half of his body was still stuck in the dragon’s claws, along with bloody pieces of his mount. “Did he know Rickon’s identity?”

“No. I claimed him as my own son, and told no one.” Her voice was throaty, eyes downward. “My husband only found out less than two months ago. Only after Stiv underwent the rite of clan, and he became named as Magnar’s blood.”

“The rite of clan?” his brother asked with a frown.

“A stoneborn ceremony,” she mumbled. “My boy gave blood to the tree and ate meat. Human meat.”

His brother turned to look at the boy, but the child was trembling as he tried to cover his face and hide his eyes. The boy was red-faced, sweating and sickly as he clutched the woman’s furs. He was breathing so fast he might choke.

The white wolf trotted closer, looking around the shattered shieldhall. Spears were pointed at the squat men, forcing them to stand against the walls, or kneel in the mud.

His brother’s expression was unreadable, but the wolf felt the unease slipping through their bond.

“Why did you bring my brother to Skagos, Osha?” his brother asked finally.

“I needed a place to hide, Your Grace. Winterfell was taken. It was a mad time. It seemed like nowhere was safe and everyone was hunting Rickon Stark.” The woman grimaced, still not meeting her brother’s eyes. “So I called him Stiv instead, and pretended to be a fisherwoman. I figured that Skagos was the one place no one would ever look.” There was a flicker in her voice. “I did not expect Lord Magnar to take such an interest in the boy, did not expect…”

There was a long silence. His brother looked at the child, as if waiting for him to say something. The boy made no sound but strangled sobs.

“I cared for him as if he were mine own boy,” the woman said finally, stroking his hair. “I swear I did, Your Grace. By the Old Gods, I looked after him. I thought his family were all lost, so I gave him a new one.”

There was no reply.

Finally, his brother lowered himself to his knee, with a pained grimace, and outstretched his hand to the child. “Rickon,” he called, voice softening. “It is me. Jon.”

The boy didn’t even look at him.

“It’s been a long time, Rickon. Four years. You were just a babe the last I saw you, but look at you now.” His voice was low, soothing, but the child still stank of fear, confusion and distraught anger. “But I’m here to bring you home. Bran, Sansa, they’re waiting for you.”

There was a long pause. His brother’s outstretched hand remained empty.

The woman shook the child’s shoulder, stroking his hair. “You must go with him, child.”

“Mother…” the boy croaked.

“Go.” she whispered. “You have to. He’ll take you home.”
“This is my home. Please, he… he hurt father, you can’t…” She tried to shake him away, but he clung on with tiny, pink fingers. He was sobbing. “Don’t let him…!”

His brother finally stepped forward, and then hoisted the boy up off the ground. The child screeched madly. He tried to cling onto the woman, but she pulled away. She was crying too.

“Mother! Father!” the boy wailed, thrashing against the grip. “No! Get off me, get off…!”

His brother grit his teeth, and didn’t listen as he carried his brother away. The child was screaming, kicking and hitting, tears pouring from red eyes.

From the yards, the black wolf started howling, thrashing. The wolf was loping forward, and suddenly the men had to try and restrain the beast. Spears were raised, men were shouting.

The white wolf bared its fangs and growled, protecting his brother against all who would do him harm. There were flusterling emotions hovering in the air, sparks of violence and cries of alarm.

Around him, the black wolf tore into a man, crazed with blood. The white wolf jumped, while others were rallying.

For a moment, his brother was distracted. The boy managed to squirm out of his grip and tried to run, but then his brother caught him and dragged him back. The child was kicking and screaming with every step, right up until another man clamped his fingers over the child’s mouth.

The boy bit down hard against the hand gagging him, drawing blood. The sound of curses filled the air.

“Torvi, keep Rickon safe!” his brother ordered. “Restrain that direwolf – do not hurt it! Get these people under control.”

Finally, they managed to force the crazed black wolf to the ground, by using large shields to pin it down. It took a dozen men to force it backwards into a corner and overpower it. The wolf was scratching and clawing, even as they finally gathered enough rope to hogtie its limbs. The men used the butt of a spear to press between its jaws, but then screams echoed as the great wolf managed to bite down into a man’s neck and shake his entire body in its jaws. Blood splattered over stone.

Even as one man was being mauled to death, the others took the opportunity to wrap a rope around the wolf’s neck.

The white wolf hovered besides his brother, poised and alert against any threat. The aggression was thick in the air.

As the boy was dragged away by a cold-skinned woman, the black wolf was finally brought under control. The black beast was yowling, moaning.

“Get Rickon out of here. I shall be flying back with him at all haste. But first…” His gaze turned around the yards, and then the ruins of Kingshouse. His gaze turned to settle on the weeping woman. “Osha,” he said finally, lowering his voice. “I want to know all of the leaders on Skagos, and where they are.”

“They are all here, or further down the valley, King Snow.” The woman finally stood, but kept her eyes low. “After Driftwood Hall fell, the Stanes and the Crowls flocked to Kingshouse. They took refuge in the Magnar’s lands, along with most of their folk.”
“And further afield?”

The woman frowned. “The Harstanes and Horgyrs were no friends of the Magnar’s, they cling to the eastern isle. The Grawls keep docks and shipyards to the south, but I haven’t heard none word of them since the dead appeared. Clan Steinn keep to their herds in the hills, but Magnar sent his cousin to call on them.”

His brother nodded. “I want to know exactly which of them supported Lord Magnar.”

The woman lowered her voice as she muttered a reply, occasionally pointing towards figures. As the evening stretched outwards, a frenzy of activity began.

The black direwolf was so agitated that they had to force it, still roped up, into a caged pen. It took five men just to drag it. The white wolf sniffed around the strange new place, occasionally pawing at its brother’s cage. The smell of his black brother’s pain and grief put the white wolf on edge.

The little child was locked up in an outhouse, guarded by two dozen men, all of them holding spears. The squat men and women were herded into separate tents, their axes and spears taken away from them. His brother walked between them, sorting through their scattered fort.

The direwolf saw a huddle of children cowering in the corner of the fort. They all seemed to be crying.

The smell of those one-horns was everywhere in the fort. His brother ordered his pack to confiscate all of the stoneborn’s mounts.

Meanwhile, the dragon made its roost atop the broken shieldhall, which was collapsing under the dragon’s weight. From the centre of the shieldhall, the dragon could stretch out over the entire fort.

The wolf could feel the anger and fear thick in the air. Its hackles were raised, senses peeled for any who intended harm. His brother still needed help to walk, so the direwolf kept close, hovering beside his brother’s every limped step. Sometimes, his brother would clutch his fur for support.

They all gave the wolf a wide berth, mostly as the white wolf followed his brother around.

Towards dusk, there was a congregation gathering in the yard. One by one, a collection of hairy and squat men were forced to stand forward. They picked them out of the huddle, dragging them to the front of the fort.

His brother was there, surrounded by a barricade of spears. The white wolf followed to heel.

“These are them?” he asked, looking between the angry glares. About two dozen of them.

“Aye, these are them,” the woman Osha replied, keeping a hard voice. “These were Lord Magnar’s top lieutenants and supporters.” She looked towards two sniffling bodies at the very edges. “And his other wives.”

They were both very thick-waisted women standing on the end of the line, weeping quietly. The women seemed as hairy as the men; their hair was rough, matted black like seaweed, their jaws were thick, and their eyes were red and fierce.

More and more were forced to stand in a line before him. Some were angry, some grieving, but they were all terrified. More than a few had soiled their furs.

“I see,” his brother said slowly. “And these are the ones that resisted my forces?”
“They are.”

“They defended our homes!” a man shouted defiantly, but his voice was trembling.

“You did.” He nodded. “And you also murdered my envoys. You denied all negotiation, all chance at resolution. You forced me to this.”

Nobody dared to object. Above them, the dragon’s neck arched downwards, curious to see what was happening. The shadow of the dragon loomed over them all, and a few whimpered. “Are you going to judge them, Your Grace?” the woman asked.

His brother shook his head. “No.” There was a pause for a moment. Then, he seemed to reach a decision. “Dracarys,” he said finally.

In an instant, the dragon breathed. The wolf felt the swash of cold air wash over its fur. Ice blasted, voices screamed, and furious teeth snapped downwards.

In a flurry of quick bites, the dragon swallowed them all whole.

---

**Sansa**

It was past the hour of ghosts when she heard the bell tower ringing, when she heard the air above Winterfell twist like a storm.

The moon was obscured by clouds, the darkness thick and complete. The watchmen didn’t notice the immense figure in the sky until the very moment it whooshed over Winterfell’s spires. And then all of Winterfell and the surrounding refugee camps started to fill with panicked shouts.

Sansa was instantly shaken awake by the roar of the wind. At first she thought it was a winter gale causing the keep to tremble, but then she felt the air shift as an immense mass dropped from the sky. She was instantly out of bed, grabbing her cloak from where it lay and pulling the furs over her as she rushed to the balcony.

She saw white wings flapping as the beast circled over the castle, coming in for a landing. The sight took her breath away.

The dragon had returned.

The keep was already stirring as the bells clattered, even despite the unholy hour. It felt like she was half-asleep, but she still had to rush. Her head was woozy and tired, but Sansa quickly pulled on her shoes, and wrapped her hair up in a crude knot.

There was an urgent knock at the door. It was her guard’s voice, a man named Wilhelm. “Your Grace!”

“I heard it!” she snapped. “I’m coming.”

Sansa had ordered the guards to warn her the moment that Jon returned, but in retrospect that had been a foolish order. Of course the dragon would alert everyone all at once by itself. She was still in her sleeping clothes, but Sansa simply pulled her cloak and dress over the top. Sansa dressed herself in record time, and then paced quickly out of her chambers.
Wilhelm, Boderick, Watt, Keg and Duncan were already waiting, their faces anxious under their helms and each one gripping their spear tightly.

She heard the sound of the dragon’s roar. The dragon was roaring as it circled lower and lower, wings beating harder as it descended, trying to clear the godswood of all the foolish worshippers who flocked there. If the dragon had landed in a rush, all of those people beneath would have been squashed.

As Sansa stepped outside, the yards were already awake and stirring. It was impossible for a dragon to do anything discreetly – it was like a parade with every step it took.

There were more guards and men-at-arms rushing to her side, until she was being trailed by two dozen of them.

“Your Grace…” an urgent voice called, and Sansa saw a portly man rushing over the stones. Archmaester Marwyn was fully dressed, and his eyes were practically glowing in excitement. Her guard’s spears crossed to block his way. “Your Grace, the dragon–”

“Step back inside, maester,” Sansa ordered curtly.

Marwyn flustered. “Princess, the *dragon*…!”

“Step back inside.”

Her voice left no room for argument. With a nod, one of Sansa’s guards broke off and escorted the maester away. Marwyn looked like he wanted to resist, but Sansa allowed no argument and the guard roughly forced him back into the keep.

Marwyn had proved himself very useful recently, but Sansa still would not trust the archmaester next to the dragon. She had taken care to keep him at a distance. No, Sansa would have to wait to clear the matter with Jon first, before she even allowed Marwyn anywhere near the beast.

Across Winterfell, the beat of the dragon’s wings was like a hurricane circling above.

Sansa and her guards arrived at the godswood just as the beast finally landed with a great thump. Her guards had to push her through the crowds, while the surrounding voices reached a frenzy. It was a queer type of panic; some were trying to run away urgently, and others were trying to push closer. The godswood felt like a cattle pen; filled with bodies cramming and squirming through the trees.

All around the heart tree, Sansa saw pale faces with their heads lowered in prayer.

By the time her guards managed to clear the path, Sonagon had dropped its head to rest in the hot springs, its tail curling around the heart tree. She saw that Jon was already climbing down the crest of the scales. He moved with a great deal of care and difficulty – gingerly trying to lever his way down a makeshift saddle of hemp ropes.

It was only Sansa’s fifth time or so seeing the dragon up close, but the sight never ceased to take her breath away.

She couldn’t help a quiet shiver as she stared up at the dragon’s immense bulk. She felt like a mouse approaching a wolf as she nervously inched closer.

The princess hovered gingerly, nervous to come any closer. The dragon was breathing deeply, and it collapsed almost instantly – perhaps the beast was exhausted from its flight.
The crowd was thick, but they still granted Sonagon a wide berth. Everything felt hushed – the loudest sound was the dragon’s breath, while all others were muttering. The dragon would need only to roll over onto its side and it might crush over a half a hundred men.

It was a frightening feeling to approach a creature large enough to squash you without even noticing.

Jon seemed to be having trouble descending the thirty or so feet from Sonagon’s crown to the ground. It was only as Sansa came closer that she realised why. There was a squirming shape fastened to Jon’s chest; he was trying to hold onto a large bundle with one hand and to clutch a rope with the other. His legs were struggling to find a grip on the scales as he rappelled downwards. Sansa heard Jon cursing and grimacing with every step downwards, but the people around him seemed too nervous to step forward to help.

In his grip, Sansa noticed, he was holding a young, pale-faced boy. It was only as Jon’s feet squelched into the mud that Sansa got a closer look.

The boy was around six years old, she realised. There was a momentary confusion, but then she met Jon’s gaze, and her breath froze in the humid air.

He never even needed to tell her; she just could tell from his expression. Sansa was already pulling up her dress and jogging forward to meet him.

“Rickon?” she gasped.

She barely recognised him. As a toddler, Rickon’s hair had been a bright auburn, almost like copper, but age had darkened his hair to near black. His bright blue eyes were red from tears, and he was kicking and wriggling in weak thrashes. The boy looked little like a prince; he was wearing grimy hides and dirty furs. His shoulder-length hair was filthy and unkempt, his face sickly pale.

Rickon? Is it truly…?

Jon was staggering forward with a wince of pain, but Sansa had eyes only for her baby brother.

“Rickon, it’s me, Sansa…” she cried. “Oh gods, Rickon…”

The child replied only by pulling back his lips and spitting at her. Sansa had been reaching to embrace him, but his lips curled and he reared like a vicious rat. Sansa was left dumbfounded as the glob of phlegm landed on her dress.

Jon grimaced, but he didn’t slacken his grip on the boy. Jon was holding him almost in a chokehold. Rickon’s eyes were raw and red, but there were no tears. The child was swaying senselessly, writhing with dazed eyes. Jon met Sansa’s gaze briefly, and then turned away.

“Guards!” Jon shouted, while the men saluted around. “Have the captain escort Prince Rickon. He needs a clean change of clothes, and plenty of water.”

There was no reply from Rickon except a torrent of words that Sansa could not recognise. They are curse words, she thought. She did not need to understand them to recognise the meaning behind them. Her baby brother was spitting curses at her. The boy seemed hysterical, still struggling against his half-brother’s grip.

Sansa stared, trying to match the feral wild boy before her with the baby brother she had once known. Has Jon brought the wrong child?
Jon paused wearily, his eyes were grim. He was likely thinking the same thing. Sansa could see something of a resemblance in the boy’s features, but it was hard to tell through the twisted face and red eyes.

_The child is angry_, Sansa realised. There was no joy in the boy’s expression, there was only raw hate.

Sansa didn’t know what to do.

Rickon was carried away from the dragon, but he still resisted with every step. Sansa tried to approach him, but her little brother cursed and spat wildly. Sansa couldn’t even understand the slurred words, but the viciousness behind them was clear.

“Take Prince Rickon to a secure chamber,” Jon ordered to the surrounding guards, then glanced to her. “Forgive him, Sansa, it’s been… an unpleasant journey.”

She wasn’t sure how to reply for a moment. “What happened?” Sansa said finally with a deep breath, keeping her voice low.

“It is near a full day’s flight from Skagos to Winterfell. I didn’t risk making a waystop,” he said grimly, in between shouting orders to the worshippers. “But Rickon was so restless, he never stopped struggling all the way from Skagos. I had to drag him onto Sonagon to begin with, and then I had to tie him down to keep him there. I still feared he might fall – he nearly wriggled free during the flight. It was bad from the start, and it got so much worse once we broke through the clouds. I think he’s afraid of heights.” Jon sighed wearily, and shook his head. “As Sonagon broke the clouds he was out of his mind with fear.”

Sansa frowned, inspecting Jon more closely. Her half-brother looked like hell; every inch of him was battered and grimy, his face was gaunt and thinner than she remembered from mere weeks ago, and his limp was worse than ever before. His face was pale, and his eyes shadowed, and he was wincing heavily with each limp. He looked fit to collapse, and beneath his riding furs, his armour looked half-ruined; like he had just walked off a battlefield.

Sansa glanced back at Rickon – the boy was left dehydrated, terrified and delirious. The journey must have been pure torture.

“And he puked on me,” Jon admitted, glancing down to his ruined furs. “Several times, in fact.”

Jon finally released Rickon onto the carpet of humus and ferns. It looked like he might have ran away, but he couldn’t even stand straight. He just dropped to the ground. Rickon was a wild thing. Sansa hovered around him, but the boy was crazed; stumbling, spitting and cursing. “Did you have to put Rickon through that?” Sansa asked with a grimace. “He’s a child.”

“It’s either a several week’s journey on land, or one long day by dragonback,” Jon replied simply. “Sonagon may not be the most pleasant option, but the dragon is still the fastest and safest. I needed to get Rickon off Skagos with all haste. It was not safe there, Sansa.”

She couldn’t argue the point, but the sight of her little brother like this, crazed like some tortured animal… it was a disturbing sight. The guard Duncan rushed back with a bucket of water and a fresh cloak, but Rickon hissed at the man when he tried to take him.

“Here, let me…” Sansa reached downwards, to try and take the ruined fur cloak off her brother. Sansa couldn’t even tell what hide his clothes were made from, it was a rough and unfamiliar material. Rickon only shrieked, trying to claw at her with podgy fingers. “No, Rickon, don’t…!”
The child screamed. The crowd was left staring at the scene, but none approached. *I cannot do this here, not in front of everybody*, Sansa cursed.

Finally, Wilhelm had to reach down and pin the young child still to get him to stay.

“Get him to the keep,” Sansa ordered.

The prince tried to bite him as he grabbed him. Rickon brought his teeth down hard, even despite the man’s thick leather gloves. The guards seemed nervous to approach the wild prince.

Rickon’s shriek broke the air, like the cry of a distraught animal.

Sansa wanted to hold her little brother, but Jon met her gaze, and then shook his head. “Not tonight, Sansa, let him rest,” Jon said lowly. “I’m fit to collapse after that journey, Rickon must be crazed.” Sansa hesitated. “Lock him in a room, let him sleep for now, and let none disturb him. Have a maester check up on him, maybe. We might make a better introduction in the morn.”

Reluctantly, Sansa agreed. It was good that Bran wasn’t here; she didn’t want her brother to see Rickon like this, so raw and wild. *Rickon doesn’t remember me*, Sansa thought, staring at the boy as he was dragged away. There had been no recollection in his eyes. Perhaps it wasn’t surprising; Rickon had only been three years old when she had left Winterfell. He was six now, almost seven.

Sansa entrusted Wilhelm and Andric to carry Rickon, all the while she trailed close behind. The boy was still trying to bite the men who pulled him away, still cursing in the Old Tongue. His eyes looked dazed. Sansa followed, and Jon limped beside her.

*Just what happened at the Wall? At Skagos?* She had heard reports of the former, unbelievable as they were, but nothing at all of the latter.

Behind them, it seemed like the dragon was already asleep.

All around them, the gaggle of faithful lined the godswood’s path, but her guards kept them back. The onlookers weren’t aggressive, but they were murmuring with their hands outstretched towards Jon. A few of the more daring tried to touch Sonagon’s scales. Her half-brother didn’t even meet their gazes.

They walked slowly out of the woods, letting the guards clear the way. Jon was staggering heavily with every step, fatigued and weak.

*It looks like a severe case of cramps*, Sansa noticed. And Jon’s legs weren’t very strong even on the best of days. Sansa had never seen her half-brother in such a state.

Still, she couldn’t let him rest without answering… “How did it fare on Skagos?” she asked finally.

“Poorly.” Jon’s jaw was tense. “Rickon was adopted by Lord Magnar, Sansa. The lord had no idea of his identity, but he took Rickon into his house. A rite of clan, Lord Magnar called it – he was claimed as the lord’s own blood.”

“What?” That caught her off-guard. The statement was baffling to her, she wasn’t sure if she had misheard. “Why?”

“The Lord Magnar was old and childless, even despite multiple marriages. So he chose his heir instead,” Jon explained, keeping his voice low so none would overhear. Sansa had to walk very closely next to him. “Lord Magnar wanted a warg to carry on his line, and Rickon is a powerful one.” Sansa’s gaze flickered. “By Skagosi law, Rickon is now the new lord of the House Magnar.”
The Lord of House Magnar? That was a lot to take in, Sansa had to pause to digest the words. “And then this Lord Magnar?”

“A fool. A stubborn old man.” Jon’s voice turned foul. “I offered Magnar peace, but the stoneborn were too set in their ways. That isle has been isolated for far too long.” He shook his head. “I gave Lord Magnar no chance to resist, I wanted him to surrender without blood, but he instead tried to possess Sonagon – he tried to seize control of the dragon himself.”

Sansa’s eyes widened slightly. *Seize control? Is that a risk we must consider?* “Is that possible?”

“Not for him.” Jon kept his head lowered as they walked over the cobbles of the courtyard. “I can barely control Sonagon myself some days, and the dragon quite likes me. A dragon is not a wolf, its skin cannot be worn so easily. Lord Magnar was a powerful skinchanger, more powerful than most, but it did him no good.”

Sansa wasn’t sure how to reply to that. Archmaester Marwyn had been teaching her something of skinchangers and wargs – an archaic magic of the First Men, Marwyn had said. While other magic required spells or rituals, skinchanging was a primal, natural magic. Skinchanging is to spellcraft what swimming in the ocean is to sailing, as Marwyn phrased it. It felt surreal to hear Jon talk about such things so matter-of-factly.

Still, Sansa could not dwell on it for long. “And what of the other stonelords?” she asked as they walked.

“I brought them to heel.”

“How?”

His voice didn’t even flicker. “I lined up the loudest of the objecters, and I fed them all to Sonagon.”

*He did what?* Sansa didn’t speak, but her lips tightened and her brow knotted in concern. Jon must have caught her gaze.

“The Others have a *fleet*, Sansa,” Jon said sharply. “The white walkers are building bone ships on the eastern coast, they plan to sail south. Skagos will shortly become the very front line of that war.” *They what?* Sansa hadn’t heard such things; the dragon moved faster than a raven. “I needed to secure that isle quickly to stand against the Others, and I could not allow any petty disputes by the Skagossons to weaken that effort. I offered them a chance, they refused it – and then afterwards I did not offer a second.”

She didn’t reply, there was too much to process. *The Others have a fleet?* That news caused tremors down her spine. They didn’t break step as they crossed over the courtyard, keeping their voices low as they mumbled to each other. Guardsmen led and trailed behind them, clearing a path through the crowds. Sansa did not want such uneasy talk to spread around the castle.

Ahead of them, it looked like Rickon had finally fallen unconscious as he was carried through the yards.

“A woman named Osha is now one of the strongest voices on Skagos,” Jon continued. “She is Lord Magnar’s widow. She was pretending to be Rickon’s mother, and I believe her loyalty is to him. I left her in a position of power, and promised Winterfell’s gratitude for keeping order.”

“I see.”
She walked quietly for a good while as Jon told her of the state of the north. The Breach and the ruins of Castle Black, the battle at Eastwatch and the siege of the Wall. The evacuation of the Gift. Some of it Sansa had already known, but much was new to her – like the news of the Others assembling a fleet of bone ships at Hardhome. Jon spoke in a grim and tired voice. Such things might have once beggared belief, but Sansa did not dare to doubt them now.

Jon described an army of legions, an unending horde. Millions of wights, both human and beast. Even fish and whales, she heard him say, scarcely believing it. Skagos sounded like it had already been devastated by the Other’s attacks, Jon described the isle in language akin to that of an apocalypse.

Sansa felt a cold sweat on her skin. A more foolish girl would have tried to dismiss the words, but Sansa just listened solemnly.

Sansa’s eyes lingered on Rickon, wondering if he had seen such things too. Rickon had found a new family, but then Jon had been forced to take him from it. No wonder the child was so distraught.

_All the while I lived as Alayne Stone, she realised, Rickon was Stiv Magnar._

They approached the steps of the keep, and Sansa extended her arm to help support Jon up the stairs. It was the cold of night, and a fine layer of frost was already creeping back over the stone. Jon took her arm without a word, ascending the stone steps with staggered limps.

“What happened to Rickon’s wolf?” Sansa asked finally. The wolf wasn’t the most pressing concern, but it was a nagging concern in the back of her mind.

“Shaggydog was feral,” Jon explained lowly. “He killed two of my men trying to chain him, but they managed to muzzle him. Shaggydog is with Ghost now, at Eastwatch. I have assigned men to escort both wolves to Winterfell, but Shaggydog will stay chained and muzzled, at least for now.”

“Why?” she asked. “Why go to such lengths to save a feral wolf?”

Jon hesitated for a moment before he replied, as he limped up the steps. “Because I know that Rickon would never forgive me if Shaggydog died.”

Sansa paused, as her thoughts drifted back to Lady. She had been thinking about her former pet a lot recently. _If my direwolf was still alive, she wondered, then would I be one of these ‘wargs’ too?_

There was a quiet, as they stepped through the gates to the keep. Jon was dragging his feet, as if fit to collapse from fatigue at any moment. Sansa’s eyes lingered on the dead shape of Rickon hanging limp in the guard’s arms. He had managed to cry and shriek himself into unconsciousness, apparently.

“The coronation will be soon.” Sansa said finally. “Will Rickon be fit to attend?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, and then paused. “I expected to miss the coronation – I thought you would have crowned Bran already.”

“I delayed it for you.” He turned to look at her. “It was too dangerous to hold it in your absence,” Sansa argued. “Too many still consider you King Snow. There can be no doubt – the whole realm must see you cede your crown, Jon.”

“Ack, fine.” His jaw clenched. “As soon as possible.”
She measured his expression, noting the dark circles under his eyes. “When was the last time you slept?”

He shrugged. “What day is it?”

“You’re burning the candle at both ends, Jon,” Sansa warned. “Even your dragon is exhausted. You are fighting battles back to back in every corner of the realm, it is too much for any man.”

His eyes narrowed. “There’s an invasion happening, Sansa.”

“Aye, there is. But how long do you think you can keep this up?”

“As long as I must.” Jon paused. “You must have heard of the Breach?”

“I have,” Sansa admitted. “Bran told me of it first, and then we received refugees saying the same. Many here are still in disbelief.”

“Tis true. The Wall is broken – there’s a hundred foot gap straight through at Castle Black. The Others resurrected monsters, wingless dragons even larger than Sonagon to tear through it,” Jon said, his voice curt. Sansa twitched slightly. “The Others are pressing forward hard with their invasion. They are already renewing their assault, and it will only get worse from here.”

Yes, Sansa did not doubt how critical it was. Winterfell was far from the warfront, but they had still seen the streams of refugees heading south. The coalition had captured several hundred unchained wights after the battles to the north, and no man could question the damage the realm had taken.

Even with enforced conscription, Winterfell was struggling to fill its garrisons. Their soldiers had suffered too many losses, they were forced to recruit semi-trained militia. They needed every farmer and cowherd holding spears in their ranks, but they made for extremely poor soldiers.

Sansa knew the mood in the castle – it was like there was a time limit hanging over everybody’s heads. How long do we have?

Jon and Sansa stopped walking in the hallway of the castle, turning to look at each other as the guards walked ahead. The shadows of the torches danced around them, and a hundred eyes were watching from the corridors. Their voices dropped further. “I cannot linger here for long, Sansa,” Jon whispered. “I must fly back north at all haste.”

Sansa shook her head. “You cannot. You must go south instead.”

He stared at her, his eyes narrowing. “Sansa…”

There was no surprise, only indignation. So he did receive my letter. Sansa hadn’t been sure if the missive she had penned would catch him in time. Sansa could see the raw emotions across his face – he was too fatigued to hide them.

He looked ready to object, but she cut him off. “Daenerys Targaryen is coming. She brings what might be the largest army in the world,” she said sharply. “She is an undisputed Targaryen – the rightful heir to the Iron Throne to many. She comes with a fleet as large as Nymeria’s, and legions of followers. And she has dragons, Jon – three dragons.” Jon’s gaze flickered, but he nodded. “Aegon means to unite with Daenerys against us. You must stop that.”

He bristled. “You want me to marry this woman?”
“I do.” She nodded. “There must be an alliance, and a betrothal is the best means. If Daenerys has any sense, she will consider it.”

“Sense? She is the Mad King’s daughter!” Jon shook his head. “And there are battles to be fought here.”

“There will always be battles to be fought,” she retorted. “But there is only one dragon and the front line must hold without you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said sharply. “Do you have any idea of the size of the Other’s army?”

“Oh, I can see it in your eyes.” Sansa nodded. “But still, you must go south. Firstly, there is a Vale fleet sailing in the Bite that only a dragon can clear. And then our envoys must reach southwards – there is Daenerys, and Aegon. We must ensure an alliance with at least one of them.”

His eyes narrowed, hands clenched. A flash of anger flickered over his features. “I am not asking you to do anything I wouldn’t,” Sansa added. “I am prepared to betroth myself to Aegon Targaryen to secure an alliance with him as well.”

He scoffed. “You remember what happened the last time a Targaryen took a northern daughter?”

“Jon, that’s unfair…”

“There is bad blood between us and House Targaryen, and yet your plan is to marry two of them?”

“My plan is to secure aid,” she argued. “We cannot last like this.”

“But how long will that take?” he snapped. “The longer the Others roam, the larger their army becomes. I have seen their army, you have not.”

His voice was growing too loud, too agitated. Perhaps this was a bad time to have this discussion, Sansa admitted. Still, she stepped forward, glaring up at him and lowered her voice to a breathy whisper.

“Think of Robb, Jon,” she hissed. “Robb fought all of his battles too.”

His gaze darkened. They were attracting too much attention standing in the middle of the hall, Sansa could see people staring. With a grimace, Sansa wrapped her arm around Jon’s and urged him to keep on walking, side by side.

“Robb was too focused on the battle in front of him as well,” Sansa whispered. “Robb never sought out alliances either. Just think, where might we be now if he had reached out – not only to his aunt, but to all the Vale houses, or to Highgarden, or even Dorne?”

“Sansa, it is not the same…”

“Oh, it is. Robb lost because he was too busy fighting those battles. Robb was too focused on the battle today; he did not prepare for the war tomorrow.” Jon did not reply. They turned a corner, walking towards the lord’s wing of the castle. “You said it yourself, Jon – the Others are unending. Their armies don’t eat, but ours do. They hardly even need to fight us; they could just sit outside our castles and wait until we starve. An alliance is the only thing that might stop that from happening.”

The very mention of Robb seemed to drain all the protest from him. He didn’t look happy with the
thought, but he didn’t object either. The only sound was their footsteps as they walked down the gloomy corridor.

“We cannot make the same mistake,” Sansa said finally. “We cannot be like Robb.”

The sound of another pair of footsteps caused them both to twitch. Someone else was walking towards them, with slow and quiet steps. A shadow loomed in the flickering torchlight; a figure coming into focus. Sansa saw pale blond hair and blue eyes.

Lady Val of Whitetree was standing at the other end of the corridor, watching them without a word. Both Sansa and Jon froze under her gaze. Lady Val was a beautiful woman in the dark, Sansa considered, but it was only on a closer look that she saw the shadowed circles under her eyes and the gauntness to her cheeks. She wore a thick cloak wrapped around her even despite the warmth, and then Sansa saw the empty sleeve hanging from her shoulder.

Jon stopped instantly, meeting Val’s gaze. Sansa hadn’t known that the woman was walking about already.

Sansa looked between the both of them, reading the silence. Neither of them spoke, and the moment stretched outwards.

“I will leave you two alone,” Sansa offered, stepping backwards.

Jon nodded. His gaze lingered on Val’s missing arm.

Still, Sansa hesitated before she left. “The coronation will be soon, Jon,” Sansa added. “And then we are putting father’s bones to rest.”

He only nodded.

She turned and walked away, and then Jon stepped forward. Sansa left him alone on the corridor with Val, but just before she turned the corner Sansa saw him stepping forward to embrace her.

The hallways were stiff and uneasy. Sansa took a deep breath as she walked.

There was so much to do, so much to worry about but still… Rickon, Sansa thought. I have my baby brother again.

The entire castle was already awake – she doubted anyone could sleep through the dragon’s arrival. Sansa stepped out the way she came, and there was already a crowd milling in the hallway.

They were waiting for Jon, she knew. A few of them gazed at her, but the rest were waiting on word from the prince and dragonrider.

Lords, knights and envoys were pushing their way forward, a mumbling rising through the hall.

Sansa’s attention turned towards a tall and grey-haired man, with a slight frown on his face. Half of Ser Brynden’s face was hidden beneath his eyepatch, the other half looked concerned.

The Blackfish was staring at where Jon had disappeared. Sansa was curious about his reaction – the old knight must have seen them walking together. “So that is Jon Snow, is it?” Ser Brynden said finally, his voice a murmur.

“Yes.” She nodded as she stepped closer. “It is.”

“He looks little like his father.”
“The likeness has faded,” she admitted. “I will introduce you to him, ser, but that would be best saved for the morn.”

“Aye.” Ser Brynden paused distractedly. “This is my first time seeing Jon Snow in person. Oh, I’ve heard about him aplenty – south of the Neck, they whisper of him as if he were king of all Seven Hells. I expected someone taller.”

“I put little trust in talk, ser.”

“I do not trust him, Sansa.” The Blackfish shook his head warningly. “Your mother never trusted him.”

_Trust him?_ Sansa mused on that for a moment. It was a curious thought. “I know him, ser. I trust Jon’s intentions.”

“Cat told me once that Jon Snow threatened to steal Robb’s seat,” Ser Brynden said, with foulness in his voice. “Your mother had poor words concerning the bastard. When I heard of his ‘northern coalition’, I was certain that Cat had been proven right.”

“I am here now only because of him.” Sansa reminded. “Bran and Rickon are only here because of Jon too.”

The Blackfish didn’t object the point, but his eye didn’t relax either.

Yes, Sansa had heard similar things before. Ser Brynden had known of King Snow for months, but he had refused to travel north to serve him. Lord Reed had confided to Sansa that the Blackfish had once considered Jon Snow to be worse than the Boltons – it had only been news of Sansa and Bran that convinced Ser Brynden to change his mind and come to Winterfell.

Sansa paid no mind; she did not doubt her great-uncle’s commitment, and a little bit of suspicion was oft a healthy thing.

Ser Brynden had proven himself, regardless. Lord Reed was too infirm for battle, and in his stead the Blackfish was the one who led House Reed’s forces against Moat Cailin. The battle for Moat Cailin had been the final conflict in the Bolton war, against the last remnants of their Bolton supporters. The Blackfish had lost an eye to a Dustin bowman, as he scaled the Moat’s wall along with crannogmen under cover of darkness.

The princess stepped away, and then she noticed another familiar figure hovering by the staircase. Lord Reed was halfway up the stairs, clutching the bannister tightly.

The lord’s eyes were fixed on the lower level, on where Jon had disappeared. _He watched us arrive_, she realised, _he must have been staring at Jon._ Still, Sansa couldn’t even guess Lord Reed’s thoughts; his gaunt face was guarded, his green eyes were indecipherable to her.

Something about his gaze made Sansa look at him more closely. “My lord?” the princess called. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Lord Reed didn’t reply for some time. “I think I might have,” he muttered, so low she could barely hear.

Sansa paused, then chose to walk away.

She settled in for a long night. She didn’t even try to go back to sleep again; she knew she wouldn’t be able to.
Instead, she walked up to the royal tower, where Bran was left stirring anxiously in his quarters. Bran would have wanted to see Jon arrive too, Sansa knew, but the little king was trapped in his chamber without his litter and the escorts to carry him.

Bran’s face lit up when Sansa told him of Rickon. “It’s true,” she remembered saying, “Rickon is home.”

Bran wanted to see Rickon straight away, but Sansa had to urge him to wait until the morning. She could only hope Rickon would be in a more approachable mood after some rest.

During the final hours of the night, Sansa found herself dropped behind the chair in her study. There was a nearly complete missive addressed to King Aegon that Sansa had spent days writing with painstaking care. She was so tired she could have just dropped, but instead she settled over the parchment with her quill, determined to see the letter finished.

She would write the peace offer for King Aegon, and then Jon could fly south on his dragon to deliver it.

Across the castle, the morning light rose sluggishly.

As soon as she left, she saw Archmaester Marwyn waiting outside of the hallway of her chamber. The archmaester looked anxious. “Your Grace, concerning the dragon,” he said urgently, with no greetings, “You promised that I could further my research – if only I could have your permission to run a few tests on the dragon?”

“It is Prince Snow’s permission you need, not mine,” she replied curtly. “And the prince is distracted.”

“Your Grace, those cultists are allowed near the dragon.”

The cultists are the ones guarding it, Sansa thought to herself. Mother Mole and her Circle had all but fortified the godswood around the dragon’s roost and the heart tree. “It is Prince Snow’s right to decide who accesses his dragon.” Sansa’s eyes narrowed. “But you have other matters to attend to, archmaester. You promised that you could establish spells to protect against wraiths, did you not?”

“I did.” The man grimaced. “But such wards take time, it is not—”

“Well, you have a day,” Sansa ordered. “It will be Bran’s coronation shortly, and I would see the Great Hall secured against such beings. Then we may talk about Prince Snow’s dragon.”

Marwyn looked like he might have protested, but he chose to swallow the objection instead. He promised that he could draw runes on the walls that might help, and she watched as the stocky man shuffled away.

As he left, it occurred to Sansa that she was left with the quandary of how to test such a thing. How could they know if these ‘wards’ worked or not? Should they hope for a shadow to appear just to prove the archmaester’s words? It was a headache no matter how she viewed it. The uncertainty was torturous. Damnable magic.

Underneath her dress, Sansa kept two daggers strapped to her thigh. As a child, she would never have dreamt of keeping a concealed weapon, but recently she had realised the need. It was not ladylike to carry a blade, but it was comforting. The weight of the blades reminded her of her sister, sometimes.
The first weapon was the Valyrian steel dagger she had stolen from Littlefinger, and the second was a small weirwood stake. Protection against both white walkers and shadow assassins, she reasoned. In truth, she knew that both weapons would likely be useless against such threats – the shadow assassin had moved faster than a man could blink, she had been told – but it made her feel better to have some degree of control.

She left it until near noon before she went to go see Rickon. Sansa dressed herself properly, and approached hesitantly towards Rickon’s quarters. They had assigned him his former room, but Sansa knew the smell of other occupants still stained the bed. The guards kept the door locked; none but family were allowed to approach.

As she stepped through the chamber, she saw the mattress and sheets were torn and crumpled into a ball, but they hadn’t been slept on. The chamber was empty. For an instant, her heart leapt into her throat, and then she heard sniffling coming from somewhere. Rickon had crawled underneath the bed, she realised. The boy was hiding beneath it like a wolf in its den.

She took a deep breath as she lowered herself to her knees and bent onto the stone floor.

“Rickon?” she called gingerly. “Rickon, it’s me… Sansa. I’m your sister, do you not remember…?”

As she lowered herself down, she saw red, weeping eyes from the shadows. The boy seemed half-feral. She tried to urge him out from the bed, but then he snapped into shrieking curse words.

“Never break!” Rickon barked, writhing away from her. “Never break!”

He snapped the words like a curse, chanting them as he spat at her from the shadows under the bed. Never break. They are the words of House Magnar, Sansa realised slowly.

Sansa heard from the staff that they had tried to serve him a morning meal, but the prince had thrown the bowl of porridge into a serving girl’s face. As she lingered in his room, Sansa could hear quiet sobbing from underneath the bed frame.

By the time she finally stepped out of Rickon’s room, she was in a grim mood. She felt exhausted and lost. Sansa was left wondering how her mother would deal with such a tantrum. As a girl, she had seen Mother growing distraught over Arya’s rebellious behaviour, but she had never really understood what it felt like.

My mother. My family. Seeing Rickon again brought back so many raw feelings.

In the hallway, Ser Brynden was waiting anxiously. The tall knight gave a grimace as he saw her expression. “Your brother,” the Blackfish said finally. “Is he well?”

“He is… healthy.” Her voice was faint. Sansa cradled a circular scratch on her knuckles, where Rickon had bit her hand. His gummy teeth had even drawn a dribble of blood.

“I heard that the boy was distraught,” Ser Brynden admitted. “He has been through a lot.”

We all have, Sansa could have replied. She kept silent instead.

The Blackfish hesitated. “If you want, perhaps I could try to reach him?” he offered. “Mayhaps a man’s voice might–?”

“No.” Sansa shook her head, and then reached a decision. “Allow my brother space for now. Forgive me, ser, but we must hold Bran’s coronation soon. This afternoon, if we can manage it.
May you inform Lord Reed?"

The knight paused, and then bowed. Sansa was already striding forward. She forced herself to focus on matters she could deal with.

With a few words, the preparations for the coronation were in full swing. The crowning ceremony had been planned days ago, but placed on indefinite hold until Jon returned. Sansa knew that Jon was intent on flying off quickly, and she could not miss this chance again.

There was no time to waste.

The guests were already in Winterfell, she needed to gather them. She needed to ensure the guards were alert and the keep was secured. She could not allow the cultists to make another mess of the proceedings, she had to make sure everyone had their role.

Originally, she had intended for it to be Lord Manderly who would place the crown on Bran’s head, but Sansa was more inclined to grant the honour to Lord Reed. The Greatjon was still not well-enough to stand, but he was at least stable enough to be carried to the hall. The Lords Manderly, Umber and Reed represented the strongest of House Stark’s supporters, they all needed to be present.

Meanwhile, Tormund Giantsbane, the Weeper, and that insufferable witch woman would head up the free folk clans. It was a headache just to imagine the northern lords on one side and the wildlings on the other.

And the guards, she mentally added. The last time there had been a congregation of important figures, that shadow assassin had appeared. Sansa couldn’t allow the same to happen again. She ordered that every guard in the hall would be readied with both weirwood and obsidian weapons.

Quickly, the entire afternoon was consumed by activity and preparations. They could not hold a coronation today, but Sansa was determined to see it next morning.

She wanted Rickon to attend, but it seemed certain that the child would only make a scene. He would be left to his room.

In her chambers, the crown of white silver and weirwood rested atop her cabinet. She held it for a time, tracing her fingers along the patterns. It wasn’t Robb’s crown, regrettably – as far as anyone knew, that crown of bronze and black iron had been lost at the Red Wedding – but this would serve, she supposed. It certainly looked the part. Previously, Sansa had kept the crown hidden in an old dress at the back of her closet so that none would steal it.

As night fell, Sansa and Wynafryd were left sorting out clothes to wear. A velvet dress with a white bear fur shawl for her, while Wynafryd preferred to wear wool and silk, with a sealskin cloak. She even spent time picking out Jon’s and Bran’s clothes; a shadowskin cloak and a fine mink tunic for Jon to make him seem civilised, while Bran would wear a thick wolfhide cloak to make the boy look larger and older on the throne.

It was easier to distract herself with such things, rather than obsess over problems she never knew how to solve.

Her guards relayed messages to and from her ear. Jon had removed himself to his quarters along with Val, and many who wanted the prince’s attention were instead trying to go through her. Marwyn continually pestered her about the dragon, while Lord Manderly insisted on having Jon address an assembly. Salladhor Saan vehemently wanted a meeting with the dragonlord, the
emissary from the Iron Bank knocked thrice looking for Prince Snow, and even Lord Reed sought a meeting. Sansa ordered her guards to tell all comers that Jon was preoccupied.

It was only at dusk that Sansa realised she hadn’t even seen Jon all day. Sansa herself kept uneven sleeping patterns – she half-expected him to find her during the night, but he didn’t.

As the next morning approached, she was shaken from a short snooze by the sound of bells ringing. It was official; the coronation of Brandon Stark would be held today.

Sansa could stand on the balcony and watch the crowd of guests all milling towards the great hall. She idly paused, trying to recognise the highborn from their outlines. She saw Lord Wyman Manderly struggling up the steps, his granddaughters by his side, and then she saw the litter as men-at-arms carried the Greatjon Umber into the hall. Lord Salladhor Saan was unmistakable – the pirate was still wearing his wide brimmed hat. Then there was Ser Ian Poole, Lyra Mormont, Lord Rickon Holt, Lord Bennard Waterman, Lord Norvel Mollen, Lord Alger Bole, Lord Werrick Cray and his wife…

Others walked hesitantly, Sansa could almost see their nerves even from balcony. Sansa watched as she recognised saw Robin Flint escorting his portly and grey-haired mother Lady Lyessa through the doors. Lady Sybelle Glover walked with her two sons, Garen Glover, the six year old Master of Deepwood Motte, and her babe Erena Glover. Young and dark-haired Lady Alys Karstark walked alone. The two Tallhart boys, Beren and Brandon, had no family left – they had to be escorted by a man-at-arms.

_Widows and orphans_, Sansa considered. This war had left a lot of each.

There was much to do, but Sansa’s head had been aching all morning. She distracted herself for a time, trying to name the figures and which loyalty they had held. A good bunch of the guests had previously supported House Bolton, before they bent the knee; there was Arthur Karstark, Barthogan Rose, Lord Harwood Stout, Ser Kyle Condon, Lord Edric Ryder, Rickard and Roose Ryswell…

Sansa sighed, rubbing her brow. She could feel the stress of a hundred different concerns wearing to her. She needed to drink half a goblet of wine, just to calm herself…

In the distance, Sansa saw the dragon bursting from the godswood, to soar over the fields of Winterfell.

She took a deep breath.

Sansa ordered the serving staff to bring the prince his outfit for the ceremony, but then they reported that his chamber was empty. She frowned. “Where has Prince Snow gone?” the princess demanded.

The woman couldn’t reply. Sansa assigned her guards to find him.

It was the early hours of the morn, there were a thousand things she had to see to, and her guards were already rushing to find the prince.

Then, Lord Gregor reported that Prince Snow had been spotted heading to the First Keep, and Sansa understood. The Captain of the Guard offered to summon him for her, but Sansa shook her head and instead walked to meet him.

He had gone to see their father’s tomb.
All around her, the yards were hectic as Sansa paced over the grounds towards the oldest section of the castle. The worn gargoyles of the First Keep loomed at her.

Even despite herself, she felt uneasy – the large ironwood door heading downwards from the lichyard had always made Sansa twitch. As children, Arya and Jon had once played games around the crypts, but Sansa had never joined in. She ordered her escorts to wait outside, and she took a lantern from the wall. The stone staircase winding downwards felt confined and stuffy, she was already sweating.

Most of the unnatural heat had faded away on the surface, but underground it still felt warm. The hot air wafting up from the tunnels made her think of a dragon’s breath.

It was dark, but she heard her footsteps echoing. They had always told her that the vaults below were larger than Winterfell itself, but Sansa had never explored them. The lowest levels were partially collapsed, and other corridors had never been walked in decades. Two stone direwolves stood guard as the passageway opened up into a great cavern – the darkness so thick it threatened to snuff out her torchlight.

A shiver went down her spine as she walked between the rows of stone columns. She could barely name half of them. The stone eyes of Kings Jon Stark, Rickard, Eyron, Theon the Hungry Wolf, Edric Snowbeard, Brandon the Shipwright, Brandon the Burner, Rodrik, Jorah and Jonos, Benjen the Sweet, Benjen the Bitter, Walton the Moon King, Brandon the Bad, and Edwyn the Spring King lingered on her as she passed. Whether aged or younger, the statues were all grim and silent, with stony clothes and armour that made them seemed dressed for war. Their crowns were stone, and their eyes were cold.

The Lords of Winterfell had a different look to them than the Winter Kings, she noticed. Their faces seemed sterner, more focused. Lords Torrhen, Cregan, Brandon, Barth, Jonnel, Rodwell, Beron, Donnor, William and his brother Artos the Implacable, and Edwyle. Their statues stood sentinel, some gripping iron swords tightly, others whose hands marred red with rust.

There was torchlight ahead, where the passageway branched. The final tombs in the crypt – those of Rickard, Lyanna, Brandon and Eddard Stark.

Then, Sansa saw the statue of Lyanna Stark standing in her enclave. The moisture in the warm air glistened over the surface, as if her stone face was weeping. Father had always averted his eyes when walking down here, Sansa remembered.

Ahead of her, there were only empty tunnels reserved for future generations of her family. That was an uneasy thought.

Jon was standing before their father’s bones, his head lowered. He heard her footsteps, but didn’t turn around. She walked slowly and quietly, but even a pin’s drop would echo in these tunnels.

Eddard Stark did not have a proper tomb yet. They had carved her father’s likeness into a statue years ago – but there had been no bones to bury back then. Father had nothing but a statue and a place reserved, while his bones were still lying in a steel box tucked into a corner. Years late, but maybe we might finally put him to rest.

Sansa hadn’t opened the box that Howland Reed brought with him. After so long, a part of her wondered if the bones might have just withered away into dust.

Sansa’s gaze lingered on their father’s statue. A stonemason must have carved it during the brief time Bran sat in Winterfell, before the sack. It didn’t look like Father to her, but for the life of her
she could not even remember what he had looked like. She could visualise his smile, his warmth, his eyes, his smell, but not him.

Jon’s gaze was on the box of bones. She stepped forward.

“Sansa,” Jon called, without turning around. “I heard the bells. Am I late?”

“No.” She spoke low in the crypts, keeping her voice to a murmur. It seemed sacrilegious to raise her voice in this place. “The guests are still gathering.”

“Forgive me, I lost track of time.”

“I understand.” She looked at the box, sealed with a lock and an iron direwolf. “I come here often myself.”

There was a long silence. Sansa took her place next to her half-brother, facing the unbuilt tomb. Her brother’s eyes were only on the craggy features of the statue looming over them. Sansa looked away, she found herself staring at that box.

It was a small box. Hard to imagine a fully-grown man fitting in there.

But then Sansa remembered the sound of the sword swinging downwards, the roar of the crowd before the Sept of Baelor. She hadn’t seen the cut at the time – she had closed her eyes and turned away – but in her mind’s eye there had been a vivid gush of blood spurting out from the open wound.

The thought made her twitch. Vaguely, she wondered what Jon thought of when he looked at the box. Just what were his last memories of their father?

“What do you think he would say if he saw us now?” Jon whispered finally, his voice barely breaking the silence.

“I… I honestly can’t even imagine,” she admitted honestly. So much time had passed since they’d left Winterfell all those years ago, they were both like different people now. Her father would be a stranger to her. She paused, glanced at him. “How do you think he’d react?”

Jon shrugged. “Angrily, most like.”

That answer gave her pause. “At you?”

He hesitated. Her brother opened his mouth, looked like he was about to say something, and then he paused, closing his mouth. It was a while before he finally spoke.

“I did what I needed to do,” he eventually said, speaking lowly. “There’s much that I wish I could have done better, but wishing won’t change a thing.”

*That didn’t quite answer the question,* Sansa noted, but she made silent note of it, letting the comment pass.

Neither of them spoke after. Sansa hesitated, and her fingers twitched. Then after a timeless moment, Sansa reached out her hand, and Jon took it without a word. Their fingers wrapped together. His skin felt callused and rough, but warm.

They stood together, side by side, holding hands before their father’s grave.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps. Uneven feet pattered over the stone floor, broken by the tap of a
walking stick. Jon flinched with the sound and turned around, breaking the grip with her hand, but Sansa recognised the sound, the familiar gait. The sound of wheezy breaths snorted through the air.

“Lord Reed?” Sansa called, and her voice echoed – “Reed, reed, reed…”

The short lord was approaching, limping on his cane. Even the walk down the staircase had left him panting for breath, struggling to breathe in the musty air. He looked between the both of them, and then hesitated. “Your Grace,” he gasped. “Am I intruding?”

The sight of the lord surprised her, and Jon’s gaze flickered back to her. “No,” she replied after a pause, “you were father’s friend, you deserve to be here too.”

Jon took a slow step forward, extending a hand. “Lord Howland Reed, I hear?”

The lord nodded. “It is good to finally meet you, Prince Snow.”

“Likewise.” They shared a somewhat uncertain handshake. There was a pause, as if both were sizing the other’s grip. “I have heard of much of you, my lord. Bran speaks fondly of your daughter.”

“As does Meera of him.” Lord Reed’s eyes lingered over Jon, his face guarded.

“And I hear that you are to be named as Bran’s regent?”

“So I’m told.” Lord Reed gave a humourless smile. “I shall say the same thing I told your sister; I will do what I must. If I can aid by serving as regent, then I will.”

Sansa found that she quite liked Lord Reed. They had spoken at length with each other over the last few days, especially about dealing with the south. The lord had been reluctant to be regent, which made Sansa all the more convinced he would be a decent one. Lord Reed had a calm demeanour, and a thoughtful presence.

“I understand,” Jon said with a nod. His gaze flickered back to their father’s stone face. “You have my thanks for bringing my father’s bones home.”

“None required. I owe Ned much and more. I always will.” Lord Reed kept himself composed, but Sansa noted something queer in his voice. He was staring at Jon, his eyes unusually intent.

Lord Reed cleared his throat, and the musty air was broken by coughing. “I owe a debt to you as well, Prince Snow.” Lord Reed said after a long moment, turning back to Jon. “My son, Jojen.”

“Ah.” Jon looked momentarily perturbed. “I heard of him. Bran told me that he was missing.”

“Missing, but not lost.” Lord Reed nodded. “Jojen was found by the Night’s Watch, although none knew who he was,” he explained. “My son was there at the Battle of the Wall, and then he fled among the refugees. He remembers seeing you, in fact. He was among the refugees fleeing to Winterfell, my guards found him coming through the gates.”

Jon blinked. “I did not know that.”

“I understand,” Lord Reed wheezed, his voice dry, almost a rasp. “But you have my gratitude nonetheless. The refugees only escaped the battle thanks to your actions. If not for your relief force, I very much doubt that my son would be alive right now.”

“That battle… it was a hard one.”
“Oh, I’m well aware. I’ve spoken to men who followed you, and they all say the same – they say that you were the very first into battle and the last to fall. There were a thousand men behind you, but none fought harder.” He lowered his head fractionally, in a slight bow. “I know of the threat to the realm, Your Grace – and I know that you are fighting against it.”

The prince seemed taken back at the comment. “That… that is good to hear.”

Lord Reed’s voice was quiet and solemn. He stood with his arms crossed, leaving a respectful distance between himself and Jon and Sansa.

Her gaze passed between the two of them. Lord Reed broke away from Jon and limped forward into the crypts. He turned in the chamber, looking between Brandon’s and Lyanna’s tombs. “The last time I stood here,” Lord Reed mused, “was when they put Lyanna’s bones to rest. Gods, eighteen years ago.”

“Has it changed much?” Sansa asked.

“Unfortunately, yes.” He gave a hoarse sigh, and his deep green eyes turned to linger over their father’s statue. “I never wanted to come back here.”

Neither of them spoke. The crypts were entirely silent, and yet it still felt too loud.

Finally, Sansa felt the need to say something, to fill the gloom of the crypts. “He would have wanted to be here.” Her voice was low. “Next to his father, his brother and sister.”

“And Robb,” Jon added. “We must build a tomb for Robb too.”

Sansa paused. She hadn’t thought of that, she hadn’t wanted to. “Do we have Robb’s bones?”

“No,” Jon replied darkly. “I don’t know what Walder Frey did with them. Robb’s remains are lost.” For a moment, Jon paused, his eyes going distant. She noticed his fist clenching. “As are Benjen’s, and Arya’s.”

Her lips pursed. “And my mother’s.” Sansa’s voice was a whisper. They would need to carve an empty tomb for Catelyn Stark too.

“There are no bones in Brandon’s or Rickard’s crypts either,” Lord Reed said suddenly, pointing towards the two tombs. “Those coffins are empty.”

Sansa glanced at him. “Truly?”

“Oh yes. Ned had them commissioned in remembrance. The Mad King never surrendered their remains, but the wildfire would have left little behind regardless.” Sansa noticed Lord Reed’s eyes flicker. “Lyanna was the only one we managed to return after the Rebellion.”

“I did not know that,” she admitted. *Father never told me.*

“It happens.” Lord Reed nodded. “We do not always get to say our goodbyes so properly. This place,” he nodded towards the shadows, “it’s more for remembrance. So many Starks have died in battle through the ages, I’d be surprised if half these tombs were filled.”

Moments passed. Jon looked to Lord Reed curiously. “You fought against the Targaryens once,” Jon noted finally. “Did you ever imagine that my father’s children would be considering a betrothal to them?”
Lord Reed went silent for a long time. “I have long since stopped being able to guess the future, Your Grace,” he said finally.

The only sound was the whisper of the flames. The silence grew agonising.

“Jon, we should go,” Sansa said eventually. “The ceremony awaits, there is still preparation to be done. We do not want to be late.” We have lingered long enough.

“Aye.” Jon nodded, and turned. “It was good to meet you, Lord Reed.”

Sansa turned to leave, and Jon followed, but then Lord Reed grimaced. He kept on glancing back towards Jon. “Your Grace, if you have a moment…”

“My lord?” Jon frowned. They both stopped.

“I have wanted a chance…” Lord Reed sounded hesitant, unsure.

“What is it, my lord?”

“Well, you mentioned the Targaryens, and I know of your intentions towards Daenerys Targaryen. It feels important to ask…” Lord Reed said with the utmost caution. “May I ask, how much do you know of the Rebellion?”

“Enough,” Jon said with a nod. “I’ve heard of it all my life – I was born during it.”

“How much did your father tell you?” His voice was probing, uncertain. Sansa frowned. What is he asking? Sansa wondered. Lord Reed had been acting strangely around Jon this whole time.

“He told me what happened, how it started. The Mad King demanded father’s head, and Arryn, Stark and Baratheon replied with defiance. Father went to war to avenge his brother and father, and to rescue his sister.”

“Lyanna.” Lord Reed nodded. “Did he ever tell you of her?”

“Little,” Jon admitted. “Father did not like to speak of her.”

“He told us some.” Sansa nodded. “He said that she was very beautiful, strong-willed, kind.” They said she was like Arya.

“That she was,” Lord Reed agreed. “Lyanna was fierce and determined, none could deny that. I met her at Harrenhal, a lifetime ago. She was the one to introduce me to your father.” He took a deep, wheezy breath. His strained breaths slurred his words as he spoke. “I had a fancy for her once. Oh, it was but a foolish child’s admiration, but Lyanna often had that effect. I think that half of Harrenhal was smitten on her, the other half on Ashara. Robert went through a woman a week, but with Lyanna he was smitten and speechless – not that she ever gave him a second glance.” He sighed. “If Lyanna had asked me to run off with her, well, I doubt that I could have refused.”

Run off. That was a queer thing to say, the choice of phrase made Sansa frown. “‘Run off’?” Sansa repeated. “She was kidnapped?”

Howland Reed pursed his lips. “That… that is not wholly accurate, Your Grace,” he admitted. “It was a simplification, a convenient half-truth to tell after the rebellion. Tempers were still high, and to call it kidnap allowed blame to be assigned more easily.”

Sansa had to stop to process that statement. Next to her, Jon had a slight frown on his face.
“Rhaegar did *not* steal her?”

“Not at first.” Lord Reed shook his head. “It was very hard to prove anything, but I strongly suspect that Rhaegar and Lyanna eloped together. Many others suspected the same.”

“That…” Sansa hesitated, processing the statement. “I did not know that.”

“It was not oft spoken. Some things were best left forgotten after the war,” Lord Reed admitted. “But as you now intend to ally, even betroth with the Targaryens, I feel it is important to tell you this.”

“Please.” Sansa crossed her arms. “Do.”

The lord seemed uncharacteristically on-edge. He wanted to say something, Sansa realised. Lord Reed’s eyes lingered on her, but he kept glancing to Jon.

“Lyanna was young and defiant, Rhaegar dashing and charming,” he explained uneasily. “They collided at the tourney at Harrenhal. I suppose it could be called love at first sight. Or perhaps Lyanna just wanted to escape her betrothal, perhaps Rhaegar just wanted to leave his wife – but they abandoned the world and left the riverlands together. Lyanna chose not to return north, Rhaegar did not go back to the capital. I know of no evidence of duress.” There was a pause. “They were… they were in love.”

*Truly?* Sansa thought. That surprised her, but she did not think Lord Reed was one to lie. Next to her, Jon’s frown deepened. “I heard that Rhaegar was a monster,” he said. “That he raped and stole Lyanna – the Targaryen’s madness.”

“The Targaryen’s madness.” Lord Reed’s eyes lingered on her. “Some matters are too easily obscured, Your Grace. At the war’s end, there was a…. bias to paint history a certain colour.”

Sansa turned towards Lyanna’s statue, cold and still. The air in the crypts felt suffocating. “It was only afterwards,” Lord Reed continued, “that matters grew more dire.”

“When Rhaegar’s father murdered Lyanna’s father and brother,” Jon noted.

“Quite,” he explained. “After that deed, Lyanna wanted to leave. She wanted to return home. But Rhaegar did not allow her, he instead had her confined and removed in secret.”

“Why did he do that?” Sansa asked lowly. A slow feeling of despair washed over her. She had not known any of this.

“As a hostage? To keep her protected?” Lord Reed shook his head. “To Rhaegar’s mind, Lyanna’s entire family were rebels, and she was important. He secluded her and kept her in secret, even from his own family. Perhaps he feared that Aerys would execute her himself? I cannot speak to Rhaegar’s motives, but to Lyanna it was imprisonment. Lyanna always hated being controlled.”

“When Ned and I arrived at the Tower of Joy,” he continued dourly, “we met the last of the Targaryen Kingsguard. Ser Arthur, Oswell, Gerold… they were always more loyal to Rhaegar than to their liege. He ordered them to keep Lyanna under lock and key. When we finally reached her, her fingernails were torn and bloody – she had been scratching and screaming at the door, trying to escape.” His voice grew sad and silent. “Lyanna’s tale was a whirlwind love with a bitter ending.”

The statement was met by a hush.

Sansa was the first to speak. “I… I did not know that.”
“Tis a painful memory. I understand why Ned did not wish to speak of it.” He hesitated, still looking at Jon. “But are you sure your father never mentioned this? What happened at Harrenhal or afterwards?”

“He did not,” Jon replied.

“I see.” Lord Reed’s mouth curled.

There was more silence. Sansa inspected the lord, trying to read his expression. He kept himself too guarded, but he still seemed conflicted. Why is he bringing this up? Sansa wondered. Is this due to our offer of alliance?

“You talk about Rhaegar almost kindly, my lord.” Sansa noted. “He was Daenerys’ brother, supposedly this Aegon’s father? I heard that Robert used to curse his name.”

“Rhaegar… he was complicated.” Howland Reed sighed. “I have had eighteen years to find peace with what happened, and yet I have found little.” He leaned backwards, resting fractionally atop the dusty tomb of Rickard. “The tourney at Harrenhal was where it all began.”

In his quiet, wheezy voice, Howland Reed started to speak of Harrenhal. He described a great feast and festivity, of a thousand banners and knights stretching as far as the eye could see. It had been the greatest tourney of its time. There was a sense of wonder in his voice as he described it.

The lord had a presence that seemed to fill the crypts with quiet. Sansa and Jon only listened.

“I first met Lyanna as she chased off three attackers with a wooden sword,” he explained softly. “I was attacked by three squires that targeted me for my queer dress as I travelled. She took me to her tent to bandage my wounds, and introduced me to her brothers. Brandon had to restrain her from hunting down the miscreants that assaulted me. I was but a crannogman so far out of my element, but Lyanna still danced with me during the feast. Every highborn son and daughter of the realm, lords and princes alike, they were all in attendance in the feast. Your father was too nervous to ask – Brandon had to convince Ashara Dayne to dance with Ned, but your father was a shy man in those days. Brandon took the next dance. I remember Prince Oberyn playing knife games over the table, Robert drank three great lords under the table, and then Prince Rhaegar sang a song so beautiful that Lyanna wept.

“The day afterwards, your uncle offered me a spare suit of armour and a horse for the tourney, to avenge myself on my attackers. I would have only made a fool of myself, but Lyanna overheard.” He shook his head. “She chose to join the jousts herself, as a mystery knight – ‘the Knight of the Laughing Tree’, she called herself. She muffled her voice with a scarf, and challenged the knights of the squires that attacked me.”

Sansa raised her eyebrow. Despite himself, a fond smile lingered on Lord Reed’s lips with the memory. A childish fancy, he had phrased it.

“Lyanna bested three different knights in her guise, and then disappeared mid-tourney,” the lord continued. “It was quite a stir. Aerys likely believed it to be part of some conspiracy or another – he ordered the crown prince to chase the mystery knight.”

Lord Reed took a deep breath. “And that was how Rhaegar and Lyanna met,” he explained, with a twitch in his weedy voice. “Rhaegar was going to tell the king of her, but Lyanna challenged him to a duel for his silence. They sparred with each other, Lyanna still clad in her mismatched armour. Lyanna won. Rhaegar lied to his father and told the king he never found her. They were both entranced with each other after that.”
“And then Rhaegar won the tourney,” Sansa muttered, “and crowned her queen of love and beauty.”

“He did.” His voice turned sad.

Sansa had never heard the way he described it before… in her mind’s eye, she saw two young and vibrant youths entranced with each other. Romantic, even. *Like a story from a song.*

That made it all the more painful to look back at Lyanna’s statue – to see that lifeless stone standing so cold and stiff. Sansa wished she could have met her.

The memories seemed to weigh heavily on Lord Reed’s words. Perhaps it was the crypts and the tombs, making them all feel overly melancholic.

Next to her, Jon had his arms folded. “Why are you telling us this, my lord?” Jon said, with something of suspicion in his voice.

“Because I feel like you should know,” the lord replied.

In the distance, they heard a muted chime echoing through the ground. The bells of Winterfell. The coronation. The sound shook Sansa from her reverie – they were going to be late. “Jon,” Sansa said finally. “We must leave.”

“All right,” Lord Reed mumbled, but still he seemed reluctant to leave things like that. “But… Jon, may I have a word?” Lord Reed asked, with an uncomfortable look towards Sansa. “In private?”

There was an unspoken flicker between them. Jon hesitated, glancing at Sansa standing by the exit. “Anything you can say to me,” Jon replied coolly, “you can say before my sister too, my lord.”

“We’re going to be late,” Sansa warned.

“This will only take a moment, I think I need to…” Lord Reed grimaced. “It is… personal.”

Jon smiled humourlessly. “Is this about my mother?”

Lord Reed looked shocked. Sansa blinked.

“I guessed from all the talk of Harrenhal,” Jon admitted. “You were my father’s companion in Dorne, you must have been with him at Starfall.” Lord Reed hesitated. “You were there when he brought me north?”

“I… I was.” He seemed put off-guard by this sudden turn of the conversation.

“I understand why you are so cautious, my lord.” Jon nodded. “But I already know of the rumours. My mother was Ashara Dayne.”

Lord Reed paused, and blinked. “… *Ah.*”

Sansa frowned. “Truly?”

He nodded again. “They met at Harrenhal, out of wedlock,” Jon explained simply. “He must have been taken with Ashara. And I was born later in the middle of the war.” Jon looked at Lord Reed, who fell silent. “And I am guessing that House Dayne has some distant Valyrian blood somewhere? I have heard the Daynes oft bear silver hair.”
Sansa was left confused, but Jon said it so straightforwardly. “I never heard that.” I heard of the fisherman’s daughter. Was Lord Borrell mistaken?

Jon only shrugged. “My mother is unimportant. I’ve long since stopped caring for her. It does not change who I am, or what must be done.”

Lord Reed only hesitated. For one painful moment, he looked torn.

“Your mother…” Lord Reed cleared his throat. “Ashara Dayne was pregnant, but it was not with Ned’s child. Ned only danced with Ashara, as did a dozen others. It was Brandon who took her to bed after the feast.”

There was no reply. Jon frowned.

“But after the fall of King’s Landing,” Howland Reed continued, “we met with Ashara again. We found her hiding amongst those taking shelter from the sack. Ned promised her safe passage to Dorne. Robert was on the warpath hunting down the last of the loyalists. She was scared for her family’s life.” His quiet voice grew pained. “Ashara revealed to us in confidence where Lyanna and the last of the Kingsguard were hiding – she was the one to point us to the Tower of Joy. Ashara trusted Ned, you see – she believed that we could reason with her brother Arthur before Robert found them, that perhaps we could convince Ser Arthur to surrender.

“But instead, we arrived at the Tower of Joy and there was no reasoning with them. We were forced to kill him.” Howland sighed grimly. “Ashara blamed herself for her brother’s death. In grief, Ashara Dayne jumped from the tower at Starfall, with her baby in her arms.”

Jon blinked. Sansa looked to her half-brother. Perhaps Lord Reed was waiting for Jon to ask the question, but he didn’t. Jon didn’t speak, he just went quiet.

“It was Ned who carried you to Starfall, Jon. You were born at the Tower of Joy.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Jon’s voice was a mumble. “How could…?”

The air went still.

The moments in the crypts turned tense. In the distance, they heard the bells ringing. Lord Reed’s soft voice sounded like a confession.

“Ned swore me to secrecy,” the lord admitted. “That is a vow I have just broken. Ned loved you like a father and he only ever wanted you to be happy. He believed that the truth would only bring you pain.”

It took a few seconds for the realisation to drip over her. For her to finally connect the dots. She stared in dumb shock as she realised what he was saying.

*Jon was born at the Tower of Joy. But that means…*

“Your mother, Jon,” Lord Reed continued, “was not Ashara Dayne. That was simply a convenient lie that your father and Lord Dayne let spread, one that neither of them denied or acknowledged. The whole realm knew she was pregnant, most simply assumed. Your true mother lies in the tomb over there.”

He was pointing behind them. At the frozen statue of Lyanna. The statue’s arms were crossed. The stone woman had never looked so mournful.
Silence reigned. Perhaps Lord Reed was waiting for a reply. Jon gave none.

“I am telling you this now because of the words of that woods witch,” Lord Reed admitted, as the silence stretched uncomfortably long. “I swore that I would take this secret to my grave, but Ned could not have known these circumstances. I feel you need to know.”

“The woods witch?” Sansa muttered mutely.

He nodded. “That night… the things she said. That woman knew of the vow that I made. I can only assume that whatever magics she used revealed it.” Lord Reed grimaced. “And I did not want you to learn of your parentage from a biased source, Jon. I want you to know the full truth, and nothing less.”

Sansa remembered that night. The witch – Mother Mole – had been covered in blood, raving in the dark. She had mentioned something of an oath, of red sands? Sansa hadn’t understood what it had meant at the time, but Lord Reed clearly had been disturbed by the words. Secrets she could not have known, Sansa realised.

Unsure, Sansa glanced to Jon, but his face was like stone. He didn’t look at her, he didn’t respond. All around them, the stone statues and direwolves loomed in the torchlight.

Lord Reed took a deep, uneven breath. “Jon, you are the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark.”

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be an epilogue and an appendix.

After that (chapter 52), will be the start of Book 2: Fire…

There are three kings in Westeros, and one queen. Queen Daenerys Targaryen sails her fleet west to reclaim her birthright and to liberate her people. The enemies she expected to face are vanquished, and Aegon Targaryen, Jon Snow and Euron Greyjoy each have intentions of their own concerning her. She arrives with a legion of former slaves and a horde of savages, all following Daenerys on the promise of safety and freedom - but there is little of either to be had in the west.

This kingdom has been broken by war, and dark forces plague on the living. The old magics are returning, ancient powers are awakened, and the Seven Kingdoms faces a Doom like nothing they have ever seen before.

Prince Jon Snow must fight to secure desperately needed aid for his newfound kingdom, yet the God-King Euron Greyjoy stands in his path.

Meanwhile, Lord Commander Samwell Tarly must try to hold a broken barrier against an unbeatable and never-ending enemy. The Wall is breached, and winter is here.

The battle of ice and fire looms ever closer.
The cage was forged from gold and magic, the chains from silver and blood. Rubies glinted in the metal of the slave collar, and the chains were fastened securely to the granite of the mountain. Great claws clenched, scraping over the mosaic tiles lining the gilded cage. The red dragon growled, stirring uselessly against its bonds.

The cage was as large as a castle, but it still barely fit the dragon. There was no space to move, no slack to struggle or even squirm against. Leg and claw, snout and wing, neck and tail – the great beast’s every muscle was bound in chains of spellforged silver. It was barely even able to breathe through its gilded muzzle. The dragon was bound like a worm, given not even the slightest chance to struggle. All it could do was slowly scrape its horns against the golden bars, while the shining metal hissed against its scales. The dragon was bound by enchantment after enchantment of blood and fire, each one foul and horrible.

The dragon’s scales shone crimson in the morning light. It could feel nothing but pure rage. Its black eyes stared unblinking over at the fine marble plaza housing its cage, built into the side of a mountain so high that it loomed over the lowermost clouds. A ‘stable’, the slavers called it. In the distance, other dragons were soaring over the surrounding mountains, and it could see black stone buildings and archways scattered over the jagged landscape. Down in the valleys below there were overcrowded slums filled with humans, but the mountain peaks were dominated by huge palaces, built from solid black or crystal white stone.

It had been trapped here for what felt like a lifetime. A low hatred drummed unending in its chest as the dragon stared at the world beyond the golden bars.

“A beautiful beast, don’t you think?” a smooth, almost liquid voice laughed. Footsteps tapped over the courtyard, coming ever closer. “My finest.”

Beady black eyes flicked, and the dragon saw them. They were silver-haired men with pale skin and violet eyes, looking down from the terrace above. They scuttled around like insects that the dragon longed to crush. They were walking along the shaped marble pavilion, laughing as they talked, sipping wine from golden goblets. The stink of their perfume burned the dragon’s nostrils.

“He’s a wild dragon, is he not?”

“Oh yes, my father was the one to capture him,” the voice replied, in that infuriating high-pitched human chirping. “Older now, but he’s never lost his fire.”

“I have never trusted the wild stock.” The other man turned his nose up. “They are too unstable.”

“Unstable?” His partner laughed. “Try ferocious. In the last championship games, he brought down Prince Aeragon’s mount – and that dragon was nigh twice his size. I’ve never known a beast with half as much fury as this one.”

The pale man stepped closer, fearlessly staring over the mountainous red dragon, so close that his
hand hovered over the dragon’s red scales. He was a weedy, tall figure – with a slim build, slicked back silver hair, and a hooked nose, wearing white and red robes. His purple eyes were narrowed and shadowed.

The dragon’s blood boiled with hatred. A small gust of smoke billowed from its nostrils, but the silver-haired man only smiled.

“Ivaryx,” the slaver whispered.

The red dragon wanted to roar, to flame, but then there was pain burning across its scales. The enchantments upon its ruby collar started to burn. The metal contracted, clenching around its throat. The beast tensed, but it wasn’t even allowed to twitch in pain. It could not crush these bugs, even though every instinct in its body was screaming to destroy.

The other man only laughed. “You named your dragon after the god of war?”

“If you saw its rage, you would too.”

“You’re as bad as Gaemon, Alexys,” the other silvery man said snidely. “He has no creativity in his names, either. I mean, Balerion? What a clichéd name – I swear that half the dragons on the lists are named after some god or another.”

“It is often done.” The slaver shrugged. “Our gods are defunct, but their names are still decent.”

“I for one would never buy a dragon named such.”

“As if you could ever afford to purchase a dragon such as this,” the man snorted with derision. “This cage alone is more than you could ever hope to own. Ivaryx requires more bindings than any other dragon in this realm.”

*Dragonlords*, these fools called themselves. Dragon slavers. The red dragon despised them with a fury like none it had ever known. It hated even the unnatural stink of their blood, the sound of their voices.

And yet still they were standing before it, pointing and chattering.

Its slavemaster placed a hand on its snout. The red dragon longed to bite it off.

The two men were laughing, teasing each other as they paced idly around the dragon’s cage. Their tiny yet shrill voices ached the red dragon’s ears. It wanted to fly, wanted to hunt, wanted to soar. Instead, it was trapped in a cage.

But most of all, it wanted to kill. The vision of burning these insects into ash flickered before its gaze, over and over.

It wanted to shatter these bonds, to explode in an inferno of flame and fury…

But each time it even thought of such, it felt the pain under its scales. The enchantments were woven by that accursed horn, they caused agonising pain with every spark of defiance.

What should have been a roar of fury only emerged as a low, strained snarl. The slavers looked up at the dragon, and then laughed.

The beast was bound as much by foul sorcery as it was by gilded steel.

“Wild dragons are too unpredictable,” the man said. “Ferocious, maybe, but what use is fury
without control? You would lose against any bonded rider in the games.”

“I do not care for games,” the slaver sneered. He flicked his fingers, and a hooded figure rushed to serve more wine. “These jousts bore me. Ivaryx was not meant for the games, he was meant for war.”

“You may well have your chance soon enough. I hear that the Consul is summoning riders to stop these eastern barbarians.”

“The horse scum?” he scoffed. “Look at how far we have fallen – the greatest concern to us are some invaders from over the mountains? No, these Dothraki are distractions.”

“There’s a horde of them, from what I hear, and more coming west. Already they threaten our outer colonies.”

“You fear their horses?” he sneered. “No, these invaders only show how lax we have become. Unchallenged. Whatever happened to the days of true Valyria, where we could bring conquest from the skies?”

They both took a long sip of wine. “You always were ambitious.”

“I am not alone.” There was something in the way he said those words, the other man’s eyes narrowed. “Our dragons were not meant for this – this peace is suffocating us.” His arms waved, motioning over the wide courtyard and intricate statues. “What happened to the days of expansion?”

His partner’s voice was guarded. “The Senate says otherwise.”

“The Senate.” The words were twisted with anger. “A bunch of scared old fools, rotting atop the bones of their ancestor’s glories. Cowards all. They have no right to rule the Freehold.”

“The Forty Families each have their say—”

The silver-haired man slammed his hand onto the cage’s bars, his golden rings chiming against the metal. All around him, the hooded slaves flinched. “Yes, there is no shortage of saying! The Senate twists and turns, debates and holds motions – and all the while Valyria rots from the inside.”

The other man did not reply. The slaver took a step backwards, anger wafting from him. His hooked nose peered down at his wine. “I want an expansion,” he said finally. ‘Is it not our right to rule the world? How can the Senate be satisfied with what little we have?”

There was a long pause of consideration. The two men both turned tense.

“The grey plague has left the Senate scared,” his partner said after a time. “That damnable curse still hangs over us all.”

“Fear,” the slaver scoffed. “Fear makes Valyria weak. These ‘Dothraki’ are just the latest in a line of plebs trying to topple us.”

His partner paused, the silence stretching a bit longer. “I do not disagree, Alexys,” he said finally. “But expand where? The eastern lands? The jungle?

“Qarth prefers to pay us off in spices, there is no war there,” he continued. They were both looking intently at each other, as they stepped back over the terraces. “After Qarth? Those monkey men are a quagmire on their own, and further east still no dragon is welcome under the Shadow. The
southern forests, that is a cursed land, disease in every breath. No,” he shook his head. “Sothoryos is folly, the Belaerys girl proved that. What does that leave us with? The lands beyond, a scattering of desolate tribes and primitives? Savages incapable of even paying tribute, scarcely even worth the effort of ruling.”

“And the sunset kingdoms?”

“The Senate will never step forward in those lands, they fear the old lore… The trees…”

“Soothsayers and foolish prophecy!” the slaver cursed loudly, violet eyes flashing. His goblet chimed off the ground, he had thrown it over his shoulder. “The Senate is made of old men clutching their withered dicks…”

They were walking away from the dragon, it was hard to hear the words. The human tongues were nigh-incomprehensible to the dragon.

As they walked, the man clicked his fingers, and a faceless slave hurried over with another goblet. “This Freehold has grown stagnant, brother. Thanks to the Senate, we cannot act – ours is the greatest might in all the world, but we are not allowed to use it? Allowed?”

His partner shrugged. “Your family is the same. As is mine. The Forty Families have long since grown comfortable with the cities and colonies they already own. No Lord Freeholder will beseech themselves to move for more, our fathers are too preoccupied with their little power struggles.”

“They have forgotten themselves. They have grown fat and lazy. They have lost their way, they have forgotten the ideal from which we were born!” His voice was louder, sharper than his partner’s. “The only gods are the ones that we have created.”

“Brother, this talk…”

“It is not just talk.” His voice grew low, the dragon could barely make out the sound. “Others are thinking the same. The red comet heralds the era of change, it is written in the stars.

“No, what Valyria is truly lacking, brother,” the slaver muttered, “is an emperor.”

The dragon could smell them – its slaver was oozing eagerness and ambition, but the other man wafted fear and hesitance. “Those are dangerous words.”

“I told you – these are not just words. There is one among us who could make this realm great again. One who would have been Consul, if not for the Senate’s lack of spine.” The other figure stiffened, and the dragonslaver peered through the corner of his eyes, inspecting his partner with suspicion. “I have already pledged my support to him, and if you were to pledge yours… well, I wonder… how many of our comrades among the Forty might be thinking the same as us?”

They were muttering in low voices as they walked away. The dragonslavers supped on fruit and wine as they talked eagerly amongst themselves. The red dragon heard the words, but it could not understand or care for half of what they said.

They were the princes of Valyria, being served on hand and foot by hooded slaves. The slaves were each wearing blindfolds – it was forbidden for such to even look upon the sons of the blood. They hid themselves under cloaks, their eyes blind under their hoods, and scuttled around the terrace by touch alone. The slaves kept their heads low, so that the dragonslavers need not even see their faces.

If the slaves ever disappointed, they were simply fed to their master’s dragons.
The days passed slowly. The red dragon was left trapped in its cage, watching other dragons – the ones that embraced their slavery – fly over the mountains. The red dragon hated them too. It hated them for their weakness, it hated them for their freedom. Its hate for them was no less than it was for their masters.

Something was happening in the palace. There were more dragons coming and going, more discussions happening in the palace and on the terrace. Steadily those conversations grew larger, louder, and more frenzied.

The red dragon could smell it in the air. The stink of fear, apprehension and ambition. The stench of conspiracy, brewing thicker and thicker.

Its slaver was fond of holding his meetings out on the terrace overlooking the ocean, where he could show off his collection of dragons to his guests. The red dragon watched as more and more were summoned – a collection of foul-blooded men and women filling up the manse. Each one of them rode dragons of their own, and each one was followed by chained and branded slaves wearing hoods.

The silver-haired youths sat out on the terraces, underneath the glittering night sky. At dusk, the comet shimmered above and cast its own shadows.

They were all young, all wealthy, and all eager for change.

“Why should we fear the nattering of lesser men?” the slaver announced. “What does the dragon care for the insect? We are the sons of Valyria, the future is ours to seize!”

“It is dangerous to defy prophecy,” a voice protested. “The warnings…”

“You sound as bad as that ‘Targaryen’ bitch,” another sneered. “Should we fear the raving of some mad girl?”

“Their family is the weakest of the Forty, their prince a superstitious coward. Targaryen is unimportant,” a man argued. “But the Houses Germantes, Belaerys, Vestaeron, or Camaegor… if we can subdue the traditionalists among the Lords Freeholder…”

“The Consul will not allow it!” another voice protested. “You are talking of an uprising – we do not have the support.”

“We have the dragons,” another prince argued. “Others are mustering for us – Aurion has already left for the colonies, to gather support in our liege’s name. This must be done quickly; we burn the Senate, kill the Consul, and the rest will bend.”

Others sounded aghast at the thought. “You expect sons to murder fathers, for kin to overthrow the heads of their houses?”

“This is for the future of Valyria, not the future of your houses!” a voice cried, from one of those who stood near the slaver. “It is because of the Senate that our families are left divided!”

Voices rose in protest, a scramble of cries and objections. The red dragon’s slaver stepped forward, raising his hands high. “Look around you! The Lords Freeholder sitting in the Senate grow old and hold ceaseless votes, but we are the youth who fly our dragons into battle! Everyone here has been scorned by the freeholders – scorned by those who expect blind obedience and give nothing in return! Our fathers scheme by day and assassinate by night, and our empire rots!”

There was a murmur of agreement. “There have been too many weak Consuls!” one called over the
din. “It is conspiracy, clear for all to see. This last election – a farce by any account.”

“The Senate is done! The Senate withers away, while we defend Valyria, not they! Their dragons have grown fat, weak and lazy, but ours?” The slaver motioned dramatically, pointing towards the red dragon’s cage. “Our dragons are fighting strong and battle-hardened!”

“Hear, hear!” a prince clapped from the crowd.

His voice raised higher. “We are the might of Valyria!” the slaver boomed, to the stomping of feet. “We are its future!”

“We are Valyrians!” another shouted, picking up the cry. “We shall forge our own future!”

The slaver stood up at the centre of the feast and raised his crystal goblet high. The wine glinted in the comet’s light, red liquid sloshing out from the goblet’s brim.

“We shall perform the Grand Rite!” he declared. “And we shall ensure Valyria’s greatness for the next thousand years!”

From its cage, the red dragon just watched. The dissenters were falling quiet, one by one. There were still some objectors to the plan, but those were quickly silenced with promises or threats. One silver-haired youth continued to object – he threatened to tell the Senate – and then the slaver drew a blade of black steel. The youth’s corpse dropped to the stones, his throat cloven in two.

The dragonlords only laughed and cheered as their comrade bled out. “Long live the emperor!” they cried. “Long live Valyria!”

Out on the terrace, it was a celebration. The youths were getting drunk on wine and dreams, chanting their support. The corpse was left in the centre of the feast for all to see.

When they finally walked away, they absentmindedly left the body for their slaves to clear up. Without a word, the slaves bowed and blindly obeyed. The faceless slaves dragged the silver-haired corpse over the stones towards the dragon’s feeding trough.

But as soon as their masters left, the red dragon saw the slaves starting to huddle. They spoke in low mutters, but they moved with purpose. All the while the princes had been plotting and scheming, they never even gave a second thought to all the hooded slaves waiting around them. Waiting and listening.

To the dragon’s nostrils, the slaves stank of death. Underneath their hoods, their faces were false. The dragon could feel their malice in the air, the stink of their illusions, but the silvery-haired men were blind. They couldn’t see the ill intent hovering through the manse, hidden in the shadows beneath their slaves’ hoods.

The red dragon growled, and it felt the whisper of shadows dance around him.

…”

It was a night of fire, battle and blood.

The dragon sensed when it began. It had been building like a storm hovering over the mountains, the skies growing tense and stuffy with expectation. It was slow to build, but quick to unravel. It unleashed like a thunderstorm, a hurricane of wings and fire. The dragon could feel the death in the air as the civil war cut through the heart of Valyria.
It was a bloody red night as the teams of slaves unfastened the silver chains. On the orders of their master, the hooded slaves prepared the red dragon for war, and its great body shivered.

The dragon was clad in an outer shell of black steel, armoured by a spiked helm with sheathes of chainmail over its wings. The steel breastplate alone was as large as a ship’s hull. In full battle dress, the red dragon looked even larger and more formidable, its joints clanging with every movement.

The slaver himself was saddled onto the red dragon’s back, with burning whip in hand as it forced the red dragon into the fray.

Red wings blocked out the moon. The dark skies shone crimson with the comet’s light, illuminating the city in a bloody glow. The dragon was let loose to burn, but the one who truly deserved to die – its ‘master’ – stood in command. The accursed sorcery forced the beast to obey.

A blue dragon lunged at it from a nearby mountain, but the red dragon was larger and fiercer. The red beast tore it out of the sky, but there was another, then another. Most were fledglings only a third or less its size – and they were barely even fodder against the crimson dragon.

All around it, the waves of dragons roiled and collided in the sky.

The slaver’s whip cracked. The man was laughing. “Burn, Ivaryx, burn!”

The Red Death obeyed. Flames exploded from its jaws, and instantly a crystal palace was consumed by the fire. Black smoke plumed everywhere like a storm, even the ground was burning.

As far as the eye could see, dragons were being ripped out of the sky, the battle spreading outwards over the golden city. Towers of smoke littered over the horizon, and the battle was growing over all the mountains.

The red dragon roared in the dusk. The humans had turned on each other. A civil war raged in the sky.

The youth of Valyria didn’t want a Freehold anymore, they wanted an Empire. They wanted an Emperor.

Over the horizon, pale grey wings unfolded, and an immense beast took to the sky. A gargantuan, one of the very few dragons even larger than the red. It was so large that it crushed a smaller beast in its jaws, easily shaking a yellow dragon apart. The air was burning as the grey beast lumbered into the fray, its wings straining just to lift its own weight.

It was a dragon of a Lord Freeholder, one of the largest on the opposing side. One of the largest dragons in the world, over twice the red’s size. The flaming whip cracked, and the red dragon was pushed into battle.

All the other dragons avoided the grey behemoth, but the red dragon swooped downwards and engaged.

The grey dragon was massive, but it was also old and heavy. It hadn’t seen battle in a long, long time, it had been centuries since it last hunted or was challenged. The grey dragon might have overwhelmed the red with pure size and strength, but the red was armoured and faster. The grey struggled to maneuver, while the red swept above it. Burning jaws went straight for the nape of its wings.

Atop of the red dragon, the slaver was laughing. “Kill, Ivaryx!”
The old man riding the grey dragon died in a fiery blaze, scorched straight off his mount’s back. The dragon’s teeth bit straight into the grey wings.

The dragon screeched so loud that the earth trembled, they both collided in a fiery blaze in mid-air.

The grey dragon was tumbling downwards, but it was still fighting. It didn’t fall easily. Huge claws twisted around and scraped at the red dragon’s armour, tearing through the metal breastplate and dragging the red dragon down with it. They were both tumbling downwards.

It was too heavy, the red dragon couldn’t shake it loose. For one fearful moment, it looked like they would both hit the ground together.

Then a black dragon swept downwards, claws outstretched. Great talons ripped straight through the old grey, and burning blood splattered. The grey dragon went limp.

It crashed onto the earth with a dull thud, flattening two dozen buildings beneath it.

The red dragon was panting as it tried to gain height again. The grey dragon’s talons had torn off its breastplate and half its armour, but it didn’t care. Its blood was singing with the thrill of battle.

Above it, the black dragon soared. An immense black dragon with bright red eyes, and old scars across its scales. A war dragon. A crowd below was cheering.

The Emperor of Valyria had taken to the skies. The man himself was a strong and broad figure for a human, every bit a warrior. His hair was shining silver, and one eye was vivid purple, and the other burning red. He wore pitch black armour that shimmered with magic, and held a blindingly bright, glowing sword in his hand.

There was fighting in the streets, while crowds of men and women chanted his name with frenzy.

The red dragon flew right next to the black as they devoured the Lords Freeholder in flames.

Most of their enemies never even had time to release their dragons from the cages they were kept, only a few of the opposing dragonriders managed to take to the skies. A dozen great dragons were slain in their cages, burnt to death and crushed as the structures collapsed down onto them.

The battle was quick, devastating and bloody. The red dragon watched from the skies as the imperialists stormed the white crystal structure of the Senate and put all dissenters to the sword. Old men with silver hair – the former lords of their houses – were dragged out in chains.

The slaver’s schemes had come to fruition; he had rallied the princes of the Freehold to declare one of their own Emperor. The dragon’s slaver expected to be the right hand of the Emperor, the strongest supporter of the new dynasty.

The coronation happened upon the tallest of the fourteen peaks, on the mouth of the greatest mountain above a maw of bubbling magma. The dragon watched as the first Emperor of Valyria was crowned in blood and ash, at the heart of fire, all the while a thousand dragons soared in the sky.

“This is the start of a new era!” they proclaimed. “Long live Valyria!”

The red dragon roared, but even its sound was drowned out by the boom of the shrieking crowd. The mouth of the volcano was surrounded by countless bodies, as dragons soared above on the warm updrafts.
The very first act of the new Emperor was to drop all of the old guard into the fire. The prisoners of war were clamped in a line of chains, and forced to walk one by one over the edge and into the magma. Pale-haired, wrinkled old men and women fell screaming into magma.

The fires were bubbling hotter and hotter with every body that fell into the volcano’s maw.

The red comet blazed in the sky as dusk crept over the world. The dragons were dancing, but the red dragon was in agony. Its ‘master’ was away, so the red took the chance to struggle against its bonds. Blinding pain seared through it with every motion. Flaming whips lashed against its skin.

All of Valyria was in attendance around the mountain’s heart – some willingly, others in chains.

The crowd was chanting, some sort of ceremony was happening. Beneath the red dragon, the flames gushed hungrily, devouring everything that was thrown.

“Valyria forever!” the crowds chanted. “Valyria forever!”

The whole crowd was staring at a podium of black stone, awaiting their new Emperor. The dragons were left to soar as the men prepared for the ceremony. The frenzy in the air reached fever pitch.

And then something changed.

The red dragon knew it before anyone else. The red dragon felt the very moment its ‘master’ perished. The enchantments bound over the dragon’s scales suddenly shattered.

Freedom. It felt like freedom.

Its huge heart was pounding, blood rushing, and suddenly the red dragon’s wings clapped like thunder. A triumphant boom exploded from its mouth, and the whole mountain quaked.

Its master was dead. The dragon didn’t know how, but its tormentor was finally dead.

Above, the black dragon with red eyes roared too. Other dragons were reacting, they could feel it as well. Some were confused, some were angry, some were scared. The red dragon was exhilarated.

It had happened with no warning. No one witnessed it. The first Emperor of Valyria died along with the elite of his supporters as they were getting dressed for the ceremony. One moment the red dragon was struggling against invisible bonds, and in the next the magical chains snapped apart.

Already, the dragon was writhing. Roaring, clawing, going berserk. The surrounding enslaved dragons tried to stop it, but the red dragon powered through. They collided in mid-air in a flurry of colours and glittering scales.

Below them, the crowd was still chanting. They hadn’t realised what happened, they never knew…

The sky was filled with roars, the ground was shaking…

… and the man who stepped out to perform the ceremony was not the same man. It was a figure that looked like him and was wearing his clothes, but it was someone else. Something else. It had no smell, no shadow and no warmth.

It was a figure wearing the dead man’s face, stepping out onto the screaming podium.

The ‘emperor’ raised his arms high, and the Grand Rite began. Sorcerers and dragonlords had
formed a circle around the mountain’s bubbling maw, chanting unearthly words. Their voices raised, echoing across the world as more prisoners, hundreds, thousands were dropped into the flames.

The red dragon raged in the sky, flapping furiously to escape as a half dozen other dragons struggled against it. The black dragon was roaring, sweeping down and forcing it backwards.

The two dragons collided in a clap of fury, spinning around each other as they wrestled. The red was being forced downwards, the black was pushing him back…

Beneath them, the flames bubbled and roared.

It felt growing power in the air, spouting forth from the mountain’s mouth in an endless flood. The sorcerers were chanting, unearthly cries echoing across the mountain, hands raised towards the flaming circle in the magma. A burning circle that was glowing, like a hole in the world.

The dragon hadn’t felt fear – not true fear – since that night in the mountains when it had first been enslaved. But it felt fear now, the other dragons could feel it too. The red dragon could see it in their eyes, could smell it in the air.

Something was coming.

The red dragon finally managed to escape the black’s grip, slipping past and shaking its claws free. It didn’t even try to fight, the red dragon only wanted to flee. The black one was slower to react – it roared, still roaring for its master.

There was power all around the sorcerers, reverberating upwards from the earth.

The entire world was quaking.

The night fell, and it felt the magic rising from the ground…

The red comet in the sky shone brighter than ever as it fell towards the earth…

For the briefest of moments, it looked as though the faceless man smiled.

Then the flames burst upwards, a tower of fire roaring through the crowds.

…

Boom.

…

The sky went black. The ground ruptured, flames everywhere. Fires so hot they burnt even through a dragon’s scales.

The sound was deafening, the earth itself cracked open.

It felt the mountains shatter.

Dragons were falling from the sky. Some were being burnt by the flames, but most were overwhelmed by scorching clouds of darkness. It saw immense flying chunks of rubble launching into the air, pasting dragons on impact against crumbling mountainside.

A wave of ash rippled outwards, painting the whole world in darkness.
Multicoloured wings glistened in the air, before they were swallowed by the black.

It was an explosion that even a dragon couldn’t survive. The beasts were left like insects before the storm.

The red was flapping with all its might, out of its mind with panic. The black dragon was right behind it, and then it was consumed by an explosion of ash. Even the immense black beast was crushed like a bug by the raw power.

Behind it, the mountains were being swallowed by the earth.

They had summoned a miracle, and the gods had answered.

The red dragon didn’t drop, it was flying onwards with all its unchained fury. The flames seared against its scales, but it didn’t fall. The pain was agonizing, yet it clung to the air with every ounce of strength it had left.

It was riding the shockwave, even as dust and burning debris whooshed around it.

Behind it, the cataclysm split open the land, the entire earth cracking apart, almost as though an unearthly sword had stabbed through the continent. It saw the earth’s molten blood pour forth in floods out from the gaps, the crust itself was flowing like turbulent water. Smoke and steam howled everywhere.

A solid pillar of smoke was rising upwards, an immense tower of pure darkness larger than a mountain. It was reaching up, spewing outwards and extending over the heavens. Columns of smoke branching apart like the roots of a tree. Or like a hand. It was like a giant hand reaching upwards – a hand so large it might have crushed the sun in its grip. The dragon felt its aura begin to flood over the world like the beating of a crazed heart.

The red dragon just flew, faster and more desperate than ever before. Its body was stained black from the rain of ash clattering around it, its hide was seared by burns.

Everywhere it looked, shadows were gushing out of the blackness, men dissolving into wispy figures going mad…

All was being devoured, it was like a storm concentrated from a single point. Everything was consumed by a single maw of endless hunger, as the shadowy fingers reached for the sky…

…

The dragon flew. It flew longer and harder than it had ever flown before. It flew over black waves and howling storms, even as it grew delirious with panic and pain.

It flew to the very edge of the earth, but the black skies followed. The black clouds were growing and growing in its wake.

The whole world was trembling, and the red dragon flew, and flew, and flew.

Time became meaningless. The dragon pushed itself to the very brink of collapse. It was crazed in pain and confusion, black burns seared across its scales. It flew for what felt like several days straight, but it never saw sunlight. The skies above had been smothered black.

The ash and clouds covered half the world. It could still smell the death and smoke on the wind, and the echoes of a million dying cries.
The dragon could feel it in its bones. This was the end of days.

Other dragons had also fled the cataclysm, but the red dragon had watched them all fall one by one. Only the red dragon managed to hold on. Its wings were strained, its breaths hoarse, its fire was flickering. Its strength was bleeding away.

Beneath it, the oceans were black with soot, and for a while the dragon feared it might never see land again.

The traces of those cursed enchantments – the slaver’s bindings – still burnt against its skin, searing into its muscles. The black magic was polluting the world, the burns from the fires were tainted with darkness.

The pain was beyond agony.

But then there was land. In the falling light, the dragon saw land at the horizon’s edge. It could smell it wafting over the seas; earthy and foreign.

The dragon didn’t know why it had come here. It followed some engrained instinct. An aura of magic still lingered here, the dragon could feel it. The power was like a memory embedded into the bones of this land, ancient and enduring. A refuge from the cursed flames devouring the world.

The dragon’s strength had long since given out. For too long it had been flying on but the memory of strength. It couldn’t even feel its wings anymore, exhaustion had long since given way to pain, to agony, to pure numbness. But the time had come – it could flap no more.

Finally, the dragon began to fall from the sky. It tried to beat its wings one last time, but it did not have the strength. It could only watch as it fell downwards into the ocean.

It wasn’t even strong enough to reach the coast. The wounded beast crashed into the salty waves, letting loose a strangled cry as the cold water swallowed it whole.

The dragon had to drag itself onto the beach, panting for breath. All around it, the land was desolate and barren. It dragged itself up onto the peninsula, a stony coast surrounded by rocks and desolate cliffs. Old ash still coated the ground, the rocks were twisted and deformed by ancient fires. The caves were screaming in the wind, and the feeling of death clung to the coast.

The red dragon felt cold. It had never felt cold before.

For a time, the dragon just curled up on the beach, half-in and half-out of the water, shivering in pain. Then the beast tried to take flight, but collapsed downwards onto the black rocks.

It was wheezing, strewn out and shivering on the brink of death.

Black flecks dusted against its snout. Wispy dark flakes, falling from the sky.

Snow. The snow was stained black from the ashen clouds.

The dragon limped onwards, searching desperately for refuge against the pain.

Around him, it was a new world. A strange world, cold and harsh. It had never flown this far before. The dragon didn’t know what it was doing, but it knew it had to escape. The cold offered shelter, and the dragon ran for it.

…
The days blurred in agony.

At first, it couldn’t see the sun, it couldn’t see the moon. The red comet had vanished. The clouds of ash were so heavy in the sky, thick and black and unending. The black clouds continued to twist overhead for what might have been months, but eventually, the snows began to push them back. Gradually, a weak sun began to emerge from behind the ash in the sky, grey and cold.

The dragon was starving, it was maddened, ferocious. The days passed in unending pain. Its wounds were festering, lingering black burns that were slowly killing it.

The red dragon went on the warpath over the wasteland.

It burnt. Everything burnt. The touch of those deathly flames still hissed across its scales. Its once crimson hide had been stained black.

The dragon roared in mad pain, dying spurts of fire shooting from bloody teeth. Even its flames were failing – what used to be a brilliant jet of power had guttered into a smoky hiss.

Strange men in furs and queer voices were screaming, scuttling around the snow like so many insects. They tried to flee, but they couldn’t escape.

All around, a village of tents and furs was broken and burning. The dragon howled as it stormed through, shattering a totem of tusks.

The dragon roared, shivering at the agony arcing up and down its hide. Blood dripped from its maw, black blood hissing against the snow. There were so many skeletons crushed in its jaws, broken beneath its teeth that its gums were bleeding. It devoured them all, it devoured everything. It kept eating until it vomited, but the hunger never ended.

The dragon took its rage out on absolutely everything that it could find. It left a trail of devastation in its wake as it moved west over the forests, mountains and icy plains.

It was harder and harder to fly; the festering wounds had grown worse and worse. Instead the beast was left limping on the ground, dragging itself by its claws, hobbling over the snow and rocks. A lesser beast would have long since fallen, but the red dragon refused to die. The hatred kept it alive.

Where it had ended up was a land of jagged mountains and frozen valleys, heavy with snow and white glaciers. In the sky, heavy black clouds writhed over the mountains.

Nostrils sniffed the air, taking it all in. It could feel it. It could feel something in the air, something that had drawn the dragon here. It wasn’t sure what, but the aura of forgotten power lingered over this place, in the heart of the mountains.

The dragon felt like there was something calling it, just over the horizon. In the distance, the snows danced over the peaks.

Then there was a cry from somewhere to its right. A bone spear bounced over its scales. The dragon stiffened, a growl bursting from its throat.

There were men scuttling about the frozen ruins, trying to surround it. They were figures clad in shaggy furs, armed with wood and bone. They were following the dragon, trying to hunt it.

“Kill the demon!” their indecipherable voices cried. “Kill the demon!”

It roared, hoping to scatter them, but they did not stop coming. Spears and arrows whistled from
the cliffs. They were like insect bites, but they hurt. Most clattered harmlessly off thick scales, but some were thrown at its eyes and snout. The dragon didn’t have the strength left to burn them, but it refused to fall.

Its tail whooshed outwards, whipping through frozen ruins. Shards of rubble and ice scattered through the air, cratering into the drifts, shattering the men’s bodies.

A dozen died, but still there were more coming.

The cries of battle echoed over the hills, and a pained mewl burst from the dragon’s throat.

Its wounds were killing it. The cold was draining its strength. These creatures would pester it until it dropped, the dragon knew.

It had killed droves of them, but it could feel still more coming over the mountains.

The beast limped onwards into the mountains, but then the ice and ground under its feet gave way. The dragon lost its footing amidst the avalanche. It was sent tumbling hopelessly down the mountainside, helpless against the thousands of tons of snow.

\textit{Crash.} Its huge body thudded into the rocks, and a monstrous whine of pain echoed over the desolate landscape. It was thrashing, trying to claw its way free, but more and more snow was tumbling down the mountain.

It was being buried, consumed by the avalanche of white.

“Enough of this. Dragon, you are not welcome here.”

A voice, loud and clear. The dragon’s teeth bared as it saw human figures heading towards it from the valley path. Enemies. They just kept coming.

There were five of them, all wearing white. Two were as tall as men, two others were short like children, and one was thrice the size of any man – an inhumanly large, hairy figure dragging a sleigh. They had strange smells to them. They were clambering over the rocky footpath, the sleigh groaning behind them.

The dragon roared with all the strength it had left, but still they kept on coming. Around it, another avalanche scattered down the mountains.

The giant hoisted the sleigh upwards, while one of the men broke off from the group, crawling on his hands and knees over the snow closer to the writhing dragon.

“I see you, I see you,” the man’s voice called, as he cautiously clambered over the snows. “I know you’re scared, I know…”

They were all terrified, but they were still approaching. The dragon growled, sniffing the air. The man at the front had his hands raised, his eyes lowered. His voice was slow, reassuring. The dragon could not understand the words, but it felt the meaning behind them.

“I know…” he muttered, the man in white. He had dark hair, and weather worn features. “I know…”

The dragon bared its teeth. \textit{Men.} Men had been its slavers, its tormenters. The men had tortured it, hunted it.
The dragon dragged its body upwards, its neck outstretcing, its teeth screaming. It tore free from the snow.

“Greenseer!” one of the companions shouted in alarm.

“It’s alright! Stay back, stay back!” His voice was loud and grim, his full attention on the massive dragon before him. “I mean you no harm! I know you’re wounded, I know you’re lost. I cannot save you, but I can help you.”

The dragon could feel it. It could feel the human trying to touch it, it could feel the human’s mind extending towards its own. The touch was soft, even comforting, but the dragon reacted with only blind rage.

_Humans._ It growled and lunged.

The dragon’s jaws opened to swallow them all whole. It shot forward like a snake, but then the snow gave way beneath it. It collapsed down the slope, claws losing leverage. Its jaws slammed wide into the rocks, while the man scrambled for cover.

A sudden wind swept through the valley – a gale of snow pummelling against the dragon’s eyes. Its vision was obscured, the wind was writhing around it. The dragon roared, angry and confused. They were doing something. It could smell the strange magic on the wind. The two small ones were singing. In front of them, the man stood tall, glaring down the slope.

It could sense the man’s presence. He was extending his mind, still trying to connect with the dragon, trying to reach it. The dragon only let loose an enraged snarl.

The humans were hastily trying to unwrap something from the sleigh they pulled. There was something cradled between them, a long shape that even the giant struggled to lift.

It was a horn, the dragon realised. A white horn. The dragon could suddenly feel the magic radiating from it.

The last time the red dragon had seen such a horn, the cursed thing had been the slaver’s tool. A horn of binding. The dragon could not be bound again, it could not fall. The beast growled and scrambled, trying to claw at the cursed thing.

The man set his hands on the horn, slowly closing his eyes and letting out a breath. The dragon couldn’t stop him, it wasn’t strong enough to pull itself free. The beast could only hiss in fury.

The man in white held himself strong atop the slope, despite the gargantuan clawing and raging below. His companions were already scattering, but the black-haired man stood ready by the mouthpiece.

“I dare not kill you, but I can give you peace.” He took a deep breath. “I can stop the pain.”

The white horn sounded, long and slow, and the boom of a thousand souls echoed over the world. It was so loud that it smothered even the wind. The dragon roared in anguish, suddenly feeling the magic reach out, and resonate…

The last horn had caused immense pain, but this one was different. It felt like a different type of magic. Similar in a way, and yet so different.

The last horn had been sharp and agonizing, but this… it was numb and cold. The dragon felt the
chill soothing through its muscles, the agony of its fiery shackles freezing away. The burns from the slaver’s enchantments were fading, the pain of all its wounds replaced by numbness.

The dragon roared, but its power was fading. Fire was pain, but the ice drained its strength. Its wings sagged, its body slumped.

It tried to fight, but the power of the horn could not be resisted.

The dragon’s head dropped, its breaths turned low. The will to resist was bleeding away. It felt heavy, like its body was turning to stone.

Ice was creeping over its scales, thin hoarfrost started to crawl over its body.

For a moment, there was nothing the dragon wanted more. It just wanted the pain to end.

The hills turned silent, the only sound the whisper of the wind and the soft wheeze of the dragon’s fading breaths.

Across from him, the man slumped beside the horn. They were staring at each other, man and dragon. His pale grey eyes against the dragon’s black.

“It’s alright. It’s alright,” the man whispered, soothing the dragon. “You are hurting. Let me end your torment.”

There was frost spreading around the man’s mouth as well, hoarfrost creeping over his skin. The touch of the horn was affecting him too, the dragon realised. The man must have known the cost – he had given his life to bring the dragon peace. A binding of ice.

In those moments, there was no pain or anger. All feeling drained away. There was naught but emptiness.

After being in pain for so long, the numbness felt almost like relief. The dragon felt itself begin to sag.

Is this what dying feels like?

With his final breath, the man reached out with his mind. This time, the dragon didn’t resist. Even as its consciousness faded, it felt the human’s presence wrap around the dragon’s soul, soft and reassuring.

The ice continued to spread, growing thicker and thicker. Veins of white crept across scales of red.

For that final moment, the dragon just felt lost and scared. The man’s aura reached out to touch it, to cradle it in those final moments. The dragon felt a vague confusion, before realising. The man was comforting it, even as they both died.

The dragon had never known a human to be comforting before.

There was nothing but silence, their minds linked and their thoughts passing between them. They were both scared.

I know… I know, the man thought softly, as the ice enveloped them both. Be at peace. In the name of House Stark, I bind you.
The mountains were quiet. The northern winds softly sang over the drifts, and the last of the avalanches scattered downwards. The only movement in the valley was snows lightly dusting over the body of the frozen white gargantuan, slow but unending.

The dragon, the greenseer, and the horn were all buried together.

In 114 BC, there was a civil war in Valyria. The old guard of the Freehold, versus the new blood following an Emperor. The culmination of centuries of political bickering and partisan assassination, the one-night coup d’etat turned Valyria from an oligarchy of Lords Freeholder into an Empire. The new Emperor meant to launch a new age of expansion.

The civil war was obliterated from history by the Doom. No one capable of recording it survived that night. The first and nameless Emperor of Valyria reigned for only six hours before his empire was destroyed by fire and blood.

The blood magic ceremony that was supposed to ensure Valyria’s future instead summoned its Doom.

The only surviving witness to the ceremony was a single red dragon, who fled around the world to the northern wilds, before eventually succumbing to the cold.

APPENDIX

LORDS AND KINGS OF WESTEROS

THE KING OF THE NORTH

KING OF THE WINTER THRONE

The Starks trace their descent from Brandon the Builder and the Kings of Winter. For thousands of years, they ruled from Winterfell as Kings in the North, until Torrhen Stark, the King Who Knelt, chose to swear fealty to Aegon the Dragon rather than give battle. When Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell was executed by King Joffrey, the northmen foreswore their loyalty to the Iron Throne and proclaimed Lord Eddard's son Robb as King in the North. During the War of the Five Kings, Robb won every battle, but was betrayed and murdered by the Freys and Boltons at the Twins during his uncle's wedding.

In the Red Wedding’s aftermath, its perturbator, Roose Bolton, was raised as Warden of the North. House Bolton held Winterfell, but then a northern coalition formed around Stark loyalists, led by Jon Snow, Robb Stark’s bastard brother. After a bloody civil war, the northern coalition retook Winterfell and raised Brandon Stark as Robb’s heir and as King in the North.

The words of House Stark are “Winter is Coming”.

The words of House Stark are “Winter is Coming”.
KING BRANDON STARK, called BRAN, the King in the North and the King Beyond the Wall, Lord of Winterfell. Also called Bran the Broken, Bran the Immortal, the twice-killed, and the next greenseer,

SUMMER, his direwolf. Currently roaming the Wall around Castle Black,

his trueborn siblings;

{ROBB STARK}, his elder brother, previously King in the North, King of the Trident, Lord of Winterfell, called THE YOUNG WOLF. Slain at the Red Wedding by Bolton and Frey treachery,

{GREY WIND}, his direwolf. Slain at the Red Wedding,

his wife, JEYNE WESTERLING, widowed and held hostage at Casterly Rock. Currently under the care of Lord Tyrion Lannister,

PRINCESS SANSA, his elder sister, married Tyrion of House Lannister (annulled), also known as Alayne Stone. Serves as the King’s Mercy in the Winter Court.

{LADY}, her direwolf, killed at Castle Darry,

PETYR BAELISH, also called LITTLEFINGER, Sansa’s pretend father, her mentor and her enemy,

{PRINCESS ARYA}, his sister, a girl of twelve, thought to have died at Winterfell in suspicious circumstances,

NYMERIA, her direwolf, prowling the riverlands,

PRINCE RICKON, a boy of six, believed dead for four years, also known as Stiv Magnar. The Prince of Skagos and Lord of House Magnar, returned to Winterfell,

SHAGGYDOG, his direwolf, the unicorn killer, black and savage. Currently at Eastwatch,

his adopted mother, OSHA, a wildling woman once captive at Winterfell, now the widow of Lord Magnar. Surrendered to the North,

his adopted father, {LORD BJARG MAGNAR}, de facto ruler of Skagos and skinchanger. Killed attempting to possess the dragon Sonagon,

his bastard half-brother, PRINCE JON SNOW, former King Beyond the Wall, formerly of the Night’s Watch, also called the BASTARD KING, Dragonlord of the North, Defender of the Realm, and leader of the northern coalition’s armies. Wielder of the sword Dark Sister. Surrendered his kingship to his half-brother, serves as the King’s Claw in the Winter Court,

Prince Snow’s skins;

SONAGON the White Doom, ice dragon of the north, remnant of
Old Valyria,

________________________ GHOST, his direwolf, white and silent. Currently at Eastwatch,

________________________ PHANTOM, his shadowcat, dark and vicious. Currently at White Harbour,

________________________ WRATH, his mammoth. Currently at Castle Black,

________________________ {HULLEN}, his goat. Died beyond the Wall,

his father, {EDDARD STARK}, former Lord of Winterfell and Warden of the North. Executed for treason before the Great Sept of Baelor, on the command of King Joffrey Baratheon,

his mother, {LADY CATELYN}, of House Tully, former Lady of Winterfell. Murdered by Roose Bolton at the Red Wedding,

his other kin:

________________________ his uncle, {BENJEN STARK}, First Ranger of the Night’s Watch, lost beyond the Wall,

________________________ his aunt, {LYSA ARRYN}, former Lady Regent of the Vale of Arryn, widow of Lord Jon Arryn. Murdered when pushed out of the Moon Door,

________________________ her son, ROBERT ARRYN, Lord of the Eyrie and Defender of the Vale, a sickly boy,

________________________ his uncle, EDMURE TULLY, Lord of Riverrun, taken captive at the Red Wedding, held hostage at Casterly Rock. Currently under the care of Lord Tyrion Lannister,

________________________ Edmure’s pregnant wife, {LADY ROSLIN}, of House Frey. Died during the Scouring of the Twins,

________________________ his great-uncle, SER BRYNDEN TULLY, called THE BLACKFISH, formerly castellan of Riverrun, hunted and then harboured at Greywater Watch, named Warden of the Southern Marches.

____ King Brandon’s Winter Court;

_______ Regent – Lord Howland Reed,

_______ The King’s Claw – Prince Jon Snow,

_______ The King’s Mercy – Princess Sansa Stark,

_______ Minister of War – Lord Jon Umber,

_______ Minister of Seas – Lord Wyman Manderly,
Minister of Justice – Ser Ian Poole,
Minister of Commerce – unfilled,
Minister of Harvests – unfilled,
Minister of Tithes – unfilled,
Minister of the Interior – unfilled,
Captain of the Guard, Lord Gregor Forrester,

Wardens in the North;
Warden of the Bite – Ser Marlon Manderly,
Warden of the Northern Mountains – Andrik Knott,
Warden of the Stone Isle – the Lord of Bones,
Warden of the Eastern Hills – the Weeper,
Warden of the Wolfswood – Lord Alger Bole,
Warden of the Western Coast – Lyra Mormont,
Warden of the Southern Marches – Ser Brynden Tully,

Prince Snow’s Dragonguard (now defunct);
{FURS OF OLD MOTHER’S CROCK}, slain during the Battle of the Snows,
{HATCH THE HALFGIANT}, slain during the Battle of the Snows,
{HALDUR TWO-NOTCH}, slain during the Battle for the Wall,
{TOREGG}, son of Tormund Giantsbane, survived the Battle of the Snows, slain by wraith assassin at Winterfell,
{BULLDEN HORN}, unicorn hunter, assigned to search for Rickon Stark on Skagos, killed during the journey,
{STIGA OF THENN}, slain during the Battle of the Snows, slain during the Battle of the Snows,
{URWEN ROCKFIST}, slain during the Battle of the Snows,
{GREGG SHEEPSTEALER}, slain during the Battle of the Snows,
{MO}, slain during the Battle for the Wall,
{HARLE THE HUNTSMAN}, slain during the Battle of the Snows,
{BLACK MARIS}, slain during the Battle of the Snows,

ERYN, son of Alvin Whaletooth, assigned to search for Rickon Stark on Skagos, survived,

DARK GERWICK, seventh son of Old Man Harwick, assigned to search for Rickon Stark on Skagos, survived,

{HARLOW}, actually {RAMSAY SNOW}, betrayed and poisoned the rest of the Dragonguard. Slain during the Battle of the Snows,

GRENN, of the Night’s Watch, only surviving member at Castle Black,

{EWAN BOLE}, slain during the Battle of the Snows,

SER ALEK, survived the Battle of the Snows, resigned afterwards,

{ROLF}, slain during the Battle of the Snows,

… plus nine others, all slain during the Battle of the Snows,

WEX PYKE, squire to the Dragonguard, handler of Prince Snow’s wolf,

Household of House Stark;

{THEON GREYJOY}, dubbed Theon Turncloak by northmen, Lord Eddard’s ward and hostage, self-proclaimed Prince of Winterfell. Imprisoned, tortured and renamed REEK by Ramsay Bolton. Died during the fall of Winterfell after the Battle of the Snows,

{WALDER FREY}, called BIG WALDER, once a ward of Lady Catelyn, eight years of age. Served as a squire to Ramsay Bolton, slain during the fall of Winterfell after the Battle of the Snows,

{WALDER FREY}, called LITTLE WALDER, once a ward of Lady Catelyn, eight years of age. Served as a squire to Ramsay Bolton, slain during the fall of Winterfell after the Battle of the Snows,

WYNAFRYD and WYLLA MANDERLY, Princess Sansa’s handmaidens,

GAWEN GLOVER, a ward of Winterfell, a boy of six, and new Master of Deepwood Motte,

BEREN and BRANDON TALLHART, wards of Winterfell, orphaned boys of twelve and six, the new Master of Torrhen’s Square and his brother,

BENNARD LOCKE, called BEN, fourteen years old, Lord Ondrew Locke’s grandson, squire to Prince Jon Snow,

MARRION MANDERLY, eleven years old, Lord Wyman Manderly’s cousin, squire to Prince Jon Snow,
Larence Snow, fourteen years old, natural son of Lord Halys Hornwood, squire to Prince Jon Snow,

{Maester Luwin}, counsellor, healer and tutor. Perished to wounds sustained during the sack of Winterfell.

Archmaester Marwyn, counsellor, healer and personal advisor to Princess Sansa Stark. Resident expert on the arcane and magical, scholar of unearthly mysteries, and dragon researcher,

Maester Henly, junior maester. Formerly in service with House Slate, now at Winterfell,

Mother Mole, former woods witch, now Mother Reverend of the Circle and tutor of King Bran Stark,

Tycho Nestoris, representative of the Iron Bank of Braavos to the North, a guest in Winterfell,

{Vayon Pool}, head steward of Winterfell. Killed during the purge of the Stark household in the Red Keep,

{Jeyne Pool}, his daughter. Vanished during the purge of the Stark household in the Red Keep. Never seen since,

{Ser Rodrik Cassel}, master-at-arms and castellan of Winterfell. Killed by Ramsay Snow during the battle at Winterfell,

Beth Cassel, his daughter. Imprisoned at the Dreadfort,

{Jory Cassel}, his nephew, captain of Lord Eddard's guards. Killed by Ser Jaime Lannister's men.

Lord Eddard’s guardsmen;

{Allyn}, guardsman, founding member of the brotherhood without banners. Now dead.

{Tomard}, guardsman, called FAT TOM. Killed by gold cloaks during the arrest of Ned Stark.

{Tomtoo}, his son. Fate unknown.

{Wyl} and {Heward}, guardsmen. Killed by Jaime Lannister's men.

{Desmond}, guardsman. Killed during the arrest of Ned Stark.
{CAYN}, guardsman. Killed by Sandor Clegane during the arrest of Ned Stark.

{PORTHER}, guardsman. Killed during the purge of the Stark household in the Red Keep.

{VARLY}, guardsman. Killed by Janos Slynt during the arrest of Ned Stark.

{HALLIS MOLLEN}, Jory Cassel's successor as Captain of the Guard. Escort Eddard Stark’s bones to Greywater Watch, joined with House Reed forces, perished during the taking of Moat Cailin,

QUENT, JACKS AND SHADD, guardsmen. Escort Lord Eddard's bones to Greywater Watch, joined with House Reed forces,

Winterfell’s guardsmen, before the sack;

{ALEBELLY}, {HAYHEAD}, {SKITTRICK}, {WAYN}, {POXY TYM}, guardsmen. Slain during the sack of Winterfell.

Winterfell’s guardsmen, after the retaking of Winterfell;

LORD GREGOR FORRESTER, new Captain of the Guard,

WILHELM, BODERICK, WATT, KEG and DUNCAN, guardsmen.

{HULLEN}, master of horse. Killed during the purge of the Stark household in the Red Keep.

HARWIN, his son, a guardsman. Founding member of the brotherhood without banners. Currently with Lady Stoneheart's band of outlaws.

JOSETH, Hullen's successor as master of horse, imprisoned at the Dreadfort after the sack of Winterfell,

BANDY and SHYRA, his twin daughters, now imprisoned at the Dreadfort.

{SEPTA MORDANE}, tutor to Lord Eddard's daughters. Killed during the purge of the Stark household in the Red Keep.

{SEPTON CHAYLE}, keeper of Winterfell's sept and library. Drowned as a sacrifice to the Drowned God during the capture of Winterfell.

{MIKKEN}, blacksmith and armorer. Killed by Theon Greyjoy during the capture of Winterfell.

{FARLEN}, kennelmaster of Winterfell. Killed by Theon Greyjoy.

PALLA, his daughter, a kennelgirl. Imprisoned at the Dreadfort.

GAGE, the cook, imprisoned after the sack of Winterfell,

TURNIP, his child. Imprisoned at the Dreadfort,

OSHA, of the free folk, imprisoned and served as kitchen drudge. Fled with Prince
Rickon Stark to Skagos, adopted Rickon as her own child, and married Lord Bjarg Magnar, now widowed,

________ NAN, known as {OLD NAN}, storyteller and once a wet-nurse. Imprisoned at the Dreadfort, probably dead,

________________ her grandson, WALDER, known as {HODOR}, a simple-minded stable boy. Perished after the sack of Last Hearth.

LOYALTY OF THE GREAT HOUSES OF THE NORTH TOWARDS THE BATTLE OF THE SNOWS

HOUSE BOLTON OF THE DREADFORT – Supported House Bolton,
HOUSE CERWYN OF CERWYN – Supported House Bolton,
HOUSE DUSTIN OF BARROWTON – Supported House Bolton,
HOUSE FLINT OF FLINT’S FINGERS – Remained mostly neutral, nominally House Bolton,
HOUSE FLINT OF WIDOW’S WATCH – Supported northern coalition, with some betrayers,
HOUSE GLOVER OF DEEPWOOD MOTTE – Split between House Bolton and northern collation,
HOUSE HORNWOOD OF HORNWOOD – Split between House Bolton and northern collation,
HOUSE KARSTARK OF KARHOLD – Supported mostly House Bolton, nominally northern coalition,
HOUSE LOCKE OF OLDCASTLE – Supported northern coalition, with some betrayers,
HOUSE MAGNAR OF KINGSHOUSE – Remained neutral towards civil war, slanted against wildlings,
HOUSE MANDERLY OF WHITE HARBOUR – Supported northern coalition,
HOUSE MORMONT OF BEAR ISLAND – Supported northern coalition,
HOUSE REED OF GREYWATER WATCH – Supported northern coalition,
HOUSE RYSWELL OF THE RILLS – Supported House Bolton,
HOUSE STARK OF WINTERFELL – Supported northern coalition,
HOUSE TALLHART OF TORRHEN’S SQUARE – Supported House Bolton,
HOUSE UMBER OF LAST HEARTH – Supported northern coalition,
ASSEMBLED NORTHERN MOUNTAIN CLANS – Mostly supported northern coalition, many
betrayers,

THE NORTHERN COALITION

An alliance between the free folk under Jon Snow, the Night’s Watch and Stark loyalists among the northern lords, established to seek justice for the Red Wedding, to resist House Bolton and to restore House Stark to the Throne of Winterfell.

____ House Manderly of White Harbour;

________ LORD WYMAN MANDERLY, the Lord of White Harbour, Warden of the White Knife, Shield of the Faith, Defender of the Dispossessed, Lord Marshal of the Mander, and Knight of the Order of the Green Hand. Vastly fat, leader of the northern coalition, serving as Minister of Seas on the Winter Court,

________________ {SER WYLIS MANDERLY}, his eldest son and heir, very fat, held captive at the Twins and rescued by Lord Reed. Later killed during the Battle of the Snows,

________________ Wylis’ wife, {LEONA} of House Woolfield, betrayed the northern coalition and supplied information to the Boltons. Killed at Winterfell by wraith assassin,

________________________ WYNAFRYD, their eldest daughter,

________________________ WYLLA, their younger daughter,

________________________ {SER WENDEL MANDERLY}, Wyman’s second son, slain at the Red Wedding,

_________ SER MARLON MANDERLY, heir to Lordsport, Wyman’s cousin, commander of the garrison at White Harbour. Sieged and captured the Dreadfort from Bolton loyalists,

_________ {SER MADRICK MANDERLY} of Lordsport, brother to Marlon. Killed at Winterfell by wraith assassin,

_________ his son, MARRION MANDERLY, eleven years old, squire to Prince Jon Snow,

_________ SER WYLAN WHITWICK, castellan of New Castle, from family of candle-makers.

_________ MAESTER THEOMORE, counsellor, tutor, healer. Born Theomore Lannister of Lannisport, exiled on suspicion of treason,

_________ {SER BARTIMUS}, an old knight, one-legged, one-eyed, and oft drunk, castellan of the Wolf’s Den, killed leading the defence during the Attack on White Harbour,

_________ GARTH, a gaoler and headsman, a convert to the Circle,
THERRY, a young turnkey,

SERA, a maid in the New Castle,


LORD DYWEN POOLE, Lord of Laketon, an old man,

his son, SER IAN POOLE, heir to Laketon, married to Baldor Icewall’s wildling daughter, serving as Minister of Justice on the Winter Court,

his daughter, widowed in Robb Stark’s campaign,

{VAYON POOLE}, Lord Dywen’s brother, former head steward of Winterfell. Killed during the purge of the Stark household in the Red Keep,

{JEYNE POOLE}, his daughter, vanished in the south. Vanished during the purge of the Stark household in the Red Keep. Never seen since,

{LORD MALCOLM WOOLFIELD}, Lord of Ramsgate, accused of conspiring with the Bolts, executed for treason,

his son, Ser GARTH WOOLFIELD, led the defence on the Attack on White Harbour, currently imprisoned in New Castle,

Lord Malcolm’s sister, {LEONA} of House Woolfield, wife to Ser Wylis Manderly, betrayed the northern coalition and supplied information to the Bolts. Killed at Winterfell by wraith assassin,

LORD RICKON HOLT, Lord of Westwood,

his daughter, married to the wildling Gerrick Kingsblood,

a second daughter,

{LORD ETHAN WHITEHILL}, conspired against the northern coalition, executed by Prince Jon Snow for treason,

LORD BENNARD WATERMAN, married a wildling chieftain’s daughter,

LORD SALLADHOR SAAN, Lord of the Bite, also called the Shark Lord. A former pirate lord and prince of Lys, established a new lordly house in the north after aiding in the Attack on White Harbour. Named Admiral in the Northern Fleet,

House Mormont of Bear Island;

{MAEGE MORMONT}, Lady of Bear Island, the She-Bear. Killed at Winterfell by wraith assassin,

{DACEY}, her eldest daughter, slain at the Red Wedding,
{ALYSANE}, her daughter, the young She-Bear, slain during the Battle of the Snows,

her son, LORD WILL MORMONT, the Little Bear, three years old, the new Lord of Bear Island,

her daughter, nine years old,

LYRA, the Middle Bear, castellan of Bear Island, named Warden of the Eastern Coast,

JORELLE,

LYANNA, her youngest daughter,

{JEOR MORMONT}, her brother, 997th Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, slain by wights in the Haunted Forest,

{SER JORAH MORMONT}, his son, an exile. Envoy of Daenerys Targaryen and defender of Sansa Stark, slain during the Attack on White Harbour. Posthumously pardoned of his crimes in the North,

his wife, LYNESSE HIGHTOWER, abandoned Ser Jorah after his disgrace, now is the chief concubine of Tregar Ormollen in Lys,

The words of House Mormont are “Here We Stand”.


House Umber of Last Hearth

JON UMBER, called THE GREATJON, Lord of the Last Hearth. Held captive at the Twins, rescued by Lord Reed, fought through the Battle of the Snows and survived the attack at Winterfell by wraith assassin. Serving as Minister of War on the Winter Court,

his first wife, {ROSEANNE}, slain in a wildling raid two decades prior,

his eldest daughter by his first wife, VALERIE, slain in a wildling raid two decades prior,

his youngest daughter by his first wife, REBEKAH, slain in a wildling raid two decades prior,

his second wife, {SHELLA}, died of fever,

{JON, called THE SMALLJON}, the Greatjon's eldest son and heir, slain at the Red Wedding,

{STEFFON} his son, missing after the sack of Last Hearth,

{KOL}, his son, missing after the sack of Last Hearth,
{MIKAEL}, his youngest son, a babe, crucified by Ramsay Bolton during the sack of Last Hearth,

{MORS} called CROWFOOD, uncle to the Greatjon, joint castellan at the Last Hearth. Injured at the sack of Last Hearth, and accused of being traitor against the northern coalition. Brought to Winterfell to stand trial,

{HOTHER} called WHORESBANE, uncle to the Greatjon, joint castellan at the Last Hearth. Slain during the sack of Last Hearth,

Houses sworn to House Umber of Last Hearth: House Mollen of Brandon’s Crossing, House Moss, House Lake, House Mull, House Emberly.

{LORD NORVEL} MOLLEN, Lord of Brandon’s Crossing, a possible but unproven betrayer at the Battle of the Snows,

{LORD HOSTER MOSS}, conspired against the northern coalition at the Battle of the Snows, executed by Prince Jon Snow for treason,


{LORD GREGOR FORRESTER}, Glover's bannerman, serving as Captain of the Guard at Winterfell,

his daughter, married Ygon Oldfather’s son,

{LORD ALGER BOLE}, minor lord of the Wolfswood, named Warden of the Wolfswood,

his son, {EWAN BOLE}, served on Prince Snow’s Dragonguard,
House Reed of Greywater Watch;

 HOWLAND REED, Lord of Greywater Watch, a crannogman,

 his wife, JYANA, of the crannogmen,

 their children;

 MEERA, a young huntress, companion of Bran Stark. Rescued Bran Stark from imprisonment by the Bastard’s Boys, considered a likely future match to the king,

 JOJEN, a boy blessed with green sight, companion of Bran Stark. Thought lost after the sack of Last Hearth, but recovered at the Wall,

 Houses sworn to House Reed of Greywater Watch: House Blackmyre, House Boggs, House Cray, House Fenn, House Greengood, House Peat, House Quagg.

 EDWYLE FERNDOWN, Lord Reed’s man-at-arms,

 House Flint of Widow’s Watch;

 LYESSA FLINT, Lady of Widow’s Watch, a widow. Accused of conspiring against the northern coalition, unproven,

 ROBIN FLINT, Lyessa’s eldest son and heir, the only surviving member of Robb Stark’s personal guard. Held hostage at the Twins, rescued by Lord Reed, serving as castellan at Widow’s Watch,

 SER BYAM FLINT, Lyessa’s second son and a man of the Night’s Watch. Abandoned his post and deserted during the Battle of the Snows,

 The words of House Flint of Widow’s Watch are “Ever Vigilant”.

 Houses sworn to House Flint of Widow’s Watch: House Flint of Cloven Cove, House Skye, House Thistlewood.

 House Locke of Oldcastle

 LORD ONDREW LOCKE, Lord of Oldcastle, an old man. Accused of conspiring against the northern coalition, unproven,

 his eldest son, {SER DONNEL LOCKE}, a knight, slain at the Red Wedding,

 his son, BENNARD LOCKE, squire to Prince Jon Snow,

 {JEREMY LOCKE}, his second son and heir. Slain by Val at the Battle of the Snows, suspected conspirator against the northern coalition.
his daughter, SYBELLE, married to Robett Glover. Held hostage at Deepwood Motte but released, mother to Gawen and Erena Glover,

The words of House Locke are “Bar the Way”.

Houses sworn to House Flint of Widow’s Watch: House Benton, House Ceomore, House Dean.

The Northern Mountain Clans;

the chiefs among the mountain clans:

[HUGO WULL] called BIG BUCKET, or THE WULL, died from wounds taken at the Battle of the Snows,

[BRANDON NORREY], called THE NORREY, conspired against northern coalition, executed by Prince Jon Snow,

BRANDON NORREY, the Younger, his son, imprisoned at Winterfell,

two daughters of The Norrey, murdered by wildlings before the northern coalition was founded,

TORREN LIDDLE, called THE LIDDLE, an old man,

DUNCAN LIDDLE, his eldest son, called BIG LIDDLE, a man of the Night’s Watch and castellan of Castle Black,

[MORGAN LIDDLE], his second son, called MIDDLE LIDDLE, slain at the Battle of the Snows,

RICKARD LIDDLE, his third son, called LITTLE LIDDLE,

{TORGHEN FLINT}, of the First Flints, called THE FLINT, or OLD FLINT, conspired against northern coalition, executed by Prince Jon Snow,

{BLACK DONNEL FLINT}, his son and heir, executed at Winterfell,

ARTOS FLINT, his second son, half-brother to Black Donnel, rejoined the northern coalition,

{ERIC BURLEY}, called THE BURLEY, slain at Winterfell by wraith assassin,

{RONNEL HARCLAY}, a man of the Night’s Watch, died during the battle at the Wall,

ANDRIK KNOTT, eldest son of clan Knott, fought at the Battle for the Wall. Named Warden of the Northern Mountains,
HOUSE BOLTON SUPPORTERS

The resistance led by Roose Bolton, Warden of the North, opposing the northern coalition in the name of King Tommen Baratheon. House Bolton was raised to power after the death of Robb Stark, which they claim was justified, and they rallied objectors to northern coalition to resist the King Snow and his wildlings’ conquest of the north.

House Bolton received considerable support from allies south of the Neck, especially the remnants of House Frey and an undetermined number of financial and political backers.

___ House Bolton of the Dreadfort;

________ {ROOSE BOLTON}, Lord of the Dreadfort, Warden of the North, called the Leech Lord. Conspired with Lord Walder Frey to topple King Robb Stark during the Red Wedding, was raised to Warden of the North for his efforts. Was defeated by the northern coalition during the Battle of the Snows, was taken captive, and later died in his cell,

______________ {DOMERIC}, his sole trueborn heir by his second wife, died of suspected poisoning,

______________ {LADY WALDA FREY}, Lord Roose’s third wife, called FAT WALDA, slain during the fall of Winterfell after the Battle of the Snows,

______________ WALTON, called STEELSHANKS, Lord Bolton’s captain. Held siege inside the Dreadfort for months, eventually surrendered to the northern coalition,

________ {RAMSAY BOLTON}, born Ramsay Snow, called THE BASTARD OF BOLTON, natural son and heir. Self-styled Lord of the Hornwood and Lord of Winterfell. Disguised himself as a common man, and infiltrated the Dragonguard, took the King Snow hostage and was slain by the wildling Val during the Battle of the Snows,

______________ {DONELLA HORNWOOD}, Ramsay’s first ‘wife’. Perished after being imprisoned without food,

______________ {“ARYA STARK”}, Ramsay’s second wife. Perished during the fall of Winterfell after the Battle of the Snows, in mysterious circumstances,

______________ {WALDER FREY} and {WALDER FREY}, called BIG WALDER and LITTLE WALDER, Ramsay’s squires,

______________ the Bastard’s Boys, Ramsay’s men-at-arms:

________________________ {BEN BONES}, kennelmaster at the Dreadfort,

________________________ {YELLOW DICK}, {DAMON DANCE-FOR-ME}, {LUTON}, {SOUR ALYN}, {SKINNER}, {GRUNT}, {MERWYN}, {LOU}, WERWICK}, all Bastard’s Boys, all dead,
The words of House Bolton are “Our Blades Are Sharp”.

___ House Bolton is extinct after the Battle of the Snows. Their lands and fiefs are dissolved, and granted to newly raised free folk lords. Houses previously sworn to House Bolton of the Dreadfort: House Deoredge, House Long, House Pikeworth, House Rose of the Red Knife, House Stonehull, House Towers,

______ BARTHOGAN ROSE, Master of the Red Knife. Previously a Bolton bannerman, surrendered to the northern coalition after the battle.

___ House Cerwyn of Cerwyn;

________ {MEDGER CERWYN}, Lord of Cerwyn, perished from wounds at Harrenhal,

______________ {CLEY CERWYN}, his son, next Lord of Cerwyn, killed at Winterfell by Ramsay Snow,

______________ {JONELLE CERWYN}, his daughter, next Lady of Cerwyn, a maid of two-and-thirty. Slain during the fall of Winterfell after the Battle of the Snows,

The words of House Cerwyn are “Honed and Ready”.

___ House Cerwyn is extinct after the Battle of the Snows. Their lands and fiefs have been claimed directly by House Stark of Winterfell. Houses previously sworn to House Cerwyn of Cerwyn: House Condon, House Gates, House Beck, House Wells;

______ Ser Kyle Condon, a knight in service to Lord Medger. Allied with House Bolton next to his liege lady, but surrendered to the northern coalition after the Battle of the Snows.

___ House Dustin of Barrowton;

________ {LORD WILLIAM DUSTIN}, Lord of Barrowton. He died fighting at the end of Robert’s Rebellion at the Tower of Joy, alongside Eddard Stark,

______________ {LADY BARBREY DUSTIN}, widow of the late Lord Dustin, the Lady of Barrowton. Supported House Bolton against the northern coalition, was defeated and executed. Died without issue and without a designated heir,

________ LORD ARNOLD DUSTIN, formerly ARNOLD SPARROW. Formerly a petty knight who fought for the Boltons, but surrendered Barrowton quickly to the northern coalition. Raised to Arnold Dustin for his efforts,

___ Houses sworn to House Dustin of Barrowton: House Stout of Greengrass, House Coffin, House Graveton, House Marsh;

________ LORD HARWOOD STOUT, Lord of Greengrass, a one-armed old man. Allied with
House Bolton next to his liege lady, but surrendered to the northern coalition after the Battle of the Snows,

___ House Flint of Flint’s Fingers;

_______ LORD CEDRIC FLINT, Lord of Flint’s Fingers, Lord of Cape Kraken. Made token contributions to House Bolton during the civil war, but mostly removed himself from the conflict,

___ Houses sworn to House Flint of Flint’s Fingers: House Greybane of Reaver’s Folly, House Hoardridge of Ulwell Pier, House Ironsmith of Forge Hall, House Saltstone of Sandbanks,

___ House Hornwood of Hornwood;

_______ Lord {HARLYS HORNWOOD}, slain at the battle on the Green Fork,

__________________ Lady {DONELLA HORNWOOD}, his wife, the cousin of Lord Wyman Manderly, widowed and then forced to marry Ramsay Snow, and then imprisoned and starved to death,

__________________ {DARYN HORNWOOD}, his son and heir, slain at the battle in the Whispering Wood,

__________________ LARENCE SNOW, the natural son of Lord Halys, 14 years old, fostered at Deepwood Motte. Appointed a squire of Prince Jon Snow,

__________________ his sister, {BERENA}, wife of Leobald Tallhart. Once captured by Ironborn at Torrhen’s Square, then rescued by House Bolton. Died during the fall of Winterfell after the Battle of the Snows.

__________________ {MAESTER MEDRICK}, a maester serving House Hornwood. Executed for treachery at Winterfell,

The words of House Hornwood are “Righteous in Wrath”.

___ The heir apparent of House Hornwood is in question after the Battle of the Snows. Their lands and fiefs have been largely reallocated between House Manderly and new free folk houses. Houses previously sworn to House Hornwood of Hornwood: House Overton, House Slate of Blackpool, House Plumbridge, House Staffin, House Shepton;

_______ LORD ANDERS OVERTON, an old warrior. Allied alongside the northern coalition,

_______ {LORD HAROLD SLATE}, Lord of Blackpool. Allied alongside the northern coalition, but accused of conspiracy against them and treachery at the Battle of the Snows. Executed at Winterfell,

__________________ {MANDON SLATE}, his son and heir. Conspired against the northern coalition at the Battle of the Snows, executed by Prince Snow at Winterfell,
MAESTER HENLY, a junior maester of the Citadel, once serving House Slate, now serving House Stark,

House Karstark of Karhold;

{RICKARD KARSTARK}, Lord of Karhold, beheaded by the Young Wolf for murdering prisoners,

{HARRION}, his eldest son, captured and executed at Maidenpool,

{EDDARD}, his son, slain in the Whispering Wood,

{TORRHEN}, his son, slain in the Whispering Wood,

LADY ALYS KARSTARK, his daughter, the Lady of Karhold, a maid of fifteen, forced to marry her cousin Cregan and then widowed,

his uncle {ARNOLF}, castellan of Karhold, allied alongside Roose Bolton with the rest of his house. Slain at the Battle of the Snows, commanding the rearguard,

{CREGAN}, Arnolf's elder son, Lord of Karhold after marrying his cousin Alys. Fought against the northern coalition, but surrendered after the capture of Karhold. Forced to fight alongside the northern coalition at the Battle of the Snows, but later died 'accidentally' falling from his horse,

Three sons of Lord Cregan, two of them slain during the capture of Karhold or the Battle of the Snows,

ARTHOR, Arnolf's youngest son, surrendered to the northern coalition after the Battle of the Snows,

(MAESTER TYBALD), a maester serving House Karstark. Executed for treachery at Winterfell,

The words of House Karstark are 'The Sun of Winter'.

Houses sworn to House Karstark of Karhold: House Covenry, House Karmist, House Grey, and House Hunter;

House Ryswell of the Rills;

LORD RODRIK RYSWELL, Lord of the Rills. Supporter of House Bolton, slain leading the flank in the Battle of the Snows,

his eldest daughter {LADY BETHANY,} the second wife of Roose Bolton, died of a fever,

his daughter, {LADY BARBREY}, Lady of Barrowton, widow of Lord
William Dustin. Executed at Winterfell,

____________ his sons, all fought at the Battle of the Snows;

____________ {ROGER RYSWELL}, slain in Battle of the Snows,

____________ RICKARD RYSWELL, the new Lord of the Rills, surrendered after the Battle of the Snows, hostage at Winterfell,

____________ ROOSE RYSWELL, surrendered after the Battle of the Snows, hostage at Winterfell,


________ LORD ERIC RYDER, Lord of Rillswater, allied with House Bolton next to his liege lord, but surrendered to the northern coalition after the Battle of the Snows,

___ House Tallhart of Torrhen’s Square;

____ {SER HELMAN TALLHART}, Master of Torrhen’s Square, slain at Duskendale,

____________ {BENFRED TALLHART}, his son and heir, slain by ironmen on the Stony Shore,

____________ {EDDARA}, his daughter, briefly Lady of Torrhen’s Square. Held captive at Torrhen's Square by ironborn, rescued by House Bolton taken as a ward of Winterfell. Died during the fall of Winterfell after the Battle of the Snows.

____ {LEOBALD}, his brother, castellan of Torrhen’s Square, killed at Winterfell by Ramsay Snow,

____________ Leobald’s wife, {BERENA} of House Hornwood. Held captive at Torrhen's Square by ironborn, rescued by House Bolton. Died during the fall of Winterfell after the Battle of the Snows,

____________ their eldest son, BEREN, a boy of twelve, the newest Master of Torrhen’s Square. Likewise held captive at Torrhen's Square by ironborn, taken as a ward of Winterfell. Survived the Battle of the Snows,

____________ their youngest son, BRANDON, a boy of six, likewise held captive at Torrhen's Square by ironborn, taken as a ward of Winterfell.

The words of House Tallhart are “Proud and Free”.

___ Houses sworn to House Tallhart of Torrhen’s Square: House Broadford, House Greenhill of Greenhil, House Shallowstone.
THE NIGHT’S WATCH

A military order dedicated to holding the Wall, the men of the Night’s Watch wear only black, and are known as black brothers. This order has came into much conflict with the free folk beyond the Wall.

After a failed Great Ranging against the wildlings and after the conquest of King Jon Snow, the black brothers were forced to accept a truce with the free folk. The Night’s Watch stands as the first line of defence against the threat of the Others from the north.

____ The sworn brothers;

________ SAMWELL TARLY, of Horn Hill, nine-hundred-and-ninety-eighth Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch,

________________ {LORD JEOR MORMONT}, called the Old Bear, nine-hundred-and-ninety-seventh Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. Slain at the battle of the Haunted Forest by the Others.

________ Stewards:

________________ EDDISON TOLLETT, called DOLOROUS EDD, appointed Lord Steward,

________________ {MAESTER AEMON (TARGARYEN)}, healer and counsellor, a blind man, one hundred and two years old, accidentally slain during an assassination attempt against King Snow,

________________ Aemon’s steward, CLYDAS, acting maester at Castle Black,

________________ {THREE-FINGER HOBB}, steward and chief cook, slain by Malvern,

________________ {DONAL NOYE}, one-armed armorer and smith, slain at the gate by Malvern,

________________ {SEPTON CELLADOR}, a drunken devout, slain by Malvern,

________________ {DAREON called LOVER}, a singer, slain by Malvern,

________________ {SATIN}, a recruit-in-training, slain by Malvern,

________________ {OWEN called THE OAF}, {SMALL PAUL}, {TIM TANGLETONGUE}, {MULLY}, {CUGEN}, {LEFT HAND LEW}, {TY}, {DANNEL}, {ORPHAN OSS}, {MUTTERING BILL}, {RED ALYN OF THE ROSEWOOD}, {ARRON}, {BASS}, {BORCAS}, {CUGER}, {DANNEL}, {EASY}, {HAKE}, {OLD HENLY}, {MASLYN}, {WALLACE MASSEY}, {MULLY}, {RUDGE}, and {WYCK} all stewards,
Builders;

OTHELL YARWYCK, First Builder,

ALBETT called PIMPLE, ALF OF RUNNYMUD, {HALDER}, {HARETH}, {YOUNG HENLY}, {KEGS}, SPOTTED PATE OF MAIDENPOOL, {SPARE BOOT}, all builders

Rangers;

HARLE THE HANDSOME, First Ranger,

BIG LIDDE, castellan of Castle Black,

SER ENDREW TARTH, master-at-arms at Castle Black,

{JANOS SLYNT}, former commander of the City Watch of King's Landing, later Lord of Harrenhal, then a brother of the Night's Watch, and then turned wight by the Others. Slain by Samwell Tarly,

SER ALLISER THORNE, former master-at-arms, executed by Sigorn of Thenn,

{IRON EMMETT}, former master-at-arms at Eastwatch, slain by Malvern,

{THOREN SMALLWOOD}, senior ranger, slain by Val at the battle of the Haunted Forest,

{SER MALLADOR LOCKE}, senior ranger, slain at the battle of the Haunted Forest,

SER WYNTON STOUT, former castellan at Castle Black, old and witless,

TOM BARLEYCORN, senior ranger and scout leader,

{BLANE}, senior ranger, slain at the battle of the Haunted Forest,

{BEDWYCK called the GIANT}, died commanding the siege weapons during the collapse of the Wall,

GRENN called AUROCHS, named to the Dragonguard,

{TODDER called TOAD}, slain at the ambush at Castle Black,

AETHAN, {ALAN OF ROSBY}, {BANNEN}, {BEARDED BEN}, {BLACK BERNARR}, BROWN BERNARR, {JARMEN BUCKWELL}, {BLACK JACK BULWER}, DORNISH DILLY, {DYWEN}, ELRON, EMRICK, {DEAF DICK FOLLARD}, {FORNIO}, {FULK THE FLEA}, GARSE, GARRETT GREENSPPEAR, {GARTH GREYFEATHER}, {GARTH OF OLDTOWN}, GEOFF, GOADY, GRUBBS, {HAIRY HAL}, RONNEL HARCLAY, {KEDGE WHITEYE}, {KETTER}, LUKE OF LONGENCY, MATTHAR, {MAWNEY}, {RORY}, SER JAREMY RYKKER, RED JACK CRABB, RUSTY FLOWERS, RYLES, TIM STONE, TUMBERJON, {ULMER}, ALADALE WYNCH, {OTTYN WYTHERS}, all rangers,
At the Shadow Tower;

(SER DENYS MALLISTER), commander of the Shadow Tower. Refused to surrender to the approaching wildling army, killed during the Shadow Tower when the dragon Sonagon assaulted it.

his steward and squire, (WALLACE MASSEY),

(MAESTER MULLIN), healer and counsellor,

(QHORIN HALFHAND), (SQUIRE DALBRIDGE), (EGGEN), rangers, all slain beyond the Wall,

(STONESNAKE), a ranger, lost afoot in Skirling Pass, used as a sacrifice by the Others,

At Eastwatch-by-the-Sea;

(COTTER PYKE), a bastard of the Iron Islands, commander of Eastwatch. Surrendered to the wildlings, continued to uphold his vows, later slain during the Night of the Dead, the Other’s naval invasion,

(MAESTER HARMUNE), healer and counsellor, oft drunk, executed on suspicion of treason against the northern coalition,

(SER GLENDON HEWETT), master-at-arms at Eastwatch, died resisting the wildlings,

(OLD TATTERSALT), captain of the Blackbird,

SER MAYNARD HOLT, captain of the Talon, fled from the battle in the Skagosi straits,

(RUSS BARLEYCORN), captain of the Storm Crow.

Free folk who took the Black:

(WULF), Samwell Tarly’s bodyguard, died at the Battle of Castle Black,

WUN WEG WUN DAR WUN, called WUN WUN, the first giant to take the black, survived the Battle of Castle Black,

ERIK BEARCLAW,

BONE ERIK,

BROGG BIG-CHIN,

THUNDERING MAMMOTH,
JAX, LEATHERS, LEMMY, TWO-TOED DIRK, ONE-EYED WULF, {MARV THE RED HAND}, {MARTHE OF THE ANTLERS}, died at the Battle of Caster Black, AKI THE WROTH, {STUTTERING ANDRIK}, ANDRIK BONESTEW, {LEFT-HANDED YOLDO} {QUORT HARLESSON}, {IVAR THE RESTLESS}, KYLEG OF THE WOODEN EAR, {YVON OF WHITETREE}, BIG ASTA, HENRIK THE HOG, and many more.

Betrayers, once men of the Night’s Watch:

{CHETT}, {DIRK}, {SOFTFOOT}, {OLLO LOPHAND}, {LARK THE SISTERTON}, {ROLLEY OF SISTERTON}, {CLUBFOOT KARL}, {MASLYN}, and {SAWOOD}, deserters, attempted to abandon post at the Fist of the First Men, all slain, {BOWEN MARSH}, former Lord Steward, slain perpetrating the assassination attempt against King Snow,

{DONNEL HILL called SWEET DONNEL}, {WICK WHITTLESTICK}, {GARTH OF GREENAWAY}, {JEREN}, {HAKE}, {RAST}, and {PYPAR called PYP}, all slain perpetrating the assassination attempt against King Snow,

SERO AYAM FLINT, led a group of deserters fleeing the battle at the Wall.

In 297, when Jon Snow joined, the sworn brothers of the Night’s Watch numbered 966 men.
After several defeats and the conquest of the Wall by the free folk, the sworn brothers were diminished to 432.

Their ranks were later bolstered by approximately 3000 free folk who took the black.

After Others assault on the Wall, less than 2000 sworn brothers remain.

---

**THE WILDLINGS, or THE FREE FOLK**

Formerly threats to the realm, under King Jon Snow they were pushed into northern coalition. Any free folk who renounces the wildling ways is granted a blanket pardon from all previous crimes and citizenship in the North.

The most prominent among the free folk were granted lordships of the castles at the Wall, in return for fortifying them.

________ NAMED LORDS AT THE WALL;

__________________________ Eastwatch, granted to the Lord of Bones,
__________________________ Greenguard, granted to Gavin the Trader,
__________________________ The Torches, granted to Gerrick Kingsblood,
__________________________ Long Barrow, granted to Big Agnes,
__________________________ Rimegate, granted to Aki Twentysons,
__________________________ Sable Hall, granted to Ygon Oldfather,
__________________________ Woodswatch-by-the-Pool, granted to Kyleg Stonehand,
__________________________ Oakenshield, granted to Soren Shieldbreaker,
__________________________ Castle Black, granted to Mance Rayder,
__________________________ Queensgate, granted to Morna Whitemask,
__________________________ Deep Lake, granted to Old Man Harwick,
__________________________ The Nightfort, still unmanned, under reconstruction,
__________________________ Icemark, granted to Baldor Icewall,
__________________________ Hoarfrost Hill, granted to Haldur Bullspear,
__________________________ Stonedoor, granted to Asta the Swimmer,
__________________________ Greyguard, granted to Blind Doss
Sentinel Stand, granted to Marrik One-Foot,
The Shadow Tower, granted to Sigorn of Thenn.
Westwatch-by-the-Bridge, granted to Soren of Thenn.

Chieftains, leaders and warlords:

[MANCE RAYDER], former King-Beyond-the-Wall, named Lord of Castle Black, acting Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, slain holding the Wall in the Other's assault,
his wife, DALLA, now widowed,
their newborn son, born in battle, as yet unnamed,
LADY VAL OF WHITETREE, Dalla’s older sister, the wildling princess, paramour of Jon Snow,
GARTH, Val’s friend and companion, named one of the Wardens of the Exodus,

LORD OF BONES, mocked as RATTLESHIRT, named Lord of Eastwatch, a raider and leader of a war band,
SIGORN OF THENN, Magnar of Thenn, Lord of the Shadow Tower,
his father, {STYR}, former Magnar of Thenn, died in prison after being captured by the Night’s Watch,
his cousin, STIGA, named to the Dragonguard, perished during the Battle of the Snows,
his cousin, SOREN, named Lord of Westwatch-by-the-Bridge, castellan of the Shadow Tower as well,
TORMUND, Mead-King of Ruddy Hall, called GIANTSBANE, TALL-TALKER, HORNBLOWER, and BREAKER OF ICE, also THUNDERFIST, HUSBAND TO BEARS, SPEAKER TO GODS, and FATHER OF HOSTS,
his eldest son, {TOREGG THE TALL}, named to the Dragonguard, slain by wraith assassin,
his other sons, {TORWYRD THE TAME}, DORMUND, and {DRYN},
his daughter {MUNDÄ}, murdered after being captured by the Night’s Watch,
THE WEEPING MAN, called THE WEEPING MAN, a notorious raider and leader of a war band,
{HARMA, called DOGSHEAD}, slain in the battle in the Haunted Forest,
Exodus, slain during the Other’s assault on the Wall,

________________ [VARAMYR] called SEVENSKINS, a skinchanger and warg. Named one of the Wardens of the Exodus, perished at the assault on the Wall,

________________________ his skins; three wolves, one snow bear, one shadowcat, one eagle, one horse,

________________ BORROQ, called THE BOAR, a skinchanger, much feared,

________________ GERRICK KINGSBLOOD, of the blood of Raymun Redbeard, named Lord of the Torches,

________________________ his three daughters,

________________ OLD MAN HARWICK, clan patriarch,

________________________ many, many sons and daughters,

________________ DARK GERRICK, his seventh son, named to the Dragonguard,

________________ SOREN SHIELDBREAKER, a famed warrior, named Lord of Oakenshield,

________________ MORNAR WHITE MASK, the warrior witch, a raider, named Lady of Queensgate,

________________ YGON OLDFATHER, a clan chief with eighteen wives, named Lord of Sable Hall,

________________ [THE GREAT WALRUS], leader of the Walrus Men from the Frozen Shore, died resisting Jon Snow as king,

________________________ another Great Walrus was elected,

________________ LORD OF SEALS, later renamed himself THE ADMIRAL OF SEALS, commander of the free folk fleet. Turned craven and fled from the battle in the Skagosi straits,

________________ [ALVIN WHALETOOTH], died at the battle of the Hardhome,

________________________ his son, ERYN, named to the Dragonguard,

________________ BIG AGNÉS, named Lady of Long Barrow,

________________ BALDOR ICEWALL, named Lord of Icemark,

________________ HALDUR BULLSPEAR, named Lord of Hoarfrost Hill,

________________ GAVIN THE TRADER, named Lord of Greenguard,

________________ DEVYN SEALSKINNER, captain in the free folk fleet,

________________ AKI TWENTYSONS, named Lord of Rimegate,

________________ HARLE THE HANDSOME, joined the Night’s Watch, appointed First Ranger,

________________ HARLE THE HUNTSMAN, named to the Dragonguard, died at the Battle of
the Snows,

________________ KYLEG OF THE WOODEN EAR, joined the Night’s Watch,

________________ KYLEG STONEHAND, named Lord of Woodswatch-by-the-Pool,

________________ BROGG BIG-CHIN, joined the Night’s Watch,

________________ MARRIK ONE-FOOT, named Lord of Sentinel Stand,

________________ BLIND DOSS, named Lord of Greyguard,

________________ THE BLOODTOOTH, captain in the free folk fleet,

________________ ASTA THE SWIMMER, captain in the free folk fleet,

________________ THE OWL LORD, a skinchanger, speaks only in hoots,

________________ HOWD THE WANDERER, a free folk chieftain, left to parts unknown,

________________ LARS THE PRETTY,

________________ MARTHE OF THE ANTLERS, a clan chief of ill-repute, joined the Night’s Watch,

________________ ERIK BEARCLAW, joined the Night’s Watch,

________________ [NED BEARCLAW], executed by Rattleshirt,

________________ [BALDR BOARHUNTER], executed by Rattleshirt,

________________ [LARRS STONEBROCK], executed by Rattleshirt,

________________ [ERIKKSON OF THE WEST RIVER], executed by Rattleshirt,

_________ Raiders, warriors and spearwives;

________________ [YGRITTE], a spearwife, Jon Snow’s once lover. Captured and enslaved by the Others, perished during the Battle of Castle Black,

________________ [LONGSPEAR RYK], a raider, Ygritte’s friend. Captured and enslaved by the Others, perished during the Battle of Castle Black,

________________ [JARL], an experienced raider, Val’s brief lover. Missing after the Frostfangs,

________________ OSHA, a free folk woman, imprisoned and served as kitchen drudge at Winterfell. Fled with Prince Rickon Stark to Skagos, adopted Rickon as her own child, and married Lord Bjarg Magnar, now widowed,

________________ [CRASTER], a man of ill-repute who lived in a keep near the Wall. Slain by warbands in the aftermath of the battle of the Frostfangs,

________________ GILLY, Craster’s daughter and wife. Fled Craster’s keep with the free folk host, found safety at Hardhome and converted to the cult of the dragon. Currently at Castle Black,
Gilly’s unnamed babe, the last of Craster’s sons,

[BULLDEN HORN], a raider, named to the Dragonguard. Perished after being tasked to search for Rickon Stark,

[ORELL, called ORELL THE EAGLE], a skinchanger slain by Jon Snow in the Skirling Pass,

[ROLF, BONE ERIK, STEN, HALDUR HALFWIT, RAGS, MHARKA, LEWIE, STUMP, SVEN, CRAB MORS, TWO-NOTCH HALDUR, FURS, LEFT-HANDED YOLDO, SHIELDFACE, AND ULF THREE BLADES], all raiders,

[THISTLE, ROWAN, MO, HOLLY, SQUIRREL, WILLOW WITCH-EYE, FRENYA, MYRTLE], spearwives,

The Circle of Witches and Wargs

The Circle, also known as the Dragon Cult, or the Cult of the White Dragon, a zealous offshoot of Old God worship. The Circle revolves around the ice dragon Sonagon, and has grown highly intolerant of other religions.

MOTHER MOLE, formerly a wood’s witch, now the Mother Reverend and Prioress of the Circle.

her apprentices;

SIGRID of Antlerstone, greater apprentice,

apprentices GUNHILDE, ARSI, HELTHA, SOLVI, and two-score others,

Wargs and skinchangers;

THE OWL LORD,

BORROQ THE BOAR,

TORVI ICETOOTH,

BRIAR, GRISILLA, GRIGG, ERROK, BODGER and more.

Giants;

[MAG MAR TUN DOH WEG, called MAG THE MIGHTY], a giant, slain by the Others at the Slaughter in the Frostfangs,

WUN WEG WUN DAR WUN, called WUN WUN, a giant, serving at Castle Black,

LEG LUN DAR TAR, a giant chieftain,
MAG DE GAR, a giant chieftain,

two dozen giant clans, approximately 300 remaining,

Beyond the Wall;

In the caverns beneath the haunted forest;

THE THREE-EYED CROW, also called THE LAST GREENSEER, sorcerer and dreamwalker, once a man of the Night’s Watch named BRYNDEN, now more tree than man,

his servant, COLDHANDS, also called the STRANGER, clad in black, once perhaps a man of the Night’s Watch, now a mystery,

RAMSAY, an unchained wight taken from the battle for the Wall,

the children of the forest, those who sing the song of earth, last of their dying race:

ACORN, LEAF, ASH, SCALES, BLACK KNIFE, SNOWYLOCKS, COALS.

THE OTHERS

The Others, also known as white walkers, cold gods, white shadows and children of the moon, are beings of ice that exist the north far beyond the Wall. They had not been seen for many thousand years and were considered extinct, but in modern times they are leading an invasion south, already conquering all lands north of the Wall. It is feared to be the second Long Night.

The Others are described as beautiful, ethereal creatures with bright blue eyes, that are prone to playing with mortals before they kill them. They seek to conquer the world, and to turn every mortal creature ‘immortal’.

THE WHITE WALKER KING, the Dread, an immortal and mysterious figure leading the Others’ invasion. Said to be the most dangerous creature in the world, and said to be half-human, half-Other,

{THE NIGHT’S KING}, a legendary figure from the Age of Heroes, a fearless warrior named as the thirteenth Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. He attempted to make peace between humans and Others by marrying one of them, but ended up declaring himself king and her his queen, and ruling from the Nightfort for thirteen dark years. They still tell tales of the atrocities of his reign, though all records of him were destroyed and his very name was forbidden,

THE CORPSE QUEEN, a name given to the Night’s King’s bride, a woman with skin as cold as ice and eyes like blue stars. Supposedly she took his soul as well as his seed,
{MALVERN}, the name given to an ambitious white walker who tricked his way through the Wall. Was wounded in the crossing, but remained strong enough to raise a host of corpses after the Battle of the Snows, and was critical in assaulting the Wall. Later slain after being lured into a trap by Samwell Tarly.

CLAIMANTS TO THE IRON THRONE, LORD OF SEVEN KINGDOMS

{THE QUEEN REGENT}

House Lannister and House Baratheon loyalists once held the Iron Throne as the sons of King Robert Baratheon, under the regency of Queen Cersei of House Lannister. After the deaths of several key figures, Cersei Lannister was accused of crimes of infidelity and murder by the Faith, leading towards a stand-off between crown and faith around the Red Keep that lasted for 77 days. Her reign ended in spectacular collapse during attack on the Great Sept and the Great Fire of King’s Landing, after crimes against men and gods, and the Iron Throne was conquered by King Aegon Targaryen.

The Queen Regent and her children were declared as illegitimate, stripped of all right, land and deed.

King Tommen's banner once showed the crowned stag of Baratheon, black on gold, and the lion of Lannister, gold on crimson, combatant.

____ {CERSEI LANNISTER}, the First of Her Name, widow of {King Robert I Baratheon}, Queen Dowager, former Protector of the Realm, former Lady of Casterly Rock, and former Queen Regent. Also called the MAD QUEEN; accused of infidelity and high treason, held siege inside the Red Keep for 77 days, dabbled in sorcery and set fire to King’s Landing in madness, and then slain in circumstances unknown,

______ her children;

_______________ her eldest son, {JOFFREY HILL}, also called KING JOFFREY I BARATHEON poisoned during his wedding feast by his uncle Tyrion,

_______________ her daughter, {MYRCELLA HILL}, also called PRINCESS MYRCELLA BARATHEON, a girl of ten, a ward of Prince Doran Martell at Sunspear, betrothed to his son Trystane. Murdered at Starfall by Ser Gerold Dayne, the Darkstar, at the behest of her uncle Tyrion,

_______________ her youngest son, {TOMMEN I HILL}, also called KING TOMMEN I BARATHEON. Once the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms. A boy of eight years, supposedly murdered by his uncle Tyrion.

___________________________ his kittens, SER POUNCE, {LADY WHISKERS}, {BOOTS},
his wife, {QUEEN MARGAERY} of House Tyrell, thrice wed, twice widowed, once murdered. Accused of high treason, held captive in the Red Keep by Cersei Lannister, murdered by Cersei Lannister and ‘resurrected’,

Margaery’s lady companions and cousins, {MEGGA}, {ALLA}, and {ELINOR TYRELL}, accused of treachery, all held hostage and slain in the Red Keep,

Cersei’s brothers:

SER JAIME LANNISTER, called THE KINGSLAYER, twin to Queen Cersei, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. Presumed dead, supposedly executed by the outlaw Lady Stoneheart,

TYRION LANNISTER, called THE IMP, a dwarf, accused and condemned for regicide and kinslaying. Now Lord of Casterly Rock, Warden of the West, and pardoned fully by King Aegon Targaryen,

PODRICK PAYNE, Tyrion's former squire, a boy of twelve, captured by outlaws,

Cersei’s father, {TYWIN LANNISTER}, former Lord of Casterly Rock, Warden of the West, and Hand of the King, murdered on the privy by his son Tyrion,

Cersei’s uncles, aunt and cousins;

Cersei’s uncle, {SER KEVAN LANNISTER}, named Lord Marshal and Warden of the West. Committed suicide during the Great Fire of King’s Landing.

his wife, {LADY DORNA SWYFT}, murdered by the outlaw Lady Stoneheart,

their children: {SER LANCEL LANNISTER}, a knight of the Holy Order of the Warrior’s Sons. Murdered and ‘resurrected’ by Lord Qyburn.

{WILLEM}, twin to Martyn, murdered at Riverrun,

MARTYN, twin to Willem, a squire, murdered by the outlaw Lady Stoneheart,

JANEI, a girl of three, murdered by the outlaw Lady Stoneheart,

Cersei’s aunt, GENNA LANNISTER, fled from the outlaw Lady Stoneheart,

her husband, {SER EMMON FREY}, briefly Lord of Riverrun, executed by the outlaw Lady Stoneheart,

their children: {SER CLEOS FREY}, killed by outlaws, his son;

SER TYWIN FREY, called TY, Cleos’ son,
WILLEM FREY, a squire, Cleos’ son,

SER LYONEL FREY, Lady Genna’s second son,

{TION FREY}, a squire, Genna’s son, murdered at Riverrun,

WALDER FREY, called RED WALDER, Genna’s son, a page at Casterly Rock,

Cersei’s uncle, {SER TYGETT LANNISTER},

his wife; DARLESSA MARBRAND,

his son, {TYREK LANNISTER}, a squire, vanished during the food riots in King’s Landing,

LADY ERMESANDE HAYFORD, Tyrek’s child wife, widowed before she was weaned,

Cersei’s uncle, {GERION LANNISTER}, lost at sea,

JOY HILL, his bastard daughter,

{SER STAFFORD LANNISTER} also called Uncle Dolt, Cersei’s cousin, died during Robb Stark’s campaign in the riverlands,

CERENNA LANNISTER, Cersei’s cousin, daughter of her late uncle Stafford, her mother’s brother,

MYRIELLE LANNISTER, Cersei’s cousin and Cerenna’s sister, daughter of her late uncle Stafford,

{SER DAVEN LANNISTER}, her cousin, Stafford’s son, named Warden of the West, died at the Scouring of the Twins,

SER DAMION LANNISTER, a more distant cousin, married Shiera Crakehall, named castellan of Casterly Rock, defeated and captured by Tyrion Lannister,

SER LUCION LANNISTER, their son,

LANNA, their daughter, m. Lord Antario Jast,

LADY MARGOT, a cousin still more distant, m. Lord Titus Peake,

After a mass outcry against House Lannister, the main branch of Lannister has been all but extinguished, and Tyrion Lannister (once condemned) stands as the Lord of Casterly Rock under King Aegon.

Queen Cersei’s small council:

{SER KEVAN LANNISTER}, Lord Marshal, Warden of the West,
{LORD ORTON MERRYWEATHER}, Hand of the King. Murdered by assassin unknown along with his wife and Great Maester Pyelle in the Red Keep.

{LADY TAENA MERRYWEATHER}, Lord Orton’s wife, and Queen Cersei’s paramour, and secret spy of House Tyrell. Murdered by assassin unknown along with her husband and Great Maester Pyelle in the Red Keep. Their deaths sparked Queen Cersei’s paranoia,

{GRAND MAESTER PYCELLE}, counsellor and healer. Murdered by assassin unknown along with Lord and Lady Merryweather in the Red Keep,

SER JAIME LANNISTER, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. Missing, presumed dead,

AURANE WATERS, the Bastard of Driftmark, grand admiral and master of ships. Fled to sea with the royal fleet, turned pirate lord – styling himself the Lord of Waters,

{SER HARYS SWYFT}, lord treasurer and master of coin. Murdered by assassin unknown during the siege of the Red Keep,

LORD QYBURN, master of whispers. A disgraced maester and necromancer, Queen Cersei’s last supporter. Resurrected a small army of abominations, masterminded the Attack on the Faith, later abandoned the Queen Regent’s cause and fled the city,

Queen Cersei’s former small council;

{LORD GYLES ROSBY}, lord treasurer and master of coin, dead of a cough,

King Tommen’s Kingsguard:

SER JAIME LANNISTER, Lord Commander,

{SER MERYN TRANT}, executed for extreme negligence, then resurrected by Lord Qyburn,

{SER BOROS BLOUNT}, executed for extreme negligence, then resurrected by Lord Qyburn,

{SER BALON SWANN}, died in Dorne with Princess Myrcella, slain by either Gerold Dayne or Obara Sand,

{SER OSMUND KETTLEBLACK}, captured by the Faith, turned accuser against Cersei, died in the burning of the Great Sept,

{SER ARYS OAKHEART}, dead in Dorne,

SER LORAS TYRELL, the Knight of Flowers, survived captivity in the Red Keep, left crippled,

SER ROBERT STRONG, a grotesque animation created by Lord Qyburn. Abandoned Queen Cersei along with Lord Qyburn, fled the city,
Tommen’s court at King’s Landing:

__________ [SER OSNEY KETTLEBLACK], brother to Osmund and Osfryd. Tasked by Cersei Lannister to assassinate the High Septon, but failed and was captured by the Faith. Tortured for a confession, his accusation against the Queen Regent formed the chief allegation against her. Later died in the burning of the Great Sept,

__________ [SER OSFRYD KETTLEBLACK], brother to Osmund and Osney, former commander of the City Watch of King’s Landing. Captured by the Faith, turned accuser against Cersei, died in the burning of the Great Sept,

__________ [JOCELYN SWYFT], Queen Cersei’s handmaid. Murdered and harvested for Lord Qyburn’s experiments,

__________ [LEWYS PIPER], [GARRETT PAEGE], hostages and squires at the Red Keep. Murdered and harvested for Lord Qyburn’s experiments,

__________ [MOON BOY], the royal jester and fool. Murdered and harvested for Lord Qyburn’s experiments,

__________ [PATE], a lad of eight, King Tommen’s whipping boy. Murdered and harvested for Lord Qyburn’s experiments,

__________ [ORMOND OF OLDTOWN], the royal harper and bard. Murdered and harvested for Lord Qyburn’s experiments,

__________ NOHO DIMITTIS, envoy from the Iron Bank of Braavos. Fled the city,

__________ [SER GREGOR CLEGANE], called THE MOUNTAIN THAT RIDES, dead of a poisoned wound,

__________ [RENNIFER LONGWATERS], chief undergaoler of the Red Keep’s dungeons. Murdered and harvested for Lord Qyburn’s experiments,

__________ [WAT], a singer styling himself [THE BLUE BARD]. Murdered and harvested for Lord Qyburn’s experiments,

__________ [HAMISH THE HARPER], an aged singer, died a captive. Murdered and harvested for Lord Qyburn’s experiments,

__________ [SER MARK MULLENDORE], who lost a monkey and half an arm in the Battle of the Blackwater. Fled the fall of the Red Keep, later executed by Lord Tyrell for his cowardice,

__________ [SER TALLAD called THE TALL], [SER LAMBERT TURNBERRY], [SER BAYARD NORCROSS], [SER HUGH CLIFTON], all murdered and harvested for Lord Qyburn’s experiments,

__________ [JALABHAR XHO], Prince of the Red Flower Vale, an exile from the Summer Isles. Murdered and harvested for Lord Qyburn’s experiments,

__________ [SER HORAS REDWYNE] and [SER HOBBER REDWYNE], twin boys held hostage in the Red Keep by Queen Cersei. Strapped to a trebuchet and launched into the city in spite,
Vast majority of hostages and captives in the Red Keep suffered horrible deaths during the siege of the Red Keep,

Queen Cersei’s Mercenaries:
- The Mountain’s Men;
  - JOSS STILLWOOD, RAFF THE SWEETLING, DUNSEN, SHITMOUTH, EGGON, TOBBOT,
- The Brave Companions, or the Bloody Mummers;
  - URSWYCK, ZOLLO, TOGG JOTH, THREE-TOES,
- Lannister loyalists;
  - VYLARR, captain of the red cloak guards,
- Various guardsmen,
  - LUM, RED LESTER, HOKE, SHORTEAR, PUCKENS, all
guardsmen,
- Various sellswords;
  - YELLOW COCK TOM, BEN RABBITHOLE, LITTLE PEWTY, ALYN, WILKIN, JOHN THE HAMMER, “CRASTER”,

Sellswords and disreputables, hired by Lord Qyburn to purge the Red Keep of Tyrell forces and then to stand siege. Most men holding the Red Keep were slain, some few managed to escaped.

The people of the Faith:
- {THE HIGH SEPTON}, also called the High Sparrow. Father of the Faithful, Voice of the Seven on Earth, an old man and reformist. Slain in the burning of the Great Sept,
  - {SEPTA UNELLA}, {SEPTA MOELLE}, {SEPTA SCOLERA},
  - high-ranking septas,
  - {SEPTON TORBERT}, {SEPTON RAYNARD}, {SEPTON LUCEON}, SEPTON OLLIDOR, of the Most Devout,
  - {SEPTA AGLANTINE}, {SEPTA HELICENT}, serving the Seven
at the Great Sept of Baelor,
  - {SER THEODAN WELLS}, called THEODAN THE TRUE, pious
commander of the Warrior’s Sons,
  - {SER BONIFER HASTY}, called BONIFER THE GOOD, of the
Holy Hundred, of the Warrior’s Sons,
  - {SER LANCEL LANNISTER}, called LANCEL THE
REPENTANT, of the Warrior’s Sons. Captured and resurrected by Lord Qyburn, surviving only as a deformed abomination,

________________ Hundreds of the “sparrows,” the humblest of men, fierce in their piety.

________________

THE DRAGON REBORN, THE KING OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS

The Targaryens are the blood of the dragon, descended from the high lords of the ancient Freehold of Valyria, their heritage marked by lilac, indigo, and violet eyes and hair of silver-gold. To preserve their blood and keep it pure, House Targaryen has oft wed brother to sister, cousin to cousin, uncle to niece. The founder of the dynasty, Aegon the Conqueror, took both his sisters to wife and fathered sons on each. The Targaryen banner is a three-headed dragon, red on black, the three heads representing Aegon and his sisters. The Targaryen words are Fire and Blood.

After Robert’s Rebellion, House Targaryen was deposed and usurped, but the campaign by King Aegon VI Targaryen reclaimed the Iron Throne for his family. King Aegon currently sits in King’s Landing, laying claim to all Seven Kingdoms but only owning a third of them.

To some, Aegon VI Targaryen is called the Mummer’s Dragon, named such by those who do not believe his right or his identity.

AEGON VI TARGARYEN, Sixth of His Name, called the Dragon Reborn, the Young Dragon, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, King of the Iron Throne, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms. A young man thought lost as a babe, but returned from exile across the sea. He vanquished the Mad Queen Cersei, and restored the dynasty of House Targaryen to the Iron Throne. Wielder of the sword Blackfyre,

________ His father, {PRINCE RHAEGAR TARGARYEN}, died at the Trident to the usurper Robert Baratheon,

________ His mother, {ELIA} of House Martell, slain by Gregor Clegane during the sack of King’s Landing,

________ His sister, {PRINCESS RHAENYS TARGARYEN}, a babe, slain during the sack of King’s Landing,

________ The {PISSWATER PRINCE}, a babe from Flea Bottom, who was murdered in Aegon’s place curing the sack of King’s Landing,

________ his aunt, QUEEN DAENERYS TARGARYEN, the MOTHER OF DRAGONS, the Queen of Slaver’s Bay and Volantis.

________ King Aegon’s small council;
\[\text{LORD JON CONNINGTON},\] former Hand of the King, sent as an envoy and executed by Stannis Baratheon,

\[\text{LORD TYRION LANNISTER},\] Hand of the King, Warden of the West,

\[\text{HARRY STRICKLAND},\] master of coin,

\[\text{LORD PETYR BALEISH},\] master of ships, Warden of the East,

\[\text{LORD RANDYLL TARLY},\] master of laws, Warden of the South,

\[\text{LYSONO MAAR},\] master of whispers,

\[\text{HOLDON HALFMAESTER},\] temporarily substituting the duties of Grand Maester,

\[\text{Advisors;}\]

\[\text{ILLYRIO MOPATIS},\] magister of Pentos, King Aegon’s supporter and backer,

\[\text{VARYS},\] also called the SPIDER, King Aegon’s shadow backer,

\[\text{SEPTA LEMORE},\] king’s advisor on the Faith of the Seven,

\[\text{King Aegon’s Kingsguard;}\]

\[\text{SER ROLLY DUCKFIELD},\] called DUCK, assigned to protect Lord Connington on Dragonstone,

\[\text{SER DAEMON SAND},\] the Bastard of Godsgrace, assigned to protect Lord Connington on Dragonstone,

\[\text{SER TRISTAN RYGER},\]

\[\text{SER OLYVAR YRONWOOD},\]

\[\text{SER RONALD VANCE},\]

\[\text{Supporters of Aegon Targaryen;}\]

\[\text{GOLDEN COMPANY},\] ten thousand strong;

\[\text{HOMELESS HARRY STRICKLAND},\] captain-general,

\[\text{WATKYN},\] his squire and cupbearer,

\[\text{\{SER MYLES TOYNE, called BLACKHEART\}},\] four years dead, the previous captain-general,

\[\text{BLACK BALAQ},\] a white-haired Summer Islander, commander of the company archers,

\[\text{LYSONO MAAR},\] a sellsword late of the Free City of Lys, company
spymaster,
______________ GORYS EDORYEN, a sellsword late of the Free City of Volantis, company
paymaster,
______________ SER FRANKLYN FLOWERS, called the BAD APPLE, the Bastard of Cider
Hall, a sellsword from the Reach. Currently serving as Lord Tyrion Lannister’s second in
command,
______________ SER MARQ MANDRAKE, an exile escaped from slavery, scarred by pox,
______________ SER LASWELL PEAKE, an exile lord,
______________ his brothers, TORMAN and PYKEWOOD,
______________ LORD TRISTAN DARRY, formerly SER TRISTAN RIVERS, bastard,
outlaw, exile. Legitimised and raised by King Aegon,
______________ CASPOR HILL, HUMFREY STONE, MALO JAYN, DICK COLE, WILL
COLE, LORIMAS MUDD, JON LOTHSTON, LYMOND PEASE, SER BRENDEL
BYRNE, DUNCAN STRONG, DENYS STRONG, CHAINS, YOUNG JOHN MUDD, serjeants
of the company,

From the crownlands;
______________ House Stokeworth;
______________ {LADY TANDA STOKEWORTH}, former Lady of Stokeworth, an
old woman. Died from a broken hip after a fall.
______________ {LADY FALYSE STOKEWORTH}, her eldest daughter. Died screaming in the
black cells after disappointing Queen Cersei.
______________ {SER BALMAN BYRCH}, Falyse's husband. Killed by Ser Bronn in a duel.
______________ LADY LOLLYS STOKEWORTH, her second daughter and Lady of Stokeworth. Past
thirty, feeble of wits.
______________ SER BRONN OF THE BLACKWATER, also called the
BLOODY LORD STOKEWORTH, once a low-born sellsword, now Lollys's husband and Lord of
Stokeworth. Also claimant to Lord of Claw Island, after service to King Aegon,
______________ TYRION TANNER, of the hundred fathers, Lollys's son of rape and sole heir, and possibly the bastard son Joffrey Baratheon,

House Rosby;
______________ {LORD GYLES ROSBY}, a weak old man, unwed, previous, Lord of Rosby. Named master of coin by Queen Regent Cersei Lannister, died of his sickness at the Red
Keep in 300 AC.
OLYVAR FREY, eighteenth son of Lord Walder Frey, Lord Gyles’ cousin and ward of Rosby. Once a squire to Robb Stark, and now the de facto Lord of Rosby. Allied alongside with Aegon Targaryen, changed his name to OLYVAR ROSBY,

House Massey;

SER JUSTIN MASSEY, once heir of his house and a knight in service of King Stannis Baratheon. Left wounded and captured after the battle of Hardhome, executed for his liege lord’s crimes at White Harbour,

LORD GORMON MASSEY, previously Gormon Waters. Once a bastard cousin, raised up as Lord after the sack of Stonedance. Allied alongside Aegon Targaryen,

From the riverlands;

House Darry;

LADY AMEREI FREY, called GATEHOUSE AMI, eldest daughter of Merrett Frey and Mariya Darry. Married to Lancel Lannister but annulled, very quickly married Tristan Rivers for protection,

LORD TRISTAN DARRY, formerly SER TRISTAN RIVERS, bastard, outlaw, exile. Married to Lady Amerei Frey, legitimised and raised by King Aegon,

LORD CLEMENT PIPER, Lord of Pinkmaiden. Lost two sons at the Scouring of the Twins, rebelled with Aegon Targaryen,

SER TRISTAN RYGER, former companion of Edmure Tully. Allied with Aegon Targaryen, later named to Kingsguard,

SER RONALD VANCE, also called Ronald the Bad, former companion of Edmure Tully. Allied with Aegon Targaryen, later named to Kingsguard,

From Dorne;

OBARA SAND, bastard daughter of Prince Oberyn Martell, one of the Sand Snakes. Appointed commander of the Dornish spearmen, later died suspiciously in the Battle of the Roseroad,

ANDERS YRONWOOD, Lord of Yronwood, Warden of the Stone Way, the Bloodroyal,

His grandson, OYLVAR YRONWOOD, named to Aegon’s Kingsguard,

FRANKLYN FOWLER, Lord of Skyreach, called THE OLD HAWK, the Warden of the Prince's Pass,
From the stormlands;

Lord Casper Wylde, Lord of Rain House, once fought for Renly, once fought for Stannis, joined Aegon after the landing of the Golden Company,

Lester Morrigen, Lord of Crow’s Nest, joined Aegon after the landing of the Golden Company,

From the Reach;

Lord Randyll Tarly, Lord of Horn Hill. Previously commander of Mace Tyrell’s forces on the roseroad, he surrendered to King Aegon after the death of his liege lord and the Great Fire of King’s Landing,

From the Vale;

Lord Petry Baelish, called Littlefinger, Lord of Harrenhal, and Lord Protector of the Vale. Negotiated the surrender of Vale forces in return for being granted title of Warden of East,

THE BROKEN KING

The brother of King Robert and Lord of Dragonstone, Stannis Baratheon pursued his right to the Iron Throne after decrying the children of Cersei Lannister as illegitimate. Spurred by the Red Woman Melisandre of Asshai, Stannis has taken for his banner the fiery heart of the Lord of Light—a red heart surrounded by orange flames upon a yellow field. Within the heart is the crowned stag of House Baratheon, in black.

Although once a serious contender for the Iron Throne, Stannis Baratheon has continually dwindled in strength and influence. Presently he holds only his seat of Dragonstone, and King Stannis’ campaign has devolved into skirmishes and raids against first Lannister, and later Targaryen.

As converts to the Red God, King Stannis and his men have grown convinced the Jon Snow is the harbinger of the Great Other, and that Stannis is the champion fated to defeat him. They are fixated on the prophecy of the ‘Battle for the Dawn’, and they are working towards a Grand Rite, a ceremony to summon a weapon that can defeat the Champion of Night.

King Stannis Baratheon, the First of His Name, second son of Lord Steffon Baratheon and Lady Cassana of House Estermont, Lord of Dragonstone, styling himself Azor Ahai, Champion of the Dawn, and Rightful King of the Iron Throne,

his wife, Queen Selyse of House Florent,
PRINCESS SHIREEN, their daughter, a girl of eleven,

PATCHFACE, Shireen’s tattooed fool,

the queen’s uncle, SER AXELL FLORENT, the Hand of the King,

The High Priestess, LADY MELISANDRE OF ASSHAI, called THE RED WOMAN, a sorceress and priestess of R’hllor, the Lord of Light,

the shadows, also called wraiths, Red Envoys or moonless children. Mysterious beings that haunt Melisandre, occasionally acting as assassins.

SER DAVOS SEAWORTH, Lord of the Rainwood, Admiral of the Narrow Sea, and previous Hand of the King, called THE ONION KNIGHT. Captured at Hardhome and believed dead, held captive at White Harbour. Later unceremoniously released, his location unknown,

King Stannis’ Godsguard;

Sworn swords to Rh’llor

SER RICHARD HORPE, his second-in-command,

SER ROLLAND STORM, the Bastard of Nightsong.

his knights and sworn swords:

{SER GODRY FARRING}, would-be dragonslayer, slain by Jon Snow,

{SER JUSTIN MASSEY}, captured at Hardhome and later executed at White Harbour

SER CLAYTON SUGGS, captured at Hardhome and later defected to the Weeper’s warband,

LORD ROBIN PEASEBURY,

LORD HARWOOD FELL,

SER WILLAM FOXGLOVE, SER HUMFREY CLIFTON, SER ORMUND WYLDE, SER HARYS COBB, SER CORLISS PENNY, queen's men and fervent followers of the Lord of Light,

{SER NARBERT GRANDISON}, SER BENETHON SCALES, {SER PATREK OF KING’S MOUNTAIN}, {SER DORDEN THE DOUR}, SER MALEGORN OF REDPOOL, SER LAMBERT WHITEWATER, SER PERKIN FOLLARD, {SER BRUS BUCKLER}, {SER MORGATH FOLLARD},

the king’s squires, DEVAN SEAWORTH and BRYEN FARRING,
The Greyjoys of Pyke claim descent from the Grey King of the Age of Heroes. Legend says the Grey King ruled the sea itself and took a mermaid to wife. Aegon the Dragon ended the line of the last King of the Iron Islands, but allowed the ironborn to revive their ancient custom and choose who should have the primacy among them. They chose Lord Vickon Greyjoy of Pyke. The Greyjoy sigil is a golden kraken upon a black field. Their words are *We Do Not Sow*.

Under Balon Greyjoy, the ironborn declared independence from the Iron Throne and set about a new conquest. Balon Greyjoy perished, and his brother Euron Greyjoy was chosen from the Kingsmoot. Although Balon attempted to conquer the north, Euron abandoned the northern campaign to focus on the Reach instead. His campaign has been marked by devastating casualties.

Euron Greyjoy led the Drowning of Oldtown, a cataclysmic battle fought amidst a storm. In its wake, the ironborn claimed Oldtown as their new seat of power, renaming it Gods Arising and converting its citizens to their new religion.

___ EURON GREYJOY, the Third of His Name Since the Grey King, King of the Iron Islands and the Reach. Styling himself the God-King of the Seven Kingdoms, the Drowned God Reborn, King of the Iron Islands and the Oceans, King of Salt and Rock, Son of the Storm, and Lord Reaper of Pyke, captain of the *Silence*, called the CROW’S EYE,

______ his bound slave, SH’CAEGLOTH,

______ LORD QYBURN, the necromancer. Once master of whispers for Cersei Lannister, now Grand Vizier under King Euron. Serving as King Euron’s chief advisor, counsellor and executor.

________________ SER ROBERT STRONG, Lord Qyburn’s flesh golem and bodyguard – actually the reanimate corpse of Gregor Clegane and others,

______ his family;

________________ his elder brother, {BALON}, King of the Iron Islands and the North, the Ninth of His Name Since the Grey King. Killed in a fall,

___________________________ LADY ALANNYS, of House Harlaw, Balon’s widow,

___________________________ their children:

___________________________ {RODRIK}, slain during Balon’s first rebellion,

___________________________ {MARON}, slain during Balon’s first rebellion,

___________________________ ASHA, captain of the *Black Wind* and conqueror of Deepwood Motte, married Erik Ironmaker. Fled from King Euron’s rule, presumed dead after House Bolton retook Deepwood Motte,
{THEON}, called by northmen THEON TURNCLOAK, held captive at Winterfell and tortured. Offered back to his family, but Euron Greyjoy refused him, his younger brother, {VICTARION}, Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet, master of the Iron Victory. Sent to Meereen to fetch Euron’s bride, Daenerys Targaryen, his youngest brother, AERON, called DAMPHAIR. Once Euron’s dissenter, now his High Priest,

Euron’s Grotesques;

{MALL THE MONSTROUS}, a deformed giant,

GHRAZZAC, a Brindled Man of Sothoryi,

many other slaves and deformities,

{URGARD}, a tortured Red Priest,

many captured warlocks, sorcerers and mages,

FALIA FLOWERS, bastard daughter of Lord Hewett, and Euron’s bedwarmer. Later tortured, disfigured, mutilated and pregnant,

his captains and crewmen:

{TORWOLD BROWTOOTH}, PINCHFACE JON MYRE, {THE RED OARSMAN}, {LEFT-HAND LUCAS CODD}, QUELLON HUMBLE, HARREN HALF-HOARE, {KEMMETT PYKE THE BASTARD}, QARL THE THRALL, STONEHAND, {RALF THE SHEPHERD}, RALF OF LORDSPORT

{CRAGORN}, who blew Dragonbinder at the Kingsmoot and died,

{RODRIK FREEBORN}, who blew Krakenbinder at the Drowning of Oldtown and died,

the ships in his fleet;

{The Silence}, captained by Euron Greyjoy,

{The Great Kraken}, the flagship of House Greyjoy, captained during the Drowning of Oldtown by Donnor Saltcliffe,

{The Thunderer}, the ship of House Drumm, once captained by Lord Denys Drumm, taken by the Red Oarsmen,

{The Dusk}, the ship of House Harlaw, once captained by Ser Harras Harlaw, taken by Harren Half-Hoare,

{The Leviathan’s Wail}, the ship of House Volmark, captained by Lord
Maron Volmark,

______________ [The Nightflyer], the ship of House Blacktyde, captained by Lord Waldon Wynch,

______________ [The Hatchet's Edge], the ship of House Sparr, captained by the Sparr,

______________ [The Silverfin], the ship of house Botley, captained by Germund Botley,

______________ [The Gargoyle], captained by Hotho Humpback,

______________ [The Foamdrinker]

______________ [The Axe Maiden]

______________ [The Bone Reaper]

______________ [The Last Light]

______________ [The Maiden’s Tears]

______________ [The Forsaken]

______________ [The Northern Hunter]

______________ [The Salt Bitch]

______________ [The King Joffrey's Valour], stolen from the Arbor prior to completion, its name kept ironically,

______________ most ironborn ships were lost in the Drowning of Oldtown,

______ his lords bannermen:

______________ ERIK IRONMAKER, called ERIK ANVIL-BREAKER and ERIK THE JUST, Lord Steward of the Iron Islands, castellan of Pyke, an old man once renowned, m. Asha Greyjoy,

______________ lords of Pyke:

______________ GERMUND BOTLEY, Lord of Lordsport,

______________ [WALDON WYNCH], Lord of Iron Holt,

______________ lords of Old Wyk:

______________ [DUNSTAN DRUMM], The Drumm, the Bone Hand, Lord of Old Wyk, perished trying to hold Southshield,

______________ his son and heir, [DENYS DRUMM], slain after challenging Euron Greyjoy to a duel,

______________ NORNE GOODBROTHER, of Shatterstone,

______________ THE STONEHOUSE,
lords of Great Wyk:

GOROLD GOODBROTHER, Lord of the Hammerhorn. Once Euron’s dissenter, now Lord of Gods Arising,

his eleven daughters and three sons,

TRISTON FARWYND, Lord of Sealskin Point,

THE SPARR,

MELDRED MERLYN, Lord of Pebbleton,

lords of Orkmont:

{ALYN ORKWOOD}, called ORKWOOD OF ORKMONT,

LORD BALON TAWNEY,

lords of Saltcliffe:

LORD DONNOR SALTCLIFFE,

LORD SUNDERLY

lords of Harlaw:

RODRIK HARLAW, called THE READER, Lord of Harlaw, Lord of Ten Towers, Harlaw of Harlaw. Currently sitting uneasily in Ten Towers while Euron is away,

SIGFRYD HARLAW, called SIGFRYD SILVERHAIR, his great uncle, master of Harlaw Hall,

{HOTHO HARLAW}, called HOTHO HUMPBACK, of the Tower of Glimmering, a cousin,

BOREMUND HARLAW, called BOREMUND THE BLUE, master of Harridan Hill, a cousin,

lords of the lesser isles and rocks:

GYLBERT FARWYND, Lord of the Lonely Light,

the ironborn conquerors:

on the Shield Islands (lost);

ANDRIK THE UNSMILING, briefly Lord of Southshield, his lands now recaptured by Reachmen,

{NUTE THE BARBER}, briefly Lord of Oakenshield, his lands now recaptured by Reachmen,

{MARON VOLMARK}, briefly Lord of Greenshield, his lands now recaptured by Reachmen,
[SER HARRAS HARLAW], the Knight of Grey Gardens, briefly Lord of Greyshield, his lands now recaptured by Reachmen. Slain challenging Euron Greyjoy to a duel,

___________ at Moat Cailin (lost);

___________ [RALF KENNING], castellan and commander,

___________ [ADRACK HUMBLE], short half an arm,

___________ [DAGON CODD], who yields to no man,

___________ at Torrhen’s Square (lost);

___________ [DAGMER, called CLEFTJAW], captain of Foamdrinker, slain by Bolton forces during the retaking of Torrhen’s Square,

___________ in Oldtown, renamed Gods Arising,

___________ GOROLD GOODBROTHER, Lord of the Hammerhorn, Lord of Gods Arising,

________ Defectors against King Euron;

___________ BAELOR BLACKTYDE, Lord of Blacktyde, executed for not acknowledging Euron Greyjoy as king, and hacked into seven pieces,

___________ AERON GREYJOY, briefly, attempted to rally the Drowned Men to raise a rebellion against Euron Greyjoy, before submitting to the God-King,

___________ ASHA GREYJOY, the kraken’s daughter, captain of the Black Wind. Last seen at Deepwood Motte, reported dead,

__________________________ her lover, QARL THE MAID, a swordsman, her former lover,

__________________________ TRISTIFER BOTLEY, heir to Lordsport, dispossessed of his lands,

__________________________ her crewmen, ROGGON RUSTBEARD, GRIMTONGUE, ROLFE THE DWARF, LORREN LONGAXE, ROOK, FINGERS, SIX-TOED HARL, DROOPEYE DALE, EERL HARLAW, CROMM, HAGEN THE HORN and his beautiful red-haired daughter,

__________________________ her cousin, QUENTON GREYJOY,

__________________________ her cousin, DAGON GREYJOY, called DAGON THE DRUNKARD,

___________ [LORD DENYS DRUMM], the Bone Hand, [SER HARRAS HARLAW], the Knight of Grey Gardens, LORD GOROLD GOODBROTHER, LORD MARON VOLMARK and ANDRIK THE UNSMILING, attempted to defect from Euron Greyjoy after the loss of the Shield Isles, but they either submitted or were slain,
THE DRAGON QUEEN

Although Aegon Targaryen claims to have restored the line of House Targaryen, there are many who doubt Aegon’s lineage. Aegon Targaryen sits as the de facto Targaryen king, there is another from the same bloodline with unquestioned heritage. Daenerys Targaryen, the daughter of King Aerys, has also made her interest in retaking the Iron Throne clear.

She is regarded as the most beautiful and powerful woman in the world. Aegon Targaryen attempts to resolve the disputing claim through marriage, but Daenerys Targaryen’s interests in such are unknown.

___ DAENERYS TARGARYEN, the First of Her Name, Queen of Meereen, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, Protector of the Realm, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, the Breaker of Chains, called DAENERYS STORMBORN, the UNBURNT, MOTHER OF DRAGONS, the QUEEN OF ASH.

See below, under ‘Queen Across the Water’.

HOUSES GREAT AND SMALL

HOUSE ARRYN

The Arryns are descended from the Kings of Mountain and Vale. Their sigil is a white moon-and-falcon upon a sky blue field. The Arryn words are As High as Honor.

House Arryn remained neutral throughout the War of Five Kings, and only began to support Aegon Targaryen late in the war.

___ ROBERT ARRYN, Lord of the Eyrie, Defender of the Vale, a sickly boy of eight years, called SWEETROBIN. Currently being warded at King’s Landing,

________ his mother, {LADY LYSA of House Tully}, widow of Lord Jon Arryn, pushed from the Moon Door to her death,

________ his guardian, PETYR BAELISH, called LITTLEFINGER, Warden of the East, Lord of Harrenhal, and Lord Protector of the Vale,

________________ ALAYNE STONE, Lord Petyr’s natural daughter, actually Sansa Stark,

________________ SER LOTHOR BRUNE, a sellsword in Lord Petyr’s service, captain of guards at the Eyrie,
OSWELL, a grizzled man-at-arms in Lord Petyr’s service, sometimes called KETTLEBLACK,

[SER SHADRICH OF THE SHADY GLEN], called THE MAD MOUSE, a hedge knight in Lord Petyr’s service, actually working for the Varys the Spider,

[SER JORAH MORMONT], an exiled knight in Lord Petyr’s service, actually working for Queen Daenerys,

SER BYRON THE BEAUTIFUL, SER MORGARTH THE MERRY, hedge knights in Lord Petyr’s service,

[SER HARROLD HARDYNG], Lady Waynwood’s ward, oft called HARRY THE HEIR. Slain by Ser Shadrich as he kidnapped Alayne Stone.

The Winged Knights;

Eight sworn protectors of Lord Arryn, each one chosen from the most highborn and skilled sons. They serve as personal guardians for three years;

[SER HARROLD HARDYNG],

SER ROLAND WAYNWOOD,

SER ANDAR ROYCE,

SER BEN COLDWATER,

SER ANDREW TOLLETT,

SER EDMUND BREAKSTONE,

SER ELBERT BELMORE,

SER OSGOOD UPCLIFF,

SER MYCHEL REDFORT, Ser Harrold’s replacement after his death,

House Arryn’s household and retainers:

MAESTER COLEMON, counsellor, healer, and tutor,

MORD, a brutal gaoler with teeth of gold,

GRETCHEL, MADDY, and MELA, servingwomen,

MYA STONE, bastard daughter of King Robert,

The Lords Declarant, the effective rulers of the Vale despite Petyr Baelish’s efforts;
HOUSE ARRYN

YOHN ROYCE, Lord of Runestone,

ANYA WAYNWOOD, Lady of Ironoaks,

HORTON REDFORT, Lord of Redfort,

HARLAN HUNTER, Lord of Longbow Hall,

BENEDAR BELMORE, Lord of Strongsong,

House Arryn’s bannermen, the Lords of Mountain and Vale:

YOHN ROYCE, called BRONZE YOHN, Lord of Runestone,

his son, SER ANDAR, heir to Runestone,

LORD NESTOR ROYCE, High Steward of the Vale and castellan of the Gates of the Moon,

his son and heir, SER ALBAR,

his daughter, MYRANDA, called RANDA, a widow, but scarce used,

LYONEL CORBRAY, Lord of Heart's Home,

SER LYN COBRAY, his brother, who wields the famed blade Lady Forlorn,

SER LUCAS CORBRAY, his younger brother,

TRISTON SUNDERLAND, Lord of the Three Sisters,

GODRIC BORRELL, Lord of Sweetsister, secret ally to the north,

ROLLAND LONGTHORPE, Lord of Longsister,

ALESANDOR TORRENT, Lord of Littlesister,

ANYA WAYNWOOD, Lady of Ironoaks Castle,

SER MORTON, her eldest son and heir,

SER DONNEL, the Knight of the Bloody Gate,

WALLACE, her youngest son,

SER SYMOND TEMPLETON, the Knight of Ninestars,

JON LYNDERLY, Lord of the Snakewood,

EDMUND WAXLEY, the Knight of Wickenden,

GEROLD GRAFTON, the Lord of Gulltown,
EON HUNTER, Lord of Longbow Hall, recently deceased,

SER GILWOOD, Lord Eon’s eldest son and heir, once called YOUNG LORD HUNTER. Died in suspicious circumstances,

SER EUSTACE, Lord Eon’s second son. Died along with his brother in suspicious circumstances,

SER HARLAN, Lord Eon’s youngest son, the new Lord Hunter,

HORTON REDFORT, Lord of Redfort, thrice wed,

SER JASPER, SER CREIGHTON, SER JON, his sons,

SER MYCHEL, his youngest son, a new-made knight, m. Ysilla Royce of Runestone,

BENEDAR BELMORE, Lord of Strongsong, considered to be corrupt,

Clan chiefs from the Mountains of the Moon,

SHAGGA SON OF DOLF, of the Stone Crows, presently leading a band in the kingswood,

TIMETT SON OF TIMETT, of the Burned Men, grown in power in the Vale,

CHELLA DAUGHTER CHEYK, of the Black Ears,

CRAWN SON OF CALOR, of the Moon Brothers.

HOUSE BARATHEON

The youngest of the Great Houses, House Baratheon was born during the Wars of Conquest when Orys Baratheon, rumored to be a bastard brother of Aegon the Conqueror, defeated and slew Argilac the Arrogant, the last Storm King. Aegon rewarded him with Argilac’s castle, lands, and daughter. Orys took the girl to bride, and adopted the banner, honors, and words of her line. The Baratheon sigil is a crowned stag, black, on a golden field. Their words are Ours is the Fury.

In the 283rd year after Aegon's Conquest, Robert of House Baratheon, Lord of Storm’s End, overthrew the Mad King, Aerys II Targaryen, to win the Iron Throne. His claim to the crown derived from his grandmother, a daughter of King Aegon V Targaryen, though Robert preferred to say his warhammer was his claim.

After Robert’s death, his sons Joffrey, and later Tommen, held the Iron Throne through a tumultuous period known as the War of Five Kings. Under the regency of his wife, Queen Cersei, his reign collapsed, his children declared illegitimate, and the Baratheon line left near extinct.
{ROBERT BARATHEON}, the First of His Name, King of the Andals, the Rhoyne, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, killed by a boar,

his wife, {QUEEN CERSEI} of House Lannister, the MAD QUEEN, Queen Regent after his death, slain after setting half the city alight,

their children:

{KING JOFFREY BARATHEON}, the First of His Name, supposedly murdered at his wedding feast by Tyrion Lannister. Posthumously decried as Joffrey Hill,

{PRINCESS MYRCILLA}, a ward in Dorne, betrothed to Prince Trystane Martell, murdered by Ser Gerold Dayne supposedly at the behest of Tyrion Lannister. Posthumously decried as Myrcella Hill,

{KING TOMMEN BARATHEON}, the First of His Name, supposedly murdered in his chamber by Tyrion Lannister. Posthumously decried as Tommen Hill,

his brothers:

STANNIS BARATHEON, rebel Lord of Dragonstone and pretender to the Iron Throne. Currently the last of his line, but condemned as a fanatic,

his daughter, SHIREEN, a girl of twelve,

{RENLY BARATHEON}, rebel Lord of Storm’s End and pretender to the Iron Throne, murdered at Storm’s End in the midst of his army,

Robert’s bastard children:

MYA STONE, a maid of nineteen, in the service of Lord Petryr Baelish,

GENDRY, an outlaw in the riverlands, ignorant of his heritage,

BELLA, a prostitute in the Stony Sept,

EDRIC STORM, his acknowledged bastard son by Lady Delena of House Florent, hiding in Lys,

SER ANDREW ESTERMONT, his cousin and guardian,

his guards and protectors: SER GERALD GOWER, LEWYS called THE FISHWIFE, SER TRISTON OF TALLY HILL, OMER BLACKBERRY,

{BARRA}, his bastard daughter by a whore of King’s Landing, killed by the command of his widow,

his other kin:

his great-uncle, SER ELDON ESTERMONT, Lord of Greenstone,
his cousin, SER AEMON ESTERMONT, Eldon’s son,
his cousin, SER ALYN ESTERMONT, Aemon’s son,
his cousin, SER LOMAS ESTERMONT, Eldon’s son,
his cousin, SER ANDREW ESTERMONT, Lomas’s son,

bannermen sworn to Storm’s End, the storm lords:

DAVOS SEAWORTH, Lord of the Rainwood, Admiral of the Narrow Sea, and Hand of the King. Thought dead and lost after being captured at Hardhome,
his wife, MARYA, a carpenter’s daughter,
their sons, {DALE, ALLARD, MATTHOS, MARIC}, killed in the Battle of the Blackwater, their son DEVAN, squire to King Stannis, their sons, STANNIS and STEFFON,

{SER GILBERT FARRING}, castellan of Storm’s End. Slain by Aegon’s forces in the capture of Storm’s End,
his son, BRYEN, squire to King Stannis,
his cousin, {SER GODRY FARRING}, slain by Jon Snow,
ELWOOD MEADOWS, Lord of Grassfield Keep, seneschal at Storm’s End,

SELWYN TARTH, called THE EVENSTAR, Lord of Tarth,
his daughter, BRIENNE, THE MAID OF TARTH, also called BRIENNE THE BEAUTY. On a quest to recover Lady Stark’s daughters, captured by outlaws,
her squire, PODRICK PAYNE, a boy of ten, captured by outlaws,

{BIG BEN BUSHY}, SER HYLE HUNT, SER MARK MULLENDORE, SER EDMUND AMBROSE, {SER RICHARD FARROW}, {WILL THE STORK}, SER HUGH BEESBURY, SER RAYMOND NAYLAND, HARRY SAWYER, SER OWEN INCHFIELD, ROBIN POTTER, her onetime suitors,

{JON CONNINGTON}, Lord of Storm’s End and Griffin’s Roost, and Hand of the King. Once exiled by Aerys II Targaryen, returned with Aegon Targaryen and made Hand of the King again, appointed Lord Paramount of Stormlands,

{SER RONNET CONNINGTON, called RED RONNET}, the former Knight of Griffin’s Roost. Lord Connington’s cousin, slain by Olyvar Frey in the battle of Rosby,
his younger siblings, RAYMUND and ALYNNE,

his bastard son, RONALD STORM,

LESTER MORRIGEN, Lord of Crows Nest, allied behind King Aegon,

his brother and heir, SER RICHARD MORRIGEN,

his brother, [SER GUYARD MORRIGEN, called GUYARD THE GREEN], slain in the Battle of the Blackwater,

ARSTAN SELMY, Lord of Harvest Hall,

his great-uncle, SER BARRISTAN SELMY, serving as Lord Commander of Queen Daenerys’ Queensguard in Meereen,

CASPER WYLDE, Lord of the Rain House, allied behind King Aegon,

his uncle, SER ORMUND WYLDE, an aged knight,

HARWOOD FELL, Lord of Felwood,

HUGH GRANDISON, called GREYBEARD, Lord of Grandview,

SEBASTION ERROL, Lord of Haystack Hall,

CLIFFORD SWANN, Lord of Stonehelm,

[BERIC DONDARRION], Lord of Blackhaven, called THE LIGHTNING LORD, an outlaw in the riverlands, oft slain and now thought dead,

[BRYCE CARON], Lord of Nightsong, slain by Ser Philip Foote on the Blackwater,

his slayer, SER PHILIP FOOTE, a one-eyed knight, Lord of Nightsong,

his baseborn half-brother, SER ROLLAND STORM, called THE BASTARD OF NIGHTSONG, pretender Lord of Nightsong,

ROBIN PEASEBURY, Lord of Poddingfield,

MARY MERTYNNS, Lady of Mistwood,

RALPH BUCKLER, Lord of Bronzegate,

his cousin, [SER BRUS BUCKLER], slain by Jon Snow,
HOUSE FREY

The Freys are bannermen to House Tully, but have not always been diligent in their duty. At the outset of the War of the Five Kings, Robb Stark won Lord Walder's allegiance by pledging to marry one of his daughters or granddaughters. When he wed Lady Jeyne Westerling instead, the Freys conspired with Roose Bolton and murdered the Young Wolf and his followers at what became known as the Red Wedding.

In the Red Wedding’s aftermath, House Frey suffered extreme condemnation from many. After suffering greatly from prosecution from outlaws and embittered houses, House Frey was all but destroyed during the Scouring of the Twins by Jon Snow.

_____ {WALDER FREY}, the Lord of the Crossing and architect of the Red Wedding. Slain by the dragon Sonagon, in the ruins of his castle,

______ by his first wife, {LADY PERRA, of House Royce}:

________________ {SER STEVRON FREY}, his eldest, died after the Battle of Oxcross,

________________ Stevron’s eldest son, {SER RYMAN FREY}, slain by outlaws,

_________________________ Ryman’s eldest son, {EDWYN FREY}, once heir to House Frey, slain at the Twins on his nameday,

_________________________ Ryman’s second son, WALDER FREY, called BLACK WALDER. Absent during the Scouring of the Twins and technically the new lord of House Frey, but fled the riverlands to parts unknown.

_________________________ {SER EMMON FREY}, his second son, married to Genna Lannister,

_________________________ {SER AENYS FREY}, his third son, leading the Frey forces in the north, slain in the Battle of the Snows,

_________________________ Aenys’s son, AEGON BLOODBORN, an outlaw,

_________________________ Aenys’s son, {RHAEGAR}, an envoy to White Harbor, hammered to death by Lord Manderly,

______________________ PERRIANE, his eldest daughter, m. Ser Leslyn Haigh,

______ by his second wife, {LADY CYRENNA, of House Swann}:

______________________ {SER JARED FREY}, an envoy to White Harbor, hammered to death by Lord Manderly,

______ by his third wife, {LADY AMAREI of House Crakehall}:

______________________ {SER HOSTEEN FREY}, a knight of great repute, slain in the Battle of the Snows,

______________________ LYENTHE, his second daughter, m. Lord Lucias Vypren,
Symond Frey, his seventh son, a counter of coins, an envoy to White Harbor, hammered to death by Lord Manderly,

Ser Danwell Frey, his eighth son, died at the Twins,

Merrett Frey, his ninth son, hanged at Oldstones,

Merrett’s daughter, Walda, called Fat Walda, m. Roose Bolton, Lord of the Dreadfort, slain during the fall of Winterfell after the Battle of the Snows,

Merrett’s son, Walder, called Little Walder, eight, a squire in service to Ramsay Bolton, slain during the fall of Winterfell after the Battle of the Snows,

Ser Geremy Frey, his tenth son, drowned,

Ser Raymund Frey, his eleventh son,

by his fourth wife, Lady Alyssa, of House Blackwood:

Lothar Frey, his twelfth son, called Lame Lothar, slain at the Twins,

Ser Jammos Frey, his thirteenth son, slain by outlaws,

Jammos’ son, Walder, called Big Walder, eight, a squire in service to Ramsay Bolton, slain during the fall of Winterfell after the Battle of the Snows,

Ser Whalen Frey, his fourteenth son,

Morya, his third daughter, m. Ser Flement Brax,

Tyta, his fourth daughter, called Tyta the Maid,

by his fifth wife, Lady Sarya of House Whent: no progeny,

by his sixth wife, Lady Bethany of House Rosby:

Ser Perwyn Frey, Walder’s fifteenth son, slain at the Twins,

Ser Benfrey Frey, Walder’s sixteenth son, died of a wound received at the Red Wedding,

Maester Willamen, his seventeenth son, in service at Longbow Hall, dismissed and banished,

Olyvar Frey, his eighteenth son, once a squire to Robb Stark, now the de facto Lord of Rosby. Allied with Aegon Targaryen, changed his name to Olyvar Rosby,

Roslin, his fifth daughter, m. Lord Edmure Tully at the Red Wedding, slain at the Twins, while pregnant with his child,

by his seventh wife, Lady Annara of House Farring:

Arwyn, his sixth daughter, a maid of fourteen, slain at the Twins,

WenDEL, his nineteenth son, a page at Seagard, slain at the Twins,
{COLMAR}, his twentieth son, eleven and promised to the Faith, slain at the Twins,

{WALTYR}, called TYR, his twenty-first son, ten, slain at the Twins,

{ELMAR}, his twenty-second and lastborn son, a boy of nine briefly betrothed to Arya Stark, slain at the Twins,

{SHIREI}, his seventh daughter and youngest child, a girl of seven, slain at the Twins,

Lord Walder’s natural children, by sundry mothers,

{WALDER RIVERS}, called BASTARD WALDER, the eldest bastard. Led a force north seeking vengeance against Jon Snow, slain by the Weeper at the Battle of the Snows,

MAESTER MELWYS, in service at Rosby, dismissed,

JEYNE RIVERS, MARTYN RIVERS, RYGER RIVERS, RONEL RIVERS, MELLARA RIVERS, and others.

HOUSE LANNISTER

The Lannisters of Casterly Rock remain the principal support of King Tommen's claim to the Iron Throne. They boast of descent from Lann the Clever, the legendary trickster of the Age of Heroes. The gold of Casterly Rock and the Golden Tooth has made them the wealthiest of the Great Houses. The Lannister sigil is a golden lion upon a crimson field. Their words are Hear Me Roar!

Under Lord Tywin Lannister, House Lannister reached great heights of power. Their house rose triumphant from the War of the Five Kings, with Tywin’s grandson sitting on the Iron Throne, and Tywin Lannister ruling the realm as Hand of the King. The Lannister downfall was heralded by Tywin’s Bane, his deformed son Tyrion. Tyrion murdered his father and allied behind Aegon Targaryen, bringing forth doom upon the rest of his family.

Presently, Tyrion Lannister, with multiple counts of kinslaying to his name, remains the last surviving member of the main line, having captured Casterly Rock and ruling as Warden of the West under King Aegon.

{TYWIN LANNISTER}, Lord of Casterly Rock, Shield of Lannisport, Warden of the West, and Hand of the King. Murdered by his dwarf son in his privy,

Lord Tywin's children:

{CERSEI}, called the MAD QUEEN, twin to Jaime, widow of King Robert I Baratheon, and once Queen Regent. Accused of infidelity and slain after setting fire to half the city
in madness,

________________ SER JAIME, called THE KINGSLAYER, twin to Cersei, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. Missing, presumed dead at the hands of outlaws,

________________________ his squires, JOSMYN PECKLEDON, {GARRETT PAEGE}, {LEW PIPER},

________________________ SER ILYN PAYNE, a tongueless knight, lately the King’s Justice and headsman,

________________________ SER ADDAM MARBRAND, SER FLEMENT BRAX, SER ALYN STACKSPEAR, SER STEFFON SWYFT, SER HUMFREY SWYFT, SER LYLE CRAKEHALL called STRONGBOAR, SER JON BETTLEY called BEARDLESS JON, knights once serving with Ser Jaime’s host at Riverrun,

________________________ TYRION, called THE IMP, dwarf and kinslayer, sent fugitive in exile across the narrow sea. Returned allied along with Aegon Targaryen and the Golden Company, to conquer the realm. Led the campaign west, captured Casterly Rock, and now rules as Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West under King Aegon.

________________________ SER FRANKLYN FLOWERS called the BAD APPLE, the Bastard of Cider Hall. A sellsword of the Golden Company, and Lord Tyrion’s second in command.

____ the household at Casterly Rock:

________________ MAESTER CREYLEN, healer, tutor, and counsellor,

________________ {VYLARR}, captain of guards, executed by Tyrion Lannister, for raping a whore fourteen years ago,

________________ SER BENEDICT BROOM, master-at-arms, captured by Tyrion Lannister,

________________ WHITESMILE WAT, a singer,

____ Lord Tywin’s siblings and their offspring:

________________ {SER KEVAN LANNISTER}, m. Dorna of House Swyft,

________________ LADY GENNA, m. Ser Emmon Frey, now Lord of Riverrun,

________________ Genna’s eldest son, {SER CLEOS FREY}, m. Jeyne of House Darry, killed by outlaws,

________________________ Cleos’s eldest son, SER TYWIN FREY, called TY, now heir to Riverrun,

________________________ Cleos’s second son, WILLEM FREY, a squire,

________________________ Genna’s younger sons, SER LYONEL FREY, {TION FREY}, WALDER FREY called RED WALDER,
{TYGETT LANNISTER}, died of a pox,

TYREK, Tygett’s son, missing and feared dead,

LADY ERMESANDE HAYFORD, Tyrek’s child wife,

{GERION LANNISTER}, lost at sea,

JOY HILL, Gerion’s bastard daughter, eleven,

Lord Tywin’s other close kin:

{SER STAFFORD LANNISTER}, a cousin and brother to Lord Tywin’s wife, slain in battle at Oxcross,

CERENNA and MYRIELLE, Stafford’s daughters,

{SER DAVEN LANNISTER}, Stafford’s son. Named Warden of the West, perished in the Scouring of the Twins,

SER DAMION LANNISTER, a cousin, m. Lady Shiera Crakehall. Named castellan of Casterly Rock, captured by Tyrion Lannister,

their son, SER LUCION,

their daughter, LANNA, m. Lord Antario Jast,

LADY MARGOT, a cousin, m. Lord Titus Peake,

bannermen and sworn swords, Lords of the West:

DAMON MARBRAND, Lord of Ashemark,

ROLAND CRAKEHALL, Lord of Crakehall,

SEBASTON FARMAN, Lord of Fair Isle,

TYTOS BRAX, Lord of Hornvale,

QUENTEN BANEFORT, Lord of Banefort,

{SER HARYS SWYFT}, goodfather to Ser Kevan Lannister, slain during the siege of the Red Keep

REGENARD ESTREN, Lord of Wyndhall,

GAWEN WESTERLING, Lord of the Crag,

LORD SELMOND STACKSPEAR,

TERRENCE KENNING, Lord of Kayce,

LORD ANTARIO JAST,
HOUSE MARTELL

Dorne was the last of the Seven Kingdoms to swear fealty to the Iron Throne. Blood, custom, geography, and history all helped to set the Dornishmen apart from the other kingdoms. The Martell banner is a red sun pierced by a golden spear. Their words are Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken.

At the outbreak of the War of the Five Kings Dorne took no part, but when Myrcella Baratheon was betrothed to Prince Trystane, Sunspear declared its support for King Joffrey. However, elements within Dorne conspired against the Baratheon rule, leading to the murder of Myrcella Baratheon at Starfall. Dorne later declared its support to King Aegon Targaryen and helped to overthrow the Baratheon and Lannisters.

___ {DORAN NYMEROS MARTELL}, Lord of Sunspear, Prince of Dorne. Held hostage in the water gardens during the war, and later drowned in the pools. His bastard niece, Nymeria Sand, is held responsible,

_____ his wife, MELLARIO, of the Free City of Norvos,

_____ their children:
PRINCESS ARIANNE, heir to Sunspear, companion and hopeful betrothal to King Aegon Targaryen,

[PRINCE QUENTYN], a new-made knight, fostered at Yronwood, and sent as a betrothal to Queen Daenerys in Meereen. Unsuccessful and failed dragon tamer,

PRINCE TRYSTANE, betrothed to Myrcella Baratheon, left traumatised by her death,

his siblings:

{PRINCESS ELIA}, raped and murdered during the sack of King's Landing,

her daughter {RHAENYS TARGARYEN}, murdered during the sack of King’s Landing, her son,

{AEGON TARGARYEN}, a babe at the breast, murdered during the sack of King’s Landing. Many doubt whether the babe Aegon is the same one that appeared 18 years later,

{PRINCE OBERYN, called THE RED VIPER}, slain by Ser Gregor Clegane during a trial by combat,

his paramour, ELLARIA SAND, natural daughter of Lord Harmen Uller,

his bastard daughters, THE SAND SNAKES:

{OBARA}, his daughter by an Oldtown whore. Conspired to seize control of Dorne and take vengeance against House Lannister. Later died in suspicious circumstances leading Dornish spearmen in the Battle of the Roseroad,

NYMERIA, called LADY NYM, his daughter by a noblewoman of Old Volantis. Conspired to seize control of Dorne and take vengeance against House Lannister. Held her uncle captive in the Water Gardens and held responsible for his death,

{TYENE}, his daughter by a septa. Conspired to seize control of Dorne and take vengeance against House Lannister. Later burnt to death in the attack on the Great Sept of Baelor,

SARELLA, his daughter by a trader captain from the Summer Isles. Left Dorne under the alias ALLERAS, joining the Citadel at Oldtown as an acolyte. Later apprentice to Marwyn the Mage, survived and fled the Drowning of Oldtown.

ELIA, called LADY LANCE, his eldest daughter by Ellaria Sand, companion to Princess Arianne,

OBELLA, his daughter by Ellaria Sand,

DOREA, his daughter by Ellaria Sand,

LOREZA, his daughter by Ellaria Sand,
Prince Doran’s court at the Water Gardens:

- AR EO HOTAH, of Norvos, captain of guards, slain by Ser Gerold Dayne and Obara Sand,
- MAESTER CALEOTTE, counsellor, healer, and tutor, held prisoner at the Water Gardens,

at Sunspear:

- MAESTER MYLES, counsellor, healer, and tutor,
- RICASSO, seneschal, old and blind,
- SER MANFREY MARTELL, castellan at Sunspear, poisoned as part of the plot,
- ALYSE LADYBRIGHT, lord treasurer, conspired to usurp Doran,

his ward, PRINCESS MYRCELLA BARATHEON, betrothed to Prince Trystane, beheaded by Ser Gerold Dayne, the Darkstar,

- her sworn shield, SER ARYS OAKHEART, slain by Areo Hotah,
- her second sworn shield, SER BALON SWANN, died in Dorne with Princess Myrcella, slain by either Gerold Dayne or Obara Sand,

- her bedmaid and companion, ROSAMUND LANNISTER, a distant cousin,

his bannermen, the Lords of Dorne:

- ANDERS YRONWOOD, Lord of Yronwood, Warden of the Stone Way, the Bloodroyal,

- YNYS, his eldest daughter, m. Ryon Allyrion,

- SER CLETUS, his son and heir,

- GWYNETH, his youngest daughter, a girl of twelve,

- HARMEN ULLER, Lord of Hellholt,

- DELONNE ALLYRION, Lady of Godsgrace,

- RYON ALLYRION, her son and heir,

- DAGOS MANWOODY, Lord of Kingsgrave,

- LARRA BLACKMONT, Lady of Blackmont,

- NYMELLA TOLAND, Lady of Ghost Hill,
HOUSE TULLY

Lord Edmyn Tully of Riverrun was one of the first of the river lords to swear fealty to Aegon the Conqueror. King Aegon rewarded him by raising House Tully to dominion over all the lands of the Trident. The Tully sigil is a leaping trout, silver, on a field of rippling blue and red. The Tully words are *Family, Duty, Honor*.

House Tully allied with King Robb Stark at the outbreak of the War of Five Kings, but they were defeated after the Red Wedding. House Tully was removed as Lord Paramounts of the Trident and their lands dissolved in the aftermath. Later, under King Aegon, many riverlords supported his cause to find vengeance against House Lannister, Lord Edmure Tully was recovered from Casterly Rock, and House Tully was restored as Lords of Riverrun, on the condition that the riverlands bend the knee to the new Targaryen regime.

____ EDMURE TULLY, Lord of Riverrun, Lord Paramount of the Trident. Taken captive at his wedding and held prisoner by the Freys and then Lannisters, and then recovered during the taking Casterly Rock by Tyrion Lannister. Currently under the care of Lord Tyrion, having pledged his support to King Aegon,

____ his bride, {LADY ROSLIN} of House Frey, with child, perished during the Scouring of the Twins,

____ his sister, {LADY CATELYN STARK}, widow of Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, slain at the Red Wedding,

____ his sister, {LADY LYSA ARRYN}, widow of Lord Jon Arryn of the Vale, pushed to her death from the Eyrie,

____ his uncle, SER BRYNDEN TULLY, called THE BLACKFISH, lately castellan of Riverrun. Fled north to join with House Reed and the crannogmen, then journeyed to Winterfell.
Pledged himself to King Brandon Stark of the North, named as Warden of the Southern Marches,

_______ his household at Riverrun:

________________ MAESTER VYMAN, counsellor, healer, and tutor,

________________ SER DESMOND GRELL, master-at-arms. Surrendered to Lannister forces,
left for the Wall to take the black. Never arrived,

________________ SER ROBIN RYGER, captain of the guard. Surrendered to Lannister forces,
left for the Wall to take the black. Never arrived,

______________________________ LONG LEW, ELWOOD, DELP, all guardsmen,

_________________________ UTHERYDES WAYN, steward of Riverrun,

_______ his bannermen, the Lords of the Trident:

_____________________ [TYTOS BLACKWOOD], Lord of Raventree Hall, perished at the Scouring
of the Twins,

_________________________ BRYNDEN, his eldest son and heir,

_________________________ {LUCAS}, his second son, slain at the Red Wedding,

_________________________ {HOSTER}, his third son, a bookish boy,

_________________________ EDMUND and ALYN, his younger sons,

_________________________ BETHANY, his daughter, a girl of eight,

_________________________ {ROBERT}, his youngest son, died of loose bowels,

________________ JONOS BRACKEN, Lord of the Stone Hedge,

_________________________ BARBARA, {JAYNE}, CATELYN, BESS, ALYSANNE, his five
daughters,

_____________________ {JASON MALLISTER}, Lord of Seagard, held prisoner in his own castle,
slain by Frey loyalists after the Scouring of Twins,

_________________________ {PATREK}, his son, imprisoned with his father, perished in the
Scouring of the Twins,

_________________________ his youngest son, the new Lord of Seagard, a boy of twelve,

_________________________ {SER DENYS MALLISTER}, Lord Jason’s uncle, a man of the
Night’s Watch, died in the collapse of the Shadow Tower,

_________________________ CLEMENT PIPER, Lord of Pinkmaiden Castle,

_________________________ his son and heir, {SER MARQ PIPER}, taken captive at the Red
Wedding, perished in the Scouring of the Twins,
KARYL VANCE, Lord of Wayfarer's Rest, slain in the Scouring of the Twins,

NORBERT VANCE, the blind Lord of Atranta,

his son, SER RONALD VANCE, named to King Aegon’s Kingsguard,

THEOMAR SMALLWOOD, Lord of Acorn Hall,

WILLIAM MOOTON, Lord of Maidenpool,

ELEANOR, his daughter and heir, thirteen, m. Dickon Tarly of Horn Hill,

{SHELLA WHENT}, dispossessed Lady of Harrenhal,

SER HALMON PAEGE,

LORD LYMOND GOODBROOK.

HOUSE TYRELL

The Tyrells rose to power as stewards to the Kings of the Reach, though they claim descent from Garth Greenhand, gardener king of the First Men. When the last king of House Gardener was slain on the Field of Fire, his steward Harlen Tyrell surrendered Highgarden to Aegon the Conqueror. Aegon granted him the castle and dominion over the Reach. The Tyrell sigil is a golden rose on a green-grass field. Their words are Growing Strong.

Mace Tyrell declared his support for Renly Baratheon at the onset of the War of the Five Kings, and gave him the hand of his daughter Margaery. Upon Renly’s death, Highgarden made alliance with House Lannister, and Margaery was betrothed to King Joffrey. With Joffrey’s death, Margaery was betrothed to King Tommen.

After the Landing of the Golden Company, House Tyrell suffered a costly defeat on the roseroad and the Lannister alliance fell apart. When King Aegon took the throne, House Tyrell was removed as Wardens of the South and replaced by House Tarly, who bent the knee. House Tyrell and the Reach have suffered great defeats from both Aegon and Euron.

{MACE TYRELL}, once Lord of Highgarden, Warden of the South, Defender of the Marches, and High Marshal of the Reach,

his wife, {LADY ALERIE}, of House Hightower of Oldtown,

their children:

WILLAS, their eldest son, the new Lord of Highgarden, crippled

SER GARLAN, called THE GALLANT, their second son, newly raised to Lord of Brightwater. Led the Reach’s forces during the Drowning of Oldtown, and missing
thereafter,

________________________ Garlan’s wife, LADY LEONETTE of House Fossoway,

_______________________ SER LORAS, the Knight of Flowers, their youngest son, a sworn brother of
the Kingsguard, severely crippled after the siege of Red Keep,

_______________________ {MARGAERY}, their daughter, thrice wed and twice widowed and once
murdered,

________________________ Margaery’s companions and ladies-in-waiting:

________________________ her cousins, {MEGGA}, {ALLA}, and {ELINOR TYRELL},

________________________ Elinor’s betrothed, ALYN AMBROSE, squire,

________________________ {LADY ALYSANNE BULWER}, {LADY ALYCE
GRACEFORD}, {LADY TAENA MERRYWEATHER}, {MEREDYTH CRANE called
MERRY}, {SEPTA NYSTERICA}, her companions,

_______ his widowed mother, {LADY OLENNA} of House Redwyne, called THE QUEEN OF
THORNS. Slain during the Great Fire of King’s Landing,

_______ his sisters:

______________ LADY MINA, m. Paxter Redwyne, Lord of the Arbor,

______________ her son, {SER HORAS REDWYNE}, called HORROR, slain in the
siege of the Red Keep.

______________ her son, {SER HOBBER REDWYNE}, called SLOBBER,

______________ her daughter, DESMERA REDWYNE, sixteen,

______________ LADY JANNA, wed to Ser Jon Fossoway,

_______ his uncles:

______________ his uncle, GARTH TYRELL, called THE GROSS, Lord Seneschal of
Highgarden,

________________________ Garth’s bastard sons, GARSE and GARRETT FLOWERS,

______________ his uncle, SER MORYN TYRELL, Lord Commander of the City Watch of
Oldtown, surrender to Euron Greyjoy,

______________ Moryn’s son, LEO TYRELL called LAZY LEO, a student at the
Citadel, fled the city after Euron’s invasion,

______________ his uncle, {MAESTER GORMON}, serving at the Citadel,

_______ Mace’s household at Highgarden:
MAESTER LOMYS, counsellor, healer, and tutor,
IGON VYRWEL, captain of the guard,
SER VORTIMER CRANE, master-at-arms,
BUTTERBUMPS, fool and jester, hugely fat,

his bannermen, the Lords of the Reach:

RANDYLL TARLY, Lord of Horn Hill, commanding King Tommen’s army on the Trident, named Warden of the South after surrendering to King Aegon,

SAMWELL TARLY, his eldest son, Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch,

DICKON TARLY, his youngest son and heir. Missing after the Drowning of Oldtown,

{PAXTER REDWYNE}, Lord of the Arbor, slain during the Drowning of Oldtown,

{SER HORAS} and {SER HOBBER}, his twin sons,

DESMOND REDWYNE, cousin of Lord Paxter and commander in the Redwyne fleet,

MAESTER BALLABAR, Lord Paxter’s healer,

{LEYTON HIGHTOWER}, Lord of the Hightower, Voice of Oldtown, Lord of the Port,

BAELOR HIGHTOWER, called the BRIGHTSMILE, Leyton’s eldest son, surrendered to Euron Greyjoy,

MALORA HIGHTOWER, called the MAD MAID, Leyton’s daughter, taken as Euron Greyjoy’s bedslave,

ALERIE HIGHTOWER, Leyton’s second daughter, married Lord Mace Tyrell, slain in the Great Fire of King’s Landing with her husband,

SER GARTH HIGHTOWER, called the GREYSTEEL, Leyton’s second son, slain in the Drowning of Oldtown,

SER HUMFREY FLOWERS, the Bastard of the Tower, son of Gerold Hightower. Tasked with defending Oldtown from the north, currently missing, location unknown,
ARWYN OAKHEART, Lady of Old Oak,

MATHIS ROWAN, Lord of Goldengrove

[LEYTON HIGHTOWER], Voice of Oldtown, Lord of the Port,

[HUMFREY HEWETT], Lord of Oakenshield,

FALIA FLOWERS, his bastard daughter, and King Euron’s plaything,

OSBERT SERRY, Lord of Southshield,

[GUTHOR GRIMM], Lord of Greyshield,

[MORIBALD CHESTER], Lord of Greenshield,

[HORTON MERRYWEATHER], Lord of Longtable, assassinated in the Red Keep,

[LADY TAENA], his wife, a woman of Myr, assassinated in the Red Keep,

RUSSELL, her son, a boy of six,

LORD ARTHUR AMBROSE,

LORENT CASWELL, Lord of Bitterbridge,

LORD JOWAN APPLETON,

LORD MARTYN MULLENDORE,

LORD ERREN WYTHERS,

LORD ALESTER CRANE,

LORD IVOR VYRWEL,

SER BRYAN GRACEFORD,

SER MATTHEW MIDDLEBURY.

SER ROGER BULWER,

SER JON FOSSOWAY, of the green-apple Fossoways,

SER TANTON FOSSOWAY, of the red-apple Fossoways.

OTHER LORDS, KNIGHTS AND LORDLINGS,

RENFRED RYKKER, Lord of Duskendale,
SER RUFUS LEEK, a one-legged knight in his service, castellan of the Dun Fort at Duskendale,

WILLIAM MOOTON, Lord of Maidenpool,

ELEANOR MOOTON, eldest daughter and heir, thirteen, betrothed to Dickon Tarly,

SER HYLE HUNT, sworn to service of House Tarly,

SER ALYN HUNT, Ser Hyle's cousin, likewise in Lord Randyll's service,

EUSTACE BRUNE, Lord of the Dyre Den,

BENNARD BRUNE, the Knight of Brownhollow, his cousin,

SER ROGER HOGG, the Knight of Sow's Horn,

SER QUINCY COX, the Knight of Saltpans, an old man in his dotage,

at Acorn Hall, the seat of House Smallwood,

LADY RAVELLA, formerly of House Swann, wife to Lord Theomar Smallwood,

LORD LYMOND LYCHESTER, an old man of wandering wit who once held Ser Maynard at the bridge,

his young caretaker, MAESTER ROONE.

WANDERERS AND COMMON MEN

SER CREIGHTON LONGBOUGH and SER ILLIFER THE PENNILESS, hedge knight and companions,

HIBALD, a merchant fearful and niggardly,

DICK CRABB, called NIMBLE DICK, a Crabb of Crackclaw Point,

SEPTON MERIBALD, a barefoot septon,

his dog, DOG,

THE ELDER BROTHER, of the Quiet Isle. A former soldier removed to a life of penitence, until his monastery was sacked by knights of the Vale moving south,

BROTHER NARBERT, BROTHER GILLAM, BROTHER RAWNEY, penitent brothers of the Quiet Isle,
the GRAVEDIGGER, a broken man,

at the old crossroads inn:

JEYNE HEDDLE, called LONG JEYNE, innkeep, a tall young wench of eighteen years,

WILLOW, her sister, stern with a spoon,

TANSY, JON PENNY, BEN, orphans at the inn,

at Harrenhal:

BEN BLACKTHUMB, a smith and armourer,

PIA, a serving wench, once pretty,

MAESTER GULIAN, healer, tutor, counsellor,

at the Inn of the Kneeling Man:

SHARNA, the innkeep, a cook and midwife,

her husband, called HUSBAND,

BOY, an orphan of the war,

HOT PIE, a baker's boy, now orphaned.

people of King’s Landing:

CHATAYA, proprietor of an expensive brothel,

ALAYAYA, her daughter, DANCY, MAREI, two of Chataya’s girls. Many prostitutes and working girls were kidnapped, murdered and harvested for Lord Qyburn’s experiments,

TOBHO MOTT, a master armorer,

at the Peach, a brothel in Stoney Sept:

TANSY, the red-haired proprietor,

ALYCE, CASS, LANNA, JYZENE, HELLY, BELLA, some of her peaches,
here and there and elsewhere:

the ghost of High Heart, an old and sorrowful woods witch living under a hill,

the Lady of the Leaves,

the septon of Sallydance.


OUTLAWS AND BROKEN MEN

{BERIC DONDARRION}, once Lord of Blackhaven, six times slain,

EDRIC DAYNE, Lord of Starfall, a boy of twelve, Lord Beric's squire,

THE MAD HUNTSMAN of Stoney Sept, his sometime ally,

GREENBEARD, a Tyroshi sellsword, his uncertain friend,

ANGUY THE ARCHER, a bowman from the Dornish Marches,

MERRIT O'MOONTOWN, WATTY THE MILLER, SWAMPY MEG, JON O' NUTTEN, outlaws in his band,

LADY STONEHEART, a hooded woman, sometimes called MOTHER MERCY, THE SILENT SISTER, and THE HANGWOMAN,

LEM, called LEM LEMONCLOAK, a onetime soldier,

THOROS OF MYR, a red priest,

HARWIN, son of Hullen, a northman once in service to Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell,

JACK-BE-LUCKY, a wanted man, short an eye,

TOM OF SEVENSTREAMS, a singer of dubious report, called TOM SEVENSTRINGS and TOM O'SEVENS,

LIKELY LUKE, NOTCH, MUDGE, BEARDLESS DICK, outlaws,

GENDRY, an apprentice smith and bastard son of King Robert I Baratheon, ignorant of his birth,

SANDOR CLEGANE, called THE HOUND, once King Joffrey's sworn sword, later a sworn brother of the Kingsguard, last seen feverish and dying beside the Trident,

{VARGO HOAT} of the Free City of Qohor, called THE GOAT, a sellsword captain of slobbery speech, slain at Harrenhal by Ser Gregor Clegane,
ESSOS BEYOND THE NARROW SEA

IN BRAAVOS

FERREGO ANTARYON, Sealord of Braavos, sickly and failing,

QARRO VOLENTIN, First Sword of Braavos, his protector,

BELLEGERE OTHERYS called THE BLACK PEARL, a courtesan descended from the pirate queen of the same name,


THE KINDLY MAN and THE WAIF, servants of the Many-Faced God at the House of Black and White,


[ARYA] once of House Stark, a novice in service at the House of Black and White, also known as ARRY, NAN, WEASEL, SQUAB, SALTY, and CAT OF THE CANALS,

BRUSCO, a fishmonger,

his daughters, TALEA and BREA,

MERALYN, called MERRY, proprietor of the Happy Port, a brothel near the Ragman’s Harbor,

THE SAILOR’S WIFE, a whore at the Happy Port,

LANNA, her daughter, a young whore,

RED ROGGO, GYLORO DOTHARE, GYLENO DOTHARE, a scribbler
called QUILL, COSSOMO THE CONJURER, patrons of the Happy Port,

______ TAGGANARO, a dockside cutpurse and thief,
_____________ CASSO, KING OF THE SEALS, his trained seal,
______ S’VRONE, a dockside whore of a murderous bent,
______ THE DRUNKEN DAUGHTER, a whore of uncertain temper.

IN OLD VOLANTIS

______ The reigning triarchs:
_____________ {MALAQUO MAEGYR}, Triarch of Volantis, a tiger, put to death by Daenerys Targaryen,
_____________ {DONIPHOS PAENYMION}, Triarch of Volantis, an elephant, put to death by Daenerys Targaryen,
_____________ {NYESSOS VHASSAR}, Triarch of Volantis, an elephant, put to death by Daenerys Targaryen,

______ people of Volantis:
_____________ BENERRO, High Priest of R’hllor, the Lord of Light, his right hand, MOQORRO, a priest of R’hllor, strong supporter of Daenerys Targaryen, heralding her as Azor Ahai,
_____________ THE WIDOW OF THE WATERFRONT, a wealthy freedwoman of the city, also called VOGARRO’S WHORE, strong supporter of Daenerys Targaryen,
__________________________ her fierce protectors, THE WIDOW’S SONS,

_____________ PENNY, a dwarf girl and mummer,
__________________________ her pig, PRETTY PIG, her dog, CRUNCH,
__________________________ {GROAT}, brother to Penny, a dwarf mummer, murdered and beheaded,

_____________ ALIOS QHAEDAR, a candidate for triarch,
_____________ PARQUELLO VAELAROS, a candidate for triarch,
BELICHO STAEGONE, a candidate for triarch,

GRAZDAN MO ERAZ, an envoy from Yunkai.

---

IN SLAVER’S BAY

In Yunkai, the Yellow City:

{YURKHAZ ZO YUNZAK}, Supreme Commander of the Armies and Allies of Yunkai, a slaver and aged noble of impeccable birth,

YEZZAN ZO QAGGAZ, mocked as the YELLOW WHALE, monstrously obese, sickly, hugely rich,

NURSE, his slave overseer, SWEETS, a hermaphrodite slave, his treasure, SCAR, a serjeant and slave soldier, MORGHAZ ZO ZHERZYN, a nobleman oft in his cups, mocked as THE DRUNKEN CONQUEROR,

GORZHAK ZO ERAZ, a nobleman and slaver, mocked as PUDDING FACE,

AEZHAR ZO FAEZ, a nobleman and slaver, known as THE RABBIT,

GHAZDOR ZO AHLAQ, a nobleman and slaver, mocked as LORD WOBBLECHEEKS,

PAAZHAR ZO MYRAQ, a nobleman of small stature, mocked as THE PIGEON,

CHEZDHAR ZO RHAEZN, MAEZON ZO RHAEZN, GRAZDHAN ZO RHAEZN, noblemen and brothers, mocked as THE CLANKER LORDS,

THE CHARIOTEER, THE BEASTMASTER, THE PERFUMED HERO,

in Astapor, the Red City:

{CLEON THE GREAT}, called THE BUTCHER KING,

CLEON II, his successor, king for eight days,

{KING CUTTHROAT}, a barber, slit the throat of Cleon II to steal his crown,

{QUEEN WHORE}, concubine to King Cleon II, claimed the throne after his murder.
THE QUEEN ACROSS THE WATER

THE QUEEN OF SLAVER’S BAY AND VOLANTIS

____ DAENERYS TARGARYEN, the First of Her Name, Queen of Meereen, Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, Protector of the Realm, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, the Breaker of Chains, called DAENERYS STORMBORN, the UNBURNT, MOTHER OF DRAGONS, the QUEEN OF ASH.

____ her dragons, DROGON, VISERION, RHAEGAL,

____ her brother, {RHAEGAR}, Prince of Dragonstone, slain by Robert Baratheon on the Trident,

__________________ Rhaegar’s daughter, {RHAENYS}, murdered during the sack of King’s Landing,

_________________ Rhaegar’s son, {AEGON}, a babe at the breast, murdered during the sack of King’s Landing,

____ her brother {VISERYS}, the Third of His Name, called THE BEGGAR KING, crowned with molten gold,

____ her first husband, {DROGO}, a khal of the Dothraki, died of a wound gone bad,

______________ her stillborn son by Drogo, {RHAEGO}, slain in the womb by the maegi Mirri Maz Duur,

____ her second husband, HIZADAHR ZO LORAQ, Fourteenth of That Noble Name, King of Meereen, Scion of Ghis, Octarch of the Old Empire, Consort to Dragons and Blood of the Harpy,

____ her protectors:

__________________ SER BARRISTAN SELMY, called BARRISTAN THE BOLD, Lord Commander of the Queensguard,

_____________________________ his lads, squires training for knighthood:

_____________________________ TUMCO LHO, of the Basilisk Isles,

_____________________________ LARRAQ, called THE LASH, of Meereen,

_____________________________ THE RED LAMB, a Lhazarene freedman,

_____________________________ the BOYS, three Ghiscari brothers,

__________________________ STRONG BELWAS, eunuch and former fighting slave,
her Dothraki bloodriders:

JHOGO, the whip, blood of her blood,
AGGO, the bow, blood of her blood,
RAKHARO, the arakh, blood of her blood,

[SER JORAH MORMONT], formerly Lord of Bear Island, an exiled knight. Once Daenerys’ most trusted protector, but nearly dismissed from her service for insolence and secrets untold. Assigned as the Queen’s emissary, and sent to Westeros to prepare for her arrival. Slain at White Harbour attempting to fulfill his task,

her captains and commanders:

DAARIO NAHARIS, a flamboyant Tyroshi sellsword, captain of the Stormcrows, a free company. Also paramour to Queen Daenerys,
BEN PLUMM, called BROWN BEN, a mongrel sellsword, captain of the Second Sons, a free company. Multiple time betrayer,
GREY WORM, a eunuch, commander of the Unsullied, a company of eunuch infantry,
HERO, an Unsullied captain, second-in-command,
{STALWART SHIELD}, an Unsullied spearman,
MOLLONO YOS DOB, commander of the Stalwart Shields, a company of freedmen,
SYMON STRIPEBACK, commander of FREE BROTHERS, a company of freedmen,
MARSELEN, commander of the MOTHER’S MEN, a company of freedman, a eunuch, brother to Missandei,
GROLEO of Pentos, formerly captain of the great cog Saduleon, now an admiral without a fleet,
ROMMO, a jaqqa rhan of the Dothraki,

her Meereenese court:

REZNAK MO REZNAK, her seneschal, bald and unctuous,
SKAHAZ MO KANDAQ, called THE SHAVEPATE, shaven-headed commander of the Brazen Beasts, her city watch,
her handmaids and servants:

JHIQUI, Queen Daenery’s Dothraki handmaid,

IRRI, Queen Daenery’s Dothraki handmaid, and occasional paramour,

MISSANDEI, a Naathi scribe and translator,

GRAZDAR, QEZZA, MEZZARA, KEZMYA, AZZAK, BHAKAZ, MIKLAZ, DHAZZAR, DRAQAZ, JHEZANE, children of the pyramids of Meereen, her cupbearers and pages,

people of Meereen, highborn and common:

GALAZZA GALARE, the Green Grace, high priestess at the Temple of the Graces,

GRAZDAM ZO GALARE, her cousin, a nobleman,

HIZDAHR ZO LORAQ, a wealthy Meereenese nobleman, of ancient lineage,

MARGHAZ ZO LORAQ, his cousin,

RYLONA RHEE, freedwoman and harpist,

{HAZZEA}, a farmer’s daughter, four years of age,

GOGHOR THE GIANT, KHRAZZ, BELAQUO BONEBREAKER, CAMARRON OF THE COUNT, FEARLESS ITHOKE, THE SPOTTED CAT, BARSENA BLACKHAIR, STEELSKIN, pit fighters and freed slaves,

her uncertain allies, false friends, and known enemies:

{MIRRI MAZ DUUR}, godswife and maegi, a servant of the Great Shepherd of Lhazar, burned alive,

XARO XHOAN DAXOS, a merchant prince of Qarth,

QUAITHE, a masked shadowbinder from Asshai, motives unknown,

ILLYRIO MOPATIS, a magister of the Free City of Pentos, who brokered her marriage to Khal Drogo,

{CLEON THE GREAT}, butcher king of Astapor.

The Slaver Alliance;

The Sons of the Harpy, a resistance group of Ghiscari noblemen within the city of Meereen, led by THE HARPY, a mysterious figure,

The Wise Masters; {YURKHAZ ZO YUNZAK}, Supreme
Commander of the Armies and Allies of Yunkai, {YEZZAN ZO QAGGAZ}, MALAZZA, PAEAZHAR ZO MYRAQ, CHEZDHAR ZO RHAEZN, MAEZON ZO RHAEZN, AND GRAZDHAN ZO RHAEZN, GHAZDOR ZO AHLAQ, MORGHAZ ZO ZHERZYN, GORZHAK ZO ERAZ, FAEZHAR ZO FAEZ – the ruling class of Yunkai, who opposed and then made an unsteady peace with Queen Daenerys,

The Triarchy of Volantis, the Thirteen of Qarth, the iron legions of New Ghis, all allied opposing Queen Daenerys,

________ the Queen’s suitors;

________ in Slaver’s Bay:

_________________________ DAARIO NAHARIS, late of Tyrosh, a sellsword and captain of the Stormcrows,

_________________________ HIZDAHR ZO LORAQ, a wealthy Meereenese nobleman, King Consort of Meereen,

_________________________ SKAHAZ MO KANDAQ, called THE SHAVEPATE, a lesser nobleman of Meereen,

_________________________ {CLEON THE GREAT}, Butcher King of Astapor,

__________________________ travelling from Westeros:

_________________________ {PRINCE QUENTYN MARTELL}, eldest son of Doran Martell, Lord of Sunspear and Prince of Dorne, travelling to wed Daenerys Targaryen. Unsuccessful and failed dragon tamer,

__________________________ his sworn shields and companions:

_________________________ {SER CLETUS YRONWOOD}, heir to Yronwood, slain by corsairs,

_________________________ SER ARCHIBALD YRONWOOD, cousin to Cletus, called THE BIG MAN,

_________________________ SER GERRIS DRINKWATER,

_________________________ {SER WILLAM WELLS}, slain by corsairs,

_________________________ {MAESTER KEDRY}, slain by corsairs,

_________________________ {VICTARION GREYJOY}, Lord Captain of the Iron Fleet, called THE IRON CAPTAIN, travelling to wed Daenerys Targaryen to spite his brother, believing that he can bind a dragon,

_________________________ his bedwarmer, a dusky woman without a tongue, a gift from Euron Crow’s Eye,
his healer, MAESTER KERWIN, late of Greenshield, a gift from Euron Crow’s Eye,

his crew on the Iron Victory:

WULFE ONE-EAR, RAGNOR PYKE, LONGWATER PYKE, TOM TIDEWOOD, BURTON HUMBLE, QUELLON HUMBLE, STEFFAR STAMMERER,

his captains:

RODRIK SPARR, called THE VOLE, captain of Grief,

RED RALF STONEHOUSE, captain of Red Jester,

MANFRYD MERLYN, captain of Kite,

RALF THE LIMPER, captain of Lord Quellon,

TOM CODD, called BLOODLESS TOM,

captain of the Lamentation,

DAEGON SHEPHERD, called THE BLACK SHEPHERD, captain of the Dagger.

awaiting her in Westeros;

KING EURON GREYJOY called the CROW’S EYE, the God-King of Westeros. Made his intention plan to marry Daenerys Targaryen, and sent his brother Victarion as his envoy,

KING AEGON TARGARYEN called the DRAGON REBORN, King of the Iron Throne. Seeks to marry his aunt to secure his reign,

PRINCE JON SNOW called the BASTARD KING, King’s Claw to his half-brother King Brandon Stark. Intends to betroth himself to Queen Daenerys, to secure aid for the north.

THE SELLSWORDS, MEN AND WOMEN OF THE FREE COMPANIES

THE COMPANY OF THE ROSE, four thousand infantry, recruited by Salladhor Saan on behalf of the North,

ANDERS FROST, captain and commander of the Company of the Rose,

RACHEL GREYSTARK, called the GREY BITCH, second-in-command of the Company of the Rose,
THE FLEET OF WATERS, a pirate fleet with up to fifty vessels, based around strong three-decked warships. They have taken a red seahorse on black for their flag. Last seen hired by Petyr Baelish; suffered very heavy losses in the assault on White Harbour, but are still formidable.

THE LORD OF THE WATERS, actually AURANE WATERS, the Bastard of Driftmark, turned pirate king after stealing the royal fleet of King’s Landing. Has grown obsessed with dragons,

THE WINDBLOWN, two thousand horse and foot, sworn to Yunkai,

THE TATTERED PRINCE, a former nobleman of the Free City of Pentos, captain and founder,

CAGGO, called CORPSEKILLER, his right hand,

DENZO D’HAN, the warrior bard, his left hand,

HUGH HUNGERFORD, serjeant, former company paymaster, fined three fingers for stealing,

SER ORSON STONE, SER LUCIFER LONG, WILL OF THE WOODS, DICK STRAW, GINJER JACK, Westerosi sellswords,

PRETTY MERIS, the company torturer,

BOOKS, a Volantene swordsman and notorious reader,

BEANS, a crossbowman, late of Myr,

OLD BILL BONE, a weathered Summer Islander,

MYRIO MYRAKIS, a sellsword late of Pentos,

THE COMPANY OF THE CAT, three thousand strong, sworn to Yunkai,

BLOODBEARD, captain and commander,

THE LONG LANCES, eight hundred horse-riders, sworn to Yunkai,

GYLO RHEGAN, captain and commander,

THE SECOND SONS, five hundred horse-riders, sworn to Queen Daenerys, and then to Yunkai, and then to Queen Daenerys,

BROWN BEN PLUMM, captain and commander,

KASPORIO, called KASPORIO THE CUNNING, a bravo, second-
in-command,

________________________ TYBERO ISTARION, called INKPOTS, company paymaster,
________________________ HAMMER, a drunken blacksmith and armorer,
________________________ his apprentice, called NAIL,
________________________ SNATCH, a serjeant, one-handed,
________________________ KEM, a young sellsword, from Flea Bottom,
________________________ BOKKOKO, an axeman of formidable repute,
________________________ UHLAN, a serjeant of the company,

________ THE STORMCROWS, five hundred horse-riders, sworn to Queen Daenerys,
________________________ DAAERIO NAHARIS, captain and commander,
________________________ THE WIDOWER, his second-in-command,
________________________ JOKIN, commander of the company archers.

Chapter End Notes

Goddamn, this was a pain to write. The epilogue was fairly easy, but the appendix was absolutely hellish.

Still, this officially marks the end of book 1. Next chapter will be with Daenerys in Slaver's Bay, but I'm taking a hiatus before I start writing it.

Till next time.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!