**Insurrection**

**Summary**

AU. Syrio Forel dispatches Meryn Trant and the Lannister guards when they are sent to apprehend Arya upon Ned Stark's arrest. Hiding in the slums of King's Landing, the Vengeful Wolf and her mentor mount a rebellion against the Lions who have imprisoned her father.

**Notes**

AN #1: This story will eventually have F/F pairings as main focuses. Will have at least one F/M.

AN #2: Currently the story will not go explicit.

AN #3: This story was inspired by a comment someone made. To paraphrase "What if Arya's Needle had been at the Water Dance lesson when Meryn Trant came upon them." it was like the blinders came off. i went straight to Youtube to watch again HBO. Then i read book fight. Egads it was worse than i feared. I know why GRRM did what he did but it makes no sense.

I have written what a true Water Dancer would have done in the situation he found himself
AN #4: After this event of course that leads to the what happens next. this story will be comprised of smaller arcs that take the story to major break points.

AN #5: I know why GRRM used the ages he did for the children but in this story i want to proceed and not come up with a situation that has the story move forward 5 or 6 years before the action starts. i did this to age up the characters in those stories.

Thus, Arya is 14 and Dany roughly 18 maybe 19. in today's world a nine year old would not start the journey that Arya did.

AN #6: I plan to publish this story every third week on a Saturday once I get it established.
“Again!” Syrio Forel barked at his student. Syrio watched Arya hop from foot to foot balancing quickly after each hop. Syrio was impressed with how quickly his new student was learning her lessons. What impressed him more was her focus. She never wavered in doing all that he asked.

As her skills were improving she did not show the bravado and hubris that his male students always did when they began to master the most basic skills. The most rudimentary of steps. Not his Arya. She hungrily learned her lessons and showed no need to show off. She never forgot she was still a novice.

“No, let us practice with swords Arya!”

“I do not feel like fighting today.”

That was a first with his student. Arya was always ready to fight.

“What is wrong with you today Arya Stark?”

“They killed Jory; my father is hurt.”

Syrio did not show it but he felt for the girl. She was still only fourteen. She should not have to deal with the hurts of the world yet. She should be allowed to be teenager for a time yet. Still, she was a high noble and she needed to deal with the realities of life. The life that came with the responsibilities of the Game of Thrones as the Westerosi called it. In Braavos it was called “Sailing the Stormy Seas.”

He would not allow her to give into her hurts. He did not accept her answer of not wanting to train. He thumped her hard in the chest with the practice sword he now had in his right hand.

“Good. Trouble is the perfect time for training. When you are dancing in the meadows with your dolls and kittens, this is not when fighting happens.”

She argued with him but she had the fire of the fighter in her belly. Syrio knew that it would take little stoking for him to bring out the Wolf that he knew lurked in his charges breast. He continued to taunt her and ridicule her wish to give into childish desires.

He had given Arya her training sword and continued to whack her on her right arm. He gave his young charge credit. She controlled her savage nature longer than he thought she would.

He smiled in his mind when the last whack of the wooden sword on his protégée arm brought the desired effect. She charged him. He showed no quarter and put her on the floor easily.

He reflected that with Arya he never had to worry about a fragile male ego. He had seen students crack when their masters humbled them repeatedly. Their ability to take hard lessons weak. They faltered and were gone from the training field. Never his Arya.

She was up in flash. They fought more with him easily blocking her strikes. He could see she was
still troubled but she focused as much as her young mind was able. She had come further in two months than most young teenage boys had in a year. She had that certain something that could never be put in a bottle. He saw himself in her. He saw a First Sword.

He put his sword to her throat after a block “You are fearing for your father. That is right.” He asked her of the gods she worshiped. He told her of the only one true god “There is only one true god and his name is death. And there is only one thing we say to death. Not today.”

Now they practiced in earnest. The blows coming fast and furious. Syrio was most pleased with his student’s progress. She had learned in only several months what all his other students took a year plus to learn. He mused on their future together. All Masters wanted an heir to their kingdom or their skills. He had finally found his heir. His shining bight star. The perfect pupil.

He barked out his instructions “Left high. Left Low. Pivot right. Cross block. Lunge. Step right. Right Low. Right Low.” His charge following his instructions to the highest degree. She was already fast. She was one of only a few that constantly worked on her balancing and conditioning regimen.

He chuckled slightly. She actually chased the cats of King’s Landing and captured them! She had the scratches to prove it. He had waited so long for such a student.

He knew the Westerosi had the practice of fostering their children in the ranks of the nobility. He was not of noble birth but maybe Eddard Stark would listen to him. What man did not want greatness from his children? In Essos if you could prove yourself it did not matter your sex. This man, this warden of the North, come Hand of the Realm was something more. Syrio had become jaded in life. Most of it because of men in positions of greatness letting him down.

Eddard Stark might be a man worth following. He would prove it with what he had to say with the proposal that Syrio Forel was forming in his mind.

Arya was ready for the next lesson “Right!” he barked and lunged left disarming his disciple as he was beginning to think of Arya.


“My tongue lied. My eyes told the truth. You were not seeing.” She argued with him of course. She had the fire. “The true seeing—that is the heart of swordplay.”

The doors burst open. Meryn Trant came into the room with six red cloaks of the Lannisters. He announced that he had been sent by Arya’s father. Syrio saw the truth. His words said one thing but his eyes said another.

Syrio had been watching the tension increase with his stay in King’s Landing. He had seen this tableau play out to many time in Braavos in the courts of the Sea Lords. Power was shifting. Men were dying now. He was sure of it. They always did. Arya went to follow the knight but he restrained his disciple.

He challenged the Kingsguard. The man was arrogant and way to confident. He was a First Sword. Much of his duties went beyond mere swordsmanship. One must be astute to one’s possible foes and to the situations that would pit a First Sword against them.

He had seen the rising tension for ten days. The Hand was contending with the force behind the throne: Cersei Lannister. The man was a neophyte in matters of court politics. He was sure Eddard
was about to lose and his daughter was to be a bargaining chip.

He had upon his arrival in King’s Landing observed the Kingsguard at practice. It was the first thing he had done when he arrived. He had to know his potential foes. He had overall not been impressed with six of the fighters. Jaime Lannister was very capable fighter but he would take him down. He was sure of it. Barristan Selmy was another matter altogether. He was a true master as himself. A contest between them would be dicey. Especially if he did not have his rapier like the situation he now found himself in.

Only one other man was his equal. Eddard Stark. He would not be fighting him.

Fortunately, he would be fighting Meryn Trant. His skills were at best slightly above mundane. Average.

Of course the Kingsguard sent the Red Cloaks against him. He wondered why supposed masters always sent lesser men to do their bidding.

Arya too saw the truth of the situation. Arya armed herself but Syrio put her behind him. The first Red Cloak looked at the Braavosi sure of himself insulting Syrio for his short height and strange garb.

The first Red Cloak advanced. “Foreign bastard” he spit out pulling his blade out. With one motion Syrio disarmed the Red Cloak and with the next Syrio’s heavy wood sword crashed into his helm knocking him senseless. Syrio sighed to himself. _Sending boys to do a man’s work._

“Arya run to your father” Syrio told his charge. If she could get to her father then Eddard Stark would be much freer to act. Only after he spoke did he consider the what if of the situation. What if her father had already been brought down by the vipers?

Meryn Trent ordered the five remaining Red Cloaks to take out Syrio. The men were not skilled at all. They sought to use brute force and clumsy sword strokes to take out a First Sword. It was almost insulting.

Syrio dived and juked from side to side his heavy wooden sword slamming into helms stunning his advisories. He struck their swords at glancing angles to block and swerve aside without cutting his wooden sword. He had one of the Red Cloaks taken out by his own men. He danced like water. His body always not where the blades of the Red Cloaks slashed.

He chopped men down to the ground with blows to the knees and then incapacitated or knocked out with blows to the head.

“Bloody oafs” Syrio groused. All the Lannisters were down.

He turned to face Meryn Trant. The Kingsguard pulled his sword out of its sheath with a snarl of disgust. Syrio saw motion to his left. Arya had not run off. Good. After reconsidering, this was best. She was pleading with him to come with her. He smiled to himself.

Now she was to see a true water dancer.

Syrio had tracked how each man fell. He heard the third man coming too. His moans loud. He had fallen on his back. His left hand scrapping the stone floor as he pushed up on his hand to rise up. His right hand moving to try and find his sword that that had clattered a foot away from his hand. Syrio was four feet in front of the Kingsguard.

With little effort Syrio flexed down knees bent. Syrio jumped up and back the four feet to land
beside the still groggy Red Cloak. He kicked out with right foot jamming the left crossguard of the Red Cloak’s sword into the man’s side. He jammed his foot in pressing down with his toe getting his foot underneath the sword at the junction of the blade and crossguard. The sword was lifted up off the floor on top of his foot. He then jerked his foot up lifting the blade. Syrio gripped the pummel of the blade with his left hand.

He spun the wooden sword at Meryn Trant like a Chakram. The blade spun on its axis horizontally. The Kingsguard fell back in a defensive position and hacked the blade down.

Syrio used the moment to pivot and he threw the sword from his left hand to his right hand and upon catching it he swept his arm down in a swift tight arc. The Red Cloak had his throat cut to his spine. The blade shattering his spine and severing his spinal cord. Blood spurted up in crimson gouts the man falling back dead.

Arya had stumbled back against the wall with wide eyes. Her breathing shallow. “Grab a sword girl!” Syrio yelled at his student. To her credit the young fourteen year old instantly complied approaching the nearest unconscious Red Cloak and purloining his sword.

Meryn Trant snarled at Syrio. Syrio saw another Red Cloak regaining consciousness to his right and Meryn Trent’s left. The man was back some fifteen feet from Meryn and six feet from Syrio. The man was up now on his hands and knees. Syrio crouched down on his dominate leg compressing his body and then jumped up high in the air. He had his sword pulled back with his right hand behind his ear. He thrust down as his body descended.

His sword found the joint between the fallen Lannister’s Cuirass, Faulds and his Culet that protected his lower back. His blade slammed in and through the joint in the armor. The blade penetrating his kidney, lung and out his ribs the tip of the sword jamming out the front of the man’s armor an inch.

The Red Cloak screamed hideously the cry scaling up with Syrio wrenching the blade to pull it back out his body. The man lay on the floor moaning piteously. His lung filling with blood.

Syrio pivoted towards Meryn Trent. A smile grimly on his face.

“No we can properly dance my partner in the dance macabre. The broadsword is a blunt instrument to be sure. Have I told you my good Kingsguard that a First Sword trains in all swords? We start out as Circle of Blades, then one becomes a Commodore, then Second Swords. Those are twenty. All vying to be worthy to challenge for the First Sword. We must master all blades to be able to know how to defeat any opponent using said blade.”

“Keep pissing you fucking Braavosi. I will gut you like the dog you are. You rapiers are blades for fags. You insult me even breathing the same air as a true knight of the realm.”

Syrio moved forward with small steps. He slide forward on his feet pivoting to keep Meryn in front of himself as the knight circled Syrio.

Suddenly, the knight roared and charged Syrio. His sword raised and slamming down with crushing force. Syrio met his sword stroke and easily stopped the stroke and pushed Meryn Trant back and away. Syrio saw the shock on the man’s face. He was surprised that Syrio’s much smaller body was his equal in strength.

Syrio knew the knight’s thoughts. Their strength was not equal. His strength far exceeded the clumsy knight’s!

Syrio did not see fear in the man’s face but he saw caution now. Meryn Trant attacked with vicious
swipes of his sword with long arching swings that showed clearly his intent. Syrio easily deflected
the man’s blows. He would throw out strikes enough to keep Meryn off balance Syrio was letting
the man waste energy. He jumped around keeping Meryn off balance. He landed a solid shot on the
seam of the back and front Cuirass with a hard crack of his sword.

Meryn grunted at the hard blow. The armor did its job. The knight sidestepped and back. Then
Meryn charged Syrio. Syrio pivoted and tripped the man. His sword slammed into his back and
then his helm. Meryn stumbled forward and he made a windmill swiping motion with his sword that
only found air with Syrio ducking underneath the arc and rolled forward his sword slashing over the
man’s calf. The knight nearly toppled to the floor.

The knight cried out in pain. Syrio rolled to his feet and attacked again. Meryn barely blocked his
attack. Syrio then locked up their swords. He moved in close pushing their crossed locked swords
up. He gripped the man’s arm with his left arm. Meryn gripped his arm. They grunted and snarled
as they pushed and pulled against each other.

“I’m going to kill you Meryn Trant of the Kingsguard. My sword will pierce your eye and squire
your brain. It is written in the stars” Syrio told Meryn in a level voice. He had added the last just to
get to the man.

Meryn barked a chuffed laugh. He grunted hard and surged forward. Syrio turned to the side and
with his grip on Meryn’s arm made the man stumble forward. Syrio followed the man and slammed
his sword down across the man’s back. Meryn’s armor clanged loudly and the man cried out in pain
at the vicious impact on his back.

Meryn turned and straightened his back grimacing. The two started circling again with their swords
held in front of them. Syrio attacked with his sword feinting and then slashing forward. He moved
at the full speed of his prowess. His sword becoming a blur. He saw Meryn’s eyes flare wide open.
He was now grimacing and Syrio smirked seeing fear for the first time in Meryen’s eyes. His sword
slashed down on Meryn’s sword and then again down. Syrio repeated the blows on Meryen’s sword
making the man brace himself. He then moved to his left and then pivoted back in a blur of motion.
He slashed hard at Meryn’s hip and thigh.

Meryn moved his sword down to block at a forty-five degree angle. Syrio hit the sword on the side
moving it to Meryn’s center plane. Syrio lifted his sword and slashed his sword down. Meryn cried
out in pain with the blade of Syrio’s sword landing in the elbow joint of his brassart and gauntlet on
his right arm. The blade did not fully penetrate the metal. The metal blunted the strike and his
forearm guards of leather and metal splints kept the blade from cutting into the elbow joint. The
shock of the blow though bruised severally the joint and bone.

Meryn fell back shaking his arm. Syrio was still fully scoping out Meryn’s ability. His assessment
had been correct. He knew he needed to finish the fight quickly but a First Sword never took his
foes for granted once blades had been crossed.

He moved in now his sword a blur. If he had his rapier he would have finished the fight already.
With a broadsword he had to be more cautious. He slashed first high, low and then back to high
again. Meryn was sweating heavily now. Syrio locked swords again and now kicked forward with
his foot hitting Meryn’s planted leg used to hold Syrio off him. The blow hit the knee straight on and
the joint snapped back stretching tendons and ligaments.

“Aarruuunnggg!” Meryn cried out in pain. He stumbled back and then charged forward his sword
slashing wildly at Syrio. Syrio stepped to the left and now hit the Kingsguard knight on his elbow
but it was only a glancing blow with Meryn on guard for another such attack. Still the blade slashed
over the damaged joint further harming it.
Meryn roared slashing furiously. Syrio heard another Red Cloak starting to revive. Syrio never lost his mental map of the fallen Red Cloaks. One never lost track of potential foes. Two were dead or mortally wounded. He heard the man levering himself up onto his feet. He could tell the man was still groggy with his uncertain steps that first went right and then left.

He saw Meryn’s eyes take in the rising man behind him. He slammed into Meryn and made the man stumble back. He slashed his sword hard and down with lightning fast strokes making the knight stumble over an unconscious Red Cloak.

Syrio was about to turn and dispatch the Red Cloak who was raising his sword. Syrio had seen the man out of the corner of his eye. The man was still stunned but he was shaking his head to clear the cobwebs. He would be ready to strike in a moment.

“AAAAAIIEEIIIIEEEEEE!”

Syrio did a spin to the right. As he spun away from Meryn Trant he saw the man’s eyes bulge out shocked. A look of disbelief on his face.

Syrio finished his pivot and smiled at what he saw. The Red Cloak head was thrown back a loud scream issuing from his throat. They did not wear pure plate armor but leather armor with metal plates sowed into the fabric. These men were not armed or trained to fight knights. They were to keep the peace in the Lannister household.

The man had a broadsword jutting out his chest. He had had a sword rammed through his back armor clear through his body and out his stomach just below his sternum. The blade bright red with his blood. The man looked down dropping his sword. Arya had been against the wall and ran forward with her sword thrust out in front of her. The blade hitting the Red Cloak with all her weight and momentum. Her grip on the hilt strong and sure. The blade held steady had had enough energy to deliver a killing stroke. The blade was ripped back.

The man toppled onto his knees and fell to his hands. Blood was pouring out his mouth as he gasped for breath. Arya was behind the man and she lifted her blade high and sliced down. Her aim was true. Her blade cut into the man’s neck just below the helm that had tilted forward with this movements. The blade severed the man’s spin and he collapsed down boneless. He was dead before his body hit the floor.

Syrio had kept Meryn in his vision. It was time to end this now. He spun around.

“You are a snake Meryn Trant. House Lannister is full of vipers. Your death will be the first blow to that vile House.”

“I will kill you. You are scum! I am a Knight of the Kingsguard.” He roared and charged forward. Syrio saw that his right arm was being held lower. Syrio blocked the blows. The blows were definitely slower and weaker. Syrio blocked them and counterattacked. The knight blocked his slashes but just barely. Syrio pushed Meryn back. He made thrusts that Meryn slashed aside. Syrio pressed his attack.

Syrio hit Meryn in his right arm again and then his shoulder and then his elbow again. Meryn staggered back groaning in pain. His right arm was hanging down now.

It was time to finish it. Syrio took the classic water dancer poise now and held his broadsword up high in front of him his other arm bent up and his hand high. He feinted a piercing thrust to this heart. Meryn instinctively went to block with his tired sword arm. Blood was dripping out of his elbow joint now.
Syrio lifted his blade and his broadsword point flew forward. The blade entering Meryn’s left eye and slamming into his brain the blade sliding through the organ till the blade bashed into the inside of the back of helm of Meryn Trant. The Knight’s body jerked wildly in a death dance.

Syrio held his sword steady letting the knight perform his death dance macabre. Meryn dropped his sword. His arms went limp even though his body was still jerking and his legs kicking like a rolling dog. Syrio held the body up for another fifteen seconds till the death dance was finished. Only then did Syrio angle his blade to let the body drop lifeless to the floor.

“Garbage.” Syrio had killed many such scum in Braavos. No matter where he went there were such rats.

He moved to the closest still living Red Cloak. He sliced the man’s throat wide open. The blood spurting in the air and a pool of crimson spreading around his neck. He moved to the second unconscious red cloak. He was lying on his stomach. The Water Dancer kneeled down. Syrio rammed his sword up from through the man’s lower back up into his heart and lungs. The man sighed and died.

“Why are you killing them?” Arya asked.

“There can be no witness Arya. Your father is being overthrown as we speak. We must disappear without witness.” He moved over to the last still living Red Cloak.

He flipped off the last man’s helm. He put the helm under his upper back. His sword whipped down. His head cut in two from his left temple through to his nose and the blade lodging in upper jaw. The man’s body convulsed once and lay still. Syrio kicked the helm from underneath the man. The metal clanging and spinning away to the back wall.

Syrio saw the confusion in Arya’s eyes. “I am making it look like a melee happened here. I want to put confusion in their minds when they come here. Was it just me? Did I have accomplishes? Will they even be sure what happened here? We will need this confusion to make our escape.”

“Escape?” Arya asked softly.

“Yes. Your father is being disposed as we speak. He is either dead or at best taken prisoner. You were to be taken as a hostage and to then become a bargaining chip. Probably to be married off.”

“And that is it?”

“Yes that is it. We need to escape and leave King’s Landing.”

“No. I am staying. I will save my father.”

“I did not save you to have you go out and get yourself killed! If you go out there you will be killed long before you even begin to find your father. You are still untrained girl. Come with me to Braavos and let me train you and then you can come back and take vengeance. I will journey back with you in your mission of vengeance.”

“No. If my father is alive then I am going to his aid.”

“You will die!”

“Then I will die.” Arya started to head to the doorway.

“Noooooo!” Syrio shouted blocking the doorway. It had been five minutes since the Kingsguard
knight and Red Cloaks had come into the room. The confusion of the coup would last for a little way. Now was the time to make their escape.

He looked hard into Arya’s eyes. He saw no fear. Only grim determination to go her father’s aid or die in the effort.

Syrio held her gaze.

“Stand aside Syrio.”

Syrio did not move. He had served two Sea Lords. He had served other high lords. None had a tenth of this girl’s honor and iron will.

“No Arya. We will get your father. Together. But we need a plan. I have an idea.”
Arya waited for her Master's plan. There was only silence. “What’s the plan master?” Arya asked Syrio. She was not filled with confidence seeing Syrio still thinking. What was his plan? “Well?”

Syrio suddenly sprang into motion. He moved among the dead Red Cloaks. He rolled their bodies looking at the slain men. On the fourth body he stopped. Arya watched him curious. Syrio started to remove the man’s armor and clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“Use your eyes Arya. Think with your mind.”

Arya watched her teacher for a few moments and then understood.

“You are going to disguise yourself as a Red Cloak … and … pretend I am your prisoner?” Arya inflected the last part of her statement into a question.

“Yes Arya.” He put on the pants and blouse of the Red Cloak over his clothes. He pulled on the dead man’s helm and jammed it down on his head. He did look like one of the Lannisters.

“Why didn’t you take off your clothes? Isn’t that uncomfortable and limit your motion?”

“Arya … I repeat—think! If I leave any of my clothes behind they will reason out what happened. Come here girl.” He put the scabbard on the floor.

“Help me move the body down to back of the closet in the back of the room”. Arya helped her master move the limp body to the closet and threw the body into the back of the small space and moved the small boxes and rolled up blankets over the body. “It will be some time before they discover the body. We will be long gone.”

They went back to the melee area. Arya following behind the Water Dancer. He had put on the dead Red Cloak’s scabbard now. Syrio grabbed Arya and spun her around so her back was to him.

“I am going to cut you hair off (Arya started to protest) we must change your appearance Arya. Don’t take this as an insult but you are not exactly well endowed in the breast department Arya. You will be able to pass as a young boy. They will be looking for a girl and in their haste will see a boy.”

Arya had started to protest. She had always been ashamed of her lack of bosom. Sansa had it all! Beautiful face, tall, red hair and awesome tits! It wasn’t fair. She loved her hair! Arya ground her teeth. She knew she had beautiful eyes like her father and Jon but her hair was her best attribute when she pulled it back with combs and her slightly wavy hair framed her face.

She sighed. She had no choice. It would grow back.

Arya felt her head pulled back as Syrio sawed his sword back and forth across her hair cutting it off. She looked down to mourn her sheared locks. Where were they?
“Where is my hair Syrio?”

“In my hand. We need to put it in your crotch.”

“What!” Arya screeched.

“No evidence Arya. Can’t have them know you have shorn locks. Forgive my impertinence but we must move in haste.” Arya felt her trousers pulled out in the back and Syrio’s hand was shoved down her pants and quickly removed. She wiggled feeling the strange sensations in her crotch.

“Adjust the hair Arya. Make it to you can walk normally.

Arya jumped and down to move the hair around to spread out the hair in her trousers. She moved and walked around. Not good enough! She felt embarrassed reaching into her trousers and moving her hand around getting the hair in place where it was not driving her crazy. Boy this was a strange feeling! Okay she was ready. It was weird for sure walking around with your hair in your crotch and not on your head!

Her hands went up to her hair and felt the short locks. She sighed. It felt uneven but many boys had that style of cut. She would definitely blend in. She never thought her flat chest would be an advantage.

Syrio had come up to her with a ripped shirt of a Red Cloak. It was blood soaked. He started to wrap it around her head. She started to question her master but stopped when she thought it through. He was further disguising her.

It had been ten minutes since Meryn Trant had come into the room. They were ready to leave.

“What now Syrio? Where do we go?”

Syrio looked at her “My rapier is two doors down where I left it for after your training. Then we have to find a way out of here.”

“I told you we are going to save your father!”

“I know girl. But listen to me. We are two. Only two! You have only started your training. We are not going to be able to fight our way to your father and get out.” Arya started to argue.

“LISTEN TO ME!” Syrio screamed at his disciple. Arya shut up.

“We will not help your father dead. I will be honest with you Arya. I seriously doubt we will succeed in our endeavor. We must first escape. Then we can somehow figure out how to get back in. We have confusion to our advantage but it won’t last for long.” Arya saw her master hesitate. His eyes locked with hers. He was gauging her ability to hear the truth. She returned his gaze and squared her shoulders.

“Arya, I will always be honest with you. Your father may be dead.” Arya started to argue. Her master’s eyes flared and she shut up. He finished wrapping her head with the blooded blouse so it looked like a bandage. Her hair, forehead and half of her right eye covered with the blood soaked cloth. It was creepy but Arya quickly squelched her squeamishness. If she was to be a water dancer she had to be like one. Starting now.

“I said maybe Arya. It is possible. Fortunately, he is severely injured. That, in this circumstance is a good thing. He will not be fighting his assailants. He will be taken hostage by the Lannisters. He is the Lord of a Major House. I can see one of two things happening. One: he will be forced to take the black and go to the Wall. Two: he will be executed. I have watched this Joffrey. I am sure the mother will take the proper political path. That boy though … he is unbalanced. I don’t know.”
Arya looked at Syrio with her eyes pleading for him to reassure her.

“We have time though. We just have to survive today and stay free. Let’s go get my rapier.”

“Why do you need it master? You don’t need it.”

They quickly started down the hall. “I may have mastery of all blades but I am the supreme master of the rapier. I need every advantage I can get. They turned into the store room and Syrio put on his rapier with its belt tied to his waist. He mostly hid it with the broadsword.

“We will go my quarters and get Needle” Arya told her master.

“What! Hell no girl! We need to escape.”

“You got your weapon. I will get MY weapon. It is only fair.”

Her master glared at her. He looked down at his hip and his rapier. He groaned and shook his head ‘yes’. A water dancer must have their weapon. Even if the Water Dancer was in training.

They entered one of the main halls and started walking down it. “Walk wounded.”

“How do I do that?”

“I don’t know! Just do it” Syrio snarled back in a harsh whisper.

Arya started to lean to one side and made her step limp lightly. “Good.” Syrio told her. She felt good hearing Syrio’s praise.

A group of Red Cloaks went running by. The came to a corner and saw three northern men dead. There were eight dead Lannisters.

Arya smiled grimly. The scum were inferior to the North! If they were not attacking with surprise her father’s men would slaughter the bastards!

They went on. They heard fighting down a side corridor. Arya instinctively started down that hall. Syrio grabbed her arm and shook his head no.

“Those are my people!” she snarled under her breath.

“If we go down that hall we die. Period. Let’s go to your room.” They moved on down the hall. They saw three Red Cloaks coming down the Hall at a fast walk. One looked like a captain.”

They passed them.

“Stop soldier.”

Syrio stopped and half turned himself and Arya around with his grip on her arm.

“The collection area for prisoners is down behind you and take the second hall on your left.”

“The Queen said she wanted this one taken to her quarters for special questioning.”

Arya saw the captain’s eyes open wide. He went for his weapon. His two fellow Lannisters were shocked at the sudden change.

Arya never even saw her master move. His rapier slashed across the captain’s throat as his hand was
still moving to grip the pummel of his sword. Hot blood started to pulse out his severed arteries. His
severed windpipe wheezed on swallowed blood. The closest Lannister guard had his heart pierced
with a straight thrust by Syrio. The man looked down with a vacant look. Syrio whipped his rapier
back and slashed his blade across the third man’s face from his temple across his nose and down his
other cheek and cut down to the man’s chin.

The man started to scream as his face was cut wide open. His scream was choked off when Syrio’s
rapier pierced his tongue and pined it to the back of his throat the rapier going out his neck severing
his spine. Syrio jerked his hand back and the man fell straight down like a stone. He was dead.
Syrio pulled out his broadsword and savagely chopped the three dead men disfiguring their bodies.
Arya now knew it was to camouflage the work of his rapier.

It had taken Syrio a little more than five seconds to kill three men. Arya was wide eyed. She had
thought she was good. She was nothing to her master’s skills! Syrio put the rapier away on his hip.

They approached her room. Two Red Cloaks were on either side of the door. Syrio walked by
them and swirled around unsheathing his broadsword and lashed out. The man’s head went spinning
down the hall. Blood geyser out the bloody stump of his torso. The body falling over gushing out
blood. The other man was just starting to pull his sword when Syrio was on him and disemboweled
the man with a slash across his stomach with savage force. The blade cutting through the thin metal
of the ceremonial armor and leather vest underneath. Syrio brought up his broadsword and this
man’s head went rolling onto the floor and bumped up against the wall. The man’s eyes wide open.
A pool of red ichor and gore spilled out from the corpse’s mutilated body.

“Get in the room and retrieve your sword Arya! Move!” She entered the room. She looked back
and saw Syrio taking a stance like he was guarding the door. “Mmoovveeee!” Syrio hissed at her.
She ran to the back of her room and picked up needle. She gripped it with her left hand. She
swished it back and forth and took a few practice lunges. She bent down and picked up Needle's
scabbard.

She shook her head. She had assumed she was beginning to come near Syrio’s skills. She grimaced
at her audacity and stupidity. She had only seen a fraction of what her Water Dancer Master was
truly capable of. He was a killing whirling devil without the tail or horns. His swords were death
incarnate. She spied her bow and quivers in the right corner of her room. She ran over and picked
them up.

She then looked across to her dresser. She saw her combs and hair brush. She saw her hair clips
lying unorganized on the dresser. She looked over to her bed and the night dress and small clothes
she had worn last night. Her vision moved over to the closet with the half open doors. She saw the
dresses she would not be caught dead in. She put on her scabbard as she looked at the items
buckling the belt around her waist.

That thought made her pause. The enormity situation hit the Stark Princess. Men were dying all
around her. She had killed one herself. She fully realized she would not hesitate to kill again. She
would be leaving here. She may die shortly. She may never see any of this again. These things in
this room had seemed a nuisance and trivial. Now they almost seemed precious.

“Oohhhhh!” Syrio fell to his knees his sword falling to the floor in front of his half collapsed body.
He was moaning.

Arya cried out seeing a swarm of Lannister men come into view of her open door frame.

As she watched two men saw her in the room. Their eyes flared with recognition of who she must be.
“Are you alright man!” a Lannister man was trying to Syrio up to his feet. Another man was looking at Syrio wanting to help a fellow man in arms. The two men who had seen Arya started to enter the room.

“Arrrgghhhh!” Syrio roared gripping his sword with this left hand and slamming it up. The sword slammed into the Lannister’s body easily piercing the armor and sliding up into the man’s torso till the crossguards slammed into his ribs. Syrio released the sword the man sagging back screaming. The Lannister gripped the sword and tried to pull it back out of his body as blood poured out the wound and down the crossguards and pommel. The man still screaming like a banshee.

Syrio surged up and gripped the man holding his armpit and stepped back. With his now free left hand the Water Dancer gripped the side of the helm of the close by Lannister man. His right hand now held a long dagger in it. Syrio slashed it across the man’s throat. The man tried to scream but choked on the blood gushing out his severed arteries and down his windpipe. The man held his hands to his throat trying to stop his life’s blood gushing out his dying body. In a blur Syrio whipped out his rapier and danced to the left as a Lannister Red Cloak slashed down on empty air.

The two men who had entered the room to accost Arya and swirled around pulling out their swords hearing the sounds of combat behind them. They started back out the door. Syrio was knocking aside the powerful hacks from the Lannister man. The man stumbling as the Water Dancer used the man’s momentum against him.

The two men were advancing back out to attack Syrio while he was engaged with the man in front of him. Arya did not hesitate. She dropped her bow and quiver in her left hand. She gripped the hilt of Needle with both hands and silently ran forward. Jon’s words came to Arya’s mind “Stick them with the pointy end.” Her sword pierced the back of the closest Red Cloak. Needle’s sharp razor point penetrating the man’s body. Arya’s body slammed into the man’s back as he screamed in agony. Needle jutting out the front of his body.

The man screamed again twisting his body as he pulled forward off Needle. He staggered and turned around to face his tormentor. Beyond him Arya saw Syrio sidestep a down hack from his foe. He jumped back and lunged forward his sword penetrating the man’s throat from the side. The rapier coming out the opposite side of the man’s throat.

The second man that had come into Arya’s room advanced on Syrio’s back. The Water Dancer kicked out with his right foot hitting that man in the stomach. The breath whooshed out of his lungs the man folding over.

Arya snarled at the Lannister man confronting her. Blood was staining the front of his armor. He raised his sword to strike at Arya. The man Syrio had just kicked staggered back into the man in front of Arya throwing him off balance. Behind him Arya could see Syrio pull his rapier out of the man’s throat and reached out with his left hand and gripped the man by his shoulder and slammed him down to his knees. Syrio lifted his right hand and his rapier came down viciously. The point of the rapier finding the joint between the man’s chest and shoulder armor. The blade sinking into the man’s body.

The blade pierced the upper lobe of the man’s right lung, went through his stomach and pierced his other lung in the lower quadrant. The man shrieked in agony. The other Lannister Syrio had kicked was straightening up. The man gasping getting his breath back his teeth gritted.

Arya charged the Lannister who had regained his balance. Needle pierced his body again this time from the front. Her blade sliding into his body till her hands slammed into his body. The man looked down at Arya’s hands that had blood leaking onto them from his body. The man roared in rage lifting his sword. Arya backed up just in time. Needle slipping out of the man’s body as Arya
retreated.

The man’s blade slammed into the floor. The men went to lift his blade but his strength failed him. He grunted and focused. He ripped his arms up his blade rising high up in the air. He was slightly off balance. Arya had flexed her knees as Syrio had taught her jumping herself to the man’s side on his weak hand. Arya screamed a blood curdling scream of rage. She lunged forward her Needle finding the space between the man’s seventh and right rib. Her blade slicing clean through the man from the side. Again her hands slammed into the man.

This there was no scream of pain or rage from the man this time. He sagged down to his knees. Blood was dribbling from his mouth. Arya kicked him in his mouth. Teeth shattered as the man’s body fell back. The man’s breath rattled in lungs filling with blood.

She looked out in the hall. Syrio was fighting the last Red Cloak. He meet powerful sword hacks and shunted the blade to the side. The Red Cloak missed and faster than Arya could follow Syrio stuck out with a half circling swipe of his rapier. The Red Cloak staggered dropping his sword gripping his throat with both hands. Blood instantly soaking his hands and pouring down onto his gauntlets. Syrio kicked the man his ribs folding him over and then kicked in the ribs again sending the man sprawling to the floor to die.

Arya came running out of her room with her needle and bow and quiver. Syrio saw her bow and arrows. She knew he was going to tell her to leave them. He considered a moment.

“Time is running out Arya.”

“What do we do?”

“We keep fighting. We must get to a window or to a door on the first floor. We must keep fleeing.”

Arya nodded her head in agreement.

“Arya listen to me. If I fall you surrender.” Arya just looked at Syrio.

“ARYA LISTEN TO ME! If I go down surrender. You will accomplish nothing dead!”

“If I am captured I will not be able to help my father. I will be a weapon against him. I will die a Stark! I will die fighting!”

Syrio looked at her for a few moments. Then a feral smile appeared on his lips.

“String your bow Stark.” She did. She put needle in its scabbard. "Shot to kill! We will go down fighting. Let’s go!”

“NO! Syrio, I know another way.”

Her master looked down both ways down the hall. They were still alone.

“Quickly!”

As they started down the hall Arya put her quiver around her body. “There are secret passages in the Red Keep. I accidentally found an entrance. We must get to the ground floor but away from the main entrances to the Keep.”

“Can you find it?!”

“I have too!”
Syrio took a deep breath. He smiled down at his student. “You lead. The time for stealth is over. Let our striving be written about in song and legend!”

Arya felt her chest swell as she strung her bow up.

“Anyone who is not of the North dies Arya. You understand. Shot to kill. Can you do it?!”

“They have killed my people. I will kill without mercy!”

Syrio again smiled at her with a feral snarl. Arya started off. Syrio reached out and gripped her shoulder. She snarled at him.

“Let’s go!”

“One thing Arya! If we survive I want to take you as my true student. I want you to become my disciple. You are already a Water Dancer. I just have to teach you. Will you.”

“Not if we survive Syrio. When we survive! I will become your disciple. Let’s go!”

They started off down the hall. They found a small servant hallway and went down two stories. They went down a hall. They heard voices shouting in confusion. They went up to a corner and Syrio looked around the corner. The intersection was large. Syrio looked at Arya. “Five Red Cloaks” he whispered “fifteen yards.”

Arya nodded notching her bow. She stepped out into hall and let loose. A Red Cloak who had taken off his helm to sop his brow fell straight down an arrow jutting out his temple. The Red Cloaks were stunned looking around confused. A second Red Cloak started to scream but it was cut off with an arrow jutting out his Adam’s apple. He collapsed spitting out big mouthfuls of blood. Arya falling back notched a third arrow. She let loose. The arrow went in between the wings of the man’s helm the arrow penetrating his left eye. He flew to the floor in a heap.

His sprawled body tripped the next two men. Syrio came around the corner and threw the broadsword he had snatched up from the last melee. The sword impaled the man through his upper chest. The body flew back off his feet. The last Red Cloak looked around with his eyes large in terror. He was confused.

An arrow slammed into his guts near his groin. He folded over. His whimper of pain and then a scream of agony. Syrio ran up to him his rapier slashed across his exposed spinal cord. The body collapsed boneless. The man was dead before his face even hit the stones.

They ran on and down another hall. Arya looked around. “Left!” Syrio looked at her and smirked. She had no idea where to go. It did not matter. They were laying waste to their enemies! He had finally found his disciple. He prayed only that they lived long enough for him to teach her. The girl was all wolf! What he could do with such a student!

They ran from room to room and down halls. Here the Red Cloaks were not present. They had other tasks and were obviously concentrating their efforts in the royal quarters.

Arya was opening doors. “Yes!” She was looking in a cellar door. She led Syrio into the cellar. They walked into the cellar and moved past stacks of crates and large casks of wine and liquor. It was like a labyrinth. Finally, they made it to the back wall. Arya looked around she spied an old crate. She moved it as she gritted her teeth. A small opening appeared. She crawled through. Syrio followed. They stood up. Syrio looked right and left.

He pulled a torch from a scion and the flint underneath it. Arya looked on shocked. She had not
noticed that in her journey through this passage. Syrio saw the look on her face.

“In the Sealord’s palace it too is filled with secret passages. I did not ask you of them not knowing you would know of any entrances. I knew to look. You did not.”

Arya felt her self ire settle. Syrio lit the torch and handed it to Arya. She took it. He bent back to his knees and leaned out the entrance and reached out and gripped the back of the crates. Arya noticed now holding the torch down that the crate had handles built into it. Syrio used them to pull the crate back into place fully blocking the entrance.

He stood up. “Where to?”

Arya looked around. “I don’t know. Down. We need to get away from the Red Cloaks.”

Syrio smiled at her again. “The correct choice Arya. You exceed your years. We need to get away from the Keep indeed. I see some footprints but they are old. One set is yours from the pattern of the steps.”

They took off down the corridor. They came to intersection that Arya had missed when she went down this corridor in the total darkness. She looked right and left. The air felt more dead to the right. They choose that path. The moved on down that corridor.

They kept moving on slowly. Syrio had his rapier out and Arya had her bow in hand in a relaxed pose. They should be safe. Anyone coming their way would be seen coming. They moved as silent as a mouse. They heard and saw no one.

The moved on the air dark and dank. Syrio holding the torch up high as they walked. They had been sweating profusely unremarked. Now Arya felt it shivering. She saw Syrio was unaffected. She knew it was his training that allowed him to suppress his body feeling the chill in the air.

They came out into a large abandon room. Syrio called a halt. Syrio told her to rest. First she reached into her trousers and removed the cut hair that had been devilish in her crotch. Relief! They sat down and put their back to wall so they could see both entryways to the room. They rested in silence. They had nothing to say and they wanted their ears attuned to any sound. The torch flickering sounded like a thunderstorm to Arya.

After some minutes unremarked they got up and went out the other entryway and kept on walking. They generally were heading down. After maybe fifteen minutes Syrio touched Arya’s shoulder. She had felt it too. The air was getting moist. They were approaching water. Arya doubted it was sea. It must be an underground river. Maybe they could follow it out to the sea.

They moved down the path. The tunnel now sloping down at a noticeable angle. The smell of water was heavy now.

“Mercy! Mercy! Have Mercy!”

“Shut up scum!”

Syrio and Arya saw light around a bend in the corridor. They both approached the bend. Arya got on her knees. They glanced around the corner.

They saw three men chained together on their knees. They were near the edge of a pier. They could see a man who appeared to be the leader with a big ring of keys on his hips. He had four guards around him.
“Prepare to become minnow bait scum.”

“Have mercy!” a well-built man called up to the leader. Arya supposed he was the master jailer by the ring of keys.

“You are murders and scum!”

“No we are innocent. Have mercy! I beg you! Mercy!”

“Lies! And if you are not guilty of his crime I am sure you will go to hell for others” the man sneered at the three men.

The man looked up at them with his hair matted and unkempt. She noticed it had grey in it. He did not look old enough to have grey hair. She looked at Syrio who was studying the jailor and guards.

“We are all innocent. Have mercy! I beg you to have mercy!”

Now all five men standing over them laughed.

The men to the left of the talker were sullen with the taller thinner man weeping softly. The other larger man who was bald and seemed to have a mouth full of rotted teeth held up his hands flipping off the jailer.

Syrio and Arya pulled back.

“We will wait till after the prisoners are killed and then we will go the wharf and either follow the jailers or take the skiff I saw at the end of the wharf.” Arya cursed herself missing the skiff.

“No Syrio. We are going to save those poor souls. I will not allow them to be drowned like common rats!” She glared up at her sword master. “They may be innocent!” she whispered harshly at her master.

“Most probably not dammit!”

Arya locked eyes with her master.

He glared down at her. He then shrugged his shoulders.

“Shit. The way this day has gone—why not.”
Arya notched her bow.

“No.”

Arya cocked an eyebrow at her master wanting an explanation.

“If you shoot you arrows from here you will not be able to kill them before they push the prisoners into the river. We need to get in up on them and try and put them in confusion.” Her master sighed and then smirked. “We need for you to once more walk into the fire. You are holding up like a water dancer!” Syrio whispered fiercely to her.

Arya rolled her eyes. She did not like it when her master exaggerated.

Arya nodded as he told her what he thought they should do. Arya agreed. If not for trying to save the prisoners it would be reversed. She could not complain. He was putting her wishes in order.

She handed her bow and quiver to Syrio. He shouldered the quiver and pulled out an arrow and notched it on the bow string. He used the first two fingers and thumb on the string to grip the arrow.

“How good are you?” she asked her master.

“I am not your good Arya but I was pretty good as a youth. Let’s hope I have not forgotten how to shoot. We will see.”

With that Arya stuck her head around the corner. She took a deep breath. It was her idea to save the men. She willed her knees to stop shaking. She had been operating on pure instinct. Now she was deliberating walking into danger.

The prisoner who was doing the talking was still begging for mercy. He looked up at the obvious jailer his head moving to take in the guards. The guards had short swords on their hips. Arya noticed one of the guards had a bullwhip on his other hip. One man was obviously the one who was going to push the men into the river. The guard was the third man in from the edge. He seemed almost anxious to pass the death sentence.

The man begging for mercy pleaded again looking up at his executioners. “Mercy! We are to be put before the magistrate. Mercy!”

“Fuck you scum!” The jailer snarled. “With all the confusion no one will miss you. Someone up there is cutting the Queen’s forces up. We need to get rid of scum like you. We will be doing the realm a great service killing scum like you.”


Arya went around the corner and down the three steps cut into the stone that led to the wharf. She staggered down to the wharf. She put one hand on the wall gasping and lurched down the stone
dock. She had to go sixty feet.

“Help me! I’ve been attacked.” Arya paused and then lurched forward again. She had her left hand down by her leg her hand angled back to hide the long dagger that Syrio had given her. She had positioned Needle on her back in its scabbard. In the half-dark the men would not see it. She needed to appear harmless. She needed to get to that third man. She had pushed up the head wrap in their flight but had pulled it back down to half cover her eye. She saw the men eyeing her. She limped severely and moaned softly in distress.

Her bloodied state and small size did not have the men on edge.

“They were after me but I lost them. I am lost. Help me. The Queen is looking for me. I am a valuable member of her entourage.” That caught the men’s attention and allowed her to continue to advance. She had almost made it to them. “I am so weak! Help me!”

The men were looking at her; the closest man moving towards her. She heard an arrow whistling down from Syrio’s hidden spot. The man closest to her jerked back his body spinning an arrow hitting his hip. The other four men looked up to the area where the arrow had appeared from. The look of shock on their faces told Arya they had no idea that the tunnel was there. Another arrow came out of the darkness. The men stood out in the darkness with four burning torches in scions along the inner wall. Syrio had put their torch out when Arya had went around the corner. The arrow missed. *Damn!* Arya thought. She staggered forward acting injured. She was on her man as they milled around confused. These were not true soldiers.

Arya pulled her left hand out from behind her leg and pulled it back. Her hand slashed violently out and across. The blade biting into the man’s unarmored belly. The blade cutting deep. The man screamed as blood and ichor gushed out his cut open belly. Arya cutting his intestines open. His intestines pushing out the incision in an obscene bulge. The man reached down immediately to try and hold his guts in his belly. The man continued screaming.

Arya looked around wildly. Another man, the furthest away had gone down with an arrow in his upper shoulder. The man was levering himself back up. Arya pulled Needle from off her back to her hip. She reached for it pulling it out. The first man hit in the hip had an arrow bury itself in his upper belly. Now he was screaming in agony.

Syrio was running down the dock now. “Arya the jailer!” Syrio screamed at her. She turned and looked. The jailer was making a break for the stairs back up into the dudgeon. Arya did not think about it. She raised her left hand up and back and she threw her Needle at the man. The small sword flashed out from her hand.

The sword whistled through the hair. The man was up to the second stair step. Needle pounded into the man’s back slamming through his back near his shoulder blade. The man stumbled and his body slammed into the stairs. The wounded man tried to get up on shaky arms. Arya ran over to the man.

“Nooooooo!” she heard Syrio scream. She ignored him. She reached the jailer. He was trying to crawl up the stairs. She heard the sound of a bullwhip cracking in the air behind her. She pulled Needle out of the man with blood staining his tunic on his back. She swiped her blade across the back of the man’s neck shattering his spinal column and severing his spinal cord. He fell dead. She turned around.

The last man was cut down by Syrio. His bullwhip falling to the dock. Arya saw what had made the Water Dancer scream. The last man had pushed the men into the river. Two were in the running water thrashing. They disappeared beneath the dark surface. The last man who had begged for life
for the three men had his manacled arms jammed up on the dock but was slowly slipping off. Arya grabbed the keys off the jailer ripping the rings free of his belt. She ran back to the dock edge. As she approached the last man slipped off with a splash into the water.

Arya dropped the keys and dove into the water. The last man was trying to stay above the water but he went under. Arya hit the water and wildly grabbed the man and kicked for the surface. She was being dragged down as she kicked hard. The weight of three men to much for but she continued to struggle to save the men. Then the load lessened and she kicked up and broke the surface of the water. Syrio had a hold of a fat bald man holding his head above the water. He had dived into the water too to help save the men. The man was struggling wildly. They were all beside the low brimmed skiff. All three prisoners gasping for breath. Syrio punched the wildly struggling man he had saved in the temple. The man went limp.

Syrio somehow found the strength to surge up and heave the man halfway into the low skiff. The last two men were kicking wildly as much as they could with their manacled legs. Syrio got behind the “mercy” man and Arya helped Syrio surge up and take the “mercy” man over the gunwale. She noticed he had a wound binding around his right shoulder and blood was weeping into the gauze. Together they heaved the last man over the edge of the skiff. The man spitting up water in a harsh coughing fit.

Arya watched Syrio move over to the dock. He disappeared below the water and splashed straight up out of the water with his body till the water cut his body off at his knees. Syrio put his palms on the dock and pivoted around. He sat down water streaming down his face. The three exhausted men clung to the gunwales of the skiff. Arya moved over to an open spot on the skiff and pulled herself up. Syrio’s training coming to her aid. Strong as a bull. She sat down on the bottom of the skiff.

She sighed and started to help the three men get fully into the boat. She started to pull on the ‘mercy’ man. He looked up at her with hazel eyes. His gaze intent. The boat rocked with Syrio jumping down into the boat. He came over to Arya and helped the exhausted man get over the edge of the built. The man flopped onto his stomach. Arya then moved to the next man who was burly and stout. She felt his body was covered with hair getting the man into the boat.

The last man was enormous and bald, with soft, doughy flesh. He had regained consciousness. The man hissed at them and Arya saw he had teeth that were sharp like canines. He hissed at her directly snarling.

“His tongue has been cut out” the Mercy man gasped to her. His tongue had been cut. He could not speak, except to hiss. His teeth had been filed into points. Syrio jumped back out of the boat and went to the jailer’s keys and brought them to Arya. He jumped down into the boat again. He pulled out his long dagger. He spun it around and rapped the bald man in the head knocking him out yet again. Arya felt sorry for the man. Syrio pivoted around and did the same on the back of the burly man’s head knocking him out. Lastly he rapped the back of the last man’s head.

“Why did you do that Syrio?”

“They are criminals Arya. We cannot take any undue risk. Unlock them and help me put the dead men in the river. I see some buckets on the back wall along with brooms and rakes. I want to reduce the evidence.” He got out of the boat and walked to the nearest dead guard and gripped his feet and started to drag him toward the edge of the wharf.

Arya went to the fat man and was thankful that man was on his sides. She looked at the key rings. Most of the keys looked the same. They had to be the keys to the doors of the dungeon. There were three smaller keys on a smaller ring. She tried the first key. It went into the keyhole but nothing
happened. She tried the second key and smiled when the key turned and the manacles released. She pulled them off. She went to the second man. He was on his stomach. She grunted and cursed as she finally succeeded in half rolling the man to his side. She soon had his lock undone.

She went to the last man, the "mercy" man. Arya groaned preparing to roll him over. The man had faked being unconscious. He spoke to her. “Why did you save us girl? We were dead. Valar Morghulis. You have cheated death of three souls. Anyone else would have let us drown. You put your life in danger.” The man half rolled over to look at her with red rimmed eyes. His stare placid but direct. She took in the rounded plains of his face and black hair.

“Are you going to cause me trouble sir?” The man continued to stare at her.

“No.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“You have saved me from death when you need not. You have cheated death of three souls. Our souls. Death must be paid. I will not harm you girl.”

Arya believed him. She reached down and undid his shackles.

The man lightly touched her hand. He looked at her with that direct almost spooky intensity.

“Three souls you have cheated death. Three deaths he is owed. Valar Dohaeris. I am in your debt. I will pay that debt. What is your name girl?”

“Arya Stark. Daughter of Eddard Stark. I am his daughter. He is the greatest man who ever lived. I am going to save him.”

The man looked at her. His gaze went to questioning.

“He may be great but he is a sheep among wolves.”

“My father is a great warrior!” she hissed softly to the man. This was between her and this man. Syrio had no part of this. “No one can defeat him” she barked at the man softly.

“On the field of battle this is most assured girl. The Game of Thrones is not a field of battle. Remember this girl. I am in your debt. I will not forget.”

“What is your name ‘mercy man?’”

The man’s eyes went back to inscrutable. “I have many names Arya of Stark. You can call me nameless.”

Arya had tired of the cryptic talk. Arya undid his locks. The man rolled back onto his stomach. Arya jumped out of the skiff. Syrio had deposited the second body into the water.

“What took you Arya?”

“The locks.” Syrio looked at her but they had much to do and little time to do it. Soon they had all the bodies floating away on the underground river. Syrio then had them get the buckets and they splashed water on the docks and used the brooms to clean most of the blood away and swept the blood into the river. They went to the steps and washed the blood away from the steps.

They spent another five minutes going over the stains again cleaning them further. The lack of blood would make the events hard to divine.
“You ready to get in the boat Syrio?”

“We are not going on the boat. We will unmoor and push it out into the current. The three men will have their chance at freedom.”

Syrio calmly stood there and endured Arya’s intense stare. “I thought you said we had to flee and then come back. We have a way now.”

“We were running blind. I have my bearings now. I told you I have seen the hidden passages of the Sea Lord’s Place. I have seen them in the Arsenal, the Palace of Truth and the Antaryans. They are all the same. The hidden passages connecting points of power and interest. Prisons are always connected to the seats of power and intrigue. King’s Landing will be no different. It is the nature of power and those who wield it.”

“I am sure we can catch a spider or maybe a warbler.”

Arya looked at him. First Mr. Mercy and now her master were talking strangely.

“We will go to the jailer’s office. I know we will find a passage.”

Arya was not so sure but the conviction in Syrio’s voice convinced her.

“I am not sure about letting the boat go Syrio” Arya voiced her concern.

Syrio answered “We are both excellent swimmers. Also, if I do not find what I seek we will bring something down that floats. The skiff tells me that the river has a clear shot to the ocean that is not hampered by enclosure. We will in fact will be less conspicuous anyways.”

Arya was impressed as always. Syrio had thought it through. They went to the skiff and unleashed it from the dock. They watched the slow current grab the skiff and slowly rotate it away from the dock and it floated away.

“It is time for us to leave Arya.”

Arya looked at the skiff riding the current and away from her. She wondered again about the “mercy man”. They turned to look at the dock and stairs leading up to the dungeon.

They started up the steps. Syrio held the torch down in front of them. He looked at the foot prints in the vague dust. He followed the steps up and slowly the air became fresher and less dusty. They came to two intersections of corridors. Syrio confidently choose the tunnel to go down.

He did seem to be in his element Arya thought.

“How do you know the way Master?”

“Look with your eyes. Hear with your ears. The environment tells you much Arya. You must learn to listen to what your environment tells you Arya.”

They kept going up. Arya’s calves were beginning to ache from the constant stepping up steps and the pull of gravity on her body. She gritted her teeth. She had trained just for moments like this. She ignored the stitch now stabbing her in the side.

“I am well impressed with your stamina Arya. You are holding up very well my student.”

The pain became a little less.
They continued walking up the steps. Then they had entered the dudgeon. Now there was torches in scions placed at regular intervals. Arya saw rows and rows of corridors with cells visible that came off the corridor that had leveled out.

“Do you think my father is here Syrio?”

“No. It has only been roughly four maybe five hours since this all started. Things will still be unsettled. They are holding him close near the Tower of the Hand I am sure under heavy guard. They still cannot be sure that there is not a band of Northmen on the loose. We two created much havoc in our escape. We left dead in a trail they cannot follow. They will see the mayhem in our training room and around your room.”

“I can tell you assuredly that they cannot even begin to fathom that we two created the death we did. They will be bringing in massive numbers constantly sweeping the halls of the Red Keep looking for the large force that laid waste to their Lannisters. We still have time. The jailers probably won’t be missed for a day or two or sooner if they decide to bring your father here. If they do, they will bring him here in force. They will take no chances.”

“Can we not lie in wait and ambush them?”

“Maybe but there are too many variables Arya. Your father is terribly injured. They could easily threaten his safety if we attack. Do you want that Arya? To have them slit his throat before we can reach him.”

“You know the answer to that Syrio damnit!” she barked back at the man. They continued to walk down the hall. They came to an intersection. Syrio walked straight through. They soon came to a door slightly more ornate than the other doors that Arya had seen in profusion in the dudgeon.

“Please let me see the keys Arya.”

Arya handed them to Syrio. He held them up. He inspected the keys as he slowly turned the keys around back and forth. He spotted the key he was looking for. He gripped it and tried it in the lock of the door. The key turned. They entered the room and closed the door behind them.

The room had a large plain desk on the left wall. There were some wooden shallow baskets on the left of the desk. On the back wall was a simple bed on a wooden platform with straw within the border slats. On the other wall from the desk was a large brazier that had come coals burning red. There was a coat stand in one corner. The office was plain. On a small corner table was a pitcher and a brick of cheese, loaf of black bread with a bowl of oranges. There were several small plates and tall glasses.

Arya felt her stomach rumble. She walked quickly to the table. She sniffed the pitcher. It was water. She spotted a small paring knife. She cut a section of cheese and ripped off a large chunk of bread. She ravenously bit into the cheese and bread. She wolfed down her meal in noisy gulps. She watched Syrio walking around the perimeter of the room looking closely at the wall. He ran his fingers along joints among the fitted stones. His face sometimes leaning into the wall to look at it closely.

He walked around the room inspecting all four walls with an intense focus. His face betrayed nothing. He came over to the table and cut out several sections of cheese that he started to eat while pulling off sections of black bread and ate the chunks of dark bread. He poured them both a glass of water to wash the food down. They ate more cheese and bread. Arya felt her hunger begin to abet. She wolfed down more bread and cheese. They ate in silence. She picked up an orange and handed it to Syrio and she took one. They ate their oranges.
They had finished their meal. Arya had seen a pouch on the stand in the opposite corner. She put the remaining bread, cheese and remaining three oranges in it. They drank the rest of the water. Arya knew they needed to be hydrated. She could not be sure when they would find more water.

Arya smirked at Syrio. “Okay. Where is the door? Abracadabra” she waved her hand.

Syrio snickered. He looked at her askance. “You are demanding you know.”

Arya smiled at him sweetly.

He went to the wall behind them. He traced again a seam. He looked across the room. The room had two torches on each wall. He went to the opposite wall and pulled the torch scion. Nothing happened.

Arya was disappointed. Syrio turned and glared at her. He pushed, pulled and rotated the scion. There was a click after a complicated set of push, pull and rotates on the scion holder. Arya heard a loud sliding scraping sound. The area that Syrio had inspected more closely than other sections of the wall Arya now saw had recessed in several inches.

She looked back at Syrio who now had a sweet condescending smile on his face. He walked to the recessed section of the door. He pushed it and it easily pushed back.

“You are going to be insufferable aren’t you Syrio?”

“Yes I am.” They went into the hidden hall. In it Arya saw some unlighted torches in scions. The floor had footprints in the dust coating the stones. She had the pouch of food around her shoulder. Syrio came into the hall. He looked at the scion by the door. He took the torch out and lit it with his flint. He handed the torch to Arya. He pushed the door back. It was not as easy going in this direction.

Arya came up and helped him push the door shut. Syrio went to the scion and repeated the motions he had done in the jailer’s office. Arya heard pins sliding down into place and locking the door in place. She would have never seen the door. She doubted anyone could have found the door who did not know how. Syrio took the torch back.

“Were are going Syrio?”

“We are going to move up. We need to find a certain spider in its web. Let’s see what sparrows he has trapped.”

Arya wracked her mind trying to decipher what Syrio was alluding too. She then remembered her father once saying Varys had sparrows. She had not been sure what he spoke of. Then another thought hit her and she felt anger. She remembered hearing two men talking in the cavern near the room with the dragon skulls. She remember words spoken out of the darkness “if one Hand could die, so could another”. She somehow knew that one of those men had been this Varys. She suddenly could not wait to meet his man.

“What do you mean sparrows Syrio?”

“Varys is a master of the hidden truth and gleaned secret. He has spies everywhere. I would not be surprised if he did not know of this coupe. The man probably betrayed your father by not reporting the machinations of the Lannisters even though that was his duty to report to the Hand all such nefarious plots. I saw the same thing to many times in Braavos. It saddens me to see the same thing happens in Westeros.”
They started to move down the corridor. They had several unlighted torches with them in case they became lost in a labyrinth. They came to a stair and went up. They were both moving as silent as a mouse. They kept walking in silence. They went up three more levels. Now the corridors were lited if dimly with far spaced torches. Syrio put out their torch. They discarded their torches in a dark recess. He put his finger to his lips. Now they became as silent as the grave.

They heard scuffling feet. They pulled back into an alcove. A small girl appeared in the hall and walked on. The girl did not see them in the dark shadows. They let her walk on until she was a hundred feet in front of them. They followed the girl. She never knew she was being followed.

They went up another level. Now the girl was joined by a young man. They walked around a bend in the hall. Syrio pushed his finger into Arya and motioned for her to stay. She saw him quickly move forward but still making no noise. She waited. Soon Syrio returned with both the girl and a young man. They were walking awkwardly in their fear. Their mouths had gags in them. The two youths stumbled into each other whimpering.

The two youths had wide eyes and were shaking violently and sweating profusely.

Syrio pulled out his long dagger. He swirled it around his fingers in a blur. The two youths eyes followed the dagger like hypnotized doves.

“You report to Varys I do believe. I have business to discuss with your master. I need you to take me to him.”

The two youths were making noises and shaking. The young man shook his head ‘no’. Syrio took his dagger and traced its tip along both of their throats. He pressed into their skin drawing a trickle of blood from each of their throats. The whimpers made Arya’s heart clench. They were safe with Syrio. They had no way of knowing that.

The young man whimpered and fainted. Syrio bent down beside the youth. He stabbed down in a flash. The girl screamed into her gag.

Syrio cut strips of cloth form the youths blouse top and bound the boy’s wrists and ankles tight.

Arya saw that Syrio had just missed the young man with his blade but the girl could not see that. She was now shaking violently. The girl was too addled to wonder why Syrio was putting bindings on the boy.

Finished binding the boy, Syrio rose up to confront the girl. “Are you going to take me to Varys?” Syrio asked the girl showing her his blade again up close. She failed to notice it was not covered in blood. She was just a little girl who spied. She was not a seasoned spy like you read in the histories or expensive if cheesy novels that the rich could afford to read.

The barely teen shook her head hard up and down her eyes as big as saucers. Syrio traced the blade around her throat and face again to remind her of consequences. She girl was made of sterner stuff than the young man. She whimpered but did not faint. Syrio bound her arms together with a strip of cloth at her wrists and her elbows.

“Lead the way little sprite” Syrio commanded the girl.

The girl again shook her head so hard Arya was afraid her head would fall off. They started down the hall. Arya could tell Syrio had his senses tuned. He paused their advance after two minutes. Arya held the girl as Syrio disappeared around the corner of an intersection. A minute later Syrio head appeared around the corner and motioned for them to advance.
When they rounded the corner and went down twenty feet there was an unconscious teenage girl on the floor of the corridor. She had a contusion on her forehead. She too had bound wrists and ankles. Arya was sure that the girl in her grasp thought the girl was dead and not knocked out. They advanced on. The girl was crying now.

Arya was sorry for the girl. She knew the girl was sure she was about to die. Arya was not about to help dispel that thought until they had reached Varys. They now went up a spiraling stair. Syrio and Arya could see from the girl’s face they had arrived.

Syrio put his hand around the girl’s throat and gently squeezed.

“I am going to cut you free. Open the door or I will kill you. Do you understand?”

The girl shook her head violently ‘yes’.

He cut the girl free. She reached out and pushed in on the wall over her head and then pushed in now near her knee.

A crease silently appeared.

In a flash the Water Dancer hit the girl in the temple with the butt of his dagger. The girl crumpled.

Arya knew she had to keep her voice down. “Why?” she fumed.

“I cannot risk the girl causing problems till we get Varys fully under our control.

Arya had to agree with that assessment.

Syrio whispered “Of course the Keeper of Secrets keeps his door oiled and silent.” He pushed open the door a sliver and twisted his head gazing out.

In an explosive move he was out the door. Arya heard scuffling and panicked squeaks.

She came out the door to look around.

Syrio had his dagger to Varys throat. Syrio snarled.

“Oh my!” Varys gasped his bulk rising up on his toes trying to move his throat back from the dagger pressed in his throat.

Arya came before the now sweating bald man.

“Let us discuss ‘the changing of Hands’” she told the man coldly.

The bald man gulped loudly.
Arya looked into the fat man’s face that had beads of sweat glistening on his brows and upper lip. His bald head filmed with perspiration. His eyes darting from Syrio to herself. Syrio drew blood with the tip of his blade.

“I ought to gut you for the worthless piece of shit you are Varys. I know your kind. We have your doppelganger in Braavos. The Sealord has his own person whispering him all the ‘secrets’. Whether real or not. He goes by the name of Enigma and his agents we call ‘Wraiths’ for their ability to walk through walls. Or should I saw walk through tunnels behind the walls.”

“Spare me! I have great value!” Varys cried out loudly.

“Like you had value for my father” Arya asked in a deadly calm voice. “You turned on him Varys. You are a traitor. Syrio—”

“NO! I can help save your father!”

“Why should I believe you viper? I should cut your head off and see if the body can still live.”

Varys was shaking now. Arya felt almost hate for the man who had betrayed her father. “Tell me why you betrayed my father. Lannister’s are scum and you helped them dispose my father the rightful Hand!”

“I did all I could child. I talked to your father several times on what he needed to do. He needed to arrest Cersei and her children. He needed to put the Lannister’s on the defense. He needed to take the Iron Throne to deprive the Lannister’s its power. Your father showed them compassion when none was given in return. I told him this.”

“You lie!”

“No, I do not. I did indeed tell your father this child. Your father has a certain blindness on matters of court. He shows mercy where no should be given. Cersei is focused on only one thing. Power and how to acquire it. That is her only purpose; her only goal. She will defend Joffrey’s right to the Iron Throne like the proverbial lioness defending her cub.”

“Did she kill Robert?”

“No child she did not. She gave him wine that was spiked indeed. But she did not make King Robert drink it. She did not make him drink it to excess. She did not make Robert hunt a wild boar when he was drunk. Cersei only gave him the tools of his own demise. Robert did all the work himself.”

Arya was still furious with the Whisper but she saw some truth in what he was saying. Her father was a kind gentle man.

“What did you mean by my father showing them compassion?”
“Your father finally figured out what was plain before all who have eyes.”

Syrio spoke up. “I have told you to see with your eyes Arya. I saw upon my arrival here.”

Arya looked at him with curious eyes. Her eyebrows knit trying to decipher what Syrio could be talking about.

“What do you remember my lesson I told you of the fat old tomcat that sat on the Sealord’s lap?”

“I remember it. The Sealord said his cat was special when in reality it was only a spoiled fat old tom. You did not let his words cloud your vision.”

“Yes child. The same thing is working here. See with your eyes and not with your expectations.”

Arya thought and thought but she could not pierce the veil. She was still not sure what her master or Varys was speaking of.

“How did you know Varys? Speak true fat man. I am good at hearing lies. I will skewer and spit you if you lie to me.”

Arya watched the fat bald eunuch stare at Syrio. His brow was sweating profusely now. She saw dark spots forming underneath his armpits and his cowl line was darkening with sweat.

“I had my sparrows reporting to me. Also, the truth was plain at each birth.”

Arya was still flummoxed.

Syrio smiled at her. “You are still young Arya. No one else who should have seen it saw the truth either. I am assuming Jon Arryn discovered the truth.”

“Yes he did.”

“I suppose Cersei had him killed.”

“I cannot be sure but my sparrows never saw her or his agents near where the poison could have been administered. Also, she was still sure at the time in her deceptions.”

Syrio tapped his chin. “I wonder who else it could be. Do you have any theories Varys?”

“No. I do not. I do not think the Lannisters did the deed. Cersei would have attacked in an instant but still felt safe. Who else had a motive I cannot fathom.”

“What is the secret for crying out loud!” Arya cried out in frustration.

Syrio chuckled and then his demeanor turned somber.

“Cersei has lain with Jamie Lannister to sire her three children Arya. One can see it in the color of their eyes and hair. Their faces are the mirror of their father and sister. There is no trace of Robert Baratheon in their countenance. I saw it the first time I saw the children after I had seen Jamie. He is lying with his sister. The likeness was too pure to be anything else. I merely saw the truth not what everyone expected.”

Arya was shocked at what she heard. The instant Arya heard Syrio’s words she knew they were true. How could she not have seen it?! How could her father not seen it? Then it hit her.

“My father figured out Cersei and Jamie were sleeping together and Cersei sired their children didn’t
he?” she asked though in this too she already knew it was truth.

“Yes my child” Varys told her. “He found a book with a detailed lineage on the Great Houses of Westeros. There have been unions in the past between the two houses in question and with other houses of fair linage. The dark hair and blue eyes always triumphed. I do not know how.”

“Genetics” Syrio spoke softly.

“Excuse me” Varys asked.

“In Braavos at a university, Watchtower Science Academy. They study how traits are passed down from parents to children. They have a theory of what they call dominate genes. Example, dark hair will win over blond hair. The family must have blond in its lineage for a child to be blond. The blond “gene” lying dormant for generations till it can partner with a ‘blond’ gene from the other parent. No one in the lineage of House Baratheon has been blond. All children are black haired. This is what your father and I suppose this Jon Arryn finally divined.”

“Is that the truth of it Varys” Arya asked in a hostile tone. She wanted the full truth.

“It is so child. I counseled against your father trying to reason with Cersei. To allow her to flee. It is not in her character. His compassion was his undoing. I told him this.”

“Did you tell him of the Lannister treason?” Arya snarled.

“Cersei is the Regent to the heir apparent, child. That trumps the office of the Hand. Robert Baratheon was dead.”

Syrio spoke up again. “We have access to the tunnels now Arya. I have a perfect memory. I can easily find our way back to the prison. I will find us a way out of the City. We will hide and then come back by the same tunnels. Let us kill this worm.”

“No!” Varys shouted. “I will take you too long to learn the tunnels.”

“I think not” Syrio replied. His left hand tightened around the upper rob of Varys with his right hand tightening on the dagger in his hand.

“We have a faceless man in our dungeon. I know of a person who can heal your father through magic Arya. If I die now your father will most likely die. At the best he will be a cripple. Also, I know what Joffrey has planned. Joffrey has been planning his ascension to the throne for a year now. Robert's death was most fortuitous for Joffrey. He has plans that Cersei is not privy too.”

“Your sparrows?” Syrio asked.

“Yes. They have been spying on Joffrey. My spies have access to most royal quarters and the quarters of the Hand and many other locations. I am most valuable to those who know how to use my knowledge and insights.

Syrio looked at her. It was her call.

Arya had seen how badly her father’s leg had been injured. He would never be able to walk again without the use of a cane. His days fighting with a sword were over. Unless he could be healed.

“This ‘healer’ can make my father whole again.”

“Yes Arya. He is a Druid priest from the misty past. He is of extreme age though to look at him you
would think he is a man in his late twenties or early thirties. They are a powerful religion. He can
heal your father. He will require a price.” He saw Arya starting to speak up “And I do not know
what it will be. They are elusive and fey people. They have their own goals and devices which
have nothing to do with the Iron Throne or the games we play around it like a Maypole.

Arya made her decision. “We will not kill Varys, Syrio. He has spoken truly about the tunnels. Do
you have a map of the tunnels?”

“I have a base map but I have discovered so much more I have not added to the map.”

“How convenient” Syrio sneered.

“It is the truth. I can take you to the Faceless Man. I can tell the jailer a long tale to convince him to
give us access to the cells.”

Syrio barked a short laugh. “One less card for you to deal Varys. The jailer and his guards are
dead.”

Varys looked between Syrio and Arya. “It would seem your body count continues to grow. We
found many dead scattered throughout the Red Keep. Especially around Arya’s quarters. That was
you two?”

“Yes it was” Arya stepped in. “We killed all that came against us. We came across the jailer and
killed him to.” She saw no reason to give him any more information.

Syrio was looking over Varys’s desk. “It seems you have many correspondences fat man. I see
Illyrio Mopatis signature. He does much business with the Sea Lords. I think we know of another
conspirator. Add him to our list Arya.”

Syrio reached down between the two top most drawers. The wood was slightly askance between the
drawers. Syrio bent down. He moved the wood slowly and then a part of the desk on the other side
and on the upper terrace of the desk jutted out. Syrio pulled and pushed it till it cantered out. Syrio
pulled out a thick binding sheath of parchments.

Varys was sweating even more profusely now.

Syrio pulled over a blank parchment. He then handed Varys a quill. “Write exactly what I say fat
man. I see how you write. If you try any chicanery I will chop off you thumb. Do I make myself
clear?”

The bald eunuch was calm now but Arya could sense the tension in the man. He knew his life still
hung in the balance.

“I have acquired the poison needed to kill Joffrey. This will require Cersei to become regent again
until Tommen comes of age. We can use this time to expose her incestuous relationship with Jamie
…”

Syrio continued to dictate the letter that would implicate Varys in treason and murder.

“She will not believe this” Varys calmly intoned to Syrio.

Syrio laughed. “Not only will she believe it, she will convince herself that she knew it all along my
dear Varys. The royals may need the likes of you Varys but they are always looking for a reason to
put your kind down. They need and loath you. She will believe it and you know that Varys.
“There are many ex-Braavosi in King’s Landing and other contacts I have made since my exile. I will put this letter in a safe place. If I do not successfully communicate with all of them every day they will send this letter to Cersei. None will know I have asked others to do the same. Do not try and have me followed. I will know it.”

Varys had finished writing, signing and putting his seal of a spider on the parchment.

Syrio made him write the same letter five more times and put his seal on it.

Varys glared at the man. “It would seem the Sealord’s palace is filled with vipers.”

“Yes it is Varys. Yes it is. One becomes very adept at the Game of Thrones in Braavos. If you do not, you die. It is really that simple Varys” Syrio told the bald eunuch. “Now that simple truth holds for you.”

Varys looked much aggrieved but held his tongue.

Syrio put the purloined papers he had stolen from Varys and the scrolls in a pouch he found in the room.

“Okay Varys. Let us take a voyage to the dungeons how bout we. If there is indeed a Faceless Man still in the cells then we will have a potential powerful ally. If not we will kill him.”

Arya spoke up. “No we will not! We are not Lannisters.”

“Arya you do not know what these men and women are capable of. They are true only to the House of Black and White and the contract they are currently working on. They are dangerous beyond measure. Capturing one is almost impossible. How did you accomplish it bald man.”

“I was forced to betray him. The need to have the man killed went away. He was too important to kill unless it was absolutely necessary. The Faceless Man killed over fifteen soldiers and sellswords taking him down.”

“I am sure he will be happy to hear of your betrayal.”

Varys glared at the man but he knew he was not in a position to do any other thing. Syrio and Arya held all the cards. They entered back into the tunnels. Varys saw the knocked out young girl.

His eyes flared in alarm. “You did not kill her did you?! Are their more? They have done nothing to you!” he raged.

Arya felt her ire settle just a small amount more. She could see it in her master. He too felt a touch of something seeing Varys rage about the unconscious youth.

“Why is it the innocent who always pay for the sins of the adults?!”

“Relax man” Syrio told the whisper of secrets. “They are only unconscious. We needed them unconscious when we confronted you.”

Syrio had brought some belts from Syrio’s quarters. He bound the girl’s limbs. As they walked back down the hidden tunnel they came to the other girl and young boy still knocked out. Their limbs were still bound.

Syrio was right. He quickly traced his ways back to the jailer’s quarters. They went to the key ring they had left in the quarters. “Which cell eunuch?”
“I will show you.” They walked out the jailer’s quarters and walked down the corridor. They went down to the third cross corridor and turned to the left. They went down the hall. The torches in the scions providing a ghostly light. The corridor slightly turned to the right. They went around the turn.

Varys gasped “No. No. It is not possible.” One of the doors was open. Varys scurried to the cell and looked in. His face was a deathly white.

Syrio looked at Arya behind Varys back. The man entered the cell all the time saying “No, no, no”. Syrio and Arya instinctively knew that one of the three men they had freed had been the Faceless Man that Varys could not believe was not in his cell.

He looked back at them in shock. “I would not have believed it. The lock is not exposed on the inside. It is impossible for him to have gotten out.” Varys did a slow circle around in the empty cell.

Arya had no intention to inform the man of what happened. She was rapidly learning that knowledge was power in this Game of Thrones.

“It would appear that your Faceless Man has escaped. I am sure he is already planning his reprisal against you for your treachery. Maybe he had some help.” Arya told the man. She enjoyed seeing Varys’ eyes darting around. Arya had not lied to the man. She merely did not tell Varys it was her and Syrio who had freed this Faceless Man.

“You must protect me!

The man was long gone now on the skiff. Probably going back to wherever Faceless Men went Arya thought to herself.

“We will protect you as long as you hold up your end of the bargain. My father is a fair man.”

Syrio jumped in “How long do you think Cersei will delay putting Eddard in the dungeon. How long before he is executed.”

“Cersei plans on Eddard Stark taking the Black. It will take time for Cersei to arrange the sham confession and banishment. It is Joffrey as I told you that has plans to execute Eddard. Cersei thinks she can control the youth. She cannot. He is cruel and despotic. He in time will kill her. He will kill all around him. He has the same sickness as King Aerys II Targaryen. He was mad. Joffrey is mad as well but he is cursed with cruelty too. In time someone must put him down.”

“How long before they know the jailer is no more.”

“That will be when they bring Eddard here or a routine change of the guard. That will be in three days.”

“Can we ambush them when they do this Syrio?”

“I advise against it Arya.”

“Why”

Varys spoke up. “You and your Water Dancer’s rampage has Cersei and Joffrey spooked. Finding a Kingsguard dead and Lannisters cut down in great quantities where no one saw any Northerners has everyone on edge. They are convinced that a small band of Northerners are on the loose in the King’s Keep. They will be moving in force for some time yet.”
“I agree with the Whisperer Arya. We need to consider how best to free your father. They will for a
day, maybe more, maybe much longer if given reason guard your father heavily and only then
reduce the guard. We will strike the Lannisters hard to give them that reason. If we continue to
strike them hard they will be cautious and move slowly.”

Syrio turned to Varys. “Alright baldy—lets have you show us the way out of here and take us to this
Druid’s residence.” Syrio smiled evilly at the bald man. “I will have you know the Faceless Man
was going to be drowned down below in an underground river with two other men. We freed them.
You do know of "Valar Dohaeris" don’t you my dear Varys. The man owes us. He will not forget.
He owes us. He will delay your slaying only as long we forebear him.”

Arya agreed with telling Syrio telling the Whisperer that they had freed the Faceless Man. It was not
exactly the truth but since she did not speak the falsehood she felt alright with the deception. Varys
was a liar himself.

Varys eyes flared at that but he regained his composure immediately. “I need to get back. I will be
missed.”

“I think you will not be missed maggot. I am sure we are in the middle of the night. I keep very
good time whisperer. We still have time to have the pleasure of your company for a little while
longer. Lead the way my dear man.”

Varys looked at them with his steady gaze. He seemed to have recovered from his earlier shocks.
He put his hands in the folds of his robe. He sighed. “It would appear I am in your debt. How do I
know you will keep your part of the bargain?”

Syrio looked at him evilly. “You have the same assurance that Eddard Stark had in you.”

Varys let his control slip for a moment and Arya again saw the fear flash over his countenance. She
liked how Syrio constantly kept the bald man off balance. It put great fear in his heart. Fear that
would keep him in their control.

She stepped up to the bald man. She put her dagger to his throat.

“I am not my father. At the slightest sign of treachery I will slit your belly wide open and then I will
slit your throat. Do I make myself clear Varys?”

The man’s face had a fresh sheen of sweat on his face.

“I fully believe you wolf child. If your father had your temperament we would not be in this current
precarious predicament.”

Arya was not sure if there was not a subtle insult in there somewhere but she would let it slide. Her
father’s safety and healing was paramount.

“Take us to this Druid Varys. We need to arrange for my father’s healing when we save him.”

The man started to protest but Syrio now put his dagger to the man’s throat from behind.

“I would advise you Varys to start following our instructions to the letter. We can do this ourselves.
I could find this Druid. I learned the skullduggery of your craft while being First Sword in Braavos.
You are just a convenience. Do I make myself clear?”

The bald man looked Arya still in front of him. “Yes. I fully understand my situation. I do not want
to die in service for the realm. That was what your father was asking of me Arya Stark. His plans
were suicidal. I warned and warned him but he would not follow my counsel. He was helpless before the likes of Cersei and Petyr Baelish. His compassion for Cersei’s children and for Robert Baratheon blinded him to the reality of his situation.”

Arya ground her teeth because at the root she heard the truth. Her father in many ways was too noble for the job of the Hand. The last half day and more had shown her that. She was learning lessons she would never forget. She only hoped her father lived to learn them himself.

Arya was anxious to get started. She needed to save and heal her father. She looked at Syrio. He returned her look. “Let’s get started on our journey to this Druid Varys. Time is wasting. As you have said with the rising dawn our opportunities diminish. We must go to ground and hide while we plan. Lead the way Varys.”

They started down the hidden corridor.

“I have glanced at these papers you had hidden Varys. Quite interesting. I see you wrote the notes backwards using a mirror. Quite skilled. Still I can read it. Much of it is in code I see but I am trained in code breaking too. One must have many skills to be the First Sword of Braavos. I will make sure this information is passed around and will pass on to the Iron Throne if I or Arya should die.”

Syrio was now on one shoulder of Varys and Arya on the other with their daggers out. Varys glanced both ways at them looking at the daggers. He knew his fate.

“I want what is best for the realm. Always. When your father first arrived I had hope. It was quickly dashed. I wish you were Queen Arya. Teach your father. He has the temperament to be a benevolent and wise ruler sitting on the Iron Throne. He is merely unskilled in governance. The Iron Throne has always attracted vipers, sluggards, louts and raving lunatics I fear. It is written in its history.”

They moved down tunnels. Arya saw Syrio looking around and she saw his lips moving. She was sure that he was counting steps and memorizing any features that the winking torch light presented. He was memorizing the layout of the tunnels.

They walked on for what seemed like an hour. The tunnels moving first up and then down. Arya saw the torches evenly spaced and lit. These tunnels were in constant use. The air was not dank and musty. These tunnels had use to them. Arya looked around. It was like living in a dream walking these the tunnels that only a few knew of. Now she knew of them. She had become a wraith herself. Arya smiled. Her smile became feral remembering that these tunnels branched into the royal chambers.

No one would be safe from her vengeance if her father was executed.

They walked on for another ten minutes. Arya saw cobwebs in the corners and strong along the high ceilings. They looked like strands of fate leading from nowhere to nowhere. They came to a stairs.

“This leads up to the back of bakery. It is a store room. The early staff will be making the first loaves. We will go out the backway. Be quiet and keep your heads down” Varys softly informed them. Varys pointed to some spare torches leaning against the wall near the stairwell. Syrio grabbed one.

They went up to a landing and Varys slowly opened the door as if he lived there. The three stepped
out into the darkness. Syrio had light his torch just before they opened the door. They moved quietly through the detritus of the back storeroom careful to make no noises. They came to a door and Varys opened it. It lead to a hall that Varys motioned them to follow him. From the front they could hear the sounds of people softly talking and the clanking of loaves of bread being put in the kilns for the first bread of the day.

The small group arrived at the rear egress of the building. Syrio put out his torch and hid it in a corner behind some crates. They went out the back door and were in an alley. Arya looked around at the buildings and breathed in the air of the city. They were in King’s Landing proper now. They walked on slowly not drawing any attention to themselves. The sky was still dark but the east had the first hint of day lighting the sky. Arya could see layers of smoke in the damp air. It was like the high flowing clouds come down to Earth. They moved from alley to alley. This area seemed to be a residential area. Arya and her party moved down roads between slightly drooping home fronts.

Arya looked on with big eyes from side to side. She had never seen a city before from within. She had ridden through King’s Landing to get to the Red Keep but had paid no attention to any particulars. Her memory of the actual City from that day were hazy at best. She had only eyes for the Red Keep and the mysteries it might hold. Now Arya truly looked at the city that surrounded the Red Keep. The plethora of homes and shops were almost bewildering. They moved into a wider street and Arya saw that it seemed to be a street where furniture makers and makers of small wares worked. The first shops being opened up and sleepy owners and workers lifting gates and putting out their wares to hawk.

The city was coming to life.

They took a side alley and then another. This area felt older somehow. The buildings crowded the narrow road here. The buildings three to four stories tall with few windows. The stucco falling off in patches. The road had water standing on it from a rainfall of last night.

They came before a narrow door. “We have arrived” Varys announced. He went to knock on the plain door.

The door was opened. A tall man in a blinding white robe of linen stood in the doorway. His face had beard stubble that appeared to be three days old. The man’s hair was a dark blonde and his eyes were dark green and had a bright intelligence to them. He looked on the three visitors to his domicile.

“I see you have brought the wayward wolf and disgraced sword to me Varys. I had dreamed of this coming to pass but never thought it would. This wolf child is wild but she will be tamed by the dragon.”

Arya knew they were speaking of her but made no sense of what this tall man was meaning with his strange words.

“That I have Merrel. I had not looked to do this.” Arya saw a sardonic grimace cross Varys face. “I have been shown the error of my ways. They have need of your unique talents. They have need of your gifts that only you can bestow. They mean to bring down a dynasty in the making.”

“Is that your goal Arya of House Stark?” the tall Druid asked her.

“I just want to free and save my father. The realm can go fuck itself as far as I am concerned. I do know my father is way more the man than any others I have seen.” She looked back at Varys who returned her look without rancor or casting his eyes aside.
Merrel spoke up intervening in the contest of wills “You have come to me as I had hoped you would. Almost all prophecies spoke of the Direwolves being put to riot and much death. I hoped that the few that spoke of you would come to pass beyond all reason and hope.”

“This is the beginning. The new age is forming. You are the catalyst Arya Stark. In time the wolf and dragon will lie together as they should have a generation past.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Arya asked confused and a little vexed. She was not sure how to take this wolf will lie with the dragon talk. What could that mean?

“In time you will see.” The man turned to look at Varys. “You want peace for the realm. She is the key. Will you serve?”

“I have been giving many reasons to serve Merrel” Varys grimaced looking askance at Syrio. “I will serve. I have waited for someone like Eddard Stark to come. He just can’t get out of his own way.”

Arya felt her temper rise again at these constant jabs at her father. She controlled herself. Saving her father was tantamount to everything else.

“He is not the one. But he will bring the one. He and you Arya Stark.”
Arya stood with her master as they looked at the tableau before them. Varys was back to his implacable self with his hands enfolded in the sleeves of his robe. The tale Druid looked from face to face. Arya wondered what would happen next.

“Varys, remember I will be distributing your traitorous letters to my confidents. They are loyal to me to a fault. If I do not contact them at the agreed to times, Cersei will be receiving an interesting missive. I also have your little personal diary. I will be perusing it and I will decipher it. We have many talents we First Swords.”

Varys made a sour face. Arya loved seeing that expression on his face. *Served him right!*

Syrio made hard eye contact with the bald eunuch. “I want you to counsel caution to Cersei. Your counsel will be to move slowly on any plans with Eddard Stark. We both know her son is cruel. I fully accept your assessment he will defy Cersei and have Eddard executed. We will give you reasons to preach caution to Cersei.”

Varys gave them another sour face. “I will perform my duties. I do only want what is best for the realm. The Lannisters are not best for the realm.” Varys studied Arya. “I do believe you should be Queen instead of your father King child.”

“Yeah right.”

“A shame. You have the same foundation as your father but you know what to do when it needs to be done.” He sighed. “When do you need me back here Syrio?” Varys asked the Water Dancer in an aggrieved tone.

“Two nights hence. Here at the third hour past midnight. Will that be a problem?”

“No. It will not be. People only want my company when they have need of my services.”

“One last thing Varys.”

The man had started to leave. He stopped looking back partially over his shoulder.

“I was First Sword. I am at home in the hidden tunnels Varys. If I sense any betrayal you will die. Do I make myself clear?”

Another sour face crossed Varys face. “I will not attempt to betray you Syrio. It would seem we both want the same thing. Hopefully, Eddard will learn from his past mistakes. If not we will meet again under similar circumstances.” The bald eunuch looked at Arya. He held her eyes. Then he was gone.

Syrio relaxed. He looked at the Druid priest. “I did not know your order still existed in Westeros. I knew your order still exists in the forests of Qohor but not in Westeros. I had read that your order had fallen with the Children of the Forest.”
“We came here with the first men when they came across the land bridge between Westeros and Essos. We still live deep in those forest of Essos where always have. We had a natural affinity with the First People. We settled in the forests and mountain vales of Westeros that the Children of the Forest favored. We bonded with the First People. Their ways and ours intersected. When the wars came we took their side. We enjoyed the same demise when House Stark butchered us.”

Arya was shocked at that and her ire flared hot. “THAT IS A LIE!” Arya screamed at the man pulling needle out.

The man eyed her sword. “It would seem the same trait lives on.”

Arya started to scream another response. She stopped. His last sentence striking true.

“I don’t understand” Arya spoke softly showing her confusion. We are a gentle, fair people. Ask any of our subjects. My father’s compassion has gotten him injured, captured and threatened with execution. How dare you accuse my father of such a thing!” she finished in a scream again.

The Druid’s eyes did not waver from hers. “You father is a great man. If your past ancestors were like your father or yourself the Ice King would not exist. The Ice King too is the fault of House Stark’s.

“You are fucking lying!” Arya snarled.

“I wish it was not so Arya Stark. Our oral history is passed down from master to disciple. We know the truths long forgotten, simply not written down or worse written falsely. The victors always writes the history and puts themselves in the best light. You family is like all families Arya. Not all are as noble as your father or yourself. Eight thousand years ago the First People were desperate with your family leading the forces of Men against them.”

“An ancestor of your lineage, Darick Stark, was a vile evil man. He was captured by the Children of the Forest and changed into the Ice King through vile necromancy. The First People were desperate as I have said. They were dying because of House Stark.”

“OKAY!” Arya yelled.

“The First People should have known better. You cannot control such a force. They created other Ice Wrights from vile men. They thought they would be the excellent weapons to kill their tormentors. Instead the weapon slashed both ways. They created an evil far greater than what they faced. The new Ice King killed all. He hated all life and killed all equally.”

“So we are guilty of sins from eight thousand years ago?” Arya asked testily. She felt great guilt at the sins of her family’s past. For some reason she instinctively believed the man.

“No child. I merely wanted you to know. I will help you father and yourself. I will ask a price. One with a steep cost. I wanted you to know the true past so when I make my demand you will know why.”

“What is it?”

“I will not tell you. I will only tell your father when he comes to me.”

“Why? Because I am a woman?” Arya sneered at the man.

“Yes and no. I could care less that you are a woman Arya. But Westeros cares north of Dorne. It is your father who will have to pay the price. Therefore, I will tell him.”
Arya knew she would have to live with that. She did not have any Crevasse pieces in an advantageous position.

Syrio had been silent. “Merrel where are we in relationship to the Red Keep. I need my bearings.”

“You are approximately one half mile north of the Red Keep. We are just below the section called Flea Bottom.”

“Can we stay here for the next day or two Merrel?”

“You will be welcome in my humble abode. You and Arya can stay here as long as you need.”

“You might not think so in a moment. Arya and I must go out and kill some more Lannister Red Cloaks. We need to sow more fear, uncertainty and doubt into Cersei and Joffrey’s Lannister’s heart.”

“It will be sunrise in less than an hour. We are heading out. I know the Regent will have heavy patrols out patrolling the streets to make sure all is under her control. We will attack some of her patrols.”

“I see” the Druid answered.

“I know yours is a peaceful religion.”

The Druid left the room at that. Arya looked at Syrio. Had Syrio insulted the man? They milled around in the room for several minutes. Arya really was starting to wonder if they had accidently upset the man.

The Druid came back out of the hallway he had disappeared down. His blinding white robe was gone replaced with a dark brown one that went down to his sandals. He had with him now a Yew wood long bow in his hand and a quiver on his back. In his left hand was a crossbow and a pouch of bolts. On his shoulders was draped a dark green travelling cloak. “We were once a peaceful order. We did not lift our hands against our attackers. We were almost annihilated for it. We have learned the errors of our ways. This is a time of violence. Violence that can usher in a better age. I will fight beside you. Your strategy is wise and your cause just.”

He handed Syrio the crossbow and the pouch of bolts. There was a tapping on the left most window.

Arya watched Syrio pull his rapier out in a lightning fast motion. He swirled around to face the window in a defensive crouch.

The Druid smiled. “Relax Water Dancer. It is just an old friend. I have called him and he has come to answer my need.” The man slowly walked to the window and unhooked the catch and threw the window open. It was still dark though one could see the sky was beginning to light in the east. Arya gasped seeing a huge raven sitting on the sill. The bird had been beating on the lead window with its bill. The bird look around with dark intelligent eyes.

The bird hopped in place and then flew to the Druid’s shoulder. “Corn corn corn!” The bird qworked. The Druid reached up and petted the bird on its head. The bird turning its head into the pats and obviously relished the affection. “Corn Corn … wolf—destiny … the girl has come … come she has—destiny … corn corn!” The druid reached into a pocket in his dark cloak and pulled out several kernels of corn and held them out in his palm.

The large raven pecked them up greedily.
“Corn … destiny now destiny now” the bird cawed out. The Druid then feed the bird some more kernels. The bird hungrily pecking them up. The Druid then held out his forearm and the bird flapped down to it. The human and bird made eye contact. The bird looked intently at the Druid with his glittering eyes. For half a minute the two maintained their staring contact of eyes. The bird then hopped up and down on Merrel’s forearm. The bird flexed down bunching itself. It hopped up high and flapped his wings causing mighty currents in the confined space.

The bird pivoted in the air and in a fast blur flew back out the window. The Druid followed in its wake like a leaf in the breeze. He closed the window and locked it behind the departed bird.

Arya turned to look at her master. Her eyes questioning. Syrio shrugged his shoulders. He had no idea. He was a master of swords and whispers.

Syrio spoke up “Care to let us know what that was all about?”

“You want to attack Red Cloaks. I have asked my friend to talk to his friends. They will find our Lannisters. Are you hungry?”

The two nodded. They had eaten the last of their food after leaving Vary’s room and walking down the tunnels. They were still hungry. The man set out on his table a loaf of bread, a quarter wheel of cheese and some raisins. The Druid poured them a glass of water each. They sat the table and ate at a measured pace.

The Druid looking at his two acquaintances with bright eyes. Arya squirmed under the inspection. To distract herself she turned to Syrio.

“When will you go to your accomplices and give them the letters that Varys wrote?” She wondered why her master gave her a sly smile.

“I have no accomplices in King’s Landing. I had not been in King’s Landing long when your father’s path and mine stumbled across each other.”

“What?!” Arya exclaimed. “Then why did we go through all that bullshit with Varys!”

“Arya” Syrio sighed. “Will you start thinking before you start exclaiming? Think. What did we need?”

Arya closed her eyes. She did not like the rebuke. She thought. She worked it around in her head. She drew a blank. “I do not know master. I only know you lied to Varys.”

“Do you consider Varys a friend to House Stark?”

“What! What a stupid question!”

“Do you lie Arya?”

“Never!”

“Then learn Arya.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your father needs to learn this lesson as well if he survives.” He saw Arya’s dander starting to rise again. He held up his hand. “Arya it simply does not pay to be one hundred honest when you are dealing with foes. I can almost guarantee that your father was totally honest and fair with Cersei.”
Where is your father? He is in their custody now child.”

Arya glared at the Water Dancer sulking.

“With Varys we needed more than just his word. He does not want power or seeks glory like the Lannisters that is true. I can see that plainly. I do believe that in his own way he wants what is best for the realm. The problem for us are his plans and means for achieving this “best” for the realm probably do not coincide with ours. He would sacrifice us if he thinks we are not achieving the goals he has for bettering the realm.”

“Thus the lies child. We had to put him under threat. He is too crafty by half. Fortunately, men like him are reviled for their work. All rulers need men like him to make their rule more effective. They need men and women who can ferret out the truth and discover their enemies’ plans.”

“To do this they must be in many ways duplicitous in their craft. This makes them unsavory at best and vile at worst to rulers. They are tolerated as a necessary evil.

“Varys knows he will never be loved by the people he helps to rule. They will always be quick to believe that he has turned traitor. Is he not himself constantly working to make others turn traitors to the people they serve or work for? Your father found that out. Varys may have tried to help your father after his fashion but when the winds of fortune changed he abandoned your father.”

“We all want to live Arya. He is not a warrior like you and I. We are willing to die for an ideal. Most of our species do not. Thus, the lie Arya. He now has personal “skin” in the game. He believes that if I die he dies. That is very powerful motivator.”

“Merrel” Syrio called out to the Druid who had been listening to Syrio talk. “I would ask that you keep the “confession” notes I had Varys write and his personal logs. I do not have time to decipher them now. I may have need of them later. Especially that log. I can only imagine the goodies in those reverse handwritten notes.”

The Druid chuckled. “You sound like a Whisper yourself my dear Water Dancer.”

Syrio chuckled in return. “To be a First Sword and to survive one must learn the craft of the spider and the ways of the whisperer.”

They ate their rest of their meal in silence. Arya noticed the sky was beginning to lighten outside the window.

Soon there was a pecking on the window. The Druid walked over to the window and opened it. This time there was three ravens on the ledge. They did not qwork this time. They stared up at the Druid with an intense look that he returned. After a minute he nodded his head. The birds flew off with the loud flapping of wings. The birds disappearing over the rooftops flying low and moving fast. The man again closed his window.

“My friends report many patrols afoot in the warrens of King’s Landing. It would seem that you two have stirred up a Lion’s den or maybe it is hornets’ nest. They are walking up and down streets and searching all wagons and covered areas that are outside. One patrol is heading towards the east end of Flea Bottom. We will attack that one.”

“Why that one?” Arya asked.

Syrio sighed. “Arya at least think before you blurt out your questions.” He paused. “No that is unfair. I have only been teaching you the art of Water Dancing. I must now also begin to teach you the art of warfare.”
“What is the difference?”

“Combat is fighting and surviving against your fellow warrior. Warfare is the application of tactics and strategy of how to fight the forces of your enemy and win.”

“We will be attacking the forces of the Crown around King’s Landing Arya. We will not hit them in the same place twice. We must move around and hit them were they do not look for us. We must strike like the leopard. The lions attack in mass and boldly charge in once they stalk near the prey. The leopard must ambush from stealth. They must be able to take their prey down quick and fast. They do this alone. We must be like the leopard.”

“Merrel, I think you know this city like the back of your hand. Is this true?”

“Yes. I have lived here for generations now. I do know the city intimately.”

Arya caught the ‘generations’ statement. How old was this man? He only looked like he was in his early thirties at the most.

“What are you talking about?”

“Arya, you would know it. You are linked to your direwolf. All of you are. A part of Sansa died when she believed Lady was killed. That was a crime indeed.”

The mention of Nymeria put a thrill through Arya. She missed her wolf terribly. “Is Nymeria still alive?!” she blurted out.

“No Arya I am not a warg like you. I communicate with the ravens. They are very intelligent and receptive to those who know how to communicate with them. They seek out those who are in tune with them. I do not become one with them as you do with Nymeria.”

Arya paused in her thoughts. A sudden insight occurred to her. If she and Syrio were successful as she hoped they would be, the Lannister’s would be pulled down. There could only be one ruler after that. Her father. Eddard Stark would be setting on the Iron Throne. She had heard the story several times of how her father had turned aside from the Iron Throne when he marched into King’s Landing and found Jaime Lannister on the throne. If only he had taken the throne then.

The world would be a much better place.

“I know these warrens. Come let us go. My friends are watching all of King’s Landing as they fly over the city. They will guide and ward us as we move about.”

“Are you a warg?” Arya asked the man. She thought they were only located in the North though when she thought of that she felt conceited. Why would wargs only be in the North?

“No Arya I am not a warg like you. I communicate with the ravens. They are very intelligent and receptive to those who know how to communicate with them. They seek out those who are in tune with them. I do not become one with them as you do with Nymeria.”

The mention of Nymeria put a thrill through Arya. She missed her wolf terribly. “Is Nymeria still alive?!” she blurted out.

“You tell me Arya” the druid told her. “You would know it. You are linked to your direwolf. All of you are. A part of Sansa died when she believed Lady was killed. That was a crime indeed.”

Arya felt great remorse consume her suddenly. Lady had paid with her life for the “sins” of Nymeria. She was thankful for her wolf’s escape but mourned for the sweet Direwolf’s death.

After the pain faded Arya knew. “Nymeria lives.”
“Yes she does. As does Lady.”

“No” Arya said sadly. “My father had to kill her to satisfy that harpy Cersei. Gods I hate her!” Arya cried out hating the woman.

“Yes. Cersei as she is, is quite despicable indeed. Remember this Arya. All is not as it seems. I foresaw the possibility of you coming to me and changing history. I have no desire to see your sister become a dark version of herself.”

Arya could only stare at this man. What in the hell was he saying? It was like he was trying to talk out of both sides of his mouth.

A thought hit her. “Hey! How do you know about me and my sibling’s direwolves if you have been in King’s Landing?” Arya asked suspiciously.

“As I have told Arya. You have been foretold. We have watched you and your family from afar. We dared to hope that you would come to us. You are the catalyst. You will bring the Dragon to Westeros before she can be corrupted. The Dragon and Direwolf will lie together.”

*What the hell did that mean … the direwolf will lie with the dragon?* Arya wondered to herself.

“It is time to go” the Druid stood up. “Let us go hunt and see how many lion pelts we can skin this fine morning.”

Syrio stood up and took the crossbow and sighted down the barrel of the weapon. Arya had seen he was a good shot with her bow. A crossbow was somewhat simpler to aim. They gathered all their weapons. She saw that the Druid had a bastard sword crossways on his back. The blade handle not quite jutting off the opposite shoulder as her arrow quiver.

The Druid handed them long dark brown traveling cloaks to put on to hide their weapons. The cloaks allowing them to blend into their environs unnoticed. They would just be one of the common rabble of King’s Landing.

Arya followed the two men out and they turned between two rows of buildings and entered into a wild warren of narrow alleys and streets. Many of the rows of building only an arm’s length apart. The buildings had few windows and only narrow doors. The building usually two to three stories tall. There was a sprinkling of buildings rising up to five stories in height. The buildings had the look of some age to them but were generally well maintained.

Where the buildings had some distance between them many small businesses had pitched tents over half of the small narrow passages. They had setup small stalls to sell the day to day items the local citizens needed to live. The small shops working out from under the tax collectors noses. The underground economy vibrant and bright. Arya smelled the first meals being cooked and prepared for the first patrons of the day.

Arya and her companions were unremarked. The bows were unstrung and held close to their bodies as were their swords that lay hidden underneath their traveling cloaks. None of the citizens of the warrens of King’s Landing had any use for the Iron Throne. The last couple generations of rulers of the Iron Throne had seen to that. To the citizens of King’s Landing Arya and her companions were one of the masses.

They moved on going down from on confusing narrow alley to the next.

“Are you lost Syrio?” Arya asked her master. She had long ago lost her bearings.
“No Arya. I will teach you how to memorize landmarks and count steps. If you are to become a true Water Dancer and potential First Sword you have much to learn.”

“I will never serve the Sea Lord!” Arya announced hotly to her master.

“Nor do I want you to Arya. I only want you to develop all the skills of one. You are capable. I have much to teach you. I had feared I would never find me a student capable of learning all I had to teach.”

Arya felt good inside hearing that. She heard a loud caw and looked up. Two Ravens were circling up above the alley they were currently walking down. The Druid looked up for a few moments.

He hurried his steps. The moved between two rows of building along a narrow walkthrough. They entered the fourth building. They walked up a narrow stairwell that switched back until they went through a narrow door and were now on the roof of a four story building.

The Druid motioned for them to bend down. They advanced to the edge of the building to a small retaining wall on the edge of the building. A raven had landed on the row of building opposite their row of buildings. Arya saw this must be a main road below capable of handling wagons moving in both directions.

The Druid whispered. “There are at least forty red cloaks moving up the road. They are harassing the locals. They are accosting any they meet and disturbing the few vendors setup to hawk wares. I had not realized there was so many. There is another patrol my friends tell me moving in from the North. They are only twelve. We may want to let these past.”

“What say you?”

Syrio looked at Arya with a hawkish look. Arya did not hesitate.

“Attack.”

Syrio smiled at her. The Druid regarded her quietly. “You are indeed the Direwolf given human flesh. It is most appropriate that you got the alpha of the pack.” They all removed their travelling cloaks and placed them on the roof top. The druid pulled his bow off and strung it as Arya strung her much smaller bow. One did not need a long bow to generate power with a well crafted bow. Syrio wrenched his crossbow back.

“Let me take on anyone with armor” Syrio whispered. Arya nodded. They went to the edge of the building. Two more ravens had alighted on the opposite buildings looking down. Their heads bobbing in time with each other looking at the Lannsiters.

“Now” the Druid whispered.

As one the three stood up. Arya immediately smiled. The Lannsiters were below them off to the right. They were in perfect firing position. Below in their light armor were the Red Cloaks with two Sers with them to provide heavy armor support. Syrio aimed his crossbow. A loud clank was heard when Syrio pulled his trigger. The crossbow jerked up releasing its bolt.

Arya watched the quarrel slam into the knight’s helm and pierced the metal. The bolt sunk deep into the man’s skull killing the man instantly. His body crumpled straight down. Arya and Merrel released their bowstrings. The strings letting out a soothing thrum. Two Lannisters feel down with arrows jutting out their throats. Syrio was furiously cranking back his crossbow. Two more Lannisters fell dead with arrows to the throat. The men below were in a riot of confusion seeing five of their number killed without warning. Arya and the Druid had large quivers with thirty arrows in
Arya and the Druid began to fire rapidly. Arrows whistling down. Seven more men had dropped down with arrows through necks or upper bodies. Syrio let loose with the crossbow again. A Lannister fell over with a bolt in his stomach. The other knight had hidden behind a stall knocking the woman manning it over as she crawled away fast. Arya saw another of her arrows take a Lannister down with an arrow to the throat while Merrel found a man’s eye.

The Lannisters had no bowmen with them. Arya and the Druid were firing fast after they drew a bead. More Lannisters fell either dead or wounded. The men were running around and hiding behind what cover they could find. The knight came out to point up at them. He spun around when a quarrel hit him in the thigh knocking his legs out from underneath him. His armored body clanging loudly on the hard ground.

The small patrol that the Druid had reported was coming up a side alley that Arya could see in the distance. They had heard the combat and were running up the alley towards the battle.

Syrio called out “It is time to leave Druid.”

The man agreed. They turned and put their travelling cloaks back on after situating their weapons to be hidden by the cloaks. They settled everything down. “Follow me.” They did not move back down the stairwell. Instead they moved down the line of building back away from the ledge. Well out of sight. They ran down the line of buildings. Another line of buildings abutted up against this line of buildings at a thirty degree angle from an intersecting alley way. They ran onto this line of buildings and ran down the buildings invisible to all but the ravens flying overhead. They reached a red bricked building.

They entered a small shack at the center of the roof and went down a narrow stairs. They were soon walking down a crowded narrow alleyway full of vendors hawking wares and people moving about. They had unstrung their bows and pulled their weapons close underneath their traveling cloaks. They walked close to walls and stalls keeping heads bowed and walked calmly. The vendors saw no potential sales and ignored them.

They moved from alleyway to alleyway till they went up another stairwell and again they took to the rooftops. Ten minutes later they were back at the Druid’s residence.

The lion’s nose had been bloodied yet again.
Perfect cupid bow lips went up to the gold goblet and sipped the rich red wine. The cup was swirled several times and then the lips again partook of the nectars of the gods. Or whatever. Cersei needed some relief. How could everything have gone to shit so fast she wondered?

She looked over at Sansa acting demure and chaste. The child really was clueless thank the gods. Telling Cersei of her father’s plans had been a godsend. Cersei had in a way underestimated Eddard. He had been passive with his dealing with her and she had been surprised when Sansa came to her and told her of his plans to bolt from King’s Landing and exposing her and Jamie’s supposed sins.

She worried her lower lip between sips. She had to act fast as the Regent for her son. Joffrey was not ready yet to take the reins of power. She would run the Iron Throne while she taught Joffrey how to master the intricacies of rule. She allowed her thoughts for a brief moment to wonder if Joffrey would ever be ready but quickly banished those thoughts.

He was to be King in both name and deed. One day.

Yes. She acted fast. She fell upon the wolves before they even knew what was happening. Even then they had given a good account of themselves. They fought bravely but wolves always fall before lions. It was the way of nature.

She looked again at Sansa Stark. This one was definitely not a wolf. She was timid and weak. A trifling thing really when Cersei examined her closely. She was a ravishing beauty to be sure. She was taller than herself which she did not like but that was the roll of the dice. Her auburn hair and deep blue eyes only enhanced the beauty of her facial features. She was beautiful but not as beautiful as herself.

Even after giving birth to three children she still retained her beauty. What the child bearing had taken from her exquisite gowns hid. She loved her children but cursed the stretch marks and taking away the firmness of her bosom.

She looked at the mild girl looking around with fear around the table. She was not the Queen that was prophesized. Sansa Stark was not a threat.

She had once been happy to have Joffrey marry the girl. She would have been a beautiful counterpart to Joffrey’s good looks. They would have looked resplendent on the Iron Throne. That plan had been dashed.

Sansa was now marked goods. She would have to figure out what to do with trembling weak girl. No one would want the scion of a traitor.

She was secretly thankful that Eddard Stark was so naïve and outright stupid. He simply had no concept of the Game of Thrones. He should have acted as soon as he knew the truth of her children’s lineage. Why hadn’t he acted? Was he that stupid? He deserved his fate. He would take the black. Then she would be free of the Starks. Robb would stay and be the Warden of the North.
She thought of Bran. Her thoughts quickly raced on. Why did that boy have to put his face in the window at that time? Damn Jaime! She had merely wanted him to bring the child in so they could put the fear of the gods into him. It had not occurred to her that Jaime could be that cavalier. She stopped and thought back a generation. What was it that Doran and Oberyn felt when their dead niece and nephew were returned to them? She wondered of the shock, anguish and hate that filled their breast.

Cersei took a big gulp of wine. It was better to not think those thoughts. She could never undo the past.

She knew what she had to do. She had been given a prophecy when she was younger than Sansa. Much of it had come true. She would make sure that the rest never came to fruition. As long as she was Regent she would make sure that the rest of Maggie the Frog’s prophecies never occurred.

She would prove her wrong yet!

She would just have to stay in power. Joffrey was weak. She knew it. She would control him and rule through him till the time came he was ready to actually rule. Cersei stared off into space out the window high up the wall. She sipped her wine again.

She had everything under control but for one very important factor. Arya Stark.

The girl had disappeared. What was worse was that she seemed to be leaving a trail of death behind her. How! How could a fourteen year old girl create such mayhem?

She had sent the Kingsguard Meryn Trant to fetch the girl. She had waited several hours for him to return with the other royal hostage she had sought. He never came back. She had been safely in her royal quarters with her children as her Red Cloaks swept the Red Keep clean of wolves. They would capture Arya Stark and bring her back to her. It had never happened.

She had received a double shock. First it was reported that Meryn Trant and the Red Cloaks sent to pick up Arya Stark had been found. All dead. There had been no trace of Arya or of some charlatan sword instructor that Eddard Stark had hired to keep his wild child occupied. She had heard how the girl had nearly run her youngest over chasing after cats.

The girl was definitely wild and feral. She had shamed her eldest child with her prowess and power. For a brief moment she remembered her childhood dreams of taking up the sword. Her father had crushed that dream with ridicule and the belt. She had not been able to sleep for days after the severe beatings he gave her for her impudence.

It still galled her that Jaime was able to take up the sword and not herself. She took another gulp of wine to soothe her distress.

She had tried to process that information when an even greater shock smacked her in the face. There had been a small massacre in front of Arya’s quarters. Seven Red Cloaks had been found dead in front and in Arya’s room. The implication was clear. First Meryn Trant and his Red Cloaks had been killed in the training room that Arya used. Then they had gone to her room and killed seven more guards.

_How_?! They were only two! A charlatan and a young teenage girl of no account. Sure, she was wild and untamed but that was all. Wasn’t it? How could they have done all that carnage? The Red Cloaks spent the day and deep into the night constantly sweeping the Red Keep. Arya and her charlatan had not been found.
The need to see and know had been too great for the Regent. Cersei had gone out to see for herself. Joffrey had announced he would stay behind and protect his brother and sister. It was his duty to protect the royal lineage of House Lannister.

Cersei had first looked a Joffrey. His cowardice galled her. She was brave enough to step into the unknown. He was a bleating sheep she sadly saw. Again she suppressed her fears and doubts of her son. He was first in line to the Iron Throne. He was and the future king. She would just have to maintain the regency until he was ready.

_Would he ever be ready?_ Her mind whispered to her cruelly. Why didn’t the boy have her steel will and Jamie’s prowess? The fates were most unkind. She had dreamed that she and Jaime’s child would be a lion indeed. She feared he would never be more than a jackal.

Cersei had walked down to the hall that Arya used to practice with her supposed sword master. A man who fought with a child’s toy. All knew the Braavosi were pansies. They were not true knights like the men of Westeros were. They had to be gay fighting with their stylized stances and little girl swords.

She would have been a warrior with a broad sword and a yew wood bow! Again she cursed her father and more so society that denied her what she longed for so much. A sudden picture came to her mind of her with a powerful sword and … and one of Oberyn’s daughter’s as her-her-her wife! Oh Helllll no! _Where did that wayward thought come from?_ She shook her head again. She had for a brief moment actually felt pure happiness.

She needed a goblet of wine!

She had entered the room where Meryn Trant had met his demise. She had not seen true combat up close like this before. She steeled her resolve. She imagined she was a Ser Knight walking upon the battlefield she had been a part of. She saw the wounds. The blood that was everywhere and the way the bodies had been partially dismembered by violent sword strokes.

Most of the bodies were stiffening their limbs locked in grotesque poses. She felt her stomach roiling but she controlled herself. She would not be weak. She again could not stop herself from sneering at her son’s weakness. _Protecting his siblings._ She harrumphed to herself.

She walked to Arya’s residence. On the way she came across another unexplained scene of death. Three Lannister’s cut down. Again no evidence of the attackers. It would seem as the attackers escaped unscathed. What kind of warriors were this? Arya could not have been creating this kind of mayhem. One man could not commit so much carnage. Then she reached Arya’s room. There she found seven dead men. The scene was the same as the other scenes.

Her men cut down savagely and again no evidence that any harm was done to the perpetrators. She moved from man to man and saw the mostly head or throat wounds. Even she could see the skill of the attackers. She was shown how one of the bodies in the way it was orientated was killed by the person in the room. This body had wounds in the torso. Who was most likely in that room?

Only one name came to Cersei’s mind. Arya Stark. Could this slip of a girl have taken down a Red Cloak? Surely not. She looked back down on the dead body as she left room. No. It was not possible. Was it?

She was lead to one more scene. This one was different. Now arrows had come into the mix. Three of the men had arrows in their throat and head. Another man had an arrow in his stomach with a sword wound to the neck. Even Cersei could see what happened her. An arrow to the stomach, the man leans over and another man comes up to finish the man. The last man had been
killed by a sword wound alone.

Cersei was most disturbed by this murder scene. Arya had been partial to the bow. The girl always wanting to practice in the courtyards. Cersei saw the white and grey fletching of the arrows. The color of House Stark. Her eyes told her what had happened but her mind argued with her that it was not possible. Surely this was not the work of a fourteen year old girl.

How could Sansa be so docile and timid and her sister play the proverbial wolf. Cersei shivered at the implications. She found a small part of herself she could never admit to was extremely envious. Arya was a wolf and struck like one. Those men had been taken down fast and furious without remorse.

Part of that called to Cersei. To be powerful and vicious in combat. It was like a Siren’s seductive song calling sailors to their deaths around the maelstrom.

She knew who had fired those arrows.

She had gone back to the throne room. She had sent out even more heavy rotations of sweeps throughout the Red Keep. She would have to keep Eddard Stark close to her in the royal quarters and not sent to the dungeons till Arya was secured and her ‘sword master’ killed.

Then the news had only gotten worse. The next day the attacks started. She was sending out patrols into King’s Landing looking for the wolf girl. The Red Keep had been swept again and again but no trace of Arya Stark and her accursed sword instructor had been found.

She closed all the gates to the City. She had patrols doubled on the curtain walls looking down for the Stark seeking escape. She flooded the City with patrols. Surely the girl and her sword instructor had to be desperate and on the run.

Varys had come to her with not much to report. He reported that his sparrows had not seen or heard anything of the Stark girl. Surely a lot of Stark men must have avoided her snares and somehow found the wolf girl and were on the loose. Varys told Cersei that he recommended they delay the transfer of Eddard to the dungeon. This reinforced her earlier decision to not yet move Eddard. She would keep him alive but no more. She needed him weak and docile.

He had more news on that front. A patrol had been sent to the dungeons at the end of the second day. The Jailer had disappeared along with five of his security detail. When he had reported that to Cersei she had blanched. Where the hell had this girl not been! She knew instinctively this too had been Arya’s doing. She had gone seeking her father! The sheer bravery staggered the Lannister. She had even more reason to keep Edward near her till she quelled this nascent Insurrection.

She sent her Red Cloaks flooding down to the dungeons. The report from the men was that they had found nothing of great import. They did report one thing though. There was evidently a tunnel and stairs from the dudgeons that led to an underground river. It looked abandon but they had found traces blood. Maybe there had been a battle fought there. They could not be sure.

Cersei knew. Arya had gone to the underground labyrinth like some patron seeking transport across the River of Death. She had then fled. Damn her eyes!

Only she had not fled. Within hours a report had reached her from King’s landing. A large patrol of her troops had been ambushed from the rooftops of the buildings. Eleven men had been killed along with four severely wounded. The attack by arrows. She had been brought some of the arrow shafts broken off the dead Lannisters as per her orders.
She ground her teeth with what she saw. She again saw the grey and white fletching. She was now the hunted. The audacity! The girl was bold by half too much. How dare her! The wolf did not take the Lions of Lannister down. It seemed that Arya had more allies. There had been a long bow used she was told. She could see these arrows was longer and thicker than Arya’s arrows. The kills had been roughly split but two of the men were killed by crossbow bolts.

Joffrey had come in while Cersei was being shown the evidence. He was loudly proclaiming that if he had been present he would have put an end to this small Insurrection. He only wished he was not tied down to the Red Keep.

Cersei rolled her eyes behind her son’s back. Sansa was sitting at her table looking down but she saw the slight smile. The bitch was enjoying this. She would get her revenge on the cunt soon enough. She just needed to focus on the current situation. She had wanted to capture the girl as a hostage but now she was strongly considering having Arya put down.

A Captain came crashing into the room. She was about to rebuke the man but the look on his face stopped her. He bowed to Joffrey and then Cersei.

“My King—regent …” the man took a breath to calm himself. “Some of our men have been relaxing at The Demon Grape Inn. They were viciously attacked. We are still not certain what exactly happened. Many were killed with arrows and more were viciously cut down by a sword. We have lost eleven dead and five wounded. They were attacked from above and from the kitchen area. Some man was among our troops. He moved so fast he could not be followed they say.”

Cersei had some of the arrows brought to her. She saw the white and grey fletching that Arya Stark used. The other arrows came from a longbow and had the yellow hawk fletching. Who the fuck was this swordsman!

Varys had reported to her now that his name was Syrio Forel. Eddard Stark had evidently found him in King’s Landing and hired him to teach Arya. The man was most definitely not a fraud. What kind of man was this that could take down a Kingsguard and six Red Cloaks? Damn Eddard Stark for indulging Arya Stark and her childish dreams of being a swordsman.

You did not indulge a girl in her desires to take up the sword! Cersei had learned that lesson the hard way from her father. More than once.

That had been four days ago. The attacks had continued and were savaging her forces mercilessly. The first two days the attacks had come in the morning. The attacks were to the north and east of the Red Keep. The attacks from the rooftops. Yesterday the attack had come at noon only two blocks from the Red Keep! That had cost her eight troops. Three hours later the next attack had come ten more blocks distant. That attack had cost her twelve more troops dead or wounded!

She had her patrols running down thoroughfares. The attack yesterday had been in the late afternoon as the shadows started to form like long broken ghosts down the streets. This one had been near Visenya hill. The men had been trudging up the hill when they were hit from three sides. They had lost ten men.

Her men were starting to show fear. They were claiming that they were fighting a company of Stark men. They were fighting mighty Goblins from the distant past. Vampires had sided with the Starks and were wrecking vengeance on the House of Lannister.

Joffrey had been ranting that if only he could meet the enemy on the field of battle he would annihilate them to the last man. When Cersei told him that Arya was part of the attacking pack he had laughed hard.
“Mother! That is impossible. All men know women cannot fight. You may as well ask the stars to come down to Earth. It takes a mighty male warrior such as myself to defeat these craven heathens.”

“Okay.” Cersei smiled with thin lips when Joffrey stopped swirling his bastard sword in the air.

“What mother?” Joffrey asked his mother perplexed.

“Okay. You are king. Our troops are frightened and in need of their king stepping to the forefront and confronting these Stark men. You will show them how a true Warrior King fights.”

Cersei had enjoyed seeing her blowhard braggart son wilt like the lilies toiling in the field underneath the noonday sun.

The room had just Lannisters in it. Cersei with Joffrey and various commanders of her Red Cloaks. The men in charge looked askance at Joffrey. Cersei saw that these men had the true measure of her son.

Her son’s fair skin had gone deathly pale. He started to shake slightly. A sheen of sweat appeared on his upper lip and forehead.

“Mother … I – I … I can’t go now. I need to get myself fitted with a true broadsword. Yes. That is right. I need a full sword to meet these enemies.”

Joffrey regained his regal bearing. “Capt. Graceford I need for you to make that happen. The sooner this is done the sooner I can put this insurrection down. I command it! Let it happen!”

The man bowed low to the King. He turned to Cersei. His face was carefully controlled his true thoughts hidden. Cersei tilted her head. She sighed softly.

How could a scion of Jaime Lannister be such a complete waste?

At that moment another man burst in.

“My regent! Some of our men were on the Silk Road at the Juicy Plum. We are not sure exactly happened but seven of our men are dead. Most with slit throats.”

“Damn!” Cersei shouted. What the hell was going on? How could Arya attack from so many places? It was if someone was guiding them who knew the City like the back of their hand. They only attacked when they had the total advantage. It was like they had eyes in the sky!

Varys had finally discovered who this Syrio Forel was. The man had been the First Sword of Braavos. This had of course meant nothing to Cersei. She had cocked her eyebrow at the cockroach. A spider was too good a description of the man.

She loathed the man but he was too valuable to her. If she was ever in a position to dispose of the man she would do it in a heartbeat. She did not feel she could trust the man. He had not helped Eddard Stark it was true but she knew instinctively it was not done out of love for Cersei or House Lannister.

“So what exactly is this First Sword of Braavos?” Cersei asked the eunuch.

“That is hard to explain my regent. In Braavos you have fierce competition to become the best sword in all of Braavos. When a man accomplishes this they come into the employee of the Sea Lord of Braavos. This is the equivalent of our king on the Iron Throne. They rule the whole of that city state.
“The person who becomes the First Sword has survived a vicious winnowing process. The best rise to become second swords. They always number twenty. When one is killed they are replaced. They are like the wolves of the Stark Lands.” Cersei ground her teeth. She was sure that Varys words were carefully chosen. Damn the man.

“You can only go up in the wolf pack of Braavos. These twenty men are constantly practicing their physical skills but also learning the arts of the assassin, the skills of the doctor. They learn the tactics of the captain and the strategy of the general. They are knowledgeable in the full history of the land of Essos. They learn philosophy and the arts to teach the Sea Lords culture. They are to be everything that a Sea Lord might need in any given situation or circumstance. They are the Kingsguard, the Grand Maester and the highest general all in one person.”

“How the hell is such a man in Westeros? In King’s Landing?! Who would let such a man go?” Cersei could not understand it. From what she was hearing, this man was a one man army and he was fighting her! She took a calm breath. She needed a drink. She walked over to a carafe in a bowl of ice. She poured herself a full goblet of red wine. She took several long drinks of dark red powerful ichor.

Varys reported that the Sea Lord that this Syrio Forel had served had been disposed. With the Sea Lord’s fall so fell his First Sword. One was tied to the other. Now this First Sword was in King’s Landing. In service to Arya Stark.

“What do we do mommy?” Joffrey asked. He was frightened of this man too. Good. It would keep him from having further diarrhea of the mouth. Gods she wanted to smack Joffrey sometimes.

Cersei groaned to herself. Not only was Arya a rabid wolf, her sword master was some demon warrior from hell. She needed to get Eddard away from herself in case they came for him. The gods knew what might happen if they had access to the Red Keep.

“Varys?”

“Yes regent?”

“I want Eddard Stark put in the dungeon. I want him fed gruel and water. I want him weak. The last thing I need is him recovering and having him somehow becoming a pain in my ass. Of course this will be done under the heaviest guard. I want to have over fifty Red Cloaks down in those dungeons guarding that man at all times.

“Is that needed?”

“Are you questioning me spider? You know what the female black widow does to the males that come into its web don’t we Varys.”

The man calmly put his hands into the open ovals of his robe to grasp his forearms.

“I know most assuredly Regent Cersei. I have no wish to be consumed my highness. I wish to merely serve the realm.”

Cersei snorted. “Go and do my will.”

“You mean my will don’t we mother?” Joffrey barked.

Cersei sighed. Her son was discovering he had spine again she saw. Gods.

“Of course Joffrey. I am sorry. I always mean your will in what I do when I give commands in your
name my precious son. I just want to make sure that we keep Eddard Stark under our control. With Arya on the loose we need to keep him alive and in our control. Once we have captured her we can then dispense justice on Eddard Stark for his treason.” Joffrey did not catch the slight sneer Cersei could not fully suppress from her voice.

“Why can’t we go ahead and punish him now!” Joffrey whined.

“Joffrey dear” Cersei told her son in placating tone “we need to keep Eddard nice and safe and away from Arya Stark. We need to keep him alive. The girl is killing our troops all over King’s Landing. What do you think she will do if we harm her father?”

Her son had grown large eyes now. He gulped. He was back to being docile again. Good.

What really scared Cersei was how the girl was in two places at once. Cersei had sent a search party down the underground river underneath the dungeons of the Red Keep. She had wanted to know where Arya fled too from the dungeons. They had sailed down the river in a boat. The three men had not returned. She had then sent out a boat with fourteen well-armed men. They had been on high alert. The boat had many torch holders with lit torches to illuminate the dark.

That had been yesterday late morning. The men and boat had disappeared as well.

What the hell was going on! How could the girl and her small band be killing her forces all over King’s Landing? It was impossible. Her forces were suffering heavy losses with nothing to show for it.

She had Varys pick the most loyal Gold Cloaks and was pressing them into the patrols in King’s Landing. One Janos Slynt proved most pliant. She would bring her Red Cloaks back into the Red Keep.

Cersei drank several more big gulps from her goblet.

She felt a fierce headache coming on.
Goading the Lion

Insurrection

Goading the Lion

Arya smiled as she walked along beside Syrio. It had been another successful hunt for her wolf pack as she now thought of her and her companions waging their personal campaign against the Lannisters and now Gold Cloak. It was really not fair in a way. Just the way she wanted it. The minstrels could sing songs of the noble knight calling out the cadre knight and fighting in the middle of the main thoroughfare in the city.

Not Arya. She wanted to live and give maximum distress to the Lions she hunted. The ravens made it all possible. They were blanketed all over King’s Landing now. The Druid Merrel’s raven calling in his friends who avidly did his bidding.

Corn, as Arya called the raven of Merrel. The bird always demanding corn when he flew into the man’s domicile. The bird was quiet pecking on the window and only started to make his raucous vocalizations when inside. The bird was obviously intelligent. The bird would lock eyes with Merrel and she knew they were communicating. It made her miss Nymeria so much. She was just starting to learn to truly communicate with her Direwolf when she had to send her away.

She sometimes remembered that injustice when she let loose an arrow that pierced a Lannister or Gold Cloak’s eye, mouth or throat. Then she would remember Lady and her cruel death. Another man went down crumpling with an arrow ending his life. Then she remembered her father’s heinous injury. More death flew down to the Regent’s forces. Sansa imprisoned. Foe dead.

For fifteen days they had been running amok among the forces loyal to the boy king. Arya snickered seeing that the little shit was never leading any of the patrols. Not that she was surprised. The boy who would be king was a spineless worm. You had to have a backbone to be a warrior. Joffrey was just a shit.

She killed her enemies day and night. Syrio was constantly varying the times of their attack. He had found a map of King’s Landing. It was detailed to the general layout of the City. Merrel knew the warrens intimately. Syrio would constantly ask Arya where they should attack next. To begin with she had not thought before she answered. She was almost flippant like most teenagers are at that age. She would point to a spot on the map.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I like the name Visenya Hill.”

Syrio had given her that look that shamed her.

“Arya this not a game. We are killing men. They will kill us in service to what they have given allegiance too. We are playing the Game of Thrones Arya. You are my disciple now. I need you to focus and learn. You are fourteen now and a woman flowered.”

That made Arya blush hotly. She was indeed a woman flowered. A woman who desired only her own sex in her bed. She was silent about that. She had hidden her desires thinking she was alone.
She now knew she was not alone anymore. With the new arrivals she had accidently been enlightened.

“Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt. Arya you need to learn more than the sword to be worthy of being a First Sword. You must master warfare. We must be like an eel to our enemies. Slippery and always falling through their fingers. This is how we live to fight another day and that our enemies die. Let them die for their cause. We want to live and therefore win the fight and in time the battle or Insurrection.

Arya had looked at the map again. Seriously this time. Syrio had put little pins in it. The pins set to mark past attacks. He was constantly selecting new target areas in the city. He had twice revisited past strike sites. “Keep them guessing. Make them like Mere cats. Their heads always twisting.” Her next selection she could defend with logic and give Syrio reasons for her selection.

He had asked her probing questions that made her think and reason out her assumptions. In this way Syrio taught his disciple reasoned thought.

Yes. Arya was learning much. When Syrio was not teaching her the basics of tactics he was helping Arya to start developing an overarching strategy. He was teaching Arya to see the “big picture” and develop tactics and plans to achieve the desired end goal.

Their current strategy to constantly seek engagement with the enemy from points of advantage. Strike the enemy fast, hard and then disappear. Make casualties on the enemy. They did not have the forces to defeat the Lannisters. Their goal was to hurt them with losses and sow fear.

Fear that would make them hesitate. They were succeeding. Varys had reported on his regular visits that Cersei was angry and confused by the strikes on her forces all around King’s Landing. She was furious that all the ambushes they laid were avoided and their forces hit where they did not expect it.

The ravens made this possible. The birds constantly patrolled the sky over King’s Landing. Their keen vision watching all the movements of Cersei Lannister’s forces. Their intelligent minds able to focus on what their master’s needed them to. The Lannister forces were tracked and when they went into buildings birds would stake out the buildings keep them under surveillance till the Lannisters left. This all was constantly being reported back to their Druid familiars.

They had finally moved her father to the dudgeons. He was under very heavy guard with two whole companies in the tunnels and the immediate environs above the dudgeons. Close to four hundred men. He was not going to be rescued from there. Arya and her allies simply did not have the manpower to accomplish a rescue against that kind of force. They would have taken to many losses and the time necessary would put her father’s life in danger.

This was good. It reduced the forces available to the Regent to use as patrols in the streets in King’s Landing. Varys reported that Cersei had sent a raven to Casterly Rock explaining to her father the need for more forces. There were some Starks leading an Insurrection in King’s Landing. Varys told Arya she had not told her father that Arya was leading the revolt.

“He would not believe it anyways” Varys had told them.

Syrio had resumed her training. He had her doing her exercises. He had worked her hard before but he had her running in place now for up to twenty minutes and then doing calisthenics immediately afterwards. It increased her endurance greatly. She did not complain. They were constantly running to and from ambush sites.

She was doing her balance routines staying on one foot for long minutes and only jumping to her
other foot to repeat. He had put X’s on the floor in two rooms that Merrel had emptied out the furniture for them. Syrio had Arya memorize putting her feet on the X’s in whatever pattern he would call out. He was teaching her basic fighting steps for various defensive and offensive attack stances.

He would have Arya with a wooden practice broadsword or with Needle now and he would call out “High high right left right right left back back low high”. He repeated her steps again and again. He did this to engrain and to form muscle memory. Then Syrio would move and give calls telling her when he would attack and from what side.

He would go right and then attack left. Arya easily blocked.

“Good Arya. You learn fast my student. You concentrate and the practice on your own to learn each new technique. I had to force my other students to do what you on your own. You understand skill only comes from hard work. Only with practice can you improve. Never forget, remember that. Not an action, not a name not a face. It will save your life. Make forgetting impossible.”

“Yes master.”

It was no longer just the two of them. The deadly duo had become a virulent mob. Rabid wolves killing weak Lannister lions.

They had started to drift in the third day. A druid had come to Merrel. He was short and dark of complexion. He had a weirwood bow and long arrows. As he stood before the door lintel a raven came down to his shoulder and rubbed its head in his neck before taking off. On the man’s hip a bastard sword. Arya understood that each Druid had his own familiar.

Then the next day three more Druids had come. These were two men and a woman. They came with the ubiquitous bow. Arya saw these Druids primary weapon was the Bow and the blade instrument was only for self-defense if necessary or the ambush required them to get close and personal. These druids seemed to be of the Stormlands or maybe Highgarden by lineage.

Over the next week twice more Druids had come to Merrel’s home. They had come two by two. Three were men but another was a woman.

This increase in force had allowed them to split into two groups and now attack the forces of the crown in two locations at the same time if desired. They had done that once but usually attacked at different times. The goal to always keep their enemies off balance.

Their attack today though had been an attack with their combined efforts. The Lannisters had started to run mounted knights up and down the main streets. The heavy armor immune except for the strongest bows and most direct hits on or finding of weak joint points. Syrio asked Arya to come up with a strategy to defeat this new tactic. He helped Arya reason out the goal and then guided her on developing tactics to defeat this new tactic of their enemy.

The next day the plan Arya and Syrio had developed was implemented. The ravens allowed them to setup the proper spot for their ambush. The forces waited patiently for the force of the Regent to spring the trap.

Arya and Syrio had been on ground level a hundred yards in front of the fifteen mounted knights when they stepped out into the middle of Garwood Lane. The two insurgents had bows. They shouted their defiance to the crow and let loose their arrows. They rapidly fired arrows at the knights that had bounced off their armor. The knights had immediately yelled and charged.
Syrio and Arya ran down the street for ten yards and went left down a slightly smaller street that ran crossway to the main thoroughfare. The long alley went to dead end after a few turns. The knights were yelling knowing their prey had been run to ground. The horse’s hooves pounding the hard impacted dirt sending up little geysers of dirt clouds. The knights spurring their horses to increase their speed to hopefully run down the two traitors.

The horses angled over to go around the corner. The knights bunched together in their haste to kill the two interlopers. They would be well rewarded in bringing the Queen their heads. They had orders to capture the girl, if the girl who was dressed as a boy was present if at all possible. They had decided it would not be possible. She had killed too many of their compatriots.

The lead horses started to accelerate down the new lane. The lead horses were suddenly tripping over screaming in fear and pain. In the haste to run down the two traitors no one, horse or man, had noticed the two one inch hemp lines side by side that were securely tied between posts holding up balconies on each side of the street. The horses hitting the first rope line with their knee joints. Legs were shattered and the horses toppled over screaming. Four horses had their legs broken with two horses cartwheeling over the lines their knights flying off their saddles. The two other horses spun around to avoid the ropes but toppled over crashing to the ground shattering their riders leg trapped between a ton of warhorse and armor and the hard ground. The men joining the horses screams.

Many in King’s landing had no use for the despotic rule of Robert Baratheon. The poor had been treated like shit while the royals feasted and had their tourneys. In the confusion, milling knights and screaming war horses did not notice three more lines being pulled tight and tied off on posts behind their party. The people in the neighborhood hurriedly pulling the ropes taught and then tying off the ropes. The persons disappearing as if mist evaporating with the sun’s rays. They would spend their gold dragons tonight at the tavern and brothels.

The insurgents would take the full blame for the ambush.

Arrows were now raining down from above on the rooftops. The nine druids firing their longbows of yew or Weirwood. Their long shafts whistling down. The knights had high quality steel for their plate armor. The long bows even at this range was not able to deeply penetrate the armor. Soon the knights milling around had arrows jutting out their armor like a newborn porcupine.

The knights were wheeling around in a milling confusion. They were shouting over each other. One of the knights that had been thrown from his horse was knocked out. The other knight struggled up to his hands and knees. His body hammered down by three arrows hitting his back. The arrow tips only slightly, partially penetrating the armor but the force of the point blank range had the arrows striking with the force of sledgehammers.

Arya had hidden crouched behind a water trough. She witnessed the knights wheeling around twenty yards in front of her. Her bow was notched and ready to be fired at a moment’s notice. She saw a knight with the Lannister heraldry on his horse and a large red bird plum on his visor. He was yelling mightily and looking wildly right and left trying to gauge the whereabouts of his enemies. His body was hit with long bow arrows that lodged in his armor. The force stunning the man.

Some of the knights tried to retreat but the raised ropes had the horses shying away. A horse stumbled and then fell to its knees with two arrows jutting out its rump. It jolted up screaming in pain and began to buck. Arrows continued to fly down and strike knights and hit the horses. The horses’ armor was nowhere as thick or made of the high tensile strength of the knight’s armor.

The man with the red plum lifted his visor to try and see better the lay of the battlefield. He looked
up around at the rooftops. He saw the bowmen standing on the roof edges firing on them. He lowered his head to give orders.

This was the moment that Arya had been waiting for. Her arrow left her bowstring with a loud thwang and whistled the short distance to the knight. The man was thrown off the horse the arrow penetrating his right eye instantly killing the man.

More knights had been dismounted and horses were collapsing as their bodies were riddled with arrows. Most of the knights had arrows jammed into armor. The arrows striking the chest and limbs of the knights stunning and in some cases breaking bones. The repeated strikes to the helms had most of the knights concussed now.

Syrio ran out to the first knight that had been rendered unconscious and slipped his rapier between the slats of the visor penetrating his eye killing the man. The other knight thrown off his horse had been rendered unconscious with repeated strikes of arrows to his head. Syrio killed him the same way.

The knights were in total disarray now. The knights with their wits still about them had cut the three ropes hemming in their retreat. The three knights still a horse spurred their mounts and fled the field of battle. They all had arrows sticking out of their armor from the arrowheads that had partially penetrated their armor. Arya counted fourteen arrows sticking out of one of the knights. The other knights were mostly dead or rendered unconscious from repeated strikes to their helms concussing the men. She saw one knight with arrows in his armor that would constrict his arm movements.

Arya felt elated. That changed in a moment. She spied a dismounted knight running down the covered walkway of wood slats. He was running straight at her! His heavy sabatons striking the wood. He had four arrows jutting out his breast plate. Arya noticed that one arrow would keep his right hand from sweeping to the left. His spurs jingling with each stop. Arya’s eyes were wide open. She dropped her bow and arrow and fumbled to pull Needle out.

Arya squatted her adrenalin rushing through her veins preparing her to meet the charge of the knight. Arya jerked back when three arrows hit the knight in rapid succession flinging him hard into the side of the building. He staggered and levered himself up.

Syrio was past her in a flash and confronted the knight. His rapier lunged and partially penetrated his chainmail links protecting his throat. The man staggered back chopping at the water dancer. Syrio was like smoke. First here and then there. His body gyrated to twist and turn slippery like an eel. Three times Syrio avoided a slashing swipe from the knight. Syrio would lunge forward his rapier point piercing the thin metal at the elbow joint of his opponent. The two men circled each other.

After the third strike Arya could see blood seeping out the joint and forming thin streams of blood that wiggled down his armor. The knight was no longer attacking Syrio. Arya glanced out into the street. Arrows were still whistling down striking the knights crawling around seeking some kind of cover.

Arya saw the back of the knight. She ran forward and just before she reached the knight she twisted her body and her left shoulder slammed into the man’s back. The knight sprawled forward with Arya rebounding off his armor. The rebound flung her out into the street to land on her side and rolled up to her feet.

She saw Syrio flip the knight over. The man having dropped his sword. Syrio jerked the man’s visor up and his rapier jammed down the point piercing his eye. The man had just started to lift his arms in defense but they dropped dead weight his brain squired clear through.
Syrio looked out at the prostrate knights. From a rooftop of a three story building Arya and Syrio heard a tall female Druid call out. “Lannisters are coming from the east up Causeway Parkway. They are still about twenty blocks away. They are a company of men” announced Kiren. Each Druid had their own Raven. It seemed each raven had its own small flock. With nine Druids now in league with Arya the ancient mystics had pretty much full coverage over King’s Landing.

“We need to go Arya” Syrio told Arya.

“We need to kill these knights Syrio. We need to weaken Cersei as much as possible. You know this!”

“Of course I know this Arya. Still. We are tired now and I can assure that our Druid allies have shot off most of their arrows. We need to flee”” he told Arya calmly.

Arya ground her teeth. Now that her blood had cooled just a fraction. She was glad that Syrio was calling them off. She had no desire to kill men who were helpless with the battle won. Most of them would be out of the fight for some time. She had seen men concussed that took them weeks and sometimes months to recover. The men who had horses fallen on them would be like her father. Cripples. Those kicked by wild, angry or fleeing horses probably had badly bruised limbs or maybe even broken. Some of those arrow strikes on limbs and sternum had probably broken the bones.

Yes these men were done as a fighting force.

She ran with Syrio down into a side street and then into the warrens of King’s Landing.

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The forces of the Wolfpack slowly filtered back to the flat of Merril. He seemed to have taken the whole first floor of the building over. He confirmed this to Arya when she had asked him this. He had over several decades bought more and more of the building. In actuality he owned all stories of the building.

Arya had eyed the man. He did not look old enough to have done that over decades.

“Why are you in this place? I have gathered that you Druids are a people of the forest and the glen.”

The Druid had acknowledge that. “Yes. My place is in the forest that is true. My clan lives in the depths of what you call the Kingswood. Our main hamlet is at the headwaters of the Wendywaters. We live a simple life living off the land. Living in harmony with the land. The area at the headwaters are piedmont and we have hidden our community in those folds. In all the great forests you will find us.”

“We also live in the high mountain passes and the hidden valleys that exist in those lofty heights. We seek to commune with nature away from men such as yourself Arya. We are also in the Barrowlands and the Sandhills. In the North you are much closer to the land but still you have forgotten how to live in harmony with it. It was your house that was instrumental in our downfall.”

Arya frowned. It pained her hearing that her House had ever been anything less than heroic. It galled her. She felt soiled.

Merril seemed to see this in her face. He placed his hand on her shoulder gently.

“That was many millennium ago Arya. Your House has a chance to undo so much harm and damage. We have waited so long for Eddard Stark and one other to come to Westeros. The Direwolf and Dragon will restore order to the world. They will help to restore nature and bring
“You are the catalyst Arya” the man had told her. He had refused to be any clearer. Damn bastard Arya had groused to herself. Gods she hated those who supposedly portended the future.

The man had told Syrio that he was surprised that they had come to him actually. The portents said that she would flee this land and go to the House of Black and White and become its avatar. That the Druids would have to wait for another. Merrel had hoped Arya would not flee. She had not. Now all was possible he had told Syrio. Arya had felt her chest swell when Syrio relayed this to her.

Her mind snapped back to the present. “But we realize that the future of Westeros lies in the major power centers. Those are not in the woods but here in cities like these. I have been here listening and waiting. We have made alliances were we could. Varys is a man with his own agenda but he is fair man in his own way. He desires peace and stability as do we.”

“He does not believe in our prophecies and beliefs but he knows our desire is harmony and peace throughout the land. He saw the possibilities and took them. Also, I am sure you would have killed him otherwise.” The man had chuckled at his own gallows humor.

Arya had drifted to a back room. In it were two women. One was an immigrant from Myr. She had the dark olive skin and black hair of that land. She was in her late twenties by appearance. She was quiet. Her name Phirona Ormonnis. When she appeared six days ago she came with a Blackfyre Valyrian. She seemed to be in her early twenties. She was very pretty. Arya was quite smitten with her looks. She had never seen a Valyrian with their silver white hair and purple irises. She was not as quiet as the Myr woman but she was very nice.

What they brought to their assembly was the making of arrows. Evidently Merril had plenty of fletching and each arriving Druid had a large pouch full of fletching. The druids made their own arrows but they did not have the time to make the quantities necessary with the arrows they were letting loose. Merril had a large room stacked with shafts.

Arya realized then that this man had been preparing for such a situation. The women spent all their free waking time in the day making arrows. They were fast and efficient. They were also doing much of the cooking and cleaning now to free the Druids time and strength for assaults on the Lannisters. They were not druids but fully supported their efforts. Arya hoped to learn more of them.

She had learned much more two nights ago. She had gotten up to fix herself a meal in the middle of the night. She had seen a low light on in the room the women shared. She had been on her way back to her room when she heard loud moaning and one of the women was then crying out as if in pain.

Arya’s hackles were not up. She did not sense danger. She had almost walked on but she tried the door knob. It was not locked. Her curiosity overcame her. Curiosity killed the cat but satisfaction kept him coming back. Arya smirked and silently opened the door to take a peak. What were those women doing to each other to make such sounds?

Everything changed for Arya at that moment. Half formed thoughts and confused desires flashed into clarity.

On the bed the two women were clenched together. The woman from Myr was lying on her back her feet facing the foot of the bed. The Valyrian woman was on Phirona straddling the woman with
her elbows and knees. The Valyrian’s body orientated in the opposite direction of the Myrish woman. Their bodies were wallowing into each other. Their mouths were … their mouths were … oh gods their mouths were devouring each other’s pussies!

Then it hit her! The smell of pussy. The same exact smell her cunny made when she masturbated and she dreamed of doing something with the maids and female cooks of Winterfell. She had not been exactly sure what she had wanted to do with them.

Now she knew! The Blackfyre woman’s head snapped up. She shrieked through clenched teeth her body bucking wildly. The woman’s violet eyes seemed to be blasted and then her eyes had rolled into the back of her head as the Myr woman was trying to simply devour her cunt! Gods it was so beautiful!

She had silently closed the door and hurried to her room. She was very tired the next early morning but she had a very happy pussy. She had been enlightened!

It was after dinner. It was her turn to wash the dishes. She was scrubbing dishes daydreaming on going down on those maids and cooks at Winterfell now that she knew what to do. She couldn’t wait to masturbate tonight!

There was knock on the door. The lead Druid went to the door and opened. His body language told Arya that he was expecting more arrivals.

There was four men at the door lintel. These men were not druids. They did not have the grey robes that the Druids wore in public. In the privacy of this sanctuary the Druids would switch to snow white robes. The Druids wore grey in public to not draw attention.

These men were definitely warriors. They seemed to be the approximate age of her father. She instinctively knew that these men were from the “losing” side of Robert’s Rebellion. Two were of Valyrian descent. One seemed to be of pure descent but the other had silver hair but it was several shades darker and bright blue eyes. They were from a family named Velnalys that had traveled with the Targaryen’s when the settled Dragonstone five hundred years ago. These men had been knights in the honor guard of Prince Rhaegar. They had survived the battle at the Trident. After the war, the men had fled to Stokeworth and led a quiet life among the other Valyrians living there.

The other two men were knights also but of Westerosi descent. Javer Goodbrook was a dour looking man. He was from one of the few houses from the Riverlands that had stayed true to the mad king. He was thick of chest and had large black beard that was showing the first hints of grey. His companion was Styve Grandison from the Stormlands. He was a genial man with thick chest and massive arms.

All the men wore large broadswords. They greeted the Druids warmly.

Arya was happy. Their wolf pack had just became much more powerful.

They came up to talk to Arya. “You are the wolf prophesied” Styve spoke to Arya. “Most strange. I would have thought you would be a male. It is indeed strange times.” He chuckled. “I can’t wait to see the look on the Septons faces!” he had roared in laughter. Javer had shook his head but he had a slight smile on his face.

What the hell was that supposed to mean?! Arya thought.
AN #1: I am guessing most of the readers are HBO viewers who have not read the books yet. The reason I mention this is Eddard's leg injury. In the books his leg injury came from his horse falling on him and not a sword wound. This will come into play later.

“"I will move out into the streets of King’s Landing and cleanse it of this foul plague of wolves running amuck in my streets!”” Joffrey's voice rang out in high pitched grating whine.

Oh gods not again Varys thought. The eunuch kept his face carefully bland.

The new boy king was slashing his bastard sword around. He now had the sword he had demanded. All were still waiting for action from the boy who would be King. Joffrey was not capable of handling a full broadsword Varys observed with mild distaste. He was in the main communal living area the Lannister’s seemed to favor. The furniture was ornate and the food extravagant. Varys was standing off to the side with his hands pushed into the large sleeves of his robes.

“I am the greatest warrior king this realm has ever known. I will make my father’s exploits seem pale by comparison.” Joffrey was pushing out his skinny chest. The eighteen year old was quite impressive in a pathetic way. He was like a half fledge eagle kicked out its nest. Hopeless. At least said eagle knew they were in serious shit. Not so Varys' royal liege.

Varys observed Cersei as she watched her son. She lifted her wine cup to her mouth and took a big gulp. Her son leapt up into the air stabbing out with his sword. He landed awkwardly and cried out twisting his ankle.

Cersei took another big gulp from her goblet with a sour look on her face. Varys had noticed that she was drinking more as the Stark wolf and her pack ravaged her precious lions and fellow sycophants. Each defeat like a thorn in her paw. She was worried and he could not blame her.

Varys was very impressed with what Arya and her Waterdancer were accomplishing. He had been surprised to discover that the Druids had been so martial. He had assumed the man, Merrel, was a pacifist. He had only hoped the man could heal Eddard Stark if Arya could get her farther to the man. Varys had heard the tales of his magical abilities.

He had thought the idea hopeless when he suggested the Druid. He had merely been trying to save his life at the time. Varys knew his life was on the dagger’s razor’s edge at his throat. Merrel had a natural magical talent that he had honed to the fine degree of the miraculous. It was not a skill that any other Druid had or anyone else for that matter.
The boy king sat in a chair rubbing his ankle. His injury now recovered Joffrey jumped up and again was swishing his sword through the air.

Littlefinger appeared. He stood with his ramrod straight posture looking at the Boy King pretend he was actually a man. Varys studied the man who was his only true foe when it came to the arts of manipulation. Robert had been a buffoon and Cersei was a harridan that would never truly accomplish anything of note.

It was Petyr Baelish that actually knew how to maneuver pieces on the Cyvasse board. He supposed Tywin Lannister had shown the skill but his focus was so centric on making his own house shine and seem great he lost sight of the larger goals of kingdom so that as many as possible benefited. He did have to give the old lion his due. Tywin had made sure the kingdom was solvent while he was the Hand during the reign of Aerys II Targaryen.

Varys had never liked Tywin. The man was cruel and vindictive. He could not be allowed to again achieve influence and power at the court of the Iron Throne. Tywin would not be good for the realm.

Varys’s had had such high hopes when Eddard Stark came to King’s Landing to serve as Robert’s Hand. Jon Arryn had been too old and lacked the vigor necessary to match wits with the jackals, indulgent lions and outright gluttonous stag. Eddard was a man in his prime and full vigor.

Alas, Eddard had been a sheep among the proverbial wolves that were his House’s name sake. For a man who led the House that had a Direwolf as its sigil Eddard Stark was amazingly sheep like. Varys had learned very quickly that one could indeed be too noble and virtuous.

He had had his hopes dashed and been forced to abandon the man to his fate. Varys had never considered that his daughter, Arya, would not only somehow escape the net caste for her but was now leading an Insurrection that seemed to be succeeding to a degree he would have never thought possible. He had assumed she and Syrio would quickly be captured and Syrio executed. Now Varys began to wonder if they might not somehow succeed.

He was in league with the daughter now. The dagger to the throat had totally convinced Varys to cast his lot with the girl. That and the threats from Syrio. Varys knew he was tolerated at best by those he served. The false narratives of sedition Syrio had forced him to pen was a death sentence if they ever reached Cersei or Joffrey.

He had thought to leave Eddard Stark to his fate. He knew the plan by Cersei was to send Eddard Stark to the wall but his surveillance of the royals had led Varys to know that Joffrey had every intention to behead Eddard in the public square. The young whelp felt he needed to show that he was indeed a fierce lion who took care of all challengers.

Varys had started to visit Eddard after his “meeting” with the young wolf and her water dancer. The clandestine meetings first in the Red Keep and the later in the dungeons. Varys with the secret tunnels had access to all of the Red Keep's environs. He gave Eddard concoctions that he purloined from Grand Maester Pycelle. The man had been feverish and ranting when he gave the man the first doses. He began the treatments in the Red Keep and continued them now that the man was in the dungeons.

He had used a tunnel that led into an unused corridor of the dungeons. He had a special lock made that had a hidden lock aperture that he had a key for. The lock recessed into the wall and all but invisible unless you knew it was there. It let him into the jail easily and unseen. The guards were guarding the passages leading into the dudgeon area. Why put many troops in the dungeons themselves when the goal was to keep interlopers out. Make the perimeter strong and one did not
have to fear the stronghold itself.

True, the warren of cells was thick with red cloaks now but most were located at the known entrances to the dungeons. These were above ground and the now discovered underground river entrance. While the numbers guarding Eddard Stark might seem impressive they were wildly distributed.

This gave Varys free reign in the dungeons. The jailers were very cautious since their predecessors had been taken out. Though the evidence was spotty, Varys and Cersei both felt that they met their end down at the underground river peer. Why had they been down there was the question.

That led to a more frightening question for Varys. Where had the faceless man gone? Did he know that Varys had betrayed him?

With his ministrations Eddard had recovered somewhat from his travails. He was no longer burning up with fever. He had lost a lot of weight but no longer was gaunt with the extra food he was being given by Varys. If the young wolf cub could reach her father, Varys wanted him able to somewhat help in his movement from his cell.

He had talked to Eddard after he had recovered his wits.

“You betrayed me Varys.”

“No Eddard. You betrayed yourself. I told you that you were aligning against forces that if you did not take them down first would consume you.” Varys looked around in the dark dank cell. “You were consumed.”

“Then why are you here now. I am sure these medicines and extra food is not the Regent’s doing.”

“It is your daughter’s doing?”

“Sansa?” the man asked with a look of doubt on his face. All knew the girl was weak in the face of danger. She was the perfect damsel that had no backbone to stand up to anyone. She had become what she was raised to be.

Varys had actually felt the need to chuckle. “It was Sansa who betrayed you.”

“What?! Impossible!”

“I fear so Eddard. She was quite besotted with Joffrey I fear. She has learned the errors of her ways I feel but it was her telling Cersei of your plans to flee that made her act. That and your threat to expose her incestuous liaison with Jamie and their children. Since you had allowed Cersei her freedom and she had made it clear to you she was playing the Game of Thrones … well, you see the end result. I did warn you. More than once.”

Varys fixed Eddard with a hard stare “You need to learn to see events from the viewpoints of your potential opponents on the board game called the Game of Thrones. It is not the physical battlefield you are used to Warden of the North. Learn! Grow! Adept and conquer your foes.”

Eddard heard but did not fully take in Varys advice at the moment. His mind was reeling. “She betrayed me” Eddard spoke softly with a stunned look on his face. Varys saw a hard look come onto Eddard’s face. Good. Maybe he was learning.

“Yes she did Eddard. The daughter who showed me the proper path was Arya.” Varys then described the exploits of Arya and her Water Dancer instructor. How they had accosted him and
forced him into league with them and how they were progressing in their Insurrection. How their efforts had delayed any action on his person.

“I knew Syrio was good … and Arya … she is possessed with the wolf … Lyanna …” Eddard mumbled to himself while looking at the dungeon wall were in reality seeing miles beyond and years in the past. Varys had wondered where that train of thought would lead but Eddard stopped musing and looked at him. “So they mean to break me from this dungeon I take it?”

Varys could see the man calculating and looking at events from all angles. This was a warrior looking at a warrior situation. He was in his comfort area now. “How? They are only two.”

Varys had instructed Eddard of him putting Arya and Syrio in league with Merrel the Druid. Of course, Eddard had never heard of the religious sect. To be truthful, Varys had only known of the man due to his unique gift in healing. Through that association he had come to learn of the hidden sect. Varys had known of them as only legends. He had assumed they still carried on their history of pacifism.

Varys had discovered that they had learned the way of the bow and the sword. That had surprised Varys. Druids had begun to stream into the City and were attacking the forces of Cersei more and more boldly the eunuch informed the leader of House Stark.

As the weeks passed Eddard strength did improve but his wrecked leg continually sapped his strength. Varys kept he man instructed with his daughter’s successes and the slow increase of their forces.

“How they are able to stay one step ahead of the Lannisters. I have done research and I believe they are using familiars.”

“What?” Eddard had asked in the glum.

“Animals that they can use their senses. They are able use the animals eyes, ears and noses.”

“Hmmm. They are wargs?”

“I don’t think the link is quite that intimate but it is effective. It is only a theory. I have no idea which animals they would be using. Something allows them to avoid all the traps set. It is driving Cersei to the cusp of drunken madness and Joffrey is frightened. It has bought you time. I only wonder who much more time.”

Eddard had had no answer to that rhetorical question.

Now Varys stood in the confluence of Lions. He was playing both sides as he was often made to do. He would not betray the young wolf but he would quickly sever all links and disavow any knowledge if the traitors were killed or caught.

Varys could feel the moment was approaching. The forces of wolf and lion were about to collide and soon one side or the other must prevail.

He looked at Littlefinger. He did not like this man who stood rock still looking over the large room. Myrcella was practicing her needle work and keeping herself occupied. Tommen had his nose in a book reading a history of the Targaryen civil wars.

Sansa was dour and downcast sitting by herself. She too was stitching a lively pattern of flowers but she was alone. She was cast out from the lion’s den. Even though it had been her rash actions that had alerted Cersei to Eddard’s plans it was the girl who suffered the rebuff of the Lannister family.
Her father was a traitor to the Lannister line and she had to pay the price. Varys knew the girl was miserable at the turn of events. No one was allowed to see her father and the lack of information was obviously wearing at the girl. She had at first asked constantly about the fate of her father but had learned from the snide remarks from Joffrey and the cold rebuff from Cersei that her requests were futile.

If Eddard survived the next weeks he wondered what Sansa’s fate would be. Eddard had deserved the right to know who had brought him down. There was always consequences to one’s actions.

“I will dispatch these Stark dogs with my mighty sword! My mighty thews will slay them all!” Joffrey called out in a regal voice.

Varys watched Cersei take another big gulp from her wine goblet. The regent regarded her son with unreadable eyes.

Petyr looked over at the boy. Petyr’s back was its usual ramrod straight self and the perpetual smirk was fully in effect. The looked seemed to be glued to his face.

“A new patrol is forming up my King. Do I have them saddle a horse for you to take the lead in hunting down the Stark wolves?” Littlefinger asked the boy King.

“The King of Beasts does not waste his efforts hunting down these elusive jackals. Corner them and then I will sally forth to put down the curs. Do not trouble me with such silly thoughts of I, Joffrey Baratheon, chasing willy nilly down back alleys and rank lanes.”

Varys was impressed. The boy king had his excuses readily at hand now. Before, the boy had been sputtering and looking like the coward he was trying to come up with reasons to not go out and lead the forces of the Crown against the Stark wolves.

The Master of Whispers looked at Cersei from the corner of his eye. The woman looked at her son with a stone face. She swirled her wine goblet looking at the dark red ichor swirl. She lifted it slightly towards her son and drank a big gulp. Varys knew the boy had to be a big disappoint to the woman. Still, the woman loved the churlish child. He was still her son and she loved him dearly. Maternal love was blind Varys had come to determine.

The woman was obviously deluded. His musings turned back to Eddard's daughter.

Varys was still impressed with how the girl and Syrio were constantly changing the patterns of their attacks. They had twice taken four days of leave from the battlefield. Just when the forces of the crown were beginning to relax the attacks would resume.

The Lannisters and gold cloaks of course were adapting. They were sending out many patrols no more than five or six city blocks apart with war horns around many necks. When an attack would commence the horns would be sounded and their fellow forces would come running.

Still, with the spies they obviously had, the Stark forces with their Druid allies always attacked one edge or the other of the patrols. They would then disappear into the proverbial mist. Now many attacks were lightning fast seeking only to kill or wound a few or small handful of loyal forces to the Lannisters. Each successful attack sapping a little more will from the forces of the crown.

The battles out in the field that Eddard had initiated and Jamie Lannister was fanning kept King’s Landing relatively isolated. Ravens had been sent to Casterly Rock but forces from that far away force were still several weeks to a month out. That was if they were not attacked and reports were coming in that raiding parties were harassing them. The Druids had spread the word and their
brothers were taking to the field to fight. Varys would not have believed it.

Word had spread of the rebellion within the walls of King’s Landing. Morale was sinking with the forces of the crown.

Worse, strange deaths were now occurring within the castle walls themselves. Men were found dead in their beds with no apparent cause of death. Others were found at the bottom of stairs and some others with heads caved in hitting the corner of a table. A few had died with froth in their mouth. A tray of food beside them. Was it poison or an allergic reaction. Three men had been found in the moat outside the main wall. One had fallen from the battlement breaking his neck.

This had everyone on edge. Nothing was ever seen that seemed amiss. How could this be happening? Was it all just accidents? It had to be murder. Didn’t it. That was what the Lannister’s thought.

Varys was terrified. The Faceless Man was in their midst.

Varys had a duty to perform. He was not sure who he was serving at the moment. "I must report moral is sinking low my King, Regent. Our losses are affecting our men."

"And what should we do Varys?" Cersei asked her focus for a moment away from her wine goblet.

"I only report what i hear my Regent. It is the crown that must act."

Joffrey had a look of disdain on his face. "The men should consider it an honor to lay down their lives for their King!" Joffrey sang out a song of discordant notes. They made no sense.

Cersei glanced at her son and for a moment contempt crossed her face. She then turned back to Varys with a look of calculation on her face.

"Increase the wages of our men by three gold dragons and the gold cloaks by a gold dragon and a silver stag. That should show the Crown values their efforts on our behalf. We will reward their service."

"Mother. No! They are here to serve me!" Joffrey cried out. Varys then watched Cersei slowly bend Joffrey to reason. Cersei was right of course. Varys wondered how much longer the Boy Lunatic would listen to his mother before he grew tired of her. Varys thought first Eddard then one day soon Cersei. The boy was cruel. The boy was vain. The boy was insane.

Between the rabid wolf pack in their midst and the Faceless Man wrecking havoc, Cersei was very afraid and Joffrey had made sure the at least three of the remaining Kingsguard were near him at all times. With the reduction of said knights either killed, out in the field or dismissed Sandor Clegane, Balon Swann and Richard Horpe had been elevated to the Kings Guard to give the necessary force to guard the royals.

They of course had no idea what was occurring or how. Varys did. He had learned long ago as a youth to hide his fear. He felt great fear now. Obviously, the Faceless Man had decided to align with the Starks for some unknowable reason. He had been so scared at first when he recognized the signature of the assassin’s work. Varys had considered using his tunnels to flee the Red Keep and then from King’s Landing. Booking himself passage back to Pentos and Ilyrio.

Then the blind panic had passed. If the Faceless Man knew who had betrayed him Varys would already be dead. No manner of secret passages or untold number of sparrows singing could have protected him from the scourge from the House of Black and White. If the Faceless Man wanted him dead he was dead. That simple. When he could look at it from that perspective he could
function again. His fear was still great but he could again think and act.

It had been one more reason to aid Arya Stark. Now she had the House of Black and White on her side. How had she managed that? Surely she did not even know of that dark and dire order. How? The girl was definitely full of surprises. She was pulling in powerful allies in from all quadrants it appeared.

He looked again at Littlefinger. He had to admit it. He despised the man.

Everything that Varys did he was trying to bring a better world to Westeros. Varys was trying to bring a more fair life for the common people. People like his sparrows. He did all he did trying to bring such a world into being. He was finding it so hard. Everyone let him down. He wondered and hoped that if Eddard Stark somehow survived to find his way back from the doorstep of death he would be ready to do what was necessary.

Eddard Stark with a sense of purpose and destiny could be a potent force of change. Change for good.

Petyr Baelish was none of the things that Varys was striving for. Petyr Baelish was only interested in power. What Varys found strange was the fact that the man did not seem to have a burning ambition to sit on the Iron Throne itself. At best he seemed to want to put a person on the throne that he could influence. He did not even seem to want to have a puppet he would work the marionette strings on. Making a person jump through hoops and jerk about on the royal dais.

He seemed to love the Game of Thrones merely for the game in and of itself. Varys found this truly troubling. Petyr did not seek to rule or have the ultimate power himself. This made Petyr a dangerous man for Varys. His motivations were so strange to Varys that he could not predict what the man might do next.

Varys smiled to himself. While Varys thought the chances of success for Arya was still marginal, he knew what the goals of the young wolf were. He saw the possibility of success. This possibility would be splendid if it did arrive. He had betrayed Eddard Stark. He could not hide that fact. He would not. The man was fair. His daughter was fair at her core too. They would know he had helped them. If they did win in their efforts he was safe. If they were captured alive then he would take to the tunnels and would flee the Red Keep. He would return to Illyrio in Pentos.

He did not think that the wolf girl would accept anything but total victory. The only other possibility for her would be death.

If they won the day and retrieved Eddard from the Lannister’s clutches that would only be part of the battle. They would then have to achieve victory over Cersei and Joffrey Baratheon. Varys would be smug if that occurred.

Petyr Baelish had also betrayed Eddard Stark. His actions as easily as Varys had put the man in the dungeons. If Eddard won his freedom then he would come seeking justice. Cersei and Petyr would have no markers to play. Varys would have the fact that he helped to save and free Eddard Stark. He would be able to operate from a position of influence and power.

He would like to see Petyr squirm. That was if he did not flee first. He was not sure what the man would do. Petyr did love so the Game of Thrones.

“We must act mother!” Joffrey suddenly called out.

Varys turned to look at Joffrey.
“What do you mean son?” Cersei asked in a bored voice.

“I demand that we punish Eddard Stark. We must punish him. If we punish him this will strike fear into the forces of the Insurrection.”

Cersei had sat up from slumping in her chair. “Or enrage them Joffrey. They are killing us across King’s Landing. Is it wise to enrage them further?”

“I say that it is mother!” Joffrey suddenly yelled. “I grow tired of these pinpricks. I will put a stop to it. We will try Eddard Stark tomorrow at high noon.”

It was the late morning.

“I do not think that we should—“

“Shut up mother! I am King I say. I grow tired of this constant agitation. I want an end to it. I will not be afraid anymore.”

Ah the truth.

“Son” Cersei began.

“ENOUGH! I am King not you mother. I command here mother. I will have my trial. I have waited long enough.”

Varys saw the boy’s eyes glittering. He had waited long enough indeed. He had wanted to have his murmurs play long enough. Joffrey wanted the stage moved from his mind to the real world.

Varys saw the calculation in Cersei’s eyes. She would wait to the trail to try and again prevail on her son to show sense. Varys knew it would be helpless. He had told Cersei that Eddard Stark had agreed to confess his crimes at the beginning of this tableau. Eddard would not now knowing his daughter was fighting for his freedom. That she was succeeding.

It was time to move. Varys had kept neutral in his actions reading the tea leaves and his finger to the wind. The portents were clear. He must act if he wanted to bring in a better world.

Varys had to wait for another hour before he was free to leave his duties with the Lannisters. He could not afford to bring attention to himself.

Varys, back in his quarters quickly donned a wig and put makeup on his face to give his face a more angular look. He smiled. Being bald had its advantages. He dressed the part of a merchant of woolen products. There were several such establishments near Merrel’s home. He started to head to the secret passage to his quarters. He had already changed his gait and leaned slightly to the left.

If spoken too he would have the accent of a man from Grandview who had moved to King’s Landing to make his fortune. He entered the tunnel and closed the door to his humble abode. He met Stelsa walking down the first hidden corridor. He told her to pass the word to all his sparrows to go to roost.

When she asked why he told the little sparrow that a storm was coming. Lions and wolves were about to fight and he did not want any of his precious friends and confidants to be caught up in the coming warfare. Her eyes went big. Varys had warned her of the possible coming conflict. He had assured it would only be the one or two more battles. They merely had to weather the storms. She said nothing but she was happy. She much preferred the Wolves to the Lions.
Varys hurried down the tunnels till he came up to the store that led him up into King’s Landing. He quickly went out to the streets and took a slightly circuitous route too Merrel’s home. His eyes constantly scanning the environs. He had long ago learned to spot being followed. A spy could always spot another spy. There were none about Varys. Varys moved freely from street to street.

The little wolf had thrown all off her scent. Again he was impressed with the wolf cub and her Water Dancer.

As he approached Merrel’s home he felt a presence on his left shoulder suddenly.

“Welcome Varys. I always loathe meeting you but I suppose that you coming here unannounced means you carry dire news” Syrio told the whisper of secrets.

Varys betrayed no reaction. Syrio kept impressing Varys in a most distressing manner. No one had ever penetrated his guises before. They never knew they were speaking to the keeper of secrets unless he let them in on his disguise. These First Swords were definitely a force to be reckoned with. Or was it just Syrio Forel. It mattered not with the current situation.

He was taken into Merrel’s abode. In it, Merrel and four of the Druids were present in the front gathering room. They wore their white tunics that whispered along the floor as they moved. At a small table in the corner were the two Valyrians who had been part of Rheagar’s Honor Guard. They spoke in high Valyrian. They spoke of the young girl that Ilyrio had helped sell to Khal Drogo to procure the Dothraki services for Viserys Targaryen. Of course the fool had gotten his hosts upset over something and gotten gold poured on his head.

His sister was probably dead by now.

Arya came down the stairs.

“Who is this?” she asked Syrio.

He sighed and tisked at Arya. Syrio motioned with his head for Arya to inspect their new visitor.

She smirked and stood before Varys. She walked around him. Varys stayed in character. She tilted her head to the side and then looked at him gauging his height and weight. Varys was impressed. He knew she was going through people she knew. Why else had Syrio reacted so? The Water Dancer was teaching Arya more than the sword. He was slowly crafting Arya into a most dangerous weapon indeed. Would they survive long enough to temper Arya into hardened Valyrian Steel?

“Varys” she said in a questioning tone.

“Yes girl. Your skills are improving.”

“Why are you here my almost friend?”

“Joffrey will try you father tomorrow at noon. He plans on beheading your father Arya.”
Prison Break

Intercession

Prison Break

Syrio was coming to the end of the tunnel that lead to the pier on the underground river that ran beneath the dungeon of King’s Landing. He walked slowly with his senses projected out. He extended his hand behind him. His two companions stopped moving and calmed their breathing. Syrio listened intently. He breathed the air deep into this lungs. He had not rounded the slow curve of the path that ran from the hidden tunnel in separate hidden steps to around the jut of rock and to the landing so he could not yet use his sight.

He paused. He smelled blood in the air. The coppery scent sharp and thick on in his nostrils. Men had recently died.

He looked back at Javer Goodbrook the tall knight with brown hair that was thinning slightly and had massive shoulders and arms. His waist thick and legs like tree trunks. He towered above Syrio. Behind the man was Dwan Risley a slight blonde Druid. He stood nearly six feet tall and had his Weirwood long bow. He had an Arakh on his hip. His bow was loosely notched and ready to fire.

He motioned them to come closer. They did. He spoke in a soft whisper.

“I smell blood. A lot of blood. There has been a battle here. This cannot be a coincidence. I am going to go around the bend and see what my eyes see. I will be crotched down. Dwan I want you right behind me ready to fire a moment’s notice. We need to see what has transpired. My instinct tells me this is good but I need to be sure.”

Syrio calmed himself. He was leading a flanking operation. In their plus month of assaults on the forces of the Lannisters Syrio had learned much of the tunnel network that Varys used to accomplish much of his spying and work of subterfuge. He knew of the two other entrances into the dudgeons from the tunnel network.

Syrio did not trust making initial assault from that direction. One, they would not know of the forces they would find arrayed against them till they left the tunnels. Providence may have conspired against them and have a large force by chance there arrayed against them. Varys knowledge of the deployment of troops was spotty since the troop rotations were open to constant change. He did not want to open the hidden entrance and suddenly be attacked.

Also, these hidden tunnels were too great of an asset to sacrifice without great need. He wanted to keep their secret intact if at all possible.

There was another reason he was attacking from this round about direction. If they assaulted the dudgeons from the tunnels within the dudgeon and were initially not discovered but Eddard Stark just disappeared it would prompt a heavy inspection of the rooms of the dudgeons. They might be discovered. Syrio planned on the continued use of these tunnels.

With Syrio leading an assault up from the docks it would lead all suspicions of the direction of the assault away from within the dudgeon itself.

Syrio had been informed by Varys that two companies of Lannisters were guarding the dudgeons.
That was near four hundred men. That number would cause most to blanch. It did not Syrio.

Most military forces used a twelve hour on and twelve hour off duty troop rotation cycle. This instantly reduced the numbers by half that one had to deal with. Varys had instructed Syrio that none of the troop were being bivouacked in the cells. It would depress moral.

Most of the troops were stationed above ground and on the grounds around the dudgeon. That would be the expected vector of attack. The bulk of the troops would be orientated to expel attacks from without. Varys had told Syrio through the month of monitoring that a small contingent was kept in the lower tunnels. The idea would be spot any boats approaching and launch arrows at the attackers as runners were sent up the steps for reinforcements. The tunnel was a constricted avenue of access and would require less guards to secure long enough for reinforcements to arrive.

A contingent of ten guards were kept in the jailers office and patrolling the halls of the dudgeon itself. Syrio was a master of stealth. He would use the shadows to sneak up on his foes and slay them silently. Dwan would feather foes from range. Javer was for the men who got through to fight up close and personal. Syrio was sure that he would be able to take most out if not all through stealth.

He smirked to himself. Who said you needed a faceless man. It was funny making Varys blanch every time he mentioned the escaped Faceless Man. Varys acted unperturbed but Syrio from the corner of his eye would see the man checking the shadows closely whenever Syrio jabbed Varys.

He stuck his head around the bend. His breath caught. There was a boat at the dock. He saw four dead men on the dock or draped over the gunwales of the boat. A body was bobbing the water near the boat.

He spotted two dead men near the steps. They seemed to have just died. He saw no effort of escape in the position of their bodies or contortion of their limbs.

Someone had struck with lightning speed and with devastating affect. Syrio did his fingers five and then two to show seven and then made a cut motion across this throat to show the men were dead. He slowly advanced out into the torch light. He had his head on a swivel. His steps made no sound. He could hear nothing but the soft lapping of water against the wood of the boat and stone of the pier. He moved slowly forward.

The men at the edge of the pier had had been cut in the throat from what he could gather. He got to the edge of the dock. There was blood everywhere. How had the men been ambushed? They had to have seen the boat come out the cave entrances that were fifty yards away on one side and forty yards away on the other side where the ceilings came down to near the water. They must have seen the boat coming.

He saw something strange underneath of the body of the man half lying in the boat. His heart rate accelerated. He motioned for the two men to come out and go to the stairwell. He waited for that to occur and then jumped into the boat. He pushed the dead body to the side.

He gasped. It was the face of a woman. He had seen this before in his duties but each time it was still shocking to behold. The face of course was flaccid and distorted but he could steal see the comely features the woman had once worn in life. A life that Faceless man had taken or maybe the woman had visited the temple of Black and White and drank from the fountain of her own free will.

A Faceless Man was on the loose in the warren of tunnels. It had to be the same Faceless Man that had Varys shitting his pants. Why were they still here? The Faceless Man had come to the dock wearing the face of a beautiful woman. The guards had been all too male. They had quickly come
up to the woman whether for good or ill Syrio would never know. It had been their death warrant. He was sure the attack had been both unexpected and savage and over before it had even begun.

The Faceless Man was helping them but again the question begged: Why?

If they knew Varys had betrayed them Varys would already be dead. Had this Faceless Man had been waiting for over a month for this moment? Varys had been reporting all the strange deaths in the Red Keep. Syrio had considered if this was the Faceless Man’s work but of course it could have been all accidents or others had joined the Insurrection. Still, deep down Syrio had known. The Faceless men most often killed by coincidence to hide their work.

Syrio had suspected strongly but he could not be absolutely sure. That doubt had disappeared with this mayhem. But the question of why again sprang forth in Syrio’s mind. They never interfered in the ways of Kings or Corporations beyond the limited scope of their contracts. This did not fit their model of activity. It made no sense to the former Water Dancer.

It did not matter for the nonce. They had been given a reprieve. He had no further time to investigate. He needed to be moving up those stairs to let in the forces of his disciple. They needed to save Eddard Stark.

Syrio pulled the corpse from the boat manhandling it to dump the body over the rail of the boat into the river. He hooked the face with his rapier and cast it far into the river to have the current take the sad face to the sea and seek a sweet embrace in the tidal marshes surrounding the Red Keep.

Syrio pushed the boat from the dock and used the paddle in the bottom of the boat to get into the main current. He then dove into the water and swam back to the dock. Javer pulled him up out of the water back onto the dock.

He would leave the rest of the corpses. Syrio wanted all to think the attack came from below and the perpetrators left again by boat. They came to the steps and Syrio saw these men had been killed by expertly thrown throwing daggers. Definitely an assassin. An assassin who worshipped death.

He led the way up the steps twenty steps in advance of his companions. They moved quietly like the silence of the grave. He would move up six or seven steps and stop to listen. His body absolutely still and his breathing shallow to let his senses range. There were torches in scions at regular intervals to give him light to see deep down the corridor.

He came across three guards that had been stationed at intersections of tunnels. Each man had had a savage cut drawn across his throat from ear to ear. Syrio was sure they never saw their death coming as a hand clamped over their mouth and they were garroted with a cut that cut across their spines the cuts were so deep. Syrio was again impressed by the Faceless man. There was light in the tunnel and still they successfully came up on each guard unawares and dispatched them.

The Faceless Man was doing their work for them. Why? He did not care. He was able to move up the stairs quickly followed by his two ghosts of walking death. They were soon in the passages of the dudgeon itself. They found seven more dead men. Damn. Each man was obviously surprised. He was not so sure he wanted to meet his Faceless Man. How could you fight a man who moved as one with the shadows.

He went to the Jailer’s office. It was empty. He wondered if one of the dead was among the corpses he had passed on the way up the steps or more likely in the dungeons itself. The Faceless Man had accomplished two tasks for Syrio. The obvious one of killing the guards was appreciated. The second and as appreciated was the path of death and destruction that had been sowed would lead the guards down to the docks for their supposed escape. This would hide the tunnels in the dudgeons
This was almost too easy. If he was reading a novel in Braavos he would be expecting the forces of the crown to explode out of the shadows. He could sense no ambush. He had been given a master key to Eddard’s cell by the Whisper. He went down the corridors to Eddard’s cell. He was on high alert but again he could not sense any ambush.

The Faceless Man had swept away all opposition. He had spent much of his efforts thwarting their efforts in Braavos and in other Free Cities. Many times he had been successful. He had also had some spectacular failures. The last one had cost him his post and nearly his life. The Sealdor he had sworn to protect had died under his protection. He had died from the hand of a Faceless Man.

He concentrated on the present. They arrived at the cell of the one they sought. Eddard Stark. He opened the door. He light the torch in the scion on the wall. The man was asleep. He was gaunt to the eye. He had lost a lot of weight. Syrio sniffed. He did not smell illness or corruption. Varys medicines had saved the man’s life. He saw that his leg was a mess though. He could see it was swollen still the joint ruined. He knew the medicines had saved this man’s life but he was still sick. He needed more medicine, food and true rest. He ran down the corridors. He came to the cell that had the secret access.

He used the key that Varys had given him and opened the cell. He went to the seam that Varys had told him to look for. He went to the seam and moved in from the corner five feet. He pushed in from the top and then pushed in from the bottom on the block of the seam. He heard the sound of scraping and the wall pushed back easily on hidden hinges.

He let in the other Druids, honor guard and Arya Stark. The girl had absolutely refused to be left behind. She pushed out the tunnel.

“Where is my father?” his young charge demanded. He quickly guided them to Eddard’s cell.

Dwan and Javer had moved off to the entrance of the dudgeons from the upper levels.

Arya went into the cell and knelt by her father.

“Oh Father, father …” Arya sniffled and took her father in her arms. She held him close. Eddard’s eyes fluttered open. Arya smiled a radiant smile down at her father. “I have come to save you father. Syrio and I are going to save you and we will get Sansa free and then we will throw the Lannisters down and you will become King and sit on the Iron Throne.”

Syrio looked at the tender interaction between father and daughter. Eddard was clearly still confused as he looked around him and slowly focused on Arya. He started to cry and hugged his daughter tighter to his body.

“Oh Arya … my precious daughter” Eddard looked around again. “Varys told me you would be coming for me but—but I doubted … oh my precious daughter.” He hugged Arya tight to him again and sobbed. “You came for me … Sansa … Oh Arya you saved me.” Syrio considered himself a man hardened but seeing this interaction between father and daughter was touching and had him choking back his emotions.

He saw movement out of the corner of his eyes. He whipped around fearing that an ambush had been sprung. He saw Varys hurrying down the corridor from the hidden tunnel. Syrio saw that the man was flushed and sweating profusely. He was breathing heavily. The man looked scared. For that man to show that kind of emotion made Syrio very afraid.
Varys bent over putting a hand on the hall wall. He took a deep breath.

“I ran all the way her from the Red Keep. I have not trusted Joffrey. I have been spying on him myself. He called in his Kingsguard. He has unbeknownst to Cersei called for your father to be brought to his quarters. He says he needs to interrogate Eddard Stark before the public trail. He really wants to torture Eddard. Joffrey is unhinged. He must be stopped.”

Syrio started to speak.

Varys held up his hand for silence. Syrio stopped. Varys felt this was important. Syrio was totally in on Varys now. The man had come to them a great haste and great possible harm to himself. This showed the Water Dancer the man was willing to put his life on the line for their cause.

“I must get back. Cersei will call for me when this coming fight gets back to her. I need to be there to keep my deception going. You must move. I ran all the way here but I cannot have gotten here much before the forces coming for Eddard. They will pair up with the forces already on duty. You must hit them in the tunnels before they get into the warrens of the dudgeons.”

Syrio was cursing under his breath. He made snap command decisions. A man must be decisive on the battlefield. Bold as the Lion; Strong as the Elephant.

“Matamion and Jaehaegar Velnalys I want you take Eddard back into the tunnels and back to the bakery. I showed everyone on the way here the food cart that the owner has stored in the back store room by the double access doors. We have the stored lettuce, potatoes sacks, and turnips sacks and produce boxes. They are in racked boxes. You can easily hide Eddard in the cart and use the sacks and boxes to camouflage him. The owners will help you. King’s Keep and the realm itself have long tired of the Baratheon rule.”

“They want Eddard Stark to take the realm.”

“Why can’t someone else take Eddard back? We want to fight!” Matamion barked out.

“Shut up! We don’t have time to fight on this! Time is running out damnit! We may need to burst out into public of King’s Landing. Your Valyrian features are harder to blend in. Arya Stark will be going with you along with Merrel.”

Arya ground her teeth. Merrel did not keep silent.

“Like the seven hells I will!”

“You are the healer among us. Is there another?”

The man glared at Syrio. “You are going with Eddard. He has to be healed. He cannot take the throne as a weak cripple. He must win all his coming battles. The realm will only support Eddard Stark if he is strong and vital. It is imperative that you heal the man.”

Jaehaegar Velnalys spoke up “I can carry Eddard by myself. Get him on my back.”

“That is a long way Jaehaegar” Syrio responded.

The man smiled grimly. “My strength was legendary in our ranks. I will not fail. You will need Matamion’s sword.

“Okay” Syrio replied. He had learned to trust these men of Rheagar’s old honor guard.
Matamion griped Jaehaegar’s shoulder in friendship. “Thank you.”

The man smiled back.

Matamion and Merrel helped get a groggy Eddard on the Valyrian’s back. The man wasted no time. He started down the corridor at a face pace with Merrel and Arya stomping behind them. They were clearly not happy at the turn of events.

He turned to Varys. “They know the way. I made sure we all do. Get back.”

The eunuch turned to go. Syrio reached out and gripped his arm.

“Thank you Varys. You showed great courage. I will never fully trust you though, you know” he said slyly.

The bald man bowed his head “I have always served the realm. You are serving the realm. Don’t disappoint me.”

The man started down the corridor. Syrio liked the challenge.

“Let’s go!” Syrio barked. They needed to meet the enemy as far forward in the dudgeon complex. The administration area on the upper floors was where he wanted to try and meet the approaching force.

They ran up the main corridor and burst out into the first level of the storage cellars that housed the detritus of past reigns. He stopped the formation’s advance. He cocked his head. He heard the rustling of many feet. He pulled his forces back to the edge of the room and tunnel. He ran around and extinguished the four torches in the scions on that side of the large room.

His archers knelt down. His eyes nearly bulged out his sockets. Arya was notching her bow.

He could not shout at the teenager. They needed to stay silent and she knew it. The girl was grim faced looking at him. He needed all the arrow power he could get. Syrio was pissed that Arya had disobeyed him but a large part of him admired the girl and her bravery. The Druids had on their dark robes and he and Arya had dressed in dark tight fitting blouse tops and trousers. Their boots flat black. They would be hid by the dark and the bright torches those approaching had. Their own torches would blind the Lannisters. Syrio could see the flow of the torches approaching from on far.

Syrio whispered out “Don’t shoot till you see the white of their eyes. Fire off five or six volleys and then fall back to the tunnel. We may need those arrows as we retreat.” Each archer had a quiver stuffed with thirty arrows.

The men came closer. Syrio smiled grimly. He saw three Kingsguard knights towards the back of the group of forty men. All were relaxed and grousing at being roused in the middle of the night.

The men were almost getting to close. They still had not seen their foes hidden in the dark in the deep shadows.

The thrum and twang of bows sounded in the room. Nine arrows shot out striking the leading edge of forces loyal to the throne. The men were spun and snatched back. All arrows hitting their targets. The regent’s forces were shocked for a moment. Another volley of arrows swooshed out and landed into targets. More men were staggered and fell. Screams started to fill the room. Now the force of men were pulling their swords out and scurrying around seeking cover.

The Kingsguard ran forward with swords drawn. Two were knocked off stride with long bow
arrows slamming into their breast plate armor and one arrow glanced off a helm. Syrio came up behind Javer Goodbrook, Styve Grandison and Matamion Velnalys. It galled Syrio to let others strike blows for him. The men engaged the Kingsguard. The sound of blades slamming into each other and bouncing off armor was loud in the room.

The Druids and Arya were feathering the other Red and Gold Cloaks. The arrows taking the fight out of them. The men’s torches illuminating their targets while the Stark forces remained hidden in the dark. Syrio watched the battle. The Kingsguard were good and the equal of their foes. None were his caliber of course. It was time to make his presence felt. A Kingsguard had locked up his blade with Javer.

Syrio’s sword shot out finding the joint at the elbow. The blade sinking in deep. The knight screamed dropping his sword. Javer slammed several swords strokes into his helm collapsing the man. Javer jumped over the fallen knight and came to Matamion’s aid as he was being pushed back and barely holding his own. Now the Kingsguard was on the defensive. Syrio and Styve was fighting the last Kingsguard who had put his back to the wall to keep himself from being flanked.

He fought furiously holding off his tormentors. Syrio heard a loud commotion. About forty more men had stormed into the long room from the other doorway. Syrio face fell into grim resolve. Too many. They could not hold against such numbers. He did not blanch. They would fight to the end. It was Eddard that was truly important anyways in this Westerosi game called Game of Thrones.

Syrio was fighting furiously to keep the armored knights neutralized.

From the corner of his eye he suddenly saw the new formation of men suddenly stop and fall into wild confusion. He attacked his foe harder but the Kingsguard was holding his own. Is armor making it hard for Syrio to find a joint to run his rapier through. He and Styve kept the knights attention. He never saw Arya crouched down approaching from the side. Needle stabbed out at the knee joint. The blade pierced the joint and went clean through the leg.

The man screamed falling down. Syrio gripped the man and flipped him onto his back and Styve slammed his sword down into his head again and again mangling his helm and crushing his skull. The Kingsguard fighting Javer and Matamion suddenly had two arrows jutting out the space between the wings of his helm. The man fell down dead like a cut marionette.

The confusion was wild now. The initial group of remaining soldiers were falling back. Syrio turned to his forces. “Retreat back to the tunnels and go down to the boats and flee.” The seeds of deception planted. They lion pack would follow the wrong trail.

Syrio saw that in a moment the tide turned as it often did on the field of battle. Now they were the aggressors.

He spun around and attacked the men falling back. He quickly cut down two of them. He moved to engage the next man. One of Arya’s arrows whistled over his shoulder and hit the man in the throat. Two more men fell with long bow arrows jutting out their bodies.

Damn! Could no one follow orders! Was everyone trying to fight impossible odds? He simply could not allow this unseen ally fight alone. He knew who it must be. He had no use for that dark dire order but his Faceless Man had come to their aid where he need not have. Syrio would not let such a man fight alone. He would not let the man, Faceless Man or not, die if he could help it.

As he closed the distance he saw the man was dressed as a Ninja of Yi Ti. He was all black from a hood that covered his head and half his face all the way down to his covered feet. He fought with a rapier and a bastard sword. Both hands a blur whirling out death and maimed bodies.
The Faceless Man was amazing but he was too outnumbered. Syrio slammed into the group milling around the Faceless Man trying to overwhelm him. Styve, Javer and Matamion slammed into the melee. Their swords hitting the men unprepared. Their blades cutting men down. These men were not unskilled but nowhere near the skill levels of true knights.

The dark dresses assassin had two men coming in on him while engaged with two men front of him. Syrio cursed he would not reach him in time! First one man and almost immediately the other man went down with arrows in their throats that had Arya’s white fletching.

Syrio’s rapier pierced a man’s eye and he saw Javer chop a man’s arm off. Blood spurting out as the man screamed in agony. The Faceless Man swirled and pivoted killing anyone who came close. The sudden charge of the new forces and the rain of arrows now falling on them from point blank range was whittling the forces of the regent down at a fast and furious rate.

Matamion staggered as sword partially penetrated his armor cutting into his ribs breaking four on his right cutting two near in half. Javer and Styve moved in and dispatched the Gold cloak viciously.

“Leave me!” Matamion shouted out in a wheezing voice his lung already filling with blood.

“Fuck you!” Javer shouted his answer.

Syrio shouted out “Bring in the reinforcement and then retreat to the boats!” It was amazing what a lie at the proper time and right conviction could do.

That took the fight out of the survivors. The Lannisters had been faltering and now they broke and ran for the doorway they had come into the room from. His lies sowing both confusion and knowledge that was false. The Faceless Man came up to him. He did not speak.

“Will you come with us?”

“Yes.”

Syrio turned and led his group back down into the tunnels of the dudgeons. They went down to the lower levels and slowly filtered out the tunnel that led away from the dock area. He was ecstatic. He had suffered no losses. Their attack was all shock and awe. He remembered the quote from his master “What the ancients called a clever fighter is one who not only wins, but excels in winning with ease.” It had been a lot of luck but their skill and ferocity of attack had carried the day.

When you surprise the enemy and attack savagely you will almost always win decisively.

Syrio’s force went up the hidden steps and into the secret tunnel from the underground docks.

They came out of the tunnel that led to the back of the bakery.

Syrio spun around and slammed his fist into the Faceless Man’s stomach knocking the breath from the man. He gripped his shinobi shozoko and slammed the back of his head into the wall stunning the man.

In a flash his dagger was against the man’s throat.

“I never forget a face Jaqen H’ghar. Borrowed or not.”
“Syrio! What are you doing?!?” Arya shouted at her Water Dancer instructor. He had grabbed the man that had suddenly joined them in fighting off the forces of the throne. She had not been able to see much as she was fighting with her bow and sword. Her focus mainly consumed by the immediate foes she was fighting.

Her mentor had the his dagger against the man’s throat his free hand holding a handful of the man’s strange grab that covered the man’s lower face and head. The look in Syrio’s face was murderous.

“You know this man?” Arya yelled at the sword master.

“Yes I do! He is a Faceless Man. He killed the Sealord of Braavos. Harlor Baerraan was under my care. I failed him. It was this man that killed him. I will have my revenge!” Syrio yelled his forearm muscles tensing preparing to cut the man’s throat from ear to ear.

“Syrio stop it!” Arya bellowed at her instructor.

Arya could see the man was going to kill the man anyways. A man who had selflessly helped to save them. This was unacceptable.

“Stop! If you kill him I will not become your disciple. I will not learn from a man who kills an ally in cold blood.”

“Jaqen H’ghar is a Faceless Man. He is no one’s ally. They only serve death. They are avatars of death. They cannot be trusted.”

“It does not matter Syrio. He helped save us. He saved us when he had no reason too.”

“A Faceless Man always has a reason Arya. Never trust them. They are snakes in the grass.”

“I don’t care. He helped us. What is between you and this Jaqen H’ghar lies in Braavos. This is King’s Landing. This is another continent. I will not judge the man on his actions that I know nothing of. That is a lifetime away as far as I am concerned.”

“Arya! Don’t be like your father! This man does not follow the same edicts of the heart we follow. He has no heart!”

Arya had walked up to them. The Druids and the honor guard of Rhaegar Targaryen stood watching. Matamion was wheezing in pain. They needed to get back to Merrel’s residence to get the man aid. His broken ribs had to be set to pull them out of his lungs. He had expended himself greatly in service to her and her father.

Arya looked up at the “Faceless Man. There was something familiar about this man. She was not sure why. Syrio still had his dagger at the man’s throat but the tension was gone. She reached up slowly and gripped the fabric covering the man’s hair and lower face. She slowly pulled the fabric back and down.
Arya gasped. “You’re the man from the boat!”

Syrio’s head whipped around to stare down at his student. “What do you mean?”

“This is one of the men that we saved. We talked some when we were in the boat.”

She saw Syrio looking at her intently. “What did you talk about?”

“He kind of thanked me and said I had cheated death and that death was owed. He also said something I did not understand “valar morghulis”.

She saw Syrio look to and from her and who she now knew was Jaqen. Syrio released his hold on the man but kept his dagger near the man. He was poised to strike at a moment’s notice.

“This man is extremely dangerous Arya. A Faceless Man only serves his house. The House of Black and White in Braavos. They have a code to be sure but it is their own code that no one but themselves truly understand. They serve death. Do you deny this Jaqen H’ghar?”

“I do not deny or confirm anything to you Syrio Forel. It is to the girl I give my allegiance. Her heart is true. She saved life where none need be saved. Can you say the same? Have you ever saved anyone only because it was the right thing to do? Put yourself in harm’s way to save a complete stranger only because it was just?”

Arya saw her master scowl. She had the answer to that question. She was not proud of herself. She merely did what she had to do in the situation.

The man looked down at her with his calm eyes. “I am again in your debt Arya Stark. Again you have plucked me from the hand of Death. Those were your arrows that shot dead the men attacking me when I could not defend myself were they not?” Jaqen asked Arya.

She nodded her answer.

“I am once more in your debt. You have fulfilled valar morghulis and once more put me in need of valar dohaeris. Not once but twice over. I do begin to wonder if you are fated to be the leader of our House one day.”

Syrio immediately bristled up and barked “Like hell you fucking ghoul. Don’t you ever say that again to my disciple. It is I who will train her. Not you ghouls.”

“I serve a purpose. You only serve weak men. Your Sealord was corrupt. Do you deny it?”

Syrio was silent.

“Arya is the daughter of a man who even our order could work with for the greater good. If he ever matures into a true leader. He is fair and just but naïve. Maybe he can learn.”

Arya had heard this not so hidden innuendo about her father since her escape from the men helping her free her father. She had had enough.

“I grow tired of this snipping about my father. He is a great man! Our people love him because he is fair and just and eats his meals with the common man. I don’t see that here!”

“That is precisely what we are saying” Syrio spoke up.

Now he was siding with the man he was about to kill! Arya fumed.
“In the North with a people who have known the Starks for generations upon generations and accept their ways and vice versa it works Arya. Not here in the South. Everyone has their own agenda. You father never took that into consideration. His ‘innocence’ blinded him to the reality of this place.”

“Did you ever tell him this?!” Arya yelled at her master. A master who she was extremely pissed off with at the moment.

“No I did not Arya. It was not my place. He would not have listened anyway. He was sure his way was the correct way. He is not the first to make such mistakes. He won’t be the last. It would seem he will survive his initial mistakes because of our actions. Your actions. Otherwise you father would have most likely have already been killed. The question that arises is will he learn now that you, Arya Stark, have given him a second opportunity.”

“We have spent enough time here on this. We must depart now. The forces of the Lannisters will soon be out in full force. We have not only bearded the Lion but we have severely injured it now. A wounded beast is a dangerous thing.”

Syrio sent out the archers first, by ones and twos. He told them to move out and spread out along the route back to Merrel’s residence. They were to find spots to watch and attack if necessary. The Druids would provide cover for Matamion and his two fellow royal guardsman Styve and Javer.

When Arya went to slip out the door Syrio went to restrain her. “No Arya stay with me.”

“Like seven hells Syrio. I will not be cuddled like Joffrey Baratheon. He claims he is a warrior. I AM a warrior. I will not be cuddled” she told her mentor hotly locking eyes with him. They stood nearly toe to toe in a staring contest of wills.

“I need you to help me guard Jaqen H’ghar.”

Arya snorted. “Riiigghhtttt! You are watching him like a hawk and you have the drop on him. Let me help you bind his wrists behind him after we fold his arms up high on his body. He may be dangerous but trussed up like a sacrificial turkey and with Styve and Javer I would think you three big strong men could keep one captured Faceless Man in check. Right?” Arya finished in a sardonic tone.

Syrio glared at her. She had seen a line of rope in the storage room and went to it. They trussed up the Faceless Man who did not resist.

“This is not the way to make friends little she-wolf. Thrice you saved me. I am in your debt” the assassin addressed Arya solemnly.

“I will let my father judge you. I you are found lacking you will hear Ice whisper to you as my father dispenses justice.”

The man looked at her quizzically. He had no idea what Ice was. Arya was not worried. Her father would judge this Jaqen H’ghar wisely. The Faceless Man was in her debt after all and she trusted her father’s fairness totally.

She slipped out the door to walk fast down the road underneath the cover of the wooden roofs covering the walkways before the establishments down this lane. She passed a Druid who softly called out to her from the shadows. She took her spot fifty yards down the road. She knew more Druids were now on the roofs.

She wondered if the Ravens were providing their normal spying for their masters. The birds were
diurnal animals. They probably couldn’t see that well at night anyways. She waited and five minutes later she saw Syrio with Rhaegar’s old honor guard go by. It would seem to the casual observer that a man had had too much to drink and his friends were helping him home. Matamion was moving with enough sway and staggering to look drunk and not the seriously injured man he was.

In another five minutes they were all back at Merrel’s home. Arya was thankful to be off the streets. Once the battle was over and the adrenaline was gone she was exhausted. She could still fight if she must but she knew she would not be at her best.

She had felt a surge though when just before she entered their sanctuary she heard the wild blare of multiple war horns being sounded. The calls coming from the Red Keep. Good. They now knew that they no longer had her father captive. She dearly wished she could be one of Varys little sparrows in the throne room or wherever the sulking Lannisters were gathered to.

She and her father would have her revenge.

Once in Merrel’s abode she immediately asked where her father was. She saw Saelalys Narennis move to care for Matamion who was looking pale. She led them down a hallway on the first floor. She saw the Myr woman with her dark hair and olive skin appear on the balcony to the second floor. Phirona Ormonnis called down to Ayra.

“Your father is up here lass. He is resting comfortably.

Arya moved to go up the stairwell. She stopped seeing Syrio roughly manhandling the Faceless Man onto a chair and tying him up severely with rope.

“Release Jaqen H’ghar, Syrio.”

“What?!” her master yelled at her.

“You will not cause us a problem will you Jaqen Hargar. You owe me Valar Doeharis if my lessons are true. I have saved you now three times if my count is right.”

The man stared at her with a taciturn countenance. He looked up at Syrio who glared down at him.

“I will cause you no problems little she-wolf. I am indeed in your debt. This is becoming a habit. You are strong of body and spirit. I again ask you to come back to Braavos and take up the way of the House of Black and White. We … no I have waited a long time for you to come. You are to be our new leader.”

Syrio was shaking with anger. Arya held up her hand.

“Jaqen … I sense you make this offer with great honor intended. I will not serve death. I will become a First Sword though I will never serve a corrupt Sealord or King.”

“HA!” Syrio spat down at the Faceless man with his arms still bound. “She choose me!” he carped in happiness.

“Arya Stark … I did not take you for a liar” Jaqen told the young Stark girl.

Syrio jammed the man down harder into his seat.

“Syrio!” Arya called out. She smirked seeing Syrio grind his teeth and lifted the Faceless Man out of his chair. He started to cut the bindings of his now former captive.
“I do not lie Jaqen H’ghar.”

“Little wolf, since I have met you—you have done nothing but send men to the god of death. Please do not lie to me.”

Arya stared at the man for a long moment and then smiled. “You kill per contract. I only kill to protect my family and serve the realm. I will never kill for money or for another when I do not agree with them. Maybe your order should learn that truth. Learn some honor.”

The man stared at her with eyes that were intense. He bowed his head fractionally.

“Why are you here anyways? Shouldn’t you be in Essos creating mayhem there?” Syrio asked the man.

“I have two missions in Westeros. The first I have now completed. A man had cheated the Iron Bank of many Iron Crowns. He has paid for his misdeeds.”


“Many feel that magic is returning. Daenerys Targaryen has been given three dragon eggs. She will find a way to hatch them. Her time is near it is prophesied. I am preparing the means to kill her and her dragons. The Citadel does not wish her dragons to again appear in the skies of Westeros. Many in Essos fear she will ally with the slave trade and again make Old Valyria rise again and a new age of vile evil will flare out across Essos and now Westeros.”

“The House of Black and White may have lost its way as you imply. Some of us wonder that ourselves. But this I will say. Our order was created because of the heinous scions of Valyria. We will not allow it to rise again.”

Arya had heard the name Daenerys Targaryen several times since this all began. She recalled the name of Targaryen. It had been the mad king that was a Targaryen that had killed her grandfather and uncle before her birth. In a most heinous manner. But really, it had all been ancient history to Arya.

Her father and mother did not gladly speak of those times.

She had been surprised that a brother and sister of Rhaegar Targaryen had survived the end of the reign of King Aerys II Targaryen, the ”Mad King”. She had paid attention enough to know he was a cruel despot. Her father had always spoken highly of Rhaegar Targaryen though. She had heard her father over the years in the feast hall lament several times that he wished Rhaegar had taken the realm over and not his best friend growing up Robert Baratheon.

Her father would then look off into space. Arya also knew enough to know that Lyanna her aunt had gone willingly with Rhaegar. She had never loved Robert Baratheon and she had heard her father say a few times when he did not know she was near say that he had been secretly happy when she had eloped with Rhaegar. Her father had not foreseen Robert’s Rebellion and having to side with his best friend.

The Warden of the North was dragged into a war when he was still coming to grips with his new duties. He had to honor that bond with Robert Baratheon her father had felt. She doubted he would have honored it now with years of experience. Arya was of the opinion that honor was earned not given.

Syrio had freed the Faceless Man. “Please both of you join me as I check on my father.” The men lined up behind Arya and they went up the stairs and met a smiling Phirona. “It is always a pleasure
to have you back little wolf” the pretty woman told Arya as she hugged the teenager. Arya always blushed hotly when hugged by Phirona Ormonnis or her partner Saelalys Narennis. The image of them in bed making love was forever seared into Arya’s mind.

It had been most enlightening.

They way went down the long hallway to the third door on the left. The walls plain as the rest of the building. There was nothing ostentatious in the humbling dwelling place of Merrel. Phirona opened the door to the room and Arya and her master with the Faceless Man entered the room that her father lay in.

She looked around the small bedroom. Up against the side of the wall was a double bed with her father in it. He was thickly covered in quilts and a bear skin. She saw the large fireplace was filled with logs and a hot fire was burning keeping the room very warm. Arya saw several hooks on swivels anchored into the hearth stones that had pots on them that had the room smelling strongly of herbs. Some of them no doubt in her father now. The Mry woman went to her father and took a cloth out of a bowl and wrung it out.

She placed the cloth on her father’s head. She gently dabbed his face with the cloth.

“How is he?” Arya asked anxiously. She walked over to kneel beside her father. She noticed that Syrio and Jaqen had followed her over to stand by the bed of her father.

“He is gaunt and worn but the potions that Varys gave your father and the increased rations while still horrendously small kept him alive. He is feverish but I am sure that my and Saelalys potions will conqueror the remaining infection. Your father is a strong man. His leg is mess though.”

“It was not properly reset when he was taken to the dudgeons. Unless Merrel can work his magic your father will never walk without a very heavy limp and with the use of a cane. He will be cripple.”

“Why hasn’t Merrel healed him now?!” Arya barked with concern for her father making her agitated. She looked up at the woman pleadingly.

“I fear that Merrel’s magical ability to heal doesn’t work as well against illness and infection. It can but it is wasted. He can only use his magic on a person but once. If he wastes his energies on this infection he will not heal your father’s leg. As I understand it, it is paramount that we heal his leg and make him whole again.”

“I hate to say it but people will not rally around a cripple. Your father will have to fight to win the throne. That is assured. He must be hale to do so.”

“What do you mean? He will use the skills of a Maester to heal my father won’t he?” Arya asked the beautiful woman.

The woman smiled at her. “No my child. Merrel’s gift is most assuredly not like the Maester’s skills. He heals from the heart and the soul. When he ‘cures’ a person they are as before.”

“What do you mean?” the teenage Stark girl asked the beautiful woman from Myr.

“I will let Merrel explain it to you girl. My and Saelalys duty is to get your father strong as we can. He will need his health back when Merrel restores Eddard Stark’s leg.”

“What do you mean?” Arya whined in the frustration of not knowing.
“The Druid will tell you when the time is right dear child. You and your father are definitely the wolves spoken of in prophecy. I am most happy. I had fear as everyone else that the Dragon would be much delayed in her coming back to Westeros to contend with the remainder of the Lions. The Lions will have torn and disemboweled this land by the time of the Dragon’s arrival. I much prefer his prophecy.”

“What prophecy?” Arya whined loudly again. The not knowing was very frustrating. She looked at Syrio. He merely shrugged. He had no true idea. Only what he had heard whispered in this Druid’s lair.

It was Jaqen H’ghar that spoke up. “We in the House of Black and White were born in the slave mines of Old Valyria. There are many prophecies of the Dragon who will rise in the East. We all had assumed it was Viserys Targaryen that was prophesized. He was killed by his Dothraki benefactors. All reports say that his sister is proving to be quite the Khaleesi.”

“We in the House of Black and White now feel that the prophecies were about her. How this is possible we still debate and wonder. She was indeed weak when she left Braavos to become Khal Drogo’s wife. She was payment for her brother’s Dothraki army. Nothing more. Yet she may prove to be more.”

“We have heard many prophecies concerning the Dragon who will rise from the East. Almost all say she will come in a time of winter when Lions rule the land. The Lions will have secured the realm through terrible and bloody warfare. Wars that leave all weak. The Queen will come in and lay waste to that which is left. The prophecies say she will start with a pure heart but by the time she arrives in Westeros she will be something else. She will have become hardened and cruel.”

“She will help defeat the Ice King but then will enslave Westeros and Essos. She will do so for the noblest of reasons but her heart will have become black.”

“We will kill her before we allow that to happen.” Jaqen paused in his speech. He looked at Arya intently. “There are several other prophecies that speak of another path.” He paused again looking at Arya as if judging her. “The prophecies are of wolves and dragons.”

Arya stared at Jaqen. She heard the need. This woman must be put down if she turned evil! Still he had said … “What of these other prophecies?”

Jaqen started to speak.

“Arya … Arya …” Arya spun around seeing her father. He was calling to her weakly. He had his squint smile on his face.

“Father!” she cried out seeing his eyes lucid. She threw herself down on the edge of the bed and leaned in to hug her father hard. “Oh Father! I was so scared for you. Syrio and I with lots of help have rescued you from the dudgeons beneath King’s Landing. We will dispose of Cersei and Joffrey and make you king father!”

Her father petted his daughter tenderly on the back. She felt him crying softly.

“Oh my precious daughter. You have saved me. Varys told me what Joffrey had plotted against me against his mother’s wishes to send me to the Wall. I owe you my life Arya. Anything you wish I will grant if it is within my power.”

Arya smiled at her father. “Being your daughter is all I can ask for father!”

Eddard smiled and hugged his daughter even tighter. “I cherish your fealty and loyalty my youngest
daughter. I wish I could say that about my eldest daughter.”

What does that mean Arya wondered? Sansa was the perfect daughter. Always doing as their mother demanded.

“What do we do now father” Arya asked her father. She was so thankful to have him back. She had been fighting on pure will. She had only one goal. Save her father. She had no clue on what to do with the Westeros. She could care less about such things. Now the realm would soon have its true ruler back. Her father would know what to do.

She watched her father grimace. He smiled at her and laid back. “I don’t know Arya. My leg is in a bad way.”

“It will be healed soon” Arya told her father earnestly.

He squint smiled at her. “I wish that is true Arya.”

“Phirona tell him” Arya called over to the dark skinned woman stirring a kettle over the flames. The woman turned and shook her head a little.

“Eddard Stark I will tell you what I told your daughter. Merrel, who is a Druid, can heal almost any wound. I am healing your body of the infection and general exhaustion that harms your body currently. Merrel will indeed heal your leg.” She saw Eddard’s disbelieving look. She smiled greater. “I cannot explain how his healing magic works. I will let the man tell you himself. He will come to your tomorrow when you have had time to recoup more of your strength. You are a strong man Eddard Stark. I and Saelalys will restore your general health. Merrel will restore your leg.”

Arya watched her father look at the woman. She could tell that her father did not believe the woman. Arya could see her father was still weak.

Phirona came over to the bed with a cup full of broth that smelled good to Arya. “Drink of this Eddard Stark. It will help fight the infection still in you. It will strengthen your countenance and it will help you to sleep. You need to sleep deeply which you could not do in that rank dank dudgeon.”

Eddard took the cup. He drank the draft down quickly. He handed the cup back.

“We will talk further tomorrow Arya. Syrio.” He saw the other man. “And you are …”

“I am Jaqen H’ghar. I have aligned myself with your daughter. She is the one prophesized by the druids. As are you. I wish to see that prophecy come true.”

Arya saw her father squint smile. He did not believe in magic or prophecy.

Neither did she. She believed in a bow and quiver full of arrows. She believed in hard cold forged steel.

Phirona moved to scoot the visitors out of the room. They all went back down to the first floor.

“Arya we cannot trust this Jaqen H’ghar. If that is his true name.” Syrio told her with renewed heat in his words.

Arya stared at the man from Braavos. How could she be sure? She had saved him three times twice from Syrio Forel himself.
The man looked at her and slowly put his hand into a deep pocket of his all black outfit. He pulled his hand back out. He slowly reached out with his hand to show he was no threat. He urged Arya to extend her hand. In her hand he put a medium sized coin into it.

Arya looked at it. It was dark with raised iron colored markings and letters. On the side that was up she saw a man’s head hidden in a hooded robe. She turned the coin over. She saw a stylized V inside a D. She looked up at Jaqen. She saw a shocked look on Syrio’s face.

“The House of Black and White stands with House Stark.” Jaqen H’ghar bowed to her. Syrio still had a shocked look on his face.
Cersei had had a long day. It seemed they were all long anymore as she drank a soothing cup of hard arbor wine from the vineyards of Highgarden. The Lioness had much worrying her and needed something to help relieve the heavy burden that weighed upon her shoulders. She needed her wine considering how events had gone of late.

She had thought that finally removing her oaf of a husband and arresting Eddard Stark would bring a feeling of peace and wellbeing to Cersei. She had worked since that fateful night with that damned sorceress to make the prophecies spoken that night to not come true. Cersei had spent her life since then working to make it not come true and yet it seemed at every turn some other facet of that vile woman’s words came to fruition.

Cersei had finally achieved the power to make herself the titular head of Westeros. She would make a new prophecy and show “Maggie the Frog” that she was would make the destiny from now on. What Cersei needed more than anything else was to get Eddard Stark to the Wall and out of her hair. She would be alright then. The goal was so close that Cersei could almost grasp it within her hands. Joffrey had forced the issue but maybe that was good thing.

The Insurrection would hopefully follow the Stark up the King’s Road. Without the crowded streets of King Landing to hide them they should be easily taken on and eliminated. Damn that Arya Stark. She had to be involved. Why couldn’t she be more like her simpering sister Sansa? All the girl did was bleat and look miserable at her situation.

Sansa’s lack of a backbone infuriated Cersei. She had suffered heartbreak and had her wishes ignored and her desires thwarted since she could remember. Cersei had not folded and simpered. It wasn’t fair what she had had to endure!

She only wished was able to show openly her love for her twin brother Jaime. She had only been able to sneak away enough time with her true love to keep her sanity while married to that dullard Robert Baratheon. Gods she had hated the touch of that man. Coming to their marriage bed drunk and whining for Lyanna Stark. A dead woman whose name he spoke when he came to Cersei that first time.

Gods she had hated that man!

One thing Cersei was highly looking forward too was getting Joffrey to make an edict that brother and sisters could now marry in Westeros. The Targaryens had always married within their family. It had been a tradition among those of Valyrian descent. They had a desire to keep their Houses pure from each other.

Only the gods knew what those heathens in Dome practiced in their dry arid land. They were very liberal in that dusty realm. There, siblings often married. She would not be surprised if the people of Dome did not marry their prized camels.

Cersei looked forward to having Jamie openly on her arm. Jamie was so beautiful and only he was worthy of being her consort. He understood her like no other. True he had his faults like all men.
He was rash and impetuous.

Cersei grimaced thinking of the whole Bran incident. She had only wanted to talk to the boy! Did she have to explain everything to everyone! Again she wished for equal primogeniture. She would be Queen now!

Cersei sighed. She would work through Joffrey. Gods the boy needed so much seasoning.

Cersei finished the last of the wine in her goblet. Looking at the bottom of her goblet Cersei moved to the table to refill the gold cup. She was in her heavy loose fitting nightgown. Weariness weighed on her body and soul. She was in some serious need of rest and relaxation her body told Cersei. It galled Cersei that she did not have Jamie to warm her bed. He was out fighting the remaining forces of Eddard Stark. Her sweet brother would soon take care of the last of them.

The Tyrion situation would have to be dealt with. A finesse touch to soothe the rancor that had started to ripple across the realm. What had gotten into Catelyn Stark’s mind to take a High Prince? She hated her dwarf brother but she supposed she would have to make sure he was returned safe and sound. A Lannister always paid their debt. She would get her little dwarf brother back and send Catelyn Tully back to Winterfell all spaded and silenced. Cersei secretly hoped that something untoward happened to her brother.

She was prepared to go to her royal bed now and to … ahem—take matters into her own hands. She had a nice bodice ripper from Essos that she was finding most pleasurable reading. The author was not afraid to be graphic in all the best ways. “The Corsair of Qarth” had as the main character a pirate raiding ships from Slavers Bay to the lands of Yi Ti.

He always dispatched his foes in the most graphic and fun ways while he bedded the women he captured. His well-endowed manhood pleasuring the women most graphically in all their holes. Cersei felt her pulse quickening. She had ended her reading last night with the Corsair captain, Shormeir na Dhokln, about to the bed the Summer Island Captain Jalha Xhara. She was tall and voluptuous. Cersei was shivering wanting to get to her defilement and the dark black woman loving every minute of it.

Cersei would then be ready to let her fingers to do some talking of their own to her slit and clit.

She had just gotten in bed and opened the book and leafed to the proper page. These books were very expensive with the new style of publishing works of literature on pages of papyrus instead of parchment.

There was a sudden commotion she could hear outside her door. She had made sure that her and her three children were heavily guarded. The sounds were muted through the thick door but she could tell that a big commotion was going on outside her door.

The door was suddenly thrown open. Cersei was shocked that anyone would dare enter her room unannounced. She relaxed a fraction seeing it was her son the boy king. Cersei was about to berate her errant son for being so rude to intrude into her privacy thus. If he had come thirty minutes later he would have been treated to quite a show he was not ready for.

At the doorway was Sandor Clegane looking very uncomfortable. She saw the five red cloaks she had posted at each doorway at her and her children’s doors. Cersei had heavy patrols patrolling the hallways. Her at times stupid son had not thought to do even that!

Cersei was about to belittle her son when she stopped. The look on his face put her in immediate unease.
“Mommy, mommy … tell me what to do mommy!” her son whined as he rushed into the room. She looked at the door at Sandor. He smirked closing the door giving them some privacy.

_Gods I need another cup of wine_! Cersei thought. Her son was definitely not his father Jamie Lannister. Again she wondered what had gone wrong with her son. She had raised him with all the love in her heart. She felt a pulse of unease run through her body. She had promised herself she would not treat her children as she had been treated. _She had succeeded hadn’t she_?

Her son was looking around confused and outright fearful. What had gotten into him?

Cersei Lannister took a deep breath. She centered herself. Damnit she wished Jamie was here. She needed her rock in this rising maelstrom buffeting her in its wrath and fury. Cersei Lannister would have to do in meeting her son’s consternation. There was no other to meet the need of the situation.

“Yeeessssss Joffrey?” Cersei could not help her condescending tone she used with her son sometimes. He was of her body but he was a … what … failure? … that couldn’t be—he was a Lannister after all …”

Her son looked at her with his big green eyes. He licked his lips nervously.

“I am King. I have the right to do as I please” he stated with a note of uncertainty in his voice.

“You are right Joffrey. You are king. What has you troubled Joffrey?” Cersei led her son forward.

“I have the right to do as I please” her son repeated himself like a parrot mimicking its favorite phrase.

Cersei did not like the sound or tone of that but she needed to know what had her son so agitated.

“Just tell me Joffrey. I can’t help you until you tell me what is happening. What has you so upset son?”

Joffrey stared at her again. She saw defiance but that was quickly replaced with raw naked fear.

“The Kingsguard are mine. To do with as I see fit!”

Cersei thought it a simplistic way to look at whatever had Joffrey agitated but she merely nodded her head to encourage her son to just get it out.

“I know Joffrey … what had you ordered them to do” Cersei knew that he had used them in some manner to have made his comments. What it could be this late in the evening she had no idea. _Gods she needed another cup of wine_!

“I sent Ser Boros Blount, Ser Mandon Moore, and Ser Preston Greenfield to the dungeons to fetch Eddard Stark. I needed to interrogate the traitor before his trail tomorrow. I sent several groups of Red and Gold Cloaks to make sure the transfer went well.”

Her son paused looking unsure. Cersei was shocked that her son would do such a thing behind her back. She had made it clear that they needed to follow the script she had laid out. To try Eddard Stark and then show clemency and banish him to the wall. He was a High Lord. Killing him could spark all-out war.

War was tricky. She was not sure if she could control all the factors if she had to work the levers of power through others. She was brilliant but so hemmed in by convention and custom.
“Okay Joffrey. Where is he? What is the problem?” Cersei started to fret. Had her son somehow gotten the man killed?! That would not do!

“They were ambushed” Joffrey cried out looking around like a confused sheep.

“What?” Cersei gasped. “How many men did we lose? Is Eddard Stark still alive? Did we capture Arya Stark and her damned fucking Water Dancer?” Cersei asked wondering how bad the situation could be. She would tolerate her son’s disobedience and ineptitude if it meant they had captured that damned girl and her instructor. The instructor she would have drawn and quartered. Arya the bitch would still make an extremely valuable royal hostage and eventual bargaining chip to be married off.

She would make sure she sent Arya to a man Cersei truly hated. Would serve him right. She would love to force the wild child on Stannis. His molars would explode with all his teeth grinding. She thought about Oberyn but the pervert would only add Arya to the festivities. The girl was probably a deviant anyways. Her wild nature, slightly androgynous look and roughhewn attire made her look like a rug muncher anyways.

“No mother. They all escaped!”

“WWWHHHAATT?????” Cersei screamed in pure shock and fear.

“I told you mother. They ambushed the guards and the Kingsguard. They all escaped.”

Cersei stared at her son horrified. Her first instinct was to jump out of bed and rush over to smack her son for his stupidity. He was a fucking imbecile! Then she calmed.

In a way, his insolence in disobeying saved them hours. If not for his disobedience they still wouldn’t know of the prison break.

But Still! Oh my gods was the next thought that crossed Cersei’s mind. EDDARD STARK HAD ESCAPED! Holy fuck! They were in a world of shit! How though Cersei thought wildly!

“How did they get into the dungeons?!”

“I don’t know!” Joffrey bleated out with that big eyed scared look on his face. His face seemed frozen in that muse.

“Didn’t you ask?”

“Ask what?” Joffrey returned confused.

Cersei threw her hands up and got out of bed.

“I need to speak to Ser Mandon Moore.” Jamie seemed to think he was the best of the lot with him and Barristan no longer in the Kingsguard. “I need him to debrief me on what has happened.”

“I think he is dead” Joffrey said in a small voice.

“WWWHHHAATTTTTTT!” Cersei screamed. This was going from a bad dream to full out nightmare.

“I told you they were ambushed!” Joffrey shouted back. “Two of Kingsguard were killed I think and one of them severely injured. They were ambushed!” Joffrey wailed again.

Cersei hurried over to the table with the bucket of ice that had the wine bottle in it. She ripped out the cork and put the mouth of the bottle to her mouth and took several big gulps. That calmed her.
“We are in a lot of deep shit” she calmly told her soon.

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It was an hour later in the meeting room that she had often used since the death of her dear departed deceased dope of a husband Robert Baratheon. Gods she liked thinking that to herself.

Cersei had called all her family together. She wanted them all in one place. She had the traitor’s daughter woken up and brought to the meeting. With this new situation, Cersei may truly need Sansa now. With Eddard Stark now on the loose Cersei would need something to keep Eddard at bay. She had also summoned Varys to the room.

Cersei desperately needed to chew someone’s ass off.

“Tell me again why you did not see this coming Varys?” Cersei yelled at her master of whispers. Gods it riled Cersei that she needed this man.

“You mean Joffrey moving behind your back?” Varys returned placidly.

Gods she hated this man Cersei raged to herself. Varys knew exactly what she had meant but he found a way to twist the knife of her son’s insolence. She pinched her temples with her thumb and middle finger. Gods I need a drink! She needed to keep her wits for the moment though.

“I mean the escape of Eddard Stark from the dungeons Varys!”

“Oh. I see. Forgive me my regent.”

Cersei glared at the man. One day she sincerely hoped she would no longer need this worm of a man. She would have her brother gut the vile eunuch. But, until and if they day came, she would have to deal with the man.

“What have you been able to determine about the attack down in the dungeons Varys?”

“It would seem that the forces that your son sent down to the dungeons to fetch Eddard Stark ran into the force that was freeing him. I cannot be sure of course but it seems that the forces that freed the Stark had scouts out. They saw the forces that Joffrey sent and were able to ambush them.”

Cersei had to agree with that assessment. It made sense to her. If Joffrey had not sent the men to fetch Eddard Stark when he did they would have escape unseen and unheard.

“How did they get in? We had two whole companies of men guarding that dungeon. It should have been impossible.”

“My regent. First you have to half that force since you have two shifts. I still agree that should have been enough. If the forces had come from above they definitely would have been seen and fought. The alarm would have been sounded and more, many more, reinforcements would have been sent in. The insurgents would have been overwhelmed and killed.”

“That obviously did not happen Varys. So what did happen?”

“I have interviewed several lieutenants who survived the fight. They are positive they heard a male, most probably Syrio telling his forces to retreat to the River. That would be the underground river that runs deep underneath the dungeons.”

“Isn’t that the river I ordered investigated? Why wasn’t it done?” Cersei asked.
“This was reported to you my regent.”

Cersei ground her teeth. The regent paused a moment growling; was she becoming Stannis. With a snarl Cersei shook her head dispelling that thought from her mind. She knew Varys had reported this to her but she wanted to hear it again. “Just answer the questions dammit!”

“Three times men were sent to explore the river that flows past the dock. Thrice, none of the men were ever heard from again. We would have had a revolt if we had sent more men to what all had to come to consider certain death.”

Cersei did indeed remember the conversation. She had decided to back off. With all the men she was losing with Arya attacking so brazenly she had decided to not press the issue. She could not risk any more losses till reinforcement arrived from Casterly Rock.

“You never did give me a reason for this Varys. Give me a theory man!”

Varys regarded her calmly. “I had a theory but I did not express it earlier.”

“You had better have a good reason for this Varys” Cersei grounded out.

“I did not start to think along these lines my Regent till the string of seemingly unconnected deaths throughout the Red Keep.”

Varys paused and Cersei ground her teeth. She glared at the man to continue.

“As you may know Cersei but I spent some of my youth in Braavos.”

“What of it?”

“I have seen the work of the Faceless Men. I now believe that one of these assassins has allied themselves with Arya Stark.”

Cersei blanched. My gods if the House of Black and White were in league with Arya Stark. Her blood ran cold as she felt her heart flutter.

“Why would those ghouls help Arya Stark? There is no way in the seven hells that she could have hired them.”

“That I cannot say my Regent. I am only theorizing with all evidence I now have at my disposal. I cannot prove that I am correct in this. But in my interview with the lieutenants they told me something that reinforces my belief that a Faceless Man is working with Arya Stark. There was two groups of men moving in to take Arya’s father. The second group had taken an extra few minutes to form up. They came in on the fight after it had begun. The forces decimating the first force of Red and Gold Cloaks along with the three Kingsguard should have been able to be attacked from the flank.”

“That did not happen. A man dressed in all black from head to foot attacked this second group from the side totally unseen until this man was in their ranks killing them with two swords that moved so fast the men could not even follows the speed of the whirling blades. This man’s attack put the second group into disarray and allowed the insurgents to attack the second group as they were thrown into confusion by what I am sure is the same Faceless man that killed the men in the Red Keep.”

“I cannot be sure of course but I think we will find that this man most probably killed all the sentries that had been posted on the river entrances. This ghoul also killed the search parties we sent down
the underground river. All of this is supposition of course but I am now convinced tying all these events together.”

Cersei processed this. She did not like it but it made sense. Damnit she wished she had Jamie here. She wished she had Barristan Selmy here but her fool son had taken care of that. Back and forth Cersei paced, her lip sucked in as she gnawed her lower lip.

She needed to see for herself. She saw Sandor Clegane along the back wall trying to look inconspicuous.

“Sandor” Cersei barked.

“Yes my Queen” the man spoke with a sneer. The man was mad at the world, not that she couldn’t blame him.

“I want you to flood the dungeon with men. I want that place swarming with men. I will be going down in two hours.”

“Are you sure that is wise Regent?”

“With your able body care I am sure it will be Sandor. If anything happens to me I will have left word to have you executed if you survive.”

The man smiled at her. “I will remember that my Regent. I would then say you had better survive.”

The man left the quarters to set in motion everything that the Regent had demanded.

“You don’t need me to go with you do you mommy?” Joffrey whimpered out.

Gods, does the boy even have a backbone Cersei wondered to herself spitefully. He should be demanding to lead the expedition to the dudgeons. To led by example. This is what Jaime would do. Cersei was about to shit herself frankly but she needed to get a feel for what had happened. With Eddard Stark now loose with that hellion of a daughter the world had gotten a lot more dangerous. If Varys was correct that a Faceless Man had joined Arya the world had become exponentially more dangerous for Cersei and her children.

*How had she done it!* Arya was only a fourteen year old girl. It was impossible what she was doing.

“No Joffrey. Stay here and protect your sister and brother Joffrey. Do you think you can do that?” she asked in a condescending tone.

Her poor son never even noticed.

“Yes! I will at my own great peril save my brother and sister if need be. The Lion of Lannister will save his siblings.”

Cersei looked over at the silent flower that had long ago wilted.

“Sansa!”

The girl looked at her startled.

“Your sister. Will she sacrifice you to achieve her goals?”

Sansa looked at her steadily. “Yes she will. We have no great love for each other.”
Cersei was shocked to hear that. This was not good. She had to hope that Eddard Stark would show restraint. That had been his undoing that had allowed her to take the power for him. Was he the type of man to learn from his mistakes? Fortunately, he did not know that it was Sansa that had betrayed him to the Lannisters. Thank the gods that Sansa had been love sick with her son, Joffrey.

Too bad she was the daughter of a traitor.

“Let’s hope it does not come down to that Sansa. I will sacrifice you if I have to too protect my children.”

The tall redhead merely lowered her head. Cersei saw tears running down the tall redhead’s cheeks. She made no sound.

Cersei hated weakness in anyone. She stared at Joffrey. She seethed at all this weakness around her. She admired Sansa more than her son at the moment though. At least she did not pretend to be something she was not.

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Cersei was heading down to the dungeons. Sandor had so many Red and Gold cloaks in the rooms and hallways that she was nearly tripping over them. He had stripped the City bare to make sure that no more ambushes would occur in the walls of the Red Keep.

She had with her Varys and the two lieutenants.

She had received a report in the past two hours from Sandor on their loses. The insurgents had killed sixty-two men in the upper halls and down in the dungeons. She guessed the Faceless Man had helped greatly with those numbers.

She had also received a report from Grand Maester Pycelle. The news had not been good with Cersei being told that it was Ser Mandor Moore that had survived the fight. His right knee was ruined though. He had several sever cuts and a massive concussion. Ser Boros Blount and Ser Preston Greenfield had been cut down in the combat.

Cersei gnawed her lip. She was running out of Kingsguard! She needed to promote more men post haste. The situation was becoming ridiculous.

Cersei came to the hall where the main battle had occurred. Many of the dead were still lying on the stones. She walked among them. Their bodies stiffening into grotesque shapes. Cersei made herself look on them. She would not show any weakness to the men around her.

“How were they decimated so badly?” she asked aloud. She glared around herself.

One of the Lieutenants spoke up. “We were not expecting any attack. We did not notice that the torches across this wall of the large room were out. With our torches lit we were night blind. The enemy hid in the shadows and waited till we were almost on them. Their sudden attack was devastating. The arrow fire decimated us at such close range. There were more than a few archers with the volume of arrows striking our forces. They had a man fighting with a rapier. I have never seen anything like him my Regent. He was death on two feet.

Damn Meryn Trant for not doing his job the Regent groused to herself. If he would have dispatched this Syrio Forel and taken Arya like he was supposed too she would not be in this situation.

They went down to the dungeons itself. She saw nothing out of the ordinary here.
“How were they able to get into the cells? The doors were locked I assume. They had better been.”
She glared again at Varys.

“The doors were all locked. I cannot explain this my Regent. I wonder if this was the Faceless Man’s work again.”

Cersei blanched hearing that most probably explanation. For Arya to have such a man in league with her. The thought was terrifying. She had heard so many stories of the Faceless Men of Braavos. They were said to be able to walk through walls and to walk right by you unseen or unheard. Cersei shivered fearfully at the thought.

Head down Cersei walked around Eddard’s cell looking for any clue. There was nothing here of import either. She went to the jailors office. Again nothing of import. Well, except for the dead jailor of course. His head was sitting on his neck at a most extreme angle. Cersei had felt a little sick witnessing that. She swallowed her bile and walked out of the office.

They took the stairs down to the dock many levels below the jail cells. On the way they passed many dead bodies. The bodies did not seem to have fought their attackers. The same on the docks.

Cersei looked around. Syrio Forel was obviously a master of the sword but these men had been taken out without even a fight. She believed fully now in Varys theories. Arya had a Faceless Man in league with her.

She had seen enough.

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She was back in the hall with her family. Cersei sighed at her predicament. She could relax now though. Upon her return Cersei had quadrupled the guard in the Red Keep. She was pulling the patrols back from King’s Landing. Eddard Stark had gone to ground. He was still a cripple though. Cersei smirked thinking of Willis Tyrell. He was cripple and no one wanted to follow a cripple. People’s prejudices would keep Eddard from acquiring too much power.

Cersei had beaten Eddard once. She would beat him again. He could have King’s Landing for now. The Regent would cede for now the slums to her antagonist. Cersei had Eddard’s daughter and she had the Iron Throne. In time her father’s forces would arrive. She would then have the ability to swamp King’s Landing and flush out the wolves. No. Rats. They were rats to her.

She would bid her time till reinforcements came. The most fervent hope Cersei felt was that Jamie would soon come back to her. Maybe he could capture Catelyn Stark to put more pressure on Eddard.

Cersei drank a deep draught of wine considering her current situation. She had Sansa. That would hold Eddard off. The man loved his children fiercely. Cersei had the forces to hold off the small group opposing her till reinforcements arrived.

She would prove victorious. She was a Lannister after all.
Arya ran up the steps to the roof that was on top of the four story building. The rainy weather had finally cleared out and she wanted some dry fresh air. The young woman needed to see the blue sky. The steps led up to a small hutch that had a small door. She opened the door and looked around. The building was as tall or taller than the other buildings in the general area so Arya did not have to worry about people looking down on her. In her everyday clothing she did not stand out anyways.

Her shorn hair had started to grow back out but with her flat chest she still looked like an adolescent boy from distance as much as any girl. She looked down at her chest and sighed. Sansa had gotten her share of the bosom quotient as well. She saw the two care giving women of the domicile had put up sheets and clothing up on lines they had run from the central shack out to iron poles that had been driven into the outside walls of the buildings. Arya saw that most of the surrounding buildings had the same setup to dry clothes. The night had been dry and slightly windy.

Phirona Ormonnis and Saelalys Narennis had put up a full load of clothes on the lines. This was additional camouflage for the young Stark to blend in with. She walked between the lines to the Eastern edge of the building. She looked out over Blackwater Bay. The Regent had closed off the port. All Arya saw were small fishing boats plying the waters of the bay. No other vessels could be seen on the waters.

The sun had just risen over the water. A morning breeze was beginning to blow off the water and the cool breeze felt good on Arya’s skin. She looked off to her left at a building that abutted her abode but was one story lower. She saw three women and their children on their building’s roof. They were terribly excited. The children were jumping up and down and pointing. The women were clearly looking to the west.

Arya felt her heart palpitate. Were they witnessing an attack that the ravens had somehow missed? Then she noticed that the women and children were not looking down or even straight ahead. They were looking up and pointing to the sky.

Arya ran down the clothes lines that were angled to the east of the building to take advantage of the breezes coming off the body of water to the East.

She came out of the lines and looked up. Her mouth fell open. She stared up into the sky and started to jump up and down herself. This was so cool. She ran back to the shack and bolted down the steps of the stairwell that had halls that came to the back and forth stairwell on each floor.

The teenager sprinted down to the bottom floor since the caregivers would be feeding all of her pack mates. She smiled at that. Arya had come to think of these men and women as her fellow companions of a ferocious wolf pack. She burst into the hall and ran down it to the common meeting and eating area. She turned the corner into the communal area. Most of the Druids and the none Valyrian Honor guards of Rhaegar were there. She saw Syrio and Merrel talking quietly at the end of the main table.
“Come! Come quick. You have to see this!” Arya spoke excitedly pointing up through the ceilings. She saw Syrio looking up at the ceiling where she was pointing.

“I don’t see a leak in the ceiling Arya” he told her calmly. “Or do you know have the eyes of an eagle. Is there a rabbit you will strike from on high?”

Arya rolled her eyes. “Hardy har har Syrio. Come see. Come up to the roof Syrio. All of you. You need to see this! It is awesommmme!” Arya could see her enthusiasm was starting to affect the people in the room. Their curiosity was piqued.

“What is it?” Styve Grandison asked Arya a trace of humor in his voice at her antics. He was in the middle of a stack of pancakes and clearly wanted to finish the delicious fare. As he looked at Arya, Phirona poured some fresh blueberries on his pancakes. The man was practically drooling.

“I’m not telling! You will have to come see for yourself. It is awesome!” She saw Syrio and Merrel look at each other. Kiran and several other Druids had finished their breakfast. They all had smiles on their faces at the excitement of the teenage Stark girl. She did not mind. Their minds would be blown. She ran back out the room and down the hall. The stairwell echoed with Arya’s footfalls pounding back up the stairwell. The door burst open with Arya bounding out on the rooftop. Arya noticed a lot more people were out on the roofs now looking up and pointing. Most were laughing and happy but some for some reason seemed afraid.

She heard the more adventurous of her companions pounding up the steps. With the morning breeze blowing on her back Arya moved to the west edge of the building and looked up at the sky. Gods it was beautiful. She heard her companions coming out the stairwell and out onto the rooftop. The companions of the teenage direwolf moved to join her on the west end of the building. They were milling around and then she heard them quiet down and come up to stand beside her. Arya turned to her right and left to look at her companions. They were all staring to the west half way up from the horizon.

In that quadrant of the sky was a red comet that was so bright in the sky that Arya thought she could almost reach out and touch the comet. The skies had been cloudy for the last week continuously and the comet had been able to grow to its bright appearance in the sky now unseen. The head was large and seemed to glow and pulse in the sky. The tail was long and so red it looked like blood in the sky. Those looking at the comet tail saw the swirls in it that seemed to fray into eddies in the sky.

It was beautiful.

“Well I will be damned” Merrel softly spoke. He looked down at Arya. He stared intently at her for some reason. “I had only hoped … its true—the prophecies are all true.” The man looked up reverently at the sky again before turning his gaze back down at Arya. “It is only fitting that you be the first to see this” he murmured before looking up into the sky at the red comet again.

More and more people were coming up to the rooftops of King’s Landing and staring up at the red comet that silently marched across the sky. More of Arya’s companions streamed up to the rooftop to join her. They were murmuring among themselves as they craned their necks up to see the comet in the western sky.

She looked around her at all the people. They were so excited. She was excited. She was soon surrounded by most of her wolf pack. They were all talking and murmuring. She saw Matamion and Jaehaegar Velnalys come up onto the rooftop. Jaehaegar was helping Matamion who had his ribs set and tightly bound. He was grimacing leaning on his old friend. Their faces were filled with wonder seeing the red comet in the sky burning brightly.
They got excited. Arya had to smirk seeing Matamion grimace and hold his ribs. He calmed down after that as he talked to his fellow Valyrian in what Arya assumed must be high Valyrian. It was indeed a beautiful language.

Arya enjoyed the comet burning bright red in the sky. It was so beautiful. As she looked she quickly came to understand that almost all the adults saw portent in the comet in the sky. They were excitedly saying that it was satisfying prophecies they had heard and many believed in.

She heard the men from Westeros saying that the comet meant that a king would rise up and unite all of Westeros under his banner. That Westeros would enter into a golden age. Javer Goodbrook spoke of a prophecy he heard from the Iron Islands saying that the drowned god would sweep a large wave over all the land drowning the foes of House Greatjoy. Styve Grandison said he had heard of a prophecy from Qarth saying that the warlocks of the House of the Undying had said to look for such a comet. That when it appeared it meant that they would spread their influence over all the world.

She heard of prophecies from the Dothraki, Qohor, Highgarden, Volantis and other lands. The Valyrians were speaking to each other excitedly. She did recognize the world “Targaryen” many times. She smiled. Of course that white haired and purpled eyed people would have their own prophecies.

Arya was surprised that so many different people and cultures had a prophecy concerning of a red comet. She thought that was funny in itself. In fact she found it so funny she started to laugh hard. Her companions started to smile and chuckle looking down at her.

Syrio told her of a prophecy that said that Braavos would rule the Free Cities when a red comet was in the sky and their caregiver from Myr told him, no, it was Myr that would rule the free cities. She heard the Druids speaking of Wolves and Dragons excitedly.

Arya could not help her laughing. She fought a losing battle with the giggles. She in fact started laughing so hard she fell on the pebbles on the rooftop and rolled around. Rolling from side to side Arya laughed so hard she had to start holding her stomach. She saw many of her companions cease their inspection of the red comet and look down at her with soft smiles on her face.

Syrio got an exasperated look on his face after several minutes of watching his student make a fool of herself rolling around on the rooftop in front of him.

“Arya what is your problem girl. You are making a fool of yourself! What is so freaking funny Arya!” he half laughed down at her.

Arya sat up on her butt and looked around at all her companions and people she had come to think of as friends.

“I’m sorry. It is just so funny. I heard prophecies from around the world. I swear I heard twenty different prophecies that pertain to that comet we are all looking at. Each country or people look at that comet and they say it is for them. The comet appears now and because of the comet the prophecies say whom it speaks to will come into power or take over their enemies.

“Andddd?” Syrio asked her. He cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Don’t you see it Syrio! I mean you said that the red comet means Braavos will rule all the Free Cities and Phirona Ormonnis says that it is Myr that will come to rule the Free Cities. I heard various Houses of Westeros will rule the land. That is if the Drowned God doesn’t drown us all first. I heard Qarth will rule all. The Dothraki will have this Stallion Who Will Mount the World. The
Valyrians are all excited in their own tongue. The Druids are all excited about wolves and dragons.”

“Annndddddd?” Syrio asked again.

“You all can’t be right! Only one of the prophecies at most can be right!”

She saw the men and women looking down at her start at that. They then looked around at each other and started to smirk. They were beginning to see what Arya was saying. She knew that secretly that all thought that their own people’s prophecy was the true one.

“What do you think Arya?” Syrio asked her exasperated.

“Hell if I know Syrio. All I know is that a week ago that comet was not in the sky. Now it is. It won’t be there tomorrow or maybe it will be a month from now before it disappears. I just know it is pretty and will be gone soon. I am going to enjoy it while it lasts.”

“When you put it that way I can see your point” Syrio chuckled down at his disciple. He held his hand down to the young Stark girl and helped her up.

Arya had calmed down and looked around. “I hope I did not anger anyone with my laughter. It just struck me funny hearing all those conflicting prophecies claiming the red comet is meant for them.”

She saw smirks and laughter in the eyes of those around her. The only ones who seemed to have not noticed her antics were the three Valyrians. They were staring intently at each other speaking in their own tongue gravely. Merrel was with them talking to them in their native tongue.

Arya was impressed with that. She wished she could speak their language.

After ten minutes her companions started to filter back into the building. She watched Syrio go down. She wandered over to the group still on the roof. The Valyrians looked at her intently as she walked up. In fact they regarded her with such focus she started to feel awkward. Merrel seemed to notice and reached out and gripped her shoulder smiling.

“Forgive us Arya” he spoke and the Valyrians seemed to realize their stares and smiled at her.

Matamion grimaced and spoke “We see much in the comet like everyone else Arya Stark. We have many prophecies in our culture. There are a few that speak of a red comet. These prophecies say that Magic will return when a red comet is in the sky. That a Dragon Lord will rise out of the east and return with three dragons. We had hoped Viserys Targaryen was the prophesized one.”

“Who is he?”

“Was Arya. He was the son of King Aerys II Targaryen, the “Mad King”. He was killed by Khal Drogo. Rhaegar was his first son but he was killed at the Trident. All that is left is his sister Daenerys Targaryen. She is pregnant with Khal Drogo’s son. Some of us argue that she is the dragon” Matamion glanced at the female Valyrian standing beside him “but I believe that it is her son she carries to whom the comet portends.”

“What if she has a girl?” Arya asked. It was a fifty, fifty proposition.

Arya saw confusion come over the three Valyrian’s faces. They looked at each other and talked in their native tongue.

Matamion then turned his focus back to Arya “Well, we don’t know. It just has to be. The prophecy says only that the Dragon Lord will appear from the east. It must mean that a King will restore
House Targaryen to power and bring dragons back. These prophecies are clear that the Dragon Lord will come from the east. We had hoped it would be Viserys. He is dead now. Now we must wait another generation. Man that sucks.”

Arya looked at them confused again.

Merrel stepped in. “What they mean Arya is now they will have wait another generation for the Valyrian ruler to come back from the East. They will be too old to be any part of that return. Thus it ‘sucks’”.

Arya could understand that. She was now involved in first saving her father from death and now she was going to help him sit on the Iron Throne. She would never be forced to let that go by! She could understand Jaehaegar and Matamion’s consternation at thinking they were part of great times only to find out that return was yet a generation away.

She remembered hearing the name of Daenerys spoken in their high Valyrian.

“I can’t speak for your prophecy Matamion and Jaehaegar but these are great times. Help me restore my father to the Iron Throne. Help me in my hour of need” Arya asked the Valyrians in an intense voice. She looked them squarely in the eye making her appeal.

The two men and Valyrian woman smiled at her. Matamion spoke to her “I think we will. There is something Valyrian about you Arya Stark. You would have been a great wife to the Valyrian ruler. We had thought to go to Lys and find a Blackfyr wife for our future king. None could match your fire and passion though.” He paused and then laughed softly. “Of course he would have to have a strong ego. I feel you would be protecting him and not the other way around.”

The three Valyrians left talking in their beautiful tongue to go back downstairs. Saelalys Narennis paused before she went down the stairwell back into the building. The short Valyrian turned to look at Arya. “There are those of us Arya who feel the dragon is Daenerys. We are few and all female. Dragons can change sex. My companions confuse beliefs with reality. The future Queen will need a strong mate Direwolf. Remember this when the time comes.” She looked at Arya with her violet eyes. She was definitely considering saying something more. She tipped her head to Arya and was gone.

“Well that was strange” Arya said to herself.

She had not noticed that Merrel was still with her off to her right. “The Valyrian men are mistaken in their beliefs” he told Arya softly.

Arya turned to look at Merrel with a questioning look.

“The Valyrians like most societies are patriarchal. Our order could care less who rules: female or male. We are not blinded.”

Arya spent a few seconds deciphering what Merrel was saying.

“You are saying that this Daenerys is the prophesized one like Saelalys believes. Shouldn’t the Valyrian’s know their own prophecies?”

“As I was saying Arya, the Valyrians blind themselves. We have heard from our brothers in Essos. Ravens have come to us. We have not shared this news with any but you Arya. You are the Direwolf.” The man paused looking intently at Arya. After a long moment he shook his head in the affirmative. He had been satisfied in what he saw. “The child was still born. Daenerys Targaryen has brought three dragons into the world. She will end slavery and she will defeat the Ice King—“
“Who?”

“And take the Iron Throne. That part we are not sure of. Will it be Wolf or Dragon?”

“My father will be King! He is already married! To my mother!”

Merrel held up his hand. “That is true. You father taking the throne will be most fortuitous. That means our prophecies are ascendant. You are right Arya. Only one prophecy can be true.” He smiled down at hers. “You are making our prophecy take ascendancy and you do not even know it.”

“You have two older brothers do you not Arya?”

“Yes I do. Robb is the eldest. Well I think he is older than Jon. Jon is my bastard brother.”

“Is he?”

“Yes. My father had Jon with some woman he will not name to protect her honor.”

Merrel smiled at her. “What happened to your Aunt?”

“My father says she ran off with Rhaegar Targaryen. He says she was in love with him. She died from some malady.”

“Did your father see the corpse?”

“I … I do not know.”

“If Daenerys returns to Westeros as I predict she will she will need a spouse. Our prophecy speaks of the wolf and dragon becoming one.”

“Robb—‘Arya began.

“No Arya. Tell me of Jon.”

“Jon … but he is a bastard … he has no line to the throne. He has gone to the Wall to serve the Night’s Watch. He has taken vows.”

“Arya when it comes to the Iron Throne believe me, nothing is set in stone or is that iron.”

Arya groaned at his humor.

“Is Jon a good man? I am told he looks much like you.”

“Yes. My mother has always hated that the bastard looks like the father more than her own sons.”

“But what about you Arya.”

Arya snorted. “I am the black sheep of the family. My father has protected me from my mother and her stupid ways. Sansa may want to simper over some stupid boy or another but not me!”

“Yes. I have seen your fascination with Phirona Ormonnis and Saelalys Narennis.”

Arya could not stop herself. She blushed furiously.

“Don’t worry Arya. I will not tell anyone else till it is the proper time.”
Arya’s eyes went large. Was he threatening her?! The Druid saw the consternation in Arya’s eyes.

“I am sorry Arya. Let me rephrase that. I will not reveal your secret till you are ready. Though your father suspects.”

Arya’s eyes went even larger.

“Worry not Arya. Why do you think he won’t allow your mother to betroth you to anyone?

Arya sagged in relief.

“I now think we have blinded ourselves. I now see clearly. A dragon can change sex indeed.” He smiled down at Arya. “Remember this Arya. To a dragon all are the same in the end. I feel you and Daenerys Targaryen have much in common. Come Arya. It is time I negotiate with your father.”

“Negotiate with my father? What do you mean?”

“I will heal your father. It will be costly to me and I will demand a price. It is a fair price. Like the Faceless Men I require something precious from the persons I heal. Also, we will need to speak of your future.” The man smiled at her. “You have a dragon to tame.”

Arya eyes went large again. “You mean I will fly a dragon?!”

Merrel chuckled his eyes twinkling “In a manner of speaking. Come. Let us go and shape destiny my young Direwolf.”

Merrel took Arya down the stairwell to the second floor to the room that Eddard Stark was convalescing in. Arya was always happy to see her father. She smiled at what she saw. It had only been six days since her father had been saved from the dungeons of the Red Keep. He was looking so much better. His skin color had returned and he looked like he had begun to put weight back on.

Her father was sitting up and reading over some parchments. He looked up and smiled large seeing his daughter in the doorway.

“Arya! My daughter filled with the wolf! The daughter who saved me!” Eddard called out spreading his arms out wide. Arya ran to the bed and plopped down on the edge of the bed and leaned in hugging her father hard. He had first grimaced at that but he now pulled her in tight. He was indeed healing.

They spent several minutes making small talk about Eddard’s recovery and Arya filled in more details of how Syrio and herself had saved him. She told her father more about the Druids and Rhaegar’s honor guard coming to their aid. She also informed her father how Varys had come to their aid.

Eddard told his daughter that he had known that vaguely. Varys had said as much but he was so sick and malnourished that he had not truly understood much of what the eunuch had told him.

She then excitedly told her father of the comet in the sky and all the prophecies people were putting on it. She told him some of the various tales that had first intrigued and then filled her with humor. She noticed her father sat up straighter when she told him the prophecies concerning Daenerys Targaryen. He asked her and Merrel to repeat parts and was extremely interested in those prophecies concerning the Valyrians for some reason Arya thought. Maybe it was because of Daenerys’ father and what he had done to her grandfather.

Eddard was quiet for a minute staring out the window. He whispered to himself “I wonder. I had
hoped to save her life … I wonder if she still lives.” He shook his head. “Enough on prophecies and what will probably never be.”

“I am happy that you procured Varys’ aid Arya. You and Syrio have been most crafty and astute. I know I could have done no better and probably much worse. I should have listened to Varys. He and Littlefinger both betrayed me. In their defense, that occurred only after I refused to listen to them. Varys has earned a second chance. He showed great courage coming to you in the dungeon telling you that Joffrey had sent forces to retrieve me and take me to him. I would be dead now if that had occurred.”

“If Varys had not come to you, the battle would not have gone as well. If you had been attacked in the dungeon itself with you trying to protect my invalid self … I hate to think on what would have happened.”

“We will win you the Iron Throne father.”

The Druid now came forward. “I need to speak to you and Arya, Eddard Stark.”

The two Starks turned to face the man.

“Varys thought of me initially to save your leg. I can indeed restore your leg. It will be as before you had your horse fall on it.”

Eddard looked at the man. “I have seen too many injuries on the battlefield Merrel. I know the sad truth. My leg is ruined. I will never be able to walk on it. In the future I will need a cane to merely walk across a room. My fighting days are behind me. I will have to rely on others to fight my battles now. As much as that may gall me.”

“That you are mistaken in Eddard Stark.”

“Not even the Grand Maester of the Citadel itself could restore my leg. I know this Merrel.”

“You know of science. I am of magic. I can restore your leg. I will take your injury into myself. I helped to tend to your body when you first arrived. I know your body now. I can feel the returning strength to your body. I know your strength and the very structure of your body. I have listened to your speech as you have talked to your caregivers and to your daughter. I have heard the genuine gratitude in your words to Syrio Forel. I hear the honor and respect in your speak when you converse with the honor guard of Rhaegar Targaryen. You are able to see the good in your supposed foes.”

“I have learned you Eddard Stark. I can now take your injury into myself. It is a hard thing that I must do to restore your health. I will have to injure myself in the same way as you were injured. I will take the damage and the pain into myself. Unfortunately, you will have to relive the pain as it passes from you to me.”

Arya saw her father look at the Druid. The man had no reason to lie. Maybe there was magic in the world after all.

“But I will require a price from you Eddard Stark. You must meet his price. If it is not met I will not give my aid further. Nor will my fellow brothers and sisters. We will slip out of King’s Landing and leave you and Arya to your fate.”

Arya watched her father stare at the man. “So you would offer me aid and then remove it. That is not very honorable.”
“Neither is what House Stark has done to the land and to the Children of the Forest.”

“I don’t like what you are saying or how you are saying it Merrel!” Arya growled at the Druid standing up. No one attacked her father! Arya thought hotly. He was the greatest father ever! Arya saw her father calmly looking at the Druid.

Eddard reached out and gripped his daughter’s elbow gently and pulled her back down to sit on the edge of his bed. This calmed Arya and she now waited to hear more from the Druid. “What do you mean Merrel? I am listening.”

The Druid took a deep breath. “We—and I include all of the men since the coming of the first men have committed genocide against the Children of the Forest and to the very life of the continent. Wildlife had been slaughtered and butchered to near extinction. That needs stop. It must stop now.”

Arya saw her father giving the man his full attention.

“Yes. It was man that denuded this land and killed its original inhabitants, the First People, the Children of the Forest. But one house stood out in its slaughter of the innocents in the wood and glen. It was your House that butchered the First people mercilessly across the continent. Bran the Builder led the slaughterer of all who sought to maintain the old ways.”

“That is a fucking lie!” Arya’s father shouted starting to get up but crying out when his leg was jostled. Arya was shocked. Her father never cursed. He had to be truly upset.

“I fear not Eddard Stark. My fore parents were among those killed. The slaughter of the First People and Druids was so great that First People created the Ice King and his initial brothers. The Ice King is in fact a fallen Stark. He was vile and psychotic. Unfortunately, the Children of the Forest did not truly understand the human physic. They felt that the weapon they had created would attack those who had attacked him and sought his death. They thought his transformation would be greeted as a boon.”

“You cannot control such a weapon. Of course, he turned on them. The Ice King hates all of us equally.”

Arya saw her father was silent and had a troubled look on his face. He looked pale again. With a troubled look Eddard turned to look at Arya. The two held eyes for a long moment before Eddard returned his shaky gaze to Merrel.

“You feel the truth in your heart Eddard Stark. You know I speak true. In your heart you lament the passing of the Direwolf, Lion, Cave Hyena and Saber Tooth Cat. It is not too late. We can restore the Weirwood trees and their grooves. We can have peace and allow the Children of the Forest to thrive and repopulate. They have given up on revenge.”

“They wish to live in peace. Magic is coming back. Now is the time. We must strike this bargain now when all is possible. You will strike it and another will seal it. Will you do it?”

“The Druids have no concern with the Iron Throne or the matters of world politics. We only wish to restore the balance with the Earth and magic. You are the catalyst Eddard Stark. It is you who will allow the Dragon and the Wolf to lie together.”

Arya watched her father sit up straighter and close his eyes.

“How do I know you will do what you say?”

“I could tell you have my word but you have been betrayed by those you thought you could trust.
You must search your heart Eddard Stark. Let us form a partnership to save your throne and your kingdom and allow the Druids and the Children of the Forest to restore the land itself. It can be done.”

Eddard Stark opened his eyes. He looked at Arya Stark. She nodded yes. He turned his head to Merrel.

“Deal. You have my word. Do you trust me?”

“You and your daughter are the only two I do trust without question. Another comes also worthy of such honor and trust. Let us restore the continent.”
AN #1: One reader has expressed interest in Jaqen H'ghar getting POV chapters. Others have expressed a liking for the character. Let me know if you wish to have the Faceless Man promoted to POV character. He is not currently.

Insurrection

Setting the Table

CLACK CLACK CLACK … CLACK CLACK … CLACK CLACK CLACK

The sounds of wooden swords hitting each other filled the large room that had been emptied so Syrio Forel could train with his prized pupil Arya Stark. The two combatants were slashing and lunging forward with lightning speed. The force of their swords colliding was strong and sure.

Arya Stark continued to improve at a fast and steady pace. She was strong and fast. She had what most fourteen years old did not have. She had focus and she did not think she knew more than her master. He had trained many male youths back in Braavos. Masters always needed to bring up the next generation of Bravos weeding out the chaff to find the kernels that could be trained up. The true kernels were so few and far between.

Some could learn the physical aspects of wielding the sword but not the building of the body and the mind. All they could see was the glinting metal in their hand. This disciple was so different than all before. Arya wanted to learn it all and to constantly improve. She did all his exercises and ad hoc games with determination and seeming enjoyment. She listened to his lessons with rapt attention. She saw beyond cold tempered steel. Her sight was that of a true Water Dancer. It was the dance with the metal that truly mattered!

Yes indeed Syrio thought I have finally found my disciple.

Syrio lunged forward and Arya blocked his rapier thrust. She did not counteract!

“Arya! You must always counteract. Prosecute! Strike again, again, again and again! You must be tight as a drum, let your sword reverberate and strike fast and furious.”

Syrio lunged forward again his rapier lunging forward. This time Arya leaned right and her sword came up knocking his sword up with a sharp blow. This time she lunged forward with a sharp thrust. Syrio down chopped. Arya flicked her sword up blocking his and lunged forward hard her blade nearly finding his chest. He spun away to the left and pivoted low and came up.

His eyes went large when he saw Arya’s blunt wood sword tip nearly hit him in the temple. He staggered off to the left. He was slightly off balance. For the first time Arya Stark had truly surprised him. She had taken what he had taught her and morphed it to the moment. Without thought she had come up with a unique move for the moment and attacked.
Inside elation crowed in Syrio’s chest. He knew he had made the right choice but to see its first manifestations was intoxicating. Yes indeed. He had chosen wisely. Her foundation was founded on Stark resolve and honor. You could ask for much worse.

Her breathing was calm and her eyes focused. Arya was learning. Calm as still waters, quick as a snake! Still, she needed her master.

She had more to learn. Arya had so much more to learn. “Arya! Why did you stop? You saw that I was unbalanced for a moment. That was the moment to attack. You must always seek advantage.”

“But you are my Master. I-I-I …”

“Don’t worry about my ego Arya. I am a Water Dancer. I will only say this once. I am not perfect as hard as that may be to believe.”

He smiled seeing Arya roll her eyes.

“Seriously Arya. Always press an advantage. Press on to victory or until the advantage is lost and a new attack must be initiated. You must be like a rabid wolverine. Relentless and ferocious.”

Arya bowed to her master.

“Let’s practice our steps Arya. Back Back Left Right Left Left Forward Back Forward Back Right Forward Forward …”

Twenty minutes Syrio felt that Arya had learned all she could for the day. Arya’s ability to focus and hungrily learn was supreme. She was indeed like the Wolverine he wanted her to fight like.

“Stand on one foot for fifteen minutes with arms extended and then the other foot.” Arya immediately rose up on the ball of her left foot and extended her arms. Her eyes closed in concentration. Her body relaxed as she went to a place deep inside herself.

Syrio smirked. He had sensed that Arya had nearly asked him several times if he could do all the things he asked her to do. She wondered if he made these up and whether he had been trained thus when he was her age. A little mystery was good for the soul Syrio thought smugly to himself.

He prepared to leave. “When you finish that I want you to catch Pepper five times.” The tabby cat was lightning fast and quick to use his claws. Arya always caught him without a scratch now. Usually.

He was on the fourth floor of the building that the Druids owned as their secret headquarters in the capital of Westeros. It was Merrel who normally manned this bastion of Druid thought and heart. It was mostly abandon. The third floor was the storage floor and the Druids did their training and rituals there. Syrio had been invited to join them but he had bowed out from that. He had never been comfortable with religion. They had setup a large room for him to train his disciple in. The Druids also saw much promise in Arya Stark. They seemed to see the girl as the protector of this supposed reborn Dragon in the East. He sometimes picked up something more was expected by the Druids but he was not exactly sure what that could be. He could see the girl becoming the Queen’s First Sword. He liked the symmetry of that.

The house had filled with more Druids. Twenty-two more had arrived. The new men and women had come from the southern mountain ranges of the Vale and the Forests of the Rainwood Forest in their hidden communities on the South face of the Blackridge Mountains. The Holds of Crow’s Nest, Mistwood and Stonehelm did not even know of the Druids existence. The twisting deep vales perfect to have small communities hidden from view. Living as one with nature made for
communities that simply blended into the local woodlands and high vales.

He saw Nysah Coldrin looking at him with that direct gaze that he found unsettling. Her dark brown hair and eyes were intoxicating. Her fair skin so smooth and silky. Syrio shook his head. Women had always been trouble for him. They always played with his heart and then ran off to others. He supposed they sensed his first devotion had always been his sword.

He wondered now if that bargain had been worth it. Having everything go to shit made him wonder sometimes.

He went to the communal area on the first floor. He saw Saelalys Narennis ladling out the stew for the noon time meal that was being served. She smiled seeing him. “When are you going to start talking to Nysah? She is growing impatient. She may do a Wildling Hunt on your ass Syrio if you are not careful!” she said with a chuckle.

What the hell does that supposed to mean? Syrio wondered. Who were Wildlings? Sounded savage. He was not sure he wanted any part of this hunt.

He saw Merrel at a table on the back wall. He was oiling his Weirwood long bow. It was a work of art. The blinding white wood was a marvel to the sight. The wood seemed to gleam wetly with fresh clear sap. The middle part of the bow was carved into a complex pattern of intertwined tree limbs with the limbs gradually blending into the ends of the bow. Garlands of boughs with leaves seeming to sprout from the wood itself.

Syrio went to the Druid and sat down at his table. “Your bow is a beautiful piece of art Merrel. How old is that bow? It literally glows when you oil it.”

“This bow is over two thousand years old. It is handed down from one Master to the next. My grandfather used this bow. I was honored to be gifted it when I rose to the level of Master. We are not given a Long Bow till we have reached our full maturity and mastery.”

Syrio processed this. He was surrounded by the best of this peoples warriors. He was honored to fight beside them.

Without preamble Merrel addressed Syrio, “Nysah Coldrin grows impatient. She is besotted with you for some reason. She keeps going on about the ‘Water Dancer’. I think you two are most compatible.”

Syrio flushed hotly. He did not need to hear this. Women confused him!

He decided to change the subject. “So you feel that this Daenerys Targaryen is the fulfillment of the red comet over our heads.”

The Druid set his longbow against the wall and turned to give Syrio his full attention. “I do. I know why others will doubt her. From all reports she is only a slip of a girl. She is nothing like your Arya Stark. She is gentle and genteel. She does not have the fiery spirit of the warrior in her. She will acquire power though guile and gumption.”

“Of course she has to survive. We have just received a raven from across the world. She has fled into the Red Wastes. We do not know if she will survive. She has gone into the crucible of her destiny. If she survives, and I know she will, she will come out the Red Wastes a force to be reckon with.”

“What will happen then?”
“It is humorous my answer” Merrel smiled softly a Syrio. “We do not know. Quite frankly, Eddard Stark was supposed to do die and Arya was to flee into the wilds of Westeros and eventually wind up at the House of Black and White and become an avatar of death. Those were the prophecies that we thought were ascendant. Of course the words involved a lot of animals, hallucinogenic mumbo jumbo and phrases that could mean anything. But it was seemed that Eddard must die. Only two prophecies had the ‘grizzled wolf’ surviving.”

“This is good. Otherwise the Dragon would eventually lose her way and fall into despair and folly. Now she has a chance to survive. She has many curses working against her. Only the love of someone who can be completely true will save her.”

Syrio harrumphed. “Like such a man exists.”

“Yes” Merrel replied. “Like such a man could exist. Maybe we should look elsewhere.”

*What the hell did that mean* Syrio wondered? What was it with these vaguely worded prophecies?

Eddard was trying hard to not complain like a child at the two women who were caring for him. They were doing an excellent job he knew. He was just having a hard time adjusting to being an invalid and needing to be cared for. He was used to being the person that everyone else came to find support.

He squint smiled at Phirona Ormonnis and Saelalys Narennis as they tended to his needs. He squirmed when they adjusted his pillows and straightened out his blankets. They were both beautiful he had to admit. It was obvious they were lovers and wore matching rings. He knew of several gay couples in Winterfell. He did not care what people did behind closed doors.

He knew of homosexuals but had never really focused on them. Seeing these two women up close was kind of eye opening for the Warden in the North. Conceptually, he knew there was no difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality but seeing it every day really brought that into focus. There was no difference.

He wondered what he would do if any of his children were gay. He would deal with it he supposed. He grimaced. Dealing with his wife, Catelyn Tully, would be another matter. That would be a battle royal.

Merrel came in and the two women bowed to Eddard. “We will serve you faithfully when you ascend the Iron Throne Eddard Stark. We would hope you will remember us.”

Eddard bowed his head. He looked at Merrel with a question in his eyes.

“They hope you will show equal justice for all your subjects. No matter their proclivities. The matter may strike closer to home than you might think.”

*What the hell did that mean* Eddard wondered? For a moment Arya came to his thoughts but shook his head. Why would he think of his youngest daughter now? The daughter who had saved him. He focused on what Merrel had asked him. “I will treat all my subjects with equal justice … but … we are putting the cart before the horse. I still have to gain the throne.” He moved his crippled leg. Or should he say he tried to move his crippled leg. “I am still a cripple.”

Eddard saw the man smile. “Oh yea of little faith … be prepared. The time is soon coming Eddard Stark.”
Eddard looked at the man and gave him a soft smile. He would believe it when he saw and more importantly, felt it. His leg was always aching and stiff. He felt like Doran Martell in Dorne. He wondered how Willas Tyrell seemed to accept becoming a cripple with such equanimity.

Eddard had to admit. A large part of his problem was ego. He had been one of the best swordsman in Westeros. With Barristan Selmy gone he really wondered if anyone else was even close to his equal on the battlefield. Damn! To be brought down by a fucking horse falling on him. He ground his teeth like Stannis Baratheon.

That stopped him. He would not become that stick up his ass man.

"What I really need are some ravens. I need to counteract the missives of Cersei Lannister. I know she has sent ravens to Casterly Rock. Her father must surely be well on the way to King’s Landing. He would have sent out a quick strike force before him to give the quickest succor. Distance to Casterly Rock has given us time. The forces of Jamie Lannister and Gregor Clegane I am sure are creating chaos but when Tywin arrives with more forces from the West it will make any future conflicts more deadly and increase the loss of life."

"I need to get Catelyn’s father Hoster Tully to mobilize and attack the forces of the Lannisters. He is fading but I am sure he will go to his son Edmure. He will be anxious to call up arms. I will get them to attack the flanks of the advancing Lannister forces. He will harass their forces and force them to slow and pull back to meet that threat. While that is happening I need to send ravens to the Vale. I would send them to Lyssa Tully but also the major lords of the Vale. I do not trust her at all. I have learned to follow my inner doubts."

"I just need ravens!"

Merrel chuckled out loud.

"Does my distress given you humor Merrel?" Eddard asked in a harsh bark. *He did not like being mocked!*

The man held up his hand. "I would never mock you Eddard Stark."

Eddard calmed. Was he that easy to read?

"I laugh because you are in the care of Druids. Ravens are our brothers. We don’t need to train our ravens to go. We can talk to our brothers directly. They have an instinctive map of all of Westeros and Essos bred into them. They are not limited to only a few locations they can travel too. We can get messages to wherever you need them."

Eddard perked up. This was unexpected news. He felt a surge of energy and hope burn through his body. Then doubt entered his mind.

"How is this possible Merrel? We need to spend years training ravens to fly to specific locations and back." Eddard felt his hope start to fade.

"Eddard Stark. Being in tune with nature has its advantages. We do not warg with our ravens as your people can with the animals of the North especially the Direwolf. But Ravens are very intelligent animals. Through countless years of close association and love we have formed an intimate bond with our ravens. Generations of humans and ravens have formed a strong bond that allows us to ask almost anything of our ravens and they understand us."

"Our ravens want what is the best for the land as we do. They will aid us. Write your messages Warden of the North. They will be delivered post haste. I will bring in a map of Westeros. Show
me where they need to go and I will make sure they arrive at their destinations in all possible haste.”

“I know of these Lions of Lannister. Their leader is despotic in his actions if not in his intentions. His two eldest are selfish and besotted with each other. It blinds them to what they could be. That will soon change. We Druids despise war but we have learned our lessons well Eddard Stark. Pacifism is for losers. We will fight for the world this time.”

“Why do you seek to help me if my family is so soiled and dishonored?” Eddard had to ask perplexed. “From what you tell me my family is largely responsible for genocide and the very creation of the Ice Wrights.”

“Do you doubt it Eddard?”

“No. I can feel it in my heart that the words are true though I am befuddled as to how this could have happened. The legends … the legends make us to be heroes of the land. Of Westeros. This is hard to take.”

“Eddard Stark.” Eddard came out of his musings at the harsh tone. He looked at Merrel. He saw no anger or rancor. “If you had been alive then; none of this would be now. That is the past. This is the now. We can only make amends and seek a new path. Will you do that?”

Eddard squared his shoulders. “I am not what I was but I will give my all. The Lannisters cannot be allowed to stay on the Iron Throne. That is imperative. If I succeed in disposing them I will not turn aside from the Iron Throne again. I have seen the result. Will I be any better than the others? I do not know but I doubt I can be any worse.”

The Druid smiled at him. “You and your daughter are the answer to many prayers Eddard Stark. Write our letters.”

The Druid left him. Eddard stared at the door. The dye was cast. It was time to take a throne. He took a deep breath at that thought. He had to strike hard and fast. He had cast his lot.

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Merrel was putting his items together. The need to leave King’s Landing to heal Eddard Stark was imperative. To restore the man he would need to be in his center of power. The wound had occurred to long ago for any other option. The center of his power would be in his home hamlet in the depths of the Kingswood. Merrel would need his full strength to restore Eddard’s leg and his full strength.

He had returned to Eddard an hour later. The man was stumped. He did not have his personal house seal. It had of course been stripped from him by the Lannisters. He was afraid that Holster and Edmure would think his message was fake without signet seal.

Merrel suggested to Eddard that he come up with something he had shared only with the men. Hopefully, that would be enough. The man’s eyes had light up at that. He remembered how Edmure had begged Eddard to be allowed to come to help free Aunt Lyanna from her ‘vile plight’. He had been much too young at the time. Eddard wrote of some of the wild boasts that Edmure had made in trying to convince Eddard of his prowess with a sword. With Holster he wrote of the doubts he had expressed to the man the day he came to marry Catelyn. He again barred his soul to the man. How he did not measure up to his brother Brandon. Hopefully, that would be enough.

The Warden of the North did not have the intimate contact with the Lords of the Vale. They would have to believe in his words. Merrel watch Eddard write these missives to the Vale. The man did
have a beautiful distinctive script writing and his words were stirring. Only time would tell. The man was highly thought of by the Druids. Their whole order had been highly upset when he did not take the Iron Throne a generation ago.

So much lost time. Robert Baratheon’s dissipation had unfortunately also caused Westeros to fade and dissipate as well.

The main prophecies had predicted a devastating war among the houses and then with the Ice Wright King. Hopefully, all that could be averted now.

The ravens even now were winging west and north to deliver Eddard’s pleas for loyalty and fealty. Merrel could not control their response. He could only do what he could to help Eddard Stark take the Iron Throne. He knew the man would honor his pledges to him and his fellow Druids. It could only be a start. The man and the Dragon Queen would have to institute systemic changes that would take generations to become the lay of the land. It would be hard but the process had to begin sometime and there was no reason to not begin now.

The sun was setting. He would be leaving soon. Varys knew of the tunnels of the Red Keep intimately. The eunuch knew of the tunnels that branched out of the Keep to various buildings in King’s Landing near the Red Keep. The man did not know of the tunnels that the Druids knew of. The man was only interested in the Game of Thrones aspect of power and pulling of levers of power. Varys focused on the political only.

Thus, the man did not know of the tunnels that riddled King’s Landing that catered to the true common man. What did the common man use tunnels for? Economics. All major cities that were walled used that wall to control the inflow and outflow of goods. It was used to control the coming of persons in and out of the cities. This was to control the populace but also to help identify and tax the new immigrants trying to get the City’s pound of flesh as the saying went. The governments always wanted to tax heavily the new immigrants. They had no power to resist. They had to pay up to enter the cities. There was no other recourse for them.

That was where the tunnels came in. With these tunnels commerce was brought into the cities and sold on the black market. New immigrants entered the cities without notice and without being taxed and put on the government’s lists. These tunnels allowed the everyday man to survive government regulation and taxation.

The Druids had always identified with the common man. The rich and power were interested only in themselves really. You had the rarity of an Eddard Stark (and thus the need to strike now) but most rulers sadly were much more like Daenerys Targaryen’s father or Robert Baratheon.

The Druids thus knew of all these smuggling tunnels. He left his home and slowly walked down the street in the increasing gloom of dusk. He was dressed not in his Druid robes but in the everyday dress of a merchant of King’s Landing. He was just another common man. Unnoticed and uncared for. Like a chameleon Merrel simply blended into the background of Flee Bottom.

Merrel walked down the busy streets. Merchants were going home that worked at producing goods. But the streets were also filled with people going to places to eat and taverns to seek some alcohol and maybe a brothel to get the pleasures of the flesh. He slowly winded his way towards the Dragon Gate on the North wall of King’s Landing. Most of the guard forces were concentrated on the King’s Road and Gold’s Road gates and also along the water. The traditional invasion routes into King’s Landing.

He walked up the streets and enjoyed the bustle of life and vitality that the common man always brought to any environ.
He was nearing the Old Gate. He could see the curtain wall clearly now over most of the buildings. He took a right down a small street. He walked down for a hundred yards and then took a left down a large alley for fifty yards and then took a narrower alley to his right. He was now in a warren of ever narrowing alleys. He came to the rear of a butcher’s shop. He pulled out a key and put it in the locked door. He inserted the key and entered the rear of the establishment. He went behind the line of hogs hanging by their hind hooves and being bleed out for tomorrow’s preparation.

He moved past the corpses of the swine and pushed out a set of crates that would seem to be heavy. They were empty and made of balsa wood. He pulled open the door that led into the tunnel that went to the small hamlet outside of the Old Gate that had grown to half a mile square now. The buildings spawning more buildings like young fish fry. The hamlets ever growing. These people were happy to live outside the walls. Until an army invaded and then they would flee into the City proper.

Merrel entered into the tunnel and gripped the ropes that were attached to the false crates and slowly pulled them back against the wall. He then crawled down the small access tunnel. The small tunnel emptied into the main smuggler’s tunnel. He could now walk fully upright. To hide in plain sight, Merrel had wrapped his package in paper that made it look a large slab of beef. His longbow and quiver at his side. He came to the backpack he had put in the tunnel this afternoon. It was in a hidden alcove up above normal eyesight.

He passed several smugglers brining in red leaf. He greeted them warmly. Smugglers were a brotherhood.

He walked on. He was good with distances. He was now under the City’s curtain wall. He kept on walking soon. He came to a side tunnel. This one he took. Soon he was at another small tunnel that angled up. He took that tunnel and came to a door. He took a key out and put it in the lock. He entered into the back of large flower stall. Women were busy restocking supplies for tomorrow. They saw his entry but were not worried. They smiled genially but in general ignored him. They had a business to run. Merrel walked through the business.

He went outside past the flower stalls. There Merrel saw the horse that had been tethered there. He unleashed it from the hitching post and mounted the horse. With his knees he nudged the horse into motion. The horse started down the road leading away from King’s Landing.

He would first go to Rosby and then take the Fisherman’s Road to the coast. From there he would take a fishing vessel across Blackwater Bay. He would sail across the bay and land on the South shore of the bay. Within half a day he would be back home in the Kingswood.

Soon he would be home. Then he would be able to heal Eddard Stark. It was then the true changes would begin.
Syrio politely knocked on the door. He waited and heard the grunted “come in”. Syrio opened the door and entered the room. He saw Eddard Stark hobbling by the dresser on the back wall. He had a walking cane in his right hand jammed into the floor. He turned to look at Syrio grimacing. He was finishing putting on his blouse shirt. He had his pants on with the leg split up to the hip on his right leg.

He grunted as he grumbled hobbling back to the chair by the table the Warden of the North was using as his staging area on his campaign against the forces of the Lannisters.

The Warden of the North had received his first responses back from Riverrun and Houses of the Vale. The man had been reading them since they had started to come back from the Vale Lord Holds. Like a bear with a maimed paw, Eddard slowly and painfully scooted across the floor to the chair. Syrio went to help the man but he was waved off. Syrio could understand the man’s thinking. For a warrior to have his body betray him was hard. It did not matter that his body was harmed by a horse that fell on it. Eddard felt betrayed.

Eddard’s body tottered like a spinning top running out of momentum. Eddard made the chair and pivoted around and plopped down unceremoniously. Syrio watched the man pull the slit open on his right leg. The sight that greeted Syrio made him grimace. The knee area was a mass of still mottled flesh that was swollen. Syrio could see massive calcium deposits around the lower bones near the knee. The joint was permanently ruined.

If Merrel did not come through with his magical healing of the injury, Eddard Stark was a cripple for life. It was shame the fallen Water Dancer thought. Syrio was not sure he could continue living with such an injury. An injury not even delivered from a blade, spear or arrow. Eddard was a legend with his sword. He was the equivalent of a First Sword; just Westerosi style. Syrio could see himself going out to a wooden glade with the sun beaming down on him and falling on his rapier piercing his heart. He could not go on from such an injury.

Sava Cartwell a druid from the Vale was a healer of traditional medicine. She had given Eddard an ointment to put on his leg to ease the pain and promote some flexibility in the knee joint. Eddard grabbed the small ointment container and removed the top and put some of the medicinal concoction on his knee. The man’s face showed that the ointment had some pain relieving properties as well.

Eddard sighed and looked at the scrolls that had been on the ravens that had returned from the Riverlands and the Vale.

“Can I ask what the responses have been? I will understand if you do not. I am only your daughter’s sword instructor” Syrio asked the Warden of the North.

Syrio watched the man put down the scroll he had picked up and looked up at Syrio. “You have every right to ask me anything Syrio Forel. You saved me. You saved my daughter. You may have saved the realm. I think you have earned the right to ask me anything.” Eddard gave Syrio a squint smile.
“I have received responses back both from the Riverlands and the Vale. I was sure and have been proven right that Riverrun will answer my call to raising their banners. Holster and more probably Edmure are already organizing forces to threaten Hornvale and Golden Tooth. I advise to not attack but merely to threaten and harry. Force the castles to close their gates and send ravens to Casterly Rock. They are sending ravens to Stoney Sept and the holdfasts around Harrenhal to marshal forces and attack the Gold Road where it loops into House Tully lands. Again I am advising to harry and harass only. My main goal is to make Tywin Lannister slow his movements toward the Red Keep. Dundarion is leading the forces from King’s Landing against the Lannisters marauding in the Crownlands.”

We cannot fight the Westerlands without a great loss of life. I have a better idea. I just need time to implement them.

“The responses from the Vale are more problematic. I sent a raven to the Eyrie, to Lyssa, the sister to my wife Catelyn Tully. Her answer was as I expected unfortunately. Damn it! She will not commit any forces to my cause. She says she must make sure the vale is safe. That Jon Arryn’s heir is held safe.”

Syrio watched the man sigh. He looked out the window that was open letting in the warm breeze.

“I expected that from Lyssa. I am not sure what her game is. She seemed evasive. It was almost as if she was waiting guidance. I only wish I knew from whom. She clearly awaits directives. I will not rely on her. Fortunately, I have other resources.”

“The Druids seeming unlimited supply of ravens that can go to any location desired in Westeros is a god’s blessing. I sent ravens to every house in the Vale stating my need. I also told them that the children of Cersei Lannister are not Robert Baratheon’s and, thus, are the issue of incest. This cannot stand.”

“The Targaryens married sister to brother. Why is this different? Seems hypocritical from an Essos point of view.”

The man looked up at him regarding him.

“Actually, I agree in the philosophical sense. Still Robert Baratheon did not produce any true heirs. I could give a rat’s ass really about Cersei’s children being by Jamie her brother. It was protecting them that got me in his situation. I will protect them still. Now, I will bring down Cersei Lannister and capture Jamie Lannister and bring him to justice for that and for throwing my son Bran down from the broken tower in Winterfell.”

Syrio watched a feral look come across Eddard’s face. “I will have justice!” the man barked out. Syrio’s head jerked back and his eyes widened. This was the first time he had seen such an outburst from the man.

“And the children? Joffrey is a shit but the two youngest are innocents in the Game of Thrones. They will be put to the sword?”

“You do not know me Syrio. You will see.” Eddard’s tone told Syrio that this avenue was closed to further conversation.

“Fortunately, some of the Houses of the Vale have answered my call to banners. They are not
sending much but it is what I need. The houses Waynwood, Redfort, Belmore and of course Nestor Royce recently relieved of his duties by Lyssa is joining the cause. The lesser Houses of Corbray and Pryor have also aligned with me. The others will heed Lyssa’s call to stay neutral for now.”

“They are sending two thousand archers and three thousand light horse.”

“Don’t you need knights to fight an army?” Syrio asked knowing the Westerosi penchant for them.

“House Lannister is too powerful to be taken on with the forces they can muster without Lyssa’s support. I need for them to harass and get the attention of Tywin Lannister. I need to have Tywin diverge his forces that are heading to King’s Landing. He has a long line of communication and wagon trains very vulnerable to attack. When they are heavily threatened he will need to meet that threat.”

“By threatening Hornvale and Golden Tooth they will send ravens for succor from Lannisport. Tywin will have to heed their call for aid. This will delay him and reduce the forces he can bring to King’s Landing.”

“He will have to consider the forces potentially arrayed against and where the next attack will come from. While this is happening Robb, my son, is calling banners in the North and marshalling the hosts for war. I have advised him to fully organize and train up his forces for a month before he does anything if he does not hear from me more. He is untried in war. I will send more ravens when I get a better feel for the forces I can bring to bare on the battlefield.”

“What of the other houses?” Syrio asked.

“I have not sent word to them yet. I need my signet ring. I had not realized just how valuable it is.”

“Get it.”

“How am I supposed to do that with a hornets nest for of Red and Gold Cloaks in the Red Keep? I can’t exactly go up to the gates and ask for it.”

Syrio snickered at the man’s aspirated attitude. “You have Varys. Let him go find it. I bet no one is even thinking about it.”

Syrio saw Eddard’s mouth hanging open. He shook his head. “I am still out of my depths when it comes to the Game of Thrones I see. He is supposed to visit tonight. I will ask him. Again I am in your debt.

Now was the time Syrio thought?

“I know how you can repay me your supposed debt” Syrio told Eddard.

The smile left Eddard’s face and he looked at Syrio with a taciturn visage. “Anndddddd?” His tone now wary.

“I wish to ask that Arya Stark become my student in full. I have chosen her to be my disciple. I have waited over ten years for her to come to me. You did that service for me when you took me into your service.”

Eddard looked perplexed. “I asked you to train my daughter to make her happy. Isn’t this taken it a little far?” Eddard asked Syrio. He did not appear angry or have a flippant attitude. He was merely unsure why a fallen Water Dance would be asking him such a question. “Don’t you want some strong strapping male student?”
Syrio shook his head. “I expected better from your Eddard Stark. The sex of a person matters not in the Water Dance. Only the skill. Only the dedication. Only the desire to learn. I had not found all three of these qualities in any of the students I took on in Braavos.”

Eddard looked at him. “That was until I asked you to train my daughter. That is what you are saying isn’t it.”

“Yes, Eddard Stark, Warden of the North. You have gifted me with what I have so longed for. A student who is worthy of that I have to teach them. A student who truly wants to learn for the sheer sake of learning. A student who will do all that I ask. A student who will train tirelessly and relentlessly. A student who has the fire in their belly to be great. A student who is fearless in battle.”

“I wish you could have seen your daughter Eddard as we fought to save you. She was truly the Direwolf of your standard. She was absolutely ruthless in battle and did not hesitate to fight her foes. In fact I had to hold her back. She is truly your daughter.”

“You would take on a teenage girl then. This is not done in Westeros.”

“I am from Essos. We are more enlightened. I am not dissuaded by one’s sex. I see the ability.”

Syrio waited for Eddard Stark. The man sat looking at him for a minute. He then looked out the window for a minute watching the drapes waft in the breeze.

“It is funny how things work Syrio. I hired you simply to make my daughter happy and to get some peace from her wild wolf nature. She reminds me so much of my sister Lyanna Stark. She too chaffed under the restrictions placed on her by my father.”

The man stopped talking. A faraway look filled his face. Syrio knew Eddard’s thoughts were in the past a generation back. A sad look came over Eddard’s visage. He took a deep breath.

“It is said that a son should learn from his father and try to become more than him.” Eddard looked up at Syrio with his steel grey eyes regarding him. Studying him and testing his mettle. “I would like to think I have learned from the past.”

Eddard painfully stood up and looked Syrio in the eyes. He stuck out his hand and Syrio took it smiling.

“Train her well Syrio. Let Arya Stark become what my dear sister Lyanna was not allowed to be. Let the wolf howl and run free. I give you my daughter to teach. Let her become a Water Dancer. You have my blessing.

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Merrel stepped off the fishing skiff he had hired to take him across Blackwater Bay. He had taken four days to ride to Rosby and a day to ride to the coast and find a ship. He had taken a route that was not traveled but by merchants and the locals. He wanted to avoid any possible troop movements. He had his bow and quiver hidden in rolled blankets he knew experienced soldiers might guess what the long shape wrapped in blankets might be.

It had taken a day to sail across the bay. It was now the seventh day and he had landed at Backhorn a small fishing village. He purchased a filly and tac and was soon on the road, Woodcroft Lane that would take him to the Kingswood that was a hazy mirage on the horizon. He took a steady gait. He was in no hurry. Once they entered the forest the lane would be bumpy and full of ruts and tree roots jutting up. This lane was for locals and not for commerce.
To go any faster would put the horse in danger. In two hours they entered the edge of the forest. Here the forest was old growth with thick trunks and plenty of undergrowth. Large brambles and between the large trees were a plethora of small trees that thrived in shadow and had canopies that topped out at between ten and twenty feet to not compete with the towering behemoths of deciduous trees with their broad limbs jutting out massive trunks.

Lichen, moss and ferns covered the ground, fallen trees and up along the first two or three feet of the massive tree trunks. The air smelled of mold and ancient detritus moldering. It was a rich smell of death and decay that gave rise to new life.

The horse plodded on. The trail going ever deeper into the forest. The dappled light falling like comets to the ground in bright tails of light that could dazzle riding out of glooming shadow.

It was roughly twenty miles to the King’s Road that ran all the way to Storm’s End. The road narrow but well maintained though official traffic was limited. Still it was a major route used by armies when moving on the coastlands of the Crown and Storm Lands of the House of Baratheon. Commerce did travel the road from King’s Landing to Storm’s end. Still the road was little used compared to above King’s Landing.

One hour past noon he came upon a clearing caused by a falling tree knocking down another in its path of destruction down to the ground. The cataclysm long ago. The branches long ago rotted away and only the massive trunks remaining. The old rotting wood covered in a thick green carpet of moss and ferns with little white flowers blooming. The canopy overhead still partially open to the sky as a new tree had risen up to fifty feet and greedy tree boughs creeped in from the side.

Here Merrel stopped and sat on the smaller tree trunk and ate hard tack and beef jerky. He had purchased two saddle bags stuffed them full of oats. Merrel feed the horse half of one bag and the horse supplemented it by cropping some grass able to grow in the partial sunlight. He drank from his canteen and the horse from a small rill.

They proceeded on. Merrel would cross the King’s Road near midnight. He wanted to cross the one major thoroughfare through the Kingswood when no one would be traveling. Wovles, bears, wolverines, badgers, pumas and a few cave lions still roamed these woods. Other fell beasts prowled the depths of the woods. Fearsome beast that had still learned to fear man and avoid him. Their safety relying on stealth and avoidance of man to remain unknown and legends of past times.

He slowly walked on. The druids were at peace with the woods. The animals knew they were protected by the Druids and let them be and even watched over them when the druids passed through their territories.

A little after dusk Merrel took another break to let his horse rest and eat more oats and drink from a small stream. He ate his travel fare. They were making good progress.

At midnight they crossed the King’s Road and traveled a mile further down the animal paths that only the wildlife and the Druids knew of. In a thinning of the trees from a forest fire several generations past Merrel came upon a small lodge built by the Druids hidden in a thick bramble thicket. Merrel hobbled his horse and went inside to the simple bed frame and the lichen and piled hay that lay on it. The Druids keeping the lodge stocked with food and clean bedding.

The next morning, Merrel refreshed moved on. He slowly took hidden paths and animal tracks that angled South by East heading at an angle to the headwaters of the Wendwater River. He crossed several large streams that fed that river over the next two days. The land slowly starting to undulate as low sharp rolling hills, gullies, small valleys and razorback ridges now sprung up from the Earth.
Merrel took paths that only the Druids and the few hardy woods folk that lived on this land knew of. Like the Druids they lived in peace with the land not harming it and only taking what they needed to live well. They did not follow the Druids religion but lived in peace with their neighbors. None had any use for the Crown and its politics.

Merrel moved on. The paths skirting the most arduous of the barriers that led into a wild land. In the distance Merrel heard the roar of lions, jaguars and saber tooth cats that still thrived hidden deep in the woods. He heard the barking laugh of cave hyenas and rough grunts of bears and cave bears. He moved on. His lack of fear calming his horse.

On the fifth day they entered the home territory of his coven of Druids. He was now in his seat of power. He could perform his magic now. He merely needed to find the proper ground. He had eaten continuously and slept peacefully in the hidden Druid lodges. The lodges filled with hay and oats for the horses that the Druids rode through the forest and tended their small garden patches. He traveled up slowly the face of a seven hundred foot high escarpment along switchbacks that slowly carried them higher and higher. The trees clinging to the rocky ground hiding his ascent. The path hidden underneath the trees was wide enough for safe passage.

He finally came out to a large clearing in a hidden plateau hidden between three high riding ridge lines. The plateau was tree rimmed but as he moved his horse in the plateau the center of it was over two hundred feet across and was filled with rocky shelfs but also several grassy pastures. His horse would have fodder. He fed it the rest of his oats from one of his satchel bags. The horse happily munched on the proffered food. Merrel hobbled the horse as it grew sleepy having eaten its fill of the last of the oats.

The headwaters of the Wendwater was now only fifteen miles distant. Merrel looked around on his homeland. The land was still like it was before the coming of the first men. It was rich and luxuriant and full of life. Eddard Stark and Daenerys Targaryen would make sure it continued and begin the restoration. The forest would grow back to its original dimensions. It would take centuries. The land would over time be healed. The Children of the Forest would come back and restore the balance with the restoration of the Weirwoods.

Each great endeavor must begin with the first step.

No matter how painful.

The Druid sat down on cross legged on a rock shelf and turned inside himself. He calmed his breathing and called to mind his memories of Eddard Stark. He had learned his body helping the caregivers when he had first arrived. He knew when the man had been brought to him this moment would come.

Most of the prophecies had said that the lions would decimate the wolves till the dragon queen came and only then would the remaining wolves again rise up in ascendancy. Eddard Stark had been prophesized to die. Only two prophecies had said that another path would be followed. Two prophecies verses a multitude of others foretelling that said the man would die.

He had been shocked when the man’s daughter appeared on his doorstep stating that they would save her father and that he would heal her. He had been so shocked to see the wolf cub before him. The wolf cub who would tame the dragon.

It had taken time to save Eddard from the dudgeons. That passed time now forced the Druid to seek the locus of his power to heal the man. If he could have prepared himself when the injury occurred he could have healed Eddard from King’s Landing. Too much time had passed.
No matter. He was in the center of his power now.

For the rest of the day and through the night the Druid centered himself. The cold of the night did not affect him. He was at peace with himself and with the world.

The sun was now rising up to the noon hour of the next day. The time had come in the day when Eddard Stark had been injured. He roused himself. He was ready.

His horse was cropping grass. He pulled off his cloak and stood naked. He wasted no time. He opened the satchel bag and dumped out the full load of oats out of the satchel. He gripped the horse’s head and looked into its eyes and spoke to the horse telling him to remain calm and not run away.

The horse flicked its ears and shook his head. The Druid smiled. He hoped the horse would not bolt. Horses could be easily spooked.

He wasted no time. He had not put the saddle back on the horse. He pulled himself up on the horse. He walked it over to rocky shelf. He gripped the horse’s main and twisted its head and used his mind to make its right leg collapse. The horse toppled down on the Druid shattering his right leg.

Merrel’s screams filled the air. Then he passed out.

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Eddard looked out the window in his room. In some ways Eddard felt like this room was his prison. He felt like an invalid with his shattered leg. His leg was paining him less each day. That was not to say it was not still throbbing with still regular stabs of almost excoriating pain. He could feel his leg locking up as the bones fused in their unnatural positons. He grimaced knowing he would be a cripple who could not move without the need of a cane.

He would never be able to fight his battles again. He would forever more need to rely on others to fight the physical battles. It galled his ego and worried his soul. To be brought low by a falling horse made Eddard want to growl in anger. To be laid low and not even by a foe.

Eddard shook his head. It was one way to learn a lesson in humility.

The Warden of the North saw movement down on the lane below. He smiled. He saw his daughter running first in circles and then juiking right and left and then tearing off to the left down the lane. She was chasing a Bengal cat that was hissing and leaping around avoiding Arya. She lunged forward but the cat twisted its back and bolted to the right and down an alley between two buildings. Arya tumbled on the ground and righted herself like the cat she was chasing and was off pursuing the cat down the alleyway.

He smiled. His daughter loved all her Water Dancer lessons with Syrio and gave each task her all.

He looked up as two ravens came flying up to the roof. More messages coming back to the headquarters as Eddard now thought of Merrel’s home. He was in some ways in heaven. Having a large flock of ravens at his beck and call (he stopped and grimaced at the inadvertent pun). The ability to communicate anywhere within Westeros as fast and often as he needed was almost intoxicating. He was not sure since he did not drink. He smirked. He was in wry humor today.

The news had been good. Edmure had already formed up small parties that were riding east and beginning to find the Lannister wagon trains and harassing them. The Houses near the Crownlands had located the leading forces of House Lannister and ambushed them twice with heavy losses to the Lannisters.
He had sent word to Berric Dondarrion by raven too. Having ravens that could fly to a person and not a point was again astounding. He had told the man to stop attacking directly and move to hit and run attacks. The idea to unsettle his enemies and save his forces. He had reinforcements coming but it would be a while before they arrived.

The forces from the Vale had begun their march to his aid but it would be a month before they arrived. He would have them too harass and snipe the enemy.

He had sent more ravens asking them to find his wife Catelyn and her prisoner the dwarf Tyrion Lannister and bring them to King’s Landing.

They had answered. They were sending out scouts to find her. If she could be found she would be. She would be kept safe and Tyrion Lannister would be brought to King’s Landing to justice.

It was his son Robb who was marshalling and training hurriedly in the North who would be his main force. Robb would lead the Army that would fight any true war if Eddard could not fulfill his nascent plans. Many were only taking form but he was beginning to see the clear route to a victory with little death and destruction for all involved.

After he had set his initial forces of the North and his traditional allies, Eddard Stark turned his focus on the rest of Westeros.

He sent more ravens to the other strongholds. He had felt more confidence sending them with his official seal. He had asked Varys to retrieve his signet ring if at all possible. The bald eunuch had given him his beatific smiled and said he “would see what he could do”.

Eddard had not held out much help but the next night Varys on his visit had handed him the ring with a smug look.

“But … but how?” Eddard asked. He expected a long convoluted story of deception and intrigue.

“It was on your desk in the Tower of the Hand half buried under now forgotten correspondence. The Hand’s tower for now abandon. Your signet ring is of no concern to Cersei or Joffrey Lannister. Why should it be? You are free yes but gone to ground somewhere in King’s Landing. I used a hidden corridor to enter your quarters unseen. Now you have your ring.”

With his official seal Eddard was ready now to speak to the Houses of the South. He told them of Cersei Lannister’s killing of Robert Baratheon by poisoning his drink. Eddard grimaced. It was a half-truth at best. She had only spiked his drink. The boar may have killed Robert anyways. Still, in essence she had poisoned his drink. She was guilty of treason.

Eddard had already sent word of that to Stannis. The truth of Cersei’s children’s parentage. There was no reason to hide it now. He sent Ravens to all the houses so the truth would be known. Eddard asked them to find the book that Jon Arryn had discovered if they had copies. To read the passages he noted. If not, he would provide the book when they arrived in King’s Landing after he had taken over the Iron Throne.

Insurrection against the Iron Throne was necessary. He Eddard Stark would ascend the throne of Aegon and take what he should have a generation ago. He would be King of all of Westeros.

He did leave out the fact he was a cripple now. He was sure the truth would be out soon if not already. Eddard saw no reason to add to his difficulties.

He had not been surprised by the results of his messages. Dorne would analyze the situation and Doran would decide the best course of action. Blast, why couldn’t Oberyn be the leader of House
Martell. That man would be whipping his horse mercilessly to get to King’s Landing to have a shot at Gregor Clegane.

House Tyrell asked basically—what is in it for us? Eddard knew this was not Mace but Olenna who was the true power of the most powerful House in Westeros. The real question was who you will offer in marriage to my son or grandson. He already knew the answer necessary to that inquiry.

Stannis had responded with “we will see about that”. This was the one House he worried about. Without his physical prowess he feared the outcome. Stannis was still in his prime and a wily fighter. Robb had still not reached his full adult strength and had not been leavened with combat. Eddard would worry about that later.

House Greatjoy he was not surprised to read from Balon that he declared himself the king of the Iron Islands. Eddard grimaced. He had a plan to bring him down but he would need time for that. Would he have time?

Eddard knew Renly was out there with plans of his own that would not coincide with his older brother’s plans. Renly only thought he was a warrior. He was a politician. In the end, one still needed to be a true warrior to take and hold the Iron Throne. Eddard would take care of this problem too.

To House Lannister he was direct. He would hold his family hostage. If Tywin defied Eddard he made it clear to the old lion he would put to the sword immediately his daughter and grandchildren. Eddard would take power before Tywin had any chance of success in rescuing his family. Eddard did not put in his scroll that he himself most seriously doubted his own chances of success.

He informed Tywin Lannister he would be held accountable for the deaths of Elia and her children. That would give him something to think about. Tywin may not have done the heinous acts but it had been his directives that led to their deaths.

He had almost opposed Robert for his callous acceptance of those deaths. Why hadn’t he?! He had wondered that many times over the years. Westeros would be in such a better place if he had.

He had received one unexpected source of support. It seemed that Robert’s Rebellion had been forecast by the Druids. Their prophecies had foretold of it and that it would lead to the events that were occurring now.

Eddard grimaced. Of course almost all said that he should have been dead already. Their prophecies spoke of the grizzled wolf’s death and the slaughter and scattering of his offspring.

Sansa was to become a dark thing in the Vale. Robb dead. Jon dead by the hand of the Ice King he had killed but risen again. He was not sure what that meant. Bran was to become a Greenseer. Rickkon was to be killed.

It was Arya that would become the most transformed. She was to go to Braavos and become a Faceless Man. She would excel and become their best assassin. She would grow strong and cold. She would kill without remorse.

While this was occurring the Dragon Queen would work across Essos and finally take Westeros. Then Arya would be sent to assassinate the Queen. Instead his daughter would swear allegiance to the Dragon Queen. Some of the prophecies even had her to become Daenrys’ Queen and together they would finally put the Ice King down for good. Jon had not succeeded in permanently killing the dreaded hoary king of Ice Wrights.
That was what all but two of their prophecies had spoken. Now they were living these prophecies. Unfortunately, they were very incomplete and vague or the Druids were not fully telling him all. They kept saying that he needed freedom of choice or else he would become a tool. A tool had no power to change destiny. To change destiny for the better. Thus, they would not speak of it to him.

He did know that the Druids had totally sided with Eddard Stark. Since the time of Robert’s rebellion they had been crisscrossing Westeros hoping that the prophecies of hope would occur.

Thus, they were able to send their ravens anywhere having fully mapped out all of Westeros. They had scouts throughout the land. Those scouts in the West were now fighting the Lannisters. They fought from afar with their longbows. As troops marched from three or four hundred yards away arrows came whistling in killing sergeants, lieutenants, captains, majors and even two colonels.

Three female Druids had taken up residence in a brothel near Lannisport. They were prostitutes for a week blending in. The last night in the brothel they had slit a general, four colonels and seven majors throats. They had left a coin of the Faceless Men behind to throw off the scent.

That idea made Eddard shiver. All feared the Faceless Men. They were like shadows that one could never hope to fight against. He was thankful that his daughter would not now become one. He hoped to never meet one.

He saw Arya walk back out of the alleyway. In her hands was the squirming Bengal cat. She had of course caught it. She had the scratches to show for it. She saw her father looking down at her. She held the cat up with a shit eating grin on her face.

He waved down. She beamed up at him and approached their residence. She was making him so proud.

His visage darkened. His thoughts on Sansa. She had betrayed him. There would have to be punishment.

He stared out the window morosely now. Thoughts of Sansa’s betrayal hurt Eddard deeply. He had yet to tell Arya of it. He was not strong enough yet. Arya had never liked Sansa and did not want to face her anger when he told her.

He looked up at the sun as it approached noon. Merrel had been gone almost two weeks now. Time was fleeting. All the combined actions would be delaying the Lannister forces marching south and east but … he needed his health back!

He did not believe in his heart that Merrel could do as he said but what man would not grab a life line hurled to him in a stormy sea. He needed his leg whole and hale to succeed! He needed to be able to meet the physical threats he knew would come his way. He wanted to lead. He wanted to lead so he could protect those he loved. He wanted to make this vision of the Druids come true.

He sat for a few minutes. His leg had started to throb badly. It pained him greatly. He would rest.

He slowly levered himself up cursing silently as he reached for his walking stick and began hobbling back to his bed.

From nowhere a crushing pain slammed into his leg. His leg was on fire and horrible pain slammed into his mind and body. Eddard collapsed screaming in searing pain his leg on fire and the very bones exploding in agony.
The sun was warm beating down on Eddard’s face as he stood atop the four story dwelling that Merrel had purchased long ago he had found out. He had begun to wonder about the age of Merrel. The ages of all the Druids actually. He had come to suspect that somehow they aged at a slower pace than was the norm.

They would make statements of events that had occurred generations ago if not centuries. He had not pursued it. He was just thankful for all they had done for him. What they had done for the realm.

He was deeply in their debt. They had directly aided in the survival of his precious daughter. It had been their force of arms that had allowed Arya and Syrio to save him from dudgeons. The unexpected arrival of so many Lannister forces in the dungeons would have overwhelmed his daughter, Syrio and the old honor guard of Rhaegar Targaryen that had joined his Insurrection.

He did not want to call it a rebellion. His childhood friend, Robert Baratheon, had forever soured that word for Eddard Stark. By the old gods Robert had been a waste as a ruler. His slovenly rule leading Westeros into debt and disdain from coast to coast and across the Narrow Sea to Essos.

The Warden of the North and the man who would be king tilted his face up to the sun. He was on the east side of the four story building. The rising sun striking his face warming it felt good. He reached up and touched his ears and the back of his neck. They were burning but Kiren of the Druids had given him a balm to put on them. He shook his head and missed the feel of his hair on his neck and resting on his shoulders.

Seeing how Syrio had cut his daughter’s hair to disguise her had given him the same idea. He had Phirona Ormonnis cut his hair close to his head. He now looked like some conscript in the Dorne military. He chuckled. His face was too weathered and craggy for that look. Maybe an instructor.

He had also cut off his beard for the first time sense he rode off to war in Robert’s Rebellion. His skin pale. He was not getting much sun. He did have to admit that the short hair and no beard made him feel less overheated in this broiling sun.

He had even taken the additional measure of dyeing his hair jet black. He was a totally different man when he looked at himself in the mirror. He had tested his new look by walking on the streets and alleyways of Flea Bottom. No one gave him a second look. Good. That was what he wanted.

He could now move about in King’s Landing to do raconteur. He had a kingdom to take. He needed to see what he was up against. Arya and Syrio’s attacks had made Cersei pull her forces back into the Red Keep.

Eddard walked to the North side of the building. Walking! Another thing he had to thank the Druids for. He stopped a moment. He needed to thank Varys for sending Arya to Merrel. The man had done what he said he would. He had healed Eddard’s leg.

When the sudden pain had hit him five days ago he had thought he was having burning oil dropped
on him. The pain had been beyond excoriating. It had nearly driven him insane it was so great. Merrel had told him that in taking his injury into himself they would be connected for a short moment of transference and each would not only feel their own injury but the others injury as well.

He had been right. Eddard thanked the old gods that he had passed out. When he finally came to several hours later the pain was gone and his leg was as if nothing had ever happened to it. His caretakers had put him to bed. They had spread the word that his injury had been healed. Not only was it healed but the muscles had not seemed to have atrophied at all or the ligaments and tendons stiffened from lack of use. It was as if the injury had never occurred. He would forever be in the Druid’s debt.

Eddard looked out across King’s Landing to see the curtain wall off in the distance to the North. He owed the Druids much more than their current help.

He had been shocked and grieved when the Druid had told Eddard Stark of his family’s past sins against the First People and against the very land he was sworn to uphold. The legends the Starks had passed down to themselves had made their House heroic and the shining example of honor and rectitude. To learn otherwise had left a sour taste in his mouth.

To know now that instead of working with the Children of the Forest his family had committed genocide on them was almost breathtaking it was so vile and revolting. How could have his ancestors been so cruel? Eddard knew. They had wanted the land that the Children of the First resided on. His ancestors had been willing to commit genocide to get it.

His ancestors disgusted him. Bran the Builder! How could he have done such a thing! It was worse.

It was his family’s persecution that had made the Children of the Forest create the Ice King. The foe he knew had to be met and eventually killed or again subdued for hopefully another eight thousand years. They had created a weapon they could not control. The weapon had proven to be a double edged sword that struck all before it.

To add a further insult to it all the Ice King was a Stark! He leaned against the retaining wall on the building. The ice king was indeed Darik Stark. The man he was told by the Druids was a craven man and hunted by his fellow Starks for his crimes and had fled to the North to escape. There the Children of the Forest in their desperation had transformed Darik Stark into the Ice Wright King.

Eddard slammed his fist into the wall. He must make amends! He would make amends.

He walked over to the west side of the building and looked down. There was a small square where four alleyways converged. Down in it Eddard saw Syrio and Arya along with some urchin children.

Syrio had Arya following his example. The man was on the ball of his right foot as was Arya. Syrio had has arms extended and his left foot extended out in front of him. His body did not move at all. His body rigid as if he was a statue. Arya was beside him in the same pose. Syrio was like marble while Arya was more like potters clay constantly morphing slightly as a leg or arm jerked to keep her in balance.

The small children were laughing and falling all over themselves attempting to keep the same pose. “Other foot” Syrio would call out and he and Arya flexed their right leg and jumped up switching feet and landed on the ball of their left foot. Syrio landed as light as a gazelle and was immediately rigid again on his left foot. Arya landed and had to bobble but after two jerks of her arm was in positon.
The children squealed falling all over each other attempting the move. Eddard smiled at both his daughter’s rising skill and the fun the children were having. Eddard thought they were safe enough. No one in Flea Bottom had any use for the dissipated throne. To the citizens of Flea Bottom Syrio and Arya were just one of them exercising in a slightly bizarre manner.

The Lannisters were still in the Red Keep licking the wounds Syrio, Arya and the Druids had given the lions.

Eddard stepped back from the edge of the roof. How hard could it be? He slowly rose to one foot and his eyes widen finding it much more difficult than he would have assumed. He finally found his balance but could feel the strain already. This was not a position a Knight found themselves in.

Okay he had mastered that well enough. Let’s jump to the other foot. He flexed his leg and jumped up and landed on the ball of his other foot. That was the plan. His arms wind milled and he wildly tried to maintain his balance but went crashing to the rooftop.

He looked around embarrassed. His eyes saw Klissa of the Druids chuckling her hood pulled back.

“Well done Eddard Stark. Well done. NOT!” She went back into the shack and down the stairs.

His pride had survived worse.

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Arya was in the practice room that had been set aside so she could practice her sword work with her Water Dancer Master. She had enjoyed exercising out in the sun but their sword practice had to remain inside. To exercise out in the sun was no big thing but slashing swords even if wood would draw attention. Attention they could not afford.

Whack whack whack … whack whack … the sounds of their swords colliding was loud in the room.

“Again Arya … right high high low left low right left high right left left” her master constantly barking out where to have her sword.

“Be sharp in your movements Arya—like a tack. Be precise like a rapier’s point. Back back forward block high high low lunge …”

Arya was exhilarated with her training. Syrio was beginning to teach her offensive moves now. She never knew what he would bark at her next … she loved it!

“Stop! Rest a moment my disciple.” Arya loved it when he said “my disciple”. While she idled she let her mind drift back to when Syrio had informed her of his gong to her father to ask if she could become his disciple. She had been so nervous when Syrio had informed her of this. That he had spoken to her father about becoming his disciple. That he had asked her father to let him teach her to become a Water Dancer. Her master had let it hang.

“And?!” she had asked breathless hoping for the best but fearing the worst.

“She said yes girl! You are to become my disciple. I will teach you to be the Water Dancer I already know you are. I am so thankful that you came to me.”

She had finally asked him a question that had been gnawing at her mind for a while. “How did you come into the employee of my father? You are from Braavos far from home. How did my father even know of you?”
“He did not. He had sent word out by minions asking for a teacher for his young daughter. I was in tavern near the red keep nursing my old hurts when, I hate to remind you of him Arya, but Jory Cassel came into the establishment. He had a few strong pints of ail and he suddenly gets up on the bar and tells the whole room “I have been given a task to find a sword instructor for my master’s young daughter. She is possessed by the wolf but she is strong and feral! Is any man brave enough to take on the task?! None have survived her ire before!”

He fell off the bar and drunkenly sat back down.

“I don’t know Arya. I was intrigued. A girl? Feral? What man would let his daughter train in the ways of the sword I wondered to myself? Did he pay good money? … I hesitate to say this but I did not expect much from you girl. I expected you to be a spoiled princess.”

“But like I said, I was intrigued. I went to your father in his quarters in the tower of the Hand. He looked up from his desk surprised. I had easily slipped his posted guards.”

“How did you get past my guards sir?” he intoned quietly. I had my rapier on my hip and his sword was in the corner of the room.

“Look for you cannot see. Listen for you cannot hear. A Water Dancer is never where he seems. He lives in the shadows. I told your father this child.”

“I told him I am Syrio Forel. First sword of Braavos. He surprised me by knowing of me. He reminded me I had left my post in disgrace. I admit I got hot and spat at him that a Faceless Man got past all the defenses of the SeaLord. That I had advised against the party hearing rumors of a Faceless Man on the grounds. The idiot had refused to listen. He was always reckless.”

She had asked her sword instructor what happened between her father and Syrio. Why had her father accepted him as her sword instructor?

“Your father slowly stood up girl. He went to his scabbard in the corner and pulled out his sword. I pulled out my rapier.”

“Prove to me you are worthy of teaching my daughter Water Dancer’ he spoke calmly. He seemed totally relaxed but I was ready. He attacked with no warning. But I am Syrio Forel. I had my rapier out and met his blow and shunted it aside.”

“For fifteen minutes it was pure poetry in motion Arya Stark. Both of us were only holding back a small fraction of our speed and power. The sounds of swords colliding and skirting up each other was a heavenly symphony.”

“The sight of our blades making beautiful paths in the air was like a fine Prizmeil mo Huzke fresco.”

“The finest poets of old Valyria would have wept writing prose of our sword prowess Arya.”

Arya had thought that her Master was laying it on a little thick at the time.

Arya snapped back to the present with a hard whack on her elbow.

“Keep you mind on the present girl! If not, feel my wood on your person.”

She glared at her master. He could be such a hard ass sometimes. They rested for a minute more.

“It is time we train again—no?”
Arya merely shook her head yes.

“Arya when a foe is assailing you from your weak right side I want—“

Suddenly Sryio dropped down and swept his right leg out to sweep her legs and put Arya on her ass and then put his wooden sword to her throat. Only she was not there! She had jumped back and then stepped forward whistling her sword down at her master. He easily blocked with his sword crossed over and pivoted on his left foot away and came up with his sword before him.

“How did you know Arya?”

“Your words said one thing but your eyes said something else.”

Arya felt good seeing a smile come across his face. “Good. Good. I knew I selected you for a reason” he said smugly. Arya knew it had been provenance that had brought Syrio to her. She was only thankful that he had come into her life.

The door to their practice studio opened and her father walked in. Arya looked at him intently. He simply looked like another man with his hair closely cropped, his beard shaved off and the black die in his hair. He looked like he was from southern Highgarden and not of the North. She knew that was her father’s goal.

“Please proceed Arya. I came to watch.” Arya knew that was not true. Why did he have a sword scabbard on his hip with the sword in it?

For the next fifteen minutes Syrio continued to put Arya through her paces. He was relentless and freely whacked her on her sides, arms and hands. Eddard did not once protest at the treatment of his daughter. Arya loved her father all the more for it. He was truly letting her train to become a Water Dancer.

Finally, Syrio called a halt to Arya’s lesson for the day. “I believe you have learned enough for one day little wolf. I think the grizzled wolf wishes to again test his prowess against the great Syrio Forel.”

“Has not anyone taught you it is unseemly to boast Water Dancer? Pride comes before the fall.” Arya saw her father smirking at Syrio.

“I will show you pride before the fall Warden of the North. I, Syrio Forel, will teach you humility!” he too had a smirk on his face. He whipped out his real rapier! Arya saw. Her father pulled out the sword that had been purchased from the cheap part of the Street of Steel. It was not the exquisite workmanship of his old war sword or Ice of course but her father had said it was “good enough”.

The two men rushed each other and Arya cried out in fear for them. They were moving in a blur. The two men slashed savagely at each other. Her father easily blocked Syrio’s swiping sword thrusts and hacks. Syrio’s light blade could not stop a full down hack with two hands but he impossibly met each such strike and shunted the blade to the side. Syrio used finesse and skill on a supreme level to meet each savage stroke and guide it aside.

Her father blocked his opponent’s sword thrusts with his heavier blade. He did not try to outright avoid the blows choosing to meet each one with his sword as the rule Arya saw. He made exceptions when Syrio started to get inside his guard and Eddard would spin to the side or jump back with a skill that matched Syrio’s but Arya saw he only did that as last resort.

Syrio would advance thrusting forward thrusting and make swirling swipes from any angle but her father somehow seemed to sense Syrio’s vectors of attack. He was ready for the Water Dancer’s
attacks. He was ready and blocked Syrio’s blade aside.

Syrio on the other hand often chose to jump, duck, juke, dive and roll to avoid many of her father’s blows all together. Arya never knew in which direction his Water Dance moves would take him. She sensed her father was not often sure either but his ability to adjust left her jaw hanging open in awe of his speed and reactions.

They fought back and forth their swords a blur and the sound of metal slamming into each other loud in the room. They would surge into each other and lock swords up their tips pointing up and their bodies pressed into each other. The two men grunting and sweating as they pressed into each other and pushed and pulled on each other’s bodies.

Arya knew that if this was true combat that fists, kicks, knees and head-butts would have been used to inflict bodily harm on each other. The men were merely practicing their sword and avoided such fisticuffs.

Several times the men would slide their swords down the shaft of their opponent’s blade and attempt to jab forward but their opponent would counter with counterforce and angles to then send their blade back down their foe’s blade. Back and forth till faster than her eye could follow one or the other would whip their sword to the side and hack in with a new attack.

For twenty minutes Arya and gathering druids and Rhaegar’s honor guard filed into the room to watch. Arya heard the murmurs of appreciation and outright awe. They were witnessing two men who were one with their blades.

All felt honored to be in their presence.

Finally, by some unseen signal both men stopped and lifted their hilts up to their faces and bowed to each other in mutual respect.

“You have a true master Arya. Learn from him” Eddard spoke to his daughter roughing her hair up as he passed her. “Syrio, would you care to dine with me tonight?”

“I would be honored Eddard Stark. Warden of the North and future King of Westeros.”

The room murmured ascent.

Arya beamed.

/////////

Up high in the sky the first one appeared wheeling around lazily soon after the sun rose into the sky. The large bird warmed by the sun slowly stretched its wings from its roost and flew up into the sky. The bird flapping its wings in short bursts and then gliding on the rising thermals that started to form with the sun warming the air.

The bird rose up in a lazy wide circles looking at the sky and down to the ground. The bird was soon over the hills of its territory. The bird rose higher and circled beginning its daily search for food. The bird was now joined by a few of his brothers and sisters. The mighty condors circling gazing upon the ground for carrion. Other condors were rising up from the roost and many flying off to all points of the compass looking for the dead or dying to consume.

The bird saw a possible meal on the ground to the north and rode the thermals along with six of its fellow condors and now circled over the fallen animal. The bird with its sharp sight spied on the fallen body looking for any signs of life. The body was motionless. The bird and his fellow roost
mates were wary by nature. The birds looked around the small clearing. They saw only a horse cropping grass. They looked for any small scavengers.

The scavengers the large birds could intimidate and keep at bay if they were small like foxes or jackals. None were present. They looked for larger predators such as wolverines, hyenas or the various large cats that still roamed the depths of these woods. They had seen no packs of wolves in this area for several months as the packs ever moved on in their territories.

The condor winged lower and still saw no danger. The figure had not moved for an hour now. The bird was about to decide to descend and test the fallen animal. A sudden jerk of the fallen form made the bird hesitate. Was it some final death throes? The bird circled observing. Now the fallen animal sat up and looked around. Its limbs began to move.

The condor and his brethren ceased their descent. For the next few minutes the condors saw the fallen animal clearly reviving. This would not be a meal today. The birds flapped their wings gaining attitude and circled off.

Merrel slowly felt his body reviving. Distance and more importantly time had made the healing of Eddard Stark arduous. The pain had nearly drove him insane as he was sure it had been crippling to the Warden of the North. Only through shared pain and injury could renewal be achieved. Only by suffering the same injury as the owner of the original hurt could Merrel heal the person. The healing was almost a mystical binding of two into one for the brief moment of the injury.

He breathed deep. He was weak and wane but he was essentially whole. In King’s Landing he knew Eddard Stark was reviving and finding his leg hale. Merrel smiled at that. Let his healed leg show the man that magic did indeed exist. He was to become Warden or more than just man. He was to become so much more. He was to become Warden of magic that was too renewed in the near future. He needed to become used to it.

Merrel looked up into the azure sky that had no clouds in it. He saw the condors rising up and circling off. “Not today my friends. Maybe tomorrow but not today.”

The Druids did not bury their dead in the ground or burn them. If possible they created a low lying pyre to place the body on and lay any personal artifacts on the pyre hat may have had importance to the Druid in life. Their bows were never left. The bow passed onto the next rising generation.

He tisk to the horse that was off a ways cropping grass. He reached into the bag he had left near his spot of restoration for the sugar cubes he had saved for this moment. An inducement to give to the horse to help it forgive his earlier mistreatment of it making it fall awkwardly. The horse saw the sugary cubes. Its ears twitched and it neighed softly and quickly moved over and lipped up the proffered cubes and greedily ate them.

Merrel levered himself up to the tips of his feet and gripped horse for balance. His world spun but it righted soon enough. He urged the horse to his items he had in his camp. He opened the saddle bag with the last of the oats and poured them on the ground. The horse’s eyes opened wide with happiness and the horse bent its head down and eagerly ate the bounty offered.

Merrel ate the waycakes he had from the last Druid lodge and the beef jerky. He drank from his canteen. He looked off to the path that led back down from the escapement. He sensed a large predator there. He was not afraid. The druids had long ago made peace with the large predators of Westeros. The animals knew and taught their young that the Druids were their friends.

He rested with his back to a large boulder till past noon. He had been nude till now. He now put on a fresh robe he had saved for after the healing. He buried the other beneath a small urn or rocks. It
would rot back into the Earth. He saddled his horse and got back on it. He moved forward back to the path that would lead him down from the high plateau. He would go to the small Druid encampment that was four miles distant. He came to the trees that flanked the path leading down.

It was there in the immediate woods. He could feel it watching him. He looked around on the ground. He looked up. He scanned right and left. There she was. He was very familiar with this predator. A large were-direwolf was perched up on a limb forty feet above him. Its large light brown eyes with large grey flecks looking down at him. Were animals were rare. Humans and spirits merged into one. They were neither but a new creation. Powerful and dire they were. They tended to be solitary animals but not his one.

“I see you have been watching. Did you see my anguish? Did you think of eating me old friend?”

The animal was in its half human form as it stood up on its hind limbs and jumped down to the ground. The animal rolled forward and onto its hind legs. Its forelimbs long and gangly its fingers sporting long claws that could disembowel him with one swipe. The mighty beast was taller than him even with his height on the horse.

The horse was frightened and started to rear. The were-direwolf’s arm whipped out and gripped the horse’s mane and jerked it head back down. Its other clawed hand whipped out and gripped the other side of the horse’s neck with a handful of mane. The were-direwolf jammed its snout into the horse’s nose. They locked eyes. The horse immediately calmed. The were-direwolf muzzled the now calm horse.

The dire-werewolf stepped back and stared at the druid.

“What now?” Merrel asked the beast.

It tilted its head back and a mighty unearthly howl filled the sky. For miles around all stopped and listened to the powerful call and acknowledged that the true alpha of this part of the Kingswood had spoken.

The beast was covered in a sudden nimbus of purple flashing lights and its body flowed to the form of a direwolf of almost nightmarish proportions. This direwolf was nearly the size of his horse. The wolf stared up at Merrel and growled steadily with locked eyes. Then the mighty magical creature turned and was gone.

Merrel relaxed. The beast was fickle. He knew he was safe but the beast was temperamental. He was never sure what mood he would find the beast when he would meet it the next time. He smiled. It made life exciting. He had been away for too long. He would soon have to go back to King’s Landing. He had an Insurrection to support.

He sensed that truly great times were afoot. The wolf and the dragon would finally lie together. That pairing had been thwarted a generation past. The cost had been most terrible. Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark had deserved such a better fate than they had met. Damn Rhaegar for being so impetuous. He was a Targaryen for crying out loud. Surely he could seen that he merely had to marry Lyanna and have the three headed dragon of his House.

The current generation would only be two heads. No matter.

He slowly walked his horse down the path. The large trees welcoming to the Druid. Even the trees acknowledged the wardens of the Earth. Even the oldest of trees could no longer remember the true wardens of Westeros. The Children of the Forest had been gone too long.
Eddard Stark and the Dragon Queen would begin the rebirth of balance and health in the land of
Westeros.

He moved back into the old forests of the Kingswood. These sharp hills had never know the horror
of the ax and the burn of unnatural fire and the cutting of the Earth with iron plows. The land here
was strong with its original vitality.

His path winded between mighty oaks, spruces and maples. He came upon a small stretch of thinned
out trees that still had mighty trees spreading out their mighty bows blocking out much of the sunlight
only letting in beautiful dabbled painting of light on the ground. The beams of light that looked so
solid you could cup them in your hand.

The ground was covered with running vines and ferns. The very air seemed green with all the
verdant foliage.

He moved on. He was soon in the old growth trees again.

Four hours later he was in the home of the Druids in this hidden valley. The trees towering. A
traveler would not find any habitations on the ground. A teenager came out from behind a tree and
took his horse as Merrel got off his horse. A rope ladder was dropped and he climbed up into the
canopy. He was soon walking on the tops of mighty bows and entering the homes of Druids that had
been constructed around the trunks and down mighty limbs. The roofs and much of the walls made
of limbs that had been blended together for generations to make water tight habitations.

He talked with leader of this village. All was quiet. Four more Druids had left a week ago for
King’s Landing. No more could be spared. They had duties to attend to in the forest and needed to
always keep their guard up. The land needed constant protection. They had learned their lessons in
the Age of Heroes.

Merrel was offered a room in the leader’s home but he declined. He preferred to sleep in the lodge at
the edge of the valley. The woman understood. She had a smirk on her face. He supped with them
over dinner. Her wife was most genteel and a great cook. Their three children models of politeness
and decorum.

He went down the rope ladder and slowly made his way to the lodge. The sun had set an hour ago.
He heard owls hooting and deer walking in the forest to the left. He paused. The deer bolted. He
sighed. He had been followed. She was never far he knew.

He entered the lodge. He was tired still from the ordeal of healing Eddard Stark. He took off his
robe and crawled into the bed of lichen, animal hair stuffed between layers of hay and thin sheets of
linen on top of blankets of wool. The lodge did not have a door this close to the Druid
establishment. He got into bed and started to get drowsy.

He did not hear it but he sensed it nevertheless. In the half moon light he saw the mighty were-
direwolf in the doorway on all fours staring at him. It looked at him with unblinking eyes. Their
eyes locked.

He finally held up the edge of his covers.

The mighty were-direwolf was covered in purple lights that flashed and pulsed up and down the
length of its body.

“Come to me my wife.”

The now human female crawled onto the bed and snuggled into the body of her husband.
“I don’t like you leaving me Merrel. I hate it.”

“You know it is necessary. The land of Westeros needs its wardens.”

The woman growled deep in her chest.

“Your brother lives.”

“What?! … That is impossible!”

“No the prophecies were wrong. Eddard Stark lives.”
Varys sighed. He turned from his desk. He simply could find no true peace anymore. His inner sanctum had been violated. He was no longer truly safe in his inner sanctum. His bastion of solitude had been breached. He had been the ghost mercurial appearing at a time of his own chosen. He found it most disconcerting to find the slipper on the other foot.

He still remembered acutely finding a dagger to his throat and Arya coming to stand before him with righteous fury in her eyes. He had thought his life was over. His goals left unattended like some carrion left out for the vultures to descend and pick his bones clean. His ambitions and plans diffuse and torn apart like dried bones slowly wasting away on the plains that surrounded King’s Landing.

He had found the answers that had saved his life. He was indeed alive but he now felt the weight of others now constantly weighing on him. It could have been worse. He had found that wolves and water dancers much more preferable than lions. He shuddered at the thought of Cersei and Joffrey knowing of his tunnels.

He had used those tunnels to bring in a stone mason to install small gargoyles around his room. The additions added to appear as if they had been part of the decor for generations. He had no visitors so no one would know the difference.

He had grown tired of Syrio barging in on him unannounced. He had come several times with Arya and then Merrel of the druids as they planned on what to tell Cersei as they planned their Insurrection and the freeing of Eddard Stark.

He had helped them to merely save his life. Syrio had ensured his loyalty with forced writing of the incriminating letters. If Cersei ever read those while she still had power Varys knew he would be summarily executed. Varys knew that all of his sovereigns had despised him. The sovereigns were always quick to use the information Varys provided them. They were always happy to come to him for information or for him to give council that they needed currently. He gave them what they sought but he knew they felt soiled in needing to use his services.

Varys turned to look at the hidden door being opened slowly. He had installed the gargoyles so he could have the one with the hidden hollowed out area within it put on the former hidden door. In that hollow a small bell had been install. Varys would at least know he was about to die if the wrong person came through the door.

Varys saw it was not Syrio. His eyes widened slightly. Maybe today was not so good a day to die.

It was Eddard Stark that stood by the aperture of the now fully pushed back hidden door. He walked in a step and turned to look at the gargoyle. He moved the door to and fro several times listening to the bell tinkle. He gave the gargoyle a squint smile.

Varys was about to make a smart remark about he could have one installed in Eddard’s quarters.
In a flash the man pulled his sword out and swirled and stepped in so fast that Varys only barely registered that the man had moved.

“Oohhhhhhh!” Varys squeaked. Eddard’s sword point was pricking his Adam’s apple. Varys gulped very carefully feeling blood trickle down his throat.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t jam my sword through your throat and kill you for your treason. I do feel you have betrayed more than myself.”

Varys considered his options. He determined he had only one recourse. He would try something he rarely did. He would be totally honest.

“You should kill me then. I did indeed betray you. I warned you several times the recourse of your actions. You refused to listen to me. You went blindly down your path of ‘honor’ and ‘sanctimonious haughty self-righteousness’. You told Cersei of your actions before you even did them. You told a love struck teenager of your plans. A poor lass who was so enamored in childish dreams you and your wife instilled in her from the cradle she really had no choice but to betray you. She is paying the price for that betrayal now.”

“You came south to King’s Landing ill prepared to be ‘Hand’. You were easily manipulated and led astray. I take that back. You led yourself astray. Did you write down Robert Baratheon’s true last wishes I wonder? Those words you read did not ring true to me. Did you follow that self-righteous code of honor when it really mattered?”

“We both know the answer to that.”

“So did I betray you? Yes. But did I betray you to Cersei Lannister. I did not. I did not wish your downfall. Even if I did I would not have needed to lift a finger. You devised your own demise Eddard Stark.”

“You blind adherence to a ‘nobility’ (Varys almost sneered the word) and doing what was ‘right’ and ‘just’ led to your downfall. I could only watch you play the fool. You are not meant to play the Game of Thrones.”

“It was your daughter who saw injustice and acted. She did not stop and weigh her actions on some balance scale to make sure it was ‘right’ and ‘honorable’. She acted. She did what her environment dictated. You should have followed the more base instincts at times Eddard Stark. Your sigil is of the wild and untamable Direwolf. Act like it.”

As Varys had spoken his soliloquy he saw Eddard’s eyes narrow ever so slightly. He betrayed no other reaction. His sword did not waver from his neck. Varys was still bleeding but the blade moved no closer to impaling his throat.

“And you are the noble aspirant of something truly grand and just? The harbinger of something grandeur?” Eddard asked quietly in rejoinder.

Varys snorted. The man simply had to put everything in terms of stark black and white. He snorted at the unintentional pun.

“I claim no grand vision Eddard Stark. I think in some ways we want the same things.”

Eddard snorted himself now. “I don’t think so whisperer. You betrayed me.”

Now Varys laughed hard. If Eddard had not pulled his sword back Varys may have fatally cut himself. Eddard still had his sword a fraction of any inch from his throat. Eddard looked at him half
exasperated with now a hint of amusement.

“Are trying to have me kill you whisperer?”

“Heavens no Eddard. I wish to live as much as if not more so than the next man.”

“And why pre tale is that?”

“I wish to try and bring something better into this realm Eddard Stark. I want peace or ... i am not sure how to phrase it ... something that actually helps the common man. To find someone who might seek what is right for all. To find a man or a woman for that matter who truly puts the needs of the many before the needs of the few or the one. I wish to serve someone worthy of the service.”

“Aerys II was mad. Tywin is, to excuse my Dorne, a fucking asshole. Robert Baratheon was a drunkard and dissipated ruler who has bankrupted the realm. You are an idealistic fool who not only blindly followed standards that have no application in the real world but told his main nemesis every step he planned to undo her with.”

“You Eddard Stark deserved your fate. Now kill me if you must.”

“It would be my mercy that would not have me kill you now Varys. You are arguing against the very things that would save you now. You claim to want a just leader but then heap scorn on the attributes that would lead to such a rule.”

Varys smiled at Eddard. “You are starting understand. If only a little.”

Eddard dropped his sword.

“You never had any intention in killing me Eddard Stark.”

Eddard turned his head giving him a ‘you had better be careful look’.

“It is you nature to forgive where you can. That is noble and just Eddard Stark. But it can’t be the end of all your thoughts and actions. I saved your life by aiding Arya.”

“You mean making sure Syrio did not send out those written ‘confessions’.

Varys grimaced. “You have me there Eddard. The truth is I wanted to help you daughter save you. Now Eddard laughed.

“It is true” Varys smiled wryly. “I am hoping you have learned balance. Your fall was spectacular even if was of your own doing. Eddard Stark your sense of honor and justice is admirable and righteous. It is also right.”

“Buttttt … I can hear it coming Varys.”

Varys smiled wryly again. “Eddard … we can never be friends after what has transpired between us ...”

Eddard cocked an eyebrow.

Varys considered. The man was very astute. Varys thought if only he can see the forest for the trees.

“I confess Eddard. I have no true friends.” Varys thought for a moment. “I will take that back. I do
have a true friend. A man I want you to meet. Illyrio Mopatis of Pentos.” Varys could see that from the expression that the name meant nothing Eddard Stark. Why should it with Eddard safely tucked away in the North.

“We are masters at the Game of Thrones. Cersei is a bumbling fool at it. Joffrey is simply a mad idiot. Petyr Baelish is a master also. This I will say. I wish only to bring a true justice and peace to this land. I have no clear understanding of what Petyr wants. I swear he merely likes playing the game and causing havoc.”

“Why should I believe you now Varys?” Eddard asked.

“I am for once in my life being totally honest. Petyr is dangerous. Can you not feel it man?!”

He saw Eddard stopping and truly thinking. Analyzing everything he had experienced in King’s Landing.

“_I think I agree._”

They looked at each other. Eddard sheathed his sword. “I really did not want to kill you. You did save me. You have proved a valuable tool.”

“Good. Good.”

Eddard stopped and looked at him like he had grown a third arm. “Excuse me?”

“You are learning Eddard. I am indeed a tool. I am sharp and dangerous. I try to achieve my goals but I will admit to a certain lack of scruples and foresight.”

“That is an understatement.”

“Sarcasm. Good. You are indeed learning Eddard.”

“I find this somewhat perplexing and maybe even galling Varys. What are you getting at?”

“I think you are starting to understand Eddard Stark. You have the mettle to be what this realm needs. You have the character and morals that have not sat on the Iron Throne. Ever. All sought what was best for themselves and or their houses. You are above that Eddard Stark.”

He harrumphed.

“You need to be king. Westeros would be a much better world if you had walked up the steps of the Iron Throne and taken it during Robert’s Rebellion. The gods know Jamie would be a piss poor king. He doesn’t have the balls to tell Tywin to kiss off. Gods that man’s sanctimonious blather about the honor of his House and all that matter is the name of Lannister.”

Eddard was walking around in Varys room. He was not paying attention. He was but was trying to act like he was not.

“I tell you Eddard Stark that you could be King. You could be a great just king. You just need to see the world and recognize threats and deal with them. Show mercy. After you have taken care of the danger. Deal from a position of strength and not weakness. Don’t tell everyone your godsdamned plans!”

“There is one thing that you keep forgetting Varys.”

Varys wracked his brain but could not think of it. “And what would that be?”
“I don’t want to be King! I do not crave that power. I am just a simple man that is satisfied with my station. I understand the north but not his confounded infernal South.”

“Exactly!”

Eddard looked at him slightly shaking his head his eyes filled with mild confusion. “Exactly what?!” Eddard half yelled at Varys.

“You don’t want to be King. You despise the mere idea of it. That is what will make you a great King. You will not be corrupted by power. There is a reason for the saying Eddard Stark ‘power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’

“I have finally lived long enough to find the exception. The one man with the honor and wisdom to not succumb to the allure and debilitating call of power. This is why you must be King Eddard Stark.”

“And why would I, a simple man, not be corrupted Varys.”

“You just answered your own question Eddard. Let us advise you. You can control our baser instincts and we can enlighten you to those failings in others.”

Eddard squirmed.

“Consider my words. Please Eddard.”

The man took a deep breath.

“I will.”

Eddard was going over the latest scrolls he had received back from the ravens that were in his service with his alliance with the Druids. The birds were crisscrossing Westeros taking his missives to the Houses of Westeros. He sighed. He had much to consider. He had decided that Westeros simply needed him as King.

The continent was close to all-out war again. He leaned back in his chair. He was discovering what it meant to be a sovereign of a whole realm. He was having to way options and consider the personalities of the heads of those houses. What could he bargain for without sacrificing too much and conversely what did the houses want that he could offer in return. He was coming up with strategies in how to deal with each house.

He was constantly communicating with his son Robb. The North was mobilizing at pace. He had received mixed news from the Vale. Many of the Houses of the Vale were aligning with Cat’s sister. He had expected that but at least some were sundering from Lysa to side with him. For that he was thankful. They still had not found his wife which worried Eddard. The world was a large place. He had to hope she would be found soon before forces loyal to the Lannisters found her.

He did not want Catelyn becoming a hostage of Tywin Lannister. He wanted to be holding all the crevasse pieces.

Of course all those schemes were for naught if he did not take the throne from Cersei. Joffrey was the titular head of course but it was Cersei who was the puppet master pulling on the marionette strings. The only problem for Cersei was the fact her son was a vile evil creature. He would eventually turn on Cersei. He would cut the strings binding him and he would then turn the knife on
his own mother.

He was the scorpion that would sting the Frog carrying him across the river. They would both drown in the middle of the river. It was his nature. Some things were just a given.

Doran of course was proving himself true to his nature. He had been waiting almost twenty years to avenge his niece’s death. Eddard scowled. Why hadn’t he taken the throne when Robert Baratheon had almost gloated at Elia’s death? His fist slammed the table making his parchments rustle. He punched the tabletop again this time with his knuckles. He grimaced.

The pain reminded him of his failures. His father had failed his own sister. He knew the pain of failure. He planned to change that.

Two women forced to marry men they did not love. Eddard grimaced again. He had not known Catelyn Tully when they married. Thank the gods they had come to love each other. He sat and stared off into the distance his eyes not seeing. He was like a man with rheumy eyes in the middle of the proverbial paradise. Surrounded by sights of unimaginable beauty and unable to see them.

He must do better. He was furious with Sansa betraying him. He was trying to quaff his anger with his new insights. He could no longer trust her. He was not sure what to do with her at the present.

He turned his thoughts back to the Game of Thrones. He grimaced again. He rubbed his face. Even thinking the thought made his stomach clench. He had to figure out the balance. He would have to take the reins of power and figure out how to take control of Westeros without losing too many pieces of his soul.

Eddard exploded out of his seat. He pivoted around ducking slightly while pulling back. He pulled out the dagger he kept hidden in his left hand sleeve. His right whipped out his left hand gripped the back of his assailant’s neck his dagger now at the man’s throat.

“I am most impressed Eddard of House Stark. No one else has every heard me approach. You heard me the instant I came into the room did you not? Yet you hid it. I think you should return to Braavos with me and become a Faceless Man.”

Eddard Stark shivered. He knew the man was only testing him. He pulled his dagger back and put it back in its sheath. He saw Jaqen H’ghar watch him put away his dagger.

“Most well-hidden and yet available at a moment’s notice. Again I am impressed for such a man known for his peaceful nature. Of course it nearly cost you your head. I have heard the whispers. The Faceless Men are well known for hearing the subtle lies and plots that waft through every seat of power. Has the wolf decided to finally unsheathe his claws?”

Eddard sat back down. He looked up at the man who looked down at him blandly.

“I grow tired already with all this talk of letting my darker impulses run wild. I refuse it.”

“I have no words of wisdom to impart I fear Eddard of House Stark. You are the noble Direwolf surrounded by a pride of lions. Red Lions. You dealt mercy before. Will you foolishly again? I hope not.”

Eddard sat back. “I have had this speech before. Varys was most impactful with his insights and commentary. All I could do was accept the truth of the words he spoke.”

The two men stared at each other.
“A wolf is bold and fearless. They will attack any who threaten their pack. Alas, so will lions. How do you defend yourself when you are in such a dire position Eddard of House Stark.”

“Why do I feel you will tell me?”

The Faceless Man’s face slightly twitched. Eddard knew this was the man exhibiting humor.

“You must be like your daughter Eddard of House Stark. She ruthlessly killed the enemies of her House. She did not kill out of hand but dispatched all who would threaten her and her house. She then found the spirit and courage to save three men when she had every reason not to. I wonder where she learned such nobility?” the faceless man asked the sitting man who would be king.

Eddard felt a soft smile cross his face.

“I have learned Faceless Man or should I say Jaqen H’ghar. Which do you prefer?

“I do not care. My true name long faded away like the mists that rise above the cut fields and fade away with the suns first light.” The man hesitated. “Though this I will admit. Jaqen H’ghar is my favorite new name. As is this face. I have learned to my detriment to grow fond of such. Syrio Forel is most observant. Still I am just a man when you peel away the layers of myself. I serve faithfully and yet I am still a man.”

“Why are you in Westeros? You are a long way from home.”

“I serve my Order.”

“Answer my question Jaqen. I am being open with you though it is not my nature. I am not normally open outside of my family and closest confidants. You helped save me. I owe you.”

“I will serve you and your daughter. And maybe another.”

Eddard sighed. One thing he was discovering was that in the South and evidently in Essos everyone spoke out of both sides of their mouths.

“Again I would ask of you. Why are you here in Westeros?”

“Many fear the rising Dragon.”

Eddard considered. “You mean Daenerys Targaryen. She is only a teenager. Varys reports she is weak of spirit and of no account. Merely a vessel to give her Khal an heir.”

“Perhaps. Many prophecies say she will bring magic back into the world. There are those in the Citadel that speak of her in fear and trepidation. As you lay rotting in the dudgeons word came to me by my order.”

The man paused. Eddard was leaning forward waiting for the answer. Eddard knew the man was leading him on to make the next statement have more punch.

“She walked in fire and now has three dragons. They are small of course but will grow. She will come to claim her throne.”

Eddard sat back. He instinctively believed it. He would deal with her when the time came. Aegon had conquered Westeros with his dragons. He smiled evilly. He had devised ways to defeat dragons. He had made a study of it while a teenager. He would enjoy pitting his tactics against whomever the girl would have lead her forces.
"I see on your face you think you will defeat her with your prowess on the battlefield."

“How else do you conquer such a foe?”

“Love.”

Eddard considered. “I fear I will have already married Robb off by then.” Eddard sighed. Bran had another destiny now. Rikkon was simply too young.

“I said love Eddard Stark. Would you do to your own children what was done to Lyanna Stark, Elia Martell, and Cersei Lannister?”

“What the hell are you trying to say man?”

“You will know when the time comes. Trust your instincts.”

“You are not going to tell me anything more are you?”

“No.”

Eddard sighed. He had called the man to see him for a reason.

“You are giving me a headache Jaqen H’ghar. The reason I have called you hear Faceless Man is to release you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I free you of your debts.”

“But—but I have pledged myself.”

“I will not have even the hint of enslavement in service to me. I free you. My daughter used chancery to keep you in our service. I cannot countenance that.”

The Faceless Man stared at him. “You are truly what I have heard. I accept. But I will follow the edicts of my own heart and conscious.”

With that the man turned and left.

Eddard shook his head. A most strange man. He turned his mind back to his immediate concerns. He studied the maps he had laid out on his table and the scrolls he had received back from the High Houses.

He knew Doran would vacillate. He had communicated with Oberyn. He had promised the man what he most sought after. The man had answered that if he, Eddard, delivered his promise he would be eternally grateful. He now would write another scroll to Oberyn. Eddard would demand that there would be no marriage of any Dorne prince to this Targaryen Princess. To get his desire Oberyn would have to agree to that. Oberyn could deal with Doran if vengeance was finally handed to their House.

Eddard did not worry about Highgarden. He knew Olenna was angling to marry a scion of Highgarden to whomever won the Iron Throne. He knew who he would dangle in front of her. She would bite. He merely had to make sure the other lure was removed from the lake.

He was not sure where Renly had fled on the night of his downfall. Eddard could guess though. He had gone to Highgarden. He had gone to his lover Loras. He strongly suspected that the cagy old
fox was fully aware of her grandson’s proclivities. That she was willing to look the other way. They would marry false wives for show and heirs but at night Eddard knew whose bed they would share.

He would have to remove that threat.

He had a plan for Renly and Stannis. Their natures would work against them.

Tywin he would neutralize by taking his daughter and grandchildren as hostages. All in Westeros had read Eddard’s pronouncement on the incest between Cersei and Jamie. They would deny of course. If Eddard lost in his bid to win the throne then they would slowly tamp down the truth till it was forgotten like the last heard howl of a wolf at night to never be heard again. Merely a memory that fades like moonshine before a hazy cover of cloud that rolls in smothering the pale light of that fragile celestial body.

Truth was like that. Fragile and easily broken.

Cat’s sister was a nuisance that he would handle when the time came.

Suddenly, Kiren broke into the room. She had a slightly fearful look on her face.

“A large force of Lannisters has formed and are riding hard down the King’s Road.”

Eddard had called a meeting of his war council. He squint smirked. Not that it was much. He then went contemplative. It did have advantages. He did not have to worry about the different regiments and coordinating their movements and making sure all followed his commands.

This battle would be totally under his command and supervision. Eddard knew even with his small force that once the battle was joined that confusion would rule paramount. Each person fighting their individual battles to achieve their objective which many times was sheer survival from one moment to the next moment. Each heartbeat an existential crises of survival.

Eddard knew this moment would be occurring. In some ways he was pleasantly surprised it had taken so long for the Lannisters to send a strong reinforcement troop to King’s Landing.

He knew that he had to thank Edmure and the beginnings of the forces from the Vale showing their forces on the battlefield. The Riverlands threatening the eastern marge of Westerlands. Tywin had to honor that threat. It was dividing his thoughts and forcing him to divert forces to confront that threat.

Then Edmure and now the Vale were harassing his forces moving down the Gold Road to King’s Landing. Each attack was forcing the forces of the Lannister’s to slow their advance. First to repulse the current attack and then to be prepared to fight any future attack.

The Druids and some of the longbow from the Vale were ambushing the Lannisters whenever the lay of the land allowed them to attack from cover and then slip away unseen. Like the hidden viper striking and then disappearing into the undergrowth.

The forces of Tywin was slowed. He knew the man wanted to get to King’s Landing to put down the Insurrection of Eddard Stark. He needed to get to King’s Landing and put down the errant Direwolf. Kill his foe and then staunch the poison of Eddard’s scrolls across Westeros declaring the incestuous union of his two eldest and their incestuous spawn.
He paused in his thinking. He would have to make sure he was ready for that when the time came.

Tywin needed to kill Eddard Stark. There would be no banishment for this. He would be executed if he survived for treason against the crown. Tywin would have to work hard to expunge the vile lies that Eddard had inscribed into the very granite blocks of King’s Landing. Adultery. Betrayal. Incest. Murder.

Eddard had never liked the man. The man was simply obsessed with the name of “Lannister”. All had to bow before that alter. No wonder Cersei and Jamie were insufferable. They were narcissistic self lov—“

Eddard stopped his diatribe. Did not the Targaryen’s allow marriage of brother to sister? They even allowed multiple partners. Multiple brothers and sisters. He tried to even contemplate him and Lyanna. His head spun. Then he thought of Brandon or Benjin added to the mix. His head threatened to explode.

Still. If it was consensual …

He would contemplate that on a later day.

The door opened to his quarters. It was time to plan for battle.

He had known this day would come. He had had the Druids heavily scout the terrain one and half days out from King’s Landing. He had found several places suitable to his needs. Eddard had already prepositioned what he needed for the ambush in several small crofts along the King’s Road. The many small living establishments that lined the major roads close to major cities. Little communities growing food for the cities and having artisans that helped produce the goods that the city dwellers clamored for.

He would use the items stored in the barns of the little crofts. He had had the Druids actively scope out the land in the distances he had given them. They had provided three possible sites. A week ago he had ridden out soon after dark from a stable near the Gate of the Gods gate. He had ridden his mount hard along with the Druids Kiren and Dwan Risley. They had brought three spare horses each. They had four scouts ahead with two runners in case they met troops of the Lannisters. None had been encountered.

They had arrived three hours past midnight to the first of the ambush sites. He had inspected the site for what he needed to make his ambush successful. They then rode to the next one that was a half hour down the King’s Road. The last one had been three miles further up the King’s Road.

Eddard had found the first site visited to be the best one. He then had went out into the fields and had camped underneath the boughs of a large corpse of trees. Eddard had laid out his blankets as the stars started to fade along with his Druid brethren. He was coming to feel a real affirmation to these secretive men and women. They were pure in their service to the land itself. He felt great sadness knowing that his family had been instrumental in their near extinction.

He felt humbled to be given the opportunity to right the scales of justice. He was determined to do all that he could to right past wrongs.

He had looked up at the stars fading away between the leaves of the trees. The twinkling stars reminding him just how small he was in the grand schemes of things. The stars so ethereal and fragile looking. Much like the life of a man. He had almost died. If not saved by his daughter his body would have already been reduced to bones on the road back to the crypts of Winterfell. He had enjoyed his time in the field after so long cooped up in the city. He had returned the next night.
He now rose up from the table to meet his small band of fellow warriors. He greeted the men and women who would be fighting alongside of him.

Javer Goodbrook and Styve Grandison entered first. He noticed as usual that Javer had his habitual dour look. Going by his look they were all heading to the gallows. Matamion and Jaehaegar Velnalys also part of Rhaegar’s honor guard came in after. Two more of the forces loyal to the Targaryen’s followed in.

Eddard could not help but wonder what would occur if Daenerys Targaryen was indeed alive and somehow survived and returned to Westeros to reclaim the throne taken from her father.

Next came Dwan Risley and Kiren of the Druids. They had been among the first to arrive. Four more Druids followed them in. They were two men and two women.

Eddard could not help but notice that the Druids made no distinction as to male or female when it came to leadership. Kiren was now the lead of the Druids with Merrel not yet returned. The ravens had reported he would be back this night. Eddard was happy to hear that. Any additional archer would be needed.

Last to come in was Arya and her sword teacher Syrio Forel. He looked at this daughter who avoided his eyes. He was sure he knew why. Syrio looked him steadily in the eyes. Eddard sighed. He knew that Syrio would side with daughter. Why shouldn’t he? Hadn’t she proven herself?

Eddard stood up and dipped his head to the group around him.

“I thank you all for coming. As you have reported to me Kiren, a force of five hundred Lannister horse have broken from the train of the Lannisters to ride light and fast to come to King’s Landing. They are still two days out. We can meet them away from King’s Landing.”

Eddard pointed to the map that showed the area around King’s Landing. “As you know I have scouted out an area that we can ambush this force. It will be dangerous and will require us to get in close and fight the enemy from within two hundreds and a select number will have to be in on the enemy when we spring the ambush.”

“This will allow us to attack outside of the line of sight of King’s Landing. They will not know of our ambush as it occurs. There will be no reinforcements to come against our rear.”

Eddard Stark then explained his attack plan. He had thought it out. He was sure it would be effective and would decimate the Lannister force coming down the road. He finished his laying out of forces and the plan of attack.

He looked at Kiren. He knew the answer and that she would be pissed but he had to express his thoughts.

“I know the Lannisters. They are guilty of war crimes in any campaign that they have led. The rape the women, killing men of fighting age no matter their physical health. They kill livestock they cannot take and burn all to the ground in their campaigns.”

“Kiren” I ask that you have two of your female Druids lead the ruse. I know I should not ask th—“

Kiren barked at Eddard “I am insulted that you even make this distinction. In our society women and men are equal. Of course we accept the risk. Do not make such an assumption again.”

Eddard felt chastised. He looked at the fierce look on Kiren’s face. Eddard saw that the male Druids
fully supported Kiren. He dipped his head.

“I apologize. I will not make this mistake again.”

Kiren smiled. “Apology accepted. Just don’t do it again.” She winked at Eddard.

Eddard could not help it. He flushed mightily in embarrassment.

The meeting soon ended. All filed out. All except his daughter and Syrio Forel.

“I’m going father!” Arya barked at her father.

Eddard bit his tongue. He did not like her defiant tone in front of Syrio. The look on her face was defiant and full of righteous anger.

“Arya. You are only fourteen.”

“That does not matter father. I have proven myself in combat. I have killed to save you. I have proven that I belong in any fight. Do not deny me my right!”

“Right?” Eddard asked. He knew her daughter had merit in her arguments. He would be dead he was sure if not for her bravery and skill in fighting. He just could not conceive of sending his daughter into battle. For himself to be putting her in danger.

“Yes! I have earned the right to be in any fight against the Lannisters. I fought in many battles. I have proven myself.”

“Arya. You are my daughter—“

“Stop! I will not hear you use my sex as an excuse to deny me my right to fight. You would not be refusing Robb if he had proven himself in combat if he was fourteen. His prowess is the sword. I am still a novice I know but my skill is the bow. My skills match the Druids. They have told me this. You need every bow you can get father. You know it. I am needed. I am going to the fight.”

Eddard had been about to argue but he liked to consider himself a fair man. Arya’s point of Robb had hit home. She was right. At fourteen Robb would have been so young and green but if he had proven himself as Arya had he would have let him come on this attack. He would have proven himself capable.

At fourteen he would have been a hindrance on the battlefield with a sword. He would be a boy fighting men. But if he had been a master of a bow? If it got to the point the archers were swarmed by mounted horse with knights and their swords then his battle plan would have been an unmitigated disaster.

His plan was well thought out and would succeed. He knew it. If the old gods did not shit down his neck then he would obliterate the fighting force approaching. It was almost a given.

Eddard thought all these thoughts in a flash. He stared at his daughter who met his gaze unflinching. He turned to look at Syrio Forel. He had been watching all this with a neutral expression.

“I assume you concur with my daughter Water Dancer?”

“Your daughter is as fierce as the Direwolf of your standard. She is walking death to her enemies. Fear cuts deeper than swords. She is not unwise but fear does not enter her heart in combat. She is
our equal in that manner.”

“So I should put my daughter into danger?”

“What does it matter if she is your daughter? Can she fight? Can she help us achieve our goals and desires? I fully support her. I will not clip her wings just when she is starting to fledge. An eagle needs to spread its wings and beat them hard. Only through risk can an eagle ever leave its nest Eddard.”

“You have raised an eagle or a direwolf if you prefer. You have done more than that. You have done the most rare of things. You have raised a Water Dancer. Let her dance Eddard.”

Eddard looked at Syrio and then Arya.

“Well then. I think I should let you dance Arya.”

Eddard could not help but smile. Arya was indeed dancing jumping around the room punching the air and hugging Syrio swirling him around in an awkward waltz.

Most strange Eddard thought to himself smiling still. How could two Water Dancers dance so horribly?
Byrron Lannister was fuming as his force of light cavalry moved down the King’s Road. He was enraged by the constant guerilla warfare that his forces had been enduring since they had marched out of the Westerlands. His enemies were cowardly curs that refused to meet his forces on the field of battle.

They would not face him. Instead they attacked from distance and faded away into the environment. He was in the leading van of the forces of House Lannister. Tywin was organizing an army to move to King’s Landing and support the new king Joffrey Baratheon. Eddard Stark had tried to usurp and overthrow the new king and had been captured.

When they had first started their march, Byrron had been sure that would be the end of events. He was a colonel in the army of the Lannisters. He was a cousin three times removed from the direct family line of Lannisters. To serve his family was a badge of honor. To serve his family and make the Westerlands ever greater gave the man a since of pride. He hoped that with the crown the Lannisters would finally be able to bring Highgarden down off their high self-important seat.

Then more ravens had arrived. Evidently a force had risen to oppose Joffrey. They were constantly attacking the Lannisters in King’s Landing. They were able to kill almost with seeming impunity. The asymmetrical warfare was killing the forces of the crown without even one of the enemy being killed. It was totally frustrating to Tywin Lannister. Byrron felt that same frustration. He longed to reach King’s Landing and help put down this Insurrection.

He had sat at the war table in Casterly Rock with Tywin raging. He demanded to know how these ‘miscreants’ were able to stay one step ahead of them.

There had been no answers. It was decided that Byrron would lead a vanguard of mounted forces with a minimal train to support the troop as they rode to the east. Tywin was staying behind to make sure the conscripts were whipped into shape. It would take six more weeks to get an army ready to march to King’s Landing.

It was supposed to be easy. He had ridden his forces onto the Gold Road and at first he had moved at speed away from Lannisport. In the lowlands and the piedmont all had been well. Then the Gold Road rose up to the mountains of Western Westeros. The first range were the Brokenback Mountains. The road was narrow and had many facing cliffs and overhangs. The road in place had been meticulously carved into the sides of the mountains. Only space for small wagons to pass in each direction. There were carve outs at the switchbacks to allow large wagons to pull off to allow traffic to pass. There were guard gates at these narrow points that controlled the traffic on the Gold Road. It was a natural tax collection point but also a means to control the traffic so there were not snares on the road.

Byrron had never thought much of it before. It was merely the way the road wove through the mountains. The Gold Road had always been thus. He had been born in Bakerfield between
Sarsfield and Hornvale. He was used to the mountains. The mountains of the Westerlands had always been at peace. The people were not restive to the rule of his House. Tywin Lannister had been open handed with his largess. He had made sure that projects were done in each house. The people may bitch but that was natural. All complained of taxes and resources being spent on another House.

All the while accepting every gold dragon and silver stag sent their way.

This was not what Byrron found on the Gold Road on this travel. It had started when they first rose up into the clouds of the Brokenback Mountains. They had left behind Oak Hill the last small city leading up into the high mountain passes. It was early in the next morning. The Gold Road here clung to the side of the mountain. There was a high mountain across from the road about three hundred yards across a ravine. The facing mountain rose up a high towering height over the road. The mountain was lined with ancient pines that reached for the sky.

Suddenly, arrows came whistling down from a great height above the King’s Road. The men were generally passing down the road in single file with wagons in teams of four or five back to back with troops between riding or walking their horses.

Men were thrown off their horses. Horses rose up with arrows buried deep in their bodies. The arrows kept flying down. Confusion soon ran riot along the troop train. Byrron looked around wildly at the facing mountain but never saw the archers. The deep ravine did not allow him to send out riders to engage in a counterattack. They were helpless but to suffer the storm of arrows without being to counterstroke as doctrine dictated. Always charge an ambush.

His own archers strung their bows and fired wildly back but their arrows fell short. The men hide behind the wagons and those in the train pulled their shields off their saddle horns or flanks of their horses. The men now able to shelter the arrows that would fire from seemingly nowhere. Finally, after twenty minutes the attack ceased.

He examined the arrows. They were definitely long bow. The mountains were supposedly inaccessible. Only thin animal trails were in these high mountains with their high angled slopes. To walk those paths were highly dangerous and nearly impossible with a heavily armored man.

That had been the first attack. He had suffered seventeen dead and twenty-one injured. He lost over thirty horses and many wounded and unable to support their riders. He was furious. This slowed his advance to a crawl. He sent out scouts on the animal trails on the mountain that the King’s Road traveled around. They were sent to lookout for possible ambush sites.

That had been the only large scale attack. From that point it had only been hit and run guerrilla warfare tactics. The deaths occurred singly or in small numbers. An arrow would come flying in from almost any angle. A man would drop dead. The men would look around wildly. The archer was never found.

Again and again this happened.

Seven times large boulders were sent down the mountain side crashing into a wagon shattering it. The driver killed. Several times the horses also killed or maimed and had to be put down.

Finally, they reached Deep Den. Byrron felt like he had had a milestone removed from his neck. His neck ached from constantly looking up for dangers that he nor any other could ever see.

They had regrouped in Deep Den. Those men too wounded to continue were left while replacement horses were appropriated. The men felt refreshed after three days and again hit the King’s Road.
They had lost ten days with their march slowed by the constant harassing attacks.

Now they were able again to make speed. The danger past. Or so he had thought.

While out of the mountains they were still in rolling piedmont and large stands of trees that appeared as small islands on the backs of the rolling hills.

Again the attacks started three days out of Deep Den. The attacks were sudden. An arrow or small flight of arrows would come flying into the line of his troops. A man or maybe two would be hammered off their horse. Horses would be feathered. The injured horses usually unable to further carry its rider.

The men and Byrron were seething at the constant snipping by an enemy they could never see. The high rolling hills and trees hiding their enemies. His men were raging at the loss of comrades and friends. The attacks were fewer. The enemy only attacked when they had the advantage and could disappear into the wilderness. It was like trying to fight a ghost that walked on the marge of ones senses. Always felt but never truly seen.

Then they had reached the Blackwater Rush. They had rode to the Rippleshorn Ford. Byrron had sent out scouts and they had reported all was safe. He started to send his men across and slowly guiding the wagons across the shallow water. The rains had been kind and the current was not fast.

He had sent across a strong company and the first wagons had gone halfway across the ford. This was not a land he knew. Nor really his scouts. The men of House Tully knew the land. They had been able to avoid his scouts. They fell on the company he had sent across with a force five times their numbers. The battle had been pitched. He charged on his force his knights following.

Arrows pierced horses making them scream in pain and rear. Knights were thrown off their horses. The wagon masters were feathered. Knights charged into his company and slaughtered his men.

His horse was feathered twice and he went into the river. He staggered up to his feet in water to his waist. The next fifteen minutes were pure confusion and panic. Then the Tully men disappeared. They had killed twelve Tully men. They killed the cowards that had been wounded and not able to flee. The Lannisters had lost fifty-five men and twenty too injured to continue.

He moved on. The anger burning in Byrron’s breast only grew. They marched on. They had no recourse. He thought that maybe the guerilla warfare had been left behind. Two days later the first attack of a new round of attacks occurred. A man went down with an arrow in his throat. Byron looked out over the rolling low hills and grasslands. He saw nothing. How could these curs be so invisible!

They had moved on three more days with two more attacks. Two men killed and one severely injured. That was when he decided to take five hundred men and ride in only chainmail. He would use speed to avoid these attacks. They were almost in the Crownlands and lands loyal to the new king.

It had seemed to work. They rode fast and being back in loyal lands finally made him feel safe. Then five days out from King’s Landing they had been struck again. That was when his childhood friend Samuel Bettley had been killed with an arrow into his upper chest. The arrow had penetrated his heart.

His friend lay in his arms gasping for breath the fear of death written all over his face. He had seen the life go out of his childhood friend’s face. His life fading away like the field falling into dark as a thick cloud slide across the sun making the land dark and cool. His friend’s grip on his hand went
slack. He was gone.

Byrron had buried his friend with his own hands. He felt rage at these unseen foes. He longed for revenge. He needed to get to King’s Landing to help find these traitors and butcher them. He would have his revenge!

They were ambushed the next day but the last three days they had been free of the accursed attacks.

They were a day and a half from King’s Landing in the late afternoon. Byrron saw up ahead on the King’s Road three large wagons filled with produce heading towards King’s Landing to sell. The troop slowed down. The first wagon had broken an axle and was leaned over. The farmers were struggling to prop it up to replace the damaged wheel. It was beyond them.

He saw that the small group had two young women. He felt his anger flare. This men had been attacked relentlessly and not been able to strike back. He felt his baser emotions rising to war with his military training.

He moved his troop forward. He knew they were not going to help these farmers. He saw that the women were comely. He looked at this sergeants and saw the same repressed battle lust in their eyes. He was debating within himself as his troop stopped. The tension in the troop was palpable.

Eddard was watching the tableau unfolding before him. He had chosen this site because it had a low wash gulley on this side of the King’s Road. The Gulley twelve feet deep. He had fifteen horse and knights and warriors who were accomplished horseback fighters. They had cut out scallops to allow for spying on the Road into the side of the gulley.

Eddard was in one of them. He saw the agitation in the troop. The Druids sending back information with their Ravens giving details of each ambush and their effect on the Lannister column. The men were milling around. He knew that the sight of two comely women would put the lust in the men. They had been on the road for well over a month being ambushed constantly. They would be fueled for revenge. He had to use iron will to make sure that these baser instincts were controlled in his own men.

He was not sure the commander would lose control or even join in but the blockade had done what he needed. The troop had stilled its momentum. The moment to strike had arrived. They were only fifty yards from the King’s Road. They had cut a channel out of the gulley for the horses to ride up out of the gulley.

On the other side of the King’s Road was a shallow basin one hundred and fifty yards from the King’s Road. Well within the range of the longbows of the Druids. He had twenty-five of his archers on that side and sixteen on this side. He had a mounted troop on that side of the road to support the archers if necessary.

He was leaving five men on horse behind each group to counterattack any rush at the archers. The numbers were still much against them. The horses were a force multiplier. He got down off his lookout point and jumped on his horse. A Druid handed him his lance. He and the fifteen knights had their lances in hand now.

Eddard nodded up at Klissa. It was time to spring the ambush.

Arya was up on the edge of the gulley. She was standing with a screen in front of her position. The
camouflage carefully lain to make the archers invisible as they studied the Lannister force. She saw her father look at Klissa. The large barn owl on her shoulder hopped off and onto a large scrub branch. It was time. Her father began to move his force to the ramp they had dug to let them leave the gulley.

She made eye contact with her father. Syrio was a little ways down the gully looking out at the enemy. They both turned to look at Eddard as he passed below them. The knights had a close grip on their reigns pulling the bite in the horses’ mouths to keep any neighs or bugles muzzled for the moment. Eddard stopped. He looked up at Arya. He had a serious look on his face as he balanced his lance. Then a small smile crossed his face. He tilted his head to his daughter.

Softly he spoke “Death to our enemies. Fight well my daughter.”

Arya felt herself choke up for a moment. He was treating her like a true warrior.

Eddard looked at Syrio. They locked eyes. Syrio understood. He was being charged with protecting Arya as much as the coming battle would allow. Syrio nodded his head.

Eddard moved his force down the gulley to the cutout to charge up onto the plain and attack.

Arya looked up and saw the ravens flying up several hundred feet above them circling flying silently. She knew the Druids were using them to coordinate their efforts on each side of the King’s Road. Arya watched the large birds as they flew circles keeping quiet. The Lannisters if they noticed them would ignore them not knowing their importance. If she had not known to look up she would never have noticed them. Klissa nodded her head and the scrub screens were slowly pulled down. As one the Druids and Arya reached back to the quiver on their back and pulled out an arrow and notched it. The human eye was designed to notice movement thus the slow movements. Everyone stood up slowly with bows pulled back. They each had four quivers filled with thirty arrows each. They would firing fast and furious. There was more quivers filled with arrows in the bottom of the gulley.

Klissa raised her arm and then slashed it down. There was the mighty sound of fifteen longbows and one Northern bow being unleased. The mighty vibrations of the strong bowstrings filled the gulley. Their arrows released to find their mark Arya fervently hoped. She knew the Druids on the other side had fired their own arrows into the other side of the Lannister troop. Arya was satisfied when she heard the screams of horses and the shouts of men.

Arya saw the streaks of the second flight of arrows flinging into the Lannisters. She saw men thrown off horses and horses bucking and some folding with arrows in their bodies. Across the formation she saw confusion taken hold as the other force of Druids fired their arrows into the bunched Lannisters.

She reached back and pulled out arrows and fitted them to her bowstring and pulled the string back in a steady motion and let loose. She heard her father riding with his fellow knights out of the gulley. The young wolf saw their arrows whistling into the Lannister ranks. Arrows impacting more horses and men. Men fell off their mounts while their mounts started to scream and buck wildly with arrows penetrating their bodies filling the horses with pain and rage.

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Eddard had his lance held up at a forty-five degree angle as he and his fellow knights rode up out of the gulley. He would not normally ride into a fight with archers firing into the enemy but he had come to fully appreciate the skills of these Druids. He watched arrows fly straight and true into Lannister’s all up and down the column. He noticed the white fletching of his daughter and felt a
thrum of pride at his daughter’s prowess. He watched a Lannister officer grip his neck suddenly with a white fletched arrow buried deep in his throat.

The skill he saw in his daughter and the Druids was humbling and also inspiring. They were the equal of knights with their skills in the bow. He rapidly formed up with his fifteen knights. He looked at Jaehaegar Velnaelys to his right and at Javer Goodbrook on his left. They nodded at each other. A fierce smile was on their faces. Eddard was sure it was mirrored on his own face. It was the face of men primed for combat. He shouted and lifted his lance. His men shouted in return.

The knights kicked their horses. They were in their full armor that they had either smuggled into King’s Landing or purchased from the cheaper sections of the Street of Steel. They quickly had their horses up at full charge gallop. The Lannisters were thrown into confusion with the hail of arrows slamming into their numbers from two sides. Eddard started when several arrows whistled just over his left shoulder by his ear to streak into the Lannister force.

The Lannister’s chainmail was deflecting some of the arrows and many were pulling their shield from off their backs or on their horses flanks. They had their shields up now and some were using their fallen horses as shields lying beside them getting their sense of the battle. Others were running to wagons to find shelter. Many arrows found their mark but now the wild milling and rising dust was causing many arrows to whistle through the ranks of the Lannisters finding no target to bury themselves in.

Eddard was not alarmed. That was the nature of arrows in combat. The storm of arrows was keeping the heads of the Lannister’s down in self-preservation. It gave the new King the cover he needed.

Eddard saw the barrel tops suddenly flung off on the barrels in the beds of the wagons. The tarps ripped back that were supposedly covering vegetable produce. The hidden archers rising up to fire off at the roiling horde of Lannisters. Horses were rearing screaming. Men were fighting their horses and others had been thrown off and milling around on the ground. The wagons had two sword fighters each for close defense.

The two Druid women had rolled underneath the wagons and pulled their longbows free they had strapped to the underside of the wagon beds along with their quivers. They quickly strung their bows and put their quivers on their backs. They now rose up armed and let loose their arrows firing at their enemies from point blank range. Some of the Lannister mounted horse were charging the wagons but the Druids dodged the strokes and the sword fighters met the initial charge hacking at knights and their horses.

With a sharp kick to his horse’s ribs Eddard had gotten his horse up to a full gallop. Eddard had his lance down now with the long handle braced against his ribs. He aimed at his chosen target. The wall of Lance Men were up to full speed. Some of the Lannister’s saw them coming. Horses pulled out of the way. Eddard had a brief moment to reflect that his attack was going exactly as planned. He wondered if he would survive it. Luck as well as skill played a major part of every battle.

The element of surprise was still totally on their side. The charge slammed into the flank of the Lannisters. His lance plunged into a man’s body in his ribs and slammed clean through his body. Eddard’s body slammed into the horse of the now dead man. Eddard had released the handle of the lance and pulled his horse back. His sword was out in his hand.

As Eddard prepared to charge into his foes he watched the devastating affect of his fellow Lance men. Their long poles impaling riders and ripping men off horses with jutting poles squirting the men. Their momentum carrying them into the Lannister column folding it in at the point of impact of the wedge of attacking Lance men. His fellow warriors dropped their lances reaching for swords.
and battleaxes.

The moment was broken with Eddard sensing a Lannister man coming at him. With sword raised,
Eddard turned to meet the attack. He slashed furiously at any man in red he saw. He slashed a man
off his horse with a cut to his neck nearly severing his head. His next foe had his sword ready and
parried the killing strokes of Eddard’s sword as the men circled each other. The man slashed at
Eddard but his armor rebounded the man’s sword stroke up and away.

The plate armor of the forces of the new King gave them a huge advantage as their swords had a
much time finding ways to penetrate the chainmail of the Lannisters. Their need to ride fast had left
them vulnerable to his kind of attack.

His foes could not organize against Eddard as arrows were flying fast and furious constantly roiling
the Lannisters. Many arrows flew through the milling throng not finding a target. Many missed but
many also found their targets. Arrows would feather horses sending them rearing or bucking wildly.
Their men fighting to stay a horse. Eddard saw arrows hit the Lannister men. Some fell down dead
or gravely wounded. The chainmail stopped many arrows from penetrating deeply though. The
men fighting on. Eddard rammed his sword through the ribs of the man he was fighting. He
wrenched his sword free when a horse slammed into his.

He struggled to keep himself upright and his horse on his feet. He did not want to have another
horse fall on him! One of his fellow knights took on the man. They slashed furiously at each other.
Suddenly, the Lannister had a longbow arrow penetrate his chainmail and sink into his shoulder.
The man yelled in pain and then screamed as a sword bit into his upper body with broken ribs and
chainmail jammed into his body cavity. He saw an arrow glance off a man’s armor. Another man
had his shield on his arm keeping it facing out.

Men were milling around the wagons pressing. From this range the Druids did not miss and their
arrows nearly shot out the other side of their targets. They were not able to fire rapidly spending
much time ducking and rolling to avoid sword strokes. Eddard saw a druid go down in the second
wagon.

Eddard roared and charged forward. He hacked down the man who had decapitated the Druid. He
saw another druid hacked down. Her body folding down with a slash to her ribs. Eddard’s battle
sense warmed him. He was suddenly whirling around to defend himself from two attackers. He saw
one of his knights go down. More of his men were fighting furiously just to survive. They were
killing their enemies at a furious rate but numbers were not in their favor though that was changing
rapidly.

He saw a force of twenty Lannister’s charging the gulley that he had ridden out of. He felt his heart
clutch knowing that Arya was in that gulley. He suppressed his fear and blocked a sword stroke and
fought with Styve Grandison and Gabrin Myatt they were helping to keep the Lannister’s from
swarming the wagons. Eddard Stark’s daughter was a warrior true.

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Arya saw the charge of mounted Lannister’s charging towards at them. She felt her eyes go large as
she changed her aim point and started firing at the charging force of attacking horse. She felt
adrenaline rush though her bloodstream. She fired steadily at the charging horses. She hit a horse in
its forward whither. It kept on charging. Horses were taking farrows but they kept charging. A
hoarse took an arrow to the eye and collapsed throwing its rider.

She saw one and then three men get feathered. Two fell off mortally wounded but the other men
kept on charging. The lead horses reached the hidden trench that had been dug into the ground and
hidden with camouflage netting. Her father and his men had made sure to ride wide of the trench. The lead horses tumbled into the ditch breaking their legs and throwing their riders. Arrows immediately chasing the men as they staggered behind their fallen horses or jumped in the trench.

Eight mounted men reached the edge of the gulley. They slashed at the Druids still on the lip. One Druid was cut deep on her upper arm. She jumped down into the gulley. The five guarding knights slashed with swords at the Lannister’s at the edge of the gulley. The Lannister’s saw they could not jump their horses down without major chance of breaking their mount’s legs. The men ducked back constantly as arrows were shot up at them. A Lannister fell down dead with an arrow in the throat.

The Lannisters saw the ramp leading down into the gulley and broke for it. Their guard knights rushed to meet them. More Lannister men were riding out to join their brothers. The men reached the ramp. Out of scrub brush on the side Syrio was suddenly out and his rapier cut two horses’ ligaments sending the horses straight down crippled. He quickly dispatched the two fallen riders with thrusts through their throats.

Without archers to slow and kill the Lannisters more were approaching their positions. Their guards met the initial charge of the Lannisters trying to get into the gulley. The Druids had repositioned themselves so they could fire up at the Lannister’s trying to hack their way through their guard force. Some of the Druids had taken up their positions back on the lip of gulley firing at targets of opportunity.

Arya saw one of their guard go down defending them. She felt righteous anger which was slightly tamped when her arrow and another Druid arrow killed the man with an arrow to the eye and throat. She was sweating like a pig and covered with clotted dust. She saw a Lannister man break through their guard and was immediately feathered. He fell off his horse dead. Two more of their forces were cut down though by the Lannister’s.

Syrio was doing his water dance avoiding sword swipes and piercing men in their knees and calves with his razor point rapier as they attempted to cut him down from on top of their horses. He cut horses ligaments. He was wounding and maiming. When he was able to get his foe down to his level he then delivered a killing stroke.

Two more Lannisters broke through the defense. They had hacked down another of their guard. He was only wounded and the Druids were using their arrows to make the Lannisters wheel their horses away. Horses were feathered. The accumulating arrows weakening the steeds. Some falling immediately with eye and throat shots.

Two horses burst through and charged Arya. Arya had time to let loose an arrow that penetrated the leading man’s eye instantly killing him.

The other man charged Arya trying to run her down. She did not have time to pull another arrow from her quiver. She dove to the side her body slamming into the gulley dirt wall. The horse’s hooves kicking up dirt in her face and body. The wind had been knocked out of her body. The man was determined to kill her.

The man spun his horse around and had it half rise up on its hind legs. He was going to slam the horse’s hooves into her head shattering it. She gaped and prepared to try and roll away but saw she did not have time. She dropped her bow and put her arms over her head to try and protect herself.

Arya did not see two arrows hit the horse making it jerk and twirl. She also did not see Syrio leaping through the air like a ballet dancer in a play from Pentos. His sword came down piercing the back of the man’s neck severing his spine. The rapier ripped from his grip. The now leaderless horse went tearing off down the gulley kicking wildly bucking the dead man off his back. Syrio landed lightly
on his feet and ran to the fallen man to retrieve his rapier from the corpse he had just rendered.

The other man who had gotten though the guard had hacked a druid wounding his leg. He then gutted another Druid disemboweling him. He was then hit with an arrow in his side. His chainmail blunting most of the force. It did make him lean over in shock. He now hacked at two Druids attacking him with their long daggers. The Druids circling out of the range of his sword strokes. The men constantly circling darting in for fast strokes.

With the Lannister focusing on them he did not Syrio run and leap up onto the horses back nor the sword swipe that opened up the side of this neck with blood gushing out severed arteries. Syrio jumped back down and landed lightly.

He moved over to help Arya up. He smiled down at her. “Let us keep killing this curs. Lions my ass!”

Arya looked around. The fight had gone out of the Lannister men. The gulley was empty. The Druids rushing back to the gulley edge to resume firing at their foes.

Arya felt renewed. She got on the edge. She saw that the Lannisters were now running off in small groups. The men running from the battle that had gone badly for them. She and Druids chasing them off with arrows whistling after them.

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Eddard was slashing wildly. He hacked a man down attacking from the left. He was not able to fully meet the attack that suddenly came from the right. He fell back enough to lessen the blow of a sword that numbed his left arm. He retreated so he could use a wagon to protect that side. From this vantage point he saw the other side of the road now. He saw the five mounted guards of the archers on the opposite side from Arya charging into the fray. They had their swords out and were at full gallop.

They were disobeying orders. He was thankful. A good commander knows to read the situation and change plans. The men slammed into the Lannister’s flank. The shock of the sudden unexpected attack made the Lannister’s attacking the wagons falter. Arrows were still flying into the melee. The Druids were to some degree firing blind with the heavy clouds of dust now kicked up in the air. The horse and riders whirling and dodging sword blows and whistling arrows.

It was dangerous with the milling forces that had comingled. Eddard knew it was necessary. It was the storm of arrows that kept the Lannister’s from organizing an effective counterattack.

With the lessening of the attack Eddard knew they would survive the battlefield. The Druids and Arya had done their work. The Lannister’s had been greatly reduced. His arm was no longer numb and he again fully engaged in battle. He hacked down two Lannisters. The Lannister men were now exhausted and confused with the continuing attack. Defeat always weakened the will of a man to fight.

The attack by Eddard and his Lance men had with the constant deadly accurate arrow fire wore down and now defeated the force of Lannisters. That had been his plan. To use shock and a devastating concentrated assault to overcome superior numbers. It had worked. The Lannister men broke and fled. Many fled back up the King’s Highway in the direction from which they had come. Other straggled out down the King’s Road towards King’s Landing. Many of them wounded with a few listing in their saddles. He saw one man fall off.

The battle was over. He saw Lannisters surrendering. He felt exhaustion wash over his body. He
saw two more either severely wounded or dead Druids draped over the wagons. He felt his face set in a grim line. The Druids had sacrificed greatly to give Eddard his victory. He felt the loss of all his men and women who had fought in his name. He knew it was necessary to achieve victory but he hated the loss of life. He felt no elation in the Lannisters he had killed. It was simply necessary.

He had his victory. Cersei was denied a large effective fighting force. He had achieved all his goals. He would not be celebrating.

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Arya could not understand her father. She was elated. They had obliterated the Lannister force. The ground around their ambush sit was littered with the corpses of their enemies. In fact she could not understand the Druids either. They were solemn. She understood they had taken loses but they paled compared to the losses of the Lannisters.

She saw the Druids treating the wounded. She was perplexed that they seemed to giving succor to both their own and the Lannisters.

Her father was cradling a knight’s head as a druid used fire to staunch a deep cut on his thigh. The man had screamed and writhed and her father cried helping to hold the man still. Arya had watched her father caring for the wounded. To her shock he had tended the wounded of both forces.

She had thought the Lord of a High House was above the mundane.

She squatted beside her father. The man had passed out and Eddard stroked his hair.

“Will he live father?”

“If the wound is not infected. He will walk with a limp. He will be limited in battle.”

“Father …” Arya trailed off not sure how to ask her question.

Her father divined her questions. “I will never be too high and mighty to not help the men who fight and die for me Arya. I am honored and humbled to offer what succor I can to these brave men. I hate and detest killing but I will not shy away from it.”

“Hopefully, in the deaths we caused today we will have to kill less tomorrow. Never come to love the art of killing Arya. Never hardened your heart to death my daughter. Do not become a Faceless Man serving death with no care for anything else in this world. Keep your heart untainted from that blight my sweet daughter.”

“The world needs its champions but never come to love the sins we perform in its service.”

Arya mulled over her father’s words. She rose up and saw Syrio behind her. He smiled at her with a tired and a little bit sad smile.

“Your father speaks true words Arya. When you become a Water Dancer you will be constantly fighting with death. He will be constantly seeking your life.” Syrio started to walk away and Arya moved to join her teacher. She was a warrior and had no skills in the arts of medicine.

They walked on in silence.

“And what do we tell death Arya” Syrio asked his prized student.

“Not today” Arya answered her teacher immediately. Syrio clapped Arya on the shoulder.
“Yes. Today we gave death his due. We did what was just and right. I have killed many who only
died because they were young and foolish attacking me. Most I wounded but some I had to kill.
Today we accomplished good for the realm. Your father fights for a greater good. Not these
Lannisters. Today we fought and killed for a noble reason.”

Arya continued the path. She was still elated at their victory but it was tempered now. She would
never shirk in her duty but she would not revel in it.
Slowly Cersei Lannister clawed her way back to consciousness. Her thoughts were scattered like a dandelion that had been breathed on by a five year old sending the seeds whirling into the air. The patterns confused and agitated. The memories from her childhood she had once found humorous but not so now. Being those seeds twirling helpless in the breeze was quite a different matter.

She slowly sat up in her royal bed. Her head spun and her vision was blurry as if her world had been upended into a water trough. Everything seemed muzzy and distorted. Her head was pounding and her stomach was upset like she was on a galleon on a storm swept sea. Cersei worked her mouth that felt like it was filled with cotton. Her skin clammy feeling.

She leaned over the side of the bed and wrinkled her nose. The chamber pot was still where she vaguely remembered leaving it last night when her stomach had gotten the best of her. Her stomach rebelling over one or was it five cups to many of wine.

She groaned feeling her stomach roiling and threatening to rebel again. Cersei very slowly and carefully got out of her royal bed and moved with slow baby steps to the door to her chambers. She opened the door and spied Sandor Clegane. He looked totally bored but was alert.

“Sandor” she barked at the man.

He ignored her.

She ground her teeth. In a more civilized tone she called to him again “Sandor”.

This time he easily heard her and turned to look at Cersei. With blood shot eyes she gazed up at the tall knight. She ground her teeth at the man’s insolence. She tried to be fair at times. She was running out of guards. The man never took his rebellious streak to far. He goaded her but never fell into open rebellion. She again saw the horrible damage done to his face by his brother. All for playing with one of his older brother’s toys she thought she remembered. She shook her head. Her ire at the man settled.

“Please send for the Grand Maester. Tell him I need my “remedy”.

The Hound looked at her. “You might want to ease up on the imbibing my Queen. Do you truly want Joffrey without the benefit of your counsel?” He dipped his head and went down the hall to do the Queen’s bidding.

She stared after the man. He was coarse and mean but at times Sandor showed the strangest insight and dare she say it compassion. He was a walking contradiction. She felt a tremor of something pass through her. These trying times were plucking unused strings of a hidden harp in her bosom. The strings out of key and the chords discordant. Cersei shook her head throwing off these unwanted thoughts.

She went back into her chambers and sat down on the side of the bed. She ran her hands over her face and through her long locks.
It was supposed to be so simple. Her plans cut and dry. She had taken Eddard Stark out of the
equation. She would have Varys work on the proud, vain and ultimately stupid with honor man into
admitting he was a traitor. Which he was. He proved that by altering Robert’s last words.

He would then take the Black and she would be rid of the man. Eddard would be out of her hair
with his exile to the Wall. She had it all planned out. Take out the old Wolf. Capture his cubs and
dole them out as chattel to increase the power and prestige of House Lannister. Gods knew that her
father was always prattling on about the only true thing of worth was the damn name of their House.
Cersei had come to really, really hate that saying of her father. It was quickly ripening to outright
loathing with her new insights.

She snorted. There was more to life than that. There had to be. There just had to be.

She stared off across the room. The only problem with her beautiful plan was that it had all gone to
shit. It was that little twat Arya’s fault. Somehow the little urchin had avoided capture. Worse,
instead of being a good little irritant and disappearing into the wilds and out of her hair the imp had
started a fucking Insurrection.

The wayward Starkling had found allies beyond the Water Dance instructor of hers. Cersei had
come to learn all about Syrio Forel through her whisperer. The eunuch was good for information if
nothing else. This Syrio had been the first sword of Braavos which of course meant he served the
Sealord of that city of blowhards. The man had been killed in a wild coup that had cost Syrio his
job. He was supposed to keep the man safe and he had died. That and the rumors he slept with
children.

Cersei was many things but she was not a pedophile. Varys had told her it was all lies. Cersei
grimaced. He was probably right. She was herself on a campaign of disinformation thanks to that
little wolf bitch Arya.

The girl had not disappeared of course. Curse her! She was leading a damnable Insurrection that
had attacked her forces so relentlessly and so successfully she had to pull all her forces back into the
barracks or the Red Keep itself. The men had started to grumble and were close to refusing to leave
their two sets of barracks. The East Barracks by the Dragon Gate and the West Barracks near
Cobbler's Square.

They would only move in force and in a straight line to the Red Keep and back. They had learned to
send forces up along the rooftops along the routes. The jackals loved to attack from above. Cersei
had decided to move many of the garrison into the Red Keep itself. Her force of loyal Red Cloaks
had been grievously reduced by Arya and her fellow traitors.

She knew Commander Janos Slynt was a corrupt man who embezzled money from his men. Robert
had kept the man fearing his successor might be worse. The Queen looked at her hands
contemplating Janos. She had come to detest the man being in his close association all the time now
but what recourse did she have. She needed him and his men. She needed bodies to defend herself
and her family. Her children must be kept safe.

Initially, she had not worried too much for everyone’s safety. The prophecy she had been given had
been most specific. There was no Queen on the horizon to dethrone her. Still Cersei had become
most afraid. Eddard Stark was loose and he was a prophecy all unto himself. He had been naïve
and outright stupid when he came to her. Cersei feared that Eddard could only be fooled once. She
had had her chance at the man. He was now plotting her downfall. She knew what happened when
dynasties were disposed. She had seen it with Elia Martell and her helpless children.

Cersei had never thought that much on the past or the sad fate of Elia. She had her own prophecy to
worry over. Now with the noose tightening she felt what Elia most have felt. Fear that only grew till you felt it strangling you. Cersei needed a drink!

Cersei looked around at the four walls of her royal bedroom suite. She was trapped in her own castle!

Arya had trapped her in her own Lion’s Den. Then, to make it so much worse the brat of a whore had somehow freed her father from the dungeons. Her son had sent for Eddard in the middle of the night and had stumbled across the rescue of the father. The bitch and her strange allies had again decimated her forces.

The lioness of Lannister sat on her bed. She could never admit it but she admired Arya Stark. The girl had been allowed to take up the sword and the arrow. Cersei had not. Now Arya was saving the day and Cersei was sitting on her bed wringing her hands in abject fear. If only she had been allowed to take up the sword! If only her dreams had not been crushed by her father. Jamie would have trained if he had the balls to defy their father.

It was infuriating.

There was a polite knock at the door. Finally! She went to the door in a slow clip to keep her world from reeling. She opened the door and let in the Grand Maester, Pycelle.

The old doddering man walked in clucking at Cersei.

“You really need to stop this excessive drinking my Queen. It is not good for your constitution.”

“Not you too damnit! Just give me the remedy already! The weight of sovereignty weighs heavy on my shoulders.”

The man hummed in acknowledgement. The man handed her crystallized ginger to nibble on. The spice would start to quell her nausea and feeling like she needed to vomit again.

The man then left a concoction of 1 teaspoon of salt and 8 teaspoons of sugar into 5 cups of distilled water. He had whisked in a ½ cup orange juice. He told her to sip the mixture slowly throughout the day, storing it in a bucket of ice. He told her to eat some food particularly carbohydrates. Every day he gave her the same instructions. Cersei fumed but dare not piss him off and have him somehow pervert her potion.

It was the same routine every morning now. She was drinking too much she knew but she needed relief. All the news was bad and it kept getting worse.

She had nearly soiled her undergarments when she discovered that Eddard Stark had been freed. He was crippled but still he was a symbol of the North. This was dire news but she had not been too worried. He was isolated and a non-threat. What did she have to fear from a cripple? Cersei used this logic to comfort herself. No one feared Willas Tyrell since his injury.

Or so she had thought.

Then the ravens had started to fly across the width and breadth of Westeros. Ravens carrying the scrolls of one Eddard Stark. Where had he gotten the ravens! Pycelle assured her that all the ravens in his rookery were accounted for. This might be so and yet the man seemed to have an unlimited source of the damned birds.

They had gone to all the Major Houses of Westeros. Repeatedly! The man was seeking alliances. She knew he was finding them in the Riverlands and the Vale. The North was preparing for war!
None of this was supposed to be happening! She had it all planned out.

Then he had started spreading dirty filthy vicious lies. Lies about the parentage of her children. That she had lay with Jamie her twin brother to birth her three sweet children Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen. He had said that she and Jamie had pushed his own son to his supposed death. She proclaimed loudly to anyone who would hear of the lies the man. The only problem the man was speaking the absolute truth.

Cersei saw in her mind’s eye Jaime pushing Bran out the window. Cersei’s face twisted. That was not her fault! Damn Jamie for acting rashly! She had merely meant to gather the child into the room in the broken tower and put the fear of the seven … or would it be the old gods—it didn’t matter!—into the child.

Eddard told in his missives how she spiked Robert’s drink on his hunt. Thus, enabling the bore to gore her dear sweet departed husband.

It was all true of course. Damnit she had every right to do as she did. Robert was a drunken buffoon. Why was it alright for the Targaryens to love whom they choose and not her and Jamie!

She denied it all. What else could she do? It was Eddard that had spiked the drink of Robert wanting his throne. It was all lies about Jamie and her. She had loved dearly her dear departed husband. Bastard! Good riddance! He had done nothing but rape her since the night of their wedding! The buffoon did not have to drink like a sodden asshole. She only gave him the means. He did all the work himself. Bastard!

Eddard had not been satisfied with his accusations. No. She finally found out how he and Jon Arryn, she supposed, figured out the true parentage of her children. Eddard had sent out page and verse to be read of The Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms, the children of a Lannister and a Baratheon always had black hair. On top of the book Eddard reminded everyone of the last union between a Baratheon and a Lannister had been ninety years before when Tya Lannister wedded Gowen Baratheon; the single child was large and lusty boy with a full head of black hair. Thirty years before that a Lannister had taken a Baratheon maid; all the children had black hair.

That would prove to all the truth. The only way she could counteract the truth was to now kill Eddard as a traitor and create a new truth to supplant the real truth. But to do that she had to kill Eddard. A man that had disappeared just like his bitch daughter. They moved around King’s Landing like the proverbial ghosts from the dead come back to Earth to wreak havoc on one Cersei Lannister. It was not fair! She had only dunderheads at her side and Eddard had Arya. All Cersei had was Joffrey. That made her gulp. It was not fair!

Damn Eddard’s eyes. He was too smart by half and yet he had been a lamb. She had easily taken him down. No more. The man had learned from his mistakes.

He was casting serious doubt on her and seeking alliances. She had been waiting for her father to come to her rescue. She knew it took time to form an army and take to field. Marches were notoriously slow. It did not matter the minstrels and bards always made them seem magically fast. She knew that much about military tactics. She didn’t care what that damn scribe GRR Martin wrote in his historical novels that she read at night snorting at him.

Her father had been enraged at the scrolls from Eddard and his acquisitions. She assured her father they were all baseless lies. Even if he suspected Eddard might be telling the truth her father would still come to her aid. Otherwise his precious House name would be fatally besmirched. Tywin Lannister could never countenance that. He would back her lies because he must. Else, all her
father had worked and schemed for would be for naught. Cersei sneered to herself at her father’s twisted ideals.

Cersei’s eyes lost focus as her mind drifted to her past in Casterly as a child and then adolescence and the pain inflicted on her by her father. She shook her head to return to the present.

She had felt safe with Eddard being a cripple. He may be able to spread his sedition but he would not be able to lead the forces against her.

She had the captains of the Red and Gold Cloaks examine the arrows that the insurgents were using against them. She had wanted to know who she was fighting. She had Pyrcelle to study the tomes to help them discover who her enemies were. That was a large part of any battle. To know your enemy. Jaime had told her that in passing one time. She had not forgotten that.

She had been flummoxed when it was reported back to her that the fletching and the arrows themselves fit no known style of arrows across Westeros. Each region and even some Houses had a distinctive way of making their arrows that Maesters had recorded and that military leaders came to know through combat.

Not these longbow arrows. It was if Arya had taken up with some mythological warriors out of some faery tale from the hinterlands of Dorne or the North.

That was impossible. She had looked at the arrows herself but of course she was not able to glean any information except for one particular arrow.

It was smaller and lighter in construction than the longbow arrows. These arrows were easily identified. They were of the North and of one House. The House of Stark. The daughter of Eddard Stark was actively fighting her. The wolf cub was leading the Insurrection against House Lannister. An Insurrection that had become much more dangerous with the freeing of Arya’s father. Arya Stark herself was directly opposed to Cersei Lannister. These arrows of the North had slain many men of Cersei’s house.

Cersei stared off into space sipping her remedy that Pyrcelle had left for her. Arya Stark was the warrior she had always wanted to be. The warrior that Jamie had been allowed to be. She had cried and kicked her pillow many nights at the injustice of it all. She paused at the strange dreams she had sometimes. Dreams she never shared with anyone. She was in Dorne and had become a mighty warrior. She smiled at that. Then she frowned. There was that one detail that highly disturbed her. The idea of becoming Obara’s wife was just not right. How could she ever turn lesbo by the gods!

She had thought that all was finally righting itself. A raven arrived that said that a contingent of light cavalry was on its way to King’s Landing to supplant her forces till a larger force could arrive down the Gold Road from Lannisport. That had been ten days ago. She was also informed that communication was trying to be established with the Lannister forces rampaging in the Stormlands. It was hoped that communication would reach Gregor Clagne and Jamie to return to King’s Landing.

The forces were constantly on the move and it was hard to get word to them.

Cersei had felt relief. That relief had turned to bile. The force of five hundred light cavalry had been ambushed and annihilated. The attack had been well planned and perfectly executed. The survivors had arrived in King’s Landing in shock and disorientated.

All twenty-two of them. She had been incredulous. The damnable archers had been the main force of the attack. There had been knights that attacked too from the flank unseen for. The attacking knights had been devastating launching an attack of lances. The charge had come in unlooked for
and been absolutely effective. There were tales of one man that was a whirlwind of death and mayhem on horseback.

Cersei had felt ill. She had inquired of the man. She had relaxed a little when the man describe to her was not definitely not Eddard Stark. This man had no beard and wore his hair short. That hair being black and not the brown of her nemesis.

Still she felt the unseen noose tightening around her neck. Her instincts told her who the man was though it was impossible that a cripple could be so effective on the battlefield. Cersei ignored the small voice whispering the truth. The cub now had its father in the fight.

Arya’s Insurrection was becoming a very serious threat to her and her children. She remembered again the prophecies of Maggie of the Frog. She simply had to end this here and now. She had to gain control of the situation to save her children.

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Cersei again had her goblet filled with hard red wine. She was sipping the fruit of the vine her face grimacing at the burn. Though the wine bit as it went down Cersei took more droughts of the drink. She needed it. She gazed up at the throne of Aegon. Joffrey was on the Iron Throne pretending to lead. He was berating a man seeking to get recompense for a man destroying his home because he had been pissed off that the man would not sell his produce at the price he had demanded.

The defendant was a minor lord. Cersei had easily seen the Lord was in the wrong. Of course her son had sided with the Lord and heaped abuse on the common man. She had looked out at the audience hall. She saw the repressed anger and discontent on the commoners’ faces.

She had a small epiphany then. Joffrey wanted to be alone on the dais of the Iron Throne. He was the king was he not? The problem was the fact that Joffrey was clearly not ready. Cersei had understood her son’s need to be in a position of superior power. Still, standing down here with the common people she felt their anger at their treatment. This new perspective was most intriguing.

There was nothing she could do though. She would not countermand her son in front of others. It would weaken his rule and cause conflict between her and her eldest. He was easily upset. When he became upset he was quite caustic. The mother had come to realize of late that her son was in fact uncontrollable. In the dark of night she feared that Joffrey was doomed to become Aerys III. She looked at her son. She was vain she knew. It was a Lannister trait after all, but, something more hid in the breast of her son. Something dark and sinister was taking root. She had begun to fear that ‘something’. Where was Jaime? He had strength and the right to use it by right of being born male. Cersei seethed again at the sin of being born female.

She kept her mouth shut but mulled over her new insights. Her insights were coming faster now.

Soon the audience session was over and the supplicants were removed.

Joffrey looked down at the audience hall. He stood up and ordered that the commander of the Red and Gold Cloaks be brought in. He also demanded that the surviving leader of the reinforcement column be brought it.

Cersei looked around at those remaining in the hall. She saw Sansa trying to be unnoticed in the back of the room. She had learned to put a stoic countenance on her face. Joffrey was constantly belittling her for being the daughter of a traitor. Cersei did have to admire the girl a little. She had at first shrank and wilted under the barrage of her son’s abuse.
She no longer shrank. She was polite and reserved and never said anything cross in return but she now stood straight and firm. She would let her eyes flash with defiance and resentment for instant and only then guard them. She was no longer a cow. She only gave a hint of rebellion to her son. Enough to rise his suspicions but not enough to spark his anger. The girl was playing her own Game of Thrones with Joffrey.

Cersei suspected she knew where the girl’s sudden spine had come from. Her father. Her sister Arya Stark. Sansa Stark was drawing strength from her father and sister being on the loose and creating havoc among the forces of the Throne.

Sansa had let her control slip a little when Byrron Lannister had come into the Red Keep. He had been the leader of the slaughtered column that was supposed to be their reinforcements that would have allowed the Throne to start to get control of the situation in the Red Keep.

Sansa had smiled great big seeing that man come in with arm bound to his chest and bloody bandages around his ribs.

Cersei had felt poleaxed and Joffrey had looked it when the man came in and told them that there would be no reinforcements that day. Most of the survivors had been as injured as Byrron. When the details of the ambush were given to the King and his Regent, Cersei had felt great fear. This had to be the work of Eddard Stark. She had asked for any details on the man that was described to them. What she had heard calmed her.

It would seem that Eddard was not part of the assault. Thankfully. Cersei had blanched to think that Eddard Stark had somehow recovered from his crushed leg to lead the assault. He was a cripple now. She had to keep telling herself that. He just had to be. There was no magic in this sad world. The whispers in her ear did not cease though.

Cersei could still clearly see Sansa and the big feral smile on her face.

“What are you smiling at traitor?!” Joffrey had snarled at Sansa. “Your father may have won the day but my Grandfather is coming. When he does I will have your father’s head tared and put on the Red Keep’s walls girl!”

Sansa had only looked at Joffrey. “Always in motion the future Joffrey. It is hard to see. We shall see my King. The Lion of Lannister is indeed roaring. Surely I do not hear a note of fear in your voice?” Sansa asked as if seeking some deep truth from the Oracle.

Joffrey had screamed at Sansa then. She had stood to her full height that unfortunately made her two inches taller than Joffrey. They had locked eyes. Joffrey fumed and Sansa seemed placid. Her son had not won that staring contest.

Cersei had sighed inside. Gods, her son could not stare down the daughter of a traitor when she had a sliver of hope. The throne was in trouble. Gods where was Jamie when she needed him Cersei wondered to herself.

Yet again Cersei was vexed that she had not been allowed to take up the sword. She was better than Jamie at everything. She would have been better at that too. She knew it.

Joffrey now had the commanders of his Red and Gold Cloaks brought before him from outside the admittance doors. Once the military commanders came into the room Joffrey started in on them. He berated them for the lack of acumen on the battlefield and lack of foresight as to the plans of the enemy.
“I could have told you that you would be ambushed on the King’s Road.” He waved his hand in a
vague way. “Anyone could have seen that it was time for such a move.” Cersei thought spitefully
why her son had not come to her and their commanders with this insight. Before the battle.

The men endured the diatribe. Cersei could see that Joffrey was getting wound up like a spinning
top.

Cersei looked around helplessly. Please not again she pleaded to herself. She loved her son
desperately and would do anything to make sure that the damnable prophecy of that toad woman
would not occur but she was growing tired of her son. His constant prattling was wearing on
Cersei. She never asked him why he never gave his insights before the events in question
happened. He was the anti-prophet she sneered to herself. Always late to the drama.

She saw her two youngest children in the corner at a table setup for them. Myrcella was practicing
her needle work. She was becoming quite skilled doing crewel and tatting. She was focused on that
not paying any attention to the events around her.

Tommen sat beside her. He was reading his books and playing with the three cats he had raised
since they were kittens. She was a little worried about Tommen. He seemed so soft Cersei thought
to herself. Joffrey was a walking mess most of the time but at least he acted like he was a virile man.
He may fail miserable but he at least tried.

Cersei narrowed her eyes. Tommen and Myrcella spent all their time together. She wondered if they
were exploring each other’s bodies as she and Jamie had by their current ages of thirteen and twelve.
She did not think so. She knew what to look for since she and Jamie had already been lovers at that
age. She did not see the hidden glances and intimate touches she had been sharing with her twin at
their age.

She did not really care if they did have feelings for each other. She paused in her thoughts. She and
Jamie had always been so primal and physical in their relationship. She wondered more and more if
their relationship was missing something.

The casual sharing that she observed between Tommen and Myrcella she and Jamie had never truly
shared. She and Jamie never had the ‘deep’ conversations she heard her two youngest have. They
would discuss the environment, history and current events. Cersei knew they delved into the politics
that surrounded them trying to make sense of the confused chaos the adults just accepted as their lot
in life. They talked and listened intently to each other. She and Jamie never had done that. They
had been more interested in the pleasures of the flesh and trying to live up to their father’s high
expectations for them. They had been taught to bring honor to their House. Their father made that
need paramount to his children. Even Tyrion had to endure the shit.

Cersei mused on that. That was something she had not burden her children with. Joffrey had taken
readily to the reins of power. Even if he was inept at it. Myrcella and most especially Tommen
seemed to have no desire for it. She did not castigate them over it. She only wanted them to be
strong. The throne was for Joffrey; not Tommen. Cersei knew she would have to use the whip to
bring Tommen along if she ever needed to make him ready to rule.

Cersei snorted. Kittens. Tommen had lifted Speckles and was kissing him on the nose. House
Lannister was doomed.

She shook her head again. She would keep an eye on them. She intended to have Joffrey allow
royals to marry within the bloodlines. The Targaryens always had and now the Lannisters would
also.
Cersei let her gaze wander. Varys had a patient look on his face. His hands in the sleeves of his robe. He looked placid as he watched Joffrey tell everyone and their brother just how great he was.

She looked at Littlefinger. He had that perpetual smirk on his face. He always looked like he was privy to some inside joke that only he had the intelligence to understand. It angered her.

Varys was smarmy and unsavory. She could never be sure exactly where his allegiances lay. Still, she had the feeling that generally she could trust the man to do his duties. Petyr Baelish was another matter altogether. There was something off putting about the man. She knew he was plotting something but she was not sure what. He seemed to have no designs on the Iron Throne. What else could he desire? Not knowing what his aims were totally threw Cersei.

She knew Varys and Petyr were constantly watching each other closely. They never found the evidence they needed to bring the other down. Again Cersei would just have to watch and wait.

The ginger had done its work. She felt much better. She was again drinking from her wine goblet. She needed the relief. Events seemed to be spinning just out of her reach. Like a dream where the keys to all her secrets and desires were always out of focus and just on the edge of clarity.

It was maddening. She needed the surcease that alcohol gave her and she took it. Somehow the Insurrection was staying just one step ahead of her. It was even staying one step ahead of her father. She never thought she would see that.

Eddard had mobilized enough resistance to slow her father’s initial prongs of support to King’s Landing. Slowed but now stopped. A large force was bulling its way down the Gold Road. They had learned from the initial hit and run attacks. In the mountains they had to accept the attacks. The mountains were to the enemy’s advantage. In the more placid flatlands they had sent out many patrols on their flanks to thwart most of the attacks.

A large force was moving towards King’s Landing and would be here in ten days no more than twelve according to ravens from her father. She just had to hang on that long.

She had the forces to keep the Red Keep safe. No force could reach them and lay siege to them long enough to force their way into the Red Keep.

Cersei just had to be patient a little time more. She just hoped her liver survived. She took another big swig of her wine goblet.

Joffrey was up now making awkward parries with her sword. He tripped and fell nearly cutting his arm on his own sword.

Again, Cersei thought to herself: we’re doomed. She knew she should not have such thoughts about her own son. He got up wincing and whining. We are doomed she thought again.

A thought she had had off and on again over the years since Robert Baratheon had taken the thrown came to Cersei.

What if Eddard Stark had taken the throne and not that fucking oaf? Eddard Stark was everything that Robert was not. Honorable to a fault. He was kind and compassionate. If she had married that man, she could have been the fire and iron to guide Eddard Stark among the dangers of the realm. She could have defended him from the snakes at court.

She sometimes contemplated the fates. Would any of Eddard’s code of honor have rubbed off on her? Having something to strive for. She never had that with her family. Her upbringing. Honor for the name only of Lannister. Never true honor for and of itself.
Snakes she understood.

She sighed. Eddard was stiff and not very imaginative but if she could have convinced Eddard so that they should follow the Targaryen way. She had had a few fantasies of both Jamie and Eddard being her husbands. The three of them could have complimented each other. She was even willing to add that prim and rod up her ass Catelyn Tully. *The more the merrier they said.* She remembered her dreams of loving Obara. She could not but help wonder sometimes about being married to Eddard and the wife that came with him.

Sometimes her dreams were of sexual excitement and wild sex that had no man in it. Only visions of Catelyn. Those she suppressed. She had too. Her sanity demanded it. It was abhorrent. Wasn’t it? That was what the Septons said. *Fuckers.* She shook her head. Enough wild thoughts!

It did not matter anyways. It would never occur. Now they were mortal enemies. So be it. Let the Lion and Direwolf contend.

Cersei had every intention of winning this battle.
It was near midnight. Eddard looked up at the high thin scudding clouds. They were like small islands sailing across the sky. The moon was full and shining bright up in the sky. Its light making the world like ethereal dreams. Eddard looked down at this hands in the magical light. He thought of the ancient legends of the Children of the Forest that Merrel’s tales had him thinking of. Of late his thoughts filled with thoughts of that ancient people. People his family committed genocide on. Could he ever make restitution?

Eddard looked down the road. Two men were walking down the lane. Eddard looked back up and watched a high cloud occlude the moon. The thin cloud seemed to light up from within. It was like someone had put a lantern into the cloud making it glow from within. Then the strong wind currents blew the cloud past the bright orb that lite the heavens.

Eddard smiled seeing more clouds anxious to kiss the face of the moon. He looked back down the road that led to the Dragon Gate.

He looked at the men. For the last nights these men had been streaming in. They were a vanguard of the Vale knights that had ridden hard from the Vales of the Arryn. With Eddard’s ability to communicate constantly with Westeros, with ravens the Druids were letting him use Eddard had been given an immense tactical advantage. Eddard had made it clear that he needed a force of knights as soon as possible. The man who would be King urged the forces aligned to him to hurry to his call of banners as fast as possible.

He did not need a large number. He had made it clear he needed two hundred and fifty men to overthrow the Lannister dynasty. He only needed enough numbers to make his coup quick and brutally efficient. Eddard had never been a man to waste men needlessly. He explained he had a plan. He would take down the Lannisters from within their own lion’s den.

He still seethed at how he had so misread the situation in the Red Keep in his time as the Hand of Robert Baratheon. How had he been so arrogant and so deluded? He had divided his forces and wasted many good men. Not this time. He would do in all his power to make sure that did not happen again.

He greeted the men advancing down the road. The Druids had vetted them as they advanced down the road. The men coming to Eddard had been closely observed first by high flying ravens and then by their Druid masters. The men thoroughly spied on as they talked at night around their banked campfires never realizing they were closely being observed.

Only as they closed in on King’s Landing did the Druids approach the advancing forces under the white banner of truce. Then they handed the advancing forces scrolls with Eddard’s seal. The men reading his words and understanding these robed men and women were their allies. The Druids had taken the horses from the men the day before so they would advance the final distance to the Red Keep on foot. The horses were to be hid in hidden corals in the hills and wadis surrounding King’s Landing.
Eddard knew that any Lannister loyalists would be looking for reinforcements to be coming in on horse. A gathering of forces to assault the Red Keep. Eddard smiled. He found out that the two men were Jorvan Collinner and Theodal Waynwood of House Waynwood. The second man a cousin of Anya Waynwood.

He greeted them warmly. They were coming to join in his cause. He thanked them for their answering his call of banners.

The men responded it was an honor to serve the great Eddard Stark.

These forces had been streaming down all the roads leading to the Red Keep. Eddard was using all the roads that led to King’s Landing so as to diffuse the men that were going to augment the Druids and Targaryen loyalists that had already gathered underneath his banner.

Eddard had needed to get out of King’s Landing. He felt like he was trapped constantly hiding in the slums of King’s Landing. So he was out in the open this night. Thus, tonight he greeted some of the men coming to answer his call of need.

He handed them off to the Druid who was going to take them to the safe house and the smuggling tunnel located within it. The Dragon Gate had three such houses. Eddard smirked smiled. He found it humorous bringing in forces through the Dragon Gate and the Gate of the Gods. He could have avoided those gates but he chose not to. He loved the symbology of it. The barracks of the Gold Cloaks were close by and yet he was effortlessly moving his forces through.

His daughter, Arya, Syrio and the Druids had savaged the forces of the Lannisters so bad that were basically staying in their barracks and in the Red Keep itself. When they did move they moved in large numbers that were easy to avoid. The Druids ravens confirmed that were not moving about except to run like harried jackals from barrack to barrack.

He now had three Druids that had another type of familiar that allowed Eddard to also patrol the night. He marveled that these people had slipped out of human knowledge nearly eight thousand years ago and remained unseen and unknown since then.

It galled him to know that his own house had been instrumental in their downfall and the people they supported. The children of the Forest. He was humbled that they had decided to align themselves so strongly with House Stark. The Druids had set aside any animus for past sins.

Eddard Stark hoped to make amends for the sins of the past. To start to undo those wrongs he needed to do what he had come to realize he should have done when he had entered King’s Landing during the end of Robert’s Rebellion. His sweet wife Cat still had to hold and calm him when he woke up screaming and sweating profusely in the middle of the night. He would never forget the horrors he saw.

If only he had arrived just a day earlier.

He could still see it all as if it had happened yesterday. The ruined body of Elia Martell and her two innocent children. Their bodies broken and defiled. He had had the sheets pulled back. Nearly twenty years later he still could see their faces and ruined bodies.

He had been filled with such unease with how easily Robert had discounted the sins of those deaths. Robert had made the argument that all made in a Rebellion or Insurrection. One must fully eliminate the past to install the future. Tywin Lannister was responsible not himself Robert had proclaimed. Tywin had denied he gave any such orders. For a man who demanded order and obedience, Eddard highly questioned the lack of control and discipline of that day. A lack of control that had allowed
monsters like Gregor Clegane to run amok.

Robert had countenanced that sin. Eddard had done nothing to step in and demand justice. Now a generation later Eddard seethed at his cowardice of twenty years ago.

He had enough of killing for a lifetime he had thought at the time. He had killed good men whose only sin had been to choose the other side in Robert’s Rebellion.

He still saw the sword piercing Arthur Dayne’s back. He understood what Howland Reed had done. It was war. But to strike such a man down like that. It still saddened Eddard to this day.

Eddard shook his head bringing himself back to the present. He turned to follow the two additions to his Insurrection. A few more would be coming in several hours.

He had forces moving in though all the gate areas. He had discovered through the Druids that all the major gates had their own smuggler tunnels nearby to move goods into the City without them being taxed. It also allowed for those on the run from the authorities to move in and out of the city.

Eddard smiled being one of those men now.

Another small force of Druids had come into the Red Keep following the Lannister force they had harried down the Gold Road. The rest were harrying the next much larger force. This force had learned from the hit and run tactics used against the previous force.

In the mountains they had no answer. The Druids knew the trackless depths of those mountain ranges. But once the new Lannister force hit the piedmont and then grasslands they had spread out pickets to sweep the flanks of their force. They now had the force to do that.

So the Druids were only occasionally assaulting if and when the force of Lannisters let their guard down.

The Druids had streamed in days ago. Now the forces from the Vale of Arryn were using the Dragon Gate, Old Gate, Gate of the Gods, Lion Gate, Kings Gate, River Gate (Mud Gate), Iron Gate. Forces were also being smuggled in by boat along the seaside edges of King’s Landing. There were many smuggler tunnels in Aegon’s High Hill that were being used to bring in forces.

With the Lannisters hold up Eddard had free access to the city. He was using it to his utmost advantage.

The major Lannister force was now four days away. A month behind that was Tywin’s main army. This force of three thousand men was to enable Cersei to hold on till he could arrive with his army.

Eddard knew that his ambush would only work once. He was making sure the Gold Road was cleared of all traffic before the advancing column when it had entered the Riverlands and now the Crownlands. The forces of the Lannisters would not broke any disruption of their advance. They would treat any blockage or large numbers of persons on the road as enemies.

They would take no chances and Eddard was not going to place any innocents in harm’s way if he could prevent it.

It was time.

He would strike tomorrow. The forces of the North were trained and now mobilizing for a March south. The Riverlands were also mobilized now but using their forces to harry the advances down the King’s Road and threatening the Easternmost Castles and Lord Holdfasts of the Westerlands.
This was definitely causing a diminution of the efforts of House Lannister. They had to protect their own. To do else would raise alarm, then contention and eventually rebellion. Tywin had to send forces to protect his own. Thus, the army he was sending to King’s Landing was much less than it would be otherwise. Still, he had a head start on Robb and he was closer.

Eddard needed to take over the Iron Throne and hold Tywin’s daughter and grandchildren hostage. Tywin would worry about their parentage after he had taken care of the “Direwolf problem” Varys spies reported from Lannisport.

Eddard did not need to know what Tywin’s plans were. It was obvious. Go to King’s Landing. Put down the Insurrection and kill all responsible. If none were left alive then who would be left alive to continue spreading the vile lies that Eddard Stark had been spreading.

Eddard needed to make sure that Tywin Lannister was given reason to pause and stop a full fledge attack. His progeny under his control would ensure that.

Eddard had it all planned out. He would strike quickly and decisively. With his resources at his disposal he would attack in such a manner that he would still keep his assets a secret. He did not want the Druids exposed until he had implemented wide reaching changes in Westeros.

He wanted to keep the tunnels rife through the Red Keep and throughout King’s Landing a secret too. They were too valuable to let any others know of them. He needed to keep Varys alive and innocent of any thought of subterfuge. He was to valuable a tool too.

Eddard was like everyone else. He could never ever completely trust the man. He was a rogue agent. But after a heart to heart talk along with steel pressed into vital organs he felt he understood the man. Generally, they wanted the same goals. That would allow Eddard to hopefully shape the man into a more reliable tool.

He just need to make sure that Varys understood that he Eddard Stark provided the clearest means to achieve the ends of Varys. They in the end were the same goals of Eddard. Peace and prosperity for all in the realm of Westeros.

He had done much thinking of late. When he took the throne much would change.

He looked out over the grasslands that surrounded the walls of King’s Landing. A wind had come up blowing out of the South. It had warmed the air and made the grass sway out across the horizon to the curvature of the Earth. Eddard breathed deep. The air was cloying with the smell of humans but still the smell of nature wafted through.

The swaying sea of grass was almost hypnotic beneath the glow of the full moon. He watched the grass sway and undulate without a care for the concerns of man and his petty ambitions. He felt the immensity of nature then. He started to turn away to go back to the distant the walls of King’s Landing.

The hackles on his neck pricked up. His instincts of danger never failed. Politics, yes, but not on the fields of battle. He was being watched. He turned back around. He felt the sword on his back. The weight reassuring. He scanned the writhing grass as the wind picked up. He looked out to the horizon. Yes. Something was watching him. It was not man. It was something primal. Something powerful. A force of nature.

He shook his head. He would not concern himself with those forces. Nature would take care of itself. He had to only concern himself with the petty concerns of man. He was a man and understood those forces. He could confront and hope to conquer them.
Whatever was in that grass of sea was majestic and primal. He prayed he never met it.

For several hours he walked back down the marge of the Dragon Road. Far enough away to follow it but not be seen. As he walked he resisted the urge to look over his shoulder. The ‘force’ was following him at distance. He swore he could feel its eyes boring into his back. He was not in danger at the moment Eddard felt. Whatever it was out there in the dark it did not want to attack him. Not now at least. He walked on ready for violence but none came.

He went back to the safe house and went down the tunnel and was soon back in King’s Landing. He looked around. Even in the middle of the night people were about either finishing off the previous day or rising to meet the coming day. Like in nature, one set of wildlife went to bed and roost while another arose. So it was with man.

There were Druids posted on rooftops on the routes that had been designated as safe to traverse. There was no danger from the Lannisters with them holed up in their Lion Dens but he saw no reason to not be rash and prudent. The Druids birds were constantly on patrol scanning for any movement from the Lannister or their allied Gold Cloaks. Though at night the bird’s vision was not that much better than a humans. Still, the advantage of height was a power unto itself.

The lions had been bearded. They were awaiting reinforcements. Not only was Tywin sending reinforcements from the Westerlands the Druids had noticed and sent back reports that the forces of the Lannisters terrorizing the Crownlands were pivoting their forces around and back towards King’s Landing. They had gotten word that Cersei Lannister was in danger.

The forces of Beric Dondarrion were harassing and attacking their rearguard mercilessly. They now had Druids with them and had quickly learned the tactics of guerilla warfare. Their combined forces were wreaking havoc with the Lannisters forces. The loses were not great but the attacks constantly delayed and scattered the forces of the Lannisters. The sudden attacks that allowed for no revenge always sapped a forces will.

All Eddard needed now was delay. Forces loyal were now ready to head south. He merely needed to hold Tywin off long enough for them to arrive.

There would be no great battle. He had it all planned out. He would use his new gleaned knowledge of the Game of Thrones to cajole, wheedle and pit one against the other to achieve his aims. He would ascend the Iron Throne and subdue all his potential foes. He had it all mapped out.

He grimaced. It was really quite simple when he thought it trough and stopped being an idiot about honor and such. He would always let honor guide him in all things but he would not sacrifice the greater good for the few or the one.

Cersei Lannister had had her chance. She had taught him this hard earned truth.

He entered into the domicile of the Druid leader in King’s Landing. Merrel had proven a most powerful and wise ally. The thought of the man made Eddard walk a little lighter. The man had indeed given him a second chance at life healing his leg. He would not squander the second chance. He had let his sense of honor and compassion cloud his better judgement.

The room was filled with people. There was a house across the street that had been little used but also owned by the Druids Eddard had come to find out. The excess of Druids, Targaryen loyalists and now the knights from the Vale were being housed in that house. There was a tunnel connecting the two residences that most of the traffic was using.

Eddard saw the now seven Valyrians sitting at a table talking in their native tongue. Three had steins
of ale that they were sipping on. They lifted their mugs in greeting. Eddard waved to them.

They were good men. He would be proud to fight alongside them. He again thought on how strange life was. A generation ago, if they had met on the Trident, he and they would have tried their hardest to kill each other. *What was that saying … aahhhh—life made strange bedfellows.* Once enemies were not fast comrades.

He wondered what the future would hold. He had heard the reports from Varys and the Druids that Daenerys Targaryen had hatched three dragons. She had survived a walk in fire in her husband’s funeral pyre. One possible foe had perished. Had a greater one arisen in his stead? Eddard could not know.

The young woman had disappeared into the desert wastes below the Dothraki Sea. The spies of Varys was sure the woman would die. Her Khalasar if it could be called that was made up of women, old men and children. Surely they would perish. The Druids were of another mind.

Which was right. Daenerys was only a young scared girl. She had her three Bloodriders but they were young and unproven as well. She would perish. Wouldn’t she? Could he have survived at that age defeated with no army to defend him? Surrounded only by the very young and the very old. Surely they were on a death march into the Red Wastes.

But if she survived what then. Eddard let his thoughts wonder. She would bring magic back into the world was the thought that kept coming to his mind. If she indeed had accomplished that, what would be her ambitions if she did survive? Would she be satisfied with a rule in Essos? Somehow Eddard doubted that. Her brother had definitely been raised on dreams of returning to Westeros and reclaiming his lost throne. He had died for it.

What was the young woman’s dreams and desires? Would she survive to try and make them a reality?

Eddard had learned his lessons. He was already planning what to do if the woman did reappear out of the desolate wastes. He would take action and remove the problem. His solution might not be what everyone would envision. He would act if and when the time called for it.

If he ascended the Iron Throne he did not intend to relinquish it.

Suddenly, the noise in the room increased. He looked to the entryway to the main hall on the first floor of the building.

“Merrel!” Eddard called out. The Druid who had healed his leg at great cost had finally returned. He had begun to fear that something had happened to him though he was assured that he was well by the Druids fellow men and women.

“Eddard!” the man called out. They came together in the center room and hugged each other.

“You are looking well Eddard” Merrel told the man before him earnestly.

“Thanks to you. You told me we would be linked. I know that we felt the same pain. I will never be able to thank you enough or repay you for what you have done for me.”

“You can Eddard. You can take the Iron Throne and rule justly. You can start to heal the land and repair the rift between our people and the Children of the Forest.”

“I will!” Eddard told the man with all the conviction in his heart.
They talked for a few minutes. Eddard told the Druid he had started to worry about his safe return. The man had laughed and told Eddard he had spent five days with his wife. Eddard was surprised to hear of that. The Druids seemed almost mystical and above the mundane desires of men and women. Eddard clapped the man on the back. He should have known better.

“I hope you had a good time. She is a lucky woman to have you as her husband.”

“She is indeed a good woman. I am sure you would approve of her.”

“I know I would. Hopefully, I can meet her someday. Maybe I can journey to your hidden vale in the Kingswood.”

“Father! Father!” Eddard heard as Arya burst in the room. It made his heart clench in his chest so to hear his daughter always so excited to see him. She was growing up to be quite the warrior and it would seem a Water Dancer but she would always be his little girl.

“Arya! My little wolf girl! I am so happy to see you!” Eddard looked upon his daughter with happy eyes as she ran to him and he picked her up and crushed her to his chest and spun them around. Her feet flying in the air. It was good to be back with his daughter. Arya had saved his life. He felt her heart pounding against him. His thoughts drifted to his other daughter. He would save Sansa from the Lannisters though he feared their relationship could never be the same.

His wife was still out there somewhere and he could only hope she was safe. The Druids were looking for her. They thought she had gone to the Eyrie. That had given Eddard pause. Cat’s sister was behaving most strangely. Still, they were family and Cat would be safe with her. He only had to reach out to her. The Druids had sent out ravens to the Eyrie but they had been ignored. Damn Lysa’s eyes Eddard fumed.

In the realm of the North all was well. The banners allied with House Stark were assembling. Their training coming apace. Soon they would be ready. Robb was fully in charge of the North. He would make an excellent Warden of the North.

His family would never be fully together with Jon at the wall now and Robb soon to take up his former duties. Bran he feared had a destiny beyond the kin of man. But he would have his wife by his side soon enough. His world would be much more centered when that occurred.

He sat Arya down.

“Father. I am really progressing in my lessons with Syrio. He tells me I am improving and getting stronger every day. He is starting to teach me state craft.”

“What?” Eddard was not sure what that meant.

“Spying father. It is so exciting. He is telling me how to observe all my surroundings at all times and commit what I see to memory. He says it is based on the teaching of a great master of the rapier and teacher from the last century. His name was Sherlock Holmes. By learning and observing ones environment you are already one if not two steps ahead of ones enemies.”

“He wants to start to teaching me battlefield tactics and field maneuver but he tells me that you are a great tactician and you should help him teach me.”

“Will you father?” Arya asked him with her steel grey eyes so earnest and full of hope.

Eddard was surprised. It would seem that Syrio had more in mind for his daughter than a mere champion of the sword. When he thought of it why shouldn’t Arya learn all that she could? He was
not sure where her destiny would lead her but the more prepared she was the more valuable asset she would be for some great leader.

Syrio had definitely used more than pure swordsmanship to escape and save Eddard. He had used guile and excellent tactics and his “state craft” to bring Varys to the fold of their little Insurrection.”

“What a splendid idea Arya. I would be honored and happy to teach you all I know. After we claim the throne I will start teaching you. I had thought I had more time actually. I still have much to teach Robb. But you are here with me. You will be my disciple. I will teach you all I know daughter.”

Arya started to squeal and jump up and down throwing her arms up whooping. The sight of her exuberance again filled Eddard with a deep sense of happiness and contentment.

Arya Stark was everything that a man could want in a child. She was smart, cagy, brave and guided by a deep sense of what was right and wrong. If only Sansa had had that. We wouldn’t be here right now Eddard thought sourly to himself. With me about to take the throne. Eddard paused. Had everything happen for a reason? Maybe it was destiny. Tomorrow would tell.

Two hours later he was in the center of the self-same room. Two tables had been pushed together. On it were maps of the Red Keep that Varys had provided. Also provided, at what Eddard was sure great vexation, a map of the tunnels and secret passages in the Red Keep and the tunnels that branched out into King’s Landing.

Eddard was going over his plans again with his commanders. He had the leaders of the two parties that would lead the initial assaults. He had thought that now that Merrel had return that he would lead that attack phase but he deferred to Kiren since he had been away. He would be her second and support her. Eddard had paused at that. Then he remember her bravery and leadership on the King’s Road at their ambush of the Lannister force.

Why shouldn’t she lead Eddard asked himself. She had proven herself more than capable. So be it.

Jaehaegar Velnalys would lead the other major party that would attack from the inside of the Red Keep. He would meet up with Theodal Waynwood that would lead up the assault from outside. They would meet up and propel their assault into the Red Keep. These two forces would attack first.

It was Eddard Stark who would lead the last attack force. It was his job to penetrate the inner sanctum of the Red Keep. They would attack and overcome the inner guard and Kingsguard protecting the boy king and Cersei. He was ready.

It was time.

The leaders of the attack talked for another hour about the timing and tactics. The assault would be begin one hour after sunset. The Druids were used to fighting in the dark and would be at advantage. Also, Eddard knew most would expect any attack to come deep in the night or in the morn or up to the middle of the day with plenty of sunlight to guide his forces.

He was trying to break tendencies. Soon he was alone with his daughter and her teacher.

“We will be ready” Syrio told Eddard.

Eddard sighed and then smiled. “Yes. We all will be ready. We will attack and defeat our enemies.” He looked directly at his daughter. “You will be with me Arya. I will be more secure knowing your bow will be with me. Syrio. You are a true sword master. I have met few men that I truly feared to meet on the battlefield. Men who I had no surety I could defeat. I am not a vain man
but I know my abilities and those of my potential enemies. You are on that list Syrio. I am thankful that you are by my side. I know that your sword will truly be invaluable in the coming battle.

He reached across the table and took his daughter’s hand. She beamed. He then reached out and took Syrio’s hand. The man blushed. Eddard squeezed their hands.

“We go to battle tomorrow night. Together along with our allies we will bring down a King and his regent. Only time will tell what the historians will write.”

“We bring down a despotic rule and try to build up something better. Something more honorable and just to the common man.”

He squeezed their hands again. “It is time my daughter and Water Dancer. Let us go out and create a better future.”
AN #1: This ends the first arc of this story. When it comes back it will be called "Heir's Apparent" though on AO3 it will have the same name.

AN #2: I have scripted the story though i am still tinkering with it. I do not publish till i have written the story or almost all of it. Real life does not allow me to write as fast as the past. Also RL took my beta reader and she edited one of my smaller stories. It has slowed me down.

AN #3: The next arc will be more like Feast of Crows and A Dance With Dragons. i loved those books. Battles and such will commence later on with someone's trip to the East and someone else going to the wall.

AN #4: Daenerys will not appear in the story till Eddard reaches out and touches her. Until then, her story is the same as in the books.

Merrel was looking around the corner of the tunnel that Syrio and Arya had found that led to the underground river underneath the dungeons. He surveyed the scene. He could not see much beyond the edge of the firelight but that was not a problem for the Druids. They had brought Dustran, Jaxar and Klissa with them.

Kiran had silently along with seven of her brothers and sisters slipped into the river. They swam silently towards the dock. They had over the last two nights attached a rope ladder to the dock that would allow them to silently ascend out of the water. The guards had never seen or heard the silent work. The druids were naked to move silently and not weighted down by their heavy cloaks in the water. Their bows and arrows were wrapped in leather and tightly bound to keep the water out.

There was a group of twenty Lannister men camped towards the back of the large dock area to have the cave wall protecting their back. The men were eating their dinner and playing cards. They had two men walking patrol along the edge of the dock. Their fire in a large brazier was blinding them to the darkness.

It had been almost three and half months since Arya and Syrio had fought their way up from these docks. The men were focused on relieving their boredom that all soldiers had to fight. The men were playing cards. What focus they had was faced out towards the river. The tunnel leading to the docks had still not been discovered. Everyone in the Lannister camp assumed that the danger had come from the water.

The guarding forces had installed a set of iron bars against the upstream route of the underground river. The ceiling was only four feet above the water. The sappers had made and installed the rods
that had been drilled into the ceiling and came down to the water level. On the downstream end of
the cavern was a boat that was anchored down. It had five men that were actually half alert looking
down the underground river for any intruders rowing upstream.

There focus was away from the docks.

The men on the large pier were on an island of light that flickered ghostly images across their faces.
They looked like half formed Titans from a bygone image.

Behind Merrell were twenty swordsmen composed of mainly men from the Vale and leavened with
men from the Stormlands and Crownlands who had been loyal to the Targaryen Dynasty and longed
to bring down the Lannisters and Baratheons who had deposed the previous reign. He also had
another twenty Druids all armed with their bows and short swords.

He watched the two guards on the edge of the dock walking their patrol and not truly paying
attention. Kiran and the seven other Druids had reached the dock and were hiding underneath the
edge. The Druids were all good swimmers growing up the wilds of Westeros.

Dustran, Jaxar and Klissa had sent their familiars up the tunnel. All Druids when they took their
robe were bonded with their familiar. This per the norm was a raven. The black birds would come
down to inspect the new robbed Druid and one would chose a Druid. This often led to a large flying
squabbling fight above the new initiate. A storm of black cawing ravens with becks pecking and
clawed feet attacking each other. Feathers fell from the sky like black rain. The winning bird would
then alight on the new master’s shoulder. The bird cawing loudly announcing that this Druid was
theirs.

That was the norm. There were the few that were not chosen by ravens but by owls instead. Here
one bird only came out of the forests or mountain vales to alight on the Druid’s shoulder. Such had it
been with the three named Druids. These Druids had been spying on the guards for the last week.

No one knew why certain Druids attracted owls instead of the familiar ravens. The Druids never
questioned the choice. The Druids immediately bonded with their birds no matter the species.

The owls flew high above the guards and then dove into the tunnel behind them unseen an unheard.
One was a mighty female great horned owl. She had a wing span on nearly five feet and weighed
six pounds. This was Klissa’s owl. This owl settled down one hundred steps up the tunnel. Two
hundred steps up further were two guards sharing a mug of diluted ail beneath a flickering torch.
The guards did not see the owl in the darkness. The female owl saw them though with her large
eyes.

The two other owls were small screech owls. This species of owl had wingspans of only two feet
and weighed only approximately half a pound. These two owls sped by the men. They flew silently
and were past the men without them even noticing the birds as they flew just below the tunnel
ceiling. The owls flew on at a furious pace. The birds had memorized the tunnel layouts the
previous week on their treks to learn the tunnels. The Druids sending them into the tunnels so the
smart birds could learn the routes of the tunnels.

The smaller male owl had turned left at the third intersection and flew down that tunnel several
hundred yards. It came to a door and hovered. It flapped its wings silently looking in the slats of a
thick oaken door. Inside was a small holding hall. It had twenty men eating their evening meal. The
mental images seen by his human master and life partner.

The other owl flew up the tunnel and then through the dungeon. He saw nothing amiss. He went to
the large entryway hall. He shot straight up to hid in the shadows. He sat down on a large beam.
His large eyes showing his master the scene below. Another force of fifty men were spread out along ten tables eating their meal. They were loud and boisterous. The owl turned her head looking at the humans. Her Druid relayed to Merrel all was well. Then the owl flew off to head back down to the tunnel warren.

It was time to start the battle for the Red Keep.

Merrel turned to look at the guards near the back of the docks. They had erected long arrow shields as used on the fields of battle. The guards had learned from their previous conflicts with his brothers and sisters. The shields were erected on tripods. These shields protected the soldiers from direct arrow fire. That was bad. Merrel smiled grimly. It was also good. The shields occluded the senses of the seated Lannister men.

Merri looked out over the river at the five guards on the boat. It was two hundred yards away near the tunnel that lead out of the cavern and led to cliffs underneath the Red Keep. The docks were in gloom. The boat was well within the range of their longbows. He looked back at Dustran, Jaxar and Klissa. They nodded back. Their owls were ready.

He had led Dustran and Klissa out of the tunnel with their bows notched. They were still in the dark shadows unseen. No more could come out to the small steps. They pulled their bowstrings back. Merrel and his fellow Druids eyed the guards on their back and forth path marching near the edge of the docks. They were at the maximum distance from each other. He glanced back at the guards at the back of the dock. They were still enjoying their meal.

He slightly jerked his head. Dustran and Klissa were better marksmen. All three released their arrows. They had used special fletching to keep the noise of their arrows passing quiet. They were slightly less accurate. It made no matter.

The furthest away guard feel down dead with an arrow in his throat and in the base of his neck from Klissa’s bow. She was the best marksman among the Druids in King’s Landing. The closest guard took Merrel’s arrow through his right eye and Durstran’s arrow through his mouth and pierced the back of his skull. Both men dropped like stones straight down. Dead.

Kiran and her fellow Druids immediately climbed up the rope ladder onto the dock. Kiran reached the dock and pivoted around. Kiran took the bows and quivers handed up to her from the Druids treading water as the first of the rest of the Druids silently climbed up on the dock.

They were at their most vulnerable. Merrel and his two mates went onto the edge of the rock dock. They had their bows notched with arrows ready to fire a moment’s notice. Three more Druids were now on the steps. All had their arrows notched. Merrel eyed the guards at their fire unaware of the carnage about to befall them. The Druids on the steps eyed the men in the far off boat.

The Druids were all in black short black robes with black leggings and linen boots. They were like wraiths of the deep night in their home forests and vales. The seven Druids that had been in the river were soon on the dock and within a minute and half had their bows strung and quivers on their backs. Now thirteen bowmen turned their bows out to the boat. The need for absolute stealth had passed so they used their regular arrows. The distance required maximum accuracy.

Kiran lifted her bow up and then slowly lowered it. When the bow came down to level the Druids let loose and immediately pulled new arrows from their quivers and notched them to their bowstrings. Four of the men in the boat were struck down immediately. Two toppled into water the distance and lapping water swallowed the sound. The next flight of arrows was in the air. One man was hanging over the edge of the boat with two arrows jutting out his body. He was trying to push himself up but two arrows hammered him down dead. The last man was panicked but that ceased
when three arrows slammed into his body and flung his body backwards into the water. He did not rise up to the surface to the water.

The Druids turned their attention to the guards on the dock itself. Now the rest of the Druids and swordsman silently as possibly had moved onto the edge of the dock. The Druids moved like shadows and the rest were moving with mostly quiet but it made the Druids grimace. Three Druids ran to their brethren on the dock edge with their clothing that they quickly put on.

“Hey Myke” a man called out to one of the guards down on the dock “what was the name of that whore we both fucked in Lannisport?”

The Swordsman moved to the fore as the Druids spread out.

“Hey Myke answer me man!” the man shouted out.

The Druids knelt down as one and pulled their bowstrings back to their ears.

The man stood up and his head poked over the wall of shields. His eyes went large.

“What the fu—“

Three arrows slammed into the man’s head throwing his body back as five more arrows slammed into the wall behind his body. The sound of arrows hammering the shield wall echoed in the cavern.

The sound of men shouting and arms being grabbed for in great haste was heard. The swordsmen charged silently. Just as they arrived at the wall of shields the first men appeared above the shield wall.

Three went down immediately with a hail of arrows. At that same moment the first swordsman slammed into the wall of the Lannister’s shields. The wall collapsed. Several men lost their balance but their brothers stormed into the milling mass of Lannisters. Arrows were whistling in over their shoulders to strike at the Lannisters.

At that time Dustran, Jaxar and Klissa spoke to their owl familiars. Klissa’s barn owl silently lifted from the steps and built up speed quickly. She advanced with talons extended. The nearest guard was just reacting to the sounds of combat below. Their duty was to run to warn the Red Keep of attack from the River below the dudgeons.

This man rose up and was immediately attacked by the large owl. The talons raking across his face. One eye was ruined and his face deeply slashed. His screams of agony hideous to human ears. Those sounds meant nothing to the owl. Wounded prey only primed her instincts.

The torch had been knocked to the steps. The owl was hovering above the man striking as he swung wildly with long dagger. The owl knew the danger of the talons of steel of man.

The other man started to run blindly up the stairs. He never saw the two small screech owls hurtling down the tunnel. Their talons slammed into his face horribly wounding the man’s face. He hunched down and pulled his dagger swinging wildly. The two little owls chittering as they avoided his talon and attacked when possible.

Merrel watched the swordsman fall on the Lannisters like crazed wolves. They slashed and hacked furiously. Druids were firing in arrows where possible. The battle was a massacre and soon over. One man from the vale had suffered a bad arm wound on his left arm. It was bound. He insisted he could continue. He would guard the rear flank.
They stormed up the tunnels. The Druids went first silently. The two leading Druids released their bowstrings feathering the two men now on their knees hunched over trying to protect their ruined faces. The arrows piercing lungs and heart. The men fell over gurgling. The throng of rebels ran up the steps.

They rushed past the tunnel with the guards down it. They ran up to the Jailer’s cell. Merrel reached the door and waited for Bracks Hardyng and Jorgan Hewett to join him. They were Targaryen loyalists from the Stormlands. Jorgan slammed his foot into the door when Merrel turned the handle. They busted in.

A homely man screeched. He was naked in the bed of the room. Merrel could not help but notice that he barely had a chin and lank blond hair. His face was marked with pox charters. The reason he noticed this so much was what else he saw. His two fellow warriors were equally shocked.

In the bed with this man was a most beautiful naked woman. The men stared at her perfect curvy body. They could not but help notice her high firm C cup breast and womanly hips and a flat stomach. She was an auburn head young lass. The woman had bright green eyes. She jumped in front of the man.

“Please don’t hurt Koryn!” she cried out pressing him to her back. “I love him!”

Merrel felt the tension leave his body and the two men with him. It was obvious the woman spoke true.

“The keys” he demanded.

The woman ran to the desk and threw them the keys. They were locked into the cell.

“Be quiet!” Merrel told them.

“We will!” the girl called back.

Merrel looked at his fellow conspirators. He saw it in their eyes. They would not kill this man who was not a player in this Game of Thrones.

They went back down and locked the cell door to the tunnel that the oblivious Lannisters were down. They sent in Jaxar’s screech owl. He would stay behind along with two swordsman. The men unslung the quivers on their backs. Druids picked them up. Each Druid now had three quivers on their backs. The swords men also had three to five quivers on their backs.

They would be needing them.

The screech owl would make sure the Lannisters if alarmed did not go out some unknown tunnel that was unknown to them. The forces of the Wolf would need to know of any escape. There were none but they needed to be sure.

The force of Insurrectionist stormed up the levels. They were soon at the entryway to the hall leading to the dudgeons. There was a large force of Lannister’s in the middle of the cavernous meeting hall.

They Insurrectionist formed in the hall that was at the end of the dudgeon tunnel. Anron Brewlan kicked open the door. His loud roar filled the hall getting the attention of all the Lannisters.

“Long live Eddard Stark. The King of Westeros! Tonight the Wolf and Dragon will slay the Lion. Death to Joffrey and Cersei. The rightful King will have his revenge done to him and his family. He
will have Cersei’s head!”

Merrrel shook his head. Eddard had been very specific that that be the first war calls and to shout out tripe like that. The man knew what he was doing.

“Death to the enemies of the mighty Direwolf!” was shouted for all to hear.

Merrel burst out into the hall and was followed by Druids who flowed to stacked crates and turned over the several large work tables. The Lannisters were turning over their tables and running for other cover as arrows chased them.

It was an immediate standoff.

Exactly as planned.

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Cersei Lannister was feeling another mighty headache coming on. Her head felt like the falling of mighty timbers crashing through the forest. Titans toppling down taking smaller brothers with it to the forest floors. She took another big gulp from her wine goblet. She grimaced recalling a childhood memory of going with her father as he supervised the felling of cypress trees for ship construction in the low mountains of Oxcross.

The felling of trees in her head had commenced about the time her son, Joffrey, started to bloviate—she meant expound on his future rule. Her first thought at the start of her son’s soliloquy had been her now repeated plaintive cry of oh gods not again.

“When I come into my full power there will be big changes around here I tell you.”

She saw the Hound eyeing the door wishing to be on guard duty on the other side.

“I will show the common rabble how to truly appreciate a king who will be remembered as a Titan!”

Cersei took a big chug out of her wine cup. She eyed her son. She dearly loved him but he was truly insufferable at times. She sometimes wondered if he was really hers. She knew deep in her heart what Joffrey’s true mettle was. It frightened her.

She saw Joffrey eye Sansa who was eating demurely. She was no longer shrinking under the gaze or barbs of Cersei or her son. The freedom of her father had emboldened the girl. She was wise enough to keep her actions and demeanor demure but Cersei could feel it. So could her son.

“I think I will marry Margaery Tyrell or maybe Arianne Martell. Both women will thank the seven gods that they will have the fortune to bear my regal children.”

She saw the Hound roll his eyes. Cersei took another swig of her wine goblet. She decided a second gulp couldn’t hurt grimacing as the liquid went down her throat.

“I think maybe I will send you to the Iron Islands. As the daughter of a traitor you will only be a Salt Wife. My. My. I fear for you dear Sansa.”

The girl raised her head. She looked at her son steadily. “I live for your pleasure Joffrey. I know you are benevolent and so brave.”

“My traitorous father is coming. I look forward to you fighting him in one-on-one combat. The minstrels will write epic songs of the outcome.”
Cersei sighed seeing her eldest blanch at the mere mentioning of Eddard.

Cersei was impressed. Sansa’s tone and demeanor spoke of admiration for Joffrey but all in the room knew who she thought would get the better of that fight. Even as a cripple.

“You will confront my father in one-on-one combat. You are the Lion of Lannister after all.”

Cersei turned to her gaze to her son. He had started to sweat and gulped loudly.

She saw Myrcella and Tommen studying their brother intently.

“Eddard is regarded as one of the great swordsman of our times” Tommen told his big brother intently. “I read it in my books.”

Joffrey gulped loudly again.

Outside the door there was a sudden tumult. The doors to their private residence was thrown open.

In came Arys Oakheart and Mandon Moore of the Kingsguard. They had between them a Lannister man who looked totally spooked and was sweating heavenly.

“My Regent!”

That got Joffrey’s attention. He jerked up out of his seat.

“You will address me! I am the king.”

Cersei took another big gulp from her wine goblet. She knew she would need it.

The man turned to look at Cersei’s son with a confused look and turned to look back at Cersei.

“Answer your King soldier” Cersei told the man.

“My King! The Iron Gate of the Red Keep has been breached! Forces loyal to Eddard Stark are streaming in. They are shouting death to the Lannisters. They cry out to rape all the women and kill the children. They want to burn Cersei alive!”

Cersei felt her heart quake and her son was pale as a ghost.

Suddenly, another man barged into the room dressed in Lannister red.

“My Regent! The dudgeons are under assault by forces loyal to Eddard Stark. They scream for vengeance and death to the Lannisters. They promise dire justice on all in the Red Keep.”

There were members of the inner court in the room with Cersei and her children. The courtesans that Robert so loved to have eating with them. Cersei deemed it wise to continue the practice for continuity purposes. They had been confused and nonplused. Now they were pale with fright.

Cersei looked at her son. His green eyes looked around vacantly. His body was shaking with fear.

“They demand the head of Joffrey be cut off now and given to them!” the man from the dudgeons said in fast gasp.

Joffrey fell into his seat. The gold circlet on his head fell off.

Cersei jumped up.
“Send all our Red and Gold Cloaks that are not on royal patrol to fight the traitors immediately. The gates and dungeon halls must be held. They cannot penetrate deeper into the Red Keep!” The men turned to Cersei forgetting their supposed king.

“Bring the royal guard details to our quarters. In case the lines are breeched we need to protect ourselves. This a good place for defense. There is only one point of ingress and the door can be bolted from the inside.” Cersei eyed Joffrey but he was out for the count she deemed. He looked around like a sheep on his throne chair he had carved for himself.

Both men bowed to her and ran out. Cersei felt raw terror coursing in her veins but she would be damned if she would cower like her son. Did he have spine? She watched her son looking around with raw naked fear. His mouth working soundlessly. She had her answer.

“Arys Oakheart and Mandon Moore take control of the royal guard when they come. Protect us as is your sworn duty.” The men bowed and left. “Sandor Clegane stay in here with us. I want twenty guard in this chamber.”

“Thanks a lot” the Hound grumbled half under his breath. Cersei glared at the Sandor Clegane. She dismissed his insolence from her mind. Cersei had more important matters to attend to.

Jaehaegar Velnalys had gone through the tunnels that Varys had mapped out for Eddard Stark. They were near the Iron Gate that was used to bring in supplies to cook for the citizens of the Red Keep. Also, day to day items of everyday life were brought in through that gate.

The Druids had fanned out into the Red Keep to start slaying the guards on the curtain walls in their nests and crenelations for archers. Other guards would be on the thick stone parapets. The goal was not to overthrow but to take the notice of the Lannisters. The Druids with him told Jaehaegar after a half hour that the Druids were in place in the Red Keep and on building tops out in King’s Landing.

He had with him nearly forty men. Two hundred more men waited outside. It needed to appear that the castle was being stormed from without.

That was when he heard it. Three separate ravens on the highest towers of the Red Keep cawed first three times. Then five times followed by three times again. Their masters had sent mental word to their raven familiars that the assault in the dudgeons had commenced.

Now it was their turn to initiate their part of Eddard Stark’s plan. He spied the guard hut near the Iron Gate. He guessed maybe ten men were in it and around the fires outside it.

He heard the sounds of arrows firing in the dark. Several men cried out in pain. The guards looked up startled.

Jaehaegar Velnalys looked down at the sheet of paper that Eddard Stark had given him. He made it very clear to say the words very loud. They had snuck to within thirty yards of the Iron Gate now. He squinted at the sheet.

“Long live Eddard Stark. The King of Westeros! Tonight the Wolf and Dragon will slay the Lion. Death to Joffrey and Cersei.” Jaehaegar was quite impressed with his delivery. He continued on with the scripted words of death and defilement of Cersei and her family. He was starting to get into it now putting emphasis on just the right words.

Maybe he should have been murmur Jaehaegar thought to himself.
His men did not attack immediately but clanged their weapons and started to shout. From without the gate a mighty roar of discontent went up. Two men went running into the Red Keep.

Now he could attack.

He roared running forward. He saw five of the men at the guard hut go down with arrows piercing their lightly armored bodies. The armor no match for the mighty longbows at such close range. He locked swords with one of the survivors and they hacked at each other for several blows till the man dropped his guard and his head was split in two by Jaehaegar’s Valyrian sword “Sweet Vengeance”.

Matamion Velnalys ran up with the family’s other heirloom. It was a mighty War Hammer with a mighty pick end made of Valyrian steel. His first cousin ran to the locks and hammered them with his War Hammer. Fifteen seconds later the lock shattered. The crossbar was pulled up and thrown off. The gates were open. The forces from outside the gate flooded in.

The force from outside advanced in only to the closest buildings to take them over and use for tactical fighting locations. Druids came in from King’s Landing climbing up into the buildings to provide cover fire. They were loaded heavily with spare quivers.

It might be a long night. They were to hold their position. If Eddard Stark’s plan succeeded that would be all that was necessary.

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Eddard Stark was down the next hall from the hall with the royals in it. It was a large room that seemed to be for meetings Eddard supposed. It had a tunnel that came into it. He had a force of twenty knights and twenty druids.

He had to rely on shock and surprise to achieve his goals. He knew his diversionary attacks would draw off most of the Red and Gold Cloaks. Joffrey was not a tactician or leader.

He had planned his attacks to appear as if they must fight their way from the distant locations to get to the royal chambers. A young child came into the room from the door that led to the hidden tunnel.

She came up to Eddard.

“My fellow sparrows report that the bait has been taken sir. The Queen has ordered the reinforcements be sent to the two locations of your attack. That was ten minutes ago. She had called the most loyal of the Lannister’s to her.”

Eddard was impressed with the discipline of the ‘sparrows’ working for Varys. Eddard had come to learn that Varys in some strange way thought of these former urchins as his children. It was clear these ‘sparrows’ loved the bald eunuch. It humanized the man.

He processed what the girl told him. Cersei giving orders gave him pause but he was not impressed with her either. He should be able to fight his way through that force. He trusted his prowess and those with him.

“What is your name?” Eddard asked the girl. She was of dark complexion.

“Wynona Ostel sir.”

“That is a Myrish name is it not?”

“Yes. I was a slave but I escaped. Varys takes in slaves that come to him. We are free. I serve
him.”

Eddard tussled his hair. She was surprised and she smiled up at him timidly.

“Go now Wynona. I go to bring down a King. If I fail I do not want you near. We will close the
door behind you.”

She reached out and touched Eddard’s hand.

“You will not fail. In Myr it is said that a Direwolf and a Dragon will bring in an era free of slavery.
You are the Direwolf.”

Eddard shook his head at all these prophecies. Strange.

“Let us hope you are right Wynona. Now go.”

She left with one last look at Eddard before she pulled open the door to the tunnel and left. Several
men helped push the door shut.

Eddard took a deep breath. He looked over at his daughter with her bow and Syrio Forel with his
rapier out. It was understood that he would guard Arya as much as he could. Arya was already a
wise warrior. She would not put herself in needless danger.

That was his own job.

“Let us go and bring forth destiny” Eddard told the men and women with him.

They all raised their swords or bows. The druids and Arya had notched their bows and the knights
pulled their swords out.

The knights had on their plate armor. Eddard was in chainmail. Except for the Kingsguard they
should not met fellow knights in the opposing force.

They opened the door. The hall was empty. The knights surrounded Eddard with the archers
behind. They moved down the hall as quietly as possible.

He rounded the corner. His eyes went large. There was a large force of Lannisters. Right in his
face! The Lannister men were equally shocked. Eddard slashed his sword back and down. His
sword cleaved the head of the man in front of him. The sword cut deep into the man’s head driving
down to his left temple. He wrenched his sword free and pivoted around and down to this left and
hit a man in the hip severing tendons and shattering his pelvic girdle.

This knights charged into the large knot of Lannister’s. Arrows were loosed into the close group of
Red Cloaks. More were sent loose down the hall to slam into the two King’s Guard and the Red and
some Gold cloaks behind them. The plate armor stopped the arrows from fully penetrating the
King’s Guard. Two more arrows hit them knocking them back.

Eddard blocked a chop to his head and pushed on into the milling force of Lannisters. His sword
chopping right and left driving men back. He was the tip of the spear lunging into the Lannisters.
He slammed into a man driving him back off balance. He chopped with his sword wounding the
man in the shoulder. He fell back but more surged forth to confront Eddard.

Syrio was a poetry in motion his rapier parrying sword thrusts sending them aside. His rapier
flicking out to cut men across their faces or pierce exposed throats. The tip of his rapier seeking
weak points of armor where joints met. When his rapier found such points the joints were pierced
crippling the men. Twice he thrust his thin blade through the shoulder joints of the light plate and leather armor to pierce the hearts of his foes fatally wounding them.

Arrows were flying into the Lannisters and gold cloaks who had started to enter the fray. Eddard saw a man spin around with a white fletched arrow of the north jutting out his shoulder. Another man went down screaming with a North arrow that had pierced his jaw on both sides.

Eddard moved toward a big strong burley Lannister. Their swords collided violently. They hacked at each other circling seeking advantage. More Lannisters and gold cloaks were running to the fight. The Insurrections were all engaged in life and death fights. Shouts of anger and fear filled the hall as men fought to defeat their foes and more importantly to live. Lannisters fell dead as did several of Eddard’s forces.

Eddard knocked his foe’s sword up and his sword thrust found the soft spot of armor at the joint of shoulder and body. His sword thrust disabling the man his sword arm falling limp. Eddard kicked the man aside. He surged ahead. Several of his knights by his side. He blocked a hard chop and the man dropped dead with a rapier in his right eye.

Syrio jumped back. Arya was right behind him firing her next arrow into a wounded Lannister that was trying to lift his sword up from the floor.

The Lannister’s had superior numbers but the sudden appearance of forces on the doorstep to the room of the royals had thrown them into disarray. Still, superior numbers were taxing the forces of the Direwolf.

The initial group of Lannisters were falling back. More were surging up the hall. Half of the druids and several of the knights formed a rear guard to fire off at the Red and Gold Cloaks before Eddard and to Guard from rear attack. Varys maps showed that the most direct path from the barracks quarters was down the other end of the hall. Sounds could be heard coming from that direction.

The Druids and Arya were felling Red and Gold cloaks at a steady rate. Their bundles of quivers of arrows giving them the freedom to fire hot and fast.

Another large group of Lannister’s charged forward to save their King. They were misguided but loyal Eddard thought. Arrows felled many of the men before they could reach the force of invaders. Eddard met the first man. Eddard blocked the sword chop with his sword and threw the man off balance and whipped his sword down in a deadly arc. Eddard chopped the man’s arm off at the elbow. His screams piteous.

The floor had become slippery with the blood and gore saturating the carpets and stones of the hall floor. The bodies of the dead and wounded tripping hazards for the foes swinging swords at each other or grappling with their enemies seeking advantage.

Eddard moved on. A knight of the Vale fell. Eddard cursed as he gutted the Red Cloak who had chopped the man’s head off. He saw a Druid go down with a vicious leg wound. His yells of pain loud.

He was near the Kingsguard. He blocked and parried sword thrusts and chopped and pierced men when he was able. The Lannisters were being forced back.

Just as he reached the door to the royal residence he heard another large force of now Gold Cloaks running up the hall. Damnit! He had not expected so many opponents. He turned to face the Kingsguard. He knew the measure of Arys Oakheart and Mandon Moore. He was more than their equal.
Mandon Moore stepped forward. Three of his knights half encircled the men.

“Leave them to me” Eddard shouted. Of course the other men advanced as he cursed internally.

They were good but not as good as Eddard Stark.

Suddenly a sword exploded out of Mandon Moore’s chest. He dropped his sword. The sword was wrenched out of his body and now his head was sent spinning down the hall by Arys Oakheart’s mighty swipe of his sword.

“What?!” Eddard yelled.

Before him Arys took his finger tips and worked them around the marge of his face in a strange circling motion. Eddard saw a line of blood appear and then disappear.

Before him stood Jaqen H’ghar.

“I told you Eddard of House Stark I would serve as I see fit.”

Eddard gaped at the Faceless Man.

A large roar went out and more Gold Cloaks were running down the hall at them.

*Dammit* Eddard cursed.

AAARRRRYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY! AAAARRRRRRRRYOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO0

Mighty fell screams of some ungodly beast echoed down the halls. Eddard looked behind him. A monstrous Direwolf leaped over the Druids and knights behind him. The mighty beast seemed to shimmer and suddenly it was running on two legs its forelegs now impossibly long arms with sharp dagger claws. The mighty beast was past Eddard in a moment as he gaped at it.

The speed! It had moved so fast it could have easily killed him before he could fully protect himself.

He had heard legends of Were-direwolves. It seemed many legends of the past were alive in this dawn of a new age he was being told of.

The mighty beast crashed into the Red and Gold Cloaks. The mighty beast’s right hand surged out and its long talons slammed into a man’s chest killing him as his lungs and heart were pierced. The wolf’s head lunged forward and a hapless man had his head in its jaws that snapped shut. The head exploded like an overripe eggplant. Brain and blood splattered everywhere. The were-direwolf’s left hand swipe a man to the floor and its hind limb raked into his body disemboweling the Gold Cloak.

Eddard and his force stopped fighting except for the archers loosing arrows in support of the monstrous beast as it killed and maimed any it could reach. The Red and Gold Cloaks were fighting desperately to save their own lives now. Their swords hacked and pierced the giant Were-Direwolf. Eddard saw wounds appear on the monstrous body of the were-direwolf. They would appear and heal almost instantly as the beast howled in rage.

Then after a minute he heard the howls change. The beast in its urgency to attack had been too rash. The wound were healing slower and now the howls were of rage and pain. The red and gold circled the mighty wolf were attacking from all sides now. The wounds were not healing fast now.
An ally no matter how strange was in need.

“Aarrrrrrggggggggg!” Eddard screamed and charged forward. So did Jaqen H’ghar and Syrio Forel. They slammed into the desperate forces of the crown. The were-direwolf fell back as Eddard and more knights put the survivors to rout. The savagery of their attack was too much for them.

Eddard went before the door to open it. It was locked. From the inside. He pushed hard and felt a crossbar. Damnit! He had not thought of that. Winterfell did not have such large eating halls with locks on the inside.

They had time to get the door open but he hated the delay.

Then the massive were-direwolf was beside him. Eddard had to control his natural instinct to feel outright terror at this towering monstrosity from the land of nightmares. No. It was his ally. He stood and waited. The Dire-Direwolf stared at the door and howled a mighty howl of rage.

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Cersei Lannister had heard the sounds of fighting in front of the door for several minutes. Then some ungodly howl of a monstrous beast. Then silence.

The Hound was standing back from the door with his sword drawn. Twenty other red cloaks were standing around with terror in their eyes.

What the hell was outside that damn door!

AAARRRYYOOOOOOOO!

The door shuddered violently. Then it shuddered mightily again. Cersei could hear iron protesting.

AAAARRRRRRYOOOOOOOO! … … AAARRRRYOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

The hinges and crossbar of the door screamed in protest and then shattered. The right door came flying off its hinges the thick oaken crossbar splintered into small shards that whipped out. Cersei felt blood on her forehead and left cheek.

A monstrous beast strode into the room followed by knights and archers in cloaks. Then she saw Arya Stark!

“Father!” she heard Sansa scream out.

What?! Cersei looked everywhere.

The monstrous beast advanced on Sandor Clegane.

“Oh Hell no! I didn’t sign up for this shit!” He threw his sword down. It clanged loudly on the marbled floor. Sandor raised his hands in surrender. The mighty beast eyed Sandor but did not attack.

“I would advise the rest of you to surrender.”

No! It could not be! The man who spoke with Eddard Stark’s voice looked around.

“The fight is over. I would wish to not slaughter you.”

The Red Cloaks bent down and relinquished their swords.
This man who looked nothing like Eddard Stark walked calmly forward.

“Arya!”

“Sansa!” The two sisters ran to each other and embraced.

*On my gods!* He had changed his look but this was indeed Eddard Stark Cersei thought wildly! Eddard was alive and hale. He was not a cripple!

Cersei knew what happened when dynasties changed. She looked over at Tommen and Myrcella. They were calm and stoic. She glanced at Joffrey in his ‘chair’. He was sobbing wildly. Stoic not so much.

Eddard advanced slowly on Cersei. She looked at him with first incredulity and then rising terror. Eddard raised his sword as he advanced. He came to stand a short distance in front of Cersei Lannister. He slowly raised his sword higher till the point of the sword was several inches in front of Cersei’s throat.

Eddard placed the tip of the razor sharp sword to Cersei’s throat. A trickle of blood started to run down her throat.

The Lannister’s eyes were large with terror now. Eddard saw the woman close her eyes and take a deep breath calming her body to not impale herself on his sword.

She opened her eyes. Their eyes locked.

“You should have taken my offer Cersei” Eddard told the woman softly. His sword pressed harder into her throat.
Aftermath

Chapter Notes

AN #1: This story arc is Heirs Apparent. Many want the Iron Throne. Only one may sit on it.

AN #2: I have said that i would only publish once i was finished writing the arc but that would be some time way into the future. i had started writing it but had to pull away. i discovered posting the last Insurrection chapters i had let some continuity errors creep into the second arc and will need to weed out. Also, i am adding more layers to the story and must trowel in those elements.

AN #3: I will post when i can. When i can edit and i am sure i will not want to add an element to the story. I will try to publish a chapter every month or so. Once i can write the story i can push out faster. I hope.

Heirs Apparent

Aftermath

Out over the thick red walls of the fortress that now belonged to him, Eddard Stark, the King of Westeros gazed down. Eddard smirked and grimaced at the same time. He was the first King to unite Westeros in its long history. Well, he didn’t technically have the sworn liege of Dorne under his sway. They always had semi independence from the Iron throne but it was close enough. He discounted the Iron Islands. They were always a thorn to the King of Westeros. He would pluck that thorn in time and staunch the wound. He had a nascent plan for that restive island nation to bring them to heel.

Eddard watched the troops of the Lannisters slowly forming their siege lines around King’s Landing. Eddard was not concerned. He could not say the same for his daughter on a crate beside him staring wide eyed at the forces being arrayed against them. To her the small force before them must seem enormous. He smiled down at his wolf daughter. She was becoming everything that Lyanna should have become. Thoughts of his deceased sister panged Eddard still after nearly twenty years.

Could I have done something for her? I was too blind to convention then. I will not make the same mistakes again Eddard thought. Eddard smiled again down at his awe struck daughter. I have many mistakes I must not repeat the former Warden of the North mused to himself. The forces arrayed against him were of no concern. They were but a vanguard of roughly twelve hundred troops Eddard estimated. Those numbers augmented with the three hundred Red Cloaks he had purged from the Red Keep and King’s Landing this morning. They would break themselves if they hurled themselves against the thick walls of his island in the storm.

Echoes of the distasteful conversation with Varys and Syrio still echoing in his mind from this very early mom.
“I counsel that we put the Red Cloaks to the sword Eddard” Syrio had told him solemnly. “They will be allied with the forces we know are near if we release them.”

“I concur my King” Varys intoned with an emphases on his new title. As if he was trying to teach Eddard to fully embrace the new titular title he now wore. “Why give our enemy more forces to contend against us? It is the wise council. Do not make the same mistakes again my liege.”

“No I will send them out the gate to the waiting Lannisters” Eddard replied in a strong sure voice. He showed no reaction but he smiled seeing Varys close his eyes and sigh. He knew the man thought, already, he slips back into his old ways. The ways of failure.

His two trusted advisors, for Eddard now trusted them implicitly, Syrio Forel and Varys. Both men started to argue with him but he held up his hand. He had indeed learned his lessons. It was his confidents who needed to learn.

“I have learned my lessons. Before I tried to negotiate and cajole from a position of weakness. No more. They are but three hundred men with no sapper skills. Their added numbers mean nothing to the force I know that will be here tomorrow or soon after. This is but a small fraction of the force necessary to assault the walls of King’s Landing. Any assault is months away if then. I will not kill where I do not have to. I have six thousand gold cloaks who are more or less loyal. I have used what little coin I have to double their salary which will buy enough loyalty. I know only a third at best are true soldiers of skill and fortitude but that is sufficient. Against the force that is now before us they are more than enough.”

“Syrio I want you to put the Gold Cloaks under a training regimen. Have Arya help. It will instill confidence and increase her practice time. It will teach her to lead. That is your goal is it not.” The father must help install confidence in his warrior children. Syrio was an excellent teacher but Eddard would help in Arya’s training when he could.

He watched the big smile come over the Braavosi’s face. “Yes it is my liege. She is a Water Dancer in waiting. I will shine the diamond till it glows. I thank you for letting your daughter become all she is meant to be.”

“Thank Lyanna. I still owe her a debt I will never be able to repay.” Eddard saw the confused look on Syrio’s face but understanding on Varys. The Whisper had been busy on his research of the new King Eddard mused. Eddard was impressed with Varys. He truly did try to learn all facets of a person. The better to understand their motivations.

An hour later Janos Slynt was brought before Eddard in the small counsel room he was using for such meetings. The Gold Cloak commander stood regally before Eddard. The man started to talk in an aggrieved haughty voice.

“I demand to kno—urrk! Janos’s voice was cut off with the rapier point at his throat. The former Gold Cloak commander felt the prick of razor steel at his Adam’s apple. Syrio had been standing near Eddard but in flash he was beside Janos having drawn his rapier out like a lightning strike. The blade at its mark before Janos even realized it had been drawn.

“You are banished from King’s Landing Janos. I have had your quarters raided and all your possessions and gold you stole from your command confiscated. I have distributed that to your subordinates. They are most pleased.”

“You have no right!” the man ground out through grit teeth.

“Huuummmmm … might makes right or so I am being told. You are a disgusting human being
Janos. I bid you adieu. May your life be short and full of strife. You sicken me. Syrio please escort this vermin out the gate. If he fights you or tries to escape within King’s Landing you may kill him.”

Syrio had gleefully accepted that command. Eddard chuckled over the pleasant memory enjoying the cool air on his face. His mind came back to the present. He grimaced next. He knew what he must do. It would be unpleasant but it must be done. He would not shirk what he must do.

The new King looked out over his kingdom. It was in all reality a paltry thing. His kingdom in truth was no more than a stone’s throw from the walls of King’s Landing. Eddard had much work to do.

The father looked down at his precious daughter staring wide eyed at the small force in front of the Lion Gate. The line of Lannisters were thin with a small force stationed at the other gates but the main force before the traditional gate of entry when travelling down the Gold Road. The six hundred men in phalanxes and companies did look impressive with their armor and their heraldry in all red and gold. Impressive but toothless. They were but a lapping wave rolling onto shore against the breakwater of the walls of King’s Landing.

“Father! They are so many!” Arya looked up at her father with large eyes and told him the news in a breathless voice.

With a squint smile Eddard gripped his daughter’s shoulder and gave it a soft squeeze. He saw Syrio looking at Eddard. He tilted his head in acquiescence to his daughter’s sword master. He needed to let the man further her learning in the ways of the sword and tactics.

“Arya do you think they are a threat to us? Those forces you see before Lion Gate?” Syrio asked his student.

Arya to her credit looked down at the troops. She had learned to observe and think when asked such questions. She then looked down at the twenty foot thick walls beneath her feet of hard sandstone. Her gaze returned to look at the troops craning her neck left and right.

“I don’t believe so master. When I stopped and thought on it we are on the inside and they are on the outside. We are like a turtle shell. They have nothing to break the shell of our walls. They cannot get inside at the tender meat.”

“Good. Good Arya. You analyzed the situation and the facts before you.” Eddard watched the two walk off. He could see that his daughter was progressing rapidly under Syrio’s tutelage. The master swordsman not only developed his daughter’s body but her mind. As they moved out of earshot he heard Syrio going over tactics and laying out the principles of siege warfare.

The next day two hours after sunrise he was met by Varys in his private chambers. The Lannister commander sought a parlay under the flag of truce. A grim look came over Eddard’s face. He had prepared for his day. He would do what he must.

It took him nearly an hour to leave the Red Keep and travel across King’s Landing to reach the Lion Gate on the far side of the city. Ten minutes later the King of Westeros was on the ramparts over the Lion’s Gate that opened onto the Gold Road. He saw that a party of ten riders had ridden forward to come before the walls of the King’s Landing. The captain by his rank on his shoulders looked up at Eddard. He waited for Eddard to speak. Eddard looked down grim faced. For five minutes no words were spoken. The air tense with the standoff.

Eddard waited patiently. He had all the cards and knew it.

Arya and Syrio came up to stand beside him. He smiled at them. Another two minutes of silence
followed. The horses below started to get agitated with the stillness in the air. Eddard thought sadly of all the men he had led to the slaughter. He would … no he must avenge their sacrifice by vanquishing the Lannister Lions.

Arya had made this possible. The Old Gods had given Eddard a second chance working through Arya. He would not waste it. He saw a man step his horse forward two paces separating himself slightly from the force of Lannisters. He looked up at the people looking down at him.

“I am Branton Lannister of Lannisport. I have come to demand your surrender and await the just judgment of a tribunal convened by Tywin Lannister.”

“What are the charges against me?”


“I see” Eddard called down. “The charges are most egregious. Let me add to them.” Eddard turned his head slightly and nodded. From the far end of the ramparts the four former honor guard of Rhaegar approached. Then they stepped forward coming into view of the Lannister force below.

The loud shouts of consternation, fear and rage filled the air from down below. The Lannister contingent appalled at what they say. “This is perfidy. How dare you do this to the Queen and her children! You animal! I order you to release them. NOW!”

Eddard looked to either side of himself in a casual manner.

Javer Goodbrook and Styve Grandison had come up on either side of Eddard. In their grasp was a trussed and gagged Cersei and Joffrey Baratheon. To the right beyond the bound Joffrey was his daughter and Syrio. Now beyond them were Matamion and Jaehaegar Velnalys who stepped into view of the Lannisters below. The Valyrians each held one of Cersei’s younger children. Myrcella and Tommen were staring wide eyed out over the wall down at the Lannisters below. The children also had had their arms tied behind their back and gags stuffed into their mouths with rope around their faces to keep in place. Each of the men of Rhaegar’s old honor guard had a hold of an arm the other hand pressed into the back of the Lannister they were controlling.

The warriors shook their hostages hard making their heads snap and teeth chatter hard. The look of pain evident on all their faces.

The Lannister prisoners kept rigid by the strong grips on their bodies. Eddard looked up and down the line at each of his hostages before he looked down at the party below him before the Lion Gate. “As you can see, I have your Princess and her children. They are my prisoners. They are trash to me. They soil this Great Keep. I toy with the idea of defiling them and killing them at my leisure. Maybe reenact the death of Elia Martell and her innocent children. I would love to hear their screams of pain as they are raped and killed. Maybe I should do this now” Eddard paused dramatically. He locked eyes with the Lannister commander. His force was agitated having drown swords and shouting up at Eddard. Eddard smiled down at them. “If you attack I will execute them all on this wall and throw their lifeless bodies down to you to dispose of.”

“You animal! I order you to release them! You have no honor” the captain of the Lannister’s shouted up to Eddard.

“That may be. Cersei poisoned the wine of her husband.” Unheard by the Lannisters, Cersei was chuffing into her gag and glaring daggers at Eddard. “She attacked the hand of the King. A capital offense. She committed incest not once, twice but thrice. She attempted to have my youngest
daughter killed.” More swallowed cries came from Cersei. Her body was kept roughly in place by Javer. “Twice she attacked heinously my second eldest son.” More muffled screams from Cersei. “So. As you can see, I have many offenses for which Cersei is guilty of high treason of, to choose from. Her sins against myself and my family are many and vile. I have the right to kill her at any time.”

“But her children! You coward.”

“I will remember your words as I remember looking at the broken bodies Aegon and Rhaenys Targaryen the children of Elia Martell. Three innocents killed by Lannisters. Tell me no more of honor. Elia was an innocent. Cersei is nothing more than an incestuous slut who committed adultery on her king. Again a crime punishable of death. I have heard enough. Be gone. If you bore me more I may throw you down a dead body post haste.”

The force of Lannister below milled around while they talked among themselves. Branton turned to look back up at Eddard.

“This will not be forgotten.”

“You are right Branton. I will kill you soon enough. I have learned my lessons well Lannister. I will not hesitate to kill to keep my throne. I am the greatest swordsman left in Westeros now that Barristan is banished. His banishment by a Lannister I may add. I will enjoy seeing the light leave your eyes as the blood gushes from your mouth and guts.”

The man started at that. His visage seemed to pale. He left silently.

Eddard chuckled as the man left with his companions.

“What is so funny Eddard?” Syrio asked the new King.

“I have no idea if I will ever see that man face to face. I have beaten him without even raising a sword against him. I hope to never have to fight the man.”

Arya started laughing. Syrio cocked an eyebrow at Arya’s father.

“You have an evil sense of humor Eddard Stark.”

Eddard gave them a squint smile. “Maybe. I am planting seeds that hopefully will prevent future bloodshed. Let’s release them” Eddard spoke nodding towards his hostages. The four former honor guards pulled out long razor sharp daggers. They worked the bladed weapons behind the hostages bound arms and cut the hemp ropes apart. They also cut the silk bindings that had been wrapped around limbs to keep them from being chaffed by the rope. Eddard removed the gags gently from each of the Lannisters.

Joffrey whimpered in fear. Cersei’s two younger children stood still with a docile look on their faces. They were prepared to meet their fate with a subdued resigned air. They had seen Sansa endure the same humiliation and knew how to keep their heads down and mouths shut. The same could not be said for their mother. She ripped her arms down when the ropes binding her arms behind her were cut. Her hand ripped up before Eddard could remove the silk gag. She roughly jerked the ropes and gag away from her mouth and face. Spitting, Cersei got them off and snarled at Eddard.

“You fucking bastard! I should have gutted you when I had the chance!”

many others?”

“You fucking liar. Robert killed himself the arrogant bastard. Your son Bran I never wanted harmed! I only wanted to talk to him!” Cersei nearly screamed the last part. “I would never deliberately harm a child!”

“Please Cersei … your family has killed children before—“

“I had no part of that you bastard! I was not even here you fucking moron!”

“No matter. Lannister’s are murderers. You killed Jon Arryn.”

Cersei paused, a confused look on her face. Then anger flushed her face “I did not kill that old goat. He probably died from old age. He was a fucking fossil. And Bran I admit I have that on my hands and conscious but we did not attempt a second attempt upon your son … I …” just a flick of her head she gazed at her eldest son. Her head snapped back to glare at Eddard. Cersei clamped her mouth shut and glared at Eddard.

Two things Eddard had discovered from this diatribe with Cersei. That flash on Cersei’s face about Jon Arryn was not faked. Cersei had not killed Jon. She also did not attempt a second murder on his son’s life but she suspected someone though. He knew it could only be one person. He eyed Joffrey. The boy was shaking with fear. Without the Iron Throne behind him Joffrey Baratheon was a spineless pathetic wannabe despot.

“What happens to us now O King?” Cersei sneered at Eddard.

“Why you go back to your quarters of course Cersei. I think you will find them more pleasant than my guest quarters were.”

“What do you plan to do with us? You know you will have to kill us eventually. That is what happens when power changes Houses. Why pretend to be something you are not?”

Eddard smiled while shaking his head. “I feel sorry for you Cersei. You are a vile reprehensible thing. The banner of your house should be a scorpion and not the noble lion. I am not going to kill you and your children. I still have nightmares of Rhaegar’s wife and children wrapped in those blood soaked curtains. Their bodies broken, raped and reviled. Your house did that to them.”

A visible shake went through Cersei’s body her eyes closed. She took a deep breath. “Yes. That was a crime indeed Eddard. I … I am guilty of many things but I would not have done that. Eventually, you will have to dispose of us … you know this. I will lay my head on the block and sign any confession you need if you will spare my children. Please spare my children.”

Eddard was shocked at this display from Cersei. He in a million years would never thought Cersei Lannister could be selfless. His attitude adjusted. However little but it had adjusted. He showed none of this to the Lannister. “How little you know me Cersei. Take them back to their rooms in the Red Keep. I think we should triple the guard. I do not want them escaping or anything happening to them. Javer put our best men on the guard detail if you would. All that bluster on the wall was for show.”

Cersei as she left said with her eyes she still did not believe Eddard. She really did not understand him Eddard thought to himself as the Lannisters were escorted away.

Arya came up to her father. “Why all that talk father? If you have no intention of killing them.” Eddard stared flatly at his daughter. “Do you?!” Arya squeaked out suddenly not so sure.
A squint smile on his face Eddard reached out and hugged his daughter while giving her instructor a wink. A snort came from Eddard seeing Syrio look unsure.

“No Arya, I am not going to kill anyone who is helpless before me. The Lannisters are helpless. I am not sure still what to do with Cersei and Joffrey but I will foster Myrcella and Tommen when the time comes. They need to get away from the influence of their parents and grandfather. It is amazing they are still so even keeled and decent.”

“You lied to those men” Arya said in a shocked voice.

“Yes I did Arya. This is not the first time.” She looked at her father confused. Eddard then explained what he had done on Robert’s deathbed. Eddard felt comforted when Arya told him she would have done the same thing.”

“I thank you for saying that Arya. It turned out badly. I learned my lesson. It was the right thing to do but the situation had become untenable. The situation now is totally different. Tywin most likely would not have attacked us but now he definitely won’t now. He remembers vividly what happened here a generation ago under his command. I was there. He remembers my rage and hurt. He will think I am itching to get revenge on him through perpetuating the same crime against his own scions. He will think twice, thrice and more before attempting anything against us.”

“I learned from the situation at Robert’s death and my inaction. This allowed Cersei to turn the tide against me. Now I will act proactively. I do not like this lying Arya but I will do it to preserve our lives and even the lives of our enemies. The best fight is one avoided.”

Eddard watched his daughter absorb his words.

“Your father has the right of it Arya” Syrio added his thoughts. “Lying is always distasteful and to be avoided if at all possible. Never get in the habit of it. Else, soon, you will begin to forget where the truth ends and the lies begin. You will lose track of them and so lose track of yourself. Only use a lie as a tactical weapon.”

Eddard watched them leave. He continued to look out over the walls of King’s Landing. The Lannister party had gone back to the picket line that had been established around King’s Landing. He was not concerned at the present levels of troops. They were spread thin and the commander of the Lannister forces knew it.

In fact, several of the Druids had slipped out last night through the tunnels that travelled underneath the walls he was currently standing on. At night, in their dark robes they wore for stealth, they walked like shadows that had been given form. They had finished what they had come to accomplish. They were going home now. Eddard wished them off with a heavy heart but did not try to persuade them to stay. They had lives to return too and duties to the lands they loved. He had the forces he needed to keep the Keep safe with Gold Cloaks and the forces that were slowly coming to him through the tunnels.

He looked off over the city and past Aegon’s Hill that had the Red Keep resting on it. Only tangentially did Eddard see his new home. He looked across Blackwater Bay, Massey’s Hook and then on past the peninsula of land and then jumped over the narrow sea to the continent of Essos. Onwards his vision jumped across the long landmass. The Free Cities were soon past as his vision surged across Slaver’s Bay. Still his vision jumped forward. Somewhere in a sweeping seas of grass or dry vistas of bone dry desert walked a teenage girl. A girl he had saved.

The girl who was the true heir of the Iron Throne. Eddard took a deep breath. He felt it deep in his bones. The girl lived. He was sure of it. Still he wondered. Eddard had been sure his path before
his capture by Cersei had been right and just. That his path would lead to victory. His arrogance brought himself down. How could that girl survive? The Druids had reported that Khal Drogo was dead and the he had led Khalasar had turned against the frail slip of a girl. She had fled then. Most probably into the Red Wastes. None who entered that monstrous maul ever came out. She must surely be dead now or would be soon.

It was probably for the best. Still Eddard’s instinct gnawed at him.

The next morning Eddard was in the court yard that the royals used in the Red Keep to get the sun and relax. Eddard was going through his sword routines working to get his body back in shape and his muscle memory sharp. He smiled when Syrio and his daughter came out and began their Water Dancer workouts. Syrio was barefoot as was his daughter. In unison they rose up on one foot the ball of the foot bent at ninety degrees. They rose up and down in perfect unison. Then they hopped to the other foot. They had their arms extended in perfect level plains. Arya’s arms only jerked a little.

Intimidated, Eddard rose up on his right foot and had his foot bent like his daughter. Big Mistake! Foot Cramp! Foot Cramp! After that Eddard kept to the exercises he was comfortable with. He watched Syrio and Arya do flips, cartwheels and rolls. They then picked up their practice swords.

“Right, right, left back forward forward right back left left …” Eddard was doing his own sword work routines. He watched Syrio blocking his daughter’s attacks and launching his own. Eddard could see that Syrio was holding back substantially but he was no longer moving at a slow clip. His sword was fast and adroit. Some strikes hit Arya but she blocked many of them. Syrio was still using basic steps and not moving near his full speed but the progress Arya had made already was staggering.

Eddard was so proud of his wolf daughter. A cat appeared in the far corner of the courtyard. Arya threw down her sword. With a loud whoop she was off after the cat. The cat seeing her coming had already tore off running like the furies of hell were after it. Arya’s laughter gaily filled the air. Syrio smiled before walking over to the King.

“Your daughter is a Water Dancer already Eddard Stark. I could make you one too. It would not take long. Foot cramps withstanding.”

Eddard broke out laughing while Syrio grinned with a shit eating grin.

“I mean what I say Eddard Stark. You too are a Water Dancer that waits to blossom. I would teach you.”

Eddard smiled back. “Nah. I like my broadsword too much.”

Syrio sighed good naturedly. “More’s the pity.”

Syrio picked up Arya’s sword and moved off. The new King continued his workouts. He was inspired to practice that little bit more seeing his daughter progressing and knowing that Syrio Forel was his equal. He had once thought that the broadsword was a by far superior weapon compared to a rapier. He now knew better. It was a little unsettling for Eddard to know that Syrio could pick up a broadsword and still defeat most opponents but if Eddard was to pick up a rapier he could only stare at the miniscule blade and think ‘I am in deep shit’.

Thrust, parry, move to the right and back … on and on Eddard practiced his sword work seeing in his mind’s eyes his opponents attacks and countering each stroke and thrust. The hackles on the back of his neck suddenly came up. He slowed his footwork and calmed his breathing. He was not
afraid having felt this several times since the fight to take the throne from Cersei. Taking a calm
breath Eddard turned around.

Coming into the courtyard was Merrel. Beside the Druid who gave Eddard his health and his leg
back whole was the mighty Were-Direwolf that had joined the fight in his cause in Cersei’s lair. The
mighty beast in its current form looked like the beasts that his children had. With a few notable
exceptions. Its massive head came up to his upper chest. The Direwolf’s coat a luxuriant dark
brown with slight light brown streaks down its flanks and on its haunches. Eddard had never seen
wolf or direwolf with such striated color markings. There were several other differences between the
Were-Direwolf and the animals his children had.

This animal had more pronounced fangs and more of them that protruded up and down the lips of its
snout. The beast had a less bushy tail and its shoulders were more pronounced. Its legs were slightly
off angled compared to a wolf or direwolf. Eddard had seen the Were morph its shape effortlessly
from an animalistic wolf gait to standing and then back down within seconds during the fight that
had won him the throne.

The legends of course he had heard growing up. The Werewolf or hyena, bear or lion. He had been
scared so bad as a little kid when Nan had told him those tales. He had grown up and stopped
believing in such fanciful tales of course. He had been rudely shown that all legends are indeed
based on fact.

What he had been even more surprised of was the obvious bond between the beast and Merrel.
Eddard stopped himself. For some reason he felt he was disrespecting the Were-Direwolf calling it a
beast. The animal was definitely intelligent and had shown great bravery coming to his aid. It had
the same affection for Merrel as his children’s Direwolves showed to them. The Direwolves showed
more loyalty than almost all humans Eddard had met.

As Eddard observed, the Were animal it brushed into the legs and hips of Merrel. The Druid reached
down and casually scratched the wolf behind the ears and along its lips. The way the animal pushed
into Merrel and shivered made Eddard feel uncomfortable. It almost seemed they were like lovers.
Eddard shook his head at the errant thought. There was just an air of intimacy about them that was
slightly off putting. Eddard banished such thoughts.

Merrel and this Were-Direwolf had proved loyal companions. Their relationship was their own.
Merrel and his companion wolf came to stand before the new King. Salutations were given and
received. Eddard felt the wolf looking at him with its golden eyes. Its head cocked from side to
side. The wolf was inspecting him and Eddard wondered if he passed the wolf’s litmus test.

“I am going to be leaving you for a short time my King” Merrel began without preamble.

A pang shot through Eddard. He had come to feel the Druid was a true friend. This most have
shown on his face.

“I will return soon my friend. I need to rest and enjoy some time in my homeland at the heart of the
King’s Wood. I want to be there when I am not shattering my leg in service to you my friend.”

Eddard snorted and then smiled a squint smile. The wolf looked at him with such intensity. For a
moment Eddard felt something. Some thought tried to intrude upon his consciousness. Did he know
this wolf? That was impossible and he shook his head. The wolf seemed to only increase its
inspection of him. Was the wolf trying to give him some strange message? Again he felt a
familiarity. Eddard shook himself mentally. He was assigning human thought to an animal that no
matter how intelligent was still an animal. It operated off different instincts and motivations.
“I will miss you Merrel. Your efforts saved me. Without you, Arya and Syrio, I could not have been rescued from the dungeons and then have you restore my leg. I will forever be in your debt.”

“You owe me nothing Eddard. Only remember the debt you owe the Land of Westeros. The Children of the Forest. These are great times I feel. Meet them with honor and your greatness and all will be well. I can feel the Queen coming. She will be most pleased.”

Eddard felt his body jolt and a thrill run through him. Was he talking of Daenerys Targaryen? Did she indeed live?

“You mean Daenerys?” he asked in wonder.

The man smiled back. “There is more than one Queen my friend.” With that the Druid and his wolf turned and walked away. Their bodies pressed into each other like lovers. Eddard shook his head at the strange thoughts. What was the word? Yes! Anthropomorphism. He kept giving the wolf human traits when it was just a wolf. A magical wolf but still just a wolf.

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The small council room was silent and empty as Eddard looked around at the table. He had disbanded the Small Council as the first royal edict upon his taking the throne. In the corners he could still hear the whispers of betrayal and malice. A grimace worked across his features. He had aided those whispers by ignoring wise council that had been hidden in the couched words and half innuendo.

Just an hour ago Eddard had pronounced sentence and execution on a man who in a drunken rage had killed his wife and two children accusing her of infidelity. She was never given a chance to raise her own defense. Even if guilty it was not worthy of death. The man had sobered up and first whined for mercy and his innocence. He had disgusted Eddard. When the man saw that Eddard was not swayed by the man’s egotistical platitudes he had grown most violent and screamed his rage and the injustice of Eddard Stark. That he was the “fucking asshole new King”.

It had taken five men to hold him down with his head over the chopping block. Ice had sung its song of justice and death. His death in the Red Keep away from the public. There would be no spectacle shows from Eddard Stark.

*Let the hand that pronounced sentence carry out the execution.* Eddard was weary. He never shied away from his duty but he hated it. Always had. He hated it more with the recent events leading up to this moment. He was king. Heavy was the weight of the crown he would refuse to wear.

There was a polite knock on the door. He had much to do.

“Come in.”

The door was opened and Varys stepped into the empty room. His footfalls whispered in the now cavernous room. The eunuch looked around at the empty seats. He walked to the head of the table to stand to the side of Eddard. Eddard looked up at the Whisperer. Eddard slowly got up from his chair. He turned aside and pointed at the seat.

“Take a seat Varys.”

“I would prefer to stand. I am always ready to serve.”

“I will take that with a grain of salt Varys if you will forgive me. I feel though our goals are much more closely aligned now. I must insist you sit Varys.”
The man’s eyebrows squinted as he considered the insistence of his King.

“I am surprised you would make this request my King. I must confess my past actions. I am surprised you even want me in this room.”

Eddard looked steadily at the eunuch. “That is the past Varys. You have made amends. Syrio has told me how he coerced you into his service and back into mine. You did that well. In fact you succeeded wonderfully. But I vaguely remember you coming into my cell when Joffrey called for me. You did not have to do that. In fact if you had not the Insurrection would have probably died on that night or maybe limped along a broken thing.”

“You merely had to do nothing and you would have been free. Instead you chose to come to my aid. At great risk you chose to put yourself in the fire for me. In those troubled times you could have been discovered. You made a choice. I am in our debt. Sit.” Eddard pointed down at the chair he had just vacated.

“This is the chair of the Hand my liege.”

“Exactly.”

Eddard saw the man hear the words and then process the information.

Rarely did the Whisperer show surprise as he did now. “Oh.”

“Please sit at this table as my Hand. You are the first member of my government. All others have been swept away. You are the only hold over. I need someone I can almost trust Varys. Don’t make me regret this Varys, else, your neck will be listening to an icy tune.”

The eunuch slowly sat down and wiggled into the seat. It was obvious he enjoyed the fit. He turned to Eddard.

“Your poetry leaves something to be desired my liege. Still, the words are precise and clear. You are learning. Justice should always be leavened with mercy but at times it must be decisive and cruel. Do you understand that now?”

For a long time Eddard stared at the eunuch with his steady grey eyes.

“I have learned what I must. I will not make the same mistakes again. That you can trust.” The Warden of the North and now King watched his Master of the hidden half-truths tilt his head in acknowledgement.

“Have you been keeping a close eye on Petyr Baelish? I do not trust that man worth a copper pence.”

“He is watched as closely as opportunity and terrain allow. I too know he enjoys mayhem merely for the sake of it. He enjoys the Game of Thrones merely for the game I think. I have goals. You have goals. Robert and Cersei had goals. Maybe not in the realm’s best interest but still they had goals. I swear that Littlefinger merely loves the game in and of itself. Any power gained is only ancillary to the game itself. He would never rule directly I think. Maybe through another. He is a most strange and complicated man.”

“I also wonder if he ever recovered from being overlooked and demeaned for not being of noble birth and not strong of arm. He works against all who are. Supposition I know but those are my thoughts.”
His back stiff and straight against the back of his chair Eddard listened. Varys words were all probably true and yet it did not dispel the fact of Littlefinger’s actions. Eddard would deal with him when the time was right.

“How is your search for a Small Council proceeding? I do not want what I had. I want men of talent and at least a sliver of honor.”

“Must you ask for the moon?”

Eddard chuckled. “I have a man in mind who might make a good Master of Coin. He is devious, conniving, selfish, deviant, cunning and filled with avarice.”

“So he is perfect for the job.”

“We will see. I had a lot of time to think convalescing in my sick bed. I had to time to think things through. We shall see.” Eddard tapped the tabletop. “I have taken the Iron Throne. Now I must secure it against all challengers.”

“I need you build me up dossiers on all the Great Houses and the houses underneath them.” Varys cocked an eyebrow at Eddard. “Yes Varys. I know the houses and their heraldry and the Lords of the Houses. But I need to know the people. Their strengths and weaknesses. Their virtues and their vices. I want to know their rivalries between themselves. I hate to say it but I need the smut, kink and out right avarice of each house if any.”

“As Warden of the North I did not concern myself of the idiosyncrasies of the Houses outside of my domain. I need to know the failings of the leaders of the Houses I must deal with. Outside of House Bolton I had no such concerns. That is a House I will have to deal with in time. My forbearance as King is much less than it was.”

“I mean to use their own weaknesses against them Varys.” Eddard looked at his first of advisors. “I will negotiate and cajole when I can but if I must play the Game of Thrones I will. I just hope I keep my soul in the process” Eddard told Varys in a tired and troubled tone. Eddard knew what he had to do no matter how distasteful it might become. The sacrifices to get to his point were too great to turn aside now.

Varys looked back at Eddard. “You are learning Eddard. You are learning.”
The two men sat at the table of the Small Council. Their voices soft as they discussed the pressing matters of their nascent rule. The storms gathering outside the walls of King’s Landing would begin to gather force in the near future. For now only, the Lannisters had to be dealt with. Soon the other houses of the South would have to be either subdued or better yet coopted into their orbit. As of the moment, the Wolves were surrounded and the possibility of being overwhelmed definitely loomed large.

The North of Westeros was either under their sway or strangely neutral. The Vale had partially given their support but it was fragmented. The titular head had chosen to go against kin and fealty to hold themselves neutral. Fortunately, this had not been absolute. Some Houses were even now gathering with Robb. The Riverlands and the North had gathered their main hosts and were now preparing to march down the King’s Road. Other formations of the Tully’s had other tasks.

The Riverlands were harassing the forces of the Lannisters by either attacking them on the Gold Road as it ran near or through the territory of the Tully’s. Additional pressure was being applied by threatening the holds of the eastern most reach of the Westerlands. The threat of attack was drawing forces away from Tywin Lannister that he therefore could not bring to bear against King’s Landing.

The Druids had retreated from King’s Landing but they were still supporting Eddard. They had thrown their support totally behind the new Direwolf King as they now called Eddard Stark. The mysterious order were not attacking the Lannisters directly. They were not even attacking with hit and run tactics. They were using a tactic from the lands of Yi Ti. Gorilla warfare. Their goal to kill a few persons here and a few more there. They attacked from the mountain sides and valleys. Once on the grasslands and hills the Druids attacked from the hidden woods or gullies. Their goals to sow the seeds of confusion and fear. This slowed the advances of the advancing forces of Tywin Lannister. His forces bled with a thousand cuts Merrel had told him.

Their ravens were allowing Eddard to keep in constant contact with not only the major holdfasts and institutions like the Citadel but forces on the move that Druids had attached themselves too. Through some connection their ravens had with each other and their masters they were able to fly to them even on the move. Between the ravens supplied by the Citadel and his Druids, Eddard had a communication web that had never been achieved before in Westeros.

He was able to coordinate circles around his foes. It was intoxicating in a way. He had the tools. He just needed to use them judicially.

He was using this tool to communicate with his son. What he heard was both reassuring and distressing. Robb was rousing the North and coordinating with the Riverlands and the Lords Declarant. They were training up post haste and would soon begin to march south. That was the good news. The bad news was the lack of news on Robb’s mother. She had left word she was going to the Eyrie. Unfortunately, no word came from the mountain top fortress.

Where was Catelyn Stark? Robb told his father he was searching along with the Lords of the Vale who had aligned with them to find Robb’s mother. Eddard would have wait for word. He could do
It had been eight days since the parley at the screening wall at the Lion’s Gate. Varys had been tasked with gathering information on the Houses that was actionable and to help Eddard begin to assemble a new Small Council.

Eddard had begun to hear supplications on the Iron Throne. His fair pronouncements were already making the populace start to whisper that they had a true ruler. He did not side with the rich and powerful by habit. He listened to the merits of the case and judged fairly. Many a rich merchant or not as powerful as he thought Lord left muttering.

Eddard was building up coin with the population. That would make any hesitate to say anything as of yet against the new King. Eddard knew he needed power and connections. For now he had enough. The world of Westeros was still wobbling on its axis with the new power dynamic that had suddenly been thrust upon it.

Once Eddard had turned aside from the Iron Throne. This time he had accepted its onerous weight.

“I have looked over the reports you gathered Varys. I am impressed.” Eddard thumbed through various parchments that lay across the table. “The information is impressive and in depth. I agree with most of your analysis.” He looked at the one report that had caught his eye. Varys had reported on everything. It would seem that Oberyn and Ellaria were quite adventuresome and had quite the stamina. He sat the report back down. He had started to read the report till the details made him blush and caused certain issues to rise up.

He pushed the report away. His eyes wanted to drift back to the report. It was quite fascinating.

“How were you able to amass so much detail so quickly? I saw the ravens flying back in yesterday and into the evening.”

Varys looked at him steadily and a slight smirk creased his features.

“I have kept all the information and gossip I have collected over the years. Whenever new information comes in I add it to my dossiers after correlating it and deciding how best it fits.”

“I also have contacts in Highgarden and Dorne. I think you know that Olenna Redwyne is the true power in Highgarden?” Eddard tilted his head in acknowledgement. “She has her own spy service. Her confidents and spies are called ‘moths’. In Dorne their intelligence service is controlled by Dontar Ladybright. His spies are called ‘jackals’. The need for information is paramount for us all. We share data. Of course we always scrub the information we give out and check for veracity and weed out subterfuge the information we receive in return. We all have spies in each other’s courts that we do not work hard to weed out. The need for information is too great. All the spymasters know to keep the truly worthwhile information close to their hearts. Else those hearts may cease beating.”

Varys paused and chuckled. “We are always feeding bull crap to each other’s spies. We always hope to have our foes believe in nothing and chasing their tales. It is fun.”

Eddard snorted as he processed that nugget of information. Cross and double cross. Thank the old gods he had Varys for this work. Calloused fingers riffled through the parchments on the Small Council table. Eddard then sat back and looked up at the ceiling. His head turned to look at the Small Council chamber door. It was flanked by Valyrian sphinxes, their eyes of polished garnets smoldering in black marble faces. They had the bodies of dragons and faces of beautiful women. Eddard studied their faces seeking guidance. They were mute. Strange thought Eddard, why did
Robert not have them removed with his obsessive hatred of all things Rhaegar. That a visage of Valyria was allowed to stand still in this meeting place was strange to Eddard. Shaking his head Eddard turned back to Varys.

“Have you heard back from the Citadel on the sending of a new Grand Maester Varys?”

The eunuch smiled softly. “Yes I have. They query as to why you request a young Maester who has just received all his links. They reason you should want a more seasoned Maester who had learned and earned wisdom. They also ask how they are to get the Grand Maester to you my liege?” Varys intoned with a hint of sardonic humor.

Eddard looked crossly at his Hand. He never knew when snark would show its head with Varys. Eddard found it endearing in a strange way. “First, I will worry about the Citadel’s concerns when they give me some names. Secondly, I have had enough of ‘wisdom’ with Pycelle. I hope, though it is probably wistful, that a young Maester only embarking on his career is … I am not sure the phrase …”

“Not corrupt and jaded?”

The new king smirk grimaced. “I would not use that phrase exactly but basically yes. Send back that is my requirement.”

“Yes my King.”

Eddard grimaced in earnest at that. Gods he hated the sound of that but he had better get used to it.

“How is Pycelle doing with his removal as Grand Maester? I want the man treated well in his later years. He will not be humiliated or kicked out of the Red Keep. He will maintain his quarters and be allowed to continue any experiments.” Eddard looked at Varys with direct contact. “As long as it purely science or just killing time. I will trust you to monitor that. He will be treated well. I have made myself clear on that I hope?”

With an aggrieved look the eunuch looked at Eddard. “Yes. He deserves a fate much worse but I accede to your wishes. He is quite harmless I must admit. I must say he is doing rather well. He is most thankful for you letting him keep his quarters and having the serving staff continue to call him Grand Maester. He speaks only highly of you.” Eddard rolled his eyes remembering the man’s past slights. It did not matter. Eddard had won.

“It is a small thing Varys. Maybe he will prove of use someday.”

The Whisperer tilted his head in acknowledgement though how that could be he had no idea.

“Our dear Pycelle is even more relieved and downright ecstatic that you have allowed him to keep Alssa Stewar as his personal attendant. She is actually quite fond of the man if not outright in love with him. I guess I can see it. He treats her gentle and is constantly cooing over her. He is using that additional twenty gold dragon monthly stipend you have allowed him to buy her nice clothes, the best of cuisine and taking her to the opera and plays. All this spending of your generous stipend to Pycelle is helping many vendors I must concede.”

“Well I’ll be damned” Eddard softly spoke to himself. “I didn’t think he had it in him.” A question hit him. The girl was quite comely. “Ahhh … ahem … how does the girl satisfy her more-ummmm … you see … welllll—“

“Sexual needs?”
“YES! That was what I was about to say.” Eddard cursed the blood and heat rising to his face in embarrassment.

“I see. Actually, Pycelle is a Grand Maester of many years. Those vows are for shit by the way. All know that. He has much experience in the boudoir I must say. For a man of his age he is amazingly spry. He is patient and attentive to Alssa. He kisses her silly, then works her breast like a maestro making her cry out in ecstasy.”

Eddard stared at his Hand. What was he doing? Eddard wondered.

“He is a patient man and Alssa is most ravenous for our Grand Maester. She wallows all over him with her twenty year old body. She sucks him off as long as it takes to get him hard. She then mounts our old stallion and rides him like her life depends on. She fucks him with all her holes if you know what I mean. She is quite the screamer I am told.

Eddard was squirming. He didn’t need to hear this!

“It is amazing how often he can get it up in a night and how gladly Alssa is to do what she must to get him hard for her yet again.”

Eddard mouth was hanging open. Whether in shock or awe Varys was not sure.

“Of course the man is a demon with his mouth. I think the girl is addicted to his mouth and tongue licking her pussy and drilling her spasming asshole. His technique is quite exquisite I think. I have read the Karma Sutra from Yi Ti. I think our Pycelle must have read it too. He has this habit of swallowing Alssa’s upper cunt and butterfly stroking it with his tongue my sparrows report; the way his cheeks are working. Then he lifts his head and extends his tongue and folds it back along his chin and roughly tongue licks Alssa’s jutting up clit—“

“ENOUGH!”

“But my liege—these tips might help you in the bedroom—“

“I think I have a handle on that Varys” the eunuch watched his liege squirm in his seat. Not having balls was a help sometimes. “Lets discuss me securing my realm so Pycelle can continue his nocturnal practices” Eddard continued nervously moving around the parchments in front of him.

“Oh I assure they are also doing it in the daytime. In fact—“

“Okay! I get the message. My realm—please!”

The Whisperer chuckled. Eddard was learning and learning fast but on some things he was too easy.

For the next fifteen minutes Eddard went over the notes that Varys had compiled over the years. Eddard was impressed with just how much the eunuch had been tracking and recording over the reigns of the kings he had served. The dossiers he had created for the Major Houses of Westeros. They looked over the parchments that had come back from the Masters of Moths and Jackals. They confirmed what Eddard had already assumed. He knew his fellow Wardens. He had known many things but had never worried over them. The North consumed his attention but that was no more.

“So what are you plans my liege?” Varys watched Eddard looking at him. Eddard kept his face neutral but he knew that the man was debating with how much to tell him. Varys was patient.

In a minute his patience was rewarded.
“I am going to trust you Varys. You have proven yourself. You have nothing to gain by working to get to this point to only squander your new raised position. You know that any possible successor will be much worse than me. I want what is best for the realm. The whole realm. Not only the rich and powerful but the low and common man. I could care less for power or riches. Robert Baratheon lived enough gluttony for several life times of any kings. Cersei only added to it.”

“I agree Eddard Stark of the North. I have waited a lifetime to finally have someone worth serving. You have my totally allegiance. Even though I know you will always wonder of my veracity.”

“Yes. I learned that lesson from Littlefinger. In fact I will be dealing with that distasteful situation shortly.”

“I can’t wait to see that Eddard. I do not like Littlefinger. He serves only himself.”

“That is his tragic flaw and your saving grace. You wish to serve others.”

“You are correct my King.”

“You can call me by name you know Varys. Out before my subjects you should use my honorific but when it is just us and other close confidents you are allowed to use my name.”

Eddard watched the eunuch process that.

“I see. I will try Eddard” Varys spoke but his name sounded slurred in the eunuch’s mouth. It would take him some time to get used to that familiarity.

For the next half hour the two men went over the ideas that Eddard Stark had developed to secure the realm under his rule and squash any and all potential challengers. Varys mainly listened to his King’s schemes and machinations with only short comments to make sure he understood and to help his liege focus on a specific element of his plans when needed.

With a low whistle the eunuch sat back. His eyes bored into the King’s visage. “I must ask my lieg … Eddard. Where was this acumen for the Game of Thrones when you sat in this chair? It was not evident. I searched diligently for it and it was never found. I frankly must tell you that I am very impressed.”

Eddard closed his eyes and grimaced. He then slowly opened his eyes to look at Varys.

“I did not think along these lines before Varys. I let my code of honor bind me. I ignored the reality around me. I refused to listen to any council that did not adhere to how I wanted to see the world. And yes, Varys, you tried to warn me.” Eddard snorted. “Renly Stannis and even Petyr Baelish in his way tried to warn me. I was the Hand of the King and limited my worldview if you would. I was just so sure that by following my code of ethics and honor I would succeed. As we all saw; I did not. Your attempts to warn me I remember Varys. You did try and convince me that I had to act. I did not listen to you at great cost to me.”

The eunuch did not answer. He had nothing to add. He decide to move the conversation forward on Eddard’s plans to secure the Iron Throne.

“Do you think you can truly make all this occur my—Eddard? You have many strands of thread to weave together to make all this come to pass. You will need to be like my namesake. The spider. You will need eight arms to make this happen. Each arm tapping a thread of the web to entice and entrap your potential foes.”

An eyebrow was quirked at Varys metaphor. The man before Varys looked at his own shoulders as
if to make sure extra pairs of arms had not suddenly started to sprout. It seemed Eddard had a sense of humor after all.

“No, I don’t think so my Hand. Two arms will be sufficient. I will merely have to be patient. I will take the time I must to weave the tapestry. I will work each House to where I need them to be to work my will. I have read your notes and observations. Your fellow Whisperers have added to them. They only reinforce what I know of the players on the Crevasse board. Together we will knock over each piece of our opponents on the board one by one. In the end they will be defeated by my white Queen”

“You are that confident?”

“Yes I am Varys. I am taking the same confidence I have on the combat field and bringing it here onto this plain of combat. There are no swords, battle axes or warhammers on this field of battle but the precepts and concepts are the same. To attack and overwhelm your enemy. To find weakness and exploit till victory is achieved. All of my potential foes have this weaknesses and failings. I will exploit them.”

“I have my sanctuary here behind these city walls. My son will arrive with sufficient force to block the Lannisters from laying siege. My brother-in-law is sapping Tywin’s strength as we speak. The Druids each day sap one more drop of blood, energy, confidence and will from Lannisters. No. I will be safe in King’s Landing till I am ready to spring my trap.”

“The Westerlands are a mighty force Eddard. Only Highgarden has the raw numbers to contend with them.”

“That is on an open field of battle Varys. Tywin’s goal will be to attack and break the defense of King’s Landing. He will be static. My son will decimate him between the anvil of King’s Landing and the Straight Peen Hammer of the Blacksmith. The Vale will come with sufficient force to augment Robb. I will be able to peel away enough Houses from the Crown and Stormlands to add to this force. No Tywin will not attack me.”

“Tywin is cunning and crafty. Also, remember Varys, he wants the safety of his daughter and his grandchildren. He has that much decency in that dissipated soul. No. He will eschew a direct attack. His actions in Robert’s Rebellion showed that. We will be safe in our sanctuary.”

Varys nodded in agreement. They had discussed this without detail in their review earlier. Hearing his King’s thinking made the Whisperer feel better. Eddard did have a sharp tactical mind. His boldness though was disconcerting.

“With our sanctuary you intend to invite the enemy into our sanctuary. Is that wise?” Varys felt a trill of fear run through his body. He had had enough of the thrill of combat to last a lifetime.

Eddard shook his head. “Varys you are not looking at the situation correctly. Think of it like this. We need to draw them in to trap them in the web we are currently weaving to entrap them. They most come to us so their limbs will become entrapped in our sticky silk lines. Only then can we wrap them with our spinners. Only then can we entrap them to work our will on them Varys. It will work. I know it. Trust me.”

What Varys found surprising was the fact that he did trust Eddard Stark. He had spoken nothing but the truth. He said he would learn from his past mistakes. The man was proving he was speaking words of truth. Eddard had almost overnight become a master of the Game of Thrones. It was frightening in a way.
“Once they are in our web I will maneuver each in turn to overcome or subvert to my will.”

“Are you that sure?”

“I have to be. I must have absolute confidence. I will work each foe to the only outcome possible is my victory.”

“I will use the Baratheon brother’s arrogance and sense of destiny. Stannis will seek to contend because he is stiff and unimaginative. His brother was king and thus he must be next in line. He forgets Robert was not King till Rhaegar was killed along with Aerys II his father. I have usurped Robert and Joffrey and, therefore, the Iron Throne runs through me now. He will move and act in a wooden manner. He will be easy. So will Renly. He is only half as good as he thinks he is. He is tall, good looking, strong and full of verve. He has all the skills to potentially be a great king but he does not have the heart. He has not applied himself and moved beyond his very basic skill sets.”

“He has Loras Tyrell as his lover so I must tread carefully there but I will navigate that maze of thrones when the time comes. I will challenge them when the time is right. A rose will be clipped and a buck shorn of his horns. I will do that at the same time if I can work it.”

“As you confirmed to me, Olenna Tyrell is the true force that controls Highgarden. Mace is manipulated to do her bidding. You tell me that Margaery is being groomed to take the levers of power when the time comes. That is good. You tell me Margaery is capable and cunning. That is good. I will use that too.”

“Highgarden is always the maiden that all seek to woe with an extravagant dowry. I have the best bauble to offer. I will coopt them to my orbit. Olenna will like what I have to say.”

“The Storm and Crownloads have no great love for the Baratheon brothers. The support I have already garnered with elements of Rhaegar’s honor guard already in my service is leading more Houses to cast their lot to me. The Baratheon brothers will not have the might to contend on the battlefield. They will have to challenge me when the time comes. I will be ready.”

“That leaves Dorne. I know what they want. They want revenge. Doran has been moving pawns around on the Crevasse board for nearly twenty years. I will move my Queen to a commanding position. I will give him the revenge he has sought for going on twenty years now. Oberyn will seal it.”

Eddard stopped. He looked at Varys.

The two men looked at each other. Varys smiled. “I agree with your assessments and you have shown me your plans. I hope you are right. You have made many assumptions and calls on character.”

“I am right Varys. Trust me. I will not make the same mistakes again. It is I who will be white on the Crevasse board. Everyone will react to my moves this time.”

Varys considered this. “How will you prove that Cersei’s children are not Baratheon’s if it comes down to it? If Tywin convinces everyone they are legitimate?”

The eunuch saw Eddard laugh softly his eyes in a squint smile. He got up from his chair and walked to a side table. There he picked up a heavy looking tome and brought it to the main table of the Small Council. He sat the book down on the table with a thump that echoed in the empty room.

“I will do what I should have done last time this situation arose. I will call all before me and have all the High Lords around me. Especially Tywin.”
“I will call out in a strong voice ‘The seed is strong.’ You have found all the bastards of Robert living in King’s Landing. We know of Edric and Mya in Dragonstone and the Vale. I will call them into the Throne Room. I will repeat the call ‘The seed is strong.’”

I will remark that every Baratheon has black hair and blue eyes, including every one of Robert's bastards. I will show them to the Lords. All of his children look like him. Some Baratheons take on other attributes of their families. Shireen has her mother’s ears, but the hair and eyes are absolute. If a Baratheon marries a woman or man of fair complexion the children will always have black hair and blue eyes.”

“I will then open this tome and start to read.” Eddard traced a bookmark and pulled on it to get his fingers in between the pages of the book. Varys saw that the name of the book was a genealogy book entitled (The Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms, With Descriptions of Many High Lords and Noble Ladies and Their Children). Eddard started to read of each wedding between Baratheon and Lannister. Varys immediately saw that every time a Baratheon produced a child, specifically with someone with blonde hair, the child still had black hair. He then told Varys that Gendry's mother was a blonde, as was Barra's mother, and yet they both had the Baratheon look.”

“I will then bring out Cersei’s three children. I will have Jamie in my clutches by then. I will line them up. It will show the truth. I hope Tywin does not force my hand in this.”

“I have no plans to execute Cersei or her children. If the issue is forced in the open and rubbed in all the Lords and the Septons of the church faces it will complicate matters. I had enough of that crime with Ellia and her children’s death. The death of Arthur Dayne by my hand. Lyanna’s needless death. If she had had a midwife she would have lived …” choked up Eddard started to cry. Varys was shocked at the sudden display of emotion by this seemingly always in control man.

Varys watched the man’s body wracked with sobs. For a minute the man wept but then he reasserted his self-control and his sobs and tears began to slow. Eddard took several deep breaths and then was ready to proceed. At first his voice slightly shaky.

“I still see Lyanna in her bed of blood and the broken bodies of Rhaegar’s wife and children. I will become a whirlwind of death to not let that happen again while I am king.”

The look that had come over Eddard’s face made the Whisperer take a step back. Varys knew in that moment he would never again betray Eddard Stark. The man turned his back to Varys for several minutes. Slowly the new King controlled his emotions the rest of the way back to his normal taciturn self. When he turned around the storm had passed.

“I will never allow again innocents and maybe not so innocents to be killed by those who are no better than the people they are passing execution on.”

There was a knock on the door. “That cannot be said about the person who is about to enter this room.”

The door was opened. Flanked by Matamion and Jaehaegar Velnalys Littlefinger was escorted into the room. The man had his buttoned coat and vest on that were immaculately pressed. He had his mockingbird sigil on his left breast pocket. The familiar smirk was on his face.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this meeting my King?” Petyr Baelish asked. His voice just his side of insolent leavened with a sardonic subtonic.

Varys observed Eddard stare at the man flatly. His look told you nothing. Eddard was a taciturn
man but it had been easy for the eunuch to read his face. No more. In the Game of Thrones you never revelled more than you had too. Indeed, Varys thought, the new King had learned his lessons.

“You are a liar and betrayer Petyr Baelish. Your actions would have led to my death if not for the heroic actions of my daughter and Syrio Forel. With the efforts of men like those who are flanking you Master of Coins.”

Littlefinger started to speak.

With a sudden start Eddard stood up. He pulled the broadsword out its scabbard that was on his back. In a flash Eddard had moved forward his broadsword before him.

“Shut up Baelish! You are a traitor. Your actions are those of a rat and cockroach. Always scurrying around in the dark fearing the light. You betrayed me.”

“I see another traitor sitting in the chair of the Hand I do believe” Petyr spoke in a sardonic tone.

Varys admired Littlefinger’s control in this crisis.

“Yes, you are right. But this man then in turn again and again helped to right his wrong. You merely stood around and smirked. You have smirked since I took the throne. I have had you watched. You disgust me. Let’s see how that smirk looks in the dark. To the dungeons with you Petyr.”

With that, the two Valyrian warriors gripped Petyr Baelish roughly by the arms and the spluttering man was dragged from the room. The look of surprise written all over his face. The door was closed.

The Hand turned to the King as he approached his chair. “I must confess that was most satisfying. What do you propose to do with him?”

“I am not sure. He will be in the dungeon but will be treated well. I am not a tyrant or despot. He may yet prove useful though I doubt it. You have truly proven yourself. I know Petyr never will but still. I may find a use for him. We shall see.”

The both turned to look at the door when there was a knock on it. The two men looked at each other. Javer Goodbrook and Styve Grandison were posted as guards outside so they had no fear of attack.

“Enter” Eddard commanded softly.

The door opened and in stepped the Faceless Man Jaqen H’ghar. Eddard saw Varys tense for a moment before willing himself to relax. His Hand was definitely afraid of the assassin. He supposed he should be. Eddard himself felt unease being in the presence of this man. He was walking death. The fact that the man had sworn allegiance to his daughter still did not dispel the unease that all felt towards the man when he was in their presence.

The man came to stand at attention before the two men. Eddard and Varys sat down and the two of them calmly waited for the Faceless Man to announce his intentions.

After a moment the man tilted his head fractionally. Without preamble Jaqen spoke.

“I have another duty I must perform. You have changed destiny. I will be leaving immediately.”

Looking at the Faceless Man Eddard grimaced. “Must you leave? Your sword and skills are
“It is precisely that I am in your daughter’s service that I must leave” the Faceless Man corrected Eddard. “I was sent to Westeros to prepare for the destruction of the dragons of the new born Dragon Lord. Their birth has been foreseen. I have determined that the threat is much reduced. In fact I see a renaissance is possible. The Dragon and Wolf can indeed lie together.” The man paused and looked steadily at Eddard. “If you allow it. Though it may be beyond your control by now. Will you accept the will of the fates and the gods who may not exist?”

Varys turned to watch Eddard. He was not sure why everyone kept talking about House Stark and Targaryen forming a union. There had been so much bad blood between the two houses. He supposed Robb would make a good prospect if Daenerys was even alive.

Eddard rapped his fingers on the table several times. With a sigh and a wry smile Eddard spoke “I do believe that I will. I will not oppose it if comes to pass. If my Direwolf tames the Dragon and vice versa then I will not only accept it but laud the union. If it comes to pass. Most likely the girl will die in the desert. She is a frail thing by all accounts and weak of will. Still, if she lives I will deal with her. I am King but I am open to persuasion.”

“I can ask for no more. I will leave now.”

“Can I ask where you go?” Eddard asked the assassin. “I will understand if you do not. You probably do not fully trust me. The reputation of your order proceeds you.”

The faceless man’s lips twitched. Varys wondered if Jaqen had almost smiled. “There are many myths concerning us. We have worked hard to create them. I go to the Citadel. We and forces in Essos fear the return of any Dragon Lord. I feel that fear is baseless. As long as the wolf and dragon become one. I believe they will. The red comet cements it. I go to undo what I had started. It will be difficult but I will succeed.”

“Go in peace my friend” Eddard to Jaqen.

“We do not have friends.”

“Still, you have one. Go. I trust you will do the right thing. You are an honorable man.”

Jaqen H’ghar stared at Eddard with a strange look. He started to speak but decided at the last moment not to. He tilted his head.

Eddard tilted his head in return. With a sharp turn on his heel Jaqen H’ghar left the room.

“Not much for conversation it would seem” Varys spoke out loud.

Eddard had to agree.

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Eddard moved slowly down the hall of the Red Keep. He was still fascinated looking at the tapestries and stands displaying armor and implements of war. He had the same in Winterfell so having something new to observe and think on was a pleasant diversion.

He came to a door. He knew who were on the other side. He knocked politely on the door and was told to enter.

He entered and was greeted by his daughter who came to her father to hug him. Syrio greeted him
as he stood beside a table that dominated the center of the room. Father and daughter walked to the
table. On it was a map of the Riverlands. Syrio had put wooden tiles on the map representing
opposing army forces of foot soldiers, pike men, archers and cavalry both light and armored.

Eddard sat silently on the table as Syrio moved his forces and Arya had to make her moves against
his forces. Eddard was happy with what he saw. Arya had an aptitude for strategic thinking. She
moved her force in the correct manner to not only block Syrio’s movements but put him on the
defensive. Only once did Eddard get his daughter’s attention to think on a move she was about to
make.

Arya then pondered and took her father’s hint and then made the correct counter move. Syrio
nodded at Eddard with a smile over Arya’s head as she bent down to make her new move.

The growth in his daughter pleased Eddard. Her mind was growing fast. Her body was as well.
She was no longer a novice with the sword. Arya was beginning to learn to muscle memory how to
be a warrior. Her steps were becoming precise and strong. Syrio was a great teacher.

They in turn were training the Goldcloaks. It was definitely a work in progress. Syrio led but Arya
reinforced and was quick to show the weaker men how to hold their sword and the proper foot
work. Again Eddard was so proud of his daughter.

His daughter was leading the training of all the Goldcloaks in archery. They had employed a group
of fletchers in the making of arrows all day every day. The bow and arrow could be a great
equalizer. Eddard himself was taking lessons from Arya in archery as he took time when he could
to teach his daughter the Westerosi way of the sword. Syrio was her teacher but he enjoyed the
exercise and bonding sword training allowed father and daughter to bond even more.

Eddard left the room. His heart filled with pride. He moved down another passageway. His heart
now not so filled with pride and love with what he saw.

He looked down the hall and saw Sansa approaching. She was on the far side of the hall with her
head lowered and taking small steps. Her shoulders were quivering and Eddard saw tears running
down his cheeks.

He felt a pang of guilt run through him but it was subsumed by his anger. His eldest daughter had
betrayed him and it would have led to his death if his youngest daughter had not stepped in to
redeem his life. He still thought with incredulity on how Sansa had been so naïve and outright stupid
to tell Cersei his plans. It had simply never occurred to the father that the daughter could betray him.
His world was still rocked by that revelation.

Eddard stilled his walk. He saw his daughter sobbing as she approached. There was no sounds but
her shoulders shook and tears ran down her cheeks her head lowered. Eddard felt his natural instinct
to go to Sansa and comfort her surge in his veins but he fought it down. This woman, his daughter,
had betrayed him. He could no longer trust her and for Eddard that was everything. Varys had
redeemed himself; Sansa had not.

Eddard paused at that thought. He had been given a second chance. What chance had Sansa been
given? Still he was not ready for that. He now realized he had much to think on. He felt his anger
rising. Yes, he still had much to process. He could not talk to his eldest daughter at this moment.
He may regret what he might say. His family was supposed to be beyond reproach. He was ready
to give his all for his wife and children and to have that thrown back in his face was galling.

Like a statue Eddard watched his daughter come down the hall towards him. She was almost upon
him across the hall. Her shoulder brushing the far wall to keep her distance from her father. Sansa
could feel the ire radiating off her father. Her courage rose for a moment. She lifted her head to glance at her father. What she saw made her head lower and she sobbed as she walked faster to pass her father. Now her sobs escaped her throat.

Eddard closed his eyes and shivered. His anger overcame his compassion. He walked down the hall. He had someone to meet. His conscious whispered to him. He shook his head to ignore the small voices clawing for his attention. He moved down the halls and up the stairs. Five minutes later he was at the door of his destination. He knocked on the thick wooden doors. The two guards stood at rigid attention. He may as well face another unpleasant situation.

“Why do you knock damnit? I know it is you Eddard. You won. I lost.”

“How do you know it is I Cersei?”

“Who else would it be? Only you actually knock and politely wait for my permission to enter. It is so noble it is sickening!” Cersei ended her rant with a shout.

“Can I come in please Cersei?”

The King heard the sounds of exasperation on the other side of the door. It was ripped open. A furious Cersei stood before him. She was in a beautiful gown that showed her beautiful body off. Her long blond hair immaculately combed out and radiant. Too bad she was such a bitch. Even if he would not say the word he could think it. He entered the liar of the fallen lioness of Lannister.

The door was flung back to slam against the doorway as it rattled in its frame. Green eyes were filled with fire. Eddard walked further into the room.

“Damnit! This false courtesy is maddening. Execute me and have done with it. Right the scales of justice for Elia and her children. Just spare me all this false bullshit. The scales of justice must be balanced. I accept my fate damnit. I just ask once more to spare my children. I will sign anything. I will make any confession to have my children spared.”

The pronouncement from his beaten nemesis touched Eddard though he would not show it. Cersei’s nobility quickly fled.

“I need wine damnit! I am going crazy in here”. Her hands were shaking Eddard observed.

“How long have you drank to excess?” he asked softly.

“I only drink to calm my nerves and to relax!”

“You must have been pretty relaxed all the time.”

Cersei knew it was an insult. Not stated as such but an insult. She fumed stomping away to march around her room. Back and forth she stormed like the proverbial caged lioness.

“Again I ask when you will execute me. I have a right to know.” Cersei glared at him. Eddard had to admire her bravery.

“Never.”

“Liar.”

“As you wish.”

“Arrrrgghhhhh!” Cersei threw her arms up and then down. She calmed down.
“You know my father will fight you bitterly to put down the truth of my children. He will then take me back to Casterly Rock and kill me silently. Of course with Jamie he will figure out how to have his sins expunged. It is always the women who take the fall isn’t it Eddard.”

“I agree.”

Eddard saw shock on her face.

“I am ready for your father Cersei. You will not have to return with him if you do not want to. If what happens as it seems is prophesied to happen I will have a mission for you. You will have my royal protection.”

The fallen Lannister snorted. Then she looked at him with an appraising look.

“You have grown Warden of the North. You know I still wonder sometimes how I would have turned out if you had taken the Iron Throne instead of Robert during his Rebellion. Maybe married me instead of Catelyn or both of us. Hell it is the Targaryen way. To have an ideal to strive towards instead of flawed imperfections.” Eddard watched a faraway look come over Cersei’s face.

In a moment it was gone. “I need wine damnit!”

“I think not. Dry out Cersei. We will talk more.” With that he left his fallen nemesis.

He heard her curses through the door. They were most inventive.
With slow deliberate movements the needle worked into the fabric. The needle puncturing the lace substrate pulling the fine red thread through the fabric. Then with complicated patterns the thread was folded, looped back and intertwined with deft movements of the needle. Only then was the thread looped back into the fabric. This was only done when the knot of thread assumed the right shape and size. Then the knot was pulled securely into the fabric to make the next stitch. The knot secured from the backside. Only then was the thread carefully cut. Finished, the needle was strung up with another thread of red. The young princess eyed the fabric and pushed the needle through the white fabric to begin the next knot.

She was taking a break from reading of the governing precepts and philosophies of the great Rhoynar leader, Nymeria, who landed in Dorne a thousand years past. Myrcella had always been fascinated with Dorne and the proud if slightly queer people. They were so willful and willing to seek out what they desired. They were not staid and stifled. Myrcella smiled stifling her own sigh. That was part of her mother’s problem Myrcella mused again. She had been stifled since she was young. Her daughter had come to see that of late. Especially since the Insurrection. The young princess had no desire to be anything more than the demure princess. To be swept off her feet and made a bride. She was like Sansa in that. Well not exactly. She smiled softly again. Her mother had too much of the lion’s spirit in her for that desire. The stifling of her true desires and wants had begun to unhinge her mother Myrcella had determined.

She shook her head. She had no answers for her mother. She doubted she had answers for herself in her current situation.

She looked over at her younger brother. He was reading some tome from Braavos on philosophy and playing with his kittens. Innocence. It must be nice. She looked back at her needlework. Slowly the flower was taking beautiful shape. The blue petals had slowly sprung to life like new shoots from a seed bursting through the ground at the birth of spring. Each petal an exquisite work of art. The flower had eight petals and the princess had done each petal so that it seemed it was alive. Now she was doing the pistil of the flower. The red and soon yellow setting off the blue petals.

Myrcella lifted up her work and eyed it critically. She took her time to make sure each detail was correctly done. Sansa had helped her immensely with her crewel needle work. Crewel allowed one to put depth to your stitch work. She loved how it gave each knot whatever quality she desired. Sansa also had an artist eye. She had used charcoal to sketch out the pattern of the flower bouquet she was slowly bringing to life.

Sansa had become listless of late. Myrcella put her work down. Sansa had been fearing for her life with Myrcella’s mother. Now that Sansa’s father had assumed the throne throwing down her House, Sansa had become sad and despondent. Eddard was a stern man. He had heard how Sansa had gone to Cersei, her mother, and confessed his plans to leave King’s Landing and head back to Winterfell. Of course he had also planned to tell the truth of Myrcella and her siblings’ true heritage.
A truth that would have imperiled the life of her and her siblings along with her mother … and her uncle—no no … her father.”

The beautiful young blond princess was still having a hard time wrapping her mind around that revelation. The man she had thought of as just a “nice man” was actually her father. Jamie Lannister, of the Kings Guard had lain with his sister to conceive her mother’s three children.

Jamie was always nice if aloof. How could he not claim Myrcella and her brothers as his? The princess had wondered many times since the revelation. Myrcella was in turns upset, angry, spiteful and filled with a sense of having no worth. How could Jaime not claim her and how could her mother lie to her so.

Myrcella looked down the table at her younger brother. He was playing with this four cats. The spoiled felines draped all around him as he read. Buttercup the yellow tabby was resting on his shoulder his body hanging down the front of Tommen’s body. His front legs and head on Tommen’s shoulder. He mowed in protest whenever Tommen stopped petting him. Sugar Cube was curled up on Tommen’s lap sleeping her whiskers twitching and legs running chasing a rabbit most probably. Princess was on the table draped over two of Tommen’s books.

Myrcella smiled at Tommen. He was so patient with his cats. He had tried to shoo the female cat off his books but she had lifted her head indulgently at him and meowed in protest and swatted at his hand playfully. Tommen had then moved to his third book. His last cat, a calico named Jester, was curled up on some towels Tommen had put on the table knowing the cat liked her bed to be ready for her. She was snoring her nose twitching and whiskers wiggling cutely.

Pyrcella had given Tommen books on algebra and trigonometry. The strange symbols and letters in straight lines all jumbled on the page was confusing to the thirteen almost fourteen year old princess. Her twelve year old brother understood it though. Pyrcella had been most pleased when Tommen immediately picked up on the “math”. Tommen was looking at the real world and developing equations to solve the questions he saw.

He was quite amazing. She eyed her brother. Knowing the truth of her heritage had opened her eyes to possibilities she had not even conceived of. If Tommen had been born Tommashina then she would have been interested in him. Myrcella looked away. She felt a rising desperation springing forth in her soul. It was only a summer storm now but she feared it would turn into the Northeasters that sometimes blew in to batter the Red Keep.

Myrcella had dreaded her flowering. Soon she would be handed out like a heifer to some High Lord. She would be forced to marry a man she could never love. She had told no one but on the day of her wedding she would caste herself off the walls of the Red Keep to her death. Better that than living a hideous lie. The man she would be forced to marry may be loving and kind but it would not matter. For Myrcella it would be rape ever night. That would be what it would be every night for the young princess. Desperation was forming in her soul. She could not help but be attracted to whom she was attracted to. Yes, life was not fair indeed.

She had hoped that maybe she and Sansa could form some union but that was dead dust now.

The door opened. Joffrey stepped in with Jaehaegar Velnalys close behind. Joffrey no longer walked around with a regal air. He now walked with his head constantly jerking to look around with eyes filled with fear. His body seemed to have fallen in on itself. He looked at the tall Valyrian.
“I am still here weasel. We know what you are. Soon—soon I will have the pleasure of cleaving your head from your shoulders. You will try something and I will be ready.”

“I do not harbor any ill thoughts!” Joffrey exclaimed.

Myrcella and Tommen stopped what they were doing to watch the dynamic. Joffrey had fallen far Myrcella observed.

“You will. It is the nature of a rat. To strive beyond your station.”

“I do not! I am just a hostage like my sister and brother!”

“Your sister and brother are sweet and kind. You are vile and loathsome thing. You will rise like a serpent to strike when no one is looking.”

“Enouh Jaehaegar …” was softly intoned from the doorway. Myrcella looked there and saw the stern but sad visage of Eddard Stark. “I do not think Joffrey is so much of a threat anymore.”

“He is Cersei Lannister’s illegitimate spawn. He is evil as she is!”

“Is she? … We shall see. If Joffrey is vile spawn then so are Myrcella and Tommen going by your logic” Eddard spoke softly.

The Valyrian sputtered and then looked at Eddard with an angry look. “That is not fair. Myrcella and Tommen and good and decent children.”

“How is this possible with the logic you use to describe Joffrey?”

Jaehaegar threw up his arms in consternation.

“I will let Joffrey stay for a while Jaehaegar if he chooses to.” Eddard looked at Joffrey. To Myrcella’s surprise she saw no anger or rancor only sadness in the new King’s face.

Joffrey fled the room with Jaehaegar following.

“Be easy on him Jaehaegar. He is miserable enough. He is a small thing without the Iron Throne. I pity him.”

The man snorted as he walked through the door. He paused. “You know Joffrey would have killed you Eddard.”

“I know” he answered softly. “I won. I can afford to be magnanimous” he paused “within reason”. He gave Jaehaegar a squint smile.

The man gave his King a shake of his head with his on wry smile and left the room.

Eddard turned to look at Myrcella and Tommen.

Myrcella simply did not know what to think of this man. He had thrown her mother off the throne and threatened their death but he seemed so gentle and nice.

What was the truth?

Eddard took a chair between them. He asked to see her needle work and asked Tommen what he was reading. Myrcella was sure his interest was genuine. Was it though? Was it all an act? The King observed the cats lazing about Tommen and smiled. He looked at her crewel work and praised
her for her skills. He looked confused at what Tommen tried to explain to him.

“I think maybe in time you would make a better King than I Tommen. Your mind is definitely gifted.”

Myrcella had to speak up. “That would make him a threat. If you do not marry me off, I will in time become a threat I would think. Why not just put us to the sword like Elia, Rhaenyes and Aegon?” Myrcella asked the Stark quietly looking him in the eyes calmly.

Eddard Stark’s reaction shocked the young princess. The King’s face became ashen. He stood up from the chair he had sat in to talk to them. He turned and walked to the far side of the room. His shoulders were stiff as he looked at the wall before him. Then his shoulders began to shake. He was obviously crying silently. He spent several minutes in the dark corner.

Controlled he walked back to them. He sat down between them and with restored sad calmness looked at them in turn. His eyes were red though.

“I am sure almost anyone else would put you to the sword Myrcella. The man you called father allowed that to occur. To my everlasting shame and humiliation of my soul I did not put the Mountain, Robert and your grandfather down that day Myrcella. I am filled with guilt over that day. I let supposed honor and obligations cloud my soul. I let past friendship stay my hand.”

“I know you do not believe me but I will lay my life down before any harm comes to Tommen and yourself.” The man stared off over Myrcella’s head. He did not speak his eyes unfocused. Myrcella knew he was seeing that night from Robert’s Rebellion.

“To know the balance between compassion and coolness is a difficult thing” Myrcella told her new king. “I would guess you must find the balance as difficult to discern my King.”

Eddard stared hard at her.

“You have wisdom Myrcella that most never acquire. I fear Robert proved that. Your mother struggles with it and fails. You do not. I commend you.”

“Thank you my king.”

Eddard reached out squeezed their shoulders. He stood up and looked down at them.

“You seem to have forgiven us Eddard Stark.”

“There is nothing to forgive—“

“And yet you have not forgiven Sansa” Myrcella had the courage to overstep Eddard. She felt very sorry for Sansa. She was so miserable.

Eddard looked down at her with his steady grey eyes. “You will make someone a good queen Myrcella. You are most observant. But it is not that easy.”

“Why not?”

“Sansa betrayed me.”

“She was young and thought she was in love my King. She did not foresee the results of her actions.”

“Let me ask you a question Myrcella if I may?”
She looked at him and tilted her head forward slightly. This man was treating her as an equal. What a strange occurrence.

“If you had been in Sansa’s place would you have confessed your mother’s plans to me?”

Myrcella could not lie. “No I would not. I would have known it was too dangerous.”

“You are four years younger than Sansa and so much wiser. I cannot forgive her rash actions. One’s family should be a bastion of support and fealty. I nearly lost my life because of my eldest daughter. My family probably scattered to the four winds and likely killed. I would not have been there to forgive her. You or Arya would never have betrayed me. There has to be ramifications. There must.” Myrcella saw no anger in the man’s visage only steely resolve.

“Forge her Eddard Stark or it will eat you alive from the inside. You are showing more compassion to my dear depraved brother than innocent Sansa” Myrcella told the new King. She felt embolden.

“That is a lie!” the new king exclaimed.

“All the chambermaids remark of it. The courtesans. The guards.”

She watched the new King’s eyes get large at that. His face showed his emotions roiling in him. Then his face calmed and a squint smile appeared.

In a rueful tone Eddard Stark answered Myrcella “Hmmmm … my father used to tell me if everyone is saying right and I am saying left … the answer son is right … you have given me much to think on Myrcella Baratheon.” He looked at her closely for a moment more. “When did you become so wise if I may ask?”

She knew the new King was not being sarcastic but genuine in his question.

“I am only a teenage girl. I look and listen. I heed what I am taught. I read the great philosophers and historians. My mother forced me to mature quickly.”

“I notice your choice of pronouns Myrcella” Eddard noted looking over at Tommen and his cats. The boy petting his snoring cat. He looked back into Myrcella’s eyes. She returned his look with a steady gaze.

“I see. I think I know who is the best suited to rule in this generation” Eddard told her softly.

Eddard Stark glanced again at the books on the desk surrounding the two youngest of Cersei.

Eddard looked at her for a long time again clearly thinking. He tilted his head and asked for permission to leave. Myrcella smiled at the politeness and granted him leave.

After he left she turned to look at her brother.

“He is a most unusual man Tommen. I wonder if it is all an act.”

Tommens looked at her with his steady gaze. “There is no guile in him.” With that Tommen went back to his book.

Myrcella nodded her head in agreement. A most strange man indeed. Why couldn’t he have been her father? The fates were most cruel indeed.

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“No! I will not send forces to King’s Landing. Everything is unsettled. I need to time to think through this new dynamic.”

“No! Enough I say! Doran have you ever heard of the saying ‘paralysis through analysis’ our House has been waiting for revenge for almost twenty years! Enough I say!” Oberyn was seething with anger. His brother looked fretful on the seat of Sunspear.

“I merely have to adjust my plans for the Targaryens—“

“NO! Viserys is dead. His head filled with gold. His sister has run off to the Red Wastes to die a miserable death. We will take what Eddard Stark has offered and run with it!”

Doran snorted in derision. “I think not brother. How in the hell Eddard was able to overthrow the Lannister’s from the throne I do not know but this I do know. The currents are building against Eddard Stark. He will soon be swept away in the rising floodwaters.”

“Brother. Doran. Listen to me. This is something you cannot see. You are too calculating and fearful to take the leap of ‘faith’. Eddard has taken the Iron Throne through guile and gumption. He finally took off the blinders he has always worn. He no longer blinds and deludes himself. He has finally become all he was meant to become. Our jackals are clear on this. Do not ignore the evidence they have given us Doran.”

“In two months Eddard is doing more than you did in nearly two decades! He is offering us Gregor! Eddard acts while you do not Dorian! I grow tired of waiting. I will be old and tottering by the time your plans come to fruition. Act man!”

Doran Martell studied his brother. Of course he would be enamored with this new version of Eddard Stark. The bold and dynamic new man. The man who was aggressively setting out to claim the Iron Throne for House Stark. The time for that would have been Robert’s Rebellion Doran thought. The man making impossible offers he could not meet. His time had passed.

“I think not Oberyn. He must prove himself first. We must sit back and see if he can indeed keep what he has so boldly taken. The North is behind Eddard but they are fragmented with the Vale only given limp support. Together the Riverlands and the North are not enough to contend with the Lannisters.”

“I beg to differ brother. Eddard inspires his people. The Tullys are solidly in his camp. The Lannisters may respect Tywin but they do not love him. They will not fight to their last strength for the man. The men of the North will do so for Eddard Stark.”

“No I say” Dorian barked back at his brother. “Highgarden is ambitious and will side with the most likely winner. That would be House Lannister. They have the strength of arms and, more so, they have wealth beyond measure. Highgarden has always been the whore of the Great Houses being bought off by any and all.”

“I happen to like whores dear brother” Oberyn smirked at Doran.

Doran sighed. Oberyn was such a debauchery ridden prig sometimes.

“Oberyn. If you go to King’s Landing and Eddard fails in his endeavor you will be in great danger. The Game of Thrones is beyond men such as you and Eddard Stark.”

“It seems to me Doran that Eddard Stark has suddenly mastered the game quite well. I will simply follow his lead and we will be given what we have righteously sought for so long. The time is now I say!”
Doran squirmed in his seat. His gout was paining him greatly. The tension of the last week had aggravated his malady.

The ravens from Eddard were quite frequent and insistent. Eddard had a new ally that he did not speak of. That was wise and crafty of the man.

The first raven to come had been a Citadel raven with the formal band on its leg. The rest had not been banded, and, thus, were not of the Citadel. It took years to train the ravens and were used judiciously for communication. Eddard was flaunting his new abilities with daily missives. Scrolls saying that he would choose other routes to achieve his goals if ignored. That time was fleeting. He would remember his allies in the future. He was to lead Westeros into a golden age.

He made mention of the Children of the Forest and Ice King. Oberyn had snorted at those mentions. Doran was much more well-read. He felt great trouble in his heart at these missives.

But two days ago Eddard had sent another raven. The man had crafted his message well. He had laid out the ground work of what he hoped to achieve and then he had set the lure before Oberyn. Eddard had been sending ravens to both Doran and Oberyn saying the same exact thing. The ravens arriving together.

That had changed two days ago. The raven had impossibly found Oberyn out in Battlefield Academy six leagues away. Word had gotten back to Doran that the raven had flown straight to Oberyn as he was on the back practice yards of the academy. Oberyn had been surprised and a little spooked with the raven singling him out so specifically landing on his shoulder cawing. Oberyn petting the raven while he took the scroll off its leg. The message delivered the raven flew off cawing. The message on his leg had proven to be a siren’s call to Oberyn.

Oberyn had rode straight back to Sunspear. He had arrived in more of a lather than his horse. Oberyn normally ignored the matters of state but Eddard had hooked him in with all the previous missives. Oberyn’s paramour, Ellaria, loved all the politics of court. He had shared the scrolls with his paramour. Ellaria inflamed with all the plots and subterfuge. Doran knew the woman urged Oberyn on in his dreams of revenge.

Eddard had promised Oberyn the head of Gregor Clegane. He had been vague but Eddard Stark promised Oberyn that he would maneuver Tywin Lannister into calling for a duel and that Gregor would be picked to answer the call. How Eddard knew this desire of House Martell was beyond Doran. It was impossible actually. House Martell played their cards close to the vest and did not reveal them to the Iron Throne. Ever since Doran became Warden of the South it had been thus.

Doran had warned Oberyn to be careful of any inducements offered by the Stark. This did not stop Oberyn from totally falling for the ploy. Doran thought his brother had been insufferable since. Once Oberyn had taken the bit into his mouth he would not release it. His brother was almost beside himself with his desire to avenge their sister.

Now today they again were arguing over Eddard’s promises.

“I am telling you Oberyn that my way may be slower but it will be surer. We will ally with Daenerys Targaryen—“

“No!” Oberyn shouted. “That will take at least several years to come to fruition. Hell, you know what our jackals report. She is lost in the Red Wastes above Qarth. You know what that means. She is most likely dead.”

“She might live. I say we wait and see. If she lives we will see what happens. If she achieves some
“Enough Doran! I have waited and waited for you to strike and bring to this House the vengeance that we deserve. I loved my Sister!”

Doran seemed to collapse in on himself.

Oberyn was a passionate man given to running his mouth off and saying the first thing that came to his mind. Guilt filled Oberyn. His brother was a good man.

“Doran … Doran forgive me—please. I spoke rashly. I know you loved her too. We have been going your way brother and it is long enough. We have achieved nothing from it. We need to take this opportunity. This path with Daenerys Targaryen is years off in the future and she will most likely die before your plans can come to bear fruit.”

Doran sighed and closed his eyes. He took a minute to gather himself before he spoke. “And if you go to King’s Landing and Eddard’s plans fall afoul of cruel reality. You will most likely die. You know I do not support this insane desire of yours to fight Gregor Clegane one-on-one. You are too hot headed! I feel it in my bones that you will die … I love you Oberyn. I lost Elia. I do not want to lose you too.”

Oberyn was moved by his brother’s compassion and love for him.

“Doran. I know you do not believe in rash actions but sometimes they are needed. Eddard is offering us what we have desired for so long. I will not turn aside. I will take an honor guard to King’s Landing and see what happens.”

“And if that happening is your death?”

Oberyn smiled. “Well, then you will be free to follow your plans without my harping.”

“I would miss your harping dear brother. I fear for you if you attempt to scale that Mountain. He is too big and too fast.”

“I do not fear him brother. I will squire him on my spear. I have total confidence in my skills brother.” Oberyn wagged his eyebrows. “It will have my special scorpion poison on its tip. Even if I die, I do know I will wound him. He is a dead man walking already. Our House will have its revenge.”

Doran stared at his brother. Eddard had set the hook to deep. Oberyn had swallowed the lure deep into his mouth and the hook was deep in his gum. He would not be able to turn Oberyn aside. Doran knew the people wished his younger brother had been born first. The people of Dorne were a people of action and passion. Doran with his caution and calculations was not what the people of Dorne sought in their leaders.

Doran knew this but he knew his wise leadership had kept Dorne free of the wars that had sapped the rest of Westeros. He foresaw another major war coming. He was still sure it would occur. When Eddard in his innocence had gone to King’s Landing to be Robert’s Hand, Doran was sure it would be the death of the man. From what Doran had heard from his jackals and Olenna’s moths it would seem he should have died.

Instead, his youngest daughter, Arya, had done the impossible and saved her father from the dungeons. Then together with some strange religious order it was thought had overthrown the Lannisters. Eddard Stark had impossibly risen from the dead.
Now he was playing the Game of Thrones most adroitly. He had Oberyn in such high passion that Doran had to give in. Doran aching knees screamed with Doran squirming in his seat. He knew that Eddard had set him up till Oberyn had to be allowed to come to King’s Landing. Actually, Doran was both amazed and a little frightened. The former Warden of the North was already a titan on the battlefield. If he became a titan in the courts of power Eddard would be unstoppable.

A new singular power had been born. Doran would have to take the gambit. He had no choice now. He had been nimbly maneuvered into sending his hot-headed brother to King’s Landing. He would have to send someone to temper Oberyn’s hot passion and simple bone headedness.

“I will send you to King’s Landing” he saw Oberyn smile happily “but you will take my emissary with you. This person will make sure you do not do something rash and get your fool ass killed.”

“I will not be denied brother. If Eddard Stark can deliver to me the Mountain then I will take it. I will be knocking that mountain down. Do not doubt that Doran.”

“We will see Oberyn. I personally doubt that the man will be able to setup the scenario he presented to us. He has to contend with the Tyrells and the Baratheons. They will not roll over and play dead for him. Anyone of them can take Eddard out.”

Doran watched Oberyn cock an eyebrow, then he chuckled and then he was laughing hard. Finally, he bent over for a minute until he regained his composer.

“I must ask dear younger brother … what is so godsdamn funny?”

“I am sorry brother. Eddard is one of the best swordsman in Westeros if not the best now that that stupid prick Joffrey sent Barristan Selmy into exile. Jaime Lannister is good. That is it. Good. Same with Stannis. Renly only thinks he is good. No brother. Eddard is more than good enough to succeed.”

Looking at Doran in his wheelchair Oberyn could see that his brother clearly had his doubts as to Oberyn’s assessments. Oberyn was alright with that. Doran was a master of the Crevasse board and the Game of Thrones. He had never trained martially. Oberyn had seen Eddard in several tourneys. The man had only fought half-heartedly for some reason and still nearly won. Oberyn had not been fooled. The man had not wanted to win.

This had been unfathomable to Oberyn. He wanted to win at everything he did with all the force of his will and passion.

“Who will be your emissary that will speak in your name Doran?”

“Arianne my daughter.”

“What! I refuse. She is like you a Doran. She is a backroom schemer and always planning what to do with her pieces instead of acting! I want a warrior at my side. Arianne is indeed skilled at politics and will make a great ruler but this is a time for war and fighting. I can’t be the nurse maid to a Crevasse player who will wilt with the possible rancor and bloodshed I may encounter.”

“No I say. I demand you send a general or high lord of one of our Great Houses” Oberyn shouted at his brother.

“I will not Oberyn. I rule here and you will be taking my daughter. You will follow her wise counsel.”

“I will not! I say this is perfidy!”
They had argued long and vociferously. Oberyn had lost. Doran had had his will imposed much to the disgust of Oberyn.

Oberyn was lying in bed with his paramour Ellaria. They had been making love for the last few hours. As always Ellaria had been most exquisite in their bed. They had brought the incestuous sisters Palina and Camylle Yornwood into their bed for most intense lovemaking. They were courtesans of the high court of Sunspear. The sisters had secretly wed but loved sharing their love with others. The sisters had been very attracted to Oberyn and Ellaria.

Dorne was very liberal in their sexual conventions and Oberyn was very open in his views of sexual relations. He prided himself in that. Ellaria shared the same openness and desire to live the ‘swing’ lifestyle. They freely brought women and men to their bed. Ellaria was especially ravenous in her hunger for the female body.

Oberyn had Ellaria half rolled onto his hard warrior body. Her heavy full breast pressed snugly into his side. Both of their bodies soaked in sweat and cum. Well, their bodies were liberally soaked in the sisters’ cum also.

The two lovers looked over on the other side of their large royal bed. A bed of extra-large dimensions to handle their nightly endeavors. The frame and supporting slates underneath most thick and sturdy to handle their hot lovemaking that they partook of every opportunity they could.

The two sisters had been still wild and full of energy after screwing Oberyn and Ellaria like crazed hyenas. The two sisters had fallen on each other beside Oberyn and Ellaria. This had recharged the elder couple several times watching the sisters go at each other. The sex between the Red Viper and his paramour intense and fulfilling.

In Dorne incest was no big deal. House Martel fully supported all unions that were freely entered into. Martell and Ellaria had enjoyed watching the last time Palina and Camylle had rolled into a sixty-nine and simply went wild on each other devouring their passion flowers with glutinous glee.

It was amazing to watch them suck each other off three more times each. Finally, they were worn out. Camylle on top at the end tiredly turned around and pulled Palina to her body and they quickly fell asleep. Now they were peacefully snoring softly hugging each other.

“So you are happy with the end of your conversation with your brother? I would think he knows of his daughter’s true nature.”

Oberyn snorted turning his gaze away from the sister lovers and smiled down at Ellaria. He slowly traced the drying sweat on Ellaria’s back.

“Arianne is the rare leader Ellaria. She is both adept at the games of court but also has an understanding of what must be done on the battlefield. She is decisive and willing to take chances. That is something, unfortunately, that my dear brother does not have within him.”

“That is the reason you argued so obstinately against him sending Arianne with us to King’s Landing?” Ellaria asked sagely.

“Yes. The more I argued against Arianne coming with us the more Dorian demanded it. I had to fight to hide my glee in his pronouncement. I know Arianne will be happy. She is a woman who likes to be in the middle of great events.”

“Why hasn’t she been in our bed Oberyn? I want her.”
“I know my sweet” Oberyn kissed Ellaria’s temple “she hides it well but Arianne is in a perplexing situation. She had used the marriage to the Targaryen’s to keep her options free. We both know that Doran now thinks to send Tristan to Daenerys if she survives. To offer him as her future king. Arianne is unaware of Doran’s schemes.”

“What Doran does not know is that Arianne, if given time to plan for it, will use her wiles to propose that she marry Daenerys Targaryen. Our Jackals report the young Khaleesi slept with her handmaidens and quite enjoyed it judging by her screams and going down on them repeatedly. This gives Arianne hope. Arianne is the eldest scion. Arianne feels they would make a great ruling couple. Alas, Doran is somewhat staid in his thoughts and precepts. Shame. That would be so hot seeing Arianne go down on the pale Valyrian. It is rumored she is quite the beauty.”

Oberyn was silent for a long moment. “Alas, for Arianne it would seem that Daenerys was quite happy with the Khal before his death. He was powerful and dangerous. It is what attracts you to me is it not Ellaria?”

He felt his sweet love smile into his shoulder and kissed it. She sighed.

“You know me too well my sweet Oberyn. It is your sense of danger and sense of power that does attract me so. That and the fact that you bone your ass off. On top of that you are sweet and kind.”

Oberyn sighed, happy with his chosen mate.

“Do you think that King’s Landing will be exciting Oberyn. Do you think that Eddard’s schemes can come to fruition? He said he told you more than he has the others. I think he did that to hook you in even deeper. He is most scheming my sweet Red Viper. We both are attracted to risk and danger.”

“You are so perceptive Ellaria.” He play yelped when she swatted his stomach.

“I think I will seduce both Eddard and Catelyn when she arrives at King’s Landing. I will like adding them to my totem. We will enjoy them bot—what do you find so funny Oberyn?”

Oberyn had started chuckling at his sweet paramour.

“Well, Oberyn?” Ellaria glared at her sweet lover chuckling at her plans. “What is so damn funny about me seducing Eddard and Catelyn Stark?” She was not used to Oberyn laughing at her plans of future seductions.

Oberyn slowly controlled himself. “You will not be seducing those two my dear. Eddard bleeds purity. Only Barristan Selmy and Arthur Dayne were his equal in purity. The man is a fucking saint my dear. If there is only one man on this world who will not commit adultery it is Eddard Stark. And Catelyn Tully … don’t even get me started on that prig. She is so stiff and uptight I am sure she was born with a rod up her ass.” Oberyn started to chuckle again at the humor it all.

“You will see Oberyn! You will eat those words!” Ellaria barked at her lover.

Oberyn chuckled. He decided he had to make a tactical move and change the subject.

“Daenerys has shown bisexual tendencies but she likes danger in those she seeks as a mate as well. She fully supported her Khal in all he did. It would seem Daenerys Targaryen is attracted to the bad boys. Arianne is a dangerous woman but it is her mind that makes her dangerous.”

His plan worked. Ellaria loved politics and trying to figure out all the angles and was focused on what challenges may be faced if Daenerys lived.
“It is only a hunch, but I feel that the Targaryen princess would not be attracted to our Arianne. No matter how sharp her mind, if Arianne cannot show great prowess with weapons and ability on the battleground, then our sweet little probably dead Targaryen will not even notice her.”

“So this Daenerys is totally het then? I thought our reports said she slept with her handmaidens? She has to be at least bisexual. Arianne has a chance, Oberyn.”

“She did sleep with her handmaidens and enjoyed them quite thoroughly by all reports. But she treated them as concubines. Daenerys likes her women but as a ruler … no she would demand a warrior at her side. Or maybe a powerful king to cement her rule. Arianne can give her Dorne but not Westeros. Arianne cannot fight the battles that the Targaryen will need to secure her throne.”

“Like such a woman from Westeros exists” Ellaria observed.

“Agreed.”

Oberyn kept his counsel on this to himself. He knew of Brienne of Tarth. The only problem was she was a little puppy dog following Renly around love sick. The only problem with that fact was the fact Renly Baratheon was one hundred percent gay and in love with Loras Tyrell. Brienne had one other large drawback. She was … well … not pleasing to the eye.

Daenerys was most definitely pleasing to the eyes from all reports. Surely, she would want a woman who was gorgeous or at least pretty as her mate. Where do you find a supper attractive female warrior? You did not find them growing on trees. They certainly were not being raised and trained in Westeros. Brienne was a one off.

Oberyn felt Ellaria’s breathing smooth out in sleep.

He guessed Ellaria was right. He knew of no other woman on the continent who could possible catch Daenerys Targaryen’s eye. Nope. No mighty female warrior who was bisexual or gay. Especially one of noble heritage. It was an interesting scenario though even if would never occur.
Righting of Wrongs

Chapter Notes

AN #1: I am back. I hope. I think. I apologize for the long wait but it was necessary. Hopefully, I can pick up where I left off and give you the reader an enjoyable story to read.

The project that kept me away for 8+ months is done. If RL does not jump up and bite me in the butt I should be able to start posting regularly again. ... But ... I have 3 other stories other than Reclamation and this story to jump start. I need to get my notes organized again and will need to reread a lot of this story to remember all the threads and sub-plots I have going.

This will take time. Nothing like the recent past. What I enjoy most is the process of creation so I am ready to get back into writing these stores.

Heirs Apparent

Righting of Wrongs

The pale hand reached out to knock on the thick panels of the oaken door. The owner looked at the hinges and iron banding the door to give it strength. The hinges had had images of dragons winging on cloudy skies by the metalsmiths. The iron hammered by delicate chisels to inscribe the beautiful images. The iron bands filled with a rolling scene of ancient Valyria. The spires rising to the heavens in fluted columns.

The man thought of the beauty lost. They were a cruel race for sure but they had wrought so much beauty.

“Yes ... who is it?”

“It is the Hand of the King. Varys.”

“Oh ...”

“Can I come in Sansa?”

“Oh ... yes, yes ... of course”. There was a slight pause, with muffled voices from the room. The door opened.

Varys slowly walked into the room. His hands in the sleeves of his dark blue robe. The fabric rustling along the thick carpet as he stepped into the room. Varys observed again the beauty that was Sansa Stark. Tall and regal she stood before him. Unfortunately, the dross of indecisiveness and trepidation marred that beauty. A beauty he observed but could never ever truly feel. The man sighed inside for what had been lost. To Varys, Sansa was like a beautiful painting of a Myrish master of the Harlillos Eranohrin dynasty. It touched his soul but it could not touch his libido. That had been cut away all those years ago.
The Whisper had followed half spoken whispers to find Jeyne Poole. His face hid the emotions he felt. He had saved her from one of Littlefinger’s brothels. Gods he hated that man. The Whisperer had been told of the training Littlefinger had planned for Jeyne. Both Sansa and Vayon Poole had been most thankful for her return. Sansa Stark had her best friend returned to her. The girl giving Sansa a lifeline. An anchor to right her spun out of control world.

The two teenagers were clearly working on their needlework. Varys could see they were both quite skilled. He was impressed with the teenagers’ abilities they had developed to a master’s level.

“Why are you here Hand of the King?” Sansa asked him guardedly.

“I need to ask you some questions my dear.” Sansa bowed politely and rejoined her friend at the table filled with the threads, fabrics, needles and hoops of the craft. The redhead seeking distance to deal with the interloper in her room. Varys observed the results of their needlework skills. Sansa was making a beautiful bouquet of wild flowers. Jeyne Poole crafting a scene of a knight on a mighty charger.

“What do you need to know Hand of the King?” spoken with a hint of trepidation. The late teenager looking up with large guarded eyes.

“Varys will do my child.”

“Oh … Varys.”

“I need to know of Sandor Clegane.”

Sansa’s eyebrows knitted slightly. “I see. What do you need to know Varys?”

“How did the man treat you Sansa? Did he ever abuse or harm you? Did he ever threaten you? I have heard how some of the Kingsguard did not treat you well child.”

Varys watched the girl’s eyes as she thought back. She paused a short moment. Good Varys thought. She was not quick to comment but clearly was replaying past events.

She surprised Varys. “Can’t my father ask me these questions? I am his daughter.”

The Whisperer paused a moment while he regarded Sansa with a steady gaze.

“I feel in time girl, that your father will forgive you Sansa.” Varys told the tall beauteous young woman in a calm steady voice. “I counsel patience my child.” Sansa fretted. Her face torn with pain. In her agitation the tall redhead rose suddenly from her chair. She began to pace. Sansa wrung her hands as she walked.

Jeyne Poole regarded her friend with sad eyes.

“Why won’t he forgive me?!” Sansa cried out plaintively. “He can barely bring himself to look at me!”

“Your going to Cersei nearly got your father killed Sansa. I fear what would have become of you without his protection. Joffrey is a reprehensible worm. Cersei is little better Sansa. How could you have told Cersei’s of your father’s plans? If it had not been for Arya leading her Insurrection I am quite sure your father would be long dead by now Sansa. Your sister succeeded beyond all expectation I might add. It is a miracle actually.”

Varys kept his counsel to himself of how it had been him that had told Eddard Stark of his daughter’s
betrayal. He had simply thought the man deserved to know how his fortunes had turned so suddenly and thoroughly. Now Varys thought it best again. It had allowed the boil of betrayal to be lanced early and hopefully begin to heal.

Sansa grimaced at the eunuch’s pronouncement. “I know” Sansa said miserably. “Arya the Direwolf … Arya the hero …” Sansa turned to face the Hand of the King directly. “Please talk to him Varys … please let my father know how sorry I am. Can you do that for me Varys? I beg it” she finished softly her eyes imploring.

“I will my child” Varys replied evenly. To his surprise he knew he actually would. The girl deserved another chance. She had been young and full of nativity. He was sure that had been expunged from the girl. Though hidden he sensed an iron will buried deep in the girl. Maybe he and others could help bring it out. He would talk to Arya and Syrio. Eddard was a good man. Time healed all wounds it was said. Varys had learned that was often not true but he would try in this case.

“Give your father time Sansa. Learn from your past. Grow. Change. Become more than you were.”

Sansa looked at him with her head tilted clearly evaluating the words from Varys. That too was a good sign. She straightened her shoulders.

“Sandor Clegane was basically good to me. He snarled and barked but his bit was toothless. He treated me no worse than anyone else.” She paused appraising her memories. “He did step in several times to protect me from others … he deflected them and shielded me” Sansa mused half to herself. “I think he saw me as a damsel that needed saving. A fairy tale maiden. I do not know if he saw me as more than that Varys. Did he see me as the woman I am? That I doubt. Does that help?”

Actually it did. Varys was actually impressed with the succinct evaluation of Sandor and the situation he and Sansa had been in. Maybe there was more to the girl than others saw. He smiled at Sansa. Yes, there was diamond here. It merely needed to be cut from the stone and then polished. Would it happen? He would try and make it so.

Varys started to leave. “Give your father time Sansa. He is a good man.”

Sansa bowed her head. Varys took his leave.

Varys took a right and started down the wide corridor. He admired the reddish sandstone and several tapestries hanging on the walls. He saw a tapestry showing the manly vigor and majesty of one Robert Baratheon. That would need to come down post haste.

The bald eunuch continued down the hall working on the members he needed to find for the new Small Council of their new King, Eddard Stark. He needed to find … ahhhh … Varys thought. Time for a diversion.

Down the hall coming towards him stomped one Sandor Clegane. The man glowering at anything and nothing. His long hair comb over to cover the side of his head where the hair was missing and to cover the damage to his face. His tall frame and muscled body intimidating. His grey eyes constantly scanning his environs.

Varys made eye contact. Sandor refused it looking away. They approached each other. Sandor dressed in his regularly worn olive-green cloak over plain, soot-dark armor. On his belt was hooked his distinctive helm sculpted into the shape of a dog’s snarling head. The helm slapping his thigh as he stomped down the hall.
“Sandor, my good man. It is so good to see you” Varys falsely enthused.

Sandor had been purposefully looking away but he now glared banefully at Varys.

“Bollock!” he snorted and pounded his feet as he passed the eunuch.

“It is a beautiful day Sandor. Enjoy it” Varys spoke turning his head to watch the retreating Hound.

Varys smiled. As he walked down the hall Sandor held up his right hand giving Varys the bird.

Satisfied Varys continued down the hall.

The Hand moved down the corridor and took a left at the intersection. He was heading towards to halls that would led him the Little Gallery which led to a covered culvert. This in turn would lead him to his residence in the Tower of the Hand. The eunuch still found it hard to believe his change in fortunes.

He was coming upon one of the four main staircase in Maegor’s Holdfast. The large steps traversing the four floors of the holdfast. Each floor had a large landing to allow foot traffic to enter and leave the stairway. He was on the third floor.

Varys eyes squinted seeing Arya go running up the stairs in a flash. She had her practice sword out in her left hand. He continued to approach the stairwell at a sedate pace. Arya came flashing by again, this time going down. He was closer now. Arya was definitely muttering under her breath her face sheened with sweat.

With measured steps Varys moved forward. He was near the landing now. Arya went storming back up the steps. Close up now Varys could see that Arya was soaked sweat. Her hair was starting grow back out. The ragged locks being trimmed to get the hair back to semblance of the same length. The perspiration dripping down her face and darkening her tunic and trousers. She was definitely making vile deprecating remarks as she ran up the steps.

Having arrived at the landing Varys looked up. On the top landing sat Syrio leaned back in a simple chair with the front legs up off the floor and the back against a bannister. He was eating an apple. His eyes twinkling with mirth. Arya was before him bent over gasping for breath.

“Catch your breath quick girl. You got more running to do” Syrio smirked at Arya.

“Why don’t you lead by example of great First Sword?” Arya sneered out glancing at her teacher askance.

“Tsk tsk … such vileness … be on your way Arya. Back down the stairs girl. Show me you are not a little girl dreaming of her dolls.”

Arya scowled and stormed back down the stairs her feet stomping. Arya was waving her sword all around in vexation.

Syrio looked down at Varys and smiled with an evil leer. Varys thought the man was enjoying himself way too much. They both watched Arya make another circuit on the stairs. She was breathing heavy but she continued on. Varys was quite impressed with her endurance and maybe more so her will to continue. She ran another circuit on the staircase.

She was approaching the top landing again. In a blinding flash Syrio was off his chair. The chair clattering to the floor. Syrio had his practice sword now in hand. With his sword whipped up he attacked Arya with vicious glee. The Stark teenager cried out but was able to block the blinding fast
first strikes. She stumbled when Syrio landed into her and tried to wrap her head hard. Arya pivoted side blocking his stroke and taking their swords down and then jumping back disengaging.

Syrio leaped after her attacking fast and furious. He quickly disarmed the girl. His unannounced attack gave the man the advantage and he took it.

“That was unfair!” Arya growled out between heaving breaths. “You cad! There was no honor in such an attack!” Arya spoke out looking aggrieved.

The Braavosi gave Arya a shit eating grin. “Arya … you speak foolishly.” She started to protest but her master held up his hand and she bit her tongue. “When the fox in the field sneaks up on the mouse does it then yip loudly and dance all around the mouse announcing its presence in its triumph. No! The fox jumps up in the air and pounces on the mouse with all four paws and then rends the mouse with sharp canines.”

“We are not foxes and mice Syrio.”

“No. But we fight like them. If a man fights you with honor then all to the good. But remember Meryn Trant. The man fought with no honor. I fear to tell you this Arya. Rare will be the fight that is honor filled. You must fight to win.

“What if I am the mouse? What should I do master?”

“Run away.”

“What!?”

“Arya dispense with the silly songs of minstrels who sing of battles never experienced and poets who have never even touched a sword. Remember Arya. We must always tell death ‘not today will you come for me’. Live today to win tomorrow. Always seek to fight at advantage Arya. When you are a Water Dancer then you can overcome most situations. Though it pains me to say this Arya, I too must run away at times to live. There is always tomorrow for victory and revenge.”

Varys saw that Arya was listening raptly to her instructor. Arya was indeed the perfect student that Syrio said she was.

“Now—back to running my disciple” the man spoke picking up his chair and leaning back again. His feet on the lowest support rung of the chair. He pulled out another apple and started to bite into it. “Chop chop!”

“Why don’t you join me Master and show me your awesome phenomenal speed and endurance?” Arya jibbed at her teacher. He merely smiled at her. Arya snarled. She then turned and started running down the steps cursing under her breath.

Varys stepped though the landing. Arya was definitely improving quickly. Maybe she was indeed a Water Dancer. The exceptional flower only needing the proper watering and mentoring to blossom into her true destiny.

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Eddard was in the small alcove that was off the royal chambers that were now his. He still did not truly feel comfortable in this place. The man who had once been his best friend had resided in this room. So had the woman who had proven to be both of their nemesis. He had had the large royal bed removed and a simple twin bed installed. Until his wife was able to join him in the Red Keep he needed nothing more.
He was sitting before the large meeting table against the back wall of the room. He sat in a chair with his back against the wall. The scroll work on the chair legs exquisite depicting scenes from a royal hunt. In Winterfell he always felt safe with his people. King’s Landing had proven to be a viper’s nest. Eddard now preferred to keep his back to a wall if possible. He had the sword he used for combat across his knees. He had run his sharpening stone along the edges till they literally gleamed in the light. He now ran his oil rag up and down the steel.

It was not Valyrian steel like Ice but it was harden steel made by Mikken the blacksmith of Winterfell. It had been made of pure iron with the impurities removed. He lifted the blade and looked down the razor sharp edge. The new King looked into the nearest corner of his room. The ceremonial sword of his ancestors resided in that corner. For over four hundred years the sword had been in his family. It was forged in Valyria just before its fall into ruin. The sword passed down from father to eldest son. The sword should have been Brandon Stark’s his brother but he had died along with his father before the Iron Throne.

The sword was used for executions primarily. The Starks had always believed that the mouth than passed sentence of death must in turn be the hand to deliver that sentence. The sword was much too large and heavy to be used in combat. Its immense size made it ungainly in combat where speed and agility were paramount. The sharpest edge that did not dull or break did little good if you could not bring it to bear upon your enemy.

He heard a knock at the door. He sighed. Getting up, Eddard put his war sword on the table. He walked to the door and opened it. Outside stood Sandor Clegane. The man stood glowering down at Eddard. Eddard knew the man was hiding his discomfort with his glowering demeanor. Eddard sighed again. He easily understood the man’s always barely suppressed boiling anger.

Sandor was a huge and heavily-muscled man. He stood six feet six inches tall. The right side of his face was gaunt, with sharp cheekbones and a heavy brow. That dour visage paled when compared against the left side of his face. It was a burned ruin with a stump for an ear. It was slick black flesh that was pocked with craters and deep cracks that ooze red and wet. The scars extend down to his throat.

Observing Sandor calmly, Eddard noted the twisted mass of a thick scar around his right eye, which was still good. The man’s nose was large and hooked. His long hair was dark and thin and brushed so it covered the left since no hair grew there. Sandor's eyes were grey and bone showed on his jaw.

The man was wearing what Eddard had come to discover was Sandor’s favorite attire during his rounds in the Red Keep. His olive-green cloak was over his plain, soot-dark armor. He had hanging off his belt his distinctive helm sculpted into the shape of a snarling dog’s head. On his hip was his longsword while on his back was a Warhammer. On his other hip was a long dagger. The man was well prepared for defense and attack Eddard observed.

Eddard had given him the duty to patrol the halls of the Red Keep to keep it safe. The man was very dutiful in his charge. The man walking along the corridors diligently looking for trouble. He growled and snapped at everyone, even Eddard, but Eddard had come to find that if the man was treated fairly his bark had little bite. The new King would chuckle to himself watching Sandor test the limits of how sarcastic he could be. The man judging the limits and not exceeding them. He had a temper to be sure but he seemed a little calmer of late.

In his raspy voice Sandor spoke “You called my King.” A slight smile tugged at Eddard’s lips. Just the slightest insolence could be heard on the honorific. The man had spunk and fire. Eddard found he liked that in the man. There was a basic honesty to Sandor. This man could be trusted if he fully believed he was being treated fairly and finally shown the honor he deserved.
This was Eddard’s thought. His instincts spoke to him. Varys thought the man too volatile. Eddard would find out. Sandor was not the type of man to find dissembling of any use so Eddard had decided to come straight to the point.

“As you know Sandor, the Kingsguard has been wiped out.”

“I had nothing to do with that!” Sandor barked holding his hands up.

Eddard shook his head slightly and took a breath to let the moment pass. “I am not accusing you of anything Sandor. I need to reconstitute the Kingsguard. With some changes. Certain moors and precepts I feel are outdated. The vow of chastity for one is an archaic burden that should be abandon.”

“Okaayyyyy” Sandor replied with a wary tone. Eddard saw Sandor shake his head to get his hair more fully over the left side of his face to hide at least some of the hideous damage done to it.

With a snort Eddard continued. “I repeat. I need to reform the Kingsguard. The throne does need its protection.”

With a steady look Sandor regarded Eddard. Then he burst out laughing.

“What is so funny?”

“Well, you wouldn’t have to worry with my chipping around with a songbird. None will even come near me.” He continued to chuckle at his dark self-deprecating humor. The tilting back of his head had made Sandor’s hair fall away from the left side of his face.

“You will be the first. Where are your quarters?”

“In the guard’s barracks. With the Goldcloaks. I do not want the position. All we knights are full of shit anyway. Hell, I’m no virtuous knight in shining armor my King. I’m just as weak as the next knight in my commitments. The Kingsguard disgraced themselves in Cersei’s coup. I repeat we are all full of shit my liege.” Sandor saw Eddard looking at his face intently. Eddard showed no shock or disgust at the sight. The Hound shook his head quickly to again cover his scars.

Eddard slowly approached the Hound.

The Hound eyed Eddard suspiciously as his King approached him.

“I told you I do not want the job.”

Very slowly Eddard reached out with his sword. His manner relaxed and nonthreatening. Sandor cringed but held his ground. Slowly with calm expert skill Eddard placed his sword underneath the hair the Hound had covering the ruined left side of his face. Eddard slowly pushed it back and away from the marked face.

“You have been harmed Sandor; I cannot undo that. I can only treat you with respect. You are a man of quality and honor in our own way.” Eddard let the hair fall back down to cover the damage done by Gregor, the older brother of Sandor.

Sandor snorted while shaking his head. “Forgive me my King but you are totally daft.”

Eddard smiled.

“You are trying to tame the savage Hound methinks my liege.”
“I have no need for a Hound, Sandor. I need a man. A man I can trust.”

“I am no saint my King” Sandor spoke with self-revulsion. “I think I would have done bad deeds if I had been ordered long enough, hard enough. No matter how much I would have hated the orders I would have eventually cracked. I say again we knights are full of shit. I am no Eddard Stark—Eddard Stark.”

“You are in luck then Sandor” Eddard intoned softly.

A look of consternation came on the Hound’s face. “How so?” Eddard could see that he did have Sandor’s full attention now.

“I will never ask you to do anything wrong or against your conscious. A conscious I know you have no matter how much you try and hide it. I only want to do what is right for the realm. Only for the realm. Not for myself or for my dynasty.

Eddard shook his head at the look of disbelief on Sandor’s face. The Hound tilted his head as if trying to understand the man before him.

“I am your King. I could command you obedience but I will not. I will have porters pack your items.”

“Ha. They won’t have much work. I repeat I have not accepted the bloody job.”

“I will have your personal items taken to the third floor” was Eddard’s calm reply. He waited. The words slowly penetrated Sandor’s guard. Eddard smirk smiled seeing first confusion and then shock come on the Hound’s face.

“You mean to make me the Lord Commander?” the disfigured man spoke in a small voice.

“Yes. That is what I propose Sandor Clegane. I need a Lord Commander. I think you would be excellent in the job.”

“I think you are daft.” Sandor looked around with a slightly stunned look to his eyes.

The new king closed his eyes and sighed. This man was confounding. He refused to see the good within himself.

“Nevertheless. I want you.”

“I need time to think on it my King.” Eddard noticed there was now no hint of sarcasm in the man’s voice. Sandor was considering his words. Eddard had him but could not show it.

“You have some time. I hope for you to say yes. I am travelling to the Street of Steel and to Tobho Mott and his establishment Arcane Arts of Qohor. Will you accompany me?”

The large man scoffed one foot on the carpet. “Oh alright. What can it hurt? … By me doing this does not mean I accept your offer my King.”

“Of course not. Meet me at the Aerion postern gate in thirty minutes” Eddard told Sandor. The man told him he would be there in a gruff reply. Eddard smiled. It was a start.

Thirty minutes later Eddard was at the gate with Arya and her sword teacher, Syrio Forel. He had his new honor guard. These men had proved their worth in the Insurrection that his daughter had led. Javer Goodbrook, Styve Grandison, Matamion and Jaehaegar Vernalys. These men had once
been part of Rhaegar’s honor guard and now they were his. He was not sure of the symmetry of it all but he accepted gladly their allegiance.

The new king had thought over the idea of having these men form the backbone of his new Kingsguard but decided they had more worth as warriors whose allegiance was directly to him and not to the Red Keep as the Kingsguard were. The duty was really same but the mindset was totally different. These men had by happenstance formed on the now King’s shoulder in combat in his conquest of the Iron Throne.

This had led Eddard to decide against them becoming members of the Kingsguard. If he went to war they would be his honor guard. He needed them at his side constantly in public. Their presence would help to solidify his nascent hold on Houses from the Crown and Stormlands. Seeing the former honor guard of House Targaryen supporting the House of Stark would lead credence to his claim to the throne.

These men were relaxed waiting to begin their journey to the Street of Steel. Arya was bouncing on her feet. She was anxious to see the making of new swords and armor. Syrio smiled at his charge. He had told Eddard that he considered broadswords an extreme waste of steel when you could make five or six rapiers from that steel. Still, the fallen Water Dancer expressed an interest to see the creation of new steel weapons.

Behind him Eddard heard the sound of feet approaching rapidly accompanied with snorting and grumbling. The Hound had arrived barking Eddard thought to himself. The man seemed uncomfortable. With an air of being bereaved Sandor fell in beside Arya and Syrio. This impressed Eddard. The Hound had seen that Eddard was well protected and moved to protect his daughter. Syrio was a master of the highest extreme but another sword never hurt.

The small party went to the postern gate that Aegon had named after his father as an honor. In his readings of the Red Keep this was the gate that Aegon had used to leave and enter the Red Keep for his day to day business when peace was in effect. The rest of the small personal gates were plain and simple affairs. This one was too on the outside of the keep. Not so on the inside. The sides and the lintel of the gate had columns that had in them carved dragons climbing up the marble shafts. The shaft also had the unique female sphinxes that were winged with dragon wings. The traditional dragons climbing up over the sphinxes. Eddard had observed the subtle eroticism after reading it in the books. The dragon’s claws and heads resting on breast and in crotches.

Eddard shook his head. Why had Aegon asked the stonemasons to put the sexual innuendo into their work? The human mind was a strange thing at times the new king mused.

The small party walked the thirty yards to arrive at the King’s Road that came before the Barbican the main gate in and out of the Red Keep. The gates were closed. The chance for some subterfuge was too great to have them opened at all yet. The new reign of Eddard Stark was still a fragile thing. The new king knew it. The populace had no love for the Baratheon reign. The previous king, King Aerys II Targaryen, had fallen into insanity and greatly harmed his kingdom.

This all gave Eddard Stark a grace period. He had instituted immediate changes. He had stopped all ostentatious trappings of royalty. There had been no grand parties or excessive displays of wealth and power. His few hearings with the populace to air their grievances had started to cause whispers. In this case positive ones. This new King was fair and just. Varys had sparrows flitting around in King’s Landing. The birds landing all over the city to peck for fodder for their own unique crops. The little birds listening intently as they went about their business.
The words they reported back were positive. The population of King’s Landing liked this new King. They were giving him the benefit of the doubt. This would give Eddard the time he needed to solidify his hold on power. He needed stability to perform the various acts he had created in his mind to fully win the throne he had taken from the Lannister and Baratheon dynasties. He again wondered about a possible claim by a Targaryen. He thought sadly this was something he would not have to worry for. He had in the end not saved the girl.

The small party walked down the King’s Road that ran through the Gate of the Gods to the Barbican of the Red Keep. The road was well maintained. The first part of the road from Red Keep was lined by tall and majestic maple and elm trees. The mature trees had full canopies that provided shade for the merchants and pedestrians using the road near the Red Keep. It was only the third hour after sunrise and the air still somewhat cool. The air would heat up with the rising sun and the populace of King’s Landing would then be thankful for the trees.

The trees were filled with robins, blue jays, mocking birds along with signing song birds. The air resplendent with their sweet melodies. Eddard smiled seeing Arya pointing at the various birds visible in the branches or those that had flitted down to the ground to look for seeds, scratch or insects to feed to their young. Arya was still young enough to see the wonder in such things. With a sad look on his face the King lamented that humans seemed to so easily lose the ability to be amazed as they grew into maturity.

Here most of the buildings lining the road were businesses that catered to the needs of the Red Keep with fine crafted pastries and cakes. Other eateries assisting the cooking staff in making delicious repasts. The repair of daily garb and the creation of new fine attire. There were artisans that maintained the fine furniture, china, eating utensils and day to day items needed for the “royal” life. There were also many fine hotels to house the staff of Lords, wealthy merchants from afar, the staff of foreign dignitaries and various visiting religious orders.

A soft smile crossed Eddard’s face. He was looking at one of the three brothels in this part of the city. The establishments blatant in their business. Most of the brothels where on the Silk Road and three other locations in the City. That was the ordinances. The reality was that if there was a need it would be met. Eddard smirked. Or maybe scratched or filled Eddard thought for what for him was wicked lascivious thoughts. The name Stiletto was an eye catcher. Along with the sultry paintings of sultry women barely clad standing in said stilettos.

The taciturn man shook his head and walked on. Arya was asking Syrio about the establishment. His confused blustering was amusing. Eddard was happy that the sword master was fielding those questions and not himself.

They had reached the major cross road of the King’s Road and the Dragon Tail Pathway. The major thoroughfare crossing the King’s Road was along a natural fold in the city. A creek was beside the road that the builders of the King’s Road had erected a small study bridge to cross over. At this intersection was several large building with one house and apartment complex rising up to seven stories. It was the tallest building in the area by far. On the opposite corner was a well maintained church of the seven. It had one main spire surrounded by seven steeples for each of the gods of the seven.

There was a store near the corner with ornate awnings that had many tables out front with circular chairs arrayed around them. There was a man out in front of the small gate surrounding the front court with the tables and chairs. He had a small cart on two large wheels. On the side was written “Cool Slushes”. The party gravitated to the merchant.

The man told them that a ‘Slush’ was ice crystals that had juice concentrate poured over them. The
man had a plethora of flavors to choose from. This allowed for many combinations to be created. Eddard said he was paying. All bought a large cup of the concoctions. Eddard had blueberry while Arya was moaning her way through a peach drink. From the corner of his eye Eddard watched Sandor gulp down four cups of cherry. He acted like he cared less but he kept going back for more with only half a snarl on his face.

Jaehaegar Velnalys mentioned to the vendor that he had the honor of serving the King. The man immediately was flustered and tried to give the King his money back. Eddard smiled and clapped the man on the back as they left. “Keep the fair my good man. You earned it with the tasty treat” the new King told the grateful man. They left the man with a big wide grin on his face.

It was time to move on. They moved down the Dragon Tail Pathway till they came to the Hook. They walked down this street looking at the many various styles of buildings that lined the road. They moved at a steady pace. Some of the citizens called out to the new King and wished peace upon him and long live his just and fair line of heirs. Eddard wondered if they would speak thus in a year. In that, only the future would tell. He would strive to fulfill the initial bloom of his reign.

They walked to the Muddy Way and took it down to the Street of Steel where the roads intersected. They were just above Fishmonger Square and the River Gate. The group looked around at the busy commerce that was all around them. The smell of fish and shellfish thick in the air. Many herbs and spices added tang to the air. Many vendors making meals for the local populace to consume on the spot. Others were preparing food for consumption further away in more distant parts of King’s Landing. Eddard knew some of the catch was to be put on ice or smoked and sent to the small villages and crofts near the city.

The men and Arya watched the busy back and forth bustle of everyday life and the vitality that humans always created when they came together. The King looked around. How he wished that men could always live thus. He thought back nearly twenty years ago. A look of sadness filled his face. Such a waste. So many lives snuffed out. Too many by his own sword. The death of his sweet sister.

Eddard looked over at Arya as she looked at bins of clams, snails, muscles and oysters. The bins heaped high with the shellfish. His daughter asking the merchants and genuinely listening to the men and women. She was clearly interested in what they had to tell her. Eddard thought his daughter had the common touch that Lyanna had also had.

He hoped to make a better world for all. Not only for the race of men but for the Children of the Forest and the Giants that lived beyond the Wall. He was starting to form heretical thoughts about the Wildlings who also resided beyond the wall. Were they not of the human race? Was it really so bad they did not bend the knee. Did he need such obeisance from all? Did he? He looked around at the men and women around. Only by the happenstance of birth did he rule and not they. Eddard shook his head. Such strange thoughts.

The group slowly started up the Street of Steel. The four men of the honor guard spread out subtly to create a small buffer around their king. Many did not notice them really. They had no standards raised up of the Direwolf. No regalia was on their breastplates. They looked like yet another group of armed men that moved around for mutual protection. The further they traversed from the Red Keep, the less people recognized their new King.

Some did recognize their new king though and called out to him. Eddard returned their salutations with a wave of his hand and nod of the head. He needed no ostentatious displays in either direction. He was their sovereign now but would never truly feel it. He had become King to serve.

With strong measured steps they moved slowly along the road that slowly gained elevation as it rose.
to circle along the side and then around the back of Visenya’s hill. The hill that had atop it the The Great Sept of Balor. The main edifice in Westeros to the new gods. The gods that Eddard Stark did not believe in. He had no use for the usurpers and the heretical beliefs that they espoused. He thought disdainfully for this new religion. The religion of Essos.

A stray thought occurred to Eddard. In fact, though he did not show it, the thought hit the new King like a sledgehammer.

Had not the Children of the Forest thought the same thing when men from Essos first came to their land? These invaders, interlopers, who invaded their land and brought heretical beliefs. Beliefs and outright greed that had led to unending warfare and the slaughter of the original denizens of this land. Had not his very House been key in their demise and the destruction of the Weirwood trees and the sacred grooves the Children of the Forest needed for their strength and power? Winterfell had been constructed to deny the original inhabitants access to the Weirwood tree enclosed within Winterfell’s walls. That tree very scared to the Children of the Forest.

Yes, Eddard reflected sadly in his soul. Had not House Stark committed genocide?

That was a bitter pill to swallow for the proud man. Eddard Stark was filled with gall that his family had committed such atrocities against the people had lived in Westeros first. He was sure his ancestors and the ancestors of other Houses had come up with many noble sounding reasons for their warfare against the Children of the Forest. The truth was sadly evident to Eddard. We had wanted the land of the original holders for ourselves. Plain and simple. Genocide was committed and, thus, no more problem.

These thoughts sickened the new King to his stomach. He would make it right. He had too. He first had to secure the whole realm to achieve what was necessary though. He had much bigger concerns than any House south of the Wall.

Winter was coming.

And with it the Ice King. The ancient Wright had returned. Now, there were no more Children of the Forest to oppose and stop him and any army he had formed. He would find a way. Finding a way, when all seemed lost, was a specialty he had developed Eddard thought to himself. He merely had to find one more way.

The man shook off his thoughts to prevent melancholy from sitting in. He looked at the establishments that lined the Street of Steel at the beginning of the road. Here the businesses catered to the needs of the fisherman that worked and lived in this section of King’s Landing. The homes and business that lined the river bank between the river and the walls of King’s Landing. The metal used was cheap but that was enough. The metal to make cages to catch lobster and octopus with fish seeding the traps. Metal used to make the tongs and digging tools that the shell fisher men used to harvest oysters from the reefs, muscles from those same reefs and along the sides of rocks at low tide and clams from the sandy flats at low tide. Sinker weights, hooks and the metal gears and turn winches used to create the apparatuses to catch crabs and fish in the river and bay.

Many other small metallurgical businesses made the items that daily life needed. The pots and pans to cook your meals. The utensils to eat the fare. The nails and screws used to construct their homes. The nails and tacks to make and repair their cheap but well-made furniture. The shops small. These shops made large quantities making a small profit on each item but made up for it by the bulk numbers they sold each day. Further up the road the items created were more refined and not necessary for the immediate needs of daily life. Therefore, the cost slowly rose as the road rose in elevation.
As the street rose up in elevation and left the flood plain behind the quality of the shops improved and the size was larger. Here higher profits allowed these masters of their craft to improve the lot of their lives. Here they had hope for a higher station in life. In these establishments many of the items were still for common use but the metal was of higher quality and the workmanship more refined. Here a spoon was beyond just the most basic of shape and utilitarian design. Here the spoon was larger and more curved and polished. Maybe scroll work on the eating implement.

This was where the ‘middle class’ shopped for their needs. People with higher disposable income to spend.

Varys had been giving Eddard full reports on King’s Landing. The neighborhoods and their economic status. The businesses and the men and surprisingly a few women had accumulated some great amount of wealth. He especially wanted to know of the poorer sections of the City. Flee Bottom was a warren of small cramped buildings that all the previous rulers had not even thought of. They had no power to bring them down. But maybe they had the power to lift one up.

The narrow streets made for poor sanitation. There were few water pumps and the citizens had to walk far to get their water. This land was somewhat like Winterfell. The few water wells and their pumps were natural artesian wells. The pressure from rock and flowing water brought the water up to the citizens. No effort had been made for more. The filth was left to gather and rot.

There were always many seeking employment. Nascent ideas were coalescing in Eddard’s subconscious. Those nascent entwined ideas slowly worming their way to this conscious. He had hopes. Only the future would tell.

The party continued their slow walk up the rising thoroughfare. The shops now catered to the high middle class and the two high income districts of King’s Landing. One on both sides of the Old Gate with one end running to near the area called Cobbler’s Square and the other end near the old Dragon Pit. One of the women on his list of citizens who had accumulated great wealth according to Varys was Chataya and her incestuous daughter wife Alayah. Eddard had had to ask Varys again for that to be repeated.

“Oh yes. They hide it from common knowledge but all their whores know it and so do my sparrows. I must say that their whorehouses are by far my most requested spots my female sparrows request. Some of my male sparrows go to the whore houses that cater to the male homosexual desires and—ahem—older women who want a young stallion in their bed.”

The Whisperer had wanted to whisper to Eddard all the sordid details but Eddard had put a stop to that. Sometimes running away was a great strategic strategy.

The other rich area of King’s Landing was the section that was behind his destination for today actually. The area behind the Visenya’s Hill with the Great Sept of Balor atop it. This section ran from the Lion’s gate along the curtain wall down to the King’s gate. The first section had formed soon after the creation of the city. It was filled with nobility and merchants that had traveled with the Targaryens and their Baratheon allies at the founding of the City of King’s Landing. There also had been some of Dorne seeking new opportunities and aligning themselves to the new King after the cessations of hostilities.

The section behind the Sept of Balor had grown with the growth of the merchant classes and emigres from other parts of Westeros and from the Free Cities primarily seeking a new life. To find opportunity to improve their station. It was these sections of King’s Landing that supplied the clientele for these shops on the Street of Steel. Here the smiths forged the fine eating utensils and cutting knives that adorned their dining rooms and kitchens. These knives made of the same steel that Eddard had in his sword. Other metals also used. Metals such as gold, silver, bronze and
copper. Metals to show one’s wealth and status.

Here buttons were not made of tin or pot belly steel but of the richest most expensive of metals and adorned with precious stones. Walking canes and the handles of umbrellas were made of ivory, gold and silver were richly carved. Statues of all shapes and sizes were created here. The statues were actually banks of a sort. The wealth of the family melted and shaped into the shapes of their desires. Not only were visitors impressed with the artistry of the statues creations of gilded metal but the wealth of the family preserved. The visitors also took into the account the gold and silver in those statues. The visitors seeing the great wealth of those they were visiting.

Eddard shook his head at such ostentatious displays of wealth. Why did so many worry so over such trivial things as the display of wealth and trying to show dominance over their peers? What was so lacking in the human spirit? The new King did not have the answers. He could only strive to create a better world for all.

The road still climbed gently in elevation. Finally, the group had reached the beginning of the shops that catered to their class. The class of the Warrior. The first shops made the implements of war for the common man who was called to arms by his Lord. The Lord taking the expense to arm the men who he would call to his banner. The weapons here were made in mass and made of low quality steel primarily. Here lances and halberds were made in profusion to arm the foot soldier to defend themselves from knight cavalry charges. Here the armor was only made to protect from glancing blows and longbow shots from distance.

Swords made in these shops were to be used to hack wildly and getting nicks was of no import. Long term use was not important. Surviving the campaign and going home to your farm or small business was the paramount concern. These weapons were not crafted for the man or woman who had dedicated their lives to the very arts of war and mayhem. This party moving up the Street of Steel were such persons.

The party of the new King walked on. Their steps taking them up the rising road. The quality of the shops rapidly improving. None of these had interest to Eddard Stark. He wanted the best. He was nearing the end of the Street of Steel and approaching the residence of Tobho Mott and his smithy establishment he had named Quant Enigmas of Qohor. Eddard had visited this place before. He was here to again do business of both a personal nature but he was also on another quest.

They were before Tobho’s house now. Eddard looked at the imposing and yet pleasing edifice before him. It was made of timber and plaster. It was larger than all other buildings on the Street of Steel. Its upper stories towered over the street. This impressed visitors while also putting a slight sense of unease in them. The mere towering presence of his establishment seemingly hanging over the street gave the man an advantage from the beginning in the haggling of the price for his work. Varys had told Eddard that Tobho lived above his shop.

The double doors leading into his business were of ebony and Weirwood carving of a hunting scene. Two stone knights armored in red suits of armor in the shapes of a griffin and a unicorn guarded the entrance. The man was standing by the door. He was tall with hair that was beginning to show streaks of grey. He had the arms and chest of a man who had spent life working the bellows to the fire pits for the forging of metal and then swinging the heavy hammers used to fashion steel.

He had dark blue eyes. These eyes now eyed the new King coming to his establishment. The Master Blacksmith was wearing his black velvet coat which had silver hammers embroidered on the sleeves. A large sapphire hung on a heavy silver chain about his neck. Varys had reported all this to the King. Tabho had not been wearing his traditional garb for some reason on his first visit to his establishment.
Eddard walked up to the taciturn man who looked at him coolly. Eddard was not sure why he seemed stand offish this time. He had not been like this on his first visit. Tabho was known for being stubborn but very loyal to his staff. He employed several slim serving girls in the house. Journeymen and apprentices, such as Gendry, worked in his shop, a cavernous stone barn behind the house. The staff all had rooms located in his house. The man treated his staff like they were his family. The man had never married and, thus, Eddard assumed these men and woman were indeed his family.

“I see you have come back to visit my humble business. I am always happy to serve the King of Westeros.”

Eddard still detected a hint of angst and almost anger in the man. Eddard looked off to the side. Syrio and his daughter were already engaged with the workers of the smithy. The two stood by one of the two main furnaces. They watched intently while Gendry worked a raw iron ingot into the rough shape of a sword shaft the first strikes slowly elongating and flattening the still white hot metal. The metal must be free of impurities Eddard noted as the strong bastard son of Robert Baratheon had made little progress in bending the metal to its desired shape. He was taking it back to the furnace as apprentices worked the bellows.

The former Warden of the North could not help but smile hearing Gendry say “please” “thank you” and “your welcome” to the apprentices. Arya was being shooed back by Gendry as she tried to put her nose in the furnace. Syrio was as curious but more restrained. He had never seen the creation of weapons before and he too was enamored of the process. Eddard and Tobho drifted off to the side along with Eddard’s honor guard.

The Hound wondered around. His curiosity had him looking at the bellows and tools. He tried to hide his curiosity with a look of being aloof but Eddard saw the interest in Sandor’s eyes. He turned back to give Tobho his attention.

“You have raised Gendry well Tobho. He is very well mannered and he gives his work his total focus.”

“Yes I have. You have come to take him from me haven’t you my new King.”

Ah thought Eddard. The heart of the matter between us. He looked into the man’s eyes and clearly saw the distress in them.

“I will not lie to you Tabho. I have not come to take Gendry. But. I have come to give him his true dynasty back. What he chooses to do with it is his own choice. Are you willing to let Gendry choose his own path even if it is not the one you would have him choose?”

The man closed his eyes for a moment collecting himself. “I want what is best for Gendry. I always have. I am sure he will choose to leave me and take on the royalty that you will offer him. He is the son of the King” the man paused and hastened to add “the former king.” Eddard laughed at the supposed fopaux. They both chuckled but Tabor became serious again. “I am assuming you are giving him his name back.”

“I am. But I am also here for a job I want to commission you for. I am told you learned to smith in Qohor. That you learned the secrets of re-forging Valyrian steel from that distant land.” The man nodded his head in acknowledgement. Eddard liked that. No unseemly boasting from this man. “I hear that Ser Loras Tyrell and Lord Renly Baratheon are satisfied with your work.”

“I would agree they were most satisfied with my work.” The words spoken as matter of fact. No boasting.
Eddard then spent the next ten minutes telling Tabho Mott what he had planned.

“Can you do it?” Eddard asked the blacksmith.

The man gave him a look that said ‘how dare you ask that question’. “I can do what you ask. There is sufficient material. I am impressed with your generosity.”

“I consider it a fair payment.”

“Be that as it may; I am still impressed.

Eddard gave the master smith a squint smile.

“I will be able to start when you provide what I need.”

“I will have it brought to you in the near future Master Tabho. It is time.”

The two men stepped back into the main smithy. Eddard felt the heat of the furnaces on his face as he approached the main blast furnace that Gendry was working at.

“Is Gendry as good as he appears to be Tabho?”

“He is my King. I would bequeath my business to him when the time comes. Alas.”

Eddard kept his peace. He had to offer Gendry Waters his destiny. It was the right thing to do for Gendry. It was time to take the stain of bastardy from the now young man. They walked up to furnace.

“How many times do I have to tell you to back up girl” Gendry bellowed at Arya.

“Shut up you big buffoon. I want to see!”

“You won’t be calling me names when you get a piece of coke in your hair and it goes whoosh! Soon to be bald headed girl.”

“Shove it you oversized twerp.”

“Or a sliver of metal in your eye. Then no more you pretending to be a sword wielder. Ha!”

“I will tan your ass with the flat of my blade! You big oaf! You probably move like a pregnant moose from the North.”

“I would disarm you so fast your eyes would fall out. Then I would spank your impudent ass!”

Syrio was standing off back two feet enjoying the interchange.

“I see your big Warhammer against the wall” Arya told the tall young man nodding her head toward the weapon. “Puulleeasseeeeee! Everyone knows that weapon sucks!”

Gendry growled in anger.

Eddard walked up to get between the two antagonists. “Arya. Let’s control your temper. Gendry’s caution near the bellows is wise.”

Arya fumed and moved down the stalls to another stall and shoved her face forward to where it probably shouldn’t be observing and asking questions.
Syrio had paused before following his student. “She is like the towel. She absorbs all that she sees and hears. She is curious about her environment and the world around her. Such a rare gift. Her mind is sharp. Like a tack. I will hone it further.” He then walked down the stalls to his student.

Eddard turned to look at Tabho Mott and Gendry Waters.

“Gendry. I think you know after our last visit who your father was. It is time that you and all your half siblings assume your true destiny. I have come to give you your last name back. You and all the bastard children of Robert Baratheon will no longer be denied your birth right. From this day hence forth you are of the House Baratheon.

Beside Gendry, Tabho had tears shimmering in his eyes. He played nervously with the large blue sapphire that hung around his neck on its silver chain. The gem moving between his fingers. The man had resigned himself to losing the young man he had come to think of as a son. The son who would take his business when it was time for him to retire.

The tall young man looked down at Eddard. “So I would become a prince of House Baratheon. I would be in line for the throne.”

“Yes. You would. Do you wish to challenge me?” Eddard asked the young man. Eddard was not sure where Gendry was taking this. He had to know that he had no chance against him.

“I will take my last name back. That I thank you for Eddard Stark. It will nice to not have the name ‘Water’. I will relish no longer being shamed for an act that I had no control over.”

He bowed to Eddard. Eddard looked back with a slight smile. He was happy to give the boy what had always been his.

“That is all I want my King. What you offer me is merely a name. I have no care for the Iron Throne. You can have it.” The almost man turned to look at Tabho. “I would hope that my true father Tabho Mott will still keep me in his employ. He is the man who was there when I was growing up. He is the man that held me when I was hurt as a child. He is the man that taught me my craft and taught me how to be a man. I would hope that this has changed nothing with you Taboo.” Gendry moved closer to the man he thought of as his father. “I have always thought of you as my father and forever shall.” Gendry looked at the master smith with intense glittering eyes.

Eddard knew that Tabho was not a man to cry but he was crying now. He and Gendry embraced and hugged each other tight. Tabho was a big man but Gendry was larger. He enfolded the older man in his arms tenderly. They embraced fully embracing the love the two had for each other. The love of a father for his son and the return of emotion equally true.

Eddard had moved off to join his daughter and Syrio to observe the armory smiths at work. He wanted to give Tabho and Gendry privacy.

Ten minutes later it was time to leave. Arya gave Gendry a raspberry and the tall offspring of Robert Baratheon gave his daughter the bird. The two hot headed youths glared at each other.

As soon as they had left Quant Enigmas of Qohor Arya seemed to forget all about her rancor with Gendry. She had learned what she wanted. She did not look back once to see if Gendry was looking at them. He was. Eddard had wondered if maybe Arya was attracted to the young man. It would seem she was not. Eddard looked at his daughter. He again wondered about his daughter and what she thought of love and who she saw as a good mate.

Of late, Eddard become more sure he knew where his daughter’s affections lie. He took a deep
breath. He found he did not truly care who Arya was attracted to and wanted as a mate. Cat he knew would have other ideas. He had much to explain to his wife when they finally met again.

In a way Eddard thought to himself with a chuckle he was off the hook. In taking an apprenticeship with Syrio, all such concerns were now his problem. It was not a problem but it would cause thorny issues. Eddard had thought of late that Arya was lucky to be Syrio’s apprentice. Essos had a much more liberal attitude. The Free cities had much in common with Dorne.

He just wondered how he was going to break all this to Catelyn. Eddard grimaced at that thought. He could not wait to be reunited with his wife. In this though, a little more time would be favorable. He would have to deal with his wife and her sure to be demands. The “Sansa issue” would also be thorny. His wife would probably feel even more harshly towards Sansa. Eddard knew in time he would forgive Sansa but he was not sure about Catelyn. Her treatment of Jon had shown him the rancor his wife was capable of holding onto.

On the way back they detoured down a side road. All were curious Eddard could tell. They turned into a brothel that was owned by Petyr Baelish. Eddard suppressed a smile. He felt the confusion with all the people in his entourage.

“Could you please call down Mhaegen and her smile child Barra.” The madam running the sitting room blanched but bowed her head. She walked with an unsteady gate and looked back at Eddard with raw terror in her eyes. She slowly walked upstairs.

Eddard was confused by the reaction. The woman looked like she was about to be executed.

Suddenly, there was screams of terror and wails of bereavement coming from the second floor. Startled the party surged upstairs in a rush. Now all the whores were wailing like banshees. *What the hell is wrong!* Eddard thought to himself as he stormed up the stairs to come to the damsels—whores defense from whatever was assaulting them. He and his honor guard had pulled their swords. Even Arya had her Needle out ready to fight.

It was easy to see which room belonged to Mhaegen. Four whores were in doorway. They acted as if they would block the wall of warriors coming at them.

The Hound growled “Oh bloody hell … probably on their periods” he started to move forward to bull the whores out of the way.

“NO!” Eddard shouted. The new King surged forward to get in front of his entourage and held his hand out for them to hold back. He had not really been thinking. Of course the whores were over reacting. The new King of a different blood line had suddenly appeared in their brothel asking for Mhaegen. *Damnit* Eddard groused at himself. I know my intentions but they do not! I should have thought of that. I must not make these kind of mistakes in the future. I have caused upset where none need have been. *Damnit!*

With the reactions around him Eddard realized he had to think through everything he did and said in public through the filter of him being the person who sat on the Iron Throne. The populace, Nobles and merchants would all take his words as the King who sat on the Iron Throne. The last ones had been very poor and capricious. They would tend to react to him as if he was like their past sovereigns.

He needed to change his actions he took day by day. He needed to see his thoughts and actions by how they would be taken by the general populace. The assumptions and supposed insights to their King’s thinking.
He slowly moved forward. He sheathed his sword as he advanced. The whores blocking the doorway looked at him fearfully. They knew that even if they dared to physically stand up to the King and his party they had no chance. They were doomed to stop him from his goal. He slowly came into view of the doorway standing back from the women at the lintel. He saw Mhaegen clutching Barra fiercely to her bosom. She was surrounded by five whores wringing their hands. The women looked at Eddard with terror in their eyes.

Mhaegen’s eyes locked with Eddard’s. “Please! Don’t hurt my baby! Take my life but spare hers!”

Spoken like a true mother Eddard thought. He realized that even Cersei as selfish as she was had made the same offer.

Slowly cocking his head to look at the closest whore to him Eddard spoke to her in a gentle voice.

“What is your name?” Eddard asked with a soft smile on his face.

“Sanya.”

With a slow deliberate motion Eddard bent down to one knee. Looking at Mhaegen he spoke to Sanya.

“Take my sword very slowly out of my scabbard on my back and place it on the floor with the blade facing me.”

The woman looked at him fearfully but moved forward when her King looked up at her with an encouraging smile. She moved to comply.

“Why the blade towards you?”

“I would cut myself if I went to use it. I am not here to cause any harm today. I wish but to talk.”

The whore had did as requested. She looked at Eddard with a mixture of fear and now awe.

“Everyone else put your swords on the ground in the same manner.” To their credit, none of his honor guard asked any questions. They followed the lead of their King without hesitation. All knew that they were in absolutely no danger in this situation. Eddard was working to make the whores feel safe was well.

In a few seconds all of the King’s men, Arya and her sword instructor were disarmed. They stood still not sure what their King was trying to accomplish.

“Mhaegen. I am not here to harm your baby. I should have thought of how this would appear to you and your fellow wh—workers. Can I stand? My sword will remain on the floor.”

A weak “You can stand” was heard from the room.

Eddard stood slowly and gave all the whores around him his best squint smile.

“I must ask for your forbearance. I did not mean to cause alarm nor I am here to cause harm.” He looked at Mhaegen clutching her baby to her bosom. “I have come Mhaegen to say that I grant Barra the right to her last name. From this moment henceforth she will be known as Barra Baratheon.” A thought occurred to Eddard. “If you so choose. I will provide a royal stipend for you to raise your daughter with the rights she was born with. If you wish I will take you onto my staff as a chambermaid or other job you have the skills for, or, you can remain here. Being a whore is an honorable profession.”
All the whores were quiet now looking at Eddard with wonder now. Mhaegen still looked fearful.

Slowly Eddard rose up his hands out palms up. He took small steps into the room.

“Can I hold her? Barra is most beautiful.”

The woman hesitantly handled Eddard her child. Eddard knew the woman felt she had no choice. He smiled down at the baby and tickled her chin. The baby smiled and cooed. Eddard commented on the baby’s dark black hair. The Whores not realizing the slight humor in the remark. The whores visibly relaxed. They watched this new King walk around rocking a bastard baby as if she was his. He smiled and laughed at the baby playing with his fingers now.

He asked Mhaegen to join him. She hesitantly came over to her King. Soon she relaxed. Eddard gave her child back. The other whores came up to the King and mother to talk and play with the baby. All now relaxed and talking freely.

He talked more with the mother. The decision on how to proceed with her life and the child’s would start now Eddard told her. He gave her a small bag with gold dragons. “This is the first monthly stipend. I will support all the children and their mothers who have had children of Robert Baratheon. From this time going forward Robert Baratheon has no more bastards.

Soon he left the whore house of Petyr Baelish. The whores talked much on this strange man who was now their King. True honor and compassion was such a rare thing. Was it genuine? Would it continue? Only the future would tell but they had hope.

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Eddard was in the small meeting room that was near the small council chamber. He liked the small intimate size of the room. It had a small desk that he sat behind. On it was the financial reports that Varys had pulled from Petyr’s office of the Master of Coin.

The new king’s head was spinning. He was not much for accounting and the way money could be dealt with through subterfuge and back channels. He had always been straight forward in his management of money. Account for the taxes that came in and try and not spend beyond that and if possible save a little money each season to meet any unexpected emergencies.

What he was reading on these byzantine sheets of parchment was not that. He was not sure exactly what he was reading except for that it was all chancery and outright lies. The realm of Westeros was in serious trouble. The Iron Throne was in debt up to its ass. Unfortunately, the level of debt was much higher than that area of one’s body. Eddard would have had to stand on his toes if it was water.

How could Robert have allowed this to happen! Was he blind? Did Cersei have him do it? With a start Eddard stopped that thinking. He would not blame Cersei merely for being Robert’s Queen. He knew his old friend’s appetites for all things sensual and carnal. Robert simply lived life to excess. It had been in his nature sadly.

With a soft sigh of parchment on wood Eddard sat the sheet down. He had had enough bad news for this reading session. What to do? The debt to the Iron Bank was astronomical. It was actually frightening. There was also a mountain of debt owed to Casterly Rock but Eddard had plans for that.

He could only think of one person with the mind and the twisted ethics to work out this problem. The problem is he might have to execute Tyrion Lannister. As time had gone by, he was almost sure
now he was innocent of what his wife had accused him of. He had no part in the attempts on Bran’s life.

He grimaced. Getting his wife to see that might prove problematic. With a sigh and smirk Eddard wondered how he preferred sword combat with the real possibility of death as a fairer risk than confronting his wife when she was sure she was right. With Robert dead he had no more reason to hold the truth from her about Jon.

He hoped he still had a marriage after that.

There was a knock on the door. The raps almost respectful Eddard mused. He paused and heard grumbling from the other side. The Hound had indeed come barking. A Hound could only be silent so long it seemed. Eddard stood up and went to the door and opened it.

“Come in Sandor.”

Sandor stood there. He eyed Eddard warily. He looked down at his feet. “Come in Sandor” the Eddard spoke again and motioned for Sandor to enter the small meeting room. The tall disfigured man came through the door. The man made eye contact with Eddard and then looked away.

“Please come in and sit down friend.” Eddard pointed at a chair at the small table that allowed for six person to sit around it.

He saw the shock cross Sandor’s face. A sarcastic remark sprang to the man’s lips Eddard saw but he swallowed it roughly. Eddard joined the man at the table sitting across from Sandor.

“How you made your decision?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“I accept.”

A small smile came on Eddard’s face. “This is good. I will ask that you begin to consider the six men … or women you might want to put on the Kingsguard.”

He saw the man almost guffaw at that. He almost sneered at his King but again fought it down. Eddard was impressed. The man was actually trying. Eddard decided to play with the man. He had a few parchments on the table and he started to pretend that he was reading them with rapt interest. He saw Sandor squirm in his seat. This quiet time and trying to be respectful was obviously trying on the man.

“Ah … ahem … is there anything else …” Sandor asked in an uncomfortable voice.

Eddard put down his parchment satisfied with getting over on Sandor. He was even more uptight than myself Eddard reflected. He was not sure that was a positive.

“I have made some changes to the Kingsguard.”

Sandor shot out of his chair rigid and upright.

“I knew it! I knew it! You did this just to screw me over! Damnit it! Why did I trust you? Why did I think you would be any different?! …”
“Sandor” Eddard called out. Eddard stood and made placating gestures at the upset man. The man continued to rant and swallow curses “SANDOR!” That got the man’s attention Eddard smirked.

“Don’t be so negative for the old gods’ sake. Let me finish.”

Sandor glared at Eddard. He fumed and snorted “Bollocks!” supposedly to himself. He glared at Eddard waiting for his King to screw him over.

“I have removed certain requirements from the Kingsguard.”

“What!” Sandor jumped in still testy.

“I have removed the vow of chastity as I had told you. You can marry now if you so choose.” Sandor laughed bitterly at that. Eddard felt for the man and the cruelty done to the man by his brother. He had no words or comfort he could give. He continued “I and Barristan are the only two who would keep such a vow. The rest of the Kingsguard have always fucked like bunnies. Same with the Maesters and the Septons and the Septas. I am tired of lying about it.”

“Like I have to worry about that!”

Eddard did not try and argue with the man. They both knew Sandor’s plight and the unfairness of life.

“I will no longer demand a lifetime of service. It is stupid really. Only Barristan has kept his vigor and prowess with his age. I do not want cavalry fodder for mounted knights to chop down. The Kingsguard can now have children and wives. If one feels he can no longer perform his duties then he can resign. If one’s peers think he is no longer capable of performing their duties a partition can be brought before the King and a judgement given.”

“I will not require such formal attire in the future. That will be your call. You and your peers must have some easily identifiable mark but that will be sufficient.”

“I will require that you and your selections live and act honorably but I feel you will not have a problem with that.” Eddard smiled and suppressed a chuckle at Sandor’s heavy drawing sigh and rolling of eyes.

Sandor took all this in with his usual ill grace. An ill grace repressed by his standards.

“My, my. You are just bringing in sweeping changes aren’t you my King” the Hound spoke in a chiding tone. He clearly had his doubts about it all.

Eddard liked Sandor’s sardonic ways. As long as he did not get carried away and showed his liege the respect necessary in public Eddard was happy. He suspected and hoped that with time Sandor’s surely attitude would improve. Sandor hid it well but deep down he was a good honorable man. Eddard just had to draw it out of him. He would give Sandor reasons to want to improve. He had read the man correctly.

“Yes I am Sandor. For good or ill I am. I will let the histories judge whether I chose rightly.

Sandor snorted. “Bollocks!” he spoke under his breath. Eddard thought it was a good start.
The new king sat at his table and pondered his new kingdom. He looked around the room he had chosen for his personal redoubt with its bare walls. He wondered if he should have some tapestries arrayed on the wall. The room was bleak. He had the same feeling in his heart at the moment. He was challenged with his new rule. The burdens of the throne weighed heavy on his shoulders and his kingdom did not extend beyond the walls of King’s Landing. His was an island kingdom that unfortunately was not an island. Fingers tapped the desktop.

There was a polite knock on the door.

“Come in Varys.”

The door opened. The Whisperer looked down at the new King.

“I would love to know how you do that.”

“A man has to keep his secrets Varys. What news do you have for me this fine morning?”

“The Martell’s are coming. I received two ravens. Well three actually. Doran says he accepts your offer but he would like to see guarantees as to how you can succeed. He estimates you have maybe five percent chance of success.”

“Well, at least the man is honest” Eddard quipped back.

“He frets that in sending Oberyn you will put House Martell in grave danger. What you propose is dangerous. Oberyn cannot see beyond his anger and need for revenge.”

“That is true. I remember Oberyn back before Robert’s Rebellion. He was always a hothead. I am thankful that Dorne had played it close to the chest in that time. I would not have wanted to meet the full forces of Dorne on the battlefield. We would have lost.” Eddard had that look on his face that Varys had come to learn was Eddard’s thoughts of a generation past.

“My second raven received was from Oberyn himself. He is most anxious to arrive and to take you up on the offer you present. He too wonders how you will arrange the Crevasse pieces to make it occur. Though he has grave doubts he has tired of waiting interminably.”

“The third raven was from my sparrows and the jackals they have roosted with. They confirm the words I have just read you. It would seem the brothers argued rather vociferously. How did you know that Oberyn would win out? Doran sits on the throne of Dorne.”

“Passion like what beats in Oberyn’s heart is a powerful force Varys. From everything I had ever heard of the man he loved his older sister dearly. This long delay in justice meted out has to have eaten at his heart like a canker. I knew he would strike the lure of my offer. He had too.”

Varys nodded at the man. “I am most impressed Eddard. I would never have guessed that you are so capable in the realm of the Game of Thrones.”
A sour look came over Eddard’s face that was followed by a smirk. “Please, stop insulting me Varys.”

The two men continued discussing the new King’s plans and discussing fine points on strategy and the tactics to make it occur.

Eddard left the room and walked down the still strange halls of the Red Keep. The red stone seemed strange and foreign to the man who had grown up among the dark granite of Winterfell or the milky stone of the Eyrie. He walked down the halls looking at the tapestries that herald the dynasty of House Targaryen. He stopped at tapestries that depicted the old holdfast of Valyria.

The soaring spires and the buildings that seemed to morph and flow in strange directions. He knew that they were not the imaginations of some mad artist. Much had been lost when that ancient land erupted in violence and desolation. Great had been its fall. Eddard had stopped at a depiction of some pageant of dragons lined down some wide thoroughfare with more dragons winging overhead. The king of Valyria astride a great blue dragon bulgingly into the air its head thrown up in triumph.

The image seemed to jump off the woven fabrics. He wondered if this was some artifact created from that fabled land. The painting seemed somehow to have depth to it. The ceremonial sword his family had, Ice, had been caste in forges in that doomed land. He took a deep breath.

The death of Valyria was sad but he could not shed a tear for that fabled land’s demise. They were a cruel and despotic race. King Aerys II Targaryen also exuded those traits of cruelty. The man had been capricious in his pronouncements and willingness to resort to extreme violence.

He started to move down the hall again. He turned the corner and he froze. Walking down the hall he had just entered were his two daughters Arya and Sansa down at the other end. They were talking quietly. They had their heads slightly turned to look at each other as they moved slowly down the hall. They were deep in conversation and had not noticed their father frozen at the intersection of the two halls down some ways from where they were deep in quiet conversation.

The new King was taken by how his two daughters spoke to each other. They had before the Insurrection been not on speaking terms at all. While their father did not think they truly hated each other he was not sure his daughters shared that same judgement of each other. Now Eddard saw no rancor between them. Their posture was relaxed with their slow steps up the hall towards their father.

The recent conflicts they had endured seemed to have changed the sisters. Arya had been in the crucible of martial conflict. She had come out of it tempered like steel. She was confident and assured now. Sansa, Eddard had come to understand, had been in her own crucible. Constantly hammered by the pistil of Lannister cruelty and malice.

Eddard had heard the reports from Varys of the cruelty his eldest daughter had to endure. She had survived the mental assaults. She in her own way had resisted. Squiring Joffrey with barbs that had enraged and sapped his will. She had survived. Still, she had not actively fought like his youngest daughter. Arya had taken destiny by the throat and changed it to her liking. Sansa had only endured.

Still, Eddard had started to wonder. Had not Sansa done the most she could with the skills she had? It made Eddard’s anger and hurt pause. Varys had reported to the new King Sansa’s betrayal. She had resisted after the fact the Whisperer reported. She had not the means to resist physically but had done the best she could in her unwinnable situation. “She really did as much as she could” Varys had told Eddard lately. The Whisperer seemed to be trying to stress something. Eddard was not sure he was ready to hear that yet.
He observed his daughters walking down the hall. Arya had started to wear a martial attire three
days past. Eddard had to admit Arya cut a dashing figure. She had on a double layer leather vest
cross stitched up horizontally on the front from her throat to her belt line. The leather dark brown
with a dark brown two inch belt belted with a buckle with tails hanging down. Her shoulders had
cuffs with more supple leather arms sleeves down to her wrist. The arm slightly darker.

Arya had on a dark grey skirt down to her knees. It was slit on both sides halfway to the hips. She
had the same dark brown leather as her leggings. She had on short heeled boots that came up to her
knees. She looked like a Bravo with hints of Westerosi to her. Eddard had to admit it looked good
on his daughter.

She had a rapier and Needle sheathed in their scabbards on her right hip. The pommels cross laid.
She pulled her blades cross draw. On her left hip was a long dagger. On each leg, through the slit
Eddard saw throwing daggers strapped to Arya’s thighs. She looked deadly.

Eddard noticed that Arya’s hair had a spikey look. Her thick hair made it stand up. It would be
another inch or two before it began to lay flat.

Sansa by contrast was dressed every inch the Royal Princess. Again Eddard thought the look totally
fit his daughter who now was as tall as he was. A fact that subtly bothered the man. He had to
admit it. Did that affect his judgement of his daughter? It couldn’t, could it? Eddard was not sure
and that bothered him greatly. He knew he had to be a better man than that.

His tall redheaded daughter had on a deep navy blue dress that was almost black. The dress had
large shoulders and with a synch to the waist to show his daughter’s beautiful build. The skirt down
to the floor. The middle of the dress from her shoulders had faceted light blue rectangular pleats that
narrowed down to the waist. The same design running down Sansa’s inner arms down to the wrists.

Her skirt in the middle had light blue fabric running from her stomach to the floor. She had
diamonds of light blue running from her stomach up and over her hips and down to the sacrum of her
back. She had puffed vertical rectangles of the light blue material fashioned to look like large buttons
down the upper middle of her dress.

This was set offset by a lace black choker. Sansa’s hair pulled back behind her ears with gold hoop
earrings on.

Eddard thought she was stunning. She was as beautiful as her mother. Eddard was thankful that
Sansa had taken after her mother. She would make any man proud to have her as his wife.

The father felt his anger flare again at Sansa. Why had she betrayed him?! He paused his steps down
the hall.

Eddard Stark was a brave man but he dearly wanted to turn around and flee down the hall he had
just come down and duck in a door and let his daughters pass. Yes, he was a brave man on the field
of battle. A sword or axe whistling at his head or heart he could deal with. Complicated emotions
that coursed through Eddard when he saw Sansa was something he was not handling very well.

He thought to turn tail and run but he would not do that. He may feel extreme discomfiture being
around his daughter now but he could not let that affect his ability to lead and meet a challenge. He
walked slowly down the hall towards Arya and Sansa who were talking with waving hands. They
looked up as he came down the hall towards them. The stopped walking and their conversation
ceased.

The two daughters of Eddard turned to look at their father. Arya made direct eye contact her back
straight and her feet planted. She had always been filled with the ‘wolf’ but her training with Syrio was giving Arya a new sense of confidence and belief in herself. She radiated power and confidence now.

The King pursed his lips. He had noticed shortly after his taking the throne from the Lannisters the change in his daughters. It quickly became evident that the events the two young women had endured had changed them. Eddard easily accepted the fact that his two little girls were women now. Sansa had grown the last year gaining four inches in height and her body filling out into a voluptuous woman with the classical measurements.

Arya still had a youngish and boyish caste to her features. She in many ways still looked like a young preteen with her girlish features of flat chest and small bottom. Her figure did not have the womanly swales that her older sister had.

No. It was a mental maturity that made Arya seem mature now. She had lead an Insurrection. It had been her passion and willingness to take risks that had inspired the people around her to risk their lives to first save Eddard Stark and then place him on the throne. She had the gift of charisma. People just wanted to follow her lead. But it was more than that. Her air of maturity had much to do with experiences earned. Arya had fought in combat and killed men with her own hand. Arya was not an innocent anymore. She was woman who had killed in combat. That changed a person. Made a person age.

With darting eyes the father took in his daughters. He would never have believed it possible but it was clearly evident that Arya and her older sister had started to bond. Their ordeals had given them a common thread to share and start to bring them together. Were before there was rancor between the sisters one could now see the true beginnings of understanding and acceptance.

In fact, Arya was doing a much better job of that than her adult father.

Sansa was wilting before his eyes. For some reason this angered Eddard. Sansa had been the cause of Eddard’s capture and near beheading. She had been the one to tell Cersei Lannister of his plans to flee King’s Landing and expose the truth of her children. It had been Sansa that had betrayed him. Not some spy or nefarious double agent. It had been his own daughter and she did not have the strength of character or will to stand and look the father she had betrayed in the eyes.

The father felt his anger boiling over again. He tried to control it but he failed miserable in the attempt. Sansa saw his anger clearly on his face. In his steel grey eyes igniting with ire. He watched his eldest daughter’s lips begin to tremble and then she turned and fled down the hall from whence she had come. Eddard felt a pang of guilt but his anger quickly subsumed that guilt.

His daughter had betrayed him. It was really that simple. He watched the retreating form of his eldest slowly shrink as she ran down the long hall of the Keep. Then she turned down a side hall and was gone. Only then did he turn to face his younger daughter. The daughter who had saved him. The daughter whose own steel grey eyes burned with fire and rage.

“What the hell is your problem father?!” Arya spat at her father.

His eyes flared open as the father absorbed the words of his savoir. Her tone of disrespect rankled the new King. “I would remind you Arya that I am your father.”

“Yes. You are. But you are still acting like an ass. No. Worse yet. You are acting like Cersei Lannister!”

“Don’t you ever compare me to that woman! I have never done the cruel things that she had done”
Eddard roared at the barb that hit home though he could not admit it.

“And yet you treat her better than you treat your own daughter. Where is the justice in that I ask father?!”

That gave Eddard pause. His mind worked out his answer. He analyzed his thoughts and feelings. After five seconds he responded to his youngest daughter “She is a conquered foe I have defeated on the field of combat. Be it the field of Game of Thrones. Cersei told me to play to win. You gave me the second chance to do that daughter. I am being magnanimous to my defeated foe. It is called being honorable Arya.”

The fourteen year old mulled that over. “Yes. I again agree with that father but it does not excuse the way you are treating your own flesh and blood. You treat your enemy better than your own daughter. It disgusts me.”

Eddard now felt his dander rising up. He did not like this new side of Arya but he had to accept it. She was a woman now. She had her own thoughts and sensibilities. He did not agree with them in this matter. It did not mean that it didn’t piss him off. The new King narrowed his eyes controlling his ire.

“Let me ask you something Arya. Youngest daughter of my body. Did you betray me?”

“You know the answer to that question father.”

“Would you have ever told Cersei my plans and actions?”

“You know I would not.”

“Yet your sister who is three years older than you did. She was besotted with that boy who is clearly a mean little shit. We both saw it upon our arrival here. Why could not Sansa?”

“Because of mother.”

Eddard could see that. Catelyn was always preaching to Sansa on how to be a lady.

“Because of her father.”

“WHAT! That is a fucking lie! Take that back!” Eddard was completely blindsided by this pronouncement by his youngest daughter. Where had she gotten that notion? “You insult me!”

Arya locked eyes with her father. Her demeanor placid like the way her father normally comported himself. “Does the truth hurt that much father? I find the truth self-evident.”

The way Arya made these comments so calm and measured gave Eddard pause. In a way Arya was starting to unsettle Eddard. To have her so calmly announce her pronouncements with her steady eyes that were a mirror image of his own gave the new King pause.

With several deep breaths Eddard calmed his ire yet again. He felt his body shaking but with will calmed his body.

“Okay Arya. I have calmed down. Please explain your rational. I totally reject what you have just said.”

Arya looked away. She herself took a deep breath. It was evident she too was controlling her own anger.
“I have always had a big advantage over Sansa. Jon and I both had it growing up. Our mother never accepted us. With Jon it was his bastard heritage.” She saw her father wince. “With me it was more subtle. I have always been different. I have never accepted the role that mother gave me. I fought her tooth and nail. I suffered from mother’s bile and ire. It made me strong.”

“Not so with Sansa. She was what mother always wanted. But even that was not enough. Mother has never been free with her praise father. You know this. She loves us all fiercely and would lay her life down for her children but she almost never gives a hug or says I love you.”

Eddard heard the words and immediately saw the truth in them. He and Cat were both taciturn people. They were not given to showing or displaying affection. Cat was too fierce and her sense of duty to focused for it. For himself, Eddard knew he was awkward and shy with his emotions. He had supported his children but he knew that he too was guilty of what Arya had said. He would not deny it now that he saw it.

“Again I must say okay Arya. You have a point. Your mother and I are not overly affectionate and your mother is driven by her Tully sense of duty and accepting burdens but this does not make Sansa’s failures our fault. She is a young woman now who must shoulder the responsibilities of her own decisions.”

“On the surface, those words are true and just but they belie the truth of the situation.” Arya paused. Her father cocked an eyebrow asking her to continue.

“Mother enforced a faery tail reality upon Sansa. Sansa being easy natured and” Arya sighed “I must say it—a little slow in her ability to handle hard reality. We both know father life can be full of shit. Sansa avoided that at all cost. Her mentors forced that upon her. Mother forced Sansa to be the perfect maid and so the perfect maid she became. She was supposed to fall in love with Joffrey. So she did. Even if he is a little shit!”

Eddard snorted at that. It was funny. Truthful and funny. His humor died remembering that faery tale had nearly gotten him killed.

“Sansa had been prepared from the cradle to believe all those stupid minstrel songs that are full of shit themselves. I have fought in battles now father. The minstrels never sing of the screams of the dying, the raw fear of dying. Seeing limbs severed and men trying to hold in their guts from cut bellies. The smell of offal and death. I have always lived in the reality of life. Sansa has lived in the make believe world of minstrel songs.”

“If she dare stray from those ludicrous lyrics mother was right there to berate her back into submission. When she tried to do that with me I fought back.”

Eddard again breathed deep. He was following Arya so far.

“I fought back and though you complained and cried out I was filled with the wolf like your sister had been before me you always supported me. You kept mother at bay. You allowed me to be me even if you groused the whole time.”

Eddard had to smile at that.

“Your support meant everything to me. You did not give Sansa that support.”

That whipped the smile from Eddard’s face. He did not like Arya turning her ire on him. “I don’t see your point Arya. Sansa never fought back.”
“Exactly father. Mother cowed and made her into a puppet. Sansa was afraid to be anything else. That is why we always fought so much. I saw her subjugation and it angered me she did not fight back. You should have stepped in to protect Sansa and Jon because they would not fight for themselves. They accepted the status quo and that was good enough for you. It is the father’s duty to protect his children. All of his children. Even if it is from their own mother.”

Eddard eyes narrowed. He was a fair man. He looked at Arya’s words from all angles trying to see it from Arya’s viewpoint. He paused considering. He weighed what he had just heard. He did not like how the scales of justice were tipping. Still, he was in the right. He had to be Eddard thought. He had done what he did for the right reasons he reasoned.

He sighed again.

“I hear you words Arya. … I don’t agree with them but I can see it from your viewpoint. I did the best I could at the time. I did not see the need to come Sansa’s defense because I saw no conflict. With you I saw the conflict and turmoil and I acted. Arya, I can’t read minds. I love your mother and I think she has raised her children well. She may have made mistakes but all parents make mistakes they would undo …” Eddard looked off into the distance.

Now was not the moment but he knew that soon he must confess the true parentage of Jon. Robert was dead.

“Sansa is still responsible for her actions but I will consider your words. Perhaps she was molded to be …. susceptible to fairytales. I don’t know Arya. I am terribly hurt by Sansa’s betrayal. It is as simple as that. I will think on this more daughter.”

With locked eyes Arya looked into her father’s soul. The eyes are the portal to the soul.

“I know you will father. Sansa was a child. A little girl caught in a world she was not prepared for. I can see that. I forgive her. She has grown. I can see it. I would hope that the father that I emulate could do the same. You did let her down father. Whether or not you see it. You were not there for her when she truly needed you to become what she is meant to be. You shirked that responsibility.”

With that Arya Stark turned and walked down the hall that she had come up. Ready to meet the challenges of her life.

Eddard watched her walk away. His soul in turmoil. He watched his daughter depart with shoulders squared and head held high. She truly was becoming a warrior. She had already become a woman. She would never shirk from fear or turn away from what must be done. She had raised the ugly truth between them. Her remarks had hit home with unerring aim. Eddard resumed walking down the hall. He wondered at himself. He knew what the “right” thing to do was. The thing that the Septons would say. What the scripture would say. Forgive.

With slow measured steps Eddard Stark the King of Westeros walked down the hall with head bowed. He was in a way at war with himself. He was at heart a forgiving man. A man who tried to see the best in people. To try and make the best of the situation. He had done this his whole life. In following that ethos, it had nearly cost him his life.

He paused in his steps and his thoughts.

His mind again made the only association it could. The reason his life was put in jeopardy was because of his daughter. If she had kept quite then he and his family would have slipped out of King’s Landing and arrived back in Winterfell safe and sound. Cersei was not really much of a strategic thinker. He would have made good his escape.
Instead, Sansa had told Cersei his plans. It was inconceivable to him that his own daughter could be so naïve or dare he think it; stupid. Everyone could see what a schemer and how maniacal Cersei Lannister was in her pursuit of her goals.

His thoughts whirled around inside him like gyre. Arya’s words came back to him. “Sansa lives in a fairytale world”. Eddard had blithely told Sansa his plans but did he once tell her that she needed to keep his plans a secret. That if word of his plans got out that it could lead to calamity. Had Sansa been prepared for the rough world of reality and not the world of songs? Songs that spoke of ideals and not reality.

For a minute the new King stood in the hall. His mind racing with memories and thoughts. Should he have said those words? Why hadn’t he? Now his conscious gnawed at him. Why hadn’t he warned Sansa the need for secrecy? He would have told this to any non-family member. Had he been that blind? He once more started walking down the hall. The turmoil in his soul only increasing.

Het turned it all over in his mind but it still came back to the fact that Sansa had betrayed him. Still, Arya had altered Eddard’s soul and id. He had a much better understanding now of his eldest daughter might have been thinking. With Robb he had been preparing his first son to one day take the helm of the North as its next Warden.

Arya by her very fiery nature and unwillingness to ‘bend the knee’ to her mother or to him quite actually had prepared herself for the cauldron that was King’s Landing. Jon he supposed had been formed in the same crucible as Arya.

Eddard stopped again. He really, really needed to come clean about Jon. Arya would be furious. Catelyn would be furious. Hell, he was furious with himself. With Robert now dead it seemed silly in a way his long silence on Jon. Lyanna had been correct of course. She had sworn him to secrecy. It made all the sense in the world actually. Robert had proved his moral blind spot when it came to Targaryen’s at the sack of King’s Landing.

*Why hadn’t he stood up to his friend then!* Is it honorable to think a thought and then not act on it? He had burned with rage at what had been done to Elia and her children. That had been a sin against man and the old gods. *He should have acted!* He had not. *What the fuck had been wrong with him* Eddard now raged at his past self. If he had acted then the events of the recent past would not have occurred. Would something better have happened? Or worse? Only the fates knew.

With measured steps the new King walked down the hall again. He had much to think on. He was realizing that knowing and doing were two vastly different things.

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It was late the next day. Eddard walked the halls of King’s Landing like a caged Shadowcat. He paced the halls in a circular pattern that took him up and down the stairs and down the long halls. He was hemmed in. He was safe but he knew he was trapped. He could smuggle himself out as others were smuggling themselves in. More and more forces that had no love for the Lannisters were coming to his flag. He had now over four hundred former forces of Rhaegar that had come to him. He was using these men to leaven the force of the Gold Cloaks.

These new men gave the forces of the King backbone. They were training the forces they were part of. The Gold Cloaks were actually becoming a fighting force. He had the men training extensively learning to draw and release bows. Eddard had sent out word to the resident’s that he was looking for archers and would pay good coin for bows and for arrows.
The man smiled. Many of the bows had been pieces of garbage but enough were of serviceable merit and a few were old gems. Many had come in saying they were archers that had fought in Robert’s Rebellion. Eddard never asked which side they fought on. He had them to demonstrate their skills. Many could not even string the bows they were given to show their skills with. Others succeeded. Finally. Some had broken fingers and large blood bruises on their forearms with a few broken noises added to the mix.

While the chaff was thick there were indeed kernels to be found. He had added two hundred eighty men and seven women who seemed to be actually skilled. Between them and the Gold Cloaks learning the bow he had a sizable force of archers forming. The new recruits had brought in a sizable number of arrows. He had put out word he would pay two copper pence for each arrow. Phirona Ormonnis and Saelalys Narennis had setup a cottage industry of making arrows. They had selected ten skilled arrow makers and they were busy producing arrows.

A nice stockpile was forming up. He would use what he had.

He walked down the halls looking right and left. He did not see the tapestries or displays of wealth or force of arms. He had much on his mind. He had foes on the outside of King’s Landing and internal strife with his daughters inside the walls. The man truly wished he was outside the walls of King’s Landing fighting for his life. He smirked with a squint smile as he moved further down the hall for yet another round of almost aimless wandering.

He was still trying to process his emotions over Sansa. He was still extremely angry with his eldest daughter but he felt the anger was more manageable now. His dialog with Arya had the father thinking. He sighed. If he was counseling some other father in this situation he would tell the man to be forgiving. To understand the motivation of his eldest daughter. He knew he was being a hypocrite. He simply could not change his feelings. Not yet. It was so easy to counsel but it was so hard to take said counsel.

He was by the door to the room that the youngest Lannister children had setup as their roost. Matamion and Jaehaegar the two Valyrians from House Velnalys stood guard. They had nodded to him with each circuit of his walk through the Red Keep. He thought he would step in and see them. He found them to be so mature for their age. How they had not become like their parents or grandfather he had no idea. They were still decent and well centered. He found Myrcella especially precocious.

He turned the handle and entered the room. Eddard immediately paused in his steps. Beside the Lannister princess at the table sat Sansa. They were talking and giggling with smiles on both of their faces. When Sansa saw her father her face fell and she turned pale. Eddard again felt the anger flare in his veins. Seeing Sansa reminded Eddard again that she nearly caused his death. The King schooled his features taking a deep breath. Even as he did so he could not forget his eldest daughter would have gotten her father killed if not for the intervention of Arya and her successful Insurrection of House Lannister.

True Eddard had lead it at the end but he could not have done so if Arya had not started the beginning of the Insurrection. She had fought in every battle. She had proven herself a true warrior.

Sansa stood up and trembled. Myrcella attempted to grab her hand but Sansa was already moving to leave the room. She took a circular route out of the room to avoid her father. She opened the door and left. Eddard heard her sniffles. He saw the glare from Jaehaegar. The man did not hide his displeasure with his King. The door was closed.

Eddard head bowed and he took a deep breath. He had tried to school his features. He had not stared at his daughter or spoke cruelly to her. He had controlled himself well he thought.
He turned to look at the two youngest children of Cersei Lannister. Tommen was reading a book while a cat lounged on his lap and another cat was swiping at his hand each time Tommen moved his fingers on the book. Tommen was focused on the book. Eddard was sure that was deliberate on Tommen’s part. That could not be said of Myrcella. She stared at the King with that steady gaze that now unnerved the man.

“I did not bark at her. I did not tell her to leave” Eddard spoke defensively. He held his hands up to show his innocence.

“You did not need to. Your eyes spoke for you.”

Eddard ground his teeth. He looked away and walked around the room looking at everything and nothing. He knew the daughter of Cersei still had more to say.

“I wonder when you will execute Joffrey, Tommen and myself” Myrcella spoke as if she was discussing philosophy.

Eddard whipped around to glare at the girl. “I have told you that you are safe!” barked at the child. Again he took a deep breath to calm his ire. “I do not hold the child responsible for the sins of the parents. You are blameless.”

“And yet you cannot forgive your own daughter. Why should I believe that you can forgive me and my siblings when you cannot forgive your own daughter” was Myrcella rejoinder. Succinct and to the point.

Still moving around the room, Eddard, pretended to be looking at what his hands touched. Her words had punctured his soul like long bow arrows. His soul flinched.

“I forgave your mother. Anyone else would have put her to the sword. I spared you all when I was counseled to kill your mother and her progeny.”

“And Sansa?”

Eddard turned to look Myrcella in the eyes. She did not flinch.

“I don’t know Myrcella. Sansa hurt me deeply. I hope I can find it in my heart to forgive her. That I can work through this. I would love to see how you would handle such a betrayal.”

Myrcella did not speak. She merely bowed her head slightly. She then looked again directly at the man who said he would spare her from death.

“Show me the purity of your words my King.” With that the girl opened a book and began to pretend to read.

They were at an impasse. He tipped his head and left the room. In a strange way, he felt his wounds being lanced. It hurt like hell but it was necessary. Sansa was indeed weak in many ways. She was what his wife had made her. He grimaced. He knew he not once intervened for his children with Catelyn except for Arya. Her resemblance to Lyanna triggering emotions deep in his heart.

No, now Eddard cringed at his past actions. He had to be honest with himself now. He must. Avoidance had been his mantra. Eddard had to acknowledge that he too had had a major hand in shaping his eldest daughter.

He sighed again. It was time to pace the halls again. His agitation only increasing instead of lessening with caged pacing.
Two days later, Varys opened the door to the chamber that housed the Small Council. He stepped in. His gaze was always attracted to the two dragon sphinxes on the back wall. The two sentinels standing on their pedestals in a half sitting repose. Their guard vigilant and eternal. The onyx dark with hidden truths. The secrets they must have seen the Whisper thought looking at their folded wings with their female bodies and faces.

On the far end of the table was the chair carved with stylized interlocked hands adorning the high chair back. The ears stylized as dragons in repose. The stiles carved to represent the limbs and leaves of the mysterious Weirwood trees. It really was a work of art.

At the other end of the long rectangular table sat Eddard Stark. His king. He sat in a chair like the other members of the Small Council. He had removed the ornate, plush chair that Robert Baratheon had sat in. The message clear. I am only a man. Varys again wondered of this strange man who was now King. Where was the overweening ego? Eddard was truly unique.

Varys snorted to himself. This man was so much more than any man he had met before. He had grown mightily since the neophyte that fist walked into this chamber.

Eddard had just cut off his hair again Varys saw. He wondered why.

"Why the haircut my liege?"

"Varys" Eddard lifted his head from the reports he was reading acknowledging his Hand. "I did not like the roots. So I cut it all off. I want only my natural hair color to show."

"I see you are still shaving."

The eunuch watched Eddard move his hand up to touch his face and rub the back of his fingers along his right cheek.

"Yes. My wife has hinted she would like to see the beard go. Well it is gone so I am maintaining the smooth look. Hopefully, Cat will like it."

The King then held up a few parchment pages from the folder he was reading from.

"So you think that this Dromen Salver will make a good Grand Maester?" the King asked his Hand.

Varys took a deep breath. "I would hope my—Eddard. He has a Vaylrian Steel link. I think that is most advantageous with all these prophecies floating about magic returning. He is young and vital as per your instruction. Hopefully, he had not become jaded."

Eddard shook his head in agreement to the Spider’s words. "But does he believe truly in magic or merely as an academic?" Eddard asked.

"He would have to have studied with Maester Marwyn. Only time and familiarity will answer that question Eddard."

He watched Eddard read some more on the prospective candidate to be the Grand Maester to the King.

"It says he is quite fond of the whores in Oldtown” Eddard sighed “Can’t anyone keep their vows” he carped to himself.
Varys kept his council to himself. Rare was the man like Eddard Stark. Of course the fates conspired against others to keep their vows Varys thought with resignation. The cruelty of life that harmed ones such as himself and Sandor Clegane while still children and helpless.

“I see he has the black iron link so our ravens will be happy … bronze—hmmmm … astronomy and astrology. That would support magic I would think … copper—engineering … yellow gold—good at math and economics. That is something we will need help with the enormous debt Robert left us with. Pewter and platinum (Eddard looked at another sheet … “what is pewter – ahhhh manufacturing, platinum and silver—hmmmm two links of silver. Good, good. Always need a good doctor. And lastly steel. Quite accomplished I would say.”

The King read a little more but then he looked up and around. “Where is Sandor? He knows it is time for our meeting.”

“I fear there was a disturbance down in the kitchen between two of the cooks. Devolved into a food fight I hear. He went down to restore order.”

The Hand watched his King blanch.

“Don’t worry Eddard. I saw him just as he was heading down. I reminded him not to bite.” Eddard only looked a little relieved. He clearly had doubts as to Sandor’s self-control.

“I have something I wish to talk to you of before Sandor comes.”

“Okay Varys.”

“I want to talk about Sansa and you not forgiving her Eddard. You need to do so. She is extremely sorry and has learned from her mistake.”

Eddard had lost his perpetual half smile. He stared down the table at Varys.

“You have basically forgiven the Baratheons. It is time for you to forgive Sansa.”

“It was you who told me of her betrayal” Eddard spoke with flint in his words.

“Yes I did my liege. You needed to know. Plus, you would hear of this eventually. Better from me at the start. This prevented any false fronts between you and Sansa.”

“I see” Eddard spoke flatly. He was looking at Varys with a stone face. He was betraying none of his thoughts. “So I should just act like nothing happened then?”

“I did not say that my King. I merely advise it is time for you to work out your feeling and forgive your sweet daughter. She has suffered enough with her situation. First with Cersei and Joffrey and now, alas, you.” He held his king’s eyes. The man’s jaw clenched.

To Eddard’s credit Varys thought, he allowed his Hand to speak to him thus.

The door to the Small Council chamber banged open starting both men. Sandor barged in wiping his cloak over his face several times before he shoved it behind his shoulders. He had food stains on his clothes and armor. There was some mash potatoes in his hair. He had an exasperated look on his face. He did a quick scan of the room.

“Damn women” he muttered. “One skirmish put down.”

He looked at his King. He took a deep breath.
“I wish to speak to you directly my King before we begin our meeting. If I could my liege”

Varys watched the man turn to Sandor. He was clearly thankful for the diversion.”

“Yes Sandor. What do you wish to discuss?” Eddard asked the man giving Varys a smug look.

“You need to forgive Sansa my King.” Sandor looked directly at the King expectantly.

Varys felt his face take on a feral grin. Eddard’s face was back to looking most unhappy.

“Yessssssss?!” Eddard grated out. He looked back at Sandor.

Sandor went on “You see we have the scales of justice.” Eddard face scrunched. Varys too wondered where Sandor was going with this. Sandor held his hands out, palms up and motioned them up and down like scales. “On one side we have the harridan harpy Cersei Lannister. On the other we have a sweet red canary—that would be Sansa my King.”

Eddard rolled his eyes.

“You are giving Cersei the Vile fair treatment while you are treating your daughter, the Lovely Songbird wh—“

“Canaries are yellow Sandor” Eddard blandly told Sandor.

The tall scared man looked confused for a moment. Then his visage cleared.

“Whatever. You are acting must unseemly—“

SLAM Eddard stood up so fast Varys had not even seen him rise. His palms slapped the table hard his body leaned forward. He glared at Varys and the Hound. He then stood up and silently left the room. The temperature had dropped twenty degrees in the room Varys was sure. The silent egress ended at the door.

Sandor and Varys looked at the door. A door that had slammed shut with a mighty reverberating bang. The Hound looked at Varys perplexed.

“What is his problem?”

Varys could only sigh. The hound could be extremely obtuse.

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He was up on the walls of King’s Landing yet again. His restless energy needed to be released. It had him walking on the battlements. His mind filled with swirling thoughts. He looked back down at the rolling grasslands and small hamlets that surrounded King’s Landing. A land now filled with Lannisters.

The Lannisters were finishing off their drills and exercises for the day. The forces seemed to be well maintained with high enough moral. They knew that reinforcements were coming. This had been going on for three weeks now.

A standoff. In a way they too were caged. The only difference was that they were on the outside of the bars. They may be looking into the cage but they had no freedom to leave. He was on the wall that Lannister waves threatened to crash against and over.

Eddard had been studying them for these past three weeks. It was time to stir up the hornet’s nest.
At a slow trot Jaime rode his horse. He looked around at the surrounding scrubland. He and his company was moving between Hayford Castle and Stokeworth. He spied the waddles of trees and deep gullies that crisscrossed this land. He was chasing again the forces of Beric Dondarrion. The forces of the man always seemed to be just beyond the next small hill or corpse of trees.

Jaime cursed softly. He was terribly frustrated. He and the Mountain, Gregor Clegane, had at first enjoyed success against the man. Beric had attempted to fight him directly. The engagements went badly for the man. Jaime and his superior forces constantly had their enemy in retreat. The Lannisters were wearing their enemy down. Each battle bleeding both sides but Jaime had the superior forces. This allowed him to absorb losses. Plus, the superior numbers gave him tactical advantage he used to inflict serious losses on his foe.

Then overnight it seemed like their tactics changed. They no longer opposed them directly but switched to hit and run attacks. Now it was ambush with advantage and slip away into the wild country. One never knew when the attacks would come. What seemed like a place for ambush foregone only to strike when not expected in a site that did not seem so advantageous. The surprise of attack made it so.

Beric no longer cared to hold ground. They easily surrendered cities to them only to retake them when Jaime moved on. He did not have the numbers to hold what he took. He had to double back and retake a city for strategic holding of ground and keeping the populace under control. He was literally running around in circles. Still, to continue his attacks Jaime would soon have to pull those forces to continue the chase. The damn tableau replayed itself again and again and all the time suffering attacks.

The attacks were bad enough. It was the snipping by bowmen that was most disconcerting and will sapping. A sudden blizzard of arrows or the single arrow taking out a lieutenant or sergeant. It seemed as if the arrows came from the very Earth. How these snipers could disappear into the land was beyond Jaime.

Then he had received another huge shock. They had been going through a holdfast and the people who had feared them now stood on the side of the road with a knowing look on their faces. The fear the populace had shown the Lannisters was gone. His forces had wanted to strike them down but Jaime had stopped them. Killing the populace only heightened their hatred of the Lannister and made them more likely to assist his enemies.

What had changed Jaime wondered. He had to know.

He and his men moved down the lane. When they were several hundred yards beyond the small holdfast Jaime ordered his men to continue down the lane. He turned around and alone went to the old men, women and children of the small community. They still stood solemnly by the side of the road. Almost as if they were waiting for Jaime. The thought disturbed the vain elegant man.

Jaime pulled his horse to a stop in front of the silent almost ghoulish people. The people staring up

“You are a Lannister. Your House is not the honorable lion of your standard. You rape and kill” a middle age woman told him with sullen anger.

Jaime was shocked to hear his House so put. What was worse he knew the woman was right. He remembered the sack of King’s Landing a generation past. He had had no part of that. Still he could not deny it. Now his commanders wanted to again terrorize the local populace.

At first, he had not cared. But the repressed anger he saw present in the populace’s faces told him they were creating future fighters. Those under his direct command he reigned in as well as he could. The ambushes made them restive. He knew how his father would deal with the populace.

Still, he was not his father. A mailed fist if used too often made one inured to it.

Jaime looked down at the woman. She did not flinch.

“I can only speak for my command. You will not suffer from my troops. It is counterproductive.”

“And of compassion? Of right?”

Jaime could only stare down at her. Her words roiled his conscious but he would not show it. Jaime’s unsettled soul writhed more within his armored breast. His hands wrung the reigns in them. All these ambushes had put Jaime off his center. It cracked his self-control. Memories long repressed had started to once more seep out.

The woman in her early fifties who was obviously the leader looked at the half of the community that had been burned by forces of another Lannister Captain. She returned her steady gaze to Jaime.

“I had nothing to do with that. I give you my word as a Lannister to not bring any harm to you for what you tell me now.”

She merely looked at him.

He felt suddenly soiled for some reason. “I, Jaime Lannister, promise to you, that I will not do anything against your community with what you tell me. I can make no stronger oath.”

The woman openly sneered up at Jaime Lannister. “I repeat. Your family is known for the murder of innocents.” She looked around at her ruined community. “I have heard the story of Elia whom you did not protect.”

“I knew nothing of that!” Jaime shouted down at the woman. He felt anger and shame flush through him. He had many things hurled at him but not that. The memory of Bran Stark came to him. He calmed down. These damn ambushes had unsettled Jaime. “I am no innocent I admit. I have committed my crimes against man and the gods. But not this time. Will you tell me? I see the change. What has caused it?” Now, the woman smiled softly.

“King’s Landing has fallen to the Wolves. Your sister and lover is taken prisoner as are your children. Eddard Stark has risen from the dungeons healed of the crime you committed against him. The Kingsguard have been slaughtered. The Lions are disposed. The Wolves ascendant. A new world order is taking root. You are dead man walking. Eddard will kill you like he should have during Robert Rebellion.”

Jaime was shaken to his core. He remembered back to King’s Landing during its sack by his father. Eddard had been so self-righteous then. The man had an air about him that made Jaime hesitate. He
had been thankful to put the Stark down back in that courtyard in King’s Landing. How this resurrection of Eddard Stark could be disconcerted the Lannister. It seemed impossible. He had seen the ruined knee. This news of the man’s rebirth shocked him.

He hoped he did not show it but he could not be sure. He could not afford to show such weakness to the populace if Eddard had arisen like some phoenix reborn. He rode away not saying anything more or looking back. He knew she spoke truly. With Eddard in control of King’s Landing and his sister and her children as hostages everything was totally undone. He was not sure how to move forward.

He gripped himself. He had to move forward. He would have to win out. It was imperative. That was not what had happened.

That had been a week ago. Something fundamentally had changed. His enemies were suddenly always one step ahead of him no matter what he tired. He tried to outflank his enemy. He tried to taking back trails. He tried to bull rush charge the enemy where his scouts said they were but were not there when he could bring forces to bear.

It had become terribly frustrating to the Lannister. It was if the enemy had eyes in the sky constantly watching everything he did. Dundarrion was now always one step ahead of him. Over the last two weeks he had ridden into ambushes that nearly decimated a company of men. They knew exactly where and when to attack to have maximum affect and then they seemed to melt away. He had found a few of the bastard’s men but he had lost over six or seven men for every man he killed. He feared the ratios were worse with other forces under the Lannister banner out in the field.

Something else had changed from the start of their successful campaign to purge the land of wolves. With no warning men were dropping dead out of the saddle with a longbow arrow through the eye or throat. Usually it was one man but sometimes up to three. The only known being the direction of the arrow shot. The point of origin hundreds of yards distant. He and his men would flush the area from where the shot had to have to have come from. They never found anyone.

Jaime examined the arrows. They were extremely long and very well crafted. The arrows were not shot by some conscript who was merely firing arrows to fire them. He was sure that the bows firing these arrows were had a very heavy pull weight. All the fletching were hawk feathers.

Some new ally had joined Eddard Stark. Damn!

Again he was riding down a track in the hills that ran to the north and east of King’s Landing. He saw a flower by the side of the road. It was red with a blue center. He had not seen its kind before. He passed it. He leaned down and back to keep looking at it. He gasped feeling air whip by his ear and the whistling that a longbow arrow made. Jaime glanced up and snarled seeing the arrow streak on into the distance.

He kicked his horse forward. His men were reacting pointing at a nearby series of hills and a large stand of woods. Three days past his men had been near another woods when arrows came shooting out. Two men fell dead with another severely injured. There had been more than one man firing that time. His men rushed in wildly as he yelled at them to stop but the constant ambushes had them filled with the need for revenge.

Seven of the men did come out of those woods alive. Four were never found.

Jaime stopped his horse ashen face. If he had not bent to look at that flower … he would be dead. He shook his head. At least his men’s discipline had improved. They had not gone charging into the woods to get feathered. He led his men on till he came to a large flat expanse of land. He had
learned to not make camp near hills, woods or gullies. He heard the ravens and crows cawing.

The damn birds were everywhere now. The land had become a feast for crows. Dead bodies of men, horses and stock animals littered the countryside. He was making camp now. The sun would set in an hour. He set his picket lines. He would have set only one picket line just a month ago but now he set three. With any less shadows would come into the camp to kill a handful of men with slit throats in their blankets. It was truly harrowing.

Jaime sat beside the cook fire. He shared his meals with his men. The other officers were near their tent. They always had a little more food and drink. Jaime said nothing. Now was not the time to worry about such things. His men did not talk to him. He was the son of Tywin Lannister. Why should they? Were not the Lannisters superior to other men of lesser houses? His father always going on about how the only thing that mattered was the honor of one’s House. The person did not matter.

*What bullshit!* Jaime stormed in his mind. Sometimes he wanted to punch his father in the face when he spewed that tripe. Instead he merely stood there while his father pontificated. *So much for being a hero* Jaime mused on himself meanly.

He missed Cersei something fierce. He should have been there to save her. He had taken the field never considering that Eddard Stark would rise up to lead an Insurrection. No, that was not correct. More rumors had surfaced. It had been Arya Stark that had lead the Insurrection that freed her father. He had at first disbelieved what he heard. Surely a woman could not have done such a thing. Especially a teenage girl.

He stared off into the night. He remember his sister being so upset that she was not allowed to take up the sword. She had been angry at him for not supporting her against their father. *What the hell was he supposed to do against their father?* Why couldn’t she just accept her fate like he did? She was a woman. They did not do such things. *Did they?*

Now Eddard had taken the Red Keep. Now the walls of the city barred him from going to his sister. He couldn’t go to her anyways. He had a responsibility to his men even if they felt no love for him.

He wondered about the safety of his sister and the children that though of his body were not his. He had never been allowed to form a bond with them. To Jaime, Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen may as well have been strangers from a strange land. Worse, Jaime realized, he never cared to form a bond with his own children. Never. He looked into the flames of the fire. What did they say of him as a man? Clearly, he was no father. Damn these ambushes. He took a deep breath. He mused on life and its meanings if any. He sighed again. It was too late now.

He missed his sister. He wanted to make love to her. She was so fiery and passionate. She was too driven he knew but he could not help but be attracted by her intensity. Even after bearing his three children he could not acknowledge as his she was still beautiful to him as when they first lay together.

His father and sadly Cersei were only focused on power and its acquisition. He did not share their singular desire for ever more power.

Jaime just wanted to love his sister and live a life with her. A life where he could acknowledge his children. A world where he did not have to be at the door guarding it while a fat drunken oaf fucked his sister.

Jaime looked into the flames of the fire before him. *Again. Too late.*
Well, that problem was gone. Now he only had to worry about that sanctimonious asshole Eddard Stark now on the Iron Throne. At least the man was so constipated that Jaime seriously doubted the Iron Throne would even prick his iron ass cheeks. He looked up from the fire and into the darkness surrounding his camp.

The heir of Casterly rock, well except for being part of the Kingsguard, sighed. He would do his duty. He knew one thing about Eddard Stark. He may have a stick up his ass but he would never kill innocents in the Game of Thrones. Jaime’s children were safe. He still shivered seeing the broken bodies of Rhaegar’s wife and children in his mind’s eye. His mind drifted back to Eddard’s father and brother. He suddenly stood up.

Damn! He hated fighting the ghosts from a time long past. He had put them to bed years ago. Not anymore. Events were conspiring to raise them from the dead. The dead of the past haunting the living now. Damn his father for lack of control on his forces. He could never show his shock and revulsion. No one would have cared anyways.

He walked around the campfire. He would not be sleeping well tonight.

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Branton Lannister of Lannisport looked up at the tall walls of King’s Landing. He had learned the hard way to always keep his men four hundred yards back from the walls of the city. Eddard had at least a few archers who were true masters of the longbow. He had lost twenty men in two days at the beginning of the siege with men constantly getting too close to the walls of King’s Landing wanting to raid the buildings that had been abandoned by the citizenry of King’s Landing that were outside its walls. The people had fled to the safety inside walls.

There would be no siege at this time. He did not have the troops. He was really just a picket line around the city to keep forces from entering the city to bolster Eddard Stark’s forces. He could stop small numbers but if any army appeared he would be crushed between an anvil and a blacksmiths mallet. It galled Branton to see ships plying the docks of the Blackwater Rush.

There was no navy coming to the Wolf’s aid but he had no navy providing a blockade either. Commerce was freely entering the city. It was maddening and frustrating. He thought of burning the buildings outside of the city’s walls but decided not to. It was a waste of effort. He had appropriated the buildings in the small communities that had grown up around the Old Gate, Lion Gate. King’s Gate and the Gate of the Gods. The buildings furthest from the city walls were just outside range of the longbows.

The Lion and Gate of the Gods gate seemed to attract the most effort from the Stark forces. He had lost more men at these gates. He had therefore stationed more forces there. The buildings did not extend as far away from the gates but the furthest away were also beyond range of the longbow. Still he had to be wary. Three times on moonless or dark cloudy nights men had slipped out the gates to attack his men as they patrolled the rolling grasslands before King’s Landing Walls. Their nearest bivouac areas were also marauded.

The losses had been few and they had killed some of the attackers but the attacks were unnerving. The trapped wolf was not willing to stay in his den. He came out in the darkest hours to try and savage the lions surrounding him and his pack mates. He had pulled his forces further back and dug deep trenches and placed lines of angled stakes in the ground to deter further attacks. His tactics seemed successful with the attacks ceasing.

He had not lost many men but it had rattled his men the audacity of the attacks. He increased his patrols on these gates. The Lion Gate made sense to Branton Lannister. It was symbolic of Casterly
Rock and the Lannisters. It was the terminus of the Gold Road from Lannnisport. It made sense to keep the area around that gate in doubt. He had pulled his forces back from this gate and the symbolic Gate of the Gods an extra two hundred yards. He did not need to test his enemies.

He simply did not have the forces necessary to take the fight to Eddard. He was merely a blocking force. He could not withstand any army marching to free Eddard Stark. The ravens were flying thick in the sky between the Major Houses and from there to their vassal lords. Once in the field, one lost touch with what was truly happening on the strategic level. This was happening now. Branton could only worry about the tactical picture. His world had become myopic. All that existed was him and Eddard Stark and their personal conflict.

He could keep Eddard Stark trapped in the Red Keep but that was all.

While his personal world and responsibility was the Red Keep word of the outside world came to him in fit and starts from fast horse courier and a few Lannister ravens. He was given a brief insight on the campaigns engaged around him. The picture they provide was unsettling.

Runners had gotten through to him with a picture of how bad it was getting. The Riverlands had risen into a footing of war. They were making threats to the eastern castles and towns of the Westerlands. Now reports were coming in that they were now blocking the Gold Road. They were only a nuisance at the moment but as they mobilized more they would most probably cut the road completely if not directly challenged. With that blockage Branton would be starved out. He would have to live off the land and that would quickly exhaust what he could find.

The North was mobilizing and would march when they had formed and trained up. That would take at least six weeks more but they were coming. Lysa Tully had sent out word she would stay neutral in this fight. Unfortunately, some of the stronger houses of the Vale were defying her edict and were taking to the field to put down the unholy Lannisters for their murder and incest as they had stated in their own scrolls answering Eddard’s need.

Branton Lannister grimaced. All knew of the incestuous relationship between the twins. Everyone except their father Tywin. Branton shook his head. How could such a scheming and manipulative man fail to see what was so brazenly done beneath his nose. By the gods just look at the kids. He did not need to reference the book that Eddard Stark had referenced in his scrolls to see the truth.

Word had arrived with the last forces to arrive at King’s Landing that Tywin was hurriedly mobilizing the full strength of the Westerlands. The old lion was anxious to take the field and meet his enemies. His large army was forming. Columns would march both into the Riverlands and Crownlands. That would force the armies of their enemies to take them into account while the main force of Casterly Rock came down the Gold Road to King’s Landing.

Unfortunately, the other major houses of Westeros were also preparing or already taking to the field.

The Vale forces had made it clear they would help the Riverlands to cut the Gold Road. They had not come to bear but they would within a few weeks. Their forces would not be great but they did not need to be to harass and make the Gold Road a very dangerous place to be if one was aligned with House Lannister.

Highgarden was of course playing the coquettish whore. They would come to King’s Landing but refrain from direct action. They would wait and see who would give them the most to curry their favor. He knew what Eddard could offer. He seriously doubted that Olenna would turn aside from that juicy offer. He would wait and see what Renly could accomplish with his lover Loras Tyrell.

Dorne would also stay neutral but send a force to King’s Landing to “see what will happen”.
Branton was not worried about Dorne. They tended to be neutral or at best give tepid support. They would not be part of this tableau.

What was worrying Branton the most was the rising up of the Storm and Crownlands. They had become quite restive. After Robert’s rebellion the Crownlands had withdrawn from the field of battle and the field of politics. They had lost their will to engage in the ethos of Westeros. The Stormlands had become quiescent with the slothful dissipation of Robert Baratheon. The houses of his Constituency had also ignored the politics of state by and large for the last ten years.

This was changing rapidly. They were rising up. Eddard Stark had awaken the sleeping giant as the old saying went. The Lords were rapidly rousing from their somnolence. The Houses were rousing to anger. Wrath that was being aimed at the Lannister’s.

The Stag was aligning with the Direwolf. He was furious with the Lions of House Lannister. The house of Kellington had ridden up to the force blocking the Dragon Gate. This gate the furthest from his command tent and staff. They came under the flag of parlay. They had inquired what the Lannisters were doing blocking the gate. They had been answered that they were putting down the unlawful Insurrection of Eddard Stark against the rightful heir of Robert Baratheon. Joffrey Baratheon.

The men had been asked if they had come to join the blockade. The men had thrown down the flag of parlay and shouted that the true King of Westeros was Eddard Stark and that Joffrey Baratheon was a child of incest and bastardy. They had fallen on the company of Lannister men.

Fortunately, the Lannister Lieutenant had sensed the nefarious intent of the men from House Kellington. The ambush had not been a total shock. They had suffered severe losses but they had given a good account of themselves. They had killed twenty of the traitors and wounded more. He had lost thirty-two men with another thirty-four wounded. He had to move a company from his reserve to reconstitute the force.

He had put out word that any approaching force that would not lay down arms when approaching would be treated as the enemy.

All this mounting opposition was sapping the strength of the Lannisters. A reinforcement troop had arrived from the Golden Road. The problem was that it was supposed to be five thousand men. It had only been twenty-two hundred men. They had had to fight through blockades. To keep the road open forces had to be left behind to garrison forts being erected. There had been harassing attacks in the Riverlands.

There had also been the incessant sniping of arrows fletched with hawk feathers. His own force had suffered under this assault that one never knew when it would strike and seemed to evaporate like the morning mist. Now it seemed that the Tully forces were working in league with these mysterious archers. The troop coming down to reinforce Branton had met a strong blocking force on the Gold Road at a place that had low riding hills on each side with woods coming to within a hundred yards on each side of the road.

The Captain in charge had not thought much on it arraying his forces to break the blockade. It had been late in the day when they had come upon the blockade. It had been hastily erected but heavily manned. The two forces had fired arrows at each other and the captain had launched a mounted assault that had been repelled. The Sergeant leading the assault thought he had weakened the force sufficiently that the next assault would sweep it aside.

The sun was near the horizon and they had decided to make camp and await the sunlight in the morning to breakthrough. The sun had set. That was when the arrows started to whistle in from the
woods on each side of the Gold Road. Throughout the night at random intervals arrows would come into the camp. The woods were too close to avoid being shot at. A charge was mounted at an area that seemed many of the shots had come from.

The arrows went from intermediate to a fast flight of buzzing death. The accuracy of these archers was almost supernatural. Fortunately, good tempered Lannister steel had saved many men from death. The men’s charge had reached the woods but no one was there in front of them. Instead arrows whistled in from their flanks. The enemy archers were never seen.

The next morning the Lannister’s discovered that the blockade had been abandon. It all had been setup to let the archers be in range for a full night of snipping at the Lannisters. Thirty-seven men had been killed. It was sapping to moral these asymmetrical fights.

Branton took the men that did arrive to supplement his forces. He felt an uneasy feeling. He had thought he would ride into King’s Landing. Instead it was like a mountain range trapping his forces in place.

The man sighed. He could only do his duty.

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“I am telling you yet again Catelyn Stark that I am innocent. I had no reason to kill your son. I did not try to have him assassinated.” Tyrion spoke to the stiff back of the infernal woman. They had survived the attack of the mountain clan. Barely. They were on their way back from the Eyrie. Their Tyrion had learned that the only woman crazier than Catelyn was her damn sister Lysa. Catelyn was a bitch but Lysa was daft!

Bronn eyed him speculatively. Tyrion had hope he could get the sellsword to again aid his cause. Men like him were always enamored with and by money. If there was one thing that Tyrion had access to were gold crowns. His father may hate him but he was still a Lannister. In the end his dear old father would save his life.

They were just starting to descend down the High Road that lead them away from the Eyrie. He had heard of the moon door. His personal experience had lived up to its sickening hype. He had been very afraid he might indeed prove dwarves could not fly. He was pretty sure they could not. Damn the damn Tully sisters! Thank the seven gods for Bronn stumbling into his life.

The infernal woman ignored him. His reasoning fell on deaf ears. His sardonic insights were met with indifference. His outright insults only inciting a glaring silence in return. He needed her to respond to his jibs so he could vent damnit! Damn the infernal woman!

He was on the High Road and felt his doom closing in on him. Catelyn had outsmarted him and that had really pissed him off. He had been sure he was going to Winterfell but she had fooled him. She had taken him to the Eyrie and counted himself fortunate to have survived. No thanks to Catelyn Stark!

The small force moved slowly down the road conserving their horses’ strength. Suddenly five figures were on the road before them. They seemed to have just materialized from the morning mist. They had long cloaks that ran to the ground. They blocked the way.

Catelyn had moved forward to tell the men that she was taking Tyrion to Winterfell for justice. That it was too dangerous to attempt passage to King’s Landing.

“No you are not. You will be in our care from now on. We will be taking you to forces that will
take you to King’s Landing and the King.”

Tyrion had felt a big grin come on his face. Surely by now his brother and father had taken King’s Landing. Sure Joffrey might be on the Iron Throne but his father would keep the little shit in line.

“Eddard Stark now sits on the Iron Throne.”

Tyrion’s smile turned upside down into a frown. Damnit!

Catelyn had been shocked and then happy at the news. Tyrion offered Bronn a huge pouch of money to save him.

“Not likely dwarf. I want to live to see the sun rise tomorrow.” Bronn pointed up at the rocks above them. On both sides of the road stood more of the robed figures. In their hands were longbows loosely held but ready for instant use. Tyrion sagged down defeated.

They were led off the High Road and into the wooded mountains. To distract himself from his plight Tyrion observed nature around him. High above them, Tyrion saw hawks flying the thermals. A few times he heard their high pitched screams. The trees clinging to the sides of the mountains with tenacious focus. He saw several woodchucks looking at the party as they passed them while they looked out from underneath brambles. Tyrion saw some mountains goats running up impossible trails on the mountain sides.

They travelled for the full day moving deeper into the thick woods and walking through high mountain glades. The beauty of the scenery would have touched Tyrion’s soul if he was not so depressed and outright pissed off.

Towards evening they came to the entrance to a cave that was hidden by a monstrous thicket of twisted trees from the wind moving down the narrow valley they had travelled through the last half hour. There had been brambles interwoven in the twisted trees. They followed narrow animal paths that had a convoluted path through the twisted maze of thorns and vines.

They walked their horses into the narrow cave entrance that seemed to magically appear out of the twisted maze of trees. The entrance lite by torches. The strangers had walked and did not tire on the long trek. The passage opened into huge caverns that were well light with several large fires. The cave was warm. He was told that there were hot thermals underneath the caves that heated up the stone and air. Vents in the ceiling took away the little smoke produced by the fires.

They were taken to small side rooms to wash and clean themselves. They were shown bedrooms for their stay here. They were then taken out to a large communal area that had long oaken tables piled high with roasted sheep and goat. Tyrion saw a large fatted ox that had been spitted. There were large bowls full of grains, nuts and vegetables. The dwarf observed large loaves of bread and wheels of cheese.

The gathering sat down to eat from the bounty being offered. Everyone ate heartily. Tyrion observed the folk that had accosted them. They seem to speak an archaic form of the language of Westeros. The words old and hoary and accent strange sounding. Now the meal was finished.

A middle age woman stood up and said she was Samaya leader of this Druid community. Tyrion could see that Catelyn had a blank look on her face as did everyone else. Tyrion had read of rumors of these people from the Age of Heroes. They had supposedly met the same fate as the Children of the Forest.

They were told that they had aligned themselves with the young wolf of prophecy. One Arya Stark.
Tyrion enjoyed seeing Catelyn Stark looking constipated at that. Tyrion had observed the rancor between the young girl and their mother. Tyrion’s party were told of events in King’s Landing. How Arya Stark had saved her father and the Druid’s greatest healer had healed his shattered leg. Tyrion was actually happy to hear that. He hoped he would have the opportunity to deal the man. He seemed fair and compassionate. *Unlike his harpy wife!*

With Eddard Stark on the throne he had a decent chance of survival. Tyrion sprang up. “I am Tyrion Lannister. I have been falsely accused of a crime I did not commit.”

He was asked what it was and he told them while Catelyn fumed silently.

“We have heard of you Tyrion. We have been watching the Lions and Direwolves closely for several generations. Our old seers and the prophets of our sacred brethren have seen this as a time of confusion, destruction and death. But, also, a time of possibilities.”

“The Lions are ascendant but there has been hope that the Direwolf could somehow prevail. That has come to pass. Now we must endeavor to make the possible become reality. The Direwolf and Dragon will lie together.”

Tyrion smirked at Catelyn Stark’s confused look. Of course the woman was so literal she could not work through the hyperbole and obfuscation that prophecies cloaked themselves in. He could not stop his smile. Someone, probably Robb Stark, would be shagging one Daenerys Targaryen if his memory held him in good stead. Which it always did.

The middle aged woman made direct eye contact with Tyrion. “Word of you has spread among our communities.”

Tyrion felt his chest swell with pride. These people seemed most enlightened and sage. He was anxious to hear what they had been able to perceive of his august personage. He was sure they had been most impressed by what they had observed.

“We have heard of your love of lying. Your love of whoring. Your love of cheating. Your love of whoring. Your willingness to defy your father. Your love of whoring. Your love of gross exaggerations of your accomplishments. Your love of whoring.” Bronn was now snickering and Catelyn looked most satisfied. Tyrion was motioning for the woman to shut up. She must not have seen his desperate gestures and continued with her litany of observations. “Your love of embezzlement. Your love of whoring. Your love of drunken revelry. Your love of whoring. Your love of gluttony. Your love of whoring.”

“Oh, Okay already! I get it that you know of my minor offenses!”

That received a cocked eyebrow. The woman looked down at Tyrion with earnest focus.

“Why do you cheat at all things you do” the leader of the Druids asked Tyrion. “You are most creative and intelligent. Yet you cheat at roulette, dice, betting, games of numbers, all forms of card games, memory games, Crevasse——“

“I don’t cheat at Crevasse!” the dwarf barked out stridently. Tyrion then slapped himself on the forehead. He had just admitted the truth of his cheating at everything else.

Samaya looked down on the man. “You are quite randy my small man. We call you the pint sized pony.”

This had Tyrion thrusting out his chest. Then a look of calculation crossed his face. *Did she just insult me?!!*
Catelyn jumped in with her windbag thoughts and crowed like the sharp beaked crow she was. She was sure that the listings of Tyrion’s lacking character traits proved her charges against Tyrion. She again listed Tyrion’s supposed crimes against her House and his general lack of character. That his House was full of miscreants and incest. The last Tyrion couldn’t argue.

Tyrion glared at the bitch who was happy to cast aspersions on his person. The dwarf glared at the woman who looked more and more like the harpies of mythology to him.

Samaya looked down at Tyrion and then over at Catelyn.

“This man is many things. Most of them vile and reprehensible.”

_Hey!_ Tyrion was feeling must set upon.

“But there is no murder in this man’s heart. Robb will soon be on his way south. There are houses in Vale that are aligning with Eddard Stark. We will meet with them. We will shield and protect you while in our lands.”

Catelyn fumed and clearly wanted to argue.

“Catelyn Stark. We have long watched you and your family as we have waited and hoped. The portents told us sixty years ago the time of Hope was coming. A time when the Starks would make atonement. That the Starks would bring back magic and restore what the Starks took away in the Age of Heroes. Still the forces of chaos are strong and we feared that our hopes would prove for naught.”

“The prophecy spoke of a strong Direwolf that was supreme above all others. That this alpha male would sire a female pup that would tame the fierce Dragon. We had watched and then Eddard was born. It was clear he was the Direwolf prophesized. We felt great hope the prophecy would be fulfilled with your husband and your young female wolf you sired with Eddard Stark.”

“We knew of their great danger but we could not offer help unless Eddard survived his trial of fate. Almost he died but Arya Stark rescued him. Eddard Stark had to be tempered in the crucible of deceit and betrayal. He had to be hardened to become the leader he now is. Your daughter, Arya Stark, had to have her course bent away from the god of death. This has now happened. We are jubilant with what is now possible. Together they can grip the throat of the fates and achieve greatness.”

Catelyn looked at the Druid as did Tyrion. Neither were given to believing in hearsay and prophecies. They were all spoken in such a way that anyone could believe in their prophecies if you only bent the words a little to what you wanted to believe.

Tyrion had an open mind. He had no problem believing that Arya could be a portent of mighty change. He saw that Catelyn Stark had no such thought. Her hellion daughter could not possibly be a portent of some prophecy was clearly written on the woman’s face. Catelyn Stark was traditional in her thinking in all things. Especially when it came to women and their place in it. Tyrion had observed the battleax in action in Winterfell.

Sansa she cowed and Arya Stark she enraged. Robb just accepted it. Jon Snow had run away to the Wall.

“Your daughter, Arya Stark is the fulfillment. So is your husband. In watching them we have been watching you.”

“Before you seek this man’s harm look into your own heart. We have observed your treatment of
Jon Snow though we call him by another name. Your treatment of this innocent boy was most vile. Your treatment of your daughters little better. While with us you will leave Tyrion Lannister in peace.”

The sounds of retching filled the royal tent. The man bent over the pail. His body contacting with each heave. His long golden hair flagged down around his face. The man lifted an arm to wipe away the bile and snot from his face and nose. He sat back and looked at the dark red fabric of his tent with bloodshot eyes.

Death had come looking again for Jaime Lannister. The first time it had been but a whisper by his ear. This time it had come upon him like a battering ram. This time death came with an explosion of sound and pain.

He looked around with shrouded eyes. The thought kept coming back to Jaime. I should be dead. Twice but by chance he would be in the ground rotting. He knew he was not an immortal. He knew he would one day die. But it was always in the future. Far in the future.

He no longer had that assurance. He now felt he might die at any moment. That twice now he had cheated the hand of death.

The first time a simple flower had saved his life. The last time four days ago it had been the sudden thought to speak to a captain who was riding into camp behind him. He had had a sudden thought and with the need to make his point turned suddenly to speak to the man.

Jaime and the man were riding back into the camp they had made for the last three days beside a winding creek that was nearly twenty feet across and lined thickly with drooping willow trees and thick reeds and tall wild grasses on its banks. There was a bridge at this place that allowed the Lannister’s to cover both sides of the creek and easily move back and forth.

The water cooled the air slightly and the trees provided shadow from the sun. The water had thick grass growing along its banks for the horses to eat while resting.

They had been camped at the site for days and it had become a safe haven. Still Jaime wore his helm all the time now and ordered his commanders to as well. The snipers were definitely shooting at those of rank. Most of the officers had their helms off with the sun going down and back in camp.

Thank the seven faced god Jaime thought. He had kept his on. He was not sure now why he had not yet removed it. He turned to shout at the captain when his world exploded in pain and sound. A long bow arrow shot at close range hit his helm. Strong forged Lannister steel had resisted the arrow. The curvature of his helm at his temple helped. The arrow had indented the tempered steel before whisking off the curved metal.

Still, the arrow’s speed and force at such close range had struck Jaime Lannister with force of blacksmith’s forge hammer striking the anvil beneath it. The reverberating force of the arrow flung Jaime from his saddle to the ground with a resounding thud. The man knocked unconscious.

In the middle of the night Jaime Lannister came too. He was woozy and his stomach felt roiled. He tried to sit up normally and promptly threw up violently. He made a mess of himself. He quickly discovered he had to move slowly to keep his equilibrium and to keep from throwing up.

He made another horrifying discovering. He had no short term memory. He asked for a report on what happened. He got pissed when he was not given the report. He kept asking for it again and
again. The men looking at him strangely. He finally came to understand he was forgetting immediately what he had been told. He picked up a parchment and read it. The instant his eyes lifted all memory of what he read was gone.

He sat on his field bed the rest of the night. His stomach randomly getting violently upset and Jaime throwing up. The Lannister’s balance touch and go. He kept reading the parchment but all memory of it disappeared the instant he finished reading it.

Jaime understood that if this continued he was useless. He would be locked away in some forgotten room in Casterly Rock. A living ghost to be forgotten.

Thankfully, his loss of near term memory had disappeared three hours after sunrise the next day. He picked up the parchment to read and he remembered it. A rush of relief flooded the blond man’s soul.

Unfortunately, he quickly discovered his body was weak and prone to vertigo which produced violent bouts of throwing up. That was what had happened a few minutes ago. He went to get up like normal and vertigo set in and had the heir to Casterly Rock vomiting his guts up it felt like. He was weak from the lack of solid sustenance the last three days. Only in the last six hours could he keep anything down.

Still his condition was improving. He could rise and move about slowly now. His thoughts had been scattered but he could focus and hold onto his thoughts again.

Thoughts that the vain man found troubling. He kept thinking. If I had delayed the moving of my head an instant or the archers fired a moment earlier I would be dead. That was a horrifying thought. Jaime knew he was not immortal but his death had seemed like an eternity away. Something he need not think on or fear.

That myth had been shattered. He could not get over the closeness of those arrows piercing his eye and brain.

He tried to think that fate was on his side. It had been the mistresses working their threads saving him. He knew that was bullshit. It had been chance that had saved Jaime Lannister. Nothing more. He feared to tempt the fates again.

He moved slowly around his tent. It had been four days since the arrow strike had concussed him. He had asked the next late afternoon once his wits had recovered somewhat if they had killed the archer. The answer had been no. Even though the willow lined creek was surrounded on both side by the forces of House Lannister the archer had escaped.

The late evening light had allowed the shot to go mostly unnoticed. By the time enough men understood what had just occurred it was evidently too late. The assailant had somehow disappeared despite the heavy flush of troops that thrashed the willows and splashed and swam in the creek.

Somehow it seemed appropriate to Jaime. The arrow had partially penetrated his helm before it ricocheted off. Jaime looked out his tent. Death had reached out for him. Death was greedy it seemed. Would he try again? Long buried memories had resurfaced. Memories he had worked hard to bury deep in the recesses of his mind.

He squirmed remembering the shattered bodies of Elia, Rhaenys, and Aegon. He had acted like it was nothing to him at the time. He had just killed their grandfather. That man had deserved his gutting on Jaime’s blade. Not so that gentle woman and her young children. He started to pace slowly in his tent. He secretly knew his father had been pleased that the Mountain had removed a
Jaime remembered how Eddard had seethed. He saw the man. He had shaken with anger his face red with rage. He raged at his longtime friend. It was clear to the Lannister that Eddard almost fell upon his brother in arms. Jaime while trouble had felt little of that august rage. Why had Eddard felt so much and he felt so little? Jaime worried on that thought now.

Bran’s face came to him. The shocked look on the boy’s face as he fell. Cersei had stormed at him. He took care of the problem he thought. He thought Cersei would claw his eyes out in that broken tower. She kept screaming at him she meant for them to talk to the boy. They could have convinced him to be quiet. Her passion shocked him at the time. Why in the hell hadn’t she said that! She just kept harping on that the boy had seen them. It had seem like the thing to do then. Now he squirmed. Another thing had begun to tear at Jaime’s thoughts.

Now he wandered why he had felt nothing. No passion. No anger. No concern. Only emptiness. Jaime had thought her silly then. Now with death’s talons raking over Jaime’s body he wondered. Why did he feel so little for everyone but Cersei?

His own children meant nothing to him. He went to look back out his tent flap. The sky glooming. He felt nothing. He had a sudden insight. Even his love for Cersei was shallow. It had no depth. Jaime felt nothing so much of the time. He looked within himself. He felt nothing now. Would he ever feel a true depth of feeling? He felt his stomach roiled again.

A coldness filled the heart of the scion of House Lannister. His face had become paler. A paleness that had nothing to do with his physical impairment. Many thoughts roiled in his mind but one was paramount.

What have I become?

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Those gathered around the table studied the map of King’s Landing and the immediate surroundings. They talked amongst themselves going over the proposed plans and the tactics to use. They had been discussing this for the last week. The dark of the moon would be tomorrow night. That would be the time to strike when the light was the least.

Eddard looked around at his War Council. He had the four personal honor guard that he had promoted with the official title of general at the table.

Javer Goodbrook, Styve Grandison, Matamion and Jaehaegar Velnalyrs who had been part of Rhaegar’s honor guard. They had been with Arya from near the start of her Insurrection and had been invaluable to Eddard Stark since. They had proven sharp of mind when it came to military thought and tactics. They were proving to be honor personified. They had pledged themselves to Eddard Stark.

With him around the table was his daughter, Arya Stark, and her mentor Syrio Forel. To round out his War Council, Eddard had added Sandor Clegane. Varys was in the room as well.

Eddard could not refuse the opportunity.

“What do you think of our tactics Sandor? Any insights to add?”

“What the bloody hell do you expect me to say? Just point me in the right direction and let me do what I do best.” The tall scared man patted the pummel of his sword with his sour face firmly in
Matamion spoke up “I wish we had more of the Druids. Their archery is most beneficial for what we propose.”

“I agree” Eddard spoke. “Fortunately, three more have come in this week. It seems that they will cycle in some of their numbers to support Merrel’s home base. I feared they had done what their duty required. It appears they have more fealty to give. We now have eight Druids to add to our cause. We will have them strategically placed to do the most damage.”

“Javer. Are the horses ready?”

“Yes. They have been fed, groomed and their care well-tended too. They have been exercised and we have a troop of one hundred knights and mounted cavalry. Sandor will lead that element.”

Eddard saw the grim determined look in the Hound’s eyes. The man would be waging war on his own House. No truer test of loyalty could be devised. Sandor Clegane was fully committed to House Stark. Eddard felt lucky to have the man’s might at his side.

“We can now field roughly three hundred men on foot that are worth their weight. I have maybe two hundred gold cloaks who I trust to both not break in battle and to be true. Your wise rule is slowly bringing those men over to our cause. They too are finding themselves enticed by the thought of serving someone truly worthy of service.”

Eddard blushed. Varys snorted while Sandor rolled his eyes at their King’s bashfulness.

“Making sure their pay is not stolen and feeding them well and giving them clean and maintained bedding is making them into believers my liege” Javer added.

Eddard squint grimaced. He still hated any such title but he knew he had to get used to it.

“Arya. Your idea about using our training bowmen was brilliant. We can use their still basic skills to hopefully do some additional damage to the Lannisters” Eddard told his daughter.

The father liked how his daughter’s shoulders squared at the praise. It was deserved. When he had proposed to leave Arya behind he had been met with her stony silence. Syrio had chastised him severely later. Eddard had to remember that if his daughter was to become a warrior then she needed to be treated like one. Eddard had sighed. Syrio was right. She was to become a Water Dancer. She had to be treated as such.

He had called Arya to him that night and apologized to her for his thoughts and actions. He made it clear to Arya that she had more than proved herself to him. She had not once shrunk from battle. She had passed each battle with showing only bravery and increasing skill and determination. His daughters smile and warm embrace had touched Eddard’s heart.

Now Eddard looked around the table. “It is time that our wolf pack to show the lion pride what happens when you invade its territory. Tomorrow night let us hamstring and savage our enemy!”

The men around the table shouted their agreement. Even Sandor Clegane pounded his fist on the table. For the first time he truly felt he belonged.
Eddard looked up into the dark sky. There were clouds scudding across the backdrop of the heavens. It blocked even the weak light of the stars as they blinked in their loneliness. Each cloud like an island sailing across the lonely starry depths looking for a long lost lover never to be found. One after another the clouds quickly flowed across the sky from horizon to horizon. The sky filled with islands rapidly scudding across the nighttime sky.

He had picked this night exactly because of the darkness. It was the dark of the moon. It would not be any more dark than it would be this night or that of tomorrow. He was now the rat scurrying around in the dark cellar. The sky above him but the analog of the ceiling of a dark hold. He was using the dark to accomplish his goals. To hide his movements.

The small hamlet that had formed above the Old Gate was slightly different from the other hamlets that had formed outside the other gates of King’s Landing. For whatever reasons this hamlet had planted many trees on the grounds around the buildings. Other stands planted on its outskirts. In fact there were several thick groves of trees interspersed in the small community. The new King supposed the trees planted to provide shade. He now stood in one such grove. He looked up at the limbs and their whispering leaves that now hide his presence.

Like a thief the King and his fellow conspirators had scurried along smuggler tunnels underneath the hamlet to come up into the small smithy that his tunnel had led them too. Others were coming up to the sky from other tunnels. The assailants moving silently up to the freedom of open sky, whispering trees and the buildings standing mute like sentinels in the dark.

Trees that now had their limbs gripped and thrashed by the strong winds. The winds were not angry merely strong late spring winds that had the limbs of the tree limbs swaying and to and fore. The limbs made loud sighing sounds that filled the night air around him as the new King skulked among the shadows between the buildings and moved beneath the limbs that had been trimmed above head height. He moved towards the farthest extent of the hamlet.

He noticed the trees were pear, maple and elm trees. Fast growing trees with large canopies but he knew that when storms came off the Narrow Sea and up Blackwater Bay that men would have many broken limbs to cut and haul off. The trees selected to provide shade as fast as possible. Strength of limb had no calculation in their selection.

Eddard was now underneath a stand of pear trees. The grass sparse underneath. The wind was in the limbs making loud sloughing sounds. The breeze was warm and pleasant to his skin. The man of the North looked up at the limbs and watched them whip and saw. The interplay of limbs and leaves interesting to watch in their intimate embraces. He stood and watched the interplay. Strange how thoughts could wander before a battle Eddard thought.

The man of the North again surveyed his environs. The wind was both a boon and a hindrance. The wind would make arrows harder to find their target but the wind in the limbs would swallow sounds of their movements. The wind finding the alleys and sides of buildings to sigh and brush against noisily. All was quiet except for nature.
He felt a shadow brush against him and move deeper into the groove of trees. A Druid was moving into a firing position. Their midnight dark cloaks had the man or woman disappear in the shadows seconds after moving past Eddard.

Eddard felt truly fortunate. Serendipity was working in his favor. This very morning thirteen Druids had come to him in King’s Landing having moved into the city through the smuggler tunnels that Varys was using to transport men in and out the City. Eddard was not worrying about any siege yet. Blackwater Bay was open and ships were still bringing in food stuffs every day to the docks of Blackwater Rush.

The Lannisters would have to sail around the continent of Westeros to bring their navy to bear. Eddard knew that such a sending of their fleet would rouse Highgarden and Dorne out of their somnolence. This would temper any desire of Tywin to send his fleet around the foot of Westeros.

When Merrel left and with him most of the Druids that had assembled to help Arya in her Insurrection, Eddard had thought he had seen the last of them in any number. Five had stayed behind lead by Kiren. Three more had wafted in like driftwood on the tides over the intervening weeks after his taking of the throne. He needed their skills and had lamented not having more of the extremely skilled bowmen. Of Eddard’s other forces only Arya was their equal with the bow.

But this morning just after the sun had broken the horizon Varys had led the new small group of Druids into Eddard’s small personal meeting room that he preferred to work alone in when focusing on his plans. Eddard remembered looking up surprised. He stood up with a big smile on his face and shook their hands.

He discovered that they were from the Kingswood. They had not participated in the Insurrection but now that word of his and Arya’s successful uprising had started to spread it seemed more Druid communities were inspired to join the … Eddard wondered if he should still call it an Insurrection. He supposed one name was as good as any other. He would never use the word ‘Rebellion’ after Robert’s war a generation past.

Evidently, the prophecies concerning him had been mostly negative with only a few predicting him even living. That had been a humbling realization. He sensed he was supposed to have died but for Arya and Syrio intervening and saving him. They alone had bent the path of the fates to a new path. It seemed the vast majority of prophecies had said Westeros was supposed to be thrown into confusion and ravaged by Lions and worse. Instead, he had survived and now the Druids were realizing that their dreams could indeed come true. They were rising out of their hidden redoubts to join in shaping the future of Westeros. Of that, Eddard was thankful.

He found out that the leaders names were Denzin Vypren and Elna Bryne. In describing their coming to the cause, Eddard discovered a little more of the culture of the Druids. The religious sect organized themselves into Shires. Merrel was from the Wendywater shire that had its seat at its headwaters. The larger group of Druids that now came before Eddard, ten of them, were located to the east of Merrel’s shire. This Druid’s Shire was named Shadowpass since their main hamlet was in a small steep valley between narrow ridges several thousand feet high. The highest ranges of the last spur of the Dornish March to the west of Felwood.

The other group was only three Druids. They called their Shire the East Redoubt. It was located in the Southern reaches of the Kingswood east of the Rosewood Road from Highgarden. This area was heavily wooded on the westernmost spur of the Dornish March. Eddard had seen it marked as the Shattered Elbow on the maps due to the wild hills and steep ravens that made travel all but impossible in those woods. The ridges only seven hundred to nine hundred feet tall but filled with knife valleys that were steep and deadly.
He was informed that the old maps were out of date since the Druids of this community had slowly extended the forest by nearly twenty leagues south by west over the last six hundred and fifty years ago. Eddard had read reports that that part of the forest was haunted. The Druids smiled at that. They had many hollowed out reeds and tree limbs that they swirled above their heads to make ghostly sounds. The local populace sure it was the angry ancestors of those long lost.

They killed all who came into the forest to kill wildlife and chop down the old growth trees. There would be no more desecration of the forests under their watch. The populace had learned to leave the forest be. They had planted trees each spring to slowly increase the size of the forest covering the Shattered Forest towards both Fawnton and Tumbletown. The new forest covering the hills that ran down towards the Blueburn River to the west of Fawnton.

These Druids were especially proud that Jaguar and mountain elephants lived in their shire. The elephants eating the thick brush and small stunted trees as they roved up and down the steep sides of the low mountains.

Eddard had been happy to hear that. Elephants had long since been killed off in the plains and savannahs of Westeros. It made him happy to know that somewhere below the Wall that the elephants still lived. He wanted to make sure that fact stayed that way.

“I have to ask why you are here” Eddard looked at the two nominal leaders of the Druids. “Merrel said that the prophecy had been fulfilled. That the purpose had been reached.”

Denzin Vypren spoke. “This is true. But word is spreading fast by raven Eddard Stark. You and your daughter are more than we dare could have dreamed for. You and your daughter are the emergence of the Direwolves of our prophecies. We now realize that we must help shepherd the coming of the Dragon. It is you that will make all this happen Eddard Stark. You and your daughter are just and righteous beyond measure. You two are precious. We must give our all to help you succeed. It is imperative.”

Eddard blushed and ducked his head hearing that.

“We sense that we are at the cusp of fate and must endeavor to help you succeed. The Dragon is coming with her mate. The time to act is now.”

Eddard heard the words. Again a prophecy of Daenerys Targaryen. She had to be dead didn’t she? A girl could not survive in the Red Wastes with only women and children as her Khalasar. Eddard wondered who her husband was or would be if she was impossibly alive. His mind drifted a moment with a stray thought. A thought he had more often of late.

“As our ravens spread the word of you we are deciding that more must be done. If we let this opportunity pass there might not be another. So many wrongs have the opportunity to be made right. We must act. The Dragon and her Wolf will conqueror those that need to be brought low.”

Eddard caught the ‘wolf’ reference but did not have time to science it out. He had a niggling though in the back of his mind. Though it seemed impossible he suspected who the wolf would be if their prophecies came true. He shook his head. He still had to secure his throne. He needed to become King of more than one lonely city.

He had taken the fortunate arrival of the Druids and inserted them into his plans. They were anxious to fight. They had great hopes that the Direwolf and Dragon could institute great changes in Westeros and help bring “balance” back to the continent. They were also excited about them bringing sweeping changes in Essos. “Chains we be broken” they told Eddard. Whatever that meant the new King thought.
Eddard had been sending scouts to the hamlet above the Old Gate for nearly ten days at night. The hamlet had grown enough that the northern edge was well beyond the range of even the longbow. Eddard looked around at the buildings. He saw one with a smashed roof. He smirked.

He had had trebuchets constructed. He had the larger ones constructed before each gate and smaller ones he could wheel around on large wheels. He was not attempting to do any serious damage to the Lannisters. He merely wanted to extend his bite a little and to make them scurry like ants after their hill had been kicked. He had not used them in three weeks. He wanted the opposing lions restive and not in an agitated state.

He had also had a secondary plan. He had concentrated their use at the Gate of the Gods, Lion Gate, and the King’s Gate to focus his enemy’s attention on those gates. That was where most of their forces were bivouacked. They were the most important gates if by nothing else but by history. He had their focus on those gates with siege engines making life interesting for the Lannisters at those gates.

The Lannisters had adjusted by moving back to be out of range of Eddard’s siege engines. He had reduced his shots over the last week and a half too. All had returned to calm in the steady state of a city under siege but not yet attacked. Time marked on in a steady boring dirge. Any army’s bane was the routine. They had grown lax with the passage of time and lack of any true action over the last month of their siege. Eddard was being a nuisance to the Lannisters. Nothing more.

Tonight Eddard would change that.

As he had hoped, Eddard found the Lannister forces were using the housing in the hamlets that were beyond the range the longbow that Eddard had on the curtain walls of King’s Landing. The archers making life miserable or maybe fatal for any Lannister man who got careless. Tonight he hoped his archers would find more Lannisters to feather. Targets in range of their bows.

It was half an hour beyond the third tolling after the hour of midnight. The sunrise would be occurring in the not too distant future. Soon the sky would be begin to lighten. The Lannisters had guards out patrolling the hamlet but they were relaxed and had grown careless. Eddard had known that the lack of action would cause this. Even an army under his command would have this problem. Human nature was what it was. Men tended to relax when they were in a boring situation that did not change day after day.

He had his most seasoned men from Rhaegar’s old honor guard and the additional forces that had been loyal to the Targaryen House with him. He leavened it with forces that had straggled in from the Vale. Men ready to join the new King’s cause. The men from the Storm and Crownlands longed for revenge against the House that had killed their King a generation past while the men of the Vale sought revenge for the death of the Hand to King Robert.

The loyalty of the Stormlands and Crownlands after the Rebellion had been for House of Baratheon but their support had been at best tepid with the dissipation of Robert. Still to have their King die at the hands of a Lannister was too much. They sought to punish the Lannisters for Robert’s death.

Over the years, Robert’s actions had dulled their support. While he had sat on the Iron Throne, it had become quiescent. That had changed since a certain Insurrection. Eddard was a shining star to these Houses now. They willingly switched allegiance from the Stag to the Direwolf.

Eddard had wondered why the Crownlands were so quick to support him. He had been instrumental in the downfall of the House they had been aligned too. He had helped throw down House Targaryen. He had in fits and starts asked Matamion and Jaehaegar Velnalys of this. These men had been part of Rhaegar’s honor guard. They had survived the battle on the Trident.
They had merely looked at him with steady eyes. Then Jaehaegar lifted an elegant white eyebrow asking for Eddard to clarify his question.

“You know I fought for Robert in his Rebellion. I killed many of the forces you were aligned with. I would have killed you if you came before me. You were my enemy as I was yours.”

The two men had looked at each other. Matamion looked at Eddard and took a breath.

“This is true. We would have killed you if we could have on that field. That was a generation ago though. Time has moved forward. You fought honorably for your side and felt anger and shame for what happened to Elia and her family. This was known then and remembered now. You showed mercy to the point that it almost caused you death. Rhaegar was a great man. Many were his talents. Maybe he was too great at too many things.”

Eddard tilted his head giving the Valyrian’s a quizzical look.

“You are a warrior supreme. Rhaegar needed to be such. He was always to much the poet. Your poetry is in the death that your sword deals out. Your prose is death.”

That made Eddard recoil. “My gods—is that what you think of me? An avatar for death?”

Now Jaehaegar Velnalys answered Eddard.

“We are not saying that Eddard though I can see why you may think that. Still, in this world the throne is won by military prowess. Not by poetry. Rhaegar was a better poet than he was a warrior. You have the right of it. You have mastered the sword. You have made yourself worthy of the Iron Throne. You do not love, long for or lust for power. Thus, you are perfect to be King.”

The new King digested those words. He had a question to ask, “What if Daenerys Targaryen is alive and comes across the sea to reclaim her throne? She is much more the rightful heir than I. What if she is wise and has a moral code the equal or better than mine?”

Jaehaegar smiled. “I see why you may harbor doubts. I cannot speak for those out in their Lordships and Holdfasts. This I can say. All that have aligned with you inside the walls of the Red Keep have aligned with you totally. You are what we have all wanted in our ruler. Rhaegar had the same qualities as you. Alas, he did not have the mettle. You would have slain Robert on the Trident.”

“I don’t know. I doubt it. Robert was truly a fearsome warrior. You fought him.”

“You would have killed him. You know it. We know it. You are our king. Our loyalty is now with the Wolf and not the three headed Dragon. They forfeited their rights with the Mad King. King Aerys II Targaryen with madness squandered his family’s right to the throne. Rhaegar Targaryen’s death sealed it.”

“Daenerys Targaryen may have your qualities of leadership and benevolence. I hate to say it and it is sad that is true but men such as we will only ever support a warrior on the Iron Throne. The world of Westeros demands it. In the city states of Essos such prowess is not necessarily needed. In Westeros it is. Evil must ever be faced with strength of arm and focus of deadly intent.”

“You are our King. You have the qualities that inspire loyalty and instill the desire to serve. We will never forsake you.”

Eddard had bowed his head at those words. He had been deeply touched though deep down he feared he was not worthy of those words. He could only try to be the man they claimed he was.
And still in the back of his mind he wondered what these men’s thoughts would be if Daenerys was somehow clawing to life. If she were to reappear and actually be worthy of following. What would his honor guard think then? He smiled. *That was a problem for another day.* A day that would certainly not occur. The child had to be dead by now. Her body food for the condors of that dry inhospitable land she had walked into.

Eddard had brought his best with him into this hamlet. He needed their skill and ability to control the space around them. A fight at night was guaranteed to be confusing for all around. His main advantage would be that he would be initiating the confusion. Hopefully, that would let him gain the advantage and let his forces do the dictating in the about to occur fight.

He had left half of his trusted foot soldiers by the Old Gate. One had to plan for every contingency possible. Eddard knew it would be suicide if his retreat was cutoff. He had the advantage of surprise but he must keep the portal of escape open at all cost. He did not want to risk using the tunnels to retreat and have them discovered. They were too valuable to be discovered. He had Trovion Norrey leading that force by the gate. He had been a lieutenant underneath Javer Goodbrook during Robert’s Rebellion and had proven himself.

Eddard had with him both of the Valyrians of House Velnaly. He also had Javer Goodbrook and Styve Grandison with him. They had selected one hundred of their best men that had been streaming in constantly from the Crown and Stormlands plus forces from the Vale. He was up to nearly four hundred such men now. He had other uses for the rest of the former Targaryen loyalists.

He had brought all the Druids. He was thankful for that. He had felt compelled to make the offer of letting the sect avoid the upcoming fight. He had told Kiren that she and her fellow Druids did not need to come. He desperately needed their help he confessed but Eddard told her that he was coming to feel unsettled taking the Druids service.

“*Your true loyalty is to the Land of Westeros and preserving its beauty and the life within it. These battles between the Houses of Westeros is unseemly by comparison.*”

Kiren had merely smiled. “*Merrel told us of you when he first met your daughter and then you. Why do you only inspire us to come and fight for you? We would feel insulted if you did not take us into battle tonight.*”

Eddard had been both relieved and honored. He had watched as the Druids quickly disappeared into the night. He imagined he could hear the flapping of wings above him distantly. The gusts of wind hiding the flapping of raven and crow wings. The familiars of the Druids in the air. They could not see at night well but they seemed to want to be in the fight with their Druid masters.

That was the only word that came to Eddard’s mind when he thought of the black birds and their Druids. Theirs was not a master slash slave relationship though. It was akin to the relationship his children had with their Direwolves. He too called his children the master of the beasts but he knew the wolves chose his children as much as the children selected their wolves.

Two of the Druids had owls as their familiars. He knew that the Druids were using their vision to help them coordinate their movements. He had heard the Druids talking. It seemed the familiars could somehow communicate to each other. Eddard was sure the owls, ravens and crows above were communicating what they perceived to their Druids.

His men had slowly crept forward. The tunnels they had used had come up near the walls of King’s Landing. There would be no Lannister forces that close to the City of the new King. The arrows of
the Direwolf assured that. Eddard met the spies that had been cycling in and out the hamlet. They
told him that the Lannisters who were stationed at this Gate were bivouacked into the large inn at the
north end of the hamlet. The officers had taken two houses that were close to the inn for themselves.

Eddard knew that rank brought privilege. If these men were savaged this would have a multiplier
effect on the rest of the Lannister forces.

He spoke to the man in charge of monitoring the Inn and officer appropriated homes. He and his
spies vigilant in their over watch.

Greysor Glovelyn gave his report “They are disciplined. They have patrols walking the streets near
their quarters. They have guards posted at all the entrances of the buildings. They are lax but not
slovenly in their patrols and guard duties. The darkness and wind will let us get close. We will
surprise them.” Eddard liked the concise report and clear competence shown by the man.

“Are there any patrols patrolling on the outskirts of the hamlet?”

“There is one but they take the same route and at the same times. We have ambush points setup. We
will move around them skirting the west most flank of the hamlet to get to our destination. Our
attack on them will keep them from attacking our flank.”

Eddard had listened intently. All was ready. With a deep breath Eddard prepared himself.

“Have you seen my daughter?”

The man smiled. “Yes. The young Wolf has moved forward with her Water Dancer. She is a most
worthy heir. You should make her your heir and not anyone else.”

Eddard snorted. “I think I will follow the normal rules of ascendancy to the throne. I have enough
battles to fight without having to wage war over equal primogeniture. Robb will make a great
Warden and in time King.” Still, Eddard was taken by the impression Arya was making on all
around on her if this man wanted her to be Queen.

The man looked skeptical. “As you say.” Then a smile spread across his face. “Let us go beard the
Lion I say.”

With that, Eddard was led in a semicircular path outside of the hamlet to avoid the one patrol that the
Lannister’s sent into the streets of the hamlet during the midnight hour watch. The Lannisters
checking on the empty buildings and to look for any riffraff that may have come into the hamlet to
take quarters or loot. Eddard and his personal guard floating like wraiths from building to building.
Their movements silent among the groves of trees.

Eddard soon was on the outskirts of the hamlet again. Now his force near where the Lannisters were
bivouacked. He looked back out into the plains. He saw darker shapes several hundred yards out
and more further out. Eddard had chosen this gate and hamlet for another reason. There were
corpses of woods that were thickest in this area around the city. They were not overly large most
only several hundred yards across with some nearly a quarter mile in depth that resided a mile to four
miles out from Kings Landing.

He knew the Druids if possible would use these woods in the coming assault. He wanted to give
them every advantage he could. The Druids were secretive on their tactics and he did not delve. He
needed and respected them too much to have them report to them. They were a people separate from
the Iron Throne. While he sat on the Iron Throne it would remain that way.

He was soon a short ways down the street that led to the inn from the depths of the hamlet. It sat on
the last street before you reached the end of the hamlet. It was a nice inn Eddard saw. He assumed that the better to do patrons visiting King’s Landing lodged here if they chose to not put themselves in the confines of the crowded city. Here they could actually feel the breeze on a night like this. The name of the Inn played into this theme. Eddard liked it. The Stargaze Hotel. It would be sad to damage and possibly destroy it but war demanded such payments.

Eddard looked around. He saw Javer Goodbrook twenty yards down the lane. The men only seen by Eddard because he knew they were there. Javer had his force of twenty men that would be the shock troops. Anymore and Eddard’s forces would be tripping over themselves.

It was near to four hours after the midnight hour by now. A general learned to feel the passage of time. He pulled the small war horn from around his neck. Eddard brought the war horn to his lips and blew into it with his strong breath. Notes from the North blared into the clam night sky. The Direwolf howled his challenge. The time for revenge now at hand.

AARRWWOOOOOOO! AAAARRRWWOOOOO! AAARRRWWWWOOOOOOO!

The plaintive wail of the horn was shocking loud in the night time air. The sound of the horn easily scaling over the buildings and the rushing wind.

He heard the thrum of bowstrings that were nearest him. He could barely see the Lannister guards that were posted around the Inn and the appropriated houses. He saw men fall down as if their strings were cut. Other men staggered back. Eddard winced. The screams of men in agony and the dying were now filling the air of the hamlet. Those sounds haunted his dreams at night. He heard curses from both forces.

More arrows were buzzing towards the hotel. The initial shock already was passing. The surviving posted guards seeking cover and shouting to their brethren inside to rise and arm. Arrows were now lodging in the walls and ricochet off wood. Some still found Lannisters to harm. Shouts of rage were interspersed with the shouts of anguish.

Eddard took a deep breath. More fodder for his nightmares. He steeled himself.

The archers were firing fast. Arrows rushing out to find targets. More Lannisters fell down dead or gravely wounded. The guards quickly whittled down by arrow fire. The surviving Lannister guards either retreated into the inn or houses. The sounds of shouting started to rise in front of Eddard from the houses and inn he was attacking. Behind him he heard the sounds of combat. The patrol was being engaged by Styve Grandison. The Lannister patrol must be put down to prevent an attack from the rear. Styve had thirty men with him. The Lannister patrol had to be annihilated and quickly.

Eddard had the two Valyrians, Matamion and Jaehaegar Velnalys with him. He also had thirty men with him that were for a tactical reserve. To be used where necessary. He had twenty of the best archers from the archers he had been trained by Arya in King’s Landing. They were hidden against building and trees near the two houses the officers had appropriated for their own uses. The men and two women firing fast and furious.

He now heard the notes of Lannister war horns being sounded. The sounds mournful. Eddard had taken Sandor Clegane down to the docks of King’s Landing. There the Hound had sounded a war horn of the Lannisters. He told his King what each note of the blown horn meant. The spot had been chosen to be far away from the Lannister’s outside the walls of King’s Landing. He did not want the Lannisters to know he now knew their war horn calls.

The blasts Eddard heard warned of attack and asking for succor and reinforcement. He would try
A man appeared at the doorway of the inn. His body juked and rose and fell while he looked both ways hearing the sounds of combat from outside the inn. He disappeared. The man was a veteran of combat. He knew to constantly move to keep from providing an easy target for archers. Eddard was impressed with his archer’s discipline. They were waiting for a better target silhouettes. Eddard knew the man was waiting for more Lannister’s to get ready to fight. That showed discipline on their side.

Javer Goodbrook led his force to doorway of the inn in a fast headlong rush. His appearance sudden. He led his men into the doorway. The sounds of confused combat could be heard from in the Inn. The archers now ceased firing into the inn not knowing where Javer’s men were.

The screams and shouts from the inn was loud and constant now. From the second house used by the officers of the Lannisters four men broke from the doorway at a run. The men had put on their chainmail. The twang of bowstrings being released filled the air. Arrows whistled towards the men. Two went down with multiple arrows jutting out their bodies. At this range the iron tipped arrows could penetrate the chain mail if hit at the right angle. A Third man staggard and fell to his knees before getting up again. The fourth man had an arrow hit him but the arrow did not penetrate his body.

The regular bows did not have the power of the longbow. More men came out of the houses now. Eddard cursed since these men had shields up and they blocked most of the next flight of arrows. Two men went down from arrows that streaked in from other directions. These arrows longer and thicker. The Druids were firing their longbows at the men.

The Lannisters adjusted immediately putting men on that side with shields upraised to block any more arrows coming in from that angle. The men were definitely skilled. Eddard breathed in. This was going to be a serious fight.

Eddard was trying to keep track of all the battle elements. The officers were jerking around to throw off the archers as they made their way to the Inn. Two more men went down with arrows in their throats or heads. The hawk feathered arrows showed they were from the Druids. Other men were staggered with multiple arrows jutting out their bodies with the arrows not sinking deep with the leather and chainmail blunting the effects of the smaller arrows.

For a few minutes the Lannisters milled about organizing their defense and prepared for counteract. Arrows from multiple vectors flying into the Lannisters. Many were blocked by shield and armor but Lannister men were falling. Eddard saw two men fall down with arrows to the eye. The pure white fletching bright in the dark. Eddard felt a thrill seeing his Arya at work. From inside the Inn the sounds and screams of close in combat roiled out the windows and doorway.

Grim faced Eddard took account of the battle inside. Men were dying horribly. It could not be helped. He simply had to savage the Lions inside.

Eddard saw Lannisters run from around the back of the Inn using another doorway to exit the domicile. Eddard did not have the forces to cover the egress that faced out into the plains. They were moving in quick jerks spreading out. From within the Inn shouts and curses were heard. Javer’s forces came boiling back out. Javer protecting their rear. The force was sizably smaller than when it entered. Eddard knew many Lannister dead littered the inside of that Inn now. Lannister’s chased the retreating men but arrows striking men dampened their enthusiasm of pursuit allowing the survivors to escape.

The Lannisters were organizing a defense now. Most of the arrows now blocked by shields on the
outside of the rush of Lannister men. He had multiple quivers brought by each archer and several
wheelbarrows filled with quivers that had been placed where the archers had gathered the thickest.
Archers would run to the reserve stockpile when they ran dry. It would delay their fire but at least
they could resupply.

Javer’s party and Jaehaegar Velnalys led ten men of the reserve to engage the Lannister’s. Their
swords hacking on shields and stabbing targets of opportunity. They were able to put holes in the
Lannister shield wall. The archers firing into the holes to strike at exposed Lannisters.

Suddenly, war horns to the west were blown and the sounds of horses in full charge came to
Eddard. His head whipped around to take in that sound. He was shocked. The Lannister’s were
moving forces around at night? Next came the screams of horses in pain. The Druids were
engaging the mounted Lannisters. That was why he had wanted the Druids so much on this raiding
party. Their skills would allow them to engage the enemy even in the dark of night.

He was thankful again the Druids were with him. He was sure an owl familiar had seen the
unexpected danger riding down on them and given the Druids time to begin engaging this
unexpected vector of attack. Why the hell had the Lannister sent me out on horseback at night?!
Eddard stormed. Why had they left their camps around the Gates of the Gods and the Lion’s Gate?
He would probably never now! He remembered no plan survived first contact with the enemy.
They would do everything in their power to turn his plans into shit. He turned toward the sounds of
the approaching mounted troop of Lannisters.

Those mounted horse had to be put down! He started to move.

Eddard ran through the buildings followed by his reserve force. What was happening? How had the
Lannisters gotten mounted and ready to fight so fast. Damnit! They most have been planning some
kind of movement in the dark themselves for some reason. Now it was two ships colliding in the
dark. He heard more horses screaming and now men’s screams were heard. Men crushed by falling
horses or feathered themselves by the Druids.

Eddard reached the edge of the hamlet. He could still could not see the advancing forces. How the
Druids were firing accurately he did not know. He felt a Druid move to his left taking up a firing
position. The woman immediately pulled an arrow from her quiver. She searched the sight line
down her drawn arrow before her for several sweeps of her head before she pulled her bowstring
back to maximum and then let loose. The arrow immediately disappearing into the dark. Whether or
not she hit her target Eddard did not know.

Then from the gloom the Lannister mounted horse were visible. Eddard thanked the old gods they
were not mounted knights. They were mounted cavalry without plated armor. Many had lances
leveled while the rest had their swords drawn. Eddard observed the charge. Fortunately, he could
see that the dark had them not riding at a full out gallop. The mounted men had to show caution for
the unknown terrain they were travelling over in the dark. Though not a full gallop they were
advancing at a frightening pace. The horses would trample any man they came across.

Eddard moved out from the buildings and trees to meet the charge. He did not want the horses with
mounted men swiping down on him while hemmed in by buildings and trees. The limited ability to
maneuver would allow the mounted force to attack down with sword and axe or running him
through with pikes or lances with not enough space to maneuver. He felt the twenty men with him
moving out to meet the charge. He moved a little faster wanting to be the tip of the spear meeting the
charge.

That was when he heard it. He felt a surge of elation run through him. He heard the sound of North
war horns sounding off to the west of their battle. The adrenaline in his blood elated the King. He
knew that the Lannisters would attempt to come to their brethren’s aid. It was what any army worth its salt would do.

To counter this he had the Hound work their mounted cavalry out the Old Gate. The gate opened just enough to allow Sandor and his cavalry to issue forth before being closed again. The dark of the moon and keeping of the Lannister’s back from the wall allowing the subterfuge. Sandor and he had been on the walls of King’s Landing mapping out the area around the Lannister’s camp and how they laid out those camps and setup picket guard lines.

Using those observations Sandor formed his plan of attack. Once through the gate he had slowly walked his horses up through the trampled grasslands to get close to the Lannister’s. The Hound had nearly one hundred mounts. He had stopped his force fifty yards from the picket lines that the Lannister’s routinely established. The horses muzzled. Those had been removed. Now the Hound was sounding the war horns and riding his troops out in a burst of speed.

The Lannister’s already agitated by Eddard’s assault now were being thrown into confusion by a seeming charge into their midst.

That was not the reality. Sandor would only engage the pickets and instead ride around the Lannister camp making a lot noise. Noise to gather their attention. The Lannister’s would not be sending reinforcements to the hamlet Eddard was attacking. He wanted the main Lannister camps to think they were under direct assault. This would pull attention away from sending immediate succor to their brethren before the Old Gate. They couldn’t send out forces blindly while under attack.

Eddard knew the danger Sandor Clegane was taking upon himself. The rising Lions would not fall on Eddard but Sandor. Sandor had smiled at his new King when Eddard made sure the man knew this. “Ballocks!” had been Sandor’s answer to Eddard’s concerns.

This was Eddard’s prepared plan. Keep the main Lannister force occupied. His unexpected plan with this mounted Lannister force coming into the hamlet was to be the point of the spear of this fight. He must be the first to meet the mounted charge. If he was asking men to die for him he had to be the first to put himself in danger.

The two opposing forces sighted each other. The horses out front put on a burst of speed to trample Eddard and his force. Shouts all around filled the air with men psyching themselves to prepare to fight. Men surging adrenaline into their blood to fight for their life and avoid the embrace of death.

The new King ran forward a few steps screaming drawing the led horseman’s attention. Eddard planted his feet and prepared to move to the side and cut the horses legs out from underneath the rider. He saw the horse jerk violently and then stumbled forward falling onto its knees and then flipping over and over. The horse’s weight slammed its rider into the ground killing the man riding the horse.

He had seen a white fletched arrow pierce the horse’s eye. More arrows whistled out hitting more horses in the head and other arrows striking riders in their heads and throats. He heard the screams of horses on the far flank of the charge. There was a stand of thick growing trees and undergrowth about one hundred and fifty years out from the hamlet.

Three of the Druids had gone into those woods in the early dark to be able to fire from the flank into the Lannister’s in the hamlet. He had agreed with Kiren in that assessment. She had told Eddard they knew how to blend into any terrain. They would be safe isolated. “And anyways, where is the fun if there is no risk” Kiren had told Eddard with a smile. It was maybe going to save him now.

The first surviving horses of the Lannisters initial charge were crashing into Eddard’s foot soldiers.
Two of his men were run through with lances. Others lances were dodged and hacked down. The sounds of men being trampled came to his ears enraging him. Eddard heard the sounds of horses screaming in anger as they stomped out at his men. He heard the screams of horses being cut and pierced. Their screams piteous but he could not feel for them. The horses must be cut down to remove the advantage of height they provided to the mounted Lannisters.

All around Eddard was confusion. It seemed horses were all around him now. A longbow arrow rushed past his face. *He was nearly feathered by his own forces!* A Lannister horse went down with two hawk feathered arrows jutting out its skull. A Lannister man had fallen to the ground his mount shot out from underneath him. One of his men ran up and slammed a long dagger into his eye twisting it. The man’s body flipped and kicked in his death throes.

The next rider in front of Eddard was charging down on the King. The rider was angling the horse to allow him to swipe down with his sword as he passed. Eddard stood his ground and only at the last moment did Eddard feint right and then went left his sword slashing out at the horse’s legs. The body of the horse barley missed the man of the North. His sword cut into the horse’s leg at the knee joint severing the leg in two. The horse screamed and careened over. The rider thrown clear.

Eddard moved to the right to get near the kicking horse. He had to protect his flank. He saw another of his men run down. His body trampled by the horse. The body did not move. Damnit! Eddard fumed. He moved out and slashed out at a man who was getting ready to run his spear through one of his men on the ground. His sword cut up and through the chainmail slicing into the man’s ribs. The man screamed and turned his horse away from Eddard.

All around Eddard was yelling and animal screams. He ducked and spun to the left sensing a horse coming up on him from behind. The battleax swished over his head the sound shocking as it barely missed Eddard’s head. Then he staggered. The man had turned his horse adroitly and slashed down with the other blade of his battleax. The head hitting him in the back but his hauberk and his overlaying back plate armor protected him. The kinetic energy of the blow sent him staggering forward.

He spun around and dove to the ground rolling away from a horse that tried to trample him. Eddard rolled to his knees. The man was charging him again as Eddard rose up. He had his sword in a blocking position. Like a flower springing forth from the dirt an Arrow with yellow hawk fletching sprung out from his neck. The man dropped his weapon and clutched his throat as blood soaked his hands. That threat eliminated Eddard moved on looking for another foe to engage.

Eddard moved over to the fallen men fighting furiously to save themselves. More mounted Lannister men moved in to give his own felled men the coup de gras. The men stabbing down with spears and leaned down to slash and stab with their swords. Eddard swung his sword to knock the spears aside and force the men on horseback back. Eddard stabbed a man in his lower leg with his sword. The horseman’s screams loud. The Lannister turned away. The problem was that more Lannister men were pressing in on him. The other men with him were forced back and were fighting for survival. Men on the ground attacked from on high. Eddard yelled his anger to draw the Lannister’s attention to him.

He swung his sword desperately from right to left and constantly moving his body to avoid being trampled and spitted on a weapon. He was able to chop horses’ legs out from underneath a few of the mounted men. He felt the air swirl wildly by his temple as a sword nearly cut his face in two with Eddard diving back and to the left. He swirled back swinging his sword in a circle forcing the Lannister back for a moment. Several others were advancing on him.

War horns were sounding all around him. The howls of the Direwolf and the roars of the Lion filled
the air snarling and roaring at each other. He heard the distant sounds of both forces war horns sounding. Sandor was harassing the Lannisters near the Gate of the Gods keeping their attention. The Lannisters could not mount a counterattack with forces attacking them directly in the dark.

He heard the sounds of combat to his right as his men rallied to try and come to his aid. He heard them being fought off as the horses gave the Lannister’s a clear advantage. He ducked a battleax that had been swung down at him. He grabbed the man’s arm and unhorsed the man. He did not have him to run the man through as he had to jump back to avoid a spear thrown at him. His instincts guiding his actions with the spear missing his torso by a foot. He charged into a horse’s flank startling the horse making it rear. Eddard observed Lannister's unhorsed and now fighting on foot.

He looked around wildly. He saw a Lannister man have his leg nearly chopped off at the knee as one of Eddard’s men swung his sword into the leg. The man screamed in agony his horse butting the man that had harmed his master. The horse stomped at the man now on the ground. Its hoof slamming down on the man’s groin making him cry out in torment. Several men from both sides were facing each other. Swords slashing and parrying the strokes of their opponents.

Three more horses were charging Eddard from his left. He turned to meet that charge. The horses were close to each other. He would not have a place to spin away from. He set his feet to meet the charge. Suddenly, the middle horse fell down dead with an arrow slamming through its skull between its eyes. The man on the right had a white fletched arrow run through his mouth and into his brain. He fell off his horse already dead.

The last man staggered when a longbow arrow hit him in the shoulder. The horse veered away to pass by Eddard. As the man passed by Eddard he saw a white fletched arrow sprout out his throat. Only one person in this fight would be using white fetched arrows. His daughter. Arya Stark. The thought made Eddard scream out a challenge to his enemies.

The new King chopped and parried the sword and ax strokes raining down on him. Eddard knew his daughter his guardian spirit was watching over him. Again she had saved her father from death. Another horse was charging Eddard. He juked to the side. The rider pulled his reigns swirling his horse around. Both combatants swiping at each other while they circled each other crazily like the bugs on a pond surface seeking advantage. Eddard blocked the sword swipes and when the man’s balance was upset Eddard nearly chopped his leg in two above the knee. The man moved on screaming in his great suffering.

Without warning, a group of at least forty Lannister men were charging him on foot. The Lannister’s from their quarters and fallen Lannister horsemen had formed a cohesive fighting force. Eddard calmed himself. He would take as many of the bastards as possible down with him as they all went to hell screaming.

He heard yelling and he saw Matamion and Jaehaegar long white hair flying as they and at least nine other men slammed into the flank of the Lannister men. They must have taken care of the Lannister patrol in the hamlet. Eddard felt a surge of adrenaline course through his body. The Lannisters had been thrown into confusion by the assault on their flank. They had been surprised but the numbers of the Valyrian led foot soldiers were still too few.

The Lannister soldiers turned to meet the attack on their flank. Five had been squired by the assault but they now were counterattacking. One of Eddard’s men fell his temple cleaved open his brains spilling out. Another Lannister had his own head sent spinning off into the night. His eyes open in shock.

Eddard was upon the Lannisters in front of him. His sword slashed wildly in front of him. The darkness made it hard to see much beyond ten feet in front of the fighter’s faces. Men were shouting,
cursing and crying out in pain. Men were fighting for survival. Eddard locked his sword up with a man’s battleax. He swung their weapons down to his left. He kicked out into a man’s stomach that was about to impale him with a sword.

Two more men were about to slash into him with their swords as he was engaged. The man on the left head snapped back with a longbow arrow hitting him in his head and a white fletched arrow hit him in the throat. The man on the right dropped his sword holding his throat. He choked on blood gushing from throat.

Another man to his right dropped down like his strings had been cut. Eddard spun in that direction. Matamion was engaged with two men. A third was about to chop his head in two with a battleax. Then Syrio was there and he squired the man through the heart. The man staggered with the water dancer pulling his sword out of his heart and his sword cutting the next man’s head off his shoulders. Syrio jumped to his left and thrust his arm forward. The force piercing another man through his throat and flicked his wrist to sever the man’s right jugular. Eddard charged into the fray taking another man down and then another.

Eddard sensed danger and dived forward. A blade slammed into his shoulder but his plate armor resisted the blow and turned aside the blow. The energy of the strike still staggered Eddard making him stumble and grimace. Eddard took the energy of the strike and pivoted forward to that side.

The man followed and chopping wildly at Eddard as he struggled to get his balance back. Another man joined the first with a morning star. The man snapping his weapon’s ball on its chain at Eddard making him jerk back still trying to get his balance. The man was whirling his arm to strike at Eddard again when a longbow arrow punched through his head from back to front. The other man disappeared into the melee finding another target in the confusion.

A horse was upon Eddard and rearing back to slam its hooves down upon Eddard. A white fletched arrow hit the horse going up its nostril and into its skull. The horse went wild bucking wildly. His rider thrown clear. The man rolling and coming up with his sword swinging. Eddard brought up his sword blocking his opponent’s strokes. The man had actual skill and Eddard had to be wary.

He saw Syrio cutting men down in a blur his small blade invisible in the dark. The Water Dancer would jump and swirl around so fast Eddard did not follow the man. Syrio’s rapier flicking out to pierce hearts and eyes. The razor sharp blade sent a head flipping back off its torso. The man alone was a force devastating the Lannisters. The Stark man thankful for hiring the man to teach his youngest daughter the art of the sword.

Back and forth Eddard and the Lannister fought. Then the man overextended his reach. In the dropping of his guard Eddard rammed his sword through the gap between the man’s armor at the junction of his chest and shoulder. His blade bit deep and punched out the man’s back. The man cried out in pain staggering back when Eddard whipped his sword his sword out his body. The man disappeared into the darkness as another Lannister attacked Eddard. The new King had to back up hacking and stabbing.

Around Eddard he saw his men rallying. They blocked and attacked with wild and yet controlled swings of their blades. His men defending themselves while cutting down Lannisters. He saw two more of his men go down. Eddard rammed his sword clear through a man’s torso. He ripped it out and down hacked on another man’s shoulder ruining the joint his sword digging in three inches through the leather and chainmail.

Arrows were flying faster into the roiled mass of Lannisters. As the Lannisters were defeated in the hamlet the archers could now focus on the battle on the outskirts of the hamlet.
By some unspoken communication the Lannister men and horse started to move back. The fight taken out of the Lions with their savaging by the Direwolves. The forces of the Direwolf did not pursue. The surviving Lannisters from the hamlet moving off with their brethren. Eddard looked around him. The ground was littered with dead and wounded Lannisters and forces loyal to Eddard. The red of the Lannister men with their stylized lions on their surcoats and armor easy to see in the dark night when on them. Eddard and the two Valyrians moved among the men down on the ground.

There was many more Lannisters than forces loyal to him lying upon the ground. A ground soaked in blood and gore.

“There will be no killing of the Lannister wounded!” Eddard shouted out. “We will let the Lannister give succor when we retreat.” The forces of the Direwolf looked for wounded men of their force and helped them up when able and started to carry those too wounded to stand and walk. The men moving back into the hamlet.

Eddard was soaked in sweat and the blood of his enemy. He swiped his arm across his face to get the blood off his face. He detested having his foes’ blood on him once the battle was over. He hated taking life and felt soiled covered in the blood of his foes. Despite his revulsion he would not turn aside from war. He needed to fight to achieve his goals. Goals he felt worth fighting for.

He looked around. He saw dead Lannisters in the streets of the hamlet. They dotted the landscape like blighted flowers. Many were scattered here and about with a few concentrations. Horses were crying out in pain and they were being put of their misery. The Lannister’s in the Inn and houses had been cut down by and large. The survivors had gone forth to fight the Direwolves. Those survivors now in full retreat. Eleven men had surrendered.

Eddard had them stripped of their weapons and bound. He would not kill men who were helpless. He would hold them as hostages. They would not be harmed while he lived. He was sure the Lannisters now had hostages of their own to exchange once Eddard had won his throne.

They moved back into the hamlet. Eddard was tired but he had more to do this night. He ordered his men to retreat back down the hamlet and to the Old Gate. They eschewed the tunnels in their retreat. He could not afford for any stray Lannister to see his men retreating into a building and not reappearing. Such a sight causing them to investigate and discover the tunnels. Their value to great to endanger.

The birds were singing in the trees and underneath the eaves of the houses and other buildings. The sun would be rising in less than an hour now. Soon the sky in the east would be begin to lighten. Eddard hoped to kill a few more Lannisters before this night was over.

A grim set came over his face. It galled him to have such thoughts but have them he would. It was imperative that he win. He knew that Westeros would be a much worse place under Lannister rule.

He moved back to the edge of the hamlet and looked out across the plains. He saw that the Lannister’s force had moved off to lick their wounds. They had disappeared into the night as they had come. Damnit! What in the hell were they doing out and about. It did not fit the pattern that had been observed. Eddard shook his head. It did not matter now. The fight was over.

Eddard along with Syrio and Arya moved along the edge of the hamlet until they came to the curtain wall of King’s Landing. With them were his personal honor guard. They were invisible still in the dark night air. This would not last long. To the east, the first glimmerings of light were making the sky turn purple there. In the distance, they heard the shouts of men, the scream of horses and war horns blowing. Sandor Clegane was keeping the Lions up and roaring.
Eddard and his force moved on. The small group moving at a fast jog. Eddard looked at his daughter easily keeping pace with the much taller and grown men. Syrio had truly trained his daughter’s body to be in supreme fitness. They jogged to halfway to the next gate moving west; the Gate of the Gods. They had moved along the line of buildings that jutted out a short distance from the curtain wall of King’s Landing. They were getting close to the hamlet that surrounded the Gate of the Gods. It was much larger than the smaller grouping of domiciles at the Old Gate.

There they met the horses that had been brought for them. Eddard and his mates pulled themselves up into their horses’ saddles. They moved out into the plains just beyond the buildings. They gazed off to the east at where the Gate of the Gods would be located. The sounds of confused combat could be heard off to the east flank of the hamlet at this gate. Sandor was terrorizing the picket lines and any force of Lannisters that had roused themselves to come out of their tents and appropriated buildings.

They waited till the sky began to lighten with the rising sun to the east. They moved out further into the plains a few hundred yards. Their horses pawed the ground. The small party waited. The last part of their plan should be playing out with the approaching sunrise. The sky slowly became brighter with the approaching sun. First the east had had a purple caste to it but now the whole world seemed to come into focus with the increasing light.

From the east, suddenly, the force led by Sandor Clegane could be seen storming across the grasslands towards Eddard and his small force. Behind them a large force of Lannisters were pelting out after them. They had had time to saddle and mount their horses waiting for the increased light. Sandor had been harassing them for over an hour and with the increasing light the Lannister were seeking to annihilate the much smaller fleeing before them.

The men whipping their horses looking to charge down and engage the small force that had been left out exposed. There was well over five hundred men coming down on the small force. The horses were galloping fast as the Lannister men sought revenge for the savaging they had just received from the two wolf packs.

Eddard turned to Arya. Eddard handed her the war horn he had worn around his neck. He had taught his daughter over the last week how to sound the horn and play the notes for various commands. She had worked out a new tone to sound her command. She had in turn taught the archers she had been training the notes to her command to them.

“It is up to you Arya. You will have to time the notes you blow. You know this. Sandor is depending on you.”

Arya did not respond to her father. She was watching the forces out on the plains. Sandor was angling his mounted force towards the walls of King’s Landing.

Eddard saw at least seven horses running with no mounts. The force smaller than when they had departed from Eddard to perform their part of this tableau. Eddard estimated that Sandor had lost maybe twenty men. The man’s black dysteria near the back of the force. The man screaming at his men to run their tired horses faster. The man at the point closest to his enemies like a true commander. His thoughts on the safety of the men under his control.

The Lannisters were closing but still a hundred and fifty yards behind. The two forces angling towards the Old Gate. The Lannister’s rushing to prevent Sandor from escaping.

Arya was at full attention on her horse. Her legs stiff as she stood up in her stirrups. She kept looking at the two forces racing across the grassy plains. She saw what she was looking for and lifted the war horn to her lips. He father watched her take a deep breath.
Arya had come to her father right after he had proposed his night time attack. In her studies
underneath the tutelage of Syrio she had read of the Loquato nomads. They roamed the lands west
of Volantis between the River Rhoyne and hill country of Sereptaff above the Orange Shore. Many
times Volantis had tried to conquer these nomads and never fully succeeded.

The nomads had mastered a deadly form of harassing attack. They would strike from behind hills.
Their attacks sudden and savage. Arya had told her father of these tactics. Eddard had loved it the
moment his daughter told him. Her plan thoroughly worked out. Her tactics sound and timing
worked out. Syrio had beamed behind Arya. Later he told Eddard this had all been her idea.

Arya had taken her archers down to the banks of the Blackwater Rush and practice her tactics to be
well away from the Lannisters. She did not want them to have any idea what was coming. She
could not practice what was needed within the confines of the actual city.

Now Eddard watched his daughter execute her attack.

AAARROOOOOOOO AARROO AARROO AARROO AARROO AARROO AARROO AARROOOOOOOO

The new king whipped his head from looking at his daughter to the curtain wall of King’s Landing.
Suddenly, the parapets of the castle were lined with archers aiming their bows through the
embrasures. A sudden blizzard of thousands of arrows appeared arching up into the sky from behind
the curtain wall. The arrows reaching a zenith and then descending down to Earth again. The better
archers on the castle wall let loose with their arrows.

By the archers were tenders handing the archers the next arrows to string up. The archers pulling
back and releasing the next flight of arrows. The first flight of arrows that had been fired off from
the courtyards of King’s Landing were approaching the ground. Eddard saw the next flight taking
the air appearing over the walls of King’s Landing like a storm of angry locusts.

Eddard did not hear the sound at first but he saw the black cloud coming closer. Now he could hear
the whistling of arrows. More arrows were shooting up over the wall of King’s Landing and now
descending towards the charging Lannisters. Arya knew the archers were not skilled in point
targeting but they had clearly mastered firing their bows with skill. The massive cloud of arrows
now angled down towards the charging Lannister men.

They had planned this ambush site to allow them to concentrate their firepower. Arya had worked
out the distances and how long it would take the arrows to fly through the air to reach their targets.
Eddard now heard the trebuchets and catapults being released that had been filled with one pound
rocks being flung over the wall. The Lannister’s in their wild rush to get revenge did not see the
cloud now descending upon them as another cloud was nearing their apex and starting to tip over
and descend down.

Whistling death started to shoot into the charging horses. Horses stumbled and fell down with an
arrow or multiple arrows hitting them. These were not knights with plate armor or horses wearing
heavy armor. Riders were hit by arrows and flung off their horses.

Many arrows of course missed their mark and sank into the ground. But with so many arrows in the
air Lannisters were being hit. Eddard smiled. Arya had been exactly right in her estimation of
distance and windage. Her command given at the perfect moment. More arrows from the second
flight where buzzing down into the now confused mass of Lannisters. More flights of arrows
arching through the sky now turning from dawn to full morning.

As they watched, the rock shot from the trebuchets and catapults started to slam into the confused
roiling mass of mounted soldiers. Horses and men screamed as arrows and stone balls slammed into
their bodies. The Lannisters were in total confusion. In their rush to avenge the attacks upon them they had lost sight of keeping their distance beyond arrow range. Eddard had limited his use of his siege weapons. Their use saved for this shock and awe moment.

It was time to leave. Sandor’s mounted troop went storming by. Eddard and his group wheeled their horses around and followed close behind. The horses raced back to the Old Gate.

Eddard looked back over his shoulder while confusion rained down on the Lannister charge. The flights of arrows from behind the curtain wall and the archers up on the wall kept arrows buzzing down into the force of Lannisters. To add to the confusion the rocks of the trebuchets and catapults now rained down on the Lannisters. More concentrated flights of arrows rained down on the Lannister’s hitting horse and men.

Many, many missed hitting anything but still arrows and stone were whistling into the roiling mass of Lannisters. Men and horse fell down dead. Man and mount struck with savage force. Other horses bucked wildly with arrows jutting out withers, shoulders and flanks. Men had their bodies pierced fully or arrows only partially penetrating their chainmail. Unmounted men were running back and away to get out of range of the death falling down upon them.

Eddard glanced back over his shoulder as his own force retreated to safety. At least four score of the mounted Lannisters by his estimate had been hit. Hopefully more. The Lannisters had given up on revenge and were now retreating to get beyond range of the archers. The Lannisters angling to the right to move beyond the line of shot of the siege engines.

Eddard urged his horse on as his force retreated at a full gallop. More arrows were falling down onto any straggling Lannisters not fast enough to retreat out of range. The continuing rain of arrows and rock was strongly encouraging them to retreat.

Eddard and his force were now in the hamlet and riding fast for the gate that was open but would quickly be shut behind their charging horses. Eddard reached out and gripped Arya’s shoulder and shook it while he looked at her with a goofy smile.

“Great job!” he shouted. “Great job!”

Arya smiled with a cheek splitting look. Eddard and his daughter rode on. Eddard considered what they had accomplished this night.

They were now galloping for the opened gate and safety. The immediate rush of success had flooded Eddard with adrenaline. He considered all he had accomplished and still had to do. Eddard felt a grim look come on his face. His mind reflecting on the night’s events. The Lion had been bloodied. In some small measure he had avenged his people’s butchery by the Lannisters. For now it would have to be enough.
Reflections On Life

Chapter Notes

AN #1: I generally use HBO for the character appearances. I don’t like most of their choices but I did like their selection of actors to play the characters. While this is the general rule I have decided to use the books for one character that will appear in the near future.

I am saying this For the HBO viewers only who might say that is not how the character should look.

Heirs Apparent

Reflections on Life

It had been eight days since the battle before the Old Gate. Arya was still stoked from the combat. Again she had proven her worth. Pride filled Arya knowing she had taken the fight to the enemy. The young woman had help to kill the enemies of her father. She knew she had been instrumental in taking the fight to the Lannisters. Her arrows had killed and wounded many of her foes.

She had put in some thought coming up with a name for the battle in the dark of night. The young wolf had turned over various names in her mind. She had decided on Battle of the Whispering Trees. Arya remembering the heavy breezes sighing through the tree branches. She remembered the beauty of the tunes the wind made in the leaves and boughs of the trees rustling with the heavy sighing winds of that night.

The beauty marred by the battle that had occurred. Arya knew it was necessary. The Lannisters needed to be bloodied. They had become too complacent. Her father had taken away their air of superiority and feelings of safety. Now in the back of their minds they would have the fear of another attack. The Lannister’s had to be filled with consternation on how their enemy had pulled off their attack.

The feral teenager smiled. The Lannisters did not need to know of the tunnels or ravens and owls spying on them. It was nice to have advantages your enemy could not fathom or even conceive of.

Her Master had given her the two days after the battle off. Arya was jittery with after battle shakes. She was so excited to have performed so well. She knew she had more than held her own on the battlefield. She had led and comported herself as a warrior and she was rightfully proud. Syrio told her that she had earned a brief time to relax and rest. “Then the training begins again. No girl?” he asked. She nodded her head. She was always anxious to train and improve.

She had taken advantage of her time off. She had gotten up an hour before dawn like she was want to do. She always wanted to get a good start on the day. It was the part of the day she loved the most. Normally, she ate a quick breakfast with her father. The two usually quiet as they ate. The two taciturn by nature. Her father always made sure to ruffle her hair and hug her tight as they parted ways. The two bonding in their quiet way.
Arya had rushed up to the battlements around the Red Keep as the sun was beginning to crest over the horizon to the east. She was on the east facing curtain wall that walked along the rim of Aegon’s Hill. She faced the east to not see the city of King’s Landing. The morning usually brought strong breezes off of Blackwater Bay. With the wind coming in from the east the smells of the city for a brief time blown back over the city. For a while, Arya smelled fresh clean air. Air she took deep into her lungs.

Looking to the east Arya saw the raw untamed land along Blackwater Bay only dotted in several spots with small fishing hamlets that seemed almost nestled into the wild growth surrounding them. When she looked over her right shoulder she saw the Kingswood. The wild woods that lay untamed along the far bank of the River Blackwater Rush. When she looked in that direction she could almost pretend she was back in the North. The untamed wild land of her birth. She loved the woods of the Kingswood and untamed growth on the shores of the sunken estuary of Blackwater Bay.

She missed the cold though. She had read that only in the deep of a long winter did it truly get cold this far south. This land only knew the briefest taste of winter except in rare instances.

The teenager missed the cold of the North. She missed feeling the bite of the winds from the north. The smell of coal oil and wood burned over night and how they left tiers of smoke in the still air of the mornings. She missed the look of frost on the ground and on the blades of grass and limbs. Watching them slowly turn to water as the morning sun struck them.

What she missed the most was seeing the puddles and depressions filled with water that had turned to ice overnight with the first cold snap of the winter that always came to the North. It always thrilled the preteen and then teenager to see the clear sheets of ice over the water beneath. She would rush to the frozen water and get off a ways and then run at them. Upon reaching the ice she would jump and hit the ice skidding across the bodies of rigid ice.

Arya smiled. She had little scars all over her body from her less successful slides across the ice. It had been a blast to test her balance and fight for balance. The tumbles part of the fun of the runs onto the ice. She missed that in this hot clime with no hint of a winter to come.

She leaned along the battlement. She remembered the words her Master had spoken to her on their way from giving the fight to the Lannisters.

“You were most impressive out there this night” Syrio had told Arya when they reentered King’s Landing through the gate on their mounts. “You were feral and your accuracy with the bow was astounding Wolf Girl. The Druids themselves were impressed. I heard some of them say that some of your shots they were not sure they could have accomplished in the dark and heat of battle.”

“I believe you are already with the bow what I want you to become with the sword. You are an Air Dancer Arya. I have seen you make shots that astound me. You will become the rarest of warriors. Complete.”

Arya had felt her chest swell with the praise. She knew she was very good with the bow and having it acknowledge filled her with pride.

When they had deployed for battle Arya had talked to the three Druids nearest her hiding in the shadows. She had told them to stick near her. She was going to pace her father and protect his flank. The three Druids had not questioned her commands. Looking back on that she was a little surprised that they accepted orders from a teenager.

As her father had moved about on the battlefield she and her small force paced him. The Druids were happy to follow her command. Arya’s father was a man to throw himself into the thick of
battle. Arya and her compatriots had many targets to shoot at in defending the man the Druids called the Alpha Direwolf. Her father had been an indistinct ghost on the inky dark battlefield.

She knew she had indeed made good shots out on the confused battlefield. She had also missed with arrows whisking away into the darkness. She had not liked that one bit. She would continue to practice her archery.

Syrio had her constantly working on her mastery of the sword. She now felt improvement in her skills and reaction time. She was becoming quicker and her endurance increasing continuously. She felt her body becoming more strong and litesome with the passage of time. She felt like she might actually achieve what Syrio said she could become.

If she stayed focused, she would continue to progress. With that goal in mind she would stay focused on her training. She had a burning desire to become the best. She would become a Water Dancer.

Syrio increased Arya’s tasks and training regimen constantly. He worked Arya tirelessly. He was adding more reps and sets to the calisthenics and isometrics. The exercises were hard and draining but Arya was happy to continue doing them. She felt her body getting stronger. Syrio now had her doing handstands near a wall and using her toes against the wall for balance. Her Master had her do inverted pushups.

The first time she collapsed after three. She had stormed at Syrio for having her doing “stupid, impossible stunts”. That was until Syrio did a handstand with no wall to balance against and did thirty inverted pushups. He jumped back up to his feet and grinned at Arya with a shit eating grin. That had shut Arya up. She could now do twenty only tapping her toes on the wall for balance.

She would soon match her Master and make him eat his damn grin! Arya would have her revenge! She groused to herself. Secretly, she craved Syrio constantly pushing her limits. It was his dedication to her training that allowed Arya to progress so rapidly.

He now had Arya lugging a large satchel filled with thirty pounds of crushed rock and lead pellets. She had to lug it forward while down in crouch with first one arm and then next and duck walk forward hunched over. Then he had her lift the satchel squat and rise up to cradle it in arms beneath her chin. Next she hefted it over her head and landed it on her shoulders and do a squat with the weight on her shoulders. Back and forth she went.

The satchel had straps and she would have to swing between her legs backwards and forward or swing the satchel up to her shoulders in turn. Then she was sitting on her butt with her knees bent up her feet off the ground swinging the damn! satchel over her stomach from one hip to the other for forty reps.

Arya never knew what combinations Syrio would put together or something new.

She cursed the man but secretly loved the exercise and torture. She could feel herself becoming stronger. It was all worth it. She knew to become a Water Dancer she needed to become supremely fit.

Syrio was advancing her sword training. They were now having sparing matches that had them fighting freestyle. She still lost badly. Syrio did not take it easy on his charge. “You must be a razor. The feel of your blade precise and sharp” and “the sword must become an extension of your arm Arya. It must obey your will as precisely as your fingers.”

The two antagonists circled each other their practice wooden swords a blur. The swords colliding
again and again. Arya’s arm felt tired soon after they began to spar. She knew Syrio was still holding back with his strength but he was using more and more of his strength as Arya improved. He had a long way to go before he was using his full strength but Arya was improving.

“Stop! Stop dreaming of playing with your dolls Arya. We are playing with swords—No?”

He would signal with his head to pause and then step in and adjust her elbow’s angle slightly or pull up the hand holding her sword and maybe twist the angle of her wrist slightly. Syrio was constantly after Arya about the positioning of her feet and the center of gravity of her hips. Syrio would grouse and kick one foot or the other to get it at proper angle and pressure of the instep.

Then they would be at each other again.

Arya knew that each day she improved in her skills. She would practice her ritualized movements. They were precise steps and movements of her sword and positioning of her free hand for balance. She would do them again and again. She did them before Syrio as he judged her footwork and style but often by herself. Syrio stressed that she must do them over an over till they become muscle memory.

Syrio was constantly after Arya when she practiced as well about her positioning and stance. He was always harping at the slightest misshape of her stance or balance.

“Arya! Arya, are you the marionette of some drunken fool! I have taught you better than that. Your body looks like it is misshapen and your joints askew. Be precise! Again and again till you get it right always!”

Syrio would whine and bitch constantly correcting Arya’s stance and balance.

“But Syrio, I have mastered the steps of the dances you have taught me … why do you bitch about a slight deviation … you only ever move whatever has you belly aching about a fraction of space Syrio! This is really starting to piss me off!!”

Her Master looked at her with that steady look that was filled with flint. His gaze steady and unflinching.

Soon Arya turned her gaze aside.

“Why Syrio? Why are you always after me? You know I am doing well. Why this constant harping on perfection?”

“Arya you disappoint me. You have done all I ask. Why do you question me now? I thought you were stronger than that my disciple.”

Arya bit her lower lip. When he put it like that she felt ashamed. She started to speak. Syrio jumped in.

“I will explain Arya. You deserve an explanation.” He paused walking around in front of his protégée.

“When you fight you will find that most of your opponents are far beneath you. This was what you saw when Meryn Trant came for you. The Redcloaks were only pretenders. Anyone with a sword and modicum of skill could have taken them out. Meryn had some skill but before a Waterdancer he was nothing Arya. Soon men like him will be nothing to you.”

“But Arya … you will meet foes that have actual true skill. There the balance between you and your
opponent will be much smaller. Maybe only infinitesimal. It is then Arya that the preciseness I am teaching you now will come to you like a sweet lover in the night. Their arms enfolding and protecting you.”

“We train with singular focus day in and out to commit to muscle memory our dance steps and thrust and parry. We must train our muscles with preciseness. It will be this rigid standard of excellence that will stand you well when you fight your foes. By achieving excellence you will have the advantage before you even take the battlefield.”

“I can tell you Arya that few train to the standard that I am teaching you. Few have the patience and strength of will to receive such training. You are one of those rare few. Thus, I take you as my disciple.”

“It may seem conceited and arrogant Arya but I can truthfully say that there are few like me. Like your father. We are true masters of our chosen weapon. None can stand against us. The only caveat to that is random luck. Who knows when the fates may have you trip over nothing or slip on a wet spot. Still. Even then your training will come to you.”

“Others who carped against their teachers or have become lazy will have slight imperfections in their stance or dance steps. With the perfection you will emblazoned into your soul you will have the advantage Arya. Those who have allowed imperfection into their stance and attack will be fodder for you. You will see their failings and will take that. You will use it to caste them down.”

“Your advantage will be small against near equals and the rare gem of an equal. You must take advantage of all your abilities and skills Arya. Learn to be exact and perfect in all you do with your body. It will come to you in your time of need Arya my student. My disciple. I have waited my life for you.”

Arya bent her head in acknowledge. She understood now. Now she may carp and snarl for show but she knew. If she was to become the shining diamond, she had to be cut precisely and polished relentlessly. Syrio was the master diamond cutter and Arya was blessed enough to be his masterwork.

She would learn from him.

She accepted his instruction and seemingly endless corrections of the infinitesimal errors of her footwork or stance. First, he had to constantly correct obvious and glaring mistakes. Those were rare now. Soon to never appear again. Now Syrio was focusing on smaller and smaller imperfections.

Arya accepted them. Cut by cut Syrio was cutting Arya’s old self away to produce the diamond that lay beneath. With each exposed facet her sword master polished the new cut facet till it glittered with perfection.

“You are truly fortunate in your situation Arya. To have me as your teacher here and now.”

Arya rolled her eyes at her instructor. Gods his ego was insufferable at times Arya thought.

Syrio glared at his student. “I am that good damnit!” He stood up straight and preened. “But that is not what I am speaking of.” Arya looked at him questioningly.

“I can focus on you and you alone Arya. I have no other students to divert my attention. I have no duty to a Sealord or to your father actually other than train you. I like it. We are making great progress my disciple. You are progressing even faster than I dared hope. You are truly what I have
waited for.”

“In return I am blessed my student” Syrio told Arya looking at her intently.

Arya’s eyebrows narrowed asking Syrio to explain himself.

“You are the perfect student Arya. Your focus is total and complete. With only minor bitching (Arya glared at that) you do all I ask with all the focus I could ask for. Better yet Arya, you are a natural. Some have had the focus in the past but alas not the skill. Maybe they could have learned in time but neither us of had the time or patient to chisel from granite any skill they may have secreted away.”

“Not you Arya. You are flooded with natural ability. You have inherited all your father’s abilities and potential. You have it within you as did your father before you. I merely most coax it out.”

Arya had preened. How could she not. She was achieving her dreams. It required hard work and total focus but she gladly gave it. The reward was worth all her toil and suffering of body and mind. She would become what she had always wanted to be. A true master of the sword.

The two resumed their practice. Syrio still calling out constant correction. Arya now accepting the corrections with no hint of defiance. She realized she was truly fortunate.

Syrio now had Arya practice slipping sword strokes. Syrio refining the technique of using angled strokes to take a strong sword stroke and shunting it aside. The Braavosi explaining to Arya how to push off against the blade of her foe. He emphasized that if the opportunity presented itself, Arya was to move in and throw her knee into her foe’s ribs or groin.

Arya had at first complained this showed a “lack of honor”. Syrio had gotten really pissed off at that.

“Stop swooning over false prose and outright lies. Minstrels are full of shit! Your opponent will not hesitate to do such to you. You will take every opportunity to knee, kick, punch and even bite your opponent if the opportunity presents itself. If you follow what the damn ballads minstrels sing you will have a date with death Arya. You will not have a second opportunity to avoid death’s embrace.”

Slowly Arya had shed her ideals of fighting only honorably. She was learning to take any advantage she could find in a fight.

At this moment Sandor Clegane came into the small meeting hall that Syrio had appropriated to teach Arya when it was raining like it was outside now. The rain coming down in sheets.

He delivered a message from the Spider to Syrio and prepared to leave.

“My good man, I would ask that you spar with my student.”

The man sneered at Syrio. “I have better things to do with my time Braavosi” Sandor barked at Syrio turning to leave.

“So you are afraid Arya will kick your ass I see” Syrio shot back with a slight insulting tone.

Arya eyes had grown large. She was not ready to fight that big, tall and always pissed off man. She shook her head ‘no’ at Syrio. Her eyes large.

“Bugger off you sot!” Sandor barked back.
Arya was now pulling on Syrio’s arm and shushing him. In panic Arya saw that her master was ignoring her obvious attempts to stop his insane goading of the Hound. It was easy for Syrio to challenge the Hound to fight her, Arya thought wildly. She was not ready to clash with the Hound! It was her neck on the chopping block! Arya blanched with Syrio’s next jib.

“Cluck cluck cluck” Syrio stated to kick the ground like a chicken kicking the dirt looking for scratch. “Run away Chihuahua. Arya will kick your ass with ease anyways.”

The tall man had started to walk away. Now he whirled around in a flash his face flushed with anger. “Right, right! Bring her on!” the Hound now howled. Arya had been shocked at the tall man’s speed. She had a distinct sinking feeling. Arya glared at her Master with hot eyes. She would put hot cinnamon sauce in Syrio’s soup for this!

Syrio threw the man his practice sword. He gave Arya a sweet smile. She glared back at her sword master. She looked at the enraged Sandor. She felt sweat trickle down her back. Damnit! She wanted to kick Syrio in the onions for this!

Arya stared up at the large scarred man. She had long grown used to his disfigurement. To Arya he was just Sandor Clegane. Arya was relieved that the man waited for Arya to stop shaking and go to the middle of the room. The Hound slightly raised his sword in acknowledgement of the coming fight. That sign of respect made Arya feel a little better.

That immediately disappeared with Sandor’s roar as he charged the fourteen year old. Arya saw he was attempting to bull rush her. She stood her ground and only at the last moment did she slide to the side cross blocking Sandor’s savage down chop of his blade while sticking out her foot and tripping the man as he rushed by. The Hound stumbling forward off balance.

Arya followed swinging wildly at the man while he was off balance. She did not worry about honor now. The Hound was too big to worry about honor! Sandor cursed sweeping his sword around in a semicircles which forced Arya to block. He turned and now attacked with cross hacks coming down at Arya from both sides of Arya. She blocked the strikes keeping her knees bent and her balance centered. She did several jabs at the man using his lack of complete balance. Sandor’s mighty strikes that for a moment had his body leaning forward slightly off balance. The man shouting out having to divert his swings to counter Arya’s attacks.

The Hound paused while he eyed Arya. He now advanced on the fourteen year old in a controlled manner. His sword held before his body at a forty-five degree angle prepared for defense.

With more caution, Sandor attacked in a controlled manner. Arya grimaced blocking his powerful strikes. His great height and weight gave his strikes a savage power. Arya attempted counterattacks but Sandor easily blocked them and again attacked. Several times she saw the man’s eyes widen when she blocked an attack and struck back making the man block her strike that succeeded in coming near the man.

Then Sandor did a savage overhead strike. Arya blocked. Again he did the same attack but in an instant Sandor side stepped when Arya went to block that attack vector again. His sword down chopped and hit Arya on the thigh. She cried out in pain. Sandor pressed his attack and quickly disarmed Arya hooking her blade near her hand and whipping his hand up and twisting his wrist torqueing Arya’s sword out of her grip.

Sandor was breathing hard and a film of sweat on his face. He stared down at Arya. He looked over at Syrio. He tilted his head slightly.

“Bollocks!”
With that the Hound was gone.

“I failed you my master” Arya told Syrio. She should not have been so easily disarmed she thought sourly.

Syrio smiled at his student.

“Quite the contrary Arya. Sandor is not a Waterdancer for sure but he is good. Very good. You lasted longer than I dare hope. You surprised him and took the fight to him Arya. You are just beginning and yet you gave a very, very good fighter a good fight. Continue your practice and diligence Arya. I see great things for you my young Direwolf.

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Later that same day after the dinner meal Arya was in the room that the younger Lannister children had seemed to appropriate for themselves. The fireplace burning brightly filling the room with warmth. There were six lamps burning on hooks filling the room with a warm light. Several large braziers were burning with coke that provided warmth and light. The air cooled quickly after the sun went down.

All were sitting around the long table. On one end the crewel work that Sansa and Mrycella were working on rested. Arya admired the intricate knots that gave their work a depth that attracted the fourteen year old’s eyes.

The table was scattered with books. Arya eyed the book titles. No sultry bodice rippers in this lot. The titles were somewhat intimidating to the young Waterdancer in training. She read the spines of some of the books, The Republic by one Platus mo Rhohzar, Critique of Pure Reason, Mediations of First Philosophy, Being and Nothingness, Beyond Good and Evil / On the Genealogy of Morals, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. Geez Arya thought. Her head was exploding and she had not even opened any of the books.

Worse than the titles of the books was listening to Sansa and Myrcella talking about precepts, concepts and moral equivalences. The two young women discussing the meaning of truth, did the human mind define one’s world, what is the meaning of truth, did merely observing a thing change it. Their words causing Arya’s head to spin.

She turned to look at Tommen. He was reading a book on trigonometry. She asked why he was reading something so stupid. He had looked at her with sympathy. “The world is based on math Arya. One must seek to learn to understand the world around us.” With that he bent his head back down to read the strange letters and numbers written weirdly across the page.

At least he was petting his cats like a normal person. The yellow tabby was nestled on his lap purring his whiskers twitching. Two cats were lying on the table on some blankets he had folded up and set between books making nests for the cats. The cats snoozing. Another cat was lying beside the book Tommen was reading. The feline lazily swatting at the pages and the young preteen patiently moving its paw aside when he needed to turn the page.

Jeyne Poole was beside Sansa reading a book of songs from Highgarden. The songs about love and gallantry judging by the cover. The girl constantly looking up to smile at Sansa. The girl stopping her reading when Sansa turned to ask her a question. The two smiling and chuckling at some inside meaning that went over Arya’s head. She did notice the two were sitting close together.

Arya looked around flummoxed. She knew her letters and was reading books on battle tactics and military history and military thought but all these books on philosophy and mathematics quite frankly
bored her. What she heard Sansa and Myrcella speak about made her head spin. It was interesting watching the two women discussing ideas and concepts with such depth of feeling and understanding of what the writers wrote. It was intimidating to see how easily her sister and the Lannister girl absorbed the ideas in the works.

When they tried to explain what they read to Arya she had learned to hold up her hand in defeat. She snickered. She had heard how her father had run from Myrcella when she tried to engage him in philosophical discourse. Arya’s father leaving with wide eyes in a hurry. It made all the women chuckle.

“Sansa, tell us of some of the things your sister used to do to you back at Winterfell.” Jeyne looked at Arya with a smirk.

Arya rolled her eyes. She now cringed at what she had done against her older sister back in Winterfell. It was funny but she always worried how Sansa would take to reliving some of Arya’s greatest triumphs in her younger years.

Sansa fortunately did not hold onto the rancor of past events. She smiled at Arya and her other tablemates. She related the past pranks of her sister. Sansa told the chuckling table mates of how Arya had put sheep dung in her bed. “That was real shitty of you Arya!” Arya had blushed mightily at that. She had put a clothes pin on her nose while she shoveled the dung underneath Sansa’s bedspread. It had been worth the whipping her mother gave her.

Sansa then related how Arya put itching powder in her short cloth and another couple of times cut holes in her short cloth. Sansa went on to tell how Arya had put some grease down on the floor in front of Sansa’s bed sending her on her butt. Sansa made it all funny and for that Arya was thankful that her older sister was willing to put those actions in the past and caste them in a humorous light.

They were funny with everyone laughing at Arya’s past antics.

Then Jeyne asked Arya to relate her battle with the Lannister’s.

Arya looked around at the expectant faces. She had yet to tell any of them about that night. She started to relate her actions during the fight that she had come to call the Battle of the Whispering Trees. She inflected her voice and made actions of shooting her bow. She got up from the table and moved around showing herself looking for targets. She would suddenly draw her imaginary bow back and fire off an arrow at her invisible enemies.

She told her listeners of her elation and the fear she felt at moments when the battle suddenly took turns that had the enemy seemingly upon her and how she fought savagely to beat the Lannisters back or a few times running to hide in the shadows to find new firing positions. It was cat and mouse between the Wolf and Lion. Arya smiled with a feral caste. She proudly proclaimed the Direwolf had been ascendant.

Arya then paused. She was telling of attacking the House that Myrcella and Tommen belonged too. Arya began to hem and haw now stumbling over her words.

The two young Lannisters looked at her curiously. Then the light dawned in Myrcella’s eyes. Myrcella had sensed what was causing Arya’s unease. She reached out and touched Arya’s arm who was near her.

“I understand your concern Arya. Rest your fears.”
Arya arched her eyebrows asking Myrcella to elaborate.

“Tommen and I never felt any affection or love from our parents. We lived in a cold sterile world. We were always tense and full of worry. Our mother was harsh and dictatorial. Our supposed father was aloof and distant. We now know of our true lineage. Our true father never once tried to tell us of his parentage. We were nothing to him. Our mother to bitter in her situation to give love.”

“With your father’s ascendency to the Iron Throne our lives have changed. Changed for the best. We have no desire to return to the past. We know what would happen to us if Tywin, our grandfather, were to get custody of us.”

She and now Tommen made direct eye contact with Arya.

“We align ourselves with House Stark. If you will accept our allegiance.”

Arya and Sansa both gladly told the two Lannisters they were totally accepted into their House. They knew their father felt the same way. (Arya hoped he did). The two sisters totally accepted and considered them already a part of House Stark as far as they were concerned.

All smiled.

Her fear allayed Arya resumed retelling the battle as she remembered it. She inflected her voice to add drama and added gesticulations to add spice to her narrative.

It was then that Arya saw that Sansa now had a sad caste to her features. Jeyne had caught on and was stroking Sansa’s arm. Now Myrcella and Tommen picked up on Sansa’s sad demeanor.

“What’s wrong sis? Did I saw something to upset you? If so I am sorry” Arya told her sister earnestly.

Sansa looked at her sadly. “This is why father will always love you better than me Arya. I am just an ornament that is pretty to look at. I am an emptied head—“

“Stop it! Just stop it!” Jeyne Poole cried out.

Arya jumped in. “Sansa please stop.” Sansa looked at her younger sister. “Sansa.” Arya paused gathering her thoughts. She pointed at all the books and scrolls around them and the maps they sometimes looked at to look where the various books had been written.

“You and Myrcella have minds that are every bit as sharp as my arrow points or my sword tip. Yes. I affect the battlefield Sansa” she turned her head to look at the others “Jeyne, Myrcella, Tommen”. I can affect those events. They are nothing but the blink of an eye. I may affect events, yes. I can bring down a king. But it will be people like you Sansa that will keep a king or maybe a queen on their throne.”

“It will be advisors that will give counsel that will keep the royal on the throne. Without good counsel Robert Baratheon lies in the ground rotting. Cersei is at my father’s mercy. Joffrey is a shit also relying on my father’s mercy. The counsel they received was poor and they are no more.”

“I know we are women and a young boy, but just maybe, you can put yourselves in a position to provide sage advice.” Arya swept her arms over the books. “These thoughts and words in these books while confusing to little ole me” Arya turned a face making her companions laugh “they sound deep and wise. It is this you offer Sansa. Intelligence and insight. You can affect a kingdom. You will be able to give wisdom.”
"All I have to offer is my left arm. You have your intellect Sansa. You are also beautiful. It, in its own way, is a tool or maybe even a weapon. Use it to achieve your aims sister."

"I gave my father a second chance to learn from his mistakes. I have given you the same gift. Follow your dreams and your desires Sansa. Don’t follow the false words of the minstrel’s songs. Don’t follow the path that our mother would have you follow. Be true to yourself."

Sansa smiled gratefully at her sister. She had tears breaming in her eyes. Which of course made Arya blush and stammer.

Myrcella and Jeyne comforted Sansa. They talked to her in soothing voices and hugged the tall redhead giving her strength. Arya awkwardly patted her sister on the shoulder offering her support in her own shy way.

Jeyne produced a deck of cards and they played a game she called kings and queens. The four girls played along with Tommen. All laughing and jesting. Arya thoroughly enjoyed her time with her Sister and her companions. Sansa was lucky to have such friends Arya thought.

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It was the next mid-morning. Arya had finished her morning training session with Syrio. He had her do the majority of her exercises and running in the morning hours before the heat took the air. She would do her exercise and then run around though the Red Keep and outside into the courtyards. From time to time Syrio would have her run around close to the red sandstone of the Red Keep to vary her scenery. This was only after the gold cloaks had done sweeps to clear the run path of any ruffians or those who seemed to have ill intent. There was never any.

Arya’s father’s just rule had the locale populace at ease and generally happy.

Arya had just come up from the kitchens where she had had a quick meal of chicken and dumplings. She really loved the broth they were soaked in.

She stopped. Walking down the corridor ahead of her were Phirona Ormonnis and Saelalys Narennis. They had moved into the Red Keep. They had unofficially become the medicinal tenders of the new King and helped in the cooking of the royal’s meals and generally looking out for the Stark household. They wanted to support their new King.

They were walking hand in hand with inter clasped fingers. It was clear they were lovers. Her father had made it clear that the women were free to show their affections. The women did not flaunt their intimate relationship in the Red Keep and made sure to keep a discreet distance from each other outside the walls of the Red Keep. They knew the prejudices that filled the hearts of less enlightened people.

The two talked quietly walking down the halls. They had quarters that was a floor below and on the outside wall of Red Keep by the bay. Arya followed like a leaf that was caught in their draft. Since seeing them making love in their bed at Merrel’s abode Arya had been terribly fascinated by what she had seen.

So many things had become clear to the young teenager seeing what the two women were doing. Her confused desires had instantly shifted with crystal clarity. She had always been attracted to her own sex but was not quite sure what to do with that desire.

She now knew.

The pale Valyrian and dark woman of Myr went around a corner. Arya hurried to follow. She
waited upon reaching the corner to give the women time to move down the hall. Arya had followed them before. There was still some distance to their quarters. Arya counted to eight and then moved to follow the two women down the new hall.

She rounded the corner.

“Aaaaiiiieeee!” Arya squealed.

Right before her were the two women she was supposedly spying on. The two women were roughly the same height and size as Arya. Instead of angry looks they had looks of evil merriment in their eyes. They stood before Arya with fists on hips. Their faces had on masks of mock scolding.

“I do believe you have been ghosting behind us Arya Stark. May we ask why?”

Arya blushed mightily. She did not know what to say. She could tell them she was following them because she had seen them making love. That seeing that had opened up a world of possibilities that she had known intuitively existed but could not put words too. *Nah.* There was no way she could tell them that!

Instead she stood there turning even a brighter shade of red. Her face felt like it was on fire. Her mind was working furiously to concoct a half way believable fib.

“Did you happen to catch us in bed?” the Myr woman asked. Her face had a smirk on it. Her right eyebrow cocked up.

Arya’s eyes widen to saucers. She stood frozen. Her mouth worked but no sound came forth.

The women laughed. Saelalys stepped forward and put her arm around Arya.

“Worry not young Direwolf. You are one of us. A woman of Sappho. A lover of women. We are the most fortunate of women. We would have you walk with us if you would young Arya. Let us share some knowledge with you.”

Arya relaxed. They were not angry with her spying. Spying that had been most inept it would seem.

“We spotted you in our doorway. We saw your understanding. We knew that you have our desires. We have been watching you since.”

Arya could not stop the next mightily blush that colored her neck and face.

“You are lucky Arya Stark. We are associated with the Druids. They are a most enlightened people. In Myr and Lys there are large communities of gay people living in peace and harmony. Dorne is a bastion of enlightenment towards human sexuality.”

“Not so much in the North of Westeros. In this land those of us with our persuasion must live circumspect lives. Often hiding our true selves while leading another life with a man we do not care for. Finding comfort with your own sex while the man is away. The same works in reverse. Many men too must hide their true selves from society and the woman they are forced to marry. It is sad. You are born into nobility so you have more options. You are the child of one Eddard Stark. A man of the ages. You are blessed.”

Arya felt more comfortable with the women now. She was thankful. She had felt so alone.

“Are there more girls like me?”
The two women laughed.

“Yes there are Arya. They are merely not allowed to show their true selves. Like you, they know they feel the pull of their own sex or maybe both sexes but are not sure how to pursue them. Society wars against us. Not so in Lys or Myr or the cities by the sea of Dorne such as Sun spear, Lemonwood or Salt Shore and Oldtown in Highgarden with its large enclaves of gay life that is allowed to live in peace.”

“In our home city states homosexuality is allowed to flourish according to the edicts of an individual’s heart. Here in Westeros maybe two percent will acknowledge their desires. Desires that cause fear with your repressive church and the rigid outdated thinking of your land’s societies. This is a fearful patriarchal society you live in.”

“Again I say that Eddard Stark is a truly enlightened man. He is truly unique. We marvel at his gentle soul and willingness to let people be happy according to what they desire and want. As long as they live in peace with their fellow man we believe Eddard will allow them to live as they will as much as he can get society to allow this. He cannot fight the mountains of custom and religion. It would cause war to fully confront. Still he can moderate it.”

“In our home City States where there is no fear of expressing ones sexuality, homosexuality is expressed from nine percent in some races and up to over twenty percent in other ethnicities. In our enclaves we live free.”

“Why did you leave?”

“We were both sex slaves who escaped. We were fortunate to be able to cater to our own sex but we were slaves. We sought freedom. We heard whispers of the Druids that were said to exist in Westeros. We wanted away from Essos. We were told of their communities in Westeros. That the Druids were most enlightened in terms of sexuality. That these people cared less if one was heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual. They care for the person and not their sexual orientation.”

“The words spoken to us as of legends or in jest. Still, we hoped and fled to Westeros. We eventually, found an agent that led us to them. We came to them and they accepted our service. We wound up with Merrel who served here in King’s Landing. We preferred to live in a large city having grown up in cities. We could be of service to their order.”

“Now we will be service to you Arya Stark. You are not alone. We will tell you of our culture.”

Arya smiled hearing that.

“We would instruct you Arya in the arts of lesbian lovemaking” Arya started to blush mightily again. She blanched at thoughts of sleeping with a woman. She truly wanted to but she was scared shitless at the prospect at the same time.

“Alas, you are destined for the Dragon as she is for the Direwolf.”

Arya then became pissed off. She was scared sure but she was a warrior! She would accept the challenge!

“What the hell is all this talk of a dragon damnit!” Arya exclaimed.

Saelalys spoke “We feel that now is not the time to explain such things Arya. We want you to learn this for yourself. If in trying to set one down the path of a prophecy, history has shown this always leads to disaster. We will give you the freedom of discovering your future for yourself. The Dragon will want to teach you the joys of Sapphic love.”
Arya rolled her eyes and snorted. It was frustrating. She was not some clueless girl damnit! Well, inexperienced but not clueless!

Suddenly, Phirona seemed to get animated and spoke up. “No, I disagree Saelalys.”

“We agreed on this Phirona” Saelalys returned sounding peevd.

Phirona was ready with her retort “No. You simply refused to listen to me. I am right and you are wrong. I know it!”

“The Valyrian will want to teach Arya the joys of sex. She is a Khaleesi and will be Queen! A dragon will want to be ascendant.”

“No” Phirona answered. “She was a Khaleesi to a strong vital Khal. She slept with her female attendants. A lot! Every night. Over and over. She is a woman now with a woman’s appetite.”

“Precisely. She will want a virgin to teach her what she wants in her bed. It is her right” Saelalys spoke in a sage tone.

“Gods you sound just like a man Saelalys. A father telling his son to screw whores and marry a virgin. A man too afraid to let the woman judge his performance against others. How male!” Phirona replied in a snide rejoinder.

“You take that back! You hear me, take that back!” Saelalys roared back.

Arya interjected her thoughts but she was not heard “I don’t want to screw a dragon damnit! I will settle for a peasant girl. Any girl!”

The two women fell out of Westerosi and slipped into Valyrian. It was not High Valyrian Arya quickly figured out. Syrio was teaching her high Valyrian since it was a high language and the root of all the dialects that populated Essos from the Free Cities to Slavers Bay.

Arya was still learning the language and now knew that understanding a dialect of that language was tough! She could only follow the basic gist of their rapid back and forth. Arya heard that were discussing her and what she might bring to this Dragon. She could not follow the particulars though which was frustrating.

At least she had figured out what they meant by the Dragon and Direwolf. She was not sure about this prophecy stuff about her going to a woman who was a stranger. She had not even met or knew anything of this woman! Then she stopped. A shiver ran through her. That was what her mother wanted her to do, but worse, to a man! She felt her spine set. She was not some bauble to be doled out! She would choose who she chose to marry!

While she had figured all that out the two women wound down their argument. They seemed to have reached an at least half way agreed consensus.

“You have a destiny. A certain innocence will be required. It will open doors for you young Direwolf. Still, a certain skill may be advantageous. We have agreed that this is your life. You will decide on your course.”

Arya rolled her eyes again which made the women laugh. Arya was not sure she really wanted this destiny crap. It was really crimping her in the here and now!

“Come to our chambers. We have much to discuss with you young Direwolf. Let us teach you of your culture.”
The next day Arya was feeling much more in tune with herself and her place in the world. Phirona Ormonnis and Saelalys Narennis had been most enlightening. Arya now knew of her culture and how her community had evolved over time. She learned most importantly that she was not alone. That had been the most frustrating and frightening fear in her aloneness with her desires. To think you were alone in being different.

Her two benefactors as she now thought of the women made it clear that Arya was not alone in Westeros. That in Dorne and Oldtown you could find whole communities nestled in the larger culture that elevated and celebrated gay culture. They did not over flaunt themselves and were allowed to live in relative freedom.

There was homosexuals in every city, hamlet and society. They learned to hide their true selves and seek out relationships in the shadows.

It was best in Myr and Lys the two women had explained to Arya. Arya loved the North and the people in it but she already felt a gravitas towards those distant lands if they allowed gays to live openly and in freedom.

The women had also shown Arya her own body. This was something that her uptight mother had not done. In fairness to her mother, Arya highly suspected that the teachings of the Septons and Septas put a pall on mothers teaching daughters about sex. Maybe a quick brief on one’s wedding day. Nothing more.

Arya had been masturbating for several years now. She had felt ashamed but Phirona and Saelalys had smiled explaining to Arya that _Everyone_ masturbated. The women knew that all men and women felt the itch. Only the most repressed and fearful suppressed the desires of the body. They may deny it profusely but biology won out the two women thought.

They had taught Arya the erogenous zones on her body and what they were called. Arya was still embarrassed by such talk but she was thankful for it. She had figured out what her body liked but to be taught more knowledge about her body was much appreciated. They had taught Arya more subtle ways to touch her body and take her self-pleasure higher.

They had also gifted Arya with several dildos. Those had made her face nearly burn up.

Arya knew she had long ago ceased to be technically a virgin. Everyone was always harping on the hymen being intact for their cad husband to take it. Arya with her heavy horseback riding and active physical lifestyle had broken her hymen long ago. If any fragment remained her fingers took care of it over the last two years.

She truly could care less what any man may want and desire. She was sure that any woman worth their salt would not care for such a trifle. _At least she hoped so._

She was thankful with the enlightenment but the details on how to use the dildos and the lubrication they had given Arya to help her break in her new ‘toys’ had her squirming. That and the information on where the ribbed dildo could be used for maximum affect.

She had been shocked. “You’ve got to be shitting me!”

“Arya. Until you have at least tried it don’t knock it. Go into it with an open mind” Saelalys had told her. Phirona had told her how to relax and use her natural juices and the lubrication to help. Arya had been repulsed with the idea.
Now as she walked down the hall she was turning it over in her mind. The idea now no longer repulsive. Her mind kept ruminating on what she had been told. She knew eventually she would work up the nerve to do it.

“It will blow you mind” the two women from Essos had told her. That idea kept turning over in her mind. What girl wouldn’t want that!

Arya had been both fearful and hopeful that the women might seduce her. They had not. She knew they were being careful with her because of her supposed destiny. Arya was thankful. She was still coming to terms with her sexuality. She both wanted to and was yet hesitant to experience sex. She had been brought up with the specialness of marriage.

She had figured out that many went to their marriage no longer virgins. She was not Sansa. Being told to hold herself pure for some stupid dolt. She would choose if and when she started to have sex. She would ruminate on it all.

She had finished her exercise and sword practice with Syrio for the day. She had washed and dressed in her leathers. She liked how it made her feel. Like she was Bravo in Braavos. The leather on her arms and legs gave her assurance. The two swords on her hip made her feel like a swordsman. She knew she had much training to go but she knew she was already as good many pretend wannabes that existed in every city.

She had her vest laced up tight with the tails of her belt swaying with her steps down the hall. The heels of her boots rapping on the stones of the hall. She had the throat of her vest laced up tight to her throat. Her eyes constantly scanning her environs. Syrio was teaching her to constantly have her eyes scan first left, then right, up and down. Repeat every few steps. One had to truly see the environment surrounding yourself. Arya committing to her conscious what was around her.

“Be like the fox Arya. Your ears constantly turning. Your whiskers constantly twitching.”

“That is stupid master. I don’t have big ears or whiskers.”

“I am teaching you through parable my student” Syrio sighed dramatically. “Shut up and listen to my august sage advice.”

Arya had rolled her eyes at her scowling teacher.

Her razor sharp senses detected her father walking down the hall. He was looking around at the stone walls pretending to not see his daughter. She moved down the hall. The two made awkward eye contact.

Father and daughter stopped beside each other in the hall.

“Father.”

“Arya. I like the look. It becomes you.”

Arya could not help but feel the rush of her father’s praise. She had to remember that she was still pissed with her father. They shared their breakfasts without rancor but did not associate after that. They did not wish to sever their ties but were still upset with each other.

“I am still upset with how you are treating Sansa. She deserves so much better. She is you daughter.”

She watched her father squint his eyes at her. He then took a deep breath.
“I want to put his rancor behind us daughter.”

Arya started to give a rejoinder but stopped when her father held up his hand. His face was stern. He was still her father and Arya shut her mouth.

“I would like to ask you to dinner—“

Arya could not stop herself “I don’t think so—“

“Damnit Arya stop cutting me off!” father barked at daughter. His eyes bored down at Arya.

Arya paused.

“I was going to say Arya … I want to invite you, Myrcella, and Tommen to dinner” Arya started to retort but Eddard overrode his daughter “and Sansa and her friend Jeyne Poole”.

Arya felt a touch of chagrin at trying to overstep her father’s words and her father proving again the man that he was.

The two looked at each other awkwardly. Neither were good at expressing emotions.

Arya was happy to see that her father had stopped wanting to act like an ass. She could afford to be magnanimous.

“I am happy to hear that father. I want this rift to be gone between you and Sansa. She has learned from her mistakes. I have gotten to really know Sansa since you took the throne father. Sansa has a truly gifted mind. She had really gotten into the books of philosophers and humanists. She and Myrcella have an insight to such thoughts and ideas that I find intimidating. Sansa has found her element I think.”

“Now that she away from mother and Septa Mordane who were suppressing her will, Sansa is blossoming. Let’s nurture this new flower blossoming.”

Her father squinted his eyes processing his daughter’s words. He then nodded his head and moved on down the hall.

It was start Arya thought.

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Arya and Jeyne Poole were shepherding a nervous Sansa down the hall to the small banquet hall near the King’s quarters. The space used by the King for intimate dinners with family and honored visitors.

Sansa had first been elated when Arya relayed the news of their father’s request to have them for dinner. Arya thought her father had been smart to have others at the dinner. It would make it less intimate and overwhelming for all the Starklings. Having the Lannister children and Jeyne Poole in attendance would allow for everyone’s focus to not be on each other and to hopefully allow for less stilted conversations.

Her father was a tactician even in such small things. Arya was again impressed with her father. He seemed to think of all the angles to any situation.

Sansa was getting more nervous with each step down the hall towards the small banquet hall. Arya was in her leathers and the other women were in beautiful dresses. Tommen was dressed in a sharp
trousers and dress shirt.

“Come on Sansa” Arya urged pulling on Sansa’s hand as she tagged along behind her younger sister.

“Yeah Sansa” Jeyne encouraged pushing Sansa along down the hall. “You have been waiting for this. Now it is happening. Don’t chicken out now!” Jeyne gripped Sansa by the hips and pushed her friend down the hall. The small teenager umphing with her pushes on her friend’s voluptuous hips.

The two Lannister children chuckled at the sight of the two small women pushing and pulling the tall redhead forward down the hall.

Sansa looked around with big eyes as she was propelled down the hall in fits and starts. They were now at the door to the feast hall. The teenagers straightened out their leathers, trousers and dresses.

The time had arrived. Arya reached out and undid the latch to the door to the small feast hall. She heard Jeyne giving Sansa more encouragement with Myrcella adding further support.

Arya entered into the room. The smells of delicious food wafted to Arya as she entered the room. The long table filled with delicious dishes of meats, gravies, vegetables, breads and spreads to put on the bread. She saw large platters of salmon and trout with garnishes surrounding the cut slabs. Large tubs of butter and jam were islands among the other food items.

Her father was sitting at the head of the table. He was dressed in a loose fitting shirt and trousers. He stood up and came down the table. He paused and hugged Arya. He then turned to Sansa. They looked at each other unsure. Then Eddard awkwardly put his arms around Sansa and patted his daughter on the back. Sansa’s arms sort of waved around.

Arya smiled. It was a start. They all sat down at the table. The two daughters of Eddard sitting on his right hand with Arya sitting by her father. Jeyne Poole sat on the other side of Sansa. The two Lannister children sat on the left side of Eddard.

“Don’t let the food go waste I say” Eddard smirked. Everyone started to load up their plate with all the delicious food items that filled the table top to overflowing.

Arya loaded up her plate with slabs of delicious roast ladled with stew full of potato, celery, chickpeas, carrots and corn. She had several cut pieces of Dornish bread. She had a bowl of clam chowder for a nice chaser.

She began to eat heartily. At first the conversation was stilted. That changed slowly with everyone relaxing under the benefice of good food and drink.

“So Sansa. Arya tells me you have started to read books on philosophy and humanist thought. Tell me about it” the father asked his eldest daughter. Sansa gave her father a brilliant smile. The father returned the smile.

Soon Arya’s father had the glazed look that Arya knew her eyes had when she tried to follow what first Sansa and then Myrcella had to say.

Eddard shook his head and looked thoughtful. Arya knew he was faking it like she had.

Soon the redhead and blonde were talking on the polemics of human destiny and whether a man was able to truly change his environment or did he first have to change himself.
This allowed Eddard to ask Tommen about his cats. The boy perked up and discoursed on the cats and their individual personalities and cute habits. Eddard smiled and encouraged the boy to happily tell his tales.

He told Sansa and Myrcella about his efforts at forming a new Small Council and the talents and personalities he sought. They began talk about it. The conversation was no longer stiff.

Arya was happy. Such things bored her. She was warrior.

Arya knew it would take time for Sansa and her father to fully repair their relationship but it was start. They both were earnestly trying.

Arya leaned back in her chair. Tommen and Jeyne were talking about something to do with the weather and maybe going out tomorrow and walking down the main walkway underneath the trees and enjoying the air and green. They asked Sansa and Myrcella if they wanted to join them. They did.

The conversation ebbed and flowed around the table.

Arya smiled. It was a good start.
“Blasted rubbish … bloody knights, bloody pompous knights” Sandor growled looking over the resumes of the Kingsguard knights wannabe. He looked over the qualifications and was not really impressed. The last batch had not lasted that long when they were presented with real threats. Of course Mandon Moore getting killed by a Faceless Man wearing Arya Oakheart’s face could be excused Sandor supposed shivering at that memory.

The man had placed his posters all throughout King’s Landing. At present, he was sort of limited in his pool. Being under a siege did not help in one’s search for qualified applicants. He had sent some out with ships leaving port for ports in Westeros and even Essos but who knew if the posters were not dumped into the sea waves once out of port. He again lifted up a few of the resumes. Most were written by the men’s own hand. That did show nobility he knew. The ability to read was a rare talent indeed. For what he needed that meant men of noble birth.

The rest written by some scribes he had posted at tables at certain times to take their verbal depositions as to their skills and abilities. He had spied on the tables near the main gate. The applicants for the most part left much to be desired. Sandor was looking for warriors it was true. One did not need to be able to read when running your sword through a kicking and hacking opponent. Still, being able to read was a definite plus he thought. He paused. He wanted to keep an open mind.

He remembered the rubbish he had worked with. Men with supposed honor. They had most definitely not been that. He tapped his fingers on the wood. He needed skilled warriors but he wanted a sense of honor in his future Kingsguard. Something innate to the person. Not a person following a written code they truly cared less about. He kept worrying over in his mind how little honor the knights of the Kingsguard had shown. Only Barristan Selmy had lived the ideal. The rest had been scum as far as Sandor Clegane was concerned.

He hated their lack of honor but he needed them to have skill as well. The previous Kingsguard had been lacking. The men had been better than most but when confronted by true masters they did not last long. Meryn Trant had proven that. He had faced a true master of the sword and was quickly dispatched. He asked Arya of that fight.

“Syrio played with him Sandor. When he decided to kill Meryn it was over. The man never had a chance.”

He had toyed with the idea of asking Syrio Forel to join the Kingsguard. Sandor shook his head. The man was a terror with his rapier but he refused to wear armor and in a melee that was asking for death. You can’t guard all the angles when surrounded. Syrio had kicked ass right and left at the battle of the Whispering Trees but he had been able to flit in and out of the confusion of a nighttime battlefield to kill men not in plated armor.

Sandor smiled. Not that Meryn’s armor saved him. The scared man shook his head. Syrio just did not fit the mold he thought. Anyways, he was teaching Arya. The man marveled. Under the Waterdancer's tutelage Arya was improving at a lightning pace. Sandor sparred with her regularly
now and her improvement was noticeable with each session. She was stronger, faster and her sword work while still somewhat lacking was adequate and improving fast. Thrice now she had almost gotten through his guard.

Damnit! To be beaten by a woman was heinous! Why couldn’t Arya be like Sansa? … Sandor paused in his thoughts. He felt a shiver run through him. If Arya had been like Sansa he would still be in the Lannister orbit … yes, maybe a woman taking up the sword and the bow was not such a bad thing after all the Hound thought.

Varys had suggested that he send out ravens with his search for a new Kingsguard. He had thought that a good idea. He had an aversion to knights out of principle but maybe a few worthy of his Kingsguard did exist out there somewhere in Westeros. He had not yet heard back from that avenue as of yet. He had done that only a two week ago. It would take time for the ravens to arrive at the various Houses. Their Maesters would then have to disseminate the information after making posters. Sandor hoped he would find someone worth their mettle and had the right constitution. The chances were small but he could hope.

Most of what he read had been from pompous assholes. Many he could sense were more bluster than ability. Still, there had been a few with skills. He needed more than that. He wanted men who would actually consider following the supposed oaths they took and had the inner fortitude to do what was right. Sandor knew he had to choose wisely. He had followed his moral code but it had been put under such pressure and strain. He needed to find men who would not blindly follow a shit like Joffrey.

Sandor got up from his desk in the office he kept near the Small Council. There was a small mirror. He looked into it. He grimaced at what always awaited him. He sighed bitterly at his fate. He snarled at his thoughts on a certain brother.

Sandor felt disgust for how easily the Kingsguard and treated Sansa Stark badly. He refused to allow that to happen under his command. He would have to choose very carefully. Skill of course was paramount but a moral code would be equally important if you wanted to serve beneath Sandor Clegane. The Commander of the Kingsguard.

There was a loud knock on the door.

Sandor looked back at the door. Who could that be he wondered? He would let them wait a minute. He had not been told to expect anyone this morning. The door was again knocked on. This time much more loudly followed by an obvious hard kick.

What the bloody hell! Sandor stormed to the door. Insufferable idiot! His hand reached out and ripped the door open. His mouth fell open and hung there. His eyes could not believe what he saw. Then he saw Varys smirking down the hall. The bald eunuch turning around and walking away. His gaze turned back to the person who stood in front of him. Said person glaring at him.

“What in the seven hells do you think you are doing?!” the scarred man roared. He had seen her reaction but also that now the woman was not staring at his scars and acted as if all was normal. Sandor noted that.
“Why, I am here to take one of those Kingsguard positions you got posted everywhere.”

“But, but … you are a woman!”

The woman glared at him.

“Fuck you pig! I am far better than any man!”

Sandor eyed the woman. He had to admit she definitely looked the part of a fierce warrior. She was six foot one inch tall. She was muscular with thick thighs and muscled biceps and triceps. Her torso thick and covered in armor. She had on a breast and back plate with the front sculpted to cover a medium sized bosom. She had gauntlets and Greaves covering her forearms and shins. She had a gorget to protect her neck and shoulders. Around her waist was a faulds that attached to her breast and back plate. Her upper arms and legs covered by chain mail sitting on top of leather doublet that went up under the armor.

She was armored but it was light compared to the heavy plate he wore. She had a helm but it was off and hanging from her belt buckled around her torso. The helm capped with three colorful enamel painted snakeheads with fangs exposed. One was red, the second royal blue and the third a lurid green. The snake’s eyes golden in color. Their fangs gleaming white. Long streamers the color of the snake heads hung down the ends near brushing the floor.

On her left forearm was strapped a circular shield with the top scalloped out to form a half moon. Three small chains hung down with triangles on the ends swinging. In the grip of her left hand were three small throwing spears. The tips elongated side notched style. In her right hand was a battle ax with half-moon heads. The stems narrow at the handle but expanding out to form the curve of the blade. Sandor had heard of the style before. It was a labrys. He eyed the woman. He knew the tribes that used this kind of battleax.

He had noticed immediately the dark blue ripples of Valyrian steel on the axe heads and haft. He had not known that Valyrian steel had traveled so far in the world. The weapon a priceless artifact. It was also deadly.

The woman’s dark black skin gleamed in the lantern and open window light. Her face did not have the angles of the Summer Islanders. Her cheeks were high and rounded. Her face was subtly heart shaped. Her lips thick and sensual with a cupid bow. She had a strong chin and nose that was still straight and unbroken or well set if broken. Her dark eyes glittered looking at Sandor. She smiled a confident smile that showed her gleaming white teeth. She looked around.

“I see I am the first. Good. The best should be first.” She spoke with easy confidence.

Sandor was pissed but now that his initial shock had worn off he weighed what was before him.

“Are you from the land of Sophos? If so, you are a long way from home. If I remember your home is the archipelago of islands off the lower eastern coast of the island continent of Ulthos. Why do I have the displeasure—I mean pleasure of your company?

The woman who was tall for the sex glared at Sandor. At least by Westeros standards. Her eyes narrowed.

“You are an ass. Still. I will let you live.”

Sandor rolled his eyes. “If you kill me then you will be unemployed.”

She shook her head considering with a fake thoughtful look on her face. “True. Today is your
lucky day."

"Why in the hell are you so far away from home … ummmm …"

"Merjen Sarovic."

"Well?"

The woman looked uncomfortable for a moment. "Let’s just say that there was a family squabble. It was pretty messy. I was on the losing side. That makes you lucky. Here I am. When do I start?"

The tall man from House Clegane looked the woman over. She was definitely a warrior. But. She was a woman and a foreigner. He did not want fucking knights but this was going too far.

"I think not. I wi—ffffffuuucikkkkk!" Sandor shouted. Faster than he could really perceive the woman had dropped her spears and pulled a throwing dagger from her thigh and flicked her hand underhanded. The dagger barely missed Sandor moving the hair by his ear. It snapped into a large wood cabinet behind the Hound. The dagger quivering.

"You crazy daft woman!"

"One Kill for Merjen!"

His eyes flared wide. Sandor snarled at the woman. He had barely registered the woman’s knife throw. She could have killed him. "You bitch! I wasn’t ready!"

"Exactly. I scored a kill Sandor Clegane. Do you need more proof?"

"Hell yes I do! You’re on!" the hound barked. He stormed over and snatched up his scabbard he had on its rack on the back wall underneath the window. He slipped it over his shoulder placing the sword on his back. "Follow me!" he barked at the woman as he passed by her and threw the door open to the room and stormed out.

The woman arched an eyebrow while she smirked. She picked up her spears and fell in line behind the fuming man.

Sandor snarled and twisted his head back to glare at the woman walking with sedate grace behind him. They walked down halls turning down other halls. The tall man walking fast and was displeased the woman was easily keeping pace. Being over six feet tall helped. He noted her afro waving with her quick pace.

They came to a door that was along the outer wall of the Red Keep facing Blackwater Rush. Sandor threw the door open. The thick door slammed back on its hinges screaming. The room had been a meeting hall for the ceremonial guard that the early Targaryen kings had. The men to add pomp and circumstance to parades and mattes of court. They had fallen out of favor over the last century. The room largely abandon with the guard disbanded.

Sandor had asked Varys for a large room away from the general routes used in the Castle. He wanted a private place to practice and train. He wanted to stay sharp and keep his body in top shape. He knew he could show no weakness. In the room were iron weights and large rocks and logs. He had ropes and large bands made of rubber. He had punching bags and balls. He had multiple human shaped dummies filled with straw that he used to practice against.

The woman followed Sandor into the room. She had carried her weapons loosely and looked around.
She perused the room with pursed lips. “Most impressive setup. Makes me almost admire you.”

Sandor snarled at the woman.

“Alright, almost high and mighty, put your weapons on that table” he said pointing to a table by the inside wall. The tall black woman went over and divested herself of her weapons. “Let’s do some exercises to get ourselves limbered up and the blood pumping I say.”

The room was thirty feet wide and one hundred feet long. Sandor went to the far end of the rectangle motioning the women to follow him. She did and they placed their backs against the wall.

They took off running to the far wall. The two bumping into each other trying to knock each other off balance. The two cursing each other. Back and forth they ran for ten times. Then the Hound had them doing squats, leg squat thrusts and then jumping jacks. His sword slapping his back. Sweat was pouring off both of their bodies in streams. Sandor’s hair plastered all over his face, back and neck.

Without warning, Sandor pulled the sword from its scabbard on his back and slashed the blade down across the back plate and gorget of the woman from Sapphos.

She cried out “You cheat!”

“Yeah! Yeah! Score one for the Hound! Aaarrwwwooooooo!” Sandor howled in triumph. “Let’s grab some wooden swords and te——“

“No! I will use my Labrys! This is my weapon. I will make sure I don’t hurt you.” She paused and her face went serious. “As you will with me. I trust you.”

That touched Sandor but he was too pissed to admit it. They were both skilled. The woman was obviously a warrior true. He wouldn’t admit it out loud. Not yet.

“Okay. Your funeral.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “It will be with your toes and rather small cock poking up” Merjen snarked at Sandor.

“You are a little—well not so little shit aren’t you” Sandor told the black woman in a snarl.

The woman had retrieved her labrys. The two circled each other in the middle of the room. Both eyeing the other looking at the other for weakness and how they balanced themselves. They made feints to see the defensive moves of their opponent. The two seeking the weaknesses of the other. Sword and ax hefted to make attack and defense.

With a scream, Merjen moved her right hand up slightly on her battleax and swung her labrys forward and down at Sandor. He crossed blocked with his sword. The woman from Sapphos swung her ax and reversed her motion using the opposite blade to swipe at Sandor. He slashed his blade into the Valyrian steel of the weapon. Sparks flew the steel ringing out their notes of strife and discord.

The two hacked and slashed at each other with their weapons. The weapons colliding with loud retorts. Metal implements of death rebounding off each other. Sandor landed several quick blows knocking Merjen off balance and staggering to her left. Sandor moved to follow seeking advantage.

The woman spun around, her labrys swinging out in a deadly arc to prevent Sandor from moving in. He slashed at the haft of the labrys. The Valyrian steel easily resisting the sword stroke. She
punched the head of the bladed ax at Sandor the sharp tip coming at Sandor’s face. He had to jerk his body back. He swung his sword in tight arcs keeping the woman back.

Merjen swung her labyrs high with Sandor squatting low and hacking at her legs. She jumped back and twisted to Sandor’s side and came in swinging. He pivoted and met her attack. He hooked her right half-moon ax head with his sword and moved their weapons up. Sandor stepped in fast and head butted the woman. The impact stunning both but the woman more. Sandor hacked down on the woman but she blocked his blows with the haft of weapon she now gripped on the handle and behind the blades of the axes. Her foot struck out and hit Sandor in the stomach knocking him back driving the wind partially from his lungs.

Both retreated for a moment and then came at each other their blades colliding violently. High and low they slashed their blades seeking advantage. Sandor breathed heavily and snarled. The woman faced swords all the time he was sure but her battleax was not the most common weapon on the battlefield. Sandor had to be careful.

They again locked up their weapons. Merjen stepped back suddenly grabbing Sandor’s sword hand with her left hand jerking him forward knocking him off balance. He surged forward taking Merjen’s arm with him throwing her around with a violent jerk of his hand now gripping her hand. She went flying but a semicircle swipe of her labyrs kept Sandor back while she righted herself.

Sandor was impressed. She was not as strong as he but she used angles and perfect balance to blunt his brute strength advantage. Sandor now stabbed at the woman forcing her to swipe her long hafted weapon right and left to block his attacks. He then bull rushed her. He was surprised when she went down easily. He lost his balance and swirled to his left.

Merjen had gone to the floor. With her right hand she flashed out her labyrs and hooked the inside of her left blade on Sandor’s heel and jerked back violently. Sandor went crashing down to the floor. The woman released her battleax and in a flash rolled up on the struggling body of Sandor trying to get his balance to heave his body upright.

Sandor’s eyes went large. Merjen had a dagger in her right hand with the blade pointed at his eye. She had her not insubstantial weight on him and had the advantage of height over him and leverage.

“I win. Two kills for Merjen!” she sung out in a sweet voice. “Never go against a woman of Lesbos. Long live women!” she screamed out. She got up. “Do I have a place on your Kingsguard.”

Sandor looked up at the woman. She had won. That sucked.

He got up. They stared at each other.

“One question I will ask you.” He saw the woman eye him suspiciously. She assumed he was going to ask a question that would bar her from joining the Kingsguard. It would depending on her answer.

“If ordered by myself or the King would you abuse an innocent? A fair maiden or a young child?”

“I would gut you or the bastard King. I will not harm an innocent.”

Sandor smiled. He reached out and gripped the woman by her forearm.

“Welcome aboard Merjen Sarovic. Now there are two Kingsguard. The woman gave Sandor a brilliant smile and gripped his arm warrior fashion.
"You won’t be sorry Sandor. I will prove my worth and valor."

“I know you will Merjen” Sandor replied. He had been disappointed so many times in the past. He eyed the woman. He thought she would indeed honor her vows to protect all. He actually genuinely smiled back at Merjen.

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Silence reigned in the Small Council room. Varys was in the chair of the Hand. He was sifting through the myriad reports from his sparrows. There was always much chirping through the Red Keep, King’s Landing, Westeros and even Essos. He had to sift through the various melodies and discern what was worth focusing on. Which melodies and songs might bear fruit? In several folders he had reports from his counterparts in Dorne and Highgarden. He had other contacts in other Houses but these had the most to offer. He had to weed out the obfuscation as they had to do with the tidbits he feed them.

The Wisper and now Hand looked up from his parchments. He looked at his King who sat in a chair less adorned than his own. The man doing his own reading. Eddard had a look of concentration on his face. He looked up and saw Varys looking at him. He smiled his gentle squint smile.

Eddard lifted up a parchment. He looked it over and looked up at Varys.

"I see Illyrio is sending in the first shipments of food stocks to King’s Landing. The ships should be here in four to five days. He says two or three ships will arrive every four or five days. Will he be able to keep up this level of commitment Varys? He is doing this on loan.” Eddard fixed his Hand with a hard look. “Will he try to call in this debt when I can least afford the distraction my Hand?"

Varys returned his King’s hard stared.

"No he will not Eddard. He thinks that you might be able to actually succeed. If you do you will be good for business. Working with a sovereign who can live within his means will improve trade and, thus, profits. Believe it or not he wants what is best for the common man. Much like myself.”

Varys watched Eddard snort and half roll his eyes.

"We shall see. The loan that Illyrio is lending us is keeping us afloat. I am using the ‘loan’ to buy warehouse space for the food we are storing for our coming visitors. This money paying local farmers and fisherman for their harvest and catches. I will be in his debt Varys. I will make sure he is rewarded with advantageous trade agreements.”

“That is all my friend can ask for” Varys answered. The Whisperer had whispered to his friend he would be well compensated for his current help. Illyrio would know increased profits and Westeros would know just peace which would increase profits for all. A win, win Varys thought.

“Are our tax collections improving at all?” Eddard now asked his Hand.

“Yes, actually. When the people see that their tax collections are not being wasted and spent in a slovenly manner they are much more willing to pay their coin to the Throne. It is tiding us by. For now, along with Illyrio’s help. Once we bring the realm into line we can bring in the taxes from all the Constituencies of Westeros. If we can find a Master of Coin worth their weight he can sift through the books and find the fraud and embezzlement I know is in the books.”

He and Eddard discussed the matter of finances for a few more minutes.

“When will Illyrio be gracing us with his presence Varys? Will he come?” Eddard asked. His tone
said he was unsure.

“He will come Eddard. I have not told him our specific plans but he knows that you plan to bring all of Westeros under your sway without war and through subterfuge. He wrote ‘this I have to see’. He believes like I do that grand times are coming. He wants to witness them firsthand.”

That finished, he watched Eddard pick up the folder of their next member of the Small Council.

“I see that the Citadel will be sending our new Grand Maester, Dromen Salver, by ship on the morrow’s tide.” Eddard took a deep breath. He had committed to the young man. The second member of their Small Council had been chosen. Soon he would be sitting at this table.

Varys would enjoy the difference. Pycelle had been competent but, how should he say it, not energetic. Well, in performing his duties to the King and Regent. He seemed to have enough energy when in his quarters with a certain comely lass. Varys was happy for the octogenarian. He felt a touch of bitterness. He would never enjoy what that elderly man was enjoying. He tilted his head in humor. Must be nice at that age. The man did seem to be more spry with his new situation.

“Do you think Highgarden, Casterly Rock or Sunspear will interfere with this? They too must know of your selection of a Grand Maester” Varys asked.

Eddard tilted his head thinking for a moment.

“I doubt it. It would be much effort for little reward. Tywin is too far away to affect anything. The Tyrells are waiting to see what I have to offer. Doran is letting Oberyn seek his revenge. He will let the ship pass through unmolested. Fortunately, there is no blockade so our new Grand Maester will have easy access to King’s Landing. To Tywin, my selection of a Grand Maester must seem a trifle to the man.

As usual, Varys agreed completely with his King’s insight and analysis of the facts presented to him.

“It should take him twenty-one to twenty-four days to sail here. That is assuming they meet no bad storms on the way. I wonder” Eddard spoke in a calculating voice “if our new Maester will cross ship prows with Oberyn on his way here. Have they left Sunspear yet?”

“I have no reports. They may have but I doubt it. They have no reason to be secretive. The stormy season is breaking in the lower Narrow Sea with the passing of the seasons into late Spring. Also, Dorne has sent out a small flotilla out into the Stepstones to wash away the brigands that have become an extreme nuisance of late. The pirates raiding shipping and taking hostages for ransom. They have disappeared further east to the islands near the coast of Essos. I guess we should be thanking Oberyn for that when he arrives.”

Eddard agreed.

Eddard looked at Varys. “How is our former Grand Maester doing? Is he doing well and how is his … um—ahhh, lady love? I believe her name is Alssa Stewar.

Varys was again impressed with Eddard’s ability to remember all persons’ names no matter great or especially the small. He had not seen it’s like with the previous King’s sitting on the Iron Throne.

“They are doing well actually. Pycelle is happily puttering around in his lab. He loves doing experiments. Alssa is always catering to our silver haired fox making sure he is well fed and his clothes clean and pressed. She hounds the maids and stewards to make sure Pycelle is given the best treatment by our staff.
Eddard smiled and shook his head. The woman genuinely cared for her benefactor it seemed.

“Then at night she strips our old Grand Maester as well as herself and proceeds to—“

“Okay, okay! I don’t need those details Varys. You have made it abundantly clear that Pycelle is able to rise to the occasion and quite frequently it would seem and that his mouth is in fine working order.”

Eddard was blushing fiercely now.

Varys was most satisfied having made his King blush and fill his face with a look of consternation.

“How do you feel about Pycelle’s breaking his vow? That our new Grand Maester is, well, quite randy as well. He will be breaking his vows of chastity quite regularly from what I read. Does it bother you?”

Eddard had started to read again but put his parchments down and looked at Varys seriously. “Yes and no – a vow is a vow and I was taught to hold them sacrosanct. Still, I have come to think that we place too much emphasis on these vows that we shackle ourselves with. Especially the vow of chastity. I do not see the animals of nature practicing celibacy and it seems like a trap set to make men … and women fail. I wonder now. I killed a man for breaking a vow shortly before I came down south … now I wander.” Eddard’s voice trailed and his eyes went distant.

Varys had come to learn that when this happened Eddard was reviewing his past. A review he often found himself wanting. It was one of the reasons he made a good King. He could reflect on his past actions and see how he could do better. This enabled Eddard Stark to make better decisions in his future. Such a rare trait in a human Varys had come to learn. A rare trait indeed.

Varys smiled and caught Eddard’s attention.

“I received this scroll this morning. I believe you will happy reading it.” Varys rose from his seat and walked to Eddard and placed the scroll in his hand. Eddard’s eyes lit up when he recognized the handwriting.

“Cat” the King softly exclaimed. “Thank the gods the Druids finally found her.” He started to read avidly. Varys watched the man’s face while he read the scroll from his wife. The pleasure on his face made Varys feel good. It was obvious the man loved his wife dearly. The same could not be said for Stannis and his wife, Seylse. Balen Greyjoy was an asshole. Tywin had been descent with Joanna but Tywin was not given to the smiles he saw now on Eddard’s face. Mace and his wife went through the steps of marriage. No rancor but no love either.

Eddard finished reading the scroll. He sat back looking up at the timbers of the ceiling. A soft smile still on his face. Varys let him enjoy this thoughts for a minute before returning him back to the task of being king.

“As you read, the Druids have found your wife and will escort her to the forces that Robb will be leading south shortly. I know you are looking forward to having your wife back at your side.”

“Yes I am Varys. I have missed her terribly.” Varys saw the man pause and a slightly pensive look come over his face. “She rails vociferous against Tyrion.”

“You know he is innocent. You will inform her of the facts. Tyrion may prove useful as we have both discussed.

“I know. I know. Cat can be quite focused when she is sure she is right.” Eddard grimaced
slightly. “Tyrion is by far the best of the offspring of Tywin Lannister. Your dossier on him and his siblings make that clear. I wonder if we have another Sandor Clegane. I will make peace between Tyrion and my wife. I think Tyrion will prove a most valuable member of my team. Maybe even on the Small Council. He seems to have a head for numbers and is insightful. When he is not trying to chisel you at his games of chance” Eddard snorted.

“You know you must tell her the other … facts Eddard. Especially one hidden from her for nearly twenty years.”

His King’s face became set and grim.

“I know and I will” the king shook his head. His face with a look of consternation on it. “I wonder now why I did not tell Cat, but, I had my reasons. Reasons that were fair and reasoned … it is just everything is changed …” Eddard looked solemnly at Varys. The Whisperer knew that a hurricane was brewing and coming their way down the King’s Road. It would be a strong one.

“Will you tell her of Sansa’s actions? She will see what Arya is becoming. Has already become. My sparrows observed the rancor between mother and daughters I must confess.”

Eddard looked at Varys with a somewhat hard look. To be told you and your family had been spied on was always disconcerting. Had been spied on for years. The new King knew it would be continuing. He would not be stopping it. It was a good check on his ego and any temptation. He felt none but having that sense of being watched would help in Eddard’s self-control. He knew he would have to sacrifice what made Varys so effective if he rooted out all vestiges of his spying in the Red Keep.

That spying had helped to save his life.

He could afford no lies or subterfuge with his Hand. He grimaced. He had learned that lesson the hard way.

“I agree with your assessment about my daughters and Cat. I have worked out my bile over Sansa’s actions. I now realize I had a large hand in that. I saw but did not act. I will admit that Cat when she is riled is quite a fearsome thing. I choose to deflect when I should have confronted her. Sansa paid the price. I paid the price. I will make sure that Sansa does not feel the brunt of my wife’s consternation with what she will find upon her arrival at King’s Landing.”

“I think Arya can protect herself now. I will referee if it becomes necessary.” Eddard paused for a long time. “It is Jon that will really set her off. I should have told her … I simply should have told her” Eddard spoke in a soft trouble voice. “I did what I must but with Robert dead—it changes everything. Now my actions taste like ash in my mouth.”

He looked directly into Varys eyes.

“I only hope I have a marriage after I tell her. She will be furious. And, rightfully so.” Eddard looked at Varys with a grim but determined look. Varys knew Eddard would not shirk the duty he must now perform. It was not in the man to not be honest with all around him and with himself. The Spider sighed. It would indeed be explosive when his wife was told.

Silence filled the room. Varys decided to change the subject and hopefully lift the pall of gloom now in the room.

“Sandor has made quite the first selection for his Kingsguard. It is most … unconventional. Will you accept his choice?”
Varys gambit paid off. Eddard smiled his squint smile.

“Yes I will support Sandor in this. She is a good choice. A fierce warrior who will not act badly as her predecessors have.” His smile became a little bigger. “To Hell with tradition!”

Varys chuckled. Eddard did have a sense of humor no matter how droll it was. The two men again began reading through notes and parchments on the various matters of state.

The Whisperer picked up a folder that had the messages from his sparrows spread across Westeros and the Free Cities that had come in since dawn. He picked up the top sheaf and read it. He read it again.

“Well, I’ll be damned” Varys spoke quietly. He could not stop the shiver that ran through him.

Eddard had heard his exclamation which was unusual for the bald eunuch. He had seen the tremor run through his Hand. He gave Varys a questioning look. He handed Eddard the sheaf with the report of a sparrow from the Iron Islands. His King read the short message.

“I’ll be damned indeed. This behavior is most unprecedented.”

Five days ago Varys had nearly had a heart attack when a scroll was delivered to him. It had come by courier to the main gate of the Red Keep. The scroll was brought to the Hand. Varys broke out into a sweat when he saw the seal. Two colors of wax had been used for the seal which was unusual in and of itself. The colors black and white. The ring that had been impressed into the two colors of wax had shown a door of black and white.

The scroll was from the Faceless Men or should he say a Faceless Man.

With trembling hands he broke the seal and unfurled the small scroll. Was the scroll his death warrant he could not help but fear? Had Jaqen H’ghar found out his subterfuge in his incarceration? He read the missive and nearly fainted. He was not facing death.

At his meeting with Eddard that day he handed him the scroll. Eddard’s face showed his sense of first perplexion and then wonder reading the words of Jaqen H’ghar.

“I have perceived your plans for Westeros Eddard of House Stark. I approve. I have my own duties but I will assist where I can. I am still in debt to your daughter Arya Stark. Valar Morghulis. Three lives were to be gifted to death by drowning. Your daughter cheated death. Death waits for the scales to be balanced.”

There was no more words. Both men agreed that they would have to wait and see what the Faceless Man had planned.

Now five days later the man’s actions were now known. Varys handed Eddard the report.

Eddard sat down with the report and read it. The he started laughing. “This is too rich!”

Varys agreed. Balon Greyjoy was dead. He had evidently slipped on the landing of one of the bridges that connected the turrets of his castle during a fierce rainstorm. The King of the Iron Islands had started to get on the bridge but he slipped and fell back his head hitting the stone landing hard. The man’s head turned into the landing. His nose had by happenstance fell into the depression of two inches caused by the feet treading on stone over centuries that formed a trough in the hard stone. The trough filled with water from the rain that was falling.

Belon Greyjoy had drowned in two inches of water.
Eddard had a sly grin on his face. “How appropriate. It would seem that Faceless Men have a sense of humor after all.”


Eddard looked at his Hand.

“I like that!” The King shook his head. “Two inches of water.”

Eddard sobered. “You know, this opens up possibilities.” Varys watched his King calculating. “I want you send a scroll to Winterfell.”

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“Right right left right, back step to the left, back again—keep that arm up Gravven” Arya barked at her students. The Goldcloaks mostly keeping in step with her barked cadences. The repetition helping the men learn how to actually sword fight. “Forward, right left, pivot to the left” Arya kept working the men cycling through her courtyard. She, Syrio, the Hound and three other men they had found in the chaff were leading the training. These men would have to defend the City if some breach was made.

It was impossible that the current forces could accomplish such a feat but her father and Syrio were teaching Arya to try and cover as many possibilities as possible. “Be prepared like the ant Arya and not the cricket” Syrio had told her. He had to explain that one to her.

She was happy they had found Cadder Ravyne, Hectar Bayle and Alran Malls. These Goldcloaks had been promoted to lieutenant. Arya and her fellow sword instructors were each taking a courtyard and working fifty men hard for one to two hours in the late afternoon when the temperatures had started to fall. This way three hundred men per day could be trained. The men cycled through so all the men could be trained on a rotating basis.

Arya had first been shocked and then highly pleased that she was as good as many of these supposed guards of the Red Keep. Their skills basic and their conditioning rather lacking. “These men had been kept as toadies” Syrio told Arya. “Stanos Flynt was a pig. He treasured lackeys who kissed his ass and not true men of mettle.”

Together with her mentor, the Hound and promoted Goldcloaks they were slowly making these men into warriors.

Arya knew she had so far to go herself but each day she was improving. She could feel it. Her long sessions of intense one on one training and rigorous exercise was starting to pay huge dividends. Arya could feel her balance improving by leaps and bounds. Her moves now being committed to muscle memory. She was beginning to move on pure instinct.

She and Syrio would run through the streets of King’s Landing around the Red Keep. Now many of the GoldCloaks were running with them. Many at first dropping like flies gasping, holding their sides and a few throwing up. Arya merely ran on now able to easily keep up with Syrio. Four days ago Syrio had put on a sprint during the latter part of the run. Before he had left Arya behind. Not this time. She was huffing but she kept pace.

Syrio had glared at her. Then he smiled. “You are getting the lungs of an elephant. Let’s hope you don’t get the ears as well”. Now it was Arya’s turn to glare.
Arya could not but help feel pride seeing men looking at her with respect in their eyes. The men marveled at her endurance and her speed and skill with a sword. Arya knew she had so far to go but these men of rudimentary skills thought Arya a goddess with the sword. She was fast and leapt like some whirling dervish only to land with graceful balance.

Arya heard the whispers. “She is a Dirwolf” “Do you see how high she leaps” “She moves like a gazelle” “I have seen her catch multiple cats one after the other … she is like a cheetah from Dorne or Essos.” Arya heard the awe in their voices and could not stop the pride she felt.

While it did build up Arya’s ego she knew she had to keep training hard every day. She had so far to go. She would become the Water Dancer Syrio told her she could become. It was her destiny she had discovered. She would not disappoint Syrio and make her father proud.

The next morning she had her breakfast in the early morning. She ate with Sansa and Myrcella along with Sansa’s friend Jeyne Poole. Their discourse was easy and filled with humor. Arya could not believe she had once thought she hated Sansa. Her tall beautiful sister had grown so much in the last several months.

Soon it was time to leave. She had to do her training. She was never late in meeting Syrio. She made sure to arrive early for every session with her Sword Master. She knew she was honored to have a First Sword teaching her one on one. Had this ever occurred before she wondered? She had all of Syrio’s focus and attention. She was blessed and knew it. It made Arya want to give her all in training and learning all her lessons no matter what they were.

First, they ran through the Red Keep and out into the lanes around the castle. As usual now many Goldgloaks were running with them. Each day the men able to keep up more and more with some of the men now keeping pace. Arya could see the pride in their faces at keeping pace with the Direwolf and Water Dancer. Arya was not sure about the nickname she was acquiring. It made her want to find her wolf Nymeria. She would run in her honor.

They finished their run. Then it was into the private courtyard in the Red Keep. Many Goldcloaks making sure the “Direwolf” would be training them this afternoon. Syrio pouted that the men seemed to want Arya’s teaching them more than himself. The Hound was just as displeased. Arya could only smile at them.

Now Arya and Syrio trained. Her sword master constantly barking out his instructions in a fast cadence. He would suddenly change the pattern of her steps. She now easily kept pace and did not falter. Syrio was having to step in less often now to correct Arya’s stance and posture. He still had to but it was less. Arya was improving and gladly accepted each correction. It would make her into a true Water Dancer. That was her goal and she would achieve it.

Then it was free style sword practice with each other. A week ago Syrio had told his student that more and more they would practice free style. Arya had felt so proud. She was truly progressing. She lost badly against Syrio their first session. He would not attack with his full skill set but he never let Arya penetrate his defense unless she earned it.

Each day, each session Arya felt her improvement. Their blades often a blur. Syrio would bark out when needed “keep that back straight” “lift that left foot up damnit” “remember to slash and then stab before you retreat” and so it went on. Arya absorbing each correction. Committing to her memory his corrections and more importantly committing her body’s movements to muscle memory.

This morning she had nearly gotten through Syrio’s defense. She had seen it in his eyes just for a moment. He had counterattacked and quickly disarmed Arya. Her wooden sword swirling in the air. It did not matter to Arya. Just for a moment she had been Syrio’s equal. There would be more
and more of those moments. Arya couldn’t wait!

The two were sitting on the table that was in the shade at this time of the morning. They were drinking ice tea from the southwest coast of Great Moraq. The tea harvested on the slopping low mountains bathed in perpetual mist. They were sharing fresh grapes from Dorne.

The both fell silent. Into the courtyard stepped Merjen Sarovic. Arya and Syrio had heard of the woman Sandor had selected as his first member of the Kingsguard beside himself. Arya made a low whistle.

“Amen” Syrio softly intoned.

The muscled woman looked at them intently. She strode over to them in an easy confident gate. Her black skin flawless except for several scars on her arms and legs but they only added to her exotic beauty. Her face was rounded and her eyes slightly almond shape. Her lips thick and sensual. Her armor molded to cover her full bosom. Her arm and leg muscles rippled with her movements. She had spears in her left hand and a war ax in her right. She cut quite the figure. Arya was slightly in lust but also an intimidated by the fierce black warrior goddess. She stared at the woman.

Syrio eyed the woman cautiously. She was entering his domain.

“I wish to train with the two of you.”

“I am the teacher of only Arya Stark” Syrio told the woman placing his hand on Arya’s shoulder. That made her feel so proud.

The woman smiled and thrust her spear tips into the dirt. She removed her helm and attached it to a hook on her belt. Arya’s eyes widened seeing the woman’s large afro spring forth from its cramped nest. The woman put a hair band onto her hair and pulled it back.

“I don’t need your instructions fallen First Sword. I have heard the story.”

Arya felt her master stiffen.

Merjen continued “That is ancient history to me. I care not. I don’t believe all I hear. I have watched you with Arya. You are a good man. I had thought you a rare species but it seems Eddard Stark collects what few there are. You are almost as skilled as me Syrio Forel. I merely wish to train with someone who will actually push me.”

The tall black warrior looked behind her.

“I want to make sure I keep my edge. I can’t have Sandor every think he is my equal” she chuckled.

Arya and Syrio looked at each other.

“Are you attracted to the man?” Syrio asked her.

The woman smiled. “Romantically, no. I am a lover of women.” The black beauty made a show of looking over Arya with an appraising eye. Arya blushed hotly. “I believe in Westeros you have the saying ‘getting the brass ring’. A woman can only truly get that with another woman. Still I won’t say no to an orgasm. I have no problem sport fucking a well hung skilled cocksman.” She now gave Syrio and appraising eye.

Arya looked at Syrio. She knew his blush covering his face and neck was every bit as hot as her own blush.
“I fight with battleax and spear. We fight dissimilarly. Fighting each other will help us to hone our skills against weapons we would not normally face. This especially true for the two of you.”

She looked at Arya directly and smiled. Arya backed up a step. That look was totally predatory. She was not ready for that. Not yet.

Syrio saw the look and stepped in front of Arya.

“You will respect my student. I agree with what you said but you will treat Arya with the respect due a High Princess. She may be a warrior born but she is a lady of extreme breeding and class.”

Arya blushed again. She was thankful for her mentor stepping in to defend her honor. She was still coming to terms with herself and her desires. She was discovering she was not alone in the world.

The beautiful black woman tipped her head.

“If she wants a good roll in the hay she will always know where to find me.” She gave a pearly smile and had a twinkle in her eye. “I merely need someone I can keep my skills honed with. Let us train now. I think you could use another person to help train these ‘Goldcloaks’.

Syrio looked at Arya. She knew he was letting her make the call. This Merjen was right. Training against a battleax would definitely help her skills.

Also, the woman was beautiful to look upon. She found the possibilities intriguing. Still Arya was slightly nonplussed by this beautiful woman’s arura. Arya had an insight. While the woman was beautiful and exuded sexuality Arya was not truly attracted to the woman in a romantic sense. True, Arya found the woman beautiful and her body responded to the signals the woman sent to Arya.

Still, there was something missing. Arya had always fantasized about a beautiful damsel as the woman she would win her heart and then bed. Someone like Sansa … only not her sister and not so tall. Arya’s eyes were always attracted to the more petite chambermaids and courtesans around the court.

Merjen and Syrio were talking. Arya eyed the woman again. She hummed to herself. There was love and then there was lust. She felt her body tingling. She liked the feeling. Lust was a good thing.

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The new King was up on the curtain wall of King’s Landing. He looked out at the camps of the Lannisters. They had pulled their forces back another two hundred yards and dug many more deep trenches and placed stakes and stockades to prevent any horse charges. They had pulled out of the hamlets as well.

Eddard knew that had to hurt the morale of those soldiers and officers. They had been enjoying having a roof over their head and the kitchens in those buildings. His attack had bloodied the Lannisters’ nose and made them react to him. His attack was successful on multiple fronts. He felt satisfaction. He had controlled the narrative of the fight and made the Lannisters react him.

On either side of Eddard Stark stood Varys and Sandor Clegane. The men with him studied the camps too.

“Tywin is coming” Sandor spoke softly. “He will try and crush you and execute you if you survive the assault.” The man turned to look at Eddard gauging him.
Eddard returned his gaze evenly. Eddard felt the breeze run through his short hair. It was starting to grow out again. He still had a buzz cut if starting to get to long to be called a buzz cut. He had his natural hair color back. He knew it would take years to get the length back. He was still shaving. Cat would like that. She would not like what he had to tell her.

He saw Arya walking up the ramparts. She was wearing her leathers that made her look so mature and like a Bravo from Braavos. She walked with an air of confidence now. Her dark leather gave her an air of being a bad ass Eddard thought. Don’t mess with me it said. The rapier and Needle on her right hip added to her aura. The breeze played with her hair as well. It was just beginning to get some length back. She still did not need to pull it back. She had bangs currently that played with her eyebrows.

She came up to join the men. She found a step stone to get on. The stones to allow those who were vertically challenged to see over the wall and fire their arrows at the enemy below.

They all looked out silently.

Sandor spoke again “What do we do? Do we just sit here and wait for the armored fist of Tywin. He will lay siege to King’s Landing.

Eddard and Varys looked at each other. They had already shared their plans with Arya and Syrio Forel. It was now time to bring Sandor into their plans on how to secure the Iron Throne.

With a smile Eddard turned to Sandor. “I have a plan actually. You know I have been sending out ravens to all the Major House and the Citadel. Let me tell you my plans.”

For the next ten minutes Eddard told Sandor all his thoughts and how he planned to bend the Houses to his will and where necessary to play them against each other. Sandor was not man that hid his thoughts. His face mobile as he absorbed all the machinations that Eddard and Varys had devised.

The tall man whistled when Eddard was finished. Sandor looked back over the wall at his former House. He shook his head slightly in an affirmative motion.

“It just might work. I think you have read the players correctly. Still. You know no plan survives the first contact with the enemy. I agree with the likely hood of them reacting the way you think they will is high, but, still, you can’t be sure. I see many places where it all could blow up in your face my King.”

Eddard smiled and clapped his Lord Commander on the shoulder. He liked his honesty. It was most becoming.

“That will be the fun of it Sandor. With this plan we can hopefully avoid bloodshed. I know what they want. I will use that against them.”

“Who says we don’t want a little bloodshed my King. I can think of a few who deserve a little beheading” Sandor retorted with a serious look on his face. Eddard was sure one brother would be on that list.

“I agree Sandor. We shall see. You are right about the enemy changing one’s plans. I will adjust where I need to. I will succeed. You will see.”

Sandor snorted and looked back over the wall down at the distant camps of the Lannisters.

“I would never have thought it” Sandor said.
“What?” Eddard asked back.

“You are one sneaky and conniving bastard.” He turned and smiled at Eddard. “I like it.”

The four looked back out over the wall of King’s Landing. The wind felt good on their faces. The four were lost in their own thoughts,

“Father, what will you do with Cersei and Jaime when you capture him? They have committed high treason.” Arya continued to look out over the fields before the city.

There was a long pause. Eddard continued to look out over the plains and hamlets with the Lannisters arrayed beyond them. He took a deep breath and slowly released it.

“With Cersei, Arya, I am not sure. I will not be executing her. Remember this Arya, it was I committing treason up to the point that I disposed her rule.”

“Why do you make excuses for her father when you were so harsh and unforgiving towards Sansa?”

The man looked out over the fields for a minute. His face calm. The wind playing with his short stiff hair.

“I can’t really explain it Arya. My thoughts are all nebulous, even to me. The clearest I can say is that I contended with Cersei Lannister. We fought not on the battlefield before King’s Landing but in the gilded halls of court. I lost by the way. You saved me from my errors daughter.”

The daughter nodded her head in agreement. She turned to her father with a questioning look.

“In dealing with her I have come to understand her a little I think. We had a conversation in the gardens before Robert’s death. I can now hear the longing and desire that was in her voice for something else in the woman. She is sorry for Bran and she has offered to have me execute her if I will spare her children.

“You have no plans to execute her children. Even that little shit Joffrey.”

Eddard smiled and chuckled.

“You are right. I cannot convince Cersei of it though. Lately, something has changed in the woman. The last two times I visited her she demanded I execute her. She has tried to goad me. She is lying now saying she told Jaime to push Bran out the window. That she subtly worked Joffrey to execute me. She poisoned Robert’s wine. She is lying, rather badly I must say. For a Queen she can’t lie worth a shit—uh excuse my Dorne Arya.”

Arya shook her head at her father’s blush. "How do you know she is not now telling the truth?"

“I trust my instincts Arya. Also, Varys was watching the Lannisters closely and his spies reported no such conversations. And yes, Arya, Varys spies could have missed those conversations. But I have talked to Sansa who spent so much time with the Lannisters. She did not hear any such conversation between Cersei and Joffrey or anyone else. Something else is going on. I can feel it. Somehow Cersei thinks that if she dies her children will be safe. She keeps saying it is ordained.”

Arya shook her head.

“That woman is not one bit religious.”

“I know” Eddard concurred “but something has the woman convinced that she must die to save her
children. That is a mystery for another day. Jaime is a different matter. For what he did to Bran, Jaime Lannister must die. He killed his King. I will order his execution when he comes into my orbit. By my hand Jaime Lannister will die.”

His four companions were quiet. All lost in their own thoughts gazing out into the warm sunshine. All were in agreement with their King. Still a question had not been answered.

“You did not answer me father. If you are so lenient with Cersei why were you so unforgiving with Sansa?” Arya again asked her father.

Eddard looked at his daughter.

“You are right Arya. That is how I reacted. Again the answer is dim even to me. It goes to the core of my soul, my id.”

“And?”

“Family is supposed to be your port in a storm. Your bastion against all enemies. A fortress you can have absolute trust in. I felt absolutely betrayed by Sansa telling Cersei of my plans. I was crushed actually. Still, with time I have come to see why Sansa did what she did. How I and your mother helped shape Sansa. How the septa and society itself molded Sansa to believe she was living a minstrel’s song.”

“She felt she was supposed to love Joffrey warts and all so she did. I now know she acted in her innocence. An innocence you long shed my youngest daughter. That allowed you to see clearly and act with that clarity. I think Sansa has learned such clarity.

Arya nodded at her father’s words. All looked back down at the enemy before the gates.

Gently, the ship’s deck rocked with the placid waves rolling in from the Summer Sea. The Serpent’s Fang had set sail from Sunspear with the evening tide. Around the royal frigate were two flotillas. Their combined might numbered forty-three ships. The smaller bireme ships were mostly stationed on the outer edges as pickets to contact and engage any enemy. The mightier trireme ships closer to the Royal frigate.

This was not an armada. Oberyn felt safe in going to sea with this small formation of ships. Eddard had his fleet out in the seas off the Stormlands patrolling. They would escort his small fleet of ships when they entered his sphere of influence. The Stormlands were not in rebellion and did not know he was coming anyways. The Stormlands focused on Eddard and Stannis Baratheon. The man in turn focused on Eddard. His gaze was west and not east. Oberyn would sail right past the constipated man’s ass.

He was not a fan of Highgarden but they had agreed to work together in their mutual desires to bring the Lions of Casterly Rock down. It was time to finish what Eddard had started in removing Joffrey and his damnable mother from the throne. Eddard had promised him Gregor Clegane. If the man could deliver that in the manner he had laid out Oberyn would be forever in the man’s debt. He would be able to kill the bastard legally! How great was that!

Down in his quarters was his spear with its special tip. He smiled a satisfied smile.

His sweet paramour came up to stand beside him at the ship’s railing. The seas were gently rolling by. They had to wait for the stormy season to end that occurred during the late Spring. Also, some brigands had become rambunctious pirating on ships passing through the Stepstones. The King had
sent out a small formation of warships out last month and had them patrolling near the coast. This allowed the ships from Dorne to set out further afield. To patrol the islands and straits of the many channels between the archipelago islands of the Stepstones.

Finally, a King who took action Oberyn thought. When Eddard had told Doran of this, Oberyn’s brother had shaken off his native somnolence and sent out a small armada to begin chasing the pirates further afield and closer to the shores of Essos. It was not worth the effort to try and permanently eradicate the miscreants. There was too many island and coves to hide in. They just needed to make it too expensive to raid shipping along the coast of Dorne.

Finally, after nearly two decades it was occurring. Action. Eddard was proving to be a man of action. He had been so passive but no more. Oberyn liked this new version of Eddard Stark. He had truly become like the Direwolf of his standard. His daughter from the reports of his jackals was becoming quite the Direwolf herself. He wondered if any of his daughters might capture her heart. Arya was fiery from what he read. She would make one his daughters or multiple daughters happy. In Dorne Arya could live as she wished.

He wondered if she was gay like his own daughters. Oberyn knew the lot of them were gay or very, very bisexual and only sport fucking men. The jackals had not been able to ascertain Arya’s sexual tastes. She seemed consumed on her training. That was good. It showed she had goals and was willing to put in the effort to achieve those goals.

Oberyn was starting to wonder. There was a certain princess lost in the Red Wastes. If she lived … he wondered. He would not be telling Arianne of his musings. What Oberyn was sure about with Arya was her fast rising skills. It was reported she was already a master with a bow. She had a fallen First Sword as her sword master. She was excelling and progressing almost inhumanely fast. The daughter definitely took after her father.

Both were extremely skilled in the martial arts. Both were sticks in the mud though when it came to enjoying life. Oberyn had to wonder though. Arya could be a terror it seemed from the scrolls he read from Dorne’s jackals. His intuition spoke to him. He had only one true goal in King’s Landing. But if the opportunity arose to help move other goals along he would. House Martell had always been supportive of House Targaryen,

He felt the presence of his sweet paramour now come up close to him. She pressed her sweet voluptuous body into his. He snaked his arm around her waist. He kissed her sweetly on the temple. Ellaria pushed herself more firmly into her man’s side.

“I am looking forward to King’s Landing Oberyn. Eddard is stirring things up. It should be exciting. The man making Varys his Hand and the Hound his Lord Commander—the balls!”

Oberyn laughed at that. “Yes, Eddard is proving to be quite unpredictable. I never would have thought of it.”

“I can’t wait to bed Eddard Stark and then bring Cat to my bed when she arrives. The sex will be soooooo good Oberyn. The fun we will have with the Starks will be wild and so good. The orgasms!” Ellaria’s eyes showed her raw lust simmering for the husband and wife who were now King and Queen of Westeros. Oberyn shook his head which his paramour did not see as she daydreamed of her supposed seductions to come.

Oberyn sighed. “How many times do I have to tell you that you will not be seducing Eddard or his wife?”

Ellaria glared at her paramour. “Damnit! Stop saying that! I will make you eat your words. You
just wait and see my sweet. You will be choking on those words I tell you dammit!"

The Red Viper merely kept quiet and smiled. There were few certainties in this world but those two prudes would never do the nasty with anyone but their spouse. They simply did not know how to conceive of anything else. They actually took their vows of monogamy as sacred acts. It was a shame really. Both were quite comely to the eye and in extreme physical shape. Sex with them would be heavenly.

The only problem is that it would not be happening. He would never tell Ellaria this, but, he would enjoy watching her frustrations in her attempts. Ellaria being pissed off would make for some fiery sex Oberyn was sure. She would be wound up and needing release. She would be really fiery and hungry and ready to do the nasty. He couldn’t wait! In her frustrations she would be bringing others to their bed Oberyn knew. His greedy mind depravedly turned those thoughts over in his head.

Looking out over the waters the Red Viper mused over other things. He was sure Jon Snow was not Eddard’s son. Sure he looked like Eddard but Oberyn suspected who his mother and father had been. Ellaria concurred. Without proof they had kept their counsel to themselves. Oberyn knew his brother had made the same deductions two decades ago. Arianne had more recently came to the same conclusion. What would come of that knowledge none knew.

“Great times are coming” Ellaria said. “I am happy to be part of them. Finally, Dorne will have revenge for the crime done to your sister Elia. I will love watching you—“

“Mother!” was heard. The name called in a high pitch. Ellaria sighed.

Obella ran up to her mother with an aggrieved look on her face.

“Make her stop mother! It is not fair!”

“Make who stop doing what?” Ellaria sighed again turning her head to face her daughter.

At that moment Dorea came running up and was standing behind Obella breathless. The mother eyed her two daughters. She arched an elegant eyebrow.

Obella looked stricken. “She won’t stop looking at meeeme!” the Sand Snake whined. She turned to stare at her younger sister.

Dorea rolled her eyes and then proceeded to give her older sister the stink eye.

“Seeeme! Make her stop!”

Ellaria turned her head from her daughters and looked at her lover.

“Tell me again why we brought all our daughter with us to King’s Landing. I am beginning to think you have started to go senile my seemingly most virile lover.”

Oberyn chuckled. Obella and Dorea were now insulting each other nonstop with much waving of arms and lots of whining between barbs. He looked back at Ellaria.

“Why these are great times Ellaria” Oberyn told his sweet.

She glared at her man with him using her own words against her.

“I want our daughters to get to experience them with us. Great changes are in the air. We both feel it. I think Eddard is going to try and achieve great change. I hope to witness at least the start of his
reign. I want our daughters to see it too. It is really that simple.”

Ellaria pursed her lips and nodded in agreement. The bickering of Oberyn’s daughters was not so bad she supposed. When they were like immature brats she refused to acknowledge her parentage of said brats.

She looked by the main mast and sighed again. There were Tyene and Sarella in a lover’s clench trying to remove each other’s tonsils in turn. Some of the crew were around the peacocks urging them on. Ellaria could not complain of the sister’s being in love with each other. The incest did not bother her at all. She loved to screw and loved orgies but she had a least a little sense of comportment. This open display in front of the ship’s crew was crass Ellaria thought.

Then she smiled. Tyene had always been the most moody and unhappy of her daughters. She loved all of Oberyn’s daughters. She tried to love them equally. It did not matter that the eldest Sand Snakes were not of her body. Tyene had made it hard with her surly nature. That had changed when she started to make love to Sarella. It had started as simple sex but now it had blossomed into true deep love. Sarella was definitely smitten with her pale half-sister in return. They were deeply in love with each other now.

They now had their legs between each other’s thighs and humping. Their hands all over each other and their heads titled over snogging deeply.

The crew was most pleased. The men hooting and urging them on. The men clapping and chanting out a lewd rhythm. Even the captain was watching from his station on the quarterdeck. Ellaria watched too. It may be crass but she had to admit it was hot.

“Is Arianne still studying her ass off down in her cabin?” Oberyn asked.

Ellaria tore her eyes off the free pep show.

“Yes, she is. She says she wants to be prepared for any contingency. She is reviewing all the files we have on all the Major Houses and their subordinate Houses. She is most impressed with Eddard Stark and his tactics and stratagems. How she can study like that I don’t know Oberyn. It is soooo boring.”

“Yes it is Ellaria. And that is why she will be a better leader of Dome than I could ever be. I can fight for Dome on the battlefield. Point me at the enemy of our land and I will kill them. Dome needs more than that. Arianne can play the Game of Thrones. I will could never be even adequate at it.”

“She is beautiful. I want her Oberyn.”

“I know you do my sweet. Be patient. Let’s see what happens in King’s Landing. I know Eddard is not telling us all his machinations but even with what he is telling us it sounds like he will be stirring the pot till it is boiling wildly. I do not know who will be scalded from his deceptions and playing one House off against the other. We will watch and take advantage of what opportunities arise.”

“Mother!” was loudly whined.

The two ignored the petulant bleat.

“Oberyn” Ellaria took her lover’s hands. “We both know what Eddard has promised. I trust in you explicitly but I fear for you my love. The Mountain is a monstrosity. He is so big and yet fast. You have seen the sword that he wields.”
Oberyn lifted their clasped hands and kissed Ellaria’s fingers. He smiled at his lover.

“To you he may seem fast but to me he is a lumbering oaf. I will simply not be where he strikes with his sword. He may wear that legendary heavy armor but all armor has joints and creases. I will peel that armor back like clam and put my spear point in the juicy meat underneath. I will play with him my sweet. Then I will kill him. It really is that simple.”

“Oberyn do not get overconfident godsdamnit!”

The Red Viper chuckled again. “I won’t my dear. I am just that good. He will say my sister’s name before I kill him.”

“Just don’t let him get ahold of you Oberyn. He would crush your head like a grape.”

“It won’t happen Ellaria. He will never even get close to me. You will see. Trust your Red Viper my love. He will be an easy kill. My legend will only grow!” Oberyn crowed.

The two talked a little more on how Eddard would maneuver events till Oberyn could squire Gregor on his spear.

“Arianne asked me to ask you about this Ice King and these Others that Eddard said we must confront. That ‘Winter is Coming’. It is all just gremlins and snarks isn’t it Oberyn?”

Oberyn had started to look out over the water again. He looked at the bright reflections off the water. The little spangles pretty to the eyes.

“I don’t know Ellaria. If it was anyone else but Eddard I would call it beliefs in childish fairytales. The next thing Eddard will tell us is that the Children of the Forest are still alive. If they ever even existed.”

“He says that these Ice Wrights represent a threat that could extinguish all life in Westeros. They frighten me Oberyn.”

The Red Viper pulled his paramour tighter to his side. “I will protect you Ellaria. We will just have to wait and see what Eddard has to tell us when we arrive. These are great times.”

“Mother!”
Varys was in Eddard’s personal meeting room. He looked around the plain unadorned room. It was not exactly small, still, Varys wondered why they could not sit in the Small Council chambers. There was seating for maybe ten around the table in this room but that would be tight. He knew his new King hated anything that even hinted at ostentatious display. Nobel Varys knew, but … well, boring.

He continued to review reports from his sparrows and what was handed out to him by the jackals, wraiths and moths to his operatives. It was actually ‘fun’ for Varys to sift out the pertinent data and check the veracity of the reports. Finding the nuggets of truth in the obfuscation.

The men were correlating all the information flying in on the wings of ravens. Some of the ravens formally provided by the Citadel and their Maesters. This information flowing in from the Major Houses and those Houses aligned with each Major House. That was important but the truly valuable information was coming in on the wings of the ravens and some owls of the Druids.

These birds bringing in reports of the movements of the Druids and the forces aligned with Eddard. Those forces tracking and shadowing the forces of the Lions of Casterly Rock. Varys had had to shake his head since the Druids aligned with Eddard. This constant inflow of information made him feel almost guilty. Guilty at the bounty of information flowing into him and his King. Almost. They used the birds’ oversight of the Lannisters to constantly punish their forces. The forces of Eddard always attacking at advantage and avoiding the Lannister forces when the battlefield was not to their advantage.

The reports were clear. The Lion was being hamstrung by the Direwolves, Falcons and Trout attacking them. No large scale battle were sought. Only a constant string of ambushes and sudden assaults that ended just as quickly. This was not be a war of confrontation but instead a battlefield shaped to achieve a tight focused goal.

There was a knock on the door. Varys had not expected any interruptions. He immediately knew it was not a runner with new information when Eddard had the air of him expecting this intrusion into this time of meeting. The Whisperer went to the door and opened it.

In stepped Sansa and Myrcella. Varys eyebrows knit at that. He had seen Eddard take the first steps in healing his relationship with his eldest daughter. It showed again the mettle of the man to so quickly move forward on his sense of betrayal. Eddard had listened to the counsel of voices speaking up for Sansa. To the man’s immense credit he had listened and not stubbornly held onto the past and maybe erroneous ideas, assumed facts.

Varys watched Eddard pull out chairs for his daughter and then Myrcella to sit down in. Varys felt a flash of shame race through him. That thought had not crossed his mind. He put it behind him. *Maybe next time.*

Eddard asked how his daughter and her friend were doing. Was there anything they needed? He asked Myrcella how her siblings and mother was doing.
“Joffrey is keeping to himself in his room. He realizes he is totally at your mercy and fears at any moment you may take revenge. I do not tell him that he is safe. I hate to say this about my own brother, but, he is … how should I say this delicately—a total piece of shit.” The last words spoken matter of factly. “Tommen is doing well. He loves to read and play with his cats.”

“My mother” she paused. “She is constantly grousing she needs a drink” Myrcella paused. “Hmmmnnn, … she has slackened in that though now that I think of it. She is surprisingly civil actually. I fully expected her to be constantly spewing bile like she used too. She still does when she feels she had been goaded but she has kept herself reasonably under control.” Myrcella now looked directly into Eddard’s eyes. “She still thinks you will eventually execute her. If not you then my grandfather.” Myrcella looked at Eddard intently. “You will prevent that won’t you?

Without hesitation Eddard answered.

“Yes. I will protect your mother from your grandfather. He sent another raven yesterday actually. He promised to let me take the Black if I would renounce my claim to the Iron Throne and give him your mother. I answered that after I have defeated him I will decide whether or not he will take the Black.” Eddard inflecting his voice giving his answer to the daughter of Cersei.

Myrcella smiled.

They made small talk for another minute. Varys was wondering what was up. Eddard did not invite the two young women to this room to make small talk. The Whisperer looked at the two parties. Eddard had made it clear he would not be following convention. He sensed he was about to experience this lack of convention presently. He contented himself in waiting.

Eddard paused. Varys sensed the reason for asking the young women to this room had arrived.

“Sansa—Myrcella, I have invited you two hear because I need your assistance.”

That made Varys start a little. *He did?* The noticed the two women had come to instant attention. Their bodies leaned forward waiting to hear what Eddard had to say. The two women were giving their King and with Sansa, her father, their full attention. He definitely had Varys attention.

“Varys and I are being inundated with information. We have the information flooding in from his spies and Varys contacts with the spies of other Houses but we are also being overflowed with information from the Major Houses and now lesser Houses wanting to have a say on the future they sense is in a state of flux. The Druids are flying in Ravens and Owls from all across Westeros and now even from Essos” Eddard shook his head saying that. Varys too had been surprised when this started to occur.

The Druids of Essos saying the “Breaker of Chains” was coming. That the Dragon and Direwolf would rend the Slaver Cities and throw them down. These prophecies both similar and yet totally different than the Druids of Westeros.

Varys thought everyone seemed to be caught up in the fever of the possible and highly unlikely. His sparrows had talked to their contacts in Essos and Slaver’s Bay. Illyrio had been seeking word of Daenerys Targaryen. She had gone to her death in the Red Wastes. A waste. He eyed Eddard. He saw he was still trusted completely by the new King. He was thankful to Arya for this.

Arya had come to Varys a week ago in his domicile. He had asked to not move to the Tower of the Hand. He explained to Eddard that he had been in this suite of apartments for so long that he hated to move. He could most effectively serve his new King by remaining in his old quarters. He needed access to the core of the maze of tunnels hidden behind the walls of the Red Keep. Again Eddard
had easily agreed. He truly did not follow convention.

He had answered a knock on his door. Outside stood Arya at military parade rest. He immediately asked her in sensing danger. She came into his room causally attired in a blouse and trousers. She came unarmed which was unusual for Arya anymore. This was a warning to the bald eunuch. Varys had felt his heartrate accelerate. With her training, Arya could kill him with her bare hands if she so chose. She came straight to the point.

“IT was you that I heard in the catacombs beneath the Red Keep discussing the need to kill my father. It was near the chamber with the dragon skulls. Who was the man?” She spoke without preamble. Her eyes boring up into Varys eyes.

His heart rage surged but he controlled it. By her actions, Arya showed she wanted explanation and not mindless vengeance. Varys felt no need to lie noting this. Arya would probably see through any subterfuge anyways. It was very hard to lie to a person who never lied. He knew exactly the meeting she spoke of. He had not known she was there.

“Illyrio Mopatis. I have known him since my youth. He is very powerful. I hope to get you and your father in touch with him. He would be most valuable.”

“Why?” Arya asked calmly looking at Varys with her steel grey eyes.

He did not dissemble. They both knew what she was asking. She was not asking of the present but of the past.

“Your father was ineffective. I saw he was going to fall before Cersei. Getting rid of the Lannisters was paramount. What little time we saw with Joffrey on the Iron Throne proved that. At that time Eddard was an impediment to my desires for a better future for Westeros.”

Arya merely stared at Varys. Her face inscrutable.

“I did not act against your father Arya. Your father fell so far so fast I did not need to act. I did warn him what to do till the end. He refused to listen. You would have listened. I know how this will sound but when I first met you at the beginning of your Insurrection I wished you were on the Iron Throne. You are young but already with the right mettle. Your father has totally surprised me. He has learned. Your father’s ability to change, learn and grown is almost astounding. He has become what you were borne to be.”

Arya’s look clearly said she thought Varys was laying it on thick “You exaggerate. One would think you are seeking to save your neck.”

“No, only the truth. You are truly gifted.” The young woman arched her eyebrow.

Arya turned to leave.

“What will you do Arya? I know how my actions must seem. What your father would think if you spoke to him of this.”

Arya turned around at the door. She looked at him evenly.

“I will say nothing Varys. You proved yourself to me when you came to us in the dungeons that night. Don’t disappoint me. Our goals are aligned. What is best for Westeros.”

She had left then.
Varys continued to look at Eddard. He was thankful. Arya had kept her knowledge to herself. Varys could still serve. Arya rightly judged Varys new allegiance. Eddard was what he had waited all his life for. A person truly worth serving. A man who had learned his lessons and not become bitter learning them.

He watched the man now. What was he getting at?

“I need research done on various Houses, institutions and persons. I have much I need to accomplish and quickly if my plans start to come to fruition. I want to continue closely tracking the Lannisters movements.” Eddard was searching the faces of Sansa and Myrcella who looked at Eddard with their rapt attention.

“I need to have all this information processed as quickly as possible. I need research on any subject that may arise. Varys is inundated with this and his having trouble keeping up with the flood of new information. He needs help.”

Varys stared blankly at Eddard. He did? True, he was having difficulty processing all the data coming in and had wondered how he could keep up but he had not said anything as of yet to Eddard about it.

“Ummfff” Varys suddenly chuffed out. The two women looked at him curiously. They had not picked up that Eddard had just kicked Varys in the shins.

“Yes! Yes, I am indeed in need of help. If I could offload much of this data collection and analysis I can focus on more important items. I could use the help immensely.”

Eddard rode his comments on the back of what Varys had just said. “I have watched and tried to understand” he smiled at the two teenage girls “what you two read and discuss. That showed you have the minds to take this information and process it. Research I think would be right down your abilities. I think Tommen might be able to help too.” The new King looked at the two women who looked at him with now big eyes and suppressed excitement.

“Is this something that I can ask of the two of you?”

Varys smiled at the excited ‘yes’ from both women. They anxiously said that they would be happy to assist and that they felt they would do an ‘excellent’ job for their King. Sansa’s eyes literally sparkled Varys thought. The two women were literally thrumming like a just released bowstring. Eddard had a smile on his face taking the two women’s acceptance of the request.

The Spider had to surreptitiously shake his head in the affirmative. Varys could use the help and his sparrows had observed the two young women. Their minds were indeed extremely sharp. So was Tommen’s mind. This was surprising considering their lineage. Neither Jaime nor Cersei had shown any desire to explore such academic pursuits.

Not only had Eddard engaged these women’s abilities it would help to further mend the breech between father and daughter. Eddard was indeed a master strategist. The smile on Sansa’s face actually made Varys feel good. That was a rare thing.

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Gently the Watch Tower rocked on the waves rolling through Blackwater Bay. They had passed through the Gullet the morning before. The Maester watched the coastline slowly waft by as his ship marched up the bay on the morning tide. The ships prow gently dipping and rising with the gentle waves. Dromen Salver smiled. To become the Grande Maester fresh out of the Citadel was an
honor that had not been conferred before. To know you had been expressly selected by the King could not help but make the young man’s pride swell. He tried to control it per the rules of his order but still he felt the pride.

Of course he wondered if he was moving into the eye of the tempest. The new King was in all reality a usurper of the supposed order of succession. His kingdom miniscule. The Maesters had made it a policy as much as possible to remain above the fray. The new King would succeed in conquering the rest of Westeros or he would fail and be deposed. Most likely to lose his head.

Dromen saw several small fishing villages on the shores of the now estuary roll up and then pass behind the ship. He saw small trawlers with their boom arms swung in and fishing nets hanging limp. The haul caught and put away in the holds. The ships returning to their slips to let out their catch for the afternoon meals. He was sure many of the boats would put out again to attempt a second catch.

He saw skiffs, a few caravels, a howker and many schooners plying various wares up and down the Bay. He saw deck boats and dhows that were out in the shoals scooping up oysters and muscles or running dredges along the oyster banks. He saw several men and women on a sand bar near shore bending over with long trowels scooping out clams for the next meals. The curious man observed all the actions of the fisher and shell men. He found human endeavors fascinating.

The man understood that these fishermen and their families had no true knowledge of the events that were occurring only five leagues up the Blackwater Bay at King’s Landing. To them the only thing that mattered was the day’s catch and processing of each catch. The rhythm of the tides in their daily visits. He saw the small river yaws moving up the tide with his ship. The watermen and some women taking the catch to the City to sell.

To these people nothing mattered but the daily rhythm of the tides. The ability to go out into the Blackwater Bay and fish that day’s catch. The pulse of palace intrigue and the Game of the Thrones meant nothing to these people and the vast majority of Westeros. They probably wanted no parts of it. They merely wanted to live their lives in relative peace and have their children live an equally good life. A life free of the strife that royalty and those of supposed ‘high minds’ seemed to thrive on.

Dromen Salver took a deep breath. He was deliberately heading to the nexus of coming events. Eddard Stark had impossibly taken King’s Landing and the Iron Throne. It was astounding really. News had arrived at the Citadel that Robert Baratheon had died in a hunting accident (though most wondered if Cersei Lannister had had a hand in it). That her son would be the Heir Apparent while Cersei would lead a regency until Joffrey was ready to lead the realm.

Then confused messages started to arrive at the Citadel. An Insurrection had broken out in King’s Landing. An Insurrection led impossibly by Eddard Stark’s youngest daughter. The thought was that within a few days the word would arrive that the girl caught and most likely executed for the temerity to defy the Iron Throne.

That was not had happened. Pyrcelle reported regularly. The young girl was actually succeeding. Then Eddard had been freed in a brazen midnight raid on the dungeons. The man had been a cripple. He was only half alive so none in the leadership of the Maesters thought much on it. A lot of effort wasted on a shell of a man.

The Insurrection continued and then spectacularly Eddard Stark had reappeared completely healed and overthrew the Lannisters. The common man did not question this. The Maesters did. Eddard’s knee had been shattered beyond repair and yet he was whole and hale. This caused great consternation among the teachers and leaders of the Citadel. If science had not healed Eddard then
only one other thing could have. The Maester reached up and fingered his Valyrian steel link.

He had much to investigate.

The Maester moved off the deck of the ship and moved down to his small berth in the ship. He entered his cabin. He looked at the small bench that was a table. He spied the bowl filled with a selection of rolled meats, cheese, slices of dark bread and deviled eggs. He pulled out a selection and put on the plate that was on the bench. The man sat down and began to eat his noon time meal.

Dromen masticated his food slowly his mind drifting on the tide of his thoughts. He was only twenty-seven. He had mastered his craft he felt. He had tried to make his studies eclectic. He had figured the more rounded his studies the more likely he would eventually be selected to work for a Major House. Instead he had been selected by the King! He would do an exemplary job for his sovereign. He had worked too hard to not excel.

He wanted to impress the King. He knew that King’s Landing would be a maelstrom. It would be dangerous with the great powers vying for power. When power changed hands it always caused chaos and danger. He looked forward to it. He would be at the center of great events.

He smiled with a slightly gallows humor. If the new King fell it would get interesting. Grand Maesters had been known to be executed at such times.

Slowly the Valyrian steel link ran between Dromen’s index finger and thumb. He wondered. Did the new King believe in magic? Dromen did though he could never really admit that fact except to Maester Marwyn. To most who took that link it was merely a study into an arcane past that had no place in the future. Dromen wished he could have seen the wonders that were Valyria before her doom. He continued to finger the links of his chain but his fingers most often played with his Valyrian steel link unconsciously.

He rested for two hours after his meal and then went back topside. The wooden steps creaking underneath his footfalls. His eyes squinted in the afternoon sun now angled to the west. They were nearing King’s Landing now.

The Maester looked along the shore. It was still mainly a wild land of thick undergrowth and stunted trees to his right. He saw hamlets that dotted the coast more thickly than before his meal. Fishermen that supplied the needs of the City of King’s Landing. To his left was the Kingswood. The old growth forest still in its pristine environment. The mighty oaks, maples and elms towering in their reach for the heavens. The canopy of interwoven limbs thick.

His ship moved on down the Blackwater Bay. The bay had now become more of a wide estuary that was narrowing as they reached the source of the river that feed into the bay. The Blackwater Rush was a fast river with treacherous currents that were a navigation hazard and threat to all who plied or swam in its waters.

The new Grand Maester mused that its banks had been salted with much blood with the battles that had been fought along its banks. He watched the coastline slowly narrow as they headed towards the ship’s goal. King’s Landing. As he watched, river life flowed by, he noticed a cog tacking against the wind heading for his ship. On the one mast at the top flew a flag that had the standard of House Stark on it. The Direwolf’s head thrown back howling in defiance. Below the direwolf was an image of docks with ships in the slips.

The Harbormaster for his ship had arrived. All ships with deeper drafts were required to take on board a harbormaster who would guide the ship into a slip waiting for it. A small fleet of cogs waiting at small hamlet Dromen spied on the right bank. He saw six more cogs along the docks of
the hamlet with the flag of the approaching vessel. He knew more were out ono the waters plying their craft.

The harbormasters provided two services. One was to safely guide the ships they boarded down the main channel as it worked its way to King’s Landing. The second was a source of revenue for the Crown.

The cog came up beside the ship and a cargo net was thrown down over the side of the Watch Tower. The harbormaster and two others climbed up onto the ship. The men led to the stern where the captain kept his station. The Maester watched the men converse. The animated discussion told the blonde man that the ship’s captain and harbormaster were haggling price for the man’s service. Both men were smiling when the conversation ended.

The harbormaster sent the two young men forward on either side of the ships prow. The two men staring down at the water intently. Dromen knew that the strong currents of the Blackwater constantly churned the channels of the estuary that led into King’s Landing. The channels slowly moving about with each surge of water from storms inland. The flood waters plowing the underwater landscape. The Maester knew the Harbormasters were constantly exploring the channels to make sure they kept track of how they have morphed and changed positions.

Ship captains did not want to ground their ships on sandbars or the muck of the bay beside the channels. A stuck ship made no money. To get off the sandbar or mudflats one may have to unload the ship in place which would be expensive. The ship would then hopefully float free at high tide. If not towing would be tried. If all else failed cofferdams would erected to get the sand or mud away from the ship. All those efforts expensive.

The harbor of King’s Landing could not afford to have the channel blocked by grounded ships. No commerce meant no profits. That was unacceptable.

The ship moved forward with the tide. The sailors on the Watch Tower crew adjusting the sails to tack forward against the prevailing winds. The two men at the bow barking back to the harbormaster who spoke to the rudder man. A bank of oarsmen on each side of the ship worked their oars according to the instruction barked down at them. The harbormaster kept the ship centered in the main channel.

For the next hour the Maester watched the Harbormaster and his assistants work. The ship slowly pivoting several degrees off the beam to adjust to the channels current path. Then he saw it the. The Rosby Road that paralleled the coast for nearly seven miles before it angled inland. They were approaching King’s Landing. The bay was narrowing now. The far shore coming closer with each passing mile. Dromen saw three more fishing hamlets flow by. Then he saw it.

The first buildings that did not end. The buildings first sparse slowly became more plentiful. This was the hamlet of Seaside that had grown before the Iron Gate. This particular hamlet had many small piers built to the shore to allow for the fisherman to fish for produce they would sell to King’s Landing within walking distance if need be.

Then Dromen’s breath caught. He saw the promontory that had the Red Keep upon it. It jutted out slightly from the land. The Red Keep’s dark red sandstone made it shine like a beacon in the midafternoon sunshine. The Maester saw the hints of the seven massive drum-towers crowned with iron ramparts. The castle high and proud atop of Aegon’s Hill. The ship continued journeying down the bay that was quickly turning to the throat of the Blackwater Rush. The curtain wall around the City now clearly seen as well as the ship closed with the City.

Dromen winced. The wind shifted and he smelled the first wafts of the stench produced when five
hundred thousand persons lived in close cramp quarters. King’s Landing was the largest city in Westeros but it was also the least well laid out. Many building had cropped up out of the Earth without any preplanning. The poorly built buildings almost built on top of each other. The narrow twisting roadways in these warrens of the poor which did not allow for good sanitation. The resulting smell now assaulting the Maester’s nostrils.

He grimaced while the ship sailed on to its destination. The ship sailed down the throat of the bay. The ship now changing course to port to begin its run up the Blackwater River. The Maester looked up at the Red Keep that resided atop of Aegon’s Hill. The four hundred and fifty foot height of the hill making the rising spires even more impressive.

The towering spires rising another two hundred feet in the air in several instances. The Tower of the Hand soaring up. From his distance he could see the tall windows that circled the tower. Inside he knew the tower had the Small Hall a long room with a high-vaulted ceiling and bench space for two hundred. The private audience chamber not as large as the king’s, but had rare expensive Myrish rugs, wall hangings, and a golden-tinted round window that give it a sense of intimacy. The Tower of the Hand also had a solar and a garderobe.

Behind the Tower of the Hand, the Maester saw the marble shod White Sword Tower. The marble used to represent the pure white of sacrifice that the King’s Guard swore too. He had read that the order had been decimated to the last man in the Insurrection of the Starks. The man shook his head. He still found it impossible to believe that a fourteen year old girl had led it till she had freed her father. Together they had decimated the Lannister’s repeatedly. From the reports, the new King not only allowed his daughter to fight but she had been in the thick of each battle.

Was this man insane! Surely, he could not be long for the Iron Throne.

She ship had tacked over and was now sailing the channel through the two Watch Towers. The seventy-five foot edifices armed but unseen the Maester knew.

Now the oar men were earning their keep rowing hard against the current. The wind was behind them and helped propel the ship up the river. The slip clawing and pulling its way up the river. They passed open berthing slips both large and small. The larger slips had men on the ends of the quays motioning for the ship to berth at their slip. The owners of those berths seeking the ship for the fee it would pay for the right to that berth space. The Watch Tower sailed on.

That was when Dromen saw the standards on tall poles at the Mud Gate. A large slip had two Direwolves snapping in the afternoon breeze. The Harbormaster shouting at the rudder man they would be berthing in the slip of the Direwolf. The ship approached the slip. Two skiffs were rowed out by four men in each skiff. A man on the front of the skiff. The men uncoiling a messenger line behind them. The skiffs came up on each side of the ship.

The lines were hooked by gaffs and pulled up. These lines then run through the hawsehole where three inch hawser s where tied to them. Then the tied together rope dropped from the ‘cat holes’ to the skiffs below. The men then paddled fast heading back to the wharf edges. The Maester saw a team of four oxen on each wooden platform. The hawser s taken up to the wooden deck of the quay. The rope tied to a block and tackle situated on the yoke on the rear pair of the ox.

The rope secured to the oxen, their masters had the beast begin to slowly strain forward. The oars men on the port helped turn the ship and then all the oarsmen pulled hard helping the oxen pull the Watch Tower into her birth. Slowly the ship moved forward till it was in its berth. Dromen watched men throw mooring hawser s over the ships rail. The hawser s on the ship attached to cleats near the rail. On the dock the hawser s were looped around broad bollards. Soon the ship was secured.
The tall man from the Citadel watched men rush to get the gangplank in place. Once secured, men boiled up the gangplank and onto the ship. The men were porters and went to the quartermaster of the ship. The two reviewed the manifest of the items in the ships holds. Again Dromen heard the barks, snarls, asides and grips of haggling. Soon a price was reached and men rushed into the holds to begin unloading the ship. When commerce was involved the activity was frenzied but in an orderly way.

The Watch Tower had loaded its hold for both ballast but also to make some profit for the Citadel. Ships were always needed to transport items around the continent of Westeros and over to Essos. The Watch Tower had brought along in her holds wine and mead from Highgarden. Textiles and brass fittings for ships. There were wheels of cheese packed in rice. One hold had been filled with dried fruits from the orchards of Highgarden.

The Grand Maester waited till he saw that his three traveling trunks were humped up out of the crew quarters. The men cursing the heavy chests as they worked the chests up the steps. The Maester smiled. His life was in those chests.

He looked down at the dock. His eyebrows flared up. He had learned of the major players in the Houses of Westeros. The Hound, Sandor Clegane, was easily spotted near the bottom of the gangplank. The man did not have on the white armor of the Kingsguard but his breast and back plates were white as well as a white cape that only went down to his waist instead of his knees per tradition. He sensed he might be with the Kingsguard. That should have been impossible. The man was not a knight.

Then the new Grand Maester took in the tall woman beside Sandor though she was not tall compared to Sandor’s six foot six inch frame. The woman’s dark skin standing out in the crowd. She and the Hound both had their helms hooked to their belts. The woman’s afro pulled back with a band. She had a battleax strapped to her back. Sandor had his sword on his hip.

The woman must be some exotic mercenary hired till they could form a new Kingsguard. Strangely, she too was wearing a half cape that was white.

There was a nondescript man of slightly taller than normal height with them. The woman pointed up to Dromen. With curiosity in their eyes the three gazed up at him.

The Maester knew he had met his greeting committee. He arched an eyebrow. This was a most unusual group. He looked around for the King. He saw no person of regal bearing. No crown or circlet was in sight.

Dromen sighed. He guessed it was too much to be greeted by the King. He knew his chests would make it to the Red Keep. Porters from the Citadel would make sure they arrived safe and sound. The new Grand Maester took a deep breath and prepared to meet his destiny. He walked down the gangplank.

The nondescript man greeted him.

“Hello Dromen Salver. We have been sent to escort you to the Red Keep.” He pointed to tall scared man “This is Sandor Clegane” he turned to the woman. “This is Merjen Sarovic. I am Kard Straedd. We will escort you to the Red Keep. It is a pleasure to have you join our court. Was your trip pleasant? How long did it take?”

The man with short brown hair and grey eyes was genial and seemed genuinely interested. Probably a lieutenant who had the common touch.
Dromen told the man it took twenty-four days to sail from Old Town and the slips of Whispering Sound. The seas had only been rough off the coast of Estermont. The sea state reaching a three. Otherwise the trip had been a comfortable journey. The spokesperson for the group peppered the Grand Maester with questions about his training at the Citadel. Again the Maester was taken by how Kard seemed to actually be interested in his answers. Sandor and Merjen Sarovic were looking around clearly bored with the back and forth with himself and Kard.

They had passed through the River Gate. They now walked through the organized chaos of Fishmonger’s Square. The Maester looked around at the endless stalls that sold seemingly everything. Of course with the name it was mainly produce from the water that the Maester saw for sale.

There were long tables with shucked fresh seashell creatures. Oysters, clams, scallops and muscles were being eaten raw, broiled, sautéed and rolled in thick batters and then fried. The various smells had the Maester’s pallet watering. On other tables, the Maester saw all manner of fish being cut, fillet and chopped to make all sorts of delicious fare. Some of the fish eaten raw in the style of Leng. Sushi. He saw some fish smoked, salted and pickled. Fish made for any pallet.

Interspersed among the fish vendors were men and women selling herbs, vegetables, spices and salt to go with the fish. Some selling loaves of various types of bread. Others were selling different kinds of cheese. Women and men buying the ingredients they would add to the sea life they had purchased and make their own fare at their homes. Many other were walking around eating the meals they had purchased. There were small areas with small tables surrounded by chairs. People sitting at them and being waited on. These people letting others do the work while they ate heartily. People splurging for a special meal.

His escort, Kard, offered to buy him a meal to tide him over till they reached the Red Keep. He demurred but the man insisted and gave him a squint smile. The smile put him at ease. It seemed so genuine. He knew it would be good manners to accept the offer. Soon he was at a table consuming his meal. The meal of steamed clams in a quick-cooked sauce of cherry tomatoes, garlic, red-pepper flakes, and oregano was exquisite. It was served with rustic bread to soak up every last drop of the savory broth.

Sandor and the tall black woman were moving around the stalls buying small items to eat. They seemed to bicker constantly but also listen intently to each other.

The man who was his escort ate some black cherries and drank a tall glass of lemon water. He asked him questions about his time in the Citadel. He noticed his Valyrian steel link.

“So you believe in magic?” Kard asked with curiosity. “They say magic is dead or maybe it never really existed.”

Dromen thought about it while he fingered his link that signified his study of the arcane arts of magic.

“Magic certainly existed. Valyria existed. The magic plain to see. Dragons filled the sky.” Dromen sighed. “It is seemingly gone now. I find it interesting and intriguing. The Citadel has artifacts of that doomed land. We know they have function but we cannot make them work. In reality most of our Maesters are happy of this. That which does not follows the rules of science as we understand it they find an abomination.”

“I hear a note in your voice Dromen. What say you?”

He looked at Kard. He wondered how much to tell the man.
The man gave him a squint smile. “I will not tell anyone of what you say if that is your fear.”

Dromen considered a moment more.

“Is magic still alive? I don’t know” he took a deep breath. “I sincerely hope so. I am a disciple of Master Marwyn. I fear that when the dragons disappeared from the sky that some balance was crossed. I don’t know. We investigate reports of strange ‘monsters’ across Westeros and Essos. There are things alive in the shadows and hidden in the depths of forests and mountains. Things that do follow the laws that my brothers say that life must adhere to. That any deviation is merely childhood fairytales.”

He took another deep breath.

“Merwyn does not believe in these vampires, werewolves and other such hybrids. That faery, goblins, orcs do not exist. I think they do. But they … I don’t know how to say this … they are low magic. They themselves are magic but cannot project beyond the abilities that are inherent to themselves.”

“The magic of Valyria for lack of a better word was ‘high’ magic. They somehow harnessed magic and used it to achieve great and dare I say it ‘magical’ things. Unfortunately, they were a cruel, despotic race.”

“If a way was found, should this ‘High Magic’ be returned?” Kard asked him.

Again Dromen paused. “I feel that if ‘High Magic’ makes a return, not I, you, your King or anyone else will be able to stop its return. It will find a way to return despite anyone’s efforts to stop its return.” He sighed thinking. Kard watched him patiently. “I don’t know … I just don’t know. Merwyn feels that something wonderful is about to occur. I just don’t know. How do you bring dragons back when there are no dragons? Merwyn and I both feel that dragons are the locus of Valyrian magic.”

He sighed and looked off over the stalls of vendors.

“What say you Kard?” The man ducked his head and squint smiled.

“I don’t know myself. I am a simple man. All I know is that I will have to deal with life with or without magic in it. It is all above me I fear.” A mischievous look came to Kard’s eyes.

“I have news for you Dromen”

Dromnen looked at him intently. His eyes asking for explanation.

“Sailors from the far east report that Daenerys Targaryen hatched three dragons. Rumors of course. The rumors also say she entered the Red Wastes to die. I am sure her dragons died with her.”

Dromen sat taking that in. “That is impossible. How could she do that?”

“She supposedly hatched petrified eggs. Three of them. I don’t know. If they were hatched, maybe more could be.”

As the Grand Maester finished his meal he ruminated on the rumors Kard had passed on. Surely these rumors were grand exaggerations or plain wrong. Still, it gave him thoughts to mull over.

They soon finished their meal. Sandor and Merjen returned and they moved out of the warren of stalls of Fishmonger Square. The new Grand Maester was surprised when they did not leave out the
back of Fishmonger Square and travel down the Muddy Way. He had made a point of memorizing the basic layout of King’s Landing. He had studied the maps of the city back in the Citadel. He thought they would take the Muddy Way to The Hook and then to King’s Highway up to the main gate of the Red Keep.

The gate called the Gate of the Sun. It was gilded in bronze and blazed in the late afternoon during the late Spring when the sun’s rays landed directly on the door. The effect meant to impress the local populace. The door impressive. The mighty panels embossed with scenes of Dragon Stone. Other panels had images of ancient Valyria. The raised scenes stamped from the other side gave the mountains, soaring towers and flying dragons depth and relief. The door a true marvel of Valyrian metalwork.

Instead, they headed down the River Row that mirrored the outer curtain wall along the river and bay. They soon moved to their left and were into the warrens of King’s Landing. The poor on every side. Dromen felt hemmed in. He also felt fear. He was from a small noble house and the fifth son but he lived a beneficial life before he travelled to the Citadel. He was buffeted with unpleasant smells, uncouth people with pigs and chickens running around. One had to keep one’s eyes peeled to avoid filth in the way.

“Could we have not taken a more direct path to the Red Keep, Kard?” he asked plaintively. They had just passed an offal pit and the smell made him nauseous. He saw Sandor sneer at him out of the corner of his eye. The Amazon seemed more interested in the sights around her. He wanted to learn more of her. He knew nothing of her and the history of her heritage. His curiosity piqued.

Kard turned his head and looked at Dromen with a chiding look on his face.

“This is, in many ways, the pulse of King’s Landing. These people striving each day to live their life and raise their children. To make a better future hopefully for the next generation. It is invigorating. You must dig to find pretension in these warrens.”

Oh great Dromen thought to himself. A philosopher.

“Besides, this is the most direct route, if convoluted, back to the Red Keep. Feel the ground rising as we approach Aegon’s Hill. Also, the new King’s rule is still tenuous. Better to travel these back paths and go unnoticed. Agreed?”

A squirt of fear ran through Dromen. Maybe a surreptitious path was not so bad after all the Master reasoned.

He observed his surroundings. He saw vendors on the sides of the larger lanes. People selling everything it seemed. Items for the home, toiletries, food, clothing, shoes and the material to make clothes. He saw little children running around. A few run up to the man who was his guide. The man putting a hand in his pocket and dispensing a copper pence that had the children squealing in happiness. Kard even ruffled their hair as they jumped around him.

They moved on and up Aegon’s Hill slowly gaining attitude. He was happy he kept himself fit. The Red Keep now visible more over the lower buildings and when the roads were aligned to give sight of the Red Keep. The Maester had come to see that his party was but a momentary distraction to the poor of King’s Landing. People noticing them and then forgetting them as they moved on. The people resuming the chores of their daily life.

Suddenly, without preamble they were against the Red Keep’s walls. They were near a postern door. There were was narrow arrow slits in the wall and a big circular hole over the small gate that would pour out boiling hot oil in a siege. Near the door was two Valyrians and two other men.
They were dressed as warriors. They wore desperate armor but the armor had images of House Targaryen embossed on them. They wore capes though with the Direwolf howling. He also saw a bald man who was slightly portly. He wore a long nondescript brown robe. This must the Whisperer, Varys.

These men were aligned with Eddard Stark. The new King. He was anxious to meet this man who had disposed the Lannisters. The man, his daughter and it was said a fallen First Sword had somehow achieved the impossible. Eddard Stark was known for his long hair and full beard. He looked around.

“My King! It is good to see you are back” the bald eunuch spoke looking at Dromen and his group. He looked around seeking Eddard.

“Yes Varys we are back”

Dromen stared slacked jawed. Kard Straedd was the King! He thought quickly. Of course Kard Straedd an anagram for Eddard Stark. The man had totally changed his look.

“I have brought our new Grand Maester. Dromen Salver. I want you to meet my Hand Varys.”

“What!” Dromen exclaimed. Everyone knew what a – a – a man Varys was. He was the Hand!

That thought echoed wildly within the Grand Maester’s mind.

Kard, come Eddard the King, smiled at him.

“You have met Sandor Clegane. He is the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.”

“But … but he is not a knight!” he exclaimed. You had to be a knight to be of the Kingsguard especially the Lord Commander! Dromen thought to himself almost shrilly.

Eddard nodded to the Amazon. “Merjen Sarovic she is Sandor’s first selection to be part of his Kingsguard.”

“She is a woman!” Dromen was feeling most discombobulated.

“You are most observant” Eddard chuckled. “Follow me please.”

Eddard entered into the Red Keep. The others stayed outside. He was led out into the courtyard on the front side of the Red Keep. To his left he saw the outside of the Throne Room. They headed to the wall that shielded the Godswood. They went in through a narrow gate. The Godswood had no Weirwood tree but it was a pleasant park with tall oaks, maples and elms with much shrubs and patches of brambles. It was like being out in nature.

They walked straight across the Godswood. His King was asking him about his youth and what it was like in the Citadel. Again he seemed genuinely interested. He knew he had gaffed before the Red Keep but he had been surprised. He would control his emotions better. They quickly passed through the one acre Godswood. They exited the gate on this section of the surrounding wall to the park. The others excused themselves and walked off.

He saw off to his left Maegor’s Holdfast. The castle within a castle. They were not heading to that location. He saw they were heading to the turret on the Curtain Wall that housed the rookery that was above the quarters for the Grand Maester. Dromen could not help but smile at that. His new home was close.

They entered into the turret. He followed the king down halls and up a flight of stairs. They came to
a door.

“This used to be quarters of the Grand Maester. Your quarters are down the hall on the other side of the turret. It is larger and has more windows so, please, do not feel slighted.

The entered the chamber of rooms. Dromen had learned to keep his mouth shut. At a table, was sitting Pycelle and on his left was a nubile young woman feeding him bits of chicken and sprigs of celery and chunks of potato. The woman slinking up against the aged man and kissing him on the lips with obvious emotion. The woman obviously loved the old man. Dromen was surprised. How could a man so old have such a beautiful woman in love with him.

Dromen tried to catch the woman’s eyes but she only had eyes for Pycelle. Surely a man in his summer would be more to her liking. He moved to get more in her line of sight. He went unnoticed. The woman must be partially addled he reasoned to himself.

Dromen made small talk with his predecessor. It was obvious the man was quite happy. Eddard was polite and deferential to the old man and his obvious concubine. Pyrcelle was working on several experiments and happily told the King about them when he asked about his experiments. Again, Dromen was touched by the man’s common touch. It was—endearing.

They left the quarters of the previous Grand Maester. They walked to his quarters and his King let him into his chambers. He was stunned. The bed was a four poster bed with rich mahogany furniture adorned around the large room. He had two large chest of drawers and a large dresser. He had a divine, sofa and (turning his head to count) five plush chairs. The suite had an alcove for meals and a large room he was told he could use for experiments and such. The room filled with shelves and cabinets. One the countertop was many scientific implements. Many of them very expensive. He was stunned. It was almost opulent.

His King as he showed him his quarters smiled and told him where some of the furniture came from and how he had Varys find many of the instruments in the ‘experiment’ room. He went to the door telling Dromen to make himself at home. He would be expected at the Small Council meeting day after tomorrow.

“I expect you to treat Pycelle with all the respect he deserves Dromon. And please call me Eddard when not before an audience. Pycelle and his … uh, girlfriend will be left in peace. No gossip and no backbiting. Do I make myself clear?” Eddard’s eyes had gone hard. Dromen felt his spine stiffen in mild alarm. The man did have a backbone of steel. He just hide it.

“And his ‘girlfriend’? You have no problem with this Eddard. It goes against our vows and convention.”

Eddard gave him a squint smile. “You seem to be a man who sheds convention himself.”

Dromen did not show it but he was jolted. His King knew he himself did not keep his vows.

“So you accept Pyccelle and his girlfriend?”

“Accept? Hummmm? I follow my personal code of ethics. That is for me. I have removed the vow of chastity from the Kingsguard.”

That shocked Dromen. One of many in the last hour.

“Do your duty and be loyal Dromen. I can ask for no more. I executed a man that I now know I shouldn’t have for not fully upholding his vows. Forces are at work I did not understand. I have come to see asking a person to forgo their sexuality is counterproductive. Just don’t flaunt your
liaisons. Pycelle only shows his affection for Alssa Stewar in private. I will trust your judgement. Do your duties well and all will be well with me Dromen.”

With that Eddard Stark let himself out of Dromen’s quarters.

Droment spent the next thirty minutes exploring his new quarters. He hoped to grow old here. He finally sat down on his bed.

A smile came on his face. Studying his maps of King’s Landing he had learned many locations. He knew exactly where Chataya and Alayaya had their establishment. He looked forward to making his first visit. He had saved many dragons and stags.

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Varys looked over the latest tabulations and overviews of the messages that had come in overnight from Ravens. This flood of information was both a godsend and a pain. He was literally being bombarded with information. He had a smile on his face though.

He had collected a gold dragon each from Sandor and his King. They had each bet on how long Dromen Salver would hold out before visiting a whorehouse. He had won of course. Only he had said the man would go the first night. Eddard had thought his conscious would hold out for five days. Sandor thought just moving in would delay him to the third night. Eddard had given his coin away with a grimace but a smile. Sandor had not been so forth giving.

“You bloody sot! This is robbery I say!” He had given the coin though. Finally, after much complaining and vile looks.

The Whisperer had become thankful that Sansa, Myrcella, and Tommen were in a room down and across the hall. Sansa and Myrcella took the incoming scrolls from the ravens and spies and processed them into categories of interest and making initial estimation of their importance. They had proven to be remarkably prescient. The girls doing most of the analysis while Tommen did pure research.

It had been Sansa and Myrcella who came up with the idea to use wax pencils to write on the map of Westeros that Eddard had constructed to mimic the one in Dragonstone. They had also come up with idea to use pens put in place with bees wax again to show where each scroll originated with a flag attached that showed the disposition of the foe and friendly forces. They had an artist roughly draw on a parchment at the end of the day what had been written and placed on they called the ‘war table’.

This gave a daily picture. A picture that when placed one atop of another and then peeled away gave one almost a sense of the flow of time and movements of forces. This gave so many insights it was almost staggering. Varys was both impressed and pissed. He should have thought of that! He told Eddard of their idea and they had joined their room and looked at what they had had captured over a week. The peeling of sheets showed clearly that the forces of Lannister’s were trying to accomplish.

“My gods Sansa, Myrcella—Tommen (Vayrs liked how Eddard made sure to include the shy boy) this is a godsend. Between the Druids insights and this table with your information I should be able to totally outfox that crafty Lion.” He had hugged his daughter fiercely and patted the Lannister children on the back and smiled at them with his beaming smile. The three children preened under his praise.

This had left Varys free to analyze all the reports from his spiders and sparrows. The other
intelligence apparatuses of Westeros that were aligned against Casterly Rock feeding information harmful to the Lannisters. No one wanted them back on the throne.

“The Druids report that Oberyn’s flotilla have crossed the Gullet late last afternoon yesterday. They most likely will arrive in the midmorning tomorrow. They will be first of the Major Houses in King’s Landing. Are you ready for them Eddard?”

The man laid down the parchment he had been reading. Sandor and Dromen stopped reading what they had been perusing. Eddard turned to look at Varys in his chair of the Hand.

“I am Varys. I am thankful he is the first. Not having a claim on the Iron Throne and sailing in by ship lets him arrive first. Oberyn and Dorne is not here for the Iron Throne. In their history the Martells seem to be the least interested in it. Well, after the North I suppose. He wants revenge. That I can offer him.”

“I also read that he has decided to bring all of his illegitimate daughters. That should prove to be calamitous. They are headstrong, combative and love to confront and cause mischief. Also, they all seem to share the same proclivity” Varys ended on a humorous note.

Sandor snorted. The Grand Maester was rereading that report. In a soft voice he intoned while reading “How strange. That all the daughters are gay or maybe bisexual in Obara’s situation. Four of them are even lovers” he shuffled through the sheaves of parchments “ah the older pair are … half-sisters. Humm” he leafed through the parchments again. “Oh my! The two youngest are indeed full blood sisters.” Varys watched the man squirm in his seat.

Eddard shook his head at that.

“I think Arya will find them most interesting my Liege” Varys said thinking to make that observation using an honorific.

Eddard glared at him and then sighed. “I have read the reports as well. That all eight are lesbians or at the least bisexual is unnatural” he stopped and looked around guiltily “… in a good way!” he added hastily. “I too think that Arya will be enamored with Oberyn’s Sand Snakes. They may not be beauties in the classic sense like Arianne Martell is but the reports say they are quite comely.

All three men looked at Eddard now.

“Arya will be most pleased with their arrival I am sure. She will … ah … interact with them I am sure. She has spent time with Phirona Ormonnis and Saelalys Narennis. I see her with Merjen Sarovic as well.” He paused looking off with a soft look.

“Does this bother you Eddard?” Vary asked softly.

Eddard turned to look first at Varys and then the Hound and the Grand Maester. He sighed.

“No it doesn’t Varys. I am still processing this but since the Druids started to prophecy about the Dragon and Direwolf lying together I have seen this coming. It is not Robb they speak of. They seem sure that Daenerys is alive. We all four have talked of this. It simply can’t be that a teenage girl can survive within the Red Wastes. She and her Khalasar of women, the old and children most have died long ago. And yet the Druids seem assured she is alive.”

“That is a problem for another day. If Arya finds happiness with a woman then I will not stand in her way. She has shown over and over she has the right to find her own destiny. Arya has earned that right by her Insurrection and continued willingness to be at the forefront of combat. She is carving her right to live her life as she will day by day. I will support her.” Eddard ended on a
“And Catelyn?” Varys asked softly.

Eddard grimaced. “That will be one battle of many that I will have to engage my wife on.” He grimaced again.

Varys was again amazed at this man. He truly did seem to put his family first. The sovereigns he had served in the past on only gave it lip service. How strange this man was.

The returned to matters of state. Robb had taken the field in Winterfell. The Houses of the far north had marched to Winterfell. The Houses further south would join up as Robb marched south.

The Vale was still a fragmented affair. Most houses aligning with Lysa and her heir apparent son. Still some Houses would meet up with Robb.

Tywin had taken to the Gold Road as well. He was being harassed by the Druids and the forces of the Riverlands. Again Eddard had given orders to not fight directly but continue the asymmetrical warfare he had started in the Crown and Stormlands. He wanted to harasses and bleed a little but it was not worth full scale combat with what he had planned.

Sandor chimed in “Stannis is bitching at the Houses under his Constituency. He has found enough loyal to him to form an army. It is small but it will be coming. Do we engage?”

“No. Let him come through unhindered. I see not the need to raise his ire and rancor. I will take care of Stannis when he is inside these walls. I want minimal bloodshed. He is an honorable man though stiff and unimaginative. I have a plan for him.” Eddard turned his head to his new Grand Maester. “You have seen my plans. Grand Maester?”

Dromen easily spoke. “It is complicated and assumes you have read your opponents correctly.” He stared at his King. “I like the idea of not having open warfare. If this works then you will have saved countless lives and spared the property of the common folk who always suffer when Kings and wannabe kings fight. I will support your plan fully.”

Varys was impressed. Their new Grand Maester had done his prep work well.

“The Druids will move your wife and Tyrion to Robb when he nears them on his way south.”

Eddard smiled at that. “Good. I miss my wife. It will be nice to have her at my side” Eddard paused with a look of consternation coming over his face but it cleared. “Tyrion I think will prove most useful.”

Varys hoped it would be so. Catelyn Stark had many shocks awaiting her upon her arrival at King’s Landing. It would be interesting to see how all fared under her wrath. Varys was sure she would have much to be displeased with.

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Oberyn felt the warm breeze wafting over his face. He turned his head up to look at the golden orb. The ship’s deck gently rocking underneath his feet. His ship, the Serpent’s Fang, had sailed for twelve days to reach King’s Landing. His flotilla of guard ships constantly prowling the horizon keeping him safe. It had been yesterday that ships from King’s Landing had greeted him at the Gullet. The direwolf standard flying from the tallest masts.

Eddard had indeed succeeded Oberyn saw plainly. The five ships sailing off the prow and beam of
his ship.

It had been a leisurely sail down Blackwater Bay. The seas calm all the way from Sunspear. Oberyn did not mind sailing but Ellaria had stayed in their quarters. She did not like the roll and sway of the decks out on the open waters.

Obara and Ellaria’s two handmaidens had been keeping Ellaria happy and smiling. His eldest daughter and the two sixteen years feasting upon and being feasted on by his sweet paramour. Ellaria’s appetites for the female body were insatiable. Thankfully, Obara, and Ellaria’s first cousins Alaysha and Josey Uller of Ellaria’s father’s House of Hellholt were equally voracious in their appetites of the female body.

Every night their wails and shrieks kept the crew amused and horny. Oberyn had spent his evenings in the captain’s quarters. Trentan Eathe a rising star in Dorne’s navy. He was twenty-eight and loved to screw. He and Oberyn spent hours pleasuring the other each night as his paramour satisfied her needs for her own sex.

It had been relatively calm sailing to King’s Landing.

“Oommmppfff … arrrrggg nnnngggg—bitch … fuck you cunt … aarrggg hnnnnn hnnnnn let go you fucking bitch!”

Oberyn was on the starboard rail on his ship seeing without seeing the coast ply by. His mind on thoughts of revenge and could Eddard do what he said he could. He felt a sharp thump on his leg. He sighed and looked down.

On the deck of the ship his two youngest daughters were rolling around pulling hair and slapping wildly at each other. He noticed they were not clawing at each other. Oberyn smirked. Thank the seven for love. They rolled away from their father grunting and cursing. He watched them for a minute. They were quite athletic. First one on top and then the other. Their hands now interlocked as they pushed and pulled against each other. They were not giving up he saw. Must be something important.

“Okay. What is it this time?” he asked in a set upon voice.

They both stopped fighting releasing their grips on each other and sat up.

Dorea shouted “She touched my spear!”

Loreza answered “She touched my whip!”

Back and forth they whined and shouted at each other.

Oberyn arched his eyebrow. How they could fight like wildcats in the day and then kiss and make up and make love through half the night each night he couldn’t fathom. They even had on matching rings on their right thumbs.

“What is really the problem?” he intoned sagely. Something else was at work here. His two youngest daughters looked at each other and then their father.

Dorea was nearly two years the elder. When they were being serious Loreza let her sister take the lead. Oberyn wondered how long that would last before they started another hissing catfight.

“Josey says when we arrive in King’s Landing that she will sleep with only one of us. That we have to choose. I want it to be me!” Dorea spoke in a stricken voice laced with being pissed off.
“Damnit! I want it to be me” Loreza whined.

Oberyn rolled his eyes. Josey had taken a liking to his two youngest daughters and visited their bed regularly. Ellaria was happy to share the cousin with her daughters. Ellaria was giving that way.

“Your mother tells me the sisters are quite kinky. You sleep in the same bed. Rough her up a little bit and let the slut know you two call the shots. That is what she wants. She wants to rile you two up to take revenge on her. She likes it rough when she is caught out being manipulative. She will be spreading her legs so wide for you both so fast it will make your heads spin.”

The sisters turned their heads and smiled great big at each other. Their rancor for the moment a thing of the past. They high fived each other and now spoke confidently how they would first make Josey their bitch and then they would make Josey scream so hard when they sucked her off. Again and again. The girls getting themselves excited spinning out their tales of desired abuse and hot sex.

Their eyes now glazed, the two sisters got up and ran fast to the doorway into the quarterdeck. The two rushing down the steps to their quarters’. Already the off duty crew ambling back that way to go to the peep holes in the walls.

Oberyn was happy he had put that fire out. For now. He walked on down the deck.

He saw Elia leaning on the rail looking at the land that led to King’s Landing slowly rise up from the surrounding bluffs and tree thickets.

She smiled at her father as he came to stand beside her. Her braided hair running down her back. Like all his daughters she had his black eyes. Her eyes almond shaped. She was tall and lean. She had her mother’s beauty.

His daughter turned and looked at her father. “I hear there are many fair women in King’s Landing. Many maidens and bored wives desperate for a woman’s touch. It that true father? I so hope so.”

“It is Elia. There are many women just waiting to part their thighs for you my sweet daughter. You can have as many as you wish. Men are so stupid. They glare and puff out their chests at other men while women like you and your sisters are fucking their women blind and making them bisexual for life.”

“I like that father. I can’t wait!” Elia spoke rubbing her hands greedily. Her eyes alight with lust for her future conquests.

“Happy hunting daughter. I expect many beaver pelts on your bed post. I want to hear of each conquest Elia.”

“You will father! I will have many pelts on all the bed posts and a beaver blanket!”

Elia was nothing if not confident Oberyn thought. He shook his head chuckling at the image his daughter painted. He hugged her and walked on.

He spent the next hour and half watching the ship enter the estuary and up the river toward the docks of King’s Landing.

He went up to the fantail where the captain stood barking orders to his crew. They kissed sweetly. Together they watched the Serpent’s Fang slowly sail into its slip. The Harbormaster yelling at his own assistants to keep the ship centered as it entered in its slip. Soon the ship was moored. The captain yelling at his crew to start furling the sails.
While the ship had been moving into its slip Ellaria and Arianne had come up from below decks. The two women followed by his other children. He saw that Ellaria had brought up the twin sisters Josey and Alaysha Uller. The sisters standing close to Ellaria. Nice touch Oberyn thought. They were nobility.

Oberyn smiled seeing Dorea and Loreza give Josey direct hot eye contact. Their faces in a stern set. The sweet dark brown skinned sixteen year old shivered with her nipples jutting out her sheer blouse top. Her tongue licking her lips. The message had been sent and received. Josey knew she would be shared and worn out by Oberyn’s two youngest.

He noticed that Arianne had on a satchel that was bulging. The woman had been studying the whole way on the voyage to King’s Landing. She had been studying since the day Doran had ‘forced’ Arianne to go with Oberyn.

How boring Oberyn thought. His next thought was this is why Arianne will be such a good leader for Dorne when the time came. She would devise the plans and Oberyn would execute her plans. Let Arianne be the Grand Marshall while he would be the Colonel making them come to fruition.

His daughters arrayed on both sides of their father gazing down at the dock.

Oberyn spotted two persons immediately. Sandor Clegane because of his height and the scars on his face. He only half succeeded in hiding with his hair.

They had one jackal that had been able to make multiple reports to Dontar Ladybright. He was a lieutenant in the Goldcloaks. The man had despised the Lannisters but was totally in Eddard’s fold now. He told his spymaster he would provide general information but nothing that would harm his King, Eddard Stark.

He had reported that Eddard had made the Hound his Lord Commander. Damn if he didn’t Oberyn thought to himself looking down at the man.

In the past the Kingsguard looked like albino peacocks in their stupid all white attire. Sandor’s breast and back plate were white with the symbol of the Kingsguard on them. He had on a half-length pure white cape. The rest of his armor was his old attire Oberyn saw.

The other man he easily spotted was Varys the Whisperer. The Earthworm Oberyn liked to call the man. It was true about him too. He had the symbol of the Hand pinned to his chest. He was indeed the Hand of the King. What was the world coming too Oberyn thought to himself.

He and Arianne had discussed this several times on the journey up to King’s Landing. He examined it from all angles. He could not understand the political or scheming reasons for Eddard’s selections. He was totally vexed. Arianne had chuckled at the convoluted circles Oberyn was putting his mind through trying to understand Eddard’s logic.

“Maybe he simply considers them the best suited for their duties.”

Oberyn finally had to agree with his niece’s assessment.

He looked for Eddard and found him. He was standing off to the right of Sandor Clegane. He had indeed totally changed his look. He no longer had his beard that was rich and full. Also gone was his flowing brown hair down past his shoulders. His hair now short. Closely cropped. It did have the look of being let out to grow though. Oberyn had spotted Eddard by the smallest of circlets on his head. When they made eye contact Oberyn saw Eddard reach up and remove the circlet and hand it to a squire behind him. Oberyn shook his head. Did this man have no pretensions? He had
been spotted and he immediately dispensed with any markings of royalty. Oberyn liked the man already and his respect only rose.

He saw beside him that Ellaria and Arianne had made the same observations and deductions. Ellaria’s eyes were hungry looking at Eddard. He chuckled to himself. His paramour was going to be so frustrated and pissed off. It would make for heated sex but her mouth would be frightful.

The gangplank was being manhandled into place.

Oberyn continued to look around on the dock. He spotted two tall Valyrians. That would be part of Rhaegar’s old honor guard that had been reported. He spotted Raymun Darry whom he remembered from before Robert’s Rebellion. It would seem Eddard was making converts of everyone.

That was when he spotted Arya. He whistled. She cut a hot striking military look. She was in brown leathers that had leather drawstrings. The leather dark contrasted sharply with Arya’s pale skin. The leather arms and legs hugging her supple arms and thick legs. Her hair was short but was in bangs with the hair half way down her ears and parted around them. Her back was ramrod straight. She had on a grey wool skirt down to the knees. Brown leather boots up to her knees.

On her right hip was two swords. She drew cross handed. One was a rapier and the other was a strange looking sword. She had throwing daggers on each thigh. She had on a leather belt with a sash hanging down. Her steel grey eyes looked up at the ship.

Oberyn looked to each side of him. His daughters were practically drooling over themselves. Their excited whispers flowing up and down the line of Sand Snakes. All of them planning on quickly seducing and bedding the hot vixen looking up at them coolly. Her martial attire was a huge turn on to his daughters. Her steel grey eyes didn’t hurt either. Arya’s demeanor turning on his daughter’s even more.

He saw a tall redhead behind Arya. That would be Sansa. He saw that some of his daughters taking in the beauty. They were now getting real excited.

Oberyn started. Behind them was a shock. Cersei stood in a regal dress. She looked around with a calm level look. She was striking and beautiful still. Time and childbearing had not diminished her looks that was sure. At one time he was near to marrying the woman he supposed. Thank the gods he had not. The woman was a total bitch time had proven. The jackals loved reporting all her shortcomings.

There was something different about Cersei though. She seemed almost demure. He supposed having the throne taken out from underneath your ass would have that effect on a person. Especially, a bitch. He would enjoy putting that woman in her place when given the opportunity. Cersei had always actively sought the harm of Dorne. He would enjoy getting a modicum of revenge on the woman.

He looked over at Obara, Nymeria, Tyene and Sarella. They all had a taste for older women and were nearly frothing at the mouth with thoughts of moving in and putting the blast on Cersei. He prayed none would be successful. Cersei had to be a frigid bitch in bed. How Robert ever fucked that woman he never knew.

Sure, like most rulers Cersei had used her body in bed to help achieve her ways but it had all been cold and calculating the Jackals reported. Her times with women all about power dynamics with no hint of warmth and sensuality.

Oberyn, Arianne and his daughters moved down the gangplank that had finally been set in place.
Eddard moved up to greet them. He took Ellaria and then Arianne’s hand and kissed their knuckles while bowing. He complimented both on their beauty. He then told Ellaria that her brood of daughters were fair and pleasing to the eye. Ellaria of course was preening. She blushed and fluttered her eyelashes at Eddard. She made hot eye contact. Eddard of course missed all the signals and moved to face Oberyn.

Ellaria stood poleaxed. Oberyn had tried to warn her.

Eddard was now before him. They clasped forearms and passed platitudes back and forth.

“You look fit and debonair Oberyn.”

“Are you trying to get in my pants Eddard?”

Oberyn smiled. Eddard’s face went scarlet. You had to be direct with such a straight backed man. He spluttered for a few seconds and then an arc look came over his face.

“I fear to go where every man has gone before” Eddard spoke with a smirk.

Now Oberyn’s face went slightly darker. Oberyn had read that Eddard’s skills at the Game of Thrones had vastly improved. It would seem his skill at acerbic snark had definitely improved as well.

The two men smiled at each other. Oberyn’s estimation of Eddard went up several more notches.

Eddard introduced Oberyn to the Hound. The tall man was stiff but was trying to be civil Oberyn observed. Eddard was indeed a charmer if Sandor was being civil. He was then introduced to Merjen Sarovic. The tall black woman looked down at Oberyn coolly. He complimented her on her weapons and her martial bearing. She answered him clearly bored with him and distracted. The black beauty was definitely eyeing his paramour, her handmaidens and his daughters.

Oh Well Oberyn thought. She left Oberyn and walked towards Ellaria. Ellaria saw her coming and was already making bedroom eyes. Maybe he could bed the Amazon with Ellaria. Hopefully, she was bisexual when in the rut.

Eddard had moved off to introduce his honor guard to Ellaria. They made polite small talk with Ellaria already flirting with the men. They were definitely receptive.

“Hello Oberyn” a warm smarmy voice called to Oberyn.

The Red Viper arched an eyebrow.

“Hello Worm”.

Varys smiled thinly. He arched his own eyebrow.

“That is Spider, but you are getting older. Forgetful?”

Oberyn sneered and scrunched his face.

“Why in the hell did Eddard make you his Hand? You are a snake Varys.”

“True. At least I do not hide what I am. You are a coward who uses poison to make up for his lack of skill” Varys snidely replied. “I have some poultices for your arthritic joints if you need it.”

“You had better hope you don’t slip with your new King Varys. If you do you will feel the prick of
"Well, at least something is still hard with you" Varys replied. He turned his back to Oberyn and then walked off to join Eddard.

Oberyn was left seething. He distracted himself watching his daughters. The four eldest had surrounded Cersei and were flirting shamelessly. Their flirting moving to outright direct overtures. Oberyn fumed over the fact that his eldest daughters wanted Cersei so bad.

“I will make you scream” Obara told her.

Sarella and Tyene were standing side by side on the other side of Cersei vying for her attention and affections.

“We will double your pleasure Cersei. We will spend the night making you our love slut. You will think you have died and gone to paradise.”

Oberyn rolled his eyes. Their excitement had his daughters most randy and direct. Nothing like the direct approach to turn a woman off. Still, it was Cersei so his demeanor lightened.

Cersei was flustered but she refused to be nonplussed. She riposte with quick asides and observations that left his eldest daughters slightly confused and off their game.

“Let my tongue speak to you” Obara husked to Cersei.

“I no longer need an interpreter Obara since I was disposed. I find your dialect off putting. I prefer a language filled with hard accents and long syllables. I think your soft, short tongue would be lacking. Sorry.”

Obara took a second to process the comeback and she was not so happy looking now.

Nymeria saddled close to Cersei “Sleep with me Cersei. I am like my namesake. A warrior and conqueror. I will make you scream and beg for it my sweet. I know there is a sweet lesbian slut in you waiting to get out. Let me show you.”

Cersei arched an eyebrow.

“Didn’t Nymeria come to Dorne because she had her ass whipped by the Valyrian Freehold. Hummmm? I prefer instruction from a woman who is actually a conqueror.” Cersei tapped her chin with a look of deep thought. “I am not a beggar no matter how far I have fallen.” The tone gentle even if the words were a barb.

Now it was Nymeria with a cross look on her face. Her face cleared when she moved in again with more sweet platitudes. She was persistent Oberyn had to admit.

Oberyn had not seen this side of Cersei before. She was almost gentle with her comebacks. She was smiling in humor at her verbal give and take with his daughters. They were getting flustered.

He turned his head. His youngest had surrounded Arya. They were complimenting the teenager about her leathers and her pretty features. They were reaching out and touching her arms and running their fingers through her short locks. The soft butch appearance looked good on Arya. They showed genuine interest in her swords. Arya carrying two swords made his daughters go ooh and ah.

It was clear that Arya was enjoying the attention but was clearly flustered. She may be a Direwolf
but she was still young. On the battlefield all the reports said she was fierce and deadly. It seemed she was still untested in the boudoir. Oberyn smiled. He was sure that there was now many women who found Arya very desirable. Why wouldn’t she be alluring to any woman who desired their own sex?

The Red Viper knew his youngest daughters especially would endeavor to enlighten and educate Arya on the arts of lesbian lovemaking.

Arya’s face now was flushed and her voice a little high pitched as she tried to respond to all the comments coming her way. She was clearly being overwhelmed. Oberyn’s daughters working on the girl to breech her shyness and then bed her. She looked around. She spotted her father and motioned for him. Eddard was talking to his Kingsguard and his honor guard and did not see Arya.

Oberyn enjoyed watching Arya flounder. He wondered which daughter would succeed in bedding Arya. Or would it be daughters? His eyebrows flexed seeing a man a little younger than his years move to the side of Arya. The man started to deflect his daughters and put his body between them and Arya. Arya was more than happy for the man running interference for her.

This must be the fallen Water Dancer, Syrio Forel, Oberyn mused. He seemed almost ordinary. Oberyn was wise enough to not let appearances deceive him. If the man was what he claimed he was then he was walking death. Oberyn would need to spar with the man. He enjoyed any challenge. To practice against dissimilar styles always invigorated the Red Viper.

Eddard gathered everybody and started to move back to the Red Keep. The talk was pleasant. Well mostly. His youngest daughters were most vexed with this Syrio Forel running interference for Arya. They fumed and glared at the man. His eldest were still plying Cersei but the schemer was easily deflecting their remarks and turning them back on his daughters.

They were now very frustrated but the mark of a true warrior was persevering and continuing the battle. Even if you were currently losing. They still hovered around Cersei who walked with a regal gait. That made Oberyn roll his eyes.

Oberyn had heard she was not drinking now. Without alcohol clouding her thoughts Cersei seemed to a much wittier woman than he would have thought.

They were soon entered into the Red Keep through the Barbican, the main entrance of the Red Keep. The bronze doors gleaming in the afternoon sun. There in the courtyard was four large serving carts filled with food.

A smile came to Oberyn’s face. Eddard was offering him and his party ‘guest right’. It was traditional but Eddard was making a grand meal of it. The carts filled with wheels of cheese, loaves of bread, bowls filled with cut vegetables, fruits and cut meats.

Tables and chairs had been set out. All sat down and started to have a nice meal. His youngest fumed when Arya moved off with Syrio. The two moving to a table for two. They started to follow but Oberyn called them back. The four glared at their father giving him the stink eye. Oberyn chuckled.

Oberyn had heard of the prophecies. Poor Arianne. Daenerys if she lived had her mate. Arya it was clear was of the Sapphic persuasion. The prophecies said Daenerys Targaryen would be as well. It was shame really. House Martell had always been closely aligned with House Targaryen.

They all ate their fill. The meal delicious. Eddard easily talked to everyone. Oberyn made sure to stay away from Varys as the bald eunuch plied the persons enjoying themselves. He was sure the
man’s ears were keen and listening. Oberyn was also sure that at least some of the servers were his agents also. The Whisperer loved to say he had Sparrows across Westeros. They must be especially thick in the Red Keep.

The meal finished Eddard got up and offered to take them to their chambers. Oberyn rolled his eyes seeing Ellaria perk up. She adjusted her bodice to lower it and show more of her still high firm nearly D cup breast. Her nipples poking out in her excitement of the hunt. She waited for Eddard to help her up. She made sure to brush against the King with her firm breast.

If Eddard noticed he did not react. Oberyn eyed the man. *He was not that blind was he?* Ellaria tried to catch his eyes to make smoky eye contact. He would not do it. It was so smooth Oberyn could not be sure if the man was simply innocent or very coy.

He had clearly learned to play the Game of Thrones it would seem. What was that saying he heard in his youth. Yes. The way to avoid temptation was to not enter the first door to the bedchamber suite.

All the way to the way to the Maegor’s Holdfast Ellaria tried to get Eddard’s attention. He was talking to her being pleasant but deflecting all her amorous innuendo.

“You are so strong and viral Eddard. I love men who are so fit and full of physical might. You wife must be most thankful” Ellaria spoke to Eddard in a smoky voice.

“Yes she is Ellaria. We are a good team in our duties of Wardens of the North. Catelyn is a sweet wife and a great mother. I fear I am only an average man. I am no more skilled than any other trained warrior. I am a simple man with simple desires.”

Oberyn rolled his eyes at this modesty. Did the man actually believe it? He was acknowledge as one of the greatest warriors of his generation. The man refused to bask in that deserved glory. *It was cloying!*

“Do your skills extend beyond the field of combat? Does your skills extend to the boudoir?”

Eddard looked at his paramour with his head cocked. A smirk smile appeared.

“Whatsoever do you mean Ellaria? I leave my sword in its scabbard when at home. I have no need for my sword when in my bedchambers.” He turned his gaze away. Oberyn smiled seeing Ellaria’s frustration.

They had reached the door to the Holdfast. Eddard moved forward to great the Goldcloak captain leading the door guard detail. Eddard gripped the man’s shoulder. The man beamed. Oberyn observed again Eddard had the common touch.

Ellaria gave Oberyn a sour look.

They walked down halls and up stairways to their quarters. Oberyn looked at the opulent wealth on display stands and in display cabinets. The halls lined still with tapestries of the Targaryen Dynasty. Why hadn’t Robert had them removed? Probably had nothing of House Baratheon to replace them with.

Eddard had guided them to the door of their quarters. He saw that Eddard took in that Alaysha and Josey Uller was with them. There was three young women by the door to their chambers.

“These will be your quarters. I see you have two young charges with you. Will they be staying in your chambers?”
Ellaria answered “Yes they will.”

Eddard showed a little surprise but hid it immediately. “I … I am not sure about the bed accommodations.”

“Fear not Eddard. They will be sleeping with Oberyn and myself. We are always open for others” Ellaria spoke batting her eyelashes and looking demure.

“I see” Eddard responded blandly. “I guess you will be offering them bed right” he smirked and turned.

Ellaria eye’s flared. Hope!

He motioned to three comely chambermaids. “Emilya Myatt, Lexia Uffering and Katherin Brackwell will serve your needs. They are genteel and conscientious in their services. The rooms are spacious with a very large royal bed. There are large sofas and several divans that should help accommodate your guests. I will have more furs brought to put before the fireplace if needed.”

His eyes sparkled with mischief but no desire Oberyn saw. The man really did control his libido. Any other man, well, not Stannis, would be almost falling over themselves to get invited into the Dorne chambers.

“Can’t you give me a personal guide of our quarters? I am sure you can show me everything in a most personal and intimate manner. I am sure that Oberyn would like to explore the Red keep.” Eddard looked over at Oberyn with a calculating eye. Oberyn replied he loved exploring new environments. Eddard pursed his lips at Oberyn making sure Ellaria did not see it.

She had positioned her body to show off her ample bosom, full hips and still tight ass. She was leaning into Eddard and smiling up at him promising him great carnal delights.

“This I doubt Ellaria though I am flattered by your estimation of my meager skills. I will let our chambermaids be your first example of the courtesy and hospitality that I hope becomes synonymous with my reign. I look forward to your and Oberyn’s company at tonight’s dinner. I have a special table setup just for House Martell and its guests. I look forward to supping with you.”

Ellaria tried to grip Eddard’s hand but he seemed to turn aside innocently though Oberyn knew it was calculated to keep Ellaria at bay,

“I must go I fear. I have meetings to attend.”

With that, Eddard backed up bowing slightly, smiling and turned around. He left with Varys coming from the shadows and falling in on Eddard’s right.

Ellaria was fuming. She glared at Eddard’s retreating back. Oberyn held open the door to their quarters. Ellaria, her cousins and the chambermaids went in with him following. He looked around and was most impressed. The furniture was of the most expensive construction. The bed a large four poster bed with a canopy. The mattress thick with seaweed and feathers. The dresser extremely expansive with a very expensive mirror the whole length of the dresser.

The sofas large as were the divans. The largest sofa had a large flat cushion on each side large enough to be a bed for sleeping … or other functions he thought lasciviously.

Eddard had definitely spared no expense in making sure the Martells were looked after in a most royal manner. The room setup for the night time activities all knew he and his paramour partook of almost every night.
He saw his sweet fuming. “What is wrong with that man? He rebuffed me! The nerve!” Ellaria barked in an aggrieved tone.

“Not every man is Robert Baratheon. Eddard Stark actually takes his marriage vows must solemnly.”

“Oh please. What about Jon Snow?”

“Ellaria. That is sophistry. We know the truth of Jon’s parentage.”

The three chambermaids were making busy work again straightening all the pillows and making sure the bed was in immaculate shape. One was opening a small window to let in some air.

“Eddard Stark is blind. Yes. That is it” Ellaria snarled to herself.

“I tried to tell you dear.”

“I will get him in our bed. Hummm, maybe when Catelyn arrives …” Ellaria’s eyes fell upon the chambermaids. They all were quite pretty. Ellaria moved over to the auburn lass who had been glancing at her nervously constantly. She talked to the girl playing with the girl’s hair. The girl’s eyes feasting on Ellaria’s full breast underneath her eyes.

Alaysha and Josey Uller moved in on the other two chambermaids. The girls giggling and blushing at the flirtations already seducing them. They were innocents Oberyn could see but they would have their cherries busted by the three women from Uller by tonight’s end he was sure.

Oberyn smiled. Yes, soon the three girls would be in their bed. First with Ellaria and her cousins. Oberyn was a voyeur so he looked forward to the great lesbian sex soon to happen. His wife was a serial seducer of straight girls and women. Then he would be joining the festivities.

He moved over to long plush sofa and sat down. He leaned back watching Ellaria working her wiles and magic. She had brought over the other two girls along with Alaysha and Josey. Both brunettes would need some work but Ellaria and her cousins was already working on them and they didn’t even know it.

They were innocents. Eddard had only pretended to be. He wondered if he had selected these girls knowing that Ellaria would easily seduce them. Varys had probably informed his King of teenage girls that he had deduced were gay or bisexual only waiting to be set free. Ellaria’s wiles were well known by all.

She never forced herself upon her female conquests but soon had her new female lovers begging to be in her bed. This was well known by all the intelligence services Oberyn was sure. Eddard knew the girls would be seduced. Ellaria could not help herself. Eddard giving the girls the future they desired and Ellaria the new nubile females she craved.

Oberyn knew the women would be coming back to Sunspear with them to live the life they dreamed of.

Oberyn reflected on Arya. He had read of her exploits. Seeing her in the flesh made him a believer in the reports. That woman carried herself as a warrior true. Her skills with the bow was marveled at according to their informant. If her sword skills rose to match that …”

She was an innocent in the game of love but Oberyn was sure that would change soon. Daenerys had married Khal Drogo but she had had no choice. She had fully supported him that was true. But the jackals imbedded in the Khalasar of Khal Drogo thought they saw more. That the young woman
knew that in performing her duty it was giving her power over her Khal.

That the seeming innocent took her position as Khaleesi to secure her own power behind the scenes. The jackals observed this until the man’s Khalasar were shattered by Khal Drogo’s death. While in the Khalasar the Jackals had come to think that Daenerys was pulling the Khal’s limbs like a puppeteer working its puppet. The Khal following her will and not even knowing it.

Then the fool had gotten himself killed like Daenerys brother. The girl had then fled into the Red Wastes. Surely she was dead. The Red Wastes was death to enter. Especially, in the spring and now trending to the summer cycle.

Reflecting on the reports on the Khaleesi, Oberyn relaxed. Daenerys had seemed to definitely come to enjoy sex with Drogo. She had also enthusiastically slept with her handmaidens. As soon as Drogo left their tent Daenerys was parting her legs wide for her fillies and having them set on her face and ride it hard. The reports said she loved to trib and had taken to being fucked with strap-ons by her fillies. Daenerys had screamed most loudly fucking her female attendants.

Bedding her Khal may have been an act but not the sex with handmaidens. One the spies in the Khalasar had been a Dothraki female. The women selected because of her espionage skills but also because of her beauty and love of sex with both sexes.

The fillies sometimes invited some of the most beauteous females of the Khalasar to join them in the tent of the Khaleesi. The Jackal often invited because of her beauty, skills in the furs and her insatiable appetites. Yes, Daenerys had been most enthusiastic. The woman reported it had been no act. She had seen it in first hand in Daenerys’ eyes when Daenerys went down on her. The Jackal reported that Daenerys was like a famished lioness devouring her attendants and females invited into her tent.

So Arya was gay. Daenerys was at least very, very bisexual. Would Daenerys take a female as her Queen would be the question if she somehow survived? Arya would not be a concubine in the background. The girl had too much pride and the Stark honor in her for that. She would take Daenerys as her lover if Daenerys would take her as her companion and lover.

That was a lot to ask. Daenerys seemed to understand instinctively the levers to power. Taking a woman as her consort and Queen would be dangerous. Would Daenerys even consider that option? Would she be brave enough to attempt that path? Wouldn’t Daenerys take the easier safer path to secure her base of power?

What would happen if Daenerys chose to come back to Westeros and demand the Iron Throne? Eddard would fight her. What would Arya do? If the Queen’s consort and wife at Daenerys side was Arya what would the girl do? Love was a strong emotion. Arya would be torn between the love for her father and her love for her Queen.

Oberyn sighed. So many possibilities.

Hell, Eddard first had to secure his realm. He would need Dorne’s support and might. To get that he had to deliver. Could he?

Oberyn thought he just might. Oberyn knew Eddard had not shared near anywhere all of his plans but he liked what he had been told. Oberyn was a warrior but if Eddard could achieve his goals without bloodshed then Oberyn would support him. Let us High born nobles kill each other and leave the poor man in peace the Red Viper thought.

The Game of Thrones was normally so messy. When the Iron Throne changed hands there had
always been so much bloodshed. Robert’s Rebellion had proven that again. Oberyn again felt the pain of Elia and her children’s deaths. After so many years he still grieved for her death. He felt grim determination flow in his veins. His revenge was so close at hand! He willed himself to relax. He contemplated Eddard’s plan.

He had achieved much already. Little blood had been spilled in King’s Landing considering one House had been disposed by another. Eddard had not even killed that little shit Joffrey.

Eddard was taking big chances. Oberyn sighed leaning his head on the back of the sofa. He was here now. If Eddard screwed up Oberyn would save his ass. It was about to get real interesting.

Soon Casterly Rock, Storm’s End and Highgarden would be here. Right where Eddard wanted them.
New Patterns

Heirs Apparent

New Patterns

Arya barely put half her face past the corner of the intersection of the two halls. Her eye surveying the situation down the hall. All looked safe but she could not be sure. Some of the assaults were full frontal but other times they were stealthy sprung upon her. Her assailants adept at moving silently. She moved her head back.

She contemplated her situation. She knew she had to move down the hall to reach the stairwell and head down the steps to get outside. Arya needed to go to her morning training and practice session with her master. She was inside Maegor’s Holdfast on the fourth floor reserved for high royals. Unfortunately that meant she must go down these halls and stairways to get outside. She would have to brave it she surmised. Ambush or not she needed to get outside and practice with Syrio. He got very cross if Arya was late. Of course, she thought sourly, if he was late that was just fine and dandy.

She ventured her head past the corner again. Her cheek pressed to the stone to reduce her silhouette. Her one steel grey surveyed the hall again. All looked clear. She was sure she could safely navigate the hall. She was a warrior dammit! She would venture forth into the lair of her—“

“Boo” the sound right by her ear.

“AAARRGGGGGG!” Arya screeched out. Her body jumped like a startled gazelle with the sudden soft voice in her ear. She was now in the middle of the hallway. Her heart beating triple time in her chest. She felt a rush of adrenaline flow throughout her body. Her limbs felt like a million hot needles were prickling her flesh. She turned to look down the hall she had just jumped from.

She glared hard at the two women with silly smiles on their faces. Their chuckles filling the halls. She pulled her Needle from its scabbard and swished it back and forth in her front of her. Jon’s gift whistling through the air. Her face in a hard set. Phirona Ormonnis and Saelalys Narennis only laughed harder. The two women’s smiles only grew larger on their faces. They hugged each other and gave it each other high fives.

Arya fumed. She had learned two very important lessons. Don’t lose track of your immediate surroundings when scouting out the lay of the land or hall in this case. The second lesson, do not let a seeming safe environ dull you senses.

“A funny Phirona, Saelalys, real funny. I damn near pissed myself!” Arya barked as she fumed at the two non-warriors getting over on her. She had been concentrating on her foes!

“Why are so you fearful of the Sand Snakes, Arya. They only wish to copulate with you” Phirona spoke with a smile on her face.

Arya felt her face flush. It still embarrassed her mightily when sex was mentioned so casually. She was too much like her father in that respect she knew. She looked back down the hall she would be moving down soon.

“Geez, Phirona, when you put it like that it makes me … me … I don’t know!” Arya whined. She
concentrated on her problem. “They are so predatory. Their eyes just eat me up.” Arya shivered at the heat the Sand Snakes gave off. She supposed it made sense. They did come from a desert clime. Arya got a funny look on her face. Geez, how lame she thought to herself.

The two women came up to Arya and hugged the slightly agitated teen.

“Why are you so easily flummoxed by the Sand Snakes? They find you attractive and wish to make love to you. They see you as a fellow warrior and that makes you very alluring to them. For them you are the best of both worlds.”

When they paused Arya gave them facial look and body language of well spill it!

“You are both a warrior and a beautiful young woman. They all want to bed you first. They want to share you” Phirona told Arya.

Arya felt a tingle building in her nipples and down between her legs. She squirmed. It still amazed the still fourteen year old how she could be both burning up for it and wet at the same time.

“Wow” Arya breathed softly. That made her feel desirable. She was humble but it was always nice to be desired by beautiful women. What woman ever tired of being told she was beautiful? She smiled to herself. She had come a long way from the name horse face. She had come into herself.

She looked back down the hall moving her head to check all the angles. The two women who considered Arya their friend smiled at her antics. They wondered how such a fearless warrior on the battlefield could be such a wuss when it came to matters of the heart or, in this case, more the bed.

“What is it that spooks you so Arya? You are a fierce warrior. All the Druids speak of your fearlessness on the battlefield. We would have thought you would have charged into the Sand Snakes bed chambers and claimed them as yours” Phirona told the young Direwolf.

“It’s just that they are so aggressive about it Phirona— Saelalys. They are so sexual. It is obvious they know exactly what to do in bed. They just overwhelm me when they come onto me so strongly.” A thought came to the young Direwolf’s mind. Arya eyed the two women. “Hey, what happened to me saving myself for this Dragon of yours?”

Saelalys blushed. “I have come to see Phirona may be right. I think the Queen would love to educate you in the arts of loving women. But. Phirona has enlightened me to the idea that you being skilled upon your arrival to her furs might be equally appealing. That way you two can fuck like banshees right from the start.”

Arya could not stop it. First her face and then her throat flashed red with the heat she felt in her embarrassment. When sex was spoken of so casually it still sent her heart into flutters. Again, she feared she was too much like her father in this. She needed to get better! The Sand Snakes were not making it any easier!

In her mind she replayed two mornings ago when Dorea and Loreza confronted her in this very hall. Arya had seen them against the wall down the hall. They were talking quietly. Dorea saw Arya coming and poked her younger sister. She turned and saw Arya. Like diving falcons they came down the hall at a fast clip. When they reached Arya they separated to get on each side of the fourteen year old.

“We want you to come back with us to our room” Dorea began without preamble. “We grow tired of waiting and you somehow not seeing our flirtations. We should have been making love from our first day here” Dorea told Arya with her dark eyes full of fire.
Loreza took over the narrative “We will make you scream. You will wreck our bed with the orgasms we will give you. You will suck us off for hours. You will beg for more of our sweet pussies. Why are you denying us? Yourself?”

The two sisters sensually came closer to Arya on each shoulder. Their fingertips tracing lightly over her arms, throat, and ears. The caresses so sensual and intoxicating.

Arya had felt herself freeze. Her body may have been frozen but her face was on fire!

“I will suck you off first—“ Dorea husked to a faltering Arya. They really were quite beautiful and alluring.

Suddenly Dorea was cut off by her sister, Loreza “No, I will! I am fed up with you using your age to always go first. I saw her first!”

“Screw you Loreza!”

“Bullshit!”

The two sisters now turned to face each other. Both of them glowering at the other.

“Arya should have the best first. That would be me” the older sister told the younger. Loreza rolled her eyes at her sister’s conceited assessment of her own talents.

“Ha! It was I that made Josey and Alaysha cry out the loudest in our bed last night. My superior skills had them both begging for my sweet mouth.” Loreza looked very smug.

Dorea gave Arya a quick look. She could not let that taunt ride. “That is such bullshit! Take that back I say! … It was I who took them to the highest fields of paradise. It was my mouth and fingers they begged for. I am the eldest anyways. I always get the first right to new women in our bed”

Dorea was all puffed up now with self-importance. “Take that runt of the litter!” Dorea sneered at her younger, smaller sister.

Loreza’s eyes flared wide with rage. She surged forward into her older sister’s chest bumping into her forcefully. The impact sending Dorea reeling back. Said sister, snarled and returned the chest bump making Loreza stumble.

They had then proceeded into a hair pulling, cursing, kicking, and rolling on the floor catfight. Arya had watched a minute. She saw they had completely forgotten her. It kind of pissed her off actually. She walked on down the hall. The sister’s grunts and curses following her down the hall.

Saelalys arched her eyebrow. This brought Arya back from her remanence.

“I think a certain fierce Direwolf skilled on the battlefield, does not want to be the envious, unsure virgin in bed. You want to be skilled in bed and be an equal with any partner?” the pale Valyrian asked sagely.

Arya nodded her head mutely. Arya was proud. She did not want to come across as a novice. She may only be fourteen she knew but she wanted to rock any woman she bedded. She wanted to make them scream. She wanted any woman she bedded to think Arya was a skilled woman in the Sapphic arts. Arya could not help her sense of pride.

“Arya. The only way to become skilled is to practice. When you first took up the bow you were not the expert Bowman you are now. I am sure the Sand Snakes or any other women who would take you to their bed would love teaching you and not ridicule you. They would love being your first.”
“I know … but—it’s just that everyone is calling me the Direwolf. I want to be the fierce skilled lover … not a timid shaking Chihuahua!” Arya knew she was whining but could not help herself.

“Arya you are being unfair to them. They are aggressive but good women. They are indeed skilled and hard loving in bed.” The two women shared a lascivious look between themselves. Their eyes twinkled with remember hot sex.

Arya felt her face heat again with a light flush. It was clear that Phirona and Saelalys had been bedded by at least several of the Sand Snakes.

The two women smiled and reached out to caress her on one cheek. They made smoky eye contact.

“Arya, our sweet Direwolf. You know where our room is. We would never ridicule you Arya. We would show you the wonders of Sapphic love. There is so many ways for women to love each other. We would love to show you all of them. Remember our offer. We would send you to your Queen a skilled woman in the furs. You will rock her world. We are not greedy. We would share you with the Sand Snakes.” Saelalys waggled her eyebrows.

Arya knew that last line was given to make her face again go beet red. At least she was pretty sure that was the reason. Arya gulped at the possibilities.

The two women walked down the hall with interlocked fingers.

Arya watched them walk away with her face on fire. She squared her shoulders and walked down the hall. Her world was spinning but she kind of liked it. Still, the Sand Snakes were just too aggressive! She looked all around. The hall was empty. For now she was safe.

The next morning Arya was with her sword master in the walled little court yard they used to do their one on one practice. They had already done their run through the grounds of the Red Keep. They had run up and down stairs and in and out of courtyards. Arya now pushed the pace. Syrio kept up of course but he was no longer snarking at her throughout the run. He had to concentrate on his breathing as Arya did.

The two joined in their run by some of the officers of the Goldcloaks. Only the most fit were allowed to run with them in the Red Keep. You could not have a stampede in the castle. The men now able to keep up. Well mostly. They were improving though.

They did calisthenics together most days now. Syrio saw the improvement in his disciple and was not about to let her show him up. When they finished he was sweating too. Arya now able to keep up with Syrio. Sometimes she was laboring but she refused to let him get the better of her.

Syrio smiled at her. “You are almost keeping up” he told her with a smug look. Arya rolled her eyes. She looked over at the rack that held their wooden swords. It was empty. She looked around.

She watched Syrio make a show of walking over to a chest. He pulled up and pushed back the lid. He pulled out two iron practices swords. They were full length with dull edges and a rounded end. Arya cocked an eyebrow.

Syrio now put a serious look on his face. He held up the two swords. He spoke to her in his teacher voice.

“You are no longer a cub Arya. You are now a Direwolf yearling. You have fangs. You have developed the basic skills you will need to give attack and defend yourself. I could have given you...
Arya felt her heart hammering in her chest. She felt so proud. She knew she was indeed improving. She tried to be modest but she knew her improvements was now coming in leaps and bounds. All because of the man before her. She felt humbled.

“We are in Westeros so we will practice for now with broadswords. You will have to fight men in armor. In Essos men fight rapier to rapier eschewing armor. That I feel is more honorable but we are in Westeros.”

He threw a sword to Arya. She caught it easily by the pummel. It was much heavier than her wooden practice sword but she did not find the additional weight a problem. Her Master had trained her to be ready for this longer heavier sword.

Arya had a big smile on her face. She slashed her sword back and forth before her. *A metal sword!* She did feel like a Direwolf!

They began their sword routines. Arya felt exhilaration run through her veins. She knew Syrio would not have given her a metal sword, even if it was dull and blunt, unless she was indeed ready. She felt herself just as quick and her reach longer with the sword sized for an adult.

“Arya let’s review your basic angles of attack with your new sword. What are they again Arya?”

“There are eight basic steps to attack Master. They are straight down from the top, straight up from the bottom, diagonally down to the left, diagonally down to the right, diagonally up from the left, diagonally up from the right, and left and right strikes horizontally.”

“Correct Arya. Defend yourself” Syrio called out attacking his charge with no further warning. He lunged forward with his blunted weapon. Arya moved her blade straight up from the bottom to hit Syrio’s blade. He was slightly thrown off balance and Arya advanced herself lunging forward. Syrio had to slash his blade up diagonally to block Arya’s sword. She swung her blade in a tight arc from left to right. Syrio had to dive back blocking Arya’s arc. The two blades ringing loudly.

This went on for ten minutes. “Up up keep the sword tip up Arya … keep it balanced so you can attack from any angle. Good good—fast faster!” Arya slashed her sword from the left and right again and again driving Syrio back. He blocked her attacks but he was on the defense. He lunged at Arya and rolled past and underneath her guard as she met his supposed attack at her heart. She swirled just in time to block his lunge with a counter parry swirling her sword to be ready for an attack from any angle.

“Good. Good. Always analyze the steps of your opponent. See his dance and where it will lead. Strike when he must adjust his stance or balance. All dances have inflection points … that is the time to strike!”

Arya listened to every word he Master had to say. She tried to absorb every word and every iota of knowledge her Master was passing on to her.

The door to their small compound was opened. They both turned to glare at the intruder. Arya eyes flared open.

Into the compound stepped Oberyn Martell and Elia Sand. They had in their right hands their spears and in their left hands practice spears with blunted wooden heads. Elia was stoic but Oberyn had a smile on his face. He seemed genuine Arya thought. He had an air about him of supreme
confidence. It was said that with his spear Oberyn was almost unstoppable. Arya smiled a feral smile. Her master would quickly make mincemeat of the Red Viper! She liked her snake medium well done.

“I have watched from afar. You, Syrio Forel, are indeed a true First Sword. I had hoped to meet one. I am deeply honored.” He bowed deeply to Syrio. Arya rolled her eyes. Syrio was still eyeing Oberyn but he was of course lapping up the words of praise.

Oberyn turned to look at Arya. He gave her an appraising eye. “Our jackals reported that you led the Insurrection. They spoke of your skill with the bow. What is it they call you now… Air Dancer—I like it. You are well on your way to becoming a Water Dancer as well.” He walked around Arya slowly. He kept his distance. He was not trying to intimidate herself Arya felt. “Is she a good student Syrio?”

“The best. I have waited my adult life to find her. She will in time exceed me.”

Arya lifted her head and shook her head. Her teacher sometimes said the strangest things.

“That I doubt—match but not exceed. You are feral Arya. If you and Syrio were to come back to Dorne with me the two of you would be free of the moors and edicts that will try to restrict you here in the North. In Dorne and especially House Martell we revere military prowess. We revere freedom of choice in all matters personal.”

Arya was taken aback. His eyes spoke the truth. He was serious.

“I thank you most honored Sir but my place is at my father’s side. It is the King I serve.”

Oberyn looked at her for a long moment.

“Well spoken. Honor. Of course. You are a Stark. Your whole bloodline is sufficed with it. Sometimes it is insufferable but of all the bad traits to have that is most … well, honorable. We would practice with you. Syrio you would agree that practice against dissimilar weapons is an advantage. I think Arya’s skills have increased fighting Merjen Sarovic with her labrys.”

Syrio nodded his head.

“I have heard of your skill with the spear Oberyn. Let Elia and Arya first spar. Agreed?”

Oberyn smiled and agreed. He took his daughter aside. Syrio came to Arya.

“Oberyn is right. I have not yet taught you to fight against poleax and their kin. In skilled hands they are a very dangerous weapon. Elia is used to fighting swords. That will give her an advantage. Still, what I have taught you applies to all weapons. Be on the defense to begin with her. Learn her dance steps. Find the inflection points as I have taught you. Are you ready Arya?”

She was nervous but only glared at Syrio. Of course she was ready! No Snake was going to beat a Direwolf!

She walked to get in front of Elia who had left her father. The two bowed slightly to each other.

Arya stepped back from Elia. Her eyes tracking every small movement of the Sand Snake. She wanted to be outside the range of Elia’s spear. The seventeen year old girl started to spin her spear with her two hands at the center of the spear. The long wooden shaft a blur. The Dorne girl advanced with the spinning shaft angled in front of her. Without warning, Elia stopped the spin of her spear. She gripped her spear by the rear part of the haft and lunged forward. Arya startled
flicked her sword up at the last moment knocking the spear up and to the side.

Arya now cross hacked with her sword. Elia flicked her spear up and down swirling the shaft to block Arya’s sword strokes. Arya feinted right and came in from the left her sword hacking and then lunging forward her blunted tip aimed at Elia’s throat. The Sand Snake knocked Arya’s blade to the side and rode her long shaft up Arya’s blade. The wooden tip hitting Arya in the wrist. The dark hued girl jerked her shaft up. The little movement on the end of the spear in her hands made the other end whip up. Only by whipping her head back did Arya avoid the end smacking her in the chin.

The Stark princess growled shaking her left hand. She adjusted her grip on her sword and started to move to her right to keep to Elia’s left. She stabbed forward with her sword. Elia blocked it up. Arya used that movement to step in and shoulder block the girl knocking her back. Inside her guard, Arya slashed in a wild but controlled manner her blade attacking first right and then left.

Elia was struggling to keep her balance. Elia swirled her spear around her body in a tight arc. Arya had expected that move with her inside Elia’s guard. She bent low and pivoted to her left and came up with an up lunge thrust. Her sword tip rapping Elia in the ribs a glancing blow.

Now it was Elia who growled. They separated. The Sand Snake stepping back quickly. Elia without warning ran forward and jumped up in the air and with the height thrust her spear down and forward at Arya. Arya juked to the side and hit her blade down hard on the haft knocking it down. Elia jerked her spear up but Arya was ready this time jumping back. Elia advanced thrusting forward first high and then low, low and high again. Arya blocking the thrusts. She would try to advance but the long shaft kept her at bay.

Several times Elia stepped in and lunged her spear at Arya’s torso. Arya hacked down on the spear shaft. The blow reverberating the wood and jamming the wooden head into dirt. Elia had to move back quickly pulling her spear back while back pedaling and moving off to a side to pull her spear into a neutral grip to be ready again for offense or defense.

For several more minutes the two teenagers fought against each other. Elia thrusting with her spear while she constantly moved in circles to vary her attack vectors. Arya for her part was blocking Elia’s attacks with slashing hits of her blade. She was able to slip through the guard of the Sand Snake forcing Elia to back up while whirling her spear in tight circles to fend off Arya. The young women constantly pivoting seeking advantage and to break off their attacks. Arya constantly attacked but then had to fight off Elia’s counterattacks.

“That is enough for now Elia—Arya” Oberyn called out. Elia scowled but backed up putting the butt of her spear into the dirt. Arya stepped back as well. Syrio had been right. Fighting against a person with a spear who knew how to fight with it was a truly dangerous opponent. She had slowly gotten used to how it was used in attack and defense. At first she had been on the defense but by the end it was Elia on the defense most of the time. Arya gave feral smile. She was truly progressing in her training. She had shown her master proud.

“You did well Arya” Syrio told her when he came up to her. “You learned well her attack steps and how to counter her attacks. You adjusted what I have taught you for the sword to the spear instinctively. This the reason I ask you to absorb all I teach you. The skills I am teaching you will allow you to fight any opponent.” He squeezed Arya’s shoulder.

Arya now watched Oberyn and Syrio move to the center of the square. Her eyes flared seeing the two with their real weapons. She felt hot pride in her master. He was a true Water Dancer. He knew no fear.
“I say we fight with our weapons Oberyn. We both know how to spare do we not?” Syrio asked the Red Viper in a calm voice.

“Indeed we do. Let us show our protégées true mastery of our weapons. Are you prepared to taste defeat?” Oberyn asked with a smirk on his face.

“It will be you who tastes defeat this day Oberyn Martell. The sword is the weapon supreme.”

Oberyn made a show of examining his fingernails looking bored.

Syrio snorted shaking his head. The two men squared off across from each other.

Between blinks Arya saw Oberyn exploded forward with a high jump and came down with his spear aimed at Syrio’s heart. Syrio juked to the side his sword slamming into the spear shaft of Oberyn knocking it down and away. In Syrio charged his sword moving in blinding whirl of chops from right and left with forward thrusts of the tip.

Arya smirked seeing Oberyn’s eyes flare open. He had definitely been surprised by Syrio’s speed and ferocity of attack.

Oberyn used quick flicks of his spear to whip his spear up and down to block Syrio’s sword hacks. He would grip one hand near the butt of his spear, the other eighteen inches up the spear, to flick his spear making the other end move in lightning fast movements. Oberyn was jumping and diving from side to side as was Syrio.

Arya and Elia watched in awe as their Masters whirled, jumped and attacked each other in a blur of attacks and counterattacks. Both men seemed to be one step ahead of the other. Both men blocking attacks and making their opponents back up or work fast to one side of the other to disengage the attack to get squared for the next attack.

Seeing Syrio moving without restraint made Arya see why her Master wanted her to remain grounded on her attacks and counterattacks. She was simply not ready. Her Master had her working hard on her legs and core to increase their strength. Syrio teaching Arya how to jump with minimal thought or preparation. This required supreme conditioning and committing to muscle memory how to jump and twist in the air.

When done right as she was seeing in front of her now it made you supreme on the battlefield. One misstep would be disaster against another weapon master though. Syrio always landed lightly his sword in the perfect position to attack or block in defense.

Not only was Oberyn thrusting at Syrio with his spear he was trying to slash the spear into Syrio’s body to hit him hard with slashing strikes. The hits aimed to sap Syrio’s strength and put contusions of his limbs and torso. The strikes on Syrio’s body sapping his strength.

Syrio blocked and shunted aside these attacks with his sword. Syrio always pressing the spear down and away from his body. Syrio moving in with Oberyn’s spear jammed down into the ground. Oberyn jerking his spear into Syrio while he jumped or tumbled away to the side. His movements so fast Syrio had to adjust his stance to follow giving the Red Viper time to prepare his defense or again press his own attacks.

Twice when Syrio got in close on Oberyn the man of House Martell gripped his spear in the middle with his hands eighteen inches apart. He used his spear like a battle staff to block Syrio’s sword hacks and thrusts. Oberyn blocking the attacks with both ends of his spear. He struck out at the body and face of Syrio. Oberyn using both sides of his spear to block aside Syrio’s swords thrusts.
and strikes and immediately counterattack.

The two men locking up spear to sword and pushing against each other and grunting trying to get advantage. One or the other suddenly kicking out with a kick or ramming a shoulder into the torso of the other. That or gripping ahold of cloth to jerk the foe off balance. Each man rolling with the energy of the strike or jerk to jump back and pivot to a defensive stance. Each man always seeking to press a fresh attack.

The two men were able to hold each other at bay with neither man able to gain an advantage that lasted for more than five or six moves before they themselves were suddenly on the defensive.

Oberyn stepped back and rested his spear butt on the dirt. He was covered in sweat as was Syrio. Both men breathing heavily but controlled.

“I have always wanted to spare against a First Sword. The legends are true. You are almost as great as I” Oberyn spoke with mirth in his voice.

Syrio rolled his eyes. “As you say Oberyn.”

The Red Viper shook Syrio’s hand. He walked over to Arya with his daughter. “Learn well from your Master Arya. I see great things in you. Maybe you can indeed tame the Dragon. Time will tell.”

Arya rolled her own eyes. More prophecy. Great.

Elia bowed to Arya. “You are a great warrior.” She studied Arya. “I would dine with you in my quarters tonight.”

Arya felt her instincts kick in. She had a guess as to what was on the menu.

“I am honored but I fear I cannot tonight.”

“I see” Elia responded. Her eyes glittered. “Your loss.”

She glared at Arya for a moment and then walked away with a stiff back.

Oberyn watched the tableau with a mirthful look on his face. Then he looked at Arya curiously.

“For such a warrior you sure are a wuss.” He winked at Arya. “We have a betting pool going as to which of my daughters will first bed you.” He winked at Arya again and left.

Syrio came up to Arya. “Let us practice on your jumps and tumbles. It is time. I am so proud of what I saw in you this day Arya. You are indeed the student I feared I would never find.”

Arya could not stop smiling. She loved her training. She loved feeling her body getting stronger and more skilled.

While she practiced she mulled over the Sand Snakes. It was flattering but she was just not ready. Not today. Maybe soon.

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The next afternoon she was in her father’s study room as she called it. He had a long table against the back wall that was three feet deep. On it her father had placed a map of the Trident. The confluence of the three rivers Red, Green and Blue that merge to flow down to the estuary that meets the Bay of Crabs.
Eddard’s forces were trying to forge across the Trident to block off the High Road and prevent forces of the Vale to sally against him. Arya was to prevent it.

Arya walked around the board that had tiles marking the advancing forces of her father. She had her own tiles to place on the map to show how she would counter his attack. Syrio had her reading books on past military battles and their outcomes and books on military philosophy. Her mentor leaned against the edge of the table observing the map and more so his protégée.

Arya picked up the tiles of her forces and started to place them on the map. She felt her father and Syrio’s eyes on her. She hesitated a few times and several times moved her tiles around after her first selection. Finished she looked up.

“I see you are not fully engaging my crossing at the ford of the Trident Arya. Why?”

“The way you have arrayed your tiles shows me that you have secured the west bank in force. To attack head on would give you the advantage. I would open my flank to counterattack. I would have a blocking force only to slow you down and engage. To cause a backup at the crossing point.”

“How would you strike me then?”

“I would bring my cavalry down the Haper’s path that is partially hidden in the low lying hills to come upon your flank. I would have my mounted horse bowmen surprise your rear echelons to sow confusion and panic. I would attack your supply train and attempt to deprive you of the food and basic stocks to move on.”

“Why the regiment in the woods on the other side of the Trident? What is their purpose?”

“I will engage and fall back and then have my men seem to break and rush away in retreat. Most men when they sense an army breaking they rush to finish the job. I would have my best archers in those woods. I would not fire till they saw ‘the whites of their eyes’. I would have a fourth of my mounted cavalry in those woods to briefly counteract the men at the edge of the corpse of trees. The woods are not large and I am sure there are many paths through it. I would retreat at nightfall and come out the back and move up to Hollow Ridge and regroup.”

“This should slow you down and force your forces to pile up at the ford. I would save one regiment of horse for reserve but use my last two regiments to attack your flank and try to roll it up. If successful I would march my lancers into the gap created and fall on your force from the side.”

Eddard shook his head approvingly. “Remember, always, Arya to send out scouts. This is a good plan but I may have my own mounted troops in reserve prepared to attack your flanks. Always do as much reconnaissance as possible. For now we have the Druids and their Ravens and Owls to provide overhead views of the battlefield. That will most definitely not be the case when they are not allied to us.”

“Good job Arya. I will come up with a new scenario in a few days and we will wage war again” Eddard said with a smile on his face.

Arya and her Master left the room.

“I am most pleased again Arya. You excel in all you put your mind to. You are forceful in attack but not reckless. As you have read and I have seen, being reckless and rushing to engage the foe has led to far too many failures on the battlefield. Always arrive on a battlefield refreshed and ready. Once a commander senses your forces are exhausted he will fall on you with the weight of the gods.”
It had been several days since Oberyn had visited Arya and her Master in the courtyard where they practiced. She had enjoyed sparing with Elia. Like sparing with Merjen Sarovic and her labrys Arya loved learning how to fight different weapons other than the sword.

Arya and Syrio observed the practice area the Martells and their fellow countrymen had setup outside the Great Hall against the outside wall of the Red Keep. The area piled up with hay on the stones. Many practice butts and dummies had been setup.

The two watched Oberyn and his daughters along with his honor guard and fellow kinsmen practice. Arya had her eyes on the Sand Snakes. She considered them her contemporaries. She was keen to see their weapons of choice and how they used them.

They were comely too. She liked looking at their beautiful toned bodies move in a martial way. It made her body tingle.

All the men and women warriors from Dorne were partial to the spear. That was clear. They were good with them. They were adept and quick using their spears to block attacks and making thrusts out at their foes. It was impressive at the power of their throws of their spears. The spears deadly within thirty yards Arya determined.

Over several days of observing Arya had seen that Obara, Nymeria and Obella were partial to the bullwhip. It was amazing their accuracy with it. The loud cracks of their whips spoke of the power of the weapon. They would use the tip of their fast snapping whips to strike at the head of the dummies and butts. The whips landing hard blows on straw filled limbs. They were also keen to strike the groin area with devastating strikes.

This had both Arya and Syrio grimacing and clenching of their groin areas. That would hurt! A lot!

The Sand Snakes wore short legged trousers and loose blouse tops with cut off arms. All except Tyene. She wore long dresses of silk with lace trim. Arya had snickered at that. That was until she saw Tyene flick her forearms to produce daggers into her palm from hidden braces on her lower arms hidden by her dresses. She would flick out the dagger in a fluid motion to impact on the eye areas of the dummies.

She was also very accurate throwing her daggers. The daggers spinning to always strike their target tip first. She appeared a lovely bird of paradise but in reality was a deadly Sand Snake in her own right.

She hoped to spare with them all. She admired their skills with their weapons. She also admired their toned bodies. She and Syrio walked by them to go to their training area for the day. Then it was time to exercise and train.

This morning Syrio had Arya and himself running through the courtyards and buildings of the Red Keep. They ran down halls and sprinted up stairs. Syrio would call out for them to start doing jumping jacks, leg squats, push ups and sit ups and then off running again.

The change of routine was taxing Arya but she concentrated past the stitch in her side and worked hard to control her breathing. Both she and Syrio were dripping sweat. Despite the physical taxing she was under, Arya reveled in the fact that she could keep up with her master now. Her hard training had paid off. Syrio glanced over several times and put on a burst of speed. Arya grit her teeth and pushed herself to keep up.
Several times Syrio called a break in their running and calisthenics. Arya knew he did it to give Arya a blow but she saw him breathing hard and whipping the sweat off his face. He had put water jugs throughout the Red Keep. The jugs hidden from casual site to not be obvious. There was one at this spot. The two drank deeply. Then they were off again.

After an hour he led them to the doorway to their inner court. Syrio put his hand on Arya’s shoulder stopping her.

“I have had porters put barrels, crates of all sizes, large urns, mounds of furs and rolled up tarps into our courtyard. They have made haphazard stacks. Go in and spend a few minutes to familiarize yourself with the items placed in the courtyard. I will then come in. I want you to attack me with all your speed and skill.”

“Why have you done this Master?” Arya asked her teacher.

“You will see” Syrio responded with a grim tone. “It is time to learn new lessons my disciple. We will do this at least twice a week. In the afternoon we will have our normal session. Agree?”

“Of course” Arya replied. She turned and went through the door.

She saw two large wine barrels standing up and one on its side by the entrance. She looked at the various crates haphazardly strewn about. There were messy stacks strewn about. She saw large wheat and wine urns. Some were standing while others were on their sides. Several large mounds of furs were in the courtyard. Some of the crates stacked lazily on each other to the point of almost toppling.

Arya walked around trying to get in her mind the layout of the various items. There was plenty of open space between the items but there was enough to easily get underfoot if one lost track of them.

“Ready or not, here I come!” Syrio shouted. The door slammed open.

Arya rolled her eyes at the cheesy entrance line.

Syrio burst into the courtyard. Arya saw him looking around looking over the items in the courtyard.

“Aaarrggghhhhhhh!” Arya screamed charging Syrio as he moved around a barrel. Arya came down a line between crates to fall upon her master. She slashed furiously. Syrio blocked her savage strokes. She was constantly stabbing at his face making him look at her to defend himself. She did not want him memorizing the layout of items. She knew his mind was highly developed to instantly map out a place but Arya was going to limit that time.

She attacked first high and then low with short controlled swipes of her sword and then throw in a straight fast jab at Syrio’s ribs and eyes. She would move her sword right and left before her and then strike without thought using muscle memory to strike without any windup of her body to lunge forward.

She loved the fact that they had moved on from practice wooden swords to practice swords made of metal. The heavier weight felt good in her hand. It made her feel like more the warrior she knew she was becoming.

“Good, good Arya. You have become the Cobra that weaves right and left lulling its prey and then striking without remorse. Good Arya” Syrio called out to his student as she constantly attacked. She was pushing him back against a large crate.

With seeming no effort Syrio flexed his knees and easily jumped the four feet to land on top of the
Arya hacked at his feet forcing him to the other end of the crate. Arya bent her knees and jumped up after him. He jumped off still looking at her. She rush forward and stopped for a heartbeat to map out the area behind the crate and jumped down. Her sword slashing down. Syrio grunted blocking her mighty down chop.

Arya followed Syrio between the items strewn about. She never knew when Syrio would jump up onto something. He jumped on a smaller crate only three feet high. She chopped at Syrio’s feet making him beat a hasty flip off the crate. Arya would fly around the crate attacking her Master again without remorse.

Arya got frustrated seeing her Master jump up and land on a platform above her. She was not ready to recklessly attack him when he had the high ground. She would swipe and stab at his legs and block his down strokes. She deliberately kept jerking left at Syrio’s down chops and thrusts. Then she jumped right and as Syrio’s arm thrust his sword down. Arya pivoted and she reached out with her hand. She gripped Syrio’s forearm and jerked him off the crate.

“Whoa!” he roared. His body did a twisting summersault that allowed him to swipe at Arya as he dismounted. She snarled jerking back blocking the stroke. Then she moved forward again. She slowed her assault to not wear herself out.

“Good Arya. You are crafty like the fox. I did not expect that counterattack.” He had a feral smile on his face. His charge’s progress making him happy. Syrio attacked her now and she used the crates and barrels to get separation when Syrio started to breech her defense. Syrio was attacking her furiously pressing her back to one of the haphazard stack of crates. She spun to her left slashing out with her sword. Syrio had taught her to do this rarely and it must be down with utmost speed. This gave a moment of separation. She bent her knees deep and jumped back twisting her body up and back. Her head just passed over the low stack to land on the other side.

She bent low and went right. It was a guess. Luck was on her side.

“Aarrgggggg” Syrio yelled as she nearly chopped his feet off meeting her Master’s rush to that side. He had just barely leaped over Arya’s practice sword. He snarled at Arya. “You are becoming one sneaky bastard—I mean bitch!”

They continued on. Arya snarled and growled with Syrio constantly jumping up on the obstacles and then off keeping away from Arya when her attack started to breech his defense. She decided to try another tactic. She watched Syrio backflip up to land on several crates stacked that were nearly five in height. Arya put on a burst of speed and jumped up after Syrio. He did not have time to land and right himself fully. He shouted seeing Arya coming up at him her sword slashing wildly at his torso. He jumped back and off the crates.

Arya landed on the crates and immediately jumped forward coming down with her sword arm pulled back and slashed at Syrio as she fell like a comet from the heavens. Arya yelled seeing Syrio’s eyes widen seeing her falling upon him. He barely sidestepped her stroke. He looped his left arm out and hooked Arya’s sword arm pulling her into his body. Arya immediately adjusted and rammed her knee into his stomach stunning him.

He fell away with her after him but she could not breech his defense.

Finally, Syrio called a halt. They both were breathing hard and dripping in sweat.

“I must say Arya, you fight like the badger. Always attacking and showing no fear. I am impressed.” He went to the table at the back of the courtyard and wiped sweat off his brow. The two sat down and ate oranges in the bowl there and drank ice tea from a pitcher.
“You did not attack me with your full skill Master.”

He eyed her. “Maybe not but only a little Arya. You are learning fast. You absorb all I have to
each teach like a towel.”

They sat and talked for a while. Syrio throwing in his little similes.

“Use your body’s movements to lull your enemy Arya. Be like the mighty Cobra who weaves right
and left. Striking only when he is ready at a moment his prey is not.”

“You must strike like the lightning in the night sky … from nowhere attack without warning.”

“Be as strong as the oak. Let your movements be like the supple willow.”

Arya enjoyed her Master’s similes and metaphors.

“Arya. Remember this my disciple when you fight. You must open your senses fully. The heart
can be fooled and the mind tricked. See what is. Hear the truth of your environment. Taste with
your mouth. Smell with your nose. Let you skin truly feel. Take in what your senses tell you Arya.
Throw your preconceptions to the wind. You need to sense the world as it truly is.”

“Your father made these mistakes Arya. He let his belief in himself cloud his perceptions and seeing
his environment as it was. He should have seen his danger in not attacking Cersei. It was clear she
would fight your father with her last breath in the Game of Thrones.”

Arya took a deep breath. She did not like hearing about her father’s failures.

“Do not fret Arya. Your father has learned. He will not make those mistakes again. You gave him
that chance Arya.”

“Thank you Master” Arya told her master gratefully.

“Let us practice your High Valyrian some more Arya.”

She had asked why she needed to earn the languages of Essos. Her master told her that learning to
speak in multiple languages helped develop one’s mind. Plus, he desired to take Arya to the city of
his birth, Braavos.

“Please come into my home Arya”

“Kostilus, Āria, māzigon ezīmagon ūha lenton.”

“What is your name?”

“Skoros iksis aōha brōzi?”

“I have the best master who ever lived, I am so blessed”

Arya gagged herself with her fingers.

“Eman se sŷrje āeksio qilōni mirre glaestan, iksan sīr beri … you suck Syrio, you really suck.”

Her master only preened.

For another fifteen minutes she practiced her spoken word. Syrio had given her first books for
toddlers written in High Valyrian. She had progressed to the level of seven or eight years old now.
She found learning the words easy. It was the unusual syntax she found hard.  

They had finished this lesson. They gathered their weapons and prepared to leave the walled court. “How sweet and cloying” was whispered from near them. 

Syrio snarled pulling his rapier from its scabbard. Arya drew Needle. From behind a stack of crates, Tyene materialized as if from mist. Arya’s eyes bulged. In both hands, Tyene was twirling daggers between her fingers and over her wrists. The blades a blur as they rotated through her fingers and round and round her wrists. The hands coming together to let the blades swirl over to the other hand. The movements both beautiful and deadly at the same time. After another thirty seconds she stopped the motions of her blades and slide them up the sleeves of her dress. Arya knew harnesses were on the woman’s forearms.

Arya could see that her master was disturbed that the blonde Sand Snake had gotten so close to them unawares. She knew he was also impressed with her stealthy appearance and skills she showed in handling her blades. “How long have you been here?!?” Syrio barked at the blonde woman. She merely cocked an eyebrow. “Why I slipped in behind you and your sweet beautiful Arya when you first entered this courtyard. I longed to see Arya up close being her feral self. It makes my loins wet.”

_Damnit_ Arya groaned to herself. Her face and neck flushing red. Arya saw her master eyeing the beautiful woman before them. She knew the woman spoke the truth and Syrio was upset she had gotten past his senses. “What is your purpose?” Syrio asked in a snarl. “Why to appraise Arya up close of course.” She sighed. “She is like yourself, my father and my sisters. She adheres to the application of brute force when subtly and stealth accomplishes the same effect, but, is so much easier.”

She eyed Arya. Arya eyes in return devoured the voluptuous woman’s large full breast. The lovely globes barely hidden by the sheer clinging silk. Her nipples engorging under Arya’s intense gaze. Dimples bloomed in her cheeks with her radiant smile seeing Arya devour her breasts with her eyes. Her voice gentle and sweet.

Arya could not stop staring at the large breast. Sansa had a full bosom but they nowhere near the size of Tyene’s breast! She couldn’t stop looking. She knew what she wanted to do with them! “You are everything I could hope for. I will tell Sarella.” She turned and left.

Arya was a little stunned. The blonde Sand Snake enigmatic. Her sudden appearance and the disappear making the woman seem mysterious and alluring.

Syrio eyed his charge. “I know they have a pool as to who beds you first my student. Still. You seem to have captured all their attention and desires.” He shook his head. “To have eight such women desiring you and you are not even trying.” He sighed now. “Some girls have all the luck.”

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Later that day, shortly after the dinner meal Arya was walking down the hall to the outside
courtyard. She had asked stewards to set up dummy butts to fire at with her bow. She needed to keep practicing with her bow. Even if she was extremely skilled with it she needed to keep her skills honed to that razors edge. She felt at one with her bow. She was totally muscle memory and reflex with the weapon. She had started shooting with the bow when she was seven.

Now that she was a young woman she again silently thanked her father. He had fought against her mother when she claimed (loudly) that it was most unladylike. Her father had told her mother it was a harmless release for Arya. Her father had told her mother that he wished his father had let Lyanna take up the bow and arrow. Her father would tell Arya’s mother he wondered if Lyanna might still be alive if she had been able to follow her dreams. Even if only a little.

Her father remembered vividly the frustration his sister had endured the father told his daughter many times. Eddard had regretted this over the years. He would make sure his daughter did not suffer that fate he told Arya when he gave his daughter her first bow and quiver sized for her small body. She had hugged him so fiercely for it. Her father became even more her hero that day.

Catelyn Stark had not been happy with that development. Her mother had given in though. It had taken a while but she had. Her father was pliable and liked to give in with his wife to avoid trouble but thank the old gods he had found the willpower and courage to defy his wife on this. Arya knew that first step allowed for her to be where she was now.

Arya knew her mother had been found by the Druids and they were moving her to join up with Robb’s forces. She might have already linked up with Robb and no raven had arrived back to inform her father of it. Arya no longer cared what her mother thought on her daughter’s destiny. She had grown up while her mother had been away. She was a woman now.

She had chosen the path she would follow and would not deviate from it. She had heard Varys and her father discussing it a week back as they passed each other in the halls. The two men deep in their conversation. She walked towards them.

She had walked by with her ears tuned. She had heard her name mentioned.

Varys was the first sentence she clearly heard.

“You know you wife will fight you on Arya and Sansa.”

She watched her father grimace as she neared them. She had subtly slowed her pace to listen will looking ahead. They were completely focused on each other and their conversation.

“I know Varys. I am not looking forward to it. My wife can be very set in her ways and willing to express her views.”

“So you will capitulate?” The eunuch turned his head slightly to look at her father’s visage. Her father took a deep breath.

“I have learned that lesson Varys. Sometimes confrontation cannot be avoided. I will get Cat to see the truth of the situation. She cannot change what has occurred in her absence. She will accept the reality. She has no choice.”

Her father tilted his head to Arya as he passed. His grimace squint smile on his face. The two parties moving in their opposite directions down the hall.

Arya felt her heart pound and her skin flush knowing her father was going to protect herself and Sansa from their mother’s probable attempts to sway them to her world view. Her father was the best!
As she walked down the main hall she saw Jeyne Poole enter the main thoroughfare from a side hall. They saw each other and called out to each other. Arya speed up to get to Sansa’s friend.

“Are you going to practice with your bow Arya? Can I come and watch?” the small brunette asked Arya.

Arya was surprised the girl would want to spend time with her. Sansa did not seemed interested in anything martial. She told Jeyne she would be happy to have her company. The two walked forward talking about recent events and how they might play out. Jeyne went on about her latest needle work and Arya told her of increasing skills with the sword. They gossiped about quirks of people and the elicit dalliances between married men and women.

They went down to the next level. As they went down the stairs several female courtesans of court were coming up the stairs. They were leaning into each other talking and giggling softly. They wore low cut bodices. Arya could not stop herself from ogling the sweet firm breasts on display. As they passed Arya and Jeyne, the taller brunette winked at Arya. Of course she blushed hard, Arya thought to herself.  Damnit!

Now on the first floor of Maegor’s Keep, the two headed to the outer doors that led to the courtyards. A blonde serving maid came walking by with several large folded towels in her hands. She looked steadily at Arya with her deep blue eyes and licked her lips slightly as she passed Arya. Arya watched her pass and turned to glance at the maid’s ass cheeks flexing and the sway of her hips. The girl was so alluring Arya thought to herself.

“I see you like the fairer sex Arya” Jeyne softly spoke to Arya breaking her out of her spell of looking at the maid’s retreating body.

Arya felt her eyes bulge and her face flush. If Jeyne tells Sansa, my father … by the old gods … her mind raced furiously. What to tell Jeyne? Her sense of honor would not let her outright lie to Jeyne but she had to protect herself. She turned to face Jeyne who looked at her with soft sad smile.

“Fear not Arya. I will not tell anyone. You of all persons have earned the right to live your life as you choose. We are all in your debt.”

“I—thank you but it was more Syrio—“

Jeyne snorted. “No Arya! Sansa and I have talked to Syrio. He wanted to take you to Braavos and teach you and then come back to take your revenge. It was you that bent him to your will. We owe you our lives Arya” Jeyne told her steadily.

Now Arya was really blushing. First for being busted on her attraction to girls by Sansa’s best friend and secondly the praise being heaped on her by Jeyne. Still, she needed to nip this in the bud. She was not ready yet to confront her mother. Her mother was religious and Arya knew she would have to fight the Church of the Seven. Arya felt she needed still more time to be ready to fight for herself. She would help her father take the Iron Throne. Then she would be free to go Braavos and become the Water Dancer she knew she was becoming.

There she had heard that she could more freely be herself. There she could love women without fear of persecution. Conservative religion had a much looser hold on that continent.

“Jeyne. I don’t know what you thought you saw. I assure you tha—“

Jeyne overrode Arya. “I know Arya because I have the same feelings myself.”

This stopped Arya cold. “You do?” Arya felt a sense of wonder come over her. She really wasn’t
alone. Sure the Sand Snakes were here now, but, they were of Dorne. Dorne was like Essos. King’s Landing was not the liberal bastion of Dorne.

“Yes Arya. I have to hide like you, but, I have the same desires.” The pretty brunette sighed. “I don’t know what to do. I guess I will be married off and be miserable. I envy you and the freedom your father is giving you to make your own life. Take what you father is giving you Arya. You are so fortunate.”

“Wow” Arya breathed. She was relieved to know that she was not alone in the Red Keep household of her father. She knew the Sand Snakes were gay and many of the Dorne contingent were gay or bisexual but … well they were from Dorne. Dorne was famous for their willingness to break all the norms and rules of the church.

Arya had sensed maybe women were interested in her but she was not sure what to do with that knowledge. Phirona Ormonnis and Saelalys Narennis offer stood out in her mind. Still, they were from Essos and they too seemed willing to not bend to society’s norms. To know a girl she had known for some time felt the same desires as she felt made Arya a little giddy.

The two teenagers walked down the hall talking and sharing their secret. Arya was happy to find another woman that shared her desires. She sensed other women were interested in her but she could not be sure. That other women shared her desires. Knowing this of Jeyne was a boon to Arya.

A woman of the North she could talk to about her desires for women. She was so surprised to find that Jeyne Poole had her same desires. Jeyne had always seemed so straight. They went outside into the courtyard that Arya used to shoot her arrows. She was usually alone with her arrow practice. It was frankly boring to watch someone calmly shoot arrows one after the other. All of Arya’s arrows landing in the center of the target butt. Arya never had any outliers.

Arya paced off fifty paces from the straw filled target. She calmly began to shoot off her arrows. The teenager shooting off each arrow only after taking a deep breath and calming her inner self.

She went to the straw filled butt and pulled her arrows out of it. Jeyne was sitting on a hay bail. Her legs swinging in a cute way. Arya looked at her. She was pretty. She wondered. She was pleasant and genteel. Arya shook her head. While pleasing to the eye she wanted something more … she was not sure what. She just didn’t feel a spark with Jeyne. Plus, she had no desire to get involved with a girl that was close friends with Sansa and Myrcella. That would be awkward.

They now made small talk enjoying each other’s company. They had bonded into a unique sisterhood.

“Do you have an eye on anyone Arya? The Sand Snakes are hot and bothered by you. They each want to be the first to bed you.”

Arya snorted. “They are too aggressive for my tastes Jeyne. They are most pleasing to the eye but I feel like a doe chased by Direwolves.” Arya felt a pang run through her. Where was Nymeria now? She missed her wolf so much. She was out there somewhere in the Riverlands Arya felt. She hoped to go and find her once her father had secured the Iron Throne.

“So you want a shy fair maiden?” Jeyne giggled.

“No … I don’t think so. I guess I am still figuring that all out. I am just attracted to women.”

Jeyne giggled cutely again.

Arya wondered. “You know I thought you were like Sansa. Boy crazy. Sansa drives me crazy
mooning over this prince and that prince. I assumed you had the same desire.”

Arya observed Jeyne sobered up. Her smile faded.

“I know. It was just for show. I know my fate.”

Arya felt sad for her. “Hey, don’t give up hope. Do you have your eye on anyone Jeyne?” She saw the girl blush. “You do? Who is it? Has she shown any interest?”

Jeyne shook her head sadly. She put a stoic look on her face.

“No. She sees me only as a friend. She so straight anyways. You could cut yourself on her. She is so tall and beautiful” Jeyne said in a dreamy voice. A soft smile on her face.

By the old gods Arya thought. She is in love with my sister.

“It is my sister isn’t it?” Jeyne’s face flushed red as bad as Arya’s face did. Arya felt for Jeyne. She was right. Sansa was boy crazy. Arya stopped. Now that she thought about it, since she and her father had rescued Sansa, she hadn’t mentioned any boy in that way. Hell, Joffrey would make any girl queer.

Now the girl before Arya sighed dramatically.

“Yes it is. It does not matter. She only talks of marrying princes.”

“Has she lately? I have not seen it. Maybe there is hope. Hey … spend more time with her Jeyne. Be with her. I know you want to be with her. She enjoys your company. I can see that. I know she and Myrcella are helping my father with all the information flowing in. Why don’t you get more involved with that?”

“But I don’t understand it … it is all so complicated.”

“Hell Jeyne. All those high sounding words confuse me. They confuse my father. You are of noble birth. You can read. Just help her and Myrcella. Be around her more. Be interested in what she is doing. Engage her … she is not attracted to Myrcella is she?”

Jeyne thought about it. “No. No I don’t think so.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter anyways. I know who Sansa will fall in love with.”

Arya’s eyebrows knit. “What do you mean? You sound awful certain. Who is it?”

“I don’t know?”

“What?” Arya asked perplexed. “Then how do you know who Sansa will fall in love with?”

“I have dreams?”

“What?” Jeyne was getting weird now.

“My grandmother was said to have dreams that often came true. They are hard to interpret and they often don’t come true but sometimes they do. Or they come true in ways you did not think they would.”

Arya could not help the look of doubt on her face.

“I know Arya. It sounds like childish fancy but I believe. I saw Direwolves surrounded by Lions
and being savaged in my dreams before Cersei attacked your father. But I also saw a young Direwolf taking on the Lions and winning. I could not see how both could be true. Now it was obvious. First your father as taken down and you then saved him.”

“Can you see the future often?” Arya asked more interested.

“No not really. I saw myself in constant terror with the first dream and then freedom in my second. I thought it had to be one or the other. Rarely do I have the dreams. My grandmother had them often. But I have one about Sansa. It is the same dream. This dream has occurred several times now.” She sighed again.

“What is the dream?” Arya asked softly.

“I see her with a tall redheaded man in a long dark mahogany red colored robe. I always see the man from behind. He is tall and broad shouldered. The man will have long red hair. I wondered who it could be. That confused me till I started to see the Druids that have joined your father. They wear long robes when in the Keep. I see Sansa with the man. It is obvious Sansa in enamored with the man.” She paused anger showing on his face. “That man is so greedy. The man is a …” Jeyne was looking for just the right word.

“Bastard” Arya offered.

“Right! The greedy bastard has another woman on his other shoulder. She is short with brown hair.” Jeyne’s face twisted up with rage. “That is so unfair! The little hussy is looking up at the man with obvious desire and love. Just like Sansa is. It is unfair! One woman is not enough for this—this bastard!”

Arya consoled her new friend. She told her that her dream might not mean what she thought. Dreams were often so elusive as to what they truly meant. Had not Jeyne had trouble interoperating her other dreams. Wait and see what the future held Arya encouraged the young woman in love with her sister.

Arya told Jeyne that she needed to work to make the future she wanted to happen to occur. She advised Jeyne to spend more time in Sansa’s presence. To be there with Sansa and to touch her and look into her eyes as much as possible. It couldn’t hurt. Arya felt it important for Jeyne to also help Sansa in her work for Arya’s father. This advice seemed to perk Jeyne up.

Arya and Jeyne talked while Arya continued her arrow practice. Arya hoped her new friend would somehow find success in having Sansa fall in love with her. How that could happen she couldn’t fathom. Sansa was soooooo straight. She hoped Jeyne’s heart would not be broke to hard if and when this mysterious Druid appeared.

Arya knew she had to figure her own desires out. She was just thankful she was not in love with a straight woman. That would suck. Royally.

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“Tell me the value of charging knights into a line of pikemen with their pikes ready for your charge?” Eddard asked his daughter.

Arya had her answer ready. “Most armies are made of conscripts. These men are simple farmers and craftsman. They are only called to arms in times of need. They are then trained up quickly and take to the field with their Lord.” Arya paused thinking. “Some Lords are always at each other’s throats and every spring have some campaign or another seeking restitution or revenge. Still, the
training they give these men is minimal. It is the knights that a Lord will rely on during any campaign.”

“It is this lack of training that one is relying on when knights charge into a wall of pikeman. The commander or lord know of this lack of training of conscripts. That the men will not find the courage to confront lines of mounted horse charging down on them with lances lowered. It takes a lot of courage to stand up against animals that weight over a fifteen hundred pounds or maybe up to two thousand pounds running at you in a full gallop. These horses are usually armored to a degree. Their size and weight is frightening. Seeing them in armor and their armored knights atop will cause most lines of conscripts to falter and break.”

“Then, when the lines break, this allows the knights to break through into their ranks and cause mayhem among the ranks of the foot soldiers.”

“Good answer Arya. I can see you are doing your studies. This has proven true over time. Conscripts will usually fail under such a charge. If a man sees the person beside them breaking ranks and falling back he will likely break as well.”

“Dorne maintains a standing army. They have men trained and hardened to withstand such charges. It is said the Unsullied have never faltered before a charge. Their iron will has decimated armies that hurl themselves upon their phalanxes. Even the Dothraki have learned to fear them.”

“It is a good tactic to use Arya. There is this one caveat Arya. One has to be prepared for the line that holds. The carnage can be great if the knights are held up and the lines behind them charge into their own held up brothers.”

Arya heard her father’s words that echoed what she had read. The books were dry tomes discussing tactics. Hearing those words from her father with their inflections made the dusty words real.

Varys came into the room and motioned to get Eddard’s attention. He tilted his head to acknowledge Varys’ presence.

“I have a message from the gates of the Red Keep. Merrel has returned. He is in the entrance hall awaiting your presence. He has come with some Druids who have come to our aid.”

Eddard smiled. He looked at Arya. He saw happiness on her face. It had been she that had brought this man to Eddard’s side. He had proven himself to be a mighty boon to the new King.

“That is excellent news!” Eddard told Varys. “Have the Lord Commander and our Grand Maester come to the entrance hall.”

“Already done my liege.” Sandor and Merjen are coming here as we speak.

Eddard and his daughter swept the tiles they had on the map into a large wicket basket. They both talked of Merrel and how happy they were of his return.

There was a knock on the door. Varys went and opened it.

Outside was the Hound and his one Kingsguard. They looked sharp with their breastplates and capes with the standard of the Kingsguard on them. The gold crown surrounded by seven swords facing out like spokes on a compass. It was a good touch Eddard thought.

Eddard went out with his daughter at his side. They started to move down the halls and stairs towards the entrance hall that was at the drawbridge and dry moat of Maegor’s Holdfast. As they walked they happened to cross Cersei who was walking down the hall. She looked morose but
stopped and looked at the party passing her by. She seemed to consider what was occurring and decided to fall in behind Eddard and his small party.

Eddard watched Sandor eye Cersei. The man just never seemed to learn his lessons.

“You are no longer Queen Cersei. Still trying to pretend you are a Queen I see” Sandor sneered down Cersei.

“You are still pretending you are not covered in ticks and fleas. You smell like an offal pit.”

Sandor started to lift his arm to test Cersei’s assertion. Then stopped. He looked crossly at Cersei.

“The makeup is getting a little thick there I would say Cersei. Those lines are getting deeper by the day.”

“Pull down your armor. Your voice is muffled. Do you ever clean that mustache by the way? I bet it is full of dingle berries.”

Merjen laughed at that.

Sandor stomped his feet. He had been bested again in his rounds of verbal jousting with Cersei. Still he tilted with the fallen Queen again.

Eddard chuckled seeing the two back bite each other. Eddard had learned that the Hound liked to take a hot bath every morning enjoying the perk of his new position. He was most pleasant smelling of late. Cersei’s rabid tongue had the man scowling as he verbally dueled the former Queen. He lost badly at every turn making his face turn red. He was pissed off mumbling and still trying to get the best of Cersei. Soon Sandor was silent, fuming while Cersei looked bored but satisfied.

Eddard looked down at Arya. He smiled at his feral young daughter.

“I will always be in your debt Arya. You saved me from death and made alliance with a man who could restore my body. I am only here now because of you.”

Arya looked up at her father with her steel grey eyes so much like his own.

“I only did what I had to do father. Syrio had thought to take me back to Braavos. That I could not stand for. I refused to leave the Red Keep unless you were by my side. I would do anything for you father.”

Eddard hugged his daughter tight to his side. He smiled seeing Sansa, Myrcella, and Jeyne rushing down a side hall to joint them. Word must be spreading. Eddard again was amazed at how fast gossip could fly through the Red Keep. At the next intersecting hall his personal honor guard were waiting. They were in full armor and joined in behind their King. They must have gotten advanced word.

Together, Eddard and his inner circle plus Cersei went to greet Merrel and his Druid brothers and sisters. Eddard mused in a way that it was Cersei who started this drama into motion. If she had not attempted to dispose of her Hand he would not be here attempting to take the Iron Throne for himself. Eddard reflected how strange the fates were.

He bumped into Arya who was now glaring hard at Cersei. The woman stuck her tongue out at Arya and flipped her off. He chuckled seeing Arya’s eyes bulge and her face flush slightly. His daughter had expected Cersei to wilt with her fall from grace. That was not Cersei’s way. In fact, Eddard had been surprised with how little trouble Cersei was giving him. She had an air of
resignation about her. He thought she would have raged and tried to cause mischief.

The only problem she was causing was constantly trying to get alcohol. Why she would want to get drunk again Eddard could not fathom. She had to know by now that she would not executed or sent back to her father and yet she remained morose. She seemed to accept that her attempt at the reins of power was over. Most strange. It did seem like she was not trying as hard to get someone to get her alcohol. Maybe she was improving.

Eddard’s group now approached the small party of Druids at the entrance hall. Eddard moved his head trying to count the Druids with Merrel. He counted roughly ten bodies. He wondered at one who seemed to be young a teen or preteen. The build spoke female to Eddard. Curiously, she wore a robe that seemed too large for her. Her hands hidden in the large cuffs of the robe. This Druid was short compared to the much taller adults. Maybe Merrel had brought his child to be part of these great times.

The King did not see the Martells or any of their party. Good he thought. This did not concern them. Maybe in time he would let Oberyn know more of the Druids.

“Merrel!” Arya called out. The man smiled great big at Arya and stepped forward opening his arms. Arya ran forward and into his embrace. The tall man scooped up Arya and swung her around in circles.

This made Eddard smile. He owed this man so much.

Eddard stepped up and made introductions with Merrel and his party. Eddard shook the new to him Druids forearms in warrior greeting. The Druids all smiled and clasped his forearm tight in return greeting. The bowed to him with a look of wonder on their faces. He wondered at that.

Eddard did not know that he and his daughter were becoming a legend to the Druids. The prophesied Direwolves had finally appeared to them.

Eddard felt a gentle peace on him watching Arya greet each Druid and the respect they gave her in return. Sandor was stiff but kept his face civil. Merjen and Dromen were the model of respectful decorum in greeting the Druids. Same with Eddard’s honor guard.

Eddard had seen that only the child had not been introduced. The small robed figure had stood slightly behind Merrel. Now the man touched the smaller form of this Druid. Eddard saw that the man did this almost diffidently.

The smaller robed figure stepped forward to come to Merrill’s side. Eddard saw that the Druids had all fallen silent. This seemed to cast a spell on the rest of the people in the hall. The guards along the wall were at rigid attention but they all were gazing at this figure too. The small figure seem to have a mesmerizing effect on all in the hall.

Eddard eyebrows flexed looking at Merrel and this new Druid as they slowly stepped forward.

Merrel now spoke in a solemn formal voice “Eddard, King of Westeros, I told you that there are more than one Queen that we Druids would bow to. The coming Dragon will contend for the Iron Throne and the world of man. The Dragon or the Direwolf we will respect. But, we follow a different Queen. A Queen of the Earth. A Queen of the wooden glen and boundless blue sky.”

Eddard felt a prickling to his skin. He saw that Arya felt it too. The two looked intently at the body beside Merrel.

“She has journeyed far to come here now. She too has sensed that this a time of great possibility.
She has left her home to come here now. She is willing to risk all for what you may bring into the world.”

The figure stepped forward slightly.

“This is our Queen” Merrel spoke softly.

Eddard started to shake. He now knew who this person was.

Two hands came out from the arms of the robe she wore. The hands were light brown with a dappled pattern of spots on the hands and forearms as they reached up to pull her cowl back. The skin color and pattern of spots made Eddard think of a newborn deer fawn.

The hands were small and had only three fingers and a thumb. Each finger was tipped with a claw. The claws a dark brown almost black in color. The limbs though small were sinewy. She was strong Eddard sensed.

Eddard heard Arya gasp.

The hands reached up. The robe arms falling back exposing brown dappled arms. The skin of the woman was a dark rich brown. The hands pulled the cowl back from the woman’s face.

Now blood red eyes with slit pupils gazed at Eddard and Arya. The eyes were large and oval. Long pointed ears came into view. Light brown hair cascaded down her back in loose ringlets. In her hair was a garland of holly and several twigs used as hair pegs were in her wavy tresses.

“I introduce to you Eddard, King of Westeros, the Queen of the Forest and blue Sky. We cannot pronounce her name in her language on our tongues. She has taken the human name of Leaf. The name captures her essence. She is the warden of the Tree of Life. She is its guardian and it in turn nurtures her.”

“She too sees what is possible with your ascendancy to the human throne of Westeros. Despite the dire times in her realm she had made the journey south to meet with you Eddard of House Stark.”

The Queen of the Children of the Forest looked up at Eddard with a steady gaze. Her face had a sad caste to it.

Eddard was stunned. To have the Queen of the Children of the Forest journey to King’s Landing shook him to his core. He saw stunned awe on the others around him. Even Varys looked on with wonder. Sandor’s usual scowl was no more. Arya had a big smile on her face.

Leaf regarded Eddard calmly. Her head moved from side to side as she regarded the new King of Westeros. The small elfin look woman now spoke. “My dreams told me of you Eddard” her voice sounded like a perfect blend of crystal chimes and a silver flute. “I thought you would die. That was the portent. Your pup was supposed to flee to Braavos to serve death.” She gazed at Arya with her intense red hued eyes. The slits expanding with her perusal of Arya.

“You are indeed capable of taming a Dragon” Leaf turned her gaze back up to Eddard.

“What will you do Eddard of House Stark?” The small woman looked up at Eddard with a lidded look. Her voice seemed to echo with crystal after notes. She was clearly waiting for Eddard to make a statement.

Eddard’s mind raced frantically. She was not here to take the Iron Throne. That was clear. She had another goal coming here now. His mind filled with the knowledge he had acquired in reading the
tomes of ancient history that Varys had wanted him to read. The genocide his race had perpetuated on the Children of the Forest. The heinous efforts of his own house on these peaceful gentle people.

He could think of only one response. This woman was not here to make conquest against the race that had decimated her race.

Eddard moved slightly to get nearer to Sandor Clegane. Leaf watched him move with a sense of calmness. The King noted that all were looking intently at the strange woman that stood before them. He slowly reached over and pulled Sandor’s sword out. He kept his eyes locked with Leaf to show he was not going to attack her. She seemed to know this. Her preternatural calmness remained.

He pulled the sword free. Sandor looked over at him like he was daft. Eddard could understand. His actions must seem strange to all around him. He now stepped forward two steps to get before the Queen of the First race to inhabit this land.

Slowly Eddard Stark fell to his knees. He took the sword he had taken from Sandor Clegane and laid it down crossways in front of him. He then bent down and put his forehead on the blade. From that position he spoke.

“As my ancestor Torrhen Stark bowed down before Aegon Targaryen to show obeisance to his new lord, I bow to you now, Leaf, Queen of the Children of the Forest. My ancestor did so out of fear for his people’s future. I now bow down to you. Not in fear but in fealty. I ask that you let House Stark begin the healing between our people. I am in your service Queen of the Earth.”

Silence hung thick in the hall.

Arya stepped forward without a word. She got beside her father. Then she too bowed her head to the floor beside the sword’s pommel. Quietly, Sansa stepped forward. With her came Jeyne Poole. They bowed down beside Arya and mimicked the actions of younger sister and father.

The North had pledged obeisance.

Everyone stared at the actions before them. All felt something wondrous occurring.

The Queen of the Children of the Forest looked at the Starks arrayed before her knelt down. Her large red eyes luminous with unknowable thoughts. All watched Leaf step forward and extend her clawed hand to rest it on Eddard’s head.

“I accept.”
Arya stood on the battlements of the Red Keep that stood upon the top of Aegon’s Hill. She faced to the east her gaze cast out over Blackwater Bay. It was midmorning. The young woman felt invigorated after a hard practice session with Syrio in the early morn. Afterwards, she had gone in and dressed in her leathers. She knew she would be in her father’s meeting and wanted to look her best. Feeling the rain cooled air on her face Arya leaned against the embrasure.

The thunderstorm had passed now. The air was still damp with the humidity it had left behind. The air was heavy but the rain for now had washed away the less pleasant smells of King’s Landing. She missed the pure clean air of the North. Often the thought occurred to Arya. How did the denizens of King’s Landing endure the stench? She had discovered how. You became inured to it. It faded to the background of your conscious till something changed. Like nature washing the streets clean for a short while.

She marveled at the double rainbows she witnessed now. The dominate lower rainbow looked so close and vibrant Arya thought. If she only leaned forward, she might be able to reach out and touch it. The rainbow able to be grasped if only it would come a little closer. A sudden flash of white from within the towering cloud caught her attention. The thunderhead was moving away up the Blackwater Bay. The storm so distant that the sound of peeling thunder no longer reached her sensitive ears. It was a wonder to see such a storm with no obstructions blocking your sight.

The shape of the cloud was fascinating. The anvil like bottom and the mighty column rising high into the air. The sun striking the cloud from the side and making it seem to glow. The dark interior lighting up with the flashes of lightening inside it. It looked like some angry goddess trying to give birth to her violent spawn.

She saw an offshoot of the storm jutting off and up to the right. The column separated from its parent but still connected at its base. The smaller column thrusting up like an angry fist. From that smaller column Arya saw swirling columns of rain falling out it. The streams of water seeking the water below. The rain dissipating before it fell half way down the length of the column. The swirls ever changing.

The storm cloud and the rainbows almost perfect counterpoints. One almost a gossamer beauty that might be gone with the blink of an eye. The other violent and vibrant with the strength to shake the Earth and the heavens.

She felt a presence come to the wall beside her.

“Hello Oberyn” Arya greeted the man from Dome. She had practiced with him and his daughters from time to time. The women coming singly or in combinations to practice with Arya and Syrio. Also, to flirt shamelessly with Arya. The Red Viper and his bastard daughters coming to test themselves with Arya and Syrio. She admired the man and his battle skills and savvy. He truly was a master with his spear. His daughters all supremely skilled with their weapons of choice.
She was becoming a better swordsman facing off against them. She had learned to also face them off in their sexual innuendo. They still flirted shamelessly with Arya and made open often lewd overtures and gambits for her to come back to their quarters but she subtly diverted their overtures with a demur cast. She softened her rejection of their offers by her retiring responses. She played the ingénue too innocent to take them up on their offers of “endless bliss”. She was just not ready yet. She was intrigued but not to the point of sleeping with any of the aggressive women.

Oberyn looked at the retreating thunderhead. “We in Dorne with our flat lands see the beauty of thunderstorms too. When I was your age I would lie back on a blanket and watch them move from horizon to horizon and never once hear the toll or the reverberation of thunder from the brilliant lightning flashes.” The man looked over at the rainbows. He smiled softly.

Arya was a little surprised at seeing this side of the martial man. She resumed looking at the retreating storm and wondered what lands or ships it might visit before it rained itself out.

“You are good Arya. I would take you back to Dorne as my fosterling but I hear you have been fostered to Syrio Forel. Why go to Essos when we in Dorne can teach you and you do not have to leave Westeros?” Oberyn asked Arya. She turned her head to look at him. He was earnest.

“I am honored at your offer Oberyn. But my destiny lies with Syrio Forel. I wish to become a true Water Dancer. Only he can bring out the best in me. I do appreciate you offer though.”

Oberyn bowed his head slightly at Arya.

“You and your father have accomplished much Arya. I do wonder if your father’s ambition is greater than his reach.”

Arya felt her dander rising and glared at Oberyn. He noticed it and smiled.

“I am not attacking Arya but your father is bringing all his enemies onto himself. He has no army to back his claim. His enemies will lay siege before the North and the depleted Vale can arrive. It almost seems like a recipe for certain disaster. Can you enlighten me? Your father has only given me hints.”

Arya calmed down. She looked back over the castle walls at the retreating storm cloud.

“You know I cannot. My father will play the hand he has. I will help ensure it comes to pass.”

Oberyn snorted and smiled at Arya.

“Confidence. It suites you.” He looked her up and down with his dark eyes. Arya felt like he was undressing her with his eyes. She met his eyes and glared in return. She felt her ire flare when he laughed at her glare. He held up his hands.

“Worry not Arya. I will not attempt to seduce for it is clear where you desires lie. You are not bisexual in the least. You are like most of my daughters. You are a very attractive woman.” He sighed. “Your loss really” he winked at her.

Normally, she would been mad at his male ego but she had to admit that Oberyn had a charm about himself. Plus, he was damn pleasing to the eye. Even she could see that. He had that certain charisma that you were either born with or you weren’t.

“Can I join you?” was softly asked in a delicate musical timbre.

“Aaaaarrggghhh!” both Arya and Oberyn cried out. They both spun to look to their left. Neither
were used to being so easily caught off guard out in the open. Before them stood a smirking Leaf, the Queen of the Children of the Forest. She had on a simple tunic now that went down to her knees. It was green and brown and yet it seemed to blend into the reddish stones beside and beneath her. Her dark red eyes twinkled looking up at the humans.

Oberyn glared at her. He regained his composure. He looked down at the small woman.

“I hope you don’t expect me to bow down before you Leaf?” he asked in a sardonic but cautious tone.

The small woman shook her head ‘no’. Her face had a neutral cast.

In her light voice she answered “I do not. I was surprised by Eddard of House Stark making the gesture. In every way he surpasses you.” The words spoken without rancor or aggression. The words a simple fact.

Arya smiled seeing a sour look come over Oberyn’s face. Then both of the humans marveled seeing Leaf only slightly flex her knees and bounded up on the top of the battlement. Her body now above them. She breathed deep and looked at the fading rainbows as the humidity was burned out of the air.

“How you humans live in these ‘cities’ I will never understand. The filth staggers the senses. You allow so many of your brothers and sisters to live such sad lives.” She sighed heavily. “Still the beauty of nature lives on.” Arya and Oberyn watched her look at the fading storm. After a minute she lightly bounded back down to Arya and Oberyn.

She looked at Oberyn. “Once our people roamed the length and breadth of this continent. Only in Dorne did we not make a permanent home. The clime to hot and dry for our sensibilities. I can sense that your people live in harmony with that arid land. I commend you.”

A big smile came over Oberyn’s face his shoulders squaring. Oberyn was always quick to puff up at any compliment.

Arya and Oberyn saw the two Valyrians of Eddard’s personal guard approaching. Matamion and Jaehaegar Velnalys came up to Arya.

“It is time Arya. Your father is ready.” They turned to Leaf and bowed low. “We would be honored to escort you to the meeting our Queen of the Forest and Glen.”

Leaf bowed slightly. Arya watched the woman fall in between the two Valyrians. She fell in behind them. She preferred to keep to the rear if at all possible in such things. Curious, Arya turned back to look at Oberyn. He watched them depart with an intent gaze. The desire to follow obviously strong in him Arya saw. That was not to be. They went down the stairwell and entered the courtyard and headed to Council Chamber which housed the Small Council. The small party moved past Maegor’s Hold and the Tower of the Hand.

Arya shook her head. Varys still preferred to stay in the quarters he had lived in for well over twenty-five years now. Her father could care less where Varys wished to reside. Arya thought in a way that was a mark to the good for Varys. He eschewed prestige.

She also mused on the slow streaming in of former soldiers and commanders that had served under Rhaegar Targaryen. It seemed that these men saw something in her father that reminded them strongly of their former Heir Apparent to the Iron Throne. Since her father’s ascendancy to the Iron Throne there had been a steady flow of these men flitting in through the smuggler tunnels.
The men led by Druids to come to serve the new King. The desire to serve something greater made the men anxious to serve the new King. The men already arrived sending word that someone as great as Rhaegar had appeared. He had succeeded where Rhaegar had failed. Since her father’s ascension to the Iron Throne nearly three hundred more such men had arrived to serve. Varys vetted them and all seemed genuine in their desires to serve Eddard Stark their new King.

Those already arrived interacting and seeing that these new men were honest in their desire to serve the new King. They had waited a generation thinking the dream was dead. These men now had hope the flame had been lit once more.

The small party advanced down the courtyard to the drawbridge that separated the inner and outer courtyard. They walked across the bridge and moved on towards the Council Chambers building that housed many meeting halls and the Small Council.

Arya observed Leaf looking around at all the constructs of man. The small woman looking long at the soaring Tower of the Hand. She turned and looked at Arya.

“Your people construct great edifices that reach for the sun” she turned her head back to look forward.

Soon the party had reached the Council Chambers and entered into the building. They walked down two long halls and they were at the doors to the Small Council chambers. Matamion and Jaehaegar opened the doors for Leaf and bowed low. Arya watched Leaf tilt her head in acknowledgement.

Arya followed the party into the room. Arya as always looked at the two Valyrian sphinxes. The animals cleverly carved to make it seem that their polished garnet eyes followed her as she moved in the room. The black marble faces inscrutable in the secrets they kept within their stone hearts.

Arya looked around. She saw that her father had brought in the ornate chair of Robert Baratheon back into the room. It sat at the head of the table. The chair was made of a rich mahogany wood with ornate carvings of forest woods with stags, bores, bears, aurochs and wolves carved into the forest. The animals majestic as they gazed out from between the trees.

Her father was not sitting in it. On the other end of the table sat the Chair of the Hand. The chair had a high back with two slits on each side of the center spar going up to the headboard on the chair. The top ornately carved with a half circle ringing a sitting moon. The circle covered with spike projects at the very top and off to the sides of a central spike. It looked like a stylized rising sun.

Varys sat in that chair. His head bent down studying some scrolls. Arya saw to her left was Sansa, Myrcella, Tommen and she was happy to see Jeyne. She had taken her advice Arya thought. Yes! She had to make herself available to sister if they were to become lovers. She wished the small brunette success. On the other side was her father’s honor guard with Javer Goodbrook and Styve Grandison joining Matamion and Jaehaegar Velnalys. Her father sat beside them.

He had on neither crown nor fancy dress. You would have thought he was one of her father’s honor guard. He watched Arya and smiled at her. On the other side of the table was Merrel and Kiran. Down from them was the Hound and Merjen Sarovic. The two wearing long white cloaks with the sigil of the Kingsguard on them. Sandor had polished his armor till it gleamed. He had the symbol of the Kingsguard painted on his pauldrons and breastplate with enamel paint. Merjen had the same done to her own breastplate and instead of pauldrons she wore gardbraces on her shoulders.

To round out the retinue was Dromen Salver the new Grand Maester.

Arya went to sit beside her father. He rose up and walked around the table to stand before Leaf. He
bowed down to his knee.

“I am honored to have you here with me now Leaf. I am told you have made a dangerous, arduous trip to get here. I would find out why you have come and how I may be of service to you. I have given you my pledge of service. I will do all I can to make amends to the past and help repair the damage of ages past.”

Arya watched her father get up and pointed to the ornate chair used by the last King of Westeros.

“Please sit here Leaf.”

“Why are you not sitting at the head of the table?”

“I don’t need it my Majesty. I want you to sit there to show the respect I have for you and your people. I thought the woodland motif might in some way touch your sensibilities. If you wish to sit elsewhere I will understand.”

The small woman went to the chair. She studied the carved trees and animals for a few seconds before stepping up the one step that had been placed there. She sat down on the ornate chair. Her blood red eyes looked out over the inner circle of Eddard Stark.

Silence hung in the room. Eddard sat back down. He looked at Leaf seeing if she wanted to begin the conversation. She small elfin woman said nothing and merely looked around the table with her strange eyes.

Eddard tilted his head. He was to lead he saw. He sighed.

The King of Westeros got back out of his seat and walked to the king’s chair that he provided for the Queen of the Children of the Forest. He took the knee before her once again.

“I feel it necessary to again say how sorry I am for my race’s genocide against your people.” He turned to look a Merrel and Kiran. “Your order has been with me from the start. The support invaluable. If not for that support I would not be here now. I fear what would have happened to my daughters and the children of Cersei if not for that help. You gave the support even though you know of my family’s past slaughter of both your order and the Children of the Forest. I am sorry.”

He turned to Leaf. “I am sorry.”

“For now that is all I can offer. I hope, in time, to make a restitution to both of your people.”

Leaf looked down at the man on his knee. She rose up from her seat and stepped down to put herself before Eddard Stark.

She looked down at him intently. Her slit eyes focused on the man kneeling before her.

“Rise up Eddard of House Stark. You speak of the past. Your race is short lived. That was so many of your generations ago. It cannot be undone.” She paused her head rising up and her eyes looked distantly. She shook her head. “It was so long ago. I have come here not for the past but for the future. Rise up. Let us plot a better future.”

Eddard rose up. Arya knew her father would always be heavy of heart for the sins of House Starks’s past. Daughter could see that the father felt better hearing Leaf’s words. He would do all he could to make amends. The human and the elfin woman went back to their respective seats.

The woman from the past gazed at Eddard. Waiting. He spoke again.
“I must ask why you have journeyed so far. It had to be dangerous for you. Why risk leaving the Tree of Life? You are its guardian. Why leave it unprotected.

Leaf tilted her head. “To the point. Decisiveness. Good. I come because of you Eddard Stark. Like the Druids I too saw in the roots of the Tree of Life your coming. Unfortunately, all the roots foretold your demise. There are no Weirwoods in the South of Westeros. I could only see echoes of what might be. The Druids sent crows north to their brothers in the Haunted Forest and Frostfangs as you name them.”

“They read the scrolls before their Weirwood trees. Through them I saw what was happening here. I saw your injury. That was constant in the visions of your demise. All the visions showed this. This in turn would lead to your death. Then scrolls arrived that spoke of your daughter leading an Insurrection. Then your rise up from the seeming dead.”

“It was then that I traced all the myriad convolutions of the Tree of Life’s roots. Finally, I saw those few filaments that spoke of this timeline. They had to be there. They indeed were. When I read them they are nebulous but they show a time of rebirth and atonement.”

“The roots I had thought ascendant showed so much death and destruction for both your world but my own. I would die in an attempt to save your son, Bran.”

Arya saw her father start. His eyes glittered at this pronouncement. “That is impossible. He is at Winterfell.”

“You know the truth Eddard. He has been touched by the Three Eyed Crow. He is to become the next human Greenseerer.”

Arya watched her father stiffen at this news. Father looked at daughters who looked back concerned for their younger brother. He shook off the shock of that pronouncement.

Eddard spoke to Leaf with concern and a hint of flint in his voice “But he is a cripple. He does not have the strength for such a journey.” Eddard paused. His face set. “I do not want that for Bran. I know what the legends say of such men. Bran is to become one with the Tree of Life. He will fall out of human history. I refuse that as my son’s destiny.” His tone hard.

The Child of the Forest looked at Eddard with her own hard features.

“You ask to be of service. When I tell you how you balk?” Leaf spoke in a firm tone.

“I will make any sacrifice but Bran is still a child. What you ask is too much.”

“It does not matter what you think Eddard Stark. The Three Eyed Crow has chosen. It was your son’s injury that opened his mind. It was necessary. He must journey to the Tree of Life.”

Arya watched her father’s face twist as he processed all that he had just heard. My gods Arya thought. She knew her father was thinking the same thing. Cersei and Jamie were fated to push Bran out that window. He sat back stunned.

“Are you to take him back?”

“No. I must journey across the seas.”

Now Eddard was truly confused. “Why? What is in Essos?”

“I go to the Dragon.”
Eddard clearly trying to process all he was hearing. Eddard had told Arya he feared that Bran’s fate was sealed once he had visions of the Three Eyed Crow. It was always a portent of great change and doom. Now Leaf was saying she was to journey to Essos to meet Daenerys Targaryen.

The King looked at Leaf with sadness. “She is dead Leaf. She entered the Red Wastes in the time of the coming summer. She was broken and defeated when she entered that wasteland with only the old and children as her Khalasar. Her bones are bleaching beneath the hot sun.”

“That is your mind speaking. What does your heart say?” Leaf answered back.

Eddard shook his head no. “She is dead Leaf. I would wish it otherwise.”

“You are alive when almost all said you would die.”

“That was a miracle. I had supporters even in my darkest hour. That is what saved me. Daenerys had no such when she went into that hellish arid land. She must be dead by now or wishing that the gods would put her out of her dying misery.”

Leaf regarded Eddard. “I believe she will survive. Another miracle will occur.”

“Why is it so important that Bran go to the Tree of Life?” Eddard went back to the question of his son.

“The Tree of Life must have its Greenseerer. Bran is that person. Also, the Ice King has arisen and even now prepares to move south.”

Arya felt his heart go cold. She saw the same look on her father and Sansa’s faces. The Lannisters faces showed understanding but no fear. They did not believe. She saw understanding on his Grand Maester’s face. The rest in the room only had a look of confusion. They did not know of the Ice King.

“How do you know? Did you see him through the roots of the Tree of Life?”

“Yes. But I have another more sure reason to know he has awakened.”

Arya could see her father hesitate to ask but he needed the answer. He had to ask the question.

“How?”

“It was I who created him and his brothers. They have passed into legend but the Ice King endured. He was once Darrin Stark. The Stark line is strong.”

A silence fell over the room. It settled in and all looked around without speaking.

“As you see Eddard Stark, we all have things we must make atonement for.”

A grim resolve came on Arya’s father’s face. Arya wondered if her father felt the same coldness in his heart as he formed the question. “Why did you select this Darrin Stark?”

“He was a most vile, evil man. He hated your line with a passion. His greed and selfishness was great. He seemed the perfect weapon to strike back at our enemies. Unfortunately, he turned on his creators and helped break the back of our remaining power.”

“Both of our races made decisions that haunt us now. Let us make restitution.”

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Two days later Arya was walking back to her room. In her arms was a sack that squirmed and from within loud hissing could be heard. She smiled. She reached the door to her room. She put the sack down on the floor and loosened the drawstring. She jumped back.

First the sack writhed and jerked. Then movement headed for the neck of the sack. Out of the sack stepped a large yellow tabby cat. He turned and glared at Arya. He hissed at Arya several times. The cat then turned around with a regal bearing. He walked down the hall with his tail held high. He looked back once to give Arya one more baleful look and a long drawn out hiss.

She looked down at her hands and the scratch marks. Butter was the fastest, meanest of the Toms that Arya still chased. He tested her speed, endurance and reflexes.

As she chased the cat, she had again replayed the meeting with Leaf in the Small Council chambers. It had been fascinating hearing what the Queen of the Children of the Forest had to say.

She like her father had been shocked with the small woman’s pronouncement concerning Bran. She had seen her father struggle to accept the woman’s words. In the end her father had reached a compromise.

“I will do all I can to help you Leaf. Bran has his own destiny. If he deems to go the Tree of Life and accepts his fate then I will support him. If not, then I will defend his choice.”

“He will. He accepts his destiny.”

Arya knew Bran would accept his duty. He was her brother. He was a Stark. He would meet any challenge.

They had discussed with Leaf the turning of Darick Stark into the Ice Wright King.

“It was done with magic tied to my obsidian dagger. We created an abomination. We deserved our fate. Evil is evil. It cannot be controlled. Evil hates all. Even the ones who created it.”

Arya had seen that her father was affected by this news. She had not known too much of this distant past. Syrio had her studying military theory and recent battles that had their movements recorded and thus could be studied.

Then Leaf had surprised everyone in the Small Council yet again with her knowledge.

“Two armies approach. One from the North and East and the second comes up through the forest you call the King’s Wood. Your Druids are keeping you informed of this Merrel tells me. You do not seem concerned. In fact, he tells me you are calling all your potential foe here while you are weak.”

The Queen paused. “Why?”

Her father had smiled at Leaf then. He had looked up and down the table. No one made a motion to stop her father. Arya and everyone else in this room knew this woman of another race was on their side.

Her father had then explained his thinking and how he would attempt to bring all under his sway. All of this without a war.

The small woman sat back her eyes wide her pupils enlarged. She finally shook her head.

“Audacious. You are that confident?”
“I have to be Leaf. I know the other Houses and what they want and their leaders’ weaknesses. I saw what happened in Robert’s Rebellion. I think I can achieve all my goals through a more subtle Game of Thrones. I will sway all to my will in the end.”

“I just think you might” the Queen had replied.

Arya shook her hands and entered her room. She went to the bench beneath the window. There she kept the medicinal items their Grand Maester had left for her. Shaking her head Arya chuckled. She was always cutting and nicking herself with her grueling training. She hissed and jumped dabbing on the antiseptic cream into her cuts.

“By the old gods that stings” she hissed. She looked around. She did not want anyone seeing her showing any weakness. If she had been in front of others she would have ground her molars to keep from showing any reaction. She had a reputation to enhance!

She went to her closet area and started to pull off her leather forearm guards she had worn knowing she was going after Butter. She pulled off her tunic top and threw it in the corner where she had thrown her other dirty garments. Having chambermaids to clean up behind oneself was heavenly Arya smirked to herself. She pulled on a clean tunic and synched it up.

Without warning Arya spun around in a crouch. She had pulled her long dagger from the sheath she had on her right arm. Her eyes scanned the room. She searched the shadows but saw nothing. She trusted her instincts. She was not alone. The hairs on the nape of her neck and forearms were standing up on end. She retreated to the corner of her room keeping her back guarded by the wall.

Her eyes scanned the room but could not see … there by the bed and before the large open window with the large gossamer drapes that seemed to breathe in and out with the air currents flowing through the open windows. She saw something in them. Her eyes made her doubt her intuition. First she almost saw something and then it was gone. Then only to reappear and disappear again.

“Come out. I know you are there even if I can’t truly see you.”

Silence.

She analyzed what her eyes could barely discern.

“Come on Leaf. I know it is you.”

She heard a delicate tinkling sound. Leaf stepped from curtains. Her body shimmering and seeming to waver in and out of reality. Then her body seemed to shimmer and she was solid standing before Arya.

“I am impressed. You training has enhanced more than muscles. Human eyes are not as sharp as ours. Yet, still you perceived me. We are nocturnal by nature. The shadows suit us.”

Arya took in the look of Leaf. She had looked like a docile diplomat with her full length attire on in her meeting in the room of the Small Council. She did not have that on now. The Queen of the Children of the Forest wore a dappled green and brown tunic that looked like a wood thicket to Arya. The patterns on the cloak somehow seeming to have depth. On Leaf’s back was an unstrung compound bow and quiver. On her right hip was a scabbard with a jet black obsidian hilt sticking out of it. She had obsidian daggers on her thighs. She looked like a warrior Queen.

Seeing Leaf so armed had Arya cocking her eyebrow. “You like you are going to war my Queen.”

“Yes. This was how I went to war in times past. Now, I wish to merely train with you. You are
going to take archery practice are you not scion of Eddard of House Stark.”

The teenager was surprised. She indeed was. “Would like to join me?”

“Yes.” Leaf replied and stood looking at Arya with her red eyes.

The two looked at each other.

“Okay” Arya felt the strangeness in the air. She felt the difference between her human self and Leaf’s ancestry. “Let me get ready.”

Arya finished changing her clothing. She went to the mirror and combed out her hair. She parted hair around her ears. She picked up her small cutting scissors and trimmed her bangs. She turned her head and looked at the hair running down her neck. It would be time to trim that soon. She liked this new look. She would keep it for a while she decided.

The teenager went over and put on her two scabbards on her right hip for Needle and the Braavosi rapier that Syrio had gifted her with. She grabbed her bow and quiver. She saw the Queen of the elfin folk looking at her up and down. Arya arched an eyebrow.

“You cut quite the figure Arya of House Stark. You are very martial looking. You remind me of my mate.”

“Is he back at the Tree of Life? Is he protecting the Greenseerer?”

Leaf tilted her head smiling enigmatically. Then her smile went sad.

“No. My mate was killed almost eight thousand years ago. We fought at what you call Winterfell. There we lost and were thrown out of our second most sacred holy ground. Bran the Builder as you name him turned on us after we had helped him to start erecting the Wall.”

This news hit Arya like a thunderbolt. Her mind went white in rage. “Bullshit!” Arya roared. “I have learned of the battles between our people but the Starks are a great noble house!” In her anger she had pulled Needle from its scabbard and made a step forward.

“You prove my words true Arya Stark.” Leaf showed no fear. She did not seem even perturbed. That stopped Arya cold. She backed up and lowered her sword. A deep breath was taken by Arya Stark. With a slow deliberate motion Arya put Needle back in her scabbard. The Stark teenager felt chagrined at her rash actions. She had acted like a teenager and shamed herself.

“I do not know what you speak of Leaf. I have not heard or read anything of this. This … this just can’t be” her voice trailing off. A great unease flowed in Arya’s veins.

“The victors right the histories among your race that later generations read” Leaf calmly replied to Arya’s statement. “Brandon expunged his malicious deceit from the written word. Our history is oral. We do not forget. Some of us lived it.”

“But … but why? What is so important about Winterfell?”

“The Weirwood tree within in your castle walls is the second oldest Weirwood tree that lives. Only the Tree of Life is older. In our lore they have always existed. They are from the birth of the World. Your castle walls are shaped as they are to cover the Ley lines that intersect and empower the Pool of All Tomorrows that lies before the Weirwood tree. From that scared pool we cast the spells to shatter the Arm of Dorne and then when we tried to shatter the Neck of Westeros.”
“Your ancestors did not want us to have the power to attempt such a feat again. Thus the battle we fought on the grounds of your now home. We fought bravely but in the end there was too many humans and your weapons of metal superior to our weapons of obsidian.”

Arya reeled from the new knowledge. She knew Leaf did not lie. Her father would not take this new knowledge well. She made a snap decision to keep this information to herself. Her father had been hurt with enough news on their families cruel past to the Children of the Forest. It seemed she and her father had many sins to atone for.

“I am sorry. I don’t have any words to say to make up for what happened in the past. For the death of your husband.”

“My wife. Her name was AutumnLeaf. She was so beautiful. She was a fierce warrior. She killed many of your kind before she was cut down.”

Hearing Leaf call Arya’s race ‘your kind’ did not anger Arya now. That would be how Leaf would looked at the people who had invaded her land. The people who committed genocide against them. Then Arya fully processed the new information.

“You were married to a woman?” A thrill ran through Arya hearing this. The idea of marrying the woman you loved made Arya long for such a right in the world of man. Still, to merely hear of this gave Arya some hope. She felt a little guilty for finding the fact that Leaf was married to a female so compelling considering what they had just discussed.

Arya could not help it. She flushed a little. That information gave Arya hope for her future.

“Yes. Our people only care for the love between individuals. The sex of the parties involved does not matter to us. We are free to pick the mates that complete us. This is something else that your kind still has to learn. The full freedom of choice. But enough of this talk of deeds done in the long ago past. We have a future to conjure for our tomorrows. For today let us practice our weapons.”

Arya led Leaf out into the hallways of the Red Keep. As they walked down the hallways Arya noticed they passed the intersection where she had killed Lannisters with her bow on the first day of her Insurrection. She did not feel any joy. She only felt the grim resolve of doing what she had to do to save her father. This spot had been the beginning of her part in the Insurrection.

They passed display stands of armor, weapons and heirlooms of both House Targaryen and House Baratheon. Leaf looked at the displays and the tapestries that hung on the wall.

“Humans create such works of beauty.” Leaf gazed at the next displays they came upon. “If only your endeavors were limited to the creation of beauty.

Arya kept silent. She had nothing to say. The past was done. She could not undo the sins of the past.

They went to the outer courtyard. Here they had the distance necessary for Arya to practice her archery at the ranges she wanted to shoot. Arya went to a small storage shed built along the outer curtain wall. She grunted pulling out some practice archery butts. The large straw filled square targets. Arya saw Leaf go to the shed and pull one out for herself. Arya had no false modesty. Leaf seemed to be able to handle the weight easy enough.

The two women of different races placed the butts along the outer wall that had clear space on each side. Then Arya went back to the storage enclosure and pulled out large parchment sheets that had black circles ringed in from the outside of the sheaf down to the innermost ring colored red. They
tacked them in place.

Leaf watched while Arya stepped off ninety paces to measure out one hundred and fifty yards. The two women retrieved their bows and went to a line of paving stones that marked their line to shoot from. Arya looked at Leaf and she motioned for Arya to shoot first. The wind was swirling as it normally did with the breezes coming off the Bay and river mouth of the Blackwater River.

The wind tended to blow from east to west up to the early afternoon. The winds coming in behind Arya and generally flowing right to left.

Arya strung up her bow and then drew it back again and again getting her shooting muscles limbered up. She did some deep knee flexes. The teenager slowed her breathing and pulled an arrow from her quiver. She felt on her skin how the breezes were currently flowing. She put the notch on the bowstring and slowly pulled the string back to her ear. She used the standard three finger draw. She let the bow become one with her. She felt her heartbeat calming. Between beats she released the bowstring.

The arrow buzzed through the air like an angry hornet. The arrow hit the target two inches off from the center point. Arya’s eyebrows arched. The wind was swirling. She looked over at Leaf. She motioned with her head for Arya to fire again.

With a slow rhythm Arya shot off the fifteen arrows in her quiver. Half of the arrows hit within two inches of the center of the central ring. All the rest of the arrows landed within the red except one that had landed an inch above the red ring. The wind had gusted with that shot Arya thought sourly. She had seen Leaf out of the corner of her eye studying her as she shot. She turned to the Queen of the Children of the Forest.

“Your turn my Queen” Arya said with a slight bow of her head.

Arya watched the woman take her bow off her back and quickly string it up. The bow so unusual looking compared to the standard bows of Westeros. The double curves strange to Arya’s sensibilities. The small elfin woman lifted her bow up and in a fluid motion pulled an arrow from her quiver. Arya noticed that the arrowhead was made of obsidian. This made no sense to her.

“Excuse me Leaf” she asked diffidently.

The small elfin woman paused in her motion and looked at Arya with a quizzical look.

“Why do your people still use obsidian?”

“It is what we have always used.”

“Yes, but against our steel armor it is useless.”

“We need obsidian to kill the Ice King and his brothers. It also kills the Walking Dead he has learned to raise from the Earth.”

“I see that but we were also your foes. Your weapons were too brittle to contend with our armor.”

“We would have had to break into the Earth to mine the raw material to make such weapons. We would have had to use trees to light the kilns. We refused to harm the Earth to make such weapons.”

The teenager took in the words of her companion. She shook her head.
“That is sophistry.”

“That is sophistry.”

Arya gave Leaf a squint smile. “It is the use of fallacious arguments, especially with the intention of deceiving.”

“I do not like being called a liar” Leaf said with an icy tone.

“I don’t mean it as an insult really. You allowed a code of ethics to prevent you from making weapons that might have allowed you to achieve victory. With our superior weapons it still took us millennium to defeat your race. Your code guaranteed our victory.”

“We would not harm the Earth” the elfin now spoke with heat in her voice.

“A small harm for a greater good. That is a small tradeoff Leaf. I know our race chopped down the forests and the Weirwood trees. Your decision to not dig for iron ore and coke nor a willingness to sacrifice some trees ensured your defeat. You needed to adapt to the changing times. A small harm for a greater good.”

The small woman now regarded Arya with her blood red eyes. She took a deep breath.

“Perhaps. But that is long past.” She now smiled at Arya. “Maybe if you had led us instead of me the world have taken a different path. Let us practice with the weapons we have now.” She turned and again lifted her bow and now notched her arrow to the string.

Slowly the small Queen of the Children of the Forest pulled her bowstring to her ear. She studied the target for a short moment. She then turned to look at Arya her eyes away from the target. She smiled at Arya and released her bowstring. The arrow hit dead center of the center ring.

Arya’s mouth fell open. Then in rapid order the elfin woman pulled her arrows out of her quiver and fired her arrows one after another at the target. She did not once look at the target. Arrow after speed out to the target and unerringly landed in the center of the bullseye. There was not one outlier. Arya was godsmacked. Her mouth hanging open. She kept looking between the target and Leaf. Her eyes had a dazed look.

“Wha— … ho-ho-howwwww that is impossible.” She now looked at Leaf for explanation.

With a mirthful countenance Leaf answered the stunned teenager.

“My senses are much sharper than your human senses. I can feel the very air currents spinning about. I feel the pressure of incoming gusts. Also, I have had fourteen thousand years to practice. How long have you been practicing?”

Arya had to think for a second “almost eight years now.”

“The difference in years is beyond measure. This explains how I can do what I do. I am amazed at your skill for one so young among your kind. Do not let it bother you. I hear it said you are the Air Dancer. I believe the words. In combat you operate off pure instinct. You are feral Arya Stark. I do believe you will indeed tame the Dragon.”

There it was again Arya thought. The reference to a Dragon. She was the Direwolf who would tame it. The only problem with all this talk of dragons was the simple fact that dragons were no more. The thought sad. Arya shook her head at what had been lost.
“Let us shoot some more Leaf. I have far to go I see.”

“Why are you staying cooped up in this room woman! Go out and find a bedmate. There are always parties that the courtesans are hosting. Plenty of whore houses to cater to whichever itch you may be feeling. Ellaria and I would be happy to have you grace our bed again.”

Oberyn wagged his eyebrows at his niece. “You know what they say. Incest is best, keep it in the family. Well I would say we are most definitely family.” Her uncle wagged his eyebrows again.

Arianne scowled at her Uncle. “You are a pig Oberyn. A virile pig but still a pig.”

Oberyn went around Arianne’s room oinking and had his index fingers on the side of his mouth sticking out and made gestures at Arianne as he bumped into her and used his fingers to pretend he was looking for mushrooms all over her body.

She finally relented and laughed at his antics. That made Oberyn laugh. The smile on his face made Arianne feel good. Her uncle was a good man.

“Seriously though Arianne. You really are studying too much. Come to our bed or someone else’s bed. Let off that tension woman!”

“I appreciate your thoughts Oberyn but I want to be prepared for any possibility. I know what Eddard Stark promised our House but I can’t figure out what Eddard Stark wants in return. He doesn’t even wear a circlet on his head or a royal cape. When he walks down the halls he looks like any other man. What is his damn game?” Arianne’s voice trailed off. The man sought power but refused to take on any of its trappings. Then why seek the power? Arianne wondered to herself.

With a shake of his head Oberyn answered his niece’s question “Sometimes Arianne there is nothing hidden. Eddard is a lot like your father but also a great warrior. A most rare combination. Rhaegar had much of these qualities but not enough as we discovered on the Trident. The trappings of power and prestige means nothing to the man. He did not take the Iron Throne when he could have during Robert’s Rebellion. You read our jackals reports. He hesitated to take the throne now. The man is truly focused on the greater good.”

Arianne snorted.

“It is true. Unlike your father, my brother, Eddard has learned to be decisive.”

“He had better be decisive” Arianne shot back at her uncle. To her reasoning Eddard’s actions were borderline suicidal. “Our jackals reported when forces loyal to Stannis left Storm’s End. He has been mustering his forces in the Crownlands at Duskendale and left last week to march south. They will be here in two days if they march at normal speed. No more than four days if the weather turns rainy.”

“What do you think the Lannisters will do uncle? Will they contend with Stannis’s forces?”

“If they want to commit suicide they will. To arrive here quickly they did not bring any knights. Stannis’s army may not be overly large but they do have at least four thousand knights. The Lannisters will not be able to contend with that. They will let Stannis through.”

Arianne turned over her uncle’s reasoning. “I concur. The Lannisters have consumed their staples they brought with them. They are now having scour the land to find food for themselves and their horses. They are having to go further afield to find food. This is disorganizing their lines. Stannis
will have the same problem soon enough. With the forces harassing the Lannisters in the field they are not getting any reinforcements and staples till Tywin gets here. That is still a two to three weeks away.”

“It is obvious that Eddard is drawing all the Major Houses to him. He is sure he can get Tywin to do what we wish” Oberyn told his niece. “Eddard has become a cagy fox in his advancing years” he chuckled.

Arianne eyed her uncle who was of similar age. Both men were still fully fit and full of vigor.

The two discussed matters of state for a few more minutes.

Arianne could not keep from probing. “How is Ellaria handling her failures to seduce Eddard?” She asked in a light voice.

Oberyn snorted. “She is like you in the sense that she simply cannot fathom the man. Ellaria is flummoxed by a man who has absolute control of his more base desires. She is so sure that somewhere in his breast beats the heart of an adultery. Eddard is like poor Arthur Dayne. He really is that pure and noble in his control of himself and what he desires for the Iron Throne.”

“What is that?” Arianne asked curiously.

“Why the greater good niece. That is all the man wants.”

Arianne’s face showed her doubts then it cleared. “Maybe you are right Uncle Oberyn. I can find no evidence to the contrary.” She now changed subjects. “His youngest daughter seems to be quite skilled in arms. I am surprised that a man in the north of Westeros would allow such a thing.”

“I know. This too surprised me when our jackals first reported this defying of custom by Eddard. Arya has become quite skilled indeed. She is very good with her sword. She has a long way to go but she is studying and practicing relentlessly. Syrio Forel is indeed a Water Dancer and he is training her hard every day. It is with the bow that she is already truly amazing. Her accuracy is almost otherworldly. I have talked to some of the men that raided the Lannisters last month. They were awe at some of the shoots she made.”

Oberyn watched his niece process that information. He did not pass on his insights to who Daenerys Targaryen would be attracted to if she yet somehow lived. It would be these skills that would catch the young Targaryen’s eye and then her heart. It didn’t matter though. She was long dead by now.

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Branton Lannister felt the heat of the midday sun on his armor. He was sweating heavily. Two days ago the pickets he had set out a day’s distant from King’s Landing had sent runners back to their basecamp. His men who were watching both the King’s Road and Rosby Road had sent back reports that armies were marching down both roads and would arrive at the same time at King’s Landing. The forces coming down from north by east were estimated to be seven thousand and the forces coming up the King’s Road from Storm’s End to be five thousand.

The numbers put them roughly twice his forces. Unfortunately, they had at least four thousand if not five thousand knights with them. He did not have the forces to fight them. He looked back at King’s Landing. He feared that if he did attempt to engage the forces of the Stag the Direwolf would sally forth and attack and hamstring the rear of his forces.

Branton took a long deep breath. He could now see the forces of Stannis coming up around the Red Keep. The forces from Rosby Road had arrived two hours ago and took up a blocking position
before his forces. He dared not attack. Their heavy horse would charge into him. The first force had engaged his line and Branton knew that Stannis himself was coming up from the south.

Branton had been helpless but to wait. He felt seething anger at being so impotent. He had to swallow his bile. Twenty minutes later Stannis’s forces from Storm’s End had come up on Branton’s rear and left flank.

He had run up his standard with a white flag on it. It was time to parlay.

He kicked his horse forward. From the forces from Dragon Stone a tall man came forward with his honor guard. His large frame made it easy to spot Stannis. The man was six foot five inches and broad-shouldered with sinewy muscles on his limbs. Branton noticed he had the Baratheon dark blue eyes and the heavy brow of that House. He had thinning jet black hair on his head. He wore a close-cropped beard on his large square jaw.

Those were the good features of the man. Branton thought his demeanor ruined the man’s rugged good looks. His face had a tightness to it. It made the man’s face appear like cured leather from the constant sour looks crossing Stannis’s face. He had hollow cheeks, and thin, pale lips that only accentuated his constant pursing of his lips and half snarls flitting across his visage.

All knew the demeanor of the Lord of Dragon Stone. He was infamous for it. Stannis was a serious, stubborn, rarely-forgiving, hard man with a strong sense of duty and justice. Most would say self-righteous Branton thought sarcastically. The Lannister had heard the man always ground his teeth at the slightest perceived offense. Of which the man found plenty.

Branton had read the reports of the man. He was an accomplished commander, sailor, and warrior though he did not lead from the front like his older brother had. He had no thirst for the thick of battle instead preferring to command from the rear. He had never had the affection of nobles or smallfolk alike. He was too serious and sour for that. In his adult life, he had become increasingly embittered by the lack of affection he received from his elder brother the now fallen king.

The two parties came together. The two groups ten paces apart. They stared at each other. Silence hung thick in the air.

Branton opened the parlay, “Why are you here Stannis Baratheon? Are you hear to help me crush the Insurrection of Eddard Stark and return Joffrey to his rightful place on the Iron Throne? Have you come to demand justice for House Lannister?”

Branton had read and heard that Stannis was not a man for easy courtesies.

“You are the usurper. I am the brother of Robert Baratheon. Joffrey is an ill begotten spawn of incest. He has no right to anything but the executioner’s sword. It is I who should and will be king.” The words spoken forcefully.

Branton saw Stannis’s cheeks bulge and work. He was almost sure he heard the man’s molars grinding.

It was then he noticed that beside Stannis was another tall figure sitting a horse beside the man. The figure was taller than his own five foot ten inches by at least four inches. The person wore a robe that had a deep cowl and hid all the facial features of the figure. What really caught Branton’s features was the vaguely feminine form to the figure. It was a tall voluptuous woman that sat beside the pretend king.

He stared at the figure but could perceive no more. He shook his head.
“That is blasphemous. Those are only lies spewed by Eddard Stark to legitimize his treasonous actions. You know this. I know this. If you have not come to join forces with my command then I must order you to return from whence you came from. It is House Lannister that sits on the Iron Throne. Before the seven gods it is so.”

It was then Branton noticed that Stannis had changed his standard. Instead of the noble stag in relief it was now just the head of the stag in a red heart with flames wreathed around the heart. The head black, heart red and flames muted yellow. It paled before the beauty of the traditional flag of House Baratheon.

“I do not follow your gods. I follow the god of R’hlilor.”

Branton gasped a little. “Heretic.”

“So be it” Stannis barked. He gave Branton a look of pure disdain. “Let me inform you what will happen. Eddard has given me passage to enter King’s Landing. You will let me and my party through. My army will camp near the Rosby Road. We will have a truce.”

“If I refuse?” Branton retorted.

“I will annihilate you. I will charge my knights into your ranks and shatter your lines and then my foot will decimate what is left. I give you one minute to decide.”

Branton felt a thrill go through him. The man was sanctimonious to be sure but also decisive. Branton had no knights to oppose the forces of Stannis. The man had not been able to rouse even half of his lands to his banner but it was more than enough to crush his depleted forces.

Branton cursed his situation. Jamie Lannister and Gregor Clegane were being harried and slowly bled by a thousand cuts and were not able to bring their forces to bear to aid his situation. They were chasing an ever elusive foe. He knew Tywin was coming but he was not here now and was at best weeks out.

He was not an idiot. He had to be diplomatic for now.

“I will accept your fair and reasonable terms Stannis. You will find Eddard to be treasonous. I will lead your party to the wall of King’s Landing.”

He noticed Stannis only gave him a stiff formal bow and a scowl. He would love to wipe it off his face but he did not have the forces to do it. He was having a hard enough time merely foraging food from the landscape. He was starting to worry. He knew he was building up resentment from the local populace. He expected them to start using their local knowledge of the land to start adding their ambushes to his forces.

Branton was not a fool. He would not lead his men to slaughter.

He formed up his men and escorted Stannis to the Gate of the Gods of King’s Landing. He would have to let Eddard Stark lead the next dance steps to this play he had started.

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Eddard leaned against the curtain wall of King’s Landing. He had watched the forces of Stannis Baratheon move in from the northwest and from the southeast. He again thought how fortunate he was to have the Druids as his allies.

Without them he would have been surprised with their appearance on the plains before King’s
Landing. The new King was trapped on an island. He did not have the ability to send out scouts. Without this ability, he would have had to make changes to plans and implement those changes in haste to his preconceived strategies. Instead he was almost able to act leisurely.

Varys’ contacts in Dragon Stone and Storm’s End had sent word that the armies of Stannis were mustering and then their departure. Their messages had then been taken by porters who went down to the docks. There they took ship to travel to King’s Landing. It took over a week and a half in the case of Storm’s end for the news to reach King’s Landing.

Instead of having to rely on the traditional means of communication, with the ravens of the Druids, the news had reached King’s Landing in less than two days. The Druids tracking the movements of Stannis’s forces sending more crows over the passing days letting Eddard know exactly how fast they were coming and over days of observation the exact composition of his forces. The forces never knew they were constantly being spied upon. The Druids mirroring the forces of Stannis at distance but not so great as to not fully perceive and report upon his forces moving to King’s Landing.

Eddard had then sent word to Beric Dondarrion by the Druids who had embedded themselves with the various warring parties of the Lord. Eddard asked that he increase his attacks on the forces of the Lannisters on their north and east flanks. This would orientate the forces of Jaimie Lannister and Gregor Clegane in that direction and away from the advancing forces of Stannis. Even if word somehow was gotten to them they would be too pressed with attacks to come to the aid of the Lannister forces before King’s Landing.

The advance notice Stannis’s arrival had Eddard ready to implement the plan he had devised to hopefully keep relative peace between the two camps and help alleviate the raiding done by the Lannister forces looking for forage to feed their men, horses and oxen. With their lines of communication cut there was no reinforcements or supplies coming to them. In truth though, most armies after they bivouacked, quickly had to start raiding the lands around their camps looking for food for their troops and forage for their animals.

He looked beside him. Arya was on a stepping stone looking down at the armies below them. The father was proud of what he saw. When Arya had seen the first army appear before the walls of King’s Landing she had been almost overwhelmed by the seeming large size. Now she calmly assessed the forces below gauging and looking for both their strengths and weaknesses. No more being overwhelmed but instead calm, cool assessment.

The father also admired his daughter in her martial attire and bearing. Arya stood with her shoulders squared and head held high in pride and fearlessness. She was wearing her leathers. The leather had been freshly oiled. They seemed to glow in the sunlight. Her boots had been oiled and shined to a high luster. Her wool skirt freshly washed and pressed. Her weapons on her hip and long daggers on her thighs.

Arya’s father had asked his daughter to wear her quiver and had her bow unstrung and strapped across her back. Arya was quickly improving as a swordsman but it was her skill with the bow and arrow that had already earned her the reputation of being a fierce ‘Direwolf’.

Surrounding the King were his honor guard with his Lord Commander and his one Kingsguard he had selected so far. Eddard smiled. It was sweet as his daughters would say. Sandor being his Lord Commander would definitely shock the Lannister forces. Seeing a woman in his Kingsguard would also set tongues to wagging.

Sandor Clegane and Merjen Sarovic had their armor polished to a gleam. They both wore their full length capes. Normally they only wore a half cloak to save weight and give freer range of motion in
case of a fight. They were dressed to impress and, thus, willing to forgo some freedom of range of motion. There would be no combat this day.

Syrio came walking up. He had on a new set of leathers himself. The dark brown leather tight fighting showing off his fit body. He had silver clasps keeping the draw strings in place. His rapier on his back. He had trimmed his beard and his hair trimmed back from the slightly scruffy look he preferred. He came to stand beside Arya.

The two smiled at each other. Eddard was happy that Arya and Syrio had such a close relationship. Arya worshipped her sword instructor and was advancing rapidly under his tutelage. Syrio training not only Arya’s body but her mind. Arya open to learning all he had to teach. Eddard helped in his daughter’s training when he could.

Oberyn came up to the battlements. Ellaria was at his side. She smiled seductively at Eddard. He smiled back and tilted his head. He then looked back over the battlements and down at the forces before him. He would be polite with Ellaria but would not give her anything to try and seduce him with.

As they watched, all saw Stannis step forward under a white flag of parlay towards the force of the Lannisters.

Eddard followed the two groups as they met between their drawn up armies. The new King fretted a little. Though he was sure no fighting would breakout a niggling worm of doubt remained. Branton Lannister knew he was in a no win position. He just hoped that Stannis would not be his stiff, unrelenting self and somehow cause a skirmish to breakout. They watched for a few minutes as the two mounted parties talked to each other. All remained calm. Then the two groups who had parlayed started to move towards the traditional gate of entry into King’s Landing, the Gate of the Gods.

Eddard called out to his party that they needed to move. They went to the door that led to the stairwell down to the courtyard.

Eddard had a thought.

“Oberyn, Ellaria” they had been looking down at the approaching parties. “I would like your company when I go out to parlay. If you wish.” He saw the two smile with radiant smiles. Eddard smiled back. Another thought came to Eddard. “Oberyn, come out with your spear. We are armed so should you be. We will wait.” Another large smile came to Oberyn’s face. He rushed off.

Eddard knew he had scored more points with House Martell. Also, Stannis and Branton would see the Red Viper with him. Oberyn’s paramour with him. Their presence showing Eddard’s supreme control of the situation. Ellaria followed Eddard’s party down with a big smile on her face. She definitely liked being included Eddard could see.

The party moved down the stairs quickly. The sound of so many feet and rustling armor echoed off the walls. The party came out into the open and marched across the outer courtyard to get to the horses and wagons that Eddard had by the Gate of the Gods. Again, Eddard was thankful for the Druids and their crows. He had all in place. No rushing to make his plans reality.

The Druids would stay hidden. They were an unknown to Westeros and wished to remain so. Only Eddard and his inner circle communicated with the Druids and knew of them. To others if they perceived the Druids at all they only knew them as some vague allies of Eddard Stark. Varys reported there was whispers of them in tomes of the histories of Westeros. The information vague and often thought of more as legends of the barely remembered Age of Heroes.
Secrecy has served the Druids well and would continue too. The Druids out in the field helped the forces of Eddard Stark but did not reveal any knowledge of their past or their homes to those helping to defeat the forces arrayed against the King of Westeros.

The forces of Eddard were too thankful to have their help to worry more about their new allies. Eddard thought dourly that he had to make sure that Casterly Rock and Highgarden especially remain as ignorant of the Druids as possible. Those two houses were simply too conniving for Eddard’s taste.

The Druids made their homes in the deep forests, high mountains passes and in the deep swamps of the Neck. With secrecy, those redoubts should remain safe. Eddard felt sorry for any who would attack the Druids in their hidden homes.

Reports from mountains east of Lannisport bore that out. After the first Lannister force had been savaged marching toward King’s Landing, Tywin had logically sent several regiments into the mountains near the Gold Road. Eddard had sent crows telling the Druids of that land that Tywin would try and sweep them from the passes. The Druids had reported back they too thought this. They would prepare. Eddard gave them the tactics he thought the Lannister’s might use.

Druid communities were small by their very nature. They like the Children of the Forest lived at one with their natural habitats. Crows had flown up and down the mountains of the west. Druids from the constituency of Riverlands were able to send large numbers of their warriors. Communities from the Granite and Seminoe Mountains above the Whispering Wood sent large numbers. Also numbers were sent from communities between the headwaters of the Tumblestone and Wayfarer’s Rest to the East. The high ranges of Absaroka Mountains between.

Along the Gold Road itself the communities in the Brokenback and Cascade Mountains were not only fighting to make the Gold Road very dangerous for the Lannisters but also fighting on their home territories. Smaller numbers were sent from the southern mountain ranges. These were in deeper Lannister lands and needed large numbers for home defense. Still they sent what men and women they could.

The steep mountains and scree filled paths along with the towering trees and thick scrub brush had given the Druids all the cover they needed. They always fought from distance and used animal tracks only they knew of to constantly attack the rear of the Lannister forces trying to bull their way onto the mountains sides. From there they hoped to fan out into the hidden valleys and along the more prevalent mountain trails.

After two weeks Tywin had learned his lesson and pulled his forces back to the main road in the mountain passes. The losses on his side had been horrendous. The old lion knew one cannot lead where the soldiers refused to go. It had become certain death to enter into the mountains. The men close to rebellion.

As Eddard moved to the gate he mulled over the Druids. When he became King he would ensure that the forest and mountains of Westeros would be left in peace. Eddard would start to grow back the forests in the north and enlarge the Kingswood and the Rainwood where possible. Those were problems for another day. He had Throne to secure first. Then he could start to make restitution.

He and his party mounted up on their horses. He called out to the main horse tender and ordered that two more horses be brought up. Three men were rushed to where spare horses were being kept in case any horse came up lame. They had spare saddles they rushed to put on the horses. They would not be perfect fits for Oberyn and Ellaria but good enough.

Eddard and his party only had to wait for several extra minutes when Oberyn came rushing back
with his favorite spear. He had put it away in a small store room to keep from lugging it around. He never went far without his favorite spear. He smiled at Eddard shaking his spear at him. The enthusiasm of the man was infectious Eddard thought. Oberyn helped his paramour mount her horse and adjusted her stirrups and synched up her saddle making sure it was completely secure. Eddard touched at his show of concern and love for his woman.

The gate slowly drew open. Eddard was at the head with his youngest daughter at his side. She had earned the right to be on his right hand. He would not be here without her. His Kingsguard right behind him and both flanked by his Honor Guard.

The column moved out of King’s Landing and moved forward a hundred yards. The now merged party of Baratheons and Lannisters moved across the grasslands to where Eddard waited for them. He sat patiently with his party.

He observed Stannis when he was close enough. Eddard smirked smiled. The man was definitely grinding his molars. He observed a tall figure beside him. The person wore a long robe that went down to the ankles. He was surprised to see the figure when the parties closed ranks. The woman was definitely voluptuous to give the robe the curves it held despite the unflattering material.

This surprised Eddard. Stannis was very traditional in his thinking. To have a woman beside him was, well, shocking. The woman rode with a straight back. That was good. Confidence.

He turned his gaze upon Branton Lannister. The man scowled at him.

The two parties stopped with ten yards between them. Their horses pawing the ground and nickering.

“I would invite both the Houses of Baratheon and Lannister into King’s Landing. There I have a meal setup. Within the walls of King’s Landing I would hold a truce. Let the Ritual of Guest Right bind us to peace. The leaders of both Houses can enter. Your armies will remain outside the walls.”

“You are not in a position to give conditions Eddard Stark” Stannis barked out his face turning a little red in his agitation. “I am the brother of Robert Baratheon. The throne by right is mine. I demand you step off the Iron Throne and I ascend.”

Already Eddard sighed to himself.

“Robert acquired the Iron Throne though insurrection. He took what was not his. As I took it from Joffrey Baratheon. The person who has the legitimate claim to the Iron Throne is Daenerys Targaryen. If she lives. She is not here. Your claim is invalid. I am the King of Westeros.”

“No! I am the King. Robert took the crown from a mad King. It by right is in my House. I will be King.” Stannis was shaking slightly with his repressed ire. His eyes filled with fire.

“Hummmmm” Eddard intoned. “You are right. We are both armed.” He started to dismount. “I will fight you here and now for the crown. Prepare to die Stannis Baratheon.”

“Wait! I do not mean to contend in arms!” Stannis shouted out. “You have invited all the Great Houses to meet to decide. I will wait.” Stannis’s face clearly said he had no wish to fight Eddard Stark for the Iron Throne. Maybe as a last resort but not now. Both men knew who the victor would be.

“Branton, I invite you to the Guest Right ritual. We will wait for Tywin to come to us.”

“I will not do such a thing as long as Cersei and her children are in the dungeons and in fear of their
lives! You scum.”

Eddard let the insult pass.

“Why they were never in the dungeons. They have stayed in their rooms they have always had. I will have you know that Myrcella and Tommen are part of my inner circle helping me in bringing my plans to fruition. They are both quite intelligent and clever.”

Branton looked shocked. “You lie!”

“Oh. I assure you it is the truth. Cersei is somewhere in the Red Keep. I keep a loose watch on her but she is free to go as she pleases. Joffrey I do keep a close guard on but he has the same freedoms. He chooses by and large to stay in his quarters or be with his siblings.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You can check for yourself. I will have a heavy guard with you of course and I will require that you relinquish your sword in the Red Keep. Otherwise you will have free access in the Red Keep as well as King’s Landing. I will give you lodging if you desire. I extend that offer to your high commanders.”

The man looked at Eddard clearly trying to decide if he was being truthful. It was clear that Branton was shocked by the generosity being offered to him.

“As a token of my good will I have assembled these wagons you see. They are filled with victuals for two armies. The even number wagons are for the Lannisters and the odd number wagons are for the forces with Stannis Baratheon. There was forty wagons filled with victuals and some clothing to fill spot need.

Branton was reeling in his saddle. “Why? I am laying siege to your damn City!”

“You are raiding the land and the homesteads of the local farmers. You are disrupting their ability to prepare for the coming winter. You are destroying property, crops and taking livestock. The resentment towards you growing. Soon your men will start to die at night and in ambush from the local populace in their anger.”

“In your anger you retaliate by burning and killing. The cycle growing ever worse. I wish to prevent that.”

“I am bringing in grains and long term vegetables from Pentos and Dorne. I am buying pigs and sheep for butchering to provide fresh meat. I will provide as much as I can. The bounty of the water that surrounds King’s Landing I have plenty. I can provide fresh fish and shellfish a plenty.”

“I have sent word to the those whom live in King’s Landing who sell food and provide services for daily life to set up shop outside the gates of King’s Landing. Under heavy guard the gates will open for one hour in the early morn and late afternoon. Vendors allowed out to setup their stalls. Commerce will be established. Fresh cooked food and basic services for your armies and coin for the population. Both win. If the peace is maintained I will allow this to continue.”

Eddard turned to Stannis directly. “Do not be overly proud Stannis. Soon your army will consume what you have brought in your wagon train. This will prevent them from foraging and destroying the land.”

“Don’t think this will give you good will by me Eddard” Stannis ground out.
“That I know Stannis. That I know” Eddard answered with a sardonic voice.

Eddard smiled at the grinding of teeth.

“Why are you doing this? It makes no sense” Branton exclaimed again. “How do I know the food stocks aren’t poisoned?”

Eddard shook his head. “Open any of the kegs or crates. If edible I will consume. Cook it and I will eat a fair portion.”

The Lannister had a dazed look now. He looked around as if the world had wobbled on its axis. “Why? I am your enemy.”

“True. For now. I fought one war when I was your age Branton. That was enough for one lifetime. I will avoid another war if I can.” Eddard looked hard at both Stannis Baratheon and Branton Lannister. “Do not mistake forbearance for weakness. I will crush both of you if I must. Don’t tempt your fate. You will not like the result.”

Branton barked “Are you attempting to scare me Eddard Stark?”

Eddard gave the man his attention. He had removed the threatening cast to his features. “No Branton. Merely telling how it would be.”

“I will not relinquish my rightful claim to the Iron Throne” Stannis strenuously made clear.

Eddard ignored the man. He looked between the two parties.

“I am bringing everyone to King’s Landing. Four armies are in the field. Five if Dorne decides to join in our dance macabre. Robert’s Rebellion threw Westeros into war. The result needless death and destruction. Much of it of my own creation. I am sick of war. I will fight if I must. I will avoid war if I can.”

Eddard saw the looks of disbelief on the faces of the leader of the Lannister’s and the man who would be King, Stannis Baratheon.

“I will bring the leaders of the Major Houses here to King’s Landing. If there must be bloodshed let it be our blood that is shed. This time it will be the Heads of the Wardens of Westeros that pay the price for our ambition and not the people we proclaim we want to lead.”

Stannis ground his teeth. Branton looked at Eddard. “What a novel idea. I wonder if the other Wardens will play your little game Eddard Stark.”

Eddard had the only answer he had ready.

“We will see.”
It was after the dinner hour. Arya walked down the halls in her leathers. She made sure now to keep them well oiled now. The gleam of the leather enticing she hoped to the female eye. With a straight back she walked down the hall with a confident gait. The leathers tight on her arms and especially on her muscular legs. The tight leather leggings she wore she knew were filled quite nicely Arya thought to herself with smug satisfaction. Her calves and forearms ripped for a woman. Arya knew her constant exercises had her shoulders filled out by her Latissimus dorsi muscles. The muscles connecting the upper extremity to the vertebral column. She knew her trapezius muscles on her back rounded out and filled in her upper body.

Any girl or woman with an eye for the female form would surely notice her muscular body and her confident walk. *Sure, some of it was bluster* Arya thought but it was the show that was important. Arya now had her senses tuned to the women around her. She could not be completely sure since she believed in being modest but she believed that she was catching the eye of many of the staff of King’s Landing and the beautiful courtesans that filled the courts and halls. The males she ignored. The females she eyed back.

Arya had many fantasies now at night. Her mind imagining various unions. She was screaming her head off now and once or twice flipping out of her bed when she climaxed from her enthusiastic masturbation. She was not embarrassed (well a little – the landing on the floor both shocking and jarring) but the feeling of her orgasms was simply divine. The knowledge and toys that Phirona Ormonnis and Saelalys Narennis had given her allowed Arya to take her masturbation to a new level.

A very happy level.

Yes, there were plenty of courtesans of the female persuasion for Arya to peruse and lust after if even only vicariously. The courtesans from across Westeros. The people from all the Houses helping in theory to draw the various regions together through constant interaction. It made for many dalliances of the illicit manner Arya was coming to know. The adultery she now perceived surprised her. Her parents were so clearly in a monogamous relationship. Better yet, they actually loved each other. Arya never doubted that.

Her mother may have had issues with her daughters and Jon but her love for Arya’s father was as clear as a bright summer day. Their love had been a bedrock Arya clung to growing up. She reminded herself of this constantly growing up. This thought helping when she wanted to shout and scream at her mother for her stiff priggish ways.

Arya worked now to put those memories behind her; to lock them away. She was an adult now. Never again would her mother terrorize her. Arya smiled. Her mother expected that from her. When Sansa defied their mother, well, that would super and wonderful to see! Sansa too had grown up. She hoped that Jeyne would show Sansa where her true sexual leanings lay. *One could hope!*

Arya turned down a new hall in the Red Keep. It had various stands with Targaryen armor on display. It was somewhat darker than most of the halls. The dimmer light made the armor seem
almost alive. Looking at the armor Arya moved down the dim hall. She imagined the armor filled with a ghost and coming to life.

“Hello there my sweet beautiful Direwolf” a soft sweet sultry but gentle female voice called out to Arya.

“Ggggaaaahhhhh!” Arya cried out jumping to the side her hand on the pummel of Needle. She turned to look into the deeper shadows beside the stand of armor she had been beside. She felt she recognized the voice but couldn’t quite place it. That surety kept her from feeling any true sense of danger.

From the shadows stepped Tyene Sand. Arya heart began to slow down its rapid gallop. Damn the Sand Snakes for moving like the silent proverbial ghosts she had just been imagining. Unlike her sisters, Tyene skills were those of the assassin. Moving in the shadows seemed to come second nature to the beautiful woman.

The alluring young woman stepped fully into the hall materializing from the shadows like a Jinn.

Arya observed Tyene Sand up close with her standing near to Arya. She was in her mid-twenties. She was a woman with an impressive bosom. Her breast full, high and rounded. She was fair of skin and her hair golden. The Sand Snake had her hair down to the middle of her back. She had deep blue eyes that Arya fought to not fall into. The Sand Snake smiled. This caused dimples to bloom in her cheeks. Arya felt like a bird before a weaving cobra. The fair maiden was beguiling.

Arya knew looks could and were deceiving with this woman. Arya knew of Tyene’s reputation thanks to Varys and his reports on the Martells and Ellaria. Despite her innocent and pious persona, Tyene was regarded as treacherous. Her mother may have been a Septa but her daughter had none of her piety and ways of gentleness.

The reports said that Tyene’s soft pale hands were every bit as deadly as Obara's callused ones. Tyene shared her father Oberyn's knowledge of poisons. Many a foe of hers had died of supposed natural causes but all wondered.

Arya’s eyes could not help but feast on Tyene’s high firm breast of at least full C cup. Probably more Arya thought hungrily. Her eyes couldn’t help but devour the succulent globes. Tyene was wearing a gown of pale blue samite that clung to her body showing off the woman’s beautiful breast and voluptuous ass. Arya fought drooling. The sleeves of Tyene’s gown was made of Myrish lace that made her arms seem so alluring.

The teenager finally turned her head up to look at Tyene’s face. The blonde woman looked at Arya with obvious sexual hunger. The teenager felt a thrill run through her body. Her core getting wet and pulsing while her little nipples hardened and jangled with her pulse. To see such desire in a woman’s eyes was turning Arya on something fierce.

“You are most alluring Arya. I have had my eyes on you since I arrived. I have never slept with a Direwolf. Are you as fierce and skilled as your standard suggests?” The woman’s eyes looked up and down Arya’s body with a sultry ease. She licked her lips in a most sensual manner. “I would give my body to you. I would gladly submit to your fierce needs Direwolf. You are free to ravage me. Totally.” The last word spoken so hot and enticing.

Arya felt a shake run through her body. Tyene oozed sexual charisma. Arya felt her blood run hot. The woman leaned into Arya and stroked her ear. Arya felt heat run through her loins. Then she remembered more details of the report on Tyene. Arya gulped.
“You are married to your sister Sarella! That would be committing adultery!” Arya barked out in a high pitch.

The woman tisked. “Arya. So limited in your thinking. Adultery keeps a marriage spicy and full of hot heat. Sarella is to clinging by half with me. Despite that, she has her sluts she regularly fucks. I have my rights. I have my needs.”

Arya was processing what she was hearing. The Martells did live an open lifestyle she reasoned with herself looking for a way in … she meant way out!

“She is in fact at this moment in bed with a powerful merchant’s wife as we speak. She thinks I don’t know” the pale woman snorted “but I do. Come with me and warm my bed. Make me scream as you make me orgasm throughout the long night.” The woman’s words seductive. Arya had heard the gossips around the Red Keep and all about the illicit dalliances that occurred inside the thick castle walls.

“I don’t know Tyene. My parents are in a committed marriage. Shouldn’t you be?”

Tyene laughed long at that with a beguiling smile on her lips. “How drool and boring. In Dorne we live life to the fullest. We don’t think of it as adultery but flings to keep the marriage hot and spicy. Come with me Arya. Fuck me” the last purred to the young Stark woman. She felt herself giving in. It was the Dorne way she started to reason with herself.

“Tyene, Tyene, Tyene” was called out right behind Arya. Arya nearly jumped out of her skin. She saw the sweet soft seductive Tyene change in an instant to an angry hissing spitfire. She turned quickly to see the eldest Sand Snake.

“Damnit Obara! Go away! She wants to spend the night in my bed. I get her first! She is mine! You see the desire in her eyes!”

That made Arya’s eyes flare open. She hated being talked about like a trinket to be used! Her desire for Tyene waned somewhat. Arya looked at the smirking Obara standing a foot behind her. The voluptuous woman also alluring in a sheer gown. Her charms equally on display Arya saw. Arya felt herself licking her lips at the sweet sight of Obara before her. Obara had an eyebrow cocked and a smirk on her face.

“Tyene. Arya is a Direwolf true but she is still a pup. Let’s let her get some experience before you get your claws into her.”

Hey! Arya thought. Let’s be careful with the brutal honesty here! She already knew she was green dammit!

“Bullshit! I won’t scratch her … unless she wants me too” Tyene cooed to Arya again stroking her ear. Then her voice registered heat as she glared at Obara her elder half-sister, “I want her!” The look that was on Tyene’s face now was a real thrill kill Arya thought backing away from the pale woman. She had an almost murderous look on her face.

“Not this day Tyene. Maybe another night soon. Find another to invite into your set stage of intrigue.”

Tyene glared at Obara and stomped her foot in a huff. The beautiful blonde turned in flash and left them mumbling darkly as she left.

Arya looked at her wondering if her life might be endangered. Her next drink being her last.
Obara must have seen the look on her face.

“Worry not young Direwolf. Tyene is only pissed. Her bark is worse than her bite. Usually. She wants to lick you, not poison you.”

Arya blushed again at that. “What did you mean by stage drama?” Arya asked Obara.

“Tyene and Sarella have a game they like to play. Tyene seduces beautiful women like you (Arya felt her body flush at the compliment) back to her bed while Sarella is supposedly away fucking another woman. You will both being doing the nasty for several hours all sweaty and cum soaked.”

Arya felt her eyes flare and her mind get a little addled at those words. She imagined her and Tyene’s bodies like Obara spoke of. She liked that look! Will except that vile look that had come over Tyene’s face.

“Then Sarella will suddenly appear catching you and Tyene in a most compromising position. There will be much bitch slapping, screaming, stomach punching, hair pulling, whipping and flogging of Tyene who will be screaming in pain and pleading for forgiveness from her sister wife Sarella. None will be given. In fact somehow without you even knowing it you will be brought into the punishment helping Sarella to abuse Tyene.

“I would never!”

“Yes you would Arya. You are fierce. You will have figured it out by then that it is all a game between the two. Tyene is always getting caught in bed with a new lover that Sarella catches them in the act. The punishment dispensed most severe. Tyene crying but really loving it and craving more and harder.”

Arya was staring at Obara with fish eyes.

“Then the two of you will fall upon Tyene and make her scream except now in pleasure. The three of you screwing the night through. In the early morning hours you will be awaken with Tyene hissing in your ear that Sarella can’t get away with what she just did. Then the two of you will fall upon Sarella and do to her what you had done to Tyene.”

“I I I would never …” Arya husked. The vision of what Obara was laying out hot and intense in her mind. She was not so sure of herself now.

“You will love it Arya. I can see it in your eyes. You are fierce. If the woman or women you are in bed with wants it you will gladly top them … you will give her what she wants.”

Arya was indeed looking down the hall that Tyene had gone down muttering with intense eyes. Her thoughts confused but also filled with lust.

“Arya my sweet. Don’t start your delights into lesbian lovemaking with such rough kinky sex. Let me teach you the arts of Sapphic lovemaking. Let me introduce you into sweet lesbian lovemaking first. The joy of the gentle touch with the loving give and take between two women. I will guide and teach you most tenderly. Only when you are ready will I instruct you in what is possible when one explores one’s sadistic and or masochistic side.”

Obara saddle close to Arya now.

“I am a hot MILF that will rock your world sweet Arya. Plus, I can be as rough as you want my sweet young Direwolf. Let me teach you how to pleasure women with all the skills I have learned.
Let me make you cum throughout the night. My knowledge of the female body intimate and vast. My skills legendary. I will make your voice hoarse with all the screams you will do this night.”

The voluptuous woman had moved in and was playing with Arya’s hair around her ears. The woman’s full bosom pressed into Arya’s side and back. Arya shivered with Obara bending her head down. She whispered in Arya’s ear.

“After I have instructed you my sweet Arya, then you will be ready for Tyene and her kink games of BDSM. Let me teach you the pleasures of intimate lesbian lovemaking before you go to my kinky sisters. Let our bodies twine as we roll on my bed taking turns sucking, finger banging and tribbing ourselves to ecstasy.”

Arya was reeling. She always did around the Sand Snakes. They were walking, talking sex. They were like the strongest whiskey. The only problem was that Arya did not imbibe. The daughters of Oberyn were to intoxicating to the young Stark princess. They overwhelmed her. She liked what Obara promised but she still felt like a mouse before the rattlesnake. Prey.

She was debating with herself when Sansa and Jeyne came into the hall Arya was in from a side hall just behind her.

“There you are Arya! Come on! You are missing the Cyvasse tournament. Myrcella is kicking your master’s ass!” Sansa exclaimed excitedly.

Jeyne piped up “You should see his face! It is beet red! He is screaming that Myrcella is cheating. He is threatening to thrash her behind with his rapier. You’ve got to see it!”

“Come sister. I will kick your ass too! You might be a swordsman but I am a Cyvasse grand master too!” Sansa crowed.

Arya felt the seductive spell broken and moved to go off with her sister. She was not quite ready for what the Sand Snakes could offer. She had to go. The chance to see Syrio getting his ass handed to him would break any spell. Plus, she had an older sister to put in her place!

Behind her she heard Obara shout out “Well that just sucks. Damnit! Cyvasse?! I’m getting dumped for Cyvasse! Ain’t no fucking way!”

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Eddard knew he had a grand plan and this was the beginning of those plans but he was really wondering if it was all worth it. By the old gods Stannis was a pain in the ass.

“I am the rightful king of Westeros!” Stannis bellowed yet again.

“Oh shut the fu—, (he glanced at Eddard knowing the man was a prude) I mean the hell up Stannis. You have no more right to be King as Cersei did as Queen” Oberyn shot back.

“Don’t you dare compare me to that incestuous slut! I am a man!”

“Are you sure about that Stannis?” Oberyn snarked back. “You act like a woman on her period” the Red Viper said with a smug look.”

“You bastard!” Stannis snarled underneath his breath. His jowls now bulged with much grinding of teeth.

“When I become King—“
“In your dreams Stannis. Your boring staid dreams. I bet you don’t even make your wife orgasm in your dreams. Hell, I bet you don’t even have sex in your dreams.” Oberyn turned to look at the intimidating tall woman that stood back with her arms in the sleeves of her robe. The deep cowl hiding her features. Her head moving at times to follow the men arguing before her. “Has he tried to pork you my tall voluptuous dark and dangerous woman?”

“Pork? Are you calling me a swine?” a low timber toned voice answered. The pitch low and menacing. From the depths of the cowl, the woman’s voice wafted from the hidden shadows about the woman’s face. The woman had a deep contralto voice Eddard noted. It had a strong eastern accent.

“Oh geez. Where do you keep finding these women Stannis who have no personality and rod up their ass Stannis? And by rod I don’t mean a di—”

“Shut up!” both Eddard and Stannis shouted out in unison. Eddard pinched his nose. He took a deep breath. Boys will boys he thought to himself.

Eddard now ran his hands over his face and hair that had finally reached the tops of his ears and down his forehead.

The new King kept telling himself he had a plan. He just had to survive it.

“I will be King” Stannis roared again. “Robert was King. I am the next in line to be King. The laws all say so.” The man glared at Eddard his face red. Eddard was leaned back against the table. He was a small compared to Stannis and chose to stand to not be so intimidated. “I will not be denied” Stannis spoke in supreme confidence. “My consular sees it” he ended his current rant with a tone of surety. Stannis looked at the tall woman who spoke little.

“We shall see Stannis.” Eddard smiled at the glare that Stannis gave him. “I have called all the Great Houses to come to King’s Landing. They all have chosen to accept my summons or already on the way. We will decide. I do have the advantage though.”

Stannis eyed Eddard. “How so?”

“I sit on the Iron Throne. It will have to be taken from me. Care to challenge me Stannis. I stand ready to fight you to the death for it” Eddard asked in an easy going voice.

Stannis blanched a little. He knew that any fight between himself and Eddard would be short. Short with his death.

“Damnit man! I will wait. I will be king though. Wait and see. I may choose to be merciful for this perfidy Eddard. I am benevolent” Stannis spoke in a self-righteous supposedly pious tone. It was all quite cloying.

Eddard sighed.

“You know saying it won’t make it so my stiff and sleep inducing friend” Oberyn offered.

Now it was Oberyn who received Stannis’s stink eye.

Oberyn turned to Eddard with a serious look. “You are playing a high stakes game Eddard. Will you be able to control all the Cyvasse pieces? You lost the last time you played. And against Cersei no less. That is not high praise I fear.”

Now it was Eddard glaring at Oberyn while Stannis who looked smug.
“Selyese and Shireen are on their way here from Dragonstone” Stannis announced.

Eddard looked at Stannis surprised. It was well known that Stannis’s marriage was loveless and his daughter with her greyscale was unloved by both parents. For Stannis to bring them here to King’s Landing made no sense. He turned to look at the woman in her dark red robe. The hem of her robe whispered along the floor whenever she moved. The hem adorned with strange glyphs sewed in silver thread along the hem. They ran the length of the bottom of the robe. The glyphs had a garish beauty to them. The symbols set off by the many accent and other diacritical marks of the Asshai language.

“Why are you bringing them here Stannis?” Eddard asked. He was genuinely curious.

“I don’t have answer to you” the stern man barked at Eddard. He did glance at the tall woman. Now Eddard knew why the woman was here. She was definitely an advisor of some merit and power to Stannis. This bore watching Eddard thought.

“Why in the hell are you bringing that prig here Stannis? Hell, you never bang her ass. She is probably all dried up by now. Can she wiggle those ears by any chance?” Oberyn called out. Eddard did wonder if Oberyn ever ceased with his sarcasm.

“You are a pig Oberyn. I should gut you” Stannis snarled.

Oberyn actually fell out laughing eventually doubling over his body working like a bellows up and down with his loud whoops.

Stannis glared and fumed staring daggers at Oberyn.

Finally, Oberyn righted himself. Now his face turned serious as did his voice “You wouldn’t last a minute against me Stannis. I know Selyse and your daughter won’t miss you but with Selyse’s looks she won’t be finding another fool to marry her. I will save her that ignobility by sparing you.”

Eddard watched Stannis grind his teeth. Stannis was a rather bland fighter. Oberyn was right. He would quickly dispatch the man who would be king.

“You hair is thinning there my man. I want you to live long enough to go completely bald. You brothers got it all didn’t they Stannis. Looks, hair, women, well men in Renly’s case, and actual skill in arms. Sad really. It is amazing how the fates missed the middle brother.”

“I will see you in the ground you smug sanctimonious son of a bitch.”

“Why thank you Stannis. Thank you. You are at least observant.”

Eddard and the tall silent woman spent the next five minutes watching the two men snipe and bicker with each other.

Finally, Stannis had had enough and announced he was leaving. Oberyn close on his heel still giving invective to the glowering man. The tall woman moved to follow Stannis out.

“If you please ma’am. I would like to speak to you” Eddard asked in a diffident tone. She paused. She looked at Stannis. He was arguing with Oberyn but caught her look. He waved his hand that she could stay and walked off yelling at a smirking Oberyn.

“Why are you here? Why are you with Stannis?” Eddard asked without preamble. After the play he had suffered through he wanted to move things forward
“Is this a demand? I am not your subject Eddard of House Stark. I am from the land of Asshai. You too are a usurper. One who failed but was redeemed by his young teenage daughter I am told. I have my tasks. I go where I am needed.”

Information Eddard thought. He knew more than he did. He also glared at the woman for her comment on past events. Okay, he needed his daughter to save him! He knew that! He was thankful of course for Arya but it got tiring having it thrown in his face needing his daughter to save himself from his dumbass self.

“No, it is not a demand. And yes I took the throne as did Stannis’s brother before him.” Eddard paused as the two figures regarded each other. “You strike quite the figure. You are literally tall, dark and mysterious. How did you wind up with Stannis? The man is not an adulterer. Yet here you are. And touché. I did lose. I won’t again. Make sure you remember that and tell Stannis this fact.”

“If I do not answer will you try and compel me to give you what you seek?”

Eddard gave the woman a squint smile. He got up from leaning against the table and walked to the door. He opened it. The hallway was empty. Evidently, Stannis and Oberyn had moved their arguing down the hall.

“You may leave” Eddard said while bowing and making a flourish with his right arm.

“That will not be necessary Eddard. I will answer your questions” the woman paused “within reason.”

Eddard smiled and went back into the room closing the door behind him. He watched the woman slowly lift her hands to push back the cowl to her hood.

Eddard kept his face neutral. The woman that was revealed was quite striking indeed. In fact she was a beautiful woman.

The woman before Eddard was tall. She was at least four inches taller than Eddard’s five foot ten. As he had noted, Melisandre was voluptuous of body. She was no warrior but her body was stout and had obvious strength to her. What little Eddard had seen she moved with a grace to her movements. She had long hair the color of burnished copper. Her skin was pale and no blemish was visible. She had full breasts with a curve to her waist and a heart-shaped face.

The woman’s eyes were striking as well. Her eyes were red. Not the color of blood but a brighter hue like her coppery hair. Around her throat was a red gold choker containing a ruby which fit tightly around her neck. The ruby seemed to catch the light from the fireplace. The core of the red gem appeared to flicker like the light from the fire. As if a fire burned deep in its depths.

Eddard went back to the table and leaned against it with his rump. The tall woman stood before him. She was silent while she regarded him. For a minute only silence was in the room.

“I am Melisandre. As I have said, I am from the land of Asshai” the tall redheaded woman began without preamble. “I am a priestess of R’hlor. I am also a ShadowBender witch. I am an enemy of the Great Other. He is the god of darkness, cold, and death. His true name is never spoken. This entity is the great enemy of R’hlor, the Lord of Light.”

Eddard processed this information. This would be the Ice King this Melisandre spoke of. By the old gods. She has come to fight a foe my own people do not believe in. She had travelled thousands of miles to get here.
“Assahi. You have come a long way. Varys had reported a rumor that Stannis had called for a ShadowBender witch. Is that true?”

“No. I came on my own. He thinks I was summoned but I was already on my way to Westeros. I have come to do the will of R’hllor. The prophecies say that now is the time for the champion of the past to once more appear in this time of need. I have come to help the agent of light, Azor Ahai, to fight the Great Other. He is to be reborn. It is he that will caste down the avatar of night and death.”

This had Eddard’s attention. “So you have come to Westeros to help save it?”

“Yes.”

Short and direct. Eddard liked that.

“Who is this Azor Ahai reborn?”

“Stannis Baratheon.”

Eddard choked with his surprise. He saw the woman’s eyebrows flex. She was not pleased with this reaction.

“If I may ask, why do you think that Stannis Baratheon is the one? That caught me by surprise.”

“I have come because of prophecy” the tall woman took a breath to recite her prophecy. “After a long summer, when the red star bleeds and the cold breath of darkness falls heavy on the world he shall be born again amidst smoke and salt. He shall wake dragons out of stone. He shall draw from the fire a burning sword, Lightbringer.”

The woman paused. Eddard processed what he heard.

“I see why the prophecy brought you here. The red star that soared across the heavens. Though I have heard other religions claim it. Why yours would hold ascendancy I do not know.” Eddard saw the woman’s bright red eyes flare in anger. She is definitely a believer in her faith Eddard thought. “How does this lead to Stannis Baratheon I ask again?”

“It is said that Azor Ahai shall be reborn from a land of smoke and salt. That is Dragonstone. Stannis is its Lord. Thus, he is Azor Ahai reborn. The flames speak it so.”

Eddard started to laugh. It made him laugh hard enough to fold his body slightly with his laughter. He was not a man given to such outbursts. He had just been blindsided by the proclamation. He worked to control his laughter. He was a man who valued control. He snorted several times getting his control back.

“May I ask why you laugh? The flames have told me that the one who shall bring dragons back into the world comes from Dragonstone. He will be the one.” Melisandre had drawn herself up to her full height in her self-righteousness.

“You have the same problem as I do Melisandre” Eddard chuckled out. “Plus, you are late.” He chuckled more.

“What do you mean? Explain yourself” Melisandre demanded in an aggrieved and aggravated voice.

“Dragons are already returned to the world. If they still live I do not know though I fear not. Also, it was a teenage girl that brought them into the world. Not Stannis.”
“What?! Explain yourself! This cannot be!” Melisandre had gone from cool, calm and collected to outright distraught in a heartbeat. Her voice filled with a threat.

Eddard told the witch what he knew of Daenerys Targaryen. How she brought three dragons into the world. The specifics he could not provide but all the reports were the same. She walked into fire and came out with three dragons.

He watched Melisandre almost stagger hearing the words.

“Dragonstone is the ancestral home of House Targaryen. Daenerys is the last of that line I fear. She entered into the Red Wastes. None who enter come out alive. Dragons though. They may yet live though I would guess they are wild and untamed now if they survive.”

“Stannis was put in Dragonstone during Robert’s Rebellion. That was only seventeen years ago. Stannis is the Lord of Dragonstone almost by happenstance. If anyone is this Azor Ahai it is Daenerys Targaryen. But she is a woman isn’t she” Eddard told the witch in a drool only half hidden sardonic voice.

He observed the priestess of R’hllor’s eyes flare but that faded quickly. She was obviously stunned by the revelations Eddard had given her. She seemed to rally.

“Stannis was put on Dragonstone because of destiny” Eddard noticed her voice was not as sure now.

“If you say. It is your prophecy. I have known the man many years. Search yourself Melisandre. What does your heart tell with what you now know?”

“The flames …” Melisandre looked around almost aimlessly.

Eddard knew he would have to get Varys, Sansa and Myrcella to do research on this religion of R’hllor. Also, on ShadowBender witches. They had not been important to him. Now they were.

The tall woman continued to look around clearly discombobulated by the words spoken to her.

“I do not know your religion Melisandre. I feel that if anyone from Dragonstone is your prophecy it is Daenerys Targaryen. I fear she must be bones by now. I am sorry.” He knew of one other who might be the prophecy but chose to keep that close for now. Some secrets were hard to release to the world.

Eddard heard the witch softly intone “could I have been so wrong. The flames are never wrong but I I must have misinterpreted.” She shook her head but confusion was still in her eyes. She started to rally in her thoughts and belief. “Stannis must be Azor Ahai …”

Eddard took a deep breath. This Melisandre was on the cusp. He needed to push her over the edge. It was time to contradict himself. He feared to say this but he must. His need now dictated it no matter his personal thoughts. It was time to release secrets he had held for way to many years.

“There is someone else who may be the one prophesized but he does not know his true heritage.”

“Who?”

“I have raised him as my supposed bastard son. In truth he is my nephew. He is actually the son of Rhaegar Targaryen. He was the heir apparent to the Iron Throne. I do not see how he could be your prophecy but he has the bloodline. Stannis does not. I regret having to tell you this news.”

“The flames … I could not have been wrong …” her voice trailed off. More softly “you must be
wrong … you must be … but the bloodline … Targaryens …”

Eddard watched the woman try to process what she had just heard. He had succeeded. A wedge now existed between Stannis and this woman priestess. This would make Stannis easier to deal with.

Suddenly, the door to the room opened and in walked Arya.

She started to speak when she took in the tall woman looking around confused and speaking almost in a babble.

Eddard saw Arya’s mouth fall wide open. She gaped at the woman. Her mouth too worked but only a babble came out as well.

Melisandre took in the new person in the room. She shook her head as if waking up from a daze. She walked out quietly.

Arya’s head slowly turned watching the woman leave the room.

“Arya?” Eddard asked his daughter. She just stared after the woman walking down the hall slowly. “Arya are you alright?”

“Jeyne … her dreams … by the old gods!” Arya’s eyes light up. “Yessssssssss!!” She pumped her first. “Yessssssss!!” Arya danced a little jig. “Oh gods—I can’t wait!” She looked at her father with a big smile on her face.

“I see you feel a lot better Arya. Care to let me in?”

“No.” with that she ran out the room.

Sometimes Eddard did not understand his little girl.

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Theon sat nursing his mug of stout ail. He had journeyed here to carry word to his sister Asha Greyjoy. How Eddard Stark had known his sister was in this port in all of Westeros and Essos the young man had no idea. He nursed his drink dressed in a satin tunic stripped black and gold and a leather jerkin with silver studs.

He looked at the dark ironwood that lined the walls of the whiskey saloon he was drinking at. His sister laying her ship, Black Wind, up at the small port of Sulfur Flats at the mouth of the River Brimstone on the Southern coast of Dorne. The shallow bay offered nearly fifty slips and little questions asked. He smiled at the cutlasses, gaffs, buoys, large fishing hooks and hanging fishnets that hung on the wall behind the bar. Theon tapped his fingers on the table top. His sister was keeping him waiting.

This really pissed him off but he kept reminding himself he was on the King’s business.

He had been training with Robb and the forces of House Stark. He was prepared to march south with Robb and do the bidding of the House he was the ward of. He was not about to be left behind in the great times of this age. He was an adequate swordsman but he knew he was exceptional with the bow.

The lean, dark, handsome youth looked down into his mead. His dark eyes did not see the mug. He mulled over his situation. Ravens started to arrive at Winterfell. Theon had noticed that many of the
ravens coming to Robb were not the banded Citadel ravens. Theon felt pride in the fact that Robb took him in his confidence and told Theon that his father had new powerful allies named Druids. It was their ravens Robb’s father was using to communicate across the continent of Westeros. The Druids had spread out across the land to enable Eddard Stark to communicate to all his allies and major castles and holdfasts.

On the travel south on the Kingsroad the flow of non-banded ravens never ceased coming to Robb. Robb had called him into his war tent. The army of the North now a month and a half on the King’s Road heading south to King’s Landing. He was handed the scroll that had been on the latest raven to come to Robb. They all marveled at how the ravens unerringly found Robb and his army as it marched south.

In the scroll, Theon read of his father’s death. It had been an accident it was reported. Theon could not help but wonder. With war afoot were old scores being settled or were new aspirations being plotted and taking a life was part of some nefarious plot.

Theon found that he was not truly phased by the news of his father’s passing. He had always been a cold and hard hearted man. Theon’s older brothers taking after their father. Theon remembered the beatings he received at Pyke from his older brothers, Rodrik and Maron. His father had only encouraged the beatings saying they ‘toughened up a soul’.

Eddard Stark had never treated Theon badly that was true the young adult thought. Still, Theon had never truly felt close to the head of House Stark. Theon knew that Eddard had indeed attempted to be like a father to him but only from time to time. It had simply had not worked. While fair, Eddard was a cold man Theon felt. He could never truly bond with the man.

As a child, Theon had hoped that Eddard might marry him to his eldest daughter Sansa and claim him for a son. That had not happened. Theon supposed that threw up a barrier between him and the head of House Stark.

Now he was fighting for the man. More to the truth he was fighting for Robb. He had come to consider Robb a close friend and younger brother. Theon was anxious to prove himself to the man that Robb had become. The marshalling of the forces of the North to march south to meet Eddard Stark’s need had matured Robb.

Now he had been given a new mission. He had been allowed to refuse but how could he.

With the news of his father’s death Theon knew that a Kingsmoot would be called to select the next King of the Iron Islands. He knew that Asha had been in his place at his father’s side while he was the ward come hostage of Eddard Stark. She must have much more sway with their people than he would. That thought galled him.

His sister had added to his gall. He had taken up with a merchant’s daughter when he arrived at the port two days ago. His good looks had easily had the overweight girl in his bed. She stupidly thought she would be coming with Theon when he left here. She was merely a trifle. Not even worthy of being his salt wife. He had felt smug in his easy capture of the woman’s affections.

That was until he met a ravishing woman at the docks the morning of the day after his arrival at this port. The woman walked down the docks as if she owned them. He found that humorous. Must be the daughter of a captain who thought her station was higher than it really was. The father cuddling his daughter.

The woman was in her mid-twenties. Maybe a few years older than Theon’s age. The woman lean and long legged, with dark eyes and black hair cut short. Her face thin, with a big, sharp nose, and
wind-chafed skin. On her neck was a faded pink scar. Her nose was large but the wicked smile made one overlook the hawklike nose.

He had attempted to bed her. She had seemed receptive. She led Theon on with his desire for the comely lass rising in his loins. That was until this woman made it clear she was Asha Greyjoy his sister all grownup. He had refused to believe it until she had told Theon facets of his early childhood that only she could have known. He had been furious at her playing him for a fool. No one did that. No one!

Asha had played coy with him. After his anger had subsided he needed to fulfill his reason for coming to see her. He wanted to go over what Eddard proposed but his infernal sister had refused to meet with him that day. She had told her brother that she had many tasks to perform as captain of the Black Wind. She had then asked him the name of his ship. He had no ship name to give her. She laughed in his face.

“I have my own ship to take me where I would go. I will meet with you tomorrow two hours after noon at the High Tide. Let me know what message you have brought to me retriever.” The reference to him being a dog had made his blood boil. Her arrogance was infuriating. One day he would turn the tables on his uppity self-righteous sister. It would be she being humiliated when Theon achieved his seat on the throne at castle Pike on the island of Pyke the ancestral home of House Greyjoy.

It was the next day. Theon nursing his drink. Asha walked into the bar she had named. She looked around like she owned the establishment. Her confidence seemed to have no limits. She spotted her brother sitting in the back corner husbanding his pint of ale. She walked over. She was dressed in a brown quilted tunic draped over her shoulders. She had breeches of black wool. On her hips was a wide studded belt and salt-stained high leather boots on her feet. She had on her torso a green leather jerkin covered with overlapping plates of steel. In the belt, she had the handles of her preferred throwing axes. He counted six of them. Theon remembered her practicing with them as a little girl. On her hip was a long dagger.

She stood before her brother. Asha looked down at her brother with a look of both disdain and humor. He lifted his mug in salute to his sister. She smirked.

“How have you come to me so we can commiserate about our poor departed father?”

“My memories of our father are not filled with fond fodder. He was an ass most of the time.”

“How dare you speak thus of our father! Have you no respect for our sire!”

“Oh, stow it Asha. You’ve been sucking his ass since I was taken hostage. Lot of good it will do you. You will never be Queen no matter what the scuttlebutt here on the docks say.”

“I will! I am the best suited to lead our House. Our people will vote for me. I will lead our people to greatness.” Her tone while filled with righteous vigor but had just a tint of doubt Theon heard. Poor deluded fool Theon thought to himself. She then looked crossly at her brother. He was laughing uproariously at her. Theon could not help it.

“You are full of shit Asha” Theon got out when he finally controlled his laughter.

“You are Eddard Stark’s bitch!”

Theon was in a good mood now getting over on his sister.
“Think what you will. I know my people will throw that at me. I cannot fight it. You are in worse situation though. You were born a female.”

“Fuck you! I could easily kick your ass!”

“You could try. Still, we waste our time. Sit with me sister. Hear me out.”

She grumbled but turned a chair around and sat before her brother. “Speak” she said in a voice of repressed anger. “I will be Queen. You wait and see!”

Theon sighed. He had talked to Robb about this moment. By raven they had sent Robb’s father their thoughts. Eddard had briefed Theon on his insights when he responded by raven. Sadly, he had to agree with Eddard after thinking on it. He had been pissed but he knew Eddard was right when he thought it through with a clear head.

“My past with the Stark’s makes me tainted. I will never win when the votes are tallied in a Kingsmoot on Old Wyk. Alas, neither will you.” He paused looking at Asha hard. “Listen to me Asha. Control your emotions. We both know our uncle Aeron will never accept a woman as our leader. He is a prig and asshole. He will rile our people against you. He will work against his brother Euron. His other brother, Victarion, is a psychopath.

“Despite our uncle’s words his brothers will contend against Aeron. They have had time to build a following among our people. They may be assholes but they have charisma. They cater to our people’s worse tendencies. Like our father did.” Theon saw his sister looking at him with her head cocked.

“Our history is bleak in the Iron Islands. When we strive to take what is ours by right and attack the kingdoms of Westeros it is always the same. You know why Asha?”

She was listening to him now. She shook her head in the negative but it was clear she wanted him to continue.

“Because we can’t win. We simply are not enough. With only mild raiding we only irritate them. But, when we ball our fist and actually strike out against our fellow Great House all we do is anger them. They rouse themselves into anger and pull their forces together and they crush us. They always have and they always will.”

Asha took a deep breath. “I know. I will lead us in another direction. I will find a way.”

“No you won’t. Asha I am not attacking you now. I am simply telling you the truth. You alone cannot overcome thousands of years of tradition. You may have a following but it is small. It will not be enough. Not even close. I am sorry.”

For a long moment Asha glared at her younger brother. “What do you propose? What his your answer? What answer does your master, Eddard Stark, have lapdog.”

Theon swallowed his pride. Anger would accomplish nothing. It would only lead to the same mistakes being repeated.

“Eddard is more of a man than our father could ever be. I never could bond with the man but he is honest to a fault in his own code of honor. He was a fool following that code and was disposed but his daughter saved him.”

“His daughter?!” Asha exclaimed leaning in.
“Yes. I find it hard to believe too. Arya Stark was always wild but good with a bow. Almost as good as me. She made alliances and somehow overthrew the Lannisters on the Iron Throne. She gave Eddard Stark a second chance. He is now trying to overthrow the whole world order of Westeros. He was honest with me.”

Asha cocked her head. “How so?”

“He knows not how to put us on the Iron Throne—“

“Yes?”

“Yes. For now, us. He does not want Euron or Vicarion on the throne of the Iron Islands. That is his goal. To prevent either of our dear loathsome uncles from ruling the Iron Islands. He will do all in his power to see us succeed. If Eddard Stark succeeds in this then afterwards we can go before our people and state our case. If we achieve victory against our uncles then we will be living legends. Our uncles are mighty warriors with large followings. When we caste them down then we will be the great heroes our people will follow.”

“I can achieve all I need on my own Theon.” Asha glared at her brother.

He smiled back and cocked an eyebrow.

For a long minute silence reigned between them.

“When do we leave?” Asha asked. “King’s Landing I assume?”

“Yes. What ships you have, have them come. Let us go figure out how to take what is ours. The throne runs through us and not our uncles.”

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Varys looked around the Small Council chambers. His gazed wandered over all those sitting around the table. It was clear that Eddard had chosen to meet here to impress and honor the two invitees to the meeting.

Oberyn was looking around casually. Leaf was sitting in the old chair that Robert Baratheon had had carved for himself. The woodland motif Leaf had found pleasing. After the last meeting in this room Leaf had inspected the chair closely. She found the representations of the plant and animal life to be accurate. She had nearly pressed her face into the dark rich wood inspecting the depictions carved into the wood.

Eddard had Varys get the chair seat and back done in an upholstery of deep forest green. The seat filled with thick seaweed. Eddard had put a dais underneath the chair to raise it six inches and now had a platform of two steps around the chair to make the chair more comfortable for the Queen of the Children of the Forest and to give her more height with her short stature.

Around the table Varys saw the Hound and his one Kingsguard, Merjen Sarovic. Eddard’s two daughters and the Lannister children were there. Tommen of course had his cats about him. The bald eunuch shook his head at Eddard’s leniency. The youngest children of Cersei and Jaime had proven themselves to Varys. Their analytical skills quite impressive. He was not sure why Jeyne Poole was allowed to be in the meetings. She had little to offer. When he had told his King this he had only shook his head at Varys.

“Friendship has its own value my Hand.”
“Can we trust her though?”

Eddard had looked at him with a slight smile. “She worships the ground my eldest daughter walks on. I think she has a crush on her.”

Varys had kept his mouth quiet. He had noticed Jeyne’s looks at Sansa too. It was the same look Arya gave most of the females in the Red Keep. He knew Eddard saw this but did not comment on it. Maybe he saw it Varys thought but did not yet understand the import of those looks. Eddard in many ways was innocent. He had looked for a return of those gazes by Sansa but had as yet not seen any. Still, he kept his sparrows peeking at the tall redhead just in case.

Their new Grand Maester was seated at the table beyond where Arya and Syrio Forel sat. The fallen Water Dancer having earned his right to sit at this table. On the other side of the table from the young Direwolf sat the four men who had become Eddard’s personal honor guard. The four men, the brothers Matamion and Jaehaegar Velnalys, Javer Goodbrook and Styve Grandiso. All proud to be sitting here with their King in the Small Council chamber.

Oberyn looked around. “Where is Stannis Baratheon?”

Eddard turned his head to the Red Viper. “He has no part of this.”

“How?”

“He is not good enough frankly. The man is unimaginative and stiff. I have better things to do with my time than listen to him yet again say ‘I will be King’ ‘I am Robert’s brother thus, the Iron Throne is mine’ ‘It is my destiny’” Eddard spoke in a mocking tone. “If I hear that tripe much more I will throttle the man.”

A most satisfied look came over Oberyn’s face Varys observed.

Now Sansa gave a report on the overnight scrolls that had come in by the ravens of the Druids. The news was basically the same on the progress in the Westerlands, Riverlands and Highgarden. Highgarden was moving down the Roseroad in peace. Tywin was being harassed on all fronts. He had split off a column to block Riverrun to make sure he was not flanked. Another diminution of his forces.

Edmure was maintaining a loose contact against the forces of Tywin. Enough to force a slowing of his forces and leaving men behind to man forts but nothing more.

Sansa was happy to report that Robb was moving apace down the King’s Road. He had paused long enough to let Tywin’s forces march pass him on the Gold Road. There would be no battle between the Lions and Wolves.

Oberyn had whined “why can’t you stomp some ass dammit?!”

Eddard had told Oberyn “I will not waste men’s lives where I need not. I can accomplish all I need here. You know this. I have promised to give you what your family desires. Patience.”

Oberyn had sulked at that rebuke.

Myrcella reported that two more houses of the Vale had pulled away from Lyse and given their support to Robb.

“That is good. I don’t know what Lyse’s game is but the Vale has always supported the North. Hopefully, with time more and more Houses of the Vale will raise their banners and join us” Eddard
“Will there be repercussions for their betrayal?” Oberyn asked. “I would not countenance such actions from any of my Houses.”

“They are not mine to command Oberyn. I am just happy that I have the support that I do.”

Varys was happy to let the two women report on all the intelligence coming in by ravens. It freed him up to work his traditional sources. His specialty was spy craft. He thoroughly enjoyed it.

He reported that Theon had made contact with Asha. After some initial rancor they had decided to come back to King’s Landing to talk to Eddard. They were outfitting the ships under Asha’s command and would leave tomorrow on the morning tide.

“Having the Druid’s ravens at my service is almost divine” Varys spoke in a dreamy voice.

“Who are these Druids?” Oberyn had asked.

When ignored he had pouted again.

The Whisperer whispered on Tywin and the frustration he was feeling. He was snarling at his command staff and unbeknownst to him a sparrow of Varys. The old craggy lion fumed of the attacks that struck without warning and then the forces melted off and away before revenge could be exacted.

The spy had listened on with Tywin talking to his brother Kevan. Cersei’s “crimes” had become untenable. Tywin now believed the fact that brother had lain with sister. “I will have to kill Cersei when I take her back to Casterly Rock. She has caste an unforgivable stain upon our Great House.”

Kevan had argued back that Jaime was equally at sin. He would have to be killed too.

“Kevan you stupid fool” Tywin had retorted. “Cersei must have seduced and bewitched my son. My wife gave her the name of that witch. Little did Joanne know our daughter was indeed a vile sorceress. No. She alone is at fault and will pay the price for her incestuous sins.”

“What of her children?”

Tywin had not answered that question.

Eddard had looked ashen. “My gods … Cersei told me this is what would happen. Her words prescient.” his face had become grim after that.

Varys had subtly shaken his head. Both Sansa and Arya rose to the snake’s defense. They may have held little love for Cersei but the injustice of Tywin did not set well with the daughters of Eddard. It enraged the two Stark women that the woman was to take the blame. Both of Cersei’s present children begged Eddard to save their mother.

“I will” had been his simple answer. What Varys found diverting and a little awe inspiring was that he knew Eddard would. He would figure a way to turn the tables on Tywin. The old Wolf had become quite adept at the Game of Thrones.

Varys had gone over some reports about Highgarden and reported that the Iron Bank was preparing to come to the Iron Throne to ask for payment of debts.

“They will be testing you my King. Will you be strong in dealing with them they ask themselves?
They know our debt is great and our resources small at the moment. At least they are sending a representative to meet with you. That is a high statement. They too have their spies.”

Eddard had said nothing. He would rely on his advisors to come up with strategies in this arena. Finances was not the warrior’s strong suite.

The Spider noted that Arya had her head tilted back over her chair back for a long minute and then she would be looking around with bored eyes. Long sighs escaping the teenager’s lips. The teen fidgeting in her seat when her restless energy could no longer be contained. Varys found it humorous. Her father noted his Direwolf daughter’s actions but overlooked it. He had wanted all the people who put him on the throne and now supported him in this meeting. He wanted solidarity shown to Oberyn and Leaf.

The Queen of the Children of the Forest had watched silently. Her red eyes following the conversations. Varys was sure that matters of state in the realm of humans held little interest to the small elfin woman. She leaned forward in her chair. All turned to look at her seeing their esteemed guest obviously about to engage the men and women in the Small Council chambers.

“I have heard the words of the one named Stannis Baratheon. I have heard the words of Varys and Sansa and Myrcella from the shadows as they processed the words coming into this counsel.” This made the three start. Varys had never seen or felt her presence. “Others hunger to set on the Iron Throne. Yet I do not feel this hunger in you Eddard Stark.”

“All eyes were now on Eddard Stark their King. Varys already knew of Eddard’s aversion to being the center of attention but he wondered if he might learn more. He found himself leaning forward like everyone else waiting to hear what their king might say.

“I don’t. But I have seen what happened when I turned aside a generation ago. Without my help Robert Baratheon never would have sat on the throne. I saw his faults then. His callous actions and willingness to burn a blind eye to atrocities. I did nothing to my eternal shame. I retreated to the North. Then I came back south again as the Hand. I blindly followed a path that led to disaster. I tried to support a King not worth the effort. I was a fool.”

“I announced my actions to my foe. Surprise. She used what I told her against me and disposed me. The fault was my own.” Varys watched Eddard look over at Sansa. “Totally.”

“I was thrown into the dungeons to gnaw on my failures. Then my covalence after my freeing gave me time to think. One thing became clear to me. The Kings of Westeros have fought for themselves. Almost never for the people. They waged war not on themselves but the populace of Westeros. I know. I did this in Robert’s Rebellion. Men died on my sword who should never have died. I fought in armies that killed the innocent. Raped women. Pillaged.”

Eddard stopped his litany of past failures. Rarely did Varys see emotion in Eddard but he saw it now. His eyes blazed with it. “I. Am. Sick. Of. It.” Eddard’s voice rose up his face showing anger.

“While I sit on the Iron Throne it will be the nobles who will fight and die for it. I plan to live. If others must die to ensure this then so be it. I will try and avoid conflict and the dispensing of death but do it I will if I must.”

A voice cut in over Eddard’s “I do not like all this talk of peace and avoiding conflict. I want what you promised!” Oberyn suddenly slammed his fist on the table his eyes flared with raw passion at the King. “I will have my revenge!” Varys smirked. His passion was so predictable and, thus, useable.
“Some things must happen Oberyn” Eddard told the Red Viper. “We both have lived with Elia’s death for too many years. Forgive me for not killing them all twenty years ago who committed that crime. I came close but I didn’t. Let the crime be mine for not taking action.” He paused lost in thought. In an absent voice Varys barely heard Eddard’s next words “If I had but arrived an hour earlier …” A sad look came on Eddard’s face.

Varys watched Oberyn gauge Eddard. “Just deliver to me the Mountain.”

“I will.” Varys again impressed with Eddard’s new total confidence. Eddard was again back in the here and now.

“This is the world of man Eddard Stark of House Stark. What of my people and the Druids?” Leaf asked softly.

“The North and the Vale is thinly populated. There is plenty of space. You are the Queen of the Children of the Forest. I will work to grow the forests below the Wall and above the neck. Did you try and shatter that land?”

“I did. We were too weakened with the destruction of our Weirwoods and the decimation of our people and the Druids. Also, the Elemental Benders had left for their home.”

“Elemental Benders?” Eddard asked.

“That is for another time” Leaf answered. Eddard let it drop.

“The woods around Hornwood and Karhold will be actively worked to increase their range. The Merewoods to the west of the Neck will be increased in their range. The Vale will actively increase their woods growth in the deep valleys where no humans live. I do not know if the Barrowlands and the Sand Hills to the west of White Harbor are good lands for your people. Sansa and Myrcella have read that once you were allies of the Marsh Kings of the swamps of the Neck.”

“I hope that your people can bring back the Weirwood trees.” He looked directly at Leaf with his steel grey eyes. “Can you? If you can’t … then … I don’t know.”

The small elfin woman looked at Eddard with her red eyes. The two leaders of their people stared at each other.

“It may be possible” Leaf spoke softly.

“I need to know that it is possible. I know enough to know that without Weirwoods there can be no true restoration of what has been lost. This is critical” Eddard’s eyes bored into Leaf’s eyes.

The small woman took a breath.

“It is possible. The Tree of life is our spiritual center, but, our power lies elsewhere.” There was a long pause as the two leaders continued to look at each other.

Eddard’s eyes narrowed. “Winterfell.”

Varys felt a start. He had never considered this possibility. The Children of the Forest had always seemed like a people of the lands beyond the Wall. It was easy to forget they were the original inhabitants of Westeros.

“Yes. Your Weirwood tree and the pool before is where I shattered the Arm of Dorne and my attempt to shatter the Neck. It is there I can bring forth new Weirwood saplings. That source is
denied me by your ancestors’ actions. You took from us what should never have been taken.”

The King and Queen stared intently at each other.

“I told your daughter of this” Leaf told Eddard Stark softly.

Eddard recoiled back. He looked at Arya. Now his intense gaze upon his youngest daughter.

“You knew of this and did not tell me Arya?” father asked daughter with a tone of one aggrieved.

Varys watched Arya for her reaction. Her eyes were large and she looked unsure for a few seconds. Then her gaze sharpened and she squared her shoulders. She answered her father.

“I sought to shield you father. I knew this new knowledge would harm you father. I sought to protect you. Please forgive me father.”

For a moment longer Eddard bored his eyes into his daughter. Then he tilted his head back and chuckled. He shook his head with his squint smile on his face.

“Like father, like daughter it would seem. History repeats itself. I thank you Arya.”

His daughter had a look on her mien that said she was both relieved and slightly confused by her father’s answer.

Varys smiled to himself. He knew why Eddard answered as he did. So did the other members of the Small Council. In the near future Varys knew hard truths must be revealed.

Eddard turned his gaze back to Leaf.

Silence hung thick in the room. All watched the two sovereigns stare down each other.

“Are you saying that my family must leave Winterfell?”

“Maybe. Winterfell was ours. It was taken from us.”

“We have been there for eight thousand years. We have ruled wisely and with restraint.”

“I have lived all those years Eddard Stark. Don’t gloss over your family’s failures. Darrick Stark, the Ice King, is one of your ancestors. He was a cruel vile man. I know. I created him.”

Shocked silence filled the room.

“I accept that” Eddard replied. Then his voice rose up with anger on his face again “Why did you do that? You knew he was evil and yet you tried to use him. How could you be so stupid??”

Leaf’s eyes flared in anger. “We were desperate! Desperation caused by genocide. That genocide caused by the race of man!”

“And it lead to your people’s utter decimation. The Ice King was an equal opportunity killer.”

Leaf was shaking now.

Varys watched the two glare at each other. Both leaned forward and glaring hard at the other.

“I repeat my question. Are you asking me to abandon Winterfell after eight thousand years?”

“We worshiped at that site for thirty times eight thousand years” was Leaf’s ground out reply.
Eddard processed that information. He leaned back. He forced himself to relax.

“What do we do Leaf?”

She sat back now. A long sigh escaped her lips. Her red eyes seemed to swirl.

“I do not ask your family to abandon Winterfell. I and my people only need free access in peace to the Weirwood tree within its walls. That and the Well of All Tomorrows before it. If you do as you say the Wolfswood and other forests will provide us plenty of land to live in. Our numbers are limited but if we lived in peace and knew we would not be prosecuted then we could grow and expand our communities. We can again bring babes into the world knowing they are safe. The few communities we have left are hidden deep in hidden valleys of the Frost Fangs. The communities far away from man.”

“Do you avoid the Wildlings?”

“All people but the Druids who like us live in harmony with the world around them” was Leaf’s emphatic answer.

“Why did you choose to come there then? You are filled with anger” Leaf started to bristle “and I understand this Leaf” Eddard spoke softly to the small elfin woman. “Our people committed genocide against yours. That cannot and will not be denied or any longer glossed over. We are at guilt. We wanted your land and took it. We have not been able to fight you so now we fight the Wildlings. It seems the race of man was born to kill.”

A pall was over the room now.

“It is time we seek a new path. In the North we do not forget. This new truth we will not forget. House Stark pledges this. Do you agree Arya? Sansa?”

In unison both sisters heralded out their answer “YES!”

Eddard took a deep breath. He looked around those at the table. He looked at Oberyn. Varys knew he had other pledges to make and keep. Oaths in the world of man.

“When I become King I will open the Gates to the Wall and make peace with the Wildlings. They will be able to trade below the Wall and live in the Gifts if they so choose. The land is unpopulated. They will pay taxes and will defend Westeros if needed. Otherwise, they will not have to bend the knee.”

Oberyn sat back. “That is some statement Eddard. In Dorne, this will not affect us. This goes against all tradition of the Iron Throne. Why?”

“I am tired of fighting and killing innocent men and women.” Again Eddard’s eyes went far sighted. Varys knew he was seeing the man he executed for abandoning his post in the Night’s Watch.

“Let me ask you a question Oberyn. Will you support me? Support me in helping to restore the Children of the Forest to their rightful lands. The North is big enough for both. I will make peace with Mance if I can. Will you oppose me?”

Varys watched Oberyn chuckle.

“Yes. I will support you. I literally have nothing to lose in this.” Varys watched the man stand up. “But I support you because I agree with you. What the other Heads of the Great Houses will agree
to I cannot speak for but I know Doran and his heir Arianne will support this. It is the right thing to do.”

The meeting soon ended. People started to leave.


Oberyn smiled.

Silently, Melisandre looked into the flames flickering in the fireplace in the quarters she had been given. Fire wood was stacked high to the side. Stannis was pacing behind her. She had pulled a chair up close to the grate of the fireplace. She had just thrown in a few more logs into the fire. She had used a poker with a clawed end to rile the cankers. The flames reaching high in the air. Heat radiating out that touched but did not truly affect the witch.

Melisandre saw many images in the flames. Many were old but now new images came to her vision. Had they always been there? Were they there now only because of the words of Eddard Stark? Had she missed the truth? Was the truth now clouded by false words?

With a loud sigh Melisandre sat back. Her thoughts were all in confusion.

“I will be King! Do you hear me? This is only a slight delay. Your own visions have said so Melisandre. Eddard is a usurper I say.”

Could Eddard have the right of it? Melisandre wondered. Who was this Daenerys Targaryen? Was she unknowingly alive? Had she truly already brought dragons into the world? That thought was staggering.”

The tall witch turned half around. “Stannis. I have told you that you will bring dragons into the world. You have had time to search your thoughts. Can you do this thing? What say you?”

The tall man stopped pacing and glared at the woman. “How should I know now?! I first must claim the Iron Throne. Then I will think about dragons. You must help me acquire the Iron Throne. That is paramount.”

The ShadowBender witch turned back around. She again leaned forward her elbows on her knees. She peered intently into the flames. The fire warmed and comforted the distressed witch.

_How could she have been so wrong_ Melisandre worried? Now she saw a golden lion in the flames. A direwolf howling. Three dragons flying high in air and then they were on the ground dispensing death all around. She saw a small elfin woman. She saw more clearly than ever the foe she had come to oppose.

She had told Selyse that she came to spread the faith in R’hillor. That was true in its own way. The tall redhead always ready to proselytize to the heathen. That was what she said. The real truth was that she came to fight what the King of Westeros named the Ice King.

These new visions were missing one thing. A Stag. Was she being led astray though by the false words of a non-believer? She could not be sure of anything now.

“What did Eddard have to say to you Melisandre?” Stannis barked at her while he paced and whined.
Melisandre would be happy when Selyse arrived and she could listen to her husband complain and spare her.

“He merely wished to greet me to Westeros. He is the King at the moment. He welcomed me as such.”

That set off Stannis to railing and snarling again. This distracted the man from further questions.

She wanted to ask the man how he would hatch any dragon eggs they would eventually need to find. Where had a teenage girl gotten them? How had the hatched them?

The witch had always operated on instinct and her gut feelings. She was starting to realize that not doing research was having a deleterious effect on her here in this place far from her home. She simply did not know enough of this strange land half a world away from Asshai. She assumed that the person who ruled Dragon Stone would be the one she sought from her visions. She had not thought that the true heirs had been forced away only a generation ago.

She looked at the visions that now flitted and wavered before her. Melisandre began to see that maybe her arrival on Dragon Stone was not the end of her journey in Westeros but the beginning. Her arrival at Dragonstone only a prelude to her true journeys. The tall redhead took a deep breath. But where to go now? This Daenerys was in the Red Wastes not that far from her home. What of this Jon Snow who was in the North of Westeros fighting their shared foe? He seemed to be both Direwolf and Dragon. What of the Lion she saw in the flames? The Direwolf and Lion were currently at war.

What truly disturbed the witch was the lack of physical combat she had seen in one vision. She had never seen so far into the future on the coming conflict. She found it disturbing that she saw no combat between Azor Ahai and the enemy of light.

She sat back again. Clearly, her ability to see into the flames was limited currently with her agitation. She would have to wait and let her physic calm.

She would need to research this land and its history.

“Do you have any idea where we could find dragon eggs Stannis? We must have them of course to hatch our dragons?” Melisandre asked. What would Stannis say?

“Bah! I will not worry about the far future when I must confront the present. Too many forces oppose my rightful ascension to the Iron Throne. That is what you must first do Melisandre. You know this.”

So little imagination Melisandre thought to herself. This was something Eddard Stark did not share with Stannis.

She would need help to better understand her situation. She needed knowledge to marry to her visions from the flames. She wondered who could help in this. She mulled over this new need. Sometimes not being able to lose oneself in sleep really sucked Melisandre harped to herself. She sighed long. Stannis’s constant barking was giving her a headache. Did the man ever stop she thought sourly?

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Lost in the Citadel of Confusion Arya thought with a sour look on her face. Too many books and too much knowledge was not a good thing! The teenager groused to herself.
She was in Sansa and Myrcella’s study room. It was also their arts and crafts room too. The two beautiful teens relaxed by doing their needle work. Their works slowly becoming masterpieces. Arya smiled seeing Jeyne Poole working on her new work. She had just started it but she had told Arya that it was to be a portrait of Sansa.

The teenager would act like it was just a portrait and not the declaration of love it was. Arya knew their future now. She could not wait to see how it would play out.

Arya turned her vision back to Sansa and Myrcella. The two were still working through the recent information that had come in through the ravens of the Druids and information that Varys was feeding them. Also, they were now happily researching the religion of R’hllor and ShadowBender witches. The two women enjoyed learning for learning’s sake Arya had learned.

The idea of such reading and focused study left Arya feeling slightly ill and queasy of stomach.

Some of the stacks of books were precarious in their balance. One stack in particular gave Arya pause wondering if it was to topple over like the spires of Valyria in its doom. Arya looked around. The fireplace was burning hotly and the braziers were filled and burning. Lamps were on hooks merrily throwing out their own orbs trying to mimic the sun. Still more little wavering orbs flickered on the table with the candles placed on it to add yet more illumination for any necessary close examination of books and scrolls.

Jeyne was beside Sansa handing Arya’s sister requested books and maps. She was also presorting the new information coming in. Sansa had told the young woman what the topics she was researching. Jeyne helped save time for Sansa and Myrcella by this presorting. She also perused books seeing if they might have knowledge her hoped for lover might need. The two smiling at each other constantly. Sansa gushed at the help Jeyne was providing. Jeyne ate it up. Geez, when would the fun times start Arya wondered yet again.

Arya could not wait for the prophetic dreams of Jeyne to come true. Their lover had come only it was a woman! Arya was so excited. Jeyne making sure to be near Sansa and immersed herself in what Sansa was doing. It was only a matter of time. At least Arya hoped so. She generally did not believe in all this dream and fates stuff but this one she really wanted to happen so she had decided to believe in it.

She would let Sansa and Jeyne figure out that this new witch of the Far East was their future shared wife.

Sansa and Myrcella were reading on books about ShadowBender witches and the religion of R’hllor that Varys had pulled from the library of the Red Keep and had his sparrows scouring King’s Landing for any books or scrolls on the subject. The two busy reading.

Tommen was busy playing with his cats of course. He had had enough of study and research for one evening. His yellow tabby, Buttercup, was in his lap being fed tidbits of fresh tuna. The cat lazily lifting its head up to be fed. The cat happily chewing its chunks of prized fish with much twisting and smacking of lips. Sundaze was flopped out on a towel nest Tommen had made for him. The cat snoozing away in happy dreams Arya was sure.

Sugar Cube sniffed a map curiously. The feline trying to get a scroll to unfurl but failing. Princess was on her back fast asleep. Her legs splayed out in total trust in her environment. Her lips curling and legs twitching. Tommen’s last cat, the calico Jester was swatting at a candle flame. The cat shaking its paw at the heat and looking at it wondering what was going on.

Arya was reading a book on martial philosophy of a great general from the land of Leng. Her master
had her reading on various military leaders. She was becoming very knowledgeable on tactics and
general philosophy on warfare and how to organize for war and then prosecute the war.

Still, while she read she was constantly looking up seeking any telltale signals of budding attraction
between Sansa and Jeyne. So far it all seemed one sided to Arya. Frustratingly, Arya as of yet had
seen none of it from her sister. Not a hint! The Stark teenager looking for any sign of Sapphic intent
between her sister and the beautiful brunette. All seemed rather, well, normal between them and it
was frustrating Arya. She wanted her sister to turn lesbo! That would be so cool. A great thought
hit Arya at that instant. Gods, their mother would freak! Both of her daughters gay! She would soil
her short cloth. That would be precious!

Arya analyzed every word and action between the two when she was around them. She now clearly
saw the attraction that Jeyne Poole felt for her sister. It was so obvious now that she knew to look
for it. The only problem was that Sansa was totally oblivious! True, she was miss heterosexual but
Joffrey had to have worked that fault out of her sister’s system. That little turd would turn any
woman gay!

Jeyne was obviously making googly eyes at Sansa. Must not be that obvious because Sansa was still
cluessel. Arya shook her head at her sister’s denseness. They were constantly touching each other
to make their point or leaned into each other when sharing a quiet thought. The only problem was
that it was so freaking innocent. Just two women who had an intense platonic friendship. If Jeyne
had not spilled the beans to Arya she would not think anything of their interactions. It was obvious
that Sansa sure wasn’t.

There was simply zero sexual heat between the two. Arya narrowed her eyes. She was
masturbating a storm anymore. Sansa, well, she was just so prim and prissy she might not be
masturbating at all. Arya thought all women masturbated but Sansa might not be doing the nasty
deed just to piss off her sister. Jeyne had to be masturbating. She had to be so freaking frustrated.
To have the object of your desires right before you and not able to have it. Arya would explode in
Jeyne’s shoes. Her left hand would have fallen off by now. Hell, her right hand too!

The younger Stark female turned to look at Myrcella. She studied the beautiful blond. If she noticed
anything she did not let on. She seemed to have no interest in things sexual at all. Maybe she was
still yet to develop those type of feelings. She was slender and had little bosom as of yet. Her
mother was quite gifted in that area Arya thought. Maybe Myrcella was a late bloomer.

Arya looked at her own flat chest. That did not cripple her libido that was for sure. She looked at
Myrcella and her beautiful curly blonde hair and green eyes. She had full lips and did have some
swale to the hips. Arya felt nothing sexual for her though. She was just Myrcella to her. A friend
only. Maybe if the girl gave Arya a sign but she had not as of yet.

She looked around. Jester was sauntering over to Arya. The cat flopped onto its side and looked at
her expectantly. Soon she was meowing in a most demanding way. Arya started to pet and scratch
the cat. The cat purring loudly with a content look on her face. A thought occurred to Arya.

Arya would be extremely pissed with her sister if she did not turn gay. Most pissed indeed.

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Back and forth Arianne observed her uncle pacing as they talked about King’s Landing and this new
version of Eddard Stark that had mysteriously arisen like a newborn phoenix from the ashes of his
abject failure as the Hand of Robert Baratheon. Now he was acting as if he was the master
puppeteer working all of the Major Houses. The audacity made Arianne take notice.
“I tell you that Stannis is one grade A prig! Why in the hell does Eddard Stark want that man around I will never know. He is a fucking asshole!” Oberyn bellowed.

Arianne looked up at her uncle from her upholstered chair. He really did not like the man from Dragonstone. He seemed obsessed with the man. Her uncle wanted to make sure that he came out of all these machinations better than the leader of House Baratheon.

With exasperation in her voice the future leader of Dorne answered her grousing uncle “So he can take him out Uncle. You know this. He told you and now me through you what his broad plan is. He plans on taking out not one, two, three, four but five potential aspirants to the Iron Throne. His audacity is quite awe inspiring actually.” How a man could change so mightily was confounding to Arianne. Her father had not changed at all. Still ruminating on plans to avenge Elia’s death and still vacillating and looking at every plan from all angles and facets. For the millionth time!

Eddard had been naïve and unsophisticated when he came to King’s Landing as the King’s new Hand. Her jackals had reported that Cersei had rather easily disposed him and took the Iron Throne by claiming to be the regent for the unready Joffrey Baratheon, her son. The little turd would never be ready the Jackals had reported.

Eddard was thrown into the dungeons to never return. Her intelligence chief was sure that Eddard would in the end be executed by Joffrey. The little shit was a psychopath. In time he would have killed Cersei his mother. A smile came over Arianne’s face.

That would have been poetic justice. The danger would have been Joffrey was a despot in the making. He would have soon been a danger to all of Westeros.

Only that was not what happened. Dorne first received reports of Cersei Lannister having thrown down the Hand Eddard Stark. His leg ruined. His daughters captured. House Stark vanquished. Arianne had considered the matter closed. Oberyn and Doran had sighed and shaken their heads but were not surprised. They waited for the reports to come in of the execution of one Eddard Stark.

It took time but more reports came back to Sunspear. News was not what they expected. Shock ran through Sunspear. Impossibly, an Insurrection had sprung up. Attack after attack savaged the Lions. The reports like the afterimage of lightning. The deed done weeks before the news reached Dorne. The attacks more and more savage. Then, somehow Eddard was broken free from prison. More attacks until finally Cersei was thrown down. Thrown down by none other than a healed Eddard Stark.

Then the news finally came out that the leader of the Insurrection had not been a man but a woman. Not even a woman but teenage girl. The girl none other than Arya Stark. All the Martels shocked. Even the Sand Snakes were amazed at the news. There had simply been no warning of this hidden martial prowess in the youngest daughter of Eddard Stark.

Now they were in King’s Landing and Eddard Stark was King. Arianne found she liked the man. He was actually humble and almost contrite in his actions. A most strange man.

“I admire his desire to do all this with minimal bloodshed” Arianne told her uncle.

“Where is the fun in that” her uncle complained back. “I just hope he can control all the forces he is calling to him. He will be making a bed with adders. He will have to be very careful at night or he will feel fangs underneath his covers. Do you think he can do it Arianne? I am warrior. This Game of Thrones is beyond me.”

The future leader of Dorne had been turning that thought over in her mind.
“I think he just might uncle.  He has grown mightily from what our jackals reported of the man from Winterfell and his duty as the Hand.  He has grown crafty and cunning.  More importantly he is striking at his enemies.  He is calling them to him so he can play one off against the other and strike when they are distracted or weakened.” Arianne sighed.  “If only father had Eddard’s guile and willingness to strike.”

“I hate to say it Oberyn, but my father could never have accomplished what Eddard did in his Insurrection.  He and his daughter are truly a frightening force now.”

Oberyn nodded his head in acknowledgement.

The two went over what Eddard had told them. They sensed that this was a test of sorts. Would they keep the words they had been told close to their chests? The two agreed to keep what Eddard had told them in confidence. If he succeeded they would be held as his closest allies. Oberyn had another reason to want to follow Eddard and where he was leading Westeros.

“All I truly care is that Eddard give me the Mountain.  I will finally have my revenge for Elia’s death.  How he will turn events to have the Challenge I cannot fathom but he seems sure he will make it happen.  He told me he knows what makes Tywin tick.  He will trick the old Lion into it.  I cannot wait!  I will make the Mountain scream.

Ariane worried about her uncle but did not express her concerns. She wanted revenge too of course but she feared that Oberyn’s hot emotion over his sister’s death would make him rash. His confidence was deserved but he could be extremely careless in his self-confidence. She eyed her uncle. She would keep a close eye on her him. Still, it will be so sweet to see the Mountain taken down Arianne thought to herself.

The conversation drifted to the other Houses that were on the way to King’s Landing. The Riverlands and Vale Houses that had joined Robb Stark were in Eddard’s fold. His son leading the allies of Stark. The Riverlands by marriage and the Vale by Eddard’s long association with that House.

House Baratheon was a virtual flytrap for the two brothers according to Eddard. He would play the one against the other and use what they gave Eddard to take them down. When Oberyn reminded Eddard that Renly was Loras Tyrell’s lover he had said “all the better”. That had confounded Oberyn.

“What is he playing at Arianne?  Stannis is a prig and has the imagination of mud but he is determined and focused.  Renly with Highgarden behind him makes that vain pompous fool dangerous.  When I told Eddard this all he did was smile.  It is infuriating.  It is like he see the fates and the tapestry they weave.”

“We will just have to wait and see Oberyn” Arianne told her uncle.  “We know that Renly will marry Margaery if he takes the throne and have Loras as his lover.  The three living the Targaryen way.  Margaery will have her ‘hens’ to keep her happy and Loras as well.  Hell, Margery and her hens may even make Renly bisexual.”

“I agree with you uncle Oberyn that is a lot of parameters to control.”

“What?”  Oberyn had a confused look on his face.

Ariane ignored her uncle’s attempt to act obtuse.

“Tywin of course is the most dangerous of the lot” Arianne mused. She had gotten up to walk with
Oberyn. “He is cunning and willing do anything to achieve his goals. Still, these new allies of Eddard’s has given him a mighty advantage. He is nicking and hobbling the mighty Lion of Casterly Rock. He is bleeding the forces of the Lannisters while sustaining minimal loses.”

“I know” Oberyn spoke “our jackals report that these mysterious Druids are somehow letting Eddard’s allies attack from advantage. Their ambushes continual, effective and one sided. I wish we knew more on them. I would not want to fight the forces of the new King with this advantage.”

“I agree uncle. Highgarden will play its usual coquette self. They plan to throw their lot with Renly but if Eddard starts to win out then they will switch overnight. Margaery could care less who she marries on the Iron Throne. Eddard plans to offer Robb.”

Oberyn started chuckling as did Ariane. Their prized jackal in the North had delivered the most juicy of news through coded scrolls delivered by courier and then by ship to now King’s Landing.

“I wonder why he wants to take on the Iron Islands” Arianne wondered.

“Eddard tells me he is tired of the Iron Islands using every opportunity of discord in Westeros to again try and reinstate the Iron Price. He plans to prevent this by being this new devious self he has become. He plans to work with Asha and Theon Greyjoy. That seems a recipe for disaster. Those two are not ready to face Euron, Victarion and Aeron Greyjoy.”

Arianne agreed with that assessment but was still impressed with Eddard’s willingness to take on all the forces in Westeros. He knew Dorne was in his corner if he delivered. The daughter of Doran Martel hoped he could deliver. It was time that Elia’s death be finally avenged. Her poor father was still working on his plans on the belief that Daenerys Targaryen somehow yet lived. Even if she did it would take years for those plans to come to fruition.

The beautiful dark haired and skinned woman shook her head. The girl was dead. No one came out of the Red Wastes in the summer of that land.

“Take a walk with me uncle. I would stretch my legs.” The two left the richly adorned room and took to the halls of the Red Keep. The two looking at the tapestries that adorned the wall. Arianne found it strange that so much culture of House Targaryen remained. She supposed it was just too much effort for Robert to take it down. He had taken down the dragon skulls but little else.

She smiled. Drinking and whoring took a lot of effort she supposed. “Uncle Oberyn.” He looked over at her. “If I ever start to get fat like Robert Baratheon please run your spear through me. Gods, to think he was once a stud. To die a fat lard.” She shivered.

Her uncle laughed at that. It was humorous but she was totally serious! She was a beautiful woman. She would always take care of herself and maintain her beauty as long as the fates would allow.

They walked down several halls. Oberyn leering at any handsome lad or beautiful lass that walked pass them. He turned to look at his niece. She was looking around but not at the pleasant bodies walking past.

Shaking his head Oberyn queried his niece “When are you going to get some trim or hard cock niece? All work and no play makes for a boring girl. You need to get out and find some willing girlie or hot stud to grace your bed. Or maybe both” Oberyn chirped wagging his eyebrows. “I have seen the chambermaids eyeing you niece. You need to bed them girl!”

The two walked on with Ariane shaking her head and murmuring “Geez what a horn dog you are
Uncle! Life is not only about sex you pervert.”

Oberyn stared at his niece with his mouth hanging open. A shocked look on his.

Arianne laughed and then Oberyn.

“Seriously though Arianne. Loosen up. Ellaria and I have had beautiful men and women in our bed every night. You should too girl. Life is too short to forgo the pleasures of the flesh. We are making them hoowwwwllll!” Oberyn cheesed it up for his niece.

“You are a pig Oberyn. Ellaria is a pure slut.”

“Yeah? So. Loosen up girl and have some fun for crying out loud.”

The beautiful heir to Dorne smiled at her uncle. “I will Uncle. I am just preparing.”

“For what?”

“For whatever Eddard cooks up Uncle. I am studying, preparing myself. I want to be able to seize any moment.”

“You are prepared Arianne” Oberyn replied in an exasperated tone. “You have been preparing since before we left Sunspear. Relax niece. Get some trim. You know you want too.”

Oberyn’s niece smiled at her uncle. He did know her well. She did much prefer the female body over the male. She would marry a man if needed when she took the throne of Dorne. She hoped to find a worthy woman to take as her Queen. She would have to see what the future provided. They walked down the hall. Oberyn openly leering now at all who passed. Arianne shaking her head but checking out the courtesans in the halls.

Coming down the hall from the opposite direction walked the pale beauty Myrcella Baratheon. The nearly fourteen year old made light eye contact and gave a polite nod of the head and the briefest of smiles. She walked on down the hall past them. Arianne tried to catch the lass’s eyes but the teen made sure to not let their eyes meet in a direct gaze.

Oberyn looked at his niece out of the corner of his eye. She was definitely checking out the beautiful daughter of Cersei. The reports from their Jackals and Varys said that the daughter of Cersei was nothing like their harpy like mother. She was sweet and gentle of soul.

“You like blondes. Go for her Arianne. She is sweet natured. She would make a great conquest. Teach her the ways of lesbian sex woman. She has not shown any desires toward anyone according to reports. Show her the pleasures of the female body. Then bring her to Ellaria and your favorite uncle.”

“You are my only uncle Oberyn and again I repeat you are a pig and Ellaria is a pigette.” Arianne said as she shook her head. She turned to look down the hall at the retreating form of one Myrcella Baratheon. Oberyn saw the intense look on Arianne’s mien. She was definitely interested in the teenage beauty.

“She is too young for me” she told her uncle.

“Like that has ever stopped you before. She is old enough. She is of marriageable age. You want her. Go for her. She has to be gay.”

“Why is that?” Arianne suspected but wanted to hear it from her uncle.
“I tried to engage the lass in conversation. *She blew me off! Bitch!*” Arianne felt her face smirk. Her vain uncle did not handle rejection very well.

“How typical Uncle. A woman refuses you and, thus, she must be gay. You are an asshole my dear uncle.” Arianne finished insulting her uncle. In her mind though she was turning over what her uncle had said.

She turned to look again at the now distant body of the beauteous teen. Nah. She was too standoffish for her tastes. But. Maybe you need to get to know her Arianne thought to herself. She had loved what she saw. Her mother had a large bosom like herself. Myrcella had the body type she liked. Slender of build and small of bosom. Nah. She was a Lannister after all. Arianne did not like being ignored just as much as her uncle. Myrcella basically ignoring her had really pissed Arianne off. Maybe she was shy Arianne reminded herself.

She shook her head. That would be a problem for tomorrow.

“I can’t wait for the Game of Thrones to begin” Arianne told her uncle.

“Me neither niece. It will be fun. I just hope Eddard can control everything.”

“Yes. He has given us hints Uncle but not his full thoughts. Interesting it will be.”

_Epilogues_

Eddard Stark sat at the desk in his living quarters. He leaned back in the high backed chair. His back wallowing on the wood in his disquieted state. He rolled his shoulders. He turned again to look at the bed he hoped to share with his wife. He then grimaced like he had the four times before when he turned to look at the bed. He knew he had to tell his wife the truth about Jon. That would have to be face to face. No scroll for that revelation. Her anger would be titanic and he needed to be there when that hidden lie was revealed.

His daughters he would tell soon. He had too. Arya would be volcanic. He feared the Doom of Valyria would pale by comparison. The father was not sure how Sansa would react. He sighed. It would not be pretty he was sure. He would tell them the truth and deal with the consequences.

The man tapped the nib of his quill on the desk top. He did not have that options with two sons. They needed to know now. Jon may only be his nephew by law but in his heart he was his son. Robb had always been good to Jon but he had picked up from Catelyn her feelings. It had kept him from being as close to Jon as he would have been otherwise.

The King took a deep breath. He leaned forward and put the nib in the ink well. It was time. He tapped the desktop to settle the ink in the quill. No more delay.

_Dear Jon, son of my heart,_

_I told you when you left for the Wall that we would talk. That I had information I needed to impart to you. I am not sure if you have heard but I was deposed as Hand of the King. I would have died I am sure if not for Arya saving me from the dungeons and finding a person who could heal me ruined leg._

_While in the dungeons and while I convalesced I had much time to think. Too long I avoided hard truths and avoided conflicts._

_No more._
Jon, again I say you are the son of my heart but you are not the son of my body. Your father was...

It was bright outside. The temperature had been cool in the morning but now in the midmorning it was heating up. Sansa and her best friend Jeyne were walking with Merrel and Leaf. The small woman walking fast to keep up with Druid. The man was taking small steps Sansa saw but the little woman of the Children of the Forest feet were working hard to keep up all the same. Leaf made even her Jeyne look large. Sansa wondered for a moment why she said Jeyne’s name in the possessive. Well, she was her best friend.

Sansa did not normally walk outside of the Red Keep. Her nostrils being assaulted by smells that were quite noxious. Her nose crinkled at the vile smells assaulting her sensibilities. She looked around at the vibrant life around her. Women washing their clothes in front of their domiciles. The clothes then hung up on lines between the buildings just above head height. The clothes swaying in the breeze like water soaked flower petals of various colors. The women yelling at their children running around being children. The little urchins laughing and playing gaily.

Behind the Druid Sansa and Jeyne wafted along in their wake. Their paths following the two. Merrel dressed in street clothes and Leaf in her tunic that hid her elfin features.

Leaf had come to them an hour ago and asked if they would journey with herself and Merrel to the Druids compound in King’s Landing. She was mysterious as to why she was making the request. Sansa had no reason not to go. It would be interesting to see where Arya began her Insurrection Sansa thought. Living it must have been so exciting Sansa thought of the Insurrection Arya had birthed and led to begin with. Of course Jeyne was coming with her. She wanted her best friend with her in this journey to the unknown.

Leaf had asked her if she knew the word ‘serendipity’.

Sansa answered “the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way.”

Leaf smiled. “Precisely.” She said no more.

They were nearing the hidden in plain sight residence of the Druids. Leaf slowed. So did Merrel. He looked down at Leaf as she turned to face the two teenage girls who had been following her.

“I wish to make amends. In the last meeting I had with your father I was cross. I must remember that the past I speak of is long, long past in your annals. To me they happened as if yesterday. If Eddard Stark had lived then, history may have been totally different. You are too young Sansa to have had any part in the tableau of life between our two races.”

The Queen of the Children of the Forest looked up at Sansa. She smiled again.

“I have a boon I think you will find” she paused “most satisfying.”

The small party entered into the building.

Sansa looked around. The first room was a large sitting room. She saw maybe ten Druids. Some were dressed in casual trousers and blouse tops that they wore outside to mingle with the world of man. The rest were in their robes they wore when only among themselves and their confidants. The two large fire places had fires going in them. The room pleasant. There were four large sofas and
five cushioned chairs to sit on. Several occupied by Druids relaxing and talking.

“Please stay here” Leaf requested. She then went down a hall to the rear of the building.

Merrel was still with them. He smiled at them. Sansa saw she was the same height as the man. She had noticed many men acted intimidated by her height. It was nice when a man was not intimidated like Merrel did not seem to be. She saw a Druid woman working her longbow and polishing the yew wood. The handle and riser portion of the bow intricately carved. Jeyne had walked over and was oohing and awwing over it. The woman went to string it. The woman grit her teeth to string the bow.

Jeyne giggled. It was obvious Jeyne though the woman was showing her lack of strength.

The woman asked Jeyne if she would like to string her bow. Sansa watched Jeyne accept the challenge. The woman grunted bending the bow down and pulled the string off the top notch. She then showed Jeyne how to run the bow between her left and right leg to brace it and how to grip the top of the bow to pull it down. Jeyne had a smug look on her face. The Druid woman was only a few inches shorter than Sansa. Jeyne was sure she could string a bow. The small petite girl was confident of herself Sansa could see.

She went to pull the bow down to string it. The yew wood did bend in the slightest. Jeyne was soon grunting and snarling trying to bend the bow. The Druid chuckled which only urged Sansa’s best friend to try even harder to no avail.

Sansa laughed at her friend who glared at her. They heard movement down the hall. The two teenage girls saw leaf returning up the hall. Behind her was a tall male druid carrying a large wicker basket with a blanket thrown over it. Jeyne gave up her impossible task handing the bow to the woman and came back to be beside Sansa. A big smile on the Druid’s face chuckling at Jeyne’s abject failure in stringing her bow.

Leaf began speaking without preamble. The Druid behind her moved forward to put the wicker basket down between Leaf and the two humans.

“On my journey to the land above the Eastwatch Tower and as I neared the shore to reach the ship the Druids were manning to take me down the coast of Westeros to the shores of the Blackwater Bay I heard weak sounds of an animal in distress. I was going to ignore the sounds for I was hurried but my sense of curiosity won out.”

“I found a young pup that had somehow been separated from its mother. It was emaciated and dehydrated. The right back leg had been clawed. The animal was weak and barely able to call out its distress. Another few hours and it would have expired”

Sansa felt distress hearing this. She saw that Jeyne felt the same.

“I see in your faces your distress. The way of nature can be cruel. It was the animal’s fate to die. For some reason I felt compelled to give it aid. I gave it some water and a strip of beef jerky which it ate some. I picked it up and carried the animal the three miles to the coast. The Druids were surprised to see me with it. I asked them to help me save it. The request strange from a Child of the Forest. We believe in the balance of life and death.”

“Still they honored my request. Their charge barely clung to life to begin with but slowly recovered. I helped in fighting the infection that ran in its wound and blood. Our charge has recovered but we are not able to keep caring for the animal.”
She bent down. Sansa and Jeyne followed suit. They were curious to see what animal that Leaf had compassion on. The Queen of the Children of the Forest pulled back the blanket.

Sansa gasped. It looked like a wolf pup but it was not. The wolf like animal asleep. The moderate sized pup was a Direwolf. In proportion to its body, this pup had legs that were longer than a wolf’s legs. Its head was larger than normal wolves. Its muzzle was also longer and more pronounced. Fangs were protruding out its lips. The pup was asleep its jet black body curled up. She was beautiful Sansa thought. The direwolf pup started to wake up.

Sansa’s hand went to her mouth. Her body began to tremble. She could not believe what her eyes beheld. She felt tears shimmering in her eyes. She had felt so lost since Lady died. She had felt something in her die then. Seeing this sweet innocent pup made her heart quiver. She felt an elation … a hope.

“We need someone to take care of and love this Direwolf. She has imprinted on humans. She will need to be raised by humans. She would never survive in the wilds above the Wall. Do you know of someone who can take on this heavy responsibility?” Leaf looked at Sansa intently as she spoke.

The sleepy wolf pup woke up. It squirmed and rolled with soft sweet yawns. Slowly the pup rose up on its rump and looked around sleepily. It saw them and turned its head looking at the two teenage girls before it with clear curiosity in its eyes. Sansa and Jeyne saw a plate of half cooked meat had been placed between them unseen.

“Why don’t you feed the pup? I am sure she is hungry again. She has a lot of growing to do” Merrel told Sansa.

Sansa trembled. She looked at the Direwolf pup with love already pulsing in her orbs. Jeyne looked at Sansa. She shook her head ‘yes’ in encouragement at Jeyne.

The two girls picked up the chunks of meat that been glazed in a skillet and fed the hungry wolf. The wolf gulping down the tasty juicy chunks. The girls giggled feeling the rough tongue working over their fingers avidly. The direwolf turned its head right and left with a happy wolf grin eating its proffered meal. The wolf pup eating till her belly bulged. Her snout going from hand to hand lapping in the tasty treats. Sansa was handed a small bowl of water which she put in the basket. The wolf lapped up water till she was satiated. She looked at the two female humans with light green eyes.

The wolf flopped on her back and started yammering her body twisting as she looked up at Sansa expectantly. Sansa smiling reached down and started to rub the grinning pup’s belly. The pup whimpering and shivering in pleasure. Sansa stopped after a minute. The wolf pup whining until rubbed again. Jeyne joined in and little wolf pup legs jerked in immense pleasure. The Direwolf looked up at the two girls with worship in its eyes.

The two girls stopped when their arms got tired. The Direwolf’s head turned right and left with a perplexed look on her face. Then she started yammering again her tail thumping the basket. The wolf’s body twisted right and left all the while looking up at the two teenage girls. Her tongue lulled out and a smile on her snout.

Jeyne laughed. “She acts like a spoiled High Princess. She acts just like you Sansa!”

Sansa glared at her friend. Jeyne gave Sansa a cheesy brilliant smile back. Sansa felt her heart go pitter-patter for some reason. Her body flushed with heat. By the Seven Sansa thought to herself, Jeyne was so beautiful. Some handsome lord or knight will whisk her away shot through her mind. Hot jealousy flooded Sansa’s veins. Sansa shook her head. Where did that thought come from?
The little wolf demanded their attention. Laughing the two girls started to rub the wolf’s belly and cheeks again. Sansa picked up the cub and cuddled it. Jeyne stroking its back and muzzle. The little pup’s tongue lulled out as it ate up the attention. The little wolf wiggled into Sansa looking up at her with big beautiful eyes.

“Will you take this Direwolf and care for it Sansa?” Leaf asked. “It would make me feel so much better to know she was protected and loved.”

“Yes. Yes I will” Sansa answered letting the wolf lick her face. She moved the beast’s snout to Jeyne’s face. She squealed when the wolf pup licked her face. Sansa smiled when Jeyne did not move her face. She smiled at Sansa again with that brilliant smile.

Sansa felt herself falling into Jeyne’s dark brown eyes. The two stared at each other.

Sansa laughed snuggling the puppy and again pushing her Princess in Jeyne’s face making her squeal so prettily. The pup wagging her tail fiercely and licking Jeyne’s pretty face.

“What will you name the pup?” Merrel asked.

Sansa laughed looking at Merrel. The strange spell between her and Jeyne broken.

“Why Princess of course”
Precious Gifts

Chapter Notes

AN #1: As I venture further afield from King's Landing I am using mainly the map from quartermaester.info. I am also using maps I pulled off the site awoiaf.westeros.org to bring in more of the world. I am making descriptions in my story based on these maps.

Heirs Apparent

Precious Gifts

The White Book lay before Sandor Clegane. He looked at his page. The Lord Commander snorted. It was routine stuff he had written so far. Rather boring. A soft sigh escaped his lips thinking how typical of his life. He was not sure on what he was doing. He was making sure to perform his duty with all the honor he knew how. More than that he was still figuring it all out. Slowly, he leaned back his eyes now looking at the ceiling. He reviewed his most important decision he had made so far. A grimace came over his face as he growled.

He hoped he had not made a mistake in anointing Merjen Sarovic as his first King’s Guard. Physically and mentally she was an excellent selection. It was just her damn mouth that was being an irritant. She just could not keep her mouth shut! She was always giving her opinion. Which usually was the opposite of what Sandor thought the matter needed.

She had convinced him several times to change his decision though. He was willing to listen and had to give the woman credit for speaking her mind. The woman was definitely willing to sound off on her views in the most infuriating of ways! They argued and bickered. He snorted. He did kind of enjoy it he guessed. What could he say? He was a masochistic it seemed!

He turned the page in the White Book to his page for Merjen Sarovic. He was in the White Sword Tower the traditional home of the King’s Guard in the Red Keep. He had thumbed through the pages of the White Book. Ballocks. There were a few gems in the pages of late. Most of the pages were boring of course. The populace and minstrels spoke and sang of high adventure and palace intrigue where the King’s Guard saved the day.

What they left out was the extreme boring routines that the knights had to endure day in and day. It was like hours and days of sheer stupefying boredom separated by five minutes of sheer terror. It was being ready for those five minutes of panic that one had to train for.

He looked again at his one selection for a brother, or sister in this case, in the Book of the Brothers. Nothing outstanding yet. He chose to not put in the book as of yet on a certain Kingsguard’s borderline insubordination. Why couldn’t she just keep her mouth shut and follow his edicts! Even if he was wrong he groused to himself. No supporting her Lord Commander blindly for one Merjen Sarovic.

As his first King’s Guard he had taken Merjen before King Stark before the Iron Throne. The woman from Sophos took her vows of service to the Iron Throne and the King who sits upon it.
Eddard solemn of course. It did have a good feel about it though Sandor had to admit. He had then given Merjen the formal white cloak of the King’s Guard. That was for ceremony. They could wear a shorter version that reduced weight and gave greater freedom of movement while on duty.

Her assessment of his new cloak design “Why, that’s a pretty good idea Hound. For a man.” Sandor had scowled at that. She was always making her digs.

He congratulated her on getting shot down by Arya Stark. The girl had turned down her overtures.

“You ain’t no better than the Sand Snakes!” He had laughed as she flipped him off.

“You just wait Sandor. You know what they say … the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice! Once Arya imbibes of my sweet nectars … well—she will be hooked!” Merjen had crowed. Strutting around like a damn peacock.

“You know to get the juice one has to stomp the berry Merjen. Get on the floor and let me get to work.”

She had glared at him and cursed him out.

He would love to put that in the White book. She was a hard worker though. She happily helped Arya in the training up the Goldcloaks. They were actually starting to become a true fighting force. There was not enough of them in case the Red Keep was assaulted but his fear of that was almost gone now.

Eddard had taken Sandor into his confidence totally about his plans and was giving him all the small changes he made as new information came in from the field. Sandor was at ease with working against the interests of his former House of Lannister. Tywin was a Sot and not worth following. The man always bleating on about making the Name of Lannister great and forgetting the common man who truly made the House great.

Sandor did have to give Tywin some credit though. He did not waste the wealth of Casterly Rock on slothful living like Robert Baratheon had. No silly ostentatious balls to waste the coin of the Westerlands. Tywin did spend his money on his constituencies. The problem was that Tywin ruled with an iron fist that was as liable to ball up in a fist to crush as to reach out and give succor. Tywin in his core felt nothing for his people.

This was not a problem with Eddard Stark. He actually did truly care for the common man. It made all the difference in the world to Sandor Clegane. In his heart, Sandor was a Stark now. The Starks and those of the Small Council all treated him with respect and he liked interacting with them. He refused to show it but he did.

He paused. That was all except for Princess!

He had met the new mutt two morns ago. He had seen the new pet of Sansa and he had not been impressed. The black Direwolf was running down the hall and then back to her mistresses. The little pup ran all around Sansa and the girl Jeyne who was always at her side. The little beast making constant barks and yammering yips. The pup running around and acting like a fool. The Stark princess and her friend encouraging the mutt to act all prissy. The beast actually gnawed on a tapestry. Sansa running over and pulling the dog away and cooing to it “what a bad, bad girl!” The infernal beast had its tongue lulled out and squirmed as the two teenagers petted and scratched the beast’s head and belly.

That was not punishment! Sandor had raged to himself.
The infernal beast had seen him coming down the hall. Then Princess had charged him barking and nipping at his feet. The little mutt was prancing around barking with her tail up and wagging all around. She looked up at him like she was some mighty attack dog. That he, the mighty Hound, should be quaking in his boots he thought to himself.

He had done what any true Hound would do. He had done his namesake and truly snarled and howled at the infernal mutt. It may grow into a fearsome beast but that was not today Sandor had thought seeing the little mutt go scurrying back down the hall yammering with its tail between her legs. The pest leaped into Sansa and Jeyne’s arms. The beast shaking and whimpering. She would look at him and then bury her face into Sansa’s bosom her whole body shaking in fear.

He had felt pretty damn proud actually. That was until Jeyne came up to him and gave him a peace of her mind. Her little finger wagging way below his face had been amusing actually. She was a Chihuahua snapping at his ankles he thought snidely. Sansa came up cuddling her pet and glared at him.

“You beast!” she had screeched at him. “What has Princess ever done to you, you, you cad?!”

“Pick on someone your own size!” Jeyne had snarled at him.

“There is no one my size!” Sandor roared his answer down at her.

Jeyne actually went to kick him but Sandor jumped back so her kick fell short. Hah! Too fast for the little princess wannabe he crowed to himself.

Sansa had moved forward to get in right in front of Sandor cradling her trembling mutt.

“You cad! You beast! You monster!”

“It is only a mutt!” Sandor had barked in his defense glaring at the flea bitten mutt in Sansa’s arms.

Both women gasped. Jeyne went to cover the direwolf pup’s ears. In a high dander both women turned and went down the hall. Vile looks cast back at Sandor. Sansa leaning into Jeyne as the small brunette stroked her back comforting the distressed high Princess.

Sandor shrugged his shoulders and went down the hall. A smile on his face. He did wonder about how close Sansa and Jeyne were with each other. He shrugged his shoulders again. He was a warrior and not a philosopher.

That night Eddard had paid him a visit. Sandor knew he was in trouble when he opened the door to his suite of rooms and saw Eddard standing there. The man had a grim look on his face. Sandor gulped though he tried to hide it. His one thought—oh shit! What did I do?! I am innocent! I think?!

The King walked around his main room sighing. He picked up some of Sandor’s gear he was cleaning on a table. He plucked at this unkempt bed. Eddard straightened his throw rug in front of the bed with his toe. He finally turned and faced Sandor.

He told him that he needed to treat Princess with all due respect. She was a part of the household. The Direwolf was precious to Sansa. She and Jeyne already worshiped the pup.

He had rolled his eyes when Eddard was looking away walking around Sandor’s room.

“I expect better of you Sandor” Eddard had intoned gravely as he left giving him the eye.
Geez Sandor thought to himself. *It is only a mutt for crying out loud* he whined to himself. Sandor felt bad. He hated letting Eddard down.

Varys told him of the fate of Lady the next morning. That Eddard had had to deliver the death blow himself. He felt bad after that. He groused to himself that he hadn’t known that! How was he supposed to know of events before he met the Starks. *It wasn’t fair!* He supposed he could understand Sansa’s anger now. It sure took all the fun out of it he whined to himself. Merjen hadn’t helped matters of course.

“You are like, what, two hundred times bigger than the pup Sandor. Geez. You can’t take me out so you attack a little puppy. How sad” Merjen had teased him the next day. “I christen you the Chihuahua killer!”

He flipped Merjen off and insulted her lineage. “At least I willingly left my House and homeland. Miss I got my ass kicked out of her hearth and kingdom.”

“Fuck you!” Merjen had answered reasonably. Not. “And that is Queendom you asshole.”

He had been extra fired up that day and twice scored killing strikes on his first Kingsguard in their private practice room. She had been most displeased. He had actually gotten pretty good in fighting the woman and her unusual fighting style.

He tapped the desktop remembering this morning and Merjen’s insults. She was a strange one Sandor thought. She had given away the secrets to him of why he had a hard time countering her attacks when they first started to spare. It had pissed him off that she was getting the vast majority of the ‘kills’. It was starting to affect his confidence.

She had after a ‘bad’ day for Sandor given him advice … only after the insults! He grumbled darkly to himself.

“Listen my tall, dark and always pissed off mutt—”

“Hound!”

“Whatever”

Ggrrrooowwwwlll

“Don’t be so hard on yourself Sandor” he had eyed her then. Sympathy? He looked at her suspiciously.

“You have to understand Sandor” her tone now actually friendly which made Sandor tense “I face a sword all the time in Essos and Westeros with the traditional battleax thrown in. You have never fought a Labrys. Thus, I have the advantage. I have fought many swords and you have never fought my weapon. I am actually surprised how well you are doing against me.”

That had made him feel better.

“Come Sandor” they had gotten up from the chairs they were sitting on. They went to the training mat they had in the training room in the Tower of the Sword. The room complex at the base of the tower used by the Kingsguard to practice out of sight.

“Let me show you how I use my weapon and my tactics.” And she had. She then showed Sandor tactics and strategies to defeat her weapon. The fights had been much more equal since then after initial practice sessions.
He had to ask “Why are you doing this?”

“I like you Sandor. You are a good man. A man, but still good. That is rare” she had told him with a smirk.

“It makes you a better warrior my Lord Commander. I serve you, and, thus, it is my duty to help you in any way I can.”

That had touched the Hound. They had started to share their noon time meal. He discovered she did not touch alcohol.

“It dulls the mind. I will not put anything in my body that pollutes it.”

Sandor had considered that for a moment before swilling a big gulp of ale from his large stein.

Merjen sighed rolling her eyes and shaking her head in disgust.

He again looked at the White Book and the pages for himself and Merjen. Only boring trite biographical information so far. Some notes on training and the assignment of duties. He couldn’t wait to see what the Septons from the Great Sept of Baelor would do for heraldic drawings and illuminations. He mused on the paintings they might render. He imagined himself lying back in his chair asleep. Merjen chasing fair maidens down the halls of the Red Keep.

Sandor chuckled. With Eddard removing the restriction of chastity, the Kingsguard did not have to do their rutting in secret anymore. His smiled faded. Like he had to worry about that.

He left the tower and walked to Maegor’s Holdfast. He was walking down the halls looking around. He saw nothing amiss. He had reviewed more submissions for the other five positions still available for the Kingsguard. He knew of two persons coming to Kings Landing. Varys had brought them to his attention. He was not sure. One would have to prove themselves to him. The other was a knight which made Sandor dislike that person but he would try to keep an open mind.

They might not even want the position if they were asked. He smirked. Their tastes would be most unusual for the Kingsguard to be sure.

He saw Cersei walking down the hall towards him. She still walked with a regal gait but her nose was not as high as before. She still had her pride and strength. Her eldest, Joffrey, was all jittery and walked around with a tick underneath his left eye. He was just a little weak turd now. He kept his mouth shut. Eddard demanded that the boy be left in peace but everyone took one line shots at the boy. It was nice to see him brought low.

It rankled Sandor but he had to admit it. Cersei was still a striking beauty. She did not use too much makeup but expertly applied it to highlight her beauty and cover any blemishes. If she had any. Her golden hair down her back in loose curls. Her emerald eyes looking around with keen intellect. Her fair skin perfect. She was still slender and cut a graceful figure as she walked. Her bodice bulged containing her ample bosom. Her rear end still high and firm.

It pissed off Sandor that he could not help but admire her beauty. He would never admit it though.

They neared each other.

“How is it going O fallen Lioness or should I say harpy” Sandor smiled at his great wit. Take that Cersei!

The both stopped appraising the other. She looked up at him blandly.
“Go dig up a bone Hound” she paused her eyes squinting “are those flees I see jumping around up there … I’m getting dizzy trying to count them all” she squinted again leaning in and rising up on her toes “your fur seems to be all mange filled—Mutt! Go terrorize a pup … oh, that is right. You already have.” Cersei finished in a droll tone and a smirk on her face.

*Aarrghhhhhhh* Sandor thought. *Bitch!*

“Well … well, you are no longer Queen!” he roared leaning into Cersei. She was not impressed in the least.

Sandor immediately cringed. *Oh gods that was so lame!* Cersei’s head tilted back with a grimace on her face. Even she was reacting to his horrible rejoinder. *Worse, he had left himself wide open for her counterstroke!* He looked at his foe fearfully.

She did not disappoint. She started rubbing her chin with her thumb and index finger looking thoughtful. Sandor cringed at what was coming. It wouldn’t be good. *Geez!*

“You know I know where you sleep Sandor. When you least expect it I will sneak into your quarters and neuter you by dear *Hound* … or should I say I will attempt to neuter you. When I reach to find your manhood I will find it a very frustrating search. Will I find it—hhuummmm” she intoned tapping her chin with her index finger. Her face showed great thought. “In fact, I will find that a Chihuahua would find you … how should I say it … lacking. You know. No boner. No balls.”

She smiled evilly up at the fuming Lord Commander.

*Bitch! Sandor thought. Damn her tongue!* He had no reply!

She walked down the hall as he fumed and stomped his foot in his agitation.

He glared down the hall at Cersei’s retreating figure.

She paused as she started to turn down another hall. She looked back at Sandor. Her face now neutral.

Sandor steeled himself for another barb.

“You make an excellent Lord Commander, Sandor.” With that she disappeared out of sight.

Sandor stared at the empty hall slack jawed. She had actually sounded like she meant it. She was definitely acting a little daft lately.

He started back down the hall. It was nearing time to meet with Eddard in his little conference room he had in Maegor’s Holdfast he used for their informal meetings. They were still far away from a having a nascent Small Council. He moved down a new hall.

That was when he heard it. He patted the pocket of the cloak he had put on underneath his half-length Kingsguard cape. He had amends to make. He turned down the hall that the sounds were emanating from.

He saw the source of the sound immediately. On their knees were Sansa and her always present friend Jeyne Poole. Between them was Princess the new Direwolf pup gifted to Sansa by Leaf of the Children of the Forest. Sansa had on the end of a willow stick a long piece of string. Attached to the end of the string was a stuffed cloth mouse. Jeyne was jerking the string making the mouse jump and twirl. The midnight black direwolf pup chasing it around. She would catch and gnaw on it for a
moment before she released to she could chase it again.

It was so sweet looking it was cloying Sandor grimaced to himself. He swallowed his thought and advanced down the hall.

The direwolf sensed his advance. It glanced his way and then gave a fearful yip and scooted in an uncoordinated way behind Jeyne. The pup then stuck her head out around Jeyne’s hip and looked at him warily.

*So much for a fearsome beast* Sandor thought in derision. The two teenagers glared at him balefully.

Sansa got up and moved a couple feet in front of Jeyne and Princess and put her hands on her hips. Both she and Jeyne had eyes that flung daggers in his direction.

He held up his hands and advanced slowly till he was fifteen feet in front of them. He noted that the Direwolf was pressed into Jeyne her head barely poking out around her hip with one eye tracking him. He reached into his cloak and pulled out a rawhide pouch that bulged out. He slowly went down to one knee and pulled the drawstring back opening the pouch.

Sandor reached in and pulled out a meat chunk that had been lightly cooked after being battered in a flaky batter with lots of butter. Smelled good the Hound thought. The smell and sight had definitely caught the black Direwolf pup’s attention. She eyed the treat with her tongue licking her lips.

Sansa and Jeyne seeing the peace offering moved forward a few feet and now encouraged Princess to scoot out from around Jeyne. The wolf was clearly nervous.

Sandor threw the first chunk half way between them. The direwolf shot out and snatched it up and fled behind Sansa and turned around chewing and then swallowing down the treat. Sandor threw out a few more slightly closer to himself. The wolf darting out to get the treat and retreat but not quite as fast.

He threw out more meat chunks the wolf now eating them where she picked them up from the stone floor. She was eyeing him as she happily chewed the meat and then swallowed. He then held out the next chunk. Princess darted forward to nip out of his fingers the treat and retreated to be near her mistresses to eat her treat. The direwolf pressed into Jeyne for security.

The two girls moved closer. Sandor held out more meat which the black canine took from his fingers and now stayed put to eat. He fed it more flaked meat chunks the wolf eating happily. He fed the wolf all the meat. Her tummy bulging out now.

He went to pet the wolf on her head. Her head rocking down. He continued to pet the pup who spread her legs out to support her body being pummeled. Princess’s legs slowly splaying out with the force of Sandor’s head pats. The Direwolf’s head tilting over. Her eyes beginning to cross.

“Pet her Sandor not club her” Sansa scolded Sandor.

“Oh. Sorry.”

He lightened his petting. The wolf now licking his fingers and smiling up at him. He petted the direwolf pup for a minute. Slowly he got back up. The wolf had plopped down on her back and whined to have her belly rubbed. The two girls smiled at Sandor before bending down to give affection to their wolf pup.

Sandor was proud of himself. He had undone the rancor between him and Eddard’s eldest daughter and her friend. He noted that they seemed inseparable. He wondered why. They must really be
best of friends. He continued on his journey to Eddard’s meeting.

He entered into the room where Eddard had his informal meetings near his quarters. The table was covered with scrolls and maps. Several books were open where his King had read some passages. Eddard was talking to their new Grand Maester about something. On the back wall, a table had been setup that had a large map of the Storm and Crownlands as well as the lower Riverlands. He noted Merrel was in the room as well. On the walls were tacked maps of Westeros and Essos.

On the map on the table in the back of the room were pins that showed the disposition of all the armies now converging or already at King’s Landing.

Varys acknowledged his entrance. The man still made Sandor edgy but he was getting more used to the bald eunuch. He felt the man’s eyes on him. He had a smirk on his face. He probably already knew of his glaring defeat at Cersei’s tongue. Damn that woman and her infernal quick wit!

Eddard turned and greeted him with his friendly half squint smile. He actually meant it. Sandor was surprised how this still touched him. The man actually respected and liked him for the man he was. He never made barbs about his face or height like Cersei had and the people of his House generally. It was refreshing and uplifting.

He talked to Dromen Salver the Grand Maester. He was young and good looking. Arya and Syrio came in and had a seat. Sandor was never sure when the two might drop in for a while. He got the impression that they dropped in for Arya to listen to strategy and see leaders designing their campaigns. It was obvious that Syrio was training Arya to be more than a warrior.

He shook his head his long hair moving back and forth over his scars. Being a warrior was enough for him. That was true but the fact that Eddard was keeping him abreast of all his plans made Sandor feel so good inside. He had half thought he would be ignored like he normally was. Instead, Eddard kept him fully involved in all the Small Council matters.

He had flat out asked Eddard why last week after the meeting at the beginning of the week. His King had looked at him strangely.

“Sandor. I asked you to be part of my government. You are my Lord Commander. You are part of the Small Council. Of course you will be involved in all the decision making of the realm. Why wouldn’t you be?”

He had said something in reply. He was not sure what to think. He had been chocked up. He choked slightly reflecting on this now. This being respected was something new to Sandor. He found he truly liked it.

They had gotten up and walked over to the back wall desk to look at the current troop locations and recent movements. That was all but Varys. War was not his forte. The Grand Maester had remained sitting as well reading a scroll. The Druids were spying on all the major armies and the forces they may be projecting out into the field. Their efforts marked by the Druids and reported as evidence by the pins on the maps. Tywin started out doing this extensively when he entered the Riverlands trying to wrest the initiative from Edmure.

The grizzled old Lion had failed. In truth, even Sandor felt a little sorry for Tywin Lannister. The Druids Ravens and even owls at night easily kept up with Tywin’s troop movements. The forces of his former House had no secrecy in their movements. This laid them open to chasing ghosts and vicious counterattacks that sapped strength and will while allowing the attackers to strike with minimal causalities.
Tywin had moved troops to attack Mummer's Ford and Stoney Sept in the upper Riverlands. The two communities located in places that allowed one to control the waterways in those locations in the Riverlands. The columns attacked continuously without warning had forced them back when losses of men and material were approaching nearly forty percent rendering them unfit for combat. All cohesion of the units destroyed through losses and moral dissipation.

After those events the old Lion had learned his lessons. Only large scale troop movements would be tried in the future.

Now Tywin was racing east to reach King’s Landing. He was leaving the countryside alone knowing he had to chop off the head of his personal serpent. One Eddard Stark. Tywin knew some ally of Eddard was enabling his attacks but had not been able to solve the mystery. Any Druids captured were either freed by daring raids or committed suicide through the ingestion of a deadly root. Only a small amount was fatal.

The Druids would not betray their brethren and sisters. Death was preferable.

Looking at the table map Sandor saw all the forces now in the field. Stannis had arrived of course. Pompous ass. Highgarden was moving at pace down the Rosewood Road. Tywin was now advancing more quickly. He was nearing King’s Landing with a now singular focus. Where Eddard wanted him. Thus, the King had ordered the attacks to lessen in hopes that Tywin would even more quickly get to King’s Landing.

Robb Stark had paused his army on the King’s Highway to let Tywin pass. Sandor was still not sure that was a fully wise idea. While bloodied, Tywin’s army was still intact. His force of nearly forty thousand men a powerful force.

Add to that the forces remaining to Kevan Lannister, Tywin’s brother, still in Lannnisport being formed up and Jaime Lannister, Tywin had the strength to assault King’s Landing. Only he couldn’t.

Stannis’s army of nearly fifteen thousand was here already. Robb was coming south with nearly thirty thousand men. Highgarden was on the way with nearly sixty thousand men and was forming a second army of nearly that same amount.

No one force would be able to wage war without fear of a deadly assault from the other armies encamped around King’s Landing. That Eddard could sally forth at any time and assault one from the rear and then retreat. It was a bold strategy of Eddard. Sandor only hoped it would work. All the armies in essence cancelling out each other.

How Eddard hoped to control all those forces Sandor had no idea. He had plans but there was so many possibilities for failure. It was known that Oberyn had only brought to King’s Landing basically an honor guard. Theon and Asha were on their way with only a handful of long ships. Neither the House of Martell nor Greyjoy would have much say in the events about to unfold.

Sandor could not help but ask. “Should we not assault Tywin’s forces more? Weaken him further.”

Eddard answered his query “That is a good valid question Sandor. I probably should but what would that truly accomplish. You know how I plan to subdue the Houses one by one. I do not see the need to kill more men than necessary.”

“What if you are wrong? We both know that Tywin Lannister is crafty and ruthless in his prosecution of achieving his goals.”
“You are right Sandor” Eddard replied calmly. “Let’s pray I am right. But having his daughter and his grandchildren as supposed bargaining chips gives me the advantage. I have caste dispersion upon his House’s name. He must work to reverse that. He needs to get his daughter and grandchildren back to attempt to undo the doubts I have caste. The other Major Houses being present gives me advantage. They will limit Tywin. I will succeed.”

Sometimes Eddard’s surety astounded Sandor. One miscalculation could lead Eddard’s plans to ruin.

“Again I must ask my liege. What happens if you fail?”

“Why then, you and the rest of the Small Council will have to decide your course after my demise.” Eddard gave him his squint smile.

“Well then” Sandor replied “let’s make sure you succeed.” The rest in the room had chuckled at that. Sandor went and sat down beside Varys. He had seen enough of the maps. He was a man of action. He would let Eddard do the planning.

As they discussed the events occurring in Westeros Eddard called out to Merrel. The Druid turned his head from looking at the map to give the King of Westeros his attention.

“Syrio tells me your people have communities in Essos? That you live in the forests of Qohor. Are there other communities?” Eddard asked.

Merrel straightened and looked at Eddard. He looked at him for long seconds. Sandor wondered if he would answer.

“The answer to your questions is yes and no. Yes we did or do have communities in Qohor. We came to Westeros along the land bridge that existed to Dorne ten thousand years before the men you call the First Men. We soon met the Children of the Forest. We had a natural affinity with them. How they lived at one with the world around them. We were both pacifist.”

“That changed when our violent brothers followed twelve thousand years ago. We remained until the Great Diaspora eight thousand years ago. Then many of our people fled back to Essos. The world had changed. Our original brothers no longer welcomed us. They had retreated to the depths of the great forest of Qohor. They inhabit the core and the north of that great forest. They have worked to increase the range of the forest on the north shore of the Shivering Sea by a hundred leagues. None are allowed in. Even us.”

“We formed new small communities as we live her in Westeros. I do hesitate to tell you of those locations but I have come to trust all those in this room. Our communities in Essos learned to live in greater secrecy with the rise of the Kingdom of Valyria.”

“We live in the south and east of the Forest of Qohor. We have brothers and sisters that live in the vast swamps below and to the east of River Royne. We have colonies in the great forests of Ifeqevron and Mossovy. We also inhabit the Bone Mountains and the Shattered Mountains on the East Coast of Slaver’s Bay. We also have communities in the dense highland forests of Great Moraq.”

Merrel explained the Druids had tried to build communities on the island continent of Sothoryos but like others had found the land inhospitable as attested by the ruined abandoned cites of Zamettar on the island’s coast and the City Yeen in the interior. Failed outposts of Nymeria.

“Why do you ask? As here in Westeros, my kin in Essos avoid man. We seek isolation. I fear your
Sandor saw Eddard squint at the not so subtle jib.

Eddard shook his head at Merrel and walked to the back of the room and moved to the left wall. Merrel walked with him and Arya and Syrio trailed behind. The room had been lined with maps of mainly Westeros but also Essos up the Bone Mountains on the two back walls in relationship to the main table. Grand Maester Dromen Salver rose from his chair and wafted over to the back of them room to join the persons already there.

Sandor sat with Varys watching the interaction play out. Eddard asking where roughly the Druids had communities near the Red Wastes. Merrel answered that most were near the tallest ranges of the Shattered Mountains and to their east. They had some communities to the west of the mountain divide but well away from the lower foot hills away from the coast of Slaver’s Bay.

Their communities back to the east and up the ridge lines from the main rivers of the Skahazadban, Qoghdeiq, Chaqokha that flowed into Meereen and the Worm River that flowed near to Astraphor. The Druids relied on the treacherous lay of the mountains and lack of trails through them to remain hidden and safe. Since they wanted to travel within the mountain ranges they had no problem with south by north passages. There were no easy east by west trails through the mountains to the east of Slaver’s Bay.

Merrel explained that the dominate Trade Winds of upper Slaver’s Bay precipitated out when the moisture laden air rose up the west face of the mountains. The successive ridge lines drying out the air. The rainfall and hard steady winds made for a large thick stunted, twisted interwoven thickets of live oaks and willows with many interspersed pine trees. It was these mountains that made the Red Wastes so inhospitable. The mountains ringing out almost all the moisture from the air.

Eddard listened raptly.

“The band of land our Essos brothers live in in the Shattered Mountains is narrow but long. Our communities only in the highest convoluted mountain ranges. The hills thickly forested and hard to traverse. Our communities run from due west of Astrorphor down to the coast of the Ghiscari Strait in the hill country of Shamdar.”

Merrel turned from the maps and smiled at Eddard. He gave the King an appraising look.

“Again I must wonder as to these questions of my brothers and sisters on the continent of Essos. They are far away, but, near to a certain supposedly dead Dragon Queen perhaps.” A wicked smile on Merrel’s face.

Eddard snorted shaking his head softly.

“I fear you have me there Merrel.”

“Ah. So you are starting to believe then?” Merrel asked in a sardonic tone and a twinkle in his eye.


“Your head says she is dead but your heart thinks she lives?”

“I fear she is dead, and, yet, I keep getting rejoinders that she yet may live. I want to be prepared. Would it be possible to setup a network that would allow me to know of her emergence and then track her? How much do you communicate with your Essos brothers and sisters?”
Merrel took a deep breath and a reflective look on his face. Looks came over his face as he fashioned his answer.

“Perhaps Eddard. Several things I must say. One. The Red Wastes are vast and our communities lining it are sparse by comparison. Only to the west do we have communities. We avoid the grassy plains of the Dothraki Sea and the lands to the east of the Red Wastes are as inhospitable as the Red Wastes themselves. We avoid the coastlines of the Scarsgamaau Expanse between Essos and the island continent of Sothroyos.”

“Therefore my brothers to the East can look but we are sparse. We could easily miss Daenerys Targaryen when she reappears. If she moves to the north or east we will not know it. Still, if she has dragons I feel sure she will make herself known soon enough.”

Sandor watched Eddard absorbing this news.

“I was hoping for more.”

“I wish I could give it. Also, our brothers in Essos have different prophecies and allegiances than ours.”

This had everyone’s attention. Merrel looked at Eddard and glanced at the others in the room.

“Go on” Eddard urged. Arya and Syrio looked at Merrel expectantly.

“With time, our goals and ambitions have diverged. We here on this continent dream of restoration of what once was in Westeros. When the Diaspora occurred those leaving shared our hopes and desires. That has changed over the millennium.”

Merrel paused. Varys whispered to Sandor. “He is waiting to see if any can guess what has changed.”

Grand Maester Dormen Slaver spoke up after fifteen seconds.

“Valyria.”

Merrel nodded to the Grand Maester.

“Correct.”

“How did Valyria change the course of the Druids in Essos?” Eddard asked.

Sandor wondered too.

Dromen answered again. “Conquest and slavery. The crimes of Essos and Westeros are vastly different. It changed the perspective of the Druids I would guess.”

“Correct” Merrel answered again smiling at the Grand Maester.

“They look for a savior for their plight as we do for ours. They foresee a man coming who is both Dragon and Direwolf. This savior will break the chains of slavery that plague so much of Essos. This savior will tame the rape and pillage of the mighty Dothraki Kalasars.”

Eddard glanced sideways surreptitiously at Sandor, Varys and Dromen. Merrel still did not know of Jon Snow. Arya looked on as well. She too did not know Sandor mused. He wondered how much longer Eddard would hold that truth close to his heart.
Eddard had taken in the Grand Maester’s insight. He looked at Merrel “You say it will be a union between the two Houses. Different and yet somewhat the same. Will they help us? She is not the fulfillment of their prophecy.”

“They will help. We are all still Druids.”

Merrel and Eddard now talked on how to set up wards to look for the possible emergence of one lost Targaryen High Princess.

Varys leaned over to Sandor.

“Which one do you like?” he whispered to the Hound.

Sandor was a literal man. “I like the Essos one. I like the fact that it is one person who is the union. Also, he is a man.”

Varys looked at Sandor appraisingly.

“I like the mystical and spiritual. I am drawn to the union of two spirits who become one. Also, you are a sexist pig Sandor” Varys snickered at Sandor.

“Whatever, ball less one. A man has a much easier time in this world when it comes to the grasping of power. Just the way it is Varys.”

“We shall see” Varys answered softly.

The men went on for five more minutes. Eddard was not satisfied with what Merrel thought he could offer but understood the Druids limitation in Essos. Eddard grimaced and nodded. Sandor agreed. Limited resources would limit what the Druids could do in that part of the vast distant world.

After the meeting was over Sandor was still on edge. Cersei’s tongue lashings always got his lather up. Plus, he was full of energy for some reason this day and needed to work some of it off. He had practiced with Merjen this early morning and did not want another training session this soon.

A long walk felt right to Sandor. He headed for the main gate out of the Red Keep, the Barbican. The gate was up. It was heavily guarded by foot with spearmen and crossbowmen. Above the guard was longbow bowmen up on the barbican. His king wanted to show strength by keeping the gate open. Sellers of stock from the Blackwater Rush and Bay and local farmers were allowed to set up tables outside and just inside the gates to sell their wares.

There was a free flow of traffic in and out the gate with sellers making transactions with the occupants within the Red Keep. The fresh food adding a flair to the meals. Vendors were setup outside the gate to help cook the meals for the guards, courtesans and the staff that kept the Red Keep functioning in an efficient manner.

Eddard had increased wages by fifteen percent of all the staff in the Red Keep. Varys friend Ilyrio was coming through Sandor thought. The increased wages made for happy workers and gave them more money to spend with the vendors plying their trade.

The Hound stopped and looked at all the interactions around him. He felt his mouth set. He knew his height and his scars kept him separated from such things. He was damaged goods and knew it. He shook his head. He supposed his snarling and snapping at anything that moved did not help his plight.

He felt so alone sometimes. He wanted a woman in his life like every other man. A woman and

He walked over to the raised gate. The Hound looked up at the bronze gate that banded the thick oaken timbers and wrought iron. The metal seeming to shimmer in the late morning sunlight. He moved out of the Red Keep. The warrens before him.

Looking right and left Sandor Clegane decided in which direction to take. He had taken the roads to go to the Street of Steel in his recent past sojourns. He had no desire to aimlessly wander around. He needed a goal. He decided to go to the docks along the Blackwater Rush. He wanted to walk through Fishmonger Square and along the wharfs. He had always liked looking at the sails and wondering where the ships had traveled from.

He remembered his first trip to Lannisport and seeing ships for the first time. It had thrilled him. He had been a mid teenager and still cable of some wonder and genuine happiness then.

The Hound sighed as he started his journey. He knew happiness now but it was always filled with melancholy.

He started to walk down the start of the King’s Road that headed out to the Gate of the Gods and began its journey to the Wall. Sandor turned to look at the open gate. Eddard had deemed his new rule safe enough to open them two weeks ago. His instincts had been right as they always seemed to be. The populace seemed to love their new king more and more.

Eddard’s Stark lack of ostentatious behavior was a pleasant shock to the populace of the King’s Landing. His policies brought more coin into their pockets. Their selling to not one but two armies outside the gates was making for happy farmers and workers of the waters around King’s Landing. Peace and prosperity. It was easy to see why the little man supported their new King.

He did not have any of the Targaryen madness, the Baratheon gluttony or the cruelty of the Lannisters.

As he walked along the road he watched the unskilled citizens that had been hired to clean up garbage and to keep the roadway clean and well maintained looking. It looked well and filled the local populace a sense of wellbeing. When one had pride in their surroundings it bled into their personal outlooks.

The first part of the road from Red Keep was lined by tall and majestic maple and elm trees. Sandor looked up at the mature trees. Their full canopies provided shade for the merchants and pedestrians using the road near the Red Keep. He observed children playing on the grass swards. Their mothers and some fathers interacting with the laughing children. Smiles and laughter on their faces.

Melancholy again washed over the hound. He wanted to have children laughing and running around his feet. Something else he would never admit but he did.

The tall man looked up at the canopy of leaves. He cocked his head to hear the robins, blue jays, mocking birds along with signing song birds. The air resplendent with their sweet melodies. Sandor did smile now. Their tunes were so pure and filled with gaiety. Sandor watched them flit through the tree limbs and those that came to the ground to pick scratch and look for bugs and seeds to eat. The birds feasting on the bread crumbs thrown their way.

Here most of the buildings lining the road were businesses that catered to the needs of the Red Keep with fine crafted pastries and cakes. Other eateries assisting the cooking staff in making delicious repasts. Other establishments for the repair of daily garb and the creation of new fine attire. There
were artisans that maintained the fine furniture, china, eating utensils and day to day items needed for the “royal” life. There were also many fine hotels to house the staff of Lords, wealthy merchants from afar, the staff of foreign dignitaries and various visiting religious orders.

Sandor kept walking. His head turned to look at the three brothels in this part of the city. The establishments blatant in their business. Sandor set his eyes straight ahead. No woman would come near him with his disfigurement. He knew he would find women who would sleep with in those establishments but it would only be for his coin and be filled with revulsion seeing his ruined face up close.

He could not tolerate that.

He had reached the major crossroad of the King’s Road and the Dragon Tail Pathway. The major thoroughfare crossing the King’s Road was along a natural fold in the city. A creek was beside the road that the builders of the King’s Road had erected a small study bridge to cross over it. He observed the tall housing complex and a small temple for the seven faced god near to the small bridge. There was a restaurant near the corner intersection with ornate awnings that had many tables out front with circular chairs arrayed around them.

On the other corner was a roaming vendor. Sandor licked his lips. Yes! The man with his small cart on two large wheels. On the side was written “Cool Slushes”. The Hound did not try to hide his near drooling thinking of getting another “Slush”. The ice crystals soaked in juice concentrate of various fruit flavors. The man had so many wonderful flavors to choose from. Sandor hurried over to the cart.

Sandor had discovered the man and his treats three weeks ago and was regular customer now of the man. The man had blanched when Sandor came up to him the first time. He was nervous and fidgeted at first. Repeated visits and good coin had warmed the man up. He had grown used to Sandor and his disfigurement. Sandor did not reply to the man’s attempts at conversation. He didn’t mean it anyways Sandor thought.

Sandor gulped down four cups of cherry. He then had an orange and lime combination. He moaned scraffing down the treats. He did not mind the man smiling up at him. He was hungry! Sandor moaned patting his now full stomach. It wouldn’t last long being all ice but his stomach was happy for the moment. Sandor would be visiting this man in the near future. A lot! He tipped the man. The man’s smile broadened.

Sandor renewed his journey. He moved down the Dragon Tail Pathway till they came to the Hook. He then walked down this street looking at the many various styles of buildings that lined the road. Sandor made sure his hair hid most of the damage done to his face. To the locals he was just another tall man. He made sure to not draw attention to himself. Anonymity was good for the Hound. It kept him from getting hurt.

He turned off the main road and walked through maze of back and side allies. He was fascinated by the many kinds of buildings and the small business set out in front of many of them and in any cross intersections of paths. The hustle and bustle washed over him and he could feel the pulse of the city’s life.

He enjoyed the breeze but grimaced at the smells. His nose wrinkling.

Eddard wanted to try and tackle the squalor of King’s Landing. Other Kings had not cared. He wondered how much success Eddard would have. He came out of the warrens and took the Muddy Way down to the Street of Steel where the roads intersected. He was just above Fishmonger Square and the River Gate. He was on the edge of that square. Sandor looked around at all the busy
commerce before him.

The smell of fish and shellfish thick in the air. Many herbs and spices added tang to the air. The tall man watched vendors making meals for the local populace to consume on the spot. Others were preparing food for consumption further away in more distant parts of King’s Landing.

Sandor was sure he saw more fish being smoked and pickled to go further afield. The fishermen of fish and those that plied the waters for shellfish hard at work preparing food for the armies outside. Their stomachs needing sustenance. The caught fair being cooked and wheeled out to the armies for sale. Coin and salt being used as currency.

Sandor started to move through the businesses setup in Fishmonger Square. Being surrounded by the tables of sellers and buyers Sandor almost felt buffeted by the vitality of daily life. People arguing over price and then happy sales. People consuming meals with glee and happy looks on their faces. He watched a cook sharpen her knives crisscrossing the blades over each other making that unique sound.

He continued to walk towards the wharfs. Several vendors tried to engage him for a sale of trout and then fried clams in a butter broth. He scowled at them out of reflex. Also, his stomach was content for the moment with the ‘Slushies’ in it. Maybe on the way back. He was sure the chance of getting some coin would have the vendors forgiving his vile temperament. Money had a soothing affect he snickered to himself.

He passed through the Mud Gate and looked out upon the ships in their slips before him. Most of the ships had their sails furled but they were still pretty to gaze upon. The tall masts looking like tree limbs that had shed all their leaves preparing for winter. He observed sailors up on the masts, cross spars and in the slack rigging. The men making repairs.

He marveled at the sailors effortless swinging from mast to mast on long hemp lines hanging off yardarms. The men unerring in their movements about the masts. One ship had its purple sail being mended while still up. The sail softly rippling in the warm breeze.

He moved down the narrow passages till he reached the docks themselves. He looked down both ways down the wooden slats of the docks. He started walking to his right. He looked upon the ships he passed. He noted the pinon on the tallest masts declaring the House or Free Cities they hailed from.

He shook his head. There was two Lannister ships in their slips. He was no longer of that House. He was a Stark now. On the quays before them were samples of the wares that the ships had either brought to King’s Landing or would be loaded onto the ships to be taken to ports unknown. Sandor shook his head. Again he thought that commerce and money trumped all. Outside the gates of King’s Landing was camped a small army of Lannister forces. Men who were buying food and simple wares from the citizens of King’s Landing.

Citizens who now bent the knee to Eddard Stark. A knee knelt willingly.

The captains of the two Lannister ships had set up tables on the docks before their side by side docked ships. The captains negotiating with warehouse owners to sell or store their wares. Conversely, the men of the warehouses were themselves negotiating to find space on the Lannister ships. The merchants of King’s Landing needing ships to move their wares. Those wares having to travel to distant ports around Westeros and Essos. There they could be sold and earn currency for the warehouse men. The men standing and the captains at their tables in animated conversations. Both sides looking for the best price. It reminded Sandor of that old saying ‘buy cheap and sell dear’.
He continued walking down the wharfs. He saw the eagle of Arryn and the spear of Dorne. He heard the bastard Valyrian of the Free Cities as well. He loved their accents and how melodic their speech sounded. He heard broken Westerosi as the seller and buyer from two continents did business.

He saw the bright colored beards of sailors and especially the captains of Tyrosh. The people of that land were mercantile who believed in trade. They were known for their greed. Sandor did not like the fact that for every free person in Tyrosh there were three slaves. *Free City my ass* snorted Sandor.

He spotted a gaggle of sailors from Pentos going by their dyed, oiled, and forked beards. The men arguing over something as he passed them.

A commotion caught his eye down the dock. He was the Lord Commander sworn to the Iron Throne. He told himself that any business on the docks was not of his concern. This was no threat to the Iron Throne. His duty was to the King of Westeros. It was most probably a squabble between sailors or merchants. Let the idiots fight he snorted to himself.

He slowly approached the disturbance. He stiffened at what he say. He felt anger flush through him. Still, this was no concern to the tall Lord Commander. He had other duties to attend. He would not get involved in a personal matter between a man and most probably a slave. He hated the thought but he would not get involved. This was not his problem he kept telling himself. His tread brought him to the disturbance.

Sandor saw a woman with medium brown skin being kicked by a man dressed in rich silk robes. The stripes in diagonal patterns made Sandor think the man was Myr. He was cursing the woman. The woman hunched over to protect a small baby she was using her body to make sure was not harmed. The man bending over to slap the woman all over her head.

The woman’s face grimaced but she did not cry out. Tears ran down her cheeks.

Near the woman was two small girls crying and hugging each other. Sandor guessed they were maybe four and two years of age. Sandor pursed his lips reminding himself this was none of his concern. This was not his business or the realms. He kept walking.

The man barked commands at her in the language of Essos. The woman cried out when the man’s next kick hit her hard in the ribs.

Sandor was passing them now. He glanced down at the woman being beaten. She noticed him passing and she looked up at him. He told himself louder that it was not his problem. Their eyes met each other and held. He told himself to look away. He would not involve himself in matters that had no import to him he told himself yet again. He felt a connection in their locked eyes but he stomped it down. *This was not his concern!* He felt his stomach twist but this was truly none of his business.

He saw hope flare in her eyes for a moment and then fade with his long stride taking him past the beaten woman. She saw he was not going to come to her aid. More tears now rained down her cheeks. Her face fell knowing she had no hope. Her shoulders now slumped with defeat.

“STOP!” Sandor bellowed at the top of his lungs as he turned on his heel and confronted the abusive situation in front of him. He had hurriedly made sure his sword was in place the strap unclasped as well as the long dagger being in place on his right hip. His loud voice had caused the poorly written drama to halt for the moment.

The merchant turned to look at Sandor. He sneered.
“Leave me be tall man” he spoke in the common tongue. His voice richly accented. He turned his back to Sandor. The arrogant man thinking his spoken command would send Sandor scurrying. The Hound barked out a derisive laugh. The man turned back to face him.

“What man beats a woman?” Sandor sneered to the man.

“She is not a woman. She is my slave.” Sandor saw the multiple tear drops tattoo beneath her right eye. She wore a collar around her neck. Sandor glared at the man and his seven sellswords or mercenaries that were in a half circle behind the man. He looked them all up and down. He noticed two were very young and nearly pissing themselves. Good that helped in the odds.

“I tell you again take your leave.”

“I thought you were from a Free City?” Sandor retorted.

The man laughed hard at that. While the man laughed Sandor calmly unhooked his helm from his belt and put it on his head. The seven swordsmen behind the merchant men were now getting nervous. Two seemed to be of some mettle Sandor thought. Two were really young and totally beyond themselves. They had not signed into this man’s service to actually fight. Only beat slaves and terrorize merchants Sandor supposed.

“Again, I say take your leave” the merchant barked at this interloper. He saw the scars on Sandor’s face. He had pulled his hair back to put on his helm. “Freak” he sneered.

With a slow motion, Sandor pulled his sword out of its scabbard. The metallic sound seemed to echo in the air that was now silent like a tomb. Sandor saw a crowd forming around them. The sailors and dockworkers lining up to see the show that was about to commence.

“I will only give you one chance to lay down your arms” Sandor said looking at the sellswords. He gauged them. Two were ready but looked like they only possessed modest skill at best. Two were still almost pissing themselves. He could ignore them for a moment. The last three were milling around not exactly sure what to do. They were used to any potential foe backing down when it was one versus seven.

_They did not know the Hound!_ Sandor thought to himself.

“Leave now” he told the mercenaries. He turned to look at the merchant “Leave the woman behind” he told him in a simple command.

The man smirked at him. The merchant thinking Sandor was only bluffing. He kicked the woman. She did not see it coming. It made her cry out in pain at the unexpected assault.

“AAAARRRGGG! GGGG!” Sandor roared charging in on the seven men who were supposed to be swordsman. Only the two most competent men had drawn their swords. The rest of the men were startled and fumbling for their weapons.

Sandor had seen the men had a hodgepodge of armor. The armor did not give their bodies the full coverage that his plate armor gave him. The men dressed in the miss mash of armor that mercenaries were want to wear. He had an immediate advantage. One he would take full advantage of.

He slammed into the man who looked the most accomplished. He was at least eight inches taller and had eighty pounds on the man. The man had swung at Sandor but he easily blocked the strike away with his sword. Sandor’s body slammed into the shocked man. The impact knocked the man off his feet and sent him flying back tumbling to the wooden slats of the dock.
This gave Sandor the freedom to half turn his body and swing his sword in a half arc around his body. The next best man blocked his sword strike but had to give ground against the power of the Hound. Sandor then turned and slammed into two of the other mercenaries who were almost tripping over each other. The man he was striking at with his sword blocked his strike but his body was knocked off balance. Sandor followed his sword striking down hitting his right shoulder covered by an aventail. His sword glanced off but the man cried out in pain from the savage strike.

In that moment Sandor looked around fast. The two neophytes still had large eyes. One was backing up not even attempting to draw his sword. The other was wildly trying to unhook the clasp to his scabbard to pull his sword. He was too busy pissing himself. The other three had pulled their swords out but were looking at each other looking for guidance.

The first man came back to the fight roaring. Sandor pivoted to the right retreating. He met the man’s charge. Their swords hacked against each other and then locked up. Sandor moved in and gripped the man and shook him violently knocking him off balance. Sandor jerked the man close as he jerked left. The man screamed when one his fellow sellswords stabbed him in the lower back where his armor did not meet. The blade sinking in piercing his right kidney.

Sandor jumped back. He snarled when the clang of a sword on armor rang out. A sword glanced off the right side of his armored body. He ran over the man who stumbled down to the ground his sword flying out his hand. Sandor kicked it away. One of the younger mercenaries had gotten his sword out and found courage.

He swung wildly at Sandor who dodged down and to the right. His sword swung up from a low angle. His blade slammed into the face of the helmless man. His blade bit halfway into the man’s face. His body started to jerk wildly. The man dropped his sword while Sandor wrenched his blade out of the man’s skull. Blood gushed out the ghastly wound. The man falling to his knees and then to his face.

He spun off to the left. He was attacked from two directions now. He slammed his sword right and left knocking the swords away. He stabbed at the men making them block up high with their swords. The Hound then slashed across the knee of the man attacking from his left. The man screamed when his leg was nearly severed in two at the knee joint. Sandor whipped his sword back. Blood arched into the air following the path of Sandor’s sword.

He saw the other sellsword he felt was accomplished. Her roared charging the man. They slashed at each other before Sandor locked up their swords. He surged into the man till their bodies were pressed hard into each other. In a flash, Sandor released his right hand from his sword. He leaned his body in and used his left hand to press his sword into his foe’s sword. His right hand had went to his hip and gripped his long dagger. He pulled it off its anchor stud.

His hand came up and back. Then Sandor stabbed in. The blade sunk into the man’s temple till over half of the blade was buried in the man’s brain. Sandor jumped back. The dead man slumped like a puppet with his strings cut.

The fight had gone out of the survivors. They dropped their swords. The two gravely wounded men were crying out in their pain. The one man was piteous in his moans as his kidney bleed heavily in his body cavity. The man with the nearly severed leg was moaning like an animal in snare. The severed arteries in his leg bleeding out.

Sandor looked at the merchant. The man’s face now filled with terror.

“Leave now pig. A man who strikes a helpless woman is a bastard.”
The man tried to gather his courage. In a weak voice “She is my property.”

“Not anymore. Leave now or I will gut you like the pig you are.”

The man had the wisdom to leave with his surviving hail bodyguards. The man with the severed leg was now unconscious and would soon die. The other moaning man would take some time to die. Sandor turned his back on them. They had fought and lost. They were scum for taking up with such a pig as an employer.

Sandor looked down at the battered woman. She had copper-toned skin and dark almond eyes. The irises black as was her hair. She had hair that was lustrous and down to her shoulder blades. The Dothraki woman had high cheekbones and a sharp nose. Her chin was prominent. Sandor could not help but note the beauty of the Dothraki woman.

Sandor saw the bruises on her face and a contusion rising on her left cheek. Her upper lip was split slightly. She had obviously been abused for some time. Even down on the ground Sandor saw she still had a proud carriage. She was a strong woman in a helpless situation. He had done well he thought to himself. His eyes took in her attire.

She wore a painted leather vest over her bare chest. The vest closed just enough by leather drawstrings to mostly cover her medium sized breast. Sandor could not but help noticing her firm breast. With anger Sandor scowled to himself. He was here to save the woman not be a pervert he thought savagely to himself. He noted she had on horsehair leggings cinched by bronze medallion belts. Her feet were shod with leather sandals which were laced up to the knee.

He went and retrieved his dagger and cleaned his sword and dagger on the shirt of the man Sandor had nearly cleaved his head in two. He turned back to the woman and went to stand before her.

The woman slowly rose up to her feet. She was weary it was clear but she straightened her back looking up at Sandor. Sandor guessed the woman was only five foot two in height. She looked him in the eye with direct eye contact. He felt she was almost challenging him. He kept their eyes locked refusing to back down. If there was one thing Sandor never did, it was back down from a challenge.

“My name is Ziggi. It means to defy” she spoke in a rich accent, in the common tongue. "I am Dothraki." She motioned her head down. "This is Thaithi. She is my daughter by that pig Brachoquo Nahanar. My other two daughters were from my Dothraki mate, Anno. Our Khalasar was attacked and he and many of our warriors killed. I was captured along with my daughters." She pointed to the bigger little girl. "This is Zhalli, which means butterfly." She nodded at the smaller girl. “This is Viqqi. Her name means rainbow.”

“The women they did not kill outright and survived being raped were herded together. The slave runners took us to the coast of Slaver’s Bay. There we were taken by a Meereen ship to Volantis. Upon arrival I was immediately taken to the auction block. I was allowed to keep my girls. I was sold off to be Brachoquo’s slave.”

Sandor had listened politely. He heard her sad story. Unfortunately, the world was filled with such stories. He looked down at the beautiful woman. He felt pride in saving her from such an unfair state. He had done his duty to protect the weak. Inside, Sandor squirmed knowing he had almost walked by. Still, he had done his duty.

“You are free now Ziggi. I will have your slave collar cut off. You can now find your own destiny as you wish.” Satisfied he had done all that he could Sandor looked around unsure what to do now. He returned his gaze to the Dothraki woman. He wanted to walk off but the woman insisted in
holding his gaze. It unnerved him. He did not like interacting deeply with people. Not at all. He supposed he would take her to an alms house and get her collar cut away.

“I am yours now. What is your name?”

The tall man answered automatically. “Sandor Clegane.” It was then he processed what the woman had just said to him.

“What?! Oh hell no!” Sandor exclaimed. “What the hell are you saying woman?!”

“I am yours” she calmly told Sandor.

“NO!”

“Why else did you fight but to claim me as yours?”

“What?! Wh wh what do you mean?” Sandor was slightly dizzy at this twist of events. The blasted woman was still holding his eyes with her midnight eyes. It unnerved him! What was this crazy woman saying?!

“A warrior fights for what he wants. It is the Dothraki way.”

“I fought because it was the right thing to do. I was honored bound to defend you.” Sandor left out the part about really wanting to pass by and leave the Dothraki woman to her fate. He felt shame flush through him.

The woman considered his words. Her face set. “I am Dothraki. I am yours now.”

“I am not Dothraki! The last thing I need is a songbird and her three chicks! I don’t need you in my life. I live alone!”

“I belong to you. You fought bravely for me. I accept you as my mate.”

“Your daft woman! I repeat I am not Dothraki. I know nothing of your customs.”

She insisted she was his.

He knew how to stop this silly back and forth. He pulled off his helm. He pulled his hair back fully to show the woman clearly his scars and the bone of the left side of his face.

She flinched but that was all. “Like I say. You are a great warrior. You must have fought a savage battle to earn those scars.”

Sandor stared at her gaped mouth and then laughed hard his head tilting back. He laughed a long time.

The woman stared up at him first with consternation and then vexation.

“What is so funny?” she asked now peeved.

“Me? A hero? Hah! This was done to me by my brother. When I was six. He fucking did this to me because I played with his damn toy! Me a hero? You’re daft. I am just a man like any other … well uglier than most” he finished. It was sadly true.

“I am not taking you in woman. I will take you to an alms house.”
The woman’s shoulders slumped. She called to the little girls in her native tongue. She started to wearily walk down the dock.

“Where the hell are you going? That is not the way to the alms house” Sandor barked at the retreating form of the Dothraki woman. He pointed in the opposite direction. She looked at his pointing finger. She shook her head and proceeded down the docks in the opposite direction.

“I am going back to my master.”

“WHAT?!” the Hound roared. He stomped down the dock to get in front of the woman. She glared up at him. He glared back at her. *What was this woman’s problem?!*

“I just saved you! What the hell!”

“I have no skills to offer beside my physical skills. I can tend horses” she looked around. “I see none here. This is not the grass seas I was raised in and knew how to live in. I will have to eventually move on from any place you take me. My future will be unsure and dire. I need stability for my girls. I will go back and endure to give my girls the stability they need.”

“He is an asshole. He abuses you.” He looked at the girls. “In time he will abuse them.” The two little girls clinging to each other looking scared tore at Sandor’s heart.

“I will figure out something before that time. For now I must endure.” She moved to go around Sandor.

He moved to get back in front of Ziggi.

Now she growled at Sandor. Her eyes blazed up at him. They were filled with fire. She had an iron will that was obvious to Sandor. He actually felt intimidated. In ire, he glared back down at the woman. He refused to back down.

“Get the hell out of my way. You have made your thoughts most clear to me.” She started to move around Sandor again.

“NO!” he shouted again. She stopped. Ziggi looked up at him with burning coals in her eyes. “Ok! Ok. You can come stay with me till I figure something out. I will house you and your daughters till I figure something out.”

“Of thank you most gracious man” Ziggi sneered. “Get out of my way! You told me how you feel!” the Dothraki woman shouted back at Sandor.

“Damnit woman!” He took a deep breath. He knew he was acting without fully thinking everything through but he couldn’t stop himself. “I want you to come with me. Okay! I did not save you to have you and your daughters go back to that asshole. Come back with me. I give you my word of honor I will treat you honorably. Let me help you Ziggi. I want you to come with me.”

The woman stared at him hard with her steady gaze. Sandor squirmed. *Why had he done that?!* Sandor berated himself.

The two little girls were hugging their mother’s legs now looking up at him. They had a fearful look on their faces. Their little faces touched his soul. Shame rushed through him again for putting fear into them.

Sandor willed himself to relax. He dropped out of his rigid stance and tried to stand around nonchalant. He started to fidget. *What was he getting himself into* he worriedly wondered.
Ziggi studied him for a long minute. Finally, the Dothraki nodded her head in the affirmative. She bent down to Zhalia. “She has hurt her leg. Carry her for me Sandor. Please.”

The Hound groaned to himself. He had no choice when it was said like that. The Dothraki woman held up the girl to Sandor. He took her in his arms and held her to his body. He looked around. The little girl immediately put her face into his neck. Her little arms reaching out to grasp ahold of his body. His eyes went large at that.

The woman picked up Viggi. The little girl looked worn out. Sandor saw Ziggi grimace and wince getting Viggi on her hip. He was sure she had other injuries that were not visible. Again Sandor cursed the merchant from Lys.

They slowly started to walk back to the Red Keep. They were soon off the docks and up into Fishmonger’s Square. The smells of fresh cooked food filled the air. He watched Zhalli stir looking at all the food around. He looked down at Ziggi and saw the same look. Sandor knew they were all hungry. He grimaced thinking they were kept in that state. Not starved but always knowing who provided their meals and kept waiting and never having truly enough. Sandor felt compassion for the Dothraki woman and her daughters.

He stopped them when they passed a long fishmonger’s table. It was piled high with various fish and shellfish. Several vendors on either end were selling vegetables and spices to add to the fare from the sea. Sandor saw two fishmongers and three fishwives behind the table. The women especially arguing and cursing customers for their cheapness and urging them on to buy more and more expensive fare. Their customers giving the invective back.

Sandor could understand the heated give and take. It made the transaction fun. He paused remembering his last mauling from Cersei. He glowered.

He went up to the table. He saw Ziggi and her two eldest daughters eyeing all the mounds of fish, shellfish and vegetables with undisguised want. They were clearly very hungry.

He looked along the table at all the fair being prepared for consummation. He watched a fishwife shuck oysters with her shucking knife. The implement a short blunt blade with a pointed tip to pry between shells. It had a long broad handle she used for leverage and stability. The comfortable handle had a hand guard and convenient hanging ring.

His mouth watered seeing the oysters being pried open. Some were placed on the stacked shells on the table in front of the women and others she threw into a pan behind her to fry the oysters.

Looking up and down the table he saw pliers to pull out pinbones, fish scalers to remove scales, filleting knives to cut away the flesh from the bones and curved knives for gutting and removing roe. The tools needed to prepare the morning’s catch. He saw beside the fishwife a fishmonger preparing the morning’s catch of small fish.

Sandor, between the two vendors, bought themselves a large meal of baked shade and minnows. He also bought a plate of fried oysters. He paid without wrangling much. His charges were hungry and he did not want them to see him acting all riled up. It was an act, well mainly, but they would not know it. He fidgeted as he waited for the meal to be prepared.

He also bought a large bowel of tossed vegetables with some parsley chopped in. A large plate of biscuits with a slab of butter. He bought tea for all around. They sat at one of the small tables in front of the fishmonger table. They all tucked into the food. Sandor was hungry and joined in the repast. He noted the mother and daughters ate like hungry jackals. There was very little of the meal left on the table. The girls looked much better. Viggi patting her belly in contentment. She smiled
up at him. He felt his heart flutter for some reason.

He gnawed his lower lip. He felt for them seeing them so hungry and weary. After eating the big meal the little girls were droopy. He wound up with both girls. They hugged themselves to Sandor immediately going to sleep. He turned his head when Ziggi breastfed her youngest daughter. The milk had the little girl soon asleep herself after her mother burped her.

As they prepared to leave, the fishwife called out to Sandor. He had left tips with both vendors.

“Bring your family back my good knight. I will feed you all well!”

Ziggi smiled at that. Geez, Sandor cringed. What have I got myself into?! He whined to himself again.

Soon they were slowly continuing their walk back through the warrens of King’s Landing. The incline up to the Red Keep was slight but Ziggi was soon flagging. Sandor knew she had little reserves left after her ordeal on the docks. They were deep in the warrens when they came to a large intersection with open space. Vendors all around on the edges hawking their wares.

Sandor called a halt to let Ziggi rest. She did not complain. They walked around looking at various wares being sold. Ziggi stopped at a table with polished tortoise shell clips and combs. She was obviously smitten with them. Sandor called down to the vendor. He asked Ziggi if she wanted any.

She demurred and said she was not worth such expense.

Sandor disagreed.

He called out to the vendor. He bought four tortoise shell barrette hair clips. The clips a little translucent with black and light brown wavy pattern in them. He also bought a banana hair clip he was informed. It was carved and painted in the same styles as the barrette clips.

The vendor encouraged Ziggi to wear them. She looked at Sandor for permission.

Why would she do that? He asked himself.

“I am buying them for you Ziggi. Please wear them.”

She gave him a radiant smile. He got a little lightheaded for some reason. Geez, he was in trouble he reflected to himself. She would be leaving him soon enough. It was for the best he sadly knew.

She clipped them into her hair. Gods Sandor thought. She was beautiful before but now … He could not stop himself from staring at the Dothraki beauty.

She reached out and touched his hand.

“Thank you my heroic knight” she said sincerely.

“I am not a knight. You are welcome” he answered on automatic. He feared her getting the wrong idea. He was just trying to be nice.

He paid the vendor. He cut Sandor's silver stag in half with his chisel and block. Sandor tipped the man several bronze falcons.

“Come back to me good sir when you need more beauteous items for your beautiful wife.”

He started to set the man straight but Ziggi cut in.
“Thank you my honest vendor” in her rich accent. “I hope to earn more such sweet gifts from my husband.”

Geez! Sandor whined.

He turned to leave but saw across the way …

He walked across the small intersection. This vendor was selling Raggedy Ann dolls. He looked down at the two girls sleeping in his arms. He looked up and down the shelves and saw two with black hair. He bought them. Ziggi came up saying he had spent enough. He saw Thaihi asleep in her papoose. He spied some rattles, pacifiers and small colored balls. He bought several of each of the former and five colored balls. He purchased a small leather pouch to put them all in. He gave that to Ziggi to carry. It was light enough.

Sandor never spent his wages on things other than for his armor, weapons and Stranger. Well, there was all of course he remembered. It was nice to have something to spend his coin on.

The small female vendor smiled at the half silver stag she received. She went to cut it but Sandor told her to keep it.

“You are most lucky miss to have this man as the father of your children!” the vendor told Ziggi. Ziggi smiling great big.

“I know.”

Geez!

Sandor saw Ziggi seemed refreshed with the rest and gifts and he resumed his trek after promising the asking doll maker he would be back when he was ready to buy more. His thoughts turned morose. The little girls would be gone before then.

By the time they reached the wagon selling slushies, Ziggi was flagging again. He stopped them at the wagon of the Slush vendor. He prodded Ziggi to get one. She smiled up at him. At least she did not refuse saying she wasn’t good enough. She asked for grape. The look of wonder and happiness on the Dothraki woman’s face made Sandor feel good. She looked like she had more pep now. He bought her another one as they left. He bought a grape slush also. She smiled up at him. The woman enjoying the treat as they proceeded up the warren of roads to the Red Keep.

“You will make an excellent father to my daughters and husband to your Dothraki wife. You have chosen wisely” Ziggi informed Sandor in a confident tone.

Geez!

He started to glare at her out of habit but bit his cheek and kept a neutral look. With slow measured steps they made it back to the Red Keep. The slow route through the pathways had Sandor looking down at the small woman wearily stepping beside him. Sandor again saw that the Dothraki woman was strong and brave. She cooed to the sleeping baby in the papoose around her neck. The woman fighting to not slow Sandor again. He did like her spunk and fire he had to admit to himself.

He led her in through the barbicon. He slowly walked Ziggi to the White Tower. It was clear that her strength was ebbing again. She had a determined look on her face proceeding forward just at a slower clip. Her ordeal taxing her stamina. He slowed his walk again. He was starting to feel like an inchworm. His predicament made him feel like his body was undulating like the little caterpillar.

He passed Arya and Syrio as they practiced out in a courtyard near the tower. Syrio had Arya doing
some routine ritualized steps of attack and parry. Arya saw him first. Her eyes nearly bulged out of her sockets. She stopped her routine. Her whole body leaned forward taking in the girls and Raggedy Ann dolls in Sandor’s arms and hands. Syrio started to berate her. He saw he had totally lost her focus. He turned around to see what had grabbed Arya’s complete attention. Now he was staring at Sandor and his entourage. His sword fell out of his grasp unremarked. With a loud report, the sword clanged on the hard stones.

They both watched Sandor, Ziggi and her daughters slowly pass them by. They stared with gaped mouths at Sandor holding the little girls who snuggled into his body. The dolls dangling from his left hand. Their heads turning to look at the Dothraki woman at his side. Their eyes going back and forth between Sandor and the woman. He watched them out of the corner of his eyes. *It was not that big of a deal*! Sandor raged to himself.

When they thought they had passed out of his view Sandor witnessed them tearing off. Syrio remembering his precious rapier turned around and retrieved it and raced off after Arya who was long gone. No doubt going to gossip Sandor groused to himself.

Sandor felt like he was in a daze. Thankfully, the Dothraki woman was quiet. She seemed very weary now that she sensed they were near their destination. She cooed to her baby even though she was asleep. The woman combing her fingers through the baby’s dark hair. Ziggi kept looking up at Sandor and her daughters he held close to his body. Their heads pressed to his torso and their limbs hanging down limp in deep sleep. Ziggi’s hand reached up to play with the tortoise hair clips and comb in her hair. She smiled at Sandor with warmth. Sandor cringed. He was in big trouble. He was only going to keep Ziggi and her daughters till he figured something out.

The small party made it to the Tower of the Sword. Thaihhi woke up and immediately was fussy. Ziggi asked if they could stop and change her little girl. Sandor told her of course. Sandor watched the woman fascinated pull out a clean diaper from her vest. Sandor somehow knew she had no more.

That would change. He would visit the nursey and pay for a bag full of diapers and all the items a baby needed to be happy and hale. He would do all he could for Ziggi and her daughters while they were with him. He found a table in the first side room. Ziggi quickly changed the little tyke who settled down now that she clean and firmly wrapped again. Ziggi had opened a small bottle and dabbed something on the baby’s butt and, uh, um, vagina to clean and soothe the tot.

Ziggi played with her smallest child for a few minutes. Sandor could not help but smile seeing Ziggi take the little tykes hands and clap them together and used them to touch her mother’s face. The little girl spluttering and smiling. She held up the little girl to look at Sandor. He cringed thinking the little girl would scream in terror seeing his face up close. All the girl did was babble and coo. Thaihhi looked around unconcerned now that her butt was clean.

Ready now they walked slowly up to Sandor’s quarters. Sandor got behind Ziggi and gently helped push her up. She looked back with a smile at him again. He felt so warm inside for some reason. They were before the door to his domicile. He heard the rustling of armor behind him. He turned around.

“Yes Merjen? How can I help you?” the tall black woman came up to him a little out of breath. Her eyes taking in the little girls he was holding and the small Dothraki woman behind him. Sandor noticed that Ziggi had moved behind him. It made him feel good again for some reason feeling the Dothraki woman seeking his protection.

“I have come to give my report that all is well on the grounds of the Red Keep. Our charges are safe.” She spoke this still looking at the Dothraki woman and the children Sandor was cradling
curiously.

*How lame* Sandor thought. He would have barked at Merjen but he did not want to startle Ziggi and upset her daughters. The seven knew Ziggi had suffered enough today. *Hell since she had been enslaved.* No one deserved to be treated like what he had seen on the docks this day. Slavery was a sin against man and the gods Sandor truly realized from the events down on the docks today.

Movement caught Sandor’s attention behind Merjen. He titled his head to see beyond her. A snarl came on his face. He saw down the hall at the closest intersection of a cross hall at the front of the tower. On one side of the hall he saw the head of his King. Below his head sticking out was Sansa and Jeyne Poole’s head. Between the two teens was Princess’s head looking at him curiously. Sansa carrying the puppy. Below Jeyne’s head was Tommen. He must have been on all fours. On the other side of the hall he saw the heads of Syrio, Arya, Myrcella, Matamion and Jaehaegar Velnalys. They must be stacked like cord wood Sandor groused to himself. How they didn’t all fall down one on top of the other he had no idea.

All gaping at him and his new chargers.

Merjen finished her perusal. Finally. She had seen enough. She started to turn to go. She paused and locked eyes with Sandor. Her gaze purposeful and direct.

“You have been given most precious gifts Sandor. Treat them as such.”

Sandor glowered at her. He would treat them with respect as long as they were with him. What else would he do? He would never harm such a defenseless woman and her children. He had that much honor! He groused to himself.

Merjen walked away back down the hall. The ferret heads sticking out all disappeared. All but Arya who continued to gape at Sandor. A hand appeared on her shoulder and jerked her back around the corner.

“Damnit Syrio! What was that for? I was still looking!” Arya’s whine could be heard.

He opened the door and he followed Ziggi into his room. She looked around his room with a slow critical turn of her head. Her right foot started to tap the floor in a fast staccato.

“I will not live in this squalor. You live like goats in a pin Sandor.” She looked around more. She pointed to the bed. “Put our daughters there.” Ziggi moved to start picking up items of clothing. “Like a pig. That changes as of now” the small copper skinned woman groused as she moved around picking up discarded clothing. The Dothraki woman smelled a sock and blanched. She did have the fortitude to continue picking up strewn about clothing though.

“Our?!” Sandor barked out.

She ignored him. Sandor decided he most have misheard the woman.

He went over to the bed and gently put the girls to bed. The stone of the tower wall had bled out the heat. The cold did not much affect Sandor anymore. Though he did not feel it he knew it was cool in the room. A soldier was trained to be inured to the cold. He was sure the small girls would quickly chill. That was unacceptable. He went to the fireplace and stoked the fire to get the main room warmer. Sandor reached into the harper to pull three more logs out and threw them into the fireplace. With the poker, Sandor got the fire going good and hot.

Ziggi had put her smallest daughter on the bed as well. She was now asleep. Sandor went to a closet and pulled out several blankets. He lightly covered the little Dothraki girls. They wiggled
down getting more comfortable underneath their covers. He appraised his new charges. That was not enough. Walking back to the closet, Sandor retrieved a bison fur and gently placed it loosely over the sleeping girls below their hips. He stood staring down at the girls. They were beautiful like their mother. He looked up. With a sigh, Sandor shook his head. He did not need those kind of thoughts running around in his head.

They would be leaving soon. It was the only way he sadly thought. He was a loner.

The Dothraki woman was still grumbling. “It will take me a month to clean up this squalor. I keep a clean home Sandor. You hear me.”

He merely nodded. *What had he gotten himself into* he moaned again to himself.

He heard a knock on the door. He sighed. Who could this be?

He went to the door and whipped it open. He glared at Varys who was before him. The bald man was unfazed by the ire radiating off Sandor. He had a folder with parchments in it. The eunuch shoved the folder in his hand and brushed past Sandor walking into his quarters.

“I have brought the report you requested Lord Commander” Varys told the tall man.

*Reports?* Sandor opened the folder. All the parchments were blank. *Of course* Sandor snarled to himself.

Varys was before Ziggi and making introductions. He told the woman that he and Sandor were the greatest of friends. Sandor had to fight ralphing hearing that. The Whisperer inquired how she came to be in Sandor’s quarters.

The woman gave a long account that was totally over the top Sandor thought. She made him sound like some great warrior in a minstrel’s song. He had merely done what he had needed to do. *Reluctantly*, he squirmed thinking back to the incident.

Varys talked to Ziggi in a conversational tone and encouraged her to make herself comfortable in her new quarters. The Dothraki woman smiled at that and said she would.

Sandor nearly swallowed his tongue hearing that.

As Ziggi moved about in her new—Sandor meant his quarters Sandor observed again her slave collar. Tomorrow morning they would visit the blacksmith and have the damned thing removed.

Varys followed the Dothraki woman around as she inspected the cabinets and their contents. Varys making easy conversation. Ziggi told Varys she would soon have her new home clean and presentable. Sandor steamed listening to Varys encouraging the woman to make her home in Sandor’s quarters.

Sandor felt like a pressure cooker with steam coming out the vent pipe making the regulator rattle. He glared at the eunuch when Ziggi’s back was to him.

Varys walked by the bed with the daughters of Ziggi asleep. The little girls looking all precious Sandor thought. He liked seeing them safe and gently sleeping. Varys looked down at the little girls sleeping shoulder to shoulder. The eunuch reached down and plucked the bison fur.

The stout bald man turned to Ziggi.

“Did you put the girls to bed? Cover them up?”
“No, Sandor did. He is gentle with my daughters. He has the caring touch” Ziggi spoke and looked at Sandor with a smile. Sandor fidgeted. Geez! The little tykes needed to be kept warm!

Varys went to leave the room. Sandor opened the door for the man. In a soft voice Varys spoke to Sandor.

“You treat that woman well Sandor. You will make a good father and husband.” He actually winked at Sandor. He could only stare at the man. With that he was gone.

Sandor gaped at the retreating man’s back. What the hell did he mean by that … surely Varys must know this was only temporary.

“I will need to go shopping to get the items I will need to wash your clothes.”

“I have stewards” he replied on automatic. He was completely discombobulated by the assault on his senses.

“I think not! I take care of my man. You will put your dirty clothes in a basket I will procure tomorrow.”

*What have I gotten myself into?* Sandor thought in a daze yet again. Geez!

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Brachoquo Nahanar was sitting at the table in his room he had rented at the high end motel he was lodging in. He was still fuming at that man taking his slave from him yesterday. He would find out who that man was and he would get his revenge. The man had humiliated him. That could not be allowed to stand. He was a powerful merchant! He would hire an assassin. He toyed with the idea of hiring a Faceless Man.

He fumed at the trouble and expense he would have to incur to hire new bodyguards. He deemed seven to paltry. He was thinking more like ten would be the number. He felt himself shiver reliving the mayhem on the dock. The man had been a swirling demon dealing death.

Brachoquo had hired a whore to keep him warm. He had abused her thinking on that damn Dothraki slut. His slave would be punished most severely he fantasied in his mild inebriated state. In his mind, Brachoquo devised means to soon get his slave back. A smile on his face as he listed in his mind the punishments he would dispense on Ziggi. She would suffer for the ignobility of his embarrassment on the docks. He had sent his whore out to get him more strong dark mead. *Where was the damn woman!*

He shouted in terror when the door exploded in. The door’s top hinge battered off the door frame. The door knocked askance.

A broad shouldered man flowed in followed by a black woman with a strange looking battleax. Four more men stormed in. Two were tall Valyrians with their snow white hair. The first man was upon him like lightning. Said man gripped his hair and slammed his face into the table top. Brachoquo stunned by the force of the blow. His broken nose bled heavily. The front of his face and shirt stained with his red blood. A large contusion rising up on his forehead like a boiled egg.

He nearly pissed himself.

The lead man identified himself as Eddard Stark the King of Westeros. It was made very clear he was to leave Westeros on the next tide. The King somehow knew a lot about himself. He was told he would be watched in Essos. If he did anything untoward he would be killed immediately. The
powerful merchant believed it.

He could not fight a King!

The man slapped him several times. His head rocked over by the savage cruel slaps.

“That is for Ziggi. She belongs to Sandor Clegane now. It is the Dothraki way I am told.”

This Eddard put his face in Brachoquo’s face.

“We won’t have any more trouble with you, will we, Brachoquo?”

His voice had squeaked. He shook his head wildly no and nearly screamed out his answer that he would never come back to Westeros.

“And?” the man had glared at him. His sword was out of his scabbard so fast Brachoquo did not see it happen. The blade against his throat. The blade started to bit into this throat. The man from Myr whimpered. He also now did piss himself.

He pledged in no uncertain terms to cause no future problems for the King of Westeros.

He was reminded he would be watched. With that he was left alone. His whore did not return.

Brachoquo Nahanar left Westeros on the evening tide. He would not be coming back.
A Rose By Any Other Name

Chapter Notes

AN #1: I have said this before but with the final season of GOT on HBO in full swing I just want to say again i draw my inspirations from the books and not the show. Though I am a hypocrite that cherry picks stuff from the show when i like it.

Heirs Apparent

A Rose By Any Other Name

3 months ago

A warm breeze was flowing up over the terraces of Highgarden. The air sweet with the pollen off the many flowering fruit trees and flowers the Great House grew near to the majestic castle. Roses blooming in profusion on rose bushes allowed to grow wild around the mighty castle. There were the roses grown to be harvested and the large briars between the first and second terrace walls filled with wild roses. Their sweet scent could almost make one drunk on their intoxicating scent. One would almost think the bees’ flights were drunken in their lazy waggling flights between flowers sipping the effervescent nectars of the roses of Highgarden.

The white walls of Highgarden gleamed in the bright sunlight. The thick walls of the terraces of Highgarden both reflecting and absorbing the light. The sunlight taken in by the walls and in turn radiating out a warm glow that soothed the joints and lightened the heart. Pinons on the upper turrets at the top of Highgarden waved and flapped hard in the breeze. The winds flowing faster up high Olenna saw. The snap of the flag’s fabric giving the air sharp retorts and snaps of protest. The undulation of the colorful flags pleasing to the eyes.

The matriarch of the Reach sat beside the ornately carved round table surrounded by family and generals. The wood glowed in the direct sunlight. The chairs surrounding the table equally ornately carved and upholstered in rich fabrics. The chairs filled with carved representations of roses of course. Olenna smiled with the thought. She was happy the artisans had not put sharp thorns in their works of art. A prick to get one’s attention she smirked.

Olenna drank from her tea cup with her little finger up. She was a lady of breeding after all. She looked over the rim of her cup. Her gaze falling out over tracts of land surrounding the ancestral home of House Tyrell. The orchards and large tracts of land given over to the raising of roses, tulips, orchids, daffodils, carnations and other flowers sought after by those with money. All around Olenna’s gaze wandered and only saw the richness of life in full bloom.

The fields added color to the greens swards beneath the mighty castle. Olenna looked up. On the high thermals, clouds lazily wafted by. The warmth from the sea raising clouds. With a purity of white the puffy clouds lulled by ever slowly changing shape on the invisible rivers of air that flowed up from the Whispering Sound. The warm currents of the Summer Sea washing along the coast and then up the Mander River valley. The currents like a lover kissing its bride who blushed white and not pink. The warm air that wafted up the western slopes of the Iron Mountains and the Rosewood...
providing the rain that made Highgarden the breadbasket of Westeros. The clouds and warmth flowing over Olenna now.

She smiled up at the clouds. Above her, high up in the sky, the clouds like balls of cotton sedately walking on invisible steps in the sky marched off to the north and east. The clouds rolling by seemed to morph constantly to make shapes she could try and perceive. Sometimes she saw an image quite clearly while other times they stubbornly refused to show themselves. A strong breeze raced over the terrace. The napkins weighted down by glasses and bowls. The lacy like paper jerking on the edges seeking freedom but denied their escape on the breeze.

A student of history, Olenna again marveled at the many centuries that this spot of land had seen and experienced. It was like Winterfell. Ancient almost beyond reason. These two castles in one shape or another had been existence at their current locations for over eight thousand years. Olenna reviewed in her mind the history of this ancient place.

The original construction done by Garth the Gardener. He chose to build his holdfast upon this very hilltop overlooking the River Mander. This location giving control to the whole river valley. Highgarden was the center of the Reach proper, and the Kings of the Reach from House Gardener grew to acquire the lands of what was to become the Reach.

It was during the Andal invasion of Westeros, that King Mern II Gardener built a curtain wall about the castle. The Andals were ultimately welcomed into the Reach, however. As with most invaders, they were assimilated by the people they hoped to conquer. Where there had been two people now there was only one.

It had been King Garth IX Gardener who built the first sept at Highgarden, although he continued to worship in the Godswood located within the walls of the rising Highgarden. Over the passing of the centuries the faith in the old religion faded and the faith of the seven faced god rose to ascendancy. In that time, the House of Tyrell became the hereditary stewards of the castle.

There was so much history after those distant times the matriarch mused while sipping her tea. Olenna shook her head. Today was not about the past but the future. A future that House Tyrell would have a large hand in shaping. House Tyrell that brokered deals that forged kingdoms from the unlooked for sidelines. It was always so the older woman chuckled to herself.

Olenna looked around the table. With her sat her son Mace. With them were his sons Willis and Garland. Olenna looked at her offspring. All capable men in their own ways indeed. She looked more to the left. There she looked upon the true apples of her eye; Margaery and Loras. On the other side of the large rounded table was the four senior generals of their army that was about to take to the field.

The four men were true combatants that had proved their worth through many campaigns that maintained and ever further built up the largesse of Highgarden. Olenna was surrounded by men who had proven themselves on the field of battle. True, Mace by temperament was not a warrior and Willis had been injured but the other men around her were men of strong thews. Her generals had shown great prowess in their marshalling and commanding of the Tyrell armies in the field.

Olenna sat back. She eyed the men. She smirked to herself making sure it did not play on her face. Mace thought he ran Highgarden. Olenna took another sip of her tea. The woman letting the tea sit on her tongue for a few long moments before swallowing to savor the tang of the exotic brew. From behind her cup she smiled. It was not a man that made Highgarden great but a woman. Herself. Olenna Redwyne. She had the nickname of the Queen of Thorns for a reason. Many might think it was because of the yellow rose of House Tyrell.
That was not the reason. It had a darker meaning.

Any who went against her would only receive the cuts of her thorns. The cuts deep and liable to fester and even become fatal if not properly cared for. The antidote only she could provide if the cut severe enough. She had her own fallen alchemist who made sure she had whatever potion she might need for a given situation.

All reports given to their Master Spy, the Gardner, were copied. Mace received his reports only after his mother had had time to digest the news gathered by Deston Cassel. The spy had long ago learned it was Olenna that guided Highgarden. It was her wisdom that led the House of Tyrell among and through the briars unscathed. It was her astute analysis that always picked the proper course.

She looked on her generals. Her field Marshall was Jarack Fossoway. She liked his House’s banner of a bright red apple with its motto of ‘A Taste of Glory’. His second in command, Moribald Chester, the Lord of The Shield Islands. Their motto “The Shield That Never Falters”. The House maintaining a sizeable armada. They were a considerable naval power and were the first line of defense when the Ironborn pirates tried to sail up the Mander to sack the wealth of the Reach.

The mother of Mace was not a battlefield commander. She knew her limitations. She did not devise the tactics that an army made during a campaign. What she provided was the grand strategies that led the armies of the Reach. Her ability was to perceive when to apply force and when to use the velvet glove. Which path to take when a myriad of paths were available. Many of her most recent decisions involving the Iron Islands and some of the restive Bedouin tribes. The House of Blackmont in western Dorne using the tribes to create mischief in the foothills of the Iron Mountains and into the plains.

The quick raids seeking to take livestock, commodities and heirlooms. The raiders eight months ago had gone further into the lands of the Reach. Their attacks more vicious and carrying away of young women to be brides to chief sons and their supporters. The Bedouins obviously becoming more bold with time.

Olenna had had enough. She asked Deston to devise a campaign. She had then whispered into her son’s ears what he needed to do. Her words the broad strokes that needed to be performed to overcome the Bedouins. Her son was too passive and when he did get involved he thought himself way more of a tactician than he was. He would give orders that Deston and Jarack knew they could disobey if they deemed it necessary.

She had waited. Her Gardner had several spies in the Bedouin camps of Sultans Mauritania and Sahrawis. Another raid in time occurred. The pump was primed. Mace wanted to send an army immediately and rush in. That would lead to heavy causalities. Olenna let the small army march south and east. They made camp at House of Peake.

Finally, the moths and voles reported back that a new attack was going to strike south by east of Horn Hill. The Bedouins emboldened by yet another successive raid into the Reach. The Bedouin’s ready to raid in new territories for them. The Sultans seeking to raid the small holdfasts and communities located in the rolling folds of the Sundance Mountain ranges. The name of the mountains derived from the bright reds, oranges and blues of the exposed sedimentary rock. The spies reported the raiding parties of the Sultans were forming up.

Mace had wondered what was happening. Olenna had him fed false information of their commander chasing the raiders around the foothills. Now she had her Marshall, Jarack Fossoway, break camp and moved into place for the ambush of the Bedouin party. The mother of Mace not willing to risk him actually controlling the forces in the field.
The ambush had worked to perfection. Problem solved. Her son led to believe it had been his stratagems that had brought success. It was a shame Olenna thought but it was the reality. She had to rule from the shadows. She had long lost the sense of gall of the unfairness of it all. It simply was the way it must be. Olenna had to accept the world she lived in. Westeros would not allow a woman to truly rule. Dorne being the exception. For a bunch of semi heathen they were in some ways remarkable advanced Olenna had to admit.

The true ruler of Highgarden groused to herself again of the world of patriarchy. Men given rule simply by their sex and birth. It was not right but Olenna knew she did not have the power to change history and tradition. Though she must accept the reality she was born into it did not mean that she could not rail against it in her mind.

Her son reminded Olenna of Cersei Lannister in some ways. Both knew nothing about anything. Both too impetuous and willing to act without understanding the true situations. Mace’s saving grace was the simple fact he was not cruel and mendacious as was a certain lioness of Lannister. Why Eddard did not put the harpy down she could not fathom. It was probably a nail in his coffin she smiled evilly to herself.

Olenna shook her head. She was grooming the next person who would lead Highgarden in peace and war if necessary. Margaery Tyrell. Her granddaughter’s three older brothers were not stupid men but they were limited in their thinking. They did not think subtly or know how to analyze a situation from all sides to find the best solution.

Loras was growing into a true master of the sword. That was all he was growing into. He was hotheaded and impetuous. Garland was mediocre when it came to the matters of court. Willis just did not seem to care about court. Probably showed his intelligence Olenna sometimes thought. When you played the Game of Thrones you either won or you would most likely find yourself dead.

Loras might be able to win a specific battle but that was all. A true ruler had to rule after the war had been won. One had to be able to see the whole to govern. Most warriors just did not seem to have that acumen of true rule. Robert Baratheon had proven that anew with his ascension on the Iron Throne. He had been a warrior supreme on the battlefield but in the halls of court he had been a buffoon. He ended his reign a slovenly fat fool.

Her grandsons were not buffoons. Far from it. Still, they lacked the arts of being able to rule efficiently and adroitly. It took skill to read all the ‘tea leaves’ and divine the best answer to the problems confronting oneself. Olenna had been doing that her entire adult life. It had been her leadership through first Luthor Tyrell and now through her son Mace Tyrell that achieved the goals of House Tyrell. Both men had never known it was their wife and then mother secretly guiding them. The men never even suspecting they were but puppets on her strings. They moved to her commands. It was her will that ruled.

Margaery had the same innate skills. She was able to take in all the facts no matter how disparate and seemingly confusing and be able to sort out the intertwined vines to select the right path to take. Margaery was never pricked by the thorn hidden by the roses. She had an instinctive ability to read people and then mold them to her will. She would be able to lead from the shadows as her grandmother had been doing for nearly fifty years. Olenna was ready to handoff to her granddaughter who was ready to assume the reigns of royalty.

Olenna had had to be satisfied with Highgarden. Now the opportunity had arisen for Margaery to become the Queen of all of Westeros. Renly had come to them with the fall of the Hand Eddard Stark. Renly and her sweet Loras were lovers. Olenna smiled. Of course Loras gave his full support to Renly in his bid to claim the Iron Throne. Olenna smiled. Great sex tended make a
person a true believer in their lover.

Stannis may be the older brother but he was a dullard and a bore. Renly was not the warrior he thought he was. He was unimaginative when it came to politics but he was charismatic and quite comely. He did have the advantage of actually wanting to do the good for the realm. He would be no drunken fool like his eldest brother. His subjects would love to gaze upon him. If he ruled wisely, and he would with Margaery guiding him, the populace would love their lovely to look upon King who had the seeming common touch.

Loras would be his Lord Commander and secret lover. Margaery would be Renly’s wife and Queen of Westeros. She would lead Renly as Olenna had led her husband and son. Margaery had no problem sleeping with Renly even though he was in love with Loras and almost one hundred percent gay. Of course Margaery had no problem sleeping with her own brother. Olenna shook her head thinking on this. That was a bridge to far even for her. She supposed the Iron Throne engendered such desires. It was the Targaryen way after all.

The grandchildren and Renly would do what they must to keep up appearances. Loras and Margaery were very, very close and once Margaery’s virtue was taken Olenna knew sister and brother would be making love constantly. Loras was convinced he would get Renly to ‘loosen up’ and join him and Margaery in the royal bed. Margaery would be happy with that. She often told her grandmother ‘the more the merrier!’ She would have her hens in attendance. Once she was Queen she would make sure they would never be married off. The girls longed for the day to being able to stop fearing being separated from each other.

The attendants to Margaery Tyrell every bit as gay as Renly. Olenna smiled. The very confused dynamics this all would cause would be exciting to follow and watch. Her moths would keep her informed. She would make Varys show her all the ‘secret’ tunnels of the red keep. She planned on having a lot of fun in the Red Keep. She was still happy to be a voyeur. A satisfied carnal glint came to her eyes. Her juices still flowed. The volcano may have snow on its summit but in its belly the fires still roiled.

Her plans for the succession to the Iron Throne quickly set once the news of Eddard’s fall had occurred. She had shaken her head at how quickly and easily he had been disposed. The man was clearly out of his depth. Cersei was an idiot and yet she easily cast the man down. Her ascension efficient and lightning fast. Olenna knew Cersei would be easy to dispose. Cersei’s opinion of her abilities greatly overblown. Olenna knew Cersei’s overblown opinion of herself would lead to her downfall once she met a true master of the Game of Thrones. That person being one Olenna Redwyne.

Olenna had easily convinced Mace to throw the might of the Reach behind Renly. Their armies immediately started to form up. Renly was the type of man that made men like her son want to follow. Renly was tall with a warrior’s body and an urbane attitude. The tall warrior pleasing to the eye of both women and men. Women wanted to bed Renly and men wanted to follow him. He was the picture of what a king should be. The reality might be lacking but the painting was quite pleasing to the eye.

She had been sure of the course to take. Highgarden would support Renly in his claim to the Iron Throne and he would marry Margaery Tyrell. At last the Tyrell’s would have the kingdom of Westeros under their sway.

Only that had not happened. Her easily placed plans upset. Olenna’s moths and vole spies had been clear. Eddard had been defeated in body and mind. He was in the dungeons and all were sure that Joffrey would execute the man out of pure spit. Only that had not happened.
An uprising soon manifested itself. It seemed as if some wolves had escaped though the initial reports were sure they all had been put down. Meetings were called with Olenna given all the reports personally from Deston Cassel and his main spook and master of disguise one Justan Lyberr. The man called the Shroud for his ability to blend into any background. All agreed that the few perpetrators would soon be hunted down and exterminated. Again it had not happened. Impossibly, the small force continued to attack with seeming impunity. The use of longbow arrows devastating at close range. The force was small because the attacks were never large scale. Always from a position of surprise were the attacks launched.

Her moths and voles along with Jackals from Dorne sniffed hard but were unable to ascertain who or what this force was that was savaging the Lions of Lannister relentlessly. Ravens flying to Highgarden and Sunspear from the hidden spies in the warrens of King’s Landing. So relentless were the attacks the Lions basically retreated into the red Keep. The gates drawn and shut. King’s Landing seeded to the insurgents.

Then the impossible happened. Eddard Stark was freed from the dungeons. He vanished as if he had become a wraith. By now new whispers had reached the ears of Highgarden. A young girl was leading the assaults. Her marksmanship with the bow was unworldly. She had acquired strange robed allies. The loudest whispers said it was Arya Stark. That had made Olenna sit back. A High Princess was the leader? It was impossible to believe. High Princesses were raised to be for husbands and were not trained to be warriors. How had Arya Stark become so advanced with the bow? It made no sense?

Now Olenna called in a marker. She had been in communication with Varys but he had of course been coy and obfuscated profusely as to what was going on and who was leading the assaults. ‘I only hear the briefest of melodies Olenna. I wish I could be of more help. If only I knew more about what the plans of Highgarden might be since Renly flitted his way to your lair?’

Ravens were flown back and forth. Varys working with Pycelle to get the messages from Olenna to Varys without the Lannisters knowing of said communications. Pycelle had no love for the Lannisters. They always belittled the man. Cersei spiteful with everyone. Varys sweetening the deal with the Grand Maester with gifts of hard to get ingredients for his experiments and the boon to the old man a comely lass. The girl plucked from a whore house she did not want to be part of. The girl jumping at the chance to have only one lover even if he was in his eighties.

Olenna had smiled grimly at Varys ploy of being coy. It was obvious anyways. She told him that Loras was the lover of Renly and that Highgarden would place him on the throne. That Margaery would marry Renly and that she would rule Westeros through him. That her youngest grandchildren and Renly would uphold the Targaryen tradition if in an unusual pairing. Olenna knew the whisperer would keep this news to himself. To sow discord in House Tyrell would not help in his own machinations. Also, it would draw her wrath. She would claim it was all baseless lies. The man was no fool.

Varys return raven had been illuminating. It was indeed Arya Stark leading the forces. She had not devised the initial strategies but she was the inspirational leader and had begun to help plan attacks. Varys reported the girl was simply amazing with her bow. Her mind sharp and intuitive. Her will in battle fierce. She was rapidly learning and growing. Eddard was to be healed soon of his injuries. They had new allies. Of that he would not say more.

Olenna had caught the word “they” Varys used. He had thrown his support to the Insurrection as he called it.

A nugget was casually cast to Olenna by the eunuch. The teacher of Arya was one Syrio Forel. The
name rang a bell to the Queen of Thorns. The name on the edge of her consciousness. The man was training Arya up to be his equal. That had made Olenna’s eyebrows flex. She asked her Shroud who this ‘Syrio Forel’ might be. The man whistled softly looking impressed with the news. Justin told Olenna that this man was no less than a fallen First Sword of Braavos. The man disgraced but still a master of swordplay, strategy and spy craft. *This man was teaching Arya?* Olenna thought amazed. How in the seven hells did this happen Olenna harped. It was as if the fates were working for House Stark.

The rest as they say was history now. Eddard Stark did indeed reappear, if in a new guise. He had strange ravens at his beck and call. He flooded Westeros with missives proclaiming the incestuous relationship between Cersei and Jamie Lannister. *Old news* Olenna had snorted to herself. At least she did not have to pretend she did not know anymore. To have spread that news would have brought war. Eddard wrote that soon he would cast the Lions down. Olenna had snorted at the man’s lunacy.

She had to eat those snorts she fumed on shortly after. It did not take Eddard long. He soon defeated Cersei Lannister and threw down the House of Lannister.

He had behaved most strangely after that. He did not execute Cersei or Joffrey on the spot as he should have. In fact he seemed to have almost adopted Myrcella and Tommen who now put in their seemingly high intellects into supporting a House they were not born into. *Why would they do that?!* Joffrey was nearly shitting himself but Eddard insisted he be left alone. Eddard had lost his mind Olenna gaped to herself. He was letting Cersei roam the Red Keep with only the lightest of guards it seemed. Surely he had hidden men following her whereabouts. The woman closely guarded at all times. *Didn’t he?* To let that woman roam free was lunacy.

Olenna had suspected sedition from Cersei but she was fairly quiet except for when Sandor kept goading her and he lost his ass with her caustic reply every time it was reported. That was humorous to read. Cersei had stopped drinking. That was Eddard’s doing too it was reported. *Why not keep the bitch drunk?* Again, what was Eddard’s game? Olenna wondered to herself for not the first time. Cersei was now quiet, well mostly, and being sedate and proper.

Where had the real Cersei gone?

Now, Eddard had made Sandor his Lord Commander and removed most of the vows that the men of the Kingsguard had had to take since Aegon had founded the order. It seemed Eddard had no use for the vows of chastity. The man was truly taking new steps with his kingship. Varys was his Hand. *Again lunacy!*

The man had made overtures. They had seemed not worth even considering to begin with. Eddard was changing the calculus. It was time to take the man up on his offer.

Thus, the reason for the meeting on this beautiful day. Olenna’s mind drifted back to the here and now.

Her son was now speaking.

“But can Eddard deliver? I know he has conquered King’s Landing but he has only enough force to keep it under control and that is only if the populace stays calm. He is surrounded by a force of Lannisters. The walls of King’s Landing protect Eddard Stark but also trap him within the same walls. Tywin will begin his march on King’s Landing shortly. He has risen the full might of the Westerlands. Most of it he will be bringing down the Gold Road. Tywin will be wrathful when he arrives at King’s Landing.”
“Yes” Jarack Fossoway replied “but he has much to worry over my Lord. The Riverlands are moving to threaten the Eastern flank of his constituency. All his forces are being attacked by these strange robed figures that have materialized to side with Eddard Stark. Jaime and Gregor’s forces have been ravaged by these new allies of Eddard Stark. The attacks savage and over in a moment. The forces of Lannister never themselves able to launch attacks at advantage.”

The man’s voice trailed off for ten seconds. It was clear he was mulling over these strange apparitions now aligned with Eddard Stark. “I would love to know how the forces of Eddard keep attacking with advantage and avoid all ambushes and counterattacks. I would hate to face that ability in the field.” All knew it had to be linked to these robed figures. It was the how that was perplexing.

Olenna knew that this advantage Eddard had acquired would make him deadly when his son was able to reach King’s Landing. He too was soon to take to the field. Stannis was ready to march on King’s Landing. Now House Tyrell was ready.

All exactly as Eddard wanted. It was brilliant actually Olenna thought. The now wily, grizzled Direwolf was enticing all the armies to come to King’s Landing. The four armies would basically cancel each other out and exhaust their supplies in the waiting. Still, that left an impasse. Gridlock. What did Eddard plan to do to break it? Having so much force outside the gates was a recipe for disaster Olenna reasoned. She was watching everything closely. House Tyrell would not be caught in the middle of melee if she had anything to do with it.

Eddard Stark had written to her directly. She was not sure that she truly believed the man. “I wish to avoid as much bloodshed as possible. I had enough of it a generation ago. If blood must be shed let it mine or yours Olenna. Let the High Royals pay the price. Let those we are supposed to protect and shepherd be spared our avarice and lust for power. Let us forge a new way.” The rest of his missive filled with such writings. She had read his letter thrice. She had Margaery read the missive. Her face showed her thoughts on the new supposed king’s thoughts.

Margery had chuckled and then spoke her verdict “This is bullshit”. Olenna knew better. Margaery was young. She had not been touched by war and its depredations. Olenna had not directly but she had seen the aftermath. Eddard had lived it. She could believe the man sought a new path. He would fail but she supposed it was noble in a doomed way. The audacity to try a new path was audacious but in the end foolish Olenna deemed.

The past had transformed the man Eddard would have one believe. Again, how strange Olenna mused. Was not war the way to achieve one’s goals when securing the Iron Throne? It had always been thus. Olenna was highly curious to see this ‘new way’ that Eddard was forging.

Her son and grandsons with her generals went over his audacious attack at night against the Lannisters. The craggy Wolf had taken losses this time, but, the losses of the Lannisters had been horrendous. The man had ambushed them three times in one battle. Olenna loved the audacity of the man. She sighed. If only Luthor Tyrell had been half the man that Eddard Stark was.

All still thought that Eddard was simply over matched even if he did have new allies. Then Varys had dropped a scroll to Highgarden and one Olenna Redwyne. The scroll delivered to Olenna personal by one of the strange ravens now in service to Eddard Stark. The Whisper had whispered that this news was not for sharing with others on the initial read. She could spread the information if she chose. The first sentence had sent a thrill of fear through the Queen of Thorns. She took several deep breaths to collect her wits.

“The House of Black and White has aligned with Arya Stark. Valar Morghulis” Olenna had to read that line over and over. A First Sword taught Arya Stark and now a Faceless Man had given his allegiance to the young pup. What was going on?! Who was this Arya Stark? She had handed the
scroll around. This was shocking news that had to be disseminated and absorbed.

The scroll had sent a shockwave through the inner circle of court of House Tyrell. *If that was true?*

Olenna had her doubts but there had to be some truth to what Varys had said. If they had to confront a Faceless Man or possibly several of the dire apparitions then all their lives were in grave danger. Varys had described how the Faceless Man had taken Arys Oakheart’s face and killed Mandon Moore in the last battle that gave Eddard Stark the Iron Throne. That this Faceless Man had killed at least sixty men in service to Arya Stark. One man. That much damage. This changed Olenna’s calculations. It had too. She would have to be at least a degree more cautious and calculating.

She wondered why Varys told them this. Probably to put caution into the grand schemes she might be thinking to devise. It worked. She decided she would go with Mace and see this new King for herself. She had no desire to have her throat slit in the middle of the night. Posting guards around her room would not protect her. The Faceless Man would kill her if had been ordered. That was a given no matter what precautions she might take. That thought still made Olenna shudder.

“The man is trying to deal from a position of weakness. He has only the Goldcloaks and these robbed allies. They cannot withstand an army. We can dictate terms” Moribald Chester made the point.

“I wish that was true” Jarack Fossoway replied “our armies will cancel each other. We all have aims that prevent us from uniting to take Eddard Stark down. His son will soon be marching south. He is getting enough support from the Vale and the Riverlands to block and weaken the Lannisters and use his full strength against any force here.”

Mace now spoke “I concur. We know that Stannis will demand the Iron Throne. Repeatedly and loudly. His army is small but large enough to create havoc if we are distracted. Tywin will demand that his grandson be placed back on the Iron Throne. He is a wily tactician and tenacious in achieving his goals.”

Moribald spoke again “We must never forget Dorne. They do not seem to be forming an army currently but they might at any time.”

Olenna knew more than they did. Eddard was sending ravens to only her. How the ravens found her room only when she was alone or herself when walking the briar fields between the terraces she did not know.

Dorne would not be sending an army. At least for now. Eddard was going to give Oberyn Martell the head of Gregor Clegane by maneuvering House Lannsiter in claiming Gregor as a their champion and Eddard would proclaim Oberyn as his champion. Then they would fight in a trial by combat. How Eddard hoped to achieve that Olenna had no idea. The man definitely had become a schemer. It showed Olenna that the man had become quite adroit at the Game of Thrones.

Olenna now spoke up. “Let us go to King’s Landing. We will wait there for events to reveal themselves. It seems as if Eddard is going to invite us all to his bosom. We have superior force. We have Renly. He is loved where Stannis is detested. The Crown and Stormlands will rally to Renly’s banner. We will out wily this new fox that Eddard Stark has become.”

The men nodded. They then resumed their talk of attack and counterattack and using force on the field of battle. Olenna let them talk.

Eddard had evolved beyond that. He was going to attempt to achieve his goals through the Game of Thrones. Much more enjoyable this path Olenna thought. She would enjoy working all the facets of
Olenna had been offered a most pleasing alternate to Renly Baratheon. Eddard proposed that his son Robb and Margaery marry. That Robb would be the Heir Apparent to the Iron Throne. Eddard told Olenna that he was already ‘long in the tooth’. In the not too distant future, it would be time for his son to ascend the Iron Throne. Olenna read in that that Eddard would not hold onto the Iron Throne until his last dying breath. No prying off of dead cold fingers on the Iron Throne for Eddard Stark.

Olenna had thought on that offer. Renly was a peacock. A pleasing to the eye peacock but still a bird only for show. He was not half as good as he thought he was. He did have the gift of oratory though. Robb from all reports was a copy of his father. Oratory might be a gift the boy had, but, if it was it was currently hidden. Honor oozed from the boy’s pores. If he learned to be as craggy as his father had become he would be quite a force. Margaery would have to be more careful with that man if they were to marry. They would be a powerful force indeed though. Olenna did fear that Robb might be intractable with some of her and Margaery’s schemes.

It was a nice offer. Still, Renly made the better choice for House Tyrell.

A week after Eddard had offered Olenna Robb as a prince to Margaery he made the offer to Mace. Olenna had not been surprised at the offer. That was a courtesy to Olenna by Eddard. To let her know first in a timely manner. How nice she thought.

Of course Loras had reacted with the typical manly adore.

“That is bullshit!” Loras had yelled. “Renly will sit on the Iron Throne. He was born to be King.”

Olenna and Mace tried to placate Loras but he had his head and continued to rant.

“I will slay Robb in a duel” Olenna thought that likely. Loras was a great knight. The reports on Robb was that he was an average swordsman at this point in time. “I will slay Eddard in a duel!” Okay. Now Loras was talking crazy Olenna groused to herself. Eddard was one of the greatest swordsman of the last several generations. That was one thing Olenna would make sure never occurred. Such a duel would be the death of her grandson.

They would be leaving soon for King’s Landing. House Tyrell had been mobilizing since Renly came to them and told them he thought he should be king. Olenna was ready to support the brash man. He was Loras’s lover and she would support Renly in his goal of sitting on the Iron Throne. In accomplishing that goal House Tyrell would be at his side. In time their heir would be on the Iron Throne. Margaery would be there to train and raise the Prince Regent in the ways of politics and the Game of Thrones. The King a Tyrell at heart.

It had all been so crystal clear and clean cut. Then Eddard came back onto the scene. His offer of his son, Robb, in marriage to Margaery was attractive but not as attractive as Renly sitting on the Iron Throne. Renly and Loras had been lovers for over a year and a half and he was a known commodity. The Baratheon was vain and over confident. He would be easily manipulated and controlled by Margaery and Loras. Renly was a good man even if he did have an overblown estimate of himself. With the might and wisdom of Highgarden behind him Renly would make a good King.

With their backing and guidance of the Iron Throne the fortunes of House Tyrell would rise exponentially.

They would be ready to march in two days. Their army would be able to march at a sedate pace and arrive on the field of potential battle refreshed and ready for any eventuality. Olenna did not look
forward to the journey but this new Eddard Stark would require her complete attention she now deemed.

She smiled. Let the Game of Thrones commence.

**Six weeks ago**

Olenna was sitting on her thickly padded chair in her royal tent. She had a large ostentatious tent for only herself. The canvas fabric dyed a deep green with the stylized yellow rose of Highgarden on each side of the large edifice. She needed the room and isolation to be able to think clearly and ponder future events.

Her joints ached mightily. Her Field Marshall, Jarack Fossoway, had sent out sappers ahead of their travels up the Rosewood to King’s landing. The engineers working to fill in ruts and mill off ridges in the road. That was one advantage of a slow forming and moving army. It allowed the engineers to prepare the road for their travel down it.

Still, one could not make travel down a heavily trafficked road a smooth ride. The old woman was an avid reader of old Valyria and the magic they had created. She wished for some of that magic now. She mused on the roads created by the Valyrians to tie their empire together.

The roads were like straight ribbons moving from horizon to horizon. The roads made of fused stone raised half a foot above the ground to allow rainfall and snowmelt to run off its shoulders. The stones precisely cut and laid out in perfection that Westeros could not match nor ever hope too. Then the stones had been fired by dragons. The fires of the dragons made the stone glow cherry red it was written. In that state their priests who were also their greatest mages cast spills upon the half molten stone. When the glow had faded indestructible fused stone was left behind.

That was recorded by Maesters. In legends it was said that rods of Valyrian Steel were embedded into the stone. Holes drilled out between the stone slabs and the magical steel inserted to tie the stones together. The fit between slabs of rock perfect. When heated the stone and metal fused into a lovers tight embrace. Centuries later the roads were still perfect and pristine seeming. She wished dearly for such roads now.

Olenna mused that unlike the muddy tracks that pass for roads in the Seven Kingdoms, the Valyrian roads were wide enough for three wagons to pass abreast, and neither time nor traffic marred them. The roads still perfectly smooth and the crowns in alignment allowing the rain to run off smoothly. They still endured, unchanging, four centuries after Valyria met its Doom.

Even earthquakes had a devilishly hard time destroying the roadways. The roads twisting mightily on the shifting land. Only the most sever twists could break the roads.

Even with the engineers working on the Rosewood the ride was dreadful with jolts and wild shakings that had the elderly woman’s joints aching.

Olenna continued to reflect on old Valyria. To have lived in that time and in that country. It literally would have been magical the woman in her early seventies sighed to herself. Arthritis was a real bitch she groused to herself. The true leader of the Reach like to think those white haired people had learned to cure arthritis. It was an idyllic thought to be sure but Olenna reveled in thinking it.

The woman sipped her tea from the grooves of the southern ranges of the Reach. The location near the Uplands, the seat of House Mullendore. The castle on the western edges of the foothills of the
Red Mountains, along the River Gaully’s Branch which flowed west to the River Honeywine. The foothills precipitating out the moisture coming up from the Whispering Sound. The seasonal rains and the constant fog wafting over the hills made an ideal ground to raise the trees producing tea.

Olenna took another sip of tea. She had put in lemon juice and two cubes of sugar. It was sweet tasting on her pallet. She gently swirled the fine porcelain cup. It was a smaller cup designed to be held between the thumb and two fingers. The cup bone white with painted gold ribbons at the lip and at the base of the cup where it turned to form the base.

In between the painted gold leaf circles were painted flowers in wild profusion. The traditional roses of course were predominate. Interspersed were tulips by tradition. Also one could see yellow and white daffodils. Other flowers in lesser profusion were gladiolus, sweat pea, zinnia and chrysanthemum. The colors bright and pleasing to the eye. The cup priceless Olenna mused taking another sip contemplating the next move in the Game of Thrones.

Beside her sat her granddaughter Margaery. The teenager was sipping a coffee with a finger of brandy. The cup painted with various interlaced geometric patterns. The gold and silver flak paint seemed to shimmer in the soft light. Olenna did not mind Margaery imbibing in some alcohol. The girl did not over indulge and she would be a queen anyways.

“So is Loras still ranting about how he will take down anyone who would have the audacity to claim the throne from Renly?” Olenna asked Margaery.

“Yes he is grandmama, he is making sure that Renly realizes he is one hundred percent in his quarter. Loras does think he is the best swordsman in Westeros.”

“He isn’t” Olenna bluntly told her granddaughter. “Loras is very good but he is not the best. Eddard is the best with Barristan exiled and Arthur Dayne dead. I have seen Brienne practicing. I wonder … Loras does not deign to spar with her. There are others near his skill and any such duel might be problematic. In battle, the unexpected can happen at any moment. Loras must be careful and not let his testosterone get his head cleaved from his shoulders.”

“Grandmama I disagree, Loras is the best in all the land!” Her granddaughter’s face showed her absolute faith in her brother.

Olenna sighed to herself. Margaery still needed more training she saw. She was letting emotion and familial connections cloud her judgement. That would prove deadly in the contest of Game of Thrones. If one let emotion rule yourself at the wrong time … well … the result might be one’s death. Olenna was not worried. She had time to train Margaery more. Her granddaughter must learn to always believe her eyes and not her heart.

“Is Renly still preening?” Olenna now asked.

Margaery chuckled with a glint in her eyes.

“Does he ever stop grandmama? He makes sure his armor is always highly polished and his clothes starched and pressed to immaculate perfection. You can cut yourself on the creases.” She chuckled again. “Loras says he bones quiet well. I cannot wait to lie with him after our bedding ceremony. Then Loras can join us. I grow tired of holding onto my virtue grandma. All my hens have taken each other’s maidenheads. I want to give them mine but I have to wait to give it to Renly … it’s not fair!”

The grandmother petted her granddaughter’s hand.
“I know Margaery. I was no virgin when I came to your grandfather but he was not in line to sit on the Iron Throne. We must make sure you pass any test our dear High Septon may request.”

Margaery crossed her arms and pouted.

“I will not marry Robb Stark if it comes down to it!” the granddaughter stomped her foot.

“Yes you will if you must Margaery Tyrell. You know this so stop whining about it. You will perform your duty. As I performed my duty. I did not love your grandfather dear. We are so close to getting the Iron Throne. Stop being selfish."

The girl pouted harder. Her lower lip sticking out and quivering. The face of Margaery turning red as anger sufficed her body.


Good Olenna thought. The girl had strength of will. Olenna had accepted the fact that for Margaery her ‘hens’ were not negotiable. To break them up would cause havoc. If her hens were taken from Margaery, she would become intractable. Olenna saw no reason to do so. Like she always did, Olenna would work it all out in the end. Olenna had total faith in her own abilities.

“Eddard Stark is boring! His son is boring! Renly is fun grandmama. He accepts my and Loras’s love for each other. I will be Queen and have both Renly and Loras … and my hens.”

Margaery had a point Olenna knew. Eddard was dull. There was no other way to put it. He was like the north. Stiff as the frozen ground. He and his wife had never committed adultery according to her moths. Not even looked at anyone else. That was strange considering the adultery so common in the other High Houses. Well, Stannis and Selyse were a special case. Their personalities turned everyone else off! Hell, they turned each other off.

“Don’t worry Margaery” Olenna placated her granddaughter. She gripped her shoulder reassuringly. “Renly has already won the campaign Margaery. Loras’s love for Renly assures that he will sit on the Iron Throne.”

“Will you wage war to throw Eddard Stark off the Iron Throne then?” Margaery asked. She looked at her grandmother earnestly.

“I hope not Margaery. The man has become wily. Our erstwhile foe has become cunning like the animal on his standard. He is having us all come to him with our armies. Armies that will cancel each other out. I agree with the man. If all can be decided among the High Houses without a major campaign then I am willing to play his game. I am sure the man will trip up and fall to ruin. He must have used up all his luck in taking the Iron Throne.”

“The grizzled Wolf’s problem is that he used all his resources to get where he was at.” Olenna was sure the man would not have the ability to acquire more resources. “He will spend himself in his machinations. We will then take his place. It is so easy for men to overreach. Their male ego making themselves greater in their own eyes than they truly are. Eddard Stark will falter and fail under the weight of his ambitions. You wait and see Margaery.”

“Will it really be that easy grandmother? That Eddard Stark will self-destruct. That events will conspire to put us on the Iron Throne.”

“I think so. Tywin is cagy I admit. But we are a force that none can overcome granddaughter. Stannis’s support will evaporate like the morning mist with the rising of the sun. Dorne only wants
revenge for Oberyn’s sister’s death. That, I am hoping will come to pass. The Riverlands and Vale only support Eddard and will return to their ancestral lands with Eddard’s fall.”

“But what if Eddard does win!” Margaery whined. “I don’t that to happen!” the teenage girl vocalized vociferously.

With a slow roll of her eyes and set upon sigh Olenna replied to her granddaughter’s concerns “Then we will deal with it Margaery” Olenna answered back in a rising tone. This defiance while showing backbone was getting tiring.

“I will not live with a boring stick in the mud. You know what I want grandmama.”

Margaery’s tent was beside her tent. Olenna’s own personal guard ringed their tents. The men setting up their tents ringing the royal pavilions setup for Olenna and Margaery. The men picked for both their physical prowess but also for their total allegiance to Olenna. The men kept all the sights and sounds they perceived to themselves.

The rest of the camp separated from the tents of the two women. The two high royal women given their privacy. The royal wagons that circled their tents outside the ring of Olenna’s honor guard. The wagons blocking the tents from visual and audial inspection. The tents the High Royals set next. Their own personal guard a ring around them giving more privacy to Olenna and Margaery. Then the tents of those of less station were arrayed in a further ring with their honor guard ringed around them. The rings, like a tree’s, provided protection to Olenna and Margaery from prying eyes and listening ears. Her honor guard made sure of that.

Olenna alone could hear the festivities of the ‘hens’. Margaery would be joining them when she left this tent. Many of the cries this night would be Margaery’s howls of ribald sexual hijinks. The girls knowing to mute somewhat their cries of ecstasy. Once Margaery was Queen in the Red Keep, the matriarch knew the nose level would rise greatly. Olenna smiled softly. To be young again. She imparted some insight to her granddaughter.

“Margaery. Robb Stark is a young man.”

“So?”

“He can be convinced to see the reality of the situation. He can be convinced to see certain advantages that only you can provide. You are a beautiful woman. Your handmaidens are beautiful. He will see the light if I present to him all that he can gain with a union between you and himself. You will convince him with your body of what is possible. During the day, Robb Stark will present the face the Septons and Lords want to see and at night … well his cup shall runneth over.”

“But his father? You have said that Eddard is a saint. He knows no dross. Well, except for Jon Snow” Margaery snickered.

“We both know that is bullshit Margaery. I am sure that Jon is Rhaegar’s son. I just can’t prove it. It just has to be.”

“Yes grandmama” Margaery placated her grandmother in return. “Eddard is a most peculiar man”

It burned Olenna up knowing something but being unable to prove it.

The next true heir of Highgarden turned serious again. “Are you sure about Robb Stark, Grandmama. He is the scion of Eddard Stark. Will he not have the same grand regard for morals, honor and the doing of the ‘right thing’ no matter the cost?”
Olenna looked at Margaery and sighed. She too had the same gnawing thoughts. The damn fool boy might be like his father. She could see the boy chopping the head off of a major ally to save his ‘honor’. Eddard would have once done that. Would he now? It seem that Eddard had changed since he passed through the crucible of complete abject failure. The old Eddard Stark cast out. Robb had not yet had such a cathartic event in his life.

The Queen of Thrones nodded her head. “It could be my granddaughter. We will have to wait and see. I do find it strange that Eddard is only offering us Robb Stark. He is not decreeing it. Again strange.”

“I know grandmama. This proposing to have us meet and ‘get to know each’ through this ‘courtship’ and then giving me and his son the right to not accept the union is—is—well, unnatural.”

Olenna had to agree. She had not believed this stipulation from the man who sat on the Iron Throne. Even if he was the King in name only at present. He had the right to decree and yet he did not. The man had to be sure that Robb would perform the duty that his father expected of him. Eddard Stark knew the kind of woman he was dealing with when he dealt with Olenna. Margaery would perform her duty as well. Even if she did so bitching all the way Olenna groused to herself.

She had been so perplexed she had written him a personal scroll and sent it to him by Citadel raven. The reply had come back with one of the strange ravens that flew into her room in the middle of the night. The bird quarking waking her up. It hopped from foot to foot at the foot of her bed.

When she rose up and lit a candle the bird jumped up the bed and held up its leg for her to pull off the scroll. The bird turned its head looking at her with obvious intelligence. Ravens were intelligent animals but this bird seem to be even more intelligent. It was definitely gauging her.

She had been eating an orange when she went to bed. The uneaten half of the orange left on the nightstand in a gilded gold bowl. She reached to her nightstand and peeled the rest of the orange and offered the bowl to the bird. The bird jumped up and down as she put the bowl in front of it. The excitement of the bird was very humorous to the woman. The raven ate the orange slices and chirped softly in happiness. She could not resist petting the bird’s head. It looked up at her with glinting eyes.

She read the scroll. The woman could not stop herself from shaking her head. Yes, indeed, Eddard Stark was a unique man.

“There is no subterfuge Olenna. I have simply grown tired of how we treat our children. How I was treated. I had to marry a woman I did not know. I was fortunate. We have grown to love each other dearly but we were both forced to perform a duty we would not have chosen for ourselves.”

“My sister died because of it. In my way, I helped it happen by not stepping in and stopping it because I was following tradition and what I thought I should do. I knew who Robert Baratheon was. Still I took his offer of marriage to my sister and then strongly encouraged her to marry him when she had grave doubts. This has haunted me as much as Elia’s death has haunted me. Their deaths still wake me in the middle of the night in a cold sweat my body shaking in guilt.”

Olenna had paused then. Such passion. Such a sense of loss and guilt. It made her pause. The Raven lifting its head to work an orange slice. Its beady eyes looking at her. She resumed reading.

“My own daughters suffered the same curse. Arya, like my sister, is filled with the wolf. She has suffered by refusing to accept her preordained path. Sansa, her elder sister was crushed and confused by tradition and what her mother decreed and what I allowed to happen with a blind eye. It almost cost me my life.”
“Arya has earned the right to seek her path with her Insurrection. I will ensure it. I care not who she chooses for a mate.” Olenna easily read what Eddard was implying.

Olenna chuckled remembering telling Margaery this piece of information. Her granddaughter’s eyes lighting up.

“I will marry Arya Stark! We will rule Westeros as Queen and Queen. It is time that Westeros above Dorne also adopt equal primogeniture. She will love my handmaidens.” Olenna had shook her head at her daughter’s rambling daydreams. Westeros was definitely not ready for a Queen and Queen.

Youth, Olenna chuckled to herself. Margaery’s hormones overpowering her commonsense. The union of two High Princesses would throw Westeros into confusion and probably war. The Septons would lose their ever loving minds. They in turn would rile up the lords and the populace. No. There would be no marriage of Margaery Tyrell to one Arya Stark. Margaery definitely attracted to powerful figures whether male or female.

The grandmother had to explain to her granddaughter that the world would only allow so much leeway. They were not Targaryens. Margaery found that terribly unfair. Her grandmother had to agree. Her memory went back to Eddard’s scroll.

“You are named the Queen of Thorns for a reason. I wonder if you have known of Jon’s lineage. I think so. His plight a crime. A crime I committed.” Olenna knew what Eddard implied of Jon’s lineage. The words written in such a way as to prove nothing of his being Rhaegar’s son by Lyanna. It could easily be Eddard confessing of his fathering a son by bastardy.

“No more. I will allow my children to set their own path. Robb will choose to marry Margaery or he will not. Margaery has the same right.” Olenna snorted. Olenna knew that both she and Eddard fully expected their two progeny to do their duty if demanded, excuse me, requested of them.

Still, she supposed it was a nice offer.

There had been no more to the scroll. Olenna had watched the raven happily eat the last of the orange. Then the bird hopped up on her lap and looked at her intently until she petted him. The bird preened its feathers for a quarter of an hour while she petted it. The bird bobbing its head and cawing softly. Finally, the bird quark loudly and jumped up to fly out the window.

She thought she understood Eddard a little more clearly. Still a strange man but driven by demons that took him down a unique path.

It would be most interesting in King’s Landing.

/////////

Now

The warm sun kissed the wrinkled cheeks of the Queen of Thorns. The woman turned up her face to let the rays more directly hit her face. She smiled up at her lover raining kisses down on her forehead and cheeks. The sun felt good. Olenna wished she could say the same for her lower back and her left leg. The pain shooting down the leg down to the knee.

That was not mentioning the literal pain in her ass. The engineers had done all they could to level the Rosewood but it was in many ways a losing battle. The dirt did not have time to set before the lead guard and then royal wagons ran over the recently repaired road. The jarring bumps and jolts had made the seventy-two year old woman’s ass ache. The pain sharp. That added to her back and
leg pain made for a miserable ride.

Her son was nothing if not attentive to his mother. They train had paused for the noonday meal. Mace had seen his mother stooped over heavily on her cane when she first emerged from her royal wagon. Before his mother set her iron will to straighten her back and walk with just a hint of a limp. He had seen the look of suppressed pain obvious on her face. Olenna was gritting her teeth behind her set lips. She refused to show weakness to the general populace. She could not afford that. Men and women circled her because of her strength and she would not allow pain to pierce that veil. Only those closest to her could perceive the truth of the pain she now hid.

“We have made enough progress for today. I am calling a halt to the march” Mace called out. The commanding generals had seen the pain on Olenna’s face when she stepped out of her royal carriage. All were happy to call a halt. They too saw glimpses of the truth but kept it to themselves. These men knew the true strength of Highgarden. The army train had made good progress marching down the Rosewood. The weather had been in their favor with little heavy rainfall to cause the Rosewood to become a horror to travel down.

The armored knights were happy to rest their horses. The extra rest and time to curry horses’ coats and check their hooves appreciated. The conscripts happy to let their feet rest and their backs stretch taking off their backpacks. The extra time off would be most beneficial to the foot soldiers.

The camp stewards went to their wagons and began to first breakout and then setup their cooking utensils and the breaking out the cut wood and coke to begin preparing meals for the Lords and knights. Soldiers and conscripts moving out to a stand of pine trees to cut down a tree or two to provide firewood for meals and warmth for the coming night. The soldiers would eat oats and trail mix in a bowl of goat’s milk warmed over those fires.

The stewards marked the area for the royal compound and began to set up the tents for the royals. The wagons brought forward to take out the furniture to put in the tents and in the sitting area in front of the tents. A communal area selected to be off to the side of the area where the royal tents were being erected. The wagons moved to circle around Olenna and Margaery’s tents.

Soon the royal chairs were setup. The seats richly upholstered and stuffed with seaweed and down feathers. Olenna settled gratefully onto her seat. The chair was not highly ostentatious but had the required roses carved on the chair back and along the undersides of the wooden arms. The wood a rich burnished dark red maple and rosewood. Her aching bum sighed in relief. A stool was placed under her feet to her raise her feet to give her back and leg relief. She smiled in the pleasure of the lack of pain this gave her.

Soon, Olenna was joined by her family and high generals. The small gaggle sat and drank the proffered water, tea and diluted spring wine. Tables had been setup with bowls of fruit put on the flat surfaces along with cuts of freshly smoked meat, thick slices of cheese and unleavened bread. Everyone started to eat in silence. The food and drink refreshing all the attendees of the ad hoc gathering.

Feeling refreshed Olenna looked around. She started the conversation.

“How far are we away from King’s Landing?”

Moribald Chester answered “We are roughly three weeks away. We will enter the Kingswood in two days. I do worry though about ambush. The Lannisters are out and about. We have sent scouts to the west and north to see the lay of the land. The Lannisters are focusing on Dondarian but our outlying scouts ran into several forces of Lannisters. One party was severely mauled in an ambush. I worry that Lannisters may lay in wait in the King’s Wood to ambush us.”
“I am sending a heavy force out tomorrow to hopefully flush out any Lions seeking to ambush us.”

The generals and Mace discussed tactics and options on their march up to King’s Landing. That was not Olenna’s area of expertise and let them plan. She worried about the strategic and not the tactical. She set the general strategy and let her generals, son and grandsons determine the day to day tactics to achieve her overall plan. Of course she did it in such a way that her son Mace always thought it was his insights and initiatives that guided the House of Tyrell.

The high generals knew the truth but willingly went along with the façade. They all desired success and Olenna provided the greatest chance of that success.

Olenna mused on the reports that Edward’s forces had ceased to directly confront the Lannisters and instead had turned to a hit and run tactics. Tactics that were spectacular successful. All assumed the robe figures that helped Arya free her father and then helped both to take the Iron Throne were now out in the field aiding the Old Wolf.

Reports had flown in from spies in the Westerlands that Tywin had engaged forces in the mountains of Westerlands. These same ‘forces’ had savaged Casterly Rock’s first columns moving to King’s Landing sent to aid Cersei when she still held the Iron Throne. Those forces had been decimated. Maybe Tywin could force the issue flooding the mountains with waves of men but he had not the time for men to flush out these brigands with his need to rush east to come to his daughter and son’s need. Any such push could not be protracted.

When Tywin first pushed into the Western Mountain ranges he did try to bull his way through and flooded the woods to the sides of the Gold Road. The forces of Casterly Rock that had ventured into the wooded mountain sides were mauled and savaged continuously. The old Lion had pulled back to the Gold Road. These robbed figures in their homelands were simply to powerful even if seemingly few in numbers. Tywin had to accept this and let these robed figures harasses his forces.

It was the lesser of evil choices from Tywin’s viewpoint.

Olenna’s moths reported that these robbed figures were now seen flitting in and out the camps of the Riverlands and the Vale. When the wounded from the conflicts in the mountain passes of the Westerlands returned to Lannisport for succor the moths of Olenna and the voles of the Gardner were ready and listening. One thing was clear from all reports. These robbed fighters were ruthless fighters and seemed to have the ability to almost disappear into the countryside. Their attacks vicious and over as soon as they began. The damage quickly done.

The generals had set their lips at this turn of events. It seemed clear that these robed figures while few in numbers their skills at stealth and longbow made them a force multiplier. Their affect on the battlefield at times devastating.

Renly spoke up.

“I hope that we can take the Iron Throne without bloodshed. I do agree with Eddard on that. I would hate to have to kill my brother on my sword. I will if I must but I hope can avoid that.” He sat back looking all regal in his shining armor and still stiffly pressed cape hanging off his shoulders. With a glance, granddaughter and grandmother shared a knowing look. A grand ostentatious display of restraint and pious desire. Renly knew how to play his part.

Olenna rolled her eyes watching Loras nearly swoon looking at his peacock. The man was definitely heads over heels in love with Renly Baratheon. Fortunately, the man would make a good head of government Olenna thought to herself. Margaery and Olenna would guide him where he needed to go to be the successful king he claimed he would be. He was good at heart and that was
always a plus. The same could not be said for the Lannisters. Tywin, Cersei and Jamie were self-indulgent, fey and capable of cruelty.

Robert had turned into a slovenly buffoon upon his ascension to the Iron Throne. It was hard for Olenna to see Robert in her mind as he was in his Rebellion. The image that kept coming to her was the sloth he allowed himself to turn into. She looked at Renly. The man was definitely too vain to let himself go to seed like his eldest brother had. Loras was nearly in an inebriated state with Renly running his fingers through his curly locks.

The elder woman did feel for Renly and Loras. All the high nobles of the Reach knew of their relationship but the men dare not flaunt their relationship in public. In the security of the Tyrell household they could show their affection. That was as far as it could go unfortunately. To openly show their affections would only cause problems that would grow over time.

The Septons suspected something was not ‘quite right’ between the two high royals but they had no proof. Once Renly was on the Iron Throne working something would be much easier Olenna knew. Being married to Margaery would give Renly the shield he would need to have Loras as his lover behind the scenes. Olenna snorted. When the Tyrells took the throne, Olenna excused herself, when Renly took the Iron Throne, the Tyrells would make sure to pour in some extra gold and silver into the coffers of the Church of the Seven Faced God. That should keep the High Septon happy and not go nosing around where his nose did not need to be.

Olenna supposed she would have Renly reinstate the vow of chastity to the Kingsguard. She could care less but it would provide cover for Loras. It would help hide their illicit affair. When one was supposedly chaste then the general populace just assumed that the oaths were being followed. Or at least pretended they thought they were. Olenna shook her head. She wished her two youngest grandchildren did not have their particular proclivities. Their bisexuality did not bother her in the least. It just made her machinations harder. She smiled. It made her life more interesting though. Olenna guessed that balanced it all out.

All seemed quiet around King’s Landing. Eddard had launched his audacious night time attack. It had truly bloodied the Lannister’s noses. He had not attacked at all since. Even in the field his forces seemed to be laying back. They had the Lannisters on weak knees and yet they now held back. The forces of the Direwolf now content to contain the Lions to their established range.

Her sons, grandsons and generals were confused by this lack of attack by Eddard.

Olenna had told Margaery her views. The man simply did not want to fight now that he had all the forces coming to him. It was clear to the women that the man would try and accomplish all his goals within the halls of court. The man making his own life much more endangered by taking this tack.

The old Direwolf truly did seem to want to limit the bloodshed if at all possible. Again something that made the man unique and strange. A king did not hesitate to sacrifice the little man to achieve his goals. Eddard was clearly not doing this.

Olenna was impressed but also had grave reservations for the man’s grip on life. He was forgoing from dealing with absolute strength. He should be currently butchering the Lannisters in the field. He was not. He should put Cersei and her brood down. He had made that very clear was not going to happen. The Queen of Thornes felt this would lead to his downfall. One had to be ruthless in achieving one’s goals. Show mercy only after you had achieved absolute victory was Olenna’s belief. Still, this new Eddard was an enigma to Olenna. That made him dangerous.

“I fear what Eddard has become Margaery” the grandmother had confided to her granddaughter last night in a moment of doubt. “He has become crafty and unpredictable. Something tells me he will
somehow outmaneuver us all in the playing of the Game of Thrones. He went in a neophyte when he contested against Cersei. Eddard Stark, the Hand of the King, lost badly. He was saved by his daughter, Arya Stark, and now he plays the game as a true master. He has become adroit beyond all reason.”

“Do not worry grandmama. You are superior to all” Margaery reassured her grandmother. Olenna preened. It never hurt to have your ego stroked she reasoned with herself. Olenna felt more confident in herself hearing her heir express her complete faith in her.

Margaery showed rising wisdom with her next words.

“Let him play his game grandmama. He will spend himself while we wait and watch. If he missteps we will swoop in like the descending hawk falling on its prey. We will win the day without warning. Our House will achieve our goals with minimal exposure.”

Olenna hoped so.

A thrill went through the people in the inner circle. A runner had come in from the field to report to Jarack Fossoway. The man’s eyes showed his surprise.

“My liege” the man said to Mace but glanced at Olenna. “A party of robed figures have come close to our outer camp lines unawares. How they slipped by our pickets I do not know. They are under the flag of parlay. They wish to talk to the leaders of House Tyrell. They say they are aligned with House Stark.”

Eddard’s mysterious allies had chosen to reveal themselves Olenna thought. Fifteen minutes later they were standing before Olenna, her family, the High Lords of her House and generals of Highgarden. The yew and Weirwood longbows on the shoulders of the robed figures quite impressive. Their quivers filled with hawk feathered arrows.

The figures varied greatly in height Olenna saw. Their robes hiding all their features. There were seven of them standing before them. The smallest took a step forward and pulled their cowl back. This was obviously the person leading the group.

Olenna cocked an eyebrow. Their leader was a female. Most interesting the elder of House Tyrell thought.

“I am Lelani Hogg. I am leading our party. We are aligned with the Direwolf and her father.”

Again Olenna felt a rush. What was going on here? These were the warriors that had joined themselves to Arya Stark. Why had they aligned themselves to the daughter and not the father?

Margaery too had caught the pronoun of who the Druids were aligned with. Olenna saw her two highest ranked generals looking at each other. They could not believe their ears.

“You mean you are following a woman?” Moribald Chester asked in an incredulous voice.

“Yes” the woman replied like she thought Moribald daft. “She does not command us. We follow the tactics of her father. It is her spirit that guides us. Her spirit savage and dire like the standard of House Stark. The young Direwolf is fierce in battle and put many Lions down. It is her will that commands our loyalty. She will lie with the Dragon and restore order to Westeros.”

Olenna saw the confusion on all the men’s faces. Prophecy was definitely not there forte. Margaery looked at her. The matriarch of Tyrell often wiled away the nighttime hours talking to Margaery over her research and thoughts on old Valyria.
The group told them that they would shepherd them though the King’s Wood and on to King’s Landing. A force from Dondarion would arrive tomorrow and provide a flanking force. They had pushed back the Lannisters from this area to give House Tyrell free access to King’s Landing. The robbed figures said they were raiding the Lions heavily to the west to draw them off.

“The Direwolves want you in King’s Landing so to King’s Landing we will escort you.”

The strange visitors were offered food and drink. They accepted. They were quiet and kept to themselves. Soon they finished the meal which they ate in silence. They were offered packed victuals. The quiet robbed figures accepted with polite courtesy. Olenna always found politeness a plus. The robbed figures moved off in single file. They were followed at distance to track their path. House Tyrell wanted to learn more of these strange interlopers. Interlopers aligned to one Arya Stark.

It did not surprise Olenna when the force following the interlopers came back near dusk. They were royally dressed down when they reported that they had lost the track of the small force they had been following closely.

“I can’t explain it” the captain had told his major. “They moved into some tall prairie grasses. They vanished. We could find no spore of their passing. No partial footprints, bent grass stalks or turned over dirt or stones. It as if they turned to ghosts.”

Olenna ordered her general to call off the major. “These followers of Arya Stark have been doing this to Tywin for months now. Leave the man be. There will be no punishment of our trackers. No one could track these robbed figures if they chose not to be.”

Later that night Olenna and her granddaughter were in her tent sipping a cup of Lotus Petal tea and eating fresh churned ice cream. Being a high royal had its advantages Olenna smirked ladling in another bit of ice cream into their porcelain cups.

“Where do you think these robbed figures reside grandmama?” Margaery asked her.

“I cannot be sure but it must be the deep woods of Westeros and the high mountains to the east, west and south. Maybe in the swamp lands of the Neck. Else, we would know of them. They evidently have avoided all contact with those not part of their clans.”

“Why show themselves now grandmama?”

“I think it must be their prophecies of House Stark and House Targaryen forming a union through Arya and Daenerys Targaryen.”

“But she is dead grandmama. Her bones whitening in the Red Wastes.”

“I know Margaery. Most prophecies are all full of shit as we know. Just wishful thinking by people who are not able to control their own destiny. Still, the beliefs of these robbed figures saved Eddard’s life it would seem. Lucky for him.”

They talked on about prophecies, House politics and what their plans were for when Renly took the Iron Throne. Margaery was looking forward to bringing her hens to King’s Landing and having them with her all the time. She was also looking forward to boning her future gay husband and brother. Brother and sister had always been close and both wished to take it to an intimate level. Renly seemed happy to have Loras to take care of most of Margaery’s needs for the male body. Both men knew who Margaery would be sleeping with primarily.

*Long live the Targaryen Way* Olenna snarked to herself.
Grandmother and granddaughter talked on enjoying each other’s company.

Olenna talked again with Margaery over the recent news of this Leaf that had appeared in King’s Landing. Varys had shared this nugget of gossip to Olenna. The supposed Queen of the Children of the Forest walked among men once more. Olenna was totally blown away at his information. That a figure from mythology, of all times, decided to now once more show herself was unsettling. She had read of the Children of the Forest and actually believed that they once roamed the lands of Westeros. But, there time had passed into extinction Olenna had been sure. Westeros was now the purview of man.

It seemed that the Children of the Forest were not quite extinct. She had asked her granddaughter what she thought of the news. Margaery had been less than impressed to say the least.

“What does it matter that this Leaf of the Children of the Forest has appeared. If, she really is what she claims to be. Their time is past. She is only one person grandmama. She has no power. She won’t affect the future.”

That summation was correct Olenna thought, but, still, this was extraordinary. If what the books said were true this Leaf was an immortal. Like the Weirwoods. She had read that the name of the original Queen of the Children of the Forest had been named Leaf. With such simple names surely many of those faery people had that name. But could it be her, the Queen of myth. If so she was how old? Eight thousand years? Ten thousand years? A hundred thousand? Some speculation by Maesters and mages had her age at a million years. Who knew? But such age! The things this Leaf would have seen if she was really of such age.

The question again rose in Olenna’s mind. Why now? Were Arya and Eddard really that special? So special a woman who had remained hidden for eight thousand years chose to now reveal herself. They were only father and daughter. What was so special about Arya and Daenerys marrying? It would only bring discord and probably war to Westeros. It made no logical sense to Olenna.

All these strange alignments, coincidences and forces that were seemingly pledging themselves to Eddard and Arya Stark left the air roiled Olenna’s thought. Margaery saw this but was unconcerned. To her, they were mere trifles. They had helped the man acquire the throne from a despot wannabe. That was all. He was now facing women and men of true import.

Like a dog with a bone, Olenna could not but help but to gnaw on these things at night after she had turned the wick back on her lamp. This strange confluence surrounding Eddard Stark.

He picks a swordsman to train his irritating daughter. It is by happenstance a First Sword of Braavos. His daughter brings to him robbed figures who are a force multiplier in his Insurrection and now the battlefield. Somehow Arya Stark brought a Faceless Man into their sphere. Now of all times the Queen of the Children of the Forest suddenly steps out of legends.

Evidently, the robbed figures and Leaf had been waiting for Eddard and Arya to make themselves known as the ones to fulfill their prophecies. From failure Eddard had been lifted up and now he had taken the Iron Throne. Arya and her father had made the impossible possible.

Margaery wrote it all off as luck, happenstance and serendipity. Nothing more.

Olenna was not so sure. Prophecies were farce and folly and yet … did not they sometimes come true. If only in a fashion. The Stark daughter and father were becoming the stuff of legend while they yet lived. They were prophecies fulfilled. Olenna knew of other prophecies.

Olenna did not tell Margaery of several prophecies from Old Valyria she had read when she been
given some manuscripts found in Qohor. One did speak of female Direwolves and Dragons lying together. The prophecy spoke of the continent to the west. That this land would be where the Queens would rule. If she remembered correctly it was a ‘future’ kind of prophecy. That prophecy was nearly seven hundred years old now. It was impossible that it could be coming true now.

Surely, we are not living it Olenna thought.

Daenerys Targaryen was dead. She had to be. She was a teenager with only the old, very young and the sick as her Khalasar. She had died months ago. She must have.

Still …

There had been another prophecy from that time … how did that one go? The elderly woman wracked her memory. Yes. That was it.

A quartet of Queens would come from the Far East to throw the old rule of Essos down. That their influence would spread over the known world. What was lost would be restored. One would be old and one new. A Direwolf and Dragon would become one. The slave trade crushed. The slaves freed. A Slave of the midnight lands would become Queen to the ancient Queen. Valyria risen again from ruin. Dragons truly tamed and no longer enslaved. What the hell did that mean?

Needless to say, the Valyrians had had no use for that particular prophecy. Their precious slave trade taken from them was definitely not acceptable. The high haughty race must have thought of themselves as invincible at that time. The culture of Valyria at its zenith. The Doom of Valyria to impossible to even contemplate. Their kingdom and culture would live on forever must have been their thought. There would be no need for restoration. Ever.

Olenna snorted in her thoughts. Valyria was no more. The slave trade still thrived though. With a shake of her head Olenna dismissed this prophecy yet again. How can you crush something that has existed for over six thousand years? She paused. Valyria was no more. If it was no more … then it could be restored … Olenna shook her head at the silly thought. No. Valyria had passed into myth. Like Leaf? In consternation, Olenna shook her head dispelling her disquieting thoughts.

The second prophecy had nothing to do with Westeros anyways the leader of House Tyrell thought to herself. Surely it didn’t? Olenna ruminated on the prophecies yet again. She could not stop herself in her current state of mind. Arya and Daenerys seemed like the logical women to fulfill both prophecies. Well, except for one of them being dead. And who the hell is this ancient Queen? And a slave from the midnight lands? What the hell did that mean? Slaves did not become Queen!

Damn mumbo jumbo. That was what prophecies were. Olenna sighed as Margaery waxed poetic over her hens. Again, the Queen of Thrones moaned to herself. Please, not again! She let Margaery prattle on with her hen ruminations. Olenna had many things to ponder on.

One more reason to go to King’s Landing. Maybe she would gain some insight on these prophecies.

Old words on scrolls from a dead civilization were just bullshit anyways.

Weren’t they?
He was trying to be a good leader of his army. He really was. It was just proving to be so difficult at the moment. He was in his command tent. The sky outside the tent was at dusk. That time of lengthening shadows. The world slowly fading into obscurity. His army was making good progress down the Kings Road. The men disciplined and well trained. The forces of the Vale having integrated well into his forces. The Riverlands were using some of their forces to threaten the holdfasts of eastern Westerlands. Most of their forces harassing and attacking the Lannisters coming down the Gold Road on their way to King’s Landing.

Robb sat in his tent while he looked over the reports of the man leading the efforts for House Tully. He was pleased with what the reports by Druid ravens brought to him. He absently scratched the head of Grey Wind as the Direwolf lazed on the ground by Robb’s feet. The wolf asleep. The luxuriant fur running through Robb’s fingers soothed the young man.

The druids guiding elements of Edmure’s forces through the foothills and low mountains at the junction of the Westerlands, Crowlands and the marge of his own Riverlands. The Druids allowing Edmure to attack at advantage. The hit and run attacks bleeding the Lannisters while minimizing their own losses. The wounds were not sever to the Lions but each cut confused and weakened the Lannisters.

The continued nicks and cuts were slowly convincing the Lions of the absurdity of continuing their forays into the lands of Tully. Most of the incursions now retreating back to Tywin and his main force.

Now Robb’s father had sent out word to cease direct confrontation. The Lannister force was near enough to King’s Landing that additional confrontation was not accomplishing much Robb’s father thought. Robb’s father wanted to keep causalities as low as possible. For both sides. It was a shame the young man thought. The arrogant lions needed to be bloodied as much as possible was his take on House dynamics.

He was reading over the quartermaster reports. Their progress down the King’s Road steady. Robb was reading over the reports on consumption of food stocks, consumables by the blacksmiths, need for more blankets, socks, boots and general clothing. There was reports on the status of the knight’s horses and the conditions of the wagon train horses. Doctors gave reports on the injuries men endured while marching great distances. Leading an army was much more than grand marches to glory Robb was finding out.

He read of the consumption of food stocks. Their wagon train providing the majority of the victuals that his army was consuming. Still his forces were foraging the local populace. An army always consumed more than it could carry for all its needs. He only took what they could give in there plenty. The local population knew war was at hand. The Lannister’s had a bad reputation from previous campaigns. The local farms and holdfast giving as much as they could to the army that they knew would protect them.

Even below the North the fairness of the Starks was well known and honored.
Robb had much to read but he just couldn’t do it at the moment. He tried to read the report in front of him for the fifth time. A tugging on his right hip distracted him yet again. He sighed and put the report down. He looked up at the other war leaders around the table.

He looked to his right at Rickard Karstark. He was shaking his head at the situation. Also to his right was Jon “Greatjon” Umber trying to act above it all. To his left was Halys Hornwood. His shoulders were shaking with suppressed chuckles. Down from him was Tobas Krey of Krey holdfast that was forty miles north of Winterfell. He had proven himself an exemplary horseman and good tactician of cavalry tactics. Further down the table were Morton Waynwood, Horton Redfort, Lawren Elesham of the Vale. They too had humorous looks on their faces.

Robb felt very satisfied with the forces that had come to his banner. The men loyal to him and following his edicts without question. That made the young man feel good inside. He knew he had large boots to fill leading the North. Leading the forces of his father Eddard Stark.

Robb felt the tugging again on his clothes. He sighed and looked down slightly.

“Yeeessss.”

“Make her stop Robb!” Tyrion whined yet again.

“Make her stop what Tyrion?” Robb asked reasonably in return to Tyrion’s entreaty.

“She is glaring at me! She won’t stop!” the dwarf whined petulantly.

Robb gave the man a sympathetic look. He looked up and over to his right. There stood Catelyn Stark his mother. She was standing looking around innocently. It was amazing how his mother appeared both totally innocent and yet completely guilty of the charge against her by Tyrion. She moved to a table near the back of the tent and picked up a sextant and pretended to look at it.

“She doesn’t seem to be doing anything Tyrion.” Robb knew his mother was harassing the Lannister. She was not physically accosting the dwarf in the slightest. She was doing her work through intimidation. It was really comical how their relationship had evolved.

Tyrion blew a raspberry at his mother. Her eyes flared. Her body snapping to attention. Catelyn Stark whipped the sexton down onto the table with a large bang. Robb watched his mother slightly bend her knees and acted as she was going to lunge forward.

SQQUUUEEEEE SSQQUUEEEEEE SSQQQQQUUEEEE

Tyrion bleated and scooted on the other side of Robb and looked out past Robb’s body at Catelyn Stark with a cautionary eye.

The loud squeals had half awakened Grey Wind. The Direwolf looked up with sleepy eyes. His head looked around. He watched Tyrion squeal for a moment before lowering his head and snoozing again.

Robb sat back and reflected back to his meeting up with the Druids that had his mother and Tyrion. His father had let his son know with his first ravens of his new allies. Soon after the arrival of these new strange ravens the Druids themselves came to him in Winterfell. They were a mysterious people and did not divulge much but he was able to gather that this group of Druids lived deep in the Wolfswood.

In the beginning no one had any idea where Robb’s mother had gone. Word had arrived in Winterfell and King’s Landing that she had captured Tyrion Lannister and would deliver him for the
rendering of justice for the second attempt on Bran’s life.

The only problem was that she had disappeared. It was thought she must have gone to her sister in the Eyrie in the Valley of Arryn. No replies were forthcoming from that mountain fortress. Though all had to assume Catelyn Stark had gone there none could be sure.

It was both confounding and frightening not knowing where his mother was located.

Robb had found it surprising to know that a whole other society existed so close to Winterfell and no one knew of it. Robb’s father had requested that Robb keep this information close. The mysterious robbed figures were allies and they needed to honor the secrecy of these new allies that had come to their aid. They were exposing themselves to come to their aid now. Robb agreed fully with his father’s wishes. The Houses aligned to Robb were curious but did not press their High Lord for information. They respected the Starks too much to question their edicts.

The Druids were helping them when they did not have to. That meant a lot to the young Stark. To do something when one need not. Robb was not naïve though. The young man knew the Druids were seeking their own goals as well.

The Druids who would be his escort down the King’s Road had greeted Robb and his army when they were a week out of Winterfell on the beginning of their march to King’s Landing. They had materialized from the early morning mist like ethereal ghosts of a lost age. Their long robs seeming to blend into the environment. Robb acted surprised to see them. The Druids announced they were in service to his father and would scout ahead for them. They told Robb and all his commanders they were warring against the Lannisters across the breadth of Westeros.

Robb smiled. That made believers out of his army. Most did not put that much thought into these new allies. They were too busy living their own lives or preparing for the possible battles to come. The few that did come to Robb with questions he obfuscated and deflected. He told the questioners he had no time to ponder the origin of his new allies. His father had vouched for them and that was good enough for Robb Stark. He had a campaign to wage. For now at least that was enough.

The Druids had been like swallows flitting in and out of the consciousness of Robb’s army. They would appear to give their reports of their scouting and reports of the general surrounding. They may share a meal and then were gone again.

Then, four days later the report came to Robb on his march that his mother had been found. The Druids of the Vale would escort the duo to the edge of their territory. They had angled through the Mountains of the Arryn to come out near to the Neck. Robb was informed that the Druids of the southern Wolfswood had been informed and sent a party to escort his mother back up the Neck to link up with Robb’s army.

The Druids moved up the Neck several miles off to the side of the King’s Road. They preferred to remain hidden from easy sight. With caution, the Druids moved their charges back up the King’s Road. Robb’s army and the group of Druids escorting Robb’s mother moving on intersecting courses. The Druids escorting Catelyn wanted to get closer to their home in the Wolfswood with some of the Druids residing in the deep fens of the Neck.

The distance between him and his mother still great. The Druids coming out of the mountains of Arryn and now travelling up towards the north. He would see them in less than two months with both forces moving towards each other. Ravens between Druids kept Robb appraised to the closing distance between the two parties.

He had anxiously counted the days until he again saw his mother. When that day arrived he took an
advance scout party to greet his mother. He did not want to have a spectacle of the reunion of mother and son. The actual event had been exhilarating but also slightly, he was not sure the right word, he guessed ‘strange’ would be the right word. He saw the party coming out of early morning mists.

The small party of walking Druids and mounted horse slowly came into view down a path in the hilly country that lay just above the Neck. He saw wild gesticulating from two of the figures. He had leaned forward trying to decipher what he was seeing. Slowly, understanding dawned.

Tyrion was on his horse and his mother was riding around him. She was reaching out and trying to pinch him. He was swatting madly at her nearly unseating himself. His mother’s hands surprising fast as she moved in to pinch the dwarf. The small man snarling and glaring as his hands slapped at his mother’s fingers trying to dart in for a pinch.

“Stop it you wench! You are like a horsefly dammit!”

“Bzzzzz bbzzzzzz bbzzzzz” Robb watched his mother make a buzzing sound moving into pinch Tyrion. Robb’s eyebrows arched. How strange. Her mother was almost playful. Well, except for the hateful look on her face. She was really trying to pinch the dwarf.

Tyrion got so agitated he nearly toppled off his horse swatting at his mother’s sniping fingers. A robed Druid reached up and gripped his leg and jerked him upright back on his horse.

Robby watched the dwarf clutch his heart.

“You nearly gave me a heart attack dammit! You vile hearted woman.”

His mother chuckled. “Well, I almost did my good deed for the day.” Again Robb was surprised. Her mother showing humor. He knew his face most look strange reflecting this strange image before him.

He moved in. The two had been so engrossed in their interactions they had not seen him coming up on them.

“Mother” he spoke softly.

It made Robb’s heart feel good seeing his mother react to his voice and seeing her face light up. She kicked her horse forward and the two embraced warmly.

“Oh how I have missed you my son! It is a joy to see you again. Finally, I have a part of my family again. I have been so alone.” She hugged Robb again and again. Robb hugged his mother back. He truly did love his mother.

The two talked for a minute. Robb saw Tyrion sitting a respectful distance off. He was trying to not stare at the familial bonding of mother to son.

“Have you been taking care of our Lannister guest mother?” Robb asked her mother. He saw Tyrion glare at his mother. He knew how his mother despised Lannisters.

She stiffened. “I have not harmed the dwarf if that is what you mean. I have been told to not harm our dear Tyrion Lannister. I have honored that edict. I merely respond to his goading. Which is incessant! I still feel he must have of had a hand in the attempted death of your brother Robb. I know he must be involved. I just can’t prove it.”

Robby saw the look of aggrieved affront come over Tyrion’s face. He glared at Catelyn Stark. Then
the Lannister’s eyes moved to glance at Robb. He knew Tyrion was trying to gauge his reaction to Tyrion. Robb gave him a neutral look. He was still weighing the dynamics between his mother and Tyrion.

“I have been in communication with father. He feels that Tyrion is innocent. It was Joffrey that attempted Bran’s second murder mother.”

“How can you and your father be so sure? He is a Lannister, Robb.”

“Mother. Don’t judge by reputation.”

“You know he is a cheat, liar and a whore monger”

“Hey!” Tyrion called out in his defense. “That is unfair dammit. I don’t always cheat, I only lie to save my own skin and I pay good coin for my whoring! I am helping the economy and putting food on sweet women’s plates. I should be praised I say! I am just like any other man I tell you!”

Robb watched his mother give him a look that said ‘I told you so’.

“And as to my goading of you Catelyn Stark … I am merely trying to bridge the differences between our two houses. I do realize my august might and presence is quite intimidating so I forgive you Catelyn.” Tyrion had a smug look on his face.

Robb asked his mother to back off on Tyrion. It was unseemly to accuse a man without proof.

“But the knife Robb?!”

“It was stolen mother. Father confronted Joffrey. He did not confess but he soiled himself. He did it mother. Tyrion has his faults but being a killer of children is not one of them. The man built that saddle for Bran so he could ride horses. I remember that.” He turned to Tyrion. “I thank you for that kindness Tyrion Lannister.”

Robb noted the look of gratification at the compliment that came on Tyrion’s face. His mother had stalked off on her horse muttering. Robb sighed. His mother really dug in when she felt she was right. She knew that Tyrion was innocent but she needed someone to accuse without Cersei and Jamie being available. He was not going to tell his mother that his father had no intention of executing Cersei and had basically freed the woman. He would let his father sail that rough sea alone.

He rode up beside Tyrion. The man eyed him warily. Robb could not blame the small man. He was still a Lion alone in a sea of Wolves.

“Tyrion.” The man looked at him intently. “I believe you are innocent and I think your reputation has grown in the retelling. I remember your stays at Winterfell. I found you to be kind hearted and a good man. I do not know if we can be friends with the acrimony between our families but I would like to try.”

It was obvious Tyrion was surprised. He seemed a little nonplussed.

“I would like that. You will protect me from your vile—I mean kind hearted mother. She is most vicious.”

Robb snorted. “My mother has the howl of a Direwolf but she will not harm you Tyrion. She is
honorable. She could have had you killed when she first captured you. She believes in justice meted out by a person in authority. That saved you Tyrion. Remember that. You can defend yourself quite well I feel in a court of judgement. You are intelligent and quick of wit.”

Over the coming days, Robb had not expected the tit for tat back and forth from the two antagonists. They seemed to almost relish their back and forth. They would be acting in a normal fashion until they approached each other. Robb was sure that they lay at night thinking on how to get at each other the next day.

Robb did want to know though of the machinations of his mother and the dwarf of House Lannister.

It was becoming clear that his mother responded to the defiance heaped her way by Tyrion. He did not kowtow to Robb’s mother. The Starks except for Arya normally bent to Catelyn Stark and her iron will. It was this defiance that seemed to be drawing out his new side of his mother. Robb wondered if maybe he and his siblings—heck even his father should have stood up more to their mother and wife.

Robb supposed it was too personal for Arya and her mother. Their anger too intense for any other reaction but extreme rancor. Robb mused on that. He had heard once ‘you will accept treatment from a stranger you would never accept or tolerate from a close family member’. He saw that was true now. It was sad really the truth of the statement.

After a few days travel, Robb had inquired of Tyrion “I have been given a report by the Druids about you Tyrion”. Tyrion immediately became guarded.

“I would like to know if it is true what they say” Robb asked Tyrion. The dwarf jumped in.

“If it is good they are a most perceptive people. If it is bad they are miserable rotten finks and liars!” Tyrion turned around in his saddle making sure no Druids were near. He saw one right behind him. The Druid looking down at him. The man’s face hidden by his cowl. It gave the man a mysterious almost sinister cast in the current situation.

The dwarf gulped loudly. He looked back at Robb with large eyes and another loud gulp.

“Are you really the degenerate litter sized knave they report you to be?” the Druid asked in a reasonable voice.

Tyrion turned his head back around to now glare at the Druid. The silent robed figure calmly returned the glare. Getting no satisfaction from that quarter Tyrion turned his glare back on Robb.

“It is all lies. Lies I say! All lies meant to cast aspersions upon my most pure of self. I am a saintly Septon I say!” His look was not one of piety but of calculation.

Robb cocked his eyebrow and returned the dwarf’s glare calmly. Tyrion started to squirm.

“Okay! Maybe one quarter is true.”

Robb continued to look at Tyrion.

“Alright! One half is true!”

Robb sighed. He now cocked his other eyebrow.

“Alright, alright already. It is all true dammit! But I never hurt anyone. I only abuse fellow degenerates.” Tyrion smiled at Robb.
“I know Tyrion. I just wanted to see you squirm and say it. You are a good man.”

Tyrion tried to act peeved but Robb could tell he enjoyed the compliment.

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Behind the screening brush Robb looked down into the shallow valley below. A scouting and raiding part of Lannisters was in the valley. They were advance scouts for the main Lannister force moving down the Gold Road. The Lannister army sending out scouts in many directions to get a sense of the land and to seek out their foes.

With the Druids ravens they were avoiding the scouts but this one was close to the army of the North. They might somehow divine his forces were near. Robb could not take the risk and allow them to report back the position of his forces. They needed to stay secreted away from Tywin’s notice. Tywin knew Robb was ‘out there somewhere’ but Robb wanted to keep his position a mystery to the old Lion. They had a plan and did not want to these scouts to report back their positon and set off a tripwire of confrontation.

Robb observed the trap the Lannisters had fallen into. The blocking force was now moving out onto the trial behind them a thousand yards back. Wagons being drawn out and the horses removed. Archers manning the flat beds and behind the wheels. A company of knight reinforcing.

Robb could not see the Druids on the lower slopes of the hills by the trial but he knew they were there. At that range they would be devastating with their archery skills.

Rickard Karstark was beside him.

“You know that the Lannister’s would spring the trap and only take the survivors as hostages. The Lannisters are not known for their benefice. I say we spring the trap as they would on us Robb. They are known for their cruelty.”

The son of Eddard Stark looked at his second in command. They looked deep and hard into each other’s eyes.

“You speak true Rickard. The Lannisters reputation is deserved. Still, are those below us guilty of these crimes? I know not. If they fight we will bloody them. I will not slaughter if do not have too. I would prefer none of our men taste death today Rickard.”

The man looked at him. Then he sighed.

“I do not want needless death either. For our side Robb. Do not let compassion rob you of the insight you need when you fight war Robb. War is about killing. Never forget that.”

“I won’t Rickard. Just not today. If they fight then we will. *If they fight*” Robb ended his pronouncement with emphasis to make sure his second in command understood he would broke no breaking of his will. The man slowly nodded his head in acknowledge of who led their forces.

Robb saw Tyrion off to the left looking down at the ambush about to happen. He was calm. The man knew he was in the camp of the Direwolves.

As all watched, a force of two hundred knights came out of hiding in front of the force of the one hundred mounted Lannister cavalry. These men lightly armed. They were for reconnaissance. The force needed to move fast. Five men from the knights came forward. Two Lannisters moved forward. The knights pointed to the hills. The Druids stood up, their bows notched and ready to fire a moment’s notice. More talk and then the Lannister’s craned their necks back trying to see the
blocking force behind them.

The flags of the Lannister’s were struck and placed on the ground. The entire force surrendered.

Robb smiled at Karstark. The man did not return the smile. He truly wanted to bloody some Lion’s noses.

“We should have annihilated the Lannisters Robb” Rickard repeated his belief yet again. “This compassion could be your undoing. They are not worth it. Trust me.” The man got up from the hiding place to go the horses picketed down the hill. The man passed Tyrion. He glared down at the Lannister.

Tyrion walked up to Robb as he got up.

“I thank you for sparing their lives. I fear that Karstark is right though. My father is a man with little compassion. His children suffered from his code of ethics our entire lives. Still, I again thank you for your compassion. It is most becoming.” The dwarf walked towards the picket line.

The forces of the North rode down to the valley floor and the surrendered Lannisters. Robb told the captured soldiers that they would be taken back to Winterfell and kept safe. The Lannisters to be held as hostages to be exchanged when peace returned to the land. They would be fed and bedded. The captured Lannister men would be treated with respect. The men were tied together around the waist loosely and were now marched down the track under a small guard force of men from the Vale and the North.

Robb and his small party began to ride back to his war camp. Tyrion brought his horse up to Robb.

“I again thank you for sparing my people Robb. I realize many in your party do not feel your compassion.”

Robb told him he worked under his own code of ethics. Ethics he had learned from his father.

They rode down the small game trail between he hills. Grey Wind came running down a hill and started to trot beside Robb’s horse. The horse long used the mighty beast it no longer saw as a threat. A companionable silence over the two men. Each musing on their own thoughts. Grey Wind did move over to sniff Tyrion’s ankles eyeing them as if he might tear one off and eat. Tyrion squirmed in fear but kept his legs still. After a minute Grey Wind moved back to beside Robb.

After ten minutes Tyrion spoke up.

“If I may, I would inquire of my sister and her children. They are under your father’s auspices. I am sure he has shared his thoughts on the subject with you. I realize that your father contended with Cersei and … what happened with Bran.” Tyrion shook his head sadly. “I am truly sorry for that Robb. That was truly a crime. Cersei and her children are under your father’s mercy. I must ask of their safety. They are my family.”

Robb looked down at Tyrion with a thoughtful expression.

“My father will not kill Cersei or her children.”

He saw Tyrion look at him dubiously. The dwarf took a breath to reply.

“I can understand Myrcella and Tommen. They are still somehow sweet and good down to the foundation of their souls. I am thankful to hear that. But, I fear I must be truthful—don’t gag Robb.” Tyrion smiled seeing the smile on Robb’s face. “My sister is a cruel harpy and Joffrey is a
shit. They are family though and I do not wish their deaths but I would understand your father feeling he must meet out justice on them. I am sure that it was Joffrey that sent the second assassin.”

Robb looked at Tyrion. He liked his honest assessment of the situation.

“I agree with your thinking Tyrion but my father says he tempers his judgements by what happened to Elia and her children a generation past. He will avoid that all cost. He tells me that he feels he understands your sister somewhat better now. Joffrey, well he is not sure what to do with the shit yet. I do not know my father’s future plans on them and their future. I will share this though Tyrion. We will either kill your brother on the field of combat or capture your brother Jaime. If he survives battle he will be executed for crimes present and past. I agree with my father on this.”

Tyrion grimaced hard and his shoulders sagged.

“You like Jaime don’t you Tyrion.”

“Yes I do. Only he treated me with respect and showed me love as I grew up. He did as much for me as he could considering our father. He loves me and did what he could to restrain Cersei.” He took a deep breath. “I cannot argue with your father’s judgement. What he did to Bran is unforgivable. I can only hope that Eddard finds it in his heart to let Jaime take the Black.

Robb could only give him a dubious look. He reached over and squeezed Tyrion’s shoulder.

“The future will take care of itself Tyrion. I like you.”

They rode in companionable silence. As they rode Robb again considered the strange dynamic he had discovered upon the link up with the Druids escorting his mother and Tyrion to him. After a few days he inquired of Dylar Ravyne the leader of this group of Druids. He asked the man of his mother and Tyrion and their interactions.

The man had smiled slightly shaking his head. The man relayed how Samaya Varner had commanded that Robb’s mother cease her verbal accusations and physical intimidation of Tyrion. She had ceased her harassment of the dwarf.

Robb was not surprised. Her mother followed the given order. To a fault her son thought at times.

“What changed?” Robb asked in curiosity.

“For several days all was well. Tyrion avoided your mother but he grew restless riding with us. We answered his questions but they seemed lacking to the Lannister.”

Robb could imagine why. Tyrion was a man that needed interactions with those he mingled with. The dwarf needed a give and take with people like most people needed air to breath. The Druids were a quiet taciturn people. Their quiet answers and reserved manners must have driven the dwarf crazy.

“Tyrion started to ride by your mother. He would boast about the superiority of his house. He started to say weird things.” The man stopped speaking. Robb sighed understanding Tyrion’s frustration.

“Like what?” he prodded.

“He started with calling himself an animal. That he was a Lion. That he was Tyrion the Lion of Lannister. Hear me roar! He would then start to make raking motions with his clawed fingers as if he had claws at your mother. It was weird actually.” The man shook his head at the memories. “He
would ride around your mother looking smug. Quite silly really. His roars of defiance preposterous. His raking claws doltish.” Robb had to agree.

“What did my mother do?”

“She endured it for a day and half. That night we rested underneath a stand of oak trees with hanging branches. The branches thick with pollenating tags. We watched fascinated as your mother spent several hours shaking the tags vigorously gathering the pollen. A fierce determined look on her face.”

“The next morning Tyrion was back beside your mother. Espousing how great he was in matters of lovemaking, martial prowess and his great intellect.” The man shook his head. “Your mother spoke in a soft voice pretending to have a hoarse voice. Tyrion moved in to hear what you mother was supposedly trying to say.”

The man chuckled shaking his head.

“When Tyrion was right beside your mother, she lifted her hand opening it. She blew the pollen into his face. His face and hair turned yellow. He looked like he had thrust his face in a vat of mustard. He started to sneeze cursing your mother. That was the start of it.”

“Tyrion then acquired from us the grease we use to maintain our tack and bows. He told us he needed to grease a part of his riding tact. We were skeptical but gave him a small container. Curious we watched him put the grease on the ground in front of your mother’s tent. He left a flask with the Lannister standard embossed on it on the ground by your mother’s tent flap. We had come to see they both enjoyed their contest of wills so we did not intervene. In the morning your mother came out the flap to the tent we had erected for her. She fell flat on her rear end. Your mother is very intelligent. We watched her scan the ground around her. She quickly spotted the flask and her face sufficed with rage.”

“She complained later in the day she needed a laxative. We thought nothing about it and gave her our root we use for that malady. After dinner Tyrion had a bout with diarrhea. Explosive I must say. Your mother smiled sweetly at Tyrion as he bolted for the privy.”

“At lunch the three days later your mother jumped up while we ate our noon time meal crying out her mouth was on fire. Tyrion had told us he liked his food hot and spicy. We did not catch on that he had went around asking various members of our troop asking for some of our spices. The inquires were spread out over two days. We fear he put a bit much of the hot spices in your mother’s meal.

That evening when we camped it was near a fire ant mound. The next morning Tyrion howled with a few of said fire ants in his short cloth. Then that night Tyrion put a green snake in your mother’s bed. She shrieked while beside her tent flap Tyrion was laughing like a desert hyena. Bent over in his mirth was Tyrion Lannister. That was until your mother came out her tent holding the snake by the tail and draped it around Tyrion’s neck.”

“I did not know a dwarf could jump so high and squeal so loud. That was not the best one though.”

Robb had to bite “What was?”

Dylar Ravyne told Robb “My father acquired an heirloom from old Valyria. It is a shallow wash basin. On the sides beautiful dragons and dragon sphinxes in sharp relief. Your mother asked to use it. I had my doubts but let her borrow it. We had stopped for the night by a fallen tree that was half rotted. We had dug out millipedes to cook and eat.”
Robb felt queasy hearing that.

“We observed your mother digging out millipedes. She put ten of them in the bowl. She came back to us. Her head swiveled looking for the dwarf. Her patience quickly rewarded. Soon Tyrion came walking up. His eyes lit up seeing the silver bowl in your mother’s hands. Your mother now acted like she was swirling liquid around in the basin while standing beside me.”

“You are right Dylar. I think I can see the future.”

“Your mother had a look of wonder on her face. The Lannister rushed up. Tyrion was jumping up and down excitedly saying he wanted to see. He asked, then pleaded and then demanded to see the contents within the bowl. Your mother refusing before relenting. She then turned and lowered the basin towards the anxious dwarf.” The man smiled. “She ‘accidently’ tripped and spilled the millipedes all over Tyrion.”

“The man can scream like a banshee and flap his wings like a hummingbird we discovered. He bleats just like a blighted sheep.”

Yes, indeed Robb snorted at the memory. His mother and Tyrion had developed a most interesting dynamic.

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The tent flap rustled and in flew Tyrion Lannister like the furies of hell were on his tail.

“Rooobbbbbbbb!” the dwarf petulantly whined. His head cocked to look back at the portal he had just rushed through. His eyes wide with supposed fear.

Grey Wind was on a pile of furs at the back of the tent. He lazily opened one eye. Seeing Tyrion he rolled over and went back to sleep. The nightly dramas now old to the Direwolf.

“What is it now Tyrion?” Robb asked in a long suffering voice.

“Your mother made a mean gesture at me” Tyrion protested looking highly aggrieved.

At that moment Catelyn Stark stormed into the tent her head swiveling to track Tyrion. She saw him by Robb.

“Whatever he is saying is a lie Robb? Don’t trust anything that infernal dwarf has to say.”

“You are a beautiful woman Catelyn Stark. You heart is filled with gentleness and love … oh, that is right—I am a liar. Pppffhhhtttt!” Tyrion blew a raspberry at Robb’s mother.

Like a hawk pouncing Robb watched his mother put on a burst of speed and advanced on Tyrion. The dwarf squealed and dove beneath the table between Robb and the main tent pole supporting the canvas.

“How am I a liar! I demand Guest Right!” was bleated from beneath the table. That had both Robb and his mother rolling their eyes.

“I will get you Tyrion. Like a fox pouncing on a field mouse, I will strike without warning.”

“Rroobbbbbbb!” came from underneath the table. “Ssaavveeeeee Mmeeeee!” whined from beneath the table.

Robb’s mother looked around the tent. Her head turned back and forth looking for something.
From beneath the table a small hand emerged. The fingers in a clawed position. Said hand making raking motions in Catelyn Stark’s direction. Robb shook his head sadly while Tyrion roared underneath the table. Rob leaned back and looked underneath the table. The dwarf had his full attention on Robb’s mother.

They both watched Catelyn suddenly put on a burst of speed and went to the right side of the tent. There some crates with slates had been opened to bring out new stakes and cleats to replace old ones that had worn out on the tent poles. Robb’s mother lifted up two of the slates that were thirty inches long and two inches wide. She walked back to the table with Robb and Tyrion. There she bent down staring intently at Tyrion who had backed up. She squatted down on her rear and extended her arms.

Loud banging filled the tent with Robb’s mother whipping her arms working them up and down slapping the wooden slates into the ground and the underside of the table. It made an awful racket. Tyrion bleated like the coward he was. Robb watched his mother move quickly around the table and squat down several times more working her slates trying to hit Tyrion. Robb saw that his mother was not really putting much effort in actually hitting Tyrion. Only scaring him witless.

Robb was impressed with his mother’s tactical acumen. The leader of the forces of the North watched his mother make Tyrion wildly scoot around underneath his war command table.

SSSQQEEEEEEE SSSQQUUUUUEEEEE SSSQQUUEEEEEE SSSQQQQUUUUEEEE

The table jostled and Robb felt Tyrion wildly jamming into his legs in his fear. The table rattling when Tyrion hit its wooden legs in terror. Or supposed terror Robb reminded himself. The items on the table top rolling and toppling over like trees whipping around in a windstorm. Tyrion appeared in a flash on the other side of the table and rushed to the entrance of the tent. The dwarf saw Catelyn rise up throwing down her wooden slates.

“Showed you Catelyn Stark. I am a cheet—SSSQQUUEEEEEEE”

Robb watched his mother snarl like said cheetah and put on another burst of speed. Tyrion went through the open tent flaps looking back with large saucer eyes. His mother was out the tent in a flash. He heard her bellowing “Show yourself Tyrion. I will shorn you of your locks and your testicles!”

Ouch Robb thought.

Robb bent down and beat his forehead on the table. He feared it would be like this all the way down to King’s Landing. He had had a talk with his mother. He had convinced her that Tyrion was innocent. She was no longer demanding justice against the youngest child of Tywin Lannister. Still she was after the dwarf. The dwarf more than happy to give it back to his mother. It was so strange to see her mother like this. She was almost playful. Well, except for the scowl, vitriol and threats to one dwarf.

He reached over and picked up a stack of parchments and prepared to start reading them. Suddenly, loud bleats could be heard outside his tent. Robb sighed and put down the papers back down. He heard rustling and then the struggle of two bodies. Loud squeals now filled the night time air.

Tyrion came stumbled through the tent flap and ran to Robb.

“Save me! Save me! Save me from a fate worse than death!”

His mother came pelting into the tent. She looked for Tyrion and found him. Her eyes bored into
the dwarf.

“I almost had you that time Tyrion. I will skin you, you little weasel.” She marched over to Robb’s table. Tyrion made sure the table was between him and Catelyn.

“You see Robb! She is a mean hearted harridan towards me.”

“Mother. Why do you spend so much time harping on Tyrion? Just ignore the man.”

“That is easy for you to say Robb. He is just a little too smug for my tastes. He goads me to action and then comes running to you for succor. Don’t buy his innocent routine my son. I will wipe that smug look off his face.”

“That is easy to say for a woman who perpetually looks like she has her teeth buried in a lemon” Tyrion snidely responded to Catelyn’s jib. He screwed up his face like he had just done that. The small man making exaggerated facial motions.

“Oh shut up Tyrion. Go grow a pair of legs to go with the onions you need to grow. I think you have raisins in that short cloth there my stunted geek.”

“Oh yeah! You look like a harpy!” Robb chose to ignore his mother getting insulted. She was having too much perverted fun to stop the dwarf’s insults. His mother always seemed to have a comeback now for Tyrion and his jibs.


“Robbbbbbb!” Tyrion whined again. While his focus was on Robb his mother rushed in and cornered the dwarf against the table and center pole for the tent. Tyrion was stiff with fear.

Robb was not worried. His mother would not hurt Tyrion. The only problem was the fact that Tyrion did not know that. Well he did know it Robb knew but the dwarf enjoyed his part in their personal drama.

Interested, Robb watched his mother slowly bend down glaring at Tyrion. She barred her teeth at the Lannister. Suddenly she brought up her right hand up in flash.

“SSQQQQQUUEEEEEE” Tyrion cowered his hands raised up in defense.

His mother’s hand went up to her hair and scratched her scalp.

Tyrion glared at her as he dodged and ran to the tent flap. He again gave his mother a raspberry.

His mother in turn stuck out her tongue. Next she returned Tyrion’s raspberry.

Tyrion flipped off his mother with double birds. Robb’s mother snarled. Tyrion laughed and ran off into the night.

Under her breath Robb’s mother snarled ‘that bastard’ and she rushed out the tent. Squeals and curses could be heard disappearing into the camp.

Robb was totally fascinated by this strange relationship Tyrion and his mother had formed.

For a while Robb went over reports by the quartermasters and knights leading units. He was looking over numbers and reviewed thoughts on his army and what should be done against the Lannister army in the field. He found all the matters of commanding an army both boring and exhilarating.
The idea of controlling so many men inspired Robb. Wielding those men to achieve victory over men of another army also striving for victory. That their safety was in hands was exhilarating and humbling at the same time.

After half an hour Robb felt he was caught up on current events and was prepared for any immediate eventuality from the Lannisters.

He now turned to the scrolls from his father. The ones about tactics and military events he had read. It was not those he wanted to review this evening. He picked up the pile of scrolls that were on the personal matters of House Stark and events in King’s Landing.

He had a look of concentration on his face as he read again his father’s renderings of justice. He was confused that his father had chosen to for lack of a better word to ‘forgive’ Cersei. Cersei and her brother, Jaime, had pushed Bran to his death but Robb’s brother had proven too strong for death. He knew his father blamed Jaime for the actual deed. He believed Cersei in saying she had meant only to talk to the boy. Jaime would be executed but Robb felt his sister should join him on the chopping block.

His father did not even blame Cersei for throwing him down as Hand. He was almost joking that he played the Game of Thrones so poorly he deserved to be cast down from the post of Hand. It was his total defeat at her hands that had opened his father’s eyes. The event a revelation. Robb sat down the scroll. His father had related the conversation he had with Cersei in the Weirwood of King’s Landing. Robb shook his head. How could so few words affect his father so. His father felt Cersei was changing and he wanted to see what the final metamorphous would be.

Somethings should not have that right Robb thought. Cersei should be put down. He hoped his father would not come to regret his decisions regarding Cersei Lannister.

Robb resumed reading. He did like his father’s plans for Gregor Clegane. It would be epic if his father was able to work events so Oberyn Martell could kill the man. The Mountain was cruel and mendacious. He was happy to read of Sandor Clegane becoming the Lord Commander. The man was rough but seemingly good despite the cruelty done upon him.

He read that the man had taken in a Dothraki woman. The Hound was telling anyone (well except the Dothraki woman) who would listen that the arrangement was only temporary. Around Ziggi, the Dothraki woman’s name, Sandor was tongue tied and deferential. The woman was obviously besotted with Sandor though her caustic tongue could fool a person Robb’s father wrote. The members of father’s nascent Small Council, Kingsguard and personal guard were placing bets on how long before Ziggi bedded Sandor. His father was giving it two months and four days. Robb had scrunched his eyebrows at that. What a strange selection.

The son of Eddard Stark sat back. He reviewed in his mind his father’s evasions with his son. It both perplexed and angered the young man. His father had always been so forthcoming with his son. To experience its absence was quite disconcerting.

It had to do with his sisters Sansa and Arya. He asked his father what was happening with his younger sisters. His father both answered and did not answer his inquires. He gave basic answers that left something unsaid. He did not know how he knew but he did. His father was holding something back from his oldest son.

Robb snorted. He was keeping his anger in check. Was he not himself holding something back from his father? A smile came on his. That was different! He snorted to himself. It was always easy to excuse one’s own actions Robb was coming to discover.
He had reached his limit finally and was about to send a scroll to his father demanding to know what was truly going on in King’s Landing. Instead he received another scroll from his father. To have the Druids and their ravens at his beck and call almost allowed unparalleled communication with his father. Robb had become quite dependent on the abilities these ravens had given him. It gave him a freedom on the battlefield that others could only dream of.

In this scroll, his father upped the ante to the mysteries swirling in King’s Landing even further. His father was becoming an oracle it seemed. He needed to tell Robb something this new scroll said. To have this knowledge Robb had to agree to tell his mother nothing that his father was to reveal to Robb. That was paramount his father said.

“The things I wish to tell you son must be held in confidence. It is I that must tell these things to your mother Robb. If you cannot agree to that then you will have to wait to hear the words I need to speak until you both arrive at King’s Landing. If this is the situation then I will tell her first and then yourself.”

Robb had breathed heavily reading that. He was sure that this mystery would involve Jon Snow. His half-brother. That had always been the fatal flaw in their family. The mystery of Jon’s mother. Robb’s mother had learned to accept that her husband would not tell her of the mother of Jon. It had filled her with repressed rage. Robb supposed that it was amazing that his mother had come to love his father so deeply. To have such a thing kept from her when it was obvious Catelyn Tully wanted to know with all her heart. He felt for her mother on this.

Of course he had agreed to the stipulation. He wanted to know the great secret of House Stark.

His father’s evasion had prompted Robb to ask his mother of the scrolls addressed to her from his father. His mother smiled at the question. The scrolls between husband and wife were what they should be Robb supposed. They were mundane in many respects. Husband and wife communicating to each other. His father had shared no secrets with his wife. The wife in return asking no probing questions. Only about how her husband and two daughters were doing. General questions on how her husband had taken the Iron Throne. The wife telling her husband how proud she was of Ned taking the Iron Throne by himself with the help of one Syrio Forel. That Varys of all people had gotten his father in touch with the Druids who had first healed his father magically and then joined his Insurrection.

His mother telling her husband of her capture of Tyrion which he had known but now told her mate of their interactions. Robb noted that his mother seemed to have not told her husband of the strange relationship she now had with Tyrion. Robb found this strange. Why had she not shared their almost banter back and forth. The banter excoriating but still banter all the same.

Again, Robb wondered what his father would reveal of the Insurrection that had put him on the Iron Throne. Something told Robb that more had happened to put Eddard on the Iron Throne. Something unusual. What was he was not sure. Why he thought this Robb was not sure either. His suspicions soon stoked.

He received scrolls from the Riverlands and the Vale. In them he started to hear rumors of a young Direwolf that had initiated the revolt against the Lannisters. What was truly shocking was the sex of the Direwolf. It slowly seem to become clear that it was a female that led the Insurrection of King’s Landing. Once this became clear, the sex of the leader of the Insurrection, Robb’s mind traced down pathways to make the necessary associations.

Robb forced himself to step away from preconceived notions. The facts were plain. The answer quite simple really.
Robb knew who this woman would be. His sister. Arya Stark. She had freed her father. The thought shocking but it was true his mind told Robb. He had smiled at that insight. He remembered his father always crying out in Winterfell “Arya is filled with the Wolf!” “She is Lyanna reborn!” Robb knew Arya being so much like his father’s sister had tempered his father from restraining Arya and her wild ways. Again and again his father had defied his wife in her desires to reign Arya in.

Like such a thing would have ever been possible! Arya was indeed filled with the wolf. He only wish now he had seen it then and supported his little sister instead of being indifferent to her plight in seeking to follow the path least followed.

Robb smile grew. Good thing his father had restrained himself. If he had not, Robb’s father would still be rotting in the dungeon cells beneath the Red Keep. Or worse.

With that insight he ordered his commanders to not spread this gossip to his mother. She needed to hear this from her husband. They had agreed. Men always wanted to control the situation Robb knew. He was not completely sure he agreed with that but it was good for now. He knew his mother would be most upset by how events seemed to be transpiring in King’s Landing.

That had been ten days ago. Four days past a new raven arrived with a scroll for Robb. There had been another scroll around the first one. It read ‘for Robb’s eyes only’. Robb had felt excitement opening up the inner scroll. Secrets were about to be revealed. Surprise filled Robb with how his hands trembled unfolding the scroll to read.

He had not anticipated the initial rage he felt. Jon Snow was not his father’s son but was his aunt’s child. His father Rhaegar Targaryen. To say he had been flabbergasted, almost shocked would be a gross understatement. Why in the hell hadn’t he figured that out! His father was not an adulterer. How could Jon look like his father when he was half Valyrian? That had allowed the deception. Lyanna and brother had the same looks and those had taken ascendency in Jon’s features.

Holding the scroll in slightly shaking fingers Robb read on. His father explained of how he came upon his sister as she lay dying. Robb knew about vows and family fealty. His aunt, Lyanna Stark, had made his father agree to hide Jon’s lineage. True, Robert Baratheon was insane when it came to all things Targaryen. The man never able to forgive Lyanna going with Rhaegar. Eddard had confided in Robb a few years ago he thought his sister had gone willing with Rhaegar.

Yes, his father had reasons keeping his sister’s dying wish. But for nearly twenty years his mind raged?! It was unfair to everyone. The ones most unfairly affected were Jon himself and his mother. To live with a lie and not know it. Robb felt for his mother. Greatly. To suspect something and have it totally off base. This was very bad Robb thought. It was almost a double lie. His father was not the father of Jon but his sister, Lyanna, was Jon’s mother. Robb knew this would tear his mother to the depths of her soul.

If Robb’s mother had known the truth, Robb knew his mother’s actions would have been exactly the opposite of what they had been. She would have taken Jon in with open arms. The poor boy who lost both his mother and father. Instead she had thought Jon a bastard of her husband. Her husband had been untrue to her. For a woman like Robb’s mother that was paramount. Fidelity and the keeping of sacred oaths. His father had suffered greatly but he deserved all the grief he had taken upon himself!

Robb loved Jon but there had always been that barrier. The barrier of bastardy. It had prevented himself and Sansa from truly, completely loving Jon as their brother. How could they? Was he not a bastard? Their mother’s rage and hurt coloring their own perceptions of Jon and the situation they all found themselves in.
It was so unfair to the whole family! The damage they had suffered!

Only Arya had had the personal strength and fortitude to love Jon as they all should have. Robb felt shame now rush through his body.

Robb had shaken his head. He definitely would let his father tell his mother that truth. It would be volcanic. His mother would explode Robb was sure. He could not blame her. How his father could have lived such a lie for so many years? Robb asked himself again. Surely, Robb’s father must have seen that his wife of all persons could hold such a secret. Robb’s mother had the same steely resolve as Robb’s father. The secret kept safe.

His father’s code of honor could be so asinine. The lies. He agreed with his father’s next words. “I hope I still have a marriage after this son. I will accept whatever your mother decides.”

That had made Robb take a deep breath. He may be angry with his father but he did not want to see his family dissolve either. He hoped that his mother and father would be able to come to terms over Jon’s true lineage.

Robb continued reading. His father was truly coming clean. Robb’s eyes large as he continued reading. More storm clouds were coming for his father and mother.

Robb discovered that the bones in Lyanna’s crypt were not really hers. The body mysteriously disappearing on his father when he went back to retrieve her body after finding a wet nurse for Jon. His father finding a young deceased woman who had the general cast of his dead sister. Telling a lie to the Silent Sisters and then to his family.

It seemed his father was not the Saint he portrayed himself indeed Robb sneered to himself. He took a deep breath. He wondered why his father had perpetuated that falsehood.

His father finished with the past and moved now to the present.

It had indeed been Arya who had been the young Direwolf leading the Insurrection. Only more. Her sword instructor, Syrio Forel had been ready to take her back to Braavos and train her and then she and he would come back once she had mastered her skills and seek revenge. Instead Arya had bent the man to her will. It had been her will that led the Insurrection. It had been her will that bent Varys to their cause. This in turn brought the Druid’s into the camp of House Stark.

There was more. She had fought from the very first moment. She had killed Lannisters throughout King’s Landing. There had been two major battles outside the walls of King’s Landing. Arya had been in the forefront of both of the battles. She had equated herself beyond well. Her father thought she was borne to be a true warrior. In fact a gifted warrior.

Robb’s father told his son that his sister was a master already of the bow. She was the equal of the Druids. That caught Robb’s attention. Then his father went further.

“Her skill with the bow leaves me astonished at times Robb. When I hired Syrio Forel I had not realized what I brought to Arya. He is a master beyond compare. I have great faith in my skills Robb but I wish to never fight the man. He is training Arya to become a Waterdancer son. She is improving at an almost frightening pace. Soon she will be as good as you. Her skills are almost growing exponentially. Robb, please do not take this as a slight son. She will outstrip your skills eventually. She progressing at a speed I cannot really fathom. She is learning a rate that astounds me. Her focus and dedication to her training is unequaled. Never have I seen the like.”

“She will become a Waterdancer. She will become a First Sword if she wishes. I have allowed
Syrio Forel to foster Arya. She will go where her talent takes her. She has my blessing.”

As he read further Robb felt a hard shiver run through his body. A Faceless Man had pledged allegiance to Arya Stark. Not to his father but to his sister. That fact sent a cold rush through Robb’s body. What was Arya becoming?

Robb had been nonplussed at his father’s assessment of his little sister. He would put her to the test when he arrived. His father must be letting his feelings for Arya cloud his judgment Robb determined.

Robb knew that his mother would not like finding this upon her arrival back in King’s Landing. She had definite thoughts on how Arya should comport herself and what her destiny should be. To follow in her mother’s path and marry a man that she had approved for Arya to marry.

Robb knew Arya had always chaffed at that. He was not sure now what he had thought of it all. His sisters had been raised to follow tradition. He was raised to follow tradition. That thought made Robb stop his train of thought. Was he not throwing away tradition to follow his own heart? What was the difference he thought? In a moment he knew the heart of the matter. He was a man and Arya was a woman. He pursed his lips. Arya had the right to pursue her own life. She had earned it with her Insurrection to save their father. It would be difficult but if Arya had the fortitude then Robb would support her.

Then his father had moved on to Sansa. Robb was surprised at what Sansa had done. How could she be so stupid as to tell Cersei Lannister of all people of her father’s plans? To do so was beyond comprehension. Sansa may have been besotted with Joffrey but to betray her own father? His father told his son of his anger and hurt.

Then his father told his son that he had come to understand that Sansa was really innocent in her actions. That he and her mother had forced Sansa to have a limited and almost childlike view of the world. So when the time came to make adult decisions she had not been able.

Robb again paused as he read. His father was taking the blame. His father now felt he should have confronted his wife on her extreme views over the years. “I felt my soul squirm but I did not act. I wanted to have as much calm as I could in my house. At first I blamed Sansa when I should have blamed myself. I should have been braver when Sansa was growing up. I should have made your mother back off on her strict manner and imposing of her beliefs on Sansa so sternly. I should have been braver in so many things Robb.”

His father then went on to tell him that he felt he let Theon down. That he sensed the young ward come hostage felt out of place and wanted a closer relationship with Robb’s father but he was not sure how to get closer to the boy who was not of his body and was not a Stark. Again Robb’s father confessed that he avoided the problem. He pulled away from Theon when he should have gotten closer.

Eddard Stark told his son of how he let Lyanna down. His father had known deep in his heart that Lyanna’s betrothal to Robert Baratheon was wrong. The man not worthy of his sister and yet he had proceeded in making the betrothal a reality. Father told his son how he let the weight of tradition and expectations sway him when he should have had the bravery to do what was right for his sister. He failed her.

Robb’s father would never forgive himself for what happened to Elia and her children. “If I had only arrived one hour earlier!”

His father came clean to his eldest son on everything. Robb had been emotionally drained by the
end of that long scroll. He took a deep breath then as he did not remember taking any breaths in a long while. He agreed with his father. All this must be told to his mother by her husband.

He sat back unsettled. His father had much to atone for. With his children but especially his wife. That coming confession would be spectacular and not in a good way.

He knew one other thing. He had to be there to see it and the fallout. Like he said. It would be spectacular. He feared he would be adding to the discord and fallout. He would not change his decisions though. His path was set. He would not change it.

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Fingers tapped the table in the tent. Robb was thinking over the events of the last ten days. The army of the North encamped near the Ivy Inn. The location of the crossroads between the Kings Road running north by south, the River Road that ran west through the Riverlands to the Westerlands. The High Road east to the Vale of Arryn also intersected at this location. Control of this position gave a force a choke point through the Crownlands above Harrenhal. The young man had followed his father’s instructions. The son had to admit that his father had proven to be a master tactician. He would follow his father’s will. Still, it didn’t mean it do not peeve him off no end.

He had sat here at this location twiddling his proverbial thumbs while the Lannister army of Tywin marched literally right under his nose and now advanced on King’s Landing. Exactly as his father wished. He had sent a raven to his father complaining vociferously over this decision. To allow the full might of the Westerlands to march on King’s Landing unimpeded seemed ludicrous to Robb.

A Druid raven quickly delivered his father response to his son’s misgivings.

“The Lannisters are reduced because of your actions son. The actions of the Riverlands and Vales have drained Tywin’s strength. The Druids sniping has reduced his strength. He is weakened. The armies of Highgarden are coming nigh. Stannis with his army will be here shortly. You will arrive shortly after Tywin.”

“There will be no fighting outside the walls of King’s Landing. Too many potential enemies to attack you in the back will be each commander’s thought. Each army fearing they may be attacked at any time. I will prevail.”

Robb had to agree with his father’s assessment but it was still mightily frustrating. The fate of Westeros would be decided within the walls of King’s Landing. Even further in the heart of the city in the Red Keep was where destiny would be decided. No grand battles without the walls of King’s Landing. There would be no grand war to prove one’s mettle as his father had proved his a generation ago.

Richard Karstark and Halys Hornwood had also not been happy with sitting on “their asses”.

They had argued quite loudly. How could he, Robb Stark, allow the Lannisters to pass unopposed?

“This is stupid” Richard had shouted adroitly. Halys had roared “We need to beat their asses!” a little less adroitly.

Back and forth the arguments went between Robb and his second and third in command. He understood their frustration but they were aligned with his father, the King of Westeros, and they would follow his commands. To their credit they did in the end accept the edicts of Robb’s father. Just not quietly. They were terribly frustrated. Robb decided he would ‘bend the rules a little’ with them and his father.
He gave them permission to select fifteen hundred men to go out and reinforce the efforts of the Riverlands in ‘harassing’ the Lannisters. They were not to engage in full on conflicts with the Lannisters. The two men had reluctantly agreed as they left the tent to select the men of the ‘expeditionary force’. They wanted more but would take what they were given.

Robb inquired of the Druids. They had agreed to his request. When the force departed, a small force of three Druids was with the expeditionary force to guide them to the enemy and integrate with the forces harassing the Lannisters. He had talked to their leader Tarik Prester.

“‘You are to harass and not attack the Lannisters in force. The leaders of this force feel the opposite. I want to obey my father’s will and keep our and our enemies losses at a minimum. The end game is about to start I feel.”

The Druid agreed completely with the Stark assessment of the situation. “We agree Robb Stark. We will follow the will of the sire of the Direwolf. We will not let ourselves be drawn into direct large scale confrontation with the Lannisters. Without our guidance they would be lost in the tract less hills we are in. We have no love of the Lannisters. We will harass. We want to pin down forces to reduce their might on King’s Landing. We will comply with your wishes.”

Robb had become used to the allegiance that the Druids gave to his sister. Robb knew these honorable people would follow his will. Their very foundations steeped in honor.

That night he heard much activity in the camp. The camp stewards were breaking down the large bivouac tents. The various Houses were organizing their forces that had become somewhat scattered with the long hiatus of their march south.

On the morrow the army of the North would begin again its march to King’s Landing. It would be the final push. They should arrive before the gates of King’s Landing three to five days after Tywin Lannister had arrived. Nothing could happen in that time. A siege of a walled city took much time to form up to begin the siege. Stannis hated Tywin. Renly wanted to be King as bad or worse than Stannis. He could not become that without Highgarden’s support. That was the last thing that Tywin Lannister could countenance.

The House of Lannister and Baratheon had the Iron Throne or had had it till Robb’s father had taken it by force from them. Tywin had more at stake as well. It was well known that to Tywin all that truly mattered was the name of his House. Cersei and Jaime had sullied that greatly. Tywin needed control of the new reality to bend it to his will to expunge the incest that had been uncovered. He must be desperate to get the power to again hide the truth. To call Robb’s father a liar and do what he needed to do to remove the stains that been exposed to the light of day.

Yes, his father was right. The armies before him at King’s Landing would cancel each other. His arrival with the army of the North would only add to that fragmentation of might. His father had indeed setup the situation to where the likely solution to the contest for the Iron Throne and King of Westeros who would sit on it would be solved by a contest of wills in the Game of Thrones and not on any battlefield.

Robb sighed. To be denied the chance of greatness on the battlefield was very disappointing and even a little galling. He would not be able to prove his prowess on the field of combat and he would not be able to show his abilities of strategy and application of tactics. He had been raised to lead a Great House. To lead that House in war and his father was preventing that. It was frustrating.

He was still confused some by his father’s desire to spare the ‘common man’ from the desires of their lords. His father’s seeming desire to spare as many lives as possible was downright startling. He supposed his father’s near death experience, his grievous injury and then miraculous recovery had
changed his father. Had taught him this new desire for compassion and sparing others from the whims of the Lords of Westeros.

This new way was strange to Robb but he would give it a chance. He only prayed to the old gods that his father knew what he was doing.

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“Rrooowwwwww!” rang out in the air. Robb pounded his head on his conference table in his war tent. It had long become a nightly ritual. Tyrion ran into his tent. His head swiveled back looking for Robb’s mother. The dwarf had stopped his flight. He looked at the empty tent flap that remained empty. Tyrion seemed perplexed that Robb’s mother was not bursting into the tent currently. Of course she would be on Tyrion’s tail Robb thought. The two picking at each other. Well, more like his mother picked and Tyrion bleated. He now knew with a certainty that they both truly enjoyed this war of wills and wits.

Neither seemed in any hurry to give it up.

“Yyyyyessssss Tyrion?” Robb put down his report. He could not stop the long suffering tone in his voice. Rickard Karstark and Halys Hornwood sat back with smirks on their faces. They were ready for tonight’s first act of the comic opera to open.

Tyrion put on an aggrieved look on his face.

“Your mother put a weasel in my bed. It ran up my pants leg!” the dwarf whined. “When I ran out in terror I discovered she had put spiders all over my tent flap. They got all over meeew! It doesn’t matter that they were not real! I thought they were! I nearly soiled myself in my fright!”

That had Karstark and Hornwood snickering.

Robb now knew what her mother had been sewing on furiously over the last two days.

Tyrion looked piqued that he had just bleated out his easy fright.

“I hate varmints and spiders!” Tyrion yelped.

Robb heard the tent flaps rustling. In stepped his mother looking very smug. Caitlyn Stark eyed Tyrion critically.

“You look flustered Tyrion. Have you gotten up close and personal with nature? Hummmm? I love nature, don’t you?” his mother jabbed at Tyrion with a cloying sweet smile on her face.

Tyrion glared and flipped Robb’s mother off. Robb had long lost any thought of being angry at Tyrion for the lack of respect given his mother. She wanted it he had come to know.

Catelyn suddenly got a vile look on her face and rapidly advanced on Tyrion. She had her hands up her fingers in claw positions.

Tyrion squealed loudly. He juked past Robb’s mother and ran through the tent flap and was gone. His mother had a most satisfied look on her face.

“He is so easy” Catelyn Stark snorted.

Robb could not figure out Tyrion and his fright of his mother. She had yet to once touch him and yet he ran off as if his life depended on his flight. He surely knew he was safe and yet he continued to
act truly terrified of his mother. Again Robb thought their behavior strange.

They both seemed to enjoy their back and forth so he let it continue. His commanders and the camp in general enjoyed their antics.

Normally, his mother would leave quickly or maybe ask a superficial question or two about the campaign. His mother was a woman who believed that her place was by the hearth and did not ask any probing questions about Robb’s army or campaign. She would ask how he was fairing and then leave.

Not tonight.

Tonight she came to stand beside her son and tell him that they were nearing King’s Landing. That she could not wait to see her husband and her precious daughters. They had been apart for too long. They needed to be a family again.

Robb felt a thrill run threw his body. He was careful to keep his face neutral. He would not give his mother any indication of the things she was to discover in King’s Landing. He listened to his mother talk about her anxiousness to again see her husband and daughters. She wondered how her daughters had fared without her guidance or the septa’s influence. The poor woman had been killed by the Lannisters and not replaced yet. She told Robb that when she returned she would request one.

He was a follower of the old gods and understood his father not hurrying to replace the late Septa Mordane. It had been a crime that innocent woman being killed. Still, Robb suspected strongly that both of his sisters found no complaint being free of a Septa’s henpecking.

Robb knew his mother was in for a shock upon her arrival in King’s Landing. He strongly suspected his effort would be wasted but he thought he would try.

“Mother. We have been away from them for a long time. A lot must of happened there without us. Let’s just wait and see what we find?”

His mother had looked at him like he was a little boy. He pursed his lips. He really did not like that look. Especially, when it was directed at him. No wonder Arya had rebelled so strongly Robb thought to himself. He was coming to understand what Arya endured as he became a man.

He watched his mother shake her head.

“Why should anything have changed that much. The events will not have changed your father or your sisters. You will see.”

Robb decided that digression was the better part of valor in this situation. He would indeed let his father fight this fight.

Catelyn looked around. She spoke a little more on her happiness to soon have her family back together. She then yawned and prepared to leave.

“I am curious son. Why do you have both a war council tent and a royal tent? Your father always had one only.”

“It gives me more room mother. I like to be able to spread out my reports and maps. Also, with the Vale and some elements of the Riverlands with me I need the space for when we have a meeting of the minds.”
His mother shook her head in agreement. She kissed her son’s temple. She did not see the look shared between Karstark and Hornwood. She left with a contented smile on her face.

Robb looked at his two main commanders. He knew they were in his corner and would support him. They continued to read over the latest reports and made plans for making camp at King’s Landing and how they would arrange a defense.

Just in case everything went to the seven hells.

An hour later he was alone in his war tent. He worked on his strategies for another hour. It was starting to get late. He could accomplish nothing further tonight. He would turn in. Tomorrow they resumed their march on King’s Landing.

He got up and went outside. The Warriors Girdle arched from the horizon up to the zenith. The dark bands within the rivers of light. He again wondered what all those points of light were. It was so beautiful. He smiled thinking of the one as beautiful as those stars glowing above.

He walked to the Karstark tent and went inside. He came out a short minute later. With him was Karstark and a small honor guard. This was a nightly ritual to show respect of the closest House aligned with House Stark. The small group moved the small distance to Robb’s own royal tent. Lost in the middle of the tall lightly armored men a smaller figure was not noticed.

Karstark and his honor guard walked Robb Stark into his tent. The honor guard left immediately. Rickard looked at Robb and the middling tall slender figure who walked over to stand beside Robb. They both turned to smile at Karstark. He smiled back and left the tent.

Now the two lone figures turned to face each other. Slowly Robb reached out and pulled back the robe cowl of the person before him. The hood falling back to the shoulders of the person looking up at him.

Alys Karstark gazed up at the man she loved with all her heart. The woman knew Robb loved her with all his heart as well. Robb gazed yet again upon the beauty that was Alys Karstark. She was tall and thin like a newborn colt he liked to think. She had her deep brown hair woven into the braid she liked to wear. Robb could not stop his eyes from looking over this beautiful woman. Her small bosom and small hips were a treasure to the young Warden of the North.

His love had pale skin. Her face had the long angles of the North. Her chin coming to sharp angles with her blue-grey eyes, and small ears. She was indeed a priceless treasure to Robb Stark.

“Do you remember when I visited Winterfell when I was six Robb? My father and I hoped you would fall in love with me. My father hoped I could charm you even though I was so young. He hoped I would be betrothed to you. I did too. You were so courteous and so beautiful to gaze upon.”

Robb blushed at that.

“It worked Alys. It only took ten years to realize it. I am glad you waited for me.”

Alys laughed her sweet twinkling laugh. Robb felt immensely happy. Is this what his mother and father felt for each other? Even after all their long years of marriage? If so, they were truly fortunate.

The two young lovers clenched and kissed deeply. Their bodies melded into one. Each young person enjoying the feel, sound and taste of their love. They finally came up for air.

“I miss you so much Robb. I hate this hiding in my father’s tent waiting for you. Having to ride
with my cloak fully covering me during the day. I hate pretending we are not what we are.”

“I too Alys. When we arrive at King’s Landing I will announce to the world our marriage.”

Alys started to weep softly.

“Why do you cry my love? I am here.”

“But for how much longer Robb!” her voice scaling up. “I hear all the talk of you being offered to Margaery Tyrell of Highgarden. She is the scion of a High House and beautiful. I did not bring such power in our wedding and I am not a beauty like Margaery Tyrell.”

Robb kissed Alys hard. When they broke for air she was breathless her eyes glassy.

“Never forget this Alys Karstark. I. Find. You. Beautiful. I want only you. If you will have me I will only be with you.”

Alys sagged into him hugging him tight.

“But your father’s plans … he has grand schemes that involve you Robb.”

“It does not matter what his plans are Alys. I have married you. When your father came to Winterfell to help plan and train our force up, to prepare for the coming conflict, he brought you. Thank the gods he did.” Robb smiled at his love. “Like I said my love. It only took ten years for me to realize the treasure you are Alys. You are everything I could hope for in a wife.”

“But the septons might annul our marriage” she spoke fearfully.

“I am follower of the old gods. I will refuse any of their edicts. I will never convert to the religion of my mother.”

“But you father plans require you to marry Margaery.”

“It does not matter what he wants when it comes to the woman I love and will be married too. Your father fully supports our union. I hope to go back North and be Warden of the North with you as my wife. If I must I will step down as the Heir of Winterfell. Your father will take me into your House. I will become a vassal of your father.”

Alys began to cry again hearing what Robb was willing to do to be with her.

“But their must always be a Stark in Winterfell” Alys reminded Robb.

He smiled back at Alys.

“Rikkon will come of age. I have told you of Jon, Arya and Sansa. Any of them would make an excellent Warden of the North. My father has shown by his actions with my sisters that he is willing to throw convention to the wind. Well, now he will have to do the same with me.” Robb smiled at his new wife and held her supple body to his.

“But Arya and Sansa are women. Jon is a bast—I am sorry I keep forgetting. They cannot become the Warden of the North.”

“Jon has Targaryen blood in him. He would make an excellent Warden. From what my father says Arya and Sansa are showing themselves to be one a warrior and my elder sister a master of diplomacy and strategy. If my father sits on the Iron Throne they could become Warden of the North. My father would give them the time necessary to prove themselves. Worry not Alys. Our
love for each other is safe.”

The slender woman snuggled close to the man she loved with all her life.

“Do not worry Alys. If I must step down from my titular role then I will. Winterfell will still have its Stark. The North will always have a Stark in Winterfell.”

The sweet tremulous smile on Alys face made Robb’s heart soar.

“I still worry my love.”

“As do I my love. But I will not be told who to love. My father still talks about Lyanna and her betrothal to Robert Baratheon. How he helped that disastrous pairing to occur even though his heart told him no. I will not make that mistake. I will follow my heart as my aunt Lyanna should have been free to follow her own heart. As Rhaegar Targaryen should have had the same freedom. A horrible war was fought because of it. I will not make that mistake. I will claim you before all. This is why I have brought you with me to King’s Landing. To make such a strong declaration of our love that it can never be severed.”

Alys smiled a radiant smile hearing this. She snuggled into her husband.

“Let’s go to bed” Alys husked to Robb.

Robb could not stop the goofy smile on his face. He had made his choice and would live by it. He was deliriously happy and would not give it up. Alys was happy. Rickard Karstark was happy that Robb had finally wised up and chose his daughter to be his mate and wife.

His mother would be furious. He was meant for ‘better’ prospects would be her thought. His father had his grand design. He would be upset with his son upsetting his grand plans. He would have to deal with it.

Both of his parents would.
Unsettled Interactions

Chapter Notes

AN #1: This chapter, the last two chapters and the next three or four are all sort of happening at the time with overlap. I wrote the chapters the way I did because it was the only way I could make the story move forward and not have it all disjointed with viewpoints jump all over the place.

Heirs Apparent

Unsettled Interactions

The words wavered and went out of focus. The light in his room dim. Several candles flickered as they valiantly shed light in the dark environs. Their globes of brightness feeble in the heavy weight of darkness. The weak beams of light caressing the surface of the scroll. The light lifting the words barely up from the gloom in the room. There was other reasons the words were hard to read. The water in his eyes refracted the light and made the words seem to shimmer like a mirage on the horizon. The shaking of hands added difficulty in reading the words coming in and out of focus. Jon sat the scroll down. The man absently stroked the fur of his snow white Direwolf that snoozed by his feet. He felt the tears running down his cheeks yet again. The cascade of drops falling off his cheeks to splash onto the wood of the small table he was sitting at in his small room. His head turned to look at the dark simple furniture. His head still reeled at reading the words from his father … was he … yes he was … Jon found his thoughts twisting and turning wildly like leaves in the gusts that came in autumn. Ghost shifted in his sleep and pressed harder into Jon’s leg. The Crow smiled. The Direwolf sensed his human’s need.

This was the fifth time reading the scroll that had turned his world upside down. Each time he felt a little more in control of the myriad emotions awash in his soul. He had been surprised when he was informed that a scroll had arrived from his father. As he did his duties as a Crow of the Night’s Watch, Jon heard the snippets, rumors and gossip that wafted up north from King’s Landing. His father had fallen as Hand of Robert Baratheon. His leg ruined. That Robert was dead. Joffrey had taken the throne but all knew it was Cersei who controlled the Iron Throne unseen.

He had been upset but his father was a High House hostage. He would be sent back to Winterfell. A smile had crossed Jon’s face. Maybe he would be joining Jon at the Wall. Exiled into the Black.

The plight of his father and sisters in King’s Landing had been a nagging thought in his mind but he was a Crow now on the Wall. He had chosen his destiny. He would not be going to their aid. That was his past now.

Then this scroll had arrived. The first part had put a smile on his face. His father had indeed been thrown down. He had been thrown into the dungeons of King’s Keep beneath Maegor’s Holdfast. Then he had been rescued. By Arya and her allies. Jon had been so happy to read of his little sister he loved with all his heart. She had “shown the wolf” as his father always called it and stole her father out of the dungeons. He smiled in reflection. His little sister had grown up to be a wolf in
actuality. A stray thought went through his Jon’s mind. Did his sister still have Needle and had she used it in her Insurrection.

It was a small thing but the thought pleased him.

Arya had led an Insurrection to free their father. Then she had forced Varys, the man called the Whisperer, to take her to a healer called a Druid who healed their father. His father giving a brief description of these unknown people to his son. They had eventually overthrown Cersei and Joffrey. That had exhilarated the young man. All of it sounded so daunting and heroic. A part of him still wished he could have been there in that exciting contention for the Iron Throne.

Then had come the line that sent a thrill through his body.

“Son. When you left for the Wall I told you that one day we would talk about you and your lineage. That day has arrived. It has been too long in coming. I had hoped to tell you face to face but the fates have decided otherwise.”

He had read with rising horror and anger the words of the man he had always called father. Only he was not his father! Jon had longed for this day to discover who his mother was. To discover why his father felt it so necessary to protect the woman’s identity. Jon had thought much on the subject. He had come to the conclusion that it must be Ashara Dayne. Better that reality than some random lass his father had laid with when he was filled with battle lust.

The one thing he had never considered was the fact that Eddard Stark was not his father. Jon was a Stark and forever would be. Only it was Lyanna Stark who was the progenitor of his lineage. His father had been Rhaegar Targaryen. That had been so damn shocking! He looked not one wit like a Targaryen! He was a Stark. That thought remained the same. He was and would forever be of the North. It went back to one thought: I am a Stark. He saw it every time he looked in a mirror. Jon Snow was of the North.

He had cried and felt anger rush into his body when he first read the news. He had suffered so much! Catelyn Stark had made his life miserable with her belief that Jon Snow was her husband’s bastard son. Now he knew he was not Ned’s bastard. He was Lyanna’s bastard. That thought had made him laugh through his tears.

He was still a bastard. He seemed incapable of escaping that fact. The fates cruel in their jests.

It dawned on Jon that someone else had suffered as much if not more than he had. Catelyn Stark. The woman who refused to accept him as a son. A woman who made sure that Jon was never allowed to forget that he was a bastard. A sudden thought had come to Jon. The woman who had raised him had been forced to live the same lie as he had. They both had been lied to. The whole family had been lied to!

Catelyn had never accepted him because she had been told by her husband that Jon was his bastard. His stiff necked step mother was not the type of woman to forgive a slight. Jon was angry for her as for himself. If Eddard Stark had come to his wife with orphaned child he was sure the woman would have loved the new baby. The son of the now dead sister and her illicit lover. The man she truly loved and not the man she was betrothed to.

His father, Jon again paused in his reading the fated words, before he continued forward the rereading of the scroll yet again. His mind coming to terms with his father words. His father explained in his scroll his reasons for the choices he had made. It had really come down to two things. One was practical. Robert Baratheon had been insane with jealousy over anything to do
with the House of Targaryen. Robert had been incensed and maybe slightly deranged with Lyanna running off with Rhaegar. Jon’s father made sure this was clear to Jon in his message. Lyanna had gone willingly with Rhaegar. She did not love Robert and would not tolerate his adulterous ways. The man had proven that with Cersei Lannister.

The other reason had been Jon’s mother dying request on her deathbed. The bed Jon had been born on. A bed soaked in the blood that had given Jon life. The request to hide Jon to protect him from Robert. Jon new his father. That kind of promise Eddard would keep till his dying breath if he felt it necessary. His father was good at keeping his promises. Honor for honor’s sake was at the core of Eddard Stark. Jon had never considered that that fealty to one’s word could so cruelly slap him in the face.

Jon sat back in his chair. If it had not been for Arya, Jon was sure Eddard Stark would be dead now. The secrets he now read would be secrets for evermore. A smile came across the Crow’s face. He owed his sister the truth it seemed.

Jon felt the turmoil in his soul that had him calling Eddard Stark by his name and then as his ‘father’. Jon knew he was being silly. His father was Eddard Stark. He was the father of his heart even if Rhaegar Targaryen was the father of his body. The young man got up from the table in his small room. He felt restless energy coursing through his veins.

With droopy eyes, Ghost lifted his head and followed his human’s tread back and forth in this small cell Jon called a room. Ghost waiting to see if they would be leaving. Seeing that was not imminent Ghost put his snout back on his forepaws to lazily watch his human walk back and forth before letting his eyes close again.

Jon was coming to terms with this world changing news from his father. Each time he had read the missive from his father he felt himself coming more to terms with the truth. He understood his father’s reasons. It made sense except it did not make sense. His father should have told two people. The babe he had raised as his son and his own wife. To keep such a truth from them was unconscionable considering the ramifications of withholding that information.

If Catelyn had been another woman who could have loved Jon despite his lineage then Jon could have understood his father’s continued silence. The only problem was that Catelyn Stark was not that woman. She had felt betrayed and took her anger and hurt out on Jon.

His father, should have at least told his wife. Catelyn Stark would never betray a confidence. That was clear with each breath she took.

Jon shook his head as he paced his room.

The other news in the scroll had paled to Jon. His father explained in crystal clarity who Jon truly was and in line to ascension to the Iron Throne. His father would support what Jon decided on this. Jon had that right his father wrote. Others would have their part to speak to this possible destiny but Eddard would support the Will of Westeros. He would support the will of the son of his heart.

These revelations great but the change of his world order could not help but take precedence in his mind at the moment. Jon’s father imparted other information to him. Father told son that he was sure Arya was gay and she had become the apprentice of a First Sword of Braavos. She was to be a warrior. Sansa had told Cersei of his plans of escape which had prompted the woman to take decisive action. His father had forgiven Sansa. He blamed himself and his wife for how they raised Sansa. Constantly attacking and belittling Sansa and making her feel like her only destiny was to marry the man they told her to marry. To bear this man male children. Sansa thinking this, had, thus, acted thus.
How typical of his father Jon thought. He always did the best for his children. Well, everybody but the bastard. He should have told his mother. Jon paused. Despite all the pain, all the rancor between Jon and Catelyn Stark he still thought of her as his mother. A distant, spiteful woman but still his mother in the end.

Jon picked up his sword. He needed air. Ghost seeing the sword picked up immediately came to attention and was by Jon’s side as he neared the door. Jon left his cell with Ghost in tow and walked down the hall. He needed to get on the Wall. He needed to look at his destiny. With an absent hand, Jon ran his fingers through Ghost’s luxuriant coat of fur.

He had shown his Lord Commander the scroll from his father the next day after its arrival. Jeor Mormont had looked up at him as he read the letter from his father. Jon could read the man’s expressions. He wondered if Jon would demand to be allowed to leave the Crows.

To be truthful, Jon had reasons to doubt his given pledge himself. He had taken the oath to the Crows to get away from Catelyn Stark because he was the bastard son of Eddard Stark. That had been a lie. Jon knew his destiny would never had led him here if he had been loved by Catelyn Stark.

Mormont finished reading the scroll. He slowly sat it down on the table. The parchments rolling up slowly to again conceal the secrets it longed to keep. The Lord Commander looked up at Jon. Jon was crying again thinking the swirling thoughts this sudden revelation had sat upon him as his leader read the scroll. His emotions were all in confusion. They still were but less now than then. The man looked at Jon for a long time without speaking.

“You have spoken your vows Jon.” The man took a deep breath. “Aemon Targaryen was in line for the throne, but, not like this. His route had been a wild twisted bramble. This is direct. You should be sitting on the Iron Throne Jon Targaryen. You are fortunate Jon.”

“How so?”

“You are the son of Eddard Stark. Maybe not in blood but in spirit you are a Stark. You have all his honor and rectitude of the leader of the North. Yet you are also the son of Rhaegar Targaryen. He had none of the taint of his father and brother. He was gifted in many things but master of none. That eventually led to his death.”

Mormont had gone quiet again. He rapped his fingers on the desktop. He stood up and looked Jon directly in the eye.

“I will free you from your vows if you want Jon. Your father makes it clear that he will let all know of your true lineage soon. I know your father Jon. He will send a command to me directly if you wish it to break your vow of service to the Black. That will not be necessary. I will freely grant you an exemption to your vow. You gave it not knowing your true lineage.”

“Your father says he knows that your claim to the Iron Throne if you wish to make it would carry weight to many in the Crown and Stormlands. The Martells have always been close to House Targaryen. I agree with that assessment. Your father will call a conclave to present the facts of your lineage.”

“Eddard Stark is king. If you come to King’s Landing he will let the nobles decide the fate of Westeros and the Iron Throne. He will willingly step aside if they chose you and you are willing.”

“He says he will subdue all the other Major Houses to his will. He wants to avoid open warfare if at all possible. By the time you could come to King’s Landing he will have either succeeded or failed.
He finds the other potential heirs to the Iron Throne lacking. He will have prepared Westeros for you Jon. If that is what you want Jon Snow."

The man whose command Jon obeyed studied the young man before him. "What say you Jon Snow … or do you wish to go by another name now?"

Jon had thought for a long while on this. He took several deep breaths. He knew the answer even if he felt confusion in his soul.

“I am Jon Snow, Joer. I was raised as I was raised. I took the vows to this order of my free will. I will honor my vows. Nothing else matters. Starks keep their vows.” He had chuckled darkly. “My father has just proven that most clearly.”

Joer Mormont had chuckled too. “The offer remains Jon. Make sure of your feelings. You could be king.”

“I know Lord Commander. I may be a Targaryen by lineage but in my heart I am a Stark. I will always be a Stark. My destiny has led me here. I will keep my pledge as any true Stark would.”

Joer Mormont rose and clapped Jon on the back. Jon smiled remembering the tears brimming in Joer’s eyes.

Jon thought on those words again as he went up the bucket to the top of the Wall. The wind swirled down the face of the Wall. The basket striking the Wall randomly. Jon struggling for balance. His spiritual balance was almost back though. He knew he would cry again for the youth who lost so much. He could not cry for Catelyn Stark but he felt sorrow for her too. To be forced to live a lie for nearly twenty years.

That was what angered Jon the most. Why had his father not told his wife the truth? Catelyn Stark was one woman who would never betray a trust. That one telling of the hidden truth would have changed all their lives.

Jon shook his head getting out of the basket. Ghost went bounding out. Jon paused in his motion to watch his wolf. The Direwolf running down the top of the Wall. The mighty direwolf enjoyed the expanse to run free. The cold unfelt by the large wolf as it bounded down the Wall free to roam. Jon watched his Direwolf disappear into the dark. His mind still coming to terms. It no longer mattered. It was the past. Jon had to consider what lay before him.

He came out of the basket. The wind was much stronger up here. The cold biting. He smiled a little. He had been about to say he had been breed for it. He then realized he had been. It was just his mother and not the supposed father that had given him the lineage of being a Stark.

He greeted several of his Crow brothers. They returned his salutations. The three men were spreading sand grit down on the top of the Wall. The men moving on slowly. They laughed and jested with each other. Jon smiled bigger this time. These men came from the length and breadth of Westeros. They arrived strangers and were now brothers. His brothers.

Jon went to the north side of the Wall. He looked out over the Haunted Forest. Somewhere out there in that frozen trackless wastes hid their implacable foe. The Ice King waited for them. Many may doubt but not the Crows. Not the North. The restive Wildlings were out there as well. He felt the wind whip across his face. The wind punishing. One could almost think the wind carried on it the hate of their ancient foe. Jon did not turn aside from the wind. For a long time he looked to the north. Over the cleared ground and the forest behind. In that dark forest and beyond lay their merciless enemy. An enemy that must be confronted and defeated.
To do his part was absolutely necessary to Jon Snow. He would not shirk the duty he had freely chosen.

He then turned and walked to the south face of the Wall. His eyes searched the nighttime air. He thought of his father and family in King’s Landing. Their struggle to secure the Iron Throne under the flag of the Direwolf. Jon only spent a minute looking south before turning and walking to the north side of the Wall again.

He had made his decision. The decision permanent. He was now a Crow and would forever be a Crow. This night he would write a reply to his father. In that reply, he would explain to his father that he appreciated the truth. It was good to know his lineage. It did not matter to him though this exposition of his lineage. His father’s plans would not involve the bastard of Rhaegar Targaryen. The son of Eddard Stark had sworn his vow to his brothers, his Lord Commander and to the Night’s Watch. He was not a Targaryen but a Stark. His destiny was of the North and only the North.

There would be no rancor in his reply. No anger. That was the past. Once more Jon gazed out over the Haunted Forest. This was his future. What lay to the North was his future. The south was his past.

He looked out over the forest. Tomorrow he and his brothers with their Lord Commander would sally forth into the unknown beyond the Wall. They would lead a great ranging north to investigate the haunted forest, after the disappearances beyond the Wall of several rangers, including Benjen Stark and patrols of the Crows. Hopefully, they would find his uncle and make contact with the enemy they all knew was out there.

Tomorrow was the first day of his destiny. He would not turn aside.

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With slow measured steps the tall woman walked down the halls of the Red Keep. Her soul was disturbed. Melisandre had been absolutely sure of her visions as she travelled from her native land. The person who ruled Dragonstone was the one prophesized to be Azor Ahai reborn. She had read the flames of R’hllor. Her skills of diving the flames built up over centuries now almost beyond count. The tall redheaded witch trusted her ability to read the flames and their portents. She had thousands of years to hone her skill at the reading of the flames.

Now she was not so sure. Worse, she was almost sure that she had badly misread the flames. She had felt that Dragonstone would lead her to what she sought. Now, with the words of Eddard Stark still ringing in her ears she had come to see that Dragonstone was but the beginning of her quest. That the person who ruled that stony outcrop of land was not the one she sought. The true ruler departed to distant lands. Lands near her birth of all coincidences.

Stannis was strong of body and sure of spirit but she had come to see that the spirit was misguided. The man’s insight limited. The current ruler of Dragonstone was not focused on what needed to be done to save all from the coming night. All the man truly cared for was the Iron Throne. A silly construct made of melted swords in the vaguely grotesque shape of a throne. She had queried Stannis several times since her epiphany. His answers to her questions had only added to her unquiet. His focus was on the Iron Throne and nothing else. The coming Night meant nothing to him. That should be his only focus Melisandre thought worriedly as she gnawed her lower lip.

Had she deluded herself? Had she allowed what she desired to become what she needed? She wanted to find Azor Ahai so badly she easily accepted that since Stannis Baratheon was the one who ruled the island of Dragonstone he must be the one she sought. That one led to the other. Dragons were magic personified and the man who ruled the island named for the great beasts must be the one
she sought. The flames had seemed so clear. It simply had to be Stannis Baratheon. She now knew with almost surety she was wrong. Now when she sought guidance of the flames they were only a gyri of writhing confused bands of light.

Eddard Stark had shattered that vision. She now knew that it was the House of Targaryen that was the true ruler of that isle. Stannis Baratheon merely an interloper. Melisandre had tried to convince herself that Stannis was not an alien to that island holdfast. That destiny and R’hllor had put him there at the right time to let her find him there. She had really tried. He was sure of himself this Stannis Baratheon. Too much so. It limited his vision.

Now the tall redhead witch was almost positive that Stannis was not the one she sought. Who then? She was clueless. She was half a world away from what she knew. She had travelled the lands of Essos over the centuries. She knew those lands at least passingly. She had been so sure of her interpretation of the flames she had done no research of the strange land she had travelled too.

She realized that she had mislead herself. Now that she questioned herself and her path, she had no clue as to what to do next. She knew none of the history of this land. She knew nothing this land or its people really. The only thing she was sure of these people was their worship of the seven face god. Heretics.

The Targaryens were the last vestiges of Valyrian heritage and power. That House extinct most likely. If that lineage still lived it was a weak and paltry thing.

Melisandre did remember they were the least of the Great Houses of Old Valyria. She had not really thought of them as she prepared to journey west. The Targaryens were a trifle in the history of Essos. She did not see how they could be of any account in the land of Westeros.

Eddard Stark had changed that. He had literally opened her eyes to the plain truth. The truth out in the open and yet she had not seen it. She supposed she could forgive herself for missing the obvious. The line of the Targaryens was almost extinct but not quite. The lone survivor a small slip of a girl. Surely, this Daenerys Targaryen could not be the stuff of prophecy and legends come to life. That was if she was even alive. It seemed prophecy hinted at her survival but reality said something else.

Despite the reality, all the portents pointed in one direction. The person who fit the visions most closely could only be Daenerys Targaryen. There simply were no other Valyrian’s of noble birth left in the world. The House of Targaryen the last of the fabled Dragon Lords even if that line was weak. The last scion of that House was but a slip of a girl. A girl lost in the Red Wastes above Qarth and certainly dead by now.

Eddard had told her of the bastard son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Eddard’s sister Lyanna Stark. He had told Melisandre that this was still secret but would soon change. The boy had known nothing of his heritage. Only recently did Eddard Stark inform the boy of his heritage. The boy as of yet had not replied to the news of his true lineage. His visage did not show any hint of his half Valyrian heritage. Surely that meant the Targaryen line had been extinguished in the lad or at best a weak thing. His royal blood weak.

The same glaring fact came back to Melisandre. The problem of her knowing next to nothing of this land and its heritage. She needed to know what her next step to take should be. Could Stannis Baratheon be the one still? Though her heart said ‘no’ her mind had a hard time releasing the man from her need of finding her Azor Ahai reborn. Could Azor reborn be this Jon Snow? She could not bring herself to believe that either. A girl probably dead? Someone still unknown to her then? She needed to acquire knowledge.
She had inquired of Eddard Stark. The man had calmly regarded her in his small personal study. To him, Melisandre was sure, she was an interloper to his machinations. Like Stannis he too sought this ‘Iron Throne’. There was large difference though between the two men. The man who now sat on the Iron Throne actually seemed to want to rule wisely from the throne. Stannis merely thought he should be one to sit on this throne. That that alone qualified Stannis Baratheon to sit on the Iron Throne in the man’s mind. Eddard had made it clear that all but the Targaryens were interlopers to the Iron Throne. The Throne had always belonged to the Targaryens until roughly twenty years ago.

It was clear to Melisandre, this Eddard felt he needed to rule wisely and leave a positive mark on the world he ruled to prove he was indeed worthy to sit on the Iron Throne that many were coming to King’s Landing to contend for.

“I need to inform myself of this land my King” Melisandre told the man of the North of Westeros. She saw the man smile at her platitude and shake his head. “You have disturbed me with your words. I need to learn of this land and its people. I need to find Azor Ahai. The great night is coming. It will start here in this Land but will spread to the whole world if it is not stopped here. Azor defeated the enemy of light once before. He will do so again.”

She saw the King squint at her and her words. He got up and came around the front of his desk. He leaned back against the desk looking up at her. Even with him standing up he was still four inches shorter than her six foot two inch height. He was not intimidated as so many man were by her size and stout build.

“That sounds like the Ice King. And yes he must be defeated. He rose up eight thousand years ago. Are you saying that a man from the land of your birth came all the way to Westeros to defeat the Ice Wright King?”

“Yes. R’hllor told Azor what was necessary and he performed his duty. He had help from great warriors and wizards of this land but it was his hand that delivered the killing blow.”

“Hmmmm” the King looked at her. “How come we know nothing of this Azor Ahai’s great victory? A man who journeyed half the world to vanquish the Ice King.”

“Probably because he was not of this land. You wanted to be the ones to bring the Ice King down. Thus, you wrote your history to say this. It is understandable.”

She could see that Eddard Stark doubted her words. It did not matter to her.

“We seem to be fighting the same foe. I will help you.”

That had made Melisandre feel good. She needed knowledge on how to proceed.

“But!” Melisandre was slightly taken aback at the sudden aggressive tone and high voice. Eddard now stood up before her at rigid attention. His eyes bored into hers with flinty resolve. She straightened her back. No man was going to intimidate her. She was superior to all her foes. They lay defeated in the hard cold ground. Their bones moldering while she continued to walk the world.

“I have had research done on you since your arrival Melisandre of Asshai. You are known as are the orders that you serve. You are both a ShadowBender witch and a priestess of R’hllor. Your religion can be very, how should I say, focused on your goals. I do not follow your god and nor will I. Most of Westeros follows the seven faced god.”

“If you can convert by the proselytizing of your faith Melisandre then so be it. I follow the old gods and do not impose my faith on others. What you do with your religion in Westeros will be done
peacefully. There will be no burning of people while in Westeros. There will be no discretion of the temples to the seven faced god. It is said that you can create ‘shadow monsters’. From what Varys has found you need to draw strength from yourself or others. That strength drawn through blood. Your order of witches prefer the blood of royals. You will not be acquiring that blood from any subject of Westeros.”

"Even if they willingly give it?"

"Even if they willingly give it Melisandre. I feel you are more than happy to claim one gives their blood freely when the truth is something else entirely. My thoughts tell me you are willing to do what you feel is necessary to achieve your goals. I doubt you ask."

"How could you stop me?” She did not like being challenged by an infidel.

"I am not sure but you will be watched. I am aware of you and how you achieve your power. I will be watching. Do you agree to my terms?"

Melisandre glared at the man sullenly. “I agree.” She would do what she must if she must. For now, she had nothing to lose to in giving this supposed King her promise. At this point in time, she had no need to take any blood from those with powerful blood. She had no need to raise her shadow demons. All seemed peaceful to her. The will of R’hllor required no confrontation or sacrifice at present.

The battle of wills between this man and Stannis meant nothing to here. She had no use for this Iron Throne. She understood more men were coming to contest for this throne. So let them. They can spend themselves on twisted melted metal. She would concentrate on the true coming foe. *Fools* she stormed to herself.

The man who would be King looked at her calmly. He had subsumed his aggressive demeanor. “I think you are less than truthful but for now it is enough. We have a common foe. One of the reasons I need to take the Iron Throne is to achieve the power to fight the Ice King. ‘Winter is Coming’ and it will be long and cruel. We are so much less than we were eight thousand years ago. That time was called the ‘Age of Heroes’ for a reason.”

“I will have you meet with my eldest daughter and her friends. They are helping Varys with his research. In fact they found some of the information on you and your order. It seems some Maesters traveling in Essos and great historians of Essos have written of some of your exploits and how you achieved them. They will help you Melisandre. Like I have said. We fight a common foe.”

She had taken her leave of the man then. He reminded her that she would be watched while she was in King’s Landing. She was sure she would be. She looked around herself as she went down the halls. A tall black warrior ghosted her path down the halls. Her armor and battleax marked her as from the archipelago of Sapphos. She wondered for a moment as to why this woman was so far from her. A kindred traveler lost in a foreign land.

The beautiful black woman had on armor and a helm with three fierce snakes in a repose of about to strike on her head. The warrior woman had her fierce battleax strapped to her back. Melisandre worked her memory to call up the weapon’s name: Labrys. She was being taken to the room where these children were doing their work for the King. The tall woman looked her up and down with a leering eye as they walked. Though she walked behind Melisandre it was clear what she was doing.

Melisandre sighed. She was used to both sexes looking at her with lust in their eyes. It mattered not to her. She remembered her youth when she was only Melony. She scowled. She could still remember her fear and shame. She had been angry with herself that she had enjoyed the acts she
was forced to perform. She was used as a whore. With men she had felt little. Women had been another matter. Still, it had been against her will.

It amazed Melisandre that she still felt such anger after multiple millennium had passed. The memories of the violation of her body were sometimes strong still. It was if they occurred yesterday if she did not control her thoughts. She had taken absolute control of her body as her will and power grew strong over the passing years. With time her passions had been subsumed by her dedication to the god she served. She doubted she was even capable of passion anymore she constantly told herself. To be dead inside was a sad thing Melisandre thought. She knew it was so because she was indeed dead to passion and joy for the sake of joy.

This female warrior was now right behind her openly inspecting her ass. Bitch! The tall witch controlled her anger. She supposed she should be honored. Her beauty was still great after all these years.

They reached the door. The woman gripped her arm with a strong grip. The grip not meant to give pain but to give a sense of subjection to the black woman’s strength. Needless to say, the tall ShadowBender witch was not impressed. Melisandre turned her head to regard the woman coolly. With a cocked eyebrow she stood her ground to the black warrior. The tall black woman was still two inches shorter than herself.

“I am Mejen Sarovic. You will behave yourself won’t you my pretty witch?” The tone almost jovial but the woman’s midnight eyes were hard as Valyrian steel.

“If I don’t?” she sneered back.

“Why I will part your pretty head off that pretty body. You will still be pretty. Just in two pieces.”

Melisandre had nothing to say so she didn’t.

The two tall women entered into the room. Melisandre looked around. She looked up and down the table. The persons sitting at the table took in the fact they had entered the room and looked up at her. The black woman walked down to the end of the table and took a seat. The battleax taken off Merjen’s back and laid down across the table top. The guard grabbed a book and started to leaf through it. Though she seemed relaxed Melisandre knew it was ruse.

“I can’t read this language? Got one with pretty paintings in it?” Merjen asked in a petulant tone. She looked around at the book covers with a critical eye.

The ShadowBender witch watched a dark haired girl dressed in Braavosi leathers push a book down to the black woman. Merjen had taken off her helm with the three snakes on it and sat it down beside herself. The black woman turned the book to face herself and opened it up. The warrior leafing through the pages. Her eyes lit up seeing the paintings and imprints in the book. The woman turning the pages slowly looking intently at the pretty colorful paintings and detailed black and white etchings on the pages. She seemed relaxed but Melisandre knew that was a deception. The woman would be on her in an instant if necessary.

The teenage girl that had given the black warrior the book now stared at her with open curiosity. Then the teenager looked at the small brunette sitting across the table from her. The grey eyed girl also looking at the tall redhead sitting at the table beside the brunette. The dark haired lass kept looking at the three of them like they each had two heads. The girl must be slow Melisandre reasoned. Melisandre could not fathom why this grey eyed girl kept looking at the redhead and the other small brunette and then back at her. Her head making the same circuit slowly again and again.
A calculating look on the woman’s face. She looked like a lioness hidden in the tall grasslands to the east of Volantis below the river Volanea. The lioness regarding its prey. What was the girl’s problem Melisandre again thought? She was attractive though with her dark hair cut with bangs and hair parted around her ears and just down to the nape of her neck. She had a martial air about her. She was also obviously gay. That caught Melisandre’s attention. Merjen was from the land of Sapphos so her intentions were clear. Melisandre felt nothing for the woman. Her hidden aggression a large put off.

The tall redhead observed the others in the room. The youngest was a boy of maybe eleven or twelve. He looked at her with childlike innocent interest. She saw no interest from the boy in her beyond her being there. He was still only a boy with no carnal thoughts. This innocence further evidence by the cats that surrounded the youth. A big yellow tabby was half asleep on the boy’s lap and looked at the boy indulgently. Two more cats were play fighting beside the boy on a nest of towels set out for them. One cat was splayed on its back his legs up in the air. The cat fast asleep. His whiskers twitching. She saw movement and a fifth cat was slinking between the books. The cat reached a dish of milk and began lapping up the white liquid. Little droplets beading up on the dark mahogany wood.

Movement caught Melisandre’s eye. A large pup slowly rose its head from off its paws. The wolf lying on a pile of multiple of blankets that were just behind a tall redhead and small brunette. The blankets arranged to make a nest for the young dog. The pup yawned great big and cocked its head looking at her curiously. It rose to its feet and started to walk towards the tall witch but the smaller brunette haired woman restrained the wolf pup. The animal easily obeying its mistress. The pup sitting down its tongued lulled out.

There was three others in the room. They were all females and regarded her with open perusal. The looks from the slender blonde and small brunette were most definitely not innocent in nature. The teenage girls could not stop their eyes roving Melisandre’s body with a hungry look. They were still innocent enough to not know of their carnal desires being so evident. Once Melisandre would have used that carnal desire to bend them to her will. She would have taken their obvious virginity and made them scream the night through in pleasure. That was long ago the tall witch thought.

That could not be said of the third female. She was a tall redhead like herself. The girl appeared to be seventeen or eighteen years of age. She was beautiful Melisandre could not help but notice. The witch could not stop her mind from drifting back millennials to when she was only Melony. More recent times when she had come into her power and still felt passion running hot in her veins. It had been the women she desired. The tall voluptuous women like herself.

She saw the small brunette move to grip the tall redhead’s hand and scoot closer. Interesting Melisandre thought. The small girl obviously thought of the tall redhead as hers. She now glared at Melisandre. The tall woman sighed. She took a moment to control her flickering inner desires she worked so hard to control. Desires she would tell herself she no longer felt and yet would raise their ghosts at the least opportune of times. She removed any desire from her face. For a moment, Melisandre thought it odd that she had to even make the effort. This tall redhead affected her for some reason. The small brunette still eyed her though. Melisandre smirked to herself. She was cute she supposed. Especially in her jealousy.

She felt sorry for the girl. The tall redhead was not aware of the small brunette’s ardor for her. Melisandre wondered. Was the tall redhead simply straight or still innocent enough to not know her true desires? The small brunette would need to work to awaken the tall redhead’s unrealized lesbian desires. If she had any. Melisandre idly thought the redhead did but she could be mistaken. She had been mistaken of late she now knew.
She supposed it did not matter. This silence between them was not accomplishing anything except wasting time.

“I am sure you have been told my name. It is Melisandre. I have journeyed a long way from my homeland. I have come to fight a great evil. The servant of ‘always night’ has arisen again. I have come to find Azor Ahai reborn. I thought I had found him but now I fear I have not. I know almost nothing of Westeros and its history.”

“I was told that the persons in this room could help educate me in these matters. I need a foundational knowledge of Westeros to help guide me in my quest to find Azor Ahai reborn. Where to search next. Whom he … or she might be. Can you help me?” Melisandre asked her head turning to look at all in the room. Her sharp gaze looking from face to face.

The black warrior was happily turning the pages of her book looking at paintings pretending to not be watching her like a hawk. The simple minded girl was watching the tall redhead and the small brunette with a happy smile. She seemed to wishing for the two to notice each other. The tall redhead was absently petting the hand and lower forearm of the brunette comforting her.

_Hmmmmm_, Melisandre thought. Maybe there was hope for the brunette.

The tall redhead stood up and took control of the situation. She made introductions to all in the room. Melisandre noted the names. The boy had completely forgotten her as he petted the tabby in his lap and gone back to reading. He was truly still an innocent. I was nice to not be leered at by a man. They were so petty. Their male ego cloying.

The tall redhead Melisandre now knew was named Sansa and was the king’s daughter. The redhead continued to take control. The others in the room more than willing to cede control to the tall redhead.

“Yes, my father told me to expect you. He told us of the information you need. Myrcella and I with the help of Jeyne (Melisandre saw the redhead look down at this Jeyne with a beaming smile that the small framed woman soaked up) have started to tabulate books and scrolls that can give you a background to the history of Westeros and the Houses that rule it. It should be a good start.”

“Can you read our language?”

“Yes I can.”

Suddenly, Merjen spoke up. “How is that possible if you have never been to this continent?”

“The advantages of being a witch I suppose” she answered the black skinned woman coolly. A smirk played on her lips. She enjoyed one upping the tall black woman. The black skinned warrior glared at her. Powerful people did not like having a potential foe show any superiority. Melisandre knew the black warrior hated it. Confidence was of supreme importance in any combat. No matter the form of the contest.

“Bitch” the woman answered in a loud stage whisper.

“Now, now” Sansa intoned in a placating tone. “We agreed that you should start with a history of the House of Targaryen. Dragonstone was founded by them and one hundred years later they invaded Westeros from there. For nearly four hundred years they ruled Westeros from here but Dragonstone remained a strong bastion for the House of Targaryen until Robert’s Rebellion. The island filled with the architecture and artifacts from the culture of Valyria.”

“I can see why you would have believed that Stannis Baratheon was the ruler of Dragonstone
finding him there but he is really only a usurper. He is really less than that I think. He was sent there
by his older brother Robert Baratheon. There was almost no fight in taking it. Rumors have it that
Stannis always felt slighted in being cast there by his brother.”

The tall redhead’s preamble finished, she picked up several tomes and walked to Melisandre.

“Their” Sansa said handing the quiet redhead woman two books “these are a history of Aegon’s
landing in Westeros and then the wars of the House of Targaryen. A huge waste of life and culture
if you ask me.” She gave the books to Melisandre and sat back down beside Jeyne. The small
brunette making sure to sit close to her sought after conquest Melisandre observed. The two glared
at each other. The girl was being silly the witch thought glaring at small brunette and arching an
eyebrow. The girl huffed and made sure to get even closer to the young woman named Sansa.

Melisandre pitied the girl. Making moon eyes did not win a woman to your bed she thought
dismissively. This Jeyne Poole was a neophyte in matters of the bed and heart Melisandre observed.
With a dismissive shake of her head Melisandre forgot about the two young women. Reaching out
Melisandre gripped the book on the conquest of Westeros by Aegon Targaryen.

The tall witch nodded her head in acknowledgement to Sansa for her initial help. Melisandre sat
down and started to read. She was familiar with Valyrian culture of course. The broad strokes of it.
How could she not be? She remembered their might. All had to tread lightly around their might and
especially their dragons. The forward gave a background on House Targaryen. It would seem that
the Targaryens were but a shadow of that might but it was more than enough to conquer Westeros.

It did seem that Aegon was a competent leader of men. His wives dutiful and supportive of their
husband brother. Stupid women. They should have led she thought. Melisandre grew tired of
having to work with weak ineffectual men. She worked with them because she must. Stannis was
the literal interpretation of not being able to see the forest for the trees. She was growing tired of the
man but supposed she would continue to work through him until better options presented
themselves. She sensed this Eddard Stark might be different but she would not have time to truly
discover if her initial impressions were correct. She would have to move on to find the reincarnated
Azor Ahai.

The room was silent with the participants in the room either reading or looking at the pictures within
the books. The only sound the whispering of pages being turned. Words imparting facts and
portents of ages gone past. Everyone was focused on the book before them.

That was everyone but the one named Arya. Her eyes openly looked over the women in the room.
She especially looked at the buff black warrior sitting near her. The girls eyes large looking at the
fairly large bosom of the warrior sitting near her. She had seen Arya’s eyes slide over her own
ample bosom. The girl definitely liked breast. Probably because she was rather lacking in that
department. Even the little spitfire beside Sansa had a bosom that made her bodice curve nicely even
if not so much.

The aura of the girls filled the room. Melisandre felt those auras touching and caressing her skin. She
liked what she felt. She had learned long ago to suppress her natural desires. Those desires faded
due to both time and hurt. She had given herself to R’hllor and the fighting of the agents of night. It
had cost her so much. She mused though while reading the pages before her. Being surrounded by
so much pheromones and desires for females had an affect on Melisandre. She could still feel
echoes of her desires to sleep with women. To find a mate or mates to love and cherish.

In the back of her mind, Melisandre thought it strange that now she felt echoes of her past desires.
She had always been a loafer. The past an albatross around her neck always weighing her down.
To survive her early life she had learned to suppress emotions to a large degree. Her search was for
physical pleasure and not love. She knew she was stunted emotionally and had come to accept it. Her few relationships never long lasting and ending in hurt. She had learned to pursue pleasure over depth of feeling till even the desire for pleasure had faded with the long centuries.

The tall woman from the dark lands of Asshai wondered what was causing these thoughts to once more course through her mind now. It had been decades if not a century since she mused on her past desires. She was letting her focus slip. She contemplated these strange feelings. She had a logical mind. Melisandre thought the main reason for her wandering thoughts was the presence of so many potential bedmates.

In her dealings with those with power, she was lead repeatedly to men. Banal and vain men. She only associated with women tangentially in her various quests doing the will of R’hhlor. Women only in the background of her existence. She did not seek them out. They had no power so they were of no import to Melisandre. Now she had put into the midst of five comely women. All of them displaying to one degree or another lesbian tendencies. In a way, they were overwhelming her defenses. Their loveliness breaching the fortifications around her heart.

She could think of another reason her dormant desires were bubbling beneath the surface like a heated spring. It must be because she was still discombobulated from her terrible misreading of the flames. Never had she so badly interpreted the flames. It had thrown her off her balance. Now her thoughts were all over the place with these many comely women around her. Long slumbering desires had partially awakened. It was both exhilarating and confounding.

With a mental shake of her head Melisandre dispelled such thoughts from her mind. Anyways, she had lost that chance fighting Atock Murlerian. She had saved all of what was now called Slaver’s Bay from his hideous rule. At such cost though. After her victory she had enjoyed consuming him though. Fear no matter how small it grew still retained a taste so sweet.

Surreptitiously, Melisandre kept an eye on the tall warrior from the land of Sapphos. She was a dangerous woman in her own way. Only Arya sensed the tension in the black skinned warrior. Melisandre sensed that Arya too was a warrior but she seemed relaxed and at ease. Not so Merjen. The tall black warrior was too on edge to catch Melisandre’s in some nefarious act. The woman looked relaxed but it was a ruse. Her battleax would be snatched up in an instant if necessary. Merjen was waiting for her to try something. Melisandre could strike in the blink of an eye but the Valyrian steel of the woman’s weapon would negate her magic if fast enough to block. It was interesting musing on attack and counterstrike as she perused the book before her. Over the years Melisandre had tired of being doubted and despised.

As mighty as Merjen might think she was Melisandre was greater. This thought gave the tall redhead witch the confidence to continue her contemplations of the women around her. Melisandre was reading what was before her but she was actually more interested in the women around her. Her mind sharp and focused enough to do both tasks.

The small girl, Arya, was a simmering bubbling fountain of lust. She was still not sure of herself though. The aura around the teenager told Melisandre that. She was a pup longing to plunge into the world of Sapphic delights. This frustration had a sharpness to Arya’s aura that did not appeal to Melisandre.

The witch turned her thought to the other three women on the other side of her. Again, Melisandre wondered why she was wasting such thoughts on these young women. She would not be lying with them and she would be leaving soon to begin her quest to find Azor Ahai. Still she looked on the fair maidens unable to stop her thoughts from wondering. Blast Eddard Stark for unsettling her!
The tall priestess had never been partial to blondes. She found them haughty as a rule. She had heard the gossip of the girl’s mother Cersei Lannister. She was pure bitch. The chances of the daughter being thus was great as well. Melisandre had to admit to herself the blonde was pleasing to the eye. She felt a sadness in her though. She had enough sadness without bringing more into her life. If a woman saw her true image … the tall witched sighed as she turned the next page of her tome.

Melisandre mused sadly that all this conjecture was useless. She was not sure such passion still burned in her loins anyways. Fantasy yes, but reality … she was not so sure.

That left the tall voluptuous redhead and the small brunette that clung to her. The girl, Jeyne Poole, loved the tall voluptuous women. Melisandre had been sure this redhead was straight but she now sensed a passion building in this Sansa. A passion for one Jeyne Poole. Where would it lead though Melisandre wondered? Was Sansa straight or bisexual? Hopefully gay? Had she been so conditioned by the patriarchal world that she would never realize her true desires?

Again, did it matter? Why did she, Melisandre, waste time and thoughts on such matters. If they saw her as she truly was it would all be over anyways. She had to remove her gem from time to time. It kept her chakras intact but her foe’s shattered presence still at all times attempted to sway and poison her. She needed separation at times to cleanse her body and mind of his vile presence and influence. His body may have been shattered and his essence consumed but his soul still writhed and sought to reach and harm all about the essence trapped within the red gem.

Melisandre sensed that to have Sansa she would have to have the little girl at her side. What was name of that little dog? Yes, that was it, a Chihuahua. She surreptitiously glanced at the tiny brunette. Like that dog she would be feisty she felt. She was pretty she supposed. Having two wives would be nothing if not always exciting. That would be a lot of estrogen to contend with Melisandre snarked to herself. Using the book for cover Melisandre eyed the two teenagers. Ying and Yang. Tall and short. To have two women loving her …

*What is wrong with me* Melisandre thought to herself derisively? Why are my thoughts wandering like this? Why feel feelings I have not felt in centuries if not a millennium. That was taken from me so long ago. Those that see me without my glamour have run screaming. Damn Eddard Stark for confounding her with his knowledge and insights.

Still, it has been so long … *Stop This!* Melisandre stormed to herself. Though her soul was upset her face remained calm as she now pretended to read the words in front of her.

Her idyll of speculative thoughts came crashing down.

“My father will never allow you to make human sacrifice in Westeros. It is an abomination.”

Slowly the tall witch lifted her head from the book she had been pretending to read. It was the small warrior. She was skilled but still in training she had heard. She had heard of the small woman called the ‘Direwolf’ by the Druid priests. Melisandre’s first sight of Arya had told her the truth of the teenager. Arya’s blood ran hot in her veins. It was puissant. The blood that ran boiling in Arya Stark veins was potent filled with magical might. With her second sight Melisandre could see it pulsing in the young woman’s body.

“I agree with my sister” the tall redhead chimed in to support her sister. “It is an abomination. It can serve no good purpose. To take such an act can only be for evil.”

Melisandre was in full control of herself but her temper was rising. She would let it pass.
“Is that so?” Damnit she stormed to herself. Let it drop! Why was she betraying herself?!

“Yes” both sisters chimed in unison. The sanctimonious looks on their faces ratched up Melisandre’s pique. She saw the same looks on Myrcella face. Only the boy, Tommen, continued on in his oblivious state. The child continued to read intently while he petted his cats. Unaware of the rapidly rising tension in the room. Jeyne of course supported the woman she desired. Only the mature black warrior regarded her neutrally. The adult warrior knew of sacrifice.

“How trite and childish” Melisandre responded. She had enough. Her good works always held up to scrutiny and castigated. She made the sacrifices necessary to do the greater good. She felt in a fey mood. She would act on it.

She slowly rose to her full height. She saw Merjen inch her hand towards her labyrs. The Direwolf pup was sitting up. She had picked up on the tension in the room and was tense. Melisandre remained relaxed and slowly held up her hands to show she meant no harm. She was not going to cause trouble. She may be angry at those in the room but it was ignorance and fear she would contest with. She was certain in her rectitude.

“That is easy to say when you are sitting the middle of a mighty castle protected by your father. One can speak blithely when extreme danger is not nipping at your heels. When imminent death is not upon you.”

The others in the room looked at her with their undivided attention. Even the boy had stopped reading to now look at her. Jeyne was petting the wolf pup relaxing the animal.

“What would your father do if the Ice King was at the gates and his victory was imminent unless I intervened? What would he do if all of you in this room were hostages and about to be killed and only I could save you from death by sacrifice. If your mother and father were about to be killed but I could save them by sacrifice. What would you require of me knowing I could save them if allowed to use my full power?”

“Does not the need of the many outweigh the needs of the few or the one? Think before you answer.”

There was silence in the room for a long moment.

“I will grant that” Sansa spoke rising up from her chair. “I ask this in return. Were all the situations you listed off … have all the sacrifices you have done been for situations so dire?”

Again long silence. Melisandre knew the answer to the question poised. She did not like the answers she would give. Time and hindsight told her some of her decisions had been severe. She held her ground. She had done what needed to be done. It was past. It could not be undone.

“But you are so beautiful” the one named Jeyne spoke in an innocent voice.

“Beautiful is it? That alone should control my thoughts and actions. How quant.”

She slowly walked to stand beside Jeyne and Sansa.

Melisandre was filled with reckless thoughts. She was off her balance and she could not stop her wild thoughts and wilder actions.

“Let there be truth between us. I grow tired of your mistrust. Let me show you sacrifice.”

Melisandre saw her fingers tremble but she would not turn aside now. She had come to save these people and they in turn attacked her. Enough!
All watched with fascinated eyes as she tall redheaded witch worked the ties, buttons to her satin dress. The silky cloth hugging her body. Slowly the garment became loose. Then the dress was pooled around the tall woman’s ankles. She had no short cloth on. Her beautiful naked body was on full display. Her ample breast high and proud. Her skin silky smooth. Her womanhood on full display. The muscles on her body sleek and well formed.

All gazed at her with wonder and various degrees of lust. Even the young boy was mesmerized. Slowly the witch’s head turned to lock eyes with each person in the room.

Then her hands moved slowly to the clasp that held her choker to her throat. The large red ruby seemed to pulse. The clasp was undone and the choker pulled away from the throat of the beautiful woman.

The instant the red ruby lost contact with Melisandre’s throat she changed. In one instant she was a beautiful woman in the middle years of her full adult beauty. The next instant she was an old hag standing before the women and boy in the room.

Louds gasps filled the room with several half breathed curses. Eyes enlarged, stared at the apparition before them. The sudden transformation before them stunned the six people in the room with Melisandre. One could hear a pin drop in the room. Eyes large and mouths working soundlessly, the persons in the room with the suddenly transformed witch looked at her unsure how to act or what to do.

Where a moment before stood a tall regal woman with squared shoulders now stood something entirely different. The woman who had had a full mane of deep auburn hair was gone. Now, before the shocked viewers stood a stooped woman with rounded shoulders. The much shorter version of Melisandre had only a fringe of grey hair. Her head nearly completely bald.

All saw the red eyes once bright now rheumy with old age. A face lined with deep wrinkles stood before the other patrons in the room. A waddle underneath her neck. Her skin once flawless now had age spots all over her face. Deep bags were underneath the witch’s eyes. The color dark and sickly. The witch’s whole face had seemed to sag in on itself. The tall witch’s hands once strong now seemed fragile and hollowed out. The hands also covered with age spots and veins standing up in relief.

Melisandre’s luscious body only a seeming dream now. Now her firm high breast sagged and hung pendulously on the aged bent over body. Where only heartbeats before a body stood with excellent muscle tone said body now had flabby and distended musculature. Muscles hung flaccid on arms and sagged on legs. The once firm stomach sagged and had rolls of skin and loose muscle.

This vision of Melisandre slowly looked at each shocked face. She said nothing.

“Holy shit!” Arya softly intoned. She stared wide eyed at this shocking transformation before her. Merjen had stood with her battleax firmly gripped but now looked around unsure what to do with it.

Jeyne had buried her face in Sansa’s side. Tommen had a glazed look on his face while his sister seemed more curious than frightened. The black warrior eyed the now wasted woman who stood frailly before them. The woman before them now swayed slightly with infirmity.

The wolf pup eyed this new vision before it curiously. It seemed neither fearful nor perplexed. The change of appearance meant nothing to the wolfling.

Melisandre saw through eyes now dim the shock on Sansa’s face but it was quickly controlled.
Sansa had pivoted her body to confront the changed woman before her. Her eyes showed Sansa’s wanting to understand. The Redhead reached out to hug Jeyne to her. The squeeze seemed to impart strength to the small woman. She too stood to be beside the object of her affections. She now peeked out from Sansa’s side at the stooped frail woman before her.

“What happened to you? This is not simply old age being hid. How did this happen to you Melisandre?” Sansa asked in a calm controlled voice. Neither shock nor pity showed on Sansa’s face. Only a desire to understand shown on her face. She pulled Jeyne tighter to her body.

The witch was impressed at the quick recover of the tall redhead. Her shock had quickly been replaced by a will to understand what she now saw before her. To provide succor if possible.

Melisandre made no move to pick up the choker with the glowing ruby that was now on the table. She had expected screams and cowering. At least some of the persons in the room running from her in their terror. All she felt was confusion and a need to understand.

Sansa’s calm demeanor soothing the others in the room. The tall redhead felt compassion for her. Melisandre was not weak of will and straightened as much as her weak body allowed.

“Long ago, nearly five millennium, I fought a dark demon mage in Bhorash. It was his army and hunger that made that once proud, strong city fall to ruin. I contested with the sorcerer. I defeated his army. With human sacrifice. The needs of the many weighed on the decisions I took in that campaign. Those sacrifices allowed me lay waste to his army. Those sacrifices let me get to the mage. We fought only eighteen inches apart.”

“My magic prevailed in the end though you can see the cost.”

“What happened to your foe?”

“I caste him down and then consumed his vile evil spirit. From that, I was able to trap his essence in this red ruby you see on the table.” She waved her fingers over the pulsing stone. “With the tattered remains of his essence and magic I am able to restore my previous self.”

She looked around as she spoke. All were enraptured with her words.

“He is dead but his essence is still vital. It seeks to corrupt and defile me. Therefore, at times I most remove the gem and I become what he did to me.”

“I sacrificed much but he was defeated and many lives were saved. The demon mage drew substance on the torment of man. Its appetite only growing. The demon addicted to horror and cruelty. If I had not defeated the demon mage, untold numbers would have died. The numbers growing until the tormented dead would have been like the grains of sand on the ocean shore.

“So you are a hero you are saying” Sansa stated. “I understand your arguments Melisandre. I cannot argue the past. You saved many at great cost. That is plain to see.”

Slowly the aged woman picked up her choker and lifted it to her throat. The instant the ruby touched her throat the gem flared and before the occupants in the room stood the strong and proud body of the now young again Melisandre of Asshai. Her youth fully restored.

She silently put her dress back on her body and synched it up tight to her body. All looked upon her in silence. In silence she left the occupants of the room.

She walked down the hall. Her body strong but her soul tired. She was sure she would be evicted from this city when the women inside the room she had just left told all of her true aspect without her
She was used to being rejected when those she saved learned of her true image. She had two aspects. One they loved and lusted after. The other repulsed and led to rejection. Grimly she returned to her room.

She would continue her mission. She would find the knowledge she needed elsewhere. The proud woman mulled over the sacrifices that were constantly demanded of her.

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“Holy shit!” Arya kept repeating with a wild look in her eyes.

Inside the room, the tall witch had exited was filled with a cacophony of loud talk and exclamations. The women excitedly talking over each other. The women looking at each other with large eyes. Tommen only silently looked at the women in the room. Even the only adult in the room now let her façade of warrior control drop and was excitedly talking and gesticulating. They all agreed that what they had just seen was totally shocking.

Finally, Arya shouted out.

“What are we to do?!” She turned and looked at her older sister.

Sansa was surprised at that. She stared back at Arya who looked at her with big eyes. Arya’s body leaned forward towards her older sister. Merjen was looking at her expectantly. Tommen had a wild look as he looked at her.

Myrcella spoke calmly. “Yes. You are our leader Sansa. We will follow your lead.”

Jeyne was pressed into her side. Her arms around Sansa. Her head on Sansa’s bosom. She felt her best friend’s head shaking ‘yes’ up and down. Her close contact soothed Sansa. She hugged the girl tighter to her body. For some reason Jeyne whimper moaned. This sent a strange thrill through Sansa’s body.

Must be all the excitement in the room Sansa reasoned with herself.

Sansa looked around. She understood that on the battlefield Arya led. Merjen Sarovic was a warrior who knew how to fight a foe in armed combat. This was not that. This situation was more academic she supposed. The path to take was not one of combat. It required reason and insight.

Sansa thought on what they had seen. What Melisandre had said and reveled about herself. She made her decision.

“What Melisandre showed us will stay with us. That is her past. A past where she defeated a great evil that saved countless lives. She deserves that. She will be judged by what she does today and tomorrow. Here. Among us. Do you agree?” Sansa asked as she looked around the room. Her eyes steady as she looked into each person’s eyes. Sansa seeking agreement with her direct gaze.

She saw all the heads of those present nod in agreement.

Melisandre would be judged by her actions from this time henceforth.

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Sandor woke up with a start. He was a warrior. His body trained to awaken totally alert. He knew
it was shortly after dawn. He was on the thick pile of furs in front of the fireplace. It had been nearly three weeks since he had defended the woman and her children down on the docks of the Blackwater.

For two days straight, working late into the night Ziggi had cleaned Sandor’s suite of rooms. The woman cleaning up and washing down dishes, utensils, cabinets, rugs and the floor. Once the girls were up the bed was made up and immaculate. She grumbled and glared the whole time at Sandor like it was his fault. *He liked his rooms in a messy state!* He sadly thought that was no more. At least as long as Ziggi was here. The thought of her not in his rooms made him feel cold and barren. Those thoughts sending shivers down his spine.

He was sleeping in front of the fireplace to let Ziggi have the large bed along with her daughters. It was the honorable thing to do. He sniffed the air and his stomach rumbled. Ziggi had asked Sandor to procure a pot belly stove four days after her arrival. There had been one in her former Master’s kitchen and the former slave had come to love the food one could make with it. Ziggi had been tasked with cocking his personal meals.

Sandor had argued that he would eat in the mess hall with the Goldcloaks. He was a warrior used to the fare that soldiers ate. He felt strange having this new woman in his quarters cleaning after him and now stating she would cook for him. He was quickly learning to put his shed clothes in the large wicker basket he had gotten for Ziggi. Her “ahem” and “I think not!” had the large man quickly putting his dirty clothes in the basket.

Sandor still cringed remembering the icy stare that came with those statement. The intense focus from the small Dothraki woman *was intimidating*! He had quickly learned to fear Ziggi’s intense stares. Her name meant defiance and brother did she live up to it.

Now his statement of procuring his own victuals had Ziggi’s midnight eyes boring a hole in him. He capitulated. Like immediately. He was not that brave! Amazement filled Sandor at how such a small woman could fill him with such dread with merely a look.

Strangely, he found he liked Ziggi’s command of his quarters. It came natural to the woman taking control of her seeming new hearth. Evidently, it was the Dothraki men who fought and hunted but the woman ruled their homesteads with an iron fist when they camped. It came natural to Ziggi.

Sandor had come to find it nice to look around his quarters and see a clean floor and not covered with haphazard strewn clothing. The countertop and wash basin not filled with dirty dishes and eating utensils. He had not wanted stewards cleaning in his room. This was his living space! Sandor paused. It was now Ziggi and her daughters as well. He feared for his but he could not stop that thought from more often now washing over his consciousness.

He had requested the item from Varys that very morning. He wondered how long it would take to be made and delivered.

That afternoon he heard a knock on the door. He opened his door and their stood his King with porters behind him. A used but excellently cleaned and fully restored pot belly stove waiting to be brought in. Sandor bit his lip and stared at his King nonplussed at the unexpected producing of the requested item so soon. A large smile on his King’s face. No half squint smile this day Sandor thought. Of course his daughters were with him along with Syrio and Jeyne Poole. Varys was rearmost smiling at Sandor with a shit eating grin. They all stood around looking stupid staring at his Dothraki guests. Sandor stared back at the entourage before him.

With a start Sandor invited them in. Ziggi had poked him hard in the back. Normally, he would have groused at that but the large smile on the Dothraki woman’s face stopped him. What could it
hurt he reasoned with himself. He would make her happy while she was here. He thought to himself sadly. Sandor knew it would end all too soon. The party entered and immediately started to talk to Ziggi and her girls.

Eddard talked to Ziggi about where she wanted it placed. Ziggi animated as she talked to Eddard and Varys. She had it placed in the back right corner of the large living area near a set of cabinets hung on the wall. The King had three cords of wood brought in and put in the large brass harper placed beside the stove. Many cooking pots, pans, and utensils were brought in as well. All made faces at the little girls. The little girls giggling with Zhalli, the eldest, age four, running behind Sandor’s legs and holding on as she looked around his leg.

Viggi was looking up at Eddard and then she too ran behind Sandor and held onto his other leg. Their mother smiled warmly at Sandor. She turned back around while Eddard and Varys showed her all the features of the stove and the plethora of items they had brought for her. The porters lit the stove and started to put the utensils, plates, bowls, and eating cutlery away into the cabinets. Ziggi pointing here and there having items put exactly where she wanted them.

Eddard’s daughters talked to Ziggi and made faces at her daughters making them giggly. Syrio walked around observing and smiling.

Oh geezzzzz Sandor thought. Ziggi will certainly feel like this was her home now. Sandor worried his lip at how Ziggi seemed to be making his quarters her home and hearth with such ease. It would make the separation unbearably hard Sandor thought. He choked up with the thought. He decided he would put that off. Like a week or two. Maybe three or four. The young tykes needed some stability for a little while longer the scarred warrior told himself. He would enjoy this time with the Dothraki woman and her daughters. He would get as much of it as he could.

He knew he was in danger getting used to this arrangement. It would only lead to him being hurt. Whenever he let his guard down in the past he had always been hurt deeply. Surely, Ziggi would eventually want to leave him. Once she got her feet underneath herself. He felt his lips set in a grim line when he thought those thoughts. He decided to enjoy the here and now.

He had been doing that for the last two weeks.

Sandor had an opportunity soon after Ziggi had come into his quarters. He kept telling himself he needed to find a reason to move the Dothraki woman and her brood on. They and he needed to get on with their lives. He had taken her to Grand Master Dromen Salver after she had her slave collar cut off. The Grand Maester looked over the Dothraki woman and gave her several ointments to treat her bruises and promote healing. He wanted to see her a week later.

Sandor did that and waited outside of the room Dromen took Ziggi into. After thirty minutes Sandor was pacing the room back and forth. What was taking so long?! He was getting worried. His body filled with nervous energy he worked off with his agitated back and forth pacing.

Dromen came into the room. He had a grim look on her face. Sandor felt his blood run cold. Dromen came over to him.

“Calm down Sandor. Her life is not in danger.”

“Then why the look!” Sandor barked at the man.

The Grand Maester explained that in his examination he had determined that Ziggi would probably never be able to get pregnant again and if she did her life would be in grave danger. She would have to abort. Dromen told Sandor that when Ziggi heard this she had become distraught and fearful that
Sandor would cast her out for being infertile and “not able to give my man strong Stallions and Fillies”. Dromen told Sandor how Ziggi felt so dejected and worthless. Her defiant demeanor now fearful. Her body crestfallen.

Sandor knew he had been given his opportunity to put an end to this murmur show. The tall man felt his body shake hard with the thought and a damn tear ran down his hale cheek. He angrily swiped it away. Dromen made a point of pretending to look elsewhere.

Yes, Sandor told himself. He would use this as a means to remove the Dothraki woman from his life. He felt like he was walking up to the gallows as he approached the door to the room Ziggi was in. His stomach was twisting but he steeled himself. It was for the best he told himself with dread. He and Dromen went into the examination room.

He saw Ziggi on the exam bed looking at him. With eyes that were red and swollen, Ziggi looked at Sandor with big fearful eyes. Tears running down her face. She was crying hard and her slender frame shook like a willow in a thunderstorm. Her shoulders slumped. Sandor felt the fear and sadness washing off of Ziggi’s body. Sandor marveled that even with her face red and swollen, with her hair disheveled, she still looked radiantly beautiful.

All his thoughts he had entered into the room with fled his mind like birds flying south for the winter the instant he saw Ziggi in her distraught state. He rushed over to Ziggi and hugged her to the side of his body. His arms instinctively reached around the sobbing woman to comfort her. This all done without any thought by the Hound. After a minute, he gripped Ziggi gently by the shoulders and pushed her back gently so he could look her in the eyes.

“What is this silliness I hear from Dromen, Ziggi?”

“I can’t give you any Stallions or Fillies Sandor. I am not worthy to be your mate!” the Dothraki woman wailed.

Sandor hugged Ziggi to him again and patted her back and hair.

“What nonsense Ziggi! You have given me three fine fillies already. The best in the land!”

“But a mighty warrior like you needs Stallions!” Ziggi wept out.

“Ziggi I always wanted Fillies! You gave me three of them. They are better than Dorne Sandsteeds! Your girls are wearing me out Ziggi—in a good way!” The Dothraki woman held onto Sandor sobbing. “Listen to me Ziggi when I tell you I always wanted Fillies. I speak the truth. I swear it. You brought me not one but three! They are beautiful and strong Ziggi. Just like their mother. I am the luckiest man in Westeros.” He smiled at the woman.

Seeing Ziggi broken was tearing at his heart.

She sniffled and smiled wanly at Sandor.

“Really?”

“Yes! Your three fillies are the apples of my eye. They were the instant I saw them. I am proud to have them in my stable Ziggi. You are a fine Filly that all envy me having in my paddock. I fought for you Ziggi. A warrior fights for what he wants.” Sandor made sure their eyes were locked. “Right Ziggi? That’s what you said on the dock. You spoke true.”

She had smiled tremulously and her shoulders straightened slightly.
“You did choose wisely” she spoke in a shaky voice. Her eyes still looked unsure. “I am your mate. You were meant to come to me” she spoke in rising confidence. Her tears now stopped.

“Damn right I did. I thank your horse gods that it was you they sent across the seas to come to me Ziggi.”

Her smile grew stronger. Her body now squared.

“My life changed completely with you coming to me in my need on those docks Sandor. I am yours. Now and forever more. I too thank the gods of the Grass Seas for sending me to you.”

A lump had come in Sandor’s throat hearing that. Ziggi’s eyes had told him her words were true.

Sandor had berated himself later as he made his rounds around the Red Keep. It was just that seeing Ziggi so sad and fearful tore at his heart. He could never hurt her in that down state. He decided again to put off the confrontation. He wanted to make sure that Ziggi and her daughters were fully recovered from their ordeal the reasoned with himself. His heart lifted seeing Ziggi recover her swagger and her commanding attitude coming back to their quarters. He liked her fierceness and ‘defiant’ ways.

He felt better walking down the corridors of the Red Keep. He would keep this current situation as long as possible.

Now his stomach demanded that he partake of the excellent fair the Dothraki woman made for each meal. He felt the little body near his stomach as he had slept on his side. It was Zhalli snuggled into his side. She had gotten out of the bed the last three nights to get beside him on the furs by the fireplace. He had placed her back on the bed when she quickly fell asleep. Then a little later she was back and now grunting and burrowing into his side to show her displeasure in waking again in the bed and not beside Sandor. Last night he gave up and let her sleep with him. He noticed that a wrapped up Thaihhi was asleep beside him too.

This was not good Sandor thought.

Ziggi glanced over as he got up. A smile lit up her features.

“You wake my mate in this land”

“What did you say?!” Sandor was uneasy. Now that the crises had passed he was unsure of their relationship again.

“My fate is in your hand”

Sandor was not sure what she had said but decided to drop it. Like immediately. He knew he was getting in deeper. He was becoming more and more attached to the Dothraki in his care. His life was so much better now but he would be so hurt if they left him. He cast that thought off. He would work it out later.

“Why does Zhalli continue to want to sleep with me?” he asked the Dothraki woman. “The bed has to be more comfortable.”

“She saw you save us. She feels safe with you. Your presence reassures her. You are good to her. She loves you already. She wants to be near the father of her heart.”

Sandor squirmed but held his peace. His stomach rumbled again. The small Dothraki woman looked at his stomach.
“Sit” she said pointing at the table. He did not argue. Not with Ziggi’s cooking! His mouth was watering. He sat down and drooled at the pancakes, bacon, omelet and cut orange slices waiting him with a tall glass of warm goat milk. He immediately tucked in enjoying the excellent repast.

He would miss this when the Dothraki woman left. He felt a sadness wash over him but he knew it was necessary. It just would not be anytime soon. Ziggi needed more time to recover he told himself yet again.

He heard Zhalli getting up. She now appeared at his knee and held up her hands. He lifted her up and put her on his knee and started to cut up parts of the fair before him and feeding the sweet little girl. Soon Viqqi woke up and she was now on his other knee and he started to feed her. Both girls talking in their language though he suspected that Viqqi was more babble than language. The way they leaned forward to chomp down on the food on the proffered fork was so fun to watch Sandor thought. They were both so cute he mused to himself. Especially when they hugged him. The total trust and love in their eyes made Sandor lightheaded.

Soon Thailhi woke up and Ziggi fed the babe and changed her diaper of the kicking and gurgling girl who looked around curiously at her world.

Ziggi looked at Sandor with that intense stare that made the man very nervous. She somehow did that to him despite their size difference. She was still after him to accept her version of reality.

“You are my stallion” Ziggi announced without preamble. “Your filly is waiting impatiently. It is time you start performing your duty my stallion.”

A tremor ran through the tall warrior. His eyes now large. Sandor did not want to have conflict with the Dothraki woman so early in the morning. He used diversion.

“I am not a horse! I am a hound, a wolf, a direwolf! Arwwwoooo arrwwwooooo!” Nothing wrong with being a coward Sandor reasoned with himself.

Ziggi glared at him but when her two eldest girls started to get excited she backed off. *For now* Sandor thought nervously. Zhalli and Viqqi bouncing up and down on Sandor’s knees clapping their hands. Sandor watched the little girls laugh. The two girls tilting their heads back and adding their girlie howls to Sandor’s deeper howls as counterpoint.

Ziggi motioned for Sandor to get on the floor on all fours.

“What?” Sandor asked looking at her suspiciously.

“If you are a Direwolf then you need to act like one.” He started to protest but Ziggi motioned her head towards the little girls. Sandor now understood.

He got on all fours and started to howl tilting his head back. Zhalli and Viqqi started to clap their hands and squeal while they jumped up and down enthusiastically. The look of happiness on their faces made Sandor feel good.

Then Ziggi put the girls on his back. He protested.

“They will fall off!” he exclaimed.

“You will not let them” she answered simply. He worked around the open areas on his palms and knees while he howled with the girls on his back adding their little howls in counterpoint as they held onto his blouse top. All three laughing. Ziggi smiling at what she saw. The woman capturing the man’s heart by her actions and through her children.
Zhalli and Viqqi did not fall off.

After they had eaten they changed into their clothes for the day. Varys had come through for Sandor again when he came to Sandor’s quarters four days back with several stewards with boxes full of Dothraki clothes. The man seemed to be able to acquire anything the Lord Commander sought. The clothes sized for Ziggi and her children. The woman had gotten teary eyed seeing all the clothes. She hugged Sandor fiercely. The tall scared man looked around confused as he gently patted the woman on the back.

She needed clothes. Sandor wondered why she was so emotional about it.

Now, today he took the woman with him down to the nursey that was run for the staff and courtesans of the Red Keep. He had discovered that a Dothraki woman worked in the nursey. She had married a knight from the Stormlands when he travelled to Qarth. How they had met Sandor was not sure.

She wore Westerosi clothing but her look spoke plainly of her heritage. Her name was Rihevi. She and Ziggi excitedly talked in their native tongue as they walked around the nursey. The mother making sure she found that the nursey was worthy of taking care of her children. Sandor thought Ziggi liked what she saw and heard. She had a big smile on her face talking to a fellow woman of the grass seas of Dothrak.

As Ziggi talked to her fellow countrymen, Sandor had the two toddlers sitting on his armored feet. He walked around making a show of swinging his feet out, up and down. The girls giggling and hugging his legs. Sandor should have been embarrassed but he was not. Their eyes looking up at him with gaiety and complete trust touched Sandor’s heart. The little girls were so cute. He did think they looked like little rainbows and butterflies clinging to him.

Satisfied with what she had found Ziggi was ready to move on with Sandor.

“Our children will be well cared for here I think” she had told Sandor casually. He dare not contradict her. Not here in a nursey. “You are very gentle with Zhalli and Viqqi” she told the scared man. “I have chosen wisely. You will be an excellent father to them. You will never mistreat them.”

Of course he would not he thought vehemently to himself. He knew what it was like to be abused. As long as these precious little girls were with him Sandor would be good to them. They had done nothing wrong. He had decided to not correct Ziggi when she made her statements of him being her husband and father to her little girls. He blazing eyes and sharp tongue had put the fear of the seven in the tall Lord Commander. Better to run off with his tail between his legs than suffer a tongue lashing. *Cersei was enough to endure!*

Ziggi simply refused to see it any other way. He was mulling over what to do when the time came. He again decided to push any such time as far off into the future as possible.

A feeling of peace came to Sandor with his decision. Unfortunately, the next moment his state of satisfaction came crashing down. The nursey was on the second floor of Maegor’s Holdfast beside the main stairway up and down the castle. The nursey situated to allow for easy access. The second floor selected for the nursey to easily meet the needs of all in the Meagor’s Holdfast and the support staff housed in other nearby buildings. It was on the main concourse through the Holdfast.

Down the hall leading to the stairway came one Hellcat. A Hellcat named Cersei Lannister.

Sandor glared at the beauteous woman. Her dress deep red with gold traces on the lapels and in the
pleats of the skirt. Cersei had her hair up off her neck which only added to her beauty. It was a beauty that hid a vile heart Sandor knew. He hated always losing to the bitch!

The Lord Commander heard a loud growl beside him. He looked down and saw that Ziggi had stepped up to get partially in front of Sandor. Her face filled with her namesake defiance. Her eyes blazed at Cersei. Sandor worried about trouble. He had complained vociferously to Ziggi about Cersei’s repeated mauling. He had conveniently forgotten to mention that he initiated most of the conflicts he lost badly. He had to admit in his soul Ziggi’s obvious jealousy of Cersei made him feel like such a man. She saw Sandor for Sandor. It made his heart pitter patter.

Ziggi flexed her knees and glowered at Cersei in challenge. Sandor thought of getting back in front of Ziggi but then quickly decided she was probably better equipped to handle Cersei and her damn mouth. Cersei seeing the challenge coming her way smirked with a raised eyebrow. She walked forward with confidence.

Sandor was suddenly afraid something untoward might happen. Both women breaming with self-confidence.

That changed the next heartbeat. Cersei suddenly jerked to a stop with knees flexed and her arms spread out a she pressed herself against the opposite wall. Her eyes large with deep alarm. Her head jerking right and left her eyes frantically searching.

What the hell? Sandor thought. Cersei was looking intently beyond and behind them. Both Sandor and Ziggi looked in that direction. Sandor’s head shook. What the hell? All he saw was Sansa, Jeyne and their Direwolf pup Princess. The wolf had grown an inch or so and was a little heavier but still a small thing. Sandor looked back at Cersei. Yes. It was the Direwolf she was staring at as if the pup was a demon from the pits of hell. With a look back in the opposite direction Sandor saw that Princess was wagging her tail like a whip and prancing around. Then she took off with a start running towards them.

“OH Shit!” Cersei exclaimed. A rush of wind whipped past Sandor. Cersei had rushed by in a tizzy. Her hands holding up her skirt. At an unbelievable pace she reached the stairs and turned on a tack. She pelted up the steps her legs churning. Damn she is fast! Sandor thought. A yipping Princess came bounding up to the landing. She barked looking up at Cersei who had already reached the top floor and turned left. She ran like the furies of hell were after her.

Princess started to loop up the stairs but her mistresses raised their voices calling her back. The pup whined but did not go up after Cersei.

“What was that all about?” Jeyne asked looking up the stairwell.

“Yes, Cersei has to know that Princes would not hurt her” Sansa stated.

For a minute Sandor stood by with his girls … he meant the girls while Ziggi talked with Sansa and her always present friend. They parted ways. Ziggi liked them.

Sandor now led himself and Ziggi to the stables of the Red Keep. The little girls resting in the crook of his arms. Sandor did not want them tiring out with long walks. He did not want Ziggi while she was with him to be bored. Raising children was hard work but he sensed that Ziggi would want to get out and about some. The answer came to him easily. If there was one thing that Dothraki knew intimately were horses. How to care and tend the mighty beasts. He led the woman to the stables on the grounds of the Red Keep.

Two days ago he had conversed with one Charad Longthorpe. The man in charge of the stables.
He made his proposition to the man.

The man had royally pissed him off.

“The woman is a Dothraki. That makes her a heathen according to the septons Lord Commander. I am a pious man of the seven faced god. I don’t want to deal with her heretical beliefs. The Dothraki are a dirty and crass race.”

“Your religion is daft” Sandor replied hotly. “The seven gods all have their heads up their asses.” That had made the man glare at him. “And let me ask you a question.” The man arched his eyebrows asking for the question to be spoken. “Have you met a Dothraki?”

“No.”

“Then how and the hell do you know anything about them?”

“The septons say so. They dress like godless women. Exposing their charms for those wild men of theirs.”

“To her, you dress like a godless man – idiots – how would want to be treated in her land – there you would be the heathen.”

The man had no answer so he just scowled. He fell back on an old reliable fallback positions of the church of the seven.

“Well, that is what the Septons say” the man petulantly spoke. His bottom lips sticking out. “I am a man of faith.”

“They’re full of shit. They are too busy trying to bugger all the young boys they bring in as choir boys and stewards. You are full of shit.”

That had the man hot. The man knew he had to let Sandor bring the woman into his stables. Being the Lord Commander to the King gave Sandor privileges. Sandor as a course did not want to use those privileges but for Ziggi he would.

When they arrived and Charad saw Ziggi dressed in her leather leggings and her open vest showing the inside swale of her full rounded breast and narrow waist the man suddenly found he did not find her dress so ungodly. His eyes instead found a new religion Sandor groused to himself. A religion named Ziggi!

Charad took Ziggi around the stables. Soon four other stable hands were around to help explain anything she had a question about. Sandor trailed behind at a distance. Ziggi had Thaithi in a Papoose. The little girl asleep. Her bigger sisters were with Sandor excited to be around horses and the new environment. The large man shepherding them safely around.

Soon they were crawling all over him. He sighed. It was not worth the trouble of trying to pry them off his body. He eyed the men hovering around Ziggi. He would have gotten jealous, okay, he was jealous, but Ziggi totally ignored their not so subtle flirting and showed zero interest in the men. That made Sandor feel so good. He started to enjoy seeing the men’s frustration getting feathered by Ziggi’s ignoring of their overtures.

Keeping the little girls under control Sandor lost track that they had come up to Stranger’s stall. He had now had Zhalli straddling his neck playing with his hair and Viggi was cradled in the crook of his left arm. The small girl snuggled in playing with his armor. Sandor hurried to tell Ziggi to not get near the mean hearted horse. Stranger his heavy courser, was almost as large as a destrier but
much faster. The horse a handsome black stallion with a mean temper. He was gentle with Sandor Clegane, but aggressive toward anyone else.

He did not want Ziggi hurt! She reached out to his vile hearted horse. It was too late! Then his mouth gaped.

Stranger was acting strange! His stupid horse was lipping Ziggi’s hand and neighing lightly tossing his head. The horse enjoying the woman’s caresses. What the hell?! With a sense of wonder Sandor watched Ziggi pet his mean ass horse’s nose. Stranger pawed the ground and rippled his lips in pleasure. Traitor! Sandor stormed at his horse mentally.

All the men just gaped. All knew of Stranger’s evil heart. What was happening? It must be divine intervention Sandor decided. Maybe the stable master’s stupid gods had chosen to make his horse docile. Maybe Ziggi’s gods? He could not stop himself from staring at Ziggi with wonder. Stranger liked no one but him! He was jealous!

After several hours the men were completely under Ziggi’s spell. Hell, Stranger was under her spell the Lord Commander thought sourly. Sandor was fuming but controlled himself. He was jealous he knew with the men either leering at Ziggi or fawning over her trying to get her attention. Thankfully, the woman did not respond in the least. Sandor took a deep breath. She would soon be gone anyways. His heart in his chest rebelled at that thought. Life sucked Sandor groused sadly to himself.

Looking around the Dothraki woman knew she would fit in well here. If there was one thing the Dothraki knew it was horses. She had many things she could teach these heathens.

The beautiful Dothraki woman again looked over at Sandor who protectively kept her daughters safe in his grasp. Zahilli and Viggi laughing and babbling to her Sandor in their native tongue. Sandor answering a few times in poor Dothraki but he was trying. Her heart beat even harder for the man she had fallen in love with on those docks. Coming to her aid when no others had. A man willing to take on great odds to win her. He said it was for honor but his heart was hers from the moment their eyes met. She had felt it. He may have fought it but he was hers from that moment.

Ziggi came up to Sandor and touched his big hand. She smiled possessively seeing the large man tenderly hold her daughters. She felt him flinch. She was sorry for the hurt in his past life but it had saved him for her. She would make him forget all about his past hurts.

He would come to his senses soon enough. She would be patient. For a while longer.

They left side by side. Ziggi leaning into Sandor. The man did not even truly notice it concentrating on not dropping his precious charges. She snuck her arm around her tall, brave knight. His scars meant nothing to her. He was a handsome man take away those scars. Dothraki saw scars as badges of honor.

Charad Longthorpe looked at the retreating figures of Sandor and Ziggi. He was surrounded by this four mater stable hands.

Malrik Mollen whistled. “That is one hot woman! Damn I would like to ride that filly. Did you see her breast?!?” His eyes slightly addled.

Charad shook his head. “Damn! Some guys have all the luck! That woman is hot! Did you see
how she looked at the Hound? She only has eyes for him.”

“That is so unfair – he is a monster”

“Oh stuff it – he is not that bad really – you get used to it – he barks a lot but he never bites” Charad carped at his employees.

“But sleeping with him – do you think they have yet”

“Naw – not for that hussy not wanting it though – Sandor is still a virgin my man – he will die from it when she finally beds him.”

“Let’s start a pool! We need to bet when they do the nasty. How will we know though?” Mortin Brask said excitedly.

“Oh we will know. If nothing else that hussy will let all know she has bedded her Stallion” Charad answered. It had become known how Sandor had won the woman’s affections. He would not have put his life on the line that was for sure. To the victor goes the spoils the saying went. Luck dog … or was that Hound? The man snickered to himself.

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They were back in Sandor’s quarters in the Lord Commander’s rooms. He had put Zhalli and Viqqi down on the bed to let them take a several hour nap. He covered them up with several blankets and then a fur over top making sure they were safe and tucked in. He did not see Ziggi leering at his ass as he bent over to take care of her daughters. The woman clearly seeing his body underneath all his armor.

Thaihhi wiggled and kicked. Ziggi needed to start their evening meal. They would eat early today.

“Sandor. Could you please change Thaihhi.”

The large man hide his blanch. He put his hand in his pocket. Yes! He had the clothes pen there in case it was needed. He took the small girl from Ziggi. She was drowsy. He put her on the furs before the fire. The little baby girl came awake. Thaihhi stared up at him. Sandor stared back. She was so beautiful.

“Ziggi could you please come here.”

The woman came over and looked down. “What is it?”

Sandor watched the little girl draw up her legs and arms and then kick them down again and again. She was gurgling and had a big smile on her face. He looked up at Ziggi and then back down at the girl jerking her arms and legs in and out.

“Why is she acting so strange?” he asked perplexed looking back up at Ziggi. The baby gurgled louder and kicked harder. A stream of droll ran out the left side of her smiling mouth.

Ziggi laughed. “She is happy to see you Sandor. She is already falling in love with you. Like your other fillies already have.”

Geez!

Sandor was in a daze. Ziggi discombobulated the Hound with such talk.

He pulled the diaper back a little unknoting it. Whew. It was not deadly beneath the fabric. His life
was not in danger this day. The clothes pin unneeded this time. He proceeded to change Thaïhhi’s diaper making silly faces and sticking his tongue out at the baby. She kicked harder and gurgled louder. She was extremely pleased with herself.

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Finally.

The army of the North was once more in the field and heading south to King’s Landing. Robb Stark was glad that camp had been struck and his army was on the march again. The Lannisters had been allowed to move unmolested as it marched to King’s. To allow them to pass unmolested galled the young Heir to the Warden to the North but he followed his father’s directives. Even if he disagreed with them.

His army coming up on the rear of the Lannister army like coyotes picking at the detritus that all armies left in their wake. It was most frustrating not being able to fight the Lannisters. Of all the Houses of Westeros they were the most aggressive under Tywin Lannister and most willing to harm the local populace and practice scorched Earth tactics.

They were two days now below Ivy Inn pacing themselves to stay four days behind the progress of the Lannister army column marching on King’s Landing. Both sides had scout parties out that had touched the leading edge of each other’s army. Neither side was looking to fight now that King’s Landing was so near.

Robb’s father had laid out sweet enticements to bring the major players of Westeros to King’s Landing. Tywin had to fear that if he engaged the army of the North that Stannis or Mace would use the opportunity to fall on Tywin’s rear or exposed flank and decimate his forces. The two other Houses knew they were coming. The battle scared Lion would not risk that.

Also, Tywin’s army had been cut and bleed by the Druids in the mountains to the West and then in the rolling hills of the Western Riverlands. Add to that the hit and run attacks guided by Druids guiding of the forces of the Riverlands and forces from the Vale the Westerlands had been bled. Not enough to defeat the Lannisters or even harm their cohesiveness but they had been cut and slashed.

Robb was sure by now Tywin was wanting to reach King’s Landing and find peace. Eddard had asked the Druids and Robb with his allies to use asymmetrical attacks to confuse and slash the Lannisters. No major attacks and major losses but continued losses of lesser numbers to weaken both body and will. Inducements to push Tywin quickly to King’s Landing.

Beside Robb rode the leaders of Houses Karstark and Hornwood. They still grumbled about not taking the fight to the Lannisters. Robb rode on ignoring their remarks. The men never fell into disrespect with their comments. They knew the line they needed to tow but they were willing to go right up to that line. Robb ground his teeth. His second in commands were excellent commanders. He allowed a certain latitude in their complaining. He understood their need to vent. He agreed with his father’s plans and the tactics to achieve the permanent taking of the Iron Throne.

It didn’t mean he had to like the plans Robb’s father had laid out for them.

Suddenly, from the tall prairie grasses two Druids appeared not twenty feet from the small party of High Lords riding their war steeds in front of the army of the North. The men fighting to control their startled horses. Robb still found it totally disconcerting how these people just appeared as if from nowhere. He noticed that his companions were equally disturbed. They would be dead if the Druids had so wished it. Their picket lines had passed by these Druids unobserved. The Druids skills at stealth otherworldly.
The two pulled back the cowls to their dark green robes that were stripped with blacks and lighter shades of green. This allowed the Druids to completely blend into the grasslands. One was a woman who identified herself as Katryna Tarner. The man was Grahar Collinner. It was clear the man was subordinate to the woman and could care less. This also disturbed the High Lords of the North. It went against culture and the seeming order of the world.

The woman told them that a force of nearly seven thousand Lannisters had split off of from Tywin’s army. The force composed of light cavalry and bowmen on horseback. They were riding east and had just crossed Rumsfield Ford on the Tumbling Rocks River that flowed down from the God’s Eye where Harrenhall lie.

Robb’s father had told his son of the sins of House Stark against the Children of the Forest and their human allies. Those allies being these selfsame Druids. Robb squirmed but that was so long ago. Could he be blamed for the sins committed so long ago? He would not do have done what his ancestors had. He would have found a way to share the land. He felt a thrill knowing that the Queen of the faery people had come to King’s Landing. He was anxious to meet this Leaf.

The Lannister force sought to ambush Dundarrion. They must have received some intelligence on the man’s whereabouts and hopefully ambush the man who had tormented them for months now. That would not be happening. The ravens of the Druids kept close eye on the Lannisters moving in the trackless animal trails that crisscrossed the sharp hills of the countryside to the west of Robb. Dundarrion giving the Lannisters tantalizing glimpses of his forces only to disappear again.

Robb thought quickly. His father had told him to not engage the main army of Tywin Lannsiter. He did not order Robb to not come to the aid of the commander contending with the forces of Jaime Lannister and Gregor Clegane. Now Tywin wanted to upset that balance. Robb’s arguments were sophistry but he could overlook the specious nature of his thoughts.

This was unacceptable Robb reasoned to himself. He called for his squire to break out the maps of the general area. He saw the interest in Rickard Kartark and Halys Hornwood’s eyes. They brought their horses closer to Robb.

“Do you mean to fight?” Karstark asked clearly dubious.

“My father said to not engage Tywin’s army directly. This force is meant to ambush elements of Dundarrion’s force. I am only coming to an ally’s aid. Dundarrion has been fighting the good fight for months now. It is time he received additional succor.”

Hornwood nodded his head vigorously and Karstark smiled.

The maps soon arrived. Robb pulled off to the side of the road and dismounted. He spread out the maps on the ground as his commanders surrounded the folded out maps. He looked at the map of the area that the Lannisters were riding through. The two Druids joined them.

There was a main track down a valley in the rift of hills of that country. The valley not obvious to the main roads of the area. Dundarrion had been using this to move his forces quickly to strike and retreat from the Lannister forces of Clegane. Evidently, it had been discovered. Tywin was hoping to turn the tables on Dundarrion.

What the leader of the Lannisters could not perceive was that his every move was watched on high by ravens by day and owls by night. The Druids embedded with the forces loyal to House Stark had their familiars constantly watching the enemy or carrying messages across the battlefield.

Robb calculated what could be done. He needed to give the Lords of Hornwood and Karhold
another boon. These men were fierce warriors. They were still restless over not directly confronting the forces of House Lannister. Robb wanted, no, needed to show he could be bold.

“If we ride with horses to swap out every ten to twelve miles we should be able to make seventy-five miles in a day. That will get us to the area we need to be” Robb stated pointing to a spot on the left most map. “I will need to use our reserve of two hundred horses and strip four hundred light cavalry of their horses. They will not be happy I know but it must be done. With that we will be able to have one hundred heavy knights we can take to the attack.”

“Once we have arrived at our destination we can send the excess horses back to be repatriated to their riders. They will have fulfilled their need.”

“We will spread out our armor and weapons over the horses to even the load. We want to be fresh for an attack.”

“Finally” Karstark breathed.

Robb ignored him.

“Katryna Tarner, how quickly can you get word to the force we sent out ten days ago to come to this new location? I think they were fifty miles to the south.”

“Actually, we suspected our foe might be planning an ambush on this hidden lane. We sent word three days ago to our Druid brethren with that force. They are nearing the location even now.”

This was excellent news. Robb did not mind the Druids taking the initiative. He had given them the leeway to guide the force as they saw necessary if they thought the situation warranted it. They had. Not in the manner he meant but their initiative was working to his benefit. Robb could not help but smile. He would have time to survey the land.

“Send word we are coming. Katryna scout out the land for tracks we can use. Once we arrive Grey Wind can help sniff out paths if more need to be found. He is good at it. We need to precisely track the Lannisters to plan our attack to have maximum affect.”

“Send word to Dondarrion to put some men on that lane to use as bait. With the Druid’s ravens we can make sure that our forces are not ambushed and the Lannisters are.” Robb looked up self-satisfied. He felt he was doing well in planning this major counterstrike. He saw approval in Rickard Kartark and Halys Hornwood faces.

“With one hundred heavy knight we can make a charge into the Lannister’s at a time of our choosing. They are light cavalry so our attack should be devastating.”

“I want to have time to scout the area. Their Bowman could cause us excessive causalities.”

“There are losses in any battle Robb” Karstark calmly told his liege.

“Yes, Rickard but let’s work to reduce ours and maximize our enemy’s losses.”

Rickard tilted his head to his Lord and liege “Agreed.”

For the next three hours the horses were gathered and the load balanced between the horses. One hundred of the best knights were selected. The men jostling and shouting out to be selected. Robb was happy to see the enthusiasm of the men wanting to join the expedition to take the fight to the Lannisters. He relied on his captains to make the selection of the best men to take on this strike force.
Then they were off. They would be able to get in four maybe five hours of riding this day. As he felt the trail reverberate underfoot of his steed, Robb knew this would be good. This late afternoon sojourn would split the strain of the ride on the horses. It would allow the men to rest as well. The horses were in excellent condition and had been trained to exert maximum effort but splitting the ride could only help all involved.

Robb enjoyed the feel of the warm breezes on his face as they rode at speed across the green landscape. The land dotted with farmsteads. Some had been totally destroyed in previous marauding raids by the Lannisters. Other had been damaged, some severely. Some of the farmers had returned to their ravaged homesteads.

The men, women and children cheered the banner of the Direwolf as it fluttered on the standards. The populace happy to see the force that was fighting to preserve their way of life. Their fast pace and spare horses showed they rushed to battle. It did not matter to these people that Robb and his force were from the North. The populace knew they had come south to save them. Their cheers loud as they rode by. The men of Robb’s force returned the waves and gave war shots in return. The notes of war horns being blown to lift spirits of both parties. The knights unsheathed their swords and waved them in the sky as they rode by the cheering farmers and hold crafters exciting them further.

As the sun neared the horizon the troop halted their fast ride and made camp. They set out scouts and prepared quick meals of trail mix and hard tack. The men checking the condition of the horses. As the sky darkened a Druid appeared. The man told them that there was no Lannisters near. The assurance allowed the men to relax and get rest. All had learned to trust totally the pronouncement of the Druids. With their familiars overhead surprise was impossible when under the protection of the Druids.

In the early morning light, they were again off on their fast march. The day the same as the day before. In the early hours of the afternoon they saw three Druids on a low hill surrounded by taller hills. The robbed figures standing like the Titan of Braavos Robb thought. Their strength indisputable. They had arrived where they needed to be. A rush of emotions went through the young man. He was about to experience his first taste of combat. He was nervous but he was ready. His father had prepared Robb for this day.

Robb led his party up the hill to the waiting Druids. The man leading the Druids told Robb that the Lannisters were two hours down the main track beyond the line of hills before them. The broad hidden lane used by the locals to traverse the roundabout land. The Druids telling Robb this was a perfect spot for ambush. After a quick review Robb completely agreed. The Druids told Robb that nearly forty Druids had gathered for the coming battle.

Robb’s eyebrows rose at that. He had experienced that the Druids did not normally gather in such large numbers when outside of their home territories. He queried the Druids on this.

“This is a major battle for you Robb. You are the son of Eddard Stark and the brother too the Direwolf. We will support your battle with maximum effort. The Lions are an abomination to the Land. They rape and pillage. We will help in striking them down. They remind of us the men in the time of the Age of Heroes as you call it. We have another name for that time.”

Robb did not query for the name the Druids gave that time. He knew he could not undo the past. He caught the honorific given to his sister. To hear his sister so elevated was a little shocking. To impress these impressive warriors Arya must truly be becoming a fierce warrior indeed. He took this information in for further thought.

He received a further surprise. Coming into view from the north by east a small party appeared. On
their raised standards was the sigil of a forked purple lightning bolt on black field speckled with four-pointed stars. The motto below ‘Fear the Lightning’. It was the standard of House Dondarrion of Blackhaven. It was an old house from Blackhaven in the Stormlands. Their home was Blackhaven, the castle of the great Marcher Lords. It was located in the Dornish Marches near the Boneway, controlling the pass to Dorne.

At the head of the riders was Beric Donadarrion. Robb observed Beric. He was a slight man. He was handsome with red-gold hair. He rode a black courser. He was wearing a black satin cloak decorated with stars. His breastplate displayed a forked purple lightning bolt. He carried a black shield slashed by lightning. The reports had said Beric was dashing but an inexperienced young man.

The war had changed that. He now had an air of competence and confidence about him. The arrivals of the Druids to his side had totally changed the complexion of his fight against the Lannisters. He had been on the defensive but now he was the aggressor. He decided when and where the attacks began and ended.

Beside him rode Thoros of Myr. He was a red priest of R’hllor from the Free City of Myr. He was a tall, fat man in his flapping red robes he was famous for. Robb saw that he indeed did shave his head and had a smooth face. He was said to be genial. It was reported he man enjoyed wine. He was said to joke that he became a red priest because the robes would hide wine stains that occurred when he became inebriated. He had been a close friend of Robert Baratheon. The man now gladly gave his support to the forces opposing the Lannisters.

The two men rode up to Robb along with Beric’s honor guard. Robb asked them why they were there.

“The Druids told us you would be coming.” This surprised Robb. They must have known that Beric would be anxious to strike a further blow. “We have eighty men with us. I think the Lannisters will be incensed seeing my standard waving before them. They will be most anxious to have at me throwing caution to the wind. They would follow me into the seven hells to have revenge. I doubt they will notice much else.”

Robb was both impressed and touched. The men were brave offering to be the bait for the trap to be set for the Lannisters. To offer this service themselves showed their loyalty to both his father and now Robb. They rode to the low hills off in the near distance.

The Druids had disappeared into the land but he knew they were near. Beric pointed to the hidden lane when they crested the low hills. He explained to Robb how it had been instrumental in letting him move his forces against the Lannisters. Here on this side of the lane the hills were gently rolling down to the lane. On the other side of the lane the hills were steep with some knife edged. Robb sent Grey Wind out to scout the trails. Down the land from the north came the column he had sent out two weeks ago. They came up the hills and down the other side.

Robb agreed this was the perfect place for an ambush. He would spread his forces out a thousand yards. He picked out easy channels for the horses to storm down the hills upon the Lannisters.

He had two hundred archers dismount and had them find locations near the trackway to hid and prepare their quivers for easy firing. The three guide Druids reappeared. They told Robb they proposed to put ten Druids in the sharp hills across the way. The other now nearly fifty Druids would intersperse with the archers of Robb’s forces. The Druid numbers growing with the various parties coming together.

Robb agreed. The knights’ armor were brought forward. The men and horses prepared to armor up
in the afternoon light and warmth. Dondarrion moved off down the lane to lie in wait to entice the Lannisters into the ambush site. Robb told the man to make sure to stay in front of the Lannisters. Let his force fall on them before turning to fight. The man agreed.

The night before Robb had been restless. The adrenalin rushing in his veins made him anxious. He was happy when the sky began to lighten in the east so he could ride off to his destiny.

Now his destiny had arrived.

He was surrounded by Karstark, Hornwood and the other knights. The men who would charge down the hills into the Lannisters. The men quickly put on the armor helping each other to tie leather tongs and snap in place their armor. Soon they were ready to mount their warhorses and move up on the small ridge line just out of sight of the lane below.

Robb had don his armor as well as his horse. His steward helping the late teenager to put the armor in place and then tie the thongs and interconnect clasps to each piece in place as the armor was put on. He ate a light meal of oats and drank a cup of water. His stomach was tight. He needed to be ready and prepared for the coming fight.

A Druid came to him. The Lannisters were an hour down the road. Dondarion was positioned to come into view several miles down the road and lead the Lannisters into the trap.

Time seemed to crawl to Robb. The seconds like minutes and the minutes like unto hours. He noticed that even Rickard was antsy as he too waited for the attack to commence. He looked over at Robb with an expression of ‘what do you expect’ and continued to fret like everyone else. Yet time moved on. Robb began to sweat and he ordered all under his command to drink from their canteens. They needed to stay hydrated to be at maximum strength for the coming battle.

Then four ravens came storming down the lane at fifty feet. They circled wildly cawing over what Robb assumed must be their hidden Druid masters. The Druids unseen maybe fifty yards up from the lane. Then the birds gained altitude and rose up into the sky no doubt providing vision to their Druids. Many other ravens up in the sky as well. The birds providing sight to their familiars. Soon they were only black dots flying around up high. The birds great height would be unseen if not looking for them.

Robb was on hyper alert. He was dismounted just below the rim of the hill he was on. He anxiously waited and felt a bolt run through him when a minute later Dondarrion’s force came into view. Their horses pelting furiously down the lane. It was strange the things you noticed when adrenaline was running hot in your veins. Robb swore to himself he could see each clod of dirt thrown up by the horses’ iron shod hooves.

Soon, a half mile behind them came the Lannisters. The men whipping their horses urging them on to catch up to the retreating figures before them. They were ever so slowly catching up to the fleeing troop of Dondarrion. The Lannister shouting and working their spurs on their horses. The light cavalry surging forward to attack the man who had been tormenting them for months now.

The titillation of catching their enemy must have the Lannisters in a lather Robb thought. He watched the drama unfold before him.

Along the hidden undulations of the hills the archers were putting arrows to string their bodies almost thrumming as much as their strings would be in moments. The horse beside Robb on each side were pawing the ground. Their riders anxious to begin their charge down the slopes of the hill they were hiding behind.
Deric and his command came by in front of Robb’s position. His men whipping their horses to keep their pace going but it was clear the horses were beginning to tire. The Lannisters were closing. Robb was certain he could feel the excitement coursing in the bodies of his foes. Their foe would soon be theirs was the thought in the Lannister’s minds.

Suddenly, horses tumbled and men were thrown from their horses on the far side of the Lannister formation. The Druids with the long reach of their longbows had started the attack from the jagged hills. A war horn sounded beside Robb. In a rush all the archers on this side of the lane among the rolling hills rose up and let loose. A cloud of arrows like angry wasps rose up in the air and buzzed into the Lannister formation now in front of them.

Again horse and men were hit. Horses stumbled and threw riders causing other horses to lose their balance. Other horses bucked with arrows sticking out their whither and some seemed to not notice at all the arrows impacting their bodies. Men were hit. Some fell off. The light armor deflected many of the arrows of the forces of the North. Their smaller bows did not have the power of the Druid longbows. The arrows were effective though in getting the attention of the Lannisters and disorientating them.

More flights of arrows whistled into the Lannisters throwing them into deeper confusion. The leaders of the Lannister trying to get control of their men. The Lannisters forgetting about Dondarrion whose horses ran on down the lane. They had a new foe. They began turn their formation to meet the threat that had appeared.

Robb shouted for the light cavalry column to form up. The need for stealth long gone. He had to raise his voice to carry over the tumult from below. Men worked their reigns to get their horses under control. Their war mounts excited by the tension in the air. Quickly, Robb saw his command was ready. Swords had been drawn. Arrows had been notched. His steward lifted the war horn and blew stridently into it.

Now the horse cavalry of the North came pelting into view and charged down the hills. The Lannisters formation became more confused seeing the horse charging down on them. Arrows flying in from both sides hitting and taking down Lannisters. Dust was rising now obscuring views of the archers. It did not matter as arrows were let loose into the milling formation. Many would miss but they added to the confusion. Now arrows were coming up the hills as Lannister archers recovered from their surprise and fired at the forces attacking them.

Many of the Lannisters started to move up the hill to meet the surging attack. Arrows flying in both directions. The Lannisters out in the open were at a decided disadvantage. The light cavalry of the North charging down the hills were exposed to return arrow fire. Robb saw several men and horse feathered. One the men falling off his horse limp. Other hit and wounded.

Robb considered as he watched the countercharge of the Lannisters. He thought that a mistake. The momentum of the charge coming down on them was much greater. The mounted horses now running down the hills past the hidden archers. He saw the cavalry storming down on the men of House Lannister. The charge tight to achieve maximum affect but beginning to disperse picking out targets to engage. The forces of the North did not hesitate in their charge.

The collision of the forces was mighty. The Lannisters line sagged but did not break. The forces of the North with the advantage of height hit the charging Lannisters like an avalanche. Riders were thrown off their horses or had legs crushed by colliding horse bodies. Horses screaming as they bit and kicked at their enemy. Men hacking desperately at each other. Horses now turning around as their masters attacked each other. The forces merging into individual bodies of striving men. The superior size of the Lannister force took the charge falling upon it and did not fall into disarray.
Robb watched the two sides fighting desperately. The men hacking and cursing as they fought to take their foe down and to live. Horses wielded around in circles while others charged into a foe. Others bucked and ran off now rider less. Robb looked to the hills to see if he could see the archers. They were now standing in the clear. They no longer needed to hide. The archers had ceased firing wildly and now were juking their heads looking for clear shots at Lannister horse and man. Robb watched a bowman suddenly stiffening and firing off an arrow. The archers at times ducking themselves as arrows were shot off at them. The wild melee had the Lannister arrow fire inaccurate.

Dondarion had ridden off. He had performed his duty. Robb saw the Lannisters were in general confusion but were fighting with skill and verve. The officers of the Lions organizing the men around them to meet the charge of the Direwolves and now starting to surge against their attackers. The Lannisters though caught by surprise had superior numbers. They were able to absorb the attack. The Lannisters spreading out and coming onto the positions of the archers. Horses kicking up the gradual slope of the hills to get at their tormentors. The archers retreating while firing.

Other Lannister forming small knots of men to counterattack the cavalry that had charged into them. The initial confusion of the surprised Lannisters giving way to organized resistance. The men fought bravely Robb saw. It was a shame their allegiance was misplaced Robb thought.

Robb could not help be fascinated by the difference between his men’s arrows and the arrows of the Druids. His men’s arrows would strike men and leave their arrows jutting out their bodies but did not sink deep into armor or body. The long arrows of the Druid longbows was a totally different matter. Men were thrown off their horse with arrows sunk half way through their body. Horses were bucking wildly driven mad with pain from the Druid arrows jutting out flanks and hunches.

The confusion of battle gripped Robb he was now discovering. He had doubted his sister but she had thrown herself into many battles now. His father would not exaggerate her deeds. The courage she must have shown inspired him. He was scared shitless seeing the melee before him. He was separated from the battle and he still felt the wild chaotic contest of wills. Men fighting for survival. He took a deep breath. His father had prepared him for this years ago. Robb remember his question to his father when he was eleven.

“Have you ever felt fear in battle father?”

“Every time Robb. The first time I went into battle my knees shook so bad I feared I would fall down on my face. I was scared shitless—uh, excuse my Dorne son. All warriors use that fear to sharpen their senses and hone their reflexes. Use that fear to live son. War is a horrible way to resolve conflicts Robb, but, if it comes to war then embrace it. Conquer your fear and conquer your foes.”

Robb used that advice now. His breathing calmed. With focused critical eyes Robb assessed the battlefield below him. The Lannister force were organizing but were beset from two sides. He heard war horns from down the lane. Beric Dondarion was charging back into the fray with his eighty men and two hundred more men Robb had hidden down the lane for this moment. Robb could not stop the stray thought of now the Lannisters were beset on three sides now. Like Lions savaged by a large pack of biting Hyenas.

The new force slammed into the fore of the Lannister forces. More shouts, slashes and dying occurring. Then Robb saw that a large force of Lannisters were pushing through the line of the North and were threatening to turn the flanks of the line of archers and start to attack the men from horseback. Their casualties would quickly mount.

Karstark and Hornwood saw it as well. Robb jumped up on his horse and pulled his lance up off the
horses flank and adjusted his grip behind the vamplate. He made sure his hand was snugged tight into the small circular plate to prevent the hand sliding up the shaft upon impact. He saw all his fellow knights dropping their lances into the forward position. Horses were wheeled around to be in place for the charge. Up and down the line horse heads jerked and men made adjustments in their saddles preparing for the charge.

He nodded towards Karkstark. The man lifted his war horn.

AAARRWWOOOOOO AAARRWWOOOOOOO AAARRRRWWOOOOO

The howl of the Direwolf filled the air.

As one, the men of Robb’s knight cavalry crested the hill. The sun glinting off their armor as they crested the hill. The knights made final adjustments to their lances and looked right and left. The horses started their charge down the hill in their armor and heraldry. Robb glanced to his sides and saw the tassels many of the men wore from their crests streaming in the air behind as their mounts stormed down the hill to the waiting Lannisters. The colors bright in the sunshine. The various heraldry resplendent as they rode down the hill.

Robb screamed in elation. His blood pumping hotly in his veins. Beside him Grey Wind bounded the ground running to keep up with his human. Slaver flinging out his open mouth. As he ran Grey Wind added his own mighty howl to the cacophony of confusion and approaching death.

Robb picked his target and angled his horse towards that man and horse. The Lannister saw him coming in time to jump his horse aside. Robb cursed as he went rushing by. He selected another target in a split second his horse storming forward. He did not practice jousting much he cried out in his mind. He missed the man but his warhorse slammed into the man’s mount. The horse stunned went stumbling to the side going to its knees. The man thrown clear of his mount.

Robb fought to keep his balance his lance tumbling forward out of his grip. He saw to his right Rickard run his lance clean through the body of a Lannister. The man dead already when Rickard horse slammed into the dead man’s mount. Halys target had seen him coming and juked his horse to the side. Still, Halys’s lance grazed the man on his ribs shattering them and nicking the man’s lungs. The blow spinning the man off his mount.

Other knights were ramming into their targets with devastating effect. Men squired like pigs on a spit. Some horses taking lances clear through their bodies. Their screams of agony something horrid to hear.

Robb immediately whipped out his sword and started to slash at the Lannisters and parry their own strokes at him. He blocked the swords strikes of a man to his right. Back and forth they slashed at each other. The men surging their horses into their foes trying to topple them over. Suddenly the man was gone in the melee.

Another man with a Warhammer came upon Robb from that side. The two weapons colliding. Then the man hit Robb in the breastplate. The small head of the Warhammer delivered the full impact into Robb’s body. He cried out in pain as he stabbed forward with his sword jerking his horse around into the man. The momentum of the move allowed his sword to penetrate the chain mail and thick leather doublet. The blade of Robb’s sword sunk into the man’s upper chest at the shoulder. Tendons and muscle severed. The man’s hand dropped the weapon.

Robb slashed the man across his back as he passed. The chain mail prevented the blade biting flesh but the chain mail links driven into the leather and jammed into the man’s back. To his left Robb saw Grey Wind grip the rear leg of a warhorse of the Lannister’s and jerk his head shattering bone
and cutting tendons. The horse crashing to the ground screaming. The rider’s body trapped and his body crushed by the wallowing horse’s weight.

Around Robb turned his charger. He saw a Lannister fall from his horse with two North arrows in him. He saw a Druid trampled by a horse and then stomped on. Robb screamed and fell on the man attacking the Druid. Their horses colliding violently. The two men slashed at each other with their swords. Their free hands grappling with their foe. Bodies jerked and shoved back and forth.

Robb shoved himself back and hacked his sword down on the back of the Lannister’s gauntlet covered none dominate hand. The blade partially cutting through the thinner armor. The man roared his hand maimed. He stabbed at Robb in desperation. Robb knocked the next sword swipe away and landed his blade on the man’s neck partially severing his throat. Blood spewed everywhere. The man’s screams half choked through the blood gushing out his mouth and down his throat.

A loud clang sounded in Robb’s ears as a battleax rebounded off his back. He was stunned and nearly disembowled from his horse. A man wearing Dondarrion’s colors was there and engaged the man with the battleax. Robb circled off getting his wind back. He saw a Lannister fighting a Hornwood knight. He charged in from the rear of the Lannister and hacked savagely across the man’s shoulder. The blade turned aside but the man was barely still on his horse. The man of House Hornwood slammed his horse into the side of the horse with the leaned over Lannister. The impact of the violently colliding horses crushed the man’s body and he fell limp to the ground.

Time both seemed to flash by and slow way down to Robb. He was parrying blows and sending out his own at his circling foes. He slammed his sword into the side of a man’s neck the blade sinking into his spinal column. The man instantly killed by his sword lodged in his spine. He jerked back wildly as the slumping man threatened to unhorse Robb while the dead body slumped down the side of his horse. Robb finally jerked his blade free his body all twisted over holding onto his sword. He gritted his teeth and righted himself on his horse.

He saw a man about to part his own head from his shoulders. Off balance Robb knew he would never get his sword up in time to defend himself. Without warning Rickard was there and blocked the down stroke of the Lannister’s longsword. The two men swirling around each other slashing with wild abandon. Before Robb could go to Karstark’s aid he was engaged with his own enemy swordsman. The two men swinging hard and blocking each other’s sword strokes.

The man engaged his sword. With no warning he released his left hand and punched Robb in the face when the pressed in close to each other. Then in a swirl the two horses separated. Robb was alone with separate battles all around. He dug his heels into the sides of his horse.

He rode on looking for foes. A battleax slammed into his shoulder. The armor blunted the blow and sent the blade glancing away but the shock of the blow had Robb’s left arm semi numb. He yelled at the blow and now yelled to physic himself up to concentrate around the pain. He traded blows with a large Lannister. Their blows blocked or glancing off armor. He ducked a swipe and was able to stab the man in the groin where the armor came together.

The man roared in pain and pivoted his horse away from Robb. The young Stark was nearly unseated when a Lannister horse slammed into the rear haunches of his horse. Robb holding on for dear life. He started to turn to meet this foe but was unbalanced. He man was thrown back with a longbow arrow that slammed into his forehead with the arrow point exploding out the back of the man’s head. The man stiffly rode on for five yards before the corpse toppled over.

Time went on. Men and horse screaming. All around was noise and dust. The striving of foes to kill and survive.
It took Robb a minute to realize that the battlefield was now almost calm. The still mounted Lannisters had broken and were flying back down to the lane and riding to the west. A flurry of arrows chased the retreating Lannisters. Men were shot off their horses and a few horses shot dead toppling their riders. Other men hit but rode on wounded.

The man who would one day be the Warden of the North felt his body shake with the rush of adrenalin and no battle to use it. He looked around. He felt a great satisfaction run through his veins. He had performed well in his first combat. Robb had conquered his fear and took the fight to the Lannisters.

He saw dead from the North and the Stormlands but they were few. The hillside and lane was littered with Lannister dead and wounded. It was a sea of dead Lannisters with only islands of North and Stormland dead interspersed in the sea of Lannister red.

It was a big victory. Robb would take it. His men had fought valiantly with savage power. He had performed well himself he knew. He had proven himself. The Lannisters had suffered yet another large defeat.

Robb smiled a feral smile.

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It was four days after the battle of Fullsom Hills Lane. Robb was back in his camp of the Army of the North. He had arrived back yesterday in the late afternoon. The sun starting to turn red as it approached the horizon. His shoulder was finally starting to stop throbbing. He exercised it every few hours to keep it from stiffening up.

He had ridden back to his army at a moderate quick pace. Karstark and Hornwood had been happy all the way back. They had finally been able to take out their frustrations on the Lannisters directly. The North had lost seventeen men. The Stormlands seven. They had nearly forty men wounded. Some would never fight again. Robb hated every lost man but it had achieved a great victory. He was sure the Lannisters were still running back to Tywin. The image of their proverbial tails between their legs came to his mind more than once.

There had been three hundred and eighty-seven dead Lannister on the battlefield. The surprise of attack had served Robb and his force well. There had been over a hundred Lannister wounded with some fourteen dying over the night. Another nineteen had surrounded. The captured men treated if necessary and prepared to be marched back to the small town of Wentworth near the Chelsmware River. Those too injured would wait till wagons could come and wheel them off to the stockade. The men to be traded for captured forces of the Direwolf and its allies.

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Robb was in his war tent. His army was only two days out from King’s Landing. He smiled. He could not wait to see his father and his sisters.

He needed to see Tyrion Lannister. It was time to make an offer to the man. He agreed with his father’s assessments. Robb would never forget Tyrion’s help with Bran in the making of a saddle to allow his young brother to ride. The dwarf had kept his temper, well mainly, despite Robb’s mother constantly haranguing the small man. True he had used loaded dice when playing Robb in craps but he had almost come clean when caught.

“I swear I don’t know how those loaded dice got in my possession” Tyrion looked around trying to act surprised. A calculating look gleamed in Tyrion’s eyes. “It must have been your mother. You
see how she attacks me! She framed me!” he shouted throwing his head back. One eye open
surveying the scene to see if his tripe had been believed.

Robb’s mother in the tent watching the men play their game of chance. She had carped and kicked
at the seat of Tyrion’s pants. The dwarf running around in circles holding his ass in self-defense.
His mother running after the dwarf still kicking out at him. Robb thought that Tyrion was amazingly
fast with fear of his mother motivating his actions.

Again Robb had to wonder at this strange dynamic between his mother and the dwarf. It was
obvious they both enjoyed this give and take of insults. It humanized his mother. He liked the smile
on her face giving Tyrion the business. She had accepted that Tyrion had in fact not attempted the
second attempt on Bran’s life. He wondered if this was his mother’s way of telling the dwarf she
was sorry.

All knew she would never say it. Tyrion seemed to enjoy the contest of wills as well but would
never admit it himself.

Now said dwarf entered into the tent. He had his chest puffed out and walked with a regal strut. He
had on his best finery that the Druids had been nice enough to make for him. The silks did make him
look princely. The red silks had gold male lions stitched on the chest and upper sleeves. Goat skin
knee high boots fashioned for Tyrion’s stature. His pantaloons stuffed into the top of the boots
bulging out at the marge. He stepped into the tent his nose tilted up. It was obvious the finery had
gone to his head. He walked in a stately gate of an august personage. He looked from side to side
with a regal bearing.

The dwarf waved to all in the tent. His wrist rigid making his palm rotate right and left. A wicked
glint in Tyrion’s eyes.

Oh brother Robb moaned to himself. Tyrion never stopped with his antics.

The tent flap was thrown up again. Tyrion’s eyes went large looking back. Robb’s mother entered
her head swiveling. Her eyes lit up seeing Tyrion. She started to move towards the dwarf.

Tyrion squealed in a loud bleat and rushed to get to the table between himself and Catelyn Stark.
Robb had a bowl of meat rolled in cheese and bread. There was a second bowl filled with light
crackers. Tyrion quickly ate a rolled meat and several crackers. Slivers of meat and cracker crumbs
falling out his mouth with loud gulps of swallowed food.

“I claim Guest Right!” Tyrion shouted out. Then stuck his tongue out at Robb’s mother.

Both Starks shook their heads and rolled their eyes.

Robb asked Tyrion to sit in the chair. The chair for Tyrion sat on a platform with steps to allow
Tyrion to sit on level with Robb and his mother now seated beside her son.

“Tyrion, I have invited you here because of unique qualities you have.” The Dwarf preened. “You
are a degenerate and a cheat. You always try to chisel people out of their hard won wages. You
have a love of lying. You seek out hedonistic pleasures.”

“Here, here!” his mother chimed in. Tyrion glared at her.

“You spend gold dragons as if the world will end on the morrow. You love to drink, game and
whore. You try to cheat on paying bills. You come up with schemes to embezzle funds from
businesses and rich patrons.”
“Those bastards tried to chisel me!” Tyrion jumped up out of his seat in a huff. “I don’t have to sit here and take this.” The dwarf made sure to bang his boots on the steps down from the chair he had been sitting in. He stomped towards the tent flap. His steps slowing as he neared the flap of the tent. His steps getting smaller now that he was almost at the egress of the tent. Tyrion casting surreptitious glances back at Robb. His steps now on top of each other.

“I have an offer for you to have a seat on the Small Council from my father, Tyrion.”

“In that case” Tyrion made a complete turn and rushed back up to the steps to his elevated chair and then sat down on the thick comfortable cushion. The color royal red as a boon to Tyrion.

“Son!” Robb’s mother whined.

“Tyrion” Robb spoke looking directly at the dwarf. “Those qualities that I listed make you perfect to be the Master of Coin. Peytr Balish has cooked the books of the Iron Throne. The schemes are convoluted and contrived. We need a sharp mind to decipher the machinations of the man. We are sure you can decipher the convoluted schemes of Petyr Balilsh.”

“Also, we are sure that your father has committed fraud in his figures on the loans he has given to the Iron Throne. You know your father. We hope you can pierce his veils of deceptions. We fear that House Tyrell has been less than honest themselves.”

“We have heard how you improved the sewers of Casterly Rock. You studied geology and helped your family find new veins of gold, silver and precious stones in new chambers deep in Casterly Rock.”

“When you focus you are quite capable. My father wants to bring those talents into service of the realm. Will you take the job of Master of Coin?”

Robb saw Tyrion pretending to be thinking it over.

His mother looked like she might have a conniption fit. “Robb! The man is a sneak and a fraud” Catelyn Stark barked as she pointed accusingly at the dwarf. “He may be innocent in Bran’s attempted murder but he is a stunted pint sized geek. He is a whore loving son of a bi—”

“I accept the positon of the Master of Coin, Robb. I will serve you well” Tyrion spoke loudly to make sure his acceptance was heard.

“Robb!” Catelyn Stark cried out.

“Pphhhfhhhh!” Tyrion answered his antagonist. His tongue sticking out wagging out at his tormentor.

Robb watched his mother take her first two fingers and point them at her eyes and then swiveled them towards Tyrion. The message clear. I will be watching you.

With a shake of his, Robb wondered what his father would think of this new dynamic between his wife and the dwarf.

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Arianne was sitting on the bench before the dresser with the large mirror. She was getting ready for the mixer that Eddard Stark was putting on this early evening. He was not a man for parties she had read but he felt he needed to give the courtesans a party to enjoy and intermingle. The Courtesans from across Westeros to allow the Houses to mix and mingle and hopefully bring a better
understanding of each other.

Dorne had the equivalent. Sunspear trying to connect with the Lords in the mountain passes of Prince's Pass and the Boneway lands further to the west in the many mountain ranges of eastern Dorne.

The heir to Dorne felt her head pulled back slightly with each brush of the comb through her thick luxurious midnight black hair. The rhythmic cycle of the brush through her locks relaxing. Ellaria at times massaging her scalp. Arianne felt a tingle in her breast and further down south but tamped it down. She was stimulated in other ways currently. Ellaria’s personal chambermaid, Eyva Maeson, was adjusting the ties and buttons on Arianne’s dress she was wearing to the party. The woman provided to House Martell by their new King. The women were there to meet the courtly needs of Arianne’s house. The women were quickly involved in meeting other needs. Needs they were most willing to help with.

The busty woman with black hair made sure her hands copped generous feels of Arianne’s own ample breast. The woman only half-heatedly pretending it was by accident. Arianne was not offended. She was a beautiful woman and women like herself and Eyva were attracted to beautiful women. Arianne made sure to keep her libido in check though. There was a time and place for unbridled passion.

She smiled looking over at her bed. In it slept Cathelyne Crook. Her own personal chambermaid. The slender seventeen year old blonde conked out snoring away. Her sweet face angelic in her sleep. It had not been that last night. Arianne had thought she would need to teach the young lass the way around a woman’s body.

That had not been the case!

The teenager came to Arianne’s bed vastly skilled and insatiable. Arianne had worried the girl would be shocked at Arianne’s appetites in bed and it was instead herself hanging on for dear life. The girl insatiable in both receiving and giving orgasms. Just the kind of woman Arianne craved. The girl had been really frisky last night and Arianne had been worn out but felt so good this morning. She hurt in all the right places.

Arianne lay with men for sport and to achieve her goals for herself and more and more the goals of Dorne. Arianne slept with women to get the brass ring. She also hoped to find her mate to help her rule Dorne. Cathelyne was not that. She was toying with the idea of taking her back to Dorne though. Arianne had a nice small bevy of concubines she slept with to keep her happy and satisfied. Arianne always looking for sweet new lasses with a love for the female body and insatiable appetite to match to add to her small harem.

The twenty-four year old woman longed to find her mate. She loved sex but she carved that soul deep love the poets and minstrels sang of. Did such a woman exist for her? She had come to doubt it. Such thoughts put her in a melancholy mood. She dreamed of finding her blonde princess to share her life, throne and bed with. Her Queen sharing with Arianne her harem for nights of endless pleasure. Her Queen helping Arianne in seducing new women into their bed for pleasure and the needs of Dorne. It would be heavenly Arianne thought to herself.

Ellaria sat next to her so she could comb the heir to Dorne’s hair. “So tell me Arianne, are you looking forward to tonight’s festivities. We definitely need to convince Eddard Stark he should have more parties and let his short hair down. He needs to relax in a woman’s loving arms. To let that woman pleasure him. To let him set aside his burdensome kingly duties if only for a little while. His wife is not here to meet his manly desires and wants. He would have many women willing to share his bed if he would but let it be known he needed womanly companionship at night.” Ellaria’s voice
betraying her want for the craggy handsome new king.

Arianne could not refuse the opportunity.

“Still striking out with said King, Ellaria?” she asked in an innocent voice.

Her head was pulled back harder. Ellaria now stroking Arianne’s hair with much more vigor.

“Just you and Oberyn wait! I will bed him, his wife, his son and both daughters! I will bed Bran and Rikkon dammit! I will bed any unborn children they have! I will bed their grandchildren dammit!”

Ellaria was nothing if not competitive Arianne chuckled to herself.

“Down there cheetah.”

Ellaria moved on to her next peeve. “When are you going to sleep with me Arianne” Ellaria whined.

Arianne sighed. She just did not feel comfortable with sleeping with her uncle’s paramour.

“Let the future come to us Ellaria. I think you will have more than enough on your plate trying to seduce Eddard. I fear you will not be successful.”

Arianne had feared her hair might be pulled out with Ellaria even more forceful in the combing of her locks.

Oberyn came into the room with Channer Hoper and Trevas Falker. Two stable hands that Eddard had agreed to assume personal duties for the Martells. It had been Oberyn that had procured the five chambermaids for himself, Arianne and his daughters. Eyva Maeson was totally bisexual as were the two stable hands. Cathelyne Crook only wanted to sleep with girls. That was one the reasons why Arianne wanted to bring her back to Dorne.

There, homosexuality in the coastal cities of Drone was totally accepted. There, the two women could live as they wished and sleep only with women if they so desire. Juline Thaller and Sofina Chapmyre considered themselves bisexual but Arianne knew the type. They were sleeping with the Sands Snakes being passed around amongst the sisters. The girls happy to be so passed. They were quickly coming to the realization they only wanted women in their bed. Arianne supposed she would be bringing back those lasses also back to Sunspear. She suspected Oberyn would be bringing back the bisexual males to Dorne as well.

Arianne loved helping women find their true selves. She wished she could import Dorne’s liberal views north but knew some dreams were simply beyond reach.

In the mirror, she watched her uncle come up to his lover and kiss her sweetly on the lips. He reached down and copped a feel on Ellaria’s full breast barely held in place by her gauzy low cut bodice. The purple dress a lovely vision on Ellaria. Oberyn winked at Arianne while he continued to grope Ellaria lewdly. His paramour did not protest in the slightest. She chuckled at her uncle’s antics.

“Eddard will be there, right Oberyn. He is so dreamy” Ellaria husked her own eyes dreamy.

“Yeessss Ellaria” Oberyn drolly intoned.

Arianne knew her uncle was not jealous. He fully supported Ellaria in her conquests. Her uncle
joining in to enjoy the spoils of his paramour's victories. Oberyn was exasperated but humored at Ellaria's failures with Eddard Stark and her going back for more. Watching a landslide did have its unique charm Arianne had discovered. Her uncle kept trying to warn his love.

“Ellaria” he sighed. “I swear the man is more of a eunuch than our dear Varys. How many times will you rub your tits all over Eddard and rub up against him like a minx in heat and have him totally ignore you before you learn that man is all prude.” Oberyn cocked an eyebrow at his love. “I am not sure that man has a cock. Same goes for Catelyn having a vagina. Our jackals are still trying to figure how Catelyn got pregnant not once but five times!” Arianne’s uncle ended on a high note to add to the sardonic humor.

“He’s weakening Oberyn!” Ellaria returned hotly. “His eyes eat me up” Ellaria husked fanning herself. “I am near having the vapors!”

“Ellaria, the only way Eddard would look at you with lust is if you wore perfume of broadsword and essence of chainmail. Stop fooling yourself my love” he tiredly told his love smirking at her pouting face that quickly tended towards fuming.

“You wait, you wait Oberyn! I’ll show you!” Ellaria barked. Arianne thought the woman might brush her hair out by the roots now. Finally, she was done. She and Grayce Jordayne touched up Arianne’s makeup. The young heir to Dorne eyed her own low cut red dress with gold trim. Her full bosom pressed up to great effect. She needed to show she was beautiful and desirable. It might come into play in the future. Men and women lusting after her would be a tool she could use to further her aims and goals.

Arianne adjusted her bodice. Her breast jiggling sweetly. She was ready to go with her uncle and his paramour. Arianne knew the Sand Snakes had already gone. The young women and teenagers looking for female conquests. Arianne hoped to find a nice beauteous blonde to seduce and bring back for a night of fun and debauchery with Cathelyne Crook. It had been a while she had enjoyed a threesome. The confusion of bodies, hands and mouths and the sweaty wetness had her tingling all over with the sweet thought.

The entourage of Dorne left their royal quarters. They walked down the halls of the Red Keep. They were heading to the Great Hall. Eddard was giving his first royal feast to celebrate the Houses of Baratheon and Martel being in King’s Landing. He was giving a grand feast and the courtesans eagerly anticipated the event.

Arianne mused there would be the need for more feasts in the near future. House Tyrell would arrive at King’s Landing tomorrow. The old Lion of Casterly Rock would be here soon after with the Direwolves nipping at the Lion’s heels arriving soon after the Lions.

Eddard had been supplying them with small events in the Queen’s hall but he avoided any extravagance until this warm late spring evening. The Great Hall was now filled with tables laden with savory food dishes. Minstrels and choirs were in the balconies above to supply music.

All were looking forward to the fair. Arianne was curious to see how Eddard would dress and act. Would the man show any ego? She had thought Eddard was wearing a façade of false modesty when she first arrived in King’s Landing but now she was not so sure. He truly seemed to have his ego totally in check. Had she ever seen a powerful man with no seeming ego? Wracking her mind she could not pull up another man of power who did not revel in that power.

They came to the main hall that led outside to the lowered drawbridge over the dry moat. To her left she saw Obara walking between a tall man and a buxom brunette. The two were dressed as successful members of the merchant class. The two wearing the finest silk and leather boots. Obara
had her arm around the man and the woman. She was laughing at something the man said.

Obara was always the most bisexual of all of Oberyn’s daughters Arianne thought. She too was bisexual but her true desire lay with women. Men were just a nice sport fuck. She liked the power they brought to the bed but hated that damn ‘male ego’. It was a real thrill kill. She just fucked the vain peacocks and left them. The heir to Dorne cast her gaze around herself.

To her left she spied Sarella and Tyene. The two were arm in arm and Tyene was laughing at something Sarella whispered into her ear. Arianne was happy the pale woman had found love in her sister’s arms. Sarella was completely in love with the daughter of a septa. Tyene was wearing a cream and green gown with long lace sleeves. Sarella’s hand had reached down and cupped the jutting ass of her woman and massaged it. Tyene leaned harder into the woman that she had married in a pagan rite of a Bedouin priest.

It was cute to see the fierce assassin so googily eyed. Tyene’s body was literally purring. A snort filled Arianne’s body. She wondered who they would seduce into their bed and whether they would play the game of Sarella catching her ‘slut wife’ in the ‘act’ and let the merriment begin. That act never grew old with those two. The act inflamed both of their desires like a raging bonfire.

Ahead of her, she saw Nymeria Sand, nicknamed Lady Nym. The Sand Snake looked around herself seeking female companionship. Arianne observed the twenty-five year old. She was slim and slender as a willow. Her skin pale showing her Volatin heritage through her mother. Her black hair worn in a long braid which was pulled back from a widow’s peak. Her dark eyes were large and lustrous. Her full lips wine red and curved in a silken smile which complimented her high cheekbones. Though she was beautiful Arianne knew she was deadly and could be vengeful.

Tonight Nymeria was wearing her yellow silk gown so sheer it revealed spun gold and jewels worn underneath. Nymeria usually concealed a dozen daggers on her person. Arianne wondered how many she had on her person with the gossamer garment she wore this evening.

Arianne saw Nymeria’s body start and she walked quickly to a young lass that was walking with small steps. The lass looked around unsure. Probably the youngest daughter of a family with too many daughters. Little prospects usually brought little attention Arianne thought sadly.

Nymeria saddled up to the strawberry blonde. She had a nice bosom and butt Arianne observed. Nymeria was now beside her and talking to the nervous teenager. The girl smiled tremulously at the beautiful woman that had appeared beside her. Arianne smiled. The girl would be in Nym’s bed this night experiencing pleasures undreamed of. The two walked off. Probably for many nights too Arianne smiled. Nymeria had seduced three comely young lasses already. Another pack mate had been hunted down. Another young lady to come back to Dorne and live a life of sexual freedom.

Ellaria and Oberyn would pay any necessary dowry to a family probably anxious to get the girl out of their household. The girl of no value to the household and only considered an expense and burden. That thinking enraged Arianne. She would work to change that thinking when she became the Warden of the South.

The military of Dorne already an escape route for young women. Arianne would work to make it more so.

The party walked around the walled off Godswood of King’s Landing. The sun baked stones radiating out their stolen warmth as the sun started to set. The temperature pleasant and the breeze from off shore blowing off the stench of the surrounding city.
They neared the corner of the wall around the Godswood. Oberyn and Ellaria were laughing and jesting. She was happy for her uncle and his bastard lover. Oberyn could care less about such things. They rounded the corner.

“Damn those two” Ellaria spoke under her breath. “How can they be lovers planning to marry each other and fight so much!” she groused. Arianne followed Ellaria’s gaze. On this border of the wall surrounding the Godswood were Loreza and Dorea. The two shouting at each other and gesticulating wildly. The small party slowly approached the battling incestuous sisters. As they neared the battling siblings, the sisters sudden lashed out hands and gripped silk dresses and a handful of hair. Bodies were jerked to and fro each girl screaming as they fought to gain advantage and stay upright. That was a losing battle. Soon they were on the ground rolling around. The sisters yelling at each other to “let go” and “I’ll get you bitch!”

The slow walk of Arianne’s party now had them beside the siblings unnoticed. The sisters grunted and snarled but Arianne saw they were not trying to actually hurt each other. Oberyn laughed. Ellaria steamed and Arianne shook her head at their antics.

Suddenly, Cersei was standing on the other side of the warring sisters looking down with a bemused look on her face. Arianne started. The bitch had walked up on them with a stealth like quality. Where had that come from she thought peeved.

Oberyn bristled. “What are you doing here Cersei Lannister?! You have no part in the family of the Martells. You have been cast down bitch! To think I might have been blighted with marrying you.”

Not looking look up, Cersei spoke. “Yes. My father wanted us to wed but I said ‘no’. I told my father I wanted a true man not a Red Worm.”

Ariane saw her uncle start and seethe at the sharp retort seemingly effortlessly given. His dark complexion turned even darker with the blood rush to his face. “That’s a lie!”

Still not looking up Cersei asked a question of Oberyn. “Do you know what you have in common with the worms of the Earth, Red Worm?”

Arianne was sure she saw steam coming out her uncle’s ears.

He bit. “What?!”

“They don’t have a backbone either” she now gave Oberyn an appraising look “nor cartilage” she finished looking at Oberyn’s crotch with an appraising eye.

Oberyn was shaking now his face even more flushed with his rage. Was that spittle spewing from her uncle’s lips? Arianne observed bemused. “You are nothing but a bitch! A snaggletooth old bitch!”

With a bored look Cersei now looked Oberyn square in the eyes. She looked at him with eyes that were calm. It was obvious that Oberyn’s words were falling off Cersei like rain on a duck’s feathers. Arianne saw it was unnerving Oberyn this new calm version of Cersei.

“What are you looking at bitch?!?” Oberyn barked. He was beyond nervous and moving to rattled Arianne saw.

Cersei sighed. “Ahhhhh, I was mistaken I see … you are the Red Slug.”

“That’s Red Viper dammit!”
Cersei looked behind Oberyn at the ground. All turned to look too. They saw nothing.

“I think not Oberyn. That slim trail behind you speaks the truth Slug.”

Arianne saw her uncle’s eyes bulge. She glanced at Ellaria. She was curious of this new Cersei. So was Arianne.

“Well you please sit beside me Oberyn at the feast. It would please me so much.”

“Why in the seven hells would I want to do that?!” her uncle exclaimed.

“Why because they will have salt shakers I am sure.”

“*What?*” Oberyn asked in a confused voice.

Cersei pantomime picking up a said salt dispenser and jerked it at Oberyn. “*Tik tik tik*”. Cersei smiled sweetly at Oberyn. “I can see it so clear, Oberyn, in my mind’s eye. The salt landing on your skin … you looking surprised.” Now Cersei started to wiggle around strangely and slowly bent her knees her body sinking. Then her hands rubbed her face and neck with a fearful, desperate look on her face.

“I’m melting! I’m melting! I am turning into a puddle of slimy slime!” the fallen Lannister finished on a high pitch.

Oberyn looked like he might blow his top. Arianne had to stifle a giggle. Ellaria was clearly impressed with Cersei’s new found wit.

Cersei Lannister rose back up. “You bore me” Cersei spoke and turned to walk away.

“Well … your children are bastards!” Oberyn threw out at his now departing nemesis.

Arianne and Ellaria both cringed at that horrible comeback.

Cersei paused. She shook her head. “Hypocrite.” She walked on.

Arianne looked down. Oberyn’s two youngest were no longer fighting. Something much more worthwhile had the complete focus. Dorea and Loreza were looking up at Cersei with hungry eyes. Her display of wit and her beauteous body had their full attention. Their hands were still fist in each other’s hair and silky gowns. They disengaged their grips on each other. They snapped to their feet and straightened their hair and dresses in great haste. Then they tore off after Cersei.

“Loreza! Dorea! Get your asses back here this minute!” Oberyn roared.

Arianne had to chuckle. Her uncle’s youngest now pursuing the fallen Lioness of House Lannister had to really gall her uncle. The girls were too young to know much about Cersei. To them she was just a beautiful woman to seduce and make scream in their bed. Take away the fact that Cersei was a bitch and a harridan, Arianne would dearly love to fuck the tall voluptuous woman herself. Physically, Cersei was just her type. Too bad the reports said she was one hell of a cunt (not in a good way) and frigid in bed with all but Jaime. Cersei only fucked for advantage.

Hell, anymore the jackals reported that Cersei only fucked Jaime to get her rocks off and control him too. How sad Arianne thought. Cersei had lost the ability to simply enjoy the giving and taking of pleasure with another person. To give oneself freely without calculation.

Oberyn’s youngest daughters ignored their father and his repeated roars. Oberyn bellowed at them
again but Dorea put her hand back and made a dismissive shake of it. The meaning clear. Leave us be father. Arianne saw that her uncle’s head was about to explode.

Oberyn’s two youngest were now beside Cersei talking to her and clearly flirting. Cersei at first looked at the girls like they had sprouted arms out their foreheads. Then a coy smile came over her face. She snuck her arms around the two Sand Snakes waists and pulled them close to her still beautiful slender body. Loreza and Dorea clearly happy at the older woman’s attention and embrace.

Cersei turned and smiled at Oberyn with a sugary sweet smile. She made sure to cup both of the girl’s butts and squeeze. They both squealed cutely. The girls in turned cupped Cersei’s still firm high ass cheeks. The Lioness started and her eyes got large. Arianne knew Cersei was wondering if she had bitten off more than she could chew but her need to get over on her uncle was more important. The now threesome walked on slowly ass cheeks being groped. Cersei kept jumping up with the firm squeezes on her butt.

It was kind of cute Arianne thought. Cersei definitely had a flustered look on her face. She turned to look at her uncle.

Arianne was afraid her uncle would have a stroke on the spot. The vaunted Red Viper railed, snarled and sprayed spittle in his vexation. His arms jerked and snatched at nothing like he was possessed by some dark demonic spirit. He wanted to go after his two youngest daughters. Ellaria stopped him.

“It is their life Oberyn. Cersei roasted you good my love. This round goes to the Lioness.” Oberyn threw another fit. If the fit was not so humorous it would have been off putting.

They waited for Oberyn to work the bile out of his system at his savaging from Cersei. It took a minute. Now they were about to enter the Great Hall.

They saw Eddard’s daughter Arya come up to the entrance. She was in tight fitting leather outfit that went down her arms and had a leather vest of thicker material. The vest with a cross stitched drawstring down the front. She had on a leather belt with leather gloves tucked behind the belt. She had on a grey wool skirt that went down to just above her knees. Her boots went to the knees to meet the bottom of her skirt.

She was hot! Arianne thought. She saw that Oberyn and Ellaria thought the same.

Beside Arya walked Elia. The two conversing walking close to each other. They were in their own world. Elia had on her own leather outfit that nicely complimented Arya’s.

Arianne wondered if they were already lovers. She wondered if Arya might be coming back to Dorne as Elia’s wife. Or maybe it was just sex. Or maybe they were still friends at this time. She missed having her jackals on the prowl taking in intelligence on the nighttime pursuits of the women in the Red Keep. There were jackals here of course but she had not sought a report on Arya and her nighttime adventures. She must do so in the near future.

They entered the Great Hall. At the far end of the Hall lay the Iron Throne. It was truly imposing.

It had been constructed by Aegon soon after his conquest of Westeros. He had made the throne from the swords surrendered to him by his enemies. Arianne had read that it supposedly taken a thousand blades to make, heated in the breath of Balerion the Black Dread. The hammering of the metal took fifty-nine days.

The Iron Throne was an asymmetric monstrosity of spikes and jagged edges and twisted metal. It
looked like some hoary tree from an ancient haunted forest. The top all bristly twisted branches. The sides of the steps leading up to the actual seat of the throne adorned with multiple branches made of swords melted and beat together. The seat itself made of twisted blades. It did indeed look uncomfortable. The back fanged with steel which made leaning back impossible.

Aegon had it made this way deliberately, saying that a king should never sit easy on his throne.

When the throne was sit on to hear supplications or hold court, members of the King’s Guard stood guard below. By tradition when the king presided on the Iron Throne only he, his family, and his council may sit; all others must stand or kneel.

Eddard was most definitely not on the throne. Arianne looked around and did not immediately see him. She saw that Ellaria was looking for the new King as well. Oberyn had stopped a server with a plate of wine goblets. The high fluted stem glasses glinting in the candle and oil lamp light. He downed one quick and gripped a second. Her uncle calming his nerves after his failed joust with Cersei.

Arianne spotted Stannis and his wife Selyse. She had arrived yesterday on the morning tide. They both looked most unhappy. Stannis grinding his teeth and Selyse looking dour. Arianne observed the woman. Selyse had a glass of champagne in her hand she sipped occasionally.

The reports said Selyse was not a particularly attractive woman. She was as tall as her husband, thin, and had the Florent trait of too-large ears the dossier said. Arianne observed her pale eyes, sharp nose. With her observations Arianne agreed with the reports that the woman did indeed suffer from hair growth on her upper lip. Her mouth was stern and her voice a whip the reports said.

The woman did nothing to enhance herself Arianne thought. If she used tasteful makeup, lipstick and had her hair styled she would be prettier. It was her personality that truly made her seem unattractive. Her baleful glare would make anyone think she was ugly. Her whole demeanor spoke of suppressed anger and unhappiness.

The woman was a total thrill kill.

Selyse had dressed well tonight Arianne thought. Why Selyse put in the effort Arianne was not sure. She had tasteful jewels around her neck and on her fingers. Off her shoulders she wore an ermine mantle. She had on a full length dress that brushed the floor. It was yellow in octagonal patterns of crossbars with a center diamond in iteration of the pattern. The dress robe had dark brown lapels to the floor with yellow oblong buttons. It was quite pretty. If Selyse would but smile she would be at least attractive.

Selyse was totally loyal in her marriage to Lord Stannis of House Baratheon of Dragonstone the reports said. It was a loveless marriage, and the two had little patience for each other the jackals of Dragonstone gleefully reported. Their pettiness and constant backbiting was enjoyable to observe and a pleasure to report.

They had one daughter, Shireen, a sad little girl bearing a disfigurement from greyscale. Arianne looked around for the girl. Arianne found her. She sat in a corner with some standing chandeliers beside her. She had a book on her lap reading. The girl had sad blue eyes. She had inherited her father's square, jutting jaw, and her mother's large ears.

Arianne then focused on the girl’s greyscale. It covered the left half of her left cheek and most of her neck. The disease left the skin cracked and flaking, with discoloration of gray and black. The affected area stony to the touch.
Arianne thought she looked cute and the reports said she was sweet. Arianne tried to find a spark in everyone she saw. Something attractive. If you focused on that one thing, then you soon saw the other beauty of her person till soon you found them more and more attractive.

Arianne shuddered. She could not look past the girl’s greyscale and looked away. She knew the fault lay in her but she could not overcome her revulsion of the girl’s ailment. The physical discomfiture she could maybe look beyond but not the hideous nature of the disease. The Maesters reported that in such cases as Shireen that the greyscale was not contagious and would not infect but the revulsion of the disease was too strong for Arianne to overcome. Arianne looked away and sought distraction from her thoughts.

The heir to Dorne plucked off a fluted champagne glass as a server passed. She sipped while she watched Ellaria and Oberyn ply the room. They were both very comely and flirted shamelessly. Arianne smiled seeing Elia and Arya sitting side by side talking. Cersei made sure to walk by Oberyn as he worked the room. His two youngest daughters on each of her hips. The girls giggling and pawing at the woman. Cersei pawing back.

Oberyn would glare at his nemesis but not give Cersei the satisfaction of losing his mind in front of an audience.

The woman was being more effective than she probably planned Arianne snickered. Cersei’s face was flushed as well as her neck. The young vixens on her sides expertly stroking her body and now nibbling on her ears. Cersei’s eyes were starting to glaze over. Between the excitement of getting the better of Arianne’s uncle and the expert plucking of her body by the skilled incestuous lesbian sisters Arianne knew where Cersei would wind up tonight. She hoped Cersei was ready for the ride of her life.

She and Jamie tore it up the Jackals reported. The voluptuous brunette shook her head chuckling. Cersei was about to be tag teamed. The teenagers would rock her world. Again the jackals reported that Cersei slept with men and women to get her way and control events but had not truly enjoyed the trysts. They were a means to an end only. Arianne paused a tremor ran through her. She was the same she thought sadly in too many of her conquests. She enjoyed them but in the end to many were a means to achieve her goals. Still, Arianne made sure to give and receive as much pleasure as she could with each bedding. Her goal to give maximum pleasure, and, thus, receive such pleasure back.

Maybe if Cersei made love just for the sheer fun of it she might discover just how much she would enjoy sleeping with her own sex. The Jackals had speculated in observing the Lannister twins that their relationship had grown stale and trite. Both going through the motions of their love. Their forced machinations had slowly eroded their relationship.

Arianne wondered if their relationship could survive the coming shocks that Eddard’s Game of Thrones play would heap upon the incestuous lovers. The events of late already changing the twins. It would be interesting Arianne determined. She would wait and see.

For the next hour the heiress of Dorne mingled and flirted. She eyed potential suitors for her attention for the night. She found herself not interested really. She had Cathelyne Crook waiting for her and any female she might bring back with her to the chambers provided by Eddard. She did not doubt Varys had peep holes in all the guest chambers. Those peep holes manned by the lucky persons spying on the nights activities. They would be spying on her performance so to speak.

She smiled. She liked the idea of being watched. What could she say? She was an exhibitionist.

Still, of late she had lost her desire to bed new conquests every night. She loved sex and a lot of it
but something had come to be missing. She was not sure what it was but she suspected she was getting older. She had started to long for a consort on her arm. She was to be ruler of Dorne. She would be the first ruler to not hide their homosexual lover from the common populace. In the past the Warden of the South would marry for the populace and keep the Septons off their back. She would not.

She would lay with some strong Lord to produce an heir. He could be part of the child’s life but he would not be her lover and consort. That would belong to her female lover. Then she and her Queen would raise their child with care and love.

She ruminated on this as she plied the gathering of courtesans playing her part. She observed her aunt plying the young lasses and studs with her coquettish behavior. She saw many young eyes fired with desire. Oberyn was having the same effect on his circle of admirers.

For some time after the Martells arrival at the banquet, Eddard Stark finally walked into the Great Hall. He wore no crown or even circlet on his brow. He wore a simple spun top and leggings. He looked like some vassal lord and not the King of Westeros. He did wear a small cape draped down his back. On it, the Direwolf was adorned in its howling repose. He greeted those he passed. He saw Arianne, Oberyn and Ellaria and headed their way.

Ellaria definitely saw Eddard and left the handsome knight she was talking to and walked toward Eddard with a predatory grace. Eddard came up to Arianne.

“I am happy you and your family frequented our ball. It is a pleasure to see you again Arianne.”

“Eddard” Ellaria announced herself and went in for a hug. Her low bodice and gauzy material showed her erect nipples and beautiful perfect skin.

Eddard deftly caught up Ellaria’s hand. She moved in but Eddard lifted her hand between them and kissed her knuckles using her hand to keep her at bay. He looked her in the eyes.

Ellaria fumed watching Eddard drop her hand and spin to take Arianne’s hand and kiss it. Then he was embracing Oberyn and slapping him on the back.

A pout filled Ellaria’s face at her thwarted efforts to get close to Eddard to press her voluptuous body into his. Her breast were on full display but the new King acted as if he was looking at a boring report. No reaction.

Ellaria was not happy.

Arianne watched Ellaria try again as she attempted to engage Eddard but he seamlessly deflected her attempts. If he was as good on the battlefield as he was here at avoiding sexual engagements then he was a true master.

The dark beauty looked around. Speaking of deflection. Arianne saw Myrcella Baratheon talking to two tall knights. They were obviously flirting with the beautiful blonde teenager. She was looking up at them with a smile but Arianne knew that smile. It was polite but totally disinterested. The knights were obviously getting frustrated in the girl’s polite but bland responses. She was definitely not succumbing to their blandishments.

Arianne admired the girl’s easy deflection of their attempts of engaging her to begin their opening gambits of seduction. She was truly beautiful Arianne again observed. Arianne had taken in the teenager’s golden curls, emerald eyes and full cupid bow lips. Arianne generally liked women with a large bosom but Myrcella had a svelte grace to her that made her small bosom enticing to Arianne.
She had attempted to engage the girl in a few past encounters but Myrcella seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to Arianne being in the vicinity. She had not been able to get the girl alone where she could talk to her and get to know her. To start seducing the young seemingly virginal teenager. She was still thirteen but her name day was only a week away.

She had visited the girl in the room she did her research and analysis work for Eddard Stark. That had not gone very well. She had felt awkward trying to get the girl’s attentions with Sansa, Jeyne, Arya and Tommen in the room. All had been interested in a book before them. Myrcella was disinterested in Arianne which did not sit well with Arianne at all. The teen refusing to break her focus on the pages before her. Only Arya seemed to know of Arianne’s intentions with Myrcella. Her knowing smirk unsettled Arianne with her lack of success with the blonde beauty.

Arianne saw an opportunity now.

She walked slowly up to the two knights accosting Myrcella. The blonde teen saw Arianne approach but did not react. Arianne came up behind the two knights.

“Excuse me sers, I would like to have a word with Myrcella.”

They turned to look at her. Arianne put on her best royal stare of don’t mess with me. The two men did not know her Arianne sensed but they definitely picked up on her royal air. They looked at each other and then bowed to her slightly and moved on. The two men were not making any progress in seducing the young lass anyways.

Finally. Arianne moved in close to the girl. The knights had the right idea. To seduce you had to get close.

She now was right before Myrcella. She was four inches shorter than the tall teenager. Arianne felt a little intimidated at the height difference but did not let that detour her goal. She looked intensely up into the teens down turned face. Arianne saw the gold flecks in Myrcella’s luminescent green eyes. She fell into them.

A loud roaring filled Arianne’s ears. Her eyes dilated looking at the perfection that was Myrcella’s face. Her eyes were like precious emeralds. The gold flecks in them were perfect with her Lannister heritage. Her skin glowed with an inner beauty. The girl’s hair was like angel’s wings resting on her shoulders and running down her back. She smelled so good with the subtle perfume and her natural scent.

The girl looked down at Arianne with a curious look. The girl clearly waiting for the beautiful woman’s opening gambit. Arianne was just looking up at her while a burning sensation swept through Arianne. It was like a storm sweeping over the twenty-four year old. Her eyes only saw Myrcella. Everything else in the Great Hall became unfocused and diffuse. Arianne’s ears only heard the storm raging over and through Arianne. Her nostrils flared taking in the girl’s heady scent. She reached out tentatively to touch Myrcella.

The girl gave her a look of don’t touch me and backed up. Arianne tried to speak but her mouth was bone dry and only a whisper came out. She again tried to touch Myrcella but the teenager backed up with a perplexed look laced with disdain. The girl now retreated and turned her back. She started to walk away.

Arianne woodenly went after the girl. Myrcella sensed this and whipped around.

“Leave me alone” she said with her green eyes ablaze. She turned around and walked off with a stiff back. Where those ice crystals left in her wake Arianne wondered in a daze. Why had the
beauteous blonde acted thus? Arianne had done nothing to upset the beauteous daughter of Cersei Lannister.

Arianne was stunned. She looked around woodenly. She was confused. Her whole body felt both alive and deaden. She felt such strong emotions she was confused. She almost felt drunk. She was. On passion.

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His eyebrows flexing, Oberyn observed Arianne. She was definitely acting strange. For the last twenty minutes she had been moving around the edges of the throngs of people in the Great Hall. She would stare for a while and then move her position her head craning until it stilled. It was clear she was following someone as they moved about in the Great Hall.

Oberyn had tried to see but there was too many persons in the hall. No one person stood out to him. He was conversing with people as he tried to keep his side sight on Arianne. She would pick out a new position and begin her intense stare. He was not sure what she found so interesting. The intensity of his niece’s stare was so intense it was almost unsettling.

Ellaria came up to him. She followed his gaze.

“I see it too Oberyn.” Ellaria spoke and moved off to get by Oberyn’s niece. She came up to Arianne. The woman had no idea she was there. She followed her gaze. She thought so.

“What has taken your attention so raptly?” Ellaria asked Arianne.

The woman slowly turned her head and stared at Ellaria. It took her a few moments for Arianne to register the woman right behind her. She spoke one word.

“Myrcella” Arianne told Ellaria. She then proceeded to totally forget the beautiful woman standing at her shoulder. She turned back to stare at the teenager who was across the Great Hall talking to Arya and Elia. Ellaria eyed Arianne. She could see the lust and frustration written all over her body. She wanted to be the one Myrcella was talking too.

Oh my Ellaria thought to herself. She had seen the initial interaction between Arianne and Myrcella. It had not gone well for Arianne. The dark hued beauty had stared at the teen with a totally confused but intense stare. The teen had not liked the open wide eye stare. She had seen the teen avoid Arianne in the halls and in the dining hall since. Arianne’s strange behavior now did not help her cause.

Arianne had it bad. Real bad. She had fallen in love at first sight. Ellaria knew of Arianne’s attempted past interactions with Myrcella. Nothing had come of those. Not this time either. Myrcella was still aloof but not Arianne. She was hooked. Deep.

This was not good.
The sound of fingers landing on the teak desktop of the table in Tywin Lannister’s private sitting room faintly filled the room. The Lion of Lannister was deep in thought. His face in a dire set. The grizzled Lion’s eyes focused and yet unseeing. His mind again to trying to process the events that had occurred since the death of that fat bumbling fool Robert Baratheon.

The room the man sat in was filled with the treasures of his constituency. The walls lined with portraits of past great leaders of House Lannister. Behind Tywin was the portrait of King Loreon Lannister. The man who became known as Loreon the Lion, the first true King of the Rock. Other portraits adorned the walls. Between the portraits were stands for the armor the men had worn.

The armor had gold and silver engraved all throughout the breastplates and spaulders. On the front breastplates, the armor adorned with many precious gems to depict the regal Lion of Lannister. Interspersed between the armor stands were cases that highlighted the gems, silver and gold that was mined from beneath Casterly Rock. At the head of the hall shaped room, was a war flag with the Lion of Lannister on it, and the House words of ‘Hear me Roar’. The Lion and words sewed with pure gold thread.

All this meant nothing to Tywin Lannister. The walls represented the past. It was the future that worried the thoughts of Tywin Lannister. His duty was in the now, to affect that future.

The man sat up straight. He looked around at the reports, dossiers, maps and scrolls that gave the man the intelligence he used to make his decisions. It seemed like the world was going to hell in a basket. He had had it all planned out. The House of Lannister on the Iron Throne.

The fool, Robert Baratheon, getting himself gored by a boar was rich the man thought. In his foolishness, Robert had allowed the Lannisters to take the Iron Throne uncontested. True, his grandson was proving to be a trifle, and Cersei was only half as smart as she thought she was. Still, her actions had set in motion for the Lannister’s to take full control of Westeros.

He would finally make Jaime renounce the Kingsguard, and assume his responsibility as the heir to the West. He could then control his unruly grandson, until he matured into a man capable of being King. It was clear that his daughter was not up to the task.

That was the best scenario. Tywin had come to see that his eldest grandson had many of the unsettling traits of the man he had been the Hand to, King Aerys II Targaryen. The man had gradually shown characteristics of insanity. Joffrey was still a teenager and already displayed many of the same traits. Joffrey showed a propensity to cruelty, and had a large sadistic trait. To make it all the worse, Joffrey was a little shit that knew a whole a lot about nothing. He was a simpleton.
when it came to matters of state. He had no idea how to rule.

Tywin had just been coming to terms with his grandson’s deficiencies. The craggy Lion determining what the possible solutions might be, when news of the Insurrection reached his ears. His daughter had at first downplayed the issue, and he had assumed it was merely a nuisance. A trifle to be easily handled. Eddard had been thrown down as Hand. The forces loyal to him put to the sword. Complete victory had seemed assured.

He had sent a moderate sized fast cavalry to his daughter’s aid. It should have been enough. It had not been. He could not have known that a healed Eddard Stark would come back from the dead, to take the reins of the nascent Insurrection. Under his guidance, the Insurrection had disposed the rule of his lineage. It should have been impossible, and yet it happened.

It had madden Tywin, to first read of Cersei’s consternation, which quickly evolved to outright fear. Her inability to control the situation had brought a devastating defeat to House Lannister. He had been too far away to affect the outcome. That would change now. He would be leaving Casterly Rock on the morrow to make things right. It had become imperative.

Eddard Stark was not satisfied with usurping the Iron Throne. He was working hard to cast dispersions on the name of House Lannister. For Tywin Lannister, the only thing that truly mattered was the name of one’s House. He had worked hard to undo the damage his weak father had caused House Lannister. Each generation bound by duty to do their work, to make that lineage stronger. Each generation building upon the work of the proceeding generation. Each generation had a limited time on the stage of destiny to do one’s work.

He had made House Lannister a House to be reckoned with again. People may fear, and maybe even loath his House, but they respected the Lions of Casterly Rock. House Lannister was to be dealt with very carefully. The way it was supposed to be, the leader of the Lannisters thought to himself. He dealt with an iron fist to any who would oppose his will, and the greatness of his House.

That was being tarnished and diminished day by day with the usurper Edward Stark upon the Iron Throne. The Iron Throne was not enough for the man. He was sending out ravens across Westeros proclaiming baseless lies that cast falsehoods on his House. The lies about his grandchildren’s lineage was a crime. To say that his son and daughter pushed Bran to his attempted death heinous. That his daughter slept outside of her marriage bed was contemptable. The words saying Joffrey again attempted Bran’s death a second time was ludicrous.

He must go to King’s Landing to put the man down, and force him to sign a declaration that all the statements were false. He would then be executed. Tywin would then work to undo the lies that Eddard had thrown across Westeros. That work was paramount. Eddard was making a fool of House Lannister, and that could never ever be allowed. Tywin would work tirelessly to undo the lies that now tarnished House Lannister.

He stared at the new scroll that been delivered to him just an hour ago. The full dark just embracing the landscape. The raven or maybe owl had dropped it by the main ornamental fountain in the central courtyard of Casterly Rock. A steward had come across it and saw its importance. The young man quickly delivered it to the Maester to the Lannisters.

Maester Creylen brought it immediately to his Lord. The seal of the Direwolf and the Iron Throne spoke of its importance. He had delivered many like it to his Lord. Tywin now forbidding any to read them but himself. The Maester could understand Tywin’s thinking, with the inflammatory words found within those scrolls.

It was this new scroll that had Tywin in an agitated state. What new lies and taunts would Eddard
Stark be spewing now the old Lion wondered? Anger flowed hot in the fifty-seven year old man’s veins. Each scroll a goad to the leader of House Lannister. Worse, the scrolls were a poison. Dose by dose, the poison spread in the arteries of the reader. Tywin knew this first hand.

His fist slammed the table. He had been a fool! His two eldest children had been fucking each other since they were eleven! They must have laughed at their father behind his back. He had refused to believe the detestable scrolls until he had the book brought to him. A ponderous tome by Grand Maester Malleon on the lineages of the great houses. He had sat down and read. When he had finished, he slammed the book shut.

Tywin, from that moment, wondered about what he held sacrosanct. Had all his beliefs been based on a foundation of lies and deceptions. How his children must have laughed at him behind his back! Had others known and not said anything? He looked in the faces of all around him now. Were they laughing at him when his back was turned? Did they jest at him when he was not present? He could not be sure. One moment he was sure they were completely loyal still, then the next moment, Tywin had no clue what lay in their hearts.

The fact that he had been so deceived had taken from Tywin something precious. His certainty in himself.

The statements about Bran were bad enough. That would make many Houses turn against him. The fact that two attempts were made only added to the dross thrown on the Lannister name. Eddard made sure to continuously dreg up the events of the sack of King’s Landing. The man making sure to cast the events in the most unfavorable light on Tywin’s noble House. On the name of Lannister. On the name of Tywin Lannister.

That was totally unacceptable!

He had to inoculate House Lannister from the poison of Eddard Stark. When the man was removed, Tywin could then work to undo the damage the infernal man had done to the heritage of his House. The vile words and accusations of Eddard Stark must be expunged from the annals of the history books.

Did not the victor write the histories?

He would kill the man, and then spread the truth of House Lannister. It did not matter that the new truths were in fact lies. That damn book had proven that. Still, one could make any lie a truth. Once he had control of the Iron Throne again, then he would have the power to assert his truth on events. He would speak the lies necessary, often enough, till they became the new truth. The old truths soon hazy, and then forgotten.

He would help the current truths to fade, with bribes of money and access to the Iron Throne. He would enlist the Church of the Seven in his cause. Tywin smiled coolly. Surely, the offer to build new spires at the Great Sept of Baelor or maybe the Starry Sept in Oldtown would entice the buffoons into compliance. The hypocrites would never let more money coming into their coffers prevent them from forgetting the former truths, for the new ones that Tywin would request them to recite.

He had it all mapped out in his mind did Tywin. He merely had to reach King’s Landing and breech its walls, and then find Eddard Stark. He would do Tywin’s bidding before he had the man executed.

For the thousandth time, Tywin went over how events would be in his mind.
Tywin took a deep breath, and reached for the new scroll that had been delivered this night. He broke the seals. With a slow deliberate motion, Tywin unrolled the scroll. He wondered what tripe Eddard Stark would have to say this time. The man goading him. It made him grind his teeth and snarl. He started to read.

*Written by the hand of Eddard Stark, the King of Westeros*

*Come to me Tywin Lannister. I wait for you. I have told you this many times now. I grow tired of this wait. I sit on the Iron Throne waiting. Come to me, and meet your destiny. Make sure to bring your son Jaime Lannister. I also request you bring Gregor Clegane. I ask that you bring Ser Amory Lorch to me as well. I have your daughter, Cersei Lannister, and your incestuous spawn of a grandson Joffrey Baratheon. The youngest of your grandchildren must also be judged. They are the issue of vile incest as well.*

*Come to me, as I ask, with whom I request. I have much to call into account.*

*With Cersei, I have listed her sins which are many. Joffrey has as many. Both will atone for those sins when I can pass judgement before you. It will be swift and just.*

*Jamie will be judged for the crime of Kingslayer. Those are known by all. I still remember his insolence on the Iron Throne when I entered the Great Hall. As I secured the throne, men under your command scaled Maegor’s Holdfast to commit murder of a woman and her children. I still have nightmares of not first going to Maegor’s Holdfast first. I did not. Let that sin be mine.*

*That is the past, which I will get back to in a minute.*

*Jaime will be tried for the sin of trying to kill my second oldest son, Brandon Stark. Let him now also be known as Childslayer. He has committed the sin of incest times beyond count. He has fathered three children by incest with his sister. All his children must suffer my judgement. Let the sin be his. He raised himself in sedition against the Hand of the King. Your son sought the death of the Hand, and has led Rebellion against the Iron Throne.*

*This is the present. This is your prodigy. Yet you too must be judged.*

*By your command, or lack of command, cowardly murder was committed. I did not strike as I should have then. I should have killed Gregor Clegane and Amory Lorch then. I should have fought Robert and killed him. I should have killed you.*

*Alas, I did not. Elia Martell, Rhaenys Targaryen, Aegon Targaryen were killed in cold blood. I and others will judge House Lannister, and those under its banner. This is more than Elia and her children were given.*

*Come to me Tywin. I await you.*

*I did not judge then. I will judge now.*

*Come to me great Lion. I, the Direwolf, howls in defiance and rage. Come to me Tywin Lannister.*

*My sword is thirsty. I grow tired of the wait. Come to me.*

Tywin sat down the scroll. The words had drawn him in. His heart was actually beating an
accelerated pace. The words had been visceral and direct. He felt the threat deep in his soul. Before, Eddard had not written so direct. So threatening.

The Lion and the Direwolf would indeed contend.

Tywin Lannister took a deep breath calming himself. They were only words on a scroll. It was action that mattered. He had not been in King’s Landing to put Eddard down, or more to the point, put Arya Stark down before she had had the opportunity to free her father from the dungeons.

The thought that a woman, worse a teenage girl, had somehow started and led a rebellion against him, galled and angered Tywin Lannister to the core of his being. It went against nature. It was the mighty male lion that led the pride. The lionesses submitted to the will of the male lion. This was done for a reason. The male was ascendant. Women needed to follow this precedent of nature.

This was proven by his daughter’s inability to crush this fool rebellion. A rebellion led by a damn teenage female. His grandson had shown his own incompetence in not quelling a rebellion led by this teenage girl. He shook his head. It was unnatural this Arya Stark. Cersei was unnatural with her unholy desires and Arya Stark was by her seeming very nature. They both needed to be put down.

He had not been there Tywin fumed. There should have been no need for him in King’s Landing. Had he been there, he would have crushed the insignificant uprising with an iron fist. He had not been there, so that had not occurred. He never hesitated to use the iron fist. Now, he was to start the march to King’s Landing in the coming morn. It would be much more difficult now. It did not matter. Success would be his. Was he not Tywin Lannister? He was he not equal to all challenges. He had proven that, time and time again, he reasoned with himself. He would do so again.

The man sighed. His Meerkats reported what he knew they would. The Major Houses had heeded the call of Eddard Stark. The Major Roadways of Westeros now filled with armies marching. All the players in the drama had taken their assigned roles in Eddard’s drama. Tywin snorted in anger.

He would not be able to lay siege against King’s Landing. He had to give the man that. He could not contend with the Direwolf in King’s Landing with his pack running down from the North. Robb Stark had the Falcons and Trout with him. Those Houses causing great mischief. They would suffer for their affront, once this damn Insurrection had been put down. With ruthless vengeance the Lion of Casterly Rock stormed to himself.

The whores of Highgarden would be there waiting their turn to play mischief. He knew Renly Baratheon was there. His lover (Tywin shuddered in disgust), Loras Tyrell, pleading his case that Renly should be on the Iron Throne. Tywin was sure he knew who Eddard would offer to the whores of Highgarden. Tywin grew tired of having to deal with Tyrells. Their might and largesse made them a force even he had to tread lightly around.

Stannis would be there before him. He was not a major danger, but he would be a thorn to be sure. The vain, self-aggrandizing man would attack his force at the first sign of aggression. The man was a dullard, and of course did not know it. He would attack, merely, because it was the ‘right thing to do’ from Stannis’s viewpoint. To hell if he was slaughtered for the effort.

Dorne would be there as well. It was clear that they did not desire the Iron Throne. As usual, Dorne did not truly desire to play the Game of Thrones. Why were they there then? Tywin was sure he knew why. His spies in Dorne reported House Martell’s repeated bleating of events long past. He would have to be careful of Oberyn Martell, and his useless ire over what happened in King’s Landing a generation ago. All knew what happened when a new power took the Iron Throne. The old was swept away.
Incompetence was what caused his problem. It would be his competence that restored order and
sanity to the Iron Throne. He would merely have to deal with the situation he found upon his arrival,
and impress his will. It might get messy, but he would succeed. Cersei would have to be dealt with.
Jaime was a problem as well, but he could be redeemed. Not his unnatural sister. It did not matter.
He would resolve each problem he now faced. The surety that Tywin had in his abilities was
absolute. He would succeed. Did he not always win?

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The sun shone brightly on the might of Casterly Rock. Tywin Lannister rode at the forefront of his
army, as it moved out of Lannisport. He and his knights resplendent in their buffed armor. The sun
reflecting off burnished metal. Other suits of armor that were painted, seemed to glow from within,
with the strong spring sun beating down upon the painted metal.

Pinons snapped in the moderate wind. Tywin looked up at the flanking standards beside him. The
regal Lion of Lannister roaring in defiance in its stylized pose. The people of Lannisport cheering
their ruler. A Ruler who took care of them, and made sure that the wealth of the Westeroslands was
wisely spent. The House of Lannister took care of its own. The people followed the edicts of their
leader, and they were rewarded for their loyalty with lives well cared for.

Tywin felt the gait of his horse, as he marched yet again on King’s Landing. His mind drifting back
nearly two decades. It would be different this time, but the end result would be the same. He would
put Joffrey back on the throne, or if that did not suffice, Tommen would take the throne with his
brother Kevan as regent.

Cersei had lost that right by her perfidy. Her incest with her brother unforgivable. His daughter
seducing her brother into incest. Jaime most have fought his sister’s wiles, but she was too much
temptation for his son. The slut not taking moon tea to stop the issue of her brother. She cast a spell
on Jaime. Yes. That had to be reason why Jaime had lost all reason. Tywin would have to break
that spell. No matter the cost.

His daughter’s actions leading to the incident with Bran Stark. That too was her fault. Her inability
to control her son, and the inability to handle the rebellion of a simple fourteen year old girl further
showed her deceitfulness and worthlessness to be the daughter of Tywin Lannister.

She would be dealt with once he had her back in Casterly Rock. The issue of his body had become
a blight on the name of House Lannister. That was unforgivable. The name of Cersei Lannister,
now a blot on the unsullied greatness of the House of Lannister. Tywin had stressed again and again
to his children, that only the name of their House mattered. That their sole goal in life was the further
increase of the greatness of their House.

Instead, his daughter only threw dross and shame on her House. He would remove those stains by
any means necessary. Then he would take his vile, loathsome daughter back to her ancestral home
to be dealt with. There really was only one recourse. She would simply have to be removed first
from life, and then from the annals of history as much as possible.

He rode on thinking of the challenges before him. The vanguard he had sent out to aid his errant
daughter had been savaged continuously on its way to King’s Landing. Eddard Stark’s surprise
attack hitting the already weakened force further weakening it. He had sent a second force that was
too late to prevent the overthrow of his grandson, but it contained the contagion of the illness to
King’s Landing. Eddard Stark was trapped in his island of a nation. Soon, that island would be
taken from the man.

Tywin had everything under control except for the godsdamm ravens. Where Eddard Stark had
acquired this seemingly unending stream of ravens Tywin did not know. It made his task so much harder, this ability of Eddard Stark to communicate almost continuously with those he chose to across the breadth of Westeros.

The words Eddard spoke may be the truth, but the truth rarely won out against a well-placed lie continuously spoken again and again until it was believed. Eddard Stark would be gone, and the original truth would soon be drowned out with the new truth. Tywin would guide Westeros to the new truth that met Tywin’s purposes.

Tywin cared little for any truth that went against his goals and desires. It was his will that was paramount and supreme. Reality would bend to it.

It was just that Eddard Stark and his North, along with the Riverlands and too much of the Vale, was making his task so much more difficult. Together, they could not stop him but they delayed him. Their attacks drained his force taking away their full might. This enraged Tywin.

He had cut short by three weeks the training of his forces. They would try and make it up when they arrived at King’s Landing. With what Eddard seemed to be trying to setup, he would have time to further train his forces while bivouacked before the gates King’s Landing. He would study the dynamics, as his army honed their skills to a razor sharp edge. They would strike when he, Tywin Lannister, was ready.

His previous forces in their haste had been savaged. Not this time. He would march in force and in an orderly manner to reduce the ability of these strange allies of Eddard Stark to attack with such force and seeming impunity. He now had the force necessary to take the fight to the enemy in the mountains. He had made preparations.

Tywin looked back behind him, at the first for the supply wagons that all army trains had. These wagons were not your ordinary wagons. These had shields built on top of them. From each corner of the bed of the wagon, six by six studs had been erected. On them, a reinforced framework had been built that allowed a sharply angled roof to be constructed over the bed, box and seat, tongue of the wagons. The slats of the roof made of three inch thick white oak. The wood shod with a thin layer of iron.

The white oak and iron might not stop all the longbow arrows of their foes from penetrating the shelter of the roofs, but the energy would be dissipated and lose their ability to do much further damage. The high angle of the roof would deflect arrows and tend to shunt aside any boulders falling upon them. It would not be perfect, but the roofs would deflect many of the boulders. The damage reduced to acceptable levels.

For the troops themselves, they would be carrying long rectangular shields made of beaten iron. The men trained to take two tactics in defense. The first, was to push to the side of the mountain and saddle up to rock. The men would angle their shields away from the mountain side during an arrow attack. If that was not possible, the men were to kneel in place. The men keeping formation. They would raise their shields above their heads while kneeling to block attacks from above. The formation to allow for a degree of interlocking shields.

The weight of shields made of iron would slow the march, but the loss of men would be much reduced. Tywin thought that a reasonable tradeoff. Once through the mountains, and back on the land beyond the mountains, the shields for both the wagons and the men could be dispensed with. The reduction in weight reducing the stress on man and draft animal. The speed of the march could be increased.

Before they entered into the first range of the mountains, Tywin would send in battalions of men
from the mountain holdfasts and castles of his constituency into the land beside the Gold Road. The men would flush out the enemy, and prevent them from making attacks on the main column. He had five thousand men allocated to this effort.

From the reports of the first two columns through the mountains passes, the ghost like enemy seemed relatively few in number. They could not afford to engage a massed force. Though the enemy may be elusive, they could not form into a large effective force when attacked themselves by forces in number. Tywin hoped they would simply fade into the forest and let him pass. The effort not worth the risk. They were brave when attacking in advantage, but how brave would they be when facing a foe ready for them.

The sun felt good on Tywin’s face. The cheers of his people invigorated the man. He may be advancing in years, but the fight still filled him with strength and purpose. He would do what was necessary to achieve his goals. House Lannister would achieve even more greatness when he proved his mettle upon a new generation. He would dispose the upstart Direwolf. He would crush all other aspirants to the Iron Throne. He would again show that House Lannister was the greatest House of Westeros.

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A strong fist slammed onto the table top. The leading edge of the Lannister column had stopped at a switchback on their trek through the Cascade Mountains. Tywin looked off across the wide ravine. The mountainsides thickly treed. With a slow calming breath, Tywin worked to control his wrath. He had sneered at his commanders of the previous strike forces fighting their way through the passes in these mountains. Tywin had formed over the last four days, a grudging respect for these damn ghosts of the mountain passes.

The first four days into the mountains had gone well. No attacks occurred. He had his men off to the flanks and above the Gold Road on the mountain sides above, as his army snaked along the sides of mountains. The men traversing to the sides of the Gold Road. These men used to these rugged slopes and steep ravines. The enemy seemed to have decided to forgo attacking a much superior force that had been prepared for their attacks.

Tywin had felt a smug pride in his ability to outfox his opponents. When he applied his intellect and will all fell before him. Tywin’s surety in his own prowess only growing. That changed in the blink of an eye.

Tywin was conferring with a Major of his Lancer Brigade, as they moved down the mountain pass. Then he was simply gone off his horse. It took Tywin a few moments to register that the man was now on the side of the mountain beside the road. A longbow arrow had nearly slammed all the way through his throat. The man now gurgling out his last breath. The old Lion looked around with large eyes. His head turned. Where had the shot come from? He had no idea.

Then in the air above him, and suddenly off to the right in the ravine that lined this part of the Gold Road, Tywin heard shouts and curses. Men screaming and war horns blowing. Several of his men came flashing down off the mountainside above them. One hitting a covered wagon, his body broken by the impact. Two hit the road and tumbled off to fall into the ravine. In the ravine below and mountainside above combat was heard.

Tywin was thankful that his men’s training took hold. Their shields had been raised quickly. Men covering to their left where the open ravine was, and others carrying their shields above the column in his area. For a minute there was no arrows. Then they came whistling in at random angles and from on high and from below. The shields did their job. Only two men had been feathered in the actual column. Continued shouts and the cries of Lannister heard above and below. Rage flushed in
Tywin when one blow of the horn was cutoff in mid breath. The man clearly killed.

Several large rocks came hurtling down. One hit a covered wagon, and did damage to the roof, but was shunted down the slope of the iron shod slanted wooden deck. The rock tumbling off the roof and into the ravine. Several rocks fell on the column of men crushing them. No human shields could protect from that kind of weight and momentum.

Tywin seethed at the loss of men and the time it would take to lever the boulders off the track.

The battle was over in ten minutes. His losses on the road had been negligible. He was to learn that his force above, and to the side had suffered losses, but their skill in the woods and training had allowed the losses to be moderate compared to their earlier losses. They had fired back at the enemy with their own longbows. The reports were shouted up and down to the Gold Road. Nearly thirty dead and twenty-two wounded. Many of those would be able to continue the march.

They had found two dead of the enemy. They had on long robes that were colored to blend into the forests. One of them being a woman. This shocked Tywin. Heathens. Their bows and arrows had been taken by their brethren it seemed. Hopefully, others had been killed.

That had been in the Brokeback Mountain range. The enemy had constantly savaged the previous Lannister columns. Now the attacks were less frequent but intense. The elusive foe seemed to focus on the forces Tywin had put out flanking the Gold Road. It was mainly sniping that killed a man or three with longbow arrows through their heads mainly, but other shots hitting torsos and limbs.

At times, Lannister men came hurtling down off the mountains above them. The men simply thrown to their deaths. Their screams as they fell echoing off the cliff faces. The men in the columns ashen face at the sight and sounds of their dying.

Then had come the three major attacks on the Gold Road itself. Tywin was sending out reinforced scout teams ahead of the main column to try and trip any ambush. He had a runner comeback. The force sent out that day had been ambushed from all sides. Only five were still alive. They marched on and found the road completely blocked by a rockslide that had been triggered.

Tywin teeth ground. He sent his sappers forward. They slowly cleared the road. Men with shields beside them waiting to shield them. The force had bowmen with them, craning their necks looking for the hidden foe all knew was near. The hairs on Tywin’s neck standing up. He could feel his foe watching him. The unseen foe gauging the Lannisters for weakness.

Lannister war horns blew above them shrilly. Arrows came whistling down as his men fired back up. Shouts and screams occurred over them. Several large boulders bounded down the mountainside. Men flattened themselves to the mountainside hearing the crash of large rocks coming down. Wagons sought out as refuge.

One huge boulder hit a wagon, and was too much for the wagon and its defenses. The wagon collapsed and tumbled over the side of the road and crashed down the mountainside below. The screams of men trapped on the doomed wagon loud. The sappers worked bravely clearing the road. Snipers taking shots. Most blocked by the shields but a few found their targets. The Lannister archers firing up the mountainside whenever they thought they had a shot.

Tywin stayed close to the mountainside cursing the unseen foe. Arrows whistling down in a constant drizzle. Men falling from the thickly treed mountainside. Most were Lannisters but a robed figure hit the Gold Road the body shattered and then rebounded over into the ravine. The sappers protected as they worked feverishly to clear the road. Finally, the road was cleared.
The enemy was ever elusive. They did kill a few here and there, but the losses were one-sided. The loss of time was as bad as the loss of men. The attacks stalled any advance, and the aftermath of each attack took hours to sort out before the column could again march forward. He had lost at least a week he knew in lost time. His men sapped of strength fighting for their lives from a foe they never truly saw.

This was why Tywin Lannister pounded the war desk beside the wagon he was sheltered behind. Another attack had ceased only thirty minutes ago. More men had been lost. He had ordered all officers to remove any regalia that signified rank. The snipers were definitely sniping for officers. Arrows coming in from all angles it seemed to hit an officer in a moment when they were vulnerable.

Many times the arrows did not penetrate the harden steel, but the impact to body was still like being kicked by a horse. The strikes leaving deep bruises on arms or torsos. The men concussed if struck in the helm. Some of the men confused a week after the helm strike.

The leader of the West had lost another wagon. The oxen and horses were covered in armor that slowed their pace but saved many animals. Not this time. The lead oxen had taken an arrow to the eye. The body suddenly fell down to its knees. This panicked the other beasts and they charged off the cliff taking their drivers and seven troops to their death.

A day later, they had actually captured one of the enemy. At last! It took an hour to lower the man by rope from above. Tywin had his best interrogator begin beating the man to break his will. Suddenly, the man started to convulse and foam heavily at the mouth. Within a minute he was dead. Poison. They could find nothing in his mouth. He must have bitten into something and then swallowed it.

Dammit! Tywin needed information on these cretins. It was so frustrating.

This night, the attacks on the column had been unremitting. Night time was for the occasional sniper attack. Not this night. Normally, the attacks occurred in the daylight to give their archery foes light to shoot by. This rule was not to be followed this night. Arrows came in from above, and from the nearby mountains where they had camped for the night. His men engaged the elusive foes to the side and above, but it was not enough to stop the attacks. The attacks ripped up and down the column. Their unseen foes constantly shifting their focal point of attack. The Lannisters never sure where the next attack would come from. The Lannisters on the mountainsides chasing ghosts who would materialize for only a moment to attack the attacker.

The unremitting arrow fire had his men on edge. Two had lost control of their nerves. The men jumping up shouting out. They were immediately cut down. Several large boulders were sent crashing down the mountainside in the early night. One hit a grouping of men killing eight and wounding twelve. Two wagons had been destroyed by direct hits of large boulders early in the night. The hidden enemy well placed to drop the massive boulders down on the exposed wagons.

Tywin was not sure how, but he would get revenge on these bastards. It was obvious to the leader of the Westerlands that the enemy were taking revenge for the man they had captured. After the midnight hour, more boulders started to tumble down. His men above Tywin, on the mountainside, exhausted by the continuous warfare and seeking shelter to survive. The screams of men and animals loud in the dark air.

Tywin was pressed into the mountain side as men took turns keeping their shield walls formed up. Suddenly a man slumped over. An arrow had found an opening no matter how small. The man had an arrow that had slammed down beside his collarbone and into his lung. It took him a long time to die. The wheezing and gurgling made Tywin curse and gnash his teeth in anger and vexation.
The attacks had occurred all night. The attack only ceasing when the sky began to lighten. Tywin was exhausted. His men were exhausted. There would be no march this day. Throughout the day he received reports of his forces losses. One hundred and fifty men lost on the road, and though the reports were somewhat sketchy, he lost roughly three hundred men on the flanking forces. Seven wagons had been destroyed. Their supplies lost.

The cold green eyes of Tywin Lannister seethed. He had a new found respect for the leaders of the earlier columns. The attack of the last night had been horrific. They had only found four of the enemy dead. Tywin knew their losses were greater, but he knew the ratio was totally in the favor of their foes.

Fortunately, the battle had seemed to sap the energy and resources of their foes. There had been no further large scale attacks. Only the occasional sniping that would take out a man suddenly without warning. The kills unnerving and demoralizing, but the column marched on. The few boulders that came down the mountains had the same affect but the men endured, as well trained armies must.

The men started to revive when they began their descent down from the mountains on the eastern side of the mountains of the Westerlands. They had made it through. The losses had been excessive but manageable. They had lost two weeks, but there was nothing that could be done for the lost time. They had come through the mountain passes. Now they could truly march on King’s Landing.

The shields on the wagons were broken down to save the weight, and lessen the load on the draft animals. The animals glad of the weight reduction. The heavy shields the men had used were cast aside. They had done their job.

Tywin took three days to reorganize his scout and picket force. He also let his men rest and recuperate on the rolling hills, safe from attacks from above. He had his pickets out in force scouting for the enemy. Tywin knew his enemy were out there waiting to attack. He was now in a much stronger position to defend his army, and hopefully put his enemy on the defense.

They began their march down the Gold Road feeling refreshed and ready to take the fight to the enemy. They were in open ground now. The enemy no longer had the mountains and close by trees to hide behind.

Tywin felt confident. The land here was filled with rolling hills that were up to five hundred feet in height. There were wooden glens and thickets, but the woods not so vast or thick and the hills not so steep. They could be navigated and flanked. He had patrols out. Tywin had sent out men who knew this land. The men to set ambushes for these elusive foes.

His army began to march out of the piedmont heading for the lands of the House of Tully. They would have to navigate through that wardenship. But Twin was confident. The worst was behind them.

Now the Lions would be the ones doing the ambushing.

That had been the plan.

A week later, Tywin fumed. He remembered he adage that no plan survives the first contact with the enemy.

His respect for the earlier commanders who had made this trek grudgingly rose by degrees yet again. Despite his superior force and tactics gleamed from the previous marches, the enemy still proved elusive. Their attacks coming from several hundred yards out. A sudden gust of arrows and then
nothing. Men and animals feathered. The losses not great, but the shocking suddenness of the attacks were demoralizing. The inability to strike back at the enemy who was never where the arrow fire came from was maddening.

Attacks from hills and copses of trees several hundred yards distant could be understood. The attacks from seeming innocent tall prairie grass and brambles were unnerving. The attacks sudden and as suddenly over. Light cavalry sent rushing to where the arrows came from. Only several times, was one of the enemy cornered and killed. The foe fighting to the death. Often, the forces sent rushing out were ambushed themselves from a new angle. One ambush carefully arranged to cause a second. The enemy still able to disappear into seeming nothingness.

How their enemy was able to accomplish this disappearing into the environment was frightening. To Tywin it was becoming borderline supernatural. He knew his men were even more unbalanced by this. It disheartened the soul. Tywin exerted his iron will to keep his command focused and cohesive, as the Army of the Lannisters continued on their march to King’s Landing.

To make matters worse now, the forces of House Tully had joined the fray. They were not invisible as the first foes were, but they still always attacked at advantage. Again, it was obvious to Tywin that the strange robed figures were now guiding House Tully’s forces.

It should have been impossible, with the large number of patrols Tywin had sent out, and the ambushes he had laid, but the enemy always attacked at advantage. Tywin was completely perplexed. How could the enemy know of his forces disposition and then attack from unforeseen vectors. His ambushes, instead of trapping and hitting his foes were instead ambushed themselves.

It was maddening beyond all reason. Somehow the enemy was completely aware of what Tywin was doing. It infuriated him. He began to wonder if one of his top commanders were a spy, but that was paranoia. The battlefield was fluid. No one with him could be sure exactly sure where all their forces were at a given moment. Somehow their enemy did. It was becoming a little frightening to Tywin.

He had learned to avoid as much as possible the wooden glens and the steep hills. The hidden enemy taking full advantage of such. The foe firing from distance. A man or several men dropping dead without warning. Dusk and dawn were especially dangerous. The arrows firing in from the gloom and striking a man dead. No idea where the shot came from.

On his pickets and attempted ambushes, the Tullys had joined the attack against his forces. The Tullys had to be in league with the hidden foe, for they too now attacked with deadly efficiency. Their attacks always at advantage. Again and again, Tywin and his generals were perplexed at this seeming all knowing of their enemy. Their pickets found nothing and ambushes waited in vain for foes to attack unawares.

The Tully forces preferred to attack with spears. The men would charge in, unlooked for, onto a force of Lannisters. The horsemen throwing their spears with the momentum of their charge to make the spears even more deadly. The attacks sudden and then the men were gone. The attacked forces sometimes gave chase, but often the chasing men were lead into ambushes of the longbows of the unseen enemy. Working together, the Tullys and unseen enemy were a deadly combination.

Tywin would have admired them if he did not hate them so.

He did have one small victory. A large regiment of cavalry and mounted archers had been sent out ahead of the main column. The large party had triggered an attack. The attack from a small forest of roughly a mile in width. The forest able to be enveloped by a charge of cavalry in counterattack. Then a force of dismounted foot had joined the battle surrounding the stand of trees. The mounted
men rushed into the small forest. They had been able to come in from all angles. The Lannisters were able to kill thirteen of the robed foes. They had lost nearly seventy men but the Lannisters felt elation at killing so many of the foes.

The success lifted the spirits of Tywin and his generals. Tywin knew after he put Eddard Stark down, he would have to concentrate on this new enemy, and devise a way to exterminate them. He would chop down all the forests of Westeros if he most to root them out.

Two day later, the damn Tullys had attacked the force that had decimated the robed enemy. This was a large scale conflict. The battle fairly even, but the Lannisters had taken the advantage the report said. Then the hidden foes had risen up from the hillsides. How they could disappear into such short grasses and scrub none could fathom. The downpour of longbow arrows harrowing to the Lannister force. The archers disorganized the Lannisters. This had tilted the battle to the Tullys. The Lannister forces were left open to a massive charge of spear and lance. The Lannisters forced to retreat taking sever losses.

The Lannisters retreated back to the main column after that. They did stumble upon an injured robed enemy. She had been hit by an arrow in the leg. The commander of the force took her with them. They rode fast to separate from the enemy. She was taken to Tywin.

He sneered at the woman. She was in pain, but was defiant. He ordered her to be raped. Rape always broke a woman’s will. He had walked off. For Tywin, rape was merely a tool to be used. He derived no pleasure in the act itself. There was always men ready to do the task. The woman now stripped made no sound. This angered the men raping her. Her defiance only escalated their barbarity. Then it was finished. Only then did Tywin return to begin the questioning.

It was then she started to convulse and froth at the mouth. Tywin bellowed at his field medics. She was to be searched for anything in her mouth. They screamed back she had been free of any such root. A search of her body produced nothing before the rape had begun. She was soon dead. They did find a small sliver of a root in her throat they were able to retrieve. The man who found it began to convulse fifteen minutes later. An hour later the foaming began. It took him all night to die.

How the woman had hidden the root, or what it was no one knew. The root deadly beyond all belief. Tywin’s will being thwarted, filled him with wrath. He was succeeding in his overall strategy, but hated this constant sapping of manpower and energy. The loss of each day precious to Tywin.

Tywin was tired of fighting on the defensive all the time. He would give the Tullys a dose of their own medicine. They had threatened holdfasts and towns of the Westerlands. Let them taste the same in the Riverlands Tywin thought. Giving it back to his enemy gave the man great satisfaction.

Tywin sent out a force of one thousand cavalry with two thousand foot to the East. He sent them to threaten Stony Sept, Acorn Hall and Pinkmaiden. The threat to those bastions would also threaten the seat of their titular power of Riverrun itself. The Tullys would have to adjust their orientation, at least to some degree, to protect their population centers, as Tywin had had to do in his turn. The initiative taken from them.

It worked. Attacks by the Tullys and any large number of the robed assailants ceased. The attacks quickly dwindled back to the sniping of single arrow strikes done from distance. It rankled Tywin that the arrows almost never missed their targets. How anyone could shoot so accurately from hundreds of yards away was almost unfathomable. The skill necessary was simply beyond human comprehension.

The march continued. The army of the Westerlands had reached the Reach. Even Tywin saw the
humor in that. It was then that the sniping stopped too. This Tywin found disconcerting as much as the attacks. Why? The attacks were not causing true harm to his army physically. The loss of soldiers at an acceptable level Tywin knew. There were losses in any campaign. Those losses did not mean anything to the cagey Lion.

What bothered Tywin was the why? The attacks did make his men jittery, and always looking at the horizon. It affected moral, but the men were too disciplined to let the sniping affect their actions. Generally, it was the pickets that drew most of the attacks anyways. No. The question came back to why. Why stop attacks that were successful Tywin wondered.

He mulled over the options in his mind weighing their viability. Only one option made sense to Tywin. Eddard wanted him to arrive at King’s Landing quickly now. While in the Westerlands he had been attacked. Now he was entering the first lands of the Reach. Soon the Lannister army would be in the Riverlands before entering the Crownlands on the final push to King’s Landing. Eddard was making it easier for the army of the Westerlands to increase their pace to reach King’s Landing.

The man’s audacity galled Tywin. Eddard Stark had let his luck go to his head. The Warden of the North had been fighting amateurs before. He would soon be facing the true master of the Game of Thrones. All who had gone against Tywin Lannister had failed. Eddard Stark would be added to the list. There would not be much time for Eddard to review his defeat. Eddard would be dealt with quickly and mercilessly.

The same for Tywin’s daughter. Cersei’s crimes against the House of Lannister were intolerable. She had committed the worst crime of all. She had besmirched the name of House Lannister. It was the duty of all born into the nobility of House Lannister to further the greatness of their House. Cersei’s actions had done almost irremediable damage to the House of her birth.

Tywin would have to work quick, and with an iron fist to undo the damage done by his daughter and Eddard Stark. Given time though, Tywin knew he could mold perceptions to what he desired. It had worked in the past and would in the future.

There had only been one focused attack on his forces since leaving the Westerlands. As with most armies, the Lannister army had to, in part, live off the land. His forces sending out scouting parties to find farms and small townships. Once located, they were raided for their crops, livestock and other items necessary for an army. The homes raided for textiles, tack for animals, cookery items and general loot that gave soldiers a sense of jubilation finding items only for themselves. A means to enhance moral of the troops.

Tywin had never cared what happened to the people that his army marched through and on. They were the enemy, and were not accorded any protection from his men’s wants and desires. There had always been the spoils of war. Tywin was a complete believer in it. His soldiers taking spoils from the defeated made his armies stronger.

He had received several communications from his son, now that his army was close enough to have runners between his army and his son’s forces in the field.

Tywin’s eyebrows knit thinking on the two scrolls. They had seemed distracted and showed a lack of focus that Tywin could not put his finger on.

His son had made the point in the second scroll, that attacking the citizens and their properties in the lands they fought in was counterproductive. Jaime advocated for treating the local populace with respect, and taking only what was absolutely needed and sparing the rest. Tywin had stared at the foreign words. Anger filled Tywin at this sudden weakness in his son.
Again, Tywin felt anger at his daughter. This sudden weakness in Jaime had to be his daughter’s doing. She had seduced him into incest, and weakened his very soul. The foul temptress had addled Jaime’s thoughts. Taken his manhood away from her brother. Tywin would correct this soon he vowed.

He thought on this when word arrived this morning of another calamity. One party that was scavenging the land for food and other items had been led by Sarrac Clegane. He was a second cousin to Gregor Clegane. He was a rising star in the forces of the Westerlands. He had burned two villages to the ground after taking all that his forces could find. Tywin cared less for any rape or deaths caused by the man and his command.

They had sent word they were approaching the Riverland village of Aberstwyth. Tywin knew that much spoils would be reaped by the assault on this substantial village by the large creek of Pohefair Rill. The village at the crossroads of paths, in the area above the Blackwater Rush, as it flowed through the Riverlands.

It should have been a routine raid. The few survivors painted a very different tale. A tale Sarrac Clegane had not lived to tell. Tywin again vowed revenge at this new affront to House Lannister. The report filled the elderly Lion with vindictive.

The town had seemed normal in every way. Men and women were observed in the streets and in the doorways as Sarrac’s command entered the village. The town folk submissive. His command dispersed to begin their looting. Unnoticed, the town folk had disappeared into the buildings. Suddenly a blizzard of arrows were raining from out the buildings and down from the rooftops. The fire deadly accurate.

It was said Sarrac, in his armor, stood his ground bravely, roaring his commands. Arrows jutting out his armor not able to fully penetrate Lannister harden steel. It was quickly discovered that all the paths out of the village had been blocked by wagons and large crates that had been hidden away. Once the Lannisters were in the trap, only then were the obstructions wheeled out. There had been only one avenue left clear. In that path way, a large troop of Trout rode in with lances lowered. The slaughter of Lannisters had been dreadful. The shock of the sudden assault completely disorientated the force of Lannisters.

The shadow fighters had dispensed with their robes to appear as common town folk the survivors reported. Together with the forces of the Trout, they annihilated Sarrac’s command. He had been run through by a lance that rammed through his groin. The few survivors said he tried to fight on, as he lay on the ground slashing his sword at mounted Tully stabbing at him with their spears. Bravely, Sarrac fought on till an arrow penetrated his eye killing him instantly.

The survivors reported of the figures running from rooftop to rooftop firing arrows with deadly affect. The Tully forces running down Lannisters. Their horsemen rammed lances and spears through their bodies. Lannisters cornered against buildings. Those men cut down by a rain of arrows from the unearthly allies of House Stark, but now reinforced with many Tully archers.

Swordsman bursting out the doorways to swarm upon the now disorganized Lannisters. It had turned into a massacre for House Lannister.

Tywin seethed. The message had been sent. If you burn and slaughter you will pay the price. He sent out word to no longer loot beyond what was truly needed. Leave the populace be, and do not damage the buildings unless absolutely necessary. He would have revenge for this too. All these affronts to House Lannister would be expunged when a Lannister again sat on the Iron Throne.

Tywin Lannister had many accounts to settle.
The midmorning sun was bright in the crystal clear blue sky above. The sun’s rays striking down on Tywin Lannister, as he sat at his war table setup in a broad meadow. He mused at the butterflies and bees flying from flower to flower. The beauty of nature meant nothing to the man. He waited patiently. His son was coming to him. The runner had reported that two hours ago.

Two days ago, the vanguard of the Lannister army finally entered into the Constituency of the Crownlands. He was near his goal. Soon he could begin to heal this madness that had infected Westeros. The infection of one Eddard Stark would be burned out if necessary.

The sound of horses approaching sounded off to the right. Tywin felt the smallest of smiles cross his face. Jaime Lannister, his son, was coming to him. It would be nice to again see the face of his first born son. It would be time to finally begin undoing the wrongs of the recent past. The father was sure now it was Cersei that had pushed Jaime into taking the White. It was brilliant in a sick perverted way. The perfect way to have her brother near to seduce with her vile temptress ways.

Eddard’s scrolls had made that clear if nothing else. Though it be truth, Tywin would have to make it a lie. The honor of House Lannister demanded it. The family legacy was what mattered. Each generation was born, strove for greatness, and then died. It was only the family name that lived on. That was paramount.

He saw his son coming to him. His blond hair longer than he had ever seen it on his son. The locks down around his shoulders and some of his golden hair running down his back. He was not sure he liked the look. He looked like a Targaryen. His armor dented and dull. His cape ragged and dirty. Jaime had on his helm. He saw a large dent by his right eye. Why had Jaime not replaced the helm or had the indentation beat out? Tywin wondered. Jaime saw his father, and tilted his head in acknowledgement. His eyes steady and yet strangely guarded.

Tywin wondered what was wrong with his son. His actions seemed slightly off. The look of the man and his armor showed a lack of self-worth. A leader had to always appear as untouchable. Inviolate. With a slow gait, Tywin’s son rode his horse to his father and then dismounted. He removed his helm and put it on the horn of his saddle. Tilting his head back, Jaime shook out his long locks. He looked at his father and then smiled.

The two embraced. Jaime hugged his father to his body. Tywin patted his son on the back.

“It is good to have you with me my son.”

“I am honored to be with you father.”

“Come with me to my tent son.” Jaime followed his father into his royal tent. The inside cool compared to the warm outside air. Jaime took the chair his father pointed to. A steward came in and quickly prepared a quick meal of cut meat on bread soaked in venison stew. A bowl of potatoes and turnips placed beside the platter of beef. A large mug of mead provided for father and son. The two men ate in silence. Both contemplating on their efforts to fight a foe who was always one step ahead of your actions.

“Tell me of your campaign in the Crown and Stormlands Jaime.”

His son told him of his efforts against the forces of the Direwolf. How at first the campaign had gone well, but then changed overnight. Suddenly, the forces of Eddard Stark were always attacking at advantage, and then melting away into the environment. Only to strike again elsewhere. The next day or maybe it would be three days later the next attack came. The attacks never large scale. The
goal seeming to be solely to bleed the Lannisters a little more and to confuse. The sudden attacks from seeming nowhere demoralizing. Jamie had chased the forces of Dondarrion across the land. The man seemingly just beyond the next hill. Day in and day out the pattern repeated.

“It is like I am chasing a Chimera. Always on the horizon, leading me to my doom. I did all I could my father.”

“I know you did Jaime” Tywin answered.

He would not have accepted his sons words before his march to King’s Landing. He would have thought his son incompetent and not ruthless enough. Not now. Tywin Lannister had experienced the same thing. An enemy impossibly one step ahead of you. All the time. It was maddening.

“You need to wash and cut your hair Jaime. I will have your helmed replaced. I will have your armor burnished. You are a Prince of House Lannister. You must look the part.”

“I’ll pass.” That was all Jaime said. The tone neutral. His son looked at his father with a weary aspect.

“Excuse me?” Tywin asked in a quiet voice. His son had always been sarcastic, but this casual dismissal of his father’s wish, surprised and aggravated Tywin mightily. Jaime might be insolent, but he always did the will of his father. Son followed the commands of the father. That father now looked at son crossly, expecting obedience.

Jaime looked at his father with this new strange calmness. “I said, father, I will pass. It is my body and my life. I will lead it as I chose.” Jaime now looked at his father with a level look which did not falter. In the past, when Tywin had shown his anger, his son had always backtracked and capitulated.

“You will do as I say Jaime Lannister.” A father raising his voice to his recalcitrant son.

“I think not father. If you don’t like it, relieve me of my command and I will ride off.” Now his son’s eyes bored into his.

Tywin sat and keep silent. The silence to control his wrath. His son was off his center. This was obvious. The infection of his daughter was worse than he thought.

“A son obeys his father.”

“Yes. I know. One has to uphold the name of Lannister. That is all that matters. We live. We die. But the name lives on. That is right father, isn’t it?”

Slowly Tywin answered. “Yes.” What was Jaime getting at?

“Hummmmm,” Jaime mused. A look of defiance now in son’s eyes. His back straightened. “I am my own man. I will live my life as I chose.” His face now showed agitation. “Fuck the name Lannister. I grow to hate the name, father.” Jaime looked away and then back. Tywin saw both defiance but also tiredness in his son’s eyes. “The name of our House begins to weigh on me, as the name Kingslayer and now Childslayer weigh me down like millstones. Both names true, I might add.”

Jaime got up and slowly walked around in Tywin’s tent.

Tywin remained silent. He saw he had to treat Jaime gently at this time. He was definitely befogged with this strange malaise Tywin observed. The long campaign, and lack of success had worn his son
down. He needed time to relax and heal. Still, Jaime was in talking mood. Tywin had questions he needed answered.

“Since you are telling me how you truly feel Jaime, I have a question for you. Did you sleep with Cersei? Are Joffrey, Tommen and Myrcella yours? I want to know.”

“Isn’t that what Eddard is proclaiming to the heavens?” Jaime barked back.

“Still. I want to hear what you have to say son. How could you have gone against the laws of man and the gods so? What did Cersei do to you Jaime?”

Jaime snorted and shook his head with a look of disgust on his face.

“I want you to tell me the truth Jaime.”

The son only looked at the father with a tired face. The two men staring at each other.

“Well? I am your father. I deserve the truth from my eldest son. It is my right!” Tywin raised his voice in vexation.

“What would you have me say father?”

“The truth!” Tywin shouted. He knew the truth now. He had been fooled, but Eddard had lifted the scales from his eyes on the truth of his son and daughter. He did owe the man that. How his eldest children must have laughed at him and their mother. He would let that lie with Jaime. He knew it was Cersei that had caused this sin to occur. The damage to the name of House Lannister incalculable.

It would take much time and gold crowns to undo the damage. Tywin was prepared to do what he must. Still, he wanted to hear Jaime say the words. To make the truth fully revealed.

“Answer me!”

“What will happen to Cersei? To her children? I would say ours but I was never their father.”

Tywin felt his eyes narrow. “I will do what must be done for—“

Jaime cut in “What is right for the almighty gods-damn name of Lannister?” he said with a sneer.

“Of course. These lies about you and Cersei must be removed from the records of Westeros. I will not have our family shamed like this.”

“Then why ask me about Cersei, father? It is all lies after all.” He smirked at his father. “We are as pure as the wind driven snow. Well, before the wolves pee on it. That’s about as pure as I can give you father.”

Jaime’s insolence enraged Tywin. He stepped up to Jaime and cocked his hand to slap his son’s face. Father lashed out at son. Jaime easily caught his father’s hand. Tywin jerked his arm but his son was much stronger than the father. Jaime was still in the late summer of his life. Tywin now in his autumn. The two glared at each other.

“I think not father,” Jaime said calmly. He threw his father’s hand down. “Those days are long past. I should have stopped you from striking your only daughter. My fault. I should have protected Tyrion from you. We both have grave faults father. I now freely admit mine. Yours are as great.” He glared at his father. “No. I lied. Greater.”
Anger and confusion filled Tywin Lannister. His son’s defiance and insolence was insufferable, but he forbore. He was used to Jaime’s sarcasm, but this was something different. Something darker and more sinister. He was to be the Heir to Casterly Rock. Tywin had decided to put Tommen on the Iron Throne. His grandson would need the support of Casterly Rock till Tommen was ready to govern.

The weight of his campaign had clearly worn on Jaime. Cersei’s damnable actions had unsettled Tywin’s son. He would abstain for now. In time, Jaime would see his father’s wisdom.

“I will forgive you Jaime,” Tywin said as he looked at his son. He could not understand what had so put Jaime off his center. “What is wrong with you son?”

Jaime looked at him. He did not answer for a long moment. Then a tired smile appeared on his.

“I wish I didn’t know now, what I didn’t know then.” Jamie looked around the tent without truly seeing the opulence in it. “I have had an epiphany father.” With that Jaime Lannister made to depart from his father’s command tent.

The strange words left the father unsettled. Tywin rocked on his feet contemplating his son. His son needed rest. That was evident. He would give his son the rest he needed Tywin decided. Jaime would have a chance to get his balance back, and then they would discuss the future.

His son seemed distracted. Jamie slowly walked towards the opening to his father’s tent. Jaime moved with a leaden slowness. His head bowed. Tywin watched his son. Jaime stopped at the tent flap. He turned to look at his father with tired eyes.

“I have something to say father. Something that should have been said long ago. I know my siblings would say the words that I am about to say now, if not for fear of you. I have moved beyond that now.”

Tywin waited. Jaime made direct eye contact now. The father was not sure what he saw in his son’s eyes. His son’s old cocky self was not evident.

“You, Tywin Lannister, were in the past, and continues in the present, to be a horrid father. You were unloving and cruel to your children. Therefore, in return we do not love you. Fear you, yes. Obey you? We try. But not for love.”

His son looked hard into his father’s eyes. The father returned the gaze. Tywin saw no fear in his son’s eyes now. He did not even see anger considering what his son had just said. Again, Tywin was not sure what he saw in Jaime’s eyes. His son’s body showed a world weariness.

His son started to leave the tent, but he only made it half way through the opening. He stopped and turned half around to look at his father. Again, no anger. Just an unsettlingly calmness. It seemed as if Jaime Lannister had resigned himself to fate.

This angered Tywin Lannister. A Lannister did not accept fate, but took it by the neck, throttling the contrarian fate and made it his own. The father knew he had to somehow reignite the flame of ambition, and a quest to again make his House great, in the breast of Jaime.

“I have one more thing to say on this father. I know of only one man who was a worse father than you.”

Jamie said nothing more. He did not make a move to leave. The two looked at each other. A standoff. Tywin wanted to know Jaime’s pronouncement so he asked.
“Who could be worse than the vile man you claim I to be.”

“Myself.”

With that Jaime Lannister turned and left the father alone in his tent.

Tywin took a deep breath. His son’s insolence would have to be dealt with. The problem was he needed his eldest son. That was paramount. Joffrey was a simpleton. He was also cruel and venial. The combination was fatal. His youngest grandson played with cats for the gods’ sake. The boy lacked a backbone. Tywin breathed deep again.

It was good to know though. He knew in his bones that Jaime had slept with his sister. Tywin could not deny that fact. The damn book that Eddard Stark had unearthed proved that beyond doubt. Still, it was really all words. Now, Jaime had verified it beyond all doubt. His grandchildren were incestuous, vile spawn.

He would rectify the situation. Tywin would have to live with certain untruths and certitudes that sickened him, but live with them he would. Once he had removed Eddard Stark from the Iron Throne, put Tommen on the throne, and made his brother, Kevan, the regent he could begin the rehabilitation of the name of House Lannister. He needed a successor to the seat of Casterly Rock. Kevan was capable, but lacked the charisma that Jaime had in abundance. The people of the West would flock to Jaime. After Tywin had turned Eddard’s words to ash, then Jaime could assume his duty, and rule Casterly Rock when the time came.

The sun felt good on Tywin’s face. The march for the day was about to commence. He was tired. He had had meetings with the commanders in Jaime’s troop late into the night. He had discovered of the two near brushes with death experienced by his son. Tywin was a strict man with others and himself. Still, to have two near death experiences would affect any man. Tywin winced thinking of feeling an arrow brush his face and then having one strike his helm at close range.

Tywin had felt better after hearing that. It helped to explain Jaime’s insolent attitude and willingness to be defiant with his father. Jaime was off his balance. It was clear that Cersei, the seductress, had harmed Jaime. He would punish Cersei for this. There was only one recourse for her. Cersei would suffer before her death.

He looked behind him and saw his son coming up the line on his horse. He liked what he saw. Jaime had washed his hair. It was no longer lank but shown radiantly underneath the sun. His armor had been burnished and he had on a new cape. He was closer now. The stubble had been shaved off. The only thing marring the resurgent look was the large dent on Jaime’s helm by his eye.

“You need to get a new helm son,” Tywin told his son. He needed to look the part of a confident leader. Tywin did not like the reminder of the arrow that nearly killed Jaime.

Jaime shook his head no. “I think not father.”

“Why?” Tywin asked in a peevd voice. He saw his son’s calm defiance was still in evidence. It was tiring.

“Death is near. I do not want to forget. The fates are balancing the scales I think.”

Tywin watched his son ignore him now. Jaime pretending to look at the camp around them.

Those words spoken by his son were unsettling. It was if Jaime was tying the present and the past
together into the future. His words putting a dark spin on future events. The attitude was disgusting to Tywin. One needed supreme confidence to take destiny, and shape it to your will.

The march began. The column moving forward. The army of the Lannisters now only five days out from King’s Landing. His pickets roaming out a day in front and the scouts out three days. He should soon be hearing word of what was occurring at King’s Landing. He knew that Highgarden was coming. He knew the army of the North had to be close. He had sent pickets out to the north to spy upon the Kingsroad. Tywin needed to know how close Robb Stark was.

The damn delays he had suffered in the Western Mountains, and by the Tullys had slowed him down too much. He would not be able to take the initiative when he arrived at King’s Landing. This galled him. It would make his tasks so much more difficult. No matter. He would succeed. Had he not always succeeded?

They rode on in silence. Tywin mulled over something else he had discovered in the debrief with officers from Jaime’s command. The attacks on the forces of Jaime had waned and then ceased at the same time the attacks and dwindled against Tywin’s command, as he came east on the Gold Road. How had that been possible Tywin wondered? Hundreds of miles apart, and yet the forces of Eddard in both locations had attacked and then ceased their attacks in sync. It defied reason.

This was something else Tywin would get from Eddard Stark. He would tell his secrets in the end. If torture was required, then so be it.

The Lion of Casterly Rock had his attitude take a darker turn in the third hour of the morning’s march. A rider came in from the scouts that had been spying upon King’s Landing. The report from this runner made the man again grind his teeth. On the morrow, Highgarden would be at the gates of King’s Landing. It angered Tywin greatly. If he could have arrived at King’s Landing before Highgarden, he would have been in a position to more easily dictate terms. This was gone now. The robed allies of Eddard had made sure of that.

He would discover who these robbed fighters were who had aligned with Eddard Stark. When he did, he would eradicate them from the face of Westeros. They had cost him dearly. As the Children of the Forest had been killed off, so would be these traitors.

The column rode on. The Warden of the West mulled over what he must do to take control of the situation. To again acquire the Iron Throne for House Lannister.

The mood for the Warden of the West only soured more when another runner came to him an hour after they had resumed their march from the noon time meal of trail mix and cornbread. This runner was from the pickets that had been sent to scout the Kingsroad to the North. The news made Tywin’s meal sour in his stomach.

Robb Stark was three days behind the Lannister column. They would arrive at King’s Landing while the Lannister force was still getting settled in around King’s Landing. Again, Tywin was being hamstrung before he had even reached his destination. He felt his teeth grind in his continuous frustration. His jaws ached.

“You are starting to look and sound like Stannis Baratheon” Jaime called out to his father with a snicker.

Tywin turned and glared at his insolent son. Now, his son’s sarcasm returned?

“Just saying.” Jaime smiled at his father.
Tywin turned around. He was pissed. He did stop grinding his teeth. To be compared to Stannis Baratheon was beyond low.

The rest of the march to King’s Landing had been uneventful. Eddard Stark wanted the Lannisters at King’s Landing and had made sure to not hinder their final march in coming to him.

Tywin looked at the walled city. He had many memories of this place. Many of them not good. The present was not looking good either. He had much work to do.

The army of Highgarden was vast. Their army easily as large as his. Tywin knew that they had a second army as large formed at Highgarden. When and if that army would march Tywin did not know. They might be here in a week, or still in Highgarden for all Tywin knew. He could not worry about the second army. He could only worry with what was before him in the here and now.

He rode into the current camp of the vanguard he had sent to aid his daughter. It had been savaged on its way to King’s Landing. Fortunately, the attacks on them had allowed Tywin to devise tactics that had lessened his losses. He rode to the edge of his camp. He saw the army of Stannis Baratheon off to the east. It was only a third of his army. Still, if he was engaged and they attacked him in his rearguard he would be decimated. Tywin sighed. With Robb here in only three days, there would be no fight before the gates of King’s Landing.

Tywin, Jaime, and his top commanders had dismounted and entered into the command tent that had been setup. He talked to the local commander, Branton Lannister of Lannisport. All had been at peace for over two months. Eddard had not assaulted Branton’s forces anymore, and Lannister commander had not forced the issue in return. Tywin did not blame the man. To fight when victory was not possible was foolish.

They went out the tent and walked around the expanding camp of Lannisters. Tywin was surprised to see three wagons filled to almost overflowing with victuals slowly being led to the cooking area of the Lannister camp. Men looking at the wagons loaded with food stocks. The men laughing and rubbing their stomachs. What had totally caught Tywin’s notice was the cover blankets on the oxen. They wore the regalia of the howling Direwolf. Tywin turned to look at Branton for explanation.

“Care to explain this Branton.”

“Three weeks ago wagons came out the Lion Gate under the flag of truce. The wagons slowly marched to both our army and the army of Stannis Baratheon. The drivers told us that Eddard Stark was going to feed our armies. He met the army of Highgarden two days ago with five wagons loaded to almost breaking with food. The drivers tell us he will fed all the armies as long as they are before King’s Landing.”

“Why and how?” Tywin asked Branton. What the hell was Eddard playing at Tywin wondered.

“We were told that Eddard Stark does not want the armies here to raid the land. He has been buying staple crops from the farms around King’s Landing and putting them in warehouses. He has ships coming in from Pentos mainly, though lately we have seen ships with sails and flags from Myr and Tyrosh. He is definitely giving out enough food to supply the needs of our army, the army of Highgarden and Stannis’s army.”

Tywin thought on what he was told. Where was Eddard getting the funds to do this he wondered? He knew that Robert Baratheon’s gluttony had driven the Iron Throne into great debt. He had loaned Robert vast sums of money himself. That was another reason to rid Eddard off the Iron
Throne. He was sure Eddard would cancel those loans if Tywin tried to use them as weapon against the man.

Another mystery to force from the man. The man seemed to be a walking enigma with all the aid coming his way. Who was supporting the Iron Throne with gold when Tywin knew the kingdom was in great debt. Another mystery to unravel Tywin thought.

Tywin decided to rest for the day. Tomorrow he would go to the gates of King’s Landing to contend with Eddard Stark.

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The sun was up two hours, when the parlay party of the Lannisters slowly advanced on the Lion Gate. A large flag with the Direwolf had been erected overnight on the battlements over that gate. Tywin had wondered if Eddard would force him to go to some other gate to parlay. He grudgingly gave the man a modicum of respect for not being petty.

The Lannisters marched up to the gate. Tywin in the lead with Jaime at his side. His generals behind him. Slowly, the party approached the closed gate. With their approach, Tywin saw a man with a small crown on his head upon the ramparts. Eddard Stark looked down at them. His look had changed mightily, but it was him. Silence reigned over the roadway. The party had reached the gate. Eddard remained silent looking down at the Lannisters. He did not speak.

Tywin looked up at the man. The two stared hard at each other. For several minutes, the two men stared at each other. No discourse between the two antagonists. The silence both rattled and angered Tywin. Eddard was obviously in no hurry to start a dialog. The man acted like he held all the cards. Soon, Tywin would instruct Eddard in the errors of his ways.

Eddard Stark had been spectacularly successful so far, but that had been fueled by both luck and incompetence of his foes. Surely, the man’s luck had run its course. He was now facing a man who was in every way his superior. Soon he would throw the Direwolf down. He would find the man’s weaknesses and exploit them. The man was in all reality a neophyte in the arts of the Game of Thrones. He, Tywin Lannister, would school and then overthrow Eddard Stark.

Tywin grew tired of the silence.

“I demand you surrender the Iron Throne. You are a usurper. The throne belongs to Joffrey Baratheon. Everything you have said of my family and our lineage is a lie. I demand you surrender and face justice.” He spoke in a strong, sure voice.

“Break down the gates and have at me Tywin Lannister,” Eddard Stark answered. “As Robert Baratheon usurped the Iron Throne from House Targaryen, I have in turn usurped the throne from House Baratheon and in fact House Lannister.”

“You admit your crime. Surrender.”

“No. As I said Tywin, break the gate and meet me in the courtyard. I will kill you within a few seconds of our meeting. Arya says you are a flyweight. I think that means you suck as a swordsman. On top of that, you are old.” He shrugged. “I will kill you quick. I hold you accountable for Elia Martell’s death. The death of her children.” The man paused and acted as if he was considering something. “Or maybe, I will hamstring you, and then have your head bashed in against a pillar, or maybe stabbed over fifty times. Yes. I like that mucchhh better. Yes, break the gate, and let us contend.”
Behind him he heard Jaime chuckle. Tywin felt anger at his son. He dare not turn to rebuke his son. His thoughts and actions were tempered with fear of Eddard Stark and his physical prowess. He definitely needed to have Gregor Clegane join up with his army. He would call in all the forces loyal to House Lannister at large in the Crownlands. In the back of his mind, Tywin needed to prepare to have a Champion.

“I will break the gates of King’s Landing Eddard Stark. We will not be facing each other. I will, in the end, put your head on a pike up high on the curtain wall.”

Eddard laughed at that. Tywin felt his blood boil at the insolence.

“Tywin. You are an asshole. I have already talked to Stannis and Mace. If you attempt to break the gates of King’s Landing, Stannis and Mace will fall upon your rear and flanks. They really hate you. They would enjoy butchering the forces under your standard. They wish to create their own ‘Rains of Castamere’. I am sure it will be a classic tune. Sung over the generations. You have screwed the Houses of Westeros for too long Tywin. Paybacks are a bitch I am told.”

“I called all the aspirants here for this reason Tywin. You cancel each other. Anyways, my son will be here in three days.”

Tywin did not continue this line of argument. This part of Eddard’s plan was indeed brilliant. He could not attack King’s Landing. His forces would be decimated if he did. He would be attacked from all sides.

Eddard Stark continued his damnable soliloquy. “If I was you, I would turn around and head back to Casterly Rock, Tywin. If not, I fear you will be cut by the thorns on all the Roses around you. I see Stags about with nice sharp horns waiting to gore you. Maybe revenge for a certain Stag being gored by a boar. Like you bore me. Sorry, couldn’t refuse that.”

Tywin pursed his lips. Eddard was real smug sitting behind a twenty foot thick wall of sandstone Tywin thought.

“A pack of mighty Direwolves will be here late in the afternoon in two days. Maybe they will hamstring you oh Mighty Lion. Then a certain Dornish spearman will put you of your misery, or maybe not. Maybe he will just nick you. We all know he likes to put concoctions on his spear point.”

The Direwolf leaned on the battlement. He smiled down at Tywin.

“Are you still here? Run. Run away grizzled, old Lion. Your time is past.”

“Geez, father. Eddard is roasting your ass man.”

Tywin whipped around to glare at his son. A contemptuous, sardonic smile placed firmly on his son’s face.

“I’m just saying” Jaime responded lifting his hands palm up and spreading his fingers, as if to say ‘what could I do’. He had a large smirk on his face.

Tywin closed his eyes. His son’s insolence needed to be smacked off his face. He did not do it. Tywin sensed that if he struck at his son that his son would strike him back.

The world had spun off its axis!

“I need to see my daughter and grandchildren. I need to see that they are safe. You need to release
them to me immediately! I demand it!”

“I think not,” was Eddard’s response. “Still, the first part is a reasonable request.” With that the man disappeared off the battlements.

Tywin fumed as he was forced to wait. Several minutes later, he saw his eldest grandson appear above the Lion Gate.

“How are you doing Joffrey?” Tywin called up to his grandson. He noted his grandson looked drawn and gaunt. He nervously looked over both shoulders.

“I am well grandfather.”

“Are you being treated well? Have you been abused by Eddard or any of his sycophants.”

Joffrey again looked around with clear fear in his face.

“No they haven’t father. I am allowed to walk the Red Keep. I am heavily guarded, but no one attacks me physically or verbally. Eddard has forbidden. Still, I want to come home grandpa!”

A grimace crossed over Tywin’s face. Could his grandson show any less backbone? The boy sickened him. It was obvious he would never grow to be a true man.

“I will get you my grandson. I have come to save you Joffrey.”

He saw relief appear on the teenager’s face. At that moment to his left he saw Tommen and Myrcella come into view. Tywin groaned inside at what he saw. Tommen had a big yellow cat hanging off his back. Its head on his shoulder with its paws down the front of his youngest grandson’s chest. Tommen had another cat he sat down onto of the wall in front of him and played with it.

Myrcella looked down at him blandly. Neither of his younger grandchildren showed any happiness at his appearance before the Lion Gate.

“How are you doing Tommen? Myrcella? Are you two being treated fairly?”

Tommen smiled enigmatically down at him. “I like playing with my cats without being belittled and harassed. I am allowed to read, and not be attacked. Mother made me cry way too often. Eddard stopped that. You scared me. I am glad you are not inside these walls. I am happy. Eddard Stark is good to us and smiles at us.”

Extreme displeasure again flushed through Tywin. The insolence! He would skin those damn cats alive when he got ahold of them.

Now Myrcella spoke.

“I have no use for you grandfather. You are cold and cruel. Eddard is everything you are not. Now that I am free of you and mother, I see that I have options. Tommen and I cast our lot with House Stark.”

Tywin stared wide eyed. He heard the blood roaring in his ears. His granddaughter looked at her younger brother. They nodded their heads to each other and were gone. That was after Tommen had gathered his damn cat off the curtain wall.

Joffrey looked around nervously and was gone too.
With an angry jerk, Tywin turned around to glare at his eldest son. This had to be partially of his doing.

Jaime gave his father a ‘don’t look at me look’.

“I had nothing to do with that father. I am a stranger to my own children. I had no hand in their upbringing. None.” His son’s eyes closed and he took a deep breath. For a long moment his eyes stayed closed. Slowly they opened with a sad cast in their depths. “Part of that being a worse father than you. A child is supposed to leave the nest and make their own way. I am proud of my two youngest for that. They have chosen their path.”

“Did you hear what they said?! You idiot! They said they turn their back on their own House!”

“Sounded more like they have turned their back on you father. Probably me as well. Could be Cersei also. Can’t say I blame them,” Jaime told his father calmly. “We reap what we sow father. I have come to accept that of late.”

In a disgusted huff, Tywin turned back around to face the wall before him. He ground his teeth. For several more minutes, he fumed while he waited for his damnable daughter to appear above him. He would have his revenge for the ignobility that he was being made to suffer through.

*By his own offspring!* He had started to have serious doubts about Jaime. His son obviously relished his father’s humiliation. He would have to rehabilitate his son’s name because he must, but, by the gods Jaime would learn respect for his father.

Several more minutes went by.

“CERSEI!” Tywin bellowed. “Answer your father’s summons dammit! I command it!”

Several more minutes went by. He shouted for his daughter to appear before him twice more. Her not appearing made his blood boil. He waited again. He made his fury evident with another shout for his daughter to appear before him. He roared that it was her duty to appear before her father when summoned. Still she did not appear. Tywin did not know if Eddard had indeed deposed Cersei, or if she, herself, was choosing to ignore him. She would suffer for this slight if she knowingly refused his summoning.

Suddenly. She was above the wall. Tywin’s eyes slit and his body jerked in consternation. *What in the hell?* Did she have a large bowl in her hand? A spoon in the other. She casually ate some type of fruit till it was all consumed. All the while acting nonchalant. In no way recognizing her own father. She licked the spoon clean.

Tywin watched the insolent display with rising anger. He watched his daughter inspect, thoroughly, the spoon she had made a show of licking clean. The open disrespect for all to see enraged Tywin.

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Only now, did Cersei finally look down at her father with a jaundice eye. She continued to lick the spoon. She did acknowledge Jaime with a nod of her head. Tywin was not sure how Jaime responded with his eyes fixated on his daughter. Her arrogance insufferable.

“Did you not hear my summons? I ordered your presence fifteen minutes ago. What is he meaning of this delay daughter?” Tywin could not stop the tremble of rage in his voice.

“I have been here the whole time sitting at table you cannot see. I wanted to finish my peaches in peace. I knew seeing you would curdle my stomach, so I finished my meal first. Upset stomach you know.” She looked at her father with a bored expression. “You know you sound like a constipated bull when you roar like that father. Did you crap your pants father? I so hope so.”
Anger flushed so hard through Tywin that his body shook. His daughter humiliating him for all to see. It was a crime! Gods, how she would suffer for this public insolence. A woman had to know her place! He raged to himself.

“I order you come down here this moment Cersei Lannister. NOW!”

“Fuck you father. I am tired of putting up with your shit.”

“You incestuous cow! You disgrace the very name of Lannister.”

In a shockingly fast move, Cersei who had been leaning forward rose up ramrod straight. Her mien suffused with raw unbridled hatred for her father. In a fluid movement, she took the bowl from her left to her right hand. She gripped the rim pulling the bowl to her body. Then in an explosive movement, she twisted her body. The next moment, Cersei’s body untwisted. Her right arm flung out and down.

“AAARRRRRRGGGGGGGNNNNNNN!” Cersei screamed in a primal howl.

Tywin’s eyes shocked wide open. The heavy ceramic bowl came spinning down at him. He noted it wobbled on its axis as it descended. It was going to hit him in the face! He barely had time to jerk his head to the side. The edge of the bowl painfully flicked his ear before it crashed into the paving stones and bounded away forty feet. It that had hit him in the face …

He looked up, but Cersei was gone.

Like a magpie squawking, his son just had to make a smart ass comment, “You know father, if that had connected you would be smiling without any teeth right now.” Tywin ground his teeth at Jaime’s words. “I never told you this father. It took you three months to catch onto the fact that Cersei was practicing the sword with me. She was faster, more adroit and even stronger than me at the time. You know, girls maturing quicker than boys and all that. Most of that hurled bowl was luck father, but a large part of it also shows the skill you tried to slap and beat out of her. I think it is still there. If she practices … well … next time she probably won’t miss.”

Father turned to glare at his son. His face red with suppressed rage.

“Just saying,” Jaime gave his father an insolent look. Then he inspected his nails ignoring his father. Jaime pulled his reings up and with an easy flick of his wrists, Jaime turned his horse around, and slowly walked his horse back towards the camp of House Lannister.

_The world had gone absolutely fucking mad!_ Tywin raged to himself. Mad! He turned to look at the walls of King’s Landing. He was surrounded and beset by problems from every side. Most from his own House Tywin stormed to himself.

He had much work before him, to undo the damage his damn daughter had done. She had infected her brother and her offspring. Eddard had added his own poison to the mix. Tomorrow would begin the expunging of those poisons. He would win in the end Tywin Lannister knew.

Had he not always been the victor. As it had been, so would it be.
Slowly, Cersei climbed to consciousness. Her body felt well used in all the best ways. Her thoughts were fuzzy and diffuse. She yawned. That was when she felt two warm bodies pressed into her sides. She looked right and saw Loreza all snuggled in beside Cersei. Loreza’s head tucked underneath her arm. Cersei turned her head left and saw Dorea. The girl had thrown her leg and arm over Cersei. The teenager’s hand clutched her breast possessively. The teenager had a smile on her face and snored softly.

Cersei looked up at the ceiling. The rafters and plaster clearly visible in the mid-morning light. She relaxed looking up. Her body was thrumming with the sweet echoes of passionate pleasure. Pleasure she had not felt in so long. Last night had been a revelation in many ways. She had been sleepwalking for years, and had not even realized it. Well, she had suspected, but now she knew.

A smile crossed her face. It had been so rich seeing first consternation, and then rage on Oberyn’s face. The Red Viper was actually red faced he was so pissed off. She turned her head to again look at the two girls pressed into her body. In sleep they looked innocent. Awake they were anything but innocent. They had been voracious! They had made her scream. Cersei had screamed herself hoarse. The orgasms finally beyond all count.

A mind still fogged with the afterglow of great sex, went back to the party last night. She had enjoyed sparring with Oberyn. Having his two youngest daughters come onto her so hot and heavy, had at first been a pain in her ass, and then a blessing.

Seeing Oberyn losing it, witnessing his youngest daughters pressed into her body had been like a benefice. It made her body thrum with pleasure and excitement getting over on the old snake. She thought he might have a stroke he got so exercised. When she observed his peevishness, she played up to the young girls overtures towards her. It was all a game. Anything to make Oberyn’s blood pressure skyrocket was worth it. He had a vein on the left side his of his forehead that throbbed when he was angry Cersei had discovered.

She had thought it might burst. That had made her day. The reflection sweet. Getting over on the vain, pompous man had sent a thrill through Cersei. It had all been easy actually. Men were easy she snickered to herself.

When she had entered the Great Hall with her two nubile escorts, she had thought she would shed them now that they entered the Great Hall. Two things, no, three things prevented it. One was seeing Oberyn still glaring at her from across the Great Hall. His eyes full of fire. The second was the fact that Loreza and Dorea simply had their hooks in her. They were holding onto her tight. They sensed she might bolt at her first opportunity. They had been right on that count. She feared they might rip her dress to tatters, if she truly attempted to disengage from them, they clung so tightly to her. The last thing that prevented her escape, was that she quickly found she enjoyed their attention. The attention doing strange but pleasant things to her libido.

She found herself feeling an excitement she had not felt in years. Her libido was beginning to thrum in her veins. She mused on this as the party progressed. Over the years, her passionate trysts with
Jaime had become stilted. She had realized it at the time, but not known what to do about it. She had sensed that her enforced separation of herself from her brother was harming their relationship. Her actions hollowed out their emotions and their connection.

The sex done almost by rote, and without the passion she had so reveled in, while in their youth. Over the years, the sex slowly became calcified. The brother and sister lost the wild abandon to their sex. Their acts done more by rote and remembrances of past true passion. Cersei had realized it at the time, but not truly worried about it. What could she have done? It had only been the sex, really, that bound them. Neither of them had attempted to make their relationship deeper. Cersei had been truthful enough with herself to realize that.

She had always kept that insight to herself. She never knew if Jaime had made the same discovery. He never acted as if he had made the connection. That he had had the insight of just how superficial their relationship was.

She had slept with her brother giving him three children. The only problem was that Jaime had to ignore them as his. That had been a rule she impressed on her brother and strictly enforced. Their survival depended on it. Of course, Jaime had not really, ever shown any true interest in his children. Her brother did not fight her directive. Ever. That had become a problem she could now see, with her being free from the Iron Throne.

She knew she and her brother were selfish. That had not bothered her in the slightest. Were not all the Lannisters narcissists? Hell, even Tyrion was one. Now, with distance, she saw that she had brought out the worst of Jaime tendencies. Her own worst tendencies.

Her mind wandered to memories she had not really thought on for so long. They were clear to her now. Jaime had made the plea one time. He had seen the truth of the matter. It was her brother that had attempted to break the path of her self-destruction. Sadly, Cersei remembered clearly her response.

It had been right before her marriage to that fucking pig Robert Baratheon. Jaime had pleaded with her to go to Dorne with him. There they could live together, and freely show their love openly. Dorne was known for its liberal views on love and incest. Jaime was certain that the Martells would take them in. If for no other reason, than to jab their proverbial thumb in their father’s eye. That was the one time Cersei saw Jaime show a true deep passionate love to her, Cersei sadly remembered.

The answer she gave Jaime now made Cersei cringe, “No Jaime. I will be Queen. I will not give that up.”

She had thought she would beat that fucking Maggie, and make the old cunt eat her words.

Sadly, the woman had been spot on with her prophecies.

Cersei knew she was fucked when Robert Baratheon came to her on their wedding bed. The man totally inebriated. He fucked her like she was a common whore. No, it was much worse. He fucked her like she was a slab of beef. All the time, whining she was not Lyanna Stark. That had been the high point. It only went worse from there.

Cersei knew it was too late for them at that moment. For her and her brother. Robert was a slovenly oaf and buffoon, but he could be a homicidal one. He had proven that by his nonchalant reaction to the rape and death of Elia and her family. That truth reinforced by his callous treatment of her body and soul on their marriage bed. There was nothing for it. The man still in his prime then. A man who through sheer physical prowess had wrestled the Iron Throne from the Targaryens who had it for nearly three hundred years.
As each prophecy of Maggie came true, Cersei felt her desperation racket up, but what could she do. She started to drink more and more. She saw that she and Jamie were parroting their love for each other as the years wore on. She could not truly blame her brother. She had refused their one true chance of escape. Then she had insisted Jaime not acknowledge his own children. He was selfish and self-centered to begin with, and she only made it worse. She brought out her brother’s worst tendencies. She only had sex with Jaime when she could work it into her duties as Queen. Over time he became resentful and morbid.

Again, all her fault. She saw what she was doing to Jaime, and made not one move to change the dynamics of their relationship. She had carried on, always convinced that tomorrow she would bend destiny to her will. The problem was that the ‘tomorrow’ she needed, never came.

She had spoken of this to Eddard in the Godswood before she disposed the Hand. She had been in a rare mood of reflection and what … whimsy she supposed. She discussed some of her inner thoughts and longings to the man for some reason.

Something precious had been lost she had long known. She doubted it could be recaptured. When had they passed the point of no return? Cersei could not be sure. She wondered if it was the when Myrcella or maybe Tommen was born. More and more, she and Jaime had to live with only snippets of them being truly together. The only time together were brief moments of wild hurried sex.

They had not been able to connect beyond a union of physical coupling. A coupling always rushed and free of true heart felt connect. Their relationship had been so much deeper when they lived in Casterly Rock. They had so many places to run off too and plenty of time to spend with each other. They had bonded then. The twins young and in love. Looking back on that time fondly, Cersei knew they truly loved each other then.

A sad reflective cast came over her features. Though it had been love, Cersei could see with the benefit of twenty years plus hindsight, that their love, even then, had a superficial quality to it. A lack of true depth and resonance. Jaime brought dross to their relationship, but it had been herself that brought the fatal flaw to their supposed love.

She had wanted to be Queen. She had achieved it she thought ruefully. Cersei could now see that the cost had been exurbanite. Only with the Starks casting her down did she see it. It took her being disposed to remove the haze from her mind. Her self-imposed delusions dispelled. It was actually funny now Cersei thought.

Now that she had been disposed, she wondered if it had all been worth it. Being married to that turd Robert Baratheon had been an odious burden. Seeing, one by one, Maggie the Frog’s prophecies come true had slowly become terrifying. Feeling the quiet desperation building over the years. The sense of impending doom slowly building like storm clouds on the horizon.

Over the years, she had suppressed her memories of Melara Hetherspoon. Why had she done that? What had it accomplished? She would look at her hands. The first sins of so many Cersei came to understand. She still heard her screams in her dreams. She would undo her actions if she could, but it was too late. Again, what could she do to undo the past? The past could not be changed. It was set in proverbial stone.

Little late for a conscious Cersei sneered at herself. Where had it been when she needed it?

She was soon to face the seven she knew. Eddard insisted he would save her. Sometimes, she thought he might actually succeed in his declaration. Then Maggie’s words would echo to her at night. The old fears anew and fresh. Cersei knew deep down in her blighted soul she deserved death. She had committed murder herself had she not? Could she ever atone for her sins? Wasn’t
her death the only true solution? Cersei would feel so depressed at those moments.

How did one rise above one’s past? Could one?

Damn that old ugly woman. Her prophecies had been so accurate. Her marrying a King and not an Heir Prince. That damn bastard Robert fathering sixteen bastards and she herself having three. How the hell had that evil, ugly, old croon known those things unless she could indeed see the future?

The prophecy about her children’s deaths had been the most horrifying. She could accept her fate, that a Queen younger and more beautiful than herself would cast her down. She couldn’t countenance the death of her offspring. Even her eldest Joffrey. The boy was a shit but he was her eldest son.

She had finally science out what the hell “valonqar” meant. She had at first thought it must be her little turd of a brother Tyrion. It made sense. She treated him like shit. Why wouldn’t he want revenge? Then she had a nightmare soon after Bran was pushed out the window. Jaime was strangling her to death. That was when she remembered that she was the elder of the twins born to their mother the in year 266 AC.

It couldn’t be, could it? Their relationship had deteriorated for sure, but to that degree?

The beauteous blond shook her head. Her body relaxed with two warm bodies pressed into hers. She would not mar this wonderful feeling she was currently awash in Cersei scolded herself. These ruminations were for another day. She smiled then.

She had awoken earlier at dawn as was her norm. She had come out of sleep with a start. She always woke up clear headed now that she had stopped drinking. As she lie there, Cersei remembered the previous day and then deep into the night.

Cersei smiled remembering the ball. Oberyn had come over several times to attempt to pry his daughters away from Cersei. The man slithering over like his name sake. He glared at his daughters.

“It is way past your bedtimes I think,” he said giving his two youngest daughters the ‘eye’.

Dorea’s answer had been shocking.

“Pphhhfffttttt!” she gave her father a raspberry with lots of tongue and spittle spray.

Cersei thought wildly her father would kill her for such insolence.

Loreza had her own answer for her father. “Leave us alone father. We don’t care if you have a past with Cersei. She is hot, and we will fuck her sooooo good. She will scream like she has never screamed before.”

Cersei’s eyes went to saucers hearing that. Oh My! The youngest daughter of Oberyn was nothing if not sure of herself!

“I order you to come with me now!” Oberyn had hissed at his daughters.

“No! We are adults father” Dorea snarled back.

“She has had three children for the god’s sake,” Oberyn barked at his two youngest daughters. “She is marked with stretch marks, sagging tits and a worn out couchie. Her pussy must be stretched out like a shucked clam.”
“Is that so?” Dorea asked her father in a calculating tone. Cersei wondered at the evil glint in the teenager’s eyes.

“Yes I say!” her nemesis barked at his daughter.

“Okay.” She grabbed Cersei’s arm with Loreza following her sister’s lead. “Where is mother?”

Oberyn got a confused look on his face. He looked around as if he was on a crowded battlefield. He sensed danger. He actually rose up on the balls of his feet Cersei noted. He was truly spooked she saw. “Why do you ask?” Cersei heard the note of caution in Oberyn’s voice now.

“I am going to tell mother what you think of her body. She has had four children. All used up you said.”

Cersei had been amused seeing the blind panic come on Oberyn’s face.

“What, Whoa! Let’s not be hasty here!” Oberyn said getting in front of Dorea.

Needless to say, he quickly capitulated to glaring at Cersei the rest of the banquet. Cersei found this all humorous. Later though, something seemed to capture Oberyn’s attention along with Ellaria. She wondered what it was.

The night wore on. Several hours later Cersei was tired. She had interacted with the courtesans. She was surprised that many would even acknowledge her presence. She always knew she was a bitch, but she had been on top so ‘who cares’ had been her attitude. When you are on top it was easy to think thus. Now that she was on the bottom, she wondered of her former arrogance.

She supposed she was lucky to be able to contemplate such things. Cersei knew if anyone else had thrown her down, but Eddard Stark, that she and her children would be dead now. She was thankful for that. Mostly for her children Myrcella and Tommen. The treatment Eddard gave her two youngest was deserved. She and her eldest, Joffrey, not so much.

Another thing Cersei contemplated, as the party worn on, was why she still had Dorea and Loreza on either hip. The two still flirting and stroking her constantly. Oberyn was distracted and no longer giving her fuel to keep pissing him off. And still, she kept his two youngest daughters with her. She had not tried to ditch them. She wondered why?

She supposed the look of desire and earnest interest in her, Cersei Lannister, kept her intrigued. There was something else though. They made her feel desired, and they treated her with respect, and actually listened to what she had to say.

It was intoxicating. She found she liked them. How strange Cersei thought, to like the children of her nemesis Oberyn Martell.

The two nymphets told their sought after prey, “It is time to go back to your chambers Cersei”.

“Oh, why?” She gulped. Cersei felt the vapors coming on.

“You know why Cersei,” Dorea husked looking up at her with fire in her eyes. Loreza stroked her back and then her stomach. She whispered, “We will make you feel so good Cersei … be prepared to scream yourself hoarse.”

Oh my bounced around in Cersei’s mind.

She really should shed her two would be paramours for the night Cersei told herself more than once.
She knew this was only about sex and pleasure. Her thoughts in a whorl, Cersei contemplated current events. She really needed to end this façade she was playing at. She was a mature woman, and these women were truly girls not that much older than Myrcella.

Yes … she should tell them it had been fun, but it was time they now parted ways.

Instead she found herself leading them to exit to the Great Hall. She was in daze. Dorea now stroked her ass and Loreza was on her toes nibbling on Cersei’s earlobe. A thought came to Cersei. Wow! These little nymphs had a world of experience over Myrcella. She was virginal. These nymphets were definitely not!

Oh my!

There way was suddenly blocked. Cersei gulped, with her eyes going big.

“Well, well … what are two cublings doing with a woman instead of a fellow teenager … a woman deserves a woman.”

Obara was glaring at her two youngest sisters. She had her hands on her hips. She looked every bit the fighter in her prime. She was a much stouter build than her slimmer sisters. Her bosom a full C cup filling out her tunic. The woman Cersei’s height. Her brown hair in a braid. Her close set eyes boring into her sisters. She wore a man’s breeches and a half-length linen tunic she preferred to wear. Her belt made of interlocked copper suns synched tight to show her waist.

“Bull!” Dorea barked at her elder sister. “You’re just pissed off that Cersei chose us and not you!”

“What I see is two hyenas bringing down an innocent fawn. She should be with a regal, mature Leopard. Not two cubs just finished nursing from their mother’s teats,” Obara snarled back. Her eyes bored into her youngest sisters.

Loreza was shaking with ire Cersei saw getting nervous. She was between two sets of predators. Help! She whined in her mind. She saw claws coming out!

An eye roll came over Loreza’s face. “What is I see standing before us is an old toothless snaggletooth with a matted pelt and missing claws. I see a has been. You are the past eldest sister. We are the future!” Loreza ended on a high note.

“You bitches!” Obara snarled. Cersei felt a tremor of true fear run through her now. Obara had a most unpleasant look on her face. Her body beginning to shake with anger herself.

“Yeah,” Dorea now chimed in “We are sweet plums bursting with juice, while you are a shriveled up prune,” she finished snickering.

“The Insolence,” Obara sneered. “At least when my bedmates are screaming and flipping around on my furs they are actually experiencing orgasms,” she paused dramatically, “where yours are totally faking it … you know—to appease your fragile egos,” she finished with a triumphant look on her face.

Cersei saw the two younger sisters look at her nervously. Cersei could see that jib had hit home. The two fearing that Cersei now thought less of them.

They turned on Obara, and the three began storming at each other with the two younger females now chest bumping into Obara who was shoving them back.

With big eyes Cersei jumped in between the fighting sisters.
“Stop! Stop this fighting! I don’t want blows to be thrown.”

The three sisters suddenly stopped and looked at Cersei weird. The looks of extreme anger seemed to melt away.

Obara spoke first, “who said we were going to actually physically fight … were just ranking each other. We do it all the time.”

Dorea and Loreza chimed in agreeing with Obara

Cersei was confused listening to the sisters explain that they always argued and bickered. No hard feelings. Well not usually. They liked to compete, and the verbal sparring was part of it. All the sisters wanted to win in their competition for new conquests.

The competition seemed to be put aside with Cersei’s intercession.

They parted with Obara snarling, “Come to me Cersei when these cubs fail to truly satisfy you. I will show you true pleasure. I am insatiable. I will show you what a woman can do with a strap-on. You will be tempted to swear off male cock.” The words said matter-of-factly.

Oh my!

Cersei watched Loreza and Dorea turn their heads and stick their tongues out at Obara. Their heads wagging. Cersei glanced back at the retreating Obara. The eldest Sand Snake was flipping off both of the sisters with both hands. A scowl on her face

She was now dragged out the Great Hall and across the courtyards to Maegor’s Holdfast. All resistance was now gone out of Cersei. The raw passion from the Sand Snakes had simply overwhelmed her defenses. It was both intimidating but also intoxicating. She could feel the tension rising in the Sand Snakes body and their voices now darker with passion. Their looks at her now filled with undisguised hunger. Sexual hunger.

Oh my!

She was being—no she had had her defenses breeched long ago she realized. She thought she still had time for a counterattack. Cersei knew it was time to cease this, and send the teenagers on their way. Instead, she found herself being dragged behind the two excited teenagers to the residence of royalty. Her body jerked forward by the now giggling and anxious teenagers.

“Show us your room Cersei. Hurry, I’m burning up for you!” Loreza husked.

“Gods my short cloth is soaked Cersei. I need you!” Dorea trilled to Cersei.

Oh my!

Instead of telling them she had had a lovely time, but it was time they separate, she found herself on the fourth floor and going down the hall to her bed chambers. The party now before her door. Then her head was pulled down and she was being kissed passionately. A mouth was nibbling her ear. Hands were groping her ass and a hand down her bodice now massaging her breast. Now the mouth was on her throat.

Oh MY!

She should send them away her mind said. For some reason, that did not happen. Instead, they were in her room. Her clothes somehow disappearing off her body at a rapid clip. Loreza and Dorea
Dorea ripped the covers off the bed. Then Cersei was on that bed lying on her back watching the Sand Snakes slithering up onto the bed. *They really were Sand Snakes!* Their eyes on fire with lust. Lust for her!

Their hands and mouths had strummed her body like a master minstrel. She had indeed screamed herself hoarse. Repeatedly! Jaime had pleasured her but never like this. The two teenagers after her continuously. Their hands and mouths gave her such powerful orgasms. She thought she had almost passed out several times. She knew that for these two hot vixens, for this night, she was the center of their universe. Their every thought and motion was to give her the maximum pleasure possible. They were giving themselves totally to Cersei. Their every glance and touch repeated this truth to the former Queen.

That was shocking enough. Her reaction to them had been even more world flipping. She had made love to several women to show them she was in control, and to make them submissive to her. She absolutely refused to go down on them. She even refused to use her fingers with them. The women rubbing up against to achieve their pleasure. Cersei refused to help them receive pleasure. She was above all that she had told herself. They were in her bed for her. Not the other way round!

Not now. She went crazy for the two Sand Snakes. She went down on them. Repeatedly. She buried her fingers in them and wallowed her face in their honey pits. She was shown how to ‘trib’ and went crazy. She pawed at them, to let her again go down on them. The sisters of course speared their legs wide, and Cersei excitedly got between them every time. The fallen Queen excitedly burying her face between the sister’s legs.

She could not get enough of this thing named ‘tribbing’. The riding of their groins into each other sent Cersei into frenzies of lust and want. Her body soaked with sweat in her striving.

She was crazy for it!

She awoke at dawn to the twins snuggled against her. She had sat up in the bed. She was confused at her actions. *What by the seven had come over her!* *She did not enjoy the female body!* She contemplated running away. She had just decided to flee when four hands pulled her back down. She had told herself that last night was a ‘one off’. That she would in no way give into the Sand Snakes and their unnatural desires. That was what she told herself.

Instead, she very willingly again made wild exuberant love to Dorea and Loreza. Cersei again found herself happily going down on the sisters. They had introduced to her the concept of analinglus. She was now hooked on that. Her mouth going where she would never have thought to go the night before. She knew she should be disgusted. She wasn’t! She loved it!

*Oh my!* She had thought to herself, all the while doing things to the sisters she would have thought impossible a day ago. Things she loved doing! Again and again! Lost in her daze Cersei could not but help wondering what had come over her.

They had made love again for hours. All three totally hot for each other. Cersei’s mouth almost fell off seeing the sisters make love to each other with her watching. The sex exciting her yet again. The former queen now pawing the teenagers again to get at them. Again and again! She had tribbed herself into a frenzy face to face with each twin, and then with her sitting up on each twin dominate. *She was a wild woman!*

They had exhausted themselves. Again. When Cersei awoke again it was midmorning. She saw Loreza and Dorea dressed. She felt a sadness run through her. She had just been a conquest. They
saw the despondent look on Cersei’s face. The two smiled at her radiantly. The heat and desire in their eyes made the fallen Queen tremble with desire and want.

They had come to her then and kissed her deeply. They had asked her if they could come back in the evening. And hopefully many more. She had breathlessly told them yes!

She felt alive and young again! It was a heady feeling. She felt like she had, back in Casterly Rock, before her life had gone to shit. Before her poor choices. Before her selfishness got the better of her.

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It was funny how the human mind worked Cersei contemplated walking down the halls of Maegor’s Holdfast. She had felt elation and like she had been liberated by the night of wild uninhibited sex with the Sand Snakes. Slowly, though, her mind started to whisper to herself that she had sinned. She couldn’t give a fuck for the Seven, but the septons and septas harping on her ass as a child growing up had still imprinted their asinine precepts on her mind.

The old teachings and moors circling around in her head. It sucked. Really. She had overcome the sins of premarital sex and incest easy enough. Of course the religious holier than thou had not really put much emphasis on the incest thing. It was considered a Targaryen thing. They knew premarital sex was a losing battle and gave that lip service only.

That couldn’t be said for their obsession with going on about the sins of homosexuality. She thought she had ignored it as child, and teenager, but she now knew that those teaching had wormed their way into her subconscious. The infernal teachings whispering to her now.

She also had to contemplate one Rosyn Hollard. She was the chambermaid who kept Cersei’s chambers spotless and her bed immaculate. She had done her duties quietly in the past. Not now. The girl was slamming drawers and the closet doors shut. With a vengeance, the girl snapped the sheets, quilts and blankets as she set the bed. The girl threw the pillows down onto the bed so hard they bounced off onto the floor.

In the past, Cersei had seen the girl smile at her shyly. That was not the case today. The chambermaid had come into her suite as the Sand Snakes had left. Cersei had at first been intrigued by the sudden change in the lass. The intrigue did not last long. She was glaring at Cersei with hot eyes. The teenager’s body tense. Cersei actually felt fear for her life! Well, not really, but the anger radiating off the teenager was intimidating.

Cersei wondered what Rosyn’s problem was.

She eyed the young girl. She was maybe sixteen. She was four inches shorter than her own five foot seven inch height. She had dark brown hair and light brown eyes. She was not big being maybe a hundred and ten pounds. She had nice high small breast Cersei observed with her new appreciation of the female form. The teenager also had a nice ass.

Cersei shook her head. She felt passion again flaring in her groin. Cersei felt herself getting wet. Oh My! She needed to leave. Like now! What had gotten into herself Cersei wondered. She was not gay or even a bisexual!

She left the room with the girl still seeming to be pissed off for some reason. Cersei had left her ballroom dress on the floor. As she looked back leaving the room she observed the girl kicking her dress across the room. She chased the dress down and kicked it to the other side of the room.

What bee had gotten in her bonnet Cersei wondered closing the door?
She climbed the stairs to go out to a balcony on the Holdfast. Near the building she watched Arya and Syrio training. She found herself doing that often. She looked down at the young girl. Her thoughts full of envy. The girl chasing her dreams of becoming a warrior. Her own dreams crushed and beaten out of her.

Cersei marveled at the High princess’s rapid progress. She had so hoped to be that girl once upon a time. She felt a presence join her on the balcony and lean onto the rail. The new presence looked down at the training occurring below her.

“She is quite the warrior isn’t she? Oberyn says she has a natural gift. She was born to be a warrior.”

Cersei looked at Ellaria. She expected to see disdain or at least a challenge. All she was neutrality as they both watched Arya train.

“Yes she is. She is poetry in motion now. I have watched her for months now. It is indeed awe inspiring.”

“Why do you watch her? Arianne told me of how you have been watching the young wolf cub. Do you have hopes of bedding her? Like you did with Dorea and Loreza last night?”

Cersei half turned her head and looked at Ellaria through her hair.

“Egads! Does everything revolve around sex in Dorne! Geezzzzz!” The fallen Lioness felt her body flush with memories of last night.

Her head tilted back, Ellaria laughed.

“No. No it doesn’t, but it can seem that way,” still chuckling she asked Cersei again, “why do you watch Arya so intently?”

Cersei turned her head back to watch Arya jump around swinging her ‘needle’ in deadly arcs. She looked so graceful.

“I had dreams once. Long ago now. They are over.” The blonde woman sighed over what had been lost. She snorted to herself. *Hell, I never even sniffed them.* If her father had supported her like Eddard Stark did with Arya, would she have achieved her dreams? She would never know. A slow intake and exhalation of breath flowed through Cersei. Too late.

The two women watched the teenage Stark girl now doing complicated steps with her sword. Syrio called for a break. He sat down but Arya put her sword on a table and started to do calisthenics. Cersei shook her head at the girl’s dedication.

A calico cat strutted into the far side of the plaza. The cat froze seeing Arya. The teenager saw the cat and let out a loud whoop. She tore off sprinting towards the startled cat. The cat jumped up nearly three feet, landed, and took off across the square zigzagging. Arya laughing as she gave chase.

Cersei shook her head. Such exuberance and love of life. *Had she ever felt such purity of spirit?* Cersei doubted it. She was too busy scheming she supposed. She was a Lannister after all. Jaime was free of that fault at least. He just waltzed through life. Nothing truly touched him, but in return, he didn’t truly touch anything himself. Jaime alone in his self-absorption.

“Come walk with me Cersei,” Ellaria called to the fallen Queen. “Let’s us talk.”
With a look of wariness, Cersei eyed the woman.

“Why would you ask that? I know my past actions, and I am positive you have not forgotten how I was a bitch to you and Oberyn in your few visits to the Red Keep. I was a royal cunt.” She gave Ellaria a wary look. “Why?”

“That is true,” Ellaria gave a little suppressed snicker. “As you said, that was long ago … come,” Ellaria held out her hand.

Cersei contemplated the offer. Why not. *Just make sure we walk out in the open* Cersei snidely thought to herself. *Don’t want her leading me into an ambush* she thought to herself. She did not take Ellaria’s hand but fell in beside her. They reentered the tall edifice and walked slowly the halls of Maegor’s Holdfast. The two women silent in their thoughts. Cersei led them down the main halls and down to the ground floor.

“You made Dorea and Loreza quite happy last night. They were almost bouncing off the walls telling me about last night.”

Wariness again filled Cersei, as she turned her head examining Ellaria. Her eyes looking for sarcasm or disdain. She found nothing on the woman’s face that seemed untoward. Cersei was unsure what Ellaria was getting at. Shaking her head Cersei replied to Ellaria.

“Bragging about sleeping with a MILF I suppose. That was what they kept calling me last night,” Cersei said. She had first blanched and then laughed when she asked the vixens what that meant. “I guess they will be moving on to the next conquest.” Cersei felt a little jealousy saying the words. “I guess they will be moving on to the next conquest.” Cersei felt a little jealousy saying the words. She wondered of the sincerity of the parting words of the two sisters. She also felt hurt. To be just a prize to get, and then discarded. She knew it was not love, but she had been touched by the teen’s complete attention on her desires and wants.

“Quite the contrary. They will be soon hunting you down for another night of sweet lesbian debauchery. True, it is not romantic love but it IS pure sexual love. They have only begun to slack their thirst for your beautiful body.”

Her face flushed red at Ellaria’s compliment. It was so unexpected.

“I only ask that you sleep with Obara, Nymeria and together Tyene and Sarella. They are most pissed off and anxious to prove themselves to you. To show you they are every bit, and more, the lovers that their youngest siblings are.”

Cersei was shocked to hear Ellaria speak thus. Surely this had to be a jib. “And if I don’t? You make me sound like a whore. A woman merely to slack your daughter’s sexual desires.”

“You so don’t understand the ways of Dorne, Cersei Lannister” Ellaria answered Cersei. Her dark eyes looking hard into the green pool of Cersei’s eyes. “My daughters are giving you the highest compliment. They wish to share life and love with you. There can be no higher compliment. Also, while all my daughters are quite skilled, each one brings their own unique way of using those skills. When you take a woman as your mate she will be most thankful.”

That shocked Cersei. Then she laughed hard. “Just because I slept with Dorea and Loreza doesn’t mean I am a lesbo by the seven.” She shook her head controlling her laughter.

“Say what you will. Dorea and Loreza saw the truth in your eyes, and the timbre of your voice. You will take a woman as your mate.”

She laughed again. “Hell, I won’t be alive all that much longer.”
“Excuse me?”

Cersei cursed herself. She had relaxed too much. At times she dared to hope, but she was sure her past would still reach out and take her down. Did she not deserve her fate? She had always known it in the back of her mind, but suppressed those thoughts. Not anymore.

“Nothing. Just remembering something I heard long ago. A new age is coming I am told.”

Ellaria did not pursue Cersei’s slip. She knew that Cersei would not be any more forth coming.

“Just consider it Cersei. Obara and her elder sisters have suffered under your tongue lashings. It is time you pleasure them with that tongue. It is only fair.”

Cersei’s face and neck turned scarlet again.

“I have not hurt them! I thought they enjoyed the ‘chase’ as Nymeria keeps calling it.

Ellaria smiled shaking her head. “Now it is my turn to say ‘geeezzzzz’. That was hyperbole Cersei. The chase will truly be on now. Now that they know you desire the female body. Their hunger for your body has truly been ignited in their cores. They will redouble their efforts to bed you.”

“I think you exaggerate. I-I-I-I … last night will not happen again” she felt her heart quiver and sadness run through her at those words. The excitement of getting over on Oberyn had in turn gotten over on herself.

“Cersei,” the way Ellaria said her name made her look at the woman. “Don’t listen to religion or society. Listen to your heart. I think you have been given a second chance by events, and the compassion of one Eddard Stark. Don’t throw it away woman.”

“Why are we having this conversation Ellaria? We both know what type of woman I am.”

“Was. You are changing before our very eyes. The change is pleasing to the eye. Remember my words. Few are given such a second chance. Don’t waste it Cersei Lannister.”

With that Ellaria smiled at Cersei. She turned and walked away.

All that day, and through dinner, Cersei wrestled with her desires and doubts. Old fears and religious training whispering harshly in her ear. She felt her body longing for more nights with the two youngest Sand Snakes.

She decided to turn in early. The mental back and forth was tiring. She walked slowly up to her rooms.

Cersei felt her heart go pitter-patter. By her door was Loreza and Dorea smiling radiantly at her. She knew what she needed to do.

She didn’t do it.

Together the three women entered her bed chambers. Cersei closed the door behind her and her two lovers.

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What had gotten in her head! Why had she done that! Everything had been going so well. She had actually started to think that somehow things would work out for her. She was clear headed for the first time in a decade. She still wanted to drink but she was totally in control of that. She felt she just
might have a future.

Her life sure had taken a major change over the last week. Every night she was losing her mind with first Dorea and Loreza in her bed. Then both together! The pairings ever changing. Cersei was wild for the youngest daughters of Obeyrn.

She had been hurt three nights ago when she was eating dinner with them at the corner table in the dining area of the royal kitchens. She was happy and cheesing big time. Then Dorea spoke.

“Cersei,” she took Cersei’s hand in hers. Loreza looked at her intently. Cersei gave them her full attention. She had a distinct sinking feeling.

“We will not be visiting you tonight Cersei.”

“Oh!” Cersei breathed out. She felt like a peacock soaked in the rain. Her plumage all crestfallen.

“Don’t be so glum. We want to sleep with Josey and Alaysha Uller again. You would like them Cersei. They are twin sisters. They are also hot for it! They are being quite cross about it. We miss them.”

“I see. I agree. Go to them,” Cersei spoke in a tight tone. She was jealous but she bit it down. She opted for being magnanimous, even when she felt like both crying, and clawing out the eyes out of these Uller sluts. Her young loves were, well, young. Cersei had both known and feared that Dorea and Loreza would tire of her eventually. Though she had had these thoughts, the reality of it happening tore at Cersei.

Dorea smiled her radiant smile. “We will be back for more of your sweet pussy Cersei. Don’t you worry your beautiful blonde head one bit about that.” They had then turned coy. Now it was Loreza that spoke, “If you are nice, we will bring the twins with us the next time we visit your bed.” The sisters waggling their eyebrows at Cersei. “You will be sleeping with four sisters!” Dorea crowed.

Their antics could not stop Cersei from smiling. But she knew the truth. Sure, Cersei thought. She was being cast off. The letdown nice, but it was what it was.

The two sisters were smiling great big and looking beyond her for some reason.

Cersei gasped when two solid bodies sat down right beside her. One to each side of her body.

“Oh My!” she gasped out looking on both sides of her. She had been ambushed!

To her right was Obara, looking at her like a lioness would at a zebra it was about to devour. Her head whipped to the left and looked into Nymeria’s eyes. Raw desire blazed in Nymeria’s midnight eyes. The sight made Cersei shake with nervousness and want. The beautiful woman slim and slender as a willow. Her straight black hair worn in a long braid which pulled back from a widow’s peak. Her dark eyes large and lustrous. Her lips were full and curved in a silken smile. Cersei noted her beautiful high cheekbones. Her olive skin seemed to glow.

“You have tasted grape juice Cersei Lannister” Obara whispered into her ear.

“Now it is time you have fine aged wine” Nymeria husked into her other ear.

Cersei gasped with both women now nibbling on her ears and blowing warm air into her ears. The sweet mouths moving to her throat to nibble and smooch kiss.
Cersei heard two loud raspberries from Dorea and Loreza. The two teenagers left smiling and giggling at the overwhelmed look on Cersei’s face.

Her hands shaking slightly she finished eating her dinner. Nymeria and Obara were making sweet talk to her and stroking her arms, sides, back and breast. Her earlobes nibbled on, and her throat kissed sensually. Soon she was snogging deeply with the two women, and feeling them up as they did the likewise to her. A sense of wonder filled Cersei, with this new found ability to simply go for it. She was letting her desires for these new Sand Snakes guide her will and thoughts. She wanted them desperately.

_To hell with the church!_

A large part of Cersei was shocked that she was behaving thus in public. In the past, sex had always been behind closed doors. Something to be hidden from view. _Not now! Oh My!_ Again, Cersei thought in a daze. She was burning up for it.

She did not really remember going back to her bed chambers. She remember everything after that! She had been devoured, and she in turn went crazy going down on Obara and Nymeria. Repeatedly. She couldn’t get enough of the two mature Sand Snakes! The two women had made love to her together with same focus of Dorea and Loreza. Cersei thought she was losing her mind with explosive pleasure overwhelming her body and soul with bliss. It had again blown Cersei’s mind, seeing these two sisters repeatedly making love to each other with wild abandon. Their incestuous sex making Cersei wild for it.

It was more than simple orgasmic pleasure. It was how she was being touched. There was a gentle focus to the sisters’ lovemaking. Cersei touched in a way she had never experienced before. Her nights with the Sand Snakes a revelation. Jaime was a great lover, but he was so typical in his wants and needs. He was attentive but it was clear his needs came first. Cersei had not minded. _Jaime knew how to bone!_

Cersei let herself submit to Jaime. Was that not the way between men and women. Men were greedy in seeking their own pleasure primarily. If you were lucky, they would pleasure you as well. Fortunately, Jaime had been a great lover.

Still, Cersei now knew that women made total love to their woman. Their focus on the pleasure of the woman they were making love to. It was the giving that was paramount to a woman. Their giving made the recipient in their turn need to give that pure focus and pleasure back. All four of her female bedmates proved this to Cersei over and over. She felt like the center of their universes had been her, and her wants and desires. It had been simply overwhelming. It was making her a total believer in bisexuality. _Hell, maybe even being gay!_ Cersei thought.

Cersei found it intoxicating. She smirked to herself. She supposed Ellaria must be happy. Cersei had now made love to four of her daughters.

The two oldest Sand Snakes were passionate lovers. They had shown Cersei the joys of strap-on sex the second night they had visited her. Cersei was more than happy to invite them back to her bed for more trysts with the elder Sand Snakes and their strap-ons. She found that she still liked it hard and deep when the elder Sand Snakes became aggressive with Cersei. The orgasms shattering in their intensity.

Cersei had discovered the intense pleasure of DP sex. Something else she now craved like she had craved alcohol before. Everything that the daughters Oberyn did to Cersei, she found she craved deeply and wanted more. Much more.
Who needed Dorea and Loreza Cersei thought snidely. Her second thought was she couldn’t wait to bed them again!

After the intense rutting was finished, Cersei found Obara and Nymeria actually funny and endearing. It was amazing how post coital bliss bonded women together. She was sorry to see them leave her bed in the morning. She was also happy with them returning in the evening.

Rosyn Hollard was still perplexing. She had always been quiet but she now did her job quickly and efficiently. Now the teenager left with a sullen cast to her features. Not much had changed really, but it almost felt cold while the chambermaid did her duties. Cersei was simply perplexed as to the girl’s sudden surely attitude.

Cersei had gotten comfortable. She was actually starting to believe things might actually continue to change for the better. That she had left the past behind. The toad that was Maggie the Frog was no longer in her life. That she was indeed free.

This allowed her to analyze her life from a new perspective. She realized she and Jamie had lost whatever they had had in their youth and through their teenage years. Sure, Jaime had been all male. He had fixated on the things that most noble boys did. Jaime was enamored with swords, dogs and horses . . . and for her, his twin. Still it had not been the kind of love she sensed that Eddard Stark had for Catelyn Tully. She shook her head sadly. Or Oberyn Martell for his bastard lover Ellaria Sand.

Love for love’s sake. Had she and Jamie ever truly loved each other passionately? Did they actually touch each other’s souls? Did they ever try?

A loud sigh came from Cersei. Jaime had tried she reflected on. He had begged her to run off with him to Dorne and Sunspear.

“How’s go Cersei! To hell with father and the fucking throne! Let’s go south and live for us! We could be happy!”

Of course she had refused, Cersei thought ruefully. She had wanted that power and prestige of being Queen. Upon reflection, Jaime had been the pure one. He had been willing to throw it all to the winds to be with her as open lovers. That, long ago, was wrecked by her actions. She had always known this deep within herself, but she had refused to acknowledge it.

No more. Now it was a time for truth. Gods she had fucked up. Cersei knew the truth now. Love of power trumping the love of a man. A man who could have truly loved her, if Cersei had but given him the chance. She had chosen the Iron Throne over Jaime.

The rueful thought came to Cersei. She had gotten her wish. Indeed, she had become Queen and had been but one step away from sitting on the Iron Throne itself. She had achieved her childhood dreams. It had come to taste like ash in her mouth. She had blown it. That was the simple truth. She had sacrificed any chance of true love with Jaime in her pursuit of power and the trappings that went with it.

She, Cersei, who despised her father, had become him in her pursuit of prestige and the name of Queen. She had become what she hated growing up. She cringed when she realized this. She would have deserved Eddard killing her with his sword point like he threatened when he cast her down. Her thoughts turned back to her brother.

When she thought of Jaime now, she remembered a lyric a minstrel sang back in Casterly Rock when she was maybe twelve or was it thirteen. She sighed again remembering the lyrics. They had
stuck with her for some reason. Probably for this time now. *How did it go* ‘I married you when I was seventeen and now I am thirty-four and I never know what I saw in you.’

Jaime had pleaded to take another path. She had not agreed. She had let greed and avarice guide her. It was she, Cersei Lannister, who had ruined what she and Jaime had. No one else. Now she was another woman. A woman who wanted another path entirely.

She had screwed Jaime over then and she was doing it again. The remembrance of passion and true desire had invigorated Cersei. Her soul felt alive for the first time in a decade. She was simply a different woman now. She had ruined her relationship with Jaime. She had done the same with her children. It was not their fault either.

Jaime to his credit was only interested in himself. The trappings of power and wealth truly meant nothing to Jaime. He only wanted to be a warrior and that was enough for the man that Jaime had become. He had easily let his will be reined in by his sister. He merely wanted to be with his sister. A sister that refused to let the man she supposedly love show his love to her. To allow the man to show love to their shared children. With a sad shake of her head, Cersei again had to acknowledge all the blame fell on her shoulders.

She had inherited her father’s curse of wanting and desiring power. There had been one large difference though. Her father was fixated on the Lannister name. Not herself, she had simply wanted power. She had been sure that once she acquired the reins of power, she could twist the fates to her designs and desires.

Maggie the Frog had tried to warn her. She had plowed ahead anyways on her quest for power and the prestige of being queen. It had felt like a noose slowly tightening around her throat over the years, as one by one all of that loathsome woman’s prophecies came true. She kept thinking that as Queen, she would have the power to overcome that bitch’s words that had cast a pall over the future of Cersei. Again and again, Cersei had tried to get ahead of the fates, but she had always failed.

Arya Stark of all people had given her a second chance.

Cersei was no longer Queen. The strings of the fates had been cut. Cersei had not understood at first. With time came realization. Over the months since her downfall she had started to hope. Maybe, just maybe, destiny had decided to let her take another path.

Then her father had arrived at King’s Landing. She had panicked at that. She, of course, knew he was coming. All the elation she had been feeling the last few months quickly faded away. The sense of freedom that Arya had bequeathed to her turned to mist. Now she felt anger and dread. Back and forth, Cersei’s emotions warred within herself. First, she felt high in her spirits, and then the next heartbeat she felt herself flagging.

She and her children knew Cersei’s father would be demanding their presence. They did not think to not go and see him. He was father and grandfather to them.

As they walked to the Gate, where her father would parlay, she saw it in her youngest children’s faces. The days of being intimidated and cowed by Tywin Lannister was over. She had smiled grimly at that. The mother happy for her children.

She thought it rich that Tommen had two of his cats crawling all over him. She snarled at herself for ever deriding him for that. He had largely ignored her, and her railings at him for the cats. Thank the gods she had never followed through on her threats to have them put down. She knew he must have come to greatly resent her for her rants. With her new insights, Cersei could not blame him. How much clearly she saw things now.
Of course, Joffrey had gone first. She did not blame him for wanting to go Casterly Rock. She just wasn’t sure if he would be so happy after arriving there. She had fears as to what her father might have awaiting her eldest son back at their ancestral home. Her father despised weakness. That was the one thing Joffrey seemed to have mastered in an abundance. Joffrey was weak and not a person worthy of love and respect Cersei knew, but, he was still her son.

Then her two youngest children spoke to their grandfather. A table and chairs had been set up. Cersei spied several bowls. One was filled with cut pears, a second had pomegranates with the third bowl having peaches in their juice. Cersei loved peaches. She sat down and partook of a snack. She enjoyed the verbal show. She loved her children dissing her father. *He had to be so pissed!* The old windbag deserved her children’s ridicule and disdain.

They left the wall looking down at their mother. Her two youngest children gave her a brief smile leaving the wall and their pissed off grandfather behind. She continued to tuck into her snack. She slurped up extra peach juice.

She heard her father bellow for her. She did not care. It pleased her to hear the anger and frustration in her father’s voice. She was so over the bastard. He had treated all his children vilely. The former Queen had had the time over the last six months to analyze her feelings on many things. One thing had been easy to realize with crystal clarity. She felt no love for her father. He was a sanctimonious tyrant who had terrorized his children. She was free of him now. She would kill herself before she allowed him to get his talons in her again.

Her father’s bellows for her to appear before him angered her, but she felt safe to wait. She enjoyed more tasty peaches and slurped down more juice. Cersei looked down at the bowl. It was near emptied. Her father had bellowed like a bull a few more times. She looked around. She was sure she was being watched to see what she would do, but she seemed alone. Eddard was giving her and children privacy for their meeting with the Warden of the West.

She slowly rose up and took her bowl with her. She placed it on the battlement and looked down at her father. His face was red with undisguised fury. She felt a thrill of terror run through her. He was a man who had crushed Houses for any hint of defiance. Whole families were now extinct because of her father. A father that raged below her. She did not care. She may no longer be Queen, but she was free of her father. That was what she told herself. She did not completely believe herself. Her father was intimidation given form.

Being out of her father’s clutches made Cersei feel free though. Events had separated her from her father’s clutches. She felt a little giddy feeling this. Eddard had freed her of her father, and maybe, just maybe, he had freed her of Maggie the Frog. She finished her peaches and spooned the last of the syrup into her mouth. She licked the spoon clean looking down at her father. The way he fulminated made her feel smug inside.

She finally acknowledge her father. She had hoped to jib her father for a while, but she simply could not control the sudden anger that flushed through her body. His hateful words and tone enraged her. The look of contempt and anger on his visage lit a fire in her. Old scabs picked open to bleed once more.

She did not know where it came from. The way her body reacted. Anger flared through her mind. She had heard of the saying ‘seeing white’. She had then. Her body took control of her. For a few moments, she had operated off pure instinct. Something inside of her coming alive. She could not really remember how her body moved. She barely heard the scream that came from her throat.

Her bowl had hurled down at her father. Her senses were hyper alert. She saw the bowl wobble on its axis. The diamond pattern on the outside of the bowl spinning making the colors of the pattern
blur. The bowl had almost hit her father.

The elation she felt was overwhelming. The bowl landing on the paved stones with a loud impact and skittered away. She had missed.

Oh how she had wished that bowl had impacted on her father’s face. She would have danced a jig.

She jumped down from the battlement onto the walkway. She felt her heart pounding. Elation went through her veins. Her eyes were saucers. Cersei had to put a hand on the wall beside her. Dizziness washed over her.

She had missed.

What had she done? Her anger had overcome her. Her father was a vengeful man. A man who would do anything to exact revenge. She had just goaded the man who had killed whole families. A man who thought nothing of women being raped and killed. A man who countenanced the killing of little children. She knew her father would have to make sure his ‘problem’ disappeared. She would be taken back to Casterly Rock. With a surety, Cersei knew she would never be seen again. Her only question was whether she would be tortured first.

With a sense of building doom, she started to walk back to her quarters. Her mind was a hurricane. Her elation already fading. A cold dread running though her mind. She remembered her father whipping her so hard she bled from the lash marks. She remembered the slaps that had loosened her teeth.

She had just goaded the proverbial Lion. Her father was a hard, vengeful man. She knew what he had planned for her. Now he would be in a fury to make his plans for his daughter to become a reality. She felt a coldness enter her soul.

She shook her head. Just half an hour ago she felt safe. Eddard had everything under control. Now she truly wondered how much Eddard could control future events. She had not had an army behind her. Her father did. Eddard Stark had been impossibly successful. She doubted that her father would have had any better success against Eddard and Arya. Not with their damn allies with the longbow arrows. Still, a lot of Eddard’s success was luck. One slip here or there and he would have been cast down.

Surely, Eddard Stark had used up his luck with his contest against her. Sooner or later the scales had to balance themselves. Didn’t they? Her father was a vicious man. Her father would do anything to achieve his goals. Could Eddard Stark truly succeed against a man like her father? A man who thought nothing of murder.

Cersei shuddered. She felt nothing for Robert Baratheon. She had only spiked his wine. The man chose to drink himself into a stupor before hunting a bore. What an ass! His demise a trifle to Cersei. Her mind drifted to other events. Bran disappearing from the window of the broken tower came to her mind’s eye. The shocked look on his face as he disappeared from view. In the flotsam of her past evil deeds, Cersei remembered Melara Hetherspoon screams in the well.

Was it not time for the fates to circle their tapestry and complete their masterpiece. Was not her father the channel of their will? Crimes and great sins had been done by herself. The scales had to be balanced. Now was the time she feared. Should she even contest against her deserved fate?

The feelings of freedom that had flowed in Cersei’s veins was gone. Replaced by a sense of dread. She had merely been fooling herself. She had always been impulsive and impetuous. In this time of truth, Cersei had to admit she had been a greedy bitch. Always seeking maximum advantage for
herself. The woman who would be Queen had wanted it all. Boy, she had gotten it all alright she thought to herself. Some good but a whole lot of bad.

Cersei had come to see that the path she had been on was a path to her own destruction. That her destruction would have consumed her children as she went down to her doom. The realization had come to her as she sobered up. That in trying to avoid the fate of the prophetess, she had been moving her prophecy of doom forward.

Now she wondered once more, if that damn Frog was still working her will on events. Her father would somehow get the Iron Throne back. Events would flow on without her, but her father would make sure that a Lannister sat on the Iron Throne. Cersei was sure that would lead to her children’s death. She knew about single minded focus. Her father had it in spades.

She did not want to die, but she now realized that was her fate. Eddard would not be able to protect her and her children. She absolutely refused to go back to Casterly Rock. Again she wondered, that if she was to die first, would that free her children from the curse of Maggie the Frog.

She was confused and frightened. Damnit! Why had she goaded the Lion that was her father? Her anger got the better of her again. Being cast down and removed from power had removed a large weight off her shoulders. A weight she had known she carried. Now she felt the crushing weight again. The weight of fate on her shoulders. A fate that would lead to her violent death.

She continued to walk back down the ramparts to get to the ground level of the curtain wall. With each step’s echo, she reflected on her life’s choices. She remembered Jaime’s plea to her to flee to Dorne. She had not. Could they have been happy there? She thought that, yes, they could have been happy in Dorne.

Jaime could have acknowledged their children. None of Maggie the Frog’s prophecies would have come true. They could have lived as husband and wife in peace. But no! She wanted to be Queen. She felt the weight of her decisions pressing down on her shoulders once more.

She had made it down from the curtain wall now. She entered into the royal wagon Eddard had given her and her children to ride in. Her children were not in it. Where had they gone? It did not matter. The driver whipped his reigns to get the horses in motion. The wagon lurched and then started forward. She wagon moving slowly down the road. The jostling of the seat while the wagon went over the joints of the stones and then the rutted ground churned Cersei’s thoughts.

Cersei tried to control her jumbled thoughts, but they were all twined and wrapped around each other. She berated herself for allowing her feelings to go from being so high to now feeling so low. She had been on the mountain top bathed in sunshine, and now she was in the deepest shadowed valley. She felt her body jostled from side to side. A few ruts had her back jamming back into the wood. The impact slightly jarring. Her soul was in disarray. Her thoughts were scattered.

She was back at the drawbridge of Maegor’s Holdfast. She shook her head. It seem like only a moment ago she entered the wagon. The door was opened and she was helped from the wagon. The porter bowing to her.

Absently, she thanked the man. Strange how she had finally learned politeness she mused. Cersei, with a slow tread walked back to her room. Word of her insane actions had not filtered back yet. She was thankful. She walked up to her chambers in a fog of confusion and foreboding. She opened her door and entered her private chambers. She closed the door and leaned against it.

She could only see in her mind’s eye the ruthlessness of her father. Many times, Cersei had witnessed what her father was capable of. She tried to tell herself she was being silly. That she had
no reason to let her fears get the best of her. She had the walls of King’s Landing between herself and her father. Eddard sat on the Iron Throne. She knew she was losing her internal battle. Despite her internal rebuttal to her fears, Cersei felt her emotions flag.

Her father was here now. All her fear, frustrations and pain from her childhood came flooding back. She had been taught her destiny. She may have wanted to be a warrior like Jaime, but her father made it clear that was not to be her future. She was to be wedded off to a high Prince. To hopefully become Queen one day.

She was no innocent she admitted to herself. One path had been closed off when King, Aerys II Targaryen, did not find her an acceptable bride to be to Rhaegar Targaryen. When a new path opened before her, she took to it like a bloodhound on the scent. Maggie had tried to warn her, but she rushed down the path to this point she found herself now. Maggie had told her that becoming Queen to Robert Baratheon would be disastrous. Cersei felt she could use the power of being Queen to make the words of that bitch untrue. To make Maggie choke on her own words, as she rammed them down her ugly ass throat.

She had been wrong. No power had been enough. It took another more powerful force to free Cersei. A force that arose totally unlooked for. The impossible made possible by the will of a fourteen year girl. Arya had overthrown her. Through that girl’s actions, she had by happenstance changed Eddard Stark, her father. Eddard had changed into a force of nature.

The only problem was the goodness of the man. Cersei’s father had none. Tywin Lannister would do anything to promote the name of House Lannister. Anything.

She paced her room. She lost all track of time.

There was a knock on the door. The nature of it told her who it was.

"Come in Eddard."

The door slowly opened. The man came in. He of course was dressed like any other person in court. No ostentatious dress for this man. He looked at her. She saw his eyebrows flex trying to process what he was seeing. He closed the door behind him. He came closer to Cersei. She could see him trying to gauge her. To fathom what he was seeing.

"I expected you at the dinner hall. Everyone is abuzz with what you did at the Lion Gate. I wish I had stayed to see it. I thought to give you privacy with your father. I had no idea you would try and literally brain him."

He looked at her to see if his humor would be registered by the gloomy woman in front of him. It was clear he was confused as to why she was so obviously down.

"You should come and eat. I have had a late dinner held for you."

She gave him a weak smile. She turned away.

"I am sorry Eddard. I feel I have come down with something. I guess all the excitement you know."

She heard behind her, "I see. I will respect your condition." She heard in Eddard’s tone that he did not buy her words. He played the charade though. "I hope you feel better in the morning Cersei." She heard him chuckle. "You have large onions Cersei. I wished you had connected. The man is
pompous.” A long pause. “I am thankful Tywin Lannister was not my father. I think I understand more now. Sleep well Cersei.”

She sobbed but controlled it. She heard Eddard pause and then he was gone. Why had not this man been her father? She cursed the fates.

For a while, she paced her room, before she sat on her bed. Like frightened doves her hands fidgeted. She was not sure what to do. A feeling of doom sinking down in on her. The executioner’s axe poised to act. She knew that Eddard had no intention of harming her. Her own father had more than enough ill will towards her. She knew he would take her back to Casterly Rock. The world would see no more of Cersei Lannister.

That she would never allow.

She had been fooling herself. She started to ponder. Maybe it would be best for her children.

She lay back on her bed. She must have dozed off. She was startled awake by a pounding on her door. She rose and shook her head clearing out the cobwebs. She shook her head. The door was rattling with repeated blows and she heard many voices outside. They were talking over each other. She felt her eyebrows knit. They sounded female.

She pushed herself up tiredly from her bed. She went to the door and opened it.

Oh my.

Outside her door in a semicircle around her doorway were Dorea, Loreza, Obara and Nymeria. That was surprising enough. The Sand Snakes had multiplied. She saw Tyene and Sarella standing side by side. They smiled at her. The smiles friendly but also predatory. She saw two other women with the Sand Snakes.

She noticed they had bottles of wine and champagne with them. Some of them carried platters of finger foods.

The women came piling into Cersei’s room. Cersei was thrown off by this large influx of women. They were chattering and laughing as they spread out in her room. She looked around at them while they spread out into her environs. They were all quite comely. The women wore beautiful dresses or blouse tops and trousers. She noticed that Obara had a large satchel around her shoulder and waist.

The women looked radiant and happy. It contrasted with the gloom settling onto her soul. She gave them a wane smile.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of some many beautiful women? I am—overwhelmed.”

“You charmer,” Tyene husked. “We will be taking our clothes off soon enough my sweet.”

“Yes! You are such a badass! Word has spread like fire around the Red Keep of how you almost took your father’s head off,” Dorea crowed. “I knew you were a lioness between the sheets but you are lioness out of them too!”

Obara came up to her and hugged Cersei tight to her warm voluptuous body. The new woman that Cersei had become, would be feeling herself getting wet, but she only felt stupor now. She knew her time was limited. Surely, her father would win in the end. Like he always did. The tune of The Rains of Castamere echoed around in her head. The tune in the mordant the key of D Minor.
“There is more to you than meets the eye Cersei” Obara whispered in her ear. “I am going to fuck you so good” she husked into the same ear. She nibbled on Cersei’s earlobe and blew warm air into the shell.

She pulled away and looked at Cersei strangely at her lack of reaction. Cersei had melted every time she did that before.

The fallen Queen looked around blankly. She should feel elation, but only felt empty now.

Cersei looked around again at all the beautiful women around her. She tried to smile but it came out as a grimace.

“Again I must ask, why do I have the pleasure of so many beautiful women in my bedroom? I am honored.”

“You charmer” Sarella shot back. “We are here to celebrate with you Cersei. You are one hot woman. To dis you father like that. You got stones woman!”

Obara brought over the two women she did not recognize. “Let me introduce you to Ellaria’s first cousins, Alaysha and Josey Uller. They have the good sense to be bisexual sluts like me. They have come to join in.”

“Join in? Join in what?” Cersei asked slightly confused. There were eight women in her domicile. They were laughing and already starting to kiss and paw at each other. Hands going inside slacks and now bodices or blouse tops. The drink and food put on a table on the side wall. The women drinking out the throat of the bottles. They laughed and jested in gaiety.

“We think it is time you join us in an orgy Cersei. You have already shown us you know how to bone,” Obara answered Cersei. “I and Nymeria want to share you. They say incest is the best Cersei. Tonight we will prove it to you my sweet.” Cersei felt her eyes go large again. Gods the Sand Snakes were hot! “We want to celebrate your triumph over your father. We are told that Tywin nearly soiled himself. Gods I wish had been there to see that!”

“Hey! It is I and Dorea that want to share Cersei. We did have her first!” the youngest sister crowed. Dorea had her arm around her little sister with a smug look on her face.

Obara flipped them off. She gave Cersei an off putting look.

“I will never live that down. Thanks a lot Cersei,” the eldest Sand Snake snarked but she had a big smile on her face.

Cersei tried to get excited. She really did. She had eight women that wanted to do terrible things to her and each other. The kind of terrible things that a woman loved having done to her. If this had been last night, she would already be stripping down. She had come too really love women and their bodies. She smiled weakly and tried to rise to the jibs thrown her way.

Obara and Nymeria quickly picked up on Cersei’s listless attitude.

“What is wrong Cersei” Nymeria asked Cersei standing in front of her looking deep into Cersei’s eyes.

The two women looked at each other. Cersei looked away. She felt bad. These women wanted to have a good time celebrating life, and a zest for pleasure. She was putting a pall on the festivities. She could not help herself. She had used it already once today but used it again.
“I feel bad Nymeria. I guess the excitement of today has me off my balance. I hate not being up for the party but, I just don’t feel like having company tonight. Hopefully, in the near future we can meet and have this ‘orgy’. I am touched, but I just need to go bed,” she paused, “alone I fear and sleep this feeling away. I am sorry.”

Nymeria saw through her but did not press it.

The beautiful woman called all the other women together and talked to them quietly. The women looking over at Cersei. She saw looks of confusion, and being a little pissed off on several faces. She also saw sympathy and trying to understand as the women looked at her more closely.

The women slowly gathered their food and drink. They left quietly. Cersei gave their looks a sad smile. She saw the looks of concern on their faces.

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Eyes opened slowly. They blinked taking in the soft light of early morning. Next, ears picked up the sounds of movement in her room. Thoughts muzzy and diffuse slowly came into focus. Cersei lay in her bed and took in her surroundings.

She felt leaden. Her limbs did not want to move. She turned her head. She saw Rosyn Hollard working in her room. Cersei had given the sixteen year old permission to enter her chambers when necessary to perform her duties. The chambermaid was moving to and fro cleaning up her room. The girl bent over to pick up some of the garments her charge had haphazardly thrown over the chair before the dresser. Most of them had hit the mark but a few were on the floor.

Cersei noticed that Rosyn was not moving with what had become her normal herky jerky motion. The woman seem to feel green eyes looking upon her. She turned her head and saw Cersei looking at her. The girl gave her a shy smile. She quickly turned her head back around and continued her tasks.

How strange Cersei thought. The girl had been huffing and puffing lately doing her assigned chores. She had at first seemed to linger doing her tasks, but of late had been flying around Cersei’s chambers doing her tasks like a hummingbird. Her arms and legs moving in a blur like the diminutive bird. Her body flitting around doing her chores, and then out the door without a backward glance. She seemed to be moving more sedately this morning.

How strange the blonde woman thought. She slowly sat up. Her body felt wooden. Her limbs did not want to follow her will. She gripped the edge of the bed and watched Rosyn work. The girl seemed to see that her charge was not feeling well.

She came over and asked Cersei in a solicitous voice if she was alright. Could she be of any service to her? The timbre of the girl’s voice spoke to Cersei. The girl looked at her with limpid eyes. Rosyn leaned her body into Cersei. Her eyes looking deep into Cersei’s.

It was like a candle being lite. The shadows dispelled. Cersei now understood Rosyn and her sudden changes of mood and emotion. The girl fancied her. Cersei took that thought in. She felt flattered but it was too late. She knew what she needed to do.

Cersei Lannister was not going to give her father the satisfaction of taking her back to Casterly Rock. Last night in her unsettled dreams, Cersei could see her fate so clearly. In the end, Eddard Stark would fall before her father. He simply was not ruthless enough to contend with a man more than willing to countenance evil being done in his service. Her father had too many lackeys to ever have to commit the crimes himself.
Her new found conscious squirmed, but she knew what she had to do. The girl was constantly glancing at her with those beautiful light brown eyes.

“Rosyn” Cersei called to the girl in a sultry voice. The girl heard the tone, her eyes locked with Cersei’s. “Come over here and sit with me please.” Cersei patted the bed. She watched the girl lick her lips unconsciously. The chambermaid’s eyes scanned over Cersei’s body with a now undisguised sexual hunger. A slight flush appeared on her pale skin along her throat and cheeks. The girl hesitated like a new borne fawn.

“Come” Cersei beckoned to the girl. She patted the bed again. “I won’t bite—unless you won’t me too” she gave the girl her most seductive smile. Again, the girl licked her lips unconsciously. Her body shivered with undisguised longing.

Cersei would have been proud of herself, if not for her feeling of guilt. She had the girl longing for her. Rosyn shuddered harder and slowly walked to Cersei where she sat on her bed. Cersei patted the bed beside her again. The girl sat down and gazed up at her with wide open eyes.

“You are a beautiful girl Rosyn. I find you beguiling.”

“Not as beguiling as those hussies from Dorne!” the girl spat out.

Uuuuuhhh … the green headed monster hath raised its head … Cersei had to soothe Rosyn to accomplish her goal.

“I know Rosyn … I had to perform my royal duties to entertain the princesses of Dorne,” Cersei highly doubted the chambermaid knew all the dynamics of High Houses and bastardy. She was sure she had not said Sand Snakes in reference to the daughters of Oberyn to the chambermaid. “That is finished. I now wish to show you the ardor you instill in me Rosyn. I hunger to take you to my bed.” Cersei made sure to look deep into Rosyn’s eyes while she spoke. Her right hand had come up to play with the girl’s hair above her ear, and stroked the sweet shell of Rosyn’s ear.

The girl whimpered and leaned into Cersei. She looked up at her with sweet surrender in her eyes. Guilt flashed through Cersei but she tamped it down. She must do what she must.

Cersei bent her head down and captured the girl’s lips. They were sweet as fresh pressed grapes. She kissed the girl sweetly, first melding lips and sucking on the girl’s lower lip. Rosyn mewled and then moaned hard when Cersei’s tongue asked for permission to take the teenager’s mouth. Permission was eagerly granted. Cersei kissed the girl deeply. Rosyn melted into Cersei. The adult woman stroking the trembling teenager.

The two embraced in a fever of want and need. At least that was the case with Rosyn. Cersei, with iron will tamped down the fire raging in her loins and running rampant in her veins. She broke the kiss. Spittle roped between their lips. Rosyn found courage and chased Cersei’s lips with desperate hunger.

Cersei brought her index finger up and placed it on Rosyn’s lips. The girl gave Cersei a sultry look, and sucked Cersei’s finger into her mouth and sensually sucked on it.

Oh my! Cersei gasped in her mind. Rosyn was a quick study! Cersei crushed down her renewed libido.

“We need to find some wine and champagne to celebrate my sweet” Cersei whispered to her chambermaid. Eddard, at first, had changed her maids as she had with Sansa to punish her, but Rosyn had become her permanent chambermaid two months ago. Cersei had supposed Eddard had
started to trust her. She pursed her lips. Shame flushed through Cersei at the breaking of that trust. She needed to do what she needed to do.

“I don’t know,” Rosyn responded “can’t we just make love?” she asked earnestly.

“I want you relaxed my sweet. I want our first time to be special. I plan to make you a woman my sweet.”

A frown came across Rosyn’s face. She turned away.

Cersei used her index finger to turn the girl’s head back around to look at her.

“What is the matter Rosyn?” she asked with sincere curiosity.

“I gave my virtue to Branton Brax. He is a son to a rich merchant. I was just a conquest to him. I fear I can’t give you my maidenhead. I’m sorry Cersei.” The girl turned her head down looking despondent. Cersei could feel Rosyn’s remorse in losing her virginity to a boy whom only saw her as a conquest.

Within herself, Cersei squirmed with what she was about to do. She excused her actions. She simply had to do what she must. It was time for her to leave the stage. She would not go back to Casterly Rock with her father.

Cersei hugged the girl hard to her body. The girl sobbed but Cersei hugged and stroked her body. She gently hushed the girl and tilted her face up to her. She felt guilt again surge through her. Grimly, Cersei tamped it down again. She would show the girl what true lovemaking was. She could give the girl that gift.

“If I catch that cad I will flay the skin off his bones Rosyn. Mark my words. You are still a virgin to loving women though. Am I right?”

The girl nodded shyly with renewed hope.

“Then I will be your first. I will show you that only a woman can truly touch a woman’s soul. I will show you that no man can do to a woman what another woman can. I will make you scream in pleasure. I will make you cum and cum till you are exhausted. I will devour you my sweet. In return, I will give you my body freely. You can drink from the wellspring of my essence Rosyn. You will become drunk on my nectars, as I will with yours. Together we will drink deeply from each other.”

Rosyn’s eyes were large now with lust. She surged into Cersei trying to kiss her with hot passion. Cersei deflected her.

“Let’s go find some spirits to enhance this special time Rosyn. I want you to remember this moment till your last day.”

“I will!” Rosyn enthused. “Can’t the spirits wait—I want you! Bad!”

“I know my sweet. But trust me. A little fruit of the vine will make it so much sweeter.”

Cersei saw the frustration in the girl. The girl wanted Cersei so bad she would do anything asked of her by the blonde beauty. Asking for some bubbly to celebrate would seem reasonable to the innocent teenager. It would be of no import Rosyn would be reasoning. Cersei saw it clearly in the girl’s eyes. She wanted Cersei and having a little alcohol before could not hurt. If it helped the brown haired beauty to bed Cersei, she was all for it.
“Come. I know where there is some. I assume you have the key to the closet.”

“Yes. I have to serve spirits at times, in the late afternoon, to some of the guests and royals. It helps them to relax. I didn’t think you drank Cersei?” Rosyn asked innocently.

“I only drink on special occasions my sweet. I would say bedding you, my luscious vixen, counts as special!” Cersei said pulling the girl to her and kissing her deeply. When she broke the kiss she smiled. The girl was zoned out. She had it bad Cersei saw. Rosyn demanded more kisses. Both women groined while their tongues dueled wetly in their mouths. Cersei finally took control though her breathing was ragged and her body overheating.

“Come, let’s make it even better Rosyn,” she got up from the bed pulling Rosyn up behind her. Cersei felt guilt well up again, but she wouldn’t have to worry about it soon.

They went to the door. Cersei stuck her head out looking both ways. Rosyn asked her why she was doing that. She told the sweet girl she was making sure there were no sand snakes in the hall. There had been an infestation lately she told Roslyn. The girl gasped and gripped her arm tightly and looked at her with big eyes. She pressed into Cersei’s body seeking her protection.

Cersei hoped this dreadful fib did not get back to Oberyn’s daughters.

The coast was clear. She did not see Sandor or his new recruit Merjen. No Starklings in the halls running about to interfere with her plans. The Sand Snakes busy elsewhere.

They went out into the hall. Rosyn had pressed herself tight into Cersei’s side, her one arm wrapped around Cersei’s waist and the other clutching her nearest arm. Cersei looked down at the girl. Her eyes big as she looked right and left with a fearful look.

“How come I haven’t seen them,” the teenager asked in a tremulous voice.

“Uh … because Sandor and Merjen have been patrolling the halls at night. But the snakes have been getting braver I think. They like to hide in the shadows and corners.” Cersei saw Rosyn looking intently at the walls and near any stands of armor or artifacts of the past Targaryen or Baratheon rule. She scooted closer to Cersei. Cersei found she liked that. Cersei used the excuse to pull the girl tighter to her body. The girl snuggled in closer looking around with large eyes. She looked up at Cersei with total trust.

Cersei grimaced, but she simply had to do what she needed to do to execute her plan. The trust in Rosyn’s eyes made Cersei cringe inside. It could not be helped. To do what she needed to do, Cersei would need fortitude that only alcohol could give one. Cersei pretended to look for ‘Sand Snakes’ while in reality checking for any persons that might stop them. Cersei figured she was pretty safe. Eddard would be focused on Cersei’s father and his army on the outside of King’s Landing, till his son arrived in two days. The Red Keep abuzz with excitement of soon having the army of the Direwolves in the fields before King’s Landing.

The populace hoping to have the Lion neutered, and sent back to Casterly Rock with its tail between its legs. Legs shorn of any testicles. Cersei smiled at that thought. *Fuck her House!* The fallen Princess and Queen raged in her mind. Most importantly, the pox on her father!

Even though she knew the way to the spirits closet, she let Rosyn lead the way. She wanted the girl to feel like she was leading the expedition. They arrived. The girl took a key ring out of her deep left pocket. She fumbled with the keys getting the right one out. The key inserted into the lock and turned. Rosyn opened the narrow slat doors. Cersei looked in at the racks of spirits.
There was all sorts of types of liquor. Cersei did not like the hard spirits. She preferred the softer to the pallet spirits of wine and champagne.

“Which one do you want Cersei?” Rosyn asked her. Cersei smiled at her. She reached in and pulled out a red wine from the Arbor and handed it to Rosyn. She then pulled out a nice red wine from rolling piedmont of Pendric Hills. The land known for more than the gold mined from the hills of that seat of power. Next, she pulled a bottle of bubbly from the region of Red Lake. The land in the Reach and the seat of House Crane.

Having met Leaf, the Queen of the Children of the Forest, Cersei hated the reason for the name of the lake. Legend wrote that Brandon of the Bloody Blade, one of Garth Greenhand's sons, was said to have slain so many Children of the Forest that what had been called Blue Lake was renamed Red Lake because of their blood.

“Why so many bottles Cersei?” Rosyn asked her. “Isn’t three bottles an awful lot of wine?”

Cersei thought quickly for a plausible reason. “I intend of having more than one celebration with you my sweet rose,” Cersei husked to the girl. This glazed Rosyn’s eyes with sweet thoughts of repeated Sapphic debaucheries with her longed for lover. Cersei looked around and hurried them back to her quarters. She needed to make this one time succeed. If she failed she would be watched closely. There would be no further opportunities to implement her plan.

Rosyn cooed and snuggled up against Cersei again, clutching her close. Cersei felt guilty again, but she had set her mind.

They returned back to her quarters. As soon as the door was closed, Rosyn was on her like a horny tick. The girl was grabbing at Cersei trying to get a liplock on the fallen Queen. Cersei laughed. She disengaged from the girl. She held out the bottles. “Don’t want to break them.” Cersei went to the main table in her room and set the bottles down on them. Rosyn advanced on Cersei again, with hot hunger burning brightly in her eyes.

“Geez girl,” Cersei laughed. “Calm down. Let’s share a glass to our success.” Cersei had several glasses still in her quarter from the Sand Snakes last night. The women not collecting all the glassware.

Cersei popped the cork from the bottle of wine from the piedmont of Pendric Hills. She filled the two glasses to the brim. She needed the girl inebriated and hopefully knocked out.

After they had made love, Cersei thought with a tremor running through her body. Cersei felt her libido racing. Her core clenching with desire.

She gulped her wine down. The rush going to her head. Whoa! She thought to herself. She was out of practice she snarked to herself. She encouraged Rosyn to drink her wine down in small gulps. The girl took to the taste and was happy to comply. Cersei took the bottle back to the bed. They sat down on the edge of the bed. They started to snoog. The girl was flushed with both excitement and alcohol Cersei clearly saw.

She poured them both another glass. She drank her wine down with controlled long sips. The teenager as well. The two kissing and groping each other. Cersei was having a great farewell she thought. Their glasses were empty again. She poured herself another glass but only a fourth of glass for Rosyn. She did not want the girl sloppy drunk. Cersei had some combs in her hair. She got up and went to the dresser to pull them out. She wanted her hair free when she made love to the sweet maid. She decided to comb out her long lustrous hair. She wanted to look ravishing when she bedded Rosyn.
Cersei finished combing her hair. She looked in the mirror. Yes indeed. She was a hot woman, if she said so herself. Cersei smirked at her vanity. She spied her favorite perfume, and dabbed on some behind her ears, on her wrists and between her breasts. Cersei felt ready to pounce. Like the proverbial lioness, she smiled to herself in the mirror. Sort of going out with a bang, she thought to herself.

She got up and went to the bed. “I’m coming for you my sweet,” she husked.

She was met with “nnngggk” Her eyes bulged wide. “nnnggg kkkkk kkkkk”

“Well shiitttt!” Cersei exclaimed.

Rosyn was zonked out. The sixteen year snoring away sawing logs. Rosyn was beyond flyweight!

Cersei stormed to herself. The girl spread out akimbo on the bed. No nookie for Cersei! The blonde beauty fumed to herself. Damnit! She really wanted the sweet maid. The fallen Queen sighed and then pouted. Dammit!

She sat down on the bed beside her supposed conquest. The girl snoring away blissfully. Definitely no boinking this fine morning. Oh Well. She got back up. Cersei pulled off the sweet innocent lass’s shoes and Rosyn’s dress leaving the girl in her slip. She put her under the sheets and blanket. The girl still snoring away with a smile on her face.

Again, Cersei sat back down on the bed. She put the wine bottle to her lips. Cersei tilted her head back taking a big gulp. She felt the alcohol rush to her head. Whoa! She took another big gulp. Let’s get this over with. She would meet her end in her way. Fuck her father.

The bloody reports were driving him crazy. Did they ever end! Sandor fumed pulling over another parchment to read. He had not known that so much of his job would be reading infernal reports about this and that. He was having to keep a tabulation of all the complaints coming into the Red Keep, about all the disputes, fights and squabbles that were reported to the King for remediation. Sandor had one word for all this. Boring!

He wished something exciting would happen.

A loud knock sounded on his door. He looked up. The door flew open. In came Myrcella, Sansa and Jeyne. Their eyes large. Lady was swirling around in a circle yipping and snapping at nothing.

Sandor pursed his lips. He was sure his prayers for something exciting to happen was about to occur. He cursed the infernal gods. Now they listened to his prayers! He was just bitching dammit! Sodding gods!

The three girls just stared at him.

“Welllll?” Sandor spoke in a droll voice hoping to entice a revelation.

“Its mom!” Myrcella shouted out. “I think she is going to jump.” Sansa and Jeyne nodded their heads in agreement. The trio offered no further information. They looked at Sandor like he was dense for not being able to divine what in the hell they were talking about.

“Jump what?” Sandor asked

“Not what Sandor. She is going to jump off the bannister rail on the fourth floor. She is drunk as a skunk! She is talking crazy!” Myrcella cried out.
“Bloody Hell!” Sandor shouted while he propelled himself up from his desk. He bolted towards the door. He left his sword not taking the time. Time was of the essence he felt. He shoved Sansa out of the way. She lurched into Jeyne who caught her. Lady jumped up on the tall redhead barking for attention in all the confusion.

“Sorry!” Sandor shouted back. His loud steps rebounded off the walls as he tore off down hall. Eddard would kill him if anything happened to Cersei! He was off at the curtain wall observing the Lannister army of Tywin with Arya and Syrio. He heard the three teenage girls pelting down the halls behind him. He was leaving them behind as he put on a burst of speed. Lady was barking wildly her long legs letting her catch up to Sandor. She barked looking up at him.

In his haste, Sandor rounded corners and bounced off the opposite wall and ran on. Lady barking wildly at Sandor and nipping at his heels to urge him on.

“Bollocks!”

He heard Tommen shouting.

“No mom! Don’t jump!”

“Don’t you tell your mother what to do!” Cersei responded her words slurred.

Sandor came out to the landing on the second floor. He looked up to the fourth floor. The top floor. He saw Cersei with her back pressed into the bannister. She was jabbing at Tommen and some male courtesan he did not know. She had a feral look on her face.

“Back I say. Back foul beasts of the pit!” A splash of spirits came out the neck of a bottle Cersei was holding. The bottle she used as a sword. “Come closer and feel the slash of by sword … I mean bottle” Cersei hiccupped her words slurred badly.

The Hound saw a smattering of other persons up and down the stairway and along the fourth and third floor looking at the strange drama occurring before them. Behind him, Sandor heard Sansa, Myrcella and Jeyne catching up. Sansa picked up her excited Direwolf

“Stay here!” he barked at them.

He started to storm up the steps. Cersei saw him coming. In a surprising graceful move, Cersei jumped up on the top of the bannister. Thank the seven that it was at least four inches wide Sandor thought, as he ran up the steps. Cersei balanced herself. She swayed in her drunken state but she did not fall off.

He slowed down as he approached the fourth floor landing. He did not want to goad Cersei into jumping off. He walked up the last few steps. She was twenty feet down from the landing. Damnit! She was too far away for him to rush her unobserved.

“What are you doing Cersei?” Sandor barked at the fallen Queen.

She swayed on the top of the rail. As he watched, Cersei took a long swig of champagne from the bottle. She pulled the mouth of the bottle from her mouth. She swiped her lips.

“Celebrating my demise my good Hound. Nothing but champagne now I am the boss!” Cersei shouted waving her bottle around. Almost, she fell off the bannister, but with wind milling arms Cersei caught her balance. Her body swaying like a willow in a dreadful windstorm. She kept eyes on Sandor to make sure he did not rush her unobserved.
Sandor saw Merjen come down the hall to the left. He motioned for her to stop.

“Get down Cersei. You don’t want to do this.” He had hope. She had fought her falling off just now. He just had to get closer before the fool woman actually jumped to her death. Then he could rush her and pull her down.

“No I don’t, but it is necessary. I won’t go with my father!” she screamed with a vengeance. “It is for the best my good mutt … I mean bitch … or is that bastard” a confused look came over Cersei’s face “whatever”. She took another swig keeping her eyes on Sandor and Merjen. Merjen had started to move but froze when Cersei put one foot in the air above the abyss she was near to jumping into.

“Why is it for the best?” Sandor asked. He needed to engage Cersei and find out what the hell had gotten into his antagonist. This was totally out of character for the damn woman.

“You know,” she waggled her free hand. She looked around as if that made everything crystal clear. “You can’t fight the fates,” Cersei intoned sagely spinning around on the top of the rail. How she kept her balance Sandor did not know. The woman must have a supreme inborn sense of balance. “Long live the frog!” Cersei screeched out in a god’s awful voice.

What Sandor thought to himself?

Ellaria and then Arianne showed up from down the hall on the fourth floor. They looked at Cersei with concern. They slowly advanced sensing the dangerous situation. They too stopped fifteen feet from the woman. They did not want to push Cersei into actually jumping. Sandor watched Cersei looking down at the abyss. He knew she was trying to screw up her courage to jump. She took another big swig of her champagne bottle.

Ellaria spoke softly to Cersei “Come down Cersei. Tell me what is plaguing your thoughts.” She held out her hand.

Cersei looked at the hand like it might bite her.

“Oh Puhlleeaaazzeee!” Cersei barked. “I know you Martells want us Lannisters dead.” She paused considering something. “Can’t say I blame you really” she said sadly. “We Lannisters suck … and not in a good way.” She saw Sandor approaching and inched backwards prepared to fall off.

Sandor growled backing up.

Now Obara, Nymeria, Elia, Dorea and Loreza quickly filtered in. Sandor saw the looks of concern and fear for Cersei clear on their faces.

Obara stepped forward a step. Cersei eyed her and leaned back. She almost fell but righted herself. All gasped and held their breaths at the near fall.

“Come down Cersei. Please. I don’t want you to jump baby. Come down. We all love you and want you with us Cersei.” She looked at Cersei with warm eyes. “We love you Cersei. Come to us and let us love you.”

Sandor watched Cersei shake her head sadly. “It is too late. I never should have gone to her dammit!” Cersei screamed. “I thought maybe Eddard had freed me.” She paused considering the words she had just uttered. “Nah.” She shook her head no. “For the best anyways. Better for Tommen, Myrcella and even that little shit Joffrey.”

She turned around and bent her knees. Sandor prepared to rush her.
“CERSEI!” was bellowed. The sound echoing down the halls. All eyes turned down to the hall on the first floor. All froze. Even Cersei.

Oberyn came walking up the hall, and then up the first flight of stairs. He was sweaty, and his clothes covered in dust. He had the look of coming in from the practice courts. His pace slow and deliberate. In his right hand was his favorite iron wood spear. He locked eyes with Cersei. He walked with a regal air that all found hypnotizing. Cersei stared at him with wary eyes, but she had ceased her motion to jump to her death.

“Ah. The red Salamander approaches. Come to watch.” Cersei called down to Oberyn.

Oberyn scowled.

“That is Red Viper dammit!”

“Of course Red Newt.”

“Think you are smart don’t you Cersei Lannister.”

“Smarter than you Red Amphibian. Or is that tadpole?”

“Think you are funny, aren’t you snaggletooth. Some bitches never learn. I have something for you.” Oberyn shook his spear as he walked up the last landing of steps. He stared at Cersei with fierce eyes. The spear had a long Redtail hawk feather on it. The feather on the spear meant to draw an opponent’s gaze.

Cersei stared at the dark red feather on the spear like a bird hypnotized by a cobra. Her eyes clearly following the dancing feather.

Oberyn reached the fourth floor. He looked over Cersei with a disdainful eye. She looked back with a neutral look.

“You want to die?”

“Yes. It is the only way. I want my children to live. If you kill me then I know they will be safe. It is the only way.” Cersei’s face went somber. “She was right in the end.”

Oberyn said nothing for a long moment processing the words he had heard.

“Are you trying to be noble in the end Cersei?”

“Me—noble?” Her head tilted back. She started to laugh almost losing her balance. “I just want my children to live.”

Oberyn had walked past Sandor. Sandor and everyone else mesmerized by the strange, dark play before them. Sandor trusted Oberyn. The man would not kill a woman in cold blood. Even if it was his hated nemesis, Cersei Lannister. He would not sacrifice the chance for the revenge that Eddard had promised him. Still, his actions were unnerving him.

Oberyn brandished his spear. “Your command is my will Cersei. Oh fallen Queen.”

“Wait” Cersei called out. She turned to look at Oberyn fully. A sad cast on her face. “I want you to know I am sorry for Elia. That was heinous what my father did to her. Oberyn. Unforgivable. I want you to know Oberyn that Jaime used to wake up sweaty and crying about that night. It harmed him seeing Elia and her children’s broken bodies.” She shook her head sadly. “I took that from him,
making him not acknowledge his own children. Robert making him guard the door as he fucked me. My sleeping with men to get my way … I drove it from him.” Cersei finished softly.

She turned her gaze directly to Oberyn. She drank a heavy swig from the bottle keeping her eyes on everyone. She spread her arms. The invitation to Oberyn clear.

“It is time. I am ready,” Cersei spoke with a tone of finality.

“So be it!” Oberyn yelled. He lunged forward with a vengeance his spear dropped into a killing position.

Sandor screamed out, “NO!” He had let the Red Viper lull him into a false sense of trust. He and Merjen moved forward, but it was too late.

Oberyn struck in a lightning fast stroke. The spear going behind Cersei. The haft of the spear ramming into her back. She landed with a thud. Her bottle sent spinning away from her grasp. The drunken, fallen Queen, sprawled out on the floor.

She screamed. Despite being sloppy drunk Cersei was up on her feet in a flash. She tried to turn around and jump off the landing again. Merjen was there and dragged her away from the edge. Cersei screaming and thrashing wildly. Safe from the edge Merjen released Cersei. Now Merjen, Sandor and Oberyn formed a wall between Cersei and the bannister. The blonde threw her head back and screamed.

Slowly, in a circle, Cersei turned around looking at all those who were around her in a loose circle.

Then she lost her mind Sandor was sure.

He watched the fallen Queen squat down so she was nearly resting on her ass. Her knees stuck out by her ears. Her hands on the floor. She suddenly began to hop around in this weird position.

Rrbbiitttt rrbbiittttt rrbbiittttt

While he watched, Cersei started croaking like a frog by the Gods sakes Sandor observed. He could only gape at her. She kept hopping around making sounds like she was a frog.

Everyone stared at her as if she had lost her sanity.

Rrbbiitttt rrbbiitttttttttt rrbbiittttttt

She swiveled her head with big eyes. She shot her tongue out her mouth. Her head snapping forward like she was chasing flies. Cersei jumped around more in her squat position. Head swiveling, Cersei looked around with big eyes. Her eyes flaring as if she had seen a fly and her tongue shot out.

Rrbbiitttt rrbbiittttt rrbbiittttttt

The woman was daft Sandor exclaimed to herself.

Cersei collapsed forward her cheek pressed into the floor her butt up in the air. She was unconscious. She began to snore loud and long.

//////////

SLAMMMMMM SLAAAMMMMMM SLAMMMMMM SLAAAMMMMMM
Cersei awoke with a start, her head throbbing wildly. “Arrrrrrrrrrrgggghhhhh” she cried out with a mouth full of cotton it felt like. Her stomach roiled. She opened her eyes, but the light felt like iron pokers so she shut her eyes again.

SLAMMMMMM SLAAAMMMMMM

With a cry Cersei sat up. She snarled while holding her stomach to try and keep from throwing up. Her world reeled around her. She squint her eyes against the light coming in from the windows. Her stomach tried to revolt but she controlled it.

“Here” she heard near her. She felt a glass put into her hands. It was Eddard’s voice. Oh great.

“What is it?”

“It is Pycelle’s concoction he developed while you were binge drinking while regent.”

She felt Eddard’s presence fade. She slugged down the remedy from the fallen Grand Maester. She waited. It would take a few minutes to begin to work. She looked over and saw Eddard sitting beside the small table she had near her chest of drawers. She saw what made the loud crashing sound that had startled her awake.

It was a thin slab of wood that Eddard had slammed against the table top.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Cersei dissemble. She had not planned on being here. For a drunk she had a good memory. Damn Oberyn! Bastard!

“We are beyond that Cersei. Why?”

“It does not matter Eddard. I failed. I don’t know anymore. Everything is confusion now. My father is here now. My life is over. He always wins in the end.”

Eddard looked at her.

“Who is Maggie? Why the frogs?”

Cersei said nothing. She was at a loss of what to do next. She was supposed to be dead now. Her children were supposed to be safe with that death. She needed time. She felt burned out. She felt lost. She had tried to make sure that Maggie the Frog’s prophecy was dead and buried with her body. She had failed. She seemed to do that all the time now.

She shook her head in the negative to Eddard. He pursed his lips.

“You are confined to your quarters Cersei. There will be no repeat. I cannot afford to have to worry over you now. I have to contend with your father and need to focus on that.” He got up and started to leave. He looked at here with a look of both consternation and compassion. He started to walk to the door to her room.

Cersei wanted to storm at the man and his ability to be so damn fucking noble! She needed to warn him.

“Beware of my father Eddard Stark. He has no conscious. To further House Lannister he will do anything. And I mean anything. Show him no mercy Eddard. He would not show it to you. We cannot have another Lannsiter on the Iron Throne. I see that now.”
He looked at Cersei from in front of her door.

“You are confounding Cersei. Rosyn has asked to no longer be your chambermaid. I have granted her request. You hurt her Cersei.”

“I know Eddard” Cersei sighed. “Please do not blame her. I used her innocence against her. I am totally to blame. Throw all the blame on me. I know you hold Jaime to blame for Bran. That too lies on my head. I made Jaime what he has become. Take my life and spare my brother. Let the blade fall on the neck that deserves it my King.”

She watched Eddard shake his head. He left her.

She sat back down on her bed. She was feeling better physically but mentally her soul was in a gyre of confusion and self-loathing. *Gods she had fucked up.*

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The next handful of days bled into the next handful. Time seemed to float by in a filtered gauzy manner. The light all diffuse. She was brought food by two men in their mid-thirties. Cersei smirked at that. She had shown her new proclivities and Eddard was going against type. The two men keeping an eye on both her and themselves. More days passed. She was lost. She did not know how to find herself. She did not want to try. She was the past now and she knew it.

She couldn’t blame Eddard. She had betrayed his trust as well. She felt extremely bad for Rosyn Hollard and how she had betrayed the young lass’s trust. Cersei mused over that. It was a case of assuming she would succeed in jumping off the rail. She had needed much alcohol and time to get the courage to do what she knew she must. She sighed. She did not really want to die, but she refused to give her father the opportunity to lay hands on her. Hearing that damn bitch Maggie the Frog whispering in her ear at night did not help.

Food was left for her. The food and drink fresh from the royal kitchen. She picked at her food. She ate what her stomach would tolerate. Her stomach stayed queasy.

She kept going over how she had treated Rosyn so badly. Damnit! She was supposed to be dead so she would not have to feel this guilt. She snarled to herself. Even as she tried to change she still hurt people. Rosyn was a pure innocent. She felt her depression deepening.

She had visitors. It was her Sand Snakes. To say they were unhappy with her was an understatement. They too felt betrayed by her actions. How could she feel like she did when they were her lovers? What could be so bad?

Dorea was cross. “Snap out of dammit! What the hell could be so fucking bad?!” She had more words to express her anger.

Loreza was more direct. “You are really pissing me off!”

Nymeria merely glared at her.

Obara had been the mature one. “I know you have a weight on your soul Cersei. When you are ready we will be here.”

The next day Ellaria asked to be allowed into her quarters. Cersei could not refuse her.

“You are looking most unwell Cersei. You need to unburden what it is that harms you Cersei. I am here to listen.”
The fallen Queen could only look at her. Had she caught the Eddard syndrome? Compassion out of all reason. “Why would you do that Ellaria? You know how I treated your House, and all of Dorne for that matter. I was a real bitch towards you especially. Why do you care? I’m really not worth the time Ellaria. We both know that.”

The woman looked at her with her dark eyes.

“You are different Cersei. You have changed.”

Cersei harrumphed. She shook her head in a disbelieving manner.

“I am still the same woman Ellaria. All see how I used Rosyn to achieve my goals. A Lannister always pays their debts we say. I say we cause debts to all we touch Ellaria.” With a sigh Cersei took a breath. “I may be a little wiser, but I don’t know what to do with it I fear. I am guilty of what all the people say. We Lannisters are a vainglorious House. We truly do only think of ourselves. Well, ole dad only thinks of the name of our House. Still, it is all about us. Never lose sight of that Ellaria.”

Ellaria looked at her for a long time.

“We heard what you said on the rail Cersei. Even Oberyn heard it. As I said, you are not the same person. We will talk when the time comes Cersei.” She paused for a long time. “Was that true what you said about Jamie and Elia.”

“I had no reason to lie.”

“You were really, really drunk.”

“It is true. He had no idea about Elia. He never said it, but I know he felt guilt. Jamie is selfish beyond reason, but he would have saved Elia and her children if he had known. He was a Kingsguard. He still had some level of idealism then. I drove that out of him I fear. One more sin to add to the tally.”

Ellaria sighed. She left her.

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More days passed.

There was a diffident knock on the door. It had been four days since Ellaria. She felt more tired and wane. She was adrift on a sea of self-imposed isolation. She knew she had to get out of the maelstrom, but knew not how to do it. Her stomach rebelled more and more when she tried to eat what was brought to her. It was scrumptious fair from the royal kitchen, but it made her stomach roil.

Cersei shook her head. Only one person knocked on her door like that. Almost a request. The man had worked the bile out of his system she supposed. She had been lying on her bed. She sat up and shook her hair out of her eyes. Her dress was a mess but she did not care.

“Come in Eddard Stark.”

He came in. He looked at her directly. A grim set came over his face.

He went to the table and stood beside a chair. He motioned at her to come and sit in the chair.
“Please come and join me Cersei.” It was a request. This exasperated Cersei. He was the King dammit. *He was too nice!* Any other sovereign would order her to come to the table. She got up slowly. Her whole body ached now. The once proud, vain woman slowly shuffled to the table. Eddard pulled out the chair for her.

Cersei took a long breath. Damn his chivalry. She did not deserve his diffidence. He had to know it! If she was not so exhausted she would be fuming. She sat down.

He began without preamble.

“I think I understand now Cersei. I had my first hints with our conversation in the garden. That guided my thought. Between what you said while attempting to do a swan dive, and talking to your brothers I think I have science out what is driving you in this destructive behavior.”

This had Cersei’s undivided attention. What had he divined? Surely he was mistaken.

“Taking it all together I believe you are trying to escape a prophecy.”

The fallen Queen’s mouth fell open.

“You went to see an oracle, seer, gypsy or wood witch in your young teenage years. She told you certain things. Things that have seem to come true. These supposed truths have convinced you that more will come true as well. You believe your children will die before your death. I am assuming that most of what this person prophesized was about your marriage to Robert. I must assume they seemed to be omniscient.”

He looked at her. “How am I doing so far?”

She could only stare at him.

“This oracle was a woman. An old hag by the name of Maggie the Frog.”

Cersei felt like she was in a trance. How? Eddard could read her thoughts she wondered to herself.

“You gave me the hints I needed. I have Jaime in custody. He told me something vital. I then talked to Tyrion. With his adroit mind he was able to fill in what little I needed.”

“Am I on target?” He looked at her searchingly. She could only stare at him wonderingly. When had he become so adept and sharp? Had he become a fucking oracle?

“I thought as much. You face tells me what I needed to know. I do not believe in prophecy per se but I can see why you believed this woman’s words. What she said has come true or more accurately seemed to. She was most likely right in most things to some degree at least. But. There is one thing though.”

Eddard paused to look at her. He did not continue. She waited but he only looked at her calmly. She finally had to ask.

“What?”

“The old prophecy is dead.”

This made Cersei start. “How so?”

“I was supposed to die. When I was first recovering with my new allies, they made it clear that you were supposed to win. I was to die. Only I am alive. When I say I was supposed to die I mean
All the major prophecies said this. The Lion would be ascendant over the Direwolf. All but a few minor ones spoke of the Direwolf triumphant. My new allies were actually surprised at the turn of events. Thankful that the impossible had seemingly happened.”

“I know you were to have me take the Black. Not wise, but compassionate in your way. I am sure your son would have killed me though. That was why he came for me in the middle of the night in the dudgeons. Yet I did not die. I prevailed.”

Again the man paused.

“In time, your son would have killed you Cersei, or started events that would lead to your death.”

Cersei nodded. She had worked out that much herself. Joffrey really was a bastard she sadly had to admit.

“Cersei. Evidently, another prophecy has taken hold. The old prophecy is dead. You are free of Maggie the Frog.”

“What changed?” she asked. “Do you know?”

She watched Eddard take a long breath.

“I cannot be sure but I have a theory.”

“And?”

“Syrio Forel.”

This made Cersei start. She looked at Eddard with a look of disbelief. How could Arya’s sword instructor be so instrumental?

“What” Cersei asked perplexed? “I was expecting something a little grander Eddard. A sword instructor?” What Eddard said made no sense whatsoever.

“Think about it Cersei. This man was a fallen First Sword. I did not think much about it at the time, but it was providence. In fact, I highly doubted his story back when I hired him. When you sent Meryn Trant to pluck Arya as a royal hostage, he was easily dispatched by Syrio. The man never had a chance against Syrio actually. This enabled my daughter to gain her freedom. This next part is critical. This man allowed my daughter to sway him.”

“They have told me that he wanted to take Arya to Braavos and teach her all his knowledge. Only then would they return to take revenge. Arya had other ideas. Her will changed his thinking. This in turn led to the Insurrection that disposed you. Without Syrio, Arya would have been captured. Or knowing Arya, she would simply have disappeared. She is filled with the Wolf. The result would have been the same though, if she had escaped one way or the other.”

“Her escape would have led to my death, and in time the death of your children and then you. Only after you had witnessed their deaths. This is what your words have told me Cersei.”

Cersei was stunned at everything Eddard had divined.

“But, like I say, another prophecy has taken hold. You are free Cersei. You can now make another destiny. That is if you have the strength. I will not attempt to compel you Cersei. You must rise or fall on your own by your own will. I am sure that if you survive your self-imposed ordeal I can trust you Cersei. Choose life.”
With that, her King slowly got up. He looked down on her with compassion.

“I am sorry for your father. He is a sadist I have come to know. Jaime told me how you wanted to be a warrior. How your father abused you. How he treated you like a mere trinket to be sold off.”

Eddard took a deep breath. “I may have been nicer, but I was treating Sansa the same. She was so complaint. Hopefully, I have learned the error of my ways.”

“Hearing what Jaime told me, I am even more thankful I treated Arya the way I did. Lyanna suffered your fate in having her aspirations cutoff. I am thankful my father never physically abused her. It is because of what I witnessed with Lyanna that I allowed Arya to take up the sword. I was not going to repeat that sin.”

He walked to the door. He paused and looked back at Cersei.

“From what I hear, you have raw talent Cersei.” He started to open the door. She called to him. He turned to look at her.

“You say you have Jaime in custody?” Eddard nodded in the affirmative. “I ask that you spare him Eddard, my King. Take my life instead.” Eddard raised an eyebrow in question and titled his head for her to continue.

“We Lannister’s are a selfish lot my King. I cannot deny that. But there is a difference.” Now she paused. She made Eddard ask.

“And what is that?”

“Jaime was always like a butterfly. He just flits around. He just wanted to live a life with me. I denied him that. He begged for us to run away to Dorne before I married Robert. I would have none of it. I wanted to be Queen” Cersei said with a rising voice. “Nothing else mattered to me but the power and prestige of that title. I craved it like a drug.”

“I got my wish of course. In acquiring that, I lost everything else. I gave Jaime three children. All the good it did him. I would not let him acknowledge them as his. Hell, I wouldn’t let him near them. He didn’t fight me of course, but it was I who set the rules. He had to stand guard by the door while that fucking lard of ass screwed me. Jaime sat by while I used my body to achieve my ambitions. I knew it hurt him deeply and yet I did it.”

“I was Queen after all. I was just doing what I must. All the while the sin was mine. What nobility he had I beat out of Jaime Lannister. The sin is mine Eddard.”

For a long time Eddard looked at her in silence. His face inscrutable. He opened the door and left.

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A few more days passed. Or was a week. Cersei was totally confused now. Adrift in a sea of fog was how she felt. She did not know what to do. Truly, she could not be free could she? It could not be that simple. Could it? She was still filled with a deep lassitude. She felt the life draining out of her. She had fallen off a precipice, and knew not how to crawl back up to the summit. The one positive had been that her lethargy had given her plenty of time to reflect on her past. The only problem was that she still did not know what to do. What was her destiny?

She was visited she half remembered. In her torpor it was hard to get her thoughts in order. Yes, she was sure Obara had visited her several times. Each time, Obara trying to talk to Cersei. Telling her she needed to snap out of her depression. She was stronger than she knew. Cersei knew better. She saw things so much clearer now.
With her new mindset she was disgusted of all the things she had done. Action after action reprehensible. There could only be one conclusion. House Lannister were one sorry lot. Cersei Lannister chief among them. She and Jaime actually loved each other once. It may have been shallow. There love superficial, but it had been a love of a kind. She had ruined that.

Gods had she ever fucked up. The realization made her feel even more depressed. Her energy waning.

She picked at her food and felt more and more languor filling her body and soul.

There was a banging on the door. The door rattled and shook with the constant pounding. Definitely not Eddard. Slowly, Cersei got out of bed and opened the door. Her eyes opened wide. Her mouth hung open.

Arya Stark stalked into her room. The girl in her full Water Dancer regalia. The dark brown leathers gleamed with a fresh dose of oil. Her grey cape gave her a dashing air. Cersei gave way to the powerful figure entering her room. Arya’s boots clicked on the stones. In Arya’s right hand was a bundle. The bundle brushing up against Arya’s Needle.

Cersei was stunned. Arya dressed in her combat leathers looked every inch the warrior. Her air dominating and commanding. The young woman walked with a military bearing now. Every step showed the fourteen year old’s competence. She went to the table her father had taken when he had visited Cersei. Arya pointed to a chair across from the one she had selected and took her seat. She pointed at the other chair again with an impatient jerk of her extended index finger.

“Sit.” Her tone broke no argument. Cersei went to the seat and sat down. The fallen High Princess sat down at rigid attention. Her back straight and her body slightly turned with hand on her left thigh. The girl across from her demanded Cersei’s full attention. Arya looked at her with her cool grey eyes. There was silence in the room.

“Father told me of your desire to be a warrior as a little girl. He told me how your father attacked you. How he struck you. My father always supported me despite my mother’s attempts to crush my dreams. I think I would have died if I had my dreams crushed. I never wanted to be Queen so I would have nothing to want to live for.”

She looked at Cersei. Again, a silence settled between them. Arya’s eyes were direct and full of a true confidence she could only dream of. A confidence earned. Cersei now knew her supposed confidence had been nothing but false bravado.

“I know father thinks that if you had been able to pursue your dreams you would be different. In having your dreams crushed it harmed you. I would say it ruined you.” Cersei watched Arya’s eyes go distant for a moment. She focused and looked at Cersei intently again.

“That is something I can understand. I want to help you. I asked Varys for something. He came through.” She shook her head. “More than I could ever have dreamed of actually. I am completely envious.”

With a slow flourish, Arya unwrapped the long narrow item from the swath of blankets. Her movements almost reverential. The item was removed from its nest. The item revealed.

“Oh my gods” Cersei gasped.

Before her on the table lay a sword made of Valyrian steel. It had the distinctive ripples of the fabled magical steel. It was a smaller sword than normal. A bastard sword with a grip for two hands. The
blade of the sword slightly shorter and thinner than the norm for such a blade. Almost as if the blade had been cast for a woman to use. Cersei mused that history did have Valyrian women going into battle. Legends said Aegon’s sister wives were such warrior women.

The pommel was the full moon with the features of that lonely orb somehow caste deep into the metal. The features almost seemed to jump out of the cold metal. All the features so sharp, one would think they could feel the features if you touched them. The seeming raised features an illusion of exquisite craftsmanship. The image of the moon almost seemed to be glowing. The features a slightly darker blue than the pale blue of the metal. The cross guards half-moons. The blade an unusual light blue hue.

It was a typical sword made for the Valyrians themselves. Not a sword cast for a non Valyrian of Westeros or Essos. The fuller part of the blade flared slightly to form a rain guard where blade met cross-guard of the sword. The metal of the blade sloped up subtly to make a smooth transition between blade and cross-guard.

This area, a traditional area where Valyrian artisans of metal engraving did their masterworks. This sword was no different. Cersei tilted her head looking at the beautiful tableau depicted on the metal. It was the time of plenilune. Craggy mountains filled the background of the scene. The mountains almost had sense of depth to them. On the left of the scene, a range of mountains marched off into the distance. To the right of the image, were soaring spires that reached to the heavens. The twisted, convoluted towers spoke of old Valyria. A dragon roared from its perch atop the second spire for the left. It wings fanned out and extended dramatically.

Behind the enrapturing vista was the full moon low on the horizon. The full moon done larger than life to make the scene magical. The moon seemed to touch the Earth. One could almost see the moonbeams glowing off the towers. It was magical.

Below the scene were High Valyrian glyphs. The glyphs themselves seemed to glow with moonshine. Another illusion of Valyrian magic had the glyphs shimmering even though did not move.

All in all, the sword was a miracle of craftsmanship in both sword forging and metal engraving. The blade priceless beyond any cost.

Cersei wanted to snicker but hid it. The cravings were on the side facing a right handed user of the sword. Arya was left handed. Life sucked sometimes Cersei thought. This time a ghost of a smile did cross Cersei’s face.

“What is the meaning of this? Where did it come from?” With wonder, Cersei continued to gaze at the sword with envy. To be a warrior worthy of such a sword would make any swordsman proud. She wondered why Arya had covered up her own sword.

“It is yours.”

“What?!” Cersei’s body recoiled back in her chair. The legs barking on the floor. She eyed Arya. What was her game?

“It is yours. I asked Varys to procure a sword for you. You are a High Princess. It needed it to be special. I would say Varys came through for you. I will not take it. As to where it came from? Varys said it was in a man’s personal collection. He owed Varys it seems. Big time. He gave it up as payment. Varys has waited almost fifteen years to call in that debt. He did it for me. I am honored. It is called Moon Glow.”
“No. Moon Beam,” Cersei turned her head reading the runes. “Beneath the light of the full moon I bequeath my love to thee.”

Arya looked at her, like Cersei had become an apparition. Cersei looked at her back.

“What?”

“You can read High Valyrian.”

“Kessā. Kostan ȳdragon Valyrīha. Nyke ųdragon se udrīr īr gūrēnna”

With a stunned look, Arya gaped at Cersei.

“I did not know. How? The words flow off your tongue. You speak High Valyrian fluently. This was not in any of the reports on you being a polyglot. I don’t think Varys knows this. How is this possible?”

“Our Maester, when I was growing up spoke fluent Valyrian, all its bastard languages based on High Valyrian and Dothraki. I learned them as well as the glyphs of High Valyrian. I learned to read the language of the Dothraki. It was simple really. It was a long time ago. Probably before Varys thought to spy on us.”

“Can Jaime?” The young wolf looked at Cersei with wide eyes.

“No. He never really tried. Language is not a horse you can ride or a sword you can weld. It is not physical but of the mind. It held no interest for my brother. The Maester said I had the gift of languages. I never use it. Never had a reason too. Still remember though. Useless really.”

“Amazing” Arya spoke slowly. She got up and looked down at Cersei. “I have given you what you said you wanted. I expect you to take it.” She chuckled now. Shaking her head with bemusement, Arya smirked down at Cersei. “Even if you don’t want to take it I think you will.” She now had an evil look on her face. “Methinks you will be compelled. They do tend to have a singular focus we are finding.” A look of merriment on Arya’s face.

She bowed to Cersei and let herself out. *What the hell did that mean* Cersei wondered to herself?

For a long time Cersei sat in her chair looking at the sword. It really was too late. She sighed for what had been lost, and what could never be.

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The next morning, Cersei woke to the sound of the door being pounded on. She first opened one eye, and then the other. She had enough of Arya and her offers. She started to roll over when the pounding on the door intensified. In a snit she got up and stomped to the door.

She was going to give Arya a piece of her mind. She had recovered enough of herself to get pissed at least she thought to herself.

She reached for the door handle and opened it with a snatch of her land. The door flew back with a bang.

It was not Arya. She stood stunned. She looked up at the tall armored figure before her. The large sword on their hip intimidating. The tall figure stared down at her with steady blue eyes. The figure was damn near as tall as Sandor, Cersei thought. She could not stop herself from leaning back slightly at the intimidating figure in front of her. That had her will stiffen. Her consternation had her
barking out.

“Who in the seven hells are you?!”

“Brienne of Tarth”.
Above the Gate of the Gods, on the west wall of King’s Landing stood Eddard Stark. He felt the sun on his back. The rays of the sun warmed him. The middle spring sun felt good; he thought to himself. The air of the late morning still pleasant. The heat rising but still tolerable. He looked to the right and left of him on the curtain wall. He smiled at the sight that greeted his eyes. He thought of the Meerkats that lived in the plains and savannahs of western Westeros and down to the arid wastes of northern Dorne.

The mammals lived in colonies on the prairies of those lands. They were famous for standing up in mass on their hind legs. Their heads constantly swiveling around to observe their environs for danger. Usually, the animals looking in all different directions as to their mates. That was what he observed now. He had his family, his nascent government and other high royals up on the wall. The various individuals observed what lay below. Fortunately, his family did not constantly turn their heads right and left and then back again.

He remembered seeing the rodents on his ride to the Tower of Joy at the upper limits of the Prince’s Pass on the ride to save his sister. A sad thought came to Eddard. It should have been named the Tower of Sorrow. He shook his head to dispel the sad thought and instead thought on the comical sight of the Meerkats in action. Were they harbingers he had wondered later when he discovered what lay at the Tower of Joy? Joy turned to sorrow. The new king sighed. He must learn to let such memories lie dormant. He looked at the sight coming into full view.

The Roses had come to the Crevasse board. The next piece in the Game of Thrones had answered his summons. There had never been any doubt. They wanted to have a Tyrell sitting on the Iron Throne or married to the sovereign. Eddard knew that Renly through Loras had the inside track to the affections of that fickle House. He hoped to entice them with his offer.

It would be difficult, he knew. Renly had a claim far more legitimate than his own. He would make his offer to the true power behind Highgarden. He would entice Olenna Redwyne with his offer. Unfortunately, he doubted it would be enough. Eddard planned for this. The impediments to his ambition he would work to remove. He was confident he could maneuver the persons necessary to make the choices that would clear the way for Robb to be the one to marry Margaery Tyrell. Vanity was an easy emotion to pluck.

He mused on this as he looked to the west at the rising dust kicked up from the Kingsroad. Again the new King thanked the old gods for bringing the Druids into his sphere of influence. The coming of the House of Tyrell was well known to Eddard. He was prepared to make his play. The ravens of the Druids had flown high above the Tyrell host from the day they left Highgarden. In a way, Eddard had been with them every step of their way to King’s Landing. Without the Druids, their march would have been a mystery to him. Varys would have known of their leaving Highgarden and his spy sending a raven warning this, but then only mystery as the army of Highgarden journeyed east.

He had seen the forces of House Lannister start to get excited yesterday at the noon hour. Surely, their scouts had seen the approaching host. House Baratheon was not so fortunate. Their army
trapped by their need to stay near King’s Landing. The Lannisters being in the field and actively engaged with House Stark, made it simply too dangerous for Stannis to dilute his forces.

Eddard normally would be in the same straits as Stannis. Blind to the reality surrounding him. He was trapped within the walls of King’s Landing. Unable to send out scouts to search the environs around King’s Landing. With the Druids, it did not matter. Fortune smiled on him, Eddard knew.

The elder Stag had to rely on the truce around King’s Landing for his safety. Stannis would not be acquiring the Iron Throne as his elder brother Robert had. There would be no equivalent to the battle on the Trident for Robert’s younger brother. He would surely lose anyways Eddard mused. He was not the warrior that Robert had been. Robert had had many failings. Being a great warrior was not one of them. Like Arthur Dayne, Robert would have fallen before him. Eddard knew this, but it would have been a close thing.

Stannis and Renly had no chance against himself. Eddard was sure that Stannis knew this. He doubted Renly did. He would use that against the man. Stannis was unimaginative in his sword work. Renly had a flourish to his sword work, but his basics were lacking. Both would prove fatal against himself. Eddard was not a vain man. It was simply the truth. A warrior knew his opponents’ weaknesses. As important, Eddard knew his own. He would play to his strengths and limit his weaknesses.

Two and a half hours ago, a runner had ridden into King’s Landing from the camp of the Stag. Twenty minutes later, Stannis had gone riding out to go to his camp. Eddard had been on the wall, knowing what was coming. Seeing Stannis riding fast with his armor haphazardly thrown on had been amusing to Eddard.

Eddard smiled. He could imagine the man’s molars grinding. The man might blow out a molar if Stannis was not careful. To Stannis, the arrival of this new force was a total surprise. Eddard saw the agitation spreading throughout the camp of Stannis Baratheon. Men were hurriedly donning their armor and making formations. The Lannisters were forming up for any possible attack, but they were in a much more orderly manner. Their scouts had to have passed the word that the force of Tyrells coming up the King’s Road was not on a war footing.

Still, one must take precautions. Tywin was not known for being careless. He would attack an enemy under a flag of truce if he thought it would further his aims. Eddard was sure of it. If Tywin could do such a deed, the grizzled old Lion would expect it in return. This caution would be impressed upon the senior commanders under his flag.

Eddard started. He looked down. Princess was gently gnawing on his heel. The Direwolf pup wiggled her head while she play attacked his heal. Eddard felt a rush of grief run through him. He still remembered, as if just a moment ago, the running of his sword through the gentle beast that had been Sansa’s first Direwolf. Lady had been the most gentle of animals. He felt his eyes brimming with tears. That act would haunt him to the day he died. He knew it would haunt Sansa and Arya. One for enduring the death of her loving Direwolf and the other for causing it.

To and fro, Eddard felt the Direwolf puppy jerking her head worrying his armored ankle. Eddard in full armor to greet the arrival of the new players on the field. Princess released her play bite on his ankle and looked up at him. Her tongue was lulled out, and her eyes sparkled with happiness. Eddard felt a few tears flowing down his cheeks. Princess seemed to have Lady’s sweet disposition. For this alone, he would forever be in Leaf’s debt. He reached down and petted the wolf puppy on the head. The wolf’s tongue lulled out in happiness. The pup whined in pleasure.

Eddard watched Princess look around. The wolf started. Eddard followed the puppy’s gaze. He smiled. The wolf looked at Sandor Clegane. The man had Ziggi’s two oldest daughters on his
shoulders. The two girls excited at the events around them that they did not understand. The girls looked around and played with Sandor’s long hair. The King did not mind their presence. There was no danger. Princess gambled down to Sandor. The wolf whined, wanting his attention. The pup looked up expectantly.

Shaking his head, Eddard watched Sandor growl down at the wolf half-heartedly. Princess not fazed at Sandor’s supposed anger. Her tail wagged excitedly. Sandor’s foot pretended to shoo the direwolf pup back. The Direwolf snipping at his foot with play bites. The Lord Commander looked around. He did not see any overt stares but missed the surreptitious looks keeping an eye on him. The tall man had a pouch around his waist. He reached into it stealthily. He pulled out a wrapped item. He peeled off the beeswax covering. He dropped the treat of cooked meat surrounded by a thick batter of buttered brown bread crumbs.

The wolf pounced on the treat. Eddard chuckled seeing the puppy wolf down the treat. Two more treats dropped by Sandor while the man looked about innocently. Princess in doggy heaven wolfed down her treats. The long tongue of the Direwolf pup licking her jowls happily with each downed treat. When Princess saw no more were coming her way now rubbed all over Sandor’s legs. He growled but bent down to pet the wolf pup on the head. Princess’s tongue lulled out in doggy happiness. Zhalli and Viqqi squealed to pet the direwolf. Sandor put them down on the ground. The girls rushed to the spoiled Direwolf pup. The wolf pup was in heaven being petted by six hands.

The pup was greedy for attention. Princess flopped onto her back and squirmed feeling fingers digging into rubbing her belly and sides vigorously. Her legs kicking the air as her back wormed around on the stones. Eventually though, Sandor and his charges tired of Princess’s need for more attention. The trio tried to disengage, but Princess had none of that. They kept up the attention since the puppy’s whine for attention was designed to pull at one’s heartstrings.

“Princess! Here girl!” Sansa called out to her pup. The wolf heard her taller mistresses’ voice. The pup flipped over to her feet and shot off down the walkway of the curtain wall. The direwolf ran past Eddard. The wolf now by his daughter and Jeyne. The two bent down petting the pup who had flopped onto her back again. The pleasure hound looked up at her mistresses with a look of why aren’t you rubbing and petting me more. Chuckling, the two teenagers knelt to their knees. The two women started to rub and scratch Princess’s belly and sides. The pup woofed in puppy happiness. Her long legs kicking the air as her back wormed right and left like a deranged worm. The Direwolf’s tail swept the stones back and forth.

Eddard again looked out over the parapets of the curtain wall. He saw the cloud of dust kicked up by the approaching army higher in the air now. A dust storm from Highgarden was about to wash over King’s Landing. Eddard looked to the camp of the Stag. The forces of Stannis had arrayed into rough lines. Stannis had to know he was in no true danger, but he was showing caution. It was what he would have done.

He knew the Lannisters had to be fuming. They were completely outclassed now with the mighty host of the Tyrells’ on the doorstep of King’s Landing. A second army was about to encamp beside them. Eddard smiled. All was going as he had planned and hoped. Tywin, the old Lion, may roar in his defiance but no one was listening. To know the forces of Tywin Lannister were so hemmed in and frustrated made Eddard smile a true smile. Tywin’s main army still days out.

He looked down the opposite way to his eldest daughter and friend. Eddard turned his head to look at the Hound again. He saw the little Dothraki girls were back on his shoulders. The two girls clearly loved the man after only a short time in his presence. Sandor still half-heartedly spoke of sending Ziggi and her daughters on their way when in the Small Council meetings. Eddard smiled.
It was obvious the Dothraki woman was going nowhere. Sandor, when in the presence of the little spitfire, was differential and almost docile. His eyes adored the woman when he was sure no one was looking. Thus, everyone saw it.

Ziggi was in the stables, proclaiming that Sandor was her man. She forcefully rebuffed all overtures. The stable hands had learned as Sandor had to fear her sharp verbal retorts. She had her eyes on one man. Sandor Clegane. Eddard wondered how long it would be before Sandor succumb to the woman’s determined plans to bed the man. Eddard shook his head. Geez, now he was thinking along those lines.

What was even funnier to the King was the fact that he had somehow been rounded up into not one betting pool, not two but three of them. All involving when a certain sexual act would happen. He blushed at the mere thought, but he found he liked participating in the pools nevertheless. The fact that two of them involved Arya made them all the more spicy and scandalous.

He knew his daughter. He was sure he would win those bets. The first advantage he had was intimately knowing when Arya’s name day would be. She would be fifteen, and the father was sure his daughter would want to celebrate. The celebration would be of a most intimate manner. The second advantage Eddard had was seeing his daughter more than the others. He had the pool expanded to let any woman be chosen as Arya’s first lover. The Sand Snakes were in such hot pursuit that all assumed one of them had captured his daughter's eyes. He knew otherwise. He would continue to participate in that pool. He was sure that eventually Arya would be snared by one or more of the Sand Snakes as well, thus, the second pool.

Eddard’s mind drifted back to his teenage years. His brother, Brandon, had only been a year and a half older than himself but Brandon had seemed so much more the man to his younger brother Eddard. Eddard had always been shy and reserved while his brother had been boisterous and outgoing. Their differences in temperament had been exact opposites in how they dealt with the opposite sex.

Eddard had avoided them in his shyness. Brandon had pursued the opposite sex with vigor. The women that Eddard did not bed Brandon made up for in his conquests. Eddard had always thought he was giving his elder brother his share of the maidens anxious to bed his brother. He could only smile at those memories now. Never had he been envious of his brother and his sexual exploits.

They were simply different souls. Their temperaments were opposites.

Now, in this time, Arya had clearly channeled the uncle she had never known. She had physical desires and meant to act on them soon. She had none of her father’s control. Or more to the truth, the crushing shyness that had so limited him. Eddard was happy for his daughter. He only hoped that Cat would come to see his view.

Putting those thoughts aside, Eddard looked at Sandor. With Sandor, Eddard did not have any idea about when Ziggi would bed her man. The man was running scared. It was clear the man was still a virgin. Ziggi was hot-blooded, so she was trying very hard to bed her man, but Sandor’s fear was a powerful motivator. It would take her some time to wear down Sandor’s defenses.

Eddard smiled. He was finding the pools to be surprisingly fun to be in.

Beyond Sandor were the Martells and their kin. They watched the advancing army intently. They were happy to see the events unfolding before the walls of King’s Landing. For them, it only meant that the Gregor Clegane was coming closer to falling into their hands. A feat that he, Eddard Stark, had promised to make happen. With the Tryells here now, the main army of the Lannister’s would not be far behind. The Druids had made sure of that. Again, Eddard was thankful for these
mysterious allies.

Eddard looked the other way beyond Sansa and Jeyne. Their wolf had plopped down by their feet and was snoozing. The pup was probably digesting Sandor’s treats. Eddard saw that Sansa had gotten Jeyne up on a stepstone so she could see beyond the parapets. Sansa was helping her much shorter friend see what was happening below. His daughter using her body, pressed into Jeyne’s back to keep her safe and in place.

He was happy his daughter had bonded so well with Jeyne. Sansa needed a good friend after the trauma Sansa had had to endure. The father noted his daughter and her friend were almost always together now. He thought on it and realized he had not seen them separated from each other for any length of time in a long while. They were truly inseparable now. Their ordeal under the Lannister rule had seemed to bond them tightly to each other. He was happy for his daughter finding such a good friend.

He noted that Jeyne now helped Sansa, Myrcella and Tommen with the intelligence work. Sansa said she was invaluable. While he watched, Sansa played with Jeyne’s hair. Yes, they had truly become close Eddard thought. He could only be happy for Sansa and her close friendship with Jeyne. Jeyne leaned back into Sansa’s hand that stroked her back. The two looked at each other, constantly smiling at each other and gazing into each other’s eyes when making a point. Sansa was indeed lucky to have such a good friend Eddard smiled to himself. He had such a close relationship with Lyanna.

Beyond Eddard’s daughter and friend was the contingent of Baratheons. Stannis and Selyse stood out due to their great height. Stannis had ridden back fifteen minutes ago and rushed back up the battlements. There was nothing more he could do. All knew the Tyrells were not here to wage war. Not yet, at least. Both husband and wife’s faces were pinched and tight. Eddard could almost hear their teeth grinding. Off to the side was Melisandre. She was looking out over the fields before King’s Landing.

Eddard noted the tall ShadowBender witch was still in the Baratheon camp, but she had an air of separation about her now. In the past, Melisandre had made sure to stand close by to Stannis. Ready to be of service. Now she stood off from the man. Not enough to draw notice but it was there with Eddard looking for it. Eddard surmised that the woman was coming to grips with the information he had given her. Sansa told her father that the tall witch was reading books on the history of Westeros. She was especially focusing on the history of the Targaryens in Westeros. The tall redhead witch was currently reading the history of the Targaryen civil wars.

“What a waste” Melisandre had told Sansa and her fellow mates. “All that fighting and killing over an edifice that in and of itself means nothing. The only significance it has comes from those who desire to sit upon it.”

Looking at Stannis and his contingent Eddard had to look back on the Martells. On his left, he saw smiles and everyone laughing and jesting. Some of Oberyn's daughters argued with each other vociferously. Eddard had come to know that was how they showed their affections at times. Oberyn jested and Ellaria flirted. They were happy.

On his right, there was none of that. All the persons were stoic and dour. Stannis’s aura of unhappiness and generally being pissed off all the time had everyone in his camp dour and gloom. Eddard took a deep breath.

Eddard knew he was taciturn and reserved but by the old gods, please never let me become like Stannis and Selyse Eddard prayed.
Eddard looked back at the King’s Road. The standards of the various houses underneath the Great House they marched for coming into view. House Tyrell had arrived. He smiled. The Druids and their relentless assaults on Tywin had delayed him long enough for House Tyrell to arrive before the Lannisters. Now Eddard knew he would succeed. Tywin hamstrung by the situation he found himself in. He could not launch any attacks upon King’s Landing with such a mighty host before him.

The Tyrells had no love for Casterly Rock. The two mighty Houses antagonists. They were the most powerful of the Great Houses by man count and riches. Therefore, both sought ascendency, especially against each other. Eddard merely had to make sure that he did not allow the two mightiest Houses to collude and form an ad hoc alliance that furthered both of their ambitions. With Cersei and Myrcella out of the picture, Eddard did not see what Tywin had to offer. Jaime was also damaged goods beyond redemption. His sins of the past and present tainted the eldest son Tywin Lannister.

A grimace crossed the King’s face. He would have to deal with that situation. That might prove explosive.

Yes, he was ready Eddard thought to himself. Eddard looked to his right. Merrel and Kiren had dressed in Westerosi attire and not their robes. There was no need to call attention to themselves. They were his allies, but they also needed Eddard to protect their anonymity. They would want to go back to their hidden redoubts and live in obscurity and peace once the Game of Thrones of Eddard Stark had played out.

He would give them that.

Eddard leaned on his elbows on the thick stone. Olenna was out there. She was coming to him. He took a deep breath. She was conniving and wanted to elevate House Tyrell, but she also had a code of honor. Much depended on that Eddard thought.

He only hoped he had read her correctly. He was about to find out.

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The wagon rocked hard with yet another rut jumped by the large wagon wheels. The world inside again rocked hard and then tilted.

“Ummppff!!!” Olenna snarled. Her abused bum called out to her in anger. The engineers had worked to smooth out the ruts, but it was not enough. The wagon shook again with Olenna gripping a handrail to stay in place. “Damn! I am getting too old for this shit!”

“Oh, Grandmama. You would never miss an opportunity to play the Game of Thrones. You thrive on it,” Margaery, the granddaughter soothed back to her grandmother. She gripped her grandmother’s forearm and smiled gently at the woman she loved best. Margaery loved her parents, of course, but it was her grandmother she adored.

Olenna groused at the abuse her bum was taking, but she knew her granddaughter was correct. Her physical strength had waned over the years, but her mind was as sharp as ever. She still enjoyed the contest of wills against people who could match her cunning and connivance. She knew Varys was such a man. It would seem that Eddard had elevated himself to the august realm of a true master of the Game of Thrones as well.

*Let the game begin* Olenna intoned to herself with a suppressed smile.
The true ruler of House Tyrell and her heir apparent rode on in companionable silence. The two softly conversing now and then. They had enjoyed each other’s company up the Roseroad. Most of the trip the two had ridden together. Margaery only left the royal stagecoach to spend time with her one year older brother, Loras. The two were close. Olenna looked out the window of her royal carriage. The two too close, but she would work that once Renly had taken the Iron Throne. She just had to make sure their physical desires did not overcome the desires of their House and its goal of the Iron Throne.

Margaery nose crinkled up. The wind had changed direction. King’s Landing was close now.

“Gods! The stench!”

Olenna chuckled, looking at the distress on her granddaughter’s face.

“It is a small price to pay to become Queen, Margaery. The Red Keep is on Aegon’s Hill by the coast. The wind blows in off the water in the morning and evening. You will get used to the smell. You will soon not even smell it.”

Margery did not look so sure. “I have my doubts Grandmama.”

“There, there, my dear.”

“I just hope my handmaidens don’t wilt and expire. They are most delicate, Grandmama.”

“I am sure they will be able to perform their duties at night, Margaery. You will not be deprived.”

A snort came from Olenna, seeing the beatific smile that came over her granddaughter’s face. That thought mollified her granddaughter. Great sex did have a soothing effect Olenna reflected. How Margaery survived to service seven horny women every night, she could not fathom. Her granddaughter was always anxious for the next night to arrive and once more go down on her handmaidens. Margaery was voracious. Fortunately, so were her handmaidens.

The wagon gently (mostly) jerked to and fro as it navigated the rutted road that was the King’s Road. Olenna ran her fingers along the rich, thick plush fabric died royal purple that sought to protect Olenna’s delicate rump. The thick fabric helped to cushion the jolts of the road. She leaned back into the thick padding that lined the lower half of the interior. The material in pleats that used large buttons tacked to the cabin wall to hold in place. Each button crafted with etchings of the various flowers raised in the Reach.

Olenna looked at the scrollwork that adorned the inside of the large royal carriage above the upholstery. The various depictions of roses and other flowers highly detailed. Each petal was delicately cut. Each offshoot stemmed with leaves and thorns. The work painted in soft hues of red, orange, yellow, greens and blues. The interior of the carriage was designed to look like the wall of vined roses that made up the famous mazes of Highgarden.

Olenna knew that the royal carriages were now flanked by knights of House Tyrell and other Minor Houses aligned to the Great House. The knights had put on their armor this morning. She knew the men were sweating heavily like sows, but a show had to be put on. She smirked to herself that the sweat was good for the men. The sweat removed the impurities from one’s body; she snarked to herself. By tradition, ten knights rode in front of the carriages carrying the standards of House Tyrell. Two knights flanked each of the four royal wagons on each side. Ten knights rode behind.

The matriarch of House Tyrell knew the importance of first impressions. She needed to make sure that all the other House of Westeros saw the majesty and might of her House. That might
highlighted by the reflections of sunlight off the burnished metal of their knights. Metal that had rubies, emeralds, sapphires and even diamonds encrusted on the royal guard’s armor. The ostentatious show had a purpose. The display meant to show the rich largesse of House Tyrell.

The royal wagons were massive. The wheels towered over Olenna’s slight stature. She felt those wheels again jumping a rut. The wagon lurching made her ass ache. Gods, she could not wait to arrive at King’s Landing.

She knew their royal wagons would impress. Their nearly six-foot-tall wheels shod in bronze reflected the sun well. She chuckled. The metalsmiths were busy at night. The men had to beat out dents in the soft metal and tack on replacement metal strips. The spokes of the wagon were carved and painted to look like garlands of roses running from hub to rim. The roses painted brilliantly.

Olenna could see in her mind’s eye the honor guard of knights with their rose crested helms of Highgarden. The knights with their flowing green capes, trimmed in sable. The tops of their capes were not trimmed, but resplendent in fox fur. They carried spears with the ends jammed into the stirrups on the outside side of their horses as they stepped beside the royal wagons. The stirrups held the spears up in the vertical axis. The Tyrell standards just below the tips. The flags of House Tyrell and the various sayings associated with Highgarden stitched with gold, silver and bronze filaments. The standards were flapping in the gusts off Blackwater Bay.

Those looking at the Royal carriages would see they were windowed on both sides with panes that folded out from center crosspieces. The windows were designed to open from the middle, with small awnings covering the apertures. The awnings were done up in a checkered pattern with tassels hanging down from the edges. The tassels jerked wildly with the motions of the carriage.

The cabins of the main carriages were made of wood panels with dovetail borders. The outer panels were painted green with the insets of the panels painted yellow. The main inset on the panels of the door on each side had carved roses etched into the wood. That wood painted yellow on the carved roses. The border of the door panels was enclosed in a garland of carved, entwined roses painted mainly yellow but with red, pink and purple that made the garland seem like a riot of color, displaying the wealth of Highgarden.

The garland filled with vines that the roses sprung off of. The thickly interwoven offshoots, and the dangerous thorns ever-present. Beauty marked with danger was the clear message.

The top of the carriages had had two turrets. One turret was located on each end of the carriages. Each turret was constructed of intricate scrollwork that formed complicated geometric patterns. The patterns then lead up to the central adornment that was twice as tall. The two outer caps had waves rushing inward to hold up the traditional crown of Old Highgarden, painted in the gay colors of red, green and yellow. The jewels encrusted in their royal crown were real. Highgarden had great wealth, which they wanted to advertise to all they visited.

All this display was ostentatious Olenna knew, but appearances had to be maintained. One Direwolf in particular needed to be impressed. She wanted to negotiate from a position of strength.

“We are almost to King’s Landing granddaughter. Soon you will be Queen, my heir. Are you ready? Are you ready to lead the future of Westeros?”

The granddaughter gave her grandmother the stink eye and huffed.

“Of course I am ready, Grandmama. I have been preparing myself since I was just a little sprite. You have groomed me since I can remember. I am ready,” Margaery Tyrell ended with a hint of rebuff in her voice. Her precious granddaughter was fiery and confident, Olenna knew. Fortunately,
her nature was tempered with a keen intellect and a sense of reticence until she had analyzed a situation true. Only then would Margaery strike. Just like her sage mentor, Olenna Redwyne.

Olenna smiled. Her granddaughter had both great intelligence and fire in the belly. She would be able to control Renly rather easily and guide him into being a competent King. His vainglorious nature would make him easy to control.

“I can’t wait, grandmother,” Margaery said. “I know once we remove this Stark impediment, Renly will be able to ascend to the Iron Throne. Then he will take me as his Queen. Finally, I will have all that I have ever wanted.”

The Queen of Thrones heard her granddaughter. She gazed out the window at the knights beside her in all their shiny regalia. She wondered. She did not show the doubt on her face that she felt in her soul.

“It will be so sweet Grandmama,” Margaery spoke in a dreamy voice. “It is high time that I fully enjoy all the joys of sex with men and have my hens be able to fuck me with their strap-ons like they do each other. I am tired of being forced to hold onto my hymen! I want my cherry busted dammit!”

Olenna rolled her eyes. She hated it when Margaery whined and became petulant. She glanced at her granddaughter. Sure enough. Her lower lip was stuck out in a nice big full pout. Margaery’s eyes were full of pissed off vinegar.

“I am tired of only being able to able to suck off Loras and Renly. The gay ass loves it when I suck him off. He better not balk at fucking me, Grandmama! I want all the pleasures that the body gives one. I have done without long enough! With two male lovers and my handmaiden’s strap-ons, I want it airtight! It is about time I say.” Margaery groused vehemently.

Oh brother, Olenna carped to herself. Not this rag again.

“He will perform his duty Margaery. We will not have you having Loras’s child. Well, not until you have a child or two with Renly. How Cersei got away with her three incestuous brats, I will never know.”

“Why didn’t you rat them out, Grandmama? I have always wondered that,” Margaery asked her.

“Two reasons Margaery. One we have discussed, and you know it. Because you have information does not mean you can use it without careful consideration. If I had exposed the incest of Jaime and Cersei, it would probably have caused great bloodshed as well as possible war. Then it might have rebounded back in the face of House Tyrell.”

“We both know how irrational Robert Baratheon could be when it came to matters of the women in his life. He fought a war for a woman who did not love him. A woman he would never have been true too. He would have executed Jaime and Cersei on the spot if I had spoken those words and then been able to prove it. That would have been problematic, though.”

“I did not know of the damn book that Eddard unearthed. It would have been my word against the Queen of Westeros. The truth was obvious on the faces of Cersei’s children, and yet Robert Baratheon did not see it for nearly two decades. Would he have believed me? I don’t know.”

“And if I had spoken the words? What would have Tywin done? He is a vengeful man. He is no Doran Martell wasting away the years vacillating and never acting. Tywin would act and quickly at that. I believe war would have ensued. Thus, the secret kept.”

With a smirk, Olenna continued her reasoning. “Second is akin to the first. You and your brother
have the Targaryen curse. We do not need keen eyes observing too closely our own dirty laundry so to speak."

She saw Margaery dander rising. Margaery’s face went red. It also twisted up.

“Poor choice of words Margaery. I am sorry. It is not a curse. But we have to be careful, though. Our family is healthy, with no illness that runs in our family. We will be safe.” Olenna looked at her granddaughter to gauge her words. They had the intended effect. Margaery had calmed.

“Good. I long to be able to take Loras’s manhood into my belly, finally. I can’t wait to sleep with both Renly and Loras together. I have heard tales of your youth Grandmama” Margaery snickered. “I too long for hot nasty DP sex. I, too, want to partake of orgies and have all my holes filled.” Margaery chuckled with these visions in her head. “I have the added bonus of being bisexual Grandmama. I get to bury my face in my handmaidens’ flowers. So sweet. I can’t wait to start seducing all the horny repressed wives I will be surrounded with.”

Margaery fanned herself in her reverie of future sexual dalliances. Olenna took a long breath. Margaery was so hot-blooded. She would have to learn enough control to have decorum. She, Olenna, had learned control enough to prevent scandal, and so would her granddaughter.

The matriarch of Tyrell smiled, though. Those were sweet memories. Olenna’s teenage years had been filled with wild sex.

“And your hens?” Margaery. “Will you be able to keep your brood in order?”

“I am their rooster Grandmama. I rule the hen house. I will keep them under my wing and control. They will bring to my bed plenty of sweet new pussy. I will share my husbands with them when they want a taste of strange. I can’t wait. You will protect us.”

With a shake of her head, Olenna had to smile. Yes. She would protect her granddaughter. Her granddaughter had the same hot lusty drive she had had in her youth. She was living the life that Olenna wished she had been able to live.

Olenna looked out the window of her carriage. She saw the unusually tall knight riding beside the carriage in front of the one she was riding. She felt a sad twinge run through her body.

Poor Brienne of Tarth, the older woman thought. It was obvious she had her eye on Renly, who rode in the carriage in front of her. Loras had been in the carriage until this morning when he donned his armor and horse. The man who would be King was totally gay. Brienne’s looks would not have mattered if Renly had been like his brother Robert Baratheon. Robert would sleep with a hag if he were horny enough. A man as beautiful to gaze upon as Renly would never look at a woman so plain. Olenna tried to be generous, but Brienne was not very pretty. Except for those beautiful blue eyes of hers. They were like sapphires.

Could anyone love the woman who wanted to be a man? Olenna stopped that thought. That was not right. Brienne knew she was a woman, but she had forced her way into a man’s world. She paid the price for it. Daily. She had to admire that in a way she supposed, the willingness to suffer any price to achieve your desire and dream.

Her granddaughter was still waxing poetic. Olenna controlled an eye roll.

“I will love finally being able to have all the sex I want, Grandmama, as I want it. This saving my virginity has been a major pain in my ass! I long to have the orgies of your youth, my sweet grandmother. You were quite the slut. Tell me again of some of those hot fucks you had my sweet
Olenna loved remembering and talking of her reckless past, but she had not been in a direct line for the Iron throne. Maybe regaling Margaery with those tales had been imprudent. **Nah.** She wanted to share the wild memories of her youth with someone, and Margaery was the only one she could divulge those secrets too. Margaery just had to practice patience for a little while longer. With a shake of her head, Olenna looked at her granddaughter. She was thinking recklessly. The nearing of their goals seemed to have intoxicated Margaery.

Fortunately, when her mind was not addled with visions of hot sex, Margaery was cool and calculating. Olenna could not fault the girl for being a teenager filled with hormones that made her perpetually horny. It did piss Olenna off that Loras was able to sleep around freely, and Margaery had to be so circumspect. She had to endure the same crap when she was Margaery’s age. Olenna’s brothers free to crow about their conquests while Olenna had to be careful and hide her randy nature. **Man’s world sucks** Olenna stormed to herself. She sighed. It was time to give Margaery another tongue lashing. The lesson needed. The girl had to acquire more self-control.

"Margaery Tyrell! Control your damn libido. Let’s get you on the Iron Throne first. Excuse me, Renly, on the Iron Throne. I have warned you of the damn Septons and Septas. They are a bunch of hypocrites. Hell, half of them father children. The Septas always have to drink moon tea. That is when they are not burying their faces in each other muffs or their Septon brothers putting their cocks in their brother’s butts."

"Still, they find the pious time to punish royal women. They will watch you like a hawk Margaery until you get on the Iron Throne through Renly. They will force you to pass their virginity test if you give them a reason to. Don’t force them to make you take their tests. We are safe, aren’t we granddaughter?"

"**Yessssssss!**" Margaery huffed. Olenna could not stop her half-smile. Margaery’s lower lip was back out in a pout, and a cross look on her sweet, beautiful face.

"Once you are on the Iron Throne, and we pay the requisite bribes, we will then be safe. **IF!** If you exercise a modest bit of decorum in the present. Remember that, and all will be well, Margaery. The current High Septon wants to keep the ship in smooth waters. He will not cause us problems unless we give him a reason to. We are safe Margaery unless we cause him problems. Do I make myself clear Margaery Tyrell," Olenna ended her admonishment with a strong, commanding voice. She had her eyes locked with her impetuous strong-willed granddaughter.

As she watched, Margaery crossed her arms underneath her high firm breast and synched them in tight to her body. Her lower lip stuck out even further, her eyes filled with fire. The granddaughter half turned her body, so she did not have to look at her grandmother. The seventeen year old snorted and wiggled her butt around on the thick cushioned seat showing her displeasure.

Olenna shook her head. She was not upset at her granddaughter’s actions. The lesson had been given again to the recalcitrant student. Olenna, too, was full of fire and willful indulgence when she was a teenager. She had learned control and so would Margaery. In the now chilly quiet of the royal carriage, Olenna looked out the window again. She had much to think on.

Earlier, she had easily discounted House Stark. In truth, now she was not sure who she should choose to sit on the Iron Throne. Olenna had waited a lifetime to be in this position, and miraculously it had fallen into her lap. All who wanted to be King needed House Tyrell to make it so. She, Olenna Redwyne, would make the choice when the time came.
Seven months ago, she would have said Eddard Stark was a great brave fighter on the field of battle but a bumbling neophyte in the Game of Thrones. That Eddard Stark was no more. He had somehow become crafty and masterful at manipulation. Miraculously, this change had occurred overnight. What was strange was he still seemed to be the honorable and good-hearted man he had been before. How had the transformation occurred without the sacrifice of the man he had been? This thought kept turning over in Olenna’s mind. The two characteristics were like vinegar and oil. They did not mix well, and yet with Eddard Stark, they did.

Renly was easy. He was urbane and was pleasing to the eye. He was smart and not a dullard. He was also vain, conceited, and while smart, his intelligence was not as great as he assumed. A man was a dangerous thing when his abilities limited his grasp. He would overreach and then fall. That was where Margaery would come in. She would guide Renly as he sat on the Iron Throne. It should be Margaery who led Westeros, but one had to bend to reality. House Tyrell would lead from the shadows.

To rule from the shadows would not be possible with Eddard Stark. He had seemingly become as great a warrior in the palace court as he was on the battlefield.

She had discussed the possibility of House Stark winning out no matter how remote it seemed with her granddaughter. What were Margaery’s thoughts on Robb Stark? The Moths reported that the son was filled with the same honor and rectitude as the father.

Margaery had thought on it for a minute.

“Our Moths report Robb is a copy of his father. Filled with rectitude and honor were their words. Translation. Boring.” Margaery paused. “Still, this new Eddard Stark that has been reported has shown real possibilities. He has shown he can be crafty and willing to think outside of the box. We both know these qualities are paramount in court. Eddard lacked them as the Hand, and thus, his fall was sudden and precipitous. Maybe these new skills translate into matters of the bedroom too. One can hope.”

“There is no vanity or conceited, elevated ego to play off of Margaery. Robb Stark will not be easily manipulated. He seems to be intelligent. He may have his father’s newfound talents in the Game of Thrones. Only time will show this.”

“That will make it easier for me if that is the case. I can let Robb rule and only step in when necessary. I will then be free to play with my hens and Robb. With House Tyrell on the Iron Throne, we can bring peace to Westeros. That will give us time to explore other matters.” A carnal look on Margaery’s face.

“Our moths are sure Arya is gay,” Margaery said. “Hopefully, Sansa is as well. I will enjoy playing with them. Loras and I will have all the Stark children.”

Olenna reminded Margaery to focus on the Iron Throne and not the Feathered Bed. Margery had snorted.

“I will get what I want, Grandmama. When I show them the pleasures my Hens, and I can bring them, they will be begging for it. All of the Starks children will fall to my charms. You wait and see! You have shown me how to use my body to control events and have my will done, Grandmama. I will lead, and they will not even know it. It will be my will that leads. I have trained my whole life for this moment. I will succeed. I will use everything at my disposal to have my will done.”

Again, Margaery reminded Olenna of herself at that age. It was funny in a way. She had been
betrothed to Daeron Targaryen. He had broken their betrothal to be with his squire Jeremy Norridge. Hell, it could still have worked. She would have had double the pleasure she had told herself at the time. Surely, the men would have been receptive to her charms. They hadn’t been the way it turned out. Oh Well. It looked like Margaery, Loras and Renly would succeed where she had not.

Margaery did not care who she married as long as she had Loras and her Hens. For Margaery, it was simply a matter of the known and the proven. Renly wanted the trappings of rule. It was the prestige and status of being King that attracted the man the most to the Iron Throne. He did want to be a fair and just ruler which was indeed a positive quality. He would not be a bad leader, but he could be manipulated with the flattery and stroking of the ego. That most likely would not be options to use on Robb Stark judging by his father.

Margaery continued with her analysis, “I don’t know of Robb Stark. I know Renly. He is malleable. He will share my tastes. Why worry about the unknowable.” Margaery had he crux of the matter right, Olenna thought. Robb would be an unknown. Much like his father was proving to be in this new form he had taken since his resurrection from the dungeons of the Red Keep.

Indeed Olenna thought. She wondered what Eddard Stark would have to say. He may make any other option than Robb Stark unobtainable. She doubted it, but she had to plan on the possibility. The man was proving to be crafty beyond all reason. Where this was coming from no one could say.

She smiled now remembered the earlier conversation. It was the possibilities that made the Game of Thrones exciting to play.

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The ten large supply wagons pulled by teams of four oxen slowly past Eddard Stark. The animals calmly walking forward, pulling the wagons loaded high with victuals for the host of House Tyrell. The wagons filled with hardtack, beef jerky, dried beans, turnips, okra, and kale. Two of the wagons loaded with fresh-caught fish and fresh slaughtered pork and beef.

The man who would be King stood beside the Gate of the Gods watching the largesse move out the gate and begin its short trip to the camp of the Tyrells. Yesterday wagons had headed out to the camp of the Lannisters and Baratheons.

Yesterday, five more ships came in from Pentos under the flag of Illyrio Mopatis. It being his flag that flew from the tallest masts of the ships. On the flag was the image of a young bravo with blond hair down to the shoulder. The youth on the flag destined to become the obese man Eddard now dealt with. The youth depicted was Illyrio in his youth. The youth hard-bodied and bare of chest. The youth was also naked. Eddard had gone down to the docks to see the ships and their crest flags. He rolled his eyes. Talk about vain! Vain about a youth the man had long cease to be. If it were not so sad, it would be embarrassing Eddard thought to himself.

Varys had journeyed with his King to the docks to greet the ships. The eunuch had seen his king’s look of disbelief when he gazed upon the flags on the topmost mast. The eunuch had told his king it was hard for him to believe that once both he and Illyrio had been rail-thin and full of vigor. Eddard shook his head, hearing that.

“Tell me again what Illyrio wants in recompense,” Eddard had asked Varys. “That he won’t turn this against the Iron Throne. That he can be trusted.”

Varys did not hesitate with his answer.
“Illyrio is now a man who craves only profit and ever more riches. This desire for ever greater
wealth has subsumed all his other desires. All he will ask for in return is the most favorable trade
agreements and the highest priority in your dealings with Illyrio. That you favor him in his holdings
in the Free Cities but especially Pentos. He is asking for the waiving of fees for shipping rights and
warehouse storage. I feel that is a fair price to ask for. If you take the Iron Throne and manage
Westeros wisely, then much wealth will be created. Increased trade will flow in all directions.
Profits generated, and taxes collected. All prosper, and the greater good will be served. With the
advantages you will grant Illyrio he will profit the most by far. That makes the man Illyrio has
become most happy."

“It is quite simple, my King. Profit has become Illyrio’s wife, progeny and mistress all rolled into
one.”

Eddard had looked askance at Varys. He hoped it turned out to be so. He did not need Illyrio trying
to use debt to him as a means to try and control the new King of Westeros. He kept waiting for the
Iron Bank to make its appearance. That produced a deep breath. He was not sure what to do about
them as of yet. He toyed with the idea of running its emissaries through with his sword but had
reluctantly rejected that idea.

Four of the ships had their holds filled high with food staples Eddard would use to feed his enemies.
The food provided to the surrounding armies without reigns to them had to produce a feeling of
tractability to the common foot soldier. The soldiers being offered food instead of steel.

The fourth ship loaded with a hundred tons of gold bars. That gold would keep the Iron Throne
solvent for another six months if spent wisely. That was something Eddard Stark planned to do. He
hated ostentatious displays and the waste of the coin of the realm on extravagance.

Eddard gnawed his lip. There had to be a price. Didn’t there? He decided he would deal with it
when and if the problem raised its head.

Eddard shook his head on that reflection and focused on what he saw spread out on the plains
surrounding King’s Landing. He stood on the curtain wall and watched the large army of
Highgarden break formation and begin to set up camp. When it became obvious that the large army
was bivouacking, the forces of Casterly Rock and Storm’s End relaxed. Their formations were
breaking to move back to their camps.

Eddard had smiled at that. He again thanked the Druids. They had delayed Tywin long enough for
Highgarden to arrive before the old craggy Lion with the main army of the Westerlands before the
gates of King’s Landing. Now he would have to come in truce to King’s Landing. Tywin had no
other choice. He was no longer in any position to dictate any terms.

His plans were all coming together, Eddard thought to himself. His plans were coming to fruition.

He moved down off the curtain wall. He looked back behind himself at the large gaggle, following
him down. Everyone wanted to see Highgarden in all its glory coming to King’s Landing.

Once outside the raised gate of the Gates of the Gods, Eddard and his party watched and waited.
Soon a regiment of mounted light cavalry came down the King’s Road. These riders were not
knights in plate armor. These men meant for fast attack on flanks and doing reconnaissance and
raids, the men in chainmail and leathers. The chainmail and leathers freshly cleaned and oiled, the
metal links gleamed in the hard sunlight.

From their shoulders, capes were buttoned down. The capes were bright green. The yellow rose of
Tyrell resplendent on the capes. The words of their House embroidered underneath, “Growing
A strong breeze was now blowing off the bay before King’s Landing. The wind snapped the capes in rolling waves. Every tenth man had a large standard that also now rippled and waved hard in the wind. The standards had four streamers sewed onto the trailing edge.

They were beautiful to watch.

Eddard's eyes followed the cavalry as they approached. Some of the men wore no helms he saw. Steel grey eyes traveled over the formation. He saw the snow-white hair of Valyrians in the ranks. He counted only three, but the white hair stood out. He thought of a young princess lost in the Red Waste. His mind told him she was dead. His heart whispered something else.

The mounted soldiers started to peel off in twos. One rider moving off the road facing out. The other man faced in. The men lined the King’s Road. Their standards snapped back over the edge of the King’s Road.

Soon, two lines of knights in gleaming armor were seen coming down the King’s Road. In their midst, the large royal wagons of High Garden could be seen. Like Titans from the beginning of the world. With a practiced eye Eddard looked at the wagons as they approached. Ostentatious was the word that came to mind. A less charitable word was ‘waste.’ So much wealth spent on show, the new King thought to himself.

With a deep breath, Eddard calmed his thoughts. King’s Landing was not the North. He did wonder if Tywin would put on such a show if he were in Highgarden’s place. He doubted it. The man had at least that much decorum.

He had to admit the knights looked resplendent in their armor. Armor that glinted in the sun. Many of the helms adorned with various guises of roses. The enamel paint on the roses was brilliant in the sun.

With roving eyes, Eddard scanned the knights. He spotted the first one he looked for. He saw Loras Tyrell. He rode a tall white stallion. Loras looked regal and resplendent in his silver armor. The armor decorated with sapphires and twining black vines made of onyx. The hammer-forged relief seemed almost real in the intense sunlight. Golden roses decorated the crest of the young man’s helm. From his shoulders hung his cloak of forget-me-nots sewn to a heavy woolen cape.

Eddard had seen with his own eyes that Loras was excellent on the tourney field. Varys reports repeated that observation. The spies reported that his skills as a warrior were not as great, though Loras would argue that fact most vociferously. Like almost all great warriors, the man was extremely vain. You had to be when your life depended on it.

Next, his eyes found the other knight that had caught his interest. The height of the knight made it easy to spot them. The height of the knight, which was near as tall as Sandor Clegane, was quite intimidating.

Brienne of Tarth rode on a dappled stallion. She had on a helm that hid her features, but it was her. She did appear to be a man in her armor though the reports said she had the gentle curves of a tall but not big breasted woman. She had a grim look on her face. She carried a Standard of House Tyrell. It was a long narrow triangle in yellow with green roses on the front of the standard near the shaft. Behind the roses were the words “Our Roots Run Deep” on a background of green bars overlapping a large yellow triangle.

He had read the dossiers on the two knights with great interest. He had plans for the two.

Eddard looked to the right and left of him. Stannis gazed at the host of Tyrells. The head of House
Baratheon knew his younger brother was somewhere in that host. A host whose focus was to make Renly the King and not Stannis. Stannis was red-faced and seemed pissed off, but that was sort of his normal look Eddard snarked to himself. Eddard looked to the other side of himself and saw the gaggle of Martells and their retinue. They were laughing and talking loudly. He could not but help to see the difference. One House happy and the other House sour and dour.

A chuckle came to Eddard. He saw Dorea and Loreza fluttering around Sansa and Jeyne. Sansa’s small friend was sticking close to Sansa. Princess was excited running around in circles and shunting between pairs of legs. All the while, barking for attention. The Direwolf was not shy in her begging for attention. The puppy running around sniffing and yammering at the Sand Snakes to bend down and pet her. The various women laughing and bending down to oblige the spoiled puppy. The cute direwolf pup soaking up the attention lavished on her.

Sansa was glaring at the youngest hovering Sand Snakes trying to catch Jeyne’s attention. Eddard shook his head. Sansa almost appeared jealous of the two upstart Sand Snakes. She kept rotating Jeyne away from them, putting her body between them and Jeyne. Her eyes were shooting daggers at the two younger girls.

Funny how it looked like jealousy, Eddard thought. He liked his daughter protecting Jeyne from the predatory Dorea and Loreza. It was the Stark honor at work he thought to himself with a chuckle. He shook his head. The two youngest Sand Snakes lived up to their reputation of always being on the prowl for nubile young females to seduce. They were quite comely Eddard thought.

His other daughter had Obella and Elia Sand hovering around Arya, making overtures. The two glaring at Merjen, who was holding Arya to her. Arya smiled at the Sand Snakes. Her eyes rounded when Merjen started to palm his daughter’s buttocks. Eddard pursed his lips. He was sure Merjen would say she was keeping up appearances. It looked like a free grope to the King. He knew he had to get used to it with his daughter’s desires.

In their frustrations on getting to Jeyne, the youngest two Sand Snakes turned on each other arguing. Those women were too competitive by half the King chuckled to himself. Each complaining loudly that the other sister was ‘cramping her style’ and that they each needed to ‘back off dammit.’

One area he saw the Sand Snakes having success was with Cersei. Nymeria and Obara were both all over Cersei. The two women stroked and groped the beautiful blonde. Cersei was definitely not stopping them, Eddard thought to himself. He saw the three giving each other quick kisses.

Eddard shook his head. Cersei was changing. That was clear. He wondered what would happen when brother and sister met each other. He owed Cersei that much before he passed sentence and execution on her brother.

Finally, the large royal carriages were at the gate. Loras had dismounted and moved to his parents’ carriage. He pulled out the folded steps built into the carriage and put them down. He opened the door and helped his father and mother come down to the ground.

Other knights opened the doors that Olenna and her granddaughter were in. All the Tyrells were soon out of the wagons stretching out their legs and looking around. The family quickly formed up. Mace in the lead. His wife on his right hand and his mother on his left. They were all richly dressed in the best silks. All their fingers adorned with rich stones. Garland and Willas had on vests that had many opals, emeralds and sapphires on them in the shapes of roses.

The party slowly walked up to the current King of Westeros.

Mace came before Eddard Stark. The King tilted his head and gave salutations.
“I thank you for accepting my invitation to come to King’s Landing. My kingdom is enlightened and bettered by our appearance,” the King spoke to the visitors before him.

Mace looked around. “It is a rather small kingdom I would say Eddard.”

“Yes, it is Mace. I would seek to enlarge my island into a continent. Maybe we can come to an understanding. One beneficial to both Houses.”

The statement had Mace smiling. “Yes. I can’t wait to see what you propose.” Eddard made greeting to the other heads of House Tyrell. The customary greetings and returns made.

Eddard smiled back. He and Olenna knew what he had to offer. He only had to make it the most attractive offer on the table. He knew the deck was stacked against him with Loras and Renly being lovers. Varys reported that Margaery planned on sleeping with both Renly and her brother.

Eddard sucked in his lower lip. He was not sure Robb was prepared for that kind of adventure. He assumed Loras and Margaery were a package deal. It seemed the Targaryen dynasty had left one thing behind. He wondered what Robb would think of such liaisons. His son was a straight-laced as his father. He would have to talk to Robb about loosening up. He felt like a hypocrite thinking such thoughts. Sometimes he felt he was so straight-laced he felt like he wore a corset. He couldn’t help it!

Sometimes one had to make compromises. It was amazing the thoughts going through his head, Eddard thought. When one factored in politics and the needs of court politics, it was amazing, the thoughts one had. Eddard had learned this with his downfall at the hands of Cersei. He had only thought of honor, not his foe. Cersei had been brutally efficient in achieving her goals. He was now trying to walk a path between where he had been and what he needed to be when playing the Game of Thrones. He would keep his moral compass but he would have to be very, very vigilant in the oversight of this.

He and Robb would navigate the thorny Roses that were House Tyrell. They would have to navigate the sure to be less than traditional requests of House Tyrell. Eddard was thankful that his wife Catelyn Tully had come to him a woman of traditional thought and bearing. A traditional bride for a traditional groom. A groom who wanted no parts of more liberated ways of comporting themselves.

Eddard greeted the sons of Mace and Aleria Hightower. The two eldest had firm handshakes and warm smiles. Now it was Loras, the youngest son that stood before Eddard. They made the requisite platitudes. Then they shook hands. Loras smirked and applied pressure on Eddard’s hand. Eddard smiled back at Loras. He applied pressure back. Loras’s eyes flared wide. His face suppressed a sharp grimace. He took a deep breath. Eddard shook their hands up and down several times more and squeezed even harder. Loras’s face now a mask of ill hidden pain.

Eddard smiled more broadly as the two finished their handshake. The old bull had just put the new rising stud bull in his place; the old bull for now ascendant. Hey, I like that thought Eddard chuckled to himself and let the hand go.

Loras glared at Eddard. The King tilted his head and moved on. The eighteen year old knight was surreptitiously shaking his hand to try and relieve the pain. Eddard chuckled, watching the retreating back of the young knight. Loras may be strong, but he was only a teenager. He was a warrior in his adult prime. Hopefully, Loras had learned a lesson.

The initial greetings of High Nobles finished, Eddard invited everyone to enter in through the Gate of the Gods. He was gracious but not being stupid about it either. He had a full squad of
Goldcloaks clustered around the gate. The men in their uniforms that made them clear as to who they were with their dyed wool cloaks. Most of the rest of the force lined the King’s Road to the Barbican of the Red Keep.

The six thousand man force had been a ghost with no real teeth to them when Eddard took the Iron Throne. That force was gone. Eddard had his youngest daughter to thank for their transformation. Through the efforts of his daughter, the Goldcloaks were now a fighting force that had a real bite. They were not enough to truly defend the city of King’s Landing, but they were enough to put on a show of force. They would bloody any foe they fought. Eddard had made sure all the men now had hardened steel longswords in their scabbards. Arya and Syrio had started their training. Sandor and Merjen had joined in on that training. Now Oberyn and the Sand Snakes were helping as well.

The armed men were at rigid military attention. They put on a show. It was enough. Their newfound marital skill and appearance would keep anyone from stepping out of bounds. They would give Eddard Stark the time he would need to win the Iron Throne fully.

In fact, the force had become so competent that fit young men were coming to Sandor and Arya asking to join the Goldcloaks. Eddard had considered this. Tradition dictated that the force be six thousand men. He had mulled that over for a minute. To hell with tradition, he told himself. They had nearly a hundred more men almost ready to join the Goldcloaks with another two hundred men in various states of training preparing to join the force.

Each additional man gave Eddard more options. He smiled at that. He motioned to Sandor.

A set of carriages brought forward. The high nobles and military commanders escorted to the wagons. The men stood by the carriages and talked. The royal carriages of High Garden were not ready to take on their occupants, so all waited.

Eddard prepared to walk beside the wagons of Highgarden. He looked around him. He smiled at what he saw. Another less ostentatious carriage had opened its doors. The girls getting out had to be Margaery’s handmaidens. The girls being allowed to stretch their legs before the journey to the Red Keep. Eddard felt his face redden a little, having read the reports on the six teenagers and the septa always with them.

Varys reports made it clear what their sexual preferences were. The reports also made it clear that Margaery spent her nights with them. That Margaery and the seven women all shared two large beds at night. His mouth had nearly fallen off when he read that the first time.

Eddard had to give Olenna and Mace credit. They were accepting of their two youngest children for Mace and grandchildren for Olenna being gay. After another minute of thought, Eddard supposed that love made a parental figure accept what they would never have accepted before that love made them change their thoughts.

Those insights were confirmed when four of the Sand Snakes made a beeline towards the Hens, who were standing together. The girls were all beautiful. They were giggling and looking around. They all hushed, seeing Obella, Elia, Loreza and Dorea moving in fast. The two groups of women were quickly engaged in heavy flirting. Eddard squirmed, knowing where that was leading.

The Sand Snakes made no show of hiding their intentions. The Hens did not hide their easy acceptance of the overtures. No one moved in to intervene. If no one else did, neither would he, Eddard thought to himself.

He looked around. Cersei was moving off with Obara and Nymeria. The two Sand Snakes each had a grip on Cersei’s ass. Their hands were massaging what they had ahold of. Cersei was not
shooing their hands off. She was leaned over to Obara, who was kissing her ear. Nymeria had her other hand caressing one of Cersei’s rounded breasts. Eddard saw Cersei’s lidded eyes. Eyes filled with lust.

Eddard ripped his gaze away. He looked around. He did not see his youngest daughter, but he easily spotted Sansa with her red hair and height. He saw Jeyne looking up at her. Eddard started. He saw the same look in Jeyne’s eyes as he saw in Cersei’s. He looked back to Cersei. Yes. He turned to look back at Sansa and Jeyne but saw only friendship in Jeyne’s eyes when he looked now.

He shook his head. He smiled. He was on Sand Snake and Hen overload. He saw Sansa and her friend gravitating over to Melisandre, who was standing tall, looking around with a disinterested look. Stannis had tried to engage her in conversation, but Melisandre ignored him. He shrugged his shoulders and walked off.

“Ahem”

Eddard turned towards Olenna Tyrell. The small woman was looking up at him. She was standing tall with her cane planted in the hard-packed dirt. Well, as tall as her diminutive height allowed. Her dark green gown buttoned up tight to her body. The pleats of the skirt brushing the ground.

“I would ask that you keep an old woman and her granddaughter company as we travel in my royal carriage. My old bones need the comfort of my carriage. Let us talk, man who would be King.”

Eddard took a quick breath. So it begins.

“I would be honored Olenna Redwyne. I hope you find my company indeed, companionable.”

He watched her smirk. He led Olenna back to her carriage. The walk slow and stately. Varys had reported the problem Olenna had with arthritis. She carried herself remarkably well, he thought. It showed her pride and iron will. He helped both her and her granddaughter step up into the wagon. He followed. He looked around and whistled softly.

“I am impressed with the craftsmanship.” He sat down across from Olenna Redwyne and Margaery Tyrell.

It was Olenna’s move. She had the advantage, and Eddard knew it. The wagon started to move forward. The King’s Road inside King’s Landing was well maintained, and thus the ride was smooth. For a long minute, there was a Dorne standoff. Eddard looked guardedly at Olenna and Margaery. The two women’s eyes bored into him. He kept a polite, calm look on his face. It really was their move. He could see that Margaery was being groomed to replace Olenna when the time came.

Olenna opened with her initial gambit.

“I like your offer, Eddard. But I fear Renly came to us first. He has Loras as his lover. Does that bother you, Eddard Stark? The fact that my grandson loves a man.”

“No.” She was trying to shock him, Eddard thought. The shock to throw him off his game. His youngest daughter had inadvertently prepared him for this moment.

Olenna cocked her eyebrow.

“Arya is gay. She is not flaunting it,” he replied calmly. “I think she is still coming to terms with who she is. She will soon act on her desires, I think. Cersei is sleeping with four of the Sand Snakes. That I know of.” Eddard ended his initial comment with a wry smile and shake of the head.
In his mind, he remembered Jeyne’s eyes as she looked up at his eldest daughter. Sansa did look at Jeyne with intense eyes at times, he realized. He never saw that hungry look in return from Sansa, though. He shook his head and smiled softly. Being surrounded by gay women was causing him to see what was not there. “I do not care. The Targaryens had brothers and sisters marry. Their incest accepted. I find no problem with homosexuality.”

“Not sure about the High Septon, though,” Eddard added. He knew that could be a problem for the Tyrells. Arya being a second daughter with absolutely no designs upon the Iron Throne, was safe from the church’s moors and desires to enforce them. “That situation will need to be finessed; I think Olenna.”

“Well said, Eddard,” Olenna answered. Her eyes looked steadily at the man who would be King. “Such … high thinking—from a man is refreshing.” A chuckle escaped Olenna’s lips seeing Eddard give her his squint smile.

“Why should I chose your son over Renly?”

“He is a better man. Period. Also, Stannis has a better claim than Renly. That has to cause problems. You know this. Some will side with Stannis purely on the principles of honor.”

“True,” Olenna answered. “Still. Renly came to us first. He is vain and can be a pompous ass. Margaery likes him, though. The man may be vainglorious, but he is a good-hearted soul. That trait is rare and a precious alloy. He is pleasing to the eye and groomed himself to be urbane and polished. He is not as good as he thinks he is, but that is where Margaery comes in. She will make sure Renly is a good King.”

“What does Robb have to offer, Eddard Stark? Why should House Tyrell choose this option?”

Eddard had prepared for this question.

“Robb has honor. He is not ‘urbane’ but honest to his core. He will always put his people first. Robb does not desire to be King, as Renly does. This is what will make Robb a great king.”

“You mean like yourself?” Margaery asked sagely.

He turned to look at the younger woman. He ducked his head. A grimace and then his squint smile returned.

“Yes. I am the best man for the Iron Throne at this time. Do you argue it?”

“Maybe yes. Maybe no,” Olenna answered. “You have become adept at the Game of Thrones I do agree. You are spending your coin on the people wisely. You are not a wasteful man. I give you that. I fear for blind spots, though. King’s Landing is not the North, Eddard. That fact led to your downfall when you were the Hand. Will there be another fall from grace?”

The potential foes looked at each other. Neither backing off with their direct gaze. After a long moment, Eddard answered.

“True. I was indeed cast down. I have learned from my mistakes, Olenna. I will not make them again.”

She looked at him hard. “I do believe you, I think.”

“Is Robb good in the sack?” Margaery asked.
A hot flush came over Eddard’s face. He could not stop it. He cursed this seeming inability to keep from blushing when people made bold sexual statements to him. It was a test, and this one the King failed.

“I cannot speak for Robb. I do believe he is like his father. He will come chaste to the marriage bed.”

The look on Margaery’s face was not favorable. Innocence was not a valued characteristic in House Tyrell, Eddard saw.

“Why do you want the backing of House Tyrell, Eddard?” Olenna asked.

“For political reasons only, Olenna. I need your support. All know that House Tyrell has wanted to place an heir on the Iron Throne for generations now. Your House always in waiting. Always playing the handmaiden. I do think your time has come.”

“So it has Eddard. I will tell you that House Baratheon has our attention. I admire how you have brought all the Major Houses here to decide the fate of the Iron Throne. It will be interesting to see how this plays out. The little man will thank you, Eddard if you can avoid bloodshed across Westeros. I, too, remember Robert’s Rebellion. A lot of good men died for little good reason when you get down to it. The war fought for a man’s vanity in the end.”

“Too true, Olenna. My childhood friend Robert proved to be a disaster for Westeros.”

Olenna’s tone became sterner, “What of Cersei? She did dispose of her Hand. That is an act of high treason. This crime is punishable by death. The execution by your hand, preferably.”

“What you say is true, but I am King. I will meet out justice as I see fit. She and I contended. I lost. I told her about my plans throughout our contest. I deserved to be cast down. She took what I told her and used it against me as she should have with our conflict. I have learned from that mistake. I won’t make them again, Olenna.” The last sentence made with direct eye contact. A message sent and received.

The Queen of Thorns appraised Eddard with a steely gaze. “I am impressed. I have never heard a man so clearly state his failings. No woman either. I highly doubt this mercy you are showing Cersei. I hope it doesn’t come back to haunt you, Eddard Stark.” He merely smiled back at her. Olenna turned to look at her granddaughter.

“Margaery,” Olenna called her granddaughter’s name, getting her attention. “Who do you chose at this time?”

“Renly.” The answer flat. Finale.

Olenna turned to look at Eddard.

“It would appear that you have your work cut out for you. I see no reason why it shouldn’t be as my granddaughter has stated.”

A deep breath escaped Eddard. “It would appear I have much work to do indeed.”

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Melisandre eyed the tall redhead and the young woman in love with her. She saw the blonde that was with them so much of the time heading in her direction. The three now before her. Wonderful, she thought sourly. She felt threatened. Why had she been so reckless! What had come over her,
Melisandre again berated herself. She was always in control of her emotions. What had cracked her 
steely resolve? In showing them the truth, she had exposed herself to needless danger.

They were arrayed around in front of her now. The Redhead’s direwolf pup was eyeing her 
suspiciously her body sheltered by Jeyne’s body. A hero, the pup was not. She looked into each of 
their faces. She searched for fear, contempt, or a desire to hold the truth over her. Her gaze went 
back and forth on their faces. What she saw was not that. Their faces were neutral. The only 
emotion she thought she might see was a sad sense of compassion.

That pissed her off. Melisandre did not need anyone’s pity!

“Why are you here?” Melisandre snapped at three young women before her. “You know the truth of 
me. I would have thought you would have told your father, Sansa. You have to inform the King of 
the information I bestowed upon thee. It is your duty. That or run screaming at what you saw.”

Sansa met her gaze and straightened her shoulders. It was clear she was the leader of this group.

“Your appearance means nothing, Melisandre. It is your actions that speak for you. You are a hero. 
You saved a whole society by your actions. My father would understand. It is the means that you 
use at times that we disagree with.” Melisandre felt herself tighten up. “But, we will never speak of 
what you revealed. Arya, Merjen and Tommen agree as well. Your secret is safe, Melisandre.”

A snort escaped Melisandre.

“You are fooling yourselves. Would you be here in front of me now if I was in my true form? My 
shattered ‘hag’ appearance. Be truthful.”

She watched Sansa. Jeyne and Myrcella started. Sansa, to her credit, looked her steadily in the 
eyes. She took a deep breath.

“That is a valid question, Melisandre. Your true appearance is startling and not beauteous. Still, it is 
you. You have a certain dour charm. It is not the total of you. I have an idea.”

Melisandre felt the hackles on her neck rise up.

“What would that be?”

“Take off your ruby. Let us see the true you. You keep going back to this ‘true’ you. You gnaw on 
it like a dog with a bone.”

Panic flushed through Melisandre veins. Terror of the prospect of others seeing her true body was 
horrifying. She felt dread with each heartbeat. She could do nothing but flee. Her steps hurried. 
She bumped people out of her way in her need to run away. In her panic, her eyes saw nothing but 
the path to escape. She only knew she had to flee.

Sansa watched her flee. Jeyne had gripped her hand at the turn of events. The three teenagers 
watched the tall redheaded witch flee as she knocked people out of her way in her haste.

“Well, damn. That did not go well. I did not expect Melisandre to react like that. I must be more 
careful in the future,” Sansa mused. She squeezed Jeyne’s hand back. The tall redheaded witch was 
a powerful woman. Sansa had expected a give and take with the powerful woman. Not an outright 
retreat without a joust first. This Melisandre was more fragile than she seemed Sansa now knew.

“She is beautiful Sansa. Just like you. You two are both so beautiful with your height and red 
hair.” Jeyne was looking at Sansa dreamily.
Myrcella watched the pair. *When would Sansa see it?* Myrcella wondered? When would Sansa realize she felt the same for Jeyne as the shorter woman felt for Sansa, Myrcella wondered. It was humorous becoming ridiculous, Myrcella thought.

Arianna Martell came to Myrcella’s mind. She sobered up.

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An hour and a half later all were assembled in the courtyard yard by the Great Hall. An outdoor feast to give the House of Tyrell safety by the ritual of the Guest Rite.

Eddard looked over the throng.

He had much to think on. He would have to remove Renly from Olenna and Margaery’s good graces. He smiled to himself. He had a plan. He knew Loras would have his part to play.

He only had to maneuver them on the Crevasse board to be where he needed them to be when he sprung his trap.

Renly was vain. Loras was in love. It would work.

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Arya bent her body low as Merjen’s labrys swished over her head. Wooden slats put over the metal ends. Arya came up and stabbed forward with her practice sword’s blade at Merjen’s kidney. The black Kingsguard jumped back, cursing, her battleax, slashing down on Arya’s blade. Arya let the energy take their blades down with a loose wrist. She snapped her hand back and over, which rotated her blade over the head of Merjen’s weapon. Her blade slashed at Merjen’s ribs. The tall black woman cursed again, diving back out of range of Arya’s weapon.

She was improving Arya knew. At times, she could almost see her opponent’s thoughts and steps before they did. Her blade a blur as she attacked and parried. Merjen, in a lightning-fast move, stepped right and came in using both blades of her battleax, making a whirlwind of death. Arya dove back and rolled with Merjen advance after slashing down with her weapon to catch Merjen’s labrys. Merjen twisted her blade sending Arya to the ground off balance. Arya went with the momentum. She rolled up and kicked out with her left foot hitting Merjen’s left arm knocking her back.

As they circled each other, Arya wondered where Cersei was. She had loved how the woman had burned her father, Tywin Lannister. Her words had been devastating. Hell, she nearly killed him. Her thrown bowl had almost taken Tywin’s head off. She had a new respect for the woman. She seemed to be changing. She would have bet her life and honor that such a change was impossible, and yet it seemed to be happening.

Life was full of strange events Arya mused countering the attacks of Sandor’s first chosen Kingsguard.

Back and forth, Merjen and Arya slammed their blades into each other’s weapons. The weapons always in a position to block the other’s attack. They then locked up their weapons. Arya grunted and cursed. Sometimes being only five feet tall and weighing only eight trending to nine stone was an outright pain in her ass! She was adding muscle with all of the exercises and lifting heavy objects. Syrio constantly working on Arya to do wind sprints and long runs throughout the Red Keep and King’s Landing near it. She, also still chased cats.

*That was fun!*
Her constant running had her cardio in excellent shape. With her cardio, she was able to keep her speed up as she sparred with her foe of the moment.

Merjen soon had to leave to go and perform her duties as Sandor’s Kingsguard. The two congratulating each other for the strenuous workout. The beautiful black woman was wiping her face with a towel to sop up the sweat running down her face and throat. Arya was doing the same. Arya smiled inside. Merjen was leering at her. The woman was looking at her with a hot, hungry look. Arya brought her towel down.

A twinkle in Merjen’s eyes, she spoke, “I hope to have you soon in my bed, wolfling. I keep hearing you are to go this ‘Dragon.’ Let me send you to her with all my intimate knowledge. Don’t you want to make her howl, my sweet? To show her how a Direwolf ruts. My skills are vast and varied. I will make you scream yourself hoarse, my sweet. If you sleep with me, I guarantee you will make this Dragon scream the night long. I stand ready to perform my duty for you.” She waggled her eyebrows. Merjen had preened, turning slightly back and forth, showing off her impressive physic as well as her sweet hips and breast.

Arya felt her face flush but only slightly.

“I have so many women to choose from Merjen. Hope springs eternal.”

The beautiful tall black woman laughed and gathered her gear to leave. Arya watched the beautiful black woman leave. She was, indeed, very enticing. Arya was coming to understand her likes in women. She was either drawn to women like Merjen and the Sand Snakes with their darker-hued skin or too the opposite aspect in a woman. Women of extremely pale complexion and not warrior-like at all. Slender and comely women with nice breasts made Arya drool. She found that Valyrians made her wet. Hell, most women did, but a woman of Valyrian ancestry made her so hot and horny. A woman like Saelalys Narennis.

Another thing that attracted Arya to a woman was a sense of power and prowess. Arya felt a strong attraction to women warriors. Their skill in arms and power was a strong aphrodisiac to her. Women of court did not attract her in the least. They were too pretentious for her tastes. Their courtly games did not attract her. She liked the common touch she supposed thinking of Phirona Ormonnis and Saelalys Narennis.

Arya was still dabbing her face dry of sweat thinking sweet thoughts when Obara came into the practice yard she and Syrio used. All the Martells had an open invitation to spar with Arya. She enjoyed pitting her skills against theirs. Arya thrilled in sparring with the Sand Snakes. She enjoyed fighting women who were warriors like Arya knew she had become. The road she needed to travel was long and winding, but she could take out many of the pompous popping jays she saw strutting around. She also enjoyed the view of the Sand Snakes as they fought. They were all hot. The ways their bodies moved while they sparred with Arya made her pulse hammer in her veins and loins.

Obara joined Arya to drink a bottle of water. She seemed distracted.

They were soon practicing. Elia was very good with her spear, but Obara was a demoness with the weapon. She was able to get through Arya’s defense at times. Arya was not too upset. Arya had recently scored a kill on her master. Her victory had put Arya in a very good mood. Of course, Syrio took it in good grace.

“I slipped! I slipped! You saw it! No fair!” Arya was elated at her first victory over her ‘master.’ She had scored her first ‘kill’ against Syrio Forel, the First Sword of Braavos! The man, when he got done bitching, had clapped her on her shoulder with a smile. “Good, my protégée. You have taken your first step … just don’t let it go to your head, Arya.” He winked at her and clapped her on
the shoulder again. “You won’t get through my guard that way again.” He looked her in the eyes hard. “Keep improving, Direwolf.”

Thus, Arya was surprised when she quickly scored a kill on the eldest Sand Snake. She had once before, and that had made her happy. She had gotten through Obara’s guard with a complicated attack and parry steps. Now her attacks were basic, and she was having success. Then she did so again and yet again scored a ‘kill’ in rather quick fashion. Obara seemed off. Her footwork flatfooted, and her usual cunning attack strategy and super-fast footwork slow and clumsy.

Arya lifted her hand to call a halt to the training.

“Okay, Obara. Spill it. You are definitely not in the here and now.”

Obara looked chagrin. She took a deep breath.

“It is Cersei. She is acting in a fashion I find troubling. She should be celebrating what she did to her father. Instead, it has put her into a tailspin. I am worried. She seemed to be opening up. She is a great fuck let me tell you, Arya. To all our surprise, she is funny and actually nice. I mean, she has a cutting wit and all, but that makes her spicy and a little dangerous,” Obara smiled. “She could be the bad girl your mother warned you about.”

“You mean like you and your sisters,” Arya joked back. She had blushed at Obara’s frank appraisal to Cersei’s skill in the furs. The teenager was happy her face no longer went scarlet at the use of the F word so casually. She wanted to be doing the F word!

“Yes. Since Cersei started making love to us, she has been so happy. Now she is back to being morose. It sucks.”

Arya tried to console her. She was not sure what to say.

She and her father had discussed Cersei too.

“You are a woman Arya. Cersei totally shamed Tywin and humiliated him. She should be walking on the clouds. Instead, she broods and frets.” Her father looked at his daughter, looking for a feminine perspective.

“I don’t know father. You have told me now of how her father abused her as a child, and her brother did not come to her aid even though they were so close. It is obvious she loathes her father, but I perceive she is also greatly afraid of the man. He is her father. That is a powerful negative force she had to grow up with. A force that was actively against her.”

Her father had thought that over. His face showed his concentration.

“I think you might be on the right path with your thoughts, Arya. The events at the gate triggered something from her past. I need to figure it out. Cersei has many layers. If Daenerys does indeed live, I will require Cersei I think. Cersei left much to be desired as a Queen but a Queen she was.”

Arya was curious by what her father could mean by that statement, but Arya did not ask. True, Cersei had changed, but she was still the woman who tried to put her father down and had treated Sansa so poorly. She had no use for the woman. But still, the change in the woman was fascinating.

Arya looked at Obara. Both women in a relaxed pose. Obara was looking off with unfocused eyes. Arya went to her.

“Give her time Obara. She will snap out of it.”
I hope so. I like Cersei so much now. I would never have thought I would say that, but I do. I guess a leopard can change her spots after all. My aunt has watched Cersei watching your training from on high. She envies you, you know. She wanted to be a warrior too. Your father has allowed the pursuit of your dream. Tywin tried to knock Cersei’s teeth out of her mouth for it.” She had shaken her head then. Obara left with a sad cast to her features.

That news surprised Arya as she stood there. My gods Ayra thought. How lucky she had been, she realized yet again. Gods! Tywin was a fucking bastard. Poor Cersei. She stopped. She shook her head. That did not forgive her actions. Arya paused. She had a better insight, though.

Arya understood Obara cutting their training short. She was too distracted to practice. Arya stood there, ruminating over Obara’s words.

Her musings ended when Syrio entered into the court. He looked at Arya.

“Whom have you practiced with Arya? How long?”

Arya knew he wanted to know to gauge how hard to push Arya. He was only interested in improving her stamina and skills. She told him.

“Okay. Let’s work on cardio and flexibility this training session first. Then we will do a little basic footwork. One must continuously hone the most basic of skills. Like the seasons' cycle one after the other, so must we practice the same routines again and again. I have been doing them for decades, and still, I must do them again and again. My body must never forget. I must be able to call on them unbidden.”

Arya knew her Master spoke true.

First, they did calisthenics. Arya and her Master did sets of fifty. Syrio did the first part of the sets making sure that Arya’s form was perfect. Arya did them with full effort. Her master led her from routine to routine. Syrio worked her hard and then let her rest for five minutes.

“A warrior never knows when he might find moments to rest when he—or she is in combat. One must be able to push oneself further than they ever thought they could to survive on the battlefield. This is why I push you so hard, my student. To be the best requires dedicated training and effort. You give it. I am blessed in this Arya.”

A slight blush came over Arya’s face. She always felt pride and a little embarrassment when her master praised her so.

Next, the man went and picked up two lengths of rope that had wooden handles fitted to the ends. They were from Selhorys. A fighting clan there had developed the idea of jumping the rope to build up endurance and reflexes. One held the rope by the handles in each hand. The rope was driven up and over the head and jumped over with the feet.

It had not taken Arya long to get the hang of the concept. She soon had the skill to jump the rope without the rope tangling in her feet. It was the speed that Syrio could attain that astonished her. Her master’s hands twirled so fast the rope was a blur. He easily jumped over the rope. It had taken Arya a month now, but she had mastered the skill and the endurance to keep up with her Master.

She remembered the first couple of times she had tried to keep up with her Master. She thought she might hack her lungs up; she was so out of breath. She had practiced on her own in her room at night. The extra practice allowed her to build up her endurance quickly. It also made sure she slept like the dead at night. She was exhausted!
Today she was easily keeping up with Syrio. Yes! She was ready.

She sing-song out, “I’m keeping up, master! Nan-na-na-nahh-na!” She stuck out her tongue at her master.

Her master looked over at her blandly. Then Arya got steamed!

As she watched, her Master found the need to humiliate her! While he jumped the rope, her Master started to do knee high rises, kicking his butt with his heels, he did cross-steps and jumping jack leg movements. He started to kick one foot forward and then the other. He capped it off by taken his jump rope and swirling on each side of his body and bringing it back all the while jumping over the rope in perfect rhythm.

To say Arya was pissed would have been an understatement. She was furious. It was supposed to be her getting over on him and not the other way around! It wasn’t fair!

She threw her rope down and rushed over to Syrio and ripped the rope from his hands. She lashed the rope around before throwing it on the ground. First, she stomped on the infernal thing and then kicked it across the courtyard.

“Temper, temper Arya” Syrio scolded his charge in a chiding voice. All Arya could do was glare at the freaking showoff. She fumed and bitched at her Master for being such a showoff! She calmed down, drinking water and eating a handful of raisins.

“Let us move to our boxing skills,” Syrio told his charge. Arya followed her Master to the iron triangle that had been installed into the inner wall of the court. From a chest, Syrio produced a leather ball that was about a foot in diameter filled with sawdust. He hung it from a hook. The first time he had shown Arya this, he had told his charge it was called a ‘speedball.’ He started punching the bag with both hands. The ball was moving forward and back in a blur. Her master, kept it going without pause. He kept this up for a minute before stopping and stepping back.

Then Arya stepped up and easily duplicated the punching of the ball. She had quickly picked up the rhythms and patterns to punch the hanging ball from her master.

She had asked her master where he learned of this and why they were doing it. Her Master had told her that in Volantis, there was a league called the “square mat.” The mat encased in a ring of leather ropes. In it, men punched one another seeking advantage. Her master told her that it taught one endurance and speed of hand. One learned to generate much power with little movement of hand or arm. This practice would help in building strength in using swords.

Not only did it teach one the ability to use one’s hands for the defense, but it also taught you to observe your opponent. This ability to observe allowed one to slip blows thrown at a person. These techniques taught one how to roll with punches and to build up one’s core to take body shots. One learned to endure blows and shrug them off.

“You must learn to be able to defend yourself without your weapon Arya. You may be surprised without your weapon in hand. You may be disarmed in combat. Learning to fight with one's hands gives you a chance to live. Runaway if you can, but if you can’t, then you must move in and engage your foe to take away his advantage. The point of the sword is the most dangerous part. Get inside the reach of the sword, and the danger is greatly reduced. You must move in close to disarm and take down your opponent. It is your only chance to live. If you become good enough, Arya, then you can go on the attack.”

The two took turns at the punching bag for the next twenty minutes. Each person was hitting the bag
with a rhythm that had the ball moving in a blur. Master and student hitting the ball with different rhythms and various combinations of hands and multiple taps with each fist before back to using both fists.

After the punching of the speedball, Syrio wound leather bindings around Arya’s fists. He put on thick leather pads that Arya tied to his arms that covered his arms and palms. Then Arya punched the hands as they moved in and out and around her person. Arya focused on their movement so she could strike the moving hands as fast and hard as she could. She was learning how to generate power without wind up. The effort made her sweat heavily. Then they switched, and Syrio worked out pounding Arya’s bound forearms and hands. Both dripped sweat. Arya’s hands were toughening up from the hard impacts.

Then he and Arya moved to the basics of grappling. One corner of the court covered with a thick layer of hay, and that covered with many furs. The two would grab cloth and limbs with clenching grips. They used their bodies as a fulcrum, which allowed them to flip each other over their hips and across their bodies.

“I will only tell you this, Arya. Twice I have been disarmed by men who were masters of their weapons. One I was able to run away from.” Arya acted shocked, but Syrio knew she was serious. She had learned that if you must, you ran away to survive. Live today to win tomorrow.

“Remember this, Arya. Cowards live to run away another day!” Syrio had smiled at his cheesy joke. “I did run away. It was the only way I could live. The second time I was able to use my boxing and grappling skills to move in and engage my enemy. He was too surprised by my moving in to prevent it. I was able to get him on the ground. There I slit his throat.”

Arya no longer thought that being ruthless in combat was dishonorable. Both Syrio and her father were teaching Arya that staying alive was the most important aspect of fighting. Live. That was the true goal of dueling. Victory brought life and the success of one’s goals. Defeat only brought death. To that, Syrio had taught Arya one phrase to tell death, “not today.”

They then ceased their toils for their morning session. They spent twenty minutes talking in High Valyrian. Syrio corrected her mispronunciations and when she missed stress points on syllables. They were coming less and less frequently now. Her ability to read the language was improving rapidly as well.

“I want you to hide this ability Arya, from everyone but your immediate family.”

“Why?” Arya was proud of the language she was learning to speak. She wanted to show off!

“It is an advantage, Arya. We may be in a situation where knowing High Valyrian and the languages based on it are to our advantage. Spycraft is about using unknown skills to one’s advantage.” Arya thought that sucked, but she could see the logic of it.

“Can I talk to you, Syrio?”

Her tone caused her Master to look at her with a sharp focus.

“Of course, Arya. I am here for you. I am a fount of great knowledge and insight,” Syrio pontificated piously.

Arya rolled her eyes, fighting her gag reflex and then said, “This has nothing to do with warcraft or matters of court.”

“Oh,” Syrio’s voice now less sure.
“My name day is coming. It will be my fifteenth.”

“Really! What day?”

She told him. He smiled at that. “That is good to know Arya.” Arya worried over that but let it slide.

Arya looked off. Then she looked back at Syrio.

“If my mother had had her way, I would be promised off to some Lord or Knight by now. I hated that. My father would not hear of it. I know he sees Lyanna in me. I am so thankful for that.”

Syrio looked at her waiting for her to continue.

“I’m attracted to women!” Arya said in a rush.

“I know,” Syrio said softly. “Your father knows too.” Arya felt her mouth fall open. Her eyes opened wide. “He does not speak of it, but I see it in his eyes. We accept that, Arya. You have earned the right to lead your life as you choose. I wish Westeros were more like Dorne, Braavos, Tyrosh, Pentos and Lys. There the strictures on whom one can love are much looser. In those locales, most are allowed to live in peace with their preferences. You may have to move to certain locations in those lands to find that acceptance, but they exist.”

“The general populace is focused on their daily lives. The religions of Essos do not focus on sexuality near as much as the Church of the Seven in Westeros.”

Arya felt a rush of relief run through her body. To know that those she loved and trusted accepted her made her feel better. She decided she would have to tell Sansa soon. If Jeyne were right, she would have a sister in arms.

“I will have to confront my mother,” Arya said in a tight voice.

“You will be supported, Arya. Your father and I will stand up for you if you are worried.”

Another rush of relief flowed through her. She relaxed. She looked at her, Master.

“Have you ever been in love, Syrio?”

She watched her Master grimace. Then he looked away. For a minute, he continued to stare off into the distance. Arya waited patiently. He looked back at her and took a long breath.

“Once. Maybe. With the passing of the years, I now wonder. I thought I was, but I was not able to give myself to her. She moved on. I was hurt, but I understand her actions now. She was able to see clearly what I could not see then.”

“What was that?”

“My first love was my sword. Maybe my only love. My blade was and is my lover and confidant. I give her my all. There was no room for any other love, Arya.” He paused. Then he reached out and gripped her shoulder. “Don’t make that mistake, Arya. I lost my chance. I may never get another. Please be wiser than I was when I had my chance. If love should stumble upon you, Arya grab a hold of her. Literally, in this case. I have given you the skills.” He smirked. Arya rolled her eyes.

“I see your suitors Arya. They are beautiful and passionate. They want to have sex with you, Arya.
Not love but sex. You are young, Arya. Partake of the joys of the body. Learn from these women who wish to share joy and life with you. Become a” he paused, a big cheesy smile forming on his face, “a Bed Dancer.” He waggled his eyebrows. Arya groaned.

“Seriously though, Arya. You are young and free now. Now is the time to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh. Become skilled so you can take those skills to the bed of future women. I see the paramours who seek your presence in their beds. The Sand Snakes and now the Hens of Margaery Tyrell are gathering. They are quite happy with their current promiscuous lives. Sex is wonderful, Arya. Partake of it. Just remember that sex by itself is not love.”

He looked at her seriously. “Sex can lead to love, but it fades with time. The rush and exhilaration of great sex cannot sustain a relationship. Only truly getting to know a woman or man can build the relationship that lasts. A relationship that is more and binds two into one. Then the sex between you and him—her will be the binding that gives life that verve and zest that makes one feel truly fulfilled and alive.”

“Only remember this, for I have seen it many times. Do not confuse pure sex for love. The first will fade with the passage of time. The later only grows stronger.”

“When will I know Syrio?” Arya asked. She enjoyed sharing this with her Master.

“Hell if I know Arya. You could fall in love with one of the Sand Snakes and she with you. Maybe several of them. They seem polygamous. They are primarily interested in sex, though. They do love each other, but they are truly polyarmorous and seem to need many partners to be happy.”

“Once you chose Arya, I feel you will be more traditional in your choice. You will want one mate. I think you will need more from your mate than physical gratification and the need for new conquests. You will need that something indefinable.” He cocked his head. He smiled, raising one eyebrow. “I hear you are destined for a Dragon.”

Arya shook her head in the negative. “I don’t know this woman. She could be a bitch for all I know. The last thing I need is a Cersei or Joffery Lannister.” She laughed at that. “I will not save myself for some damn prophecy. She is dead by now. I have read up on the Red Wastes. It is a desiccated land with dead cities. Her bones are picked clean by jackals now and bleached by the sun.”

“How will I know when love has come upon me?” she asked her master again. He paused, clearly considering.

“I can’t answer that for you, Arya. It may strike like lightning from nowhere. It may come upon you like the slow rolling of the tides.” He took her shoulder again, giving it a strong squeeze. “Only this will I say with any certainty. Know it when you see it, Arya. Don’t deny it. Take it and hold onto it. If she does not see it, then make it clear to her of your adore and purity of love. If she is worthy of you, she will come to see it.” He paused. “Or maybe she will be the one pursuing you. If she is persuasive and her soul is good, then see the truth. Grab ahold of her and never let go.”

“But what if I am wrong?”

“Arya, true love is precious. It is worth the risk. Ask your father. It is the taking of risks in life that gives it spice. Again, I repeat what I have told you before Arya. See with all your senses and insights. You will know if you do, Arya. Don’t let dross, ambitions or fear cloud what your heart tries to tell you, Arya. Nothing more can I say.”

He smiled at her with a sharp grimace.
“Just don’t blow it,” Syrio spoke in a forlorn timbre. There was a long pause. A sad look on Syrio’s face. “Like I did.”

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He felt good being upon his horse. He had arrived. Robb looked out over his army as it lay spread out before him. They had bivouacked behind and in a semicircle around the Lannister host on their rear quadrant. He had enjoyed that. The Lannisters had to feel threatened, and yet they could not do one damn thing about it.

Tywin Lannister had been cut off from the other armies in the field. Their leaders all in King’s Landing with his father. House Lannister was the least loved House in Westeros. All thanks to one Tywin Lannister. Robb paused in his thinking. Well, the Iron Islands were a bunch of assholes too. At least they had the good grace to be off the continent.

Yes, Tywin Lannister knew he must tread lightly. He was most definitely not in a position to dictate terms at all. The old man knew it too. The situation must be a novelty to the conniving man. A man used to doing as he pleased. Tywin was a man who did not care what others thought of him.

The forces that had streamed out of King’s Landing during his father’s wounding were now slowly streaming back to King’s Landing. At this time, the forces of the Lannisters were still fragmented.

The forces of Beric Dondarion had savaged the forces of the Lannisters that had roamed the Crownlands. The Druids had given the forces under the Stark banner that. They had sniped and surprised the forces of Lannisters at every turn. Tywin had felt the same wrath on his journey east. The Lions were ready for this truce. The fight had been taken out of them for the moment.

The other Houses with their armies had arrived refreshed and ready for battle. The Lannisters were not in this condition, Robb knew. They had been attacked and harassed since they traveled up into the mountains of the Westerlands. The armies of House Lannister constantly savaged. The rank and file soldiers were more than ready to accept this time of truce.

The Druids that had been in the field around King’s Landing and those that had followed the army of the North and Tywin’s army were now with Robb. They had formed a phalanx around his army, making sure there were no surprises from the old Lion. The Druids were providing a cloak of protection unseen by all. Even the forces of the Direwolf could not see their protectors. Tywin seemed to have had enough of battle for now, as well. His army was only sending out pickets around his army on the last fifty miles to King’s Landing. Those pickets held close to the Lannister army. Tywin not seeking confrontation. The main army of the Lannisters now bivouacked, the Lannister host had retreated into their camp. They sought no contact with the other present armies.

The old cagy Lion knew that the fate of Westeros would be decided in the walls of the Red Keep itself. There would be no grand battles it seemed. Robb sighed at that. His father had proved himself in combat when he was the age that Robb was now. His father’s actions were now robbing Robb of the opportunity to achieve greatness on the battlefield.

He supposed it was a fair tradeoff. Many men had died in the conflict of Robert’s Rebellion. That was true. He had lost men already and only fought in skirmishes. His army had not confronted a great army in the field of battle. His father’s plans were working as he said they would.

Robb would let his father try his Game of Thrones tactics. A war would only be as a last resort.

Now his commanders, honor guard, and highest-ranked knights were slow marching down the King’s Road to the Gate of the Gods. He had thought of going in through the Lion’s Gate, but he
decided not to rile the old Lion unnecessarily.

He knew he and his fellow soldiers dressed in their shined and buffed armor were putting on a grand display. Their armor polished to a high sheen reflected the sunlight in bright spangles. The standards of the North and Vale flapping in the early morning wind. The howling Direwolf and proud Falcon in abundance. The flags of the lesser houses also flying high and proud. Other poles were holding flags with the formal and informal sayings of the Houses above the neck and the Vale.

Robb was proud of what he had accomplished. He had formed up the Houses of the North and Vale and marched them down the Neck and to King’s Landing. He had led their training and followed his father’s wishes on how to comport their factions. He had controlled the more warlike desires of his main subordinates.

He had led a force into combat when he must. His father had supported his actions when he reported them to his father by Druid raven. “I know you needed to give Karstark and Hornwood something Robb. Well done.”

Yes. On the field of battle, he had done well. He took a deep breath. It was the off the battlefield situations that would be vexing his father. He did what he must. He was not some damn pawn used on a Crevessa board, he thought defiantly. He would not have his personal life controlled as his father had had his late teenage life dictated too.

That was a battle that did not have to be fought as of yet. Sometimes a tactical delay was called for Robb thought to himself. He steeled himself yet again. The confrontation was coming.

He marched on. He had every right to feel confident. He felt relaxed and charged. Last night with Alys had been freaking fantastic. The sex was only getting better as they learned from each other. He hated not having her at his side now, but she understood. She was hidden away deep in the host of House Karstark. For now, he would endure it. Endure it, he must, but only for a little while longer.

Robb knew his father would lose his ever-loving mind when he found out Robb was off the table in his father’s machinations. There would be no marriage between House Stark and Tyrell.

Love had changed everything for Robb. He would do anything he had too to keep Alys as his wife. He sighed. He now understood how Arya felt all those years. The years of fighting expectations and being forced to be in a box, she absolutely had no desire to be in. Arya was Lyanna reborn. His father had let Arya take her lead because of it. Robb, at the time, had been angered at her defiance. Now he had made her actions look tame by comparison.

His face took a grim set. He had been a hypocrite and not even known it.

He heard a commotion behind him. He looked back. Oh, brother, he thought.

Tyrion was on the horse Robb had provided him. Robb had his carpenters and leather tack men construct for the dwarf his specially designed saddle. Said dwarf had an angry look on his face. Robb really couldn’t blame the dwarf.

Robb’s mother was on her horse riding along behind Tyrion Lannister. They were not verbally sparring. That did not mean they were not jousting.

His mother would surge her horse forward and lean in to try and pinch Tyrion. The Lannister was swatting his hands furiously at his mother’s fingers. He landed a slap on her hand. Catelyn Stark grimaced and pulled her hand back, sucking on her fingers. Her eyes glared at the dwarf while she
shook her hand to take the sting out of her fingers. Robb’s mother’s eyes filled with fire and the promise of false death.

Tyrion flipped Robb’s mother off but scooted his horse forward, seeing the rage burning hotter in the eyes of his nemesis.

Robb had no desire to intervene. It was clear the two enjoyed their contests of wills and snark.

Tyrion was beside Robb now. Karstark looked over. He, too, enjoyed the contest of wills.

“Water, a biscuit, hardtack, anything!” Tyrion cried out. Karstark produced a strip of jerky. The dwarf snatched the jerky from Karstark’s grip. Tyrion tore into the proffered strip of cured meat. He chewed it furiously. Robb’s mother had recovered from her stinger and had ridden up. She was hovering two feet off from Tyrion, looking for her opportunity to strike.

“Guest Right! Guest Right! I declare Guest Right!” Tyrion bleated out.

Oh, brother Robb groaned. To Robb’s surprise, his mother’s eyes widen, and she backed off. Tyrion relaxed. He turned to look at Robb with a look that said I am in total control. Thus, he did not see Catelyn Stark kick her horse forward. Both hands struck out. Fingers found flesh and pinched hard.

SQQUUEEEEEE SSSQQQUUUUEEEEEE SSSQQUUUUUEEE

Tyrion kicked his horse with his small feet sending it surging forward. Somehow Tyrion wormed his horse between Robb and Karstark’s horse. His little head was bending all around, looking for his foe. Robb saw that for now, his mother was satisfied. She had not advanced giving chase to Tyrion.

Robb wondered where this strange dynamic was going. He smiled. It was entertaining.

He saw a party march slowly out from the Lannisters. He smiled grimly. At the head of it was Tywin Lannister. His glare would make the Wall seem like Dorne in the summer it was so cold and lacking in decency and humanity. He returned the gaze with a flat stare. He was happy to be entering King’s Landing. He had to admit that the man had an air about him that was intimidating. His past actions and ruthlessness were giving him a stature beyond the man’s mere height.

His father had plans for House Lannister. Tywin would not be riding so high and mighty then.

As his party approached the Gate of the Gods, his father came out astride his horse. He only had a small contingent about him. Robb shook his head. On his father’s face a soft smile. He had nothing on his head. He was a King without a crown. Nor was he wearing a sword on his hip. Robb was not sure about that. He understood his father was showing Tywin that he did not fear the old Lion. While brave to the utmost, Robb doubted the wisdom of his father’s actions. He kept his mouth shut. This moment was part of his father’s Game of Thrones play. Eddard acknowledged the forces from the North but moved his contingent towards the Lannisters. It was clear his father had something to say to Tywin Lannister.

Robb felt love for the man who was his father flow hot in his blood. His father cut a dashing figure, and his sheer bravery filled one with awe. He heard his mother take a deep breath. He looked at her. Her face sufficed with love. He could only hope that Alys looked at him with such love after nearly twenty years of marriage. Wife and son watched the man they loved dearly come up before the party of Lannisters that needed to be parlayed with.

As he watched, his father walked his horse to be in front of Tywin Lannister. With his father went his honor guard along with a squad of Goldcloaks. The distance was too great for Robb to hear, but
he saw that Tywin was most displeased with the words spoken to him. The party of Lannister’s milled around uneasily holding their place while Eddard Stark and party walked their horses back to Robb and his commanders.

Robb’s father smiled broadened into a full one. A rare event.

“Ned!” Robb’s mother enthused. She kicked her horse forward. Husband and wife embraced. Their faces filled with big happy smiles. Robb could not hear what was said, but their faces said it all. They were extremely happy to once more be in each other’s company. Robb felt his face set. This would change for his mother all too soon. Again Robb felt anger at himself for initially thinking he wanted to see discord between his parents.

The King, wife and son slowly rode back to the Red Keep. Robb turned back to glance at Tywin before they entered the gate into King’s Landing. The old Lion’s face was red with anger. Robb looked at his father. The look on his father’s face was bland. Tywin was being left to stew in his anger.

The ride back to the Red Keep was amiable. Robb enjoyed being back with his father. It pleased Robb to see his parents happy. Robb had heard from the Karstark camp that their titular head had been a cold man towards his wife. Not so Robb’s father for his mother. For that, Robb had come to realize just how lucky he had been to have Eddard Stark as his father. He may be a quiet man, but he showed all the love he felt for them. It gave Robb an ideal to strive towards. With these thoughts in his mind, it seemed like they had just passed through the gate into the City that they were now at the Red Keep. A smile filled Robb’s face seeing the persons outside the Barbacon and the lowered drawbridge.

Robb’s face went grim. He knew of the coming storm that would wash all over them all. A storm he would add too. He shook his head. That was for another day. The smile came back to his face, though it was not quite as sunny and pure.

He saw Arya. She has stepped forward. Robb felt his eyes go big. She indeed looked like a warrior true. She had dressed in the style of a Braavos Bravo. The attire only accentuated her new military bearing. Her body had filled out, and her stance spoke only one word. Warrior. Her leathers freshly cleaned and oiled. They gleamed in the sun. He saw the two swords on her right hip.

Slowly the horses clopped down the King’s Road. He was almost at the party that waited to greet them into the Red Keep. He saw Sandor Clegane. He was hard to miss with his tall height and scars. His head went back. Was that two little girls on his shoulders? He saw the small copper-skinned woman by Sandor’s side. She had to be the Dothraki woman Ziggi that Robb’s father had mentioned. Did she have a baby in a pompous? Seeing the little girls was a surprise to Robb. Not only did Sandor have a wife but children as well.

Robb’s father had not told him all that was occurring in King’s Landing.

He saw Oberyn Martell and his family now. He smiled. The Sand Snakes had to be a handful. He saw one of them glide over to Arya. They talked quietly. The tall woman stood near to Arya. The
woman touched Arya on her upper arm. The Sand Snake moved in close to Arya. While Robb looked on, he saw the woman look intently at Arya. Arya was completely comfortable with the closeness. The looks between them had an intensity to it. The way they looked at each other reminded him of Alys and himself.

Robb felt a jolt rush through his body. It was so clear. Robb had hinted to his mother that she would have to accept big changes upon her arrival back in King’s Landing. He had not anticipated this change. The truth of Jon would be bad enough. Now he knew the truth about Arya. He had known it, of course, but seeing with his own eyes made it real to Robb. Arya wanted to be a warrior and had taken on a warrior’s appetites.

He felt a rush of judgment start to form in his heart. He stiffened and crushed it. What right did he have to judge Arya? She was not hiding what her desires were. Well, if you were looking for it. His desire he was hiding from all but the High nobility of House Karstark and Hornwood. That controlled any rush to judgment.

Robb turned to look at his mother. She was smiling, looking at her husband and daughters. She did not see it. Thank the gods. It was then he looked at Sansa. Egads! Look how close his tall sister and Jeyne were standing to each other, Robb thought. They were holding hands with interlocked fingers and leaning into each other. He looked at their faces quickly. His eyebrows knitted. Sansa seemed innocent enough, but Jeyne’s showed pure possessiveness. As he looked on, Sansa pulled Jeyne tight to the side of her body. The hand caressed the hip of Jeyne. Oh hell! Sansa was in love and did not even know it! For how long would that continue? When would they act on their passions?

Another surprise hit Robb. Is that a Direwolf pup at Sansa and Jeyne’s feet dancing around with a wagging tail. A black Direwolf had come from behind the pair of teenagers. The wolf was jumping around and rubbing against both of their legs. Robb saw that Sansa had found herself another Direwolf somehow. His father had left out more than a few details from his scrolls Robb was discovering. He doubted his father had picked up on Sansa and Jeyne yet. More layers to unravel in the near future.

Again Robb glanced at his mother. She did not see the attraction between Sansa and Jeyne, thank the old gods. He guessed his subterfuge had opened his eyes to the obvious that so many missed. There would be much to come to terms with Robb now understood. With a shake of his head, Robb sighed for the turmoil that he must cause. He would not shy away from it. He would do what he must to keep Alys by his side. The choice made, Robb would accept the consequences of his actions.

Earlier, Robb had told himself he wanted to see Yi Ti fireworks. Brother, was he going to get his wish. Robb felt a little punch drunk but shook it off. His party was at the gate now. He and his party dismounted their horses. His father slipped down off his horse with elegant grace. Years of experience had given Robb’s father an air of competence and regal skill. Robb and his mother dismounted as well.

He went to his father and gave him a quick, tight hug. He finally could once more hold his father. If not for Arya, he would not be able to this now he thought to himself. He had much to give his youngest sister thanks for. He was genuinely happy to see his father, but he knew that his father and mother longed to get truly reacquainted. Robb stepped back. Robb smiled, seeing his mother go to his father. The two embraced tightly. His father swung his wife around and around and giving each other chaste kisses. Their eyes alight with love for each other.

The two now able to fully connect again after their enforced separation. The love the two clearly felt
for each other was a benefice to observe Robb thought. Oberyn was not married to Ellaria as Stannis was to Selyse. The marriage between the Lord of Dragonstone and Selyse Florent cold and loveless. Robb knew he was lucky to grow up in a household where love clearly existed between the spouses. Robb had begun to wonder just how rare that might be.

Robb felt a wave of sadness wash over him. When his mother was informed of Jon and found out about her daughters, she would be most displeased. With Jon, he would not blame his mother. He pursed his lips. How could his father have kept such a thing secret Robb asked himself for the millionth time. The anger of that secret flushed through Robb’s veins. He knew his parents' love was strong. He hoped it was strong enough.

A smile filled Robb’s face seeing his mother run her fingers through her husband’s much shorter hair. She commented on his clean-shaven face and how much she liked it. Robb’s father blushed bashfully.

Robb walked over to Arya. They had had a strained relationship with their growing up in Winterfell. Her wild ways were always off-putting to Robb. He now saw the childishness of his past actions. She looked up at him with an open but guarded look. He had most often backed up their mother’s actions. He smiled down at Arya with what he hoped was total acceptance and familial love on his face.

“The marital attire looks good on you, Arya. You are quite the warrior. I want to train with you if you find that acceptable.”

The beaming smile on Arya’s face made Robb feel good inside. He had grown up himself and made rebellious decisions. He understood Arya now. He also understood that Arya had become a truly dangerous warrior. It exuded from her pores. Robb’s father had told his son of his youngest sister’s constant dedicated training. It had transformed her into something truly dangerous. He was not so sure of his prowess in regards to his sister. He would be wary when they dueled.

They made small talk for a few minutes. Arya introduced Elia Sand to Robb. The young woman was polite and made small talk with Robb. She reached out several times to touch Arya on the arm. Arya smiled back, but Robb did not see the heat in Ayra’s eyes that he felt when Alys touched him. The desire was there, but not the heat to act on it. He wondered about that. He had much to get caught up on. There were many dynamics at play he needed to understand.

He gravitated over to Sansa and Jeyne. They were talking to each other. Robb looked around for the Direwolf pup he had seen. He came up to the pair. He hugged Sansa hard and kissed Jeyne’s knuckles lightly. They exchanged greetings and talked of time in court and marches south. Robb looked over the pair. They were standing side by side close. The distance between the two to close for correct social etiquette.

He suddenly smiled. The green dress of Sansa and the light gold dress of Jeyne were merged between their close together legs. Suddenly, the fabric began to wiggle. A black snout appeared sniffing. Then a wolf face pushed through and looked around.

“What is his name?” Robb asked.

“It is her. Princess,” Jeyne answered. “I named her after Sansa. She is the princess of my life.” Robb caught that. Jeyne had a scared look come over her face. She looked up at Sansa, but she was talking to Karstark, who had ambled over to pass salutations between himself and Sansa. Robb looked elsewhere to give Jeyne cover. Karstark’s eldest son came up on Jeyne’s open side. He started to talk to her. Sansa noticed this immediately. Robb watched Sansa snake her arm around Jeyne’s hip and pull her tighter to her body.
The wolf wiggled clear of the legs, now hemming her in. Princess looked up at Robb. He knelt, and the wolf gambled over, and he patted her on the head. Grey Wind walked over. Princess took one look at Grey Wind’s mighty form and whined running back behind her mistresses. Robb continued to watch Sansa and Jeyne. Jeyne's eyes went limpid, feeling Sansa rub her hip. Robb looked up at Sansa. She did not have the ‘look’ on her face.

Robb thought he understood. Jeyne wanted Sansa and would soon bed her. Sansa’s body knew the truth even if her heart had not caught up yet. He took another deep breath. He would support them. He would support Arya. He would support Jon. He supposed he would support his father even though he was still angry about Jon with his father.

He looked at his mother. She was so happy. He felt childish now, remembering his desire to see the coming conflict. He felt anguish now for what his mother would soon endure. He would be adding to her hurt. He straightened his back. He would handle the coming storm as well as he could. He supposed his father and mother would too. He could not but help feeling for her mother. So many foundations she had built her life on were about to crumble beneath her.

He knew his mother. It would be a winter hurricane. His mother had to learn to let go, but in many things, she had been lied too. Lies that had led her down paths she would not have taken otherwise. He would do what he could to minimize the hurt and discord. He hoped he was up to the task.

His mother and father had separated. He saw his mother's eyes search his father's face. A wife knew how to read her husband.

“What is it, Ned? I can sense something. What is it?”

He saw his father give his wife a grimace and a squint smile. He took a long breath.

“Much has happened in your time away, Cat. Things I long to tell you. Soon Cat. Let me deal with Tywin and get things settled, and then I promise we will talk.”

He watched his mother process the words. She bowed her head to her husband. His mother was nothing else if not the dutiful wife Robb thought.

His mother moved off to perform her duty now, as the wife of the new King of Westeros. She was greeting Stannis and Selyse. He felt for his mother. His mother kept a polite, solicitous look on her face as she talked to the stiff couple.

Robb walked back to this father. Karstark and Hornwood were talking to him. When he walked up, they heaped a profuse amount of praise of him to his father. He was embarrassed. He merely did what his duty required. He did catch Karstark’s eyes. They shared a look. Robb shook his head ‘no’ ever so slightly. Karstark bowed his head. He knew that Robb would have to tell his father at a time of his choosing about Alys. He glanced over at his mother.

He would be ruining his father’s plans, and yet he feared his mother’s reactions more than anything else. Catelyn Tully was a force of nature when riled.

Arya walked up. He saw the surprised look on Karstark, and Hornwood faces.

Eddard came up beside his daughter, his face beaming with pride, “Arya is training with a former First Sword of Braavos. She is well on her way to becoming a Water Dancer. She is leading the training of the Goldcloaks. She has been in every battle I have fought and in battles while I lay imprisoned and then convalescing.” Robb saw the look of doubt on the faces of his second and third in command faces. He looked over at Arya. She seemed unfazed by the doubt on the men’s faces.
She also seemed supremely confident. With a steady gaze, she looked back at Karstark and Hornwood.

The two men had doubt on their faces but were not about to contradict their Warden and now King. The three men walked off a short way discussing events in the North and on the way down the King’s Road. His father bonding again with his two most trusted Lords of the North.

Robb felt a small smile on his face, thinking of his second and third in command commanders. He thought Arya might have a surprise for them. She might have one with her brother. She exuded a supreme air of confidence now. The way she held her back so stiff and straight made one doubt oneself. He sensed Arya had become extremely dangerous. *Good for her!* He thought. Robb felt he understood his filled with Wolf sister much better now. Again, he, Robb Stark, had grown up.

He felt his dander go up. His mother was walking their way. Her face had a hard set to it. Her eyes riveted on Arya. Robb took a deep breath. So it begins.

With a supreme air of confidence, the mother confronted her daughter. “What is the meaning of this, Arya? This wearing of a warrior’s garb and a Braavosi at that!”

“I am a warrior now, mother. Father has fostered me to Syrio Forel. He is a master swordsman. I am his disciple. I will become a First Sword in time, mother. Be happy for me.” Arya made direct eye contact with her mother. Robb’s mother held the gaze. For many heartbeats, the two women continued the stare-off. It was his mother that broke and looked away.

“I will talk to your father on this, Arya.”

“Please do, mother. It will not matter. I have chosen my path. *I*—mother. Not you. I am my own person.”

“The impudence! You are still only fourteen young lady.”

“No matter. I am a woman now.”

Again they stared off against each other, and again it was Catelyn Stark who looked away. Arya’s air of confidence was an intimidating force. Robb himself felt a new power that radiated off his small sister’s powerful body. He could feel Arya’s new aura, and their mother most definitely did.

Robb saw that Arya had become hardened steel since he last saw her. He watched his mother catch his father’s attention and motioned him to come over. Robb watched his father scan the situation. Robb cocked his head. In the past, his father would have ducked his head and not hold his wife’s direct fiery gaze. This was not the case this time. Eddard held his wife’s gaze as he walked up. A soft smile on his face. Robb’s father’s body was relaxed.

Arya and Robb stood off to the side to watch their parents contend over Arya and her chosen path.

“Yes, Cat?” He had his soft squint smile on his face. His voice was amiable.

“You know of this? Arya being with a swordmaster. Arya said you fostered her to a swordmaster?”

“Yes, I did, Cat. She saved me from death Cat. She has earned the right.”

“But she is a girl, Eddard!”

“This is true, but it does not matter, Cat. Lyanna was a girl and had her dreams denied her because of it. That led to war and her death. I refuse to allow that to happen to my daughter. I have indeed
fostered her to Syrio Forel. My father fostered me, and while I loved my time in the Vale, I missed my family and Winterfell terribly. I did not want that for my children, but in this case, Arya wants it. So I will allow it.”

“She is to marry a Lord, I say,” Robb’s mother ground out to Robb’s father.

“No, my wife. Arya will foster with Syrio Forel. You can argue, but the decision has been made. It is set in stone. Arya will train with Syrio and become all she can be.” He paused. “Support our daughter Cat. Give her the support my sister was denied. Lyanna might still be alive if I had given her the support she deserved. If my father and brother had stood with their daughter and sister as she deserved. To my everlasting shame, I did not. I will not make that mistake again in this time.”

That stopped Robb’s mother. She looked around. Her confidence had been taken down a peg.

“We have much to talk on husband.”

“Indeed we do my wife. But I must again say I have to deal with the Lannister army outside the gates of King’s Landing. At this moment, this is paramount. Let us delay. I need to deal with Tywin. It will be dangerous, and I need to focus.”

That caught everyone’s attention. Everyone near looked at Eddard.

“I will now call in Tywin and his host. I will confront him. He will not like what I have to say and do. Let me focus on this. I must do what I must. It will be dangerous what I have planned. Can I delay our conversation, my wife.”

“Of course, Ned. Of course.” Robb watched his mother chew her lip. Robb knew what must occur, as did his mother. The next minutes would indeed be dangerous. Very dangerous.

Robb felt an edge come on everyone. He now noticed that his father's honor guard had mounted and brought their horses together. Sandor and the black female, who was his Kingsguard, were also mounted now. They all showed tension in their bodies. All prepared for what might be. Two large squads of Goldcloaks had mounted upon horse as well.

Robb looked along the walls of the Red Keep. Goldcloaks with spears lined the walls. Upon the battlements were bowmen.

Robb looked back at his father. On his face, a grim set. It looked like Robb might get a murmur’s show after all. The mounted force traveled out of the Red Keep.

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Anger seethed in the breast of Tywin Lannister. The ignobility he had been made to endure filled his conscious with raging anger. To be made to wait like a common criminal. Made to wait while the army of the North arrived and then bivouacked. Then waiting another day for the damn son of Eddard Stark to go marching by. Strangely, they had come back out in the evening. The men retired to their war tents. With the Tyrells and Stannis army at hand, he dare not make a move against Robb Stark. His inability to take action was maddening. Tywin Lannister was a man of action, and he was forced to be in a docile state.

He would have his revenge on the other Houses of Westeros.

Also, boiling in Tywin’s mind was the insult perpetrated upon him by his daughter! The list of her crimes was becoming so long that the scroll could not be furled up. He had barely dodged her missile. *If that bowl had hit my face*, he shuddered at the harm it would have caused him. The
bitch! His daughter’s unnatural traits seemed to know no end.

Then there were the actions of Cersei’s youngest children towards their grandfather. Their disrespect had Tywin fuming to himself. The insolence was galling. All except for Joffrey, and he was a fucking waste! His daughter had poisoned them with her vile incestuous magic. She had crippled her twin brother with her rancid essence. Now Jaime seemed a shell of himself. He merely stared off into the distance. He had tried to engage many times now with his son, but he kept calling him “Cuz.” What the hell did that mean?! It infuriated him to the point that he stopped talking to his eldest son.

It was confusing to Tywin in a way. Jamie was insolent, as was his character, but the fire that had been there had become banked. His son’s mind often seemed miles away. It was almost as if Jaime was waiting for something. What it could be, Tywin had no clue.

His youngest grandchildren had openly declared for House Stark. Did not his dastardly grandchildren know that one’s whole reason for existence was to further their family name? This thought consumed Tywin. That one’s House’s honor was to be passed on to each generation in turn. He had endeavored to pass that duty on to his children and then grandchildren. He tried to pass on the innate desire to fulfill the duty of preserving the honor on one’s House. At least he had tried, he raged to himself. All his progeny had failed him! It was the name of Lannister that his grandchildren should burnish and lift up. Not Stark! Clearly, the blood incest passed from mother to her children had tainted them. Tywin was thankful that few had seen the unnatural incident with his daughter and grandchildren.

With time, he might still salvage Myrcella and be able to marry her off to some high lord or another. If he took the belt to Tommen, he might be able to beat some sense into his grandson’s weak self. The first thing he would do was have those damn cats of Tommen skinned alive! Normally, he would do that in front of Tommen, but he was so weak that it might break the boy. What malady had ruined his children and grandchildren?! The Lion of Lannister roared to himself in his mind.

A large force of Goldcloaks had formed a phalanx before the Lannister force and held them in check. They had been held in place so that his force was forced to wait nearly three hours while the Direwolf pack moved on down the King’s Road to the Red Keep through the city of King’s Landing.

The sun was hot. The Lannisters dismounted and relaxed as well as they could. The men drank from canteens. Some of the Goldcloaks came forward with large skins of water and large platters of various succulent fruits, loaves of bread and meats. The affrontery of being made to wait not mollified by the offering of food and drink.

He did feel better now that Gregor Clegane had rejoined him. He stood beside his sovereign. Tywin looked up at his immense height. The man near eight feet in height. The man’s massive shoulders and arms thick as the trunk of small trees Tywin thought. The man must weigh at least thirty stone. The man all muscle. Tywin thought that the man had sacrificed his mental acuity for his great strength from his massive frame. The man did not need intellect to protect Tywin. He was inhumanly strong. That strength gave Tywin a sense of security now.

Gregor's strength allowed him to wield a six-foot, two-handed greatsword with just one hand, giving him enormous reach while still wielding a shield. Such was the power of Gregor's strength that he had been known to hack men in half with just a single blow.

The man encased himself with the heaviest, thickest plate armor in the Seven Kingdoms. His armor was so heavy that no ordinary man would be able to move, let alone fight effectively while wearing the armor. The armor made Gregor Clegane nigh-invincible in combat. Below the plate, he wore
chainmail and boiled leather. He also wore a plate helm with only a narrow slit for vision, atop of which was a stone fist punching up towards the sky. Gregor carried on his back an extremely thick oaken shield bearing the three black dogs of House Clegane on a yellow field.

Yes. Tywin felt safe with his Mountain at his side. In his safety, he turned his head to gaze at Jaime Lannister.

He watched his son, who stood beside him. Jaime was in his full armor. He had long ago abandoned his Kingsguard armor. He wore his Lannister armor instead. The golden armor decorated with the Lannister lion, with a gilded longsword and ornate lion's helmet. Jaime’s hard-muscled body filled the armor out like a statue carved by the great Jeffary Tarre. Tywin could not but help think this is what a king should look like. Jaime was tall and straight with his long golden hair gleaming from beneath his helm.

Tywin again wondered about what to do with his son. He had always been impetuous and quick to anger. Still, he had been tractable when given time to think things through. Now though? Tywin was not sure. Jaime still snarked, but it seemed like he was a million miles away now. He answered his father, but it was in a disinterested way. The tone of his son seemed to say that he wished he was across the Narrow Sea in the lost tracks of Essos wandering aimlessly in the grass seas of Dothrak.

These thoughts ran through Tywin’s mind. Surely, he could rehabilitate Jaime, he assured himself. Given time and the removal of all distractions, he could get his son back on course. Little recourse had been given to Tywin. Joffrey was a disaster. That was clear. Tommen was weak. He only had Jaime. Cersei was unredeemable. He would take care of her once back in Casterly Rock. She had totally disgraced the name Lannister.

A hard set came to Tywin’s face. He did have Tyrion, but the imp was only as a last resort. He truly detested his youngest son. His guess at the lineage of his supposed youngest son a thorn always tearing at his paw.

Some message arrived to the Goldcloaks. The men now parted and pulled back. Tywin and his commanders knew the time to advance to the Red Keep had arrived. The next act of Eddard’s drama was now to commence. Tywin and his party mounted their steeds once more.

Slowly, they arrived at the Gate of the Gods. He felt his lips tighten into a grim smile of disgust and contempt. Eddard rode outside the gate to greet them. Why had he traveled to the Red Keep and back? Only the man was outside the gates in his arrogance. What was his game, dammit? He wore his armor but nothing else, no cape with regalia on it. No crown. No sword at his side. He bowed to them when they stopped in front of him. His horse nickered and shook his head, but the King controlled his horse.

Tywin looked through the tunnel through the wall of King’s Landing. He saw a large contingent of Goldcloaks on horse. The men had spears in their right hands. Anger flashed through Tywin, seeing Sandor Clegane on a horse also. The traitor would be tortured before he was beheaded Tywin promised himself.

Eddard slow-walked his horse up to Tywin and his party.

“I thank you for waiting patiently for my return Tywin Lannister.” Tywin seethed at the affront to him. Tywin watched Eddard look over at Jaime. Jaime looked blandly back at Eddard. Tywin watched Eddard’s gaze move to Gregor. “I am glad to see you have joined Tywin. I have not forgotten your actions during Robert’s Rebellion.”

“Shut up,” Gregor shot back. His voice a deep gravelly rumble.
Eddard bowed his head. He had a smirk on it. Tywin felt a shiver run through him. That look on Eddard’s face said I have all the cards and know it. Tywin shook his head. Eddard had merely had a run of beginner’s luck. He, Tywin Lannister, would put an end to that. He would enjoy having Eddard Stark put down. Tywin hoped that moment would come soon. He tired of dealing with the man.

“Please come into my humble abode Tywin. I have awaited you. Let the Game of Thrones begin.”

With a snort, Tywin kicked his horse to have it amble forward behind the retreating back of Eddard Stark. He could not refuse an affront.

“You are a novice Eddard Stark. I will school you. You will rue your actions. Soon you pay for your affronts to House Lannister.”

Eddard tilted his head to the right in acknowledgment. The act insolent. Tywin ground his teeth in vexation. They entered through the gate and slowly walked down the Kingsroad towards the Red Keep. The travel silent. The goldcloaks fell in line behind the Lannister host. The position to allow them to attack from the rear if they desired. Tywin hated it, but he could nothing about it. His anger ratcheted up another level.

Eddard rode his horse just in front of Tywin’s party. On either side of Eddard were Sandor Clegane and a tall black female warrior. Another unnatural female Tywin sneered to himself. Eddard kept his back to them showing no fear. Tywin had to admire that. The Kingsroad within King’s Landing lined with Goldcloaks Tywin observed. The men at rigid attention. In their right hands were halberds. Tywin wondered where they had learned discipline. They had always been a sorry lot. When he was Hand he had brought a large contingent of his Redcloaks to keep peace and order in the Red Keep.

Tywin looked right and left as they walked down the road. He saw many gawkers, but many more of the populace ignored them. The common populace had little use for High Royals. The common peasants were like that. Tywin did not truly care one way or the other. The peasants were beneath his notice. The rabble of this city was not his House’s people.

Tywin turned his head to the right slightly to the right to observe his son, who rode his horse just slightly behind his father. Jaime had a vapid smile on his face. His son seemed disinterested in everything about him. Again Tywin wondered what was going in Jaime’s mind.

It took them over an hour and a quarter to reach the Red Keep.

Eddard paused at the main gate into the Red Keep. He turned to look at Tywin. The man made a flourish with his hand motioning Tywin into the Red Keep. Eddard wheeled his horse around and moved forward. The act galled Tywin to his core. Soon the man would pay for his insolence Tywin again promised himself. Tywin looked up at the Barbican, the main entrance of the Red Keep. Its great bronze doors open, and the huge iron portcullis raised.

Tywin looked around as they crossed the drawbridge. The iron horseshoes of their horses ringing on the ironwood. He crossed into the tunnel. The change of sunlight confusing the eyes. They were past the thirty-foot thick curtain wall and into the inner court. His eyes were adjusting again to the change of light. He heard his men shouting and horses being reigned back their hooves clopping on the hard stones.

Shock registered on Tywin. Mounted swordsmen were swarming around him. They were in chainmail and leather armor. Interspersed in them were true knights in plate armor. Sandor Clegane had wheeled around and was coming forward with sword drawn. Another line of knights behind the
initial line. He had heard of the knights that Eddard had used on his night-time attack. He had not
realized there were so many. They came in fast with swords drawn.

His force was in confusion. The force of Goldcloaks behind them had parted and was on his rear
flanks. The men had lowered spears. He only had forty men with him. He jerked his head back at
the drawbridge. He saw many robed men and women with longbows cocked. Their many arrows
aimed at his force. The hated enemy that had been unseen only now showed themselves. On the
inside of the walls of the courtyard were lines of archers with bows drawn and arrows straining for
release. Out in the courtyard were men on one knee with crossbows aimed at the Lannister force.

He felt fear run in his veins, but more he felt unbridled rage. He saw Mace, Oberyn, Stannis, Renly,
Robb Stark standing out before the throng of onlookers. They were behind the second line of
mounted knights. The cowards here to see his humiliation safe behind a wall of mounted steel. The
force of Lannisters surrounded by steel and aimed arrows. The message clear. He was ringed by
death. He would get no support here. _The Bastards!_

“What perfidy is this?!” Tywin shouted out. “I come in before you under the flag of truce.”

The pretender King had turned his horse around while Tywin took in the ambush. Eddard was
looking at him calmly.

“I offered no Guest Right.” Eddard looked around at the large force arrayed against the Lannisters.
“It is time for a reckoning Tywin. Not all wrongs will be righted now, but one is paramount. If you
accept, then I will offer Guest Right.”

“Fuck you!” Tywin roared. He had been pushed and abused for too long. He pulled his horse
forward and pulled out his sword. Gregor had pulled out his sword as well. His horse was coming
beside his titular head. Tywin heard visors being slammed shut. He had slammed his visor down on
his helm. “I will have justice,” Tywin roared for all to hear.

Eddard just looked at him. The damn man showed no fear! Was he an idiot?! The bastard in his
arrogance was unarmed. Eddard would rue that overconfidence. Tywin knew he would probably
die soon, but he would take Eddard down with him to the deepest pits of hell.

“Calm down, Tywin,” Eddard replied in a calm neutral tone. “You and your party will be feathered
with hundreds of arrows before you can do anything.” He motioned up with his head. Tywin
looked up. He snarled. He saw at least forty of the robed figures with longbows drawn back upon
the curtain wall of the Red Keep. There were other bowmen as well with arrows aimed. On top of a
merlon stood a small brown-haired teenage girl. He snarled again. It could only be Arya Stark. She
had her bow cocked, and her arrow aimed at his head.

“What do you demand you godsdamn fucking bastard?!” Tywin roared. “I will have my revenge for
this! A Lannister always pays his debts!”

“That may be Tywin Lannister. But today, you will pay my debt.” It inflamed Tywin that Eddard
Stark still refused to show any fear. The damn bastard still thought he was in complete control of the
situation. Tywin was about to show him different he roared to himself.

“And what might that be Eddard Stark,” Tywin snarled with venom in his voice. “A man who
betrays trust!”

He will finally answer for the many crimes he has committed against the realm and my House
personally. That is all, Tywin. You can then enter in peace if you accept this price. You will be
guarded closely, for you are a vile snake, but in peace you will be allowed to move with relative
freedom. That is IF you do commit treason. I know it is hard thing I ask of you, but that is all I will
ask. Remember Tywin; I have Varys in my confidence now. You will be watched. Like a hawk.”

Tywin had turned to look back at his son. As he looked on, Sandor and Merjen closed in on Jaime
with broadsword and battleaxe drawn for combat. His son did not react except to smile softly with a
tilt of his head at Sandor. What was Jaime’s problem Tywin screamed to himself?

This was unacceptable Tywin stormed to himself. The craggy Lion’s instincts kicked in. Tywin
must defend his son. If Eddard took him into custody, his only Heir worth a shit would be gone.
There was no one else.

“My honor guard pull your swords! Let House Lannister go down in a fight that the bards will sing
of for ages to come!” Tywin roared. He would not be humiliated further. Enough Tywin’s mind
roared.

The men did as commanded. He saw the surprise in Eddard’s eyes now. His eyes were large as he
backed up his horse that was suddenly nervous. The horse restive and tossing its head.

“You fool, stand down!” Eddard shouted. “Your horses will be cut down, and then you will be
feathered and fallen upon by my forces. You won’t last a minute!” Eddard’s force hesitated to fire.
The traitors waited for their traitor King to give the order to fire and attack.

Eddard Stark would die if no one else Tywin shouted to himself in his mind. The fool, in his
arrogance, had no sword. Gregor was kicking his horse forward. Their plate armor would allow
them to live long enough to exact revenge.

“STAND DOWN! NOOWWWWW!”

The words echoed in the courtyard. The words were spoken so powerfully even Gregor paused and
reigned his horse in. Tywin looked back, surprised at the source of that command.

It had been Jaime that had shouted. He now calmly walked his horse forward. Sandor following
behind at a small distance. Sandor’s sword was pointed down to the flagstones of the court. This act
lowered the tension in the courtyard a fraction. The tall black woman was on Jaime’s other hip with
her strange battleaxe at the ready position, but it too was slightly relaxed.

Jaime advanced slowly encased in an eerie aura of preternatural calm, given the situation. It made all
pause and look at him. Tywin watched his son come forward. While he gazed at his son, Tywin
watched Jaime casually unstring his scabbard from his leg and then unbuckle the belt. His sword
clanged when it hit the paving stones.

Jaime reached up and took off his helmet. It, too, was let go to ring upon the stones. He went past
his father.

“Don’t be stupid father. Eddard holds all the cards. It is long past time anyway,” Jamie said to his
father in a soft but clear ringing voice.

With confused anger, Tywin watched Jaime slowly walk his horse to be in front of Eddard Stark.
His son slid down off his horse and shooed it back. Jamie Lannister looked up at Eddard Stark with
a steady gaze. He then turned to face all the Royals. His son’s eyes made contact with all the High
Royals around him. Jaime’s head turned to take in his father and Eddard. “I willingly turn myself
over to Eddard Stark. The King of Westeros. I am guilty of all the crimes that he would say and
more.” Jaime looked at all in the courtyard as he spoke.
Tywin could only look on. *Fool,* his mind roared to himself.

Jaime was facing Eddard again.

“I killed my King, oh great Eddard. You were there. I would do it again. The man was a fucking bastard. He deserved what he got that day. I did what I must.” Tywin saw surprise flare in Eddard’s eyes. What the hell was his son saying?! Tywin fumed to himself.

“I have committed crimes against you personally, Eddard Stark. I attacked you by surprise when you were the Hand of the King Robert Baratheon. I should have killed you then, but I did not. It was I that pushed your son Bran from that window.”

“NOOOO!” Tywin shouted. “Shut your fucking mouth! YOU FOOL!”

Jamie turned to look at his father. His face still sufficed with the eerie calm that made Jaime seem almost surreal. “It is too late for that father—cuz.” The scion of House Lannister turned to face Eddard Stark once more.

What the hell was Jaime’s problem Tywin raged to himself? Tywin’s body now shook with a confused anger.

Tywin watched his son look up at Eddard with a direct gaze. “I want to say that the sin against Bran was mine and mine alone, Eddard. Cersei only wanted to talk to Bran. She nearly clawed my eyes out and screamed at me for it. She is blameless. Why your son had to appear in that window at that moment, I will never know,” Jaime spoke, shaking his head sadly.


In a whisper back, Jaime spoke, “By the gods, I wish I knew Eddard. I wish I knew. I have asked myself that question countless times of late.” Tywin blanched. Tears had started to run down Jaime’s cheeks.

He looked around. “Where is my sister Eddard?”

“She is disposed,” Jaime’s eyes widened. Maybe Eddard had put his bitch daughter down Tywin hoped. She was nothing to him after the wall incident.

“She is fine, Jaime,” Eddard spoke in a compassionate tone. “She is ill, but she will recover in time, I am sure. My Grand Maester is watching over her closely.”

Jaime took a deep breath. “Please tell my sister I am sorry, Eddard.”

“For what?” the man asked genuinely interested what Jaime Lannister had to say.

“For not truly loving her,” Jaime sighed. “I guess it works in reverse as well, but let the sin be mine.” Eddard was looking intently at Jaime, asking with his eyes for the son of Tywin to continue. “I loved her no more than my warhorse, my armor, my sword. It was glory and exploits on the fields of combat that my heart longed for. She was just a bauble to me when you get down to it Cuz.” Jaime paused. “This, tell Cersei, Eddard. Please. Tell her I am sorry that I never stood up to our father when he beat her with his belt and slapped her unconscious for daring to play with the sword. To dream of being a warrior. I wanted to intervene. I truly did, but I was afraid of our father. In the end, wishing is not doing. Tell her I am sorry for that.”

Tywin watched his son turn away from Eddard. He slowly walked away. His son walked towards Maegor’s Holdfast with its dungeons underneath. Eddard motioned to his forces to let Tywin’s son
Jaime had spotted his children. With a slow tread, Jaime now headed towards them. He stopped fifteen feet in front of them. Tears were running down his cheeks in streams now. Tywin sneered at his son’s weakness. With slow steps, Jaime closed the last distance to stand before his children. The children he had never acknowledge. Until now.

“I was never your father Joffrey, Myrcella, Tommen. Your mother forbade contact with you, but it never crossed my mind to fight her on it. I just accepted it. I fear you were nothing to me, and, thus, I am nothing to you.” Myrcella started to speak, but Jaime put up his hand. “It is too late my children. I have missed my chance.” Jaime gazed at his children sadly. “If the time comes and you have children, give them all the love I did not give you.”

He turned away. Myrcella and Tommen were crying. Joffrey looked confused. Tywin turned his head in disgust. All of my progeny are weak! Tywin sneered to himself. Only Cersei seemed to have a fire, and she was an unnatural bitch!

“Tyrion! My brother! I need to speak to you!” Jaime shouted out. Jaime looked around for his younger brother.

Tywin did not need to see his vile spawn. Though he did now want to see his youngest son, it looked like he had no choice in the matter. Eddard had won. For now.

Tyrion stepped forward. Jaime walked over to his brother. The older brother bent down to one knee. The dwarf came up to his brother to hug him. Tywin could not but help to compare Jaime’s physical perfection to the dwarf again. He still had his suspicions about Tyrion’s lineage, but he would never be able to prove it.

Jaime stopped Tyrion from hugging him. Jaime’s hands reached out to grip Tyrion’s shoulders and held his little brother back. Tyrion tried to close the distance, but Jaime was far too strong for Tyrion to close the distance still between them. A look of consternation now on the dwarf’s face.

“Tyrion, I need to tell you the truth of Tysha.” Tywin saw Tyrion shut down. A troubled look now sufficed on his face. Damn Jaime! Tywin shouted in his mind. As he watched, Jaime’s head lowered. He had finally started to control his damn crying. When Jaime raised his head again, Tyrion cursed. Tears were again silently running down his eldest son’s cheeks. His scion spoke in a breathy, watery voice.

“She was innocent, Tyrion. She was no whore. She was just a lost girl seeking refuge. You gave that to her. She was only a simple peasant girl. She was a total innocent. When father found out about her, he concocted the whole …” Jaime’s voice trailed off. Jaime looked off. He stood up. Tyrion had rocked back onto his heels. The dwarf’s eyes were brimming with unshed tears. “I am sorry Tyrion. The sin was mine. Again I did not act. I feared my father more than I loved you.”

Tywin was beyond disgusted now. Jaime tilted his head back. His body shook with silent sobs. Tyrion turned his damn head right and left with a stunned look on his face. Tears were now running down his cheeks.

Jamie turned around and walked away. He was sobbing now. Tyrion had a look of shock on his face. Then boiling anger filled his face. His body lurched forward, shaking with rage and burning sorrow. He ran with his stunted legs to get right behind his brother’s retreating back.

“You fucking bastard! By the gods! I hate you, Jaime! Why? Why?! Ohhhhhh, Tysha, you were innocent!” The stunted geek’s eyes were raging Tywin noted. The geek’s body awkwardly
pirouetted around. Tyrion came running up to his father.

In a fluid motion, Eddard slid down off his horse and moved to intercept Tyrion. Eddard got in between Tyrion and his father, who was still mounted. Eddard gripped Tywin’s youngest son’s shoulder.

Tyrion looked up at his father with raw, untrammeled anger. “I hate you! I hate you! You fucking bastard!” Tyrion screamed up at his father. Then he fell to his knees, sobbing brokenly.

Tywin only looked down with disdain. He had removed a problem. Nothing more. The head of Casterly Rock watched his deformed son blubber like a silly woman. Movement caught Tywin’s eye, and he turned his head. Why in the hell was Jaime walking up to the Martells! *What the fuck is Jaime’s problem*?! Why the seven hells wasn’t he walking to the dungeons! He watched Jaime stand before the troop of Martells. Jamie fell to his knees as if the ligatures to his knees had been severed.

The Martells looked upon Jaime as if he was some apparition risen from the graveyard. Their eyes shocked open when Jaime fell to his knees before them. He sobbed for a long minute before he controlled himself. From his kneeling position, he looked up at Oberyn and Ellaria with tears streaming down his cheeks. It disgusted Tywin.

“You would have thought I would have learned my lessons. Alas, I did not.”

Oberyn could only look down at Jaime in confusion.

Jaime wept. His head bowed. Finally, he controlled himself. He stood up. He still cried but was no longer sobbing thank the gods Tywin thought.

“I killed our mad King. I make no apologies for that. But what did I do after that? I climbed the steps to the Iron Throne and plopped my ass down on it. I waited for Eddard Stark to come to me.” Jaime took a deep breath. He looked hard at Oberyn. “Do you know what I should have done Oberyn?”

Oberyn looked confused and shook his head ‘no.’

“I should have instead gone to Maegor’s Holdfast and saved your sister and her children!” Jaime screamed out. The anguished words echoed in the courtyard.

“But you didn’t know,” Oberyn spoke back softly. Why could the damn Dorne man see the truth and not his half-crazed delusional son? Tywin raged to himself.

“It doesn’t matter,” answered Jaime. “I was of the Kingsguard. I was sworn to protect the royal family!” Jaime screamed. Jaime ceased speaking, lifting his head to gaze up at the brilliant blue sky. He controlled himself again. “I wanted to act like an impudent ass instead of doing my duty. For years I had nightmares seeing their broken bodies. The dreams are back. I look forward to my death.”

The Martells showed shock on their faces.

Jaime walked back slowly towards Tywin and his father's antagonist. Jaime came up before Eddard Stark.

“I stand ready to accept punishment for my many crimes, King of Westeros. Do you wish to pass execution now?” Jaime asked with a tired voice.
This whole strange play had Tywin perplexed and confused. Jaime’s actions were delusional and insane. He had given his father no recourse but to sit on his horse in silence. Eddard held all the cards. Jaime himself had given the last card to finish Eddard’s hand. All he could do was wait upon Eddard.

Tywin seethed, but he had to give Eddard credit. He had given him, Tywin Lannister, no recourse but to sit here and take it. He writhed in righteous fury.

Eddard looked at Jaime with now sad eyes.

“No. No Jaime. Sandor,” Eddard called out. The man came forward in his Kingsguard attire, Tywin supposed. The tall black woman with the same cape and breastplate came forward with the traitor Sandor Clegane. Soon he would execute the man Tywin assured himself. Eddard spoke now to finish this grotesque play. “Please take Jaime to the dungeons. Make sure his cell is cleaned out, dry bedding put in and light provided. He is to be fed hale food that is nutritious. The chamber pot changed. He will have blankets and fresh hay each day.”

Tywin watched Jaime and Eddard look at each other. Tears were still running down his son’s cheeks. That madden the head of Casterly Rock. Jaime tilted his head and was led away.

Silence hung in the court.

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