A Wreath of Thorns

by LadyNormaOfTheWesterlands

Summary

In the aftermath of the Battle of the Bastards and the destruction of the Great Sept in King's Landing, new allegiances are forged and family ties will be tested, as two Queens dance around a blood-dripping throne and a new King rises in the North.
The day of reckoning is getting closer, for princes and commoners, for friend and foe, while cold winds bring the longest of winters, and, with it, an enemy who doesn't respond to honour, nor love.
Post-Season 6.

Notes

Disclaimer: I own nothing. *wraps shock blanket around herself and cries in the corner*
The snow flake fell on the back of his hand, almost frizzling at the contact with warm skin. The weather wasn’t so cold yet that it required the use of gloves, but, Lord Selwyn Tarth mused, soon they would become a necessity. Snow in Tarth wasn’t that uncommon during winters: the Lord of Evenfall Hall had lived through thirteen of them, he was actually born during a winter that lasted for two years, but this was different. Everybody seemed to notice. Even the cattle and the horses in the stables, growing more and more agitated, and the flocks on the hills, as cold winds had swept the island, stronger each passing night.

The days were becoming short, too, and the sun barely flickered, grey and dull, a perpetual twilight through the misty miasma that plagued the island like a pestilence, gripping in a vice its inhabitants since two months now.

For a week the island had quaked under the violence of a thunderstorm that had devastated both the coastline and the inland and had torn down the largest part of the port buildings: the fishermen villages, the market, the shops of blacksmiths and craftsmen, the brothels, the many taverns and inns.

He ordered the population to evacuate and take refuge in the warm caves hidden on Shepherd’s Hill that since ageless times, before the Andals, before the Age of Heroes and the First Men, had been giving sanctuary and protection to the good people of Tarth.

The storm had passed, but the miasma came in its stead.

Now an otherworldly silence had slithered down on the palace and its surroundings; in the dead calm, the sea had become a flat, murky board and its distinctive sapphire colour, for which the isle was renowned in all Westeros and beyond, had turned a dull, ominous grey, the glittering whiteness of the foamy waves now more akin to the colour of sour milk.

And, all over, the breath of the island smelled of salt, seaweed, and rotten flesh as though someone had unearthed all the graves of the Seven Hells combined.

Lord Selwyn knew what everyone was saying; that the fog had been brought forth by the Queen across the Narrow Sea, the Mother of Dragons, as many were starting to call her even in Westeros (although these famed dragons, as far as he was concerned, were still nowhere to be seen), when she landed on Dragonstone and retook her ancient seat, vacated by the Baratheons. The people of Tarth, still secured in the grottos, had started to curse her name, but Selwyn knew better.

The advent of Daenerys Stormborn coinciding with the start of the bad weather and the dark mist has been only a sad, fortuitous happenstance; the real reason for it, if his men’s reports were to be taken seriously, must be found elsewhere, in the North.

The Lord of the Sapphire Isle dropped his eyes to the message delivered the previous day from Oldtown, carrying the seal of the Night’s Watch: *dire state of affairs beyond the Wall...an army of White Walkers, thousands of them... the Night King walks among the living...if the Wall falls*
down, we’ll all be dead…send as many men as you can, dragonglass and Valyrian blades, if you have them…

White Walkers…Night King…those were only old tales he remembered from his old wet nurse, stories to frighten naughty children who did not do what their Lords fathers had ordered. The missive was signed ‘Samwell Tarly, Maester of the Night’s Watch’: he did not know the lad. He supposed he was one of the sons of that brooding, ill-tempered Randyll Tarly of Horn Hill.

Why would Tarly’s son, a sworn black brother, lie about such crucial, vital matters?

Up until a month ago, dispatches directly from the North came through Gulltown or Storm’s End. Now direct communication has abruptly stopped, as the ravens could not be sent farther north than Moat Cailin anymore; they simply would die for the cold.

News was scarce and disturbing. Rumours, mostly.

The horsemen and knights travelling in search of news often weren’t even brave enough to face the big expanse of ice separating Winterfell from Castle Black. And the roads connecting the valleys of the South to the colder regions, roads once moderately secured by the King’s peace, now swarmed with sellswords, brigands, cutthroats, savages beasts and other dangers only secretly whispered in hushed tones in the middle of the night, for fear that a word said aloud would make these terrors too real even under the daylight.

Occasionally the men sent to the North would come back half dead of exposure, their hands and feet swollen and covered with purplish and blackened blisters, toes, fingers and nails fallen off, and they would speak of a cold so deep and devastating that their bones wouldn’t stop rattling against each other, not even when they’d wrapped themselves in layers and layers of furs and wool covers, across from a warm, merrily crackling fireplace. On few cases, the men had come back lost in a stupor, demented and speechless, and they had let themselves die of starvation or thirst a few weeks after.

Sometimes, the men wouldn’t come back at all.

The last time he had trustworthy updates of Brienne had been five months ago, when Ser Germont Connington, his loyal Captain of the Guards, had met her in Winterfell, after she had returned from Riverrun, a few days after the Battle of the Bastards and the fall of the Flayed Men of Dreadfort. Ser Germont reported that she was unscathed, in fairly good health, all things considered, but he also said that she had looked melancholic and despondent. Ser Germont, the good man, had tried to cover it up with a bad case of homesickness: ‘Lady Brienne longs for the sapphire sea of Tarth, my lord, but she would not return. She swore an oath to Lady Sansa Stark’, he had said, and while Lord Selwyn knew it was partially true, nostalgia was not the only reason for her current state of mind.

He was a father, and he had learned to read his daughter’s silences better than anyone, even better than herself, many years ago.

When his beloved Dyanna, her spirit and heart broken over the loss of Arianne and Alysanne and unable to counter the combined attacks of pain and grief, surrendered her body to the illness that was slowly eating her away, dying shortly after the twins and taking all of her secrets to the grave with her, Brienne and Galladon had become all Selwyn’s world, until the Gods and the cresting waves of Tarth decided to take away from him his purple-eyed boy, his heir. Selwyn’s world had then contracted to his girl, the princess with the sapphire eyes and an ungainly appearance that would have made a good match with any of the great houses of Westeros difficult, if not impossible.
The Lord of Evenfall Hall didn’t care. He only feared she would never be happy.

He had cherished her with all the unflinching love a father could muster and, yes, even doted on her, to the point that her every wish had been his command. When Brienne had wanted to learn how to fight and joust like a boy, Selwyn gladly let her, even encouraged her, his only reward the look of absolute freedom and joy he would see shining in her eyes whenever she held a sword. He had meant well; he had hoped to strengthen her against the storms of life, which were sure to beat and mar even the most virtuous, to inspire in her a higher sense of justice that would sprout and grow from truth, not beauty, from fairness, not prettiness, from acceptance, not vengeance.

He had tried to shield her from the public contempt, from the jests of men, and the malice of women – which sometimes was even crueler – but he could not shield her from her innocent nature: Brienne has always been a very passionate girl, an idealistic and a dreamer. She had tried to conceal her heart beyond armours and swordsmanship, under discipline and honour, but he knew better: when she was a child, her most favourite stories were the ones about Galladon of Morne and Florian the Fool. Epic tales of heroes and chivalric feats, sure. But tales of love, at their core.

It came to no surprise at all for him to discover her affections for Renly Baratheon: she fell in love with him, because he was the handsome, spotless knight pulled out straight from one of those tales. He had been gentle with her when everybody else would sneer and call her Brienne the Beauty in jest; he made her dance and donned a blue cloak on her shoulders.

But after Renly got murdered it became blatantly clear that Selwyn could not shelter her against the sorrows of heartbreak: he had written a heartfelt letter, then, begging her for his sake to put aside her dreams and illusions to become a knight and to come back home, fearing for her life and her sanity. Brienne had been adamant in her answer: I love you, Father, but I am what you and life made me, and I will not rest until I’ve brought to justice Renly’s murderer.

He had known then, without a doubt, that his daughter had a knight’s heart, full of high ideals on honour, glory and nobility that, Selwyn feared, would crumble at the first clash with a discordant, unforgiving reality. Selwyn suddenly understood that, instead of giving her a sword to play with and feeding her the chivalric stories of old, he should have taught her to be wiser and more practical; he had meant well, but all his good intentions had failed and backfired on him in a rather spectacular way.

And now history was repeating itself.

Selwyn wasn’t a fool. He had heard the rumours – even if Ser Germont had threatened to cut the tongues of anyone in Tarth who would dare to even whisper such obscene slanders.

*The Kingslayer’s whore.*

After the wrath which instinctively almost brought him to raise arms against both King’s Landing and Casterly Rock had subdued, with a clear mind he pondered the predicament: he couldn’t believe that Brienne, his Brienne, so proper and modest, would ever let herself get so much involved and drawn in to forget herself and her principles…and yet…even in the most ignominious gossip, sometimes a bit of truth could be found.

He wouldn’t believe rumours, just as he didn’t believe them when they had suggested that Brienne had killed Renly because he’d rejected her in his bed.

But she was just a girl, then. Now she was a grown woman. A strong-willed, spirited, hopelessly romantic woman.
After Bitterbridge, after her oath to Catelyn Stark, after his ignored offer of three hundred gold Dragons to ransom her at Harrenhal, she wrote to him a long letter from King’s Landing, in which she recounted her travels back to the capital with Jaime Lannister, in the hope to get Lady Stark’s daughters to safety. She told him about the Kingslayer, how he bargained for her maidenhead and lost a hand in the process, how he saved her from the bear pit in Harrenhal, unarmed and unarmoured, how he gave her a wonderfully crafted new armour that caught glorious blue iridescences under the light, sapphire gleams like the sea of Tarth, and a Valyrian sword, a real Valyrian sword, sharp as dragonglass, with mesmerizing dark red veining and a golden hilt in the shape of a raging lion’s head which alone would have made a prince’s ransom. It was so light and balanced that, when she wielded it, she seemed to dance on water like the Braavosi swordsmen old Ser Goodwin used to tell her about. ‘I’ve named it Oathkeeper,’ she had added, ‘But it’s not mine. I’ll return it to Ser Jaime when my oath will be fulfilled.’

She also wrote that Ser Jaime wasn’t the man everyone believed he was, that he was brave and honourable, in his own way, that he had protected her like a perfect knight would have done even when most of the time he was the one needing protection, that he was sincerely horrified when he had been informed about what had transpired at the Red Wedding, that his eyes were open and clear and wore none of the coldness of his father’s eyes. He broke some vows, during his life, ‘twas true. Many of them. However, sometimes circumstances on which we don’t have any control whatsoever force our hand to make hard, brutal decisions that not always corresponded to one’s deepest desires and good nature.

But Ser Jaime had solemnly sworn to bring the Stark girls to safety and never raise arms against Tully or Stark. And now his vow had become hers: she had to honour it, for Lady Stark’s memory and for him.

‘I trust him, Father.’

He knew then; it wasn’t a childhood crush.

He knew then that it was serious and that she was lost.

Of all the men she could have chosen…

Kingslayer, Oathbreaker, father of his own sister’s children, as the story went…

She did not write what has made her change her mind about him, but Ser Germont told him that Brienne still had that Valyrian sword with her, when he saw her.

She had just returned from Riverrun, kept under siege by Lannister forces; did she meet him there? Why didn’t he want his sword back?

Selwyn wasn’t worried about his daughter’s honour – Brienne was more than capable of defending herself. He was worried about her heart. If she were at Evenfall Hall, she would ask for his advice and guidance; they had always been close and had no one else but each other to rely on.

What would he say to her?

Probably the same thing her mother used to tell her, even if she probably couldn’t even remember: ‘Follow your heart’.

The steps of his Captain of the Guards, his sword clinking against his chainmail, drew him back from his musings.

“My Lord.”
Ser Germont stood behind him, fully armoured: he was a stout man with a formidabley round and shiny bald head and the Connington trademark auburn beard and moustache. He had served the Sapphire Isle for longer than Selwyn could remember: he already was in the Guard when Lord Edwyn, Selwyn’s father, had been the Evenstar, and he was the knight who brought a young, orphaned Dyanna Storm to Tarth to be raised, after tragedy struck in Summerhall. Out of gratitude and friendship, Selwyn had hoped, once, to merge their families, but truth be told, Germont’s nephew was a cunt and he was secretly grateful to the Seven that Brienne had beaten him in such a dramatic, public way during the grand melee at Bitterbridge.

“My Lord, they’re coming.”

Selwyn pointed the Myrish Eye on the Straits: from the observatory set on Shepherd’s Hill, the highest spot on the isle, he could have a good view from all the cardinal points on the valley below, the palace and the coastline.

On clear days he could easily see the rainwood, where it was said the descendants of the Children of the Forest still lived after the conquest of Durran Godsgrief, all the way to Rain House on the tip of Cape Wrath, and to Durrán’s Point, miles away, where the lone tower of Storm’s End would stand tall and proud, grey and menacing, a fist raised in defiance to the Storm Gods.

Now, amidst the mist, Selwyn could barely make out the outlines of several slender galleys swiftly approaching Starfall’s Beach, although it was still too dark to perceive how many and which colour their sails were.

It mattered not.

Dragons, Lions, Squids…everyone, sooner or later, would have wanted the Sapphire Isle, but if he were to bet his money, it would be on Queen Cersei’s soldiers: his sentries had been reporting movements of armed forces carrying the new banners of the Lannisters – a crowned rampant lion, gold on a field of crimson and black stripes – over Shipbreaker Bay for days now. They were only waiting for the dead calm to lift and for the Straits to become accessible again. He should have expected it. He had tried to stay as neutral as possible; Tarth had never mingled in the politics of the capital, when it could be avoided, but it has always been a feast too succulent and delicious to pass by. The island held a strategic position in the bay and its natural resources alone – woods, crops, livestock – could ensure the survival of all the population of King’s Landing through a few winters. If Tarth would fall into Cersei’s hands, it would be disrobed of all its natural beauties, savagely raped, until nothing would remain but a wasteland.

Nonetheless, more than a strategic move meant out of necessity, the impending invasion tasted like vengeance, pure and simple: Brienne had sworn a fealty oath to the Starks and the new King in the North. The Queen on the Iron Throne surely didn’t appreciate it.

“I need you to ride North,” he said to Ser Germont, without preamble. He would never have asked, if the situation hadn’t already been compromised beyond repair. Selwyn pulled out from his girdle two parchments, sealed with Tarth’s insignia.

“You will deliver this message to Lord Snow, or whatever name he likes to call himself these days. And this letter….this is for my daughter’s eyes only…you’ll give it to her, with this,” he added, as he took off from his finger the ring crowned with the large sapphire and engraved with the sigil of House Tarth. His hand felt weird, weightless without the sweet burden of the jewel he honourably had worn for the best part of thirty years. He wrapped it up in a piece of cloth with the blue and pink colours and the yellow sun and white crescent moons of Tarth.

A gift.
Many moons ago, his own father had handed it over to him on his deathbed, telling him that the Evenstar was the sentinel of the East, and that this ring was the harbinger of the morning light to come.

*Dawn will come again, dear child,* he had written to Brienne. *Wait for it. Fight for it.*

His own fight was almost over.

“My Lord, I’m begging you, let me stay and fight at your side.”

Selwyn’s blue eyes bore into Ser Germont’s bronze ones: he remembered thinking, when he was younger, with no spite whatsoever, but with genuine admiration, that Ser Germont’s eyes were akin to a horse’s: big, deep, noble, full of unreserved love, loyal.

Loyalty, true loyalty was hard to come by, and Selwyn prized his Captain’s friendship and revelled in it like a rare gift. Mostly, he was grateful: so many years ago, Germont had brought to Tarth the girl Selwyn would fall in love with. The only woman he would ever truly love, no matter how many others he had, in the futile attempt to fill up his days and nights, and his solitude.

“Your fealty is to Tarth, not to myself,” he spoke gently. “I expect that you will serve my daughter as admirably as you have served me.”

Ser Germont straightened his spine and nodded curtly, but Selwyn could read a deep emotion in his placid eyes.

“My friend,” he added, putting a steady hand on his shoulder, the words of gratitude left unspoken. His hand gripped Germont’s arm stronger. A silent plea.

“Ride as fast as you can.”

*And the Gods be with you.*

Through the Myrish eye, the Lord of Tarth followed his Captain and saw him reaching by horse the sheltered, hidden cove on the eastern side of the island, where a small, inconspicuous sailboat was waiting for him.

*It is done,* he thought with a sigh, as he redirected the Myrish eye of Starfall’s Beach: the crowned lion was now unmistakably discernible. He prayed that Jaime Lannister wasn’t with them, *leading* them; Selwyn really hoped, for his daughter’s sake, that he wouldn’t be that kind of man.

Lord Selwyn’s lips turned up in a sad smile; it was ironic, to say the least, that, in the middle of one of the greatest crisis Tarth had endured since the Andal invasion, his main concern was still Brienne and her wellbeing.

Or maybe not. Maybe, in the same circumstances, any father would think the same.

He unsheathed his blade and climbed down the steps separating the observatory to Evenfall Hall, where his men – a little more than forty soldiers – were waiting for his orders.

Snow was falling hard and fierce, now. As he walked through the thick patches of white, rapidly collecting on the edge of the road, Lord Selwyn let his mind drift.

He thought of Galladon, then, of the summer day he had taught him to swim in the open water, his innocent, excited laughter bouncing on the sea, like pearly waves rolling over onto the beach and expanding in his heart.
The sea is sooo blue, papa! It’s the same colour as your ring!

That sea that killed him. That sea they both had loved.

He thought of Dyanna, of endless mornings spent in the stronghold on Morne, holding each other and talking about the future, as they waited together for the sun to rise.

Her hair had an almost silver glitter, under the first light.

And Brienne… Brienne who didn’t have any idea of how beautiful she truly was, Brienne with her gentle, strong heart, and fiery sapphire eyes.

His same eyes.

Brienne who would be also the last chance for Tarth to survive.

He sent a final, silent prayer to the Gods for his extraordinary daughter, for her to stay alive during the cold Darkness that was sure to follow, and, most of all, for her to find happiness even at the end of world, and braced himself to greet at best, with steel and blood, the Queen’s men, knowing full well that in a few hours’ time a new Evenstar would be rising in the west.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, gentle readers and welcome to A Wreath of Thorns. This is the longest multi-chaptered work I’ve ever written, and also my first foray into the Game of Thrones/ASOIAF universe, even though I am a longtime reader (and lurker, Hi to everyone at JBO!) .

Virtually, this fic aims to be a continuation of GoT’s Season 6, starting only a few weeks after Daenerys has landed on Westeros: from there, I’ll try to address the main storylines and to give to some beloved characters the closure they deserve.

Although I’ve often been called “fanatic” when it comes to fidelity to canon stuff, I’ve chosen to follow mostly the TV series, with elements from the books thrown in the mix – lines and scenes that didn’t make the final cut, some backstory, some stuff related to prophecies and dragonlore etc. etc. – essentially because GoT has now reached a narrative point where the books have become somewhat “irrelevant”, especially for Brienne/Jaime-related stuff.

For this reason, I will follow the show more than the books without feeling too much guilty about it!

A Wreath of Thorns will be written in multiple POV style; the first ten chapters are already done, and I have a pretty good idea of where I want to go from there (mostly... supposing that the characters won’t suddenly turn against me, as it’s often the case, and in the end do what they want) so I’ll try to post weekly.

As English is not my mother tongue, I would gladly welcome any grammar/lexicon/phrase structure-related advice to improve (especially in the use of tenses) and give more fluency and authenticity to the narrative. Also, this is still unbeta’d work, so if a charitable soul would be so kind as to help me with it, he/she
will have my eternal gratitude (and lots and lots of dragonglass to fight off the WW). Enjoy the ride and remember: winter is here.
The black hole at the centre of the city, where once the Great Sept of Baelor the Blessed stood out with its crystal towers and white marble reflecting the light of Visenya’s Hill, annoyed her. A little more than two months had gone by, but still, she could smell the pungent whiff of burned stone and bodies exhaling from the collapsed ruins, like the breath of a sleeping dragon; the rocks had burned and burned for days, way longer after the fire had ceased to consume flesh and bone.

Those first days had passed in a flash of green, red and gold so swift that Cersei didn’t have any clear recollection; but she did remember vividly the enjoyable hours spent behind the closed door of the dungeon’s cell where Ser Robert Strong was repeatedly taking his pleasure and burying his darkest and lowest instincts deep into the dry cunt of Septa Unella. How does a corpse barely moving, with no mind of its own, still have desires it retained from its previous life?, she had wondered.

But Septa Unella’s high-pitched cries had been so compelling, and so amusingly distracting that she had soon forgotten all her philosophical musings, her ear glued to the wooden door, her laboured breath hitching in her throat and her eyes closed in rapture.

She had felt like a little girl, then. She recalled a younger version of herself, maybe five or six years old, sneaking out of her chambers in the middle of the night: barefoot, she would wander around the deserted halls of Casterly Rock, mastering her fear for the tales about the ghost of Lann the Clever still haunting the place; she would reach a stop in front of her parents’ master bedchamber and eavesdrop the sweaty sounds of skin against skin, the noises and moaning coming from it.

Once, the door had been slightly ajar, enough for her to peek inside. Afterwards, stifling a laughter, she had recounted to Jaime what she had seen and together, carelessly amused about the whole thing, they had tried to replicate the absurd tangle of bodies, arms and legs. Their laughter, or maybe their fake groans and cries of pleasure, had caught the attention of Lady Tynelle, one of their mother’s ladies-in-waiting.
Tynelle looked a lot like Septa Unella.

*The stupid, spying bitch, I hope she died in shame and disgrace.*

But that hadn’t been the end of the game.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

Difficulties made them more creative, more cunning, more resourceful.

And when she discovered she could control other men through her body, the promise of a touch or a kiss to get what she wanted, she didn’t hesitate to use this new-found power over the guards at her bedchamber’s door, to sneak out any time she liked.

Hostility and opposition, Cersei mulled over, had always had the power to fuel her, to spur her on, until she had her enemies cower in fear and she was the only one standing.

She revelled in secrets, in the knowledge that she was doing something forbidden right in the face of the men who supposedly commanded her – her father, and later Robert – and she would never be caught and punished for it, because she was Lady Lannister, she was the Queen, and common rules didn’t apply to her, or her brother.

It was a heady, liberating rush, comparable to the feeling she was experiencing now, with her body pressed to the dungeon’s door.

When Qyburn humbly suggested ending the bitch’s sufferings, Cersei had dismissed him with a cold, menacing stare: her sufferings would come to an end when and if she would say so. But not before Unella had thoroughly begged, her voice hoarse from screaming, and her spirit broken forever. That was the kind of triumph she expected.

Ser Robert had been *relentless* in his ministrations. Pretty much like his namesake. The thought brought a spiteful sneer on her lips. And when, after two days, she had finally heard Unella begging for her mercy, Cersei had felt a shiver of excitement down her spine, pooling hot and heady in her low belly; a deep simmering rather similar to the emotion she felt when she had watched the Tower of the Hand burning to the ground after her father’s death.

Now, wildfire was burning inside of her, too.

*She was* wildfire.

That night, after Ser Robert had deposed at her feet the lifeless, smashed body of Septa Unella, she chose two of the most brutal and hulking men among her personal Guards and took her own pleasure from them.

It took no effort at all to reach her peak.

*Victory always had this effect on her.*

*Victory and power.*

And now she wielded both, with equal strength, determination and boldness.

Many moons ago her father had promised her Rhaegar Targaryen, the tall and handsome dragon-Prince with fire running in his blood, and a silver voice that could move to tears even the cruelest of knights. She often wondered how her children would have looked like, if things had gone the
way her father had planned: they would have had the distinctive purple eyes of old Valyria and the Lannister cunning mind and love for scheming. The perfect match.

Probably she wouldn’t even have sought her own brother, letting him slide in her own marital bed anytime she had liked.

Fucking Jaime had been so pleasurable not only because it was forbidden, but mostly because the thought of making a cuckold out of Robert, carrying the seed of another man inside of her, had been a temptation too great to pass by. Robert had killed the Prince who had been promised to her. Robert had never wanted her. And Cersei had humiliated and ultimately erased him on a more permanent basis.

If she had married Rhaegar, none of this would have happened. Instead, Aerys, out of spite of her own father, forced him to marry that sickly Dornish girl, and, in the end, her pretty prince got himself killed for the cunt of a she-wolf.

A whole dynasty almost swept away by a blue winter rose.

*Men are stupid.*

If she had married Rhaegar, she would have been Queen, but ultimately he would have been the one truly ruling the Seven Kingdoms. Now it was her, only her, sitting alone on the Iron Throne. This had never happened in twelve thousand years. During the Dance of Dragons, Rhaenyra Targaryen had tried to seize the power only to end up betrayed by one of her own knights and fed to her brother’s dragon.

Robert, Rhaegar, Rhaenyra.

They were all dead, now. And the Seven Kingdoms were hers, at last, just as Tywin had promised her. Better, even, for she had no husband, nor father to depend her own destiny upon; she had shaped her own fate and future, and now she was picking the ripe fruit of her design.

Not even the sight of her last son’s broken body could abate her elation: when Cersei had set her eyes on Tommen’s horribly disfigured face, her once beautiful baby boy, she had barely blinked, her mind cold and lucid, her hand steady. The fall had shattered all the bones in his body, and completely crushed his head; Qyburn had done what he could to mend and fix the corpse, but there were still clots of blood smirching his hair, and his eyes were open, staring over the nothingness, staring accusatorily at her. Jaime’s same jade eyes. Her golden boy.

He had looked so much like Jaime that she wasn’t really surprised the rumours of incest hadn’t subsided with time, but had only strengthened.

A week later, Jaime was at her side once again. Just in time to see her coronation.

From the arched gallery on her right, he stared at her, his eyes darkened by foreboding and horror, his body tense and his ashen face gaunt as though he had aged twenty years in a blink of an eye.

He had looked helpless.

*Good, that’s the kind of feeling I want to inspire,* she had thought. She had stared back, an insolent smirk on her lips, and had dared him to speak up, to raise his voice against the reverent, *terrified,* silence drowning the Great Hall.

He did speak up, after.
Cersei, what have you done? Where is Tommen?

Her sweet brother had cried when she told him of their son’s fate. A full-force, unashamed sobbing that lasted several long minutes.

Cersei hated every second of it. She could never stomach weakness, even less so in her own kin; and now this strange, broken man wearing the face and the red-and-gold armour of the brother she once had loved was kneeling on the spot over Visenya’s Hill where Qyburn had buried their cub’s ashes.

She had been nauseated.

And after the crying, had come the shouting and the name-calling: Jaime had reproached her for having sacrificed their children and their love at the altar of her own blind madness and lust for power; he called her a crazy, manipulative bitch who would be the cause of the extinction of House Lannister. Due to her foolish actions, he yelled that now everyone in King’s Landing, everyone in *fucking Westeros*, would try to put her head on a pike, and his too, for good measure, and that, by killing single-handedly the Lord and the two heirs of Highgarden, she had antagonized in one fell swoop the Reach and all its bannermen. And now that an alliance with Dorne was also impossible, she was truly alone.

He had threatened her to leave her; he had threatened to drag her by the hair to Casterly Rock, where at least, safe behind Lannister lines, they could plan their countermoves without the risk of being flayed alive, Bolton-style, by an angry mob.

Cersei had slapped him.

*I am Queen, the Iron Thrones is mine! I will never yield it!*

*If I die, you’ll die with me.*

The fight seemed to leave completely his body, then.

In the past, their heated confrontations usually ended in torn clothes, bleeding scratches on the back, and a great deal of broken furniture.

But now Jaime had looked like an old, tired lion, its mane turned grey and its claws clipped.

She wondered, not for the first time since he had returned to her, missing a hand and a part of his soul with it, what she had found in him that in the past had her limbs shaking with anticipation and her cunt pulsing wet with desire. Jaime was the shell of the man he had been; after their father and Myrcella’s murders, Tommen had simply been the last straw.

But yet, he did not leave her.

Their relationship had grown tense, of course, and even though she had tried to pacify him with the promise of her body, they haven’t touched each other since he left to lay siege on Riverrun. But Cersei wasn’t concerned; Jaime couldn’t help but loving her, he didn’t know anything else, and he would aid her to keep the throne.

They were one and the same.

*We’re the only ones who matter, the only ones in this world,* he had told her not long ago. And Cersei had believed that.
Who knew, maybe she could even give him another child, or two, so that the throne would be even more secure into House Lannister’s hands. And if he didn’t want to share her bed any longer, well, he would serve her as a good brother, leading their army, crushing their enemies.

Cersei looked at the sky through her open patio windows. Foreboding dark grey clouds, full of snow and rain, were closing in on the rooftops. The light reflected from the burned ground of Visenya’s Hill was giving the clouds’ edges an eerie gleaming, tinted with green and gold.

The capital was silent, under her gaze.

A dead city, where not even stray dogs and wild cats could be seen roaming in the alleys and canals, and seabirds, gulls, terns, pigeons and ravens had seemingly left the banks of the Blackwater’s delta and the docks of the harbour. The weather had suddenly turned and now winter was upon them.

And with winter came preposterous rumours about an army of the dead, menacing the Wall and the realms of men.

It did not matter now.

She was Queen of the Andals and the First Men, and all her children were dead.

Maggy’s prophecies had come true one by one. Except for the last.

The valonqar.

A shiver that had nothing to do with the cold wind entering from the open window of her solar shook her to the core.

Tyrion was still alive, somewhere in Westeros or maybe Essos, she was sure of it.

The little worm had escaped her justice for all this time, with the help of Varys and the Gods knew whom else.

And Jaime had released him.

Cersei closed her eyes and had to take a deep breath to keep at bay the hot rage surging from her belly like bile.

She won’t think about the Imp and his crimes, now, nor the blamed part Jaime willingly played in it.

Fuck prophecy. Fuck fate.

Presently she had bigger troubles to face: her Master of Whisperers had informed her that the Queen of Slaver’s Bay had crossed the Narrow Sea with an army of ten thousand Unsullied, at least a twofold of Dothraki cavalry, the allegiances and ships of Sunspear, Pyke and Highgarden, and three dragons, ready to take King’s Landing, and if rumours were to be believed, the ironmen led by Yara Greyjoy had already hoisted their golden kraken over the battlements of Storm’s End.

They were getting closer and closer.

She smiled.

Let them come. Let them try.
I’m going to unleash an inferno of fire over them.

She sipped from her chalice, the Arbor gold rich and sweet on her tongue, and re-read the missive her Commander of the City Watch had sent her from the Stormlands.

Resistance has been scarce and easily dispelled...thirty men captured...the villages raided...villagers are still hiding underground, like moles, into the island’s natural caves...the Evenstar is dead...

She had put Ser Osfryd at the head of a small contingent formed with some Gold Cloaks and mostly Lannister soldiers from Lannisport and sent them to Tarth with instructions to bend Lord Selwyn’s insolent spine and take the island back under the control of the Crown.

What are your orders concerning the smallfolk?

Kill them all, she was tempted to write him.

But she might need the island and its people, in the near future. For now, she had to settle for this little victory, her small retaliation.

'I don’t serve your brother, Your Grace."

'But you love him.'

She remembered her very vividly.

A towering, graceless ogre, more man than woman, bowing and offering her congratulations to the royal couple as though she were a regular knight, mere minutes before her darling Joffrey got poisoned to death.

The way her eyes anxiously roamed the whole courtyard, constantly searching for Jaime in the middle of the crowd.

As Cersei taunted her, her whole body stiffened and her awful, crooked mouth grimaced in pain. Amusing that it had to be Cersei to make her realise, probably for the first time, what was blatantly in front of everyone to see.

The Maid of Tarth had seemed on the verge of tears, and Cersei had savagely savoured the moment.

The poor cow...how could she even think that a man like Jaime would look at her twice, would look at her with something akin desire, when he would always have her taste in his mouth?

He had started a war only for Cersei, he would burn cities to the ground to keep her from harm.

How could that sorry excuse for a woman ever hope to hold a candle to her?

Cersei should have put the freakish mule out of her misery right there and then, or at the very least leave her to Ser Boros’ sweet cares...who knows, maybe she would even enjoy that.

There’s still time for it.

“Did you send for me, Your Grace?”

Her twin’s voice reverberated through the solar. Jaime was waiting at the entrance, a casual look of boredom and impatience over his features.
Ser Robert, who was standing guard next to the door, moved in front of him, blocking the way.

She saw her brother gripping the hilt of the roundel dagger he had started wearing on his belt. But he didn’t baulk and didn’t sound concerned at all.

“Dismiss your dog, Cersei. I won’t talk to you with this half-corpse looming over me stinking of putrefaction.”

Cersei lied down languidly over the couch; the silk of her gown skimmed and lifted above her ankles.

“You can leave, Ser Robert, I’m safe with my brother.”

The Mountain mutely stared at Jaime, who just raised his eyebrow in mock anticipation, and slowly directed his lumbering mass to the door, stomping his feet.

“You look very pleased with yourself,” he warily said, when at last they were left alone.

She emptied her glass and smirked, stretching her hands over the head.

“It’s been a good day.”

“Good news?”

“The best!”

She teasingly waved Ser Osfryd’s note in front of his eyes, “The Isle of Tarth is mine.”

Jaime was somewhat comically gaping at her, wide-eyed, struggling with words. He snatched the letter from her hand and turned around as he read it.

“Why?” he asked, incredulous, shock and betrayal colouring his voice. “Lord Selwyn declared his neutrality many moons ago!”

“Whoever doesn’t declare himself for me is against me, and with that Targaryen bitch reaching Dragonstone I need all the support I can manage,” she replied matter-of-factly, ostentatiously looking up at the ceiling.

“In Tarth there might be a Guard of no more than fifty men! What are you going to do with it? They’re peaceful, innocuous people, mostly fishermen and shepherds!”

“Then fishermen and shepherds will take up arms for me!” she cried out bitingly, rising from the couch. “And if they happen to be of no use, I will put each one of them to the sword and I will raze to the ground their precious forests to make a new fleet of dromonds!”

Jaime set his jaw; the letter, which was still in his hand, was crumpled up into a ball. He stared at her with glistening eyes and the most curious expression: as though he was seeing her for the first time.

And, for the first time, Cersei realised she couldn’t read him.

It pained her. Once, it had been so simple. Their thoughts were so aligned that they would often end each other’s sentences, and most of the time they wouldn’t even feel the need to voice their hopes and desires aloud. A look would have sufficed. They understood each other with perfect harmony. One body, one mind, acting together.
The awareness of what had been lost weighed down on her and veiled her eyes with melancholy.

She took a steady breath and cradled his face in her hands, emerald on emerald.

“You’ve promised me that you would take back everything they’ve taken from us,” she tried to ingratiate him, reminding him of his vows to her.

Gently scratching his cheeks with her nails, her lips trailing hot to the side of his face.

Accommodating, meek, patient.

A tamed cat purring in his lap.

“And what does that have to do with Tarth?” Jaime seethed through gritted teeth.

Cersei felt her cheeks flush with anger and frustration.

“It has everything to do with Tarth!”

Well, she had never played well the part of a domesticated cat.

She strode by the little oak table where she had put the jug and poured herself another generous glass of wine. Jaime was hers, she thought exasperated, and so was the Throne.

*I’ll show anyone who would threaten my family’s unity what the Lions of the Rock are made of!*

She threw Jaime a savage, feline look over the brim of the cup. “Did you know that Lord Selwyn’s daughter has pledged herself to the Starks? Ned Stark’s bastard now is styling himself King in the North… Can you picture it? If she’s lucky, maybe some wildling beast will get it over with and just fuck her!”

Her brother didn’t react, except for his left hand closing in a vice on the hilt of his dagger, so hard his knuckles had turned white.

She smiled maliciously and stepped closer to him.

“Do you hear what they call her? *The Kingslayer’s whore*! As if you’d ever touch her.”

“Watch your mouth, Cersei.”

He brusquely invaded her personal space and grabbed her arm so hard Cersei had to stop herself from crying out in pain; instead, she schooled her expression into one of amused defiance. His whole body was shaking and his lips were so thin that they almost looked devoid of blood: Cersei had no doubt that, had he wished to, he could have easily snapped her neck in two, but she secretly rejoiced she was still able to exploit so well his emotional weaknesses and sore spots.

Jaime’s eyes flashed with open hostility.

“Do I have to remind you that I owe Lady Brienne my life?”

“I haven’t forgotten.”

*I never forget anything.*

She gently freed herself from his grip and reached out to his golden hand: the metal was cool and smooth under her deft fingers, except for the beautiful floral motifs, adorning it in relief, and the
little dents here and there, where quick blades had left their sharp kisses.

It was her fault, that horrible Tarth girl! If Jaime hadn’t tried to stop her from getting raped, he would still have his hand, right now.

He would still be whole.

“Do you remember Melara Hetherspoon?” she innocently asked, her fingers running up to his forearm.

His eyebrows knitted together at this sudden and apparently unrelated change of topic.

“Ser Tybolt’s daughter? Of course. A pretty freckled lass. You two were constantly running into trouble at the Rock.”

Cersei’s mouth twisted into a grimace. Her hand went to the front of his brown leather jerkin, casually fiddling with the laces.

“She fancied you. She confessed to me she wanted to marry you.”

*Will I marry Jaime?*

Poor, stupid Melara. If only she could have kept her pathetic dreams to herself!

Her eyes bored into his, cold and calculating.

“Pity she died.”

It was as though the temperature in her solar had dropped by several notches.

Under her hands, Cersei felt him holding a breath, his muscles taut and stiff as though he was readying himself to flee, while his heart had started to beat erratically. His face was an unreadable, white mask.

She left the implications and the sharp, unmistakable threat there, hanging in the toxic air between them, like a rotting corpse dangling from a tree, and spun around in a swoosh of silks: her crown, the simple headpiece made of silver and steel with the Lannister sigil on top of it, was resting on a velvet crimson pillow next to her bed. Cersei took it and faced the long figure looking glass.

At last, the image reflecting on the sleek surface matched to perfection the way she had always thought of herself, the way she felt, how she had always wanted to be. She smoothed the wrinkles over her red-and-black gown and smirked, thinking that, originally, those were Targaryen colours; for the coronation she had worn a black leather dress, befitting her condition as a mother crying for her child’s untimely death, and a Regent lamenting her King’s demise.

But now it was no use; she’s grown tired of mourning.

“What happened to Tarth was long overdue,” she eventually spoke balancing the jewel on her forehead. “It was about bloody time someone taught the Evenstar a lesson that won’t soon be forgotten. Lord Selwyn was a bannerman of House Baratheon; he had indisputably tarnished his reputation when he gave his support to Renly, committing treason against Joffrey and the Crown in the process, or have you forgotten?”

“Tommen had pardoned him.”

Her cold laughter bounced on the mirror’s slightly bent surface and boomed into the room.
“Tommen was a frail, inadequate child! He should have never become King, you know it as well as I. He would put his signature and sigil over any paper and royal decree the Small Council deemed convenient. He loved to play with his stamp and his cats. He was like you: meek and easily influenced. Myrcella could have been a great Queen, she had the wits and the good looks for it, but, thanks to you, she has come home in a coffin.”

She didn’t even see him coming at her, as swift and silent as a cat, until her crown was clattering on the floor and he was forcing her down over the couch, his whole body pressing against her.

“Don’t you dare, *don’t you dare* –”

Even if her instinctive reaction was to call out for the Mountain’s help, her worry and alarm quelled and abated at once when her eyes found her brother’s: blown dark, almost liquid with hunger and anger.

She leered, sinuously squirming under his weight with deliberate smugness, and with a smirk launched herself at him: she absently thought if this was what it must have felt like for Jaime on the battlefield, maybe during a glorious charge of the cavalry, or after, as he was the last man standing amidst the dead and the dying, his sword held high and shining from the blood dripping and rapidly crusting over the steel.

Jaime’s lips, pliable and willing under hers, opened with no prodding at all, while his hand was gripping the back of her head to get her even closer.

*I still have this power over him.*

Her mouth found its way to the lobe of his ear and his throat, through well-known paths of pleasure, already discovered and conquered endless times before.

Her gown’s skirt was swiftly pulled up and out of the way.

She loudly gasped when he pressed without warning his golden fingers inside of her; a joyful hum bubbled in her throat until it blossomed into a soft laugh of glee and triumph.

His stubble was leaving delicious red marks on the side of her neck, down to the white exposed skin above her corset.

She arched under his touch.

“Recall your men, Cersei,” he rumbled between hot kisses. “Let Tarth go unscathed. You don’t need it.”

Through the haze of desire, it took her a while and a considerable effort of her mind and body to focus on his words.

At first, she thought she had simply misunderstood.

Then, slowly, it came to her: Jaime was using his lips, his hand, his whole body to coax her into giving up part of her power.

He was asking her to show *mercy*!

She shook him off herself, flustered, her temper rising and boiling hot in her blood.

“What is *wrong* with you?” she burst out, incredulity etched all over her features.
She could not believe that she had almost fallen for his easy manipulation: usually, she was the one deploying her feminine ruses to get what she wanted.

And now Jaime had almost beaten her at her own game.

She would have been proud, if she weren’t so annoyed.

He was truly like her.

Except that he couldn’t have looked more different and estranged from her as he did now, so composed and collected, absently cleaning his golden hand with a piece of cotton cloth, while only mere seconds before he was driving her mad with lust, lost and engrossed in his ministrations as though nothing else existed in his world but her.

She rose from the couch, trying to keep her irritation in check, and faced him like she would have a curious, exotic beast.

“Why do you care so much about Tarth, mmh?”

Jaime persisted in his pointed silence.

“What is it that has you all tied up in knots over that useless piece of rock?” she pressed on. “What do you –

And then it hit her. With such clarity and force that she had to grip the couch’s wood arms to balance her wobbling legs.

It was for her! That girl.

It seemed almost impossible, but it was the only explanation that made some kind of twisted sense.

Jaime recognised the realisation in her face and didn’t even make an effort to try and deny it.

“Is it a jape?” she hissed, her voice dripping with sarcasm and spite. “Have you completely lost your mind? I should feel insulted that you’re antagonising me for that silly, monstrous wench –

She stumbled back against the long mirror and would have fallen on the floor, if not for the little table she had grabbed for support. Her cup of wine was knocked out and had fallen over the floor, spilling all its content. The wood planks voraciously drank the wine like blood. It’s going to leave a stain, she thought stupidly.

The tip of her tongue tasted blood on the corner of her lips: the left side of her face was pulsing maddeningly where his hand, his sane hand, had backhanded her.

Jaime, her Jaime, had dared to hit her.

Cersei was staring up at him, stunned and speechless, her mind completely blank.

He too was staring, but at his open left hand, uncomprehending, as though he couldn’t believe what he had just done either.

“How dare you…how dare you?” she managed to croak.

I could have him executed for this!

Robert used to beat her; he would lose control especially when he was drunk – which was most of
the time – unleashing his frustration on her back, where nobody would notice, blaming her for his insecurities and weakness, and then lamely apologising after the spirits’ effects had ebbed.

Each time, she had tried to conceal the damage from Jaime, for he would have certainly killed him without a second thought. And she would have let him. The last time the King had dared to raise a hand against her was at Ned Stark’s bedside, after Jaime had left her alone in the city.

*I shall wear it as a badge of honour.*

Cersei had promised herself then that nobody would ever touch her again without her permission. Nobody would ever make her feel so helpless and ashamed.

She would have never believed that she would have needed to shield herself from Jaime.

Her twin blinked at her once, twice, then, without a word, without stretching his hand to help her ease the pain, he turned and strode to the door.

“Jaime! *Jaime! What do you think you’re doing?*”

She ran to him. He was the one hurting her, and she was running *to* him! She never had to run to him before. He was always the one coming to her.

*What in the Seven Hells is happening?*

None of this was making any sense. Cersei felt like her whole damn world was turning on its axis, crumbling at her feet.

She gripped his shoulder in a desperate attempt to hold him back; Jaime just spun around with a look so fierce that she recoiled, fearing he might hit her again.

“You may be wearing the crown, but you’ll never be Queen. And surely not with my help. You don’t know what you’re doing, Cersei!” he spat.

“I’ve asked you to cease this folly, I’ve begged you to run away with me and leave all this behind: King’s Landing, the Iron Throne. You wouldn’t hear any of it! And now our children are dead.”

“We will have more of them! I still can –”

“If you think I will ever touch you again, you’re sorely mistaken.”

Her body froze, panic rising in her throat.

He picked up the crown that had rolled on the carpet and raised it before her eyes.

“Do you want this? Mhm? Keep it!” he vehemently told her, shoving the diadem on her chest. “Keep your crown, Cersei. Keep your blasted throne. It is what you desire the most, is it not? It is what you truly love.”

She wanted to say that the crown and the throne would be worthless without him at her side. That she had done what she had done *for them*. So that they could be together, without the constant fear of being discovered and the nuisance of being judged guilty for it.

That she loved *him*.

She was willing to share her power with him, wasn’t that enough?
But the words wouldn’t come out.

She was trapped under her brother’s gaze, disappointment and disgust obvious in it.

“You made your choice, I’ve made mine. We’re done,” he said, his mouth twisting in pain. And there was a finality to it, a strength she had never heard in his voice before.

He was leaving her.

_He was leaving her._

As Cersei watched him marching to the door, white spot dancing before her eyes and clouding her vision, she tasted rage mounting again, scorching just underneath her skin. She could feel the cold steel of her crown in her fist, the texture of the interlaced design rough under her fingers, like silver coils, and she squeezed, squeezed, _squeezed_ until it bit into her palm’s flesh, and her skin was splitting and slicing where the barbs dug deep, her muscles throbbing as sticky rivulets of blood flew through her fingers and down on the carpet.

It was painful.

It was beautiful.

Something wondrous and heady happened then: she felt her whole body turning inside out, her outer shell peeling off and changing, merging, remodelling into something else, like a snake shedding its skin, under the purifying force of an erupting volcano. The fire inside her killed the lioness and moulded her into another beast, something with claws and teeth still, but a different kind of claws and teeth.

Crawling, forcing its way out.

Emerging stronger, larger, mightier.

Immortal.

“Jaime!” she bellowed. Her brother stopped but didn’t turn.

“If you walk out of that door don’t even _think_ about coming back.”

_I will burn him. I will burn them all._

One heartbeat. Then two.

Jaime straightened his spine, opened the door and slammed it behind him.

Time stretched out. She stood there, waiting, counting her breaths, her eyes burning holes into the wooden panels of the entrance, the only sound the loud puffs of air through her flaring nostrils and the thunderous pounding of the blood in her head. She had been expecting betrayal from every front; she has been preparing for it. But to think that it would come from the inside, from the only person she trusted with her life, that was inconceivable.

He was not coming back.

He had forsaken her. For that Tarth woman.

The door opened again, and she saw without really seeing Qyburn standing there, with Ser Robert in tow, the polished brooch of the Hand shining on his otherwise black and plain, priest-like tunic.
“Your Grace…”

He took in her appearance, the red swollen cheek, the bloodied crown still in her fist, the wine-soaked floor, but, except for a slight frown, he didn’t make any further comment.

“Your Grace!” he said again, handing out a message to her. She ignored it. Qyburn faltered under her cold stare. “A-A...raven from the Riverlands… Lord Walder Frey is dead, the Twins have fallen. Hearsay is that there was a big fire and that Lord Edmure has been freed. He was last seen rallying his bannermen to take back Riverrun. Men say that he’s moving the Tully army on Casterly Rock.”

A big fire. So that was the reason why Lord Frey hadn’t been answering to any of her messages: communications had been scarce, if not non-existent, for weeks, now.

If Edmure was alive, he would try to join forces with his niece.

*That filthy whore who murdered my son.*

And together they’re planning to take Casterly Rock? Her home? She’ll die before she’d let that happen.

“What?” Cersei snapped, when another guard entered her solar, soaking wet and soiling her floor with muddy boots.

Maybe the rain will wash away this awful smell of decay and rotting flesh.

“Ser Jaime, Your Grace! He was seen by the King’s Gate. Ser Bronn was with him. He left the city with a garrison of two hundred men. Lannister soldiers.”

He stopped on his tracks and eyed Qyburn in apprehension, as though he wouldn’t dare to say more.

She scrutinised him: he looked not older than ten-and-eight, maybe ten-and-nine, tall for his age but with a boyish expression that even the armour and the open helmet couldn’t completely hide. His eyes were a striking, thoughtful silvery grey.

Pretty eyes, almost a woman’s.

Currently, they were also full of dread, as he scuttled from one foot to the other, panicking.

She was at the end of her already thin patience.

“By the Gods, *what else?!*”

“Ser Jaime…he-he also stole King Joffrey’s Valyrian sword,” he blurted out.

*This is too much.*

“Ser Robert, chop his head off.”

“What? Your Grace… No! NO!”

The Mountain, without breaking a sweat, unsheathed his long sword and in two long strides flung the blade on the young man’s neck with absolute precision.

Spurts of thick blood gushed on her face and her dress.
Good: let it wash everything else away.

If they thought they could threaten the Rock and take away from her everything she held dear, woe betide them.

She will have to think about alliances. Rally the bannermen still supporting the Crown. Build a new fleet. And wildfire.

Wildfire, wildfire, wildfire.

But first things first.

She turned to Qyburn, who was lifting the hem of his robe in a desperate attempt to avoid the pool of blood jetting from the severed head and the torso.

“Take the body and the head. Have Ser Robert give the same treatment to, let’s say, another hundred of your choice…you have free hand to use soldiers and smallfolk alike.”

Her Master of Whisperers listened with an enraptured light dancing in his mild brown eyes.

“You will improve the procedure to make them better, stronger and faster. Indestructible. And they will answer only to my orders. You’re going to make me an army.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand he’s off!
It was well about time, don't you think?

No one, no one calls Brienne ‘wench’, except Jaime! (even if there is no justification at all to beat a woman, any woman. Ever).

I love Cersei, she’s just so full of craziness, rage, resentment and more craziness! And Mad Cersei is the best Cersei.

As Tyrion had said to her, back in Season Two, the love for her children was her only redeeming quality (that and her cheekbones, let’s not forget the cheekbones) and now, with Joffrey, Myrcella and Tommen gone, I think there isn’t really anything else to hold her back, so it will be interesting to see her unravelling and show more and more of her true nature.

A little clarification: although in the TV-show Franken-Clegane still keeps his original name, I’ve chosen to follow the books, where he’s called Robert Strong. This will be explained later.
Jaime I

Chapter Notes

As usual, a heartfelt thank you to my reviewers.

Personal gratification aside, comments and kudos are what makes it all worth, so go on, don't be shy and tell me what you think!

Warnings for this chapter: brief mention of rape. Also, the usual level of coarse language and violence: I mean, there's Bronn in it, what do you expect?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JAIME

Jaime Lannister would’ve never imagined that the first time he’d set foot on Tarth would have been to the sight of a barren landscape and an island that even from the sea had the sick look of a wounded, desolate rock; an isle of the dead, very different from the lavishing explosion of green he saw merely months ago from the deck of the merchant ship that brought him and Bronn to Dorne.

“This would be the glorious sapphire sea of Tarth? Somebody told you a big fucking lie,” Bronn had complained to him, as he looked down from the portside rail, wrinkling his nose for the vile waft that was exhaling from a greenish, lifeless sea.

After his confrontation with Cersei, the need to take action had kicked in: he had summoned Bronn and just said to him We’re sailing to Tarth. The mercenary didn’t even ask why: in less than one hour he rallied some Lannister soldiers, mostly loyal men who were with him at the siege of Riverrun, men Bronn knew he would trust, and, in a hurry, they had left Maegor’s Keep under a pouring rain.

Two miles out of the city, he had stopped the column, approximately two hundred men, and addressed them, explaining what they were going to do and why – although he didn’t elaborate in the details – and that, once they’d left the Kingswood behind, there would be no coming back: they were going against direct orders from the Queen, and no one of them, not even him, would be pardoned the insult.

“With all due respect, Lord Commander,” Ser Lyle Crakehall, one of his Captains, observed, “nobody among us had been longing to die for Her Grace.”

Once upon a time, Jaime would have taken offence on his sister’s behalf by the nods of agreement, and the gabbles and mutterings of confirmation which were exchanged among the ranks.

Now he was just glad that his men sided with him and that they were willing to follow him.

Ser Lyle moved his horse next to his, out of the others’ earshot, and reached across his saddle: “Grant me permission to ride back to King’s Landing with a couple of able men, my lord; I would
rally the rest of the Lannister army still in the city and get it ready for when you return in the Crownlands.”

“Wouldn’t be a bad thing to have more men,” Bronn added, scratching his chin as though he was already mentally counting how many men they would eventually need, “specially if you’re planning to take back the city from your sister.”

“Are you mad? I don’t want to start a war in the city’s streets! King’s Landing would become a slaughterhouse,” Jaime had said sternly. He didn’t become the Kingslayer only to end up being the main cause of the city’s destruction. Cersei still had hundreds of jars full of wildfire hidden in the underground tunnels all over the town. He couldn’t risk it.

“If it won’t be you, it will be the Dragon girl.”

Bronn was right: in any case, they would need a sound strategy and the numbers to go with it.

Jaime sighed and addressed his Captain: “Double back, gather as many men as you can; then wait for me at the crossroad on the Goldroad beyond the Blackwater Bridge. Four days from now.”

“Aye, my lord.”

With a heavy heart, Jaime had watched Ser Lyle as he jabbed his heels in his horse’s sides and rode away; then, he had led the rest of his host across the Wendwater, to Broad Arch, at the feet of Massey’s Hook, where they would set sail for Tarth.

As they rode in the Kingswood, familiar places were triggering his memory at every corner: with a jolt in his stomach, he recognised the clearing where he once crossed swords with the Smiling Knight, while Ser Barristar finished off Simon Toyne.

_I was still a squire, younger than Podrick Payne at the time._

It was raining back then too. He remembered with a shiver the feeling of the cold mud seeping into his boots and breeches as he knelt in front of Ser Arthur Dayne.

_He touched my shoulders with Dawn, that muddy day, and changed my life forever._

He believed in those vows, back then, with all his soul; he wanted to do great things, things for which he would be remembered.

_Well. I’ve got that part just right._

They didn’t encounter troubles in finding passage for Tarth, once they arrived in Board Arch: Bronn told the harbour master they were the rearguard of the Queen’s host that had reached the island the previous week and that they couldn’t leave from King’s Landing due to bad weather in Blackwater Bay.

No questions asked: two cogs were promptly made available without further ado.

When they landed, a crushing desolation welcomed them: the harbour village was completely deserted, with fish left to rot for days and days, flies and maggots feasting on it. A lone stray cat was meandering around the dry pit of the market square, in search for rats and pigeons.

Bronn covered his mouth and nose with a red scarf and threw him a worried look.

The doors of the houses and the many shops and inns were all wide open, some of them even off
their hinges, collapsed and splintered; inside, there was only chaos, broken furniture, upturned tables, cauldrons toppled over, their contents, mostly potatoes and vegetables, spilled on the wooden planks. But no dead people, as far as Jaime could see. That was a relief, although the sight of the empty, ghostly village filled him with uneasiness and dread.

In one of these houses, there was still a forgotten crib, next to two little cots. Bronn knelt down and picked up a rag puppet, dressed as a milkmaid: “Where the fuck are all the people?”

No one came down from the palace to receive him and his men halfway, so they climbed the hilly road that led to Evenfall Hall in silence.

The seat of the Evenstar stood proudly over the cliff on the western side of the island, a beautiful palace of pearly white marble and pink granite, with a thick curtain wall and two, no, three, bastions still standing, while the one of the eastern side had been almost brought down, collapsed under the assaults of an onager, by the look of the damage.

Around the corner, he could finally see the main gate; gracing the battlements, like a macabre parade, there were twelve heads on pikes. The second to last on his left was the head of a man in his late fifties, with sandy blonde hair streaked with silver and cornflower-blue eyes staring at the bleak sea.

Jaime’s stomach lurched. Next to him, he felt Bronn’s body stiffen as he followed his same line of sight. It was a meagre solace that his sellsword would share his same disgust and indignation.

*How am I ever going to tell her?*

The barbican was still standing, but the gatehouse and part of the wall had been clearly severely damaged by battering rams. Jaime could see the holes where the oak wood had caved in.

*Cersei, what have you done?*

“Who goes there? State your business!” shouted the sentinel on the rampart.

“I’m Jaime Lannister, Lord Commander of the Royal Army. Open the gate!”

They heard movement beyond the main entrance and after a while, slowly, the gate was opened and Ser Osfryd, a tall man with dark hair and a perpetual scowl on his face, marched to greet them. Behind him, there were about twenty men, fully armed.

With the corner of his eye, Jaime glimpsed Bronn’s hand tightening on the pommel of his sword. He could sense his men’s readiness: if there was going to be a fight, at least they wouldn’t run from it.

“Ser Jaime! We weren’t expecting you. What a pleasant surprise!” Kettleblack said, with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes: the grimace told him that his arrival was anything but pleasant.

Jaime didn’t even pretend to reciprocate the sentiment and cut to the chase, not wanting to waste time in small talk.

“Where are the people of Tarth, Ser Osfryd?” he asked, following him into the courtyard.

“Those ruddy fishmongers hid like rats and moles into the natural caves on that hill over there. Shepherd’s Hill, they call it. Lost three men into those caves. Pitch black, with tunnels as tight and slippery as a maid’s cunt, and the bastards had put all kind of bear traps, spring-guns, nets and snares to ambush us if we venture too deeply in them. You can get lost in those caves, they’re a
fucking labyrinth. I’ve been trying to drive them out under duress: I’ve threatened to kill a prisoner per day, but they wouldn’t yield, not even when I’ve put their Evenstar’s head on a spike. Stubborn bastards.”

To show his distaste about the whole ordeal, Ser Osfryd spat on the ground, mere inches from Jaime’s boot tip. Jaime and Bronn exchanged a non-committal glance.

“What are you going to do once you’ll run out of prisoners?”

The Queensguard shrugged and scratched his hooked nose.

“The Queen’s orders are to have the island freed and the smallfolk deported to King’s Landing. She didn’t clarify how I am supposed to achieve this result. I guess I will have to get creative,” he added puffing his chest, both his hands hooked on his belt. His smile was cruel and sickly.

A loud shrieke interrupted them: a young shoeless girl darted into the courtyard, followed closely by three soldiers, in civilian clothes except for the Lannister capes, all of them tipsy by the look of it; she, on the other side, was wearing only a dingy, torn tunic, loose on her breast, and it was clear from the bruises on her face and all over her legs and arms and from the dried blood on her inner thighs that she had been repeatedly beaten and raped.

One of the soldiers was still smugly tucking his shirt in his breeches.

Jaime’s blood turned to ice.

The tallest of them had a loop of rope which he twirled above his head before throwing it at the girl. The noose at the end of the rope caught her around the neck and immediately squeezed like a vice. Amidst the soldier’s japes and jeers, the girl fell with a hard thud on the ground, red in the face, gagging and scratching her neck with the nails in a desperate attempt to loosen the noose and catch a breath.

Jaime had seen herdsmen in Dorne do this with their cattle.

Only, the herdsmen were gentler.

He was suddenly reminded of a wedding banquet, of the purple face of his firstborn, of the bloody marks his nails had left on the neck.

Ser Osfryd didn’t seem particularly perturbed by the commotion.

“What’s this racket? Don’t you see we have guests?” he pronounced that last word as it were an insult.

“Beg your pardon, my lord. She had tried to escape. Again,” the man punctuated the words with a yank of the rope; the girl was dragged in the dust, the cobblestones on the pavement leaving deep scratches on her knees.

Ser Osfryd grabbed her by the hair and with a harsh jerk made her stand on wobbly legs and face him.

“This has become some sort of habit, hasn’t it? She had tried to run, this leveret, when we raided the village! Fast as lighting, aren’t you, sweetling?” he whispered in her ear as he nuzzled the side of her neck, grinding in her backside, his hands groping her breast and disappearing under the torn tunic. The girl whimpered and tried to turn her face away.
“How many girls do you have in the castle?”

Bronn’s voice sounded so different from the usual that Jaime snapped his attention to him, almost expecting to find another person entirely. The sellsword looked murderous.

Kettleblack didn’t register any of this, too engrossed with the girl’s breasts to take notice, but he looked around to his men for an answer.

“Five, my lord,” one of them remarked.

“You must forgive these lads, Ser Jaime; they’re young, and there’s not much to do on this blasted island.”

“M’lord…” she croaked. “Please, m’lord…”

Jaime realised that her pleas weren’t directed at Osfryd: the girl was looking at him, her hazel eye wide with fear and self-consciousness, but there was steel in them too. Despite the large bluish bruise over her left eye, which was almost completely closed, and a split lip, she was pretty, with long, ash blonde hair, full bosom and straight legs, slender but muscular.

_She can’t be older than ten-and-four_, Jaime thought.

“She’s a beauty, innit? Young and supple. If you wish I’ll have her warm and ready for you and your second-in-command. I’m sure you won’t be –

Without warning, Bronn unsheathed his dagger and plunged it into Ser Osfryd’s chest, twisting it for good measure. The man didn’t even moan, as he fell on the ground, but there was a perplexed, almost comical surprise in his black eyes when he exhaled his last breath.

A stony silence had fallen over the courtyard: Osfryd’s men, only moments before laughing and jesting at the girl’s expenses, were looking at each other, lost and aghast.

Jaime threw a warning, annoyed glare at Bronn.

“Apologies, my lord, but he was being truly disgusting,” he said, as he pulled out his dagger and cleaned it over his sleeve.

Jaime rolled his eyes and sighed, although he couldn’t really blame him. He cocked his head to the side and nodded to his men behind his back.

“Seize them.”

Everything happened so fast that the other soldiers of the City Watch didn’t even have the time to react, when Jaime’s men disarmed them and put them in shackles.

Few of them protested feebly.

“When the Queen will hear of this…”

Jaime took three long strides and silenced the young guard with one good golden backhand.

“You don’t serve the Queen any longer. And you don’t get to threaten me, boy.”

This shut them up.

Bronn was cutting the rope still around the girl’s neck, gently helping her on her feet. Once she was
free, she flung herself to Jaime’s legs, hugging him and brushing her lips all over his right hand.

“Figures. I save her and she goes kissing the golden hand of the pretty knight. I am a knight too, I’ll have you know!”

She sent an apologetic, shy smile Bronn’s way.

“Get up. What’s your name?”

“Ashlynn, my lord,” she wheezed, her voice hoarse and cracked, “but they call me Lynn.”

“Lynn, do you know where everyone went?”

She nodded, a bit wary.

“Can you bring me to them? No harm will come to any of you, I promise.”

“Is it true what they say?”

Jaime frowned, confused.

“I know who you are… I mean…” her gaze lingered to his right arm and Jaime stiffened.

“Is it true that you saved Lady Brienne’s life in the Riverlands?”

He had not been expecting this. He let go a tense breath he didn’t notice he was holding, his body relaxing.

“I did.”


Although she saved me just as much, in every way a wretched man can be saved.

Lynn gave him a small smile and extended her hand, strangely full of confidence.

“I will show you where the caves are. But you must come alone. And unarmed,” she added, pointing her eyes on Widow’s Wail, fastened to his hip.

Without hesitation, Jaime unbuckled his belt and gave his sword to Bronn who just snorted, annoyed.

“Make sure that the other women are safe and taken care of,” Jaime ordered him. “Free the Guards of Tarth still in the cells and put these cretins in their place.”

“Are you certain you don’t want somebody to watch your back?”

“I have Lady Lynn here, I’m sure that’s the only protection I need.”

The girl blushed.

“Your plushy heart is going to get you killed.”

He put his hand on Bronn’s forearm and nodded in the general direction of the battlements.

“Take him down. Take all of them down.”

Bran bowd his head and left without another word.
I’ll pay my respects, later.

On his way out, he yanked down one of the new Lannister banner, the one with the crowned lion on a red and black field, dangling from the wall, and ripped it in two.

The side of Shepherd’s Hill was punctured by dozens of holes in the ground, some of them hidden so well that Jaime, more than once, had Lynn stopping his feet mere seconds before he would fall into one.

When prompted, the girl told him that she had been able to escape, when the Queen’s soldiers landed, but then she noticed that her cat, a big monstrosity of long reddish fur, had stayed behind and she doubled back to retrieve it. And that’s when she got caught.

“You should have left the cat where it was.”

“It is my cat!” she shrilled, scandalised that he would even suggest something so horrible.

Tarth people and their absurd loyalty…

There must be something in the water.

At the entrance of a cave, they stopped.

“We don’t have torches,” he considered, glancing worriedly in the darkness ahead.

Lynn looked up at him and smiled condescendingly like he was a very stupid man.

“We won’t need them. Any child of Tarth could find the way into those caves even with their hands tied behind their backs. We all learn from an early age.”

Jaime watched as she stepped inside, fearless, and caught himself thinking about Brienne as a little girl, about the many times she likely went there, with the same boldness and the same penchant to go looking for trouble.

Did she know these cavities like the palm of her own hand too?

He felt Lynn’s hand gently tugging him into the dense, inky blackness and he wondered when he became so trusting that he didn’t have a problem whatsoever to follow a girl he just met into the hollow depths of a cavern.

She could easily slit my throat and leave my body to the wild beasts.

Instead, she had him flattening his back against the inner wall, and with her hand in his, guided him step by step.

“Stay on the left side of the wall, don’t touch anything else and put your feet where I put mine.”

“Do you keep bears under there?”

“Possibly.”

He could not see her, but there was a smile in her voice.

The descent into the cave was slow and treacherous; the rock against his back was warm to the
touch – natural hot springs running under the granite stone, he thought. Once or twice Jaime’s feet threaten to slip on the wet soil and he had to grab Lynn’s shoulder for support.

Down and down, they went, darkness weighting over his eyes.

This was oddly familiar.

_I remember this. I’ve been here before, in a dream. Or was it the Rock?_ '

_’Why come back?’_

_’I’ve dreamed of you.’_

“Stay here,” Lynn said, at least, letting go of his hand, and disappeared, her steps echoing in the dark; after a while, in the stillness Jaime heard a long whistle, followed by three shorter sharp sounds and a final one, long and with a descending tone.

Suddenly the space around him blasted with light; Jaime covered his eyes, as he was temporarily blinded by the many torches that at once were lightening up a circular space. Lynn was in the middle of it, and she was surrounded by at least fifty men armed with crossbows, maces and spears.

“Ashlynn! Gods be good…”

A white-haired man, armed with a thick oak club, cut his way through the crowd and stared at the girl, equally shocked and relieved; Lynn threw herself in his open arms.

“’m alright…Ser Jaime saved me from the Queen’s men.”

Just then, they seemed to become aware of his presence. It was like rousing a hive of wasps: angry whispers ran among their ranks, louder and louder.

Jaime Lannister…the Kingslayer….Oathbreaker…sister-fucker…

_Well, what did you expect, really, a kiss on the cheek?_

“Let’s kill him and send his head to his sister-lover!”

“He’s a monster! He’s cursed by the Gods!”

“He will bring misfortune on Tarth!”

“Kill him, Harwyn!”

The man pointed his club at him and addressed the girl: “Why have you brought him here?”

“I want a parley,” Jaime intervened in a commanding voice, loud enough to be heard over the ruckus.

Their brash laughter echoed and bounced all over the cavern’s walls.

“You want an arrow in your gut, Lannister, that’s what you want!”

“Your men attacked Tarth!”

“They weren’t his men! He killed Ser Osfryd and locked the others in the cells!” Lynn’s voice was
still feeble from the abuse, but Jaime was grateful she was taking his side in this.

“Lannister men, with Lannister banners and Lannister armours! He proved who he was at seven-and-ten, when he murdered his King. Why should we trust him?”

“Because Lady Brienne trusts him!”

This silenced them.

*Oh, wench, your name spoken aloud is all it takes to save me.*

“Lady Brienne is an honourable woman, nobody denies it, but a good judge of character she is not!”

Murmurs of approval rippled the air. Another man with black, greasy hair and rotten teeth put a dirty hand on Harwyn’s shoulder, sneering.

“Let’s capture him and demand a ransom to the Queen Bitch.”

“Excellent plan! Except that I’m here *against* her orders, so if you kidnap or kill me, you’d probably do her a favour.”

“Oh, trouble in the Seven Heavens?”

He sighed, trying to shake off their mocking sneers and their suspicious glares.

“I didn’t come here to pick up a fight. If I had bad intentions, believe me, you’d know by now. You have your families here, in these caves. They’re safe and under my protection: nobody will touch your children and women again,” he looked pointedly at Lynn, who nodded in encouragement.

“When you’ll come out, you’ll find *my* men in the palace. They’re here to serve you, and for your own security.”

Harwyn took a step in his direction, his club loose on his hand.

“You’re going to stay here and occupy the island?”

“No, you’ll keep your independence and neutrality. I’m leaving the island tonight.”

Harwyn’s eyes searched him up and down, trying to read in his face and body any sign of foul play, then he turned to his men and conferred in hushed tones.

Jaime stood there, tense and alert, listening to the distant sound of the underground creek. After a while, Harwyn faced him again: “We have an agreement. You’re free to leave.”

With Lynn’s aid, he walked back to the cave’s entrance.

It has started to rain. He wrapped his cloak tighter around himself and he felt old and tired. This weather didn’t agree with him.

*Winter is coming.*

“You’re riding North, aren’t you?”

The girl was standing there, still with her torn tunic and her swollen eyelid and the blood smearing
her legs and the red bruise around her neck, but there was something hard and raw dancing in her eyes, an open honesty that made her look more like a woman than the child she still was, and that reminded him achingly of Brienne, an eagerness and a solemnity he couldn’t quite place or understand.

Riding North meant reuniting with Brienne, and, although he yearned to be with her more than he liked to admit, he wasn’t quite sure he was ready for that. He didn’t have a definite answer to give to Lynn, so he left the implications hanging in the air and flashed her his trademark Lannister grin, all brash impertinence he didn’t quite feel like having, right now: “Thank you for your help, Lady Lynn.”

He felt her eyes following him as he climbed down from Shepherd’s Hill to the palace alone.

When he returned to Evenfall Hall, he found the courtyard deserted, except for his men, now walking on the ramparts and guarding the main gate; the heads weren’t on display anymore. Since it seemed that Bronn had everything under control, Jaime took advantage of the calm to ascertain the damages inside the palace. He also wanted to clear his head: the encounter with the smallfolk had rattled him more than he’d cared to admit.

The east entrance and the ground floor, with the dining hall, the little private sept and a chamber that must have been Lord Selwyn’s council room, looked mostly in good condition, and so was the great double-spiral staircase connecting the noble level.

By contrast, the second floor was heavily damaged: from the holes in the walls left by the onagers, Jaime could see the ruins of the east tower, still standing by some miracle, but looking on the verge of toppling down any minute now. He walked into a long hall, opening to his right into a spacious archway open over the promontory, while on his left, high pier glass mirrors, framed with elegant wooden panelling in bronze colours, were covering the surface of the inside wall, so that the landscape and its beauty would be duplicated in a wonderful game of reflections. On summer’s days, it would have been a magnificent view. But now almost all the mirrors had been shattered, leaving only the wooden panels on the wall to see. The shards were crackling under his boots.

Jaime knelt down and took one of the sharp pieces; he pictured Brienne as a girl, walking, almost running through the Hall, afraid that if she caught by mistake her own reflected image, it would haunt her later, in her nightmares. Maybe she would try to distract herself keeping her eyes downcast, or looking to her right, to the sapphire sea and the bay and dreaming of sailing to new adventures. Or maybe not. Maybe she would stubbornly walk, tall and fierce, fearlessly staring on her left, while, step after step, her face and her whole figure would silently mock her, and thinking of becoming a knight to show them, to show them all, what real beauty truly was.

He smiled sadly.

But the mirror fragment only reflected his own distorted image, now. He looked a lot older than the last time he stared into a looking glass. Outer beauty was a fickle, overrated thing: Cersei had been the prettiest of girls, only to become one of the most beautiful women of the Seven Kingdoms, and even now, after having birthed three children, she still had a very distinctive, very primeval allure…but besides that?

When they were children – Tyrion wasn’t even born yet – their Septa Sybella often told them the tale of a magic mirror that instead of reflecting appearances, would reflect one’s inner worth or flaws, revealing the person’s true nature. So the beautiful, but spiteful and cruel princess would look like a hag, and the homely miller’s daughter with too many warts and too little teeth, but a heart of gold, would look like a crowned queen (and by the end of the tale she turned out to be exactly that).
What would such a mirror show, if Cersei were to gaze into it, now?

His sister had planned and ordered this useless sortie against an imaginary enemy out of vengeance and jealousy.

She cared more about destruction than beauty, if the annihilation of the Great Sept, with the annexed holocaust of hundreds of innocent people, and the current damages to Tarth were any indication.

And what would that same magic mirror show to him?

Kingslayer, oathbreaker, sister-fucker, almost a murderer of little boys. The people of Tarth were right. He wasn’t any better than his twin, after all.

*Deep down we are still mirror images of each other,* he thought bitterly.

His hand tightened around the sharp edges of the mirror’s glass, until fresh blood spilt from little, harmless cuts. If only it were that easy...if only he could purge her out of his body like leeches would do with poisonous blood...

For a while he had truly believed their relationship could be mended: Myrcella's death had brought them closer together again, at least in the beginning. Pain and mourning, and the desire to exert rightful vengeance on everyone who had been menacing their family, had been two powerful catalysts.

But then she sent him away again, and, alone, she sank deeper into her own delusions of power.

He didn’t recognise her anymore. What had happened to the bright and witty golden girl, whose hand could caress and scratch with equal intensity, the ardent, wild woman who promised him the rest of the world would disappear – *so small we can't even see them* – the lioness that fuelled him with her words of love and fierceness?

*We've always been together. We'll always be together. We're the only two people in the world.*

She had lied. They weren't the only people in the world.

*His* world, somehow, against all odds, had enlarged to include other people that weren’t themselves.

People he cared about.

People he could trust.

*This is all the wench's fault,* he sarcastically snickered. *She had ruined me.*

The Hall of Mirrors turned up directly into what Jaime believed must have been the Great Hall of Tarth, or what remained of it: it was a large, circular room, perched atop of the western side of the cliff protruding over the sea. Jaime could distinctly hear the low, regular murmuring of the undertow shattering on the rocks below.

The Great Hall wasn’t a room like anything Jaime had seen in all his life: he had stood in pretty rooms, before. The Red Keep had an opulence about it that was worthy of heroes and legends and dragons, and Casterly Rock had its spaces of refined elegance and grace that were unparalleled even by the many beauties of Highgarden and the Water Gardens of Sunspear, but this was frankly ridiculous.
All around him, instead of concrete granite walls, there were enormous, high stained-glass windows, almost reaching the coffer ceiling. The coloured glazing panels had been shattered, of course, and the shards were now lying on the white marble floor, a mayhem of debris and crumbling splinters and coloured dust.

Where once there was glass, now there were the empty spaces inside the windows’ panels, still intact, and the steel armature of rods and came strips that, like a skeleton, had kept together the work of art, framing it at the same time.

His heart constricted.

_Brienne, I’m glad you’re not here to see this._

He ought to have spared Ser Osfryd his life, now, only to be able to kill him again and in more creative, painful ways.

On each side of the panels, there were extinguished braziers supported on sculptured gilded tripods, portraying the mythical Children of the Forest, with their large eyes and ears and their sharp black claws.

On top of the windows, exquisite floral motifs and Tarth’s coat-of-arms, the suns and the crescents, benevolently overlooked the place. The high coffer ceiling was decorated with mosaic tiles, shells and beach pebbles in shades of red, grey, green, blue, white and other hundreds of different colours, which were giving the Hall the glittering look of an undersea cave.

Cersei had tried to humiliate the Evenstar in every possible way. Even by destroying his ancestral home. But she could not touch its inner beauty. And even now, with the stained-glass windows broken and the depressing weather, Jaime could still spot here and there glimpses of the past greatness and majesty, where the fragmented stained glass still had remained connected to their panels, showing scenes he knew well enough from history books and fairy tales: there it was Prince Aemond, clad in black and gold, riding Vhagar, the monstrous she-dragon, on Shipbreaker’s Bay, and there it was Arrax’s carcass, washed up ashore on the cliffs of Storm’s End. Despite the many holes and missing parts, Jaime recognised Durran’s Defiance as the gods of sea and wind unleashed their fury above it, and a knight – was it Galladon of Morne, perhaps? – kneeling in front of a beautiful maid, as she presented him with a sword; they were works of the greatest craftsmanship, probably made by the skilled master glass-makers of Braavos, where the most renowned glass factories took residence since the Andal invasion.

And then, in the middle of the room, right over the side of the wall facing further west, a severely damaged, incomplete picture that Jaime hadn’t been expecting at all, here in the Great Hall of Tarth, a vassal house of the Baratheons: Summerhall, engulfed in flames. The stained-glass was so damaged that he could barely discern the turrets and the outline of the palace, but the many gargoyles and sculptures of rampant dragons on the curtain wall made it impossible to mistake it for anything else than the Targaryens leisure home.

Jaime tried to visualize with his mind’s eyes how it might have looked like under the summer sun, in all its splendour: with the excellent west exposure he held no doubt that, at dusk, with the sun low on the horizon flooding the windows and the hall with its shimmering light, the room would’ve become a triumph of blood amaranth, golden, crimson, amber and bright yellow dancing and flickering on the pearly white floor like darting tongues, their edges darkened in the turquoise green of wildfire. The flames which had swallowed and consumed the Targaryens ancient castle would have come alive again, their scorching heat almost made real by Tarth’s sizzling eastern sun.
He felt dizzy as though hypnotised, just by looking at it, and he could almost hear the screams of the people eaten by the blaze.

*I don’t have to imagine that, he suddenly thought, I know first-hand what fire can do.*

He had distant memories of Summerhall: his parents had brought him and his sister to the ruins once, when they were five, on a detour during a trip to Storm’s End. He never went there again: when Rhaegar would run away from the court and his father’s madness and would stay there for days, his harp as his sole company, in a sort of religious retreat, as though he had to repent from some kind of original sin, Jaime was never with him.

Tywin had recounted to him and Cersei the story of Aegon’s slow descent into folly and lunacy; how he had been a good king, with very bad ideas; how he had convinced himself that only dragons could help him keep the crown; how his death and the death of the Prince of Dragonflies had left a dynasty marred and hopelessly damaged by madness.

As Cersei cheerfully hopped from rubble to rubble, almost breaking one ankle in the process, Jaime had stared transfixed at the collapsed vaulted ceiling of the Great Hall with tears in his eyes: the vision of wrecked beauty would always make him wistful. His mother saw and understood that and had silently comforted him offering her hand; Jaime couldn’t remember anymore the exact colour of her hair and eyes, and the sound of her voice and her smell had long been forgotten too, but he would never forget her smiling down at him, and the consoling pressure of her hand closed in his.

The Summerhall tragedy hadn’t been a dreadful coincidence, an awful game of fire and blood played by destiny: his father had always been sure that everything had started with Duncan’s refused betrothal to Lyonel Baratheon’s daughter. The lord of Storm’s End was a very conceited, cranky man, annoyingly proud of his first-born’s beauty, and didn’t take well, *at all*, his defeat at the hands of Ser Duncan the Tall that had ended his short-lived rebellion. Despite Ser Lyonel being tamed with his heir’s betrothal to Princess Rhaelle, Tywin maintained that the fire had been set by an arsonist on the payroll of the Baratheons to wash away the shame for the Prince’s broken promise to Lady Jocelyn.

*Aegon wasn’t stupid, he would say. He would’ve never tried to hatch a dragon egg with wildfire, with all his family under the same roof.*

Well, Jaime conceded, a dragon *had* been born from the flames of Summerhall.

He had wondered many times if Aerys’s mad fascination with fire hadn’t perhaps truly started at Summerhall: how things would have been different, if instead of Aegon or Duncan the Small, Aerys would have perished, that night.

He also wondered how many promises broken out of love have been the direct cause of the griefs and bloodshed that had torn up the country ever since Aegon’s Conquest.

There was a common thread, it seemed, tying Rhaegar and Lyanna Stark to Robb Stark and Talisa, to Duncan the Small and Jenny of Oldstones, to Jaehaerys and his queen-sister Shaera, to Aemon the Dragonknight and Queen Naerys and, ever further back in time, to the mad passion that took Rhaenyra and Daemon, which almost tore a kingdom apart with civil war.

History liked to repeat itself.

*And men never learn.*
If there was a thing he had learnt from the past and from his own experience was that passion always trumps honour. That even the worthiest men could lose their minds and decency chasing after a dream of love, blossoming like a flower in spring.

Look what even good, respectable Ned Stark did.

_You’re not better, though. Fucking your own sister, thinking yourself above the rules._

Brilliant; now Ned Stark’s voice was even judging and chastising him in his own mind.

He returned his attention to the stained-glass window picturing Summerhall: on the left side, there was the image of a gigantic knight, carrying a bundle of blankets in his arms…no, not a bundle, Jaime thought, squinting his eyes and examining closer the remaining pieces of glass: it was a child, semi-hidden by a big cloak and protected from the flames and the scorching heat by the blanket and the huge body of the mysterious man, clad in the white cloak of the Kingsguard, the fabric eaten by the fire and sullied by black spots all over.

_Ser Duncan the Tall._

The legendary hedge knight who travelled with a young Aegon Targaryen as his squire and from the slums of Flea Bottom rose to become the sworn shield of the King, when Aegon, against all expectations, surprisingly was acclaimed ruler of the Seven Kingdoms.

Every child knew the story; as a boy, Jaime too had often daydreamed about him, picturing himself in his stead, craving adventure and glory, fancying himself to wear proudly that same white cloak too, someday.

_Well, you did wear the Cloak, in the end, and look what good those vows have brought!_

Ser Duncan had been an inspiration, for so many.

The Lord Commander had died with his King, the epitome of loyalty and devotion, but not before he had saved many a life, that terrible night. Maybe the child was one of the few who owed their lives to the brave knight.

_I wanted to become like him, more than anything in the world, when Ser Gerold put that Cloak on my shoulders; but Aerys wasn’t Aegon, and I didn’t stand a chance._

What would _trustworthy_ Duncan have become, if he had served the grandchild, instead of the grandsire?

Would he have stood patiently next to the Iron Throne while his King was roasting people in their armours, or would he have thrust his sworn sword into his back, too, and a lot sooner than Jaime had?

It was easy to be loyal, when your king was a good man, a man you trusted and loved like a father or like a brother.

_If only Rhaegar had survived…_

His eyes trained over the image of the palace consumed in flames and the kind giant rescuing the child – a girl, a boy, he couldn’t tell – and above it, where a cartouche with Tarth insignia still held some sparse glass-coloured letters and words. He could read _OUR, a Y, an N and IES_ at the end.

Jaime was intrigued: he realised that he didn’t know Tarth’s motto.
All those months together and he never thought to ask.

*I will, when I see her.*

If.

The sound of a quiet cough behind his back made him turn: Bronn stood there, his head cocked curiously to his side, Widow’s Wail held tightly in his hand. He gave him a curt nod pointing to the main entrance.

Jaime followed him down across the courtyard and to the north wing of the palace, which was slightly less damaged than the rest.

Here there were the kennels, the stables and a spacious place full of armours, swords of any kind, axes, maces, morning stars, spears, longbows and crossbows. Tarth’s armoury. Brienne’s world.

Now twelve corpses had been placed in the middle of the room, their heads reassembled shoddily with the rest of the body.

On a makeshift bier, Lord Selwyn Tarth’s body had been wrapped up in a banner with the colours and the sigil of the island. Bronn’s idea, most likely.

The gods knew what would Lord Selwyn have thought in seeing that the only ones keeping vigil over his dead body were a low-born soldier of fortune with a penchant for dark humour and insolence and the infamous Kingslayer who, just by his proximity, had tainted even the honour of the most virtuous among the maidens, the noblest among the knights.

Lord Selwyn had been a muscular man, tall, but nowhere the size of his daughter. An old, large kite shield rested over his chest: it was decorated with an elm tree on a sunset field, its branches reaching up to the sky where a shooting star was falling in a glory of red and orange.

Jaime recognised this coat-of-arms; he had seen it many times, not least even in the Book of Brothers, up in the all-white Round Room in King’s Landing’s White Sword Tower.

This was the shield of Duncan the Tall.

Duncan, who was said to be seven feet tall, with straw-blonde hair, and honourable to the bone.

First the Summerhall stained-glass window, now his own shield; it could not be a coincidence.

*Could he be...?*

But she never told him. Maybe she didn’t even know.

*Another thing I will have to ask her.*

When.

If.

“We found twenty-three Tarth soldiers in the dungeon’s cells,” Bronn muttered. “Everyone is gathered in the north courtyard, waiting for orders.”

He spared a last look to the late Evenstar and followed Bronn outside.

“How’s the castellan, in the absence of the Evenstar?”
“They don’t have one; they have a Captain of the Guards, Ser Germont Connington, who’s currently en route to Winterfell.”

To bring Brienne the news of her father’s death.

The men of Tarth’s Guard were assembled at the main gate, all of them wearing a light chainmail under boiled leather with the pink and blue of Tarth; they were a bit battered up, but none the worse for wear.

“With Ser Connington gone, who’s in charge of the island’s security?”

“I am, my lord,” answered a man who could not be older than Jaime himself, with black hair and striking blue eyes, “My name is Cole Grandison, of Grandview.”

“Do you know who I am?” he asked and he was grateful Ser Cole’s eyes stayed on his face and didn’t wander on his golden hand.

“Aye, ser. You replaced my great-uncle in Aerys’ Kingsguard.”

Ser Harlan. The Sleeping Lion. He was already decrepit when he became one of Aerys sworn swords.

“Then you also know that I don’t make idle threats: if I hear that you fled, leaving this island to rot and its people without protection, I will make sure that you’re punished for it.”

“I am not craven and I love this island like it were my own mother. I will protect her with my last breath!”

“Good. These men are yours, then.”

He turned around from Ser Cole’s surprised face and addressed his Lannister host.

“You will follow Ser Cole’s commands as if they were mine.”

“What about the people in the caves?”

“They will come out on their own, once they realise they have nothing to fear. So don’t give them a reason to start a plain rebellion. They know the island inside and out and they would crush you in less than a week, if they choose so. Am I right?”

“We like our freedom, here, my lord,” the young Grandison confirmed with a grin.

It was a white lie, of course: the smallfolk wouldn’t last very long in open combat against trained Lannister soldiers. But, for once, it was a lie said with their best interests in mind.

Leaving his men on Tarth was a contingency plan, in case Cersei would order another attack on the Straits, but Jaime believed she wouldn’t try to get the island back: she had already achieved her main purpose, and now the island had ceased to hold the same interest it had only a week ago.

“What are we going to do, now?” asked Bronn, as they walked back to the harbour.

There was only one thing Jaime wanted to do.

“We’re going home.”
As promised, we’re back on Tarth.

I can't even start to tell you how much I love Evenfall Hall's design and general layout. I’m pretty proud of it, actually: the Hall of Mirrors with its symbolic meaning...and Summerhall...yes, well...we'll get to that...

The Hall of Mirrors and the double-spiral staircase are loosely based, respectively, on Versailles' Galerie des Glaces, and the Bramante staircase in the Vatican Museums.

Although Ashlynn can be read as OC, she is also very much a crossover between Peck and Pia (because she is a sweet girl and I miss her in the show). She will have a big scene coming, later on.

As the musical/movie lovers among us may have noticed, the passage where Jaime rips the Lannister banner in two is very clearly a reference to Captain Von Trapp in "The Sound of Music".

I also referenced Jaime's weirwood dream from "A Storm of Swords" because, what the hell, it was one of the most beautiful exchanges between these two idiots, and even I, the less romantic person you'll meet in your life, was drooling all over the page when I read the 'I dreamed of you' bit.
I’d like to thank each and every one of you for the support this story is receiving!

I loved all your comments on the last chapter, and I can’t wait to read what you all think about this one!

It’s pretty long, I warn you…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE SHE-WOLF OF THE RIVERLANDS

The moss under her paws was damp and slimy, as she made her way through the meadow that ran along the lake. The path was hard and dangerous: the coat of moss hid another deeper layer of mud that swallowed up the limbs of humans and animals alike, entrapping them. By the end of their struggle, they were so deprived of their energy that they would simply let themselves die, or quietly wait for other stronger or more desperate beasts to sniff out their blood, made sweeter and warmer by fear, and come to feed on them.

Moving with great care, she grabbed by the scruff of the neck one of her cubs, the black one, always jumping ahead of the others, always seeking trouble, and leapt across the swamp, leading the way for the pack.

Her other three cubs were taken care of by the other females, as they loped across the meadow.

They were her last litter, the sons and daughters of the black, one-eyed wolf with the big scar cutting his muzzle from left ear to his jaw – a parting gift from an enormous grey bear, before the pack had assaulted him and torn him to pieces – the wolf who won her after he had killed her previous mate; she had accepted it, as thus was the rule of the pack, but the black wolf did not really conquer her, didn’t beat her in combat, as did the other one, the silver-haired one whom she had chosen, whom she had bonded with, so she didn’t really have much respect for him, although she had borne him his cubs. After his encounter with the bear, the black wolf had become slower and weaker, and he would probably die in this swamp.

Her litter, luckily, took its strength from her: they all had her dark-golden eyes and grey fur, and she was proud of them. They were cubs of Winter, and Winter has finally come.

Her other pups, well, they weren’t pups anymore: the eldest stood noble and confident, almost as big as she was, on the high ground surrounding the marsh, surveying the pack, considering its strength and weaknesses and biding his time. It would not be long before he claimed the leadership of their clan for himself. He had his father’s same beauty, his silver coat glowing bright under the moonlight, and, beneath it, a fur purer than snow: he moved silent and graceful, blending into the landscape so completely to the point that even she couldn’t find him if he wanted to disappear
between the patches of ice and snow.

His sister, her daughter, the only one she had left, after she had lost two, still in the den, from cold and starvation right after whelping them, was dangerous and solitary: she trotted quick and wary over the mushy ground, a little bit apart from the brother, her teeth always bared and ready to tear anyone who dared to come closer without her permission. She loved her daughter, for she could see herself in her, like a mirror image: the same thirst for freedom and independence, the same lethal edginess. Soon she would leave to create her own pack, maybe to have her own litter, if she found a suitable mate wild and strong enough to claim her.

Behind her suddenly rose a sharp yelp: the black wolf, she gathered, at last entrapped in a quaking bog, sinking below the deceitful surface. She could hear him moving, flailing, trying beyond reason to free himself: this would only make him sink faster. She would know. She had seen it happen many times, now.

As the smell of his fear assaulted her nostrils, she didn’t even turn: his cries for help and whimpers were growing weaker and weaker, but they couldn’t stop to give him assistance, or they would probably die too, in this forsaken land.

It did not matter. Death would come for the unfit, for the unworthy.

Only survival mattered. And her cubs. Her cubs ought to survive this winter.

The survival of the pack fell on her: she had led them farther south, preying on animals and humans, she had kept them warm and sheltered and well fed, and when the weather had turned for worse, she had secretly rejoiced.

She belonged to the North and the cold never bothered her: while the other wolves of the pack were snarling and grinding their teeth, shivering from the tip of their ears to the tip of their tails, their limbs numb and freezing, howling their disappointment to the skies, she thrived in it. Her body had changed then, adapting to more extreme life conditions. Her grey fur had turned into a lush, silky coat, warm and dense, resistant to snow and rain, which made her look even larger, her eyes had become even more accustomed to hunting in the dark, and her legs were stronger and didn’t fear the rough, bumpy path, nor the frozen ground.

As she shredded layers after layers, she felt as though nothing of what she once was had remained, except for the ever more distant memories of a previous life, fading like an echo, dissolving under new coats of snow.

Her sensory memory was the last thing, the only thing left tying her to her past: she remembered another litter, belonging to another life; she remembered the lukewarm taste of the milk suckled from her dying mother’s udders, the taste mixing with blood and decay, and her mother’s body supine in the snow, the stag’s antler stuck deep into her throat.

And she remembered the warmth of the hands of the young human, almost a man, who picked her and her sister up and put them into the arms of the other one, the fake wolf smelling of salt and water and seaweed, and the smell of the pup-child, the one smelling like summer and weirwoods, and the brooding one whose blood ran faster and warmer in his veins. Like fire.

They were almost all gone now: her sister, of course, was the first to go, slain in her stead; then the grey brother faster than the wind, and the angry one – she thinks she misses him the most, for they shared the same savage rage, the same desperate need for freedom; and, lately, she could not feel anymore her other brother, the brave one, lost in the lands of the North. That had been harsh and painful: their connection had always been strong, and she had hoped, one day, to meet him again.
Instead, now she knew that the next time they would be reunited, they would be enemies. She was with him, when he died. She remembered snow and yells and agony and blue eyes.

His golden eyes had become blue now, too.

The child, the wild boy who liked to fly and climb... his connection had become lost too, for a while, then came back, but it was as tenuous as a tendril of smoke, as though he was too far away for her to reach, up north in the immense expanse of the Land of Always Winter.

But what she still remembered the most were the loud shrieks of joy and excitement and the boisterous thumping of the girl’s heart, when she run to her the first time. A little, noisy, skinny thing, with long face, big, grey eyes that were quick, curious and fiery. She remembered thinking that the child, a true wolfling, would be fun to train. Difficult, but fun.

Thinking about her brought a dull ache to her heart.

The girl sent her away to protect her, that she knew very well. But the memory of the sharp rocks thrown at her, the stones hitting her head and legs, still hurt more than she cared.

The pain she felt when she left couldn’t have been sharper if she were to leave her own pups.

Those rocks weighed heavy on her mind.

That girl gave her a name, a name she couldn’t even remember now, a name similar to a battle cry that reminded her of iron and water, and, in exchange, she had loved her. They were kindred souls.

For a little while she had managed to track her, so that she could still protect her at the best of her abilities, following her scent, still strong and close, for weeks, mixing itself with other human smells: the pup-boy who smelled of freshly baked bread and the other one, who smelled of leather, iron, fire and, as absurd as it seemed, stag, and the man without a scent and without a face; and after them, the girl’s scent mingled with the feral smell of another creature, fearful and hurt behind the mask of the rabid, angry dog; then, all of a sudden, her scent became faint to the point that even she had troubles in detecting it among the other smells, the smell of smoke and fire coming from the two buildings of men, standing tall like gigantic twins across the river, and then above the smell of death and putrefaction. Until one day, the scent had simply stopped, and the girl had ceased to exist; she lost her trail in the place where human constructions ended and the great expanse of salty water, the water the animals couldn’t drink, began.

She had almost lost all hope, when, three turns of the moon ago, the wolfling’s scent had returned.

It was different, darker, full of relentless hatred and vengeance, like if it belonged to another person, or to hundreds of different people. She was baffled by it, for a while. How could anyone smell like themselves and at the same time like any other people? But it was her, that was unmistakable.

So close that her dreams had become her own.

She kept her distance, though: let her come to me, see if she can find her way back.

The unworthy will die; only the pack will survive.

These woods would soon bring them together again, of that she was sure; but she still didn’t know if she would forgive or attack her.

I’ll know when we’ll meet again face to face.
For now, her only worry was to go through this meadow, without losing any other member of her pack: once they’d manage to walk past the peat bogs, trembling under their paws, once the swamp would be past them, they would be safe on higher ground and then, beyond the hill, they would see the lowland stretching out until it reached the cities built by men.

Time was on their side: it was their moment, the hour of the wolf, the hour of the dead rising; the winds of winter blew harsh and cruel, and the lone wolf never survives.

So she looked up to the moonless sky, and howled.

Her grey eyes popped open, staring ahead alert and ready at the bleak sky, her hand automatically grabbing the hilt of Needle, always strapped on her hip. She wouldn’t unbuckle it not even while sleeping or if she had to go take a piss. She pulled herself up, sitting in the cold muddy soil and sniffed the air.

The smell of the smoke coming from the fire she had set on the Twins had disappeared long ago, concealed by other smells, but she thought she could still detect it, sticking obstinately to her clothes, for weeks after she had left the wild and dangerous streams of the Green Fork.

The weather was slightly less cold than it had been during the whole week: now snow had given way to a clammy rain, slimy with mud, its stickiness sweeping through her bones.

All around her, the ice weighting on the branches of oaks and alders was melting, giving the trees the look of weeping ghosts, their skeletal fingers swaying eerily to a non-existent breeze, pointing at her, both in accusation and in beckoning.

I’ve dreamt of Nymeria again, she thought, stretching and standing up from her makeshift bed made of leaves and moss inside the hollow she had dug up under the roots of a weirwood, to hide from the cold and the wild beasts which haunted the swamp. The pale bark was still encrusted in ice: she put her lips on it, warming the cold layer until it melted under her kiss, and avidly sucked the drops. The frozen water tasted of clay, stone, lichens and blood: an acrid, somewhat bitter tang.

The flavour of the forest.

Arya smirked. She felt like one of the Children of the Forest of Nan’s old ghost stories, the ones Bran constantly asked for before going to sleep. She examined her hands as though she expected to see only four fingers with long, sharp black claws. Nan’s tales always ended with High Heart and the sacrilege of Erreg the Kinslayer, who cursed the place forever. The nightmares resulting from the tales were made of shivering whispers among the trees, of fleeting touches of damp, rotten fingers, of mean, red eyes hiding under the bogs, of mad laughter and hushed weeping sounds echoing in the wind.

But now that she was mere miles from the hill of High Heart, there were no ghosts. Only her.

Only Death.

And Death doesn’t bother itself with ghosts: the nightmares of her childhood were mild and pale compared to the dreams of darkness and vengeance that filled her up.

Dreams of blood and fire. And meat pies.

In the House of Black and White, Jaqen H’ghar, or whoever the Faceless Man truly was, told her she had finally become no one. But she knew better. In Braavos she had found her true self again:
after the many weeks spent in darkness, her eyes had learned to see beyond the light, beyond the solid world, beyond its lies and games, and now she could see and hear everything, as if she were one of the greenseers of the legends.

When she was a child and her head swirled with dreams of becoming a knight, she had envied so much her brothers’ training: sword fighting, archery, jousting were disciplines barred for her because of her sex.

Now she knew that swords, crossbows and knightly virtues wouldn’t keep her and her family alive, in the war to come.

In Braavos she understood that she would have needed a whole new set of skills, a completely different kind of training, to do what she was supposed to do, to become what she truly meant to be.

She didn’t harbour a true grudge toward the Waif, not really: yes, she had hurt her and tried to kill her more times than Arya cared to remember, but ultimately she had only been a means to an end. Jaqen H’ghar had fomented their animosity and rivalry to make her better: the Waif had been the final test.

And now the training was over.

She had left the House of Black and White with a purpose, finally knowing her own name, her true identity: the Faceless Man didn’t have anything else to teach her. Once he had explained to her how to don and change one’s face with another, she had laughed aloud: the trick was pretty simple, when one knew where to look, not more than smoke and mirrors. Some would call it magic, but the truth was a lot funnier and a lot more dangerous.

She had learned how to be a ghost a long time ago. To disappear, to blend, to go unnoticed. Now she knew how to act, to wear a mask, to pose as another person entirely. She thought of Lady Crane fondly. Maybe, when all this would be over, she’d join a mummer’s company and travel all around the known world.

She had stayed hidden in Sisterton for several weeks, biding her time: there wasn’t a better place to gather information than a smuggler’s den. Posing as Mercy, a pretty wench serving patrons at the Belly of the Whale, Arya didn’t have any problem in uncovering secrets, facts and rumours.

Men’s tongues, she found out, became zealously loose if there was a sweet girl with green eyes and teasing dimples flirting with them, eager to listen to the wild stories coming from the North, particularly in the last months.

She could wait. Time was on her side.

Men liked to talk to her in jest about the death of Stannis Baratheon: the king with the flaming heart on his shield wasn’t very popular among the smugglers and the pirates who landed on the Three Sisters, since the times when he was his brother’s master of ships. When the news of the destruction of the army of the Lord of Light, led by a Red Priestess who reportedly could see the future in the flames, reached the town, Sisterton exploded in joyful songs and dances: the parties lasted for days, even after they almost ate and drank up all the provisions of stocked fish and meat for the upcoming winter. On the last day of celebrations, Lord Godric Borrell himself was seen at the head of a parade, where two dummies made of straws and twigs, their faces painted to resemble Stannis and his red whore, were hanged and put to the stake.

She had heard about the Great Sept of Baelor in King’s Landing, the death of the Tyrells heirs and Tommen’s suicide: she remembered him, a plump, silly thing covered in padding as Bran
repeatedly hit him with a wooden sword.

"’Tis pity that his bitch of a mother is still alive: I wouldn’t mind seeing her burn!’ one of the tavern’s patrons had said and she had inwardly smiled in relief. Vengeance was still hers.

News from beyond the Neck was sparse and not always reliable: a sailor from White Harbor had talked about Sansa Stark’s marriage to the Bolton Bastard and about the Flayed Man banner flying atop Winterfell. That hadn’t made any sense at all. It took two more days, and the chuffed stories of a stranger coming from the Dreadfort, for Arya to learn the truth.

Later that evening, as she unceremoniously dropped the man’s body into the bay’s cold waters, she recited her names of hate: Queen Cersei, The Mountain, The Hound, Walder Frey, Ramsay Snow, Beric Dondarrion, Thoros of Myr, the Red Witch, Theon Greyjoy, Theon Greyjoy, THEON GREYJOY.

A few days later, she crossed the Bolton bastard off her list, when accounts of the so-called Battle of the Bastards reached the island. There was still discordant news about her brothers: hearsay was that Rickon hadn’t been killed by the Kraken, but by Ramsay himself. The rumours about Bran were even stranger: people coming from Last Hearth and Karhold, trying to escape either the wrath of the Starks of Winterfell or the cruel bite of winter, spoke of a ghost that looked like Brandon Stark, haunting the Fist of the First Men, where he was seen riding a gigantic elk, while he gathered an army of Children of the Forest to fight against the Others and the wights.

White Walkers, wights…a deathly menace beyond the Wall, an Army that was said to have wiped out thousands of years ago, raised again against the realms of men…these hearsays were even crazier, but Arya had learned a long time ago not to judge merely on words.

*Words are wind.*

The only way to ascertain the veracity of gossip would be to go North, and see for herself. But, although the Direwolf might be gracing the battlements of her ancient home once again, Winterfell still had to wait.

She still had a job to do.

When she heard about the siege at Riverrun, with the Lannister army doing the dirty work for the Frey traitors, Arya knew where to go.

There were other names on her list to cross.

Places to be, people to kill.

On the road to the Twins, across the Bite and the Riverlands, she had learned everything she could about the Red Wedding: details, names, even what was served at the banquet. That’s when the news about Jon having been proclaimed King in the North reached her. She hadn’t been impressed, at all.

*Because it had worked so remarkably well the last time,* she had bitterly mused.

Infiltrating the Twins, lit up for celebration and with the guards even more loose than usual, had been painfully easy.

There were so many people either so drunk that they couldn’t even piss straight or dozing off with their bellies full of stuffed trout, honeyed mutton and onion soup that no one noticed the new lass serving at the tables.
Later, when the blood spurting from Walder Frey’s sliced throat warmed her hands and his body quavered under the last spasms of life, she felt she could finally breathe again.

Wearing the face of a page, she climbed down to the dungeons, freed her uncle and told him to take his wife and son and get the hell out of there, as fast as he could.

Then, while the house still slept, unaware of the blood staining the marble stones of the Great Hall, she set fire to the damned buildings.

To be really, really sure that what was dead stayed dead.

That’s where the dreams began.

Dreams of moss and trees, and frozen hilltops, and golden eyes, calling out to her like a siren’s song.

She hadn’t planned to travel so deep into the Riverlands: her main target was still the capital, where the Queen was, and the Mountain, even if she heard that nowadays he went by another name, but her feet had driven her further south, almost all the way to High Heart, farther away from Winterfell, as though a force compelled her to keep going, searching for…she wasn’t quite sure what.

South of Pennytree, the Riverlands had become one immense marsh: the Red Fork had flooded, swelled by the copious rains of the last weeks, thus changing drastically the landscape.

Arya had learned to move slowly in the mud, using long branches as walking sticks and meticulously checking the trail with them, before taking each step, to make sure the ground wasn’t hollow below the surface and that it could support her weight.

It was a long, tiring progression, but to be swallowed into a marsh after she survived so many things would have tasted like a bad joke from the Gods.

So she patiently journeyed south, not really sure where her feet would take her, following the pull she felt in her dreams, letting reeds and thorny shrubs leave their bloody kisses on her legs and arms, crushing in her palms the leeches that glided under her shirt and pants during the night and envisaging it was Cersei’s heart she was squeezing.

Worse than leeches were the flies and gnats, which didn’t leave her alone not even when it had started raining again.

She lived on mud crabs, frogs and snakes, on acorns, red berries and the flowers and stems of wild lilies, like the little crannogwomen and men her father often spoke of fondly.

She found a turtle, on a foggy morning, and it was a feast for the ages.

It was nearly impossible to say how many days she had spent in the meadow, now: the sky was always covered, grey clouds full of rain and snow weighing down on her, and the nights were growing longer. Birds and bigger wild animals, predators and preys alike, had almost completely deserted the swamp, migrating south in search of milder climates.

Only the comforting howls of wolves kept her company in the night.

Once she caught a deer stuck in the mud: she got closer, Needle at the ready, but instead of giving it the gift of mercy, and salvaging what she could for a hearty meal, Arya had sat on the swamp’s edge and watched fascinated, as the beast desperately attempted to free itself, only to be swallowed
deeper and deeper, its cries more and more frightened, its forelegs flailing frantically, until two or
three air bubbles erupted on the flattened grey-brown surface of the pond and silence descended
again on the marsh.

But there wasn’t only game in the woods: sometimes Arya felt as though she was followed, golden
eyes staring down at her in the darkness only to disappear at the first bleak light of the morning.
Shadowcats and wolves bigger than horses haunted the Riverlands, but she was more worried
about the presence of human predators, than animal ones.

She was crossing a particular tricky patch of unstable peg bogs, when it happened again: the thin
hairs on her arms and nape raised, as she sensed danger lurking from the edges of trees and bushes.

Needle was swift and ready; her left foot not so much.

The bog under her trembled without warning and in a second Arya lost her balance and sunk into
the muck below, waist-deep. She tasted blood in her mouth, where her teeth had dug into her
tongue.

She would not let the distraction to cost her her own life.

Unbidden, came to her mind words lost in the very fabric of time, words spoken in an exotic accent,
an accent she had learned to love, to a little girl who looked like her, but wasn’t her anymore.

*Fear cuts deeper than swords.*

Panic surged inside her, but she forced herself to stay completely still: she remembered the deer,
how its movements only hastened its end. Her arms were still free: she tried to lie on her back,
floating over the surface like a snake would, but her feet were trapped and she felt as though the
mud was solidifying around her ribcage. Breathing was becoming difficult.

Not like this.

*I’d look like a bloody fool if I die here in this fucking swamp.*

Not today. *Not today.*

She tried to reach the branches of the weirwood stretching over her head, but there was nothing to
grasp onto. If anything, it seemed that the twigs were growing farther apart, eluding her extended
hand, as though pulled by an invisible force.

A rustling of leaves and bushes had her head spun around, searching for moving shades in the
penumbra: if a shadowcat would find her in this predicament, dying suffocated would be the last of
her problems.

She raised Needle as another noise from her left startled her and made her sink deeper.

“Come out and fight, you foul beast!”

“I’ve been called names before, but foul beast…”

Arya started.

Perched like some sort of bird of prey on one of the peat bogs in front of her, stood a woman, older
than any other woman she had ever met, with white-bone skin covered in wrinkles and big,
bloodshot eyes that surveyed her like *she* was the oddity.
She looked like the Crone herself.

Maybe just like the Crone, she could be moved to show guidance and wisdom.

“Help me!”

The old bat cocked her head in curiosity and stood up, balancing her bare feet like an accustomed, although decrepit, dancer.

Arya gathered that she could not have been four feet tall.

The creature skidded over the murky surface, somewhat gracefully and a lot swifter than her age would allow, and reached a more solid patch of grass, unscathed. Arya was still trying not to sink lower: she seemed to be able to brush something with the tip of her boot…the ground, or maybe…

“Get me out of here! Please!”

“What?

“Do you know the Song of Ice and Fire?” she asked, her eyes sparkling in excitement. “No, I suppose you don’t. Nobody knows it, yet,” crestfallen she added in a whisper, more to herself than to Arya, and exited from her field of vision.

Panic and annoyance fought in equal measure inside Arya: a crazy, albino woods witch, who talked in riddles and left her to die in the swamp, that was the last thing she needed, right now.

A truly disappointing end to my adventures: the lads would be inconsolable.

“What?

“Do you have money?” the woman’s dismembered voice raised again, echoing through the trees.

Arya frowned: what in the Seven Hells would an old dwarf probably related to the Children of the Forest do with silver stags and golden dragons?

“I don’t have anything to give you, nor money, nor songs,” she called in the air.

“But you do have names,” said the voice, this time from above her head. The dwarf was hanging upside down from the branches of the weirwood, her long, milky hair tickling Arya’s nose: she looked like one of those mouse-like animals with that strange pouch over their bellies which the smallfolk of Braavos called didelphos.

“Names like drops of blood, names like faceless faces…” she sing-sang, her long claw-like nails scratching her forehead.

How does she know about the names?

“The names are mine,” Arya growled and bared her teeth, suddenly on the defensive.

“One of those names doesn’t belong to you, child. It belongs to the valonqar.”

The woods witch disappeared again into the branches of the weirwood, the rustling of red leaves the only clue of her presence.

“This girl has many names, but only one death awaits her. You should have died a long time ago, you should have died many a hundred of deaths. In the belly of the Red Keep, on the road to the
Wall, in the hall of Kings and Dragons, on the streets of the city of the Titan. But here you are. How many lives does this girl have?"

“Many,” Arya said defiantly.

“Not enough,” the old woman answered, voice thick with scorn and sarcasm.

Silence once again fell on the marsh; Arya craned her neck hopelessly. She could not feel her legs any longer, and her breath was coming out in laboured puffs. The mud had reached her chin, and she was growing more tired by the minute.

Then, all of a sudden –

“You’ll die!”

The witch was standing once more on the bog in front of Arya, clearly amused by her startled reaction.

“Could you just stop doing that?!” she blurted, now positively freaking out. If this old witch didn’t want to help her, Arya hoped that she at least would just leave her alone, so that she could die with some of her dignity still intact.

“Everyone will die. Valar Morghulis,” the crone went on, with a caricature of a curtsey. “But you’re not going to die in this meadow. You won’t give me songs, money or names, so you’ll repay this old, sad woman with life, instead of death.”

She rested her eyes on the weirwood; Arya followed her line of sight, until it seemed to her that the branches of the tree were bending, bowing, leaning over her.

A trick of the light.

No.

It wasn’t a trick of the light: the tree was flexing its white fingers toward her, forming a cradle of twigs around her upper body.

Arya looked up to her with questioning eyes.

“How would you know I won’t kill you the instant I’m out of this marsh?”

The woman smiled morosely.

“Fire couldn’t kill me. What makes you think you could?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Arya put the hilt of her sword in her mouth and, with both her hands free, grabbed the branches. The weirwood gave a lurch and pulled her out of the marsh with a loud squelch.

The contact with the freezing air made her shiver instantly; the heart tree laid her down gently on the ground, then its branches retracted to their natural position.

“You’re still a long way from home, little wolfling,” the woman spoke in hushed tones, her eyes glossy and slightly out of focus. “You don’t have to fear the bogs, you only have to fear the bird. Keep the stag close. And when the avalanche will come, the wolf who’s not a wolf will fly to the end of the world and pierce the heart of darkness, and, after that, blue roses will blossom in the ice and the princess, with fire in her heart and storm in her eyes, will be cloaked in the lion’s pelt.”
Arya’s eyes followed her as she scampered to a puddle of murky water and looked intently at her face reflected into the surface.

“The dragon has three heads… the dragon has three heads… Snow! Snow!… smell of burned trees over the hills… black wings obscuring the sun… a great darkness… a sea of fire and tears… you must go south to go north…”

The witch was making less and less sense. Arya should have run as far as her feet could take her, leaving her to her mysteries and visions; instead, the girl kneeled next to her, trying to see in the puddle what she was seeing: “Who are you?”

Her head snapped and her red eyes were now observing her, clear and sharp like an owl’s.

“I’m no one,” she said matter-of-factly, with a condescending smirk, as if Arya were none the wiser.

Was she mocking her?

Arya didn’t like her, at all. But she didn’t shy away, when the old woman reached out with a dirty, wizen hand. The touch on her cheek was surprisingly soft beyond the callouses and the signs of old age.


A flock of ravens fled from the treetops, alarmed by some hidden menace; Arya sprang to her feet, alert and watchful, and tensely spun around, checking her surroundings and up, in the spaces between the trees’ branches.

Up above, an eagle’s high-pitched scream could be heard.

When Arya’s eyes returned to the pond, the old woman had already disappeared into thin air.

After her encounter with the woods witch, Arya found that it was somehow easier to cross the marsh: the rains gave her a reprieve, and the mud under her feet had gradually solidified, making her steps more secure and the trail a lot less dangerous.

A pale sun had peeked out from the black clouds, gleaming shyly through the trees’ branches. Her heart felt lighter: soon she would be able to hear the sweet babble of the Little Tumbler, the main tributary of Blackwater Rush, and surely the Wind’s Ravines couldn’t be much farther away. There, protected from cold and bad weather by the natural granite caves that opened inside the hills and mountains, Arya would finally be able to bathe, to scrub off this damned crust of mud which was making her skin itch almost painfully.

Only a few hours later, the swamp ended almost unexpectedly and, before her, the Waterfalls of Florian’s Helm came into view, the drops of water vapour caught into the colours of a rainbow.

Here and there, spiky icicles hung from the edge of the rocks, the water still running wild under the frozen surface.

It was beautiful.

Arya smiled and, after a quick perusal of her surroundings to make sure she was alone, she stripped and dove in.
The water was so cold it left burning marks on her skin, but the feeling wasn’t completely unpleasant. She grasped a handful of sandy pebbles from the riverbed and started vigorously scrubbing the mud away.

This was said to be the place where Florian the Fool found his sword, embedded into a stone at the feet of the waterfall, its hilt glittering with diamonds and topaz and jacinths.

*Caliborne…Calabrun, Arya let out a long, wistful sigh, Sansa would know.*

The cold was making her feet and hands go numb: all her muscles screamed with stiffness and her nipples were practically blue.

She was about to come out of the water when, above the roar of the waterfall, she heard a high-pitched yelp followed by a splash of water: desperately clinging to the slippery side of a rock, there was a wolf pup.

The stream in that point was stronger and the wolfling was struggling and getting weaker and weaker, but the water was also shallow, so Arya could get to him with relative ease as the water only reached her knees.

*He must have fallen from the rocks up there; it’s a miracle he avoided the stones in the river.*

The poor thing, scared to death, scratched her breasts and shoulders in the desperate attempt to hold on and let out loud whines and wailings.

When they reached land again, Arya tried to catch him by the scruff, but the little demon bared its teeth and closed its jaws on her palm.

A little more than a nip to free himself, surely not to hurt her, but nonetheless Arya released him at once.

“You’re welcome!” she called after him, holding her bleeding fingers to her mouth, while the pup vanished in the bushes’ shadows on the borders of the woods.

But she hadn’t taken more than two steps in the direction of her clothes, when she heard a low, deep growl coming from the trees.

*This is not a pup.*

She carefully backed away until she reached her sword and held her breath, as from the shadows emerged the biggest wolf she had ever seen.

It had thick, grey fur and golden eyes shining dangerously with hot rage; the pup was cowering between its long legs, as the beast stretched its head, frothing at the mouth, its muscles taunt and ready to strike.

It could not be a mere wolf, not with that size.

Arya heavily breathed in, as a sense of familiarity rushed from her memory: a scent of wildness lingering in her bedchamber and a warm softness under her hand while she slept, a giggle when a wet tongue would lick and gently bite the point of her ears, the sound of feet padding along beside her, never leaving her alone, the feeling of being herself and at the same time someone else outside her skin.

She remembered a time when she truly *belonged.*
Needle slipped from her hand and clattered on the ground, as realisation hit her.

“Nymeria…”

If the direwolf recognised her, or the sound of her own name, she didn’t show; instead she bared her sharp teeth even more, in her eyes a savage brutality brought forth by rejection and hurt.

Overlooking the clear signals that screamed at her Do not come closer, or I’ll rip your throat off, completely naked and unarmed, Arya took two steps toward the direwolf.

“Nymeria, it’s me!”

But the wolf’s growls only grew louder and her fur stood on end so that she looked even bigger. Arya stopped dead on her tracks.

I hit her. I’ve thrown rocks at her. She was my friend, my only friend, she had tried to protect me and I pushed her away.

A deep sense of misery emerged from within her, woe and ruefulness clenching her heart and lungs.

The wetness all over her cheeks came unbidden, as a surprise not entirely welcomed. If she were to be honest with herself, she didn’t even think she could still cry, after all this time.

The realisation both confused and annoyed her.

It’s been so long…the last time I felt this way was when Mother and Robb died.

She thought herself impervious to such girlish emotions, but Nymeria, her yellow eyes, was conjuring up such painful memories, so heavy on her heart, that Arya found herself crouched on the frozen ground, her bare knees bent and her empty palms held up in surrender, or maybe in the silent hope of a conciliatory hug.

“Forgive me.”

The wolf flattened herself, ready to lunge, body stiff and ears lying flat against the head.

I don’t care if she tears me to pieces, I only want her absolution.

“Nymeria, I’m sorry!” she literally bowed before her, her hands outstretched and beseeching, harsh breath puffing in clouds of condensation before her.

The growls relented and then stopped; Arya risked a glance upward. Nymeria was still in a predatory stand, but she wasn’t grinding her teeth anymore; instead, slowly, very slowly, her snout drew closer, sniffing tentatively the air between them, until Arya could feel her warm breath over the point of her fingers. She didn’t dare to close the little distance, but found herself leaning in, yearning for a touch.

Like coming home.

A distant howling into the woods broke the spell: Nymeria fell back, raised her muzzle and answered the pack with a long, guttural AHOOOO that ricocheted against the rocks of the waterfall and up in the snowy sky; then took her cub and left without looking back.

Only when her muscles became stiff and numb with cold, did Arya raise from her kneeling position and recovered her discarded clothes.
Five days went by, and as she followed the course of the river farther south, Nymeria wasn’t doing anything to cover her tracks: she wanted Arya to know she was following her, testing her, to see if she was worthy to be taken back. But she didn’t show up again.

For now, she could feel her moving close to her, like a second heartbeat, and, from time to time, at night she felt herself wrapped up in the warmth of her furs, even though, when she opened her eyes again in the morning it was to the loneliness of the woods and to a sore back, half-frozen against the hard ground.

On the sixth day’s sunset, Arya finally came across human life: around a fire, eight men with mismatched armour plates were finishing in silence a frugal meal of rabbit soup and mushrooms.

The last remnants of the Brotherhood Without Banners, Arya mused as she immediately noticed Beric Dondarrion, the Red Priest and Anguy the Archer; the other four, Arya didn’t know them, but the last, she would have recognised that burned face in a million.

How was he still alive?

What in the Seven Hells was he doing with them? Why weren’t they at each other’s throats?

Arya waited, concealed by night, until the fire died out and the men fell fast asleep, well wrapped up into their wool cloaks, their bellies full and sated; then, silent as death, she went to work.

After she had finished to set the traps and to tie hands and feet, she settled snugly across the camp fire and helped herself with the leftovers of the dinner.

“This is really good,” she exclaimed loudly as she sucked the hollow of a bone, not caring about changing or hiding her own face. She wanted to be recognised. The men, spooked, started to rouse. “What did you add to get it so flavoured? Cilantro and fennel, I would say? We should share recipes: I make a mean meat pie!”

Anguy was the first to get on his feet, only to get his ankles trapped into one of her snares and to fall, face first, on the hard ground with a girlish yell. Beric tried to instinctively reach for his sword, as Thoros attempted to no avail to stand up.

“Don’t bother. I took off all your weapons. I could have killed you all, and you wouldn’t even notice.”

The Hound didn’t talk, didn’t even move, but his eyes bore into hers, a weird glint dancing maliciously in them.

Was it admiration?

She remembered when she had tried to sneak up on him to hit him with a rock.

*Kill me and you’re free. But if I live, I’ll break both your hands.*

She was stupid, then; now, she could easily tie up nine grown men, allegedly dangerous men, without them even stirring.

Thoros of Myr looked like a sausage, red in the face both for the wine he had drunk from his flagon during their meal and for the strain of pulling at his ropes.

“We don’t have money. As for food and weapons, we’ve got plenty: take all you need.”
Arya almost laughed out loud; they had taken her for a common criminal, maybe a boy escaped from the waste caused by Freys and Lannisters to an already abused land, or a girl lured to the little camp by hunger and cold.

“I didn’t come here to bargain in things, Thoros of Myr,” she said, standing up into the light of the fire. Thoros, and Beric next to him, both let out a sharp hiss, as they recognised her. “You and your Lightning Lord are both on my list.”

“What list? Who are you?” cried out the Archer, craning his neck to have a better look at her. The Hound’s coarse laughter boomed in the night. Arya ignored him.

“Where is Gendry, Red Priest?”

“I don’t know.”

“You do not know. But you didn’t hesitate to sell him for two bags of gold to the Red Witch.”

“I’ve explained to you why it must have to be done. We needed the gold to help defend the smallfolk.”

“Oh. And how many smallfolk have you been saving with that gold since then, pray tell?”

The Priest’s silence was everything she needed to hear.

“Lady Arya…”

She turned to Beric Dondarrion, her name and title strange and foreign to her own ears.

“I knew your father, some six or seven lifetimes ago…he was a true pain in the ass, constantly repeating those thrice-damned words: Winter is coming. Well, here we are. We’re travelling north, to join up with your half-brother’s army against the menace that’s rising from beyond the Wall. If you wish to kill us for what we did to Gendry, go ahead. Nobody could say we didn’t deserve it, and I personally would welcome the Stranger with joy and relief, like an old friend. But with the Boltons defeated, your place is at Winterfell, among the rest of your pack. There might be darkness and coldness in your heart, but your flames still burn warm and bright below the embers, I can see that. Come with us, fight with us. We’ll need all the help we can manage. And maybe at the end of the journey, you’ll find a small amount of freedom and peace from whatever it is that’s eating you.”

Freedom and peace.

Such risible concepts.

Her freedom and peace could only come when all her enemies would be dead, their blood warm on her hands.

“I won’t come with you. But I’ll let you walk away unscathed, so that you can reach the Army of the Northlands and fight whatever’s rising from the snow. I’ll spare your sorry lives, for now, in exchange for his,” she raised her arm and pointed at the scarred man to her left.

“Sandor belongs to the Brotherhood.”

“The Hound belongs to me.”

“I don’t belong to fucking anyone,” the Hound, who had been silent throughout the conversation,
blurted out, “less of all you, sodding Stark bitch!”

Arya cocked her head toward him, her lips thin in annoyance.

“You’re coming with me, whether you like it or not. I could put you to good use for what I must do. Besides, you still owe me. I spared your life.”

“Owe you? You left me to die after that dumb bitch almost beat me to a pulp!”

“Aye,” she chuckled, “that was bloody fun to watch.”

The Hound sneered in contempt.

“Look at you, all grown up! Your tits got bigger, but brain’s still the size of a coin. I won’t follow you, so you go ahead and kill me now. I am on your damn list, too, after all, am I not?”

Arya paused and studied him: in the past months his name had done nothing but get on and off that list, depending on which mood she would wake up in the morning. She couldn’t make up her mind just yet: Clegane saved her ass on several occasions, he stopped her when she would have run to her own death at the Twins, he protected her along the way, and got her safely to the Eyrie. But he had served Joffrey and killed Micah…although she couldn’t even remember anymore what Micah had looked like.

It was unnerving.

“You’re currently not on the list. Doesn’t mean you couldn’t be back on it, come sunrise.”

“What are you planning to do, anyway?”

“Sh-she wants to go to King’s Landing and kill Cersei,” Thoros said amicably, as though they were chatting about the weather.

Arya savagely smiled down at the Hound and added: “And your brother.”

“My brother’s already dead.”

“Perhaps, but the Mountain’s still walking and killing innocent people. Don’t you want revenge for what he did to you? To your father and sister?”

For the first time, the Hound faltered.

“How do you know –”

“He might not be breathing, but he still lives, I tell you. If you don’t believe me, ask your Red Priest. You’ve seen him in your flames, didn’t you?”

Thoros glanced at Clegane and nodded once.

“If I come with you, you’ll let the others go?”

She bowed her head in tacit approval.

“Alright…” he raised his tied-up hands. “Untie me, then.”

Arya pulled out from behind her back Thoros’ dagger and stepped across his legs to cut the ropes straining at his wrists.
She felt him watching intently her every move.

“Where did you learn to do knots like this?” he asked, genuinely curious. She let out a small grin.

“From Braavosi sailors.”

As the Hound freed himself from the other ropes around his torso and ankles, Arya cut down another man who ended up upside down, suspended from a tree, one leg trapped into the snare, the other flailing and making him comically twist on himself.

“We’ll take two horses,” she stated, as the man fell on the ground with a loud thud and a groaning. “Don’t try and follow us. I’ll know. And if I happen to hear that Gendry is dead,” she added to Thoros in softer tones which did nothing to hide the steely menace under it, “I’ll come for you: you’ll be praying to your God of Light to make the pain stop, then.”

“Don’t I already?” he breathed out.

She thrust his dagger in the ground, few inches from his wrists, so that he would be able to cut the ropes by himself, and left, the Hound right behind her, silent and gloomy.

During the next few days, as they travelled south of Stoney Steps by horse, the Hound had been trying to coax the story of her whereabouts out of her, only to be met with icy stares and flicks of itching fingers on Needle’s silvery hilt.

“If I knew you’d become so dull, as well as an expert on sailors knots, I would have saved myself the trouble and stayed behind with the Brotherhood. They’re not particularly funny, but at least they’ve got wine.”

“You still can turn your horse around and go back.”

The Hound huffed like a petulant child, but didn’t leave.

*He can’t,* she thought smugly.

He wanted to reach King’s Landing as much as Arya did: after all, she had promised him he would do the honours when they’d meet the Mountain.

Hate was a powerful motivation.

Exasperation was another, she considered, rolling her eyes, as her companion started again to hum another verse of *Her Little Flower.*

*I’ll end up killing him before we even reach the blasted Crownlands.*

“Someone is following us,” he said suddenly, interrupting the song right when the knight put his nose inside the lady’s petals to get a good sniff.

“That’s Nymeria,” Arya confirmed, adding hastily: “my direwolf.”

The Hound let out a bark of recognition.

“The fuckin’ direwolf. You should have let her rip Joffrey’s throat; would’ve saved us a lot of troubles.”

Troubles did catch up with them, for a change, just across the Blackwater Rush: they hid behind a patch of bushes as the host of armed men, around a thousand soldiers, paraded across the land,
their red-and-gold armours perfectly discernible even from a distance.

The gall of them.

They were taking a secondary road, less travelled and away from the Goldroad, probably for the same reason they were – to avoid troublesome encounters, but they were heading to Casterly Rock, that much was a given.

“That’s Jaime fucking Lannister,” The Hound said, pointing to a knight on a white courser at the head of the host.

She could barely make him out, but she had no reason to doubt the Hound’s words. The dim light cast by an opaque sun reflected on the patches of snow and on his golden hand, that absurd, ugly, useless thing she had seen him wearing strapped on his right wrist at the Twins.

She did not know the whole story of it, just snippets and scraps.

A plan was quickly forming in her mind; surely she could spare some time to take care of the Kingslayer, and hear the woeful tale of his maiming.

The Queen would have to wait. She had another lion’s pelt to collect.

As her eyes trained on the still handsome knight clad in red and gold, Arya smiled, already foretasting her satisfaction when she would look upon Cersei’s pretty face, and roll at her feet her twin’s golden head.

Chapter End Notes

Arya is on the hunt and out for blood.

I have to admit that my little psychopath she-wolf is truly a joy to write and her chapters are usually engaging on many levels, character and style-wise. Opening this chapter with a Nymeria POV was risky, but I’m glad about how it turned out: it might even be one of my favourite parts yet.

With Arya and the Hound finally meeting up again (and Nymeria lurking along the way), I’m finally – slowly – building up the narrative to the first big reunion between some main characters previously scattered around Westeros. Familiar faces will turn up and there will be other reunions to look forward to!

Arya also revealed the answer to some of you questioning what Jaime meant when he talked about going “home”: we’re all going on a day trip to Casterly Rock, my summer children! Yay! So expect a chapter full of CR goodness, soon! Ahh, the woods witch and her riddles… I’d like to know what you all think about it!

(The didelphos are nothing but opossums: “didelphis” is simply their genus scientific name; Caliborne/Calabrun is of course a reference to Arthur’s Excalibur).
Brienne I

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the comments, kudos, bookmarks/subscriptions!

And now, without further ado, I give you Brienne!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

BRIENNE

Lady Brienne of Tarth was hungry, cold, annoyed and almost at the end of her already naturally thin patience.

“I won’t walk with you to the godswood, Tormund. How many times do I have to repeat myself?”

“Why not?”

The lumbering redhead wildling was appraising her again with that maddening intense stare he sometimes got, usually in public and in the most inappropriate of circumstances. Never mind that she wore her full armour: when she was at the receiving end of one of those stares, she always had the distinct impression to be naked. She protectively crossed her arms in front of her.

“Because every time you’ve tried to lure me there, it was either to try to kiss me or to make some absurd promises in front of the heart tree!”

He shrugged.

“So?”

“First of all, the words were all wrong, and I’ve already told you that I worship the Faith of the Seven, not the old Gods of the North.”

“Old Gods, new Gods, that’s all the same to me. If they hear, they hear anyway, don’t care how you call ‘em. And who the fuck cares about silly words, anyways? The gist of it, that’s what matters, ‘llright? And I meant them.”

Brienne relented; he sounded shy, as shy as a man like Tormund could be, and just a bit desperate.

“I don’t call that into question, but, Tormund, really, you have to stop acting like this.”

“I want us to be together,” he retorted stubbornly.

*He’s not listening to me,* she thought for the umpteenth time, but despite herself she was amused and more than a little bit flattered.

“We’ve been together for the most part of last year! Ever since I came to the Wall with Lady Sansa; we’ve barely spent a fortnight apart since then!”
She knew what he meant but chose to mistake him on purpose. The hurt look he gave her told her that he was fed up with her nonsense.

He crossed his arms over his considerably large chest, a sulking babe of three-hundred and fifty pounds glaring at her sideways, and mumbled: “Except when you went to Riverrun.”

There. Right in the open, and through her damned gut.

Her amused smile was obliterated in an instant.

Tormund’s blue eyes were staring at her like a hawk. *He doesn’t even blink, it’s uncanny,* Brienne thought, as a cold that had nothing to do with the winds raging on Winterfell’s battlements and everything to do with the unnamed presence clad in red and gold looming between them, shook her. She took a deep breath to steady herself, the ghost of Riverrun smirking annoyingly at the back of her mind.

“You know why I went to the siege. And you also know how relieved I was to see you alive and well after I’ve returned.”

As disappointing as it was to have missed the battle only by a few days, Brienne had been elated to see Sansa and her half-brother safe and at home. And of course, Tormund had demanded all of her attentions that very night, as he recounted his fight with the traitor Smalljon Umber almost blow-by-blow, and the amazing charge of the Knights of the Vale that had destroyed their enemies’ front lines and blown up their pincher move.

“What else do you want from me?” she asked gently. Tormund’s eyes navigated toward her sword, the accusation unspoken, but there, nonetheless. She shifted her weight as though countering an attack and pre-emptively struck: “I spend more time at your barracks than in my quarters. We spar together, we go hunting together, we even dine together every evening, sitting next to each other on the same bench!”

“It’s not the same!” he fought back. “You wouldn’t even eat from me plate!”

Now he was acting like a petulant child.

It was unbelievable how, sometimes, he would sound precisely like Jaime.

*My Riverrun ghost.*

She had learned what it meant when a wildling man shared his meal with a woman, and she had no intention whatsoever to be considered officially betrothed as a consequence of that.

Free Folk customs were fairly different from the traditional courtship of southern lords and ladies: although they might be considered simple people with simple lives, their mating rituals were nothing of the sort. Their wooing techniques, in some respects, were even more complicated, with very strict rules of engagement, that each boy and girl would learn from a very young age: men would publicly engage into complicated war dances in front of their women, like peacocks using their colourful feathers to attract the peahens, stomping their hands and feet over the stretched skin of the drums, howling and putting gifts at the women’s feet.

Animal pelts, weapons.

Limbs and heads of enemies.

It was all very sweet; and if they were interested, the women would tie to the men’s wrists
wonderfully crafted bracelets, each with different colour and design, so that the other girls knew
the man was taken. The thing Brienne liked the most was that women ultimately had the last word:
even in the so called stealing, which, Brienne learned, was more a show of prowess to keep up with
their social conventions, but in reality came only after a long courtship made of fighting and heated
looks and only with the previous appraisal and agreement of the woman.

This notwithstanding, some men wouldn’t take no as an answer.

Case in point.

“You must at least let me fight again against you!”

“We already fought three times, Tormund; you lost every time! I almost chopped your nose off
when you’ve tried to climb in my bedchamber’s window, because you thought that I would have
been pleased to be stolen! Or what about the time after it, when you were knocked unconscious for
a whole of five minutes? Do you have any idea how scared I was when you wouldn’t wake up?”

He, at least, had the good grace to look rightfully chastised. She rolled on. “But then, you had to go
and try me for a third time, only to blame the slippery ice for making you lose your balance and
fall spectacularly on your fat ass!”

Tormund looked sour; he didn’t take losing very gallantly. But then again, there was very little
about the redhead wildling that could be dubbed as gallant.

Truth be told, he had almost beaten her, that last time. Almost.

The iced ground be blessed.

“You don’t know what’s like, – he grumbled, licking his lips as though he wanted to devour her, –
you standing here, looking magnificent, and tall, and…and with yer moon-like skin…and with your
freckles…and yer eyes…bloody torture, that’s what it is! What a man’s supposed to do? Me balls
must have turned blue by now!”

He practically yelled the last part for everyone in the yard to hear. Brienne threw a glimpse at some
men from Bear Island snickering into their hands and shaking their heads in jest.

“The Seven protect me…” she mumbled, trying to make herself disappear, heat rising to her neck
and cheeks.

“And do not blush! You may be a maiden still, but I know what yer doing, the Others take you!”

“I’m not doing whatever you think I’m doing to torture you, Tormund!” she cried out, now frankly
peeved up. “I don’t even know why you would even look at me twice!”

He scoffed at her, his eyebrows knitting in confusion as though saying Yer mad!

“You’re not like any other woman I’ve known, that’s why! I don’t know how to court a proper
lady, I don’t know anything ’bout fancy dances, or songs, or roses…”

“Oh, Tormund…”

If only he knew the truth about roses…

“I only know that I love you and I want you to be mine.”

Brienne froze, the slight blush now becoming a full-force blaze.
He cannot really have said that. I must’ve heard him wrong.

She did not know how to counter that. Nobody had taught her the moves.

She’s never been on this side of the battle.

Tormund took a step toward her, then another, until there was barely the space of a hand between them: even if they were practically the same height, she felt him towering over her.

Brienne stood her ground, although her heart thrummed harder, excitement and fear flooding her senses in equal measure.

What am I going to do if he kisses me, here, in front of everyone?

Her fists closed into balls, ready to hit, but at the same time she unconsciously wetted her lips.

“We’d be great together, you know that. Everyone from here to Castle Black knows. Even the fucking wights know.”

He spoke with a deep drawl, his rumbling voice thick with arousal; his body radiated waves of pulsing heat so hot Brienne wondered how the patches of snow around them were not melting.

His breath smelled of spiced ale.

Then, unexpectedly, Tormund was stripping.

She sucked in a breath, panicking.

“What are you –

“Take this wolf pelt, woman!”

Brienne gawked, her eyes running from Tormund, standing in the wind with only his trousers and leathered jerkin, to the cloak hanging between them.

“Take it! It’s a….gift.” he pressed on, the word rolling weirdly on his tongue as though he was rehearsing its taste.

For a moment, confusion etched in her face.

Confusion…and disappointment.

Very few people had the power to surprise her.

Tormund now looked impatient, fidgeting restlessly with his cloak, shifting his weight from one leg to another.

Brienne shook her head.

“I-I can’t accept it.”

He gritted his teeth and shook the pelt in front of her.

“Take it, ye bloody woman! Don’t make me look like a cunt in front of me men.”

She threw a rapid glance sideways; to her left, there was a little group of wildlings gathering across the blacksmith’s shop to have their weapons checked. They were whispering and pointedly nodded
in their direction. Tormund could be exasperating and pushy, but shaming him and wounding his
honour was not something she wanted to do, so she held out her arms. The man thrust the heavy
cloak unceremoniously into them and grimly stomped away.

She just stood there, amidst the industrious noises of the yard, not really knowing what to do with
herself, wondering why turning down a suitor was suddenly hurting her more than actually being
the rejected one.

Tormund is a fool.

A good-hearted, bounteous fool.

She unclasped her own wool cloak, unrolled the wolf pelt and gazed at it admiringly, then twirled
it around her shoulders and settled it above the armour Jaime had gifted her, a lifetime ago: it fit
almost perfectly and smelled like Tormund – pine needles, leather and game – and it was
unbelievably comfortable and warm.

She walked through the yard and up to Winterfell’s battlements, the flanks of guards and knights
opening at her passage, men and squires alike standing at attention and greeting her with curt nods
or few mumbled ‘Good afternoon, Lady Brienne.’

Her face remained still and neutral, but her sapphire eyes were sparkling with amusement and
pride.

How things change. Only a year ago these men would have mocked me for my looks and loathed
my skills in a fight; now they would willingly follow me in battle.

These last few months in Winterfell had been, for lack of a better term, pleasant. Although the
weather had turned for worse, and surely and constantly the cold had been gripping their guts with
icy fingers, never letting them forget about the menace that was rising beyond the Wall, Brienne’s
life had taken on a quiet routine. She had her own private quarters in the Great Keep, next to
Podrick’s room and not far away from Lady Sansa’s own bedchamber; she could hang out in the
armoury anytime she liked, and she was free to spend a whole afternoon talking with Clem, the
blacksmith, who had a real talent for pairing each different type of steel or iron with their owners
and was fascinated by Oathkeeper; in the morning and at dusk, there were always sparring sessions,
and she would help Hobb the master-at-arms to select and train the recruits and the youngest;
sometimes, between the King’s Councils and meals, she would engage with the men who had
fought in both the Battle of Winterfell and the Battle of the Bastards, and during these bouts her
name was always the one cheered louder.

Even though Winterfell had become the headquarters of military operations in the North, where
armies with different provenances could find shelter and purpose, the North was a profoundly
divided country. The betrayal of Umbers and Karstarks was still an open, suppurating wound: while Alyss Karstark managed to keep her grasp on Karhold, in spite of her father’s treason, riding
personally to Winterfell to bend the knee to Jon Snow (Sansa had wickedly commented that Alyss
would have gladly stayed on her knees, if her brother had asked so), the state of things in Last
Hearth was tenfold worse, for Smalljon Umber didn’t have any surviving progeny.

Not that Sansa and Jon were desperately sorry for it.

But Last Hearth was a powerful stronghold, and whoever would have the honour and responsibility
to rule over it, would also gain an army of three thousand men and a great number of supplies for a
very long winter.
To make things worse, the houses closer to Brandon’s Gift and the Wall – the Branches, the Hulls of the Bay, The Flints of the Mountains, the Norreys – weren’t exactly overjoyed by the prospect of having wildling tribes so close to their borders.

The King needed to avoid at all cost a power struggle between his bannermen, so he and Ser Davos often left for weeks, riding to the Gift to negotiate with the lords and assure the allies that the wildlings weren’t a menace, but an asset, in the likely event of a White Walker attack; at the same time Jon had to convince the Free Folk that, if they wanted to stay on the right side of the Wall, they would need to learn to behave following the customs of the ‘kneelers’; which meant no pillaging, no raids and above all, for the love of the Gods, no stealing of any kind outside their tribes.

The past week had been one of the few where they were simultaneously all present and accounted for in Winterfell, so the castle and the near village were practically lit in an odd atmosphere of festivities and yuletide.

The Winter Feast had been particularly memorable, especially the bit when Tormund showed up at the village wearing a ridiculous red and green outfit with a funny-looking hat made of reindeer’s antlers and carrying a bag full of gifts and toys for the children.

Sansa and Jon were still laughing about it.

They had chosen an unusual moment for celebrations, with chasing rumours about dragons around Crackclaw Point and a silver Queen sitting on the ancient Targaryen seat in Dragonstone, but the men needed to soothe their nerves and forget, if only for a little while, the impending war, and if she were to be honest with herself, Brienne had needed it too, after Riverrun.

Here, among people who cared for her, she found a small amount of peace, in the middle of a winter that smelled more and more of never-ending warfare.

At Winterfell the men, finally, respected her.

That was new and unprecedented.

For the Free Folk it wasn’t so unusual to see a warrior woman as an equal, and she had learned quite a few battle tricks from the many spear wives who had settled in Brandon’s Gift – the other tricks the women had tried to teach her, bedroom tricks, were met with hot blushes spreading all over her neck and face and stuttered excuses as she left their tent in a hurry – but even the southern army, the Knights of the Vale, the Night’s Watch brothers, looked at her differently, with some kind of nervous respect.

She was the one who brought Lady Sansa back to her brother, after all, and the Lady of Winterfell had been adamant in her preference to her: nobody would dare disrespect or mock her, while she was under the Starks protection. Lord Snow, although his usual brooding self, took a liking to her, too, and would never let the occasion to slide by without often inviting her to break fast privately with his family and close advisers.

And after the news reached the camp that she had actually been the one delivering the killing blow over Stannis’ head, their opinion on her and her own prestige had risen even higher.

Stannis had never been popular, but he had reached a new low when he had agreed to sacrifice his own daughter, his only heir, to the flames of his Red Priestess.

The small amount of guilt over Stannis’ death she had felt in spite of everything had rapidly quelled
and waned, after she had learned of the pyre raised in the camp just outside of the castle walls.

Lady Shireen was her name.

Brienne had never met her, but she was told she was a sweet, engaging child, good and compassionate. Ser Davos still couldn’t pronounce her name aloud: he had been stricken with unspoken grief for weeks now, as though he had been her real father.

She and the Onion Knight got off on the wrong foot, but the pain for the loss of the girl got them closer together; Davos reminded her of Selwyn. So she had tried to replicate the same things she did and said to her father, to soothe him after Galladon’s death. They weren’t exactly friends, now, but Davos respected her opinions and she, on the other hand, had accepted his claim that he hadn’t been a willing participant into Stannis’ plan to kill his own brother, but in truth had been horrified by it.

The real culprit had been banished from the North by Jon Snow, when the army’s discontent had become palpable, and even now the men openly said that Lady Melisandre’s presence was an insult to both the Gods of the North and the South, and that she must have certainly brought bad luck over the whole camp. Brienne was still on the road from Riverrun, or she would have fought the King on this matter: exile was a mild punishment, and not even close to the kind of justice needed to put Renly’s ghost to righteous rest. She still owed him that.

In the camp, there were still rumours about Renly’s murder, concerning herself, but that had stopped right after she managed to knock off all the front teeth of Lord Cley Cerwyn for insinuating that she killed him because she couldn’t stand his rejection; later, he was even made to apologise to her by Lady Sansa, who had witnessed the exchange and vouched for her innocence, promptly saying that her Lady Mother would’ve never kept into her service a lying murderer.

Sadly, though, there wasn’t an efficient way to stop idle gossip, once it was put into circulation; the voices running from barracks to barracks often were cloaked in such absurd and exaggerate details to inspire jealousy even in the minstrels’ imagination. But sometimes they were so enticing that it was difficult not to believe them.

Brienne hadn’t taken ill: words were wind, after all; camp life was slow, somewhat, and the men were growing restless and enjoyed themselves with the little they’ve got.

Other viler slanders were making the rounds, too. She couldn’t resent them for this either. She was still proudly wearing his sword, after all, and nobody really knew what had truly transpired in Riverrun.

Truth be told, the few times the men had been bold enough to call her that foul name while she was within earshot, she had been more peeved about the Kingslayer bit, than for the other part which more closely concerned herself.

When she realised she had been more irked for his honour than for the attempts to vilify her own virtue she had laughed out loud for a full minute, until Pod probably started to question her own sanity.

Riverrun…every time she thought about it, a bittersweet ache would build inside her belly, a very familiar feeling she had come to associate with the steamy baths in Harrenhal and just him.

They had so little time, in Riverrun, not nearly enough for the many things she would have wanted to tell him; to ask him. And stupid politics had gotten in the way almost immediately.
Closed up and protected in their armours, the table put between them half for keeping each other apart, half for reminding them they still were meeting on different fronts, they had tried to keep things as professional as they could. She was on a delicate diplomatic mission, from the outcome of which depended the fates of the North; he was playing the part of the Lord Commander of an army of occupation to perfection, looking fierce and detached and every inch the roaring Lion of Lannister ready to shred his enemies to pieces with his claws.

The Warrior clad in red and gold.

They had argued, but it was easier when they were trying to get on each other’s nerves.

But then she and her stupid mouth had to bring up talks about honour and knighthood and his face had immediately changed, his shoulders sagging a little, under the pressure of both her and his house’s contradicting expectations: he had convinced himself a long time ago that his concept of family was so much in conflict with doing the right thing that he thought he would be flogged regardless any alternative he’d choose. It was a losing battle against reputation and the deeply flawed, deformed perception of his image reflected in the opinions of others.

It had pained her to see him struggling, the lines on his face brought forth by age and the impossibility to solve a conundrum inextricable on a moral ground.

He had looked at her as though she was the real embodiment of the dilemma itself.

*Find the solution*, she had not so secretly prompted him, hoping he, for once, could see himself through her eyes.

And he did.

When she heard the news that Riverrun had fallen into Lannister’s hands without bloodshed and that the only casualty had been the Blackfish (more for his own stubbornness than an actual fault in the Lord Commander’s plan) she had been so elated that her joy had blocked out even her own shame and regret for her failure. Sansa’s great-uncle had died and that was tragic and she was rueful over it, but, as she rowed along the Red Fork, the only thing she could think of was Jaime bloody Lannister leaving the siege unscathed and both his and the Tully’s armies intact.

He had taken the castle without a battle, just because she suggested it, and she was absurdly proud.

They were at a three days ride from Winterfell, resting their legs and horses on a tavern at the Wolfswood’s borders, when news from the capital reached her and Pod.

The Great Sept blown up, the deaths of the Tyrells, young Tommen and his anguished surrender to heartache and despair.

The new Queen on the Iron Throne.

It took all of Pod’s good-natured patience to change her mind, while she wrestled with herself and the desire to turn around the horse and spur it at full gallop to King’s Landing. Pod had pleaded with her, on the verge of tears, telling her that Cersei would have her murdered if she so much as put the tip of her boot into the city’s boundary only to prove a point to her brother, only because she could. Brienne relented only when Pod had knelt down and said that he’d be lost without her.

That night she had curled up in her cot and cried herself to sleep.

She had cried for Tommen and Myrcella, stainless victims forced to pay for the sins of others, but also for Margaery, so beautiful and charming, a true rose who’s always been so good to her and
never believed the charges against her, and Loras, who’s been a rival in so much more than a mêlée, her last link to Renly, and she could only wonder now how things could have been, if they hadn’t been divided by the sentiment they both felt for their summer king. Maybe they would’ve even become friends, comrades.

And she cried for Jaime. For herself, for how much she missed him and yearned to be with him, without armours, without tables between them. For the sound of his voice as he said her title and name, with an annoyed playfulness tinged with challenge and something else she couldn’t quite understand. For the barely-there touch when he didn’t want his sword, her sword, back.

*It’ll always be yours.*

She cried for her own helplessness, for innocence lost, for lost opportunities, for the longing of spring that was still nothing but a faraway dream. She cried for the weight of things that were never meant to be.

After that night, she had been miserable for weeks, and only Pod’s gentle care and the extra effort he put into his training just to please her and take her mind off the many thoughts that plagued it, and Tormund’s lively, earthy presence, and Lady Sansa’s quiet understanding had alleviated her pain what little necessary to let her ease into life in Winterfell, where now she truly felt like she belonged.

Brienne wrapped herself more into the wolf pelt and put on her gloves, as the familiar noises of clattering steel against steel, grunting and sweaty curses coming from the training yard caught her attention: Tormund was working off some steam with four green lads who seemed not even to realise what in the Seven Hells had hit them. In a brief pause of the assault, while opponent number three was trying to inconspicuously scuttle away, the wildling raised his head and caught her staring.

Damn these blushes, she thought frustratingly as she walked toward the covered passage overlooking the yard.

From the wooden balustrade, Lady Lyanna Mormont was taking in the whole sight as though it was a wonderfully funny scene from a mummer’s play. When she saw her, she burst into a giggle.

“Are you laughing at me, my lady?” she asked when she reached her.

“Somebody should point out to you the difference betwixt laughing *at* and laughing *with*, my dear lady Brienne.”

Lady Lyanna was a little, wild thing barely out of childhood, but her eyes were sharp and saw well beyond her age – and her tongue was even sharper.

After the Battle of the Bastards, she had briefly returned to her island to make sure her castellan had been taking good care of her people and that their granaries and storehouses were packed with smoked fish, meat and wheat.

But she came to Winterfell often enough, while the weather conditions still permitted the travel by sea to Deepwood Motte and then by horse, across the Wolfswood, to the Starks’ ancient seat. Brienne suspected the soulful eyes of Jon Snow and his luscious black curls had something to do with it. Once she had caught the young lady staring at him from across the training yard with round, starry eyes and a slight blush.

She never blushed.
Lyanna had been so irked by Brienne’s knowing smirk that she didn’t speak to her for the whole evening.

But she knew she couldn’t hold a grudge against her for long: Lyanna was fond of her.

They were both islanders, born and raised, so they immediately bonded over that, at first; sharing stories about swimming and sailing, comparing notes about how the ocean could come alive with different colours and they both laughed at the stupidity of the people of the mainland, for whom ‘water is always water, no matter which colour it is’. They knew better. They knew the sea had a soul and a mind of its own, and learning to read its moods was for them as natural as breathing. Often, it was the only thing marking the difference between life and death.

Then, Lyanna found out that Brienne too was motherless, so when she started to talk longingly about the late Lady Maege, about her bold courage and stubbornness in battle and her sweetness when she would tuck her daughter into bed, Brienne only deemed it fair to tentatively tell her about Lady Dyanna and what little she remembered of her.

Sometimes Lyanna talked about her childhood like it was something that had happened to her many years ago, a thing gone and almost forgotten. She has an ancient soul, Brienne often wondered, but conceded that she had to grow up really fast, due to the violent deaths of both mother and sister, slaughtered with one fell swoop at the Twins.

And then, one thing led to another and, in no time at all, the girl had Brienne completely wrapped around her little finger, and persuaded her with no effort whatsoever to tell her all about her journey across the Riverlands. Both journeys.

The bear pit in Harrenhal was a personal favourite.

She loved to hear that story.

It’s like something out of an epic tale!, she had said the first time, with charcoal eyes that burned like embers. Brienne kept to herself that it hadn’t really felt like something out of an epic tale, and had just smiled.

‘I admire you, Lady Brienne,’ she had added, truthful. ‘If I’d had an elder brother I would gladly have given him to you. Our two Houses united would be virtually unstoppable.’

Brienne had been both deeply honoured and humbled.

Needless to say, she loved the girl fiercely.

If only I had half her wit and willpower when I was the same age…

But then again, Lyanna was a very pretty girl, bound to become, well, maybe not beautiful in the conventional sense, but surely striking and charismatic. She already was a natural leader at ten-and-two. A strong beauty, made of steel, rock and bear claws.

Aye, I do know a thing or two about it.

“Methinks Tormund is trying to wear you down, in the hope that maybe you’ll say yes out of exhaustion.”

Brienne let out a heavy sigh and looked down to the red-headed bear wrestling two opponents at the same time with his bare hands.
“I’m beginning to think the same.”

“Would it be really that tragic and shameful? Nobody in Winterfell, nor at the Wall or in the Army of the North would think any less of you if you’d yield, my lady,” Lyanna suggested, her eyes dancing brightly in the afternoon dull light. She could read mischief in them, the typical playfulness of a girl that age, but there were also wisdom and practicality in her words.

She sighed again, worrying her lower lip, and her hand went to Oathkeeper’s pommel on its own volition.

“It is complicated, Lady Lyanna.”

“Complicated. *Complicated,*” she scoffed impatiently. “What does that even mean? It *shouldn’t* be, should it?”

Brienne didn’t know how to respond to that: in her experience, relationships between men and women had always been difficult. Without bringing up Red Ronnet and his blasted rose, or Ser Humfrey and his outrageous requests, or the mêlée at Bitterbridge, or even Renly and her misplaced affections for him, there would always be duty, honour, oaths and unspoken words to confuse matters.

“We don’t get to choose whom we love,” she found herself repeating the words Jaime had told her. She did not believe him, then, she had always been a strong advocate of free will, but now she wasn’t so sure anymore.

*Do we really have a choice about anything?*

Lyanna cocked her head curiously at her, weighing her words.

“I may be a young girl of only ten and two, but I know about the facts of life. There shouldn’t be any shame, when a man and a woman choose to openly love each other. My cousin Jorah used to tell my sister Dacey that a man who doesn’t know love is a half-man…of course, this was before that complete twit got bamboozled by his wife and had to run away to avoid Lord Stark’s justice.”

Brienne grimaced.

“Love makes you do stupid things.”

Unbidden thoughts of sapphires and bear pits came to her mind, before she could catch herself.

*Don’t be ridiculous, Brienne;* that *wasn’t* love.

Lyanna beckoned to follow her, as she strolled toward the Great Keep.

“If two people love each other, shouldn’t they really just ignore the scorn of society? What should they care about what the rest of the world thinks of them?”

Brienne smiled fondly; sometimes she forgot how young the Lady Mormont really was.

She thought of Jaime and his sister.

She thought of Rhaegar and Lyanna Stark.

“I don’t really have the experience to answer those questions, Lady Lyanna, but, if I’m not mistaken, a war has started exactly because Rhaegar Targaryen thought he could ignore the rest of the world and kidnapped a girl who was promised to another man.”
Brienne was already two steps ahead of her, before noticing that Lyanna had not been following, but was standing there, pale, still and rough like one of the statues carved into the granite stones of Winterfell’s crypt. Brienne feared she had somehow insulted her; after all, the girl had been named after Lord Eddard’s late sister.

“Rhaegar never kidnapped Lady Lyanna Stark,” the young lady said, at last. “They’ve run away together.”

Her forehead creased in confusion.

“This is not the story I’ve been told all my life.”

“Aye, because the official version has come out directly from King Robert’s mouth.”

A bit, as the implications started to sink.

“Are you saying he lied about the rape?”

She shouldn’t be talking about such dire topics with a child who had barely flowered, but the revelation was so startling and Lyanna looked so final about it that her curiosity prevailed over her common sense.

Lyanna shrugged.

“He was a scorned man. A scorned, arrogant man who didn’t take losing very well.”

“And how would you know that?”

“Because my mother was Lady Lyanna’s confidante, at the time. She told her she had fallen in love with a handsome knight, in Harrenhal. But it was a doomed love, for he was married and he would never forsake his vows for her.”

Brienne tensed: Harrenhal, always Harrenhal. What was about that cursed place that had people forget their decency and their natural survival instinct and make them act like bloody idiots all the time?

She had heard about that fated tourney, like everybody else: how Rhaegar had crowned Lyanna Queen of Love and Beauty right in the faces of Robert Baratheon and Elia Martell, starting a chain of events that led straight to Rickard and Brandon Stark dying, Robert’s Rebellion and the almost destruction of the most powerful dynasty in all three continents of the known world.

“Lady Lyanna had confessed that she wanted to speak to her father and ask him to break the betrothal with Robert Baratheon, because she didn’t think she would have been happy with him. When she spoke with my mother, she never said aloud the name of her suitor, but his identity became clear when, less than three months later, Lyanna disappeared in the Red Mountains of Dorne, never to return. Nobody knows what had really happened after it, only that several months later, Rhaegar was killed on the Trident, Lyanna’s remains were taken back to Winterfell, and another king was sitting on the Iron Throne.”

Brienne stared in meditative silence as Lyanna gloomily glanced down in the training yard, her eyes unfocused and faraway. She always believed that Lyanna Stark had killed herself, because she could not bear the shame and dishonour of her abduction and rape, but what if she killed herself simply because she could not think of her life without the man she had loved? Or because, now that Rhaegar was dead and Robert king, she knew she would have been forced into a loveless marriage against her will?
In the yard, Tormund had managed to beat all three his opponents and was currently barking against master Hobb because he wouldn’t let him fight, barehanded and unarmoured, with the youngest among the soldiers of the North. Tormund stomped away, clearly angered, nearly colliding with Lady Sansa, who was climbing down the narrow steps of the Bell Tower.

“What ails that Tormund?” she snickered twirling her long tress over her shoulder as she reached them, glancing from behind her back at the wildling’s retreating hunkering form.

“Lady Brienne has rejected him again,” Lady Lyanna interjected, maybe a little too enthusiastically, all thoughts about forbidden, tragic loves forgotten.

Sansa’s mirthful laughter caught the attention of some Cerwyn and Stark soldiers below, who bowed gallantly when they noticed her. Everyone was a little bit in love with Sansa Stark.

“You are truly heartless, my lady!” she benevolently joked. “That poor man only wants to serve you.”

Brienne was burning up with embarrassment. Lady Sansa has been tried to match her up with Tormund ever since she returned from Riverrun.

“Lady Brienne doesn’t need a man to protect her!”

“Of course not! But, let’s be honest, we’re at the end of the world, here, on borrowed time. Everyone is trying to find a little corner of happiness, to keep warm in the middle of winter.”

“Well, maybe it’s not him she wants, to keep her warm,” countered Lyanna, crossing her arms and looking ready to pick up a fight.

Brienne shook her head. They are talking about my non-existent love life as if I wasn’t even here!, she thought with a twinge of amused sternness.

“Mayhaps. But I do wonder what kind of man does she want.”

It seemed to Brienne that her Tully blue eyes, her mother’s eyes, lingered on Oathkeeper more than necessary and with a malice Brienne by now knew her lady possessed, beyond the porcelain skin and poised manners.

Lady Sansa, Brienne had learned, was more cunning, and way more dangerous, than she let on.

She awkwardly cleared her throat, on her lips a fast retort to her lady’s innuendos, when Podrick came running into the yard.

“My Lady! My lady-ser!”

“What is it, Podrick?”

He just stared at her breathless, red in the face and eyes bulging out, worry and sadness etched in all his features.

Her first thought was Jaime. She panicked, right then and there, her mind running to King’s Landing, to the Queen, to what other horrors she might have conjured up in her madness.

The truth, as she discovered less than five minutes later, was much worse.

She marched into Winterfell’s Great Hall, Lady Sansa and Lady Lyanna in tow: Lord Snow was reading a message while Ser Davos was talking in hushed tones to a man who was giving his back
to her. A bald man with a soiled cloak in the blue-and-pink of Tarth.

No.

All the air left from her lungs.

As she entered all eyes trained on her; she barely registered the worried looks brother and sister were exchanging, as Sansa took the message from her brother’s hands and perused it with rapid eyes. She barely registered the look of grief on Davos’ face. She only had eyes for Ser Germont, her gentle Captain of the Guards, kneeling in front of her and mutely handing out a piece of parchment and a bundle, no, a handkerchief with the sun and moon of her coat-of-arms.

No, no, no, Gods, please, no.

When the Evenstar’s ring, her father’s ring, slipped into her hand, she could not hide a ragged breath: her chest heaved rapidly, trying to expand and fill her lungs with much needed air, to no avail.

Her vision clouded, as the walls of the Hall closed in on her, ghost hands gripping at her throat, suffocating her.

“What happened?”

She could not stop shaking.

“We were attacked. Queen’s soldiers. With the Lannister banners.”

The room whirled before her eyes. She couldn’t bring herself to even think his name.

I will die. If he was with them, my heart will surely break.

“Was there…who was commanding them?” she stuttered, words failing her, her voice rough and scratching like sandpaper.

Ser Germont studied her and saw right through her armour. His eyes, already full of woe, became impossibly soft and full of compassion.

I can’t. I can’t bear his commiseration now. If I let it get to me, I will break down right here.

“I do not know, my lady. Your father…he sent me away before the sails landed. His last words and thoughts were for you.”

Her eyes couldn’t stop staring at the ring with the big blue stone; it felt heavy on her palm. It would feel even heavier on her finger. She shut her eyes, trying to block out the logic consequence of this line of thinking.

If I hold this ring, this means…this means…

“There was nothing in the world he loved more than you.”

Ser Germont was talking again; it took her a few seconds to focus on his words, on his big hands, steady over her shoulders.

“He was very proud of you, my lady.”

She thought of sunlit mornings in the training yard, her father’s watchful eyes as she was knocked
on the ground, his strong voice carrying across the bay, ‘Stand up, Brienne! Pick up that sword and try again.’; she thought of warm evenings on the terrace, the Evenstar smelling of salt, smoked birch wood, night-blooming sword lilies and laughter as he twirled her in the air and told her the story of the origins of the island; she thought of hundreds of times when his kisses and his words soothed the invisible wounds open in her soul, mending and stitching the cuts with threads made of steel and love.

His eyes, so gentle. So like her own.

“He never told me,” she confessed, her voice cracking.

Germont’s arms went swiftly around her; she was taller than him by few inches, but she felt like a little girl, lost and drifting and bleeding. Her mind was numbly focusing over silly, inconsequential things: the sharp, regular tempo of the hammer striking the anvil in Clem’s shop, the draughts coming from the open front door and from the chinks in the walls cooling the tears on her face, the shuffling of feet close to her, the elegant swoosh of winter gowns and winter cloaks; the crackling of fire into the braziers and the warmth coming from the big marble hearth.

She concentrated on a single sensation, blocking out everything else, shutting off the pain, forcing herself not to feel anything.

The man holding her smelled of sweat, grass and horse, the rancid odours characteristic of the many days spent riding to reach her, but, beneath it, she deluded herself into finding other familiar smells. The sea, the wet stones of the waterfalls, the resins of the cedar forest, the grass after a rainstorm, the honeysuckle climbing to her window.

The smells of home.

“Oft stern men can’t find the words,” Ser Germont said, his voice vibrating with her same emotion. “But you were all his world.”

Brienne muffled a sob into his neck; strange, how Ser Germont’s hugs held the same strength and ability to comfort her father’s had. She wished to stay here, forever shielded, pretending it was Lord Selwyn holding her, but the burden of the ring squeezed tightly in her hand reminded her that she had responsibilities, now, which went further and deeper than her own desires and sorrows.

She straightened her spine and fought back the tears, hoping that her voice wouldn’t break: “My Father loved you. And I know you loved him too. For the love you bore for him, for that same love I hope you bear for me too, I need you to ride back to Tarth, and rule in my stead.”

The old Captain looked up at her with wide eyes, then at the ring she had put in his hand, and dropped on his knees.

“My lady, you’re the Evenstar, your place is in the Stormlands, with your people!”

“I can’t leave.”

This time her voice did break.

“I’ve made a sacred oath.”

“Brienne,” Sansa grabbed her forearms and made her turn around. “I can’t ask you to stay away from your island in this time of need; if you’re doing this for my sake, then I release you from your vows. Go home!”
Beneath the commanding tone, Brienne heard the pleading: Sansa knew all too well what it meant to be far away from home while it was pillaged and destroyed.

She knew what it meant to lose a loved one because of it.

Maybe if Robb and Catelyn, instead of being persuaded to leave Theon Greyjoy to the mercy of Roose Bolton’s bastard son, had ridden to Winterfell themselves and retaken the castle, maybe none of this – the Red Wedding, Rickon dead, Brandon lost, Sansa sold like cattle into a marriage which brought nothing but pain and terror – would have happened.

Lady Sansa understood her need to leave everything else behind and run away to fight for her land’s freedom.

But the real war was here, here was the front line. And Brienne wouldn’t desert her post, not even when this probably meant never to see her beloved Sapphire Isle again.

She looked down at her lady’s blue eyes, full of tears, mirroring hers, and forced the words out of her mouth.

“I can’t. Please, don’t strip me of my honour, too.”

_I’ve lost everything else. This is the only thing, the last, true thing I have left._

Sansa was speechless; next to her, Lyanna was watching with pursed white lips and unfathomable eyes full of rage and grief on her behalf.

Brienne’s fingers closed over the chiselled lion’s head at her side, her thumb stroking the lines of the roaring jaws, the golden mane, smooth and shining.

She wanted to unsheathe it and snap it into a million pieces against Winterfell’s solid stones.

She wanted to kiss it and then fall on it.

_Jaime…Jaime…_

“Ser Germont,” the King stepped in, putting a hand on the shoulder of the old soldier, “I’ll give you sixty men. Trained soldiers.”

“Your Grace…”

“You’ll sail from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, the Night’s Watch has ships there. You’ll be able to reach Tarth faster, storms notwithstanding. I’ll send ravens right away to Lord Commander Tollet and to Cotter Pyke to arrange for provisions for the travel.”

Ser Germont looked at her, not knowing how to take such a kindness.

“This is not open to discussion!” Jon added, a little bit harsh, raising a hand to her face when she tried to contest his decision. Sixty men sailing to Tarth, a lone island far away on the Narrow Sea, meant sixty men less to guard the Wall and protect the North from the Others; she’d never wanted this, but Jon looked livid and immovable and the retort died on her lips. He must have sensed her struggle and reluctance, for his features softened.

“You gave me back the most precious treasure in the world,” Jon said, holding out a hand to his sister and pulling her closer to him, “I’ll be forever in your debt, my lady. This is the least I can do. The North remembers.”
Both Starks stared at her, daring her to fight them on this; they couldn’t have looked more
different, Sansa with her Tully hair and eyes, and Jon with his dark scowl that so much resembled
Eddard Stark, or so she was told, but at the same time they held themselves fierce and dignified
and hard like the stones of Winterfell and the cold winds sweeping over it.

Lyanna stepped up and took her hands: to a casual observer, they should have made a funny
picture, she, the blonde half-giantess wearing armour under a wolf’s pelt, and the young lady,
reaching not higher than Brienne’s waist, small in size, but fearsome in everything else that
mattered.

“And my men are at your disposal, too, my dear friend.”

Friend. Sister, brother.

Family.

This was too much.

She dipped her head, unable to speak, and just squeezed Lyanna’s hands harder.

What did she do to inspire such a devotion?

A surge of affection for Lyanna and the Stark siblings rose in her heart, mixed with the mind-
numbing fear for the smallfolk of Tarth, the shock for her father’s fate dulling her senses, and the
blinding wrath against the Lannisters, all the Lannisters.

Jon was talking again. “You’ll be our guest, tonight, Ser Germont. Have supper with us, and a good
night’s sleep within our walls. Tomorrow, Tormund will ride with you to Eastwatch.”

Ser Germont searched her face for permission; Brienne forced a painful smile on her lips and just
nodded again.

“Your Grace is too kind.”

“Is there anything I can do, my lady?” Sansa spoke softly to her left.

She stared at the parchment still in her hand, her mind grasping to make sense of this, sickness
boiling in her stomach, then slowly shook her head.

“I need to be alone.”

Her feet carried her outside the Great Hall, across the Sept – she had no prayers for the Gods, not
now – to the Great Keep and the covered bridge connecting it with the armoury, then through the
Guards Hall, where the men were readying themselves for the first watch of the night, some
singing bawdy songs, some playing cyvasse, some chatting animatedly about whom was better
between The Sword of the Morning and Barristan the Bold.

“What say you, Lady Brienne?”

She ignored them and kept walking, until she reached the ruins of the First Keep and the Broken
Tower. The steps had been made sleek by a thin, almost invisible, slippery film of ice, glittering in
the fading light. She did not know why she went here, of all places: the shadows stretched over the
rubble and the vines of ivy and fern quickly climbing over the rocks, their tendrils pushing inside
the stone, making it brittle, clawing at the granite like greedy grey fingers.
Night was fast approaching through the only open window.

The same window where Sansa put a lit candle, hoping to be rescued.

The same window from where Jaime had pushed a young boy to his death.

Brienne sat right under it, her back against the wall, and unfolded the message with the unbroken Tarth sigil Ser Germont gave her.

It was just as she had expected: a practical letter, with few requests and advice about ruling – nothing that she hadn’t heard before, from her septa and her maester – written in the typical style of a soldier, a no-nonsense man, who didn’t really know how to address matters if not with straightforwardness and honesty.

But, almost at the end, the tone shifted, as though he had a sudden change of mind, and his handwriting too became rushed and nervous. She wondered if perhaps the two parts had been written in two different moments.

    My dearest, I can’t, in all conscience, greet the Stranger with a free and light soul, without apologising to you for a great wrongdoing, which, I fear, had caused you profound discomfort.

I’m referring to my decision to have other women at Evenfall Hall who weren’t your mother. You’ve never said anything, out of love and dutiful respect for your own fool of a father, but I know my choices hurt you, and for this I ask your forgiveness.

I’ve missed your mother, you see; I miss her even now, with each word I’m writing. She was the only woman I’ve ever loved. The other half of my soul. I’ve tried to fill up the empty space in both my heart and my bed in the useless attempt to keep with me something of that past bliss and happiness, but my paramours did nothing but remind me of what had been lost. I hoped that a womanly presence aside from that old bat of Septa Roelle might have helped you to overcome your shyness and your insecurities, and maybe guide you through the hard road of womanhood better than I ever could, but I realise now that some of these women might have damaged your heart even more.

My loneliness under no circumstances should have been reason for you to feel unwanted, unfit or at fault in any way. Dyanna would have never permitted it.

There’s nothing wrong with you, Brienne.

You’ve become exactly the kind of woman both your mother and I had hoped you’d be: noble, true, gentle, just. And I’ve never regretted having you as a daughter. Not for an instant.

I’m aware how much you worry about honour: we are bound and judged by our words and our actions, that’s what I taught you, but in the end, my darling, what matters most is not honour.

It’s love.

Being able to balance these two unforgiving, sometimes opposite, forces, it’s a work of a lifetime which very few manage without getting burnt. In the end, there’s always a sacrifice to be made.

Do not throw your life away trying to be perfect, my love, trying to match some impossibly high, idealistic standard you’ve set for yourself. Leave the unblemished heroes of your childhood to the minstrels’ songs: there’s a real war we have to battle, in a real, harsh and merciless world. We all
have a small amount of time to live, Brienne: do not waste it in regret, make it count!

What your mother and I had was rare and beautiful and I will cherish in my memory every moment I’ve been blessed to have spent with her.

Every single moment, even the pain...it’s all been worth it.

I pray for you to find the same peace and joy, the same wholeness at the end of the road.

Dawn will come again, dear child. Wait for it. Fight for it.

You have my heart and my love, always.

Her father’s neat handwriting blurred before her eyes; she crumpled the paper into her trembling fist, her eyes focusing angrily on a spot a few feet from her, where the dust and the rubble were glittering in the receding light of sunset.

This is where you’ve fucked her, Jaime?

What did you ever know about love?

She killed my father!

And you...what did you do?

She closed her hand over Oathkeeper’s scabbard, wishing there wasn’t the soft leather between her flesh and the bite of the Valyrian steel.

I hate you, I hate you!

She couldn’t stay here; she had to do something.

Climbing down the tower two steps at the time, she strode to the stables, ignoring the inquiring looks of the soldiers, the squires, the kitchen boys, the women and the children, took her black mare, Obsydian, and darted outside the South Gate.

Night had dropped on the castle, bitter and sharp, and snow was falling at a steady pace; she did not feel the cold, nor the tears on her cheeks. She launched the horse madly through the darkness, her heart exploding with rage and sorrow.

I shall ride to King’s Landing and kill her with the sword her brother gave me.

The horse raced past the Wolfswood, further south, toward Cerwyn and the western branch of the White Knife, across deep snow and wind, until one of her hooves tripped over a protruding root: the mare crashed on her side with a terrified neigh. Brienne slammed her right shoulder hard into the frozen ground, the fall only barely softened by the coat of snow; she pulled herself up and sat against Obsydian’s expanding chest.

“I’m sorry…I’m sorry...” she gently patted her muzzle and checked her ankle. The mare let out a distressed whinny, breathing hard through the nostrils, her coat beaded with sweat. Besides the fear, she seemed mostly unscathed.

“I’m so sorry,” Brienne said again, her voice thick; then her arms circled the mare’s neck, smooth and warm, and she yielded to heartbreak and grief, until her sobbing got lost in the winds.
Finally, our leading lady shows up!

You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to post this, and I know some of you were becoming restless! I hope I did her justice and that you weren’t disappointed by it!

Poor baby, there’s so much heartbreak and sorrow in this…Sadly, you’ll have to wait a little longer for a proper J/B reunion: Brienne needs to solve some conflicting feelings, first!

(I know, I’m evil. You should have an inkling, by now)

Liked it? Hated it? Either way, leave a comment, or I'll send an angry Lady Mormont your way! ;)}
Tyrion I

Chapter Notes

It seems I’m unable to write a chapter below the 6K word count. Curious, since I’ve always had the opposite problem, actually.
I’ll try to work on my editing skills, but I won’t make any promises.
Just let me know, if you find the length of these chapters somewhat detrimental to your ability to enjoy the story! (and any tip/advice about editing is, of course, more than welcome)

Comments/Kudos are always appreciated and cherished!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TYRION

“This is a very bad idea!” for the hundredth time, Tyrion Lannister said to no one in particular, flailing his short arms at the scaly golden horned beast that was currently looking down at him with what the little man thought was a curious, smug smirk.

Viserion had been patiently waiting for him to make up his mind, stretching languidly like a giant lizard in the small patch of sun that finally graced the blasted island after weeks of rains, and winds and stormy waves thrice as high and angry as the largest giant. On his back, had been strapped a black saddle, with leather harnesses circling the dragon’s forelegs and chest; it had been made from Tyrion’s own original designs, inspired by the drawings he had made for Brandon Stark’s new saddle. It had started as an exercise of wits, to flex his fingers and keep his mind occupied on the long, idle hours spent after they had landed on Westeros’ shores, their plans halted by bad weather; but then Varys had to poke his nose in his affairs and show the sketches to Daenerys; she had been intrigued and had asked Tyrion if he thought it could actually work.

One month later, Haereg, the skilled blacksmith of Old Wyk who had followed Yara and Theon Greyjoy when they gave their allegiances to the Mother of Dragons, presented the Queen with this gift. Daenerys had been so pleased by it that she asked – ordered – Tyrion to try.

He had spent quite a good amount of time, during the last few days, trying to tarry the unavoidable, swearing up and down that it would be dangerous to ride a dragon in such a bad weather, and, in the meantime, attempting to persuade some of the Dothraki warriors to swap places with him, with talks about great honour and courage: riding a dragon couldn’t be so much different than riding a wild horse of the Dothraki Sea, after all.

Some Dothraki screamers had laughed at him, calling him naqis hrakkar tokik mahrazh, ‘little lion
man-fool”: he had learned to recognise the sound of his own sobriquet, by now, and there was Missandei always helping him with the words still difficult for him to understand. The bloodriders, on the other hand, were a lot less friendly, when he tried to bribe them with wine and barbed promises of glory and songs: Tyrion feared that, after the not-so-positive experience on the ships across the poison water, the Dothraki weren’t really in any haste to get their feet off the solid ground again, and the way their fingers were caressing the cutting edge of their arakh while speaking to him made Tyrion deem more sensible not to push his luck with them and their superstitious beliefs.

He had tried to reason with Grey Worm, next: ‘The little man has made his own bed, now he has to lie in it,’ he had said with his thick Astapor accent, a wise nod and his proud chin up.

He suspected Missandei had prompted him with this line.

But the Unsullied soldier was right. I’ve put myself into this mess.

Which was the reason why he was currently fidgeting in the narrow upland below the stronghold’s entrance, stomping his feet for the chilly late afternoon air, under the entertained eyes of Missandei and Grey Worm and the edgy stare of their Master of Whisperers.

“If we are to use dragons in battle, we’ll need dragon riders for Viserion and Rhaegal,” Varys reasoned in a continuation of their argument, his puffy hands concealed into the ample sleeves of his vest. “During the Targaryen dynasty there were always dragonlords to guide them.”

“Well, I’m not a Targaryen, am I? And Viserion and Rhaegal did fairly well without a rider during the Battle of Dragon’s Bay.”

“Fire raining over few ships that didn’t expect an attack from the sky can hardly be called a battle, won’t you agree, my lord?” Varys said, a touch of impatience colouring his otherwise suave voice. It must be the cold; it drives everybody mad.

Tyrion took a deep breath and rubbed his hands over his thighs, trying to get some warmth into his useless muscles.

You must shape the horse to the rider, he had said to maester Luwin years ago. But dragons weren’t exactly horses, no matter what he tried to say to the Dothrakis. And Viserion, being the eldest of the hatch, was an untrustworthy rascallion, always ready to pick up a fight with Rhaegal and even steal food from their huger brother.

“Dragons, as my lord Hand knows very well, recognise as their equal only somebody with whom they had previously established a connection: you climbed down the steps of the catacombs of Meereen, you removed the chains from their necks. You freed them, my lord. You said it yourself: they are exceptionally intelligent creatures and are bound to remember how good you were to them, and show appreciation.”

Tyrion snorted. Only because he was lucky enough, that one time, to leave the catacombs in one piece, it didn’t mean he would willingly put his sorry ass on the front line to roast, nice and crispy like pork butt. There wasn’t enough stupidity into his large, deformed head for that, nor wine in his veins.

He had read everything about dragons, in fact he had been obsessed by them even before meeting Daenerys’s three unruly children: every incomplete scroll, every text and illuminated manuscript on which he could lay his hands, using the influence both name and gold could buy. He could quote entire passages from Munkun’s True Telling – with all its inaccuracies – and from Septon...
Barth’s *Unnatural History*, which he retrieved some years ago from an illiterate smuggler of the Shields who in turn had stolen it from a lesser lord of the Arbor, not having the slightest idea of how much it was actually worth, but the truth was that the more he got used to life with actual, fire-breathing, mood-swinging dragons, the more he found out that his beliefs and knowledge were completely ill-suited. Reality had surpassed even his wildest childhood dreams, and practice was quite a different animal than theory.

*Who can know the heart of a dragon?*, Gyldayn had written centuries ago, and he couldn’t but agree with him.

“Why me? Why not…Missandei? The dragons love her.”

He turned to look at the young girl, her dark skin contrasting with the candour of the wool-and-leather coat tied up to her chin covering entirely her lean body.

Another reason to hate this winter.

Missandei stared him down with a stern, annoyed look, her plump lips pressed in silent reprimand; next to her, the otherwise composed Unsullied was trying to conceal a smirk.

*Fine, don’t help me!*

“Viserion was the first to let you touch him,” Varys pressed on relentlessly. “This makes you the best choice.”

“Aye, the best choice to be used as a toothpick!”

The eunuch smirked malevolently.

“Didn’t you always desired to be a knight leading the charge in battle?”

“This – he pointed a stubby finger at the dragon – is not what I meant! Viserion could snap me in half only by a flick of his spiked tail! I’m already short enough without his help, thank you!”

“If Viserion had wanted to hurt you, to hurt any of us, don’t you think he would have already done so?”

In response, the golden beast spread his wings and, craning his neck to the sky, let out a loud hoot. It sounds like a raucous laugh. A jape at my expenses.

Varys was right, though; Viserion had been nothing but accommodating and friendly with him, going as far as eating from his hand. That is, he would throw him a roasted lamb leg and the dragon would catch it in the air. But, even though this was a behaviour more befitting to a dog, this didn’t mean that Tyrion wanted to take his chances with how far he could push the game.

“Think about what a wonderful opportunity it could be, my lord,” Varys persisted. “What better way to gather evidence for the book about dragons I know you’re writing than to ride a living one?” he said, all innocence and honeyed-dripping sarcasm.

One of Tyrion’s mismatched eyes twitched uncomfortably.

*Oh, you dickless bastard!*

Nobody could hide anything from the Spider. Good strategy, teasing him with the lure of knowledge. Varys knew it was his personal undoing, his weak spot, right next to a woman’s tits
and a good flagon of red wine.

“Besides,” Varys added with a pointed look, “this is the Queen’s wish.”

Well, he did wonder more than once when the proverbial Targaryen madness would have kicked in.

With a huff, knowing all too well he couldn’t win this argument, he picked up his leather gloves from his belt and angrily put them on, struggling a little because tension had made his palms clammy despite the cold.

“I’d bet a bag full of Lannister gold, which I currently don’t have, that you were the one who convinced her of this folly; this is one of your ploys to ensure that I’ll break my squat neck, so that you could become Hand of the Queen in my stead.”

“You wound me, my lord,” the Spider gasped, a hand flying over his heart in mock sternness. “I wouldn’t use such trifles plots. I’d rather use poison,” he added with a grin from ear to ear.

Tyrion threw him a leery look and approached the white dragon warily, one of his hand outstretched to brush the golden horns: Viserion dropped his head, with a satisfied purr, leaning gently under his touch. Tyrion smiled and relaxed visibly. Who would’ve thought that dragons were effusive puppies that loved to be petted? Septon Barth never wrote this.

Drogon had brute force working for him, while the less ill-tempered Rhaegal was the most melancholic, often isolating himself from his siblings, but, although the smallest, Viserion was definitely the most expansive and cunning of the three.

It was probably the reason why they got along fairly well, he mused as he vigorously scratched his muzzle.

_I must look like a fucking cunt. At least I’m lucky Bronn is not here, or I’d never hear the end of this._

He perused the simple saddle on the dragon’s back, checking the complex system of steel locks, flank billet, rigging hardware and belts which allowed the rider to secure his position. Viserion hadn’t been extremely overjoyed by it, in the beginning, and it took some convincing from Daenerys herself to get him in the right mood for wearing it, especially the girth.

Luckily, Tyrion surmised, it wouldn’t be too much uncomfortable, once in the air.

_Well, it’s do or die, I guess._

With his heart in his throat, he gingerly stepped over the thick membrane of Viserion’s left wing and hoisted himself up grabbing the pommel of the saddle; Viserion grumbled and let out a whiff of hot smoke, but seemed to put up with him gracefully enough.

There weren’t reins, Viserion wouldn’t have much appreciated a bit into his jaws, nor stirrups to hold him in place, but a mechanical device Tyrion had designed with his own short dwarf legs in mind: he carefully inserted both legs into the gears, until he heard the locks closing with a sharp click around his calves and ankles, positively securing him to the saddle. He gave a strong tug, for safety’s sake, but his legs didn’t move.

It looked safe enough. As much as riding a dragon could be deemed safe. And at the same time, Tyrion thought, the position allowed him to turn his torso, and left his arms free to hold a sword, a spear, an axe or even a crossbow.
The same locks-and-levers device that fastened him on Viserion’s back, also permitted air loops, rolls and spins at the top speed, without the rider falling – at least virtually; Tyrion wasn’t really dying to find out if his assumptions were true and valid on a practical level.

One step at the time.

*What a fearsome vision you would make on the battlefield,* a voice that resembled disturbingly his father’s mocked him in acid, resentful contempt.

Tyrion tried to clear his head; it wouldn’t do to get distracted, now.

Ignoring the knots in his stomach, he patted Viserion’s neck as though he was a horse.

“All right, big boy, don’t make me look stupid out there.”

As if on cue, Viserion stood up on all fours, spread his wings and propelled forward, his legs stomping loudly on the ground as he took a short run-up: in front of them, the cliff was ending into a precipice, a fall of four hundred feet down on the reef and the protruding rocks beaten by the waves.

“Viserion…” he warned, trying and failing miserably to hide his panic.

Then it happened.

An energetic flap of wings, then another, and they lifted off, mere inches from the chasm.

As he felt the ground drifting apart, Tyrion instinctively closed his eyes, flattening over Viserion’s long neck, uselessly pressing his thighs to the saddle’s sides, grabbing whichever protruding scale his little hands could reach and praying to the Gods the locks and belts around his legs would hold.

His heart had dropped somewhere next to his bowels for the sudden acceleration; it was like falling, only the ground never raised to meet him; instead, the sky greeted him.

He opened his eyes and ventured a glance below. Varys, Missandei and Grey Worm had gathered on the cliff’s end and were getting smaller and smaller, little ants barely discernible as the ground was rapidly falling away. He had thought he would be petrified with height dizziness and just pure, unadulterated *terror*, but now that the whole world seemed to fade away and he and Viserion, just the two of them, were wrapped up into a soundproof bubble where nothing could touch them, the fear was simply gone.

A feeling of lightness conquered both his head and body as though his limbs had lost all their deformed, flawed shortcomings and he was finally free from life’s struggles.

Instead of worry and fright, Tyrion was feeling emboldened with each beat of Viserion’s formidable wings, their rhythmic strength rivalling with his heart’s pounds.

*It’s like a song.*

Euphoria seized him, as if he were drunk on the best wine he had ever tasted.

*No, this is better than wine,* he suddenly thought, *Hells, this is even better than a whore’s lips around my cock!*

When he was just a child at the Rock, Jaime would push him on a swing hanging from one of the great branches of the weirwood in the Stone Garden, higher and higher, until he would launch
himself into the air, dreaming of sprouting wings and fly away, soaring above Lannisport and the Sunset Sea, and farther away still, to see if their world was really round like the archmaesters of the Citadel said and if there would be another land that might lay beyond the Sea. He would see himself reaching to the edges of the world, heading farther west until the West became East and he would find himself in the fabled lands of Yi Ti, where the Lion of Night ruled as a god-emperor and the sweet scent of saffron and wine bloomed in the evenings. In the few seconds when he was suspended in the sky, free of his restraints, he wouldn’t see his father’s disgusted frown every time he looked down at him, nor his sister’s malicious sneer, nor the disappointment in the faces of the Knights and other Lords, whispering behind his back shocking, cruel truths: ‘Tis lucky that Lady Joanna died, so she couldn’t see this disgrace of a son’.

Up in the air he wasn’t clumsy like a crippled duck.

He was whole.

He was invincible.

As Viserion wheeled over Driftmark and the castle of High Tide, then headed north again, toward the ruins of The Whispers and Claw Isle, he let himself drown into this new surge of empowerment: not even the Battle of the Blackwater, when the water of the bay had turned green and red, and the kiss of wildfire had so much inflamed his soul that he would not even feel the sharp pain of the arrow stuck deep into his shoulder, as he led brave men in battle among blood and fire, soot and ash, not even then had he felt such reckless, visceral elation, a childlike awe that made him want to laugh and roar simultaneously.

The pride of the Lion had stirred in him, and, perhaps for the first time, it was uncorrupted and perfect.

*Look, Father, look at me now; won’t you say anything, now?*

*A dragon’s roar is better than a lion’s.*

This was a dream come true. It was as though he was born to do exactly this.

He pushed back his curly hair from his eyes and forehead, slightly wet from a light drizzle, and reached out over Viserion’s neck, a new purpose in his eyes.

“Viserion, egliktα sōvēs!”

The dragon responded to the command straight away and with a flip of his winds soared higher, in a fast vertical climb past the rumbling clouds and the impending storm, leaving a trail of shattered, vaporous whiteness behind them.

Tyrion’s ears popped for the height and the pressure.

Above the clouds banks, the view wasn’t like anything Tyrion had seen: shielding his eyes from the dazzling explosion of the light refraction which gave the clouds golden, violet and pink hues, he let his gaze wander over the horizon line.

Viserion hovered in the air, almost magically, his wings open and steady, motionless in the empty and silent sky.

As night was falling, before and behind him, above him, all around him, the immensity of the heavens, leagues and leagues of the purest blue, was almost unbearable for the human mind. Tyrion held his breath: how could such formidable beauty, such immeasurable solitude even be
conceived?

But at the same time, he didn’t feel lonely: Viserion was with him, like an extension of himself, body, mind and soul, and he felt connected to him in such a profound level, that he viscerally was sure that the dragon shared his same wonder, as they floated together in the sunset-kissed sky.

*If we’re to wage war on the Seven Kingdoms, I won’t die alone. Viserion will be with me. And there’ll be songs about us, so that we won’t be forgotten.*

Against himself, his eyes filled with tears.

Imp, half-man…no more, no more.

For all his life, he had concerned himself more with the satisfaction of his earthly pleasures and desires, than with the care of his unscrupulous soul: he never did care much for the gods, but in this sapphire vastness he felt he could almost become a spiritual man, if not a religious one.

*This is the peace of the dead; but I’ve never felt so alive.*

Tyrion took a moment to savour it: it was such an odd, unaccustomed feeling, deviating so drastically from the lawless chaos which had always ruled his life, that his head spun under its blunt impact. Daenerys had made a believer out of him, but it took a ride on a dragon’s back to really shatter the life-long sentiment of self-loathing, guilt and cynical bitterness that had undermined his judgement and had impeded him to live his life at its fullest.

*I needed to rise above the earth, to breathe this thin air, to see as far as my eyes could reach and almost touch the stars, to fully understand.*

He looked down again: the expanse of the clouds blocked the view of the ground, but the clouds were dense and soft and inviting like the snow cream of which he was glutton when he was a child; he felt the sudden urge to lose himself in it, swim in it like if it was froth of the sea.

Then a crazy compulsion hit him: normally he wouldn’t be so audacious as to gamble with his life, the few chances he took were almost always a calculated risk, after all, but now he felt a reckless boldness, a prowess for once not only limited to his mind and wits. His body was tingling with anticipation.

He checked the locks on his legs, cinched the belts more firmly around his waist and said: “Viserion, what say you? Shall we go a little wild?”

The dragon’s roar of approval boomed like thunder.

*If this equipment really works, good; if not, I’ll die happy.*

“Hen jēdār ropās!”

Viserion flapped his wings once, soaring higher, then dived, elegant and nimble like a tumbler, plunging head first into the thick clouds, right into the eye of the approaching night storm.

For a moment, Tyrion couldn’t see anything at all into the grey, damp mist and lost his bearings, disoriented by the abrupt reversal of direction and the darkness, the wind noise, and the sudden, very reasonable fear of being struck by lightning.

But when they re-emerged on the other side, Viserion’s wings were flattened against his flanks: the dragon was simply letting himself drop from the sky in a free fall, at breakneck speed.
Bad idea, bad idea!

I’ll either throw up or soil my breeches.

His eyes watered up.

The wind was so strong that Tyrion almost expected his ugly squashed-in, mangled face to simply peel off his bones.

The ground was rapidly drawing closer. On the cliff, he could see three lone figures scuttling away in apprehension. Good, serves them right!

Just before crashing down, Viserion steered at the last moment and gracefully glided over the sea, weaving between the rocks and flying so low that the membrane tips of its wings scratched the water’s surface, drawing over it gentle ripples and little waves, like a skilful painter in complete control of his craft.

If Tyrion craned his neck just a little bit, he could see his reflection on the waters: a dwarf riding a dragon…This time, he did roar with laughter.

All those years spent reading about dragons, crying ruefully over their extinction, learning everything I could about the ancient dragonlords of Old Valyria, and now I’m one of them!

Viserion seemed to enjoy the ride as much as he did. He thrust up again and launched himself into a sort of somersault, a combination of a roll and a loop, rotating in the air, so that the ground became the sky for a few seconds. Tyrion felt the wind getting knocked out of him as the locks on his legs strained painfully, but held nonetheless. The dragon circled around the grey steams erupting from the Dragonmont and began the manoeuvre to land.

They touched the ground somewhat smoothly, lifting dust and clumps of dirt in their wake.

Tyrion couldn’t think straight: in his head the thoughts were piling up in an incoherent cacophony and, as bewildered, deliriously thrilled and completely out of breath as he was, he didn’t seem to be able to give an order to things.

His mind was already conjuring up the necessary alterations to the saddle, to make it more comfortable and manoeuvrable, and maybe add a device to calibrate the locks and belts so that the saddle could be also accommodated to riders of different heights.

He was only mildly aware of the scorching heat between his legs, not provoked by a sudden, however understandable, overly enthusiastic physical reaction to the ride, but by the actual fire erupting from Viserion’s scales: the dragons’ thick skin was always warm to the touch, but apparently, during flight, the area around the neck, back and shoulders lighted up, perhaps in readiness for fire-breathing, both as defence and offence.

Another thing of which there wasn’t any evidence in the books. But then again, Tyrion strongly doubted that the likes of Septon Barth had ever ridden one of these wonderful beasts.

Daenerys also never reported such a thing to him.

She probably doesn’t even notice the warmth.

I shall think of some kind of vestment, a leather cowhide to wear over my breeches so that it wouldn’t be so uncomfortable.
His musings were interrupted by a high-pitched shriek: Missandei, usually so demure, was bouncing up and down, clapping her hands enthusiastically, a giddy child with a new toy. He shook himself off and smiled down at the girl and the Unsullied, then unlocked the girths and straps and dismounted, but his feet hadn’t even touched the ground that he had to grab Varys’s arms for support as an intense dizziness hit him. It was the first time he saw such a peculiar expression on Varys’ face, half shocked, half terrified: he was white as chalk, his eyes and mouth frozen in an expression of admiration and wonder.

He was looking at Tyrion as though he was a half-god.

Funny, they usually gawp at Jaime like this.

He flashed him a mischievous grin and whispered: “They won’t even know what hit them.”

Varys’s mouth opened and shut like a goldfish and Tyrion basked in the realisation that he, for once, had been able to render the Spider truly speechless.

“That was amazing!” interjected Missandei, her onyx eyes bulging; Tyrion smirked and managed a half-bow on wobbly legs, still throbbing for the effort.

“That was – I’ve never seen not even her riding Drogon like this!”

As a matter of fact, Tyrion doubted that Drogon would ever allow anyone to bridle him with harnesses and saddle like his elder brother did, and in any case, for now, Daenerys could still easily ride him without a saddle. He brushed absent-mindedly the silver brooch she had pinned on his chest as his eyes travelled to the dragon-shaped towers on the Stone Drum, where he knew the Queen would retreat when she wanted to be alone. But there was no sign of her presence over the turrets, or at the tall windows of the Chamber of the Painted Table. He frowned, disappointed despite himself that she wouldn’t even spare few minutes of her precious time to witness the triumph of her Lord Hand.

“Viserion, you were so magnificent out there!” Missandei was saying, patting gently his muzzle.

Evidently pleased by the compliment, the dragon reared to his full height, stretched his wings and let out a burst of fire.

Even Grey Worm had to laugh at that.

Tyrion shook his head, with an eye-roll.

Show-off.

That’s another thing we have in common.

He reached out to the dragon’s flank; the scales were still burning up. Viserion’s head jerked back, pulling at the saddle’s belts with a strangled snarl.

“Just a little patience, Viserion,” Tyrion soothed him. “I’ll have master Haereg sent for, so that he can pull the saddle and the girths off you. Thank you for not having tossed me off into the waters around Dragonstone,” he added then, in a whisper; Viserion repeatedly jabbed him in the chest, not to hurt or make him lose balance, but in a genuine show of friendship and appreciation.

He circled his arms around the dragon’s neck, stretching them as far as they could be extended, and rested his head mere inches from his jaws. The beast’s hellish breath tickled his beard, but Tyrion didn’t withdraw. Instead, he leant even more against him, in complete trust, feeling contented and
thankful.

“Yes, yes, I love you too, mate.”

“That was remarkable for a first ride, my lord Hand!”

Both man and dragon raised their muzzles.

On the steps leading to the great entrance of the stronghold, Lady Olenna stood proud, a soldier sporting the colours and roses of Highgarden on each side of her for support and balance: the old matriarch smirked down at the spectacle and, with some difficulty, climbed down the steps. Even though everyone still considered her the fearsome Queen of Thorns, a formidable opponent with a sharp mind and an iron will, these last months, and her many woes, had inflicted a harsh blow on the venerable lady’s already declining health.

She walked with a stick, now, and every step looked a painful hardship on her ankles and knees; when Daenerys reached Dragonstone three months ago Lady Olenna was already there, with an army strong of thirteen thousand men set to storm the Crownlands from the north and the west, while the Greyjoys would conquer Storm’s End and move from the south, paralysing King’s Landing and Cersei’s army in a vice. The plan was sound, but impracticable, as Tyrion many times had already explained to both his Queen and Lady Olenna: both women were blinded by vengeance and the desire to act, and didn’t fully understand that his sweet sister would blow up the city rather than surrender to their armies. They all concurred that Cersei had gone mad and had to be stopped, but Tyrion held no hope: they needed to build strong allegiances in the Riverlands and the North, before even thinking about a strategy to lay siege to King’s Landing.

In spite of their past disagreements, Tyrion was sincerely sorry for Lady Olenna’s losses: he had respected savvy Margaery, if only because she had a true knack for pissing his sister off, and Loras was a brave boy who’s been ultimately a victim of bigotry and fanaticism. The old woman had loved her grandchildren and even that dim-witted fool of a son with a fierceness worthy of a lioness.

He could sympathise with that.

Tyrion patted Viserion’s muzzle one last time and, nodding to Varys to follow him, met Lady Olenna halfway on the steps.

“Varys and I had a wager about how long you could ride, before Viserion would unsaddle you into the Gullet.”

And, just like that, gone is the sympathy.

He looked up at Varys in dismay; Varys just shrugged.

“I am a decrepit old hag, and I’ve seen quite a few sights in my life. But a dwarf riding a dragon was most certainly not one of them.”

“What can I say? I’m a man of many talents.”

“You might do well, after all. I’ve always known you were the cleverest among Tywin’s cubs.”

He did not know how to respond to the compliment, so he just curtly nodded.

Her sharp eyes travelled up to the top on the Dragonmont, where low, foreboding ash clouds were rising from the crater.
“I haven’t come here on this wasted piece of rock ever since I was ten and seven, and still betrothed to Daeron Targaryen. The castle was awful then, and it’s even more hideous now. I’m about to travel back to Highgarden; I ought to think about who will take my place as head of the family after I’m gone.”

“Many years from now, I’m sure, my lady.”

“Oh, Varys,” she raised a withered hand to pat playfully the eunuch’s sleeved arm, “I will miss your deliciously entertaining and unctuous ways.”

“Do you already have names in mind?”

“The prospect of leaving the Reach into the fat hands of my flatulent good-brother distresses my soul to no end, but I don’t have many other options, if I want the Tyrell name to be perpetuated.”

Tyrion grimaced at that: he never met the Lord Seneschal of Highgarden, but he remembered that Tywin had vied for him as new master of the coin: if his father had wanted him in the Small Council, this only meant that Garth the Gross hadn’t been gifted by the Gods with the sharpest of minds.

“He has two bastard sons,” Varys offered.

“Garse and Garrett, yes. Good lads. Daenerys has already agreed to legitimate them; I hope at least one of them would be worthy of the title of Warden of the South. You need not worry about our allegiance: House Tyrell will keep its end of the bargain and will stand for the Targaryen princess till the end, but…may I have a word, my Lord Hand?”

The use of a lesser title of courtesy while addressing Daenerys didn’t escape him, but Lady Olenna has always been the kind of woman who called a spade a spade, without toying with words, especially when the blunt truth of them was sure to cause a lot more damage than any honeyed lie. Daenerys was not Queen yet, that much was an indisputable fact, and a fact both Tyrion and Varys needed to remind her on a daily basis, if they wanted to avoid the dangers of power prematurely going to her head.

He toddled away from Varys, while she sent away her guards with a severe wave of her hand and sat, with a grimace of pain, on one of the obsidian benches at the entrance of the Dragonglass Gardens.

Her blue eyes bore into him with a look that meant business.

“The girl is young, but clever and capable. She will make a worthy Queen, if you manage to get her backside on that thrice-damned throne.”

Tyrion sensed a ‘but’ coming.

“But… she is restless, angry and eager to go to war. Awful combination. You’ll have your hands full, trying to keep under control that Targaryen temper, especially if she refuses to marry to strengthen her allegiances in Westeros and her own claim to the throne.”

“Whom do you suggest?”

“One of your cousins could be a good choice. Euron Greyjoy would be an even better one.”

Tyrion’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline, questioning, disbelieving.
“Crow’s Eye? We have an agreement with his niece and nephew, the ones he’d tried to kill?”

“Agreements can be made and unmade, if needs be,” Lady Olenna dismissed the problem altogether with an impatient flick of her hand and a sneer on her wrinkled face. “You Lannisters are famous for that!”

He recoiled as though slapped, his eyes dark and dangerous.

“I’m not my father!”

“Tywin and I have played this game for longer than any of you,” she tapped her stick harshly on the ground. “Your father understood the importance of compromise. You’d better keep that in mind if you and your princess will want to survive the winter. And whatever you’ll choose to do, you must needs find a way to bring the North on Daenerys’ good side, or it will be the ultimate problem that will cost her the throne and possibly her life too.”

“Euron Greyjoy and his ships can go fuck themselves! I will find a solution that won’t require having all the Seven Kingdoms call me a traitor more than they already do,” he angrily snapped. “I am not a turncoat!”

Lady Olenna pinched her lips together, her nostrils flaring.

“No, you have a lot more honour in you than your stature would suggest at first glance.”

Tyrion let out a nervous breath, clenching and unclenching his fists.

She is right, though; if Euron won’t find allies here, he will move to greener pastures. Or, more likely, to the golden curls of Cersei’s cunt. But he could not swap sides, not after he had made Daenerys give her word to Yara Greyjoy. This would mean tainting the Targaryen name on a sensitive time and disgracing his own name beyond repair.

I won’t be the downfall of my house. I won’t give my father the satisfaction.

He closed his eyes, as a wave of nausea threatened to make him throw out the herring and the poached pears in spiced red wine he had at lunch.

Perhaps sensing his discomfort, Lady Olenna put a hand over his shoulder: her grip was surprisingly strong, for such an old and petite woman.

“I’ve just seen you riding a dragon, my lord. I’m sure you’ll muddle through some silly diplomatic woe with poise and the usual, trademark Lannister arrogance. The girl is fond of you. She’ll listen.”

A mirthless smirk curved his lips. There was no lost love between them, that much was certain, not ever since she admitted her own role in the murder of the king to his own wedding feast. Tyrion didn’t really hold it against her for the murder per se; Joffrey wasn’t exactly what one would call a merciful, love-inspiring king, or even just a boy with a sound mind, but he didn’t forget that Lady Olenna had left him to take all the blame, without any help whatsoever.

There might be no lost love, but there was mutual respect, at least.

I’ll miss her wisdom, once she leaves.

She stood up with a low groan and gestured for her two escorts to come and get her: “This weather is a true bane for my old bones and I don’t have the patience to stand here chatting with you,
freezing my arse off. We’ll hit the road presently, before night falls, so this is good-bye.”

She smiled good-naturedly, but there was sadness in her eyes.

“Safe travels, my lady.”

“Tread carefully, my lord, and good luck.”

He bowed his head and watched her stepping slowly onto one of the wagons arranged for her and her small retinue, trying not to feel a little bit lonelier against the cold winds that had risen.

By the time he returned to the castle’s main gate, the sun had set behind the Dragonmont and an almost unreal chill had fallen over the island. The air smelled of snow. Haereg was finishing unlocking the saddle from Viserion’s back; when the dragon spotted him, he let out a low, happy bellow and in the haste of reaching him, nearly knocked on the ground with his tail Grey Worm, who was gingerly patting him on his right flank.

Missandei laughed, a crystalline sound full of childlike wonder and warm like summer, completely out of place in the waste of the Narrow Sea. The little Naathi scribe playfully teased the dragon, gently pulling at his golden horns.

“Oi, hands off! That’s my dragon!” he mockingly reprimanded her. Viserion shook himself off and with a formidable flap of his wings flew off, free and beautiful. Around the crater of the volcano, Rhaegal was waiting for him. Tyrion knew that the dragons would retire for the night into the Dragonmont. They barely tolerated this cold during the day, but after sunset they looked almost to fall into hibernation. The heat of the volcano seemed to reinvigorate them.

“Where’s Varys?” he asked the girl and the Unsullied.

They both turned their heads toward the high turrets of the Stone Drum, their faces dark.

“That bad?”

“She has received letters, this afternoon,” Missandei said. “She has been in a mood ever since.”

Tyrion took a deep breath, turned up the collar of his cloak against the wind and walked directly into the mouth of the stone dragon that controlled the entrance of the main gate. The courtyard was mostly deserted, except for a few Dothraki screamers who raised their arakh in greeting when they spotted him. They were some of the bloodriders of the Queen, who preferred to sleep closer to her and the castle, rather than into the campsites they had set up in the villages nearby, where most of the khalasar had pitched their tents.

They were looking sour, Tyrion thought, their moods probably reflecting their khaleesi’s. He couldn’t blame them: first, the long journey on the sea, then a cold like they had never known had greeted them on the continent when they had landed (and the weather would only get worse). The first time it snowed, some of them went crazy and started pointing at the flakes crying ‘witchcraft’; after more than four weeks under pouring rain and stormy northern winds, almost a third of the whole Dothraki army had fallen ill, shaken by fever, sore throat and bloody flux, until almost two hundred of them had died; the survivors then had started to complain about the food (their stomachs simply couldn’t hold back any kind of fish), the clothing, the volcano that didn’t stop rumbling and the general inactivity into which they had been forced: the island was cursed, the conquest of Westeros started to look like a useless folly, and what would be the fun in it, anyway, if Khaleesi wouldn’t even let them rape, pillage, raid at will the wealthy cities of the Crownlands as it was their right and custom?
The Unsullied fared a little bit better, but it was difficult to say if it was because they were immune to the sickness or because they never complained as a general rule.

If Tyrion didn’t do something soon, they would find themselves with a rebel horde of bloodthirsty barbaric horselords on their hands.

The morale was generally low and the dark reputation of the castle surely didn’t improve things, with its black stones from hell, its demons, basilisks, gargoyles, manticores, ghouls, chimeras and seven-heads marine serpents frightening at every turn even the most skilled among the men, the shadows and gloom getting on everybody’s nerves. Even Aegon’s Garden, which all the chroniclers had always described as full of a beautiful melancholy, had dried out, the intense fragrance of dying roses climbing to the Sea Dragon Tower and mixing with the pungent smell of ash, lava and burned stone coming from the Dragonmont.

Dragonstone was a child’s nightmare come true. A decadent monstrosity even worse than Harrenhal.

*And not even a whore to keep me warm at night.*

Wondering if Daenerys purposely hid on the top floor of the Stone Drum because she enjoyed making him climb the one-hundred-and-seventy-five-steps winding staircase almost every day, Tyrion reached the two Unsullied guarding the Chamber of the Painted Table and, without knocking, let himself in.

Slouched over the chair overlooking the Seven Kingdoms painted on the table, a dragon piece of cyvasse in her hand, Daenerys Stormborn was gloomily staring at a point a little more down below, where a wooden flag with a rampant lion had been positioned; her hard eyes seemed to want to burn the wood just by looking it.

She was dressed in a simple red and white plissé gown in the style of Meereen that left her arms and a good portion of her back exposed.

The cold seemed not to touch her.

*The perks of having dragon blood, I’d wager.*

To his right, Tyrion nodded to Varys, who was holding a roll of parchment, and approached her in the same cautious way he used with Viserion earlier: “You’ve missed a good performance, out there.”

“I’ve heard the screams and the clapping.”

She didn’t even dignify him with a look.

Tyrion let out a steady breath, arming himself with endless patience. This, so far, was still one of the good days, but since they had landed, her moods had become quite unpredictable and Tyrion had learned to exercise caution over this slippery battlefield. She could be stubborn just like one of her dragons. “You could at least show a little bit of enthusiasm over the fact that your Lord Hand is still in one piece.”

Her violet eyes shot him a warning glare. She stood up gracefully, and Tyrion thought, not for the first time, that she truly was one of the most beautiful women he ever laid his eyes on. Even in the almost total absence of light, her silver hair was literally glittering, as though made of diamond threads.
“I will ask you the same question I’ve just asked Varys: why are we still here, Tyrion? We’ve been stuck on this island for the last three months, and while you and Viserion play war up in the sky, my khalasar and the Unsullied are dying from the cold! I’m sick of this forsaken land!”

“It’s your ancient seat, this is where everything began for your family, this is where you’ve been born!”

“This is where my mother died! It’s just a piece of black rock full of long forgotten memories, with a volcano about to erupt any moment now. It means nothing to me!”

She grasped the lion sigil that marked the capital on the painted table and held it in front of Tyrion: “I want King’s Landing!”

The lion of Lannister rolled over the long table and ended in the vicinity of Tarth.

“I’ve explained to you why we can’t raid the capital. Not while there’s still so much wildfire under its streets that the city would blow up with just a misplaced spark from one of your children’s breath.”

“Caches of wildfire you put there.”

“Well, it was rather easy: all I had to do was follow in your father’s steps. He had already done half the work for me.”

Shame red as sour wine blotched her cheeks as she clenched her fists as though she wanted to strike him.

_I must be crazy. She could feed me to Drogon, if the whim arose._

Maybe some of Viserion’s impertinent intrepidity had slid under his skin too, during their ride, but he did not flinch and defiantly held her dragon gaze.

Outside, high screams filled the sky as a huge flying shadow covered for a moment the windows: as if on cue, Drogon was back from his usual late afternoon hunt; Tyrion prayed that the black dragon had not damaged the crops and the livestock of the few farmers still scattered around the Point. They needed to have Lord Celtigar and the other noble houses of Valyrian descent in the peninsula on their side, and not anger them with an unintended holocaust of cattle to be fed to one of her pets.

“We’ve heard word from Casterly Rock, my lord,” Varys tried to diffuse the tension, handing him a parchment with his cousin Daven’s sealing wax. “With Euron Greyjoy on the move and threatening to lay siege to the Westerlands coast towns, they refuse to send east the host we’ve asked…”

Predictable; as long as Cersei sat on the Iron Throne, Casterly Rock and Lannisport would give their allegiances to her. Regardless, the rejection hurt in more ways than one: Daven wouldn’t acknowledge his authority over the Rock and its army, and by consequence of that he was putting Tyrion between a rock and a hard place. If a time would come when he would be forced to choose between Daenerys and his own home, his birth right, what would he do, then?

_If Jaime were here, everything would be different_, he found himself thinking with a twinge of ache.

“And where is your brother?” Daenerys said, more or less reading his mind.

Daven didn’t say. He probably didn’t know, either. Jaime’s whereabouts had been erratic for
weeks: Varys’ little birds said he had fled the capital and gone to Tarth, to do what, nobody knew. After that, he was seen leading a host of Lannister men across the Riverlands, maybe toward the Rock, maybe to the North.

“I don’t know,” he reluctantly admitted.

“You don’t know, or you don’t want to tell me?”

Tyrion tensed. Jaime was a sour topic at least as much as Aerys and his wildfire were. He knew Daenerys wanted to capture him and possibly question him about what really happened during the sack of King’s Landing, but, besides that, Tyrion had no idea what she was planning to do. He did know, though, that Ellaria Sand had been a strong advocate for beheading, as if Myrcella’s murder had not been enough.

They had a rough time, when Daenerys had refused to punish the Sand Snakes for his niece’s assassination. Varys had to step in before Tyrion threw the Hand’s brooch at the Queen’s feet and left Dragonstone forever; it took from the Spider a lot of diplomatic finesse and all his influence to mediate between two opposite and absolutely unyielding stances: Daenerys needed Dorne’s allegiance, their army and ships, hence Tyrion must needs swallow his pride and keep his grief and vengeful remonstrations to himself until the Seven Kingdoms would have been secured into Targaryen hands. Only then, Daenerys had promised, the Queen would give justice to her Hand’s innocent niece.

The assurance did nothing to quell his turmoil.

Ellaria herself never set foot on the island, thanks to the gods, or Tyrion couldn’t really be accounted for his actions; the Sand Snakes were there, however, and their taunting japes and innuendos about Jaime and how he could not save his own daughter were doing nothing but exacerbate his feelings.

I’m serving a Queen-to-be who’s made an alliance with people who had murdered two of my three niblings and I’m trying to dethrone the other woman responsible for the death of the last one, he thought scathingly.

And now Ellaria, through Oberyn’s daughters, didn’t let a day pass by without instilling doubts about his true loyalties, painting him like a treacherous little leech, a kinslayer ready to discard Daenerys at the first hint of trouble, once he would have obtained enough wealth and power from his association with her.

Those were Ellaria Sand’s words coming from her mouth, right now.

“The Sand Snakes have been hissing in your ears again?” he inquired with polite coolness, not rising to the bait. Daenerys paced restlessly, wringing her hands, in her eyes uncertainty and suspicion.

“Ellaria is trying to break us apart. I’m not hiding my brother under Varys’ skirts, I’m not trying to double-cross you into making you do my bidding. If I tell you to send the Greyjoys to lay siege to Storm’s End, it’s not because I’m plotting to divide you from your best allies, sending them away instead of planning a surprise attack on Blackwater Bay!”

“Euron Greyjoy is sailing down the Sunset Sea,” Varys came to his help, “If his Iron Fleet will attack Dorne’s port towns, how long will it take before Sunspear’s fleet would drop out of the allegiance to run to Ellaria Sand’s rescue? Sending Yara and Theon to patrol and defend the offshore waters under Tarth and Estermont will allow us to have the upper hand in case of attack
by their uncle, while we bide our time and rally other allies on the continent.”

It seemed like all the rage in the princess’ body left all at once. She let herself fall heavily on her chair, her hands holding her head between her knees.

“I’m so close to it, Tyrion! I can almost reach out and touch it, but I’m standing here, doing nothing. I feel like I’m going mad.”

Only once before Tyrion had heard her sounding on the verge of tears: when she had exiled Ser Jorah from Meereen. Those were angry tears, then, brought forth by love and betrayal. Now, for the first time, the will to fight seemed to have deserted her: it sounded so much unlike her, that Tyrion turned to Varys, not knowing what to do. He’s always been shit at consoling damsels in distress.

But she was not a disheartened damsel; she was a tired, frustrated dragon.

How do you soothe a dragon?

He stepped next to her and put a hand over the chair’s armrest.

“Let Cersei wallow in the illusion to be invincible, in the misconception that nobody would ever dare to lay siege to the city. Let her think she’s winning. I can guarantee that arrogance will be her undoing. I will give you that throne, if it’s the last thing I do. But we need to stick together and you must be patient!”

*And please, please, do not listen to that Dornish bitch!, his eyes beseeched.*

“There’s another matter that requires your attention, my lord,” Varys held another missive, with the sigil of the direwolf. “This just came from Winterfell, signed ‘Ser Davos Seaworth, Hand of the King’.”

“Davos Seaworth? Wasn’t he Stannis’ Hand?”

“Apparently, now, he’s Jon Snow’s Hand.”

“What?”

He almost snatched the parchment from Varys’ hands.

The letter was dated two months ago; the ravens from the North were starting to have trouble to reach the southern regions in an acceptable amount of time. This meant the news would be obsolete, by the time it reached Dragonstone.

Tyrion already knew some of the facts Ser Davos had written: Stannis’ death, Lord Snow giving up the Brothers of the Night’s Watch to ride south with Sansa, the battle fought at the gates of Winterfell between Stark and Bolton armies.

Some others, he didn’t quite expect: he could never have imagined that he’d wanted a crown for himself.

“Who is this Jon Snow?”

“He’s Eddard Stark’s bastard son,” Tyrion answered somewhat bluntly, not even raising his eyes from the parchment.

“Eddard Stark…was he –
This time he did look up at her.

“Lyanna Stark’s brother, yes.”

_The woman your brother kidnapped and raped; the man whose brother and father your father killed_, he wanted to add, not really knowing why he suddenly was so angry.

_Nothing is going the way you’ve been planning, that’s why._

“And now he’s been proclaimed – she took the paper from Tyrion and read aloud –…_King in the North?_”

The embarrassed silence that followed stretched and stretched, punctuated only by the heavy looks Tyrion and Varys were exchanging and by the screams of the three dragons around the volcano.

And then, Daenerys burst out laughing.

A full force, shrieking laughter that had her body convulsing and her eyes turning indigo and shining with tears.

It wasn’t a pleasant sound. _It is a laughter tinged with madness._ Tyrion’s blood seemed to freeze in his veins at the thought.

“So let me get this straight,” she went on, putting her hands on the table and trying to catch her breath, “in King’s Landing there’s your sister, a truly deranged woman who murdered thousands of people and her own youngest cub; then, there’s Euron Greyjoy, who wants to fuck me, but in the meantime has killed his own brother and is currently whetting his sword for his niblings’ necks; and now, this _White Wolf_ from the North, crowned by the wildlings and a bunch of scattered lesser houses. Everybody’s got a crown, except me!”

_Please, Seven Gods, if you truly exist, I beg you; do not let her turn mad like Aerys._

“The Seven Kingdoms had spent centuries as separate realms raging war against one other, just as much as they had spent united under the fire of the Targaryen dragons. Did you really think they would have given you the throne only because you’re the Targaryens’ last surviving heir?”

Daenerys let out a hollow laugh and shook her head: “This is ridiculous.”

She wasn’t in the game, yet, but she needed to learn how to deal with a bad _cyvasse_ opening and she needed to learn fast, if she wanted to keep, not the throne, but simply her own life.

In front of her, the North painted on the table seemed to go on and on forever: “What does _he_ want?”

“They talk about a war for the survival of the human race fought on their northern borders… they’re asking for men, dragonglass, and, well, dragons, if it’s true we have three of them, to help the Brothers of the Night’s Watch,” said Varys.

“It matches with the things written in the other letter we’ve received from the Citadel, earlier this week,” Tyrion mused aloud.

“What is this all about?” Daenerys questioned them. “_Tyrion_?”

He gritted his teeth; it wouldn’t do to keep her in the dark about this. She needed to know, as absurd as it might sound.
“The last time I went to the Wall, there already were odd rumours making the rounds, not from the mouths of green lads, scared of their own shadows, mind you, but from the mouths of some of the bravest and more seasoned men.”

His memory went to Benjen Stark, Maester Aemon and Lord Commander Mormont talking of dead boys, winter and dark things not made with meat, blood and bones; he also remembered how eager he was to dismiss the chatters about the awakening of unmentionable forces.

*I don’t believe that giants and ghouls and White Walkers are lurking beyond the Wall.*

“These might not be simple borders quarrels with the wildlings.”

“You believe these tales about the White Walkers?”

“Three dragons have hatched after more than a century they were believed dead and gone. I’m open to believe the magic of the Children of the Forest and the First Men had rekindled again in Westeros, too, somehow.”

“Your Grace, the three of us had already seen inexplicable things in our lives and, if I may, I’ve lived through ten winters, the longest of which lasted four years: I can’t tell you why, but this feels different.”

So the eunuch was feeling that too! Varys sounded worried and, was it possible?, more than a little scared.

“If what they say is true and an army of the dead is about to invade the lands of men, conquering the Iron Throne will mean absolutely nothing. When the shadows walk among the living, there would be no military discipline, nor courage in battle, nor superior numbers to keep us on the winning side.”

A shiver ran across Tyrion’s back. The conversation was disturbing, to say the least, and was putting him ill at ease; Varys was right: Dothraki, Unsullied, the bravest knights from Dorne to the Reach, all of them would die the same useless death and would rise again only to join the ranks of the Others.

“You’re right, it is ridiculous,” he said and gestured to the Painted Table. “But the North is as big as the other regions combined: if you don’t wish to have a rebellion you will never be able to overcome, you ought to be ready to make some concessions…not for independence, but if they want to negotiate, as it might be the case, it might be wise not to turn the ear on the other side.”

“I need more information,” she resolved, stretching over the table to move the three dragon-shaped wooden pieces from Dragonstone to Winterfell. “You will ride to Winterfell and meet with this so called King in the North. You will speak in my stead, I give you the authority to strike bargains and work out the terms of an allegiance, anything you’ll deem paramount to favour and validate our cause, and you’ll return to Dragonstone with reliable news about the Wall and what is or is not lurking beyond it.”

She strode to the chamber’s entrance, making clear the council was over.

“It will take weeks!” he whined, more petulantly than he intended to.

Daenerys stopped at the door and turned with a knowing smile: fire was dancing in her eyes.

She threw him something he caught with his clunky hands: the dragon *cyvasse* piece had golden wings.
“Not if you ride on dragon’s back.”

Chapter End Notes

Tyrion the Dragon Trainer. Yes, I went there. I simply couldn’t help myself: Viserion is a cinnamon roll! And no, Tyrion is NOT a Targaryen in this fic. Viserion simply likes him, and besides Tyrion does cut quite a gloriously handsome figure riding him: can you picture Jaime and Sansa’s faces when they’ll see him?

This chapter also serves as introduction to Daenerys and the Dragonstone arc: I think it would be funnily anticlimactic having Dany literally trapped on the island, after that last epic shot last season showing her and her army in all their glory, ready to conquer the world! Well, it doesn’t work like this, princess. Forget King’s Landing and go North! That’s where the real battle is!

I’m not really sure about the phrases in High Valyrian (grammar is a true nightmare), but I haven’t had this much fun since high school, when I used to translate from Latin and Greek! Anyway, here’s a rough translation:

eglikta sōvēs = fly higher!
Hen jēdār ropās = fall from the sky!
With its snow-clad peak overlooking the Ancient Road across the mountains of the Westerlands, the Seal stood to his right, high and proud like a mountain lion: the old passage, now closed forever after an earthquake during the reign of Jaehaerys the Conciliator nearly caused the mountain to crumble on itself, meandered north of the actual Goldroad, unravelling between juniper and hemlock forests, half-frozen streams eroding the mountain’s sides with their harsh waters and gorges so deep it was said monsters lurked from their darkness, ready to jump on lost travellers. Some even claimed Lann the Clever had reached the Rock through one of those openings.

Above him – enormous, tall and burly, like the body of a giant warrior sleeping sideways over the mountains – the Rock.

Jaime stared over the miles and miles of granite stone on which stood his ancient seat, feeling icy and remote: instead of bringing him a small measure of peace, a consolation from his woes, the familiar landscape was looming unforgiving and inhospitable.

“I can’t even see the top. It’s frightening,” murmured the girl next to him.

Ashlynn had followed the host all the way from Tarth, in spite of his many refusals. She had concealed herself on the ship that brought them back on the continent and showed up once they had landed again in Board Arch, wearing a red jerkin, breeches and a new short haircut.

Jaime had yelled at her, losing completely his patience, threatening to send her back to her grandfather after a good spanking. He didn’t have the time to tend to an insubordinate child.

She had defiantly stared back, arms crossed, and said, deadpan: ‘I’ll be your squire.’

He almost laughed at the absurdity of that.

‘I don’t need a squire,’ he had answered, trying to keep a stern, straight face.

‘Of course you do! Every knight needs one!’
‘Do you have any idea of what happens to a young, pretty girl sneaking into a troops camp? At the very least, you’ll be taken for a camp follower and treated as such!’

‘I’ll kick ‘em in the balls!’

‘Let her come, Jaime. You’re never gonna win this bout,’ Bronn had sneered. Jaime grudgingly relented.

Stubborn Tarth girl.

‘If they start molesting you, or worse, don’t come crying to me.’

But in truth, she had actually been valuable: she washed the laundry, cooked fairly well, was quick to follow orders and never complained once, not even when they got trapped for five days into a blizzard between Deep Den and Hornvale: she had never lost heart, but she had helped to keep the horses warm and to store as much fire wood and food as they could. Jaime had to admit that, during the long travel to Casterly Rock, her energy and high-spirited mood had kept him afloat.

Bronn had a soft spot for her, too, and had started training her, so she could defend herself, if need be. More than once he was lulled to sleep by her buoyant laugh just outside his tent, as the mercenary recounted some silly tale from the time when he was still in Tyrion’s service.

During those nights he always dreamt of Myrcella.

“It’s solid rock, how do we get in?” Lynn wondered, staring at the mountain with a mix of awe and terror. The Rock always had that effect on strangers. He gave her a crooked grin: “We’ll politely knock at the front door.”

They rode to the two enormous golden statues that had been guarding the Lion’s Mouth for centuries. He dismounted, walked the steps to the oak-and-iron entrance, lifted the ornate door knocker three times and waited, while Lynn’s jaw dropped in incredulity. Jamie snorted. She thought I was jesting.

After a few moments, the heavy door opened and they were granted access: the horses rode along a broad passageway through the natural cavern, lit by hundreds of torches; her mouth still open, Lynn couldn’t stop staring at the high ceiling as though she feared the Rock would tumble down on them at any moment. Jaime could hear the ebb of the tide gently reverberating from the underground harbour; he inhaled deeply the familiar scent of salt impregnating these walls.

He was home, but the thought wasn’t bringing him any consolation.

The host was led to the first of the many outer courtyards, where a bulky man with a leonine beard and formidable whiskers jovially patted his round belly and laughed cheerfully when he saw him.

“Cousin Jaime! I’ll be damned!”

Daven Lannister was the only surviving son of Jaime’s uncle Stafford: he was older than Jaime by ten years, but his hair was still as golden and lavish as a real lion’s mane. He had been one of Jaime’s first playmates, during their carefree childhood at the Rock and was also Joanna’s favourite nephew: she had doted on him as much as her two twins; in return, Jaime was still fond of him, even though he believed him a frivolous, narcissistic ponce.

“You’ve grown old, mate.”

“And you’re on the fast track to becoming a succulent ham.”
Daven guffawed.

“These fucking stairs are preventing me putting on too much weight, but just barely.”

Although a head shorter, the cousin circled Jaime’s shoulders with a big arm and squeezed affectionately.

“And how fares Cersei? I didn’t know she was planning to send you to the Rock: no raven has brought us the news of your arrival,” he said as he snapped his fingers at a stable boy, who promptly took the horse reins from Jaime and led his courser to rest.

“I came on my own, Daven. My sister doesn’t know I’m here.”

Daven’s smiling face darkened. He grabbed his arm and took him aside, out of range from the other soldiers, squires, page boys intent on taking care of horses and quartering Jaime’s men into the barracks.

“You show up here unannounced with a host of, I’d say, around two thousand men, Queen’s men; and the Queen herself doesn’t even know? Jaime, what the hell is going on?”

From where to start?

Jaime stared at the courtyard’s buzzing comings and goings, his mind blank and burned out. When he turned to his cousin and opened his mouth to answer, Daven held up a hand to stop him: “Not here,” he whispered, looking around suspiciously. “Later. At supper.”

Jaime nodded gratefully and stepped inside.

He was tired beyond words and in dire need of a hot bath, but he had wanted to visit the Hall since he set foot on the Westerlands. It’s been years since his last visit, and after everything that had happened in King’s Landing and at Evenfall Hall he felt the need to see her.

Usually, only the knights and lords who had brought prestige and glory to the house name with their deeds were granted their resting place into the Hall of Heroes, their armours, swords and carved faces on display all over the walls; but, on the south side, right where the gallery opened into a terrace overlooking the sea, covered by a golden ciborium supported by four alabaster columns with rubies the size of walnuts engraved in them, rested the recumbent effigy of Joanna, last Lady of the Rock.

The pretty head was reclined over soft marble pillows, and the beautifully carved transparent veil couldn’t entrap the ringlets which, even in death and stone, flowed freely over her chest and hips, wild, fair and comely. There were filigree threads soldered over the surface of the curls, so that the golden hair still glittered with the sun’s kiss. It was a beautiful work of art, for sure, and Jaime wished he could say the lineaments carved in stone were the perfect copy of the soft, silky, scented skin against which he used to fall asleep, but the truth was he couldn’t remember her.

The effigy looked like a perfect mix between Myrcella and Cersei, although his sister had never looked so peaceful and still, not even in sleep. The detail of the hands demurely folded over her breasts wasn’t Cersei at all, as she wouldn’t ever be so maidenly.

Beloved wife and mother; forever cherished, read the epitaph Tywin had the sculptor chisel up; Jaime would have wished to raise a prayer to the Mother and the Crone asking for mercy and wisdom, but nothing came out.

The words had died inside of him a long time ago.
I miss you, he thought somewhat lamely, despite the fact he wasn’t even sure what he was missing, exactly.

Her hands, yes, he did miss those, though. The soft weight of a caress over his golden curls. Strong and gentle. If he closed his eyes and really concentrated, he believed he could still remember at least this, like a distant echo rippling in the recesses of his memory.

He put his own hand over the figure’s cold ones as the impact of what had transpired in the Red Keep hit him at full force: I’ve beaten her, I’ve smacked her in the face with this hand.

The regret he felt didn’t diminish the gravity of the act, or his own self-loathing. What would you have thought of me, Mother? Of us? Would you have forgiven us for what we’ve done? Would you have loved our children?

His mother saw darkness ahead and tried to save her foolish children. But with her gone, both he and Cersei had been left without guidance, spiralling out of control without even giving a thought about the consequences of their acts. Because who would even dare to hold a Lannister accountable for any wrongdoing? He had poured all the love, worship and devotion once addressed to his mother on his sister, while Cersei had grown more and more enraged, distant and manipulative, and when Jaime realised how dangerous that was, it was already too late. He had been so stupid and irresponsible, thinking he could save everyone – his sister, their children – from their enemies, not understanding that the true enemy was the insane lust that had eaten their souls and changed them both into blind, heartless beasts.

He was seeking a new path for himself, struggling to reach a new understanding and walk toward a future free of the invisible shackles he felt he had worn for many years, but the ghosts of his past didn’t seem intended to leave him anytime soon. Cersei was still a looming presence in the back of his mind, beautiful and false, calling to him like a siren. Come back to me, brother! We’ll forgive and forget. Sweet brother. My love.

It would have been so easy, to fall back into the old ways. Easy and comforting. But he couldn’t forgive, much less forget.

I’ve been trying, Mother, I’ve been trying so hard, but nothing of what I do will ever be enough. Everything I touch turns to ashes.

The marble effigy stared at him, mute and accusing: no words of encouragement and absolution for him. He would need to find the wisdom inside himself.

And for the first time in his life, he felt truly alone.

Private dinner in Daven’s solar was a boring affair.

While an excellent venison soup and pork pie with eggs and cheese were being served, Jaime, Bronn and Daven exchanged pleasantries and small talk about the management of Casterly Rock...well...he and his cousin exchanged pleasantries; Bronn just stuffed his mouth with second helpings and wine.

Daven had uncorked one of the Arbor red vintages from the Rock’s cellars and the cup bearer, a boy with the reddish blonde hair of the Lantells, was careful to keep their three goblets always full to the rim.

Halfway through his third glass, Daven threw a cautious look at Bronn and pointedly stared at
Jaime.

“You can speak in front of Bronn, coz. I trust him.”

To his right, Bronn sucked soundly his fingers, just to rile him.

“What happened in King’s Landing, Jaime? Is it true she had blown up the Great Sept?”

“Did you really think it was an accident?”

Daven sighed and rubbed a tired hand over his forehead.

“I don’t know what to think anymore.” His blue eyes bore into Jaime’s emerald ones: “I’m sorry about Myrcella and Tommen.”

Jaime fidgeted in his chair, suddenly uncomfortable. What did Daven truly know? How much did he guess? His ghost fingers itched.

“But whatever happened between the two of you, I don’t want to be part of your personal wars. The Rock is loyal to the Iron Throne.”

“The Rock is loyal to the Lannisters,” Bronn said, picking his teeth with the point of the knife. “He is a Lannister,” he added, cocking his head in Jaime’s general direction.

“So that’s the reason why you’ve come back? Now that you aren’t Lord Commander of the Kingsguard anymore, you want to take your rightful place at home?”

“I have no interest in the Westerlands, Daven; it’s thanks to you if the Rock is thriving even in these dire times: you’ve been doing an excellent job in keeping it out of harm’s way, and for that you have my gratitude. You will be free to rule here as you deem fit, but I shall need a part of your military strength.”

“How much?”

“Eight thousand.”

Daven’s eyes bulged out.

“Eight thousand?!”

“You can choose the men among Lannisport City Guard and the Lannister army stationed at the Rock.”

“But, Jaime, how will we ever manage in case of an attack?”

“If someone will be so idiot as to try and lay siege to an impregnable fortress, you mean? You’re going to have enough left to curb anyone from coming to bother the lions during winter. This is not a request, Daven, it’s an order,” he added, his green eyes flashing dangerously, “from now on you’ll answer and report directly to me.”

“What do you need eight thousand men for, anyway?”

Jaime and Bronn exchanged a look: they had never discussed further plans, beyond Casterly Rock, but, as strikingly beautiful sapphire eyes assaulted his mind, he realised he had already yielded to the inevitability of this choice weeks ago. Bronn’s lips twitched knowingly. _Bloody bastard. He knew from the start I would come to this_, he thought, getting his irritation, and a slight blush, in
He stared back at his cousin, took a deep breath and plunged.

“I’m going North. I shall make a bargain with the Starks.”

Daven’s cup stilled in mid-air.

“Have you gone mad? If Cersei knew…

“Cersei can go hang herself!” he slammed his golden hand on the table, spilling red wine all over, and stood up, pacing like a lion in a cage, while the cup bearer tried to salvage the Myrish lace of the table cloth. “The Others take her! I’ve done being her lapping dog. I’m not following her orders anymore, and neither should you!”

“She is the Queen, Jaime! We’re talking about treason, here!”

There, the word he had been avoiding since he stepped out of the Red Keep, like a slap in his face. For the first time in his life, he was working against his sister’s wishes, so technically, yes, that was treason. *I truly can’t keep my oaths to any of the rulers I’ve served. But she is not my Queen. She will never be my Queen,* he considered ruefully.

“Speakin’ of which…” Daven resumed, standing up. “I’ve got word from Tyrion.”

Jaime’s heart gave a lurch.

“The little fella is alive?” Bronn exclaimed, with a small pleased glint in his eyes, before raising his cup in a silent toast.

“Alive and faring exceedingly well,” he handed to Jaime a folded parchment. “He has become Daenerys Targaryen’s Hand.”

Bronn choked on his wine.

Jaime stared at his cousin, aghast, then at the missive, where his brother’s neat handwriting flowed easily, talking about dragons, an army of more than two hundred thousand men, and fire and blood over Westeros.

Then, at the bottom, next to a sealing wax in the shape of a three-headed dragon Jaime hadn’t seen for almost twenty years, his signature.

*Tyrion Lannister, Hand of the Queen.*

Tyrion...back on the continent...serving a woman who probably wanted him dead...

*So it’s true. She really has returned.*

His head was spinning with the knowledge that the hour of reckoning, for him, for his whole family, has finally come.

Bronn stood up and snatched the letter from his hand.

“He’s asked for the Lannister army to go to Dragonstone and fight with this silver-haired *Mother of Dragons* to win back the Iron Throne...”

“Aye, and I’ve said no to him as I’m saying no to you, too.”
“I’m not asking you to go against Cersei, Daven,” Jaime said, chafed. “I’m just taking a small part of my army to move up North.”

Daven flinched, the use of the possessive not going unnoticed.

“And once you’re there? What happens after you strike an alliance with the King in the North?” he let out a thick, scornful laugh. “A lion parading with the wolves, that must be the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard!”

Jaime reached out for his glass on the table and gulped its content, a dark smile on his face.

“I’ve done many things more dishonourable than that, Daven; get my host ready, we’ll be leaving in two days.”

After making sure his men had been quartered in the barracks and that Cersei’s old childhood bedchamber had been assigned to Lynn, just to see the girl’s eyes sparkling with amazement at the stunning, princely opulence of it, Jaime retreated to his own rooms: Daven had wanted to arrange for him to sleep in his father’s quarters, but he adamantly insisted that his own old bedchamber would do just fine.

It hadn’t changed much, during the last twenty years: there was still the same Myrish carpet and tapestry hung on the walls and, everywhere, rampant golden lions on red field, roaring bravely.

Only the bed had been replaced, and for that Jaime was grateful; in that bed, he and Cersei had laid together countless times, and he had no intention to be reminded of it even in sleep.

All around him, there were too many bittersweet memories, already – stolen kisses, sleepless nights spent laying in each other’s arms and talking in hushed tones about a future that never came – without adding the weight of his own resentment.

His head felt heavy and dizzy for the wine; he stepped outside on the balcony. The view from there had always taken his breath away: halfway between the heavens and the ground, from his terrace, on clear days, he could see with the naked eye Fair Isle and the ruins of Castamere, the playground of his and Cersei’s many summer afternoons.

We played over the drowned and burned bones of our enemies. We played over a graveyard.

From the terrace, he could also see the cliff where he used to jump from, as a lad. Cersei never jumped with me; she ran straight to Father and tattled on me.

The only one who’s been brave enough to follow him on the cliff was little Melara. He still remembered the dare he had agreed to: a kiss in return for a jump together in the water. A true kiss, like the one Florian the Fool had given to his Jonquil.

Jaime had pointed out that Florian took from Jonquil a lot more than a kiss.

‘Then, next time we shall find a higher cliff,’ she had said with a wink, before peeling off her dress. She boldly stood in front of him only in her smallclothes, which had revealed unripe, but already well-shaped breasts; and right after, she had jumped, and he had followed her with the same reckless abandon.

One hundred feet below, in the summer water, her soaked linen clothes did nothing to hide the hardness of her nipples. She had brazenly put her arms around his neck, pushed herself flat against
his chest and kissed him.

A sweet first kiss: warm, wet and wonderfully awkward.

And after that, they had both laughed and tried to dunk each other beneath the surface, playing all through the joyous mirth of never-ending youth, until goosebumps had erupted all over their eleven-years-old bodies.

Melara was brave and lively and would have become a beautiful, passionate woman.

Instead, less than a week later, she was dead. A horrible death, according to the whispered rumours he had caught from Maester Creylen’s young assistant and from the baker’s son, who had been there where they pulled out the body from the well: the sixteen-feet fall had broken both her legs, but it hadn’t been fatal. What killed her was the water. Melara had drowned when the high tide had filled the well; when Jaime had heard that her lungs were full of the sea he thought they were all lying to him, because, how could it be? She was a wonderful swimmer and he had seen her holding her breath under water for more than two minutes only a few days past. So he’d asked to see the body, to be really sure, but Maester Creylen had forbidden it: the accident had happened on the outskirts of Lannisport, where nobody at first had thought to go looking for the lost girl. The well was isolated and located over a patch of land that had been abandoned for years. When they finally found her, after almost two days, the corpse was in an advanced state of putrefaction, her freckled skin black and already falling off due to water and the abnormally hot weather of those days. When they refused to let him see her, Jaime had yelled, kicked, bitten, threatened to head to Father with his remonstrations. In the end, the only thing he could do was standing quietly like a good boy in the sept, his cheeks streaked with tears, while the septon and the Silent Sisters took care of the funeral rites.

Everyone was crying, that day.

Everyone, except Cersei.

At the time he didn’t think much of it: his sister had lost one of her best friends, after all, and sometimes the shock and grief of losing a loved one would dry up the tears even before they could be spilled.

And after, he had simply forgotten about her, the memory of that first kiss buried deep down in his heart. Until his sister unlocked it with a well-put insinuation and a not-so-veiled threat.

Could she really have Melara’s blood on her hands? Committing murder at one-and-ten, just out of spite and jealousy?

He tried to call to mind what Cersei did, during those days when Melara couldn’t be found: she had been the last to see her alive, but was she helping the search party? Was she worried? Did she point the men to the right direction?

He couldn’t remember.

It took hours for the well to fill up. With her legs shattered and the water level getting higher and higher, Melara had the time to realise she was about to die. A slow, inconceivable agony.

But, for some reason, even today, Jaime couldn’t picture her scared and whimpering, not until the very end, at least. No, she was so fiercely attached to life that she would have put up a fight against the Stranger himself, screaming at the top of her lungs, breaking her nails and scratching her fingers bloody in the desperate attempt to find a handhold to climb out on her own, never
surrendering to the cold, nor the pain.

_Sister, could you really have been that cruel, even as a child?_

Jaime pushed the palm of his hand against his eye, his temples throbbing with the early signs of a headache, and went back inside.

_I can’t really hold my liquor; Tyrion would laugh himself stupid at this._

He yanked his golden hand from his stump and fell heavily into the bed, still dressed, hoping for dreamless sleep…

He was chasing Melara…down, down… her laughter echoing through the labyrinthine passageways coiling inside the belly of the Rock: for some strange reason, she was wearing Cersei’s wedding gown, the vaporous silky skirts kissing her bare ankles as she ran fast ahead of him.

*Wait! Wait!*

Melara stopped, shyly smiled at him from behind her shoulders and jumped into the darkness below. He tried to reach her, but he wasn’t standing on the cliff at Casterly Rock. His feet were planted on the window sill of the Burned Tower in Winterfell: beneath him, the sea was raging, and two golden eyes were staring at him from the deepness. *The things I do for love.* He jumped and dived deeper and deeper, into the water…

…Under the sea there was a banquet table loaded with drinks and food and sitting there, across one another, were Robb Stark, his wolf head almost completely severed from his neck, and Tyrion, with three arrows stuck in his chest…he was crying all over a dragon’s skull the size of a dog; and, from the opposite side, Lady Catelyn was kissing Rhaegar Targaryen, who was wearing a fool’s crown with little bells and playing his harp. Jaime recognised Lady Catelyn only from her blue eyes, because her hair had turned white and the skin of her face had been completely eaten by fish.

His lungs were straining almost painfully, now; he needed to resurface soon, or he too would die at the bottom of the sea.

He used his feet and arms to propel him back to the water’s surface, but he realised there was something holding him back.

A hand.

_Cersei’s_ hand, grasping his ankle, pulling him under.

He struggled to free himself from his sister’s grip, but she was stronger: her face was beautiful and hideous, her eyes terrible to behold, cold and merciless like stone, and in her hair there were snakes…thousands of them…

He opened his mouth to call for Melara, to call for his mother…he tried to breathe, but he gulped only salt water.

Salt water that tasted like blood and decay…

An astonishing headache woke him up.

Three things were instantly clear: first, he wasn’t in his bed anymore; for a moment he thought he was still dreaming: he was shrouded in darkness, but, from the heat, he had a fair inkling of where
he was. He could sense the Rock weighting down on him: the Rock’s underground caves, or more likely, one of the abandoned goldmines; mixed with salt, he could taste copper, quicksilver and the bitter almond-like smell of the concoction used to separate gold from ore.

Second, he was tied up, suspended like a ham, his useless stump and right arm left dangling to his side.

Third, he wasn’t alone: someone was repeating a list of names, on and on, like an endless litany.

_The Red Woman...Beric Dondarrion...Thoros of Myr...Theon Greyjoy...The Mountain...Queen Cersei..._

_The Red Woman...Beric Dondarrion...Thoros of Myr...Theon Greyjoy...The Mountain...Queen Cersei..._

His head was splitting in two.

“What are you babbling about?” he slurred.

The wine...the wine was drugged...

“The Red Woman...Beric Dondarrion...Thoros of Myr...Theon Greyjoy...”

“Stop it. Stop it!”

He felt dizzy and wanted to throw up, but he managed to ask: “What are those names?”

A boy’s voice answered from the dark: “These are the names of dead people.”

“Cersei...she’s not dead…”

She couldn’t be dead.

“Oh, but she is...only she doesn’t know it yet.”

The sound of friction between flint and steel was followed almost instantly by a faint spark and then fire was erupting from the tip of a torch.

Jaime looked around.

_Mines it is._

Next to him, Bronn was in his same predicament, and was still snoring.

“Bronn! Bronn!”

Although his own legs were tied up together, he managed to kick him hard in the shin; the sellsword gasped as he regained consciousness.

“Is it the war yet?” he yelled, disoriented; then, when he noticed the ropes, he added a colourful string of chosen swear words.

“Struggling will only tighten the ropes.”

Jaime turned: in front of him, sitting on a chopping block and holding an axe, there was a lanky young boy of maybe two-and-ten, with hazel eyes and the Lantell trademark strawberry blonde
hair.

The cup bearer who poured their drinks.

How did he manage, alone, to bring into the mining caves two passed-out, grown men? He must necessarily have had some kind of help. Jaime craned his neck, to see if there was somebody else, lurking in the shadows, but, with the exception of the tight circle of light surrounding them, he couldn’t see anything else.

“Who are you?” he addressed the boy.

“I’m no one.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to choose...between your left hand...” at that, he pointed the axe’s edge at his whole arm, “and the life of your lieutenant,” he concluded, pointing at Bronn next, and, with a serious pause for dramatic effect, eagerly waited for their reaction.

Jaime gritted his teeth, not giving him the satisfaction to see he was actually struggling to think straight.

The boy let out a perfunctory, cold laugh and waved his hand, as though to dismiss them.

“Nah, I’m jesting. I only want the truth,” he sat on the chopping block, the axe maliciously lying askew on his knees.

Absurdly, the gesture made Jaime think of himself, a little bit older than this boy, sitting on the Iron Throne with his bloodied sword held across his knees in almost the same way.

“I’m going to ask you some questions, and I want you to answer truthfully. I’ll know if you’re lying.”

The silence that followed stretched, as the boy seemed to ponder the best way with which to breach the subject.

Then, finally, he pointed his axe to Jaime’s stump: “How you got that?”.

He furrowed his brow, not expecting that.

“Arakh. While I was a captive of the Bloody Mummers.”

“And why were you prisoner of the Bloody Mummers?”

“Lady Catelyn…Catelyn Stark has freed me in exchange for her daughters. We’ve made an oath to her.”

“We?”

“The wench…

*My name is Brienne – Sapphires! – Is every word you say a lie, Kingslayer? – I only rescue maidens."

He shook his head; the room was swaying before him.
“The wench was with me.”

“Did you find the daughters?”

The kid sounded mildly interested, although Jaime didn’t really know where was the point of the conversation. He squeezed his eyes shut, fighting with the sickly feeling at the back of his throat, and tried to clear his head.

“Sansa...was in King’s Landing, married to my brother. We couldn’t stop her...she went to the Eyrie with Littlefinger, and then Winterfell.”

Or at least that’s what Brienne had briefly told him, but he still didn’t know the whole story.

“What about Arya?”

“Arya...” he let out a bitter laugh, “I don’t know where Arya is.”

“Arya’s dead.”

Jaime’s eyes shot open; the boy was whetting the axe’s double edges, his voice calm and bored.

“I’ve killed her. I’ve killed her a thousand of times.”

He didn’t know how to take the sudden, sharp pain and regret that followed this declaration; he held no hope that the girl would be still alive, yet, a part of him, the part closer to Brienne, perhaps, always urging him on, not letting him shy away from his duty, had whispered to him to have faith, to keep on trying.

“Who the fuck are you?” Bronn hissed; the boy ignored him and moved closer to Jaime: in this light, his eyes had russet specks which made them look almost bloodshot.

“Did you push Brandon Stark out of a window with that hand?”

It took him two heartbeats to really understand.

“What?”

“Did you murder five Stark men on the streets of King’s Landing and incapacitate Lord Eddard Stark, with that hand?”

“How do you...”

“Did you shake Lord Bolton’s hand when you’ve planned the Red Wedding together?”

“No!” he almost yelled, at once, the rage somewhat sobering him up. “That wasn’t me!”

That was my father’s doing. He might have shit for honour, but this would have been too much even for a wretched soul like his.

“Did you kill the Blackfish during the siege at Riverrun?”

“Ser Brynden was a stubborn old goat and he died fighting, but he didn’t fall by my hand!”

My hand was too busy waving goodbye to a wench, at the time.

“And I won’t answer any more bloody questions if you don’t tell me who you are!”
The boy snickered.

“You really don’t recognise me? Let’s see if this helps.”

He put a hand under his chin and pulled, until the skin fell off. Jaime recoiled with a yelp: the boy’s face changed before his eyes; gone were the red hair of the Lantell cup bearer; in his place now stood a boy of maybe five-and-ten, with pitch black hair and amber eyes. The stable boy who took his horse when they arrived at the Rock.

*I must have finally gone mad. Aerys, are you laughing, in the deep hell where I’ve sent you?*

The young lad chuckled at his discomfort: “You didn’t recognise me at the Twins, either. I was wearing this face, then.”

Another wave of his hand and next to him, Bronn exhaled loudly as they both recognised the young, pretty brunette serving tables at the Twins, who had made sultry eyes at Jaime for the whole evening.

“You were amiably chatting with Walder Frey. Exchanging tips on betrayal, perhaps. You stared at me, remember that?, and I smiled. And then, after everyone had left, I painted a bloody grin over the throats of Lame Lothar and Black Walder, I cut their limbs and put them in the meat grinder and I cooked a delicious pie. I guess it must have been good. Old Walder liked it so much he helped himself with seconds. And then I opened his throat too. He didn’t recognisize me, either, but, in the end, I let him have a peek behind the mask.”

This girl, lean and lovely, had killed Walder Frey and his two heirs...there was a pattern here...his mind was still sluggish for the drug, but he could understand that there was something about the Red Wedding and vengeance...and the names he heard at the beginning...some of those names belonged to people who wronged the Starks...

“And before her, I was Arry, Weasel, the Ghost of Harrenhal, the Cat of the Canals, Salty, Mercy… for a long time I was a thousand different names, and I was no one for a lot longer.”

“And who were you, before all those?” he whispered, dreading the answer.

She stood on the chopping block, so that their faces were almost on the same level: “Look into my eyes...and tell me what you see.”

He stared and stared, until the brown, warm, liquid eyes started to change, the flecks of green shifting to gold and steel, as cold grey was staring back at him, like silver daggers in the dark. And all around it, the long face of a girl on the verge of womanhood, with high cheekbones and strong, square chin, framed by sleek dark hair.

Stark eyes. Stark hair.

“Do you remember me now, Kingslayer?”

His head was spinning.

“Arya...Arya Stark!”

She was there, she was really there. Bronn was seeing her too. He wasn’t hallucinating, was he?

Or maybe he was still dreaming, maybe all his life had been someone else’s dream...the dream of a child unconscious after a fall...
He must have truly lost his mind.

And in the middle of all this madness, his only thought was: *I’ve found her! Brienne, I’ve found her!*

She addressed Bronn, next: “I’ve heard you’ve got a very distinctive, beautiful singing voice.”

Bronn looked at her like he wanted to rip her apart.

“Any requests, *Lady Stark*?”

Arya’s lips quirked up malevolently.

“Sing *The Rains of Castamere*. That’ll set the mood just right.”

Her grey eyes turned up to him: two bottomless holes, dry and dead.

*There is nothing there.*

“Do you know that they were playing it, when Roose Bolton plunged a dagger into my brother’s heart? Do you know what they said he told him? ‘The Lannisters send their regards’.?”

Jaime paled. He had said those words to Bolton in Harrenhal, the morning he set off for King’s Landing. But he never meant...he didn’t think...He braced himself, the ropes so tight they were cutting off circulation in his legs and left arm.

“I didn’t have any part whatsoever in your brother and mother’s murders. I don’t know what else you expect me to say, but that, at least, is the truth.”

Truth was the only thing he could give her.

“Is it, now? I think you’re going to tell me the *whole* truth, before you beg.”

“You expect me to beg?”

“Everyone begs.”

“I’m not everyone.”

The smile she gave him was downright terrifying.

“Bring her!” Arya called.

From the shadows two other figures emerged into the torch’s light. Lynn was still in her nightgown, a pretty robe trimmed with lace around the cuffs and the neckline he remembered Cersei wearing often. The Hound’s black mass, hunkering behind her, his hands gripping her arms and smirching the sleeves, was somewhat comical, next to her, a fair, slim vision all in white. A ghost and a blackened soul the Seven Hells had just regurgitated.

When Arya yanked her by the arm, Lynn put up a fight, kicking and biting, until one of her punches reached her captor’s face.

Arya seemed only amused by the struggle, and, although shorter and thinner than the Tarth girl, answered in kind, re-opening the cut on Lynn’s upper lip which took more than a week to heal.

Bronn let out a ghastly howl.
“You little cunt! I’ll fucking kill you!”

_Threatening her with violence won’t do; she’s too far gone._

“Arya...listen to me;” he said then, his voice even, despite the hot fury igniting at the sight of blood on Lynn’s face, “This is between you and me. Let the girl go. I’ve sworn a sacred oath to your mother to bring you to safety, back to Winterfell. Your sister and half-brother are there, alive, and they’re still waiting for –

White-hot pain erupted all over the right side of his face, where the Hound’s punch had landed. Now Lynn and he had matching split lips.

“You don’t have a fucking idea of how long I’ve been waiting to do that,” Joffrey’s former dog snarled, the light of the torch dancing all over his scars.

“Clegane, always a pleasure. You’re running with the wolves, now?” he spat a clot of blood. “Don’t you get tired of always wagging your tail to please deranged masters?”

The Hound raised his mailed hand to hit him again.

“Don’t,” Arya calmly said. “I want him awake for what comes next. Keep her down.” The Hound complied with a grunt and pushed his knee against Lynn’s back, positively pinning her on the block; Arya took her axe, as Clegane yanked Lynn’s right arm out in front of her.

“Don’t squirm, my dear, or this would become ridiculously messy.”

Lynn was staring at him, shaking with laboured breaths, but her eyes were clear and unflinching.

Jaime panicked; memories of his time with the Bloody Mummers flashed in front of his eyes.

If I let this happen to Lynn, too, I will cut my other hand myself.

“Tell me what you want me to say, if it’s not the truth you want to hear!”

He twisted his left wrist, attempting to slack the knots; the skin strained against the damp hemp, as blood trickled down his fingertips.

“I’ve pushed Bran, it’s true! There is no justification for what I did. Do you want me to say I was behind the Red Wedding, too? If you want retribution for what my family did to yours, kill me, but don’t hurt the girl. She’s innocent!”

Her grey eyes, _wolf eyes_, chilled him to the bone.

“So were my good-sister and her unborn child.”

She raised the axe above her head, ready to strike.

“Please!” he begged.

The axe never fell: a noise of rolling, skittering pebbles, bouncing from the farthest corner of the mine, distracted her; the Hound unsheathed his longsword and with a nod from Arya he went into the mine's shadows to give a look.

It happened very fast; Jaime saw a flash of silver steel in the semi-darkness, and the next thing he knew, there was a Lannister soldier in his full armour and helmet behind Arya, and the sharp point of a sword pressing under the wolf girl’s chin until it drew blood.
“Drop it,” he ordered, his voice muffled by the visor. “Drop it, now!”

The axe fell on the ground with a clatter, as Arya held both her arms up. Lynn took it and swiftly cut the rope which kept both Jaime and Bronn suspended in the air.

“I’m sorry, m’lord, I’m sorry, they crept up on me while I was sleeping,” she said really fast, as though the whole predicament was her fault, while she helped him with the ropes around his chest. “I’ve tried to fight them off, but –

“Are you all right?” he interrupted her, grabbing her arm a little bit harder than necessary. The girl nodded decisively, brave and resolute, and he had to resist the urge to hug her.

“Watch out!” Bronn yelled. Jaime just had the time to free his legs from the ropes, as chaos erupted into the small space of cave: Clegane had crept up to the lad and was raining a shower of blows that would have easily incapacitated a less rapid and nimble opponent; Lynn had tackled Arya to the ground and was currently trying to disarm her of the sword she held tied on her waist, her nails scratching bloody wrinkles over the Stark girl’s cheeks; Bronn was trying to free himself as quickly as he could. They were both without weapons.

The boy was strong, but the Hound was rabid: he delivered a blow on his head that would have certainly killed, were it not for Arya’s axe he had instinctively grabbed. Clegane’s longsword only brushed against the side of his head, enough to blow his helmet off, revealing a young man with thick, black hair Jaime had never seen before.

Or, at least, he hadn’t seen him in a very long time.

The boy was Robert Baratheon’s spitting image.

The Hound is going to kill him.

Recovering from the shock, Jaime acted on pure, reckless instinct and, unarmed, tackled the Hound, head first. Unbalanced, they both fell on the ground: Clegane had lost his sword in the scuffle, but he could easily slay him with just his bare hands.

Jaime loaded his punch and hit him on his right temple, where his awful damaged skin looked even worse than he remembered. When did he completely lost his right ear?

But the punch was sloppy and the Hound barely moved; if anything, the blow only got him angrier. He bared his teeth in a sneer and put his hands around Jaime’s throat: “This is all you’ve got, pretty boy?”

“And you, Clegane? Still mistreating young, innocent girls? What would Sansa Stark think of it?”

He savoured with a wicked pleasure how Sandor’s already deformed features contorted even more in hatred and revulsion, even if it cost him another beating.

Laughing hurt his ribcage and mouth; he couldn’t bring himself to care.

I’ll die here, buried in the warm depths of the Rock, like in a mother’s womb. There was a certain amount of peace in surrendering to that thought.

Except...except for those two sapphires eyes flashing stubbornly, annoyingly beautiful in his mind...

His hand raised of his own volition, catching in an iron grip the Hound’s closed fist ready to strike
him again; Jaime was roughly the same build as him, although Clegane looked emaciated as if he hadn’t had a good meal in months.

*I’m stronger than him,* Jaime realised.

Galvanised, he used his weight to push him off, and, without giving him the time to think of a countermove, leapt to his feet, grabbing the sword Clegane had dropped during the fight with the lad.

“**NO! STOP!**”

Arya’s voice stopped him mere seconds before he plunged the tip of the sword into Clegane’s chest.

He turned: Bronn held the girl firmly by the arms and neck, while Lynn was tying the ropes around her wrists. Arya seemed not to notice: her grey eyes danced from the Hound to the young man in Lannister garbs, and for the first time, she looked like the lost four-and-ten years old girl she was supposed to be.

*She might be a killer, but she’s still her. Arya Stark is still somewhere in there.*

“What?”

“I’ve promised not to raise arms against Tully or Stark. She’s both.”

Bronn blinked twice, then shook his head in dismay and released her, giving her back her sword.

“I won’t raise a finger to help you, next time she tries to kill you!”

The moment she found herself with her hands and ankles free, Arya ran past him without even dignify him with a look and threw her arms around the lad’s neck.

“I thought you were dead.”

“There’s a lot of that going around, m’lady.”

“Wait, you know each other?”

“I’ve met Lady Arya when she fled King’s Landing, after her father was...we’ve travelled together, for a while.”

He smiled down at her, and she almost smiled back, until she caught herself and pushed him away, anger and resentment colouring her cheeks: “Why in the Seven Hells are you wearing Lannister colours?”

“It’s a long story. Why are you trying to kill Ser Jaime?”

Arya snorted, opened her arms and let them fall hard against her thighs with an exasperated huff that spoke *Why not?*; when her eyes found Jaime’s again, gone was the elated tenderness he witnessed for a heartbeat only moments before.

“Because he deserves it! He’s killed Jory Cassel, he’s made my brother Bran a cripple!”

“I think he already paid for that, with interests, don’t you think?”
“Don’t talk about matters you know nothing about, Gendry. Stay out of this.”

_She is unforgiving,_ Jaime grimaced internally.

_She has the right to it,_ a voice that sounded like Tyrion prodded at him from the depth of his conscience.

He took a step ahead.

“Arya.”

The girl swiftly turned around, graceful like a dancer, and pointed her sword at his throat. He held both his arms up in surrender. “You said you know when somebody lies to you. Let me follow you North.” The cold tip of the blade bit his skin, but Jaime didn’t withdraw; if anything, he leaned even more on it, until he could feel blood trickling down his jerkin.

“Let your brother and sister decide what just punishment I will have to endure for my crimes. I won’t run, I won’t hide behind better people. I swear to you, when this will be over, if you still won’t be satisfied, I’ll let you take your vengeance.”

Arya’s eyes were assessing him, the grey weighing on his emerald ones; it seemed to him the sword was imperceptibly lowering, but before he could act on it, the ground under their feet shuddered and rumbled as though shaken by earthquake.

The Hound barked a laugh.

“A fucking natural disaster, that’s all we needed right now!”

Another blast, more powerful than the last one, made some rock fall from the granite ceiling over their heads.

“The mines are collapsing. We must get out of here!”

Gendry took Arya’s hand and pulled her out to the cave’s entrance: “Come now, I don’t fancy being buried alive.”

“Shut up, everybody, and don’t move!”

Jaime strained his ear, not in the entrance’s direction, but on the opposite side, where the mines dropped in darkness for miles and miles, before ending on the western cliffs.

The ringing noise was stronger coming from the sea; a weird, dead sound, like a thunderstorm quickly approaching, or a riptide mounting and crashing against the rocks. And amidst all this, very faint, the echo of people screaming.

_This isn’t an earthquake,_ he thought.

“Jaime, what’s going on?” Bronn asked.

His heart jumped in his throat and filled with both dread and the familiar thrill of battle as he said to his second-in-command: “The Rock is under siege.”
This chapter is mostly wishful thinking on my part, because I'm dying for the books and show to move some of the action to Casterly Rock. I mean, come on, they have to show it, sooner or later, right?

Jaime is finally starting to get some agency back in his life choices, but he still has so many conflicting thoughts troubling his mind! His actions and his own ghosts are catching up with him; he’s in desperate need to have someone to make amends to, someone who will listen to his confessions the way Brienne did in Harrenhal, hence the scene in front of Joanna’s mute effigy.

The whole Melara sub-plot is quickly becoming one of my favourites: Melara is the embodiment of the innocence of childhood and first love (and we all know how much Jaime likes innocence…), and for Jaime, I think, she’ll always symbolise the road not taken.

As for Arya, I already know some of you will wonder, so I’ll get out in front of it: Arya doesn’t know exactly how Bran fell from the Tower, but she is smart enough to make her own assumptions, just as Ned and Cat did. Jaime pretty much does the rest in confirming it.

I know most of you don’t like how I write her, but I hope that this chapter, and the next one, will show that there are cracks in Arya’s armour, even if she likes to play the tough girl. Any comment, either positive or negative (as long as it’s constructive criticism) is, as usual, more than welcome! ;)

Next chapter, a family reunion.
Sort of.
There was something about the Rock’s underground passages and serpentine shortcuts that strangely reminded Arya of Winterfell’s crypts, even if she couldn’t really say what it was: maybe the mysterious, damp darkness, maybe the stony solemnity, or maybe the silence, which muffled even the sound of the explosions hitting the granite walls.

As Jaime Lannister led the way toward the entrance of the mines, she could feel the Hound’s hunkering frame moving behind her, quiet except for a grumble and a swear word every now and then, when the cave’s ceiling lowered unexpectedly causing him to bash his head in. As for the young man holding the torch to her right, well, she didn’t want to think about him, yet; they were in the middle of a siege, apparently, and it wouldn’t do to argue about her previous conduct, or the fact that he was joining forces with the enemy, before they safely resurfaced outside the heated belly of the Lannisters home.

The siege’s noises were becoming louder and louder as they made their way through the exit; from the sound of it, whoever was planning the storming of the castle was striking the south-west ridge of the mountain, toward the harbour and Lannisport: the huge stones thrown against the naked rock had the cave’s walls tremble with each blow and it was just sheer luck that, for now, they hadn’t found the path completely obstructed by some rockslide.

“I thought you said the Rock was impregnable!” the man with the thick Flea Bottom accent the Kingslayer had called Bronn said, behind her.

“It is! Casterly Rock has never been taken by storm or siege; I’ve never said anyone hasn’t ever been stupid enough to try before.”

After what seemed like hours, finally they crawled out from one of the trapdoors opening into one the wine cellars on the servants floor; Arya knew that place fairly well: she had spent the last five days here, posing first as a serving wench, wearing the ebony skin of a slave girl of the Summer Isles, then as the cup bearer with the red-blond hair, while she patiently waited for the blizzard over the mountains to wane off and for the Lannister host to reach unscathed Casterly Rock.

There weren’t windows nor embrasures, on that floor; Arya had no idea of who could be laying siege to the fort. Euron Greyjoy? Unluckily, if the news of him moving on to Oldtown were to be taken seriously. Or, maybe – Arya thought with a sudden jolt in her stomach ——but no, he could not be that stupid, not after she had saved him and told him to go home with his wife and son.
"We must reach the ringfort," Lannister interrupted her musings. From the ceiling, thin strings of brick dust and crumbled granite rained down over their heads, as another blast hit the western side of the building.

"If they’re using trebuchets, we're at risk of being hit, here in the lower floors."

Arya ground her teeth, but followed him without questioning further.

On the next floor, where the servants quarters and the first of the many store rooms were located, there was absolute madness: everywhere, soldiers in arms trotted with haste toward the barracks and the armouries, passing by plump matrons, puffing for the worry and lifting their skirts to run off more efficiently, wet nurses with screaming babies still attached to their breasts, old bakers with their hands still covered with flour, serving wenches who were kissing farewell to their favourite warriors sent to the port, and all around, in a cacophony of yells, cries for help and swearing, men and women who were carrying, by hand or by pack mules, sacks of oat, wheat and cereals, hams, seasoned venison, fattened geese and headless chickens.

*They’re moving the food upstairs.*

The Rock was readying itself for the siege, closing up the lower floors, and barricading the top with a system of oak-and-iron doors gradually locking to keep everyone out.

"M’lord, I must go with them," Gendry said, nodding to the Lannister army rushing toward the outer courtyard. Arya froze: the idea of letting Gendry out of her sight as he went to fight outside made her uncomfortable.

"No," Lannister ordered, grabbing his shoulder as he made a move to leave, "stay put. We might need you. Bronn, find Daven and bring him here."

The sellsword left for the courtyard at once; Arya and her companions followed the Kingslayer's long strides as he dodged gracefully both people and rubble from the uninterrupted blows on the southern wall; there was no fear in his posture, but a calm, bold self-assurance, coming from years spent on the battlefield. Arya could appreciate that, at least.

"Where is your Captain?" he asked, grabbing by the arm a young soldier who was helping an old man loading a horse with stock. The soldier jumped at attention when he realised whom he was talking to and pointed with his mailed hand to the arrowslits on the walls where bowmen were being positioned for defence.

The Captain was a short, fierce-looking man with broad shoulders and chest, splendidly attired in a white and brown cuirass and gorget with a boar engraved in it; he gave off an air of strength and brute force, despite his small stature.

"Lord Commander! Thank the Gods, we were wondering if you were sleeping through the siege!"

"I got caught up, Ser Lyle," he directed a pointed look at Arya, and took a Myrish eye from the Captain's hands. "What have we got here?"

"Thirty war galleys, plus other ten longships with three catapults. The bloody trout himself is leading the van."

*Trout?*

Her stomach fluttering with a feeling of impending doom, she saw Jaime Lannister tensing up as he directed the bronze tube on the openings over the wall, his knuckles whitening around it.
“How many?”

“Twelve thousand, estimated.”

He took a deep breath and shifted his eyes to hers: a cold fury was shimmering in them and the likeness with his twin was so uncanny that Arya almost recoiled. He was fuming.

“Go on, take a good look.”

She gingerly took the Myrish eye from him and turned it over the bay: when the lenses put the sight into focus, a gasp escaped her. The waters of the Sunset Sea were swarming with dozens of silver trout leaping in the red and blue of Tully sails, aligned in two ranks.

At the base of the Rock, men in their armour and knights on their horses were fast moving in formation toward Lannisport: despite the high outer walls protecting it, the city was on fire.

“Tell me,” Lannister started, conversationally, as another jar full of burning tar exploded in the middle of the docks, “how come the former Lord Paramount of the Trident is storming my castle, if he's supposed to be held hostage by the Freys?”

Emboldened by the flames erupting on the east side of the harbour, where a curtain of smoke was rising from inns, fish markets and brothels, Arya laughed, the sound resounding rich and loud against the reverberation of the detonations still ringing in the air.

“It's not funny, isn't, when it happens to your own home!”

The taunting found its target as Jaime's face contracted in wrath. He pulled her off the far-eye and grabbed her by the collar, almost lifting her off the ground: “This is your doing, I've seen enough of you to recognise the style, by now.”

Behind her, the Hound moved his hand to unsheathe his sword, as, next to Lannister, Gendry did the same. It pained her, seeing him wearing the red-and-gold and jumping to the Lion's aid anytime he felt a menace in the air. It pained her that he would consider her a menace. She cast a glance at the Hound and imperceptibly shook her head. It wouldn't do, if they started to kill each other. The Hound let go his hilt and dropped his hand on his side. Gendry, in return, relaxed his shoulders.

Her ashen eyes darted back to Lannister, matching his hardened steel with an abrasive stare.

“You haven't seen anything, Kingslayer.”

He wasn't there when she gauged out Meryn Trant's eyes, nor when she slowly plunged Needle into Polliver's chest, or when her slippery fingers closed on Walder Frey's bloodied throat.

Lannister pursed his lips; his hand relented its grip and released her.

“My name is Jaime,” he growled.

Arya's lips twitched in a grim smile.

“My uncle is not the smartest of the lot, I grant you that, but I certainly didn't suggest him to attack the Rock with half of his fleet!”

“You've freed him! What did you think he would've done?”

The girl shrugged, savouring the sharp smell of burned wood surging from the sea.
“Well, for the look of it, he's managing fairly well, don't you think?” she said, theatrically waving her arms toward the arrowslit, “Half of Lannisport is in ruins, Tully sails outnumber yours by three to one, and soon troops will land on your shores and will raid the villages on the coast; I bet my uncle is moving land armies down south as we speak, to cut off any supply and war provisions sent your way by your allies, assuming that you still have them. And maybe it's true, they won't conquer the Rock, but at least you and your family will know what it's like to watch as the last thing you hold dear is ransacked and maimed. The Westerlands will be isolated in a sea and land blockade for months: good luck with the coming winter. The way I see it, it's fair to say it's about time the Lannisters paid their debts.”

He had patiently listened to her tirade with rapt attention, but now he was bent over, his hand on the knee, as unrestrained laughter shook him.

“Oh, you foolish, half-witted girl…you have no idea of what you’ve brought about.”

“Ser Jaime, who is this girl?” Ser Lyle asked, apparently only now noticing her.

He ignored him.

“You, with your keen military mind, think the Tullys are winning?!?”

She felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment and anger and crossed her arms over her breast.

“And that’s the reason why you’re a stupid, little girl!” He grabbed her before she could express her disagreement at being called stupid – or little, for that matter – and without further ado pushed her face to one of the openings in the wall with a southern exposure.

“Do you see those Lannister sails still at anchor?” His finger pointed to a dozen cogs half hidden from the Tully fleet by the cliff. “They’re not simple cargo ships. They're among the fastest in all the Seven Kingdoms. Their crews are just waiting for the right time to row into the bay: King's Landing has a gigantic defensive chain at the mouth of the Blackwater Bay, courtesy of my brother. Here, we have shallow waters, and a channel reef with strong currents that is in itself a natural trap for whoever would be so stupid to attempt an offensive manoeuvre in it. What do you think will happen, when your uncle will do precisely such a thing?”

In her mind, she could clearly visualise the outcome of the battle, with the light Lannister cogs rowing at full force into the right flank of the Tully's fleet, ramming them in the side, while the other Lannister ships would round them from north and push them back against the coast, where the cliffs and the rocks of the sea bottom would do the rest.

The other ships already at sea, they’re a decoy. Uncle Edmure won’t even know what hit him. When the real battle starts, it will be a massacre.

“Edmure is an impulsive fool. Once he enters the bay with his galleys, he won’t be able to get out anymore. Not alive, at least.”

The derisive tone was gone from his voice: now he sounded angry and rueful. Arya glared at him, not trusting him in the least, trying to ignore the pesky confusion she felt mounting in her blood.

“The poor bastards. We might as well sit tight and wait it out,” Ser Lyle smugly proclaimed, and Arya fought the temptation to put him right on her list.

“Do you want to give the order to the cogs yourself?”

“No.”
"No?"

“I’ve made a promise and I intend to keep it.”

Lannister turned to her, his eyes flaring like wildfire: “You are going to help me solve this mess.”

He grabbed her by the arm and led her toward the next flight of stairs that, Arya remembered, led to the high terrace, one of the many, overlooking the bay, just as Lord Daven Lannister was trotting downstairs, with Bronn in tow; in his full armour, he struck a ridiculous figure, with his protruding belly and the red wine stains clearly visible over the tunic under the chest-plate.

I should have put a stronger dosage into his glass. He would be still sleeping and out of my way.

“Jaime! Gods be good, where the hells have you been? My men have been searching for you everywhere! We need you to lead the van to Lannisport, they’re –

“Daven, listen to me, there will be no battle on Lannisport’s shores.”

The Lord Paramount of the West stared curiously at the cousin, his thick dark blond eyebrows furrowed in confusion, then at her, uncomprehendingly.

“This is Lady Arya Stark, Edmure Tully’s niece.”

Recognition flashed briefly in his beady eyes, along with a hostile delight Arya didn’t like at all.

“A hostage! Perfect! He wouldn’t dare attack us, when we have his kin.”

Arya’s hand ghosted over Needle’s hilt, her body taut and ready to lunge. Lannister must have sensed it, for his grip on her arm hardened.

“She’s no hostage. You will treat her with the utmost care and respect. Get her on a cog flying a black flag with ten of your men, and bring her to her uncle.”

“What?”

“What?” Arya echoed, snapping her head up to look at him.

“Coz, are you out of your fucking mind?”

“Possibly,” he conceded, with a grin that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Do not engage, no matter the provocation. Give the order, Daven; Bronn will come with you.”

What the hell is happening?

And then, in the middle of chaos, with people running and debris falling from the battered walls, the Kingslayer knelt in front of her, like a true knight.

“I know it’s easier for you to think of me as the enemy, but I’m not!”

She surveyed him warily, searching for signs of deception.

“I’ve promised to your mother I wouldn’t raise arms on Stark or Tully, but your uncle is making really hard for me to keep that vow. You can appreciate my difficulty.”

“It deeply pains me to see you struggling, my lord.”
Her sarcastic muttering earned her a snort and a lopsided grin.

“T’m sure,” he admitted, his eyes sparkling briefly before returning grave and serious.

“This...this is unnecessary, Arya. People will die...my people, your people...and for what? Vengeance? You've already proved your point, you have my word that once we get to the North I will stand any punishment your brother will deem fit...You have the power to stop this even before it begins; if you refuse to do that, you'll be held as responsible as me for the deaths that will surely follow and, in the end, after even the last link to your mother's heritage will be gone, you'll be left with nothing, but a fistful of ashes.”

Gone were the clamour of the siege, the high yells of soldiers giving orders, the clatter of steel and armour, the brays of donkeys laden with food and clothes.

Arya's world contracted to the man kneeling in front of her, speaking about trust, honour, duty and family.

This monstrous man who had caused, in one way or another, abominable pain and horrible death to her family for his own personal advantage and egoistic pride.

His word, his vows meant nothing, and yet...yet...

Her uncle had a wife, a baby only a few years old she hadn't even met.

Where was the catch? Why was she hesitating?

A life for one death, the old wood-witch had told her. Was she supposed to spare the Kingslayer so that her uncle could get back home, unarmed?

*This lion is not even on this girl's list,* Jaqen H’ghar drawled in her mind with his Lorathi accent.

*Shut up!* she squeezed her eyes closed, trying to block the whispering of her conscience, but when she reopened them, two beryl gems were staring at her, clear and honest.

*No, they aren't like Cersei's at all.*

“I'm begging you; help me!”

Less than an hour later, they were both on the upper deck of one of the cogs at anchor in the Whiskers, the covered bay that owned its name to the low bottom creating a pattern similar to vibrissae on a cat's cheeks. Next to her, in his full armour and with the golden hand strapped to his right wrist, Jaime Lannister looked every inch the imposing knight out of every girl's dream, even if the cloak billowing to the wind was red, instead of white.

She remembered what Jon, full of awe, had whispered to her, a lifetime ago, the night after the banquet in honour of King Robert had ended: 'Have you seen Jaime Lannister, little sister? He looks like a knight from one of Bran and Rickon's books!'

*Aye. And then he went and threw Bran out of the Broken Tower's window.*

Lord Daven hadn't been happy to oblige his cousin's orders to fall back, and call off the Lannister army, until they had managed to broker peace, a truce or, at least, the break of the siege, and convince Edmure to stand down and go home. But Jaime, she had learned, could be awfully
convincing and had a way with words.

*He didn't even flinch when I bade him to come with me to the parley; he doesn't fear for his life at all.*

Arya didn't understand him. She couldn't wrap her mind around the reason, the *real* reason, why he was so bent on fulfilling those last oaths to her mother, while he had unconcernedly forsaken so many others during all his life.

Now he seemed to make a point not to threaten the safety and wellbeing of Stark and Tully anymore and to bring *her* home.

And he apparently wanted to serve her family.

*Valar dohaeris.*

Edmure's ship was fast approaching; they were within shooting range now. As Jaime was busy ordering around Lord Daven's men, she spotted movement over the deck of her uncle's ship, where bowmen were lining up in defence formation.

*We are sporting black sails, they can't attack us!*

Horror and indignation rose inside of her, when she watched Edmure grab a bow, nock the arrow and draw, aiming at Lannister's back, as he turned to speak with Ser Lyle.

She didn't know what possessed her, that made her jump into the line of fire, before Edmure could loose the arrow. She stepped in front of Jaime and shouted toward the Tully flagship.

“Uncle Edmure! It's me, Arya!”

She watched as her uncle hesitated and lowered his bow, then held a hand out to stop the other men, their weapons taut and ready to rain a shower of arrows over them. He marched to the rail and called back: “Kingslayer! Using little girls as shield, now, are we?”

“You stupid fish, I'm bringing her to *you!* Let us come aboard!”

Edmure and a tall man Arya suspected was the master of the ship met at the centre of the forecastle desk and put their heads together, conferring in hushed tones, until they seemed to reach an agreement.

She expected they'd put a boarding plank for them, so that they could walk from the Lannister's ship deck to the Tully's galley, as such was the custom when receiving a delegation for a parley; instead, they rolled a simple ladder to the side.

Lannister tensed beside her and a swift, worried glance at his golden hand told her why.

*They want to humiliate him.*

A boat was promptly readied for them to disembark; when they reached the ladder, Jaime beckoned for her to climb first. Arya thought the gesture was made more to avoid her witnessing him struggle, than out of gallantry or protection.

She quickly climbed on board, as the Tully soldiers and the sailors looked over the rail, stretching on the wood to better see the lion wrestling to cling to the ropes and rungs as he slowly made his way to the ship. The weight of the armour surely didn't help.
They were sneering at him, throwing him assorted quips and insults; some of them took their cocks out of their breeches and tried to hit him with the jet of steaming piss.

Clearly amused, her uncle watched with a nasty smirk, not lifting a finger to stop them.

_They're laughing now, emboldened by their advantage; they wouldn't have dared, if he'd still had both hands._

No matter that she had him at her mercy mere hours ago, hanging from the ceiling like a cured ham. She was disgusted now.

Jaime reached the rail and hauled himself on the deck, smooth and cool, ignoring the japes and the spitting, as though he owned the place. He pulled a clean cloth out of his belt and wiped his face from the sweat and his armour from the drops of piss staining it, as if they were fresh raindrops, then he casually tossed the cloth toward one of the standing officers.

“It's good to see you, too, Edmure.”

Her uncle snorted derisively.

“Just when I thought you couldn't swoop lower, you prove me wrong! What do you want?”

“I've brought this pup back to you, as a gesture of good faith. And I've got a proposition: you'll turn your ships around and we'll grant you safe passage across the Sunset Sea so that you can get back to Riverrun peacefully.”

Edmure laughed.

“I'm sorry...Did I give you the impression that this was a negotiation? It's not.”

Jaime turned an unpleasant shade of grey.

“Swim back to your ship, Kingslayer, before I order my men to have you thrown at sea. Come nightfall, Lannisport will be mine.”

“Come nightfall you'll be dead,” he countered matter-of-factly, taking a good look at the Tully soldiers. “You and all your men. Some of them are green lads at their first skirmish. Eager to prove their courage in battle, I'm sure. I wonder if they ever had a woman.”

Arya understood what he was doing: her uncle's men were young, some even barely older than her. And now they were glancing sideways at each other, shifting nervously on their feet, a new worry etched in the tension of their stance. Edmure seemed oblivious to the doubts surrounding his troops. He took two steps forward: they were approximately the same height, but Jaime's build made him look more powerful and looming.

“I wouldn't worry. We'll stop by King's Landing after we take the Rock: they will all take turns for a ride on your sister.”

Jaime bared his teeth as a sardonic laugh escaped his lips; he craned his head toward the other man and whispered into his ear: “I came here to offer you an out without bloodshed, Edmure. But I secretly hope you will give me just one good reason to forsake my vows to your sister and to this girl, please...”

Arya held her breath as her uncle paused and seemed to consider his predicament, lips curled in dislike and a vengeful glint in his blue eyes. _Mother's eyes._
“How would I have enjoyed throwing one of your sons across Lannisport’s walls with a trebuchet like you promised to do to mine,” he said, then, “but I’ve heard all your children are dead, even the pretty girl, – he mockingly snapped his fingers, making a show to remember – what was her name again?”

The power play suddenly turned into something else. At the casual allusion to Myrcella, Jaime's eyes seemed to shrink in his skull, burning with something alike to fever, as pure hatred and violence twisted his perfect features.

Arya had already seen the same, identical look in dozens of different men and women, desperate enough to come to the House of Black and White with a request for the Many-Faced God to grant, no matter the price.

She herself had probably worn the same expression many times, now, but on Jaime's face, usually so sardonically composed and comely, the change was frightening to watch.

*He's not a violent man,* she suddenly realised with clarity. *He enjoys the thrill of the battle, but doesn't take pleasure from the killing, per se. Right now, though, Arya knew, he would gladly open my uncle's throat, if it were not for me standing here.*

She stepped between them, forcing Jaime to take a step back.

“Uncle...”

His blue eyes shifted to her, and there wasn't a hint of fondness or recognition in them.

“You call me uncle, but how do I know you're who he says you are? The last time I've spoken to my younger niece, she was nine.” He grabbed her chin and roughly turned her face on the side, inspecting it like it was the muzzle of a high-priced mare he was expected to buy.

“You surely remind me of her, the eye and hair colour is right and I can see a resemblance to Eddard, but...there's plenty of young girls with dark hair and grey eyes willing to pass off as the daughter of the late Lord Warden of the North, or a traitor according to you, – he growled to Jaime – if the price in Lannister gold is just right. It's what you do, right? People, freedom, honour, *death*, anything can be bought, isn't it?”

The loathing in his voice was harsh and crisp like the winds sweeping over the promontory.

They were running out of time: she had to think of something to convince her pigheaded uncle of her identity and good intentions.

“You came to Winterfell for Robb's fourteenth nameday. You've brought him a new saddle with red and blue decorations and a scabbard with a wolf sewn on it.”

Her memory was rekindled with the telling: the scabbard was too short for his sword, and the saddle was a garish monstrosity that had her and Sansa snickering all along the banquet, calling Robb 'The Lord Trout'.

One of the few occurrences where she and her sister had agreed on something. But Edmure didn't seem impressed.

“This is the best you can do? Anyone in attendance at Winterfell could have fed you with this information. I wish I could believe it, but the truth is that Arya disappeared right after this man and his Lannister soldiers slaughtered Ned's personal guard, and shoved him into the Red Keep's cells, and no one has heard news of her ever since.”
Arya let out a crestfallen sigh; her uncle sidestepped her and came face to face with Jaime.

“Prepare your troops and your defences: I will look for you on the battlefield.”

“You're making a big mistake, ser.”

“You've got nothing to bargain with, Kingslayer,” he spat and turned to leave. “The girl is dead.”

“The girl is not dead!” she shouted stubbornly. Her uncle stopped. “Do you remember what you said to me in the stables, when you've caught me returning from a midnight ride with Apples? It was the hour of the bat, way past curfew, and I've begged you not to go to Mother, because I've already been grounded that week for setting fire on Septa Mordane's skirts, and you said to me 'Your mother enjoys playing the highborn lady, now, but you'd be amazed at some of the wild stories from our childhood'. You told me that I might have looked like a Stark, but I was a Tully, too. And Tully blood, sooner or later, would reveal itself.”

There weren't many interactions she could call to mind, and Edmure for sure had never been her favourite uncle, but he must remember this. *He must listen to reason.*

She held her breath as Edmure marched back; his eyes, so wide and shiny now, made him look younger, and a lot more alike to her lady mother.

He cradled her face with both hands; they were burning up, despite the cold. Or maybe it was her own face flaring up for the emotion.

“If she'd caught you, Catelyn would've had you grounded till you came of age.”

Her smile was tentative, but full of overwhelming gratitude, as palpable relief swelled inside her. Edmure gripped her shoulders with shaking hands, as though he feared she would disappear in a thin puff of smoke.

“I will speak with my niece in private, if you don't mind,” he said to Jaime, his eyes never leaving hers.

The men started to murmur, shocked to discover that Catelyn Tully's daughter had apparently been returned to her family by their worst enemy.

“If he tries anything, shoot him,” her uncle ordered to the bowmen; without a second thought, they circled him and pointed their crossbows at his head. Jaime shook humourlessly his golden curls, as she trailed after her uncle inside the captain’s quarters.

The little cabin strongly smelled of fish, betraying the real, original destination of the boat, converted into a war galley from a more friendly trade ship. The furniture was sparse and frugal: only a cot with a wool blanket thrown on it, an oaken writing desk and a table completely covered by papers, parchments and maps of the Westerlands and the Crownlands, showing battle plans, weak and strong points of the terrain and the variations in sea warfare tactics.

Arya had wanted to ask what he thought he was doing, with all these charts of King’s Landing, but found herself engulfed in a bear hug.

“Where have you been?”

The answer was lost in her throat; tears welled up in Edmure's eyes, and his voice trembled, but she remained unperturbed.
“Your mother...she didn't let a day pass by without fighting for your safety, yours and your sister's...until the very end, with her last breath, her only thought was to find you.”

At the mention of Catelyn Stark, a cold shiver crept on her back: this man was the only survivor of the Red Wedding, he was the last person to see her mother still alive.

Instead of bringing her some comfort, the thought troubled her.

_He fucked and slept all the way through the butchering of my family._

“I was at the Twins...the night when...I couldn't stop them,” she confessed. He scoffed.

“What could you have done? You're just a child!”

The words were meant to soothe and alleviate her grief and guilt, but her body stiffened with rage.

Is that what even Sansa and Jon will think of her? _Will they consider me a child, too, when they'll see me again? Or they'll be scared to look into my eyes and find out what I did?_

“A child could do this?” she asked, and her face changed into the one of the page who had unlocked the door of the prison where he had been thrown after the fall of Riverrun. Edmure sucked in a breath and stumbled back against the desk.

“It's just a trick...just a magic trick...but with it this _child_ has opened your cage and released you...my hands were dripping with Walder Frey's blood, at the time. You didn't even notice. You were too busy crying like a baby. And this _child_, only a few hours ago, had the chance to kill the Kingslayer, and no one would have known.”

With a wave of her hand she returned to her original appearance. “I've told you to go back to Riverrun with your family, why didn't you listen?”

“How could I? Your mother's ghost still haunts my sleep, asking I avenge her!”

“Leave vengeance to the ones who are able to execute it,” her voice couldn't hide her contempt.

He was only an amateur. A scared, weak man.

“What the Kingslayer said was true. You can't win this siege, you won't even survive the upcoming battle. It will be a carnage.”

Edmure frowned, his eyes darting to the maps over the table.

“What do you know?”

She silently glared at him.

“Arya! If you know something that could help us break the siege, battle plans, ships tactical dispositions, the ringfort's floor-plan, you must tell me!”

_I could tell you about the quiet cogs waiting in the Whiskers, but that won't change a thing._

“You're wasting my time, uncle. You're wasting _everybody's_ time. I could be riding North, right now, presenting Jon with an army of eight thousand trained Lannister soldiers as a gift to help his cause; that's a lot more than you'd ever given to any of my brothers during their campaigns.”

Edmure paused, a pained expression curving his mouth.
“He's tricking you. He's making you believe he wants an alliance, but in truth he's most likely following the orders of that crazy bitch he calls sister. When he'll reach Winterfell he'll probably kill Sansa as payback for Joffrey's death.”

The doubt has crossed her mind, too, for a while; but she had dispelled it, just as she had dismissed the idea that her uncle could be of any use to her in the North. She knew Jaime wasn't a liar, just as she knew that Edmure was, at his core, maybe not a coward, but profoundly incompetent, for sure.

“And concerning Jon Snow and his northern campaign, he's not your brother, Arya, you can't trust him, your mother didn't...he's making claims over the North only to undermine your and Sansa's lawful right to rule! After he's gotten what he wants, he will turn on you and your sister.”

Her cheeks reddened for the rage at the plain insinuation and just like that, it hit her.

This man wasn't her family. Her family were Sansa and Jon, waiting behind the strong walls of Winterfell's Great Hall, and Brandon, lost in the lands of Always Winter, but still alive – I'll know if he were dead – and Gendry, wearing a Lannister armour.

Her family were the Kings in the North sleeping in the crypts of her home, next to grandfather, uncle Brandon and aunt Lyanna.

And Father.

In winter, we must protect one another, keep each other warm, share our strengths, he had said to her, and now she missed him so much the feeling almost choked her, leaving in her mouth a taste of ash and decay.

She was a child of the North, a wolf of winter. Nymeria's courage flowed freely in her veins.

Winter is here, and the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.

“How dare you,” her voice carried silvery and strong, full of boldness and disdain, “how dare you speak of Jon in such a way? While you were rotting in the Frey's cells, Jon alone was brave and skilled enough to lead an army against the Bolton Bastard and take our home back! Were he here, our father would be proud of him, and disgusted by you! You're quick to talk ill of the Kingslayer's honour, but where's yours?”

Edmure staggered back as though slapped.

“Family, Duty, Honour...and yet, you and the Blackfish did nothing when Sansa, your supposed family, begged you to come to her aid.”

A logic consequence followed from this, and she wasn't even surprised.

“The Tullys betrayed us,” she said flatly.

I should feel wroth, I should scream and hit him, but I don't even feel the cold. I feel nothing.

“What do you want me to do?” Edmure asked after a long silence.

“You will hear the Kingslayer's terms and you will accept them, if you want to return in one piece to your family. You'll get your army and fleet ready for when my brother will call his bannermen against the Iron Throne. And you'll answer the call, then, or the Lannisters will be the least of your problems.”
Jaime was standing where she had left him. His eyes followed her curiously, when, a few minutes later, she and Edmure re-emerged from the cabin.

“Speak your terms, Kingslayer, and begone!” he said, hard and deliberate.

“You and your army will leave; in exchange, Casterly Rock will provide Riverrun with one-fifth of its supply to support the Riverlands during wintertime. And when spring will come again, supposing that our families will be still standing, you'll be free to change the terms of the pact as you deem fit, whether it will be securing an allegiance by marriage or resuming the siege from where you've left it, whichever you'll prefer.”

Arya chewed her lower lip and nervously closed her hand over Needle's silver hilt; these were excellent terms, and her uncle couldn't ask for more. She hoped he wouldn't try any stupid trick. Instead, he said: “You'll leave the Rock and head North with your men, and you'll never lay your filthy paws over the Riverlands ever again.”

Jaime confirmed with a slow nod. Edmure addressed the first official.

“Prepare the gig; the Kingslayer will return presently to his ship.”

Jaime turned around, all Lannister arrogance and aloofness, his red cloak billowing majestically at his ankles.

No pleasantries, no handshaking were exchanged. Arya had no doubts that, come the day when they would meet again, they would be on different fronts, ready to tear each other apart.

For now, this semblance of peace will have to do.

Edmure stopped her and put his hands on her shoulders.

“Are you sure?”

She read in his eyes the desire to hold her back, to make amends, maybe to bring her to Riverrun with him and keep her safe and sheltered during the winter. She had never been there. Her mother had often described her happy childhood sailing and bathing on the Red Fork and hunting in the Whispering Woods, but Sansa and Jon's calls were becoming louder and louder in her heart. The choice has already been made.

“My place is at Winterfell.”

She boarded the captain's gig and didn't look back.

The short trip to Lannisport was made in a tense silence; she refused the hand held out to help her disembark.

“Thank you,” he called after her.

“I didn't do it for you,” she said without turning around.

As Jaime went to inform his cousin and the other men about the truce and what he planned to do next, she found the Hound in one of the Rock's barracks, drinking away with Bronn the fear of the siege – and maybe the fear of fire, too. She was mildly surprised to still see him here.

I'd thought he would have run away, by now. Suddenly she was furious, with no reason at all.
“You're not on the list anymore,” she bluntly informed him as he curiously raised his ugly, scarred muzzle from the tankard. “You're free to go wherever you please. Go back to your Red Priest, go to King's Landing and die, I don't fucking care! I'm going home.”

She stormed out of the barracks before the Hound could say anything and joined Gendry who was readying the horses. Jaime had given orders to depart right away, and the courtyard was buzzing with preparations.

A pretty palomino palfrey was delivered to her: it took Arya a moment to recognise Lynn, behind the breeches, jerkin and cloak of a squire.

“With the compliments of Ser Jaime, Lady Stark,” the Tarth girl spat disdainfully, tossing her the reins.

She should probably apologise; she hadn't meant to hurt Lynn, not really, only to use her as leverage, and now she couldn't really blame her for being skittish and bitter.

Instead, Arya just mumbled a laconic 'Thank you'; she was tired, too, and way past caring.

“You truly are a charming young lady, a real piece of work, did I ever tell you that?”

She turned and the Hound was there, mounted on a black stallion resembling the horse he had while they had crossed the Riverlands together.

He wants to follow me. She did not know what to do with this fact. He sneered, sensing her discomfort.

“What? I've never been north of Winterfell, and I really wanna see how it ends.”

“...understand that, but promising one-fifth of the harvest, too, Jaime?” Lord Daven was having a hard time keeping step with the knight's long strides. Jaime led his white courser to the courtyard and, helping himself with his teeth, put a fur glove on his left hand.

“The Westerlands have got an excellent late summer and autumn, we've stored more wheat and rye than we know what to do with them. Our storerooms are bursting with salted meat and fish. We can afford it, Daven; it wouldn't hurt you to lose some weight, anyway,” he added with a sly grin, patting Lord Daven's belly, and mounted his horse.

“What should I say to Cersei, when she'll demand an explanation?”

Jaime locked eyes with the cousin and seemed to choose with care his next words.

“Tell her I send my regards.”

Then he pushed his heels into the horse's flanks and cantered toward the head of the host.

There were five hundred leagues between them and Winterfell, plenty of time to think about the meaning of family, honour and betrayal. Cersei will have to wait; I'm going home and I'm bringing an army with me, she smirked, glancing every now and then beyond her shoulders at the throng of horsed men, standard-bearers, infantrymen making their way through the Riverlands, as though she couldn't believe they were really following her.

They're not following you, the voice of the Witch of High Heart spoke, they're following him.
She peeked at Jaime, riding to her right in concentrated, lonely silence, ignoring sleep, cold and fatigue, proud like a lion and resilient like a wolf.

He baffled her. Again and again. Every word he said, everything he did was a mystery. She had learned to read others fairly well: the people she had killed, The Waif, Lady Crane, even the Hound, at the end of the day were all simple creatures, moved by simple desires. But him? She could not read him, and the fact irritated her to no end.

“Did you really set fire to your septa's skirts?”

Arya was startled from her musings by his amused voice and it took her a moment to elaborate an answer.

“She had me redo my stitching work for the third time, and I was sick of it.”

Jaime roared with hearty laughter.

“Yes, jest as much as you want. You've never had to sit for hours trying to stick a stupid needle into a cushion instead of your fingers.”

“Actually, I did...”

Noticing her confused frown, he clarified: “When we were children, nobody could set me and Cersei apart, so we often switched places. While she attended Ser Broom's sword lessons, I would don one of her dresses, and would graciously ‘sit for hours’ stitching lions and wonderful embroideries on silken cushions, doublets and gowns. I was pretty good at it, in fact. And the knowledge served me right later on, when I had to mend torn shirts and capes during my years as Barristan Selmy’s squire.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“I'm completely serious. But you're right, some of those techniques were clearly conjured up by some evil beast from the Seventh Hell. Crochet stitches were a true nightmare.”

Arya couldn't agree more.

“Bloody crochet,” she grumbled, squirming uncomfortably on her saddle, and stole a furtive glance at him.

Who the hell was he? Why did he confound her so much? Why...why...?

“What do you want?” she blurted out.

She could say what he did not want: he didn't want to become king, that much was a given. He wasn't interested in power, or else he'd stayed in King’s Landing with his sister-lover. He didn't particularly crave for people's admiration, not anymore, at least, although Arya was pretty sure he still cared enough about what the others thought of him in general. And it clearly still irked him when people judged and called him the Kingslayer.

*He tries to shrug it off, to wield the title as a weapon, but he's bothered by it. He's plagued by the power it holds over his life.*

But she couldn't say what he wanted.

“What do you want?” she prompted again.
“I want to take a hot bath. I want to sleep this winter away and wake up only at the beginning of summer.”

Stop jesting, stop trying to deflect the question, and tell me the truth, the Others take you!

“What do you want?”

“I want my fucking right hand back. I want vengeance for my daughter’s death.”

Vengeance…she could sympathise with that. They were getting closer.

“What do you want?”

She saw his hand tightening around the reins.

“I want to go North.”

“Why? Why the North, of all places? Why would you want to join Jon’s army?”

Silence. Then...

“Because Lady Brienne of Tarth is in it.”

Her eyes bulged out for the surprise. So that was it, the answer...the simplest, oldest truth of all...

It was Arya's turn to laugh.

“You know, of all the things you could have said, this I wasn’t expecting. So the rumours I've heard are true, then!”

“What rumours?”

Arya disregarded his sudden anxiety with a wolfish grin.

“I've met your Lady Brienne. Tall, ugly woman, pretty blue eyes. Lannister sword. Stubbornly hell-bent on bringing me back to Winterfell. She fought the Hound almost to death because she was under suspicion I was held against my will.”

She stretched forward on the saddle and added in a conspiratorial whisper: “Do not mention her to him; he hasn't taken being beaten by a woman very well.”

“Arya!” he circled her horse, forcing her to stop. “What rumours?”

She savoured for a moment the possibility to leave him hanging without an answer, but the concern in his face was real and Arya knew that naked truth would cut deeper.

“On the road, I've heard many people call her 'the Kingslayer's Whore’.”

He paled; she innocently went on: “They were under the assumption you've paid for her virtue with that beautifully crafted Lannister sword.”

She could not conceal a satisfied smirk in seeing his expression: the hurt was quickly replaced by a cold fury that made his jaw set and his eyes grow dead and still, but Arya couldn't tell if the sentiment was directed to the perpetrators of the insult or against himself.

Without another word, he spurred the horse on and kept to himself for the better part of the
journey. They camped near the Twins, the next day. A misty rain blocked most of the view of the plain from the upland, but Arya left the men, busy with setting tents and fires, and hiked to the near hill, where she could observe at leisure the two ghostly buildings, rising above the fog, black and empty. The cold night didn't touch her; she had the sweet memories of the flames crumpling wood and stone, washing away the stench of the Red Wedding, to keep her warm.

A wolf howled in the darkness.

Nymeria is close.

A rustling of leaves and tree branches behind her alerted her of Gendry's presence; she had learned years ago to discern his steps, the rhythm of his breathing, the bulk of his body next to hers.

“That one of your handiworks, too?”

“It's beautiful, isn't it?” she whispered reverently.

Gendry sucked in a sharp, strained breath and grabbed her arm, making her turn to face him.

“Arya, what the hells are you doing? What happened to you?”

I've grown older, she wanted to reply. Instead, she poured out on him all the boiling rage, heartache and disappointment she was feeling since meeting him again in the mining caves of the Rock.

“What happened to me? You're wearing Lannister armour! Care to explain why you're consorting with the enemy, now?”

“I'm not 'consorting' with anyone! It just happened!”

Then he proceeded to tell her how Melisandre – he blushed in saying her name – had brought him to Dragonstone, where he met King Stannis, and how she had wanted to use his blood to make some kind of magic sacrifice to her Lord of Light. He told Arya of his escape thanks to the Onion Knight, who had put him in a rowboat and instructed him to head south, back to King's Landing.

“She would have probably killed me, if it were not for Ser Davos.”

Arya had been listening without interrupting, but the story did not make any sense.

“Why would the Red Woman need your blood for her magic tricks?”

“She said there was power in it. Because of...my father.”

“Your father...” she frowned in confusion.

Gendry lowered his head with an unsteady breath, his shoulders tense; when his clear eyes met hers again, there was apprehension, but also a new resolve in them.

“I'm Robert Baratheon's bastard son. Everyone who knew him said I look precisely like him when he was my age. And apparently I'm good with sword and hammer too.”

The rage she had felt dissolved under the impact of this new revelation. Arya was simply stunned. He's the son of a king and he was worried he hadn't been calling me 'my lady'; she almost laughed aloud, when another thought surfaced: he is the rightful heir to the Iron Throne! That's why the Gold Cloaks were sent to kill him...and now with Stannis dead, Gendry was the last of the
Baratheons. Arya wondered if he realised what the discovery truly meant.

“King’s Landing was the last place where they would go looking for me, so it was easy to disappear,” he carried on. “And after a while, they stopped hunting me. And when I’ve found out Ser Jaime wanted to go North, to Winterfell, I followed them.”

“What?”

He let go a nervous laugh, as though he couldn't believe she was asking something that obvious.

“Because...I was hoping to find you there.”

All these years and he never stopped searching for me. Arya wanted to kiss him and hit him at the same time. Her vision blurred as tears threatened to spill. She choked back a sob. I can't cry in front of him.

Their shoulders brushed lightly when she stepped past him toward the camp.

“He’s a changed man, Arya.”

Her hands closed into fists, her back to him.

“A man can't change that much.”

In her opinion and experience, that could happen only if he were a Faceless Man serving the Many-Faced God.

“Everyone changes. Look at you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she angrily flinched, facing him again. Gendry took a cautious step toward her.

“You're different. There was anger and pain, in you, back then, but this coldness...you've never been this cruel and merciless...I look at you and I don't recognise you...I don't think even Lord Stark himself would – ”

“Do not speak about my father...do not presume...”

“I saw his eyes, when he came to the shop to talk to me, your father. He had gentle eyes. Your father was a noble man. He knew mercy. He saved my life. He wouldn't have wanted this for you.”

Tears were streaming down her cheeks, and she hated him for it. He had no right to make her feel that way.

“You think I should just forgive and forget?” she cried. “My whole family has been slaughtered by Lannisters!”

“Aye, and I've got more reasons to hate them than you do! Cersei killed my father, and Joffrey had all my half-brothers and sisters murdered in cold blood! And maybe yes – he added before she could cut him off – all Lannisters deserve to die, but that still doesn't give you the right to take a life.”

“They play their little game of thrones while people, real people, suffers the consequences. Gendry, don't you see?” she cradled his face in her hands, shaking him a little, imploring him to understand. “I'm just fighting back, I'm giving them a taste of their own medicine!”
He gently pulled her hands off his face, and held them, staring as though he could see the blood
tainting them. His eyes were full of sorrow.

“This is not the way. There has to be...I dunno, something else...something better...This is not you.”

She wriggled her hands out, hurt and miserably lonely.

“We’ve been apart for years, Gendry; how would you know?”

They stared at each other, gazing painfully at the irreconcilable chasm that had ripped open
between them.

Across the hills, in the distance, the Twins loomed, grim and hopeless, and it felt like they were
mocking her.

A fortnight later, they finally reached Moat Cailin. The rain had turned into a persistent snowfall;
the host trudged slowly and carefully across the pack of ice, just barely managing to avoid losing
horses for the cold and wagons full of provisions for the rough terrain.

With each step she took, Arya's heart beat a little faster, and her foul mood lifted: the familiar
rugged landscape of the Barrowlands welcomed her as they entered the North. As though the
closeness to home had enhanced her senses, she could feel Nymeria almost all the time, now,
during both day and night, and she perceived in the direwolf the same eagerness to reach their
destination that she had. They both longed for the warm walls of their shared bedchamber, the
solemn quietness of the godswood, and, most of all, the tender caresses of their brothers: Nymeria,
can you feel Ghost's presence, just as I feel Jon's?

But only two miles to Winterfell, they had to stop.

Half a hundred Stark men, clearly identifiable by the white direwolf on grey field, her brother's
inverted sigil, on their arms and horses, were patrolling the passage to the castle's gates, alongside a
fair amount of fierce-looking wildlings, armed with spears, longbows and battle axes.

Jon's vanguard, Arya supposed.

She lowered her hood and addressed the three sentries leading the Stark scouting company.

“I'm Lady Arya Stark, daughter of Eddard Stark, Warden of the North; inform my brother and
sister I've come home.”

Hilarity ensued.

“That's the first time we hear that one, isn't it that right, lads?” the bulkier of the lot snickered
sarcastically. He missed a front tooth. Gendry rode forward, hammer at the ready.

“Let her pass through, you fools, if you don't want to regret it later.”

“I only see a wench surrounded by Lannister scum. If you're Arya Stark I am the Kingslayer!”

“I really doubt that,” Jaime's horse smoothly trotted to her side. “See, you have the wrong colours,
and too many hands.”

He held out his golden hand with a cocky, little wave; the faces of the Stark soldiers lost all colour.
"It’s him! It's him!"

Everything happened in a rush. Swords were drawn from their scabbards and crossbows aimed at their heads, as a horn resounded over the hills around Winterfell, two long blows to call for reinforcements.

Her palomino balked, sensing the mounting tension. She stepped between the two sides, holding out her arm.

"No! Lower your weapons!"

A Lannister soldier yelped in surprised pain to her left and glided down the saddle, an arrow sticking out from his throat.

"Stop! Stop! Do not engage!" Jaime called out, trying to appeal to reason, but he too unsheathed his Valyrian sword.

Another arrow was shot, aimed at herself or at Jaime, she couldn't tell, but it missed by a hair her leg and hit her horse's right shoulder instead: the palomino bucked, mad with pain and fear. Arya was thrown off the saddle in the midst of the brawl.

She unsheathed Needle and swerved to the right, just in time to avoid a blow from a wildling boy not older than her; when she kicked the back of his legs, he lost his balance and fell right over her sword’s pointy end.

Next to her, Gendry and Jaime were fighting against Stark soldiers; Gendry had just made a man twice his weight fly several feet backwards with one good smash of his hammer. Jaime, on the other side, was mostly on the defensive: he used his golden hand to parry the attacks, then struck his opponent on the head with the pommel of his sword.

*He's not killing, he's just incapacitating them,* Arya realised.

Not so much the Hound, who was raining down blow after blow against three opponents.

"Don't kill them!" she shouted, just as he raised his longsword for a final blow. He stopped his arms in mid-air, just in time to throw her a what-the-fuck look, then hit the man with a punch on the face, knocking him out cold.

*That's not the homecoming I was expecting,* she ruminated as the noise of another approaching host from Winterfell distracted her, enough for a wildling woman to tackle her to the ground, the silver blade of a dagger glittering in her hand.

A blur of grey and golden, and the wildling toppled down screaming, crushed under Nymeria's full weight. The snow all around her bloomed red.

Gendry was at her back in an instant, crushing the breastplate of another assailant and moving quickly between her and her brother's men. She felt Nymeria and the Hound doing the same on her other side, so that she was surrounded and protected.

*This is ridiculous! These are Jon's men!*

All around her, the fight was in full swing, and even though most of the Lannister army and the cavalry had been ordered to fall back, the red-and-gold had easily the upper hand, thanks to their superior numbers.
“No, stop! Hold your steel, damn you!” a woman's voice ordered suddenly, and just like it had begun, the skirmish ended: soldiers froze like ice statues with their weapons raised in mid-air, before dropping them loose to their sides and standing at attention as the woman warrior rode through their ranks. About twenty men, Lannister, Stark and wildlings, lay on the ground, either dead or wounded. Nymeria trotted to Arya's side, sniffing her to make sure she was still in one piece. Her muzzle was dripping with blood. Arya didn't care: she threw her arms around the direwolf's neck and squeezed, relieved to see her.

Her other travel companions were unscathed, as far as she could see; Jaime was only a few feet away from her: his sword was clean of blood and he seemed mostly unhurt, but he wore over his face a fervent, awestruck expression Arya had never seen before on him.

He was transfixed, as though he had just seen something wondrous.

Arya followed his line of sight to the blonde giantess who, powerful and completely in control of the situation, dismounted her black mare and strode in her blue armour to a halt in front of the man in charge of the outpost, a Lannister sword in her hand.

Brienne of Tarth, red in the face, pointed the tip of the Valyrian steel toward Arya.

“Do you have the slightest idea of who that girl is?”

“I'm sorry, my lady, I'm sorry, we saw the Kingslayer and –

“Do not call him that!” she growled dangerously, her striking eyes ablaze. She was even taller than the towering redhead wildling who was accompanying her.

The Stark soldier cowered: “Ser Jaime, then...we thought the Lannisters were attacking us!”

But Lady Brienne seemed not to hear him: her sapphire eyes had found Jaime and Arya watched fascinated as the air around them seemed to actually crackle.

“Ser Jaime?” the redhead wildling next to Brienne turned to her, then to Jaime, a murderous look in his eyes, “Ser Jaime?”

From the corner of her eye, Arya could only catch a glimpse of the blue-eyed shieldmaiden, who, swift like a cat, had sprung toward them yelling 'Tormund, no!', then, before any of them could do anything, the wildling dropped his axe and Jaime Lannister fell unconscious on the ground.

Chapter End Notes

I went through some editing for this one; I also plan to fix the paragraph about the BWB in chapter 4, but I don’t know where I’ll be able to do it! Updates might come a little slower now, as I’ve reached the point where I don’t have previously-written material ready for publication anymore. Just drafts and scribbles.

Additionally, I’ve just been made aware of the boring existence of such things as real life and work assignments which, apparently, require my attention, hence I’ll be out of commission for a while. I hope to be back in a couple of weeks, with – finally – a J/B reunion! (I might not be able to answer to comments right away, either, but keep them
coming: I’ll read everything and get back to you as soon as I can!)
Brienne II

Chapter Notes

Yay! An update! Sorry it took me forever to post this, but here it is!
Thank you for your patience and for the comments and kudos left on the previous chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

BRIENNE II

“YOUR ACTIONS ARE COMPLETELY OUT OF LINE, TORMUND!” she yelled back at the top of her lungs, throat hoarse and burning and head pounding as though she was the one who had just been hit with an axe.

Her opposer didn’t look any less dishevelled and distressed.

“YOU’RE STILL DEFENDING HIM? AFTER WHAT HE DID TO TARTH??”

“WE DON’T KNOW IF HE IS TO BLAME FOR THE ATTACK!”

“WHAT WERE YA PLANNING TO DO? ASK HIM ABOUT IT? PLEASE! HE’D DO NOTHING BUT DENY IT! THAT’S WHAT THEY DO! LANNISTERS LIE! I MAY BE A BRUTE, BUT EVEN I KNOW THAT!”

This gave her pause.

Lannisters lie!

The words resounded clear in her mind like the first time she had heard them: she saw herself, younger and more naïve, in Harrenhal’s Great Hall, sitting awkwardly in her second-hand pink satin gown, the Myrish lace itching over the bruised skin of her arms and chest, while, next to her, a still fevered Jaime exchanged charged quips with Roose Bolton. She remembered how the Leech Lord’s icy eyes had glared at her from the opposite side of the table, contempt and cruel condescension behind his amused smile as he spoke to Jaime about the sacredness of the laws of hospitality, mere days before the Red Wedding.

‘My lady, has no one told you? Lannisters lie.’

She shut her eyes, as a wave of nausea threatened to make her stomach churn.

“Even if….” she croaked, “even if…you don’t have any right to do justice on my behalf for my father’s death! It’s not your bloody business!”
Tormund wordlessly gaped at her, rage and incredulity etched in his blotched face. He was foaming. She half expected to see his fiery red hair to catch fire any moment now.

He took two long strides toward her: the blood rushing to his face was bringing out the striking sky-blue of his eyes by contrast.

“I don’t care what you think you know about him. The bugger is lucky to be still alive,” he seethed, bitterly, his voice raw from shouting. “Do you have the slightest idea of what he did to Jon’s family?”

“More than you do!” her shaking voice rose again, as she balled her fists to block herself from unsheathing Oathkeeper and hitting something with it. Or someone.

Since Jaime had been knocked out cold in the lowland surrounding Winterfell less than an hour past, things had escalated rather quickly. As a messenger was promptly sent to Winter Town to inform the King and Lady Sansa of their sister’s return, Ser Davos had taken matters into his hands: Jaime, still unconscious, was apprehended and shoved into one of the castle’s dungeon cells before Brienne could even make a case for him in front of the King, and the eight thousand Lannister men he had brought with him were made to camp on the edges of the Wolfswood, at a safe distance from the Main Gate.

The captains of the army were outraged by such an insulting treatment, rightly so, and demanded that their Commander be freed right away. Ser Davos assured that, once the King would get confirmation of Ser Jaime’s peaceful intentions, he would be returned to his troops without a single hair out of place. When Ser Bronn angrily pointed out that Ser Jaime had just been greeted with a blow over his head and that his army had been attacked with no reason at all, the brawl between Starks and Lannisters nearly began anew.

The diplomatic incident was just barely avoided when she stepped in and vouched for the King’s honour and fairness: they remembered her from the siege at Riverrun, Bronn knew her and trusted her word, so she promised she would talk to Jon and have Jaime released.

‘You have ‘till tomorrow morning, my lady,’ Ser Lyle Crakehall had charged her. ‘If the Lord Commander won’t be here by daybreak, we’ll lay siege to the castle.’

To this, Bronn had further commented, with his usual brisk mockery: ‘Why do you think he came all the way up here? To enjoy the weather?’

Brienne had ridden back inside the Great Keep’s yard, beside herself with confusion, worry and rage.

With the help of the other Stark soldiers, Tormund had escorted Lady Arya, her direwolf and her companions in the Great Hall, then he had followed Brienne outside the oak-and-iron wide doors into the dimly-lit gallery connecting the room with the kitchens.

That was when the shouting match began.

They had been at each other’s throats for the last ten minutes, like two wolves ready to tear flesh apart: the more they screamed, the more words lost their significance, and now they were simply drowning in a cacophony meant to intimidate and strike where it hurt the most.

Brienne had downright accused him of being clouded by petty jealousy and his own overbearing nature, overstepping bounds in thinking she would need some kind of protection, and, in turn, he
had brought up talks about loyalty to the Starks and Tarth. As though she would need him to remind her of that. Or of what Jaime did.

Yes, she knew all about it, and sometimes she wished she didn’t.

Without a clear answer to the fears gnawing at her heart, it would have been easier, liberating, even, to let all of her rage and sorrow and doubts get the better part of her. She could have acted rashly, just like Tormund did, and used Jaime as the scapegoat that each and every one of them had always judged him to be, faulting him for every misfortune, every single execrable hardship ever befallen House Stark, and be done with it. She would have her vengeance for what the Lannisters did on Tarth.

_I was like them, once, too. Ready to pass judgement on him from the moral high ground of my pure honour, my noble, untainted virtue._

Before the Bloody Mummers. Before Harrenhal.

When in her mind she would still call him Kingslayer and believe he deserved the title, along with any insult, any look of contempt and repugnance, any drop of shame and humiliation falling on his head for his vanity and arrogance and immorality.

A disgraced knight.

A man without honour.

She felt her eyes sting with unshed angry tears at the thought: Tormund wouldn’t understand, no matter how many times she’d try to explain. He only saw the mud, soilng and blackening the gold within.

Oh, how good would it feel to cave in, to yield to the uncomplicated, unadulterated way of seeing everything either bathed in light or buried in darkness… but that was a luxury she could no longer afford. Not after everything she had learned about Jaime, about _life_, in the meantime.

And now she had only a day to speak to Jaime and convince Jon of his good intent in bringing a host of almost ten thousand men at Winterfell’s gates. Assuming that what Ser Bronn and Ser Lyle had told her in their brief meeting was true.

_Lannisters lie._

She took a deep breath and stared down at Tormund, fighting the overwhelming impulse to bite his stupid face off.

“There will be no further discussion, until I’ll know exactly what’s going on. I’ll get to the bottom of this, and if it turns out he was leading the attack on Tarth, I’ll cut out his other hand myself. So you can stop being an insufferable muttonhead who speaks of things he knows nothing about!”

Tormund puffed his chest as though he was about to start shouting again; then he pursed his lips, narrowed his eyes at her and stormed out, without adding another word.

Brienne let go the breath she was holding, as tension swept from her body. Clammy sweat had been trickling down her neck: she ran a nervous hand over her forehead to wipe off the beads and straightened her cloak, trying to regain a semblance of composure as she followed Tormund in the Great Hall.

Jon and Sansa weren’t there yet.
In the middle of the room, surrounded by Stark soldiers at attention, Lady Arya was silently waiting, wrapped up in a wool cloak too light for this weather.

As Tormund stomped across the hall and disappeared behind the wide doors without looking back, she paused at the threshold and spared a few moments to assess the situation: the girl seemed unharmed, and so did the two men she adamantly refused to part ways with, when Tormund had escorted her inside the gates. The tallest one, she knew him fairly well. *Still alive, after all,* she mused with a satisfied half smirk as her blue eyes lingered on the scarred face and the hole where his right ear once was; the other one, wearing a Lannister armour…

*He must be a ghost.*

She forgot Jaime Lannister, Arya Stark, the attack on Tarth. She simply forgot how to breathe altogether.

Under those ice blue eyes, the granite walls of Winterfell disappeared and she was at Evenfall Hall again, the room ablaze with the lights of thousand candles, and there he was, her sweet lord, beautifully dressed in black and gold, beckoning her to join him for a dance… a young girl, a *normal* girl, gracefully floating to the music of fiddles and pipes, under her father’s prideful gaze, while the other prettier ladies stood and watched, secretly seething with jealousy.

This young man – Gendry, she had heard Arya call him – had Renly’s eyes, Renly’s mouth and Renly’s hair, but if Brienne took a deeper look, she could also see buried differences too: the kid was bulky and brawny, with heavy, muscular arms well noticeable even beneath the armour’s braces, whereas Renly had been lean and lithe. There was a hint of untrimmed beard on his gaunt cheeks and his features held all the signs of a harsh life mostly spent in the open: completely missing was the debonair gentleness, that air of careless, effortless beauty and grace, fine-tuned by years of pampering and highborn upbringing, she had always witnessed on Renly’s face.

*And he was always smiling,* she reminisced with a pang of longing. *I don’t think I ever saw him angry or with a scowl on his face.* Not like the one Gendry was sporting right now, anyway.

The boy carried himself as though he feared he could be attacked at any moment by dozens of enemies ready to cut his throat and leave his rotting body to the crows. His hand never relaxed its grip on the handle of his battle hammer and on his face Brienne could read a fair share of confusion and wariness.

*He’s not highborn, and he’s definitely not used to the attention,* she thought as he looked around himself, up to the Great Hall’s high marble ceiling.

*He’s not Renly. Renly died in my arms, because I was careless and stupid.*

It wouldn’t do to think of the past now; she must needs focus on the matter at hand.

As Brienne strode to Arya, the direwolf, quietly crouched at her feet, roused and considered her with cagey golden eyes, but didn’t make a move to attack her.

When she spotted her, Arya cocked a brow in mild disapproval: Brienne’s cheeks flushed crimson.

*They must have heard the yelling.*

“Lady Arya –

The girl raised a hand.
“Please! Drop the title. It’s really not necessary.”

She looked very different from the child Brienne had met in the Riverlands. Her face had lost any trace of innocence. Although Brienne could see a resemblance to both Jon and Sansa, there was something disquieting, and just purely Arya in her stance. A sharp stubbornness bordering on something akin hostility was prominently featured in both her eyes and body, in the tautness of her shoulders, in the determined way she set her jaw and held her chin up, as though daring anyone to defy her.

*She is home, among friends and family, and yet, she doesn’t trust anyone.*

“I’m sorry I’ve doubted your fealties, the last time we met: you were wearing a Lannister sword, after all. You still do,” Arya said with a pointed look to her scabbard and an impertinent smirk that had Brienne’s cheeks burn even redder. “Oathkeeper, was it?”

Brienne returned the smile and nodded.

“You were smart. I was a stranger, I had no right to ask you to come with me, while clearly you were being protected just fine by your…” she stressed out, shifting her eyes to the grouchy man on Arya’s right.

The Hound scoffed.

“Protected? Travelling companion? She was my hostage! I meant to sell her to one of her relatives, if it wasn’t for the fact I couldn’t find any smart enough not to get killed in the first place!”

“So that’s why you’re here?” Brienne bantered, sarcasm and disbelief colouring her voice. “To collect her ransom?”

Arya crossed her arms and glowered, obviously interested in the answer.

Under the double scrutiny, Clegane sulked silently.

Brienne secretly grinned: he could try to mislead her and Arya, he could spin any mummer’s tale he liked to himself in the childish attempt to quell his own hurt pride, but Brienne knew the truth.

*To keep Arya from harm, he was willing to die. He almost did.*

“It looks to me like this hostage has left you to die alone, after this woman beat the hell out of you!” Arya remarked spitefully.

“Woman?!” he spat, looking Brienne up and down. “That still remains to be seen.”

Brienne’s retort was lost: the Great Hall’s front doors banged open and Jon and Sansa rushed in, both of them very nearly out of breath, with Ghost, Ser Davos and Tormund at their heels. Brienne took a step back, to give the siblings some space.

Snowflakes swirled into the Hall whipped by the wind and, for a few moments, nobody dared to move.

The Starks stared at one another, their minds trying to catch up with what their eyes were seeing.

In the end, the direwolves were the bravest: when she noticed Ghost, Nymeria swiftly left Arya’s side and trotted to the door, her tail wagging madly, and greeted her white brother with joyful, high yips of recognition. Even Ghost, who was usually very quiet, succumbed to the surprise and was
voicing his own delight with excited whines and low rumblings.

They playfully jumped on each other and nibbled at their ears, nuzzling, sniffing and licking, leaving a trail of kisses all over their muzzles.

It was a tender moment, and Brienne couldn’t help but smile a little.

And then, the spell broke: Jon Snow borrowed some of his direwolf’s courage and moved, at the exact time when Arya also stepped toward him.

“Look at you,” he muttered with an awed whisper, raking his eyes over her. “You almost look like a woman!”

Arya frowned.

“What am I supposed to look like?”

Jon let out a short, almost surprised laugh, his eyes shining with love and a happiness Brienne had seldom seen on his face.

“A wolf!”

He mussed up her hair, and that was it. Arya’s face broke up in a brilliant smile as she jumped into her brother’s arms, with a very unlady-like squeal.

“Gods, I can’t believe you’re home,” he said, his voice muffled against the furs of Arya’s cloak. He leaned his forehead against hers.

“I’ve missed you, little sister.”

Her hands were gripping the front of Jon’s jerkin as if it were a lifeline; he planted a kiss on her forehead before releasing her, his eyes now sparkling with mirth and satisfaction as he recognised the sword buckled on her hip.

“And you still have Needle!”

Her whole face darkened.

“You have no idea of what I did to guard it,” she uttered gravely.

Jon raised a hand to cup her cheek.

“I don’t care. You’re here. That’s all that matters.”

Arya looked beyond Jon’s shoulders, where Sansa was standing numb and petrified, holding her breath, not really believing the sight in front of her.

The younger sister disentangled herself from her half-brother’s embrace and demurely dropped her eyes on the floor: she looked strangely chastised and shy, a little girl caught by her mother nicking some sweets right before supper.

“I know, I…” she gesticulated nervously, pointing at the state of her dress. “I don’t look like a lady, at all. Mother would be ashamed.”

At this, Sansa stifled a sob behind her hands and finally broke down.
Brienne could count on a single hand the times when she had witnessed such a strong emotion in her lady’s eyes. When Sansa had recounted her what a nightmare her marriage to Ramsay Bolton had been, tears of rage and humiliation had welled up, but never fell. And Brienne remembered how she had thought Lady Stark was truly made of steel, then. But now, the façade was dropped without reservation: Arya watched, frozen, as her sister tentatively took one, two steps, hot tears freely streaming on her cheeks…and then she was rushing to her, crushing her to her chest, until they were both kneeling on the floor.

It seemed as though Arya didn’t really know what to do with her hands; when she finally, hesitantly, reached out and reciprocate the hug, Brienne felt a surge of affection for the girl: the indomitable little sister running barefoot and dirty across Winterfell’s yard, who had more fun with sword-playing than stitching, who liked to throw food into her siblings’ faces during supper, who dressed like a stable boy rather than a highborn lady, who was always scolded by her septa or her mother for not being pretty enough, or gentle enough, or well-behaved enough, like a proper daughter of the Warden of the North was supposed to be; Brienne suddenly wondered if a part of Arya’s heart, however small that might be, wasn’t perhaps convinced her sister would have turned her down.

But Arya couldn’t know how many evenings Brienne had spent with Sansa as she narrated, again and again, every single detail about their fruitless meeting in the Vale: what she said, how she looked, what she was wearing. Did she look well-cared for, to you? Healthy? Did she ask for me at all? She couldn’t know how fondly Sansa treasured the memory of their childhood together at Winterfell before everything went to hell, how shameful she felt for blaming her for Lady’s death.

‘We were barely on speaking terms, the last time I saw her. And after Father got…I mourned her, as if she were dead, too. And the worse part was… I didn’t even get to say goodbye,’ Sansa had confessed to her, with such melancholy in her voice that Brienne’s heart broke for them.

The cold resentment and bitter misunderstandings were melting away, now, under the sheer force of the kisses Sansa was raining on Arya’s face, regardless of the dirty cheeks and the blood-soaked, muddy clothes.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry…forgive me!” she sobbed again and again, stroking her tangled hair, all along chanting words of love and rue, as though repenting for past sins.

They deserve this joy: it’s such a small consolation, after everything they’ve been through.

Unbidden, Brienne’s thoughts flew to her Sapphire Isle, to a homecoming that would be forevermore shrouded with sorrow and grief. There would be no brothers, nor sisters, nor parents praying for her safe return, waiting with bated breath for her sails to appear at the mouth of the harbour.

If I’ll ever manage to come back at all, she brooded. Her hand glided to her belt, where her father’s letter was safely tucked, along with the handkerchief which had enwrapped the Evenstar’s ring. She wore them on her person all the time, now, a guidance to her choices and a grim reminder of what was lost.

The last things, the only things she had of him.

I must needs speak with Jaime. He will tell me the truth.

Bolton’s voice, Tormund’s voice, boomed again inside her head, their warning veiled in mockery: Lannisters lie.
“What is he doing here?”

Sansa had risen and was now clasping one of Arya’s hands in hers. The tears had frozen on her cheeks and there was a hardened expression in her eyes Brienne could not quite read. She followed her gaze to the troubled man darting his eyes from Arya to the oaked door behind Sansa’s back as though he was wrestling with the compulsion to flee.

“Who is he?” Ser Davos asked.

“Sandor Clegane,” Jon offered sombrely.

“Joffrey’s personal dog,” Sansa elaborated in a sharp whisper. “He made sure the King could do anything he liked with me, while I was his betrothed, before he ran away from the battle of Blackwater Bay like the craven he is.”

The Hound’s mouth twisted into a mirthless laugh.

“Oh, I see…The little bird has grown some backbone, at last. You don’t sing pretty songs anymore, do you?”

Jon clutched Sansa’s arm and asked in a low, dangerous voice: “Did he hurt you?”

Sansa’s red-rimmed eyes pierced the scarred man beyond Jon’s shoulders, a cold flame burning in them.

She slowly shook her head.

“He liked to frighten little girls with death threats. But no. He did not hurt me.”

It seemed to Brienne that she wanted to add something else, but then she spun around to face her and this time there was no mistaking the hurt reproach in her voice.

“Why didn’t you tell me the man travelling with my sister was him?”

Brienne lifted up her chin. “My lady, I thought he was dead. Only afterwards, Podrick told me what he remembered of him from his time at court.”

She understood why Sansa would be mad at her for her reticence, but it was a mistake made in good faith. Brienne did not know him, except from what she had heard on the road: a deserter, a rabid dog with a bounty of one hundred silver stags over his head, one of the most dangerous men in Westeros. The rumours depicted him like a hellish fiend who enjoyed raping children and murdering in cold blood old and saintly people, but in those tales, he was often mistaken for his elder brother, so that it was near impossible for her to safely tell who did what. The Hound had the reputation of being ill-tempered, ‘twas true, but Pod had told her that he had never seen him killing somebody just for the fun of it.

“Your sister seems to rely upon him.”

Everyone turned to Arya, who just shrugged.

“I’m just the hostage, am I?” she bit back heatedly.

The Hound bared his teeth.

“Aye! You’re the most annoying hostage ever befallen on me and I’ve always thought a good spanking would benefit you immensely! I should have sold you out to the Freys when I had the
chance! Make good money for it, too. And leave the continent, leave all of you cunts to your petty
wars and your fucking cold winter!”

Jon grabbed Arya’s shoulder and pulled her back.

“If it’s money you want, Clegane, I will see that you’re well paid for your services. As much as I
regret admitting it, Arya has been returned to us safe and sound also thanks to you, after all.
Tomorrow you could be on your way, if so you wish.”

Clegane searched Arya’s eyes, but the girl grudgingly looked away with a grimace.

“So,” Jon continued, sensing the discomfort, “you could stay here: we’re always in need of good
fighters and from what I’ve heard it might be the time for you to join the fray once again. On the
right side, for a change. That’s what Thoros of Myr thinks, anyway.”

His eyes bulged out in surprise, and even Arya forgot for a moment to be angry with him.

“The Red Priest is here?” she sounded mildly interested.

“He was, my lady. He and his friends left a couple of days ago,” Davos replied. “They seemed in a
hurry to reach the Wall.”

“Lord Beric spoke of you, too. He seemed persuaded you are a reformed man. Said your near-
death experience changed you. Was he lying?”

The Hound averted Jon’s eyes, chewing on the inside of his cheek. For the first time faced with a
choice, Brienne saw him struggling.

“I won’t do your bidding, Jon Snow. I don’t care if they call you king. I’m done serving kings!”

Those were harsh words, but one thing was obeying orders blindly, another was showing respect
while being free to decide if a ruler deserved to be followed. Jon was smart enough to know the
difference: unfazed by Clegane’s ostensibly rude manners, he simply nodded.

Clegane exhaled loudly and awkwardly looked around himself.

“Do you have any ale in this freezing place?”

“See him to the kitchens,” Sansa ordered to the soldiers still gathered in the Hall. Something
passed between her lady and the former Kingsguard; an understanding, maybe. The Hound bowed
his head to Sansa, in his eyes a mix of surprised gratitude and caution, and left with the armed
guards.

“And you are…?” Jon enquired of Gendry.

The lad was about to answer, when Davos wrapped a protective arm across his shoulders.

“Your Grace, my lady, this is Gendry Wood,” he pointedly looked at him, then, and added:
“He’s…my nephew.”

Nephew?

Brienne’s brows knitted as she caught Arya’s eyes and read her same incredulity in them.

“I didn’t realise you still had surviving family, Ser Davos,” Jon said.
“On my wife’s side, Your Grace. Gendry is my good-brother’s son.”

By the Gods, this man’s wits were sharp and swift when it came to lying! Brienne wondered if perhaps it wasn’t a skill he honed during his many years as a smuggler.

Gendry kept his mouth shut, but she could see his growing confusion and uneasiness, under Sansa’s shrewd azure eyes.

“Why is he wearing a Lannister armour?” she voiced her suspicions.

The Onion Knight let out a nervous laugh: “Long story.”

Sansa didn’t look convinced at all, but Brienne saw her throwing a sidelong glance toward her sister. Arya was anxiously staring at both Davos and Gendry, her hand fidgeting over Needle’s hilt. When she met Sansa’s piercing eyes, she tried to strip her face of any compromising emotion, but a slight blush gave her away.

Jon seemed oblivious of the silent exchange between the sisters.

“Any member of Davos’ family is welcome at Winterfell,” he informed Gendry. “But for the time being, considering your current affiliations, I must needs ask you to return to the Lannister camp.”

“Jon!” Arya cried out, indignant.

“For everyone’s safety,” the King raised a finger, his eyes hard and unyielding. “Until I talk with our…honoured guest.”

“If I can take my leave, sire, I will bring back my nephew to the camp myself.”

Jon nodded his assent and Davos seemed only too eager to comply and swiftly ushered the boy out of the Great Hall’s double doors.

Once alone again in the room, Jon finally turned to the red-haired wildling and asked: “Where did you put him?”

“The cells next to the kennels. Separated from his men and heavily guarded.”

Brienne made a move to speak, but Arya beat her to it.

“He’s not a threat, brother. He brought the Lannister army with him to join up with our forces.”

“Your Grace,” she intervened, “Ser Davos and I have spoken with Ser Jaime’s captains. They ask for his release before daybreak.”

“Or?...”

Brienne hesitated. There was no way to put it in a better light: she was well aware of how it might sound.

“They threaten to lay siege to Winterfell,” Tormund clarified in her stead, a little too keenly for her taste.

Jon blanched.

“What?” both Sansa and Arya blurted out.
“They come pounding at my home’s front door with an entire army and they have the nerve to give us an ultimatum, too?” the taller girl snapped, red in the face and eyes blazing with fury: her tress swirled behind her back like a whip.

Brienne shot a deathly glare at Tormund.

“My lady,” she tried to thaw Sansa’s anger with the most soothing voice she could muster, “Ser Lyle Crakehall had guaranteed me that they mean no harm. They only want Ser Jaime back, if I could speak with him…”

“Enough!” Jon howled and she fell silent.

He looked livid.

“Double the guards,” he said to Tormund. “I’ll have words with him, once I listen to what Arya has to say. In the meantime, Brienne, you’re not to talk to him, or go anywhere near his cell, under any circumstance.”

Her heart sunk.

“Your Grace…I beg of you, I’m –

“I’m sorry, my lady, I will keep your counsel about anything else, except this matter. You can’t think straight when it comes to Jaime Lannister.”

Behind her back, she heard Tormund grunt his approval.

She ignored him and tried to rein in her own dismay.

“Did I ever give you reason to doubt my loyalty to you and your family?”

The mere suggestion was making her blood boil.

“Never,” Jon admitted. “And I truly hope you’re not thinking about breaking that faith just now. It’s him I don’t trust and I can’t risk you: you two have too much history together.”

She protectively put a hand on Oathkeeper’s lion-shaped pommel, almost as if shielding it from his probing eyes.

He drew in a deep breath and clenched his jaw.

“After his capture at the Whispering Woods, that man murdered his own cousin in cold blood and managed to elude, single-handedly, the strict surveillance of both Stark and Tully forces. That was the first time. The second time he escaped, however, you were helping him.”

Her own jaw dropped in shock.

“I was following Lady Catelyn’s orders at the time!” she almost shouted, her fingers curling tightly on her sword’s hilt.

“Aye, and look what good it made!” he shouted back. “Lady Stark’s judgement was clouded by rage and vengeance. She believed she was protecting her daughters and didn’t think about the consequences of her actions: Robb lost his crown and his head, because of that, and you were her willing accomplice!”

Hot indignation rendered her speechless: with her head spinning and heart hammering in her chest,
she turned to Sansa and Arya in the hope they would side with her, but the girls silently looked back and forth at them in confusion and didn’t seem inclined to speak in her – or their own mother’s – defence.

Their brother was king, after all, and it surely wasn’t her place to scold him, no matter how tempting the prospect was at the moment.

She would’ve wanted to reply that Robb had lost his head not because Jaime Lannister had been released from his cell, but because he chose love and lust over duty and honour. Because he had angered and offended the Starks’ major allies when it counted the most, when he didn’t stick to his oaths and followed his own heart’s desire, without taking into consideration what it could mean for both his cause and his whole family.

Robb hadn’t been wise, he hadn’t been particularly smart either, and the ghastly wound his brief reign had inflicted on the North was still open and bleeding and she would’ve also wanted to inform Jon he should be careful and learn from his brother’s mistakes, lest he’d find himself in his same hopelessly dire circumstances, short of a head!

Instead she gritted her teeth and, in a strained, shaking voice which didn’t quite belong to her, she just said: “I may not be impartial, but with all due respect, Your Grace, neither are you!”

Jon’s nostrils flared as he took two steps toward her; even with the height difference, he was full of that stubborn confidence she often found charming, in a sweet, annoying way.

But not now.

His brown eyes, usually so warm and gracious when he turned them upon her, now held all the glacial stillness and severity she had learned to associate with the lands of the North, and winter. Ice coated him, both as protection and weapon wielded to harm.

“We were standing right here, in this hall, when news of the attack on Tarth came,” he spoke softly, calm and lethal.

“Would you still jump to the Kingslayer’s defence, if it turned out he was the one storming Evenfall Hall?”

Blood drained from her face.

She could not believe he was swooping so low as to use that against her.

Her father was dead.

Of all people, Jon Snow should know how it felt like.

“Jon…” Sansa’s voice admonished at her back, gentle but firm.

He inhaled sharply through his nose and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the ice had melted: Brienne could read sincere contrition and guilt, all over his face, but also weariness.

He looked older than he ever had.

“Forgive me, my lady. That was cruel and uncalled for. I’ll always hold you in the utmost regard, but I must take careful heed of my predicament. I still don’t know why he’s here. He shows up bringing my sister with him, while his sister is still ruling from the Iron Throne. How would I know he’s not trying to win my trust only to stab me in the back, later?”
“Then let me speak to him!” she pleaded with urgency, choking back tears.

“I cannot. I have a responsibility toward my sisters, and Winterfell, and my father’s legacy. There won’t be a siege to my castle, that I promise you. I will grant him audience before morning, and you’ll be summoned too. But until then, you will stay away from him. That’s an order.”

She was too much appalled to muster enough strength to counter back.

*He won’t change his mind.*

Jon held out a hand to his half-sister: “Come along, Arya. We have many things to discuss.”

Ghost licked the tip of the girl’s fingers, urging her to follow, but Arya still lingered, a curious expression in her grey eyes as she stared at her.

*My words won’t move him, but maybe…*

Brienne had no idea of what happened on the road to Winterfell, but Arya had stepped up for Jaime just now, confirming his plans to move his army up North for defence.

*Please, please…talk to your brother…make him understand!,* she desperately tried to convey through her eyes.

But Arya disappeared with her siblings into the gallery leading to the Great Keep without giving her solid reason to believe she would help her.

Alone in the Hall, Brienne struggled to make sense of what had just come to pass.

The King’s dismissal hurt her more than she let on.

She owed a great deal to Jon Snow and his family; she was happy, at Winterfell, and loved Sansa with all her heart. They had welcomed her in their home, gave her a new purpose, helped and supported her when Tarth had fallen, and she knew that, when the time would come, she would lead Jon’s men in battle, alongside his other commanders. There wasn’t a greater honour than that. It had been her life’s dream, to serve a ruler worthy of the name.

But somewhere along the way, her dreams had taken different shape and colour, shifting from muddy battlefields, sieges and clashing swords to steaming baths, bear pits and green eyes glinting in the dark and tearing to shreds all of her carefully woven certainties, her walls, just by a single pointed, proud look.

She let out an anguished sob.

The Great Hall suddenly became too hot, too small, too grim and she couldn’t properly catch her breath.

*I must know what happened to my island.*

She marched outside and let the cold weather clear her head: the courtyard was buzzing with the sounds of swords, long-axes and crossbows clinking against steel and iron. Banners with white mermen and black battle-axes on a silver field, silver mailed fists and brown moose, green thistles and bears with their claws ready to cut their enemies stood out against the cloudy sky, flapping energetically in the wind. Word of a possible siege had spread in the castle like a mounting storm and now every vassal house of the Starks was getting its men fully armed and ready for the worse.
Brienne’s eyes skimmed over the place: at the south gate, she spotted Davos talking to ‘his nephew’.

An exasperated puff of hot breath steamed from her mouth: the Onion Knight had lied to Jon, but Brienne couldn’t see the reasoning behind his actions. Gendry didn’t seem to pose a threat. Aside from his red cloak and armour, which currently were attracting unwanted attention by some Dustin soldiers.

_A brawl in the courtyard it’s the last thing I need right now._

“Ser Davos!” she called as she approached him. “I’ll take the lad to the Lannister camp.”

The knight glanced apprehensively to the Great Keep and back to her again, closing the maimed fingers of his right hand in a tight fist.

“Very well,” he breathed out, pursing his lips. Then he fatherly patted Gendry’s shoulder and added with a hopeful little smile: “I’ll see you soon.”

The camp was within walking distance from the southern walls; the silence was broken only by the brittle sound of fresh, compact snow crunching under their boots, as they made their way through the plain surrounded by the hills.

Brienne inconspicuously tipped her head and studied him from the corner of her eyes.

“You two look very close,” she tentatively inquired.

A fond smile tugged at his lips.

“I owe Ser Davos my life, m’lady.”

_He’s speaking the truth_, she understood. His blue eyes were raw and clear and in that moment he truly was Renly come alive again.

Her heart gave a pull.

“You don’t sound from the Stormlands.”

“No, m’lady. I was born in King’s Landing. My father was….he was a carpenter.”

And that, right there, _that_ was a lie.

Brienne didn’t have the patience for games, now. She came to a halt and, with a harsh breath, abruptly demanded: “Do you know who I am?”

“You’re Lady Brienne of Tarth.”

“Do you know what I did?”

He furrowed his forehead in confusion.

“I’ve executed Stannis Baratheon for the murder of his own brother,” she blurted out, trembling for wind and wrath.

His eyes, Renly’s eyes, widened and filled with realisation and hurt contempt.

“Some say you’ve killed Renly, too.”
She reeled as though kicked in the guts and wished he would stop staring at her with those blue eyes.

“A dreadful slander. Ask your Ser Davos to tell you what has really happened!”

*Ask him about his late King and his Red Priestess, ask him about shadows and blood magic, and see if he answers.*

*If he dares.*

“Why we’re having this conversation?”

She noticed his hand shifting over his hammer’s hilt and scowled.

*At least he’s not craven.*

“You have Baratheon blood. Do not deny it! – she added when he opened his mouth to retort – You look very much like him. Renly, I mean.”

And just like that, his name spoken aloud quelled the aggressiveness in her voice. A dull, empty pain swelled in her heart, like the fading memory of a nightmare. Before her eyes, she could still see it all. The candles shuddering in the wind, her rainbow cloak drenched in blood, Ser Emmond’s scream before he attacked her, and Lady Catelyn’s hands dragging her out of that tent, away from the body.

*You can’t avenge him if you’re dead.*

Gendry raised his eyes on hers and whatever he saw there made tension ebb in his shoulders.

“I… he was my uncle. I’m one of Robert’s by-blows,” he gently confessed.

Her lips slightly parted in realisation.

The King’s bastard. Of course. She had never met Robert, but her father had oft told her about the Rebellion; the King’s strength and prowess, both on the battlefield and beyond, were renowned and well-documented throughout the Kingdoms. And he himself almost seemed to enjoy to make a point of not hiding it, never worrying about keeping up appearances, not even with his own Queen. Everybody knew about the many children he fathered out of wedlock. It was the realm’s worst kept secret, right next to Renly’s predilection for young, curly-haired knights.

All those innocent children whom Joffrey had mercilessly ordered to be put to the sword, in the early days of his rule.

“Please, m’lady, don’t blame Ser Davos, he’s just trying to protect me.”

*He’s got no family,* she realised. *Except the one he has chosen.*

Her hand rested on Oathkeeper’s hilt.

*Just like me.*

“Who else knows?”

“Arya.”

She nodded unsurprisingly, remembering the way the young Stark girl had looked at him, half
concerned, half sheepish.

Probably Jaime knew, too. After all, he had been Robert’s good-brother for nineteen years and had witnessed him in his prime, at the peak of his power and vigour; if the boy truly was his father’s spitting image as she was inclined to think, it would be an easy connection to draw.

A sudden thought hit her.

“Gendry, were you with Jaime Lannister, when he set sail for Tarth?”

“No, m’lady, I joined them after, when Ser Jaime rode off to Casterly Rock.”

Hope died in her throat.

She wrapped her cloak tighter around her sagging shoulders.

“But maybe,” the boy added, studying her crestfallen face, “maybe I know someone who can tell you what happened there. Someone you’ll trust.”

Jon forbade her to speak directly to Jaime, but no one dared to stop her, when Brienne marched with Gendry through the Lannister lines. They walked across tents and pavilions, wagons and carts full of supplies, among the comings and goings of squires carrying cloths, spare arms and parts of armour, smiths nailing horseshoes and fixing arrowheads, foot soldiers setting up a perimeter and digging trenches and she could feel the same crackling energy, the same taut mood she had observed among the Stark soldiers, too.

Everyone was staring at her, she realised: some faces she recognised from Riverrun. She almost laughed aloud as she called to mind with savage satisfaction their stunned surprise when their Lord Commander dropped everything else to personally receive her, when he got word she was there, with his sword.

When they reached the camp’s headquarters, Gendry pointed her to a girl in squire garbs, attending a fire and a pot of boiling broth.

“The Evenstar…” she gasped in wonder when she saw her, nearly dropping the jug of water she was holding. Then, almost as if she remembered her manners at once, she awkwardly curtsied.

“My lady, you probably don’t remember me, I was only ten when you left Tarth to join King Renly’s army at Bitterbridge. I’m Ashlynn, Harwyn the smith’s granddaughter.”

The home accent was so sweet on her ears Brienne almost wept out.

“Ashlynn! Yes! Of course I remember.”

She was a scrawny little thing, back then, always trailing after her grandfather every time he climbed up to Evenfall Hall to present her father with a new sword or armour.

Brienne disregarded the many trivial questions crowding in her head and immediately asked: “Ashlynn, can you tell me what happened on Tarth?”

The girl chewed her bottom lip, solemnly nodded and started talking.

She told her about the Queen’s sails swarming over the Straits, the Battle on Starfall’s Beach, the valorous resistance of her father’s men and the three-days siege of the palace. The destruction left by onagers, trebuchets and battering rams and the smallfolk’s fear and impotence, while they were
still hiding inside the caves, following the Evenstar’s last order. And then, she told her about Ser Osfryd Kettleblack taking control of the castle, the gruesome sight of the heads over the battlements and the arrival of Jaime Lannister a few days later.

“So he wasn’t leading the raiding party?” Brienne breathed out.

“Of course not! The first thing he did was to lock up the Queen’s men so that they couldn’t ravage the island any more than they already had. Ser Bronn personally killed Ser Osfryd. And then Ser Jaime left behind some of his soldiers, for defence; he instructed them to follow Ser Cole Grandison’s lead until Ser Germont’s return.”

Brienne found herself nodding in relieved agreement: Ser Cole was an excellent choice; he was a skilled knight and was well-loved by the other Guards and the population. She had no doubts he would keep everyone safe, although she hoped to have news from Ser Germont, too, soon enough.

He must have returned, by now.

She left the Lannister camp in a daze and by the time she returned to Winterfell, twilight had already started to shroud the castle in frosty silence, the shadows cast by the fires and torches on the sconces rippling in small waves across the walls. The familiar warmth of her bedchamber was a welcoming shelter from the noisy chaos ruling over her mind after such an eventful day, but she could not rest.

I should have been there, fighting the Queen’s men alongside my father.

The grief for the confirmation of Lord Selwyn’s death warred inside her with relief in knowing that Jaime had nothing to do with the attack. Now that the lump of tension regarding Tarth’s fate had loosened, Brienne realised with horror and panic that the knots gripping her stomach hadn’t untied at all, but had simply changed their nature.

Instead of sorrow and rage, now there were unnamed longing and heat simmering low on her belly.

She yearned to see him, there was no point in denying it, but dreaded the moment at the same time. A part of her was feeling guilty and ashamed for blaming him without cause for her father’s end. Another secret part of her was persuaded that, if it hadn’t been Tormund pummelling him on the ground, she would have personally taken care of that.

But the deepest part of her, the part that brought his name over her lips with a quivering breath in the middle of the night, did not understand him: coming to the North with an entire army of Lannister soldiers! For what?

Why do you think he came all the way up here? To enjoy the weather?, Bronn had teasingly scolded her. But he couldn’t have…the mere notion that Jaime could be here because of her…for her to nurse such hope, it was folly. Yet, she could not hide that, when she saw him, standing there in the snow, staring at her as though she was as fair as the Maiden herself, her heart flowed with hunger, devotion and amazed elation.

She tried to recall if she had ever felt this way, with Renly, but came up with nothing.

We are bound and judged by our words and our actions, but in the end, my darling, what matters most is not honour. It’s love, her father had written to her, and she missed his guidance now more than ever.

Would it come to this, in the end? Honour against love? Should she ignore a direct order from the King and follow her heart instead?
Jon’s words had cut her, deep.

If it was undoubtedly true that she owed a lot to the Starks, it was even truer that she owed Jaime an even greater debt: Jaime, his actions, his choices, had compelled her many times over to reconsider her own stance on those principles of honour she had held dear for all her younger years. He had changed her, challenged her and saved her life: his example, his more realistic views, his jarring frankness had helped her survive again and again, and now she couldn’t help but wonder what kind of justice a man like Jon, honourable to the point of foolishness, would pass on him.

Would he do what his father did, so many years ago?

Give Jaime a single look and judge him guilty?

_By what right does the wolf judge the lion?_

The thought, for some reason, angered her.

“This is ridiculous!”

Brienne sprung to her feet, grabbed Oathkeeper and walked to the door, a new resolve in her eyes: King’s orders or not, she would talk to Jaime; they needed to clear things between them and she would gladly break some bone, if anyone tried to stop her.

She thrusted open the door and stopped in her tracks.

Ser Davos was standing there, with his fist hovering in the air, ready to knock. He looked grim.

“It’s time, my lady.”

She silently followed the light of his torch down the flight of stairs, her senses dull and her mind whirling hazily as though she was the one about to be judged.

Only halfway the road, Brienne realised they were heading toward the Guest House, instead of the Great Hall.

When Davos finally stopped in front of a bolted door guarded by two Stark soldiers on each side, her heart jumped in her throat, pounding frantically. The sudden rush of blood to her face made her feel faint.

“I thought…” she mumbled, breathless.

“I know what you thought.”

Davos cut her off, pulled from his cloak Jaime’s golden hand and a sword in a crimson scabbard and gave them to her.

“You have ten minutes,” he tilted his head to the door, his whiskers trembling upon a hint of a knowing smirk. “Don’t make me regret it.”

Chapter End Notes
Here, let me give you more angst and confusion and cliffhangers, in case you didn’t have enough of them!

“I’ve always thought a good spanking would benefit you immensely” is an almost direct quote from Gone With the Wind, because I feel we all deserve a little bit of Clark Gable in our lives! You’re welcome!

Also, Jon and Tormund, stop getting in the path of true love, DAMN YOU!
Things weren’t exactly going according to his plans.

It was difficult to gather the passing of time from the windowless room he had been confined in, but Jaime supposed at least half a day had passed since he and his troops came knocking on Winterfell’s front door; he wouldn’t imagine that moving his army to the North would cause so much trouble.

What was supposed to be his grand entrance through the castle’s gates, applauded and cheered on like a true hero for bringing Arya Stark home again, along with a more than generous dowry of ten thousand men, turned out to be a complete disaster and source of utter embarrassment.

Passed out, tossed sideways on a horse’s neck like a sack of oat, then unceremoniously thrown on his ass into the damp, straw-covered dungeons floor, where he’d woken up some time later, smelling of piss and shit, with a ghastly headache threatening to split his head in two, his curses only barely drowned out by the ominous, grim howling of the hounds in the nearby kennels…

Because of his head concussion, he had faint recollections of those first moments, but he remembered clearly the two guards wearing the bear sigil of House Mormont, jeering and taunting him, while they removed and took away his Valyrian sword and his golden hand: ‘Lord Bolton was torn to pieces by those same dogs, after he lost the Battle of Winterfell. Maybe the King will grant you the same special treatment. D’you remember the Boltons, Kingslayer? Your father’s best friends?’

*My father’s never got any friends, you morons. Only subjects and pawns,* he would’ve wanted to answer. But he could only grit his teeth and silently lick his wounds.

The Lion of Lannister. What a sight to behold!

He had almost expected a queue outside his cellar: men, women and children laughing and pointing at the maimed, former Kingsguard, the tired, mangy lion resigned to his cage as everyone threw stones and quips at him.

Instead, for a while, nobody came.

He waited in the darkness, trying to keep time counting the drops of condensation rhythmically falling on the floor, somewhere on his left, until another couple of guards came, forced him on his
feet and jostled him up the stairs, to a more spacious chamber, with an actual sleeping cot, a chamber pot and a single burning candle placed over a nondescript piece of furniture. It was a little more than a storage room: a mansion, if compared to Riverrun’s cells.

A maester was sent to check his head, courtesy of Lady Arya. He suspected the wolfling to be behind his more recent relocation to the safety of the warmer inner walls of the Great Keep, too, but his theory was bound to remain unconfirmed, because, no matter how hard he tried, the few people coming to see him were stubbornly giving him the silent treatment.

*What have you done with my men?*

*What’s going on?*

*Where’s your King? Let me speak to him!*

He had asked those questions to the guards, to the young attendant who had brought him a stale vegetable broth and emptied his chamber pot, to the maester… Jaime had jested, charmed, made promises; then he had snarled, insulted and threatened. None would talk to him.

This pointed, mute indifference was worse than torture and was driving him up the wall; he had lost count of all the times he’d asked to see Brienne. But the wench never came, and somewhere along the way, he had started to doubt his own mind and wonder if perhaps he hadn’t dreamt the whole thing: her, standing under the falling snow, Oathkeeper assuredly held in her big hands, its hilt glistening red and golden; a vision of ethereal white and blonde, and glittering sapphire blue, emerging from the ice, like the work of a sculptor conjured up by the cold wind and the pulsing in his head.

She had looked so striking, so perfectly confident in her element that for a moment he forgot where he was and hadn’t been ready to par the blunt side of the axe aimed at his head.

That redheaded, fierce-looking wildling… Jaime would personally see that he got what he deserved; in the meantime, though, he couldn’t do anything else but wait.

He didn’t doubt that Brienne would’ve wanted to speak to Jon Snow and make a case for him; she wouldn’t let him rot in a cell without at least inquiring about his intentions.

*Why hasn’t she come yet, then?*

A sudden realisation hit him. *Perhaps no one had informed her about what happened on Tarth. Perhaps…perhaps she believes me at fault for her father’s death.*

It was an intolerable thought, which, for a moment, sealed his throat with unease and misery.

With his dark moods even more burdened, he started to pace, seriously considering the possibility of a break-out, alliances be damned. The feeble light of the candle hardly illuminated the space around him: there wasn’t anything Jaime could use as a weapon, but he had worked with far less, in the past.

*I still had two hands, back then, though.*

But before he could form a plan, the locks and chains bolting the door clattered and the shadow of an armoured man stretched on the wall in front of him, enormous and foreboding.

“I’m at the end of my patience,” he seethed, facing the wall. “If you’ve come again to bore me with your silent stares, I’ll crush your head against one of these stone walls.”
“I’d like to see you try.”

Jaime held a breath and turned.

And there she was. Holding a torch in one hand and his possessions in the other. He barely noticed the guards and the shape of another man waiting outside; the door closed again and they were alone.

Heart pounding madly in his ears, he took his time to size her up, and noticed with a jolt of thrilled delight and amusement that she was rooted on the spot, doing precisely the same.

The Maid of Tarth seemed even taller and more imposing than he remembered, but that was probably due to the wolf pelt covering her from neck to heels. In the dim light, the blue armour underneath shone with silvery ripples.

The armour she had worn in Riverrun, too.

The armour he gave her.

Suddenly a mad, overwhelming impulse of grabbing and stripping her of all those offending layers, until only her true, bare self would stand in front of him, flooded his senses.

Only her, in the magnificent fairness of her skin, just like she did, when she rose from the steaming waters of Harrenhal, all toned muscles and glorious outrage. So that he could leisurely map out each and every scar that had damaged her body since then.

By his side, his fist clenched powerlessly. It wouldn’t do to let his greed have the better of him now, with soldiers at the door. Besides, Oathkeeper was strapped to the wench’s side. She would probably give me another concussion, if I try anything.

He let out a shaky breath in the attempt to quell the heat simmering in his lower belly and with some reluctance settled for the parts of her his eyes could freely, and properly, roam over.

Her hair was a little longer, and although this didn’t make her face’s features softer, nor more feminine or pleasant to the sight, the slight curl of the tips just below the ears was downright endearing.

The torch spilled a grotesque light all over her face: her broken nose was too big, her forehead too large, her cheekbones too prominent, her lips too wide and a little chapped for the cold, but her eyes still held all the beautiful, bewitching innocence that had him wonder more than once how such a gentle soul could belong to such a graceless beast of a woman.

She looked surer of herself, too: her presence, her whole bearing spoke of a self-assurance he seldom had linked with her in the past, as though she finally felt comfortable in her own skin. Brienne blushed a little under his scrutiny, but nonetheless held his gaze with a tilt of her chin so fierce and proud he felt a smile tugging at the side of his lips.

Flustered, she huffed impatiently and put the torch in the sconce; the narrow space was instantly filled with light.

“How’s your head?” she asked, facing him again.

“Still thick. Still attached. Although, to be greeted with a broken skull is not what I envisaged in the first place.”
“Maybe you should’ve thought about it twice, before showing up with a whole army of Lannisters soldiers.”

His brows shot to his hairline.

“I had Arya with me!” his voice rose, incredulous. “And to be perfectly honest, your King’s men attacked first!”

“They believed you were leading the Queen’s men against us!”

Memories of Riverrun assaulted his mind: he shut his eyes and bit his tongue, before he said something he could regret later.

“Could we just…not?...”

This was ridiculous: the whole routine where they met and almost immediately ended up fighting about politics was becoming awfully stale and annoying, by now. Why is everything always so difficult with her? Couldn’t she just be happy to see me?

She stared, guarded, self-conscious and on edge like a doe caught in a clearing, and Jaime briefly wondered if she shared his same frustration at not being able to say what truly was in their hearts.

A million japes and inappropriate confessions flocked in his mind.

I’ve missed you.

I’ve left Cersei and I don’t intend to ever look back.

I don’t care about Arya Stark, the bloody North and its fucking King! I came here for you, you obtuse, blind cow!

“It pleases me to see you in such good health, my lady,” he lamely said instead.

Her shoulders fell a little; she tried to mask her disappointment by walking to the small table on her left, and placed his golden hand and Widow’s Wail there. His brows furrowed: why was he, a prisoner, allowed to wear weapons? Was it perhaps the last considerate concession before he was to be executed?

“Have you come to escort me to the gallows?” he quipped, only half-jokingly.

“Don’t be absurd. The King wishes to have words with you in the Great Hall.”

A public audience, then. Jaime drew in a breath through his nose as he clasped the golden hand and fumbled with the straps around his stump.

“The King,” he scoffed. “Ned Stark’s by-blow born in the south, now sitting on the ancient throne of the Winter Kings.”

For sure, the lad had come a long way, from the sullen boy barely out from his wet nurse, brooding alone in a corner of the Great Hall with the younger squires, while everybody else was enjoying the feast.

“The last time I saw him he looked angry at the whole world. But then again, I suppose it’s hard not to be, when you’re fifteen, and a bastard.”

Brienne smiled a little at that.
“He’s done remarkably well since then, all things considered. He’s a good leader, a fine commander.”

Good, ol’ trustful Brienne. Winning a battle doesn’t make you a leader.

Jaime gave a final jerk to the straps and grunted as he felt the metal fall into place around his forearm’s skin. He took the sword’s scabbard next.

“Who else will be there?”

“Ser Davos Seaworth, Hand of the King. Lady Sansa. Lady Arya.”

Both our charges, safely home. Not bad for a man without honour and a lady knight. Despite the dire situation, the thought brought a small, pleased grin on his lips.

He tightened the leather belt around his waist with fast, by now accustomed, movements.

“And you. You’ll be there, too, right?” he eagerly asked, seeking reassurance, sounding less sure and more worried than he meant.

Brienne looked at him and took a deep breath.

“What in the Seven Hells are you doing here?” she sighed, and, despite the half-worried, half-exasperated tone of her voice, her eyes were full of expectation.

She truly is as thick as a castle wall.

He straightened his spine and stared. How easy would it be, now, to tell her the truth. The words were already on the tip of his tongue.

After the siege at Riverrun, he had returned to King’s Landing only to find even his last son dead and his sister crowned Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, and yet he stayed. And he stayed when Cersei threatened, almost on a daily basis, to burn the rest of the city to the ground. He stayed despite the growing distrust and uneasiness between him and his twin, as Cersei started to follow only Qyburn’s advice and further isolated herself, alienating even the few houses still loyal to the Lannisters. He should have left a long time ago. But, in truth, the last straw had been what his sweet sister did to Evenfall Hall.

“I couldn’t stay in King’s Landing any longer, not after –

Tell her, you craven!”

“She attacked Tarth,” he blurted, avoiding her eyes.

Brienne recoiled and when he ventured a glance in her direction again, she looked pale and shocked as though that was the last thing she had expected to hear.

Jaime took two steps ahead and his right hand rose, lingering in the space between them before he could realise what he was doing. When he spoke, his voice was fierce and thick with emotion: “I’m begging you to believe I haven’t had a part in any of this!”

“I know that!” she promptly said, just as vehemently, the blush on her cheeks bringing an eerie quality to her stunning blue eyes. Not for the first time, that shimmering, intense stare gave him pause. He saw such an unaltered, unflinching faith in him that it took all of his willpower not to fall on the floor and embrace her knees like a supplicant would do in the presence of the Warrior. Or
the Maiden. She was both, to him.

After all the things he had done, she still trusted him, no question asked. She still believed he could be saved.

“I went to the camp, earlier,” she explained, quietly. “I’ve talked to Ashlynn. She said you’ve claimed back the island in my name and left a garrison there, in case Cersei changed her mind.”

The skin touching the golden metal itched painfully and he wanted to rip the damned thing off. Guilt burned in his throat like poisonous bile.

“I was too late.”

Her eyes, so clear moments ago, clouded with the weight of loss and mourning.

His words worked around the lump in his throat: “I should have known. Please, forgive me.”

He hated this, he hated to see that look on her face. He knew Cersei, and what she was capable of, if miffed, and yet he had underestimated her. The crown hadn’t changed her nature, it had only revealed it. Her heart had always been hateful and merciless and completely blinded by vengeance. Whereas this brave woman in front of him, still standing after losing everything she had held dear…

“None of it is your fault, Jaime.”

*She doesn’t hate me.*

“I’m grateful, for what you did for my people.”

No, she didn’t hate him: she simply was returning his honour back to him for the umpteenth time, piece by piece. And each time, it was a little bit cleaner, and whiter.

*Dear Gods, is she even real?*

He swallowed, stunned, and speechlessly nodded to the door, not trusting his own voice.

But Brienne hadn’t taken two steps toward it that he frowned, suddenly remembering something that’s been irking him since he put foot on the Great Hall of Tarth.

“Brienne?”

Her hand paused on the doorknob as she turned.

“What are your family words?”

Her eyes became impossibly tender and sad. “Our Beauty Never Dies,” she said, and in that moment Jaime thought she truly could be the Maiden reincarnated.

The short walk to the Great Hall was made in strained silence; to escort him, besides Brienne and his four dour guards, there was Ser Davos Seaworth: it was the first time the two met, but he recognised the Hand of the King by the little sack he held around his neck, which, Jaime knew,
carried the fingers Stannis had cut as punishment for his years as a smuggler. He had also heard that the knight had fought valiantly in the Battle of the Blackwater and had lost a son to the wildfire.

*My brother did that.*

When they reached the gallery, Brienne tensed next to him.

“Don’t say or do anything stupid!” she said with a hardened look that brooked no argument.

Clear as day, memories of him tied to a tree screaming ‘Sapphires!’ at the top of his lungs and jumping into a bear pit stormed his head… Don’t say or do anything stupid…right…

Despite the situation, a laughter bubbled inside his chest.

*This woman doesn’t know me at all!*

He watched as she swiftly left his side and disappeared beyond a secondary back door. One of the guards behind him gave him a hard push as the Onion Knight opened the double doors.

He stepped in.

Even though the huge stone hearth was merrily crackling, the Great Hall of Winterfell was still unbelievably cold.

His mind conjured up that same room, all decked out for the feast and lightened up by hundreds of candles on the candelabra, the air thick with music and the delicious smell of roasted pork, freshly baked bread, garlic and herbs, and amidst the smoke and the laughter, Robert, completely drunk, with that hated stag crown on his stupid, empty head…a disgrace of a king, only interested in mingling at the tables of the lesser lords and Stark bannermen, stuffing his mouth with stew, pudding and ale. He should have kept his arse glued to the chair next to his Queen, while he spoke of politics and dynastic marriages with Ned Stark. Instead, even then, in front of his best friend and his family, Robert had insulted Cersei, grooping and fondling each and every maidservant and table wench who had appeared to be within grabbing distance, for the whole evening, right in Cersei’s, and Jaime’s, face.

No wonder he had easily consented to Cersei’s wishes, when, the following morning, she had asked him to stay in the castle, while everyone else was busy with the hunt.

*And what a perverse satisfaction I felt when she whispered in my ear that she was mine, only mine, as I filled her.*

Jaime looked around himself: the hall was austere back then, and even more so now.

The tables were gone, as well as the magnificent tapestries showing the direwolf and the heart tree in the Godswood: a single banner with the white direwolf of the new King was gracing the bare walls and, at the far end of the room, there was a simple dais from which Jon Snow waited, one half-sister sitting on each side, and, standing right next to him, a redheaded man Jaime recognised as the wildling hitting the side of his head with an axe.

His left hand clutched his sword’s hilt, just as Brienne reappeared in the hall and positioned herself on the dais next to Sansa. She shot a warning glare to the bearded bear and made a point to completely ignore *him*.

Lord Snow stared down with a scowl on his scarred face and his unsheathed longsword leaning on
Jaime remembered as if it were yesterday the first time they spoke to each other; a green lad barely out of boyhood, checking the new, polished sword he meant to give to his sister before setting off for the Wall. That same sword which now hung proudly from Arya's belt. The boy had been young and inexperienced, then, and Jaime had his fun teasing him and exploiting his doubts and insecurities with his usual sarcastic cruelty and smugness. He was the best swordsman of the Seven Kingdoms, after all, the firstborn son of Westeros’ most powerful family talking to a bastard, and he gladly took the opportunity to assert all his superior nobility and greater prestige and status. The boy had squirmed under his aggressive scrutiny and Jaime had basked in his embarrassed discomfort, while he made a show of talking about the Night’s Watch as an elite force just as distinguished and respected as the Kingsguard and not like the receptacle of the filth and scum of the realm like both of them privately knew it was.

His own words still resounded loud and stark in his mind, but now they were veiled by a disappointed bitterness: it's only for life.

Jaime realised now, for the first time, that, behind the flippant remarks, there was also a warning, albeit somehow unintentional, buried deep in his words.

It’s only for life.

Yes. Jaime would know. He knew exactly what it meant to forsake everything else and bargain his future, his life, his honour, his own soul, for a damned cloak, whether it be white or black.

“Come closer, Ser,” Jon Snow instructed him.

Jaime’s lips twitched in a sour smile. Ser. Too much kindness.

“I must thank you, I suppose,” he started without preamble, and without a bow, “for returning my sword and hand. I’d be lost without them. May I enquire about my men and my captains’ wellbeing?”

“Your army is faring well and has been quartered outside the gates. You’ll be allowed to return to them once we're done here.”

A suspicious brow rose.

“You’re not a prisoner, my lord, despite what the first impressions may tell.”

“Yes,” his eyes flashed with vicious contempt as they moved to the sour-looking wildling, “I was wondering what happened to the famed northern hospitality.”

“It died when you pushed our brother from the Broken Tower,” Sansa glared at him like a true Queen of the North, in act if not in name, stiff and frosted like a block of ice. But her hands, grabbing both armrests of her chair until her knuckles turned white, were betraying her inner turmoil.

Jon shifted his sword between his knees and leaned out with both his palms resting on the direwolf-shaped pommel: “Is it true?”

He gravely nodded.

“Why?”
Jaime let out a distressed sigh. Lord Snow could very well take an educated guess about the reason why, but he gathered that there would be no point whatsoever in being tight-lipped right now.

_I might as well come clean about all my wrongdoings and speak some uncomfortable truths: everyone seems to already have an opinion about it, anyway._

He looked up to Brienne, standing there with her sapphire eyes bereft of judgment, fearless for truth, her strength shining even against his sins.

How he envied that sureness!

“He saw us,” he admitted, more to her than Jon. Brienne did not react, but for a slight pinch of her lips, as though bravely bracing herself for what was to come. _She’s already carrying in her heart the burden of my other secrets, what’s one more crime to atone for?_

His eyes moved again to the boy sitting in front of him.

“Me and Cersei. Fucking. I’ve pushed him because I feared he might tell somebody. If the fact had reached Robert’s ears… you’ve made Robert’s acquaintance long enough to draw your own conclusions… his nature had never been much inclined to forgiveness. He would’ve had my sister’s head on a pike, and the children’s too.”

“And yours.”

“And mine,” he conceded with a tip of his head. “I’m not that virtuous a knight to deny that I did what I did to save my own skin, too.”

Not his most shining hour, clearly.

Cersei was there, frantically clutching her gowns, trying to cover her nakedness, panicking, pleading… _He saw us. He saw us._

He acted.

It was done, there was no point in brooding over the matter now.

“You’re admitting to the crime, why should I spare your life?”

“Because, as absurd as it might seem to you, I’ve already paid the debt in full.”

He raised his golden hand and gave it a slight shake.

“You’ve attempted to murder a child whose only fault has been not listening to his mother’s bidding. Do you think that losing your sword hand is restitution enough?” Jon uttered, with more than a hint of disbelieving scorn in his tones.

“How many deaths the war between our families has sowed?” he fought back. “My firstborn executed Lord Eddard, and then he got poisoned shortly after. Robb and Lady Catelyn have been murdered at the Red Wedding. My own father was shot to death by my Imp of a brother. Myrcella and Tommen were good, decent kids and they died anyway! If it’s any consolation for you, yes, I think that’s enough retribution for the deaths and the maiming my family caused, directly or indirectly, to yours.”

“We’re not keeping score, here, my lord,” Sansa said. “I was saddened to hear about Tommen and Myrcella, I’ve never wished them ill. They’ve always been nice to me.”
Her eyes were cold, but there was a sympathetic frankness in her voice. Jaime found himself unable to speak.

*She looks a lot like Cat.*

“None of us wishes for the innocent to die to balance the scales. We’re not in the South, where children’s death is a way like another to extort vengeance.”

“Oh, and what is the North’s way?”

“Justice,” Jon Snow answered.

“Justice,” he snorted. *More like hypocrisy.* “Wait to have children of your own, if you’re lucky, *Lord Snow,* then we will have this conversation again.”

This, mercifully, shut him up, if only for a moment.

“Arya told me what happened in the Westerlands,” he resumed, his jaw working nervously. “She also said you swore an oath to Lady Catelyn to protect her daughters and never raise arms against Stark or Tully again.”

Jaime paused and looked up to Brienne: she watched him expectantly and gave him an almost imperceptible nod of encouragement.

“For you trust Lady Brienne?”

“Lady Brienne’s actions has always been beyond reproach,” he acknowledged, regarding her with warm eyes. “I’d trust her with my life. She’s family.”

The wench seemed oddly touched by this admission; the lines of tension on her face loosened and relaxed as she shared with Jon a little, private smile of gratitude.

“Then you also know that honour compels her to tell the truth,” Jaime said. “She can confirm everything Arya told you about me.”

“We both swore that oath to your mother,” Brienne took his hint and pressed on, her hand proudly gripping Oathkeeper’s hilt. “Ser Jaime gave me this sword: ‘You’ll be defending Ned Stark’s daughter with Ned Stark’s own steel’, he said when he charged me to find you.”

She craned her neck to address Arya too: *“Both of you!”*

The sisters exchanged sheepish looks and Jaime had to conceal a smirk, for he recognised very well that forceful tone. It was the same tone the wench used with him any time she pestered him with talks of honour and duty.

“You know the story,” Brienne said to Sansa. The girl took a deep breath and turned her crystalline eyes on Widow’s Wail’s gold and cherrywood scabbard.

“That sword, Oathkeeper’s sister, was forged from my father’s greatsword. Joffrey used it to cut down books,” she sounded disgusted.

*I don’t blame her; Joffrey was a demented cunt.*

“Hopefully, now that I’ve returned it to you, it can be put to better use. These swords belong to the North. They’re supposed to be wielded together.”
“And the army you’ve led here?” Jon inquired.

“The North is not at peace, yet. You rule over a land as big as a small continent and you currently don’t have the numbers to secure it. Daenerys Stormborn has landed in Dragonstone and my sister would love nothing more than to crush all of you like beetles: divided you won’t stand a chance against both enemies. You need these ten thousand men.”

“So, in short, that’s an alliance against the Iron Throne you’re offering.”

“An alliance? To you?” he sneered. “No. I’m just providing a blunt force. I’m still not sure if you’re worth my pledge.”

Jon’s discontent was palpable.

There was something, in the way he pursed his lips, oddly familiar, but Jaime couldn’t put his fingers on it.

“My father oft talked about you. My sisters and I have heard the story many times… How he found you sitting on that throne…your sword still dripping with your king’s blood.”

Jaime’s mouth contorted in anger.

“Yes, you know everything, do you?” he cut sharp and deep.

But, in truth, what would this kid know?

He had sat down on that blasted chair because he had been fucking tired beyond words. He hadn’t been sleeping for three days straight and he had just killed his king, the king who ordered him to bring him his father’s head and who with his last breath still invoked the city’s destruction: his legs simply weren’t supporting him anymore.

“I know a pretty funny story too, since we’re sharing tales about honour, or lack thereof; weren’t you a sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch, Lord Snow? How was it again? ‘I shall wear no crowns and win no glory’? Yet, here you are, the King in the North! So, as far as oathbreakers go, you’re not that better than me, after all.”

Jon narrowed his eyes at him. “I died, murdered by my own men. My watch has ended.”

Jaime had caught some snippet of gossip about it, while travelling North… the betrayal of his fellow brothers, the return to life thanks to some Red Priestess’ dark spell… Jaime wasn’t exactly up-to-date with the details, he would have to ask Brienne about it, but he still couldn’t quite bring himself to believe it, although the man was right there in front of him, alive enough to confirm the tale and be a pain in the ass.

He grimaced, his head tilting ironically from one side to the other.

“Technicalities.”

“If it’s not an alliance you’re seeking, why are you here? I’m still not quite clear on the concept.”

He glanced down at his fake appendance. The hand that pushed Bran out of a window, the hand that had gripped his sister’s ankle when they were born, had been cut away, as payment for Brienne’s maidenhead. For a long time, he couldn’t see what was left behind, beside the gaping, empty space when once there was his glory. And his shame. For a long time, he had been wondering who he was, short of that hand… Kingslayer, Oathbreaker, man without honour, sister-
fucker… these names still belonged to him, maimed or not, but, of late, he oft caught himself striving for new possibilities. New names.

Goldenhand the Just.

He still had a long way to go, but somewhere he must start.

He raised his eyes again.

“Lady Stark, I’ll make another oath, to you and you alone.”

Sansa squared her shoulders.

“Speak up, I’m listening.”

“Robb and Rickon are dead. But you’re still one brother short: what is the last news you’ve got of Brandon?”

“One of my brothers in the Watch saw him at the Nightfort,” Jon said. “He was heading north of the Wall with Hodor, Summer and Howland Reed’s son and daughter. Sam helped them go through the Black Gate. That was two years ago,” he added with a discouraged breath.

Jaime held his gaze and deliberately said: “He might be still alive.”

The lad survived when nobody expected him to, was it that far-fetched to think that he might have gotten through the cold and whatever menace was lying beyond that Wall unscathed for so long? If Jaime were a man who believed in such trivial things as fate and happenstance, he would go as far as to admit that everything had already been written in the stars, as some Volantene merchant would poetically claim, and he would gladly sit back and wallow in acceptance of a necessity predetermined by an external force, call it Gods or fortune.

But he wasn’t a thinker like Tyrion was.

He was a man of action. And so act he must.

*I can’t change the past, but I can do something about the present time.*

He took a step toward Sansa: “I pushed Bran out of a window, I made him a cripple. Now let me try and get him back to you.”

Brienne flinched and threw him a stunned, fretful look.

*So much for not doing stupid things.*

“You want to ride north, go beyond the Wall and hope to find a crippled boy, a simple-minded half-giant, a direwolf and the Reeds siblings lost in the Land of Always Winter?” Ser Davos asked, astonished.

“I was hoping I wouldn’t have to venture that farther north. I didn’t come here to have the fingers of my only hand falling off for the cold.”

The wildling barked a laugh and jeered at him: “Do ya hear that? He jests! The pretty boy doesn’t even know what he’s talking about!”

*I truly dislike you.*
“Have you ever fought a wight, my lord?” Davos stepped in. “A white walker? Have you ever had eyes look at you so blue that your insides turn to ice just by staring?”

He almost gave himself away by throwing a fleeting look in Brienne’s direction. I had blue eyes staring at me, all right, but usually when that happens, my insides turn up in flames, not ice.

“Davos is right. You won’t survive an hour beyond the Wall,” Jon stated, and then he stood up –

“That’s why I’m coming with you.”

“What?”

“Jon!”

“Your Grace!”

Lord Snow ignored the outraged cries from his sisters and Ser Davos and stepped down the dais.

“I’ve been idle for far too long. And now that even Arya has returned… I must know what happened to Bran, too. I already had in mind to arrange a search party with rangers months ago, but I couldn’t ask the Night’s Watch to sacrifice able men for such a personal matter.”

“You’re the King!” the Onion Knight stressed. “If anything happens to you, Winterfell…

“Winterfell will be left in my sister’s more than capable hands. As long as Bran is missing, Sansa is the true Wardeness of the North and rightful Lady of Winterfell. She will rule in my stead. He is my brother, Davos,” he added, putting a hand on the older man’s shoulder. “If he still lives it’s my duty to bring him home safely. If he’s dead…I only hope I won’t have to kill him again. I have to try, to at least find his remains so that he can rest here, where he belongs, with our father.”

An almost impossible task, Jaime mused. If the kid is truly dead, there won’t be anything, not even a split hair, to bring back home. Yet, the roots of a newfound respect for this young man sprouted deep inside him and, without knowing why, the realisation warmed his heart.

He had guts, Jaime would grant him that.

“Go back to your camp, my lord,” the King addressed him, tough and resolute, “speak with your men, get as much rest as you can. At first light, we ride to the Wall.”

“This is a suicide, plain and simple!”

“You don’t even know where to start looking for!”

“The boy is most certainly dead!”

What had started like a cheerful supper with his captains, all of them pleased to see him still alive and mostly unscathed, turned into a heated argument as soon as Jaime expressed his intentions to ride to the Wall, in search of Brandon Stark: Lord Serrett, Ser Lothar Banefort, and the Brax brothers all voiced their strong disapproval and objections.

“You don’t owe anything to the Starks, my lord! That boy’s fate does not concern us!” Ser Flement complained hotly. The twinkle of the amethysts over his silver breastplate was irritating.
“I’m not commanding you to come with me, Ser Flement, if that’s what troubles you! We wouldn’t want to expose your fair skin to the merciless northern winds.”

The younger Brax brother flushed with anger. Jaime hadn’t the time, nor the patience, for stupid brawls with his own men.

“Get out,” he curtly ordered. “All of you! Ser Lyle, stay.”

One by one, all his captains left the tent, except Bronn, who, for some reason, thought he could ignore his commands almost on a daily basis.

Strongboar stomped to the table, where plates and bowls of hot stew had been set aside, and now a map of the North, detailing the disposition of the nineteen fortifications guarding the hundred leagues of the frozen barrier, was spread out.

“Jaime, I’ll be honest with you,” the burly knight started in a surprisingly soft, respectful voice, concern etched in his scarred, broad forehead. “Your father was a cold-hearted, self-entitled dickhead and, by the Gods, I could never stand the sight of him, but I was fond of your mother. A true Lady, Joanna was. When she died, I’ve made a silent vow to help protect her children, all three of them,” he breathed deeply. “Cersei is too far gone, I fear. I can’t fail you either. I beg of you: reconsider this mission, or, at the very least, take a part of the army along with you.”

Jaime leaned both his hands on the table and perused the map in front of him.

“I won’t move men up north until I know exactly what we’re up against. I’ve got to see for myself what’s going on beyond that thrice-damned piece of ice.”

*If what they say it’s true, may the Gods protect us all.*

“I’ll take Bronn with me. In my absence, the Lannister army is yours, Ser Lyle. You have your orders: set our base of operations here in Winterfell. Lord Snow will soon need to strengthen his hold on Torrhen’s Square and the Dreadfort, which currently don’t have any ruling lordship and have been practically deserted, so be ready to send garrisons there, if need arises.”

*Once I’ll have a clearer picture of the situation north of Last Hearth, I’ll know what to do with the rest of the army.*

“What if we are to receive news from King’s Landing?”

He chewed on his bottom lip. Cersei would have been made aware of the army’s defection, by now. There would be no turning back.

“Burn anything with my sister’s sigil.”

Ser Lyle exhaled loudly, but didn’t comment any further.

Alone again, Jaime fell heavily on a chair, massaging the side of his head, where a lump had formed. Bronn had stayed in the background, strangely quiet, during the council, and now was pouring a goblet of wine for both of them.

“My brother told me you went beyond the Wall,” he said as the sellsword sat down across him.

“Aye, but it was years ago, in the summer. And the only things I needed to worry about were wildling’s raids and bear attacks.”
“Do you believe these rumours?”

“Northerners have a wild imagination, but if even dragons are back on the continent…” Bronn shrugged, “who really knows… Either way I warn you, if it’s too much cold out there, I’m going to bury myself deep inside some whore’s thighs in Mole’s Town and wait for your return there. There was this pretty girl… white teeth, wonderful hands… Aemma, I think her name was. I wonder if she still remembers me.”

Jaime laughed. “You wouldn’t make a very good Brother of the Night’s Watch, I’m afraid.”

“Believe me, that will never be an issue. You Lannisters have spoiled me too well. And black isn’t a good colour on me, anyway.”

Snapping his knees with a loud groan, Bronn stood up, took his still half-full goblet, and with a last friendly pat on his shoulder, retreated to his own tent.

I should rest, he brooded, as he lied down on his cot, but sleep eluded him.

Too many thoughts in his throbbing head, and soon, dawn was upon them.

Jaime scrubbed away the weariness with a basin of frozen water, donned his hand and armour and sat back on the table, waiting for breakfast to be served.

He was about to tuck in his black pudding when Bronn showed up, looking well rested and freshly shaved. And he had the wench with him. He immediately scrambled to his feet.

“Which part of ‘don’t do anything stupid’ exactly you didn’t understand?”

She was angry. Bronn hid a snort and retreated with a cocky bow.

Jaime grinned at her and gave a short, noncommittal shrug.

“I thought you found my reckless exuberance youthful and charming!”

Her big mouth set into a straight line. Oh, if looks could kill! He threw her an apologetic smile and gestured for her to sit down and share the meal with him. The wench wasn’t having any of it.

“Have you come to wave goodbye?” he quipped, piercing a piece of bacon with the knife.

“I’ve been granted permission by Lady Sansa to ride off with you.”

The cutlery clattered on the plate; it was his turn to be incensed. He stood up.

“You shouldn’t have!”

“Oh, so you can be all reckless and exuberant, riding off with the rescue party as it pleases you, but I can’t?”

The stupid cow was purposefully mistaking his meaning.

“We don’t know what we could find beyond the Wall!”

“That’s precisely why I’m coming with you! Our swords are meant to fight together, side by side, you said that!”

She was turning his own words around: he never meant for her to risk her own life to follow him.
Why would she, anyway?

He clenched his jaw, his appetite lost.

“You’re even more annoying than I recalled!”

“Supposing that you find him, what do you think will happen?”

Jaime didn’t have a reply to it. He didn’t think that far ahead. For sure, to say sorry would not give the boy back the legs he had taken away.

He doubted that Bran would ever forgive him.

Why should he?

*If I will ever meet Locke again, I surely won’t thank him for cutting my hand off.*

*Brandon asking his brother for my head is certainly more likely.*

He looked up to her and suddenly the answer was fast on his tongue.

“Everything started when I’ve pushed him from that blasted window. I have to try.”

What was in those blue eyes that held the power to rip unwilling confessions out of him every time?

She moved closer.

“The man you’re trying to make amends for… that man doesn’t exist anymore. Perhaps he never did.”

Oh, stubborn wench!

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

But Brienne stood her ground, unflinching. He shook his head.

“What would you say if I told you that less than eight months ago I’ve threatened Edmure Tully to put his firstborn, his only son, into a trebuchet and send him flying inside the walls if he wouldn’t surrender Riverrun? Am I a reformed man?”

She paused, studying him.

“This happened before or after our meeting?”

He frowned in confusion, sensing a trap.

“After, but I don't see how…”

A shy smile and a blush blossomed on her face.

“You just proved my point, then. You’ve promised not to raise arms against Tully or Stark, and you haven’t. You’ve promised to take Riverrun without bloodshed, and you did. You’ve threatened Lord Edmure because you knew you wouldn’t have to follow up.”

“I don’t make idle threats.”
“I know you don’t,” she hastened to add, “but Edmure…I think it’s fair to say he’s a weak man. You know it as well as I do. You played on his insecurities and his love for his family and you knew he would yield. You’re a good judge of character, after all, and as much as it annoys me to admit it, you’re a master at pushing buttons.”

Her cheeks flared up when she said that, and he knew she was remembering those first days of their acquaintance, when he took any chance he got to debase her, as a woman and as a knight, playing easily with her feelings of inadequacy and the guilt she bore for Renly’s murder.

But Brienne didn’t seem to hold any grudge against him for his past stupidity and blindness, if the light dancing in her eyes were any indication.

She was daring him to refute her and he contemplated to kiss her, just to wipe that smug smirk over her ugly face.

“You’re hopeless, wench,” he muttered, the moniker sounding more tender and intimate than he had intended.

The smirk now became a full-force smile that showed her crooked teeth and made the astonishing sapphire of her eyes shimmer even brighter.

“And you’re a good man,” she whispered back, and he was lost.

In a few moments, they would be battling against the cold winter, surrounded by snow and death.

He didn’t want to leave this tent, yet.

Ever.

She wasn’t wearing gloves and Jaime couldn’t resist the temptation any longer: he took her right hand in his, turning its palm up so that he could trace the lines and the callouses with his thumb. Brienne’s breath hitched.

“I’ve always wondered…how can your hands be so strong when wielding a sword and feel so gentle at the same time? It’s a conundrum.”

Flames were spreading across her cheeks and neck, but she didn’t retract her hand. Her eyes shone like a pulsing star, by the light of the brazier.

*She has pretty eyelashes; how come I’ve never noticed before?*

Her pulse spiked up madly when he closed his hand around her shaking wrist.

And then the bloody tent flapped open again and the spell broke.

*I will kill Bronn, slowly and painfully, I swear it by all that’s holy!*

But when he turned, it wasn’t Bronn standing at the entrance.

“Who let you in?” he growled.

The redheaded oaf’s burning stare shifted from him to Brienne: if her face was red before, now it had turned a commendable Lannister crimson. She looked delectably guilty, as though she had just been ravaged.

How he hoped for the stupid wildling to come to this same conclusion!
“Jon has sent for you,” the bear said to her, disdainfully ignoring him. “We’re leaving.”

Jaime moved between them, the lion’s claws ready behind his fake smile: “I haven’t got the chance yet to thank you for the kind welcome I’ve received yesterday’s morning.”

The wildling’s eyes glared at him with open hostility.

“Why don’t ya just do it now, pretty boy? Let’s see what ya can do with yer bare hands. Well,” he looked down and his teeth flashed behind a nasty smirk, “hand, anyway.”

Blood rushed to his head and, in a blur of red, Jaime took a fast step toward him, but Brienne was faster. She stepped in and separated them before they could come to blows.

“Stop it! Stop it right now!”

She put her hand on his breastplate and pushed hard; he barely heard her words beyond the loud hiss in his ears.

“Break it off, or I swear I’ll knock both your asses in the dust! Tormund!”

His nostrils flaring, the wildling lifted his eyes to her: there was a fire in them that didn’t have anything to do with the heat of the fight.

Everything clicked together.

Jaime snapped his head back to Brienne, incredulous.

Brandon Stark, the winter, the Wall, the white walkers…all forgotten…

Tormund puffed up his chest and with a last deadly look at him stomped out.

He at once turned to her: “That wildling?!? Are you fucking serious?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You…Did you…Are you…”

The Gods be merciful, he was babbling!

She was staring at him uncomprehendingly, a deep frown between her eyes. Then she spun on her heels, and, without even deigning him of an answer, exited the tent.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

He ran, literally *ran*, after her.

“Brienne!”

He clutched her shoulder when he reached her.

Usually they tried to keep touching to a minimum, if not necessarily required. It simply wasn’t a thing they did. Personal boundaries, et all. Now in less than five minutes he held her hand and grabbed her arm. That was more contact than the last three years combined.

*Personal space be damned! This is bloody serious!*

“What’s going on?” he asked resolutely.
“With what?”

“You and that ginger thug!”

Brienne furiously blushed, then blanched almost immediately.

“This is hardly your business,” she said, deadpan, disentangling her arm. “Get your horse. We’ll leave right away.”

She dumped him in the middle of the camp, with his mouth stupidly agape, and panic and irritation spreading out of him in waves. Jaime looked around, not really paying any attention to the sounds of the camp slowly waking up, and spotted Podrick chatting amiably with Lynn next to the barracks.

He marched to them and grabbed the lad by the scruff of the neck, spun him around, almost lifting him up in the process, and without preamble he hissed: “Your lady-ser and that Tormund fellow: spit it out! Now!”

“There’s nothing between them, my lord,” Pod hurriedly replied. Jaime’s hand dropped.

“I mean, apart from the fact that he’s clearly, completely smitten with her. He always tries to beat her during sparring sessions, often calls her beautiful in public and a couple of times he has even attempted to steal her.”

“Steal her?”

“Aye, my Lord! For the wildlings that is pretty much a declaration of love.”

His face fell.

“What does Lady Brienne say about this?”

Pod just shrugged.

“Podrick! Tell me!” he sounded so desperate that he wanted to punch himself.

“I don’t know! She is flattered, I guess? It’s not like my lady confides in me with matters of the heart!”

“Yes, but you’re her damn squire, aren’t you, you’re with her for the most part of the day, you sleep in the room next to hers!”

Pod’s brows knitted in confusion. “What does my lord mean?”

He was about to lose the last bit of patience and self-control he possessed.

Do I really have to spell it out for him?

“Did she…have they…”

And again with the blabbering. Gods, what was happening to him?!

Podrick’s eyes grew the size of saucers as the meaning of his enquiries became obvious.

“Oh, that! Of course not!” he exclaimed, nonchalantly dismissing the thought with a wave of his hand. “Lady Brienne always said that if someone ever tried to get near her chambers unsolicited,
they would leave with some of their parts missing.”

The tension Jaime felt marginally loosened, and he finally drew a breath he didn’t notice he was holding.

*Unsolicited*…what about the solicited ones?

At least the wench did not do anything irreparable. Yet.

It was a good thing they were to hit the road presently.

Pod was staring at him, with a knowing, deeply amused look; brilliant, now even the squire was making fun of him.

He smacked him on the nape of his neck, not hard, but enough to leave a red mark. As a warning.

“Stop smirking and go get your lady’s horse ready!”

Podrick trotted to the gates, muttering under his breath, his smile obliterated, but Jaime held no hope: come nightfall, all the camp would know about his little outburst.

He headed toward his horse; Bronn was already there, breaking fast with an apple.

“Well, that was a love scene worthy of the Mummer’s Ship in Braavos.”

“Don’t!” he held up a finger. He wasn’t in the mood for Bronn’s japes too. The sellsword snickered quietly.

“You know, Jaime, women like her, no matter how homely they look, never die virgins.”

He flashed him a meaningful look: “Bonn, I warn you, be careful of how you speak, if you care for your teeth.”

“I meant no disrespect for the lady! I was complimenting her! I like her! But you, my lord, need to get your head out of your golden ass, respectfully speaking. She won’t wait forever, you know? And from the way some of the other soldiers look at her, I think it’s fair to say there’s not only, how did you call him?, ‘that ginger thug’ vying for her virtue.”
Plenty of time to talk about many interesting topics.

He put the spurs to his white courser and moved closer to Brienne’s black mare.

Her hands tightened around the reins.

“So,” he cleared his throat, “you and that red-bearded bear…”

She scowled.

“There’s nothing going on between him and me. And I’ll thank you if you call him by his name.”

“Tormund!” he spat the name as though it were an insult. “What kind of name is it, anyway? Does he have a family name?”

“His people call him Tormund Giantsbane.”

“Well, that is a battle name sure to instil a sacred fear of the Stranger in the enemy.”

“I’ll have you know that he’s actually a pretty remarkable warrior, and he makes a striking figure on the battlefield!”

He snorted. Now she was just trying to make him jealous.

“You fancy him!”

She took a deep breath and stared back at the road ahead of them.

“I do not.”

“You do!”

His mind evoked a flashback of himself, younger, more stupid and with more hands walking through the woods of the Riverlands, while she tried to deny her feelings for Renly, failing miserably at it.

They were back to square one, it seemed.

Only, Renly was a funnier topic and a rival positively a lot less daunting.

“I like him…just not in the lecherous way you’re making it sound.”

“Oh, I see. It’s all pure and spiritual. A marriage of souls. I bet he thinks about it precisely on the same line as you,” he grumped.

Peeved, she rolled her eyes, not really getting the point of the conversation, and sputtered: “What…why do you…Tormund is well respected, he’s honest and honourable, he has a good heart and if you think that –”

“Has he been courting you?” he looked pointedly at her. She blushed and gave herself away by clutching the hem of her cloak.

Of course. The oaf with the stupid beard wouldn’t court a maid with flowers and sweets.

“He gave you that wolf pelt, didn’t he?”

She squared her shoulders and averted his eyes.
“This conversation is over.”

He chuckled.

“And here I thought that a new armour and a sword of rare Valyrian steel would’ve been enough!”

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Brienne gaping at him.

Grinning, he spurred his courser to a trot and left his mulish wench to her own conclusions.

Chapter End Notes

And they’re finally together again!!
While I was writing this, I realised with horror that in the TV-Show Jaime pushes Bran with his LEFT hand, not his right. Luckily, in the books, Martin leaves this detail more open to interpretation, so I’ve worked around this ambiguity. If any of you notices any incongruity with it, let me know!
Brienne’s family words were actually a second choice: the best Tarth motto I’ve ever read is still the one written on the excellent “A Walk of Frost and Fire (and Death and Snow)” by LuxEvergreen: ”The first to shine; the last to fade” (chap. 5), which is absolutely perfect for Tarth, with the whole evening star symbolism… I’m seething with envy, lol!
Talkin’ about jealousy… Jealous!Jaime, everyone! What’s not to love?
A last moment of frivolity before we plunge into action and I start killing off beloved characters.
Kiddin’.
(Sort of)
The spring’s scalding water was leaving angry marks on her white skin, but Sansa gladly welcomed the sensation anyway: buried in the pond to the chin, every inch of her body was revived by the warmth, while the hands of winter slapped vigorously her face, exposed to the godswood’s frosty air. The weather was biting, but the contrast helped to sweep away the numbness in her limbs and mind both.

Rumour had it that the Queen on the Obsydian Throne in Dragonstone had risen from the flames, twice, and that neither fire nor hot water could touch her. Sansa’s skin, normally so pale and delicate, on the other side, was now reddened and swollen.

She relaxed her head against the soft, damp moss behind her and let out a loud, satisfied sigh, as the knots across her shoulders and back started to loosen and tension glided across her arms in gentle ripples which made her fingertips tingling pleasurably; the reprieve was a much-needed, refreshing change from the chaos that had been her life in the past ten days.

They didn’t even have the time to rejoice for Arya’s return, that Jon had left for the Wall with the Kingslayer; Bran had constantly been in her mind ever since, to the point that even in her dreams, she had started to hear his voice. *I’m flying back home, sister,* he would whisper, *wait for me!*

Almost the voice of a ghost, disconnected and far away from her same plane of existence; she had a hard time picturing her brother, now. A young man of ten-and-five, maybe with a hint of a reddish stubble on his chin and upper lip.

*He won’t be anymore the boy I remember, the scrawny, nimble squirrel dangling upside down from one of the heart tree’s branches.*

But he was still alive, Sansa was certain of it. And if there was someone who could bring him home, that was Jon.

With her eyes closed and a secret, confident smile tugging at her lips, Sansa breathed in the familiar scent of the sleepy godswood all around her; the acrid smell of rotten eggs, which seemed...
to surface directly from the earth’s depths, didn’t bother her any longer. She was used to it, by now. In the distance, the spicy smell of bonfires rose from the Lannister and wildlings camps and from Winter Town: the strong fragrance of rotten leaves and damp, rough pine bark crusted in ice mixed with a metallic, slightly mildewed edge, not dissimilar to the tang of a copper coin on her tongue, triggered her memory and she found herself remembering the echo of long-forgotten summer days.

This had always been one of her favourite spots in Winterfell: the hot, silvery mists rising from the pond still gave the place the mysterious look of a fairy-tale landscape borrowed straight from one of Nan’s old stories.

To an eleven years old girl with a fervid imagination and a secret craving for adventure, every blue spruce was an ice dragon, every majestic soldier pine a giant, every beast stealthily lurking through sentinel trees and bushes of thorny holly and hawthorn a skinchanger in disguise.

As a child, she would often come here, alone or with Jeyne Poole, sometimes for hours, picking blue roses and coldsnaps, and while Arya and the boys re-enacted the legendary battles between the ancient Kings of Winter and the Kings of the First Men for the control of the barrowlands, Sansa shivered thinking about the Night’s King and his corpse bride and dreamed of a princess with her same red hair and blue eyes, kidnapped either by the children of the forest or the grumkins beyond the Wall and buried under the roots of the heart tree, waiting for a faceless knight in a shining white armour to come and rescue her.

She remembered vividly when she went there, the morning they set off for King’s Landing.

I truly believed I would never see Winterfell again, and I rejoiced at the thought. I prayed for Brandon’s recovery, and I prayed even harder for my handsome, brave green-eyed prince to fall in love with me and make me his Queen.

Tilting her head backwards, Sansa popped her eyes open: through the snowflakes, the heart tree’s red-blood leaves seemed to shelter her in a cocoon, whispering to her in an inscrutable language.

Stupid girl, I should’ve never left.

If you wouldn’t have, another voice that sounded like Theon murmured through the rustling of leaves, you’d be dead now.

She felt herself closer to her father, in this place.

How many times she had caught him resting against the weirwood’s white, thick trunk, whetting Ice, lost in thought! Was he also listening to the breathing of the woods, like she was now, trying to decipher its meaning? What did it whisper to him?

This was a sacred place, once, but Sansa disconcertedly wondered if perhaps her marriage to Ramsay had somehow tainted it beyond repair.

In the snowy stillness of the afternoon, the only sound was the rippling of water as she ran a gentle hand across her tortured, scarred body, tracing the marks her husband had left.

The heat was making her blood rush faster in her veins. It reinvigorated her and burned away even her wounds, cleansing the recollection of them.

She hadn’t been lying when she told Littlefinger she could still feel what Ramsay did just by standing: for weeks, after she had escaped with Theon’s help, there hadn’t been a single inch of her that didn’t hurt. And even now, in the cold weather especially, the skin around the scars seemed to lose its insensitivity and would stretch and stiffen, puckered and painful, throbbing to the point that
sometimes a warm bath was the only soothing remedy which kept her from whimpering, when she lay sleepless in her own bed, breath ragged and teeth clenched for the pain.

Her hand skidded over her abdomen, along the inside of her thigh, both of them, over her arms… The thin lines on her back, where Ramsay had whipped her more than once… she couldn’t properly reach those, but she could feel them anyway, little bugs crawling just under the skin, ants digging their holes and tunnels, scraping to come out.

Sharp cuts, lacerations, bites, burns, bruises from beating, fractured fingers… to break her body as well as her mind, Ramsay didn’t spare her anything, except the method of torture his family was justly famous for. It wouldn’t have done if she were to walk around Winterfell missing a few inches of her pretty, silky skin.

He had loved her skin; he used to tell her so, often.

During.

And that had been only foreplay.

The act itself… she still could not bring herself to think about it without shuddering in disgust and shame and helplessness.

*I was frightened and disgusted when I stripped in front of Tyrion Lannister, too.*

*I had no idea.*

On her left breast, the jagged scar of the nipple Ramsay had cut out in a fit of rage, after he had found out she had tried to drink moon tea, was shining horribly under the dull light, a purple round hole reminding her daily of the horror she survived, even long after the bruises and the other signs of abuse had started to fade.

For as long as she lived, she would never forget the savage look on his face when he saw the blood spurting from the gash, nor the feel of his lips and teeth scratching at the wound afterwards, completely blind and deaf to her tears and screams, as she begged him to stop.

The screaming only spurred him on.

‘What do you need two nipples for, anyway, my love? One is more than enough to feed the son you’re going to give me,’ he had jeered in a soft, almost tender voice, after he had spent himself in her.

Sansa still thanked the Gods her womb hadn’t quickened, during those months she had braved as Lady Bolton.

*I would have killed it without thinking twice, if I were to become with child.*

There was no pain, nor remorse, in the thought, only the cold, bitter awareness that she could’ve never loved any son borne by him.

Writhing her hands in the desperate attempt to stop the shaking, she scraped at the bottom of the pool for the warm, deep-red sludge which was said by the elder women in Winter Town to have extraordinary, almost miraculous medicinal properties. Sansa knew little to nothing about folk wisdom; she only remembered that, after spending some hours soaking into one of those pools, her mother’s skin was smooth and glowing as though made of mother-of-pearl.
Her own skin was blotchy and covered in scabs and callouses, now, but the viscous clay helped relieve the soreness.

The ground was hard and frozen, under her head; Sansa filled her nostrils with the scent of moss and winter, waiting for her shallow breaths to quell down and for the mud to take effect. *He’s dead, he can’t hurt you now.*

In these last months, she had repeated those words, inside her head, again and again.

The trick not always worked.

She still woke up in her bed, her parents’ bed, in the middle of the night, feeling like her lungs were on fire, startled by the unnamed monsters filling up her nightmares, wrenched and weeping, an uncontrollable sickness causing her empty stomach to heave as she anxiously fumbled with the covers and gripped with trembling fingers the hilt of the dagger she had started to keep under her pillows, as a good habit. Just in case.

Winterfell was full of ghosts, and Ramsay was one of them, now.

‘You can’t kill me. I’m part of you, now.’

He had promised her, and he was right.

His presence was engraved forever in her body, like a map where each scar now underlined the patterns of the ways by which he had possessed her. She didn’t own her body anymore, Ramsay had made it abundantly clear, during their marriage. She was his property, his to do anything he liked, anytime he liked. Little more than a slave. A trophy. Vestiges of war.

With time, she knew, she hoped, the more noticeable scars would heal, but the issue still remained: who had she become, beyond those scars? What had risen from the ashes of her previous life, when she mercilessly turned around and smiled as the hungry hounds barked and ruthlessly ripped flesh and bone from Ramsay’s face?

She feared the answer.

The Boltons, and the Greyjoys before them, had tried to destroy every single happy memory she and her siblings had of these woods, their castle. But she took back what was hers. She took back her own body, and, as Ramsay screamed and screamed in agony, she had promised that nobody would take her choices away from her ever again, manipulating her into believing she was less than nothing, a pawn, lonely and afraid.

*I’m not alone. I’m the Lady of Winterfell, I can’t be frightened by shadows on the wall.*

Peace could still be found in this place, she thought.

These woods were like her.

The quiescence, Sansa knew, was only on the surface. In the ground, deep down the earth, there still was an inner world, surviving under the layers of ice and snow. If she rested her ear on the moss and held her breath long enough, she could almost hear, against the quiet stillness, the hidden activity of the forest, the endless workings of Time which moved and changed the seasons, shaping the contours of the nature around them, preserving the sparkle of life even in apparent death, waiting for spring to bloom again.

She loved the idea that, even in death, life would always find a way. It was both inescapable and
The healing mud worked its magic on her skin, imbuing it with the smells of home and absorbing, in exchange, the poisonous corruption and the ugliness of her scars.

Warmth was lulling her into a light, floating slumber, so she didn’t immediately pick up the crunchy sound of boots on the slippery ground, until it was already dangerously close to the pond.

Sansa roused only to find the huge shadow looming above her head, barely discernible through the milky mist; her heart leapt in her throat as she edgily glided to the other side of the pool and glared; the dark, scarred man stared back, mutely.

Was he spying on her?

“What do you want?” she demanded, hugging her knees against herself under the water’s level.

His eyes darted around them, as though he almost expected to spot enemies on the prowl between the birches and the oaks’ branches. But only black crows rested through the weirwood’s red foliage, still as gargoyles made of dragonglass, guarding the glade with steel-grey and dark brown eyes.

“You shouldn’t be alone in the woods. It’s not safe, out there.”

“This is my home,” her voice rose, taut and stinging. “This is where I belong. Other people have tried to turn Winterfell into a place of fear and hate. They’re all dead, now. And I’m still here. What should I be afraid of?”

The Hound scoffed with a grimace and turned his head to the side: his long, black hair fell like a curtain over the hideous burns maiming his right cheek.

“Anyway, you should always bring a detail wherever you go.”

She boldly pushed herself to her full height, muddy water trickling down arms and legs, and climbed out, noticing with a satisfied smirk that he had averted his eyes straight away with a low, uncomfortable grunt.

At the contact with the cold external air, her skin pebbled with gooseprickles, as the soothing heat from the pool rapidly melted away in steamy puffs of vapour.

Warm towels and dry clothing had already been arranged on a rock next to the heart tree; with her back to the Hound, she cleaned up the residual mud as best as she could in the dimming light, and started to get dressed.

He came to my bed, the night the Blackwater burned, she reminisced, shivering, slightly lightheaded. He was lost, drunk and scared, searching for solace and a song...I touched his marred cheek and he wept against my hand...

She put on her woollen chemise and hose.

He wept and kissed me.

No…

Her hand stopped in mid-air, frozen and heavy under a disconcerting certitude, and the gown’s left sleeve slid off her bare shoulder.
No, that’s not what happened.

Her eyes rose to the heart tree: the crows were watching her unperturbed and the icy breeze through the leaves seemed to hiss remember…remember…

She did remember drowsing under his stained white cloak after he had left, a warm shield against her nightmares, until dawn banished the terrors of the siege with the joyful, victorious sound of the city bells.

And she remembered other kisses, very well: Joffrey’s, sweet and deceitful, Tyrion’s, perfunctory and hesitant, Petyr’s, ardent and greedy, and Ramsay’s, brutal and cruel.

But try as she might now, when she thought about Sandor Clegane, she came up with nothing.

*He pointed a dagger to my throat, he demanded a song, but didn’t kiss me.*

Why then, for all those years, her mind had tricked her into believing he did?

She didn’t understand.

Sansa ventured a cautious look beyond her shoulders. He was staring dauntlessly at her, now, his eyes wild and angered; she followed his look and noticed that the cuts and marks on her exposed arm were visible. With her face burning up in embarrassment and confusion, she hastened to cover herself, feeling like ten thumbs had sprouted on her hands instead of fingers as she laced and buttoned up the gown and clasped the fur-lined cloak around her neck.

The knot pinning her long hair high on her head had come undone, and now humid ringlets were cascading to her hips, blazing fiery against the woods’ whiteness.

Dishevelled and unflinching, she held the Hound’s gaze as tough daring him to say something.

The anger turned into something else, hungry and raw.

She had learned to recognise desire in a man’s eye, by now; such distinctions were imperative, when one wanted to play the game hoping to survive.

And if there was something Cersei had brilliantly taught her, it was that there was power in exploiting a man’s weakness.

*Tears aren’t a woman’s only weapon.*

The Hound had been lusting after her ever since; she was just too stupid and naïve to realise it, back then.

*He wanted to take me away.*

‘No one would hurt you again, or I’d kill them,’ he had said. He had promised he would keep her safe and, by the Gods, amidst the reek of blood and wine and fear, in that terrible night where the air had glowed green, she had believed him.

And then he left her to the malicious scheming of Tywin Lannister and to the cruelty of his crazy grandson.

*I should have gone with him. Spare myself some of the pain. Why didn’t he take me when he had the chance?*
Less than a fortnight past, upon seeing him again after so long, she had called him craven, but Sansa understood now that she had held a grudge against him not because he had fled the battle, but because he had fled without taking her with him.

The thought unsettled her and made her heart jump in her throat.

*I can’t dwell on it, now; I’ll go insane.*

She dabbed her hair and arranged them in a loose tress, then rapidly walked past him, her eyes firmly trained on the ground.

“Are you still afraid of me?” he rasped to her back.

The anguish and dejection in his voice stuck her to the spot, as though her feet had suddenly grown roots. A rugged breath escaped from her lips as she turned: Sandor stood there equally motionless, his cloak gently swaying in the wind; a black, tormented shadow clad in furs and leather, but somehow less imposing than she remembered. For such an introverted man, his brown eyes were remarkably expressive and betrayed a great array of emotions: rage and sorrow wrestled on the surface, but, deep down, she could also read an expectant need to prove himself to her.

Emboldened, Sansa stepped closer and closer, until she could smell the wine in his breath and her eyes could roam at will across his face... searching for what? She had no idea. He seemed to shrivel and shrink in pain under her scrutiny, his mouth twitching disagreeably as though he was enduring some kind of torture.

*I couldn’t bear to look at him, once.*

*Bu now, after all the things I’ve seen, after everything that has been done to me...*

“Scars don’t scare me anymore,” she said, as soft and gentle as she could, as if she was reaching out to a hurt, frightened animal.

No. Scars were the least of her problems. *We all have plenty of them, now,* she considered remembering with a shudder the one she saw on Arya’s belly only a few days ago, when she had accidentally stepped in on her sister as she was undressing: an ugly mark which slashed her stomach almost from hip to hip, and two deep knife wounds on her right side.

Stabbed like Robb and his Queen.

Sansa had been horrified; but when confronted about it, her sister had just shrugged off her worries, shutting herself in, and had morosely replied: ‘A nameless bitch thought it would be funny to stick me full of holes, hoping I’d bleed to death. It didn’t work as planned.’

By the corner of the eye, she studied the Hound’s bulky form, as he fell in step with her.

“Why aren’t you following Arya? Aren’t you her sworn sword, now?” she prodded him.

“She’d give you a black eye for saying that,” the Hound growled. “Your sister is not the most pleasant company when she’s in a good mood. Today she’s not in a good mood. My hands were starting to itch, so I left her in the training yard, practising with wooden sticks and longbows with the younger lads.”

Sansa let out a discouraged sigh.

Arya worried her. Since she got back home, she had retreated even more into herself, spending
most of her time water-dancing with her sword or riding alone in the Wolfswood, like the centaur she had always been.

And she wouldn’t speak, not to her anyway. Arya had told her and Jon about the attempted siege to Casterly Rock, but had been reticent about everything else, to the point that Sansa had to resort to Sandor to at least hear the story of their travels together across the Riverlands and the Vale.

She found out they were at the Twins, the night of the Red Wedding, and if it weren’t for the Hound, Arya probably would have been murdered too; she knew about the fight at the tavern with Joffrey’s men, and how Arya killed the soldier who had previously stolen Needle, and she also knew that they had reached the Eyrie mere days after aunt Lysa’s flight through the Moon Door. When Sansa explained to the Hound that she was actually still there, they both shared a bitter laugh at their mutual bad luck.

And she knew that, after ditching him to die alone from the wounds his clash with Brienne had earned him, Arya went into hiding in Braavos for the better part of the past two years.

Beyond that, nothing.

The only one able to break the layers of ice, apart from Sandor, was that young man who had worn Lannister colours when they had met again in the Great Hall.

*The young man who’s definitely not who Davos says he is.*

And *Arya likes him.*

Sansa couldn’t even tease her about it, as it was a big sister’s legitimate right, for fear of pushing her further away.

She longed for Jon’s reassuring, quiet presence; he would know how to reach her: they’ve always been close.

But in the meantime, she was left to manage alone Arya’s mood swings and sour temper. Davos had suggested letting her simply be. *You’ll know when she’s ready,* he had wisely commented. But Sansa was starting to believe the moment would never come.

“She’s changed,” the Hound’s gruff voice startled her. She tilted her head up, a surprised eyebrow arching as she waited for him to continue. His eyes shifted rapidly to her and then back to the ground. “But so have you, little bird,” he said, somehow sheepishly. “You’ll find your way back to each other.”

By the time they reached Winterfell, the courtyard was almost deserted, except for some scattered Lannister and Glover soldiers, Clem working tirelessly at his forge and Winterfell’s new kennelmaster, Abe, returning from his usual afternoon stroll with the bitches. When they spotted her, Grey Jeyne and Kyra burst into high, playful barks, and yanked their leashes from the kennelmaster’s safe hold.

Sansa patted her knees with an encouraging whistle and bowed to greet them with affectionate scratches on their muzzles and bellies and vigorous rubs on their bluish coat, just as she remembered doing to Lady.

“She’s changed!” she intoned with a pleased lilt above their excited whining. The Red unceremoniously welcomed her by jumping up, almost as tall as Sansa was; she yelped in surprise under the weight of her big, wet paws soiling her dress and fell flat on her bottom with an earthy laugh. The others immediately surrounded her, licking, nipping and nuzzling, their tails wagging
madly. Kyra and Willow rolled on their sides and exposed their rotund bellies, their nipples pink and swollen; the new litters would be born in a little more than a sennight, Abe had predicted, and Sansa had no reason to believe differently.

“Have they been fed?” she asked, appreciating their muscular, slender bodies, and the dangerous energy only barely tamed by their merry, submissive behaviour. The pack was thriving and in perfect shape, to the credit of its master’s excellent work and dedication in re-educating it.

“Aye, my lady. Ravenous as always,” the bald man replied with a mischievous glint.

She patted the Grey’s back. Her favourite. The one who took the first bite out of her husband’s face.

“Good.”

Ramsay was right: the Girls were unbelievably loyal, and they loved her to bits.

Maude trotted next to Sandor, cautiously sniffing his cloak, maybe sensing an affinity.

He was the grandson of the Lannisters’ old kennelmaster, after all; from a young age, he must have learned how to address dogs better than he did people. She watched with bated breath as the former Kingsguard pulled off his glove and outstretched his palm under the dog’s chin. Maude sat down obediently and licked the hand that was offered to her. He gently patted her head, his lips twisting in a grimace remotely close to a gnarling smile, before he met Sansa’s beaming eyes and tried to shoo Maude away as though he had been caught doing something indecent.

*I had a direwolf, once, she pondered, amused. Now I have a pack of hounds.*

“My lady!”

Kyra showed her discontentment at the interruption with a low rumble, baring her teeth to the approaching Stark soldier.

“My lady, Lord Baelish is here,” he announced, slightly out of breath, taking a leery step back.

Her smile faded.

“I’ll meet him in the solar.”

The guard nodded and eagerly scuttled away under her hardened look.

She disentangled herself from paws, tails and tongues and stood up with a deep sigh, brushing off dust and dirt from her skirts.

“You shouldn’t trust him.”

The Hound’s eyes were fixed to the solar’s windows, the hand that had gently patted Maude’s head now gripping tensely the pommel of his longsword until the veins on the back bulged out. His presence comforted and grounded her, and for a mad second, she almost asked him to come with her.

It wouldn’t be the wisest choice: Baelish was dangerous when there were only the two of them speaking, but he could become lethal if he suspected enemies were surrounding him.

She had to lull him into a sense of false security to induce him to expose himself.
Frozen snowflakes mixed with muddy rain had started to fall copiously. The hounds fretted, in a hurry to get back to the kennels’ warmth.

Sansa followed Sandor’s look, bracing herself.

“I don’t trust anyone,” she murmured under her breath.

When, a few minutes later, she stepped into her mother’s solar, Littlefinger was still in his travel clothes, bent over a book about the Dance of Dragons that Davos had left there the previous evening.

“Whom would you have supported, the Blacks or the Greens?”

_Tread carefully_, she advised herself, _Petyr’s questions are always loaded._

Maester Luwin’s history lessons came back easily to her mind, even if the real expert about the Targaryen’s civil war had been Bran, but she remembered the Realm’s Delight. Rhaenyra was born to rule, and Sansa truly believed she would have been a great Queen; she was Viserys’ eldest child and designated heir, after all, and yet, in a world dominated by men, the vows of loyalty and obeisance her father’s bannermen, the most powerful lords and ladies of the kingdom, had paid to her held out only as long as Viserys lived, only to crumble down when the king’s body hadn’t even turned cold yet.

_Even dragons couldn’t help her or her sons, in the end._

“The Blacks, I suppose,” Sansa answered with a shrug, thinking about the Pact of Ice and Fire, the Winter Wolves rampaging across the Gods Eye, painting the lake’s shores red, black and grey, while her ancestor uselessly led his host to lay siege to King’s Landing.

“Howe Stark cut a deal with Rhaenyra.”

Littlefinger cocked his head at her; his grey eyes were glinting defiantly, full of condescending irony: “To what end? Marry a Targaryen princess? Cregan was an idiot! Instead of wasting time brokering a dynastic marriage everyone knew would never happen, he should have killed every single Velaryon and Targaryen he could lay his hands on, in the Hour of the Wolf, spare the kingdom the useless torture that was the Broken King and keep the throne for himself. If he hadn’t been such a cowardly fool, we would be telling a different story, now.”

He had drawn closer to Sansa, smelling of fresh mint and rotten knavery.

“Lord Cregan lost his chance,” he whispered, low and intimate, one hand playing with the tip of her tress and the other caressing her left arm up and down, “As it is, we must work around the issue from a different perspective.”

He pulled her to him and tilted his head up for a kiss.

Sansa turned her face to the side.

His hand dropped.

He leant back, squaring his shoulders, and, with an unreadable smirk that chilled her to the bone, raised her fingers to his lips instead.

_Take heed._
“I rode from the Moat as fast as I could after I’ve received your letter,” he resumed, taking a step back and pacing in the middle of the room. “Such exciting news. The little sister home again. Where is she, by the way? I’d like to pay my respects.”

She shook her head, incredulous. The gall of him.

“Weren’t you the one writing to me, only two months ago, that I shouldn’t be clinging to the hope of finding both her and Bran still alive?”

Petyr gave her a curt nod and folded his hands above his belt. “I believed her dead and gone, it’s true. I am partly to blame for her disappearance, I must say. I should have kept her safe, after your father’s imprisonment and… sad, unexpected demise.”

Sansa pursed her lips, her fists balled stiffly at her sides. Baelish’s definition of ‘safe’ wasn’t exactly making her comfortable. *He had probably meant to hide her inside one of his brothels.*

“But she was faster and smarter,” he admitted, with poised graciousness. “I couldn’t find her anywhere, and not for lack of trying, I assure you. This only goes to prove how resourceful you Starks are.”

*He doesn’t sound pleased in the least.*

She studied him as he swiftly moved to the windows with a southern exposure and gazed out to the Lannisters barracks.

“And she hasn’t come home alone. A well-endowed retinue, I might say.”

His face was an inexpressive mask of granite coldness, but Sansa had learned to read the little tells in his body, too; the unwitting way his fingers picked at the skin around the nails, the tension in his back that made him straighten his spine to look taller.

He was troubled and, when he faced her again, the irritation in his eyes was plain.

“You and your brother opened Winterfell’s gates to the Kingslayer, of all people. Ill-advised doesn’t even begin to cover it. Do you realise how dangerous it is? Why give Cersei more excuses to draw her wrath on us?”

“Cersei knows the North can’t be conquered by invasion. And if she is stupid enough to try, let her come: we have time and space on our side.”

*Winter shall welcome them with a kiss, just as it did with Stannis.*

“There are different ways to have you bend the knee, other than the threat of a land invasion,” he admonished her darkly.

Her eyes flashed with anger at the scolding.

“If you fear Cersei’s retaliation on the North so much, maybe I should just send you to King’s Landing, as a peace offering. I bet the Queen would be ecstatic to know all the details of your involvement in Joff’s assassination.”

His shoulders sagged and his eyes narrowed in disappointment; then, before Sansa could react, he took three long strides and cradled her face in both his hands. For a second, she thought he would try to kiss her again.
“Cease this childish hostility against me, my love,” he emphatically said instead. “The Knights of the Vale and I are on your side.”

Her lips curled in a mirthless smirk: how courteous of him, to remind her she needed the Eyrie and that the Eyrie was in his hands! Her cousin Robin, as feebleminded and sickly as he was, could oppose neither strength nor wits to Littlefinger’s machinations. He didn’t fool her for one second: Littlefinger was on Littlefinger’s side. If, for the time being, that side matched with hers, it was merely a fortunate happenstance.

She gripped both his wrists and pushed his hands off her.

“Where’s the King? I’d like to have a word with him.”

Sansa tilted up her chin, defiantly: “He went north. With Jaime Lannister. They’re looking for Bran beyond the Wall.”

Baelish’s mask slipped just enough for her to catch a genuinely stunned surprise between the cracks. She hadn’t written this detail on purpose, in the letter she had sent him, for fear of being intercepted.

Littlefinger definitely didn’t see that coming.

“This changes the game.”

He stared at her without really seeing her, his eyes dead and remote.

Sansa could almost see the cyvasse pieces moving across the board in his mind, as he reshaped his strategy, cunningly reorganising the forces at work and predicting all the possible outcomes.

“For the time being, Winterfell is still yours, my lady. But if Bran turns out to be alive, you’ll lose your grasp over the North and your rights over Winterfell.”

She scoffed. “You think I care about rights and lines of succession? I want my brothers safe back home!”

“I know you do, and I understand that! But you must think about the political fallout. Consider the greater picture: with Brandon back as Warden of the North, your dear half-brother won’t need you to hold Winterfell any longer and will be free to marry you off to one of the northern houses in no time, to strengthen his claim.”

“No. No, Jon would never do that! Not after…”

The solar’s temperature had become awfully hot all of a sudden, to the point she was having a hard time to breath, in spite of the chilly sweat running down her back.

Petyr swayed before her eyes and she had to cling to one of the seats’ headrests, lest she fall down.

*You should hold on to your candles. The nights are so long now.*

“I won’t agree to another arranged marriage,” her voice shook with tears and revulsion.

She felt Littlefinger’s hands heavy on her shoulders, and his whisper in her ear.

“We must prepare, Sansa. You’re Ned Stark’s trueborn daughter. I’ve said it before: the North will follow you. Rally the men loyal to your father, and the Tullys’ bannermen. Edmure won’t deny you a second time.”
From the table, the book about the Dance of Dragons was open on a red-and-gold illustration of Rhaenyra, wrapped up in flames as her half-brother’s dragon devoured her. If she closed her eyes, she could almost hear the screams and smell the abominable, crisp stink of burned skin and charred bones.

Her stomach churned.

The miniature seemed to taunt her, even if she realised the absurdity of Jon ever owning a dragon.

“No,” she repeated, more harshly, “I won’t turn the North into a bloodbath only to follow your ambition!”

*Or mine own.*

Her eyes found his again, blue boring into silvery grey: “I trust Jon. He won’t have me do anything against my will.”

“I pray you won’t come to regret this, my dear.”

Taking short, measured breaths, Sansa straightened her spine and wiped her clammy hands across her gown.

“Welcome back to Winterfell, Lord Baelish,” she spoke in a composed voice and retreated to the solar’s door. “I’ll have the guest room prepared for you.”

Once the door was closed at her back, she hid a sob behind her palm, ignoring the two guards’ awkward stares.

She hated Littlefinger, for instilling doubts in her mind about Jon’s intentions, drop by poisonous drop, and she hated herself even more, because, deep down, she believed he had a point.

*If she were here, Brienne would scowl at me for even listening to his snaky tongue.*

Nevertheless, she found herself in desperate need of counsel, but to whom could she turn to? As indispensable his practical wisdom had been to her in the past few weeks, Davos still remained Jon’s Hand and he was bound to speak with his best interests in mind, even when he advised her.

Her feet carried her back to the courtyard, but, she noticed with a disappointed huff, the Hound was nowhere to be found.

If the living wouldn’t hear her woes, maybe the dead…

Night was fast approaching; the wind was spreading all around the castle the heady smell of hot spiced wine from the kitchens, while on the battlements and curtain walls, over the towers and turrets, at the highest windows of the Keep, torches were being lit, a beacon of hope for the traveller lost in darkness.

Sansa crossed the lichyard next to First Keep: the crypt’s ironwood door was ajar and one of the torches was already missing from its sconce.

Inside, the winding spiral stone steps were coated with a thin, glittering layer of ice and, on the first floor, the imposing granite pillars and the vaulted ceiling were spotted with liverworts and lichens growing between the grains of the solid rock.

Some feet ahead, Arya was silently lighting candles all around Rickon’s resting place. Sansa
walked past aunt Lyanna’s statue, crowned by a wreath of blue winter roses she herself had picked in the Wolfswood a few days before, and carefully approached her sister. By candlelight, the sharpness of Arya’s features softened in gentler lines, making her look a lot like their aunt’s effigy.

Wordlessly, she mirrored Arya’s movements and proceeded to put some candles on Mother and Robb’s graves, too.

Empty graves.

Not even a bone to mourn over. Their enemies didn’t even grant them that.

Roose Bolton had been buried down here, too, for a time, she recollected. Right next to Father. Ramsay’s orders. But after the fall of the Flayed Man, she had taken care of that, too, ordering his bones’ re-interment in an unmarked mass grave a few miles outside Winterfell, where the ashes of the Bolton soldiers fallen during the Battle had been scattered.

As for Ramsay… after the Grey and the other Girls had feasted on him, sadly nothing was left for a proper burial.

“Did you see him?” Arya’s voice seemed to boom across the vaults. “Rickon… when they took him here to be buried?”

A lump choked the words in her throat as flashes of their brother’s broken body assaulted her mind.

“Some Mormont soldiers told me that his body was riddled with arrow wounds,” Arya went on. “He was such a pretty baby, with big, bright blue eyes, rosy cheeks and unruly red curls. Our little wildling.”

He was only six when she, Jon and Arya had left. For Arya, he would always stay that charming, wild child; Sansa sent silent thanks to the gods, for that one memory, at least, wouldn’t be tarnished.

“He’s been avenged.”

Her sister stared ahead into the dim light, eyes glittering with tears and fury: “No. Ramsay had it easy.”

Sansa frowned.

“That list of names I’ve caught you reciting sometimes… those are names of people you intend to kill, isn’t it?”

“It was a longer list, in the beginning.”

She didn’t find that difficult to believe and was under the impression that, at some point, even Joffrey and Tywin Lannister might have played a relevant part, on that list of hers.

Those two at least, I know Arya isn’t responsible for their fates.

But for how many others was she to blame?

“Do you remember Meryn Trant?”

Her head jerked shockingly to her side.

If I remember him? How could she forget the taste of blood on her split lip, or the shame of
standing half-naked in front of a cruel, sniggering court, as he struck and beat her bloody, just as indifferent and detached as he would have been, if tasked of feeding laying hens?

The Hound was a truer knight than Ser Meryn ever was, even if he had angrily pointed out to her more than once that he wasn’t anointed. *But he was chivalrous, in his own resentful way, and tender with me,* she recalled with a pang of regret.

*And so was Tyrion.*

The only kindnesses in those endless months of fear had come from the less likely of places.

“I’ve met him in Braavos. He had very particular tastes. Little girls were his first choice. And old Walder Frey and his two eldest sons.” A suggestion of a smile danced on Arya’s lips. “Do you know what happened to the Twins?”

Her breath hitched. Of course she did. The Freys’ death, the fire.

“How did you do that?”

“How do you really want to know?”

She let out a heavy breath. *Please, make me understand!*

“I must.”

Her sister paused to contemplate her and cast her eyes down with a sigh, but when she raised her head again, Arya was gone.

None of it made sense: those were Arya’s clothes and Arya’s sword, but her face… she wore the face of a young boy with red-blond hair and amber eyes. She raised a hand to touch his cheek and the face fell off, to show another face behind, a girl with olive skin and green eyes, and another, an elderly woman with crooked teeth and freckles, and another, a bald man with a pudgy nose and an open, wide smile, until it was Arya again, staring back at her, with grey eyes full of sadness.

Was it a magic trick? A complex mummer’s farce, a joke at her expense?

“I’ve been trained by the Faceless Men of the House of Black and White, in Braavos,” Arya explained. “From them I’ve learned that all men must serve, and all men must die.”

The Faceless Men… she had heard about them… a secret sect of assassins without names, nor family, who worshipped a God similar to the Stranger.

“If you can change your own face as you please, how do I know it’s truly Arya standing in front of me, now?”

Arya’s brows raised as though Sansa had asked a very stupid question, and she was suddenly reminded of the little girl who stuffed sheep shit into her mattress and put live frogs inside her slippers and then hid herself in the closet to peek at her horrified reaction.

“Because no one has the power to tick you off more than I do!” she scoffed with a wolfish grin, and there, in front of their father and brother’s graves, they both broke out in high, silvery laughter.

Lighter than she had felt in weeks, Sansa clasped her sister’s hands: her nails weren’t trimmed, nor very neat, to start with, and her palms were rough and calloused. They weren’t a lady’s hands, to be sure, but they were clean.
There was no blood on them, not to Sansa.

Then a thought sobered her up.

“Is Theon on that list, too?”

“Oh, Theon is the deadest of them all!”

“You can’t truly want to kill Theon, Arya. He grew up with us!”

The tender, mischievous complicity they had just shared was suddenly gone, consumed in a maelstrom of violent rage and pain. She wrenched her hands off: “This didn’t stop him from betraying Robb and putting our home to the torch, or have you forgotten? How many had to die because poor, little Theon Greyjoy was feeling bitter about his life as Lord Eddard Stark’s ward? He’s always been jealous of us, of what we had! He’s the reason why Bran is missing and Rickon’s…”

Arya didn’t even notice that she was crying, until tears literally choked her up. She slapped away the comforting hand Sansa was offering and turned on her back.

Sansa’s own eyes welled up.

She couldn’t really blame her sister; Arya didn’t see Theon, while he was Reek, Ramsay’s most devoted servant.

*I wanted to kill him too, when I’ve met him in the kennels. I wanted to put my hands around his throat and squeeze, squeeze, squeeze until his eyes popped out from their sockets.*

“Arya, listen to me. Listen!” she grabbed her shoulders and shook her gently. “Theon helped me escape from the Boltons. If it weren’t for him, I would have killed myself. I owe him my life. Ramsay…I can’t even begin to tell you what he did to him. He broke him. He destroyed everything that he was, until he forgot even his own name. You want to punish him, and I can understand the impulse. But, believe me, there won’t be worst torture for him than to be still alive, and have our forgiveness.”

Arya sniffled and angrily wiped her tears with the back of her hand, but didn’t reply.

Over Rickon’s tomb, the candles’ flames flickered and shrank under an invisible gust of wind, but did not go out.

Sansa wrapped her cloak tighter around her, feeling cold and exhausted.

“Did it give you joy? Killing all those people who had deserved to die for the things they did to us?”

“Look me in the eye, and be honest for once in your life!” her sister snapped, hotly. “Look at me and tell me you didn’t enjoy any second of it, too, when those hounds you’re now so fond of ripped the Bolton Bastard’s face off!”

Sansa could not move, nor speak. Her chest hurt. She did not want to remember, but Arya’s words rang too much close to the truth. The screams, the spurt of dark blood when Grey Jeyne mauled his throat, his body, shaken by uncontrollable tremors as it went into shock…

*The Girls had begun to eat him when he was still conscious, and I couldn’t tear my eyes off him.*
“Please, Arya, stop talking. I don’t want to listen…”

“If you had that same power, if you could do that to Cersei, change your face to your liking, put on a mask and slide in the Red Keep unnoticed by everyone, a ghost making their most horrible nightmares come true, wouldn’t you seize the opportunity? Rid the world of their games and atrocities?”

“Stop… just, stop!”

Arya held stubbornly her gaze, her mouth shut into a grimace.

Sansa turned her eyes to the statue beside her: their father’s austere face seemed to reproach them in stone as he did in life, when he would catch the two of them bickering. *It always pained him so to see us at odds about the stupidest of things. A sickness overcame her. No more of this. Not here, in front of Father and Rickon.*

“You’re right. They deserve to die. But we can’t become them.”

What would remain of Arya, of them both, if vengeance would be left to fester in their hearts?

“The trouble with a mask is that one day, you’ll find out you won’t be able to pull it off anymore, and I… I can’t lose you, too. I don’t have idea of what you had to go through. I don’t even care! I don’t care if you had to lie, to steal, to sell your body, to kill! We all did what needed to be done in order to survive. That’s all that matters. We’re alive. We’re home. You’re my sister, Arya. Nothing you have done, nothing you will ever do will make me love you less.”

Arya’s retort never came: a loud noise from outside the crypt had them simultaneously turn their head toward the entrance.

Sansa strained her ear: she could hear people screaming and soldiers yelling orders, and, above the mad howling of the Girls in the kennels, a ripping, crackling sound, like a roar of a thousand lions.

Without thinking, Arya unsheathed Needle and flung herself up the stairs.

When they resurfaced, everywhere was chaos. Some men had dropped their swords and shields and were running to the Hunter’s Gate, toward the Wolfswood, as if there were no tomorrow. Some others were just frozen on the spot, soiling their breeches. The majority of them, though, was fighting, pointing their arrows and spears and crossbows to the sky, shouting and shaking in terror and panic. Even the Lannister soldiers had rushed from the nearby camp, swords, battle hammers and longbows ablaze.

“TAKE COVER!”

“*Shoot it down! SHOOT IT DOWN!*”

Sansa followed their looks as a huge, white shadow flew over Winterfell.

“Seven hells!” Arya uttered next to her.

The dragon hovered not higher than two hundred feet from the ground and screeched like an enormous bird of prey, as arrows bounced off its scales, like flies swatted away before they could become more than a nuisance.

Yet, the dragon’s attitude didn’t strike her as aggressive.
A foolish instinct nudged her to step closer, but the Hound had appeared to her side and yanked her arm: “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?!” he shouted sternly, grabbing Arya’s collar, too, and pushing them both toward the godswood, just as the beast, irritated, spat out an orange burst of flame which nearly licked the tip of the library tower.

“VISERION, NO! DON’T SHOOT, THE OTHERS TAKE YOU! WE COME IN PEACE!”

_I know this voice._

She wrenched her arm from Sandor’s iron grip and squinted her eyes: there truly was a man, riding atop the wondrous beast. A very short man, indeed, but casting a large shadow.

“WAIT!” she yelled to the soldiers and wildlings. “Hold your weapons!”

“My lady?”

“Do as I say! Fall back!”

With their weapons at the ready, the guards made space in the middle of the courtyard and the dragon graciously landed in a cloud of snow and dirt; next to her, a young wildling was trying to nock an arrow, but his hands shook so badly that the dart was rocking, unstable over the arrow rest.

She put a hand over his and gently lowered the bow.

_It won’t be necessary._

The Imp pulled at some kind of steel locking system wrapped around his short legs and then literally glided off from one of the dragon’s creamy wings.

“You bloody idiots!” he fiercely addressed the soldiers assembled in the yard, tearing off one of the arrows stuck between the dragon’s scales. “Are you mad? Do you wish to be roasted, by any chance? Haven’t you received word of my arrival?”

He whipped around, but stopped dead on his tracks when he spotted her.

“I guess not.”

Silence fell on the castle.

She stared at him, speechless and transfixed, barely taking note of Ser Davos moving to stand beside her.

Seeing a real, fire-breathing, living dragon wasn’t as shocking as to watch Tyrion Lannister riding one.

_This man was married to me, once._

He had changed. A thick, reddish-gold beard hid most of the scars from the Battle of the Blackwater and gave him the look of a wild lion, shrewd and alert, his eyes burning green and black and scanning the surrounding space.

There was something humorously similar between man and dragon, Sansa considered, turning her attention to the beast now peacefully curled up in her courtyard, its horns and scales glowing as though they were made of spun golden threads.

_Jon will never believe this._
Tyrion gingerly staggered to her and bowed.

“My lady Sansa. I apologise for...” he gestured at the general state of disarray of both her men and her courtyard and cleared his throat with a tight, embarrassed grin. “This is Viserion, my dragon. Well, not my dragon, precisely, but...”

“Lord Tyrion! I’ll be fucking...”

“Ser Lyle?” he frowned, surprised, at the broad-chested captain, only now noticing the Lannister soldiers who had flocked fully armed to the inner walls. “What are you... wait, is Jaime here?”

“My lord!” Ser Davos interrupted, grasping for words, his eyes shifting nervously from Tyrion to his ‘mount’. “I beg your pardon, but... Would you be so kind as to explain why there’s a dragon grazing in Winterfell’s main yard?”

The winged creature craned its neck and snarled in disapproval at being likened to a herd of cows.

“Forgive me, Ser Davos, my lady, I...” Tyrion did a double take to the Lannister host, almost hoping to see his brother appear from thin air, then he straightened his red and black cloak and said in a strong, carrying voice: “I’m here on a diplomatic mission for Daenerys Stormborn, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Queen of Meereen and rightful claimant to the Iron Throne.”

Sansa caught Ser Davos’ eye and gave him a pointed look.

“She has sent me on her behalf,” Tyrion continued unconcernedly, “to speak with your brother, the King. The Queen wishes to assess the living conditions of the good people of the North, and offers her help concerning a particular situation on your... northern borders, in exchange for an alliance whose terms shall be drawn up by me and the King himself.”

Sansa felt as though she had just swallowed a ball of cotton; her mouth and mind were completely empty and dry and she was grateful when Davos spoke up for her again. “Queen Daenerys is very gracious and considerate, my lord,” he said with a nod. “And her help is more than welcome. But his Grace is not in Winterfell, at the moment.”

“Oh,” his chin dropped to his chest in disappointment. “When is he supposed to be back?”

“We don’t know,” Davos slowly said. “He went beyond the Wall, with your brother.”

“What? When?”

“Almost a fortnight ago,” she finally spoke. “They went to find Bran.”

Tyrion exhaled loudly and took a step backwards, shock and bewilderment etched in his face. He spun around without a reply and angrily marched back to his dragon, muttering swear words under his breath. The dragon obediently offered its wing and lifted him up to its back.

“Those idiots will get themselves killed!” he informed them as he worked his legs around locks and belts.

With a roar that made the ground tremble and the castle’s windows shake in their rods, Viserion flapped his wings and soared. The air which hit her face was strangely lukewarm. It was the heat coming off the dragon’s body, Sansa realised.

“When we get back,” Tyrion called, up in the air, “please, do kindly not try to shoot us down again!”
Sansa trained her eyes on the white dragon and his rider as they disappeared into the twilight and wondered if perhaps it might have been all but a dream.

In the deadly quietness that followed, Arya burst into an unrestrained, high-pitched fit of laughter.

Chapter End Notes

What was supposed to be mostly a filler chapter turned out into a full-force, 9k words-long, piece of angst from Sansa’s point of view.
I don’t know exactly how that happened, to be honest. The characters have just taken over!

The chapter is built around the aftermath of Ramsay’s abuses and death, and how that whole experience has changed Sansa.
Through the conversations between her and Baelish and her and Arya, I’ve meant to show that there’s an ambiguity, now, in the way Sansa thinks about herself and about her role in the game.
She is not alright. She’s suffering from PTSD, panic attacks and chronic pains. She’s desperately trying to hold it together, but I really believe she’s hanging by a thread, and of course Littlefinger questioning her loyalties to Jon, putting doubts in her mind, doesn’t help in the least.

As for the notorious Unkiss, this came a bit as a shock to me, because, although I’ve read the books more than once, I’ve never actually caught that intentional discrepancy, until ten days ago LOL! It was truly interesting to read Martin’s take on it, the whole “Sansa is an unreliable narrator” speech, and it definitely made me change the dynamics between her and the Hound, in this chapter.
I think Sansa has come to a point in her life where she’s disillusioned enough with her childhood dreams of fairytale and knighthood that her unconscious mind doesn’t need anymore to build lies to protect her. Her awareness has awoken and she doesn’t need to lie to herself about what she wants any longer. We’ll see how the situation will evolve, also in terms of shipping.

Thanks for reading; we'll move to the Wall in the next chapter!
I hoped to have this chapter ready a little sooner, but halfway through it my Muse decided to ditch me and go out to play beach football with the fairies and unicorns, under the first glimpses of what promises to be a wonderfully warm Italian summer… while I, on the other side, was pulling my hair out, trying to write something worthy in the semi-darkness of my Fortress of Solitude.

So, if you find something you don’t like, blame my lazy prankster of a Muse: I disclaim all responsibility for it, lol!

Jokes aside, for some reason, this was a difficult chapter to write and I sooo wanted it to be good, being the first Jon chapter and all, but try as I might, I just couldn’t find the right rhythm to it, especially in the last part. Although my perfectionist self is far from satisfied, after much editing I’ve decided to post it anyway and see how it goes: I hope you won’t be too much severe in the comments section!

On a more positive note, we’re past the 100k words mark and A Wreath of Thorns, with all its flaws, has officially become the longest story I’ve ever written, so allow me a moment to gloat and to thank you for your support and comments! I do hope you’re still having as much fun reading it as I have writing it!

Looming mercilessly against the clear sky, the Wall seemed to stare the six travellers down, beautiful and fearsome and weeping, as a single, long horn blast alerted the brothers of the Night’s Watch of their presence at their doors.

The party had reached Castle Black on a bright and cloudless day, one of those rare winter mornings where, from up the Wall, one could see as far as the highest peaks of the mountains surrounding the Thenn lands and Storrhold’s Point and the black sea beyond it. Jon would know; he had spent endless hours patrolling the Wall’s wide, gravelled top, holding his own breath in almost religious wonder while, all around him, the whole world seemed to be coated and sheltered in a pristine purity from miles and miles on.

More than a fortnight had come and gone since he left Winterfell to his sister’s cares. As they travelled across pine and hemlock forests, rugged hills and mountains, with snow-clad edges as sharp as dragonglass, hamlets, abandoned inns and stone holdfasts barely standing up and weathered by wind and age, Jon recognised with a twisted pang of disquiet and wistfulness all the places he rode through on his first journey to the Wall with his uncle Benjen and Tyrion Lannister.

A lifetime ago. Quite literally.
They hadn’t encountered any sign of human life until Last Hearth.

The Umbers’ ancient seat was a pile of rubble and charred woods, a last, oafish retaliation against a once illustrious, heroic house whose reputation, in the eye of the other northern men, had been tarnished beyond repair, after Smalljon had declared for the Boltons and had delivered Rickon in Ramsay’s hands. The North remembered, and didn’t forgive treason lightly, but Jon hadn’t been impressed, nor grateful to the ones who burned the old castle to the ground. The Roaring Giants were all dead, now, but Last Hearth still had resources in terms of men, weapons, lands and provisions that Jon could use: he couldn’t let the lesser houses on Skagos and the mountain clans in the north-east to fight over the spoils like cats and dogs, while, in Karhold, Alys Karstark was slyly following her own hidden plans, getting ready to make a decisive move.

If the Wall crumbled down, Last Heart would be the first line of defence against wights and White Walkers: the castle had to be rebuilt and garrisoned with trusted, competent men who wouldn’t shrink back when the Long Night would be upon them.

When they had taken cover for a night inside the castle’s inner walls, they had found the stronghold almost deserted, except for a small family of farmers and a drunken septon turned swineherd who had no idea of who Jon was; they all adamantly refused his request to come to the Wall with them so that they could have protection, shelter and food for when the nights would grow even colder. ‘Respectfully speaking, my lord,’ the septon had turned him down, ‘I would rather die from the cold and let my pigs eat my body than ride to that thrice-damned block of ice forsaken by Gods and men. Mark my words: the Wall will soon be dripping blood, instead of ice, and I’m going to keep myself well away from it.’

During the last portion of their journey, the weather had been getting warmer, slowly but steadily, but, as thankful to the Old Gods as he was for the improvement, strangely enough, Jon couldn’t find much comfort in the thought; now, as he watched concernedly the crystal-white tears sliding down from the top of the iced structure in slick rivulets which glittered blue and golden under the winter sun, he couldn’t shake off the almost palpable feeling of putrescent doom brewing in the wind.

_The Wall looks weakened_, Jon reflected, wrapping himself tighter in his furs as he waited for the gates to be opened.

_Snap out of it, you bloody fool. You’re feeling this way only because you died here_, he tried to reason with himself. But he couldn’t fail to notice that even Ghost and Nymeria had become more and more unnerved and spooked as the group trod closer to the Wall and now they were meandering restlessly around the snowdrifts clumped to the gates’ sides, snarling as they sniffed the frosty air, the fur on their back bristling, as though the Wall were an enemy in disguise, instead of the last bastion against the darkness tasting of death that swept from the north.

“It truly is as immense and stunning as Tyrion described it,” murmured reverently the man next to him, still as stone, his golden hand raised to shield his eyes from the sunbeams, as he stared up in a speechless stupor. Daylight bounced off the amazed lines of his face and refracted against the hoarfrost caught in his beard.

“Immense, stunning and thrice as cold and unforgiving,” Jon agreed wholeheartedly, not bothering to hide the little prideful smile tugging at his lips. The Kingslayer might be used to the grand comforts of royal halls and to the harsh, glorious life spent in muddy trenches, giving orders to armies of thousands, but this wild, frozen, wasted land was Jon’s world, his second home, and he savoured with wicked smugness his travelling companion’s uneasy astonishment: the Wall was in his veins, in his lungs, in his mind, constantly, and, even though he had forsaken his vows, Jon
could still feel the pull of its magic calling out to him time and again like an insistent lover, regardless of the many miles he had tried to put between himself and his past life. *I still belong here, somehow.*

Grudgingly, Jon had to admit that Jaime Lannister had been of great help, during the journey. He had expressed a genuine, concerned interest in the fates of the Night’s Watch and had eagerly shared information about the military forces stationed in the Westerlands and the Crownlands: their numbers and disposition, their activities on land and sea and the orders he left regarding the Riverlands. When Jon asked what were Cersei’s plans for the North, he shrugged and bitterly muttered that his sweet sister had stopped sharing her secrets with him a long time ago.

It came oddly easier, after that, to reveal to this despicable man, a former enemy, what truly happened in Hardhome: how he, Tormund and Edd had sailed to the promontory with Stannis’ ships and tried to persuade as many free folks as they could to come back to the Wall with them, and then… the dogs barking… the wall of frozen, white mist crashing down on them… the people crying and yelling beyond the closed palisade and chaos erupting on the pier as thousands of wights fell into them tearing up wood, stone, flesh and everything else that was in their way…

‘We got off by the skin of our teeth,’ he had said, shivering despite the campfire merrily crackling in front of him. ‘There was nothing we could do for the ones we left behind, except watching them from the boats as they were exterminated by the hundreds. And then, the Night King lifted up his arms, and the dead rose again.’

The yellow flames had seemed to shiver, too, shrinking with a flicker as they licked the cold air around them. The white wolf’s garnet eyes on the bastard sword’s pommel sparkled in the dark and Jon had absentmindedly rubbed a thumb on it.

‘Fire doesn’t stop the White Walkers. Common steel blows up in shards against them. I managed to kill one just because I had Longclaw with me,’ he had whispered, waiting for a reaction.

But Lannister hadn’t jested, in the silence that followed; he hadn’t doubted his words, but had wordlessly unsheathed his own sword – Widow’s Wail, he had called it – and offered its hilt to Jon. His father’s sword.

Well, a part of it, anyway.

When it was still whole, Ice had very distinctive dark grey veining, like wisps of smoke. This sword, though, had red and black ripples, almost identical to the ones Jon had often spotted with mesmerised admiration on its sister, currently secured about Brienne’s waist.

*They’ve become Lannister swords, now, with Targaryen colours,* he had found himself thinking ruefully.

‘We have *three* Valyrian steels with us, now,’ Lannister had said, hard and steadfast, with eyes of wildfire burning just as bright as the velvety crimson ripples on the side of the blade. Jon had brushed a hand over it, feeling a mysterious warmth spreading from the hilt to his arm, and had nodded in gratitude.

After that, for a few hours at least, even Tormund had been courteous enough with the knight, to the extent of splitting with him his smelly blue cheese and his skin of fermented goat milk.

However, despite their unlikely truce, Jon still didn’t trust him and gave only vague answers to his own pointed questions about the Northern Army’s deployment and conditions. Mutual understanding or not, he simply couldn’t forget who this man was, what he did and who was his
sister, and more than once he wondered what Lady Brienne saw in him.

‘She’s in love with him,’ Sansa had warily whispered in his ear, shortly before leaving home. Jon didn’t understand; ever since they hit the road, those two did nothing but quarrel about the most inconsequential things, from the species of the trees they spotted on the way to the lyrics of *The Maids that Bloom in Spring*.

And when, one morning, Lannister started to sing the refrain of *The Bear and the Maiden Fair* at the top of his lungs, Brienne had cantered next to Tormund, her cheeks burning scarlet like a bunch of frostfires, and refused to speak to her golden lion for the whole afternoon.

If that was love, Jon was truly at loss.

_You know nothing, Jon Snow. We bickered too, a lot, from the very first time we met_, Ygritte’s husky voice rasped in his mind, barbed as an arrowhead, and he was pulled back inside the cave, naked, surrounded by darkness, the sobbing of Gendel’s children and the sweet smell of her.

_No, my love_, he replied as he often did; _you teased me and I was just pretending to ignore the stirring in my breeches at the sight of your crooked smile._

The cave’s walls abruptly dissolved around him when he heard the bolts and iron bars of Castle Black’s south gate slide back with a screech on their hinges; the doors ground and slowly opened, half obstructed by snowbanks sparkling in the light like diamonds with the colours of the rainbow.

On the other side, flanked by his men, Eddison Tollett, 999th elected Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch stood in the courtyard, just as uncomfortable as he had left him, with the same black cloak which had belonged to Jon weighing on his shoulders as though made of lead.

_It’s the weight of the Wall. I remember the feeling very well._

Ghost and Nymeria anxiously padded inside and he followed them, sensing their same foreboding apprehension. Dolorous Edd stepped up with a small smile and welcomed him with a warm hug and a brotherly pat on his back.

_“Do I have to take a knee, now, Your Grace?”_

Jon snorted.

_“I don’t think your old, rattling bones could take such arduous strain that easily. And then who would they pick as their Lord Commander, if you croaked like the mangy crow you are? Three-Finger Hobb?”_

_“It’s Two-Finger Hobb, now,”_ Edd grievously replied, deadpan. _“I believe I found half of his pinkie in my bowl, at supper last night.”_

But the laughter in his brown eyes died when he caught sight of the man beyond Jon’s shoulders.

_“He’s who I think he is?”_

Jon turned around; the Kingslayer marched to them, tall and proud, a cocksure grin defying the unwelcoming glares of the men assembled in the courtyard. The bear and seal pelts hid the gold and red of his Lannister armour well enough, to the point that he could almost pass for a wildling himself, but that golden hand of his was a dead giveaway.

Even the Crows at Castle Black knew about it.
“Ser Jaime Lannister, at your service, Lord Commander Tollett,” he bowed gallantly, but the mockery in his voice was unmistakable.

Dolorous Edd balled his fists and threw Jon a dirty look, his lips livid and tight.

“He’s here to help,” he held out both his hands, in a placatory gesture.

Edd gritted his teeth. “Or, he’s come to spy on us at the behest of that crazy sister of his.”

Lannister annoyingly raised an eyebrow.

*Oh, I do hope he will write to the Queen, sparing no details to describe exactly the situation. This way, maybe, the Iron Throne would understand,* Jon wished to say, but that would be asking for trouble, so he bit his tongue and said instead, with a pat on Edd’s shoulder and a congenial smile on his lips: “Play nice.”

But for all his smiles and good intentions, he noticed with a twinge of worry how the Brothers who had gathered at the gate, perhaps curious to see the King’s arrival, were now openly staring at the Kingslayer with a mix of awe and loathing.

Jon reflexively rested his hand on Longclaw’s pommel.

*Law stops at the Wall,* he had to remind himself. But how many of these men had taken the black after they deserted during the War of the Five Kings, how many had suffered their kin’s death, and famine and torture at Tywin Lannister’s hands? *Some things aren’t that easily forgotten, even with a black cloak. I should know.*

His heart had filled with wrath and vengeance too, after news of his father’s death had reached Castle Black, and if it weren’t for his friends... Grenn, Pyp and Sam’s faces were vivid, sharp memories in his mind, Sam’s most of all. He missed him. He missed him just as he missed Robb. Even more so, perhaps, as odd as it might sound. *Are you still unearthing mysteries at the Citadel, brother? Are you finding the answers we so desperately need?* His eyes searched anxiously the place, almost expecting to see him and his rotund belly bouncing down the steps of the rookery, his arms full of books and parchments, but the yard was emptying; the Brothers resumed their tasks, while only a few new recruits stayed behind, putting their heads together as they confabulated in hushed tones.

As Edd went to greet Brienne, Podrick and Tormund, Jon spotted Thoros of Myr and Beric Dondarrion, standing around a fire just next to the stables.

The flames seemed to burn brighter and as he got closer.

“My lords.”

The Lord of Blackhaven bowed.

“Your Grace.”

The Red Wizard ignored him altogether. A frown of deep concentration made the lines etched into his forehead stand out even more, as his bloodshot eyes never left the flames.

“I take it the long journey from Winterfell has been as uneventful as ours?” Jon addressed the Lightning Lord.

“Mercifully so, Your Grace. Trouble started when we got here. We went beyond the Wall, three
days ago. Just a few miles east into the haunted forest…” a short, quivering laugh escaped him. “No name has ever been more appropriate.”

“White Walkers?” he asked with urgency; if the enemy was already crawling so close to the borders, that meant they were running out of time. And we’re not ready.

“Wights. Four of them, all wearing black cloaks. Rangers, by the look of it.”

Jon’s heart missed a beat. Was his uncle among them? They never found a body, and by now he had lost any hope of ever finding him alive.

“They seemed recently dead. Commander Tollett confirmed he has sent on patrol a party of ten, a fortnight ago. Only six have returned.”

Jon flexed the fingers of his sword hand and took a cursory glance around the place: under the stern look of Denner Frostfinger, Castle Black’s new master-at-arms, Anguy the Archer was showing to a group of young recruits how to trim raven’s feathers on an arrow’s fletching, but the other two remaining members of the Brotherhood Without Banners who had left Winterfell with Dondarrion and Thoros a moon’s turn past were nowhere to be seen.

“Any losses?”

The ugly, black bruise on Lord Beric’s neck stretched as he silently shook his head.

“They were vicious and damn tough to strike down, though. We burned them in a hurry and then we retreated back, before something else more difficult to kill could catch us unawares.”

His indigo eye drifted to the seven-hundred-feet tall barrier that seemed to fill up the blue sky.

“The Wall has been weeping ever since.”

And it’s also the last thing standing between the living and the dead, Jon pondered, following his gaze. But when he returned his attention to Beric, his eye was firmly trained on him, flashing audaciously like the purple thunderbolt which adorned Blackhaven’s coat of arms.

The curious, unfathomable expression perturbed him.

I may have been resurrected once, but this man was brought back six times. He had shown him the scars, back at Winterfell: the gaping hole in his chest, the slash which went from shoulder to navel when the Hound had cloven him, the puckered flesh in the eye socket where a dirk had been plunged to the hilt… Jon couldn’t look away.

Sansa told him that Dondarrion had been a handsome knight, once, but Jon thought he looked more like a frayed, broken scarecrow. Beric had cracked a sullen joke, then, calling him ‘brother in death’, but no facetious laughter had lightened up his face.

Will it become my destiny, too?, Jon wondered now, brushing a gloved hand over his heart, where the wound Olly had inflicted on him sometimes still seemed to sting. Brought back, again and again, until the Long Night would end and I could finally rest?

His eyes shifted to the Red Priest on Beric’s left: Thoros too must have changed from the intrepid warrior who first charged the Ironborns through the breach in the walls of Pyke, his magic sword ablaze, as his father often portrayed him, sparing no praise.

Now the Myrish wizard was hunched over the flames, his eyes lost in the fire, glazed and
unfocused.

“What are you seeing in those flames of yours?”


The pudgy tip of his nose glowed a copper red as he cocked his head to exhort him to search for the answer by himself, but try as he might, Jon couldn’t see anything, except embers and charred wood.

*He’s drunk. A drunken, raving fool.*

Jon pitied him.

“There are no dragons at the Wall, my friend.” Or nowhere else. He was starting to believe that the rumours of that silver-haired Targaryen Queen landing in Dragonstone with three living winged beasts were just that: empty gossip spread around by some bored, old sailors from White Arbor and the Vale. *Words are wind.*

“I might have to ask you to leave again Castle Black’s safe haven, to join me on a search-and-rescue mission beyond the Wall,” he said back to Beric.

“Our swords are yours. That’s why we came here.”

Jon curtly nodded.

“Warm yourself up with a cup of mulled wine in the common hall, my lord. We’ll meet at supper.”

Despite his hidden wish to retire in the cold solitude of his old cells in Hardin’s Tower, Edd had the King’s Tower made ready for him; the same lodgings Stannis had slept in, when he had been the Watch’s honoured guest. The rooms were just as austere and grim as he remembered, but fitted his current, darkening mood to perfection.

“Come in,” he answered the knock at the oak door without raising his eyes from the ragged piece of hide on which a map of the known trails of the lands north of the Wall was painted.

Edd stepped in, stomping his feet to shake off patches of frozen snow from the tips of his boots.

“Is it true what Brienne tells me?” he cut to the chase. “That you want to ride north in search of your little brother?”

Drops of condensation and melted snow dripped from the hem of his black cloak and collected in a small puddle on the wooden floor. Jon silently nodded and placed one of the candles on the map’s right corner to keep it from rolling up.

“They’ve crossed the Wall here,” he pointed to the Nightfort. “I mean to go through the Black Gate and then trek toward Whitetree, across the ruins of Craster’s Keep, retrace backwards the path on which they presumably have travelled too.”

Edd flattened a hand over the Skirling Pass and stared at the map, frowning unconvinced.

“How do you know they’ve headed toward the mountains and not, let’s say, east, to Hardhome?”

Jon let out a frustrated sigh. He had no sure answer. It was pretty much like flipping a coin in the air, praying it would land on the right side. If Bran chose to go toward Hardhome... His mouth twisted in an anguished grimace; he didn’t like to think about that possibility.
“You won’t find any trace of them, not with the amount of snow fallen during the last few weeks.”

“Our direwolves will help,” he stated, sounding more confident than he felt.

Ghost had survived alone beyond the Wall for weeks and knew every inch of that big expanse of frozen land even better than Jon himself; as for Nymeria, she and Summer had always had a strong bond. Jon remembered her savagely scuffling with Grey Wind in Winterfell’s yard, each time their bigger brother felt entitled to bully his yellow-eyed sibling. If Bran’s wolf was still around, she would find him. Jon had to believe that.

“How many men do you need?”

Give me twenty, he wanted to say, half a hundred, for my brother’s sake. So that I can bring him back home.

But the words died in his throat.

I am King, but I can’t order him around. I’m not Stannis.

“How many you’re willing to grant me. Volunteers only.”

“Don’t expect a lot of them, then. Even seasoned rangers go beyond the Wall reluctantly, nowadays, and only because they’re ordered to,” Edd admitted somberly, then added with a ghost of a smile: “You’ll still have me, tough. It will be just like old times.”

“You’re not coming!” Jon objected right away. “You’re the Lord Commander, your place is at Castle Black.”

The smile on the Crow’s face froze. “This didn’t stop you, when you led us to Craster to get rid of Karl, Rast and the others.”

“That was completely different. We couldn’t risk Mance to know the real number of men garrisoned at Castle Black, back then. Killing the mutineers was for the Watch’s own protection. This, however, is a personal matter. The Watch takes no part. It mustn’t and it won’t.”

Edd pursed his lips, clearly upset by his exclusion, but, beyond the disappointment, Jon saw genuine concern in his eyes.

Loyal eyes.

He knew that Edd would follow him to the end of the world and back. He came with me to Hardhome, despite our disagreement on the policy concerning the wildlings.

“I’d trust you with my life,” he admitted, clasping his shoulders, “and there’s no one I’d rather have watching my back. But you leaving your post to follow me would tear the Watch apart, and I need you to stick together and hold the front line.”

“‘The shield that guards the realms of men’ and all that shitty rubbish, aye?”

“And all that shitty rubbish,” he nodded with some reluctance.

“Alright,” Dolorous Edd exhaled loudly. “I may have a handful of names willing to go. I’ll make inquiries.”

Jon dropped his head in agreement and leaned again over the map.
“We’re having supper in the common hall. Will His Grace grant me the honour to dine with us mere mortals?”

The gentle tease had him crack up a tentative smile.

“Go ahead. I shall join you shortly.”

“Jon,” the Lord Commander paused at the door. “I wouldn’t get my hopes up, if I were you.”

In the Watch’s recent history, rarely had Jon witnessed the timbered common hall so much packed with people; the number of the brothers had grown in those last months, he noticed with satisfaction; the new men came from Winterfell, Karhold, Last Hearth. Many of them were the survivors of the Battle of the Bastards, who had pleaded for their lives and had put their destinies into the hands of the newly-crowned king, but there were also a few wildlings who, while still living in the New Gift with their families and not officially wearing the black, were actively helping anyway, now. After Hardhome, they had committed themselves to the Watch, convinced by now of the unavoidable urgency to have capable men manning the Wall, and Edd had been only too happy to oblige, despite the grumblings of some of the other men; the Watch needed fresh blood and the Lord Commander couldn’t be prickly about his new recruits.

Jon curtly nodded in greeting to the table in the east corner, where the scant remains of the Brotherhood without Banners were sitting with the group of the rangers. While under the table Ghost and Nymeria were fighting over a bone, Thoros was ravenously eating anything he could reach, sputtering ale and crumbs all over his beard each time he opened his mouth to talk. Lord Beric, on the other side, had tucked himself deeper into his cloak and wasn’t touching any food or drink. Jon couldn’t really blame him. The stew looked disgusting.

The Lord Commander’s table was nearer to the hearth and was also the noisier.

Above the sounds of fire crackling, cutlery and plates clinking together, men chatting with their mouths half full, Tormund’s boisterous voice rose and rumbled like a thunder.

Squeezed between Lady Brienne and Podrick Payne, the redheaded fellow was in the middle of one of his stories and even the Kingslayer, who was sharing the bench with his sellsword friend and no one else, seemed to be mildly interested. *At least they’re not trying to kill each other.*

Jon pulled off his gloves and moved closer to the wildling’s back, careful not to interrupt.

“You hit him on its flank, you hit him on the head,” Tormund was mimicking each blow, using Podrick as an unwilling sparring partner. “Ya must be clever ‘bout it, use your agility to dodge claws and teeth, and then when you got him tired good an’ proper, you jump onto his back, put your arm around his neck and *squeeze* until you have him on his knees and he don’t move no more.”

He then proceeded to do exactly that with poor Pod’s neck. Lady Brienne was quietly chuckling behind her hand.

Jaime Lannister raised a sceptical brow, considered the approach to the matter and wiggled his fork in front of the wildling’s eyes. “And then next thing you know, you’ll have to shove your own guts back inside your belly! You can’t kill a bear like that, it’s impossible! It would rip you to shreds before you lost consciousness.”

“Aye,” Tormund flashed a lopsided, wolfish grin, as the squire was dramatically kicking and
pulling at the wildling’s thick arms, “I’m not sayin’ I would get away without a scratch, where’s the fun in that?, but it can be done, even with bare hands. I did it plenty o’ times, with both bears and giants. Even though why you would want to kill bears instead of fuckin’ ‘em is beyond me.”

At this point, Pod’s face was starting to turn red for lack of air.

“Cut it off, you overblown bag of wind.” Jon intervened, tapping Tormund’s arm until he loosened his grip, “you were so much drunk, that one time, that I doubt you could tell the difference between a bear and a particularly hairy spearwife!”

The whole table roared up in guffaws and sniggers.

Jon ignored the empty spot left for him next to Edd and Frostfinger, and purposefully went around the table to sit with the lions.

Tormund’s thick, red eyebrows narrowed. “You know nothing, lad. Why d’you think they call me Husband to Bears?”

“They should’ve called you Tormund Blabbermouth instead,” Brienne murmured, raising the tankard of mulled wine to her lips to muffle her own laughter. Over the brim of the mug, her astonishing eyes found Jaime Lannister and shone, vibrant with undisguised hilarity. His green eyes seemed to drink from her own delight, crinkling in return, and mixed with mirth there was an open, unmistakable fondness Jon was sure he never witnessed on his face before.

*I’ll be damned; you were right, Sansa.* He took his own cup of wine, shaking his head in amused consternation, and for a little while, at least, he forgot about the weeping Wall and the night descending upon them.

“How are you faring with food supply?” Jon finally asked, once everyone’s stomachs were full of Two Finger Hobb’s vile slop, a beef stew – or was it goat? Jon couldn’t really tell – thick with barley, onions and carrots.

“We have enough for two hard winters, maybe three, if we don’t get other mouths to feed,” Edd said, pulling a particularly obstinate lump of gristle from his teeth. “I’ve ordered greenhouses to be built both here and in the Gift, so we could grow a supply of fresh vegetables, but we’ll be soon out of glass and Myrish glass-makers are awfully expensive. Sailors and fishermen in the Bay of Seals have been reporting to Cotter Pyke an increasing shortage of fish in the waters around Skagos, and with the weather changing for worse, it’s only a matter of time before trade will stop altogether. White Arbor still has a great supply of smoked salmon, salted cod, herrings and blubber, though, but you know the old Lamprey: he’s a tough nut to crack. He’d rather die than give away some of their stocks for free. I’d feel more comfortable if you could send us a share of the provisions currently at the Dreadfort. No one is eating them, anyway.”

“What about deserters and pilferers?”

“Just yesterday morning, in the wormways, two lads have been caught while they were ransacking the ham vault,” Denner Frostfinger replied. “They denied they were trying to sneak out and desert, but there were reindeer and pork sausages popping out from their pockets. They were locked up in the ice cellars, so they could mull over what it is to be truly hungry.”

Jon nodded in silent accord. Under normal conditions punishment for pilferage would have been stricter, but with the Watch in such precarious balance, Edd couldn’t afford to lose any man…. Although, Jon knew, if they really wanted to flee, they would try again, next week or the week after, until they succeeded, or they died in the attempt.
“How many men do you currently have?” Brienne asked Edd.

“In total? A little under 1100, but only a third is fit for fighting. The rest can do other things, of course: work in the kitchen, in the stables, in the forge. Some of them are masons and crofters, so they’ve been assigned to the builders and stewards.”

“Stonedoor, Rimegate and Oakenshield are garrisoned now, but it’s not enough. Not even remotely,” added the master-at-arms.

Jon set his jaw. A thousand men, and at least twice that number scattered in the Gift, among the elderly, women and green lads.

_A wall is only as strong as the men who defend it, and when the Long Night falls, they’ll be the first to drop._

His sword hand closed in a tight fist.

“If the Watch is in such a dreadful state,” Jaime Lannister’s voice rose, impatient and angered, “why haven’t you sent a request for more men?”

The question was aimed at Edd, but it was Jon who answered.

“I have, many times. And Commander Mormont before me. Maester Aemon has sent dozens of letters with pleas for help to all the high Lords and Ladies of the Seven Kingdoms, as far as Sunspear and the Arbor, and after he died, the task has been entrusted to Samwell Tarly, to no avail.”

“All of us sent letters south, describing the situation in great detail.” Edd pressed on. “The Iron Throne turned a deaf ear to us. The only one willing to help was Stannis Baratheon, but he is dead too, now.”

“Take a careful look around, m’lord,” Frostfinger resumed. “We’re a tattered army of thieves, murderers, rapists, bastards, wildlings, men who have nothing to lose except their own lives, and even that is not worth very much, is it? Who would ever trust our words? Each time we send rangers out there, fewer and fewer come back, alive at least. But there isn’t anyone else listening to their stories, except us. There’s no one believing them, except us.”

“Tyrion Lannister did,” Bronn knitted his brows. “Back in King’s Landing, when he was Hand of the King, he ordered men to be sent here.”


“Janos Slynt!” Lannister snorted with a disgusted grimace and pushed away the cup of wine he had been drinking as though it was vinegar. “And they say I’ve brought dishonour to the Kingsguard.”

“That is all we have, for now,” the Lord Commander said with finality.

A heavy silence fell. Edd clasped his hands in front of him and bowed his head as though in prayer. Although none of them was broken nor had completely given themselves over to despair yet, a cold, deceitful resignation was slowly creeping in their ranks. And resignation was harbinger to downfall. Jon met Brienne’s gaze from the opposite side of the table and read in it his same anger. *We can’t declare ourselves already defeated, without even giving them a good fight,* he thought, his blood boiling.

Jaime Lannister tensely grabbed his glove and sprung to his feet.
Pray excuse me, Your Grace, Lord Commander. My lady. I need some fresh air.”

Brienne made a move to stand and follow him outside, but Jon held out a hand to stop her and trailed after him instead.

He found him on the covered bridge which overlooked the training yard, pacing up and down in extreme agitation, like a lion in a cage. He exhaled loudly when he saw him approaching.

“I’m wondering if perhaps we might have made an unforgivable mistake in ignoring your calls,” he said, turning to face him, eyes blazing with fury and hot indignation colouring both his cheeks and his voice.

“Assuming we survive the following few days, once we return to Winterfell I’ll dispatch some of my men here, and I’ll write to my cousin Daven. He’s castellan at the Rock and the ruling Warden of the West. We have plenty of granite and limestone you could use to restore the Castle and the other forts to full functionality.”

Jon’s jaw slacked in surprise. That was a more than generous offer and it would be to the Watch’s advantage to take it. But he still wasn’t sure what kind of game Jaime Lannister was playing: was he moved by an honest, albeit quite strange, wish to help, or did he have an ulterior, still unfathomable, motive?

“You have my personal thanks, my lord; I’m sure Commander Tollett will take you up to that offer. But only the Iron Throne could give the Watch the kind of support it truly needs, I’m afraid.”

Lannister ground his teeth, his good hand gripping the splintered handrail, and confessed in a whisper: “Cersei won’t listen.”

Jon didn’t expect anything different, but still, having Jaime Lannister confirm the pointlessness of their attempts bit him like a slap in the face. He felt his own powerlessness like a burden weighing darkly over his heart.

The knight clutched his cloak closer to his body: “I don’t even know how you’ve managed to keep your wits about you in the years you’ve spent here. I wouldn’t stand a week in this cold: I can’t even think straight.”

He smirked bleakly.

“You get used to everything, after a while. If you can face Hobb’s disgusting cooking without throwing up your own bowels, you would learn to stand the cold too.”

This was nothing compared to the numbing feeling his mind still conjured up every time he remembered the knives’ blades plunging through him, again and again, slashing, twisting, driving the warmth out of him… and the hard feel of the frozen ground, when they left him to die in the snow…a slow agony… The whiteness drank my blood and I could feel life sweeping through me, out of me… and then nothing at all.

“Maybe it’s true what they say: you northerners are made of a thicker skin than the rest of us.”

“I’m not a northerner,” he japed, then clarified with a grin when he saw the confused look in the Kingslayer’s eyes. “I was born in Dorne. Or so my father told me.”

It was the only thing he told me.

Lannister leaned out of the railing to inspect the yard below: some brothers were shovelling out the
paths, some others were gathering around the braziers, kindling their torches and getting ready for
the nightly patrol on top of the Wall. All of them seemed, every now and then, to throw charged
looks full of contempt and condemnation in their direction.

“These Crows look like they want to gut me and fling my body on the other side of the Wall with a
trebuchet. Should I sleep with one eye open and my sword at the ready, do you reckon?”

Jon frowned, something coiling in his chest. “Don’t worry, they’re more likely to stab me.”

In fact, he couldn’t really say if such unfriendly attitude was aimed at the Kingslayer or at himself.
He knew that some of the men were thinking about him as a sort of divinity, who had walked
through the shadows and resurfaced again on the other side, after having defeated death itself;
some others, however, judged him a godless abomination, a monstrous freak, for that same exact
reason.

But on one thing everyone concurred: he was a bastard boy, a wildling lover and a deserter who got
away with it and whose head was rewarded with a crown instead of the sharp edge of a sword.

Why should they keep their own oaths, if I, for one, couldn’t keep mine?

How am I any different from Mance, who ran north and crowned himself King Beyond the Wall?

He stole a fleeting glance to his left.

How am I any different from this man?

Lannister’s jade eyes followed closely the guards as they headed to the winch.

“It must have stung. The betrayal…” he uttered.

“They didn’t betray me. They murdered me. In cold blood. Stabbed me to death, seven times.”

He let that sink in, then added: “Do you know what Ser Davos told me, after I came back? That
only one of those wounds was really mortal… I mean…I would have bled out to death anyway,
eventually… but this…” he put a hand over his heart. “And it was a boy who did it, a boy not older
than Arya… my own steward.”

The thought would always leave a sour taste in his mouth. He killed Ygritte and I took him in; I
had loved him like a little brother, I’ve taught him how to fight in the same way Lord Eddard did
with me, and he plunged a dagger in my heart.

Of course it stung. Quite literally. But a small part of him felt like he deserved it; wouldn’t Jon
have done the same thing, given the chance, had the roles been reversed?

After all, Olly stood in the common hall while he made a bargain with the very people who
butchered both his parents right in front of him… Tormund himself had led the raid on his village,
and had been rewarded with his life and his freedom. Jon couldn’t really blame Olly for wanting to
take his revenge, but his duty as Lord Commander dictated to punish the mutineers. All of them.

Kill the boy, Maester Aemon had said. Kill the boy and let the man be born. And that had been his
final act as Lord Commander.

“I put him to the gallows with the others, afterwards, and there hasn’t been a single night ever since
that I haven’t dreamt his face,” he blurted out, his voice cracking.
Why am I telling this wretched man?

Lannister was studying him with the most peculiar, mystified expression, as though he was looking at something remarkable he hadn’t quite expected to find.

Jon stubbornly held his gaze with pursed lips and his fists stiff along his sides, feeling exposed and harrowed by the reluctant respect he could see into those green eyes.

But the look was gone before he could fully figure it out, and in its place there was a disillusioned, harsh cynicism.

“Sometimes we don’t have a choice between what’s right and what’s wrong,” he said coldly, his stare fixed on the Wall. “Sometimes our only choice is between ‘bad’ and ‘worse’. There isn’t always a clean, bloodless way to fix things. We want to be Prince Aemon the Dragonknight, or the Sword of the Morning, and we end up hated by the very people we have struggled to save. Don’t delude yourself, Jon Snow; we’re not the heroes of this story. The best we can do is try, hoping it will be enough.”

His words had rung blunt and bold in Winterfell’s Great Hall, too, and Jon was just as startled and piqued in his pride. This didn’t mean they weren’t true.

“Lady Brienne warned me. You can’t really hold your tongue, can you?”

He likes the sound of his own voice a bit too much, were the Maid of Tarth’s exact words.

Lannister faced him again. “You’d rather have everyone lie to you, now that you’re styling yourself King? That would make you feel better?”

Jon shut his eyes, the Old Bear’s voice clear in his head: the hard truths are the ones to hold tight.

“I’m well-known for not mincing my words. This is how I lost my hand, after all; hasn’t Lady Brienne told you the heroic tale of my maiming?” he asked lightly and waggled the golden hand in front of him. “I believe that Locke had meant to teach me a lesson in humility, when he chopped it off. Can’t say it worked.”

“Locke?” Jon’s brows furrowed. “Tall, gaunt fellow, with a goatee and two deep scars on both cheeks?”

By the light of the braziers and torches, he saw the Kingslayer’s face turning the colour of sour milk.

“How do you – ”

“I’ve met him! He joined the Watch, shortly before I became Lord Commander, said he was a game hunter from the Stormlands.”

“A game hunter?” Lannister gasped incredulously, his eyes wide and hardened by resentment and hatred. “The bastard was on the Boltons payroll! He was the leader of the Bloody Mummers!”

Jon grabbed the handrail and felt every muscle of his body freeze in fear. He knew. He knew! He overheard me and Sam talking! Air left his lungs all at once.

Lannister’s voice was faraway when he spoke again.

“What happened?”
He drew in a breath, tasting bile in his mouth. “Locke knew that Bran went beyond the Wall. He befriended me, followed me as a volunteer when I’ve lead a mission to Craster’s Keep.”

If he truly served Roose Bolton, there was no doubt that he had infiltrated the Watch to find and kill his brothers. For, as long as Bran and Rickon lived, the Boltons’ power over the North would have been weak and delegitimised.

Lannister grasped his arm in a vice and made him turn. His grip was firm and harsh, but the rest of him was shaking. “He’s still here?” he asked stiffly, his green eyes wild and haunted.

Jon shook his head. “He’s dead.”

He still remembered very well Grenn’s comment, when they found the body, the collarbone sticking out horribly from his broken neck.

‘What seven hells could do that to a man?’

Jon hadn’t given much thought about it, back then, but now Hodor appeared vividly in his mind. The gentle half-giant, with his innocent eyes, strong hands and feeble wit. Could it really be? Could he have killed a man to save Bran’s life? And if it were so, why wouldn’t he have warned him of their presence?

There was no use in asking those questions now.

He rubbed a weary hand across his face, trying to overcome his qualms, and looked up, to the faint lights dancing on top of the Wall, like ghosts glowing blue and violet and orange in the dark. The night patrols had begun.

“Do you want to see the world from up there?”

Next to him, the Kingslayer let out a deep breath: “It might well be my only chance.”

Ten minutes later, Jaime Lannister was peering over the edge into the blackness threatening to swallow them all, with a mix of deep discomfort and awe.

“Your brother pissed over the edge,” Jon reminisced somewhat fondly.

“Yes.” Regret seemed to colour his voice, as the shadow of a smile crept over his face. “Tyrion would do that.”

The wind blew stronger up there, and the hems of their cloaks flapped sharply all around their bodies.

Every now and then, faceless men armed with spears, longbows and horns crossed their path, stopped for a few minutes to scan the area below, then resumed their patrol.

“There’s a sort of mysterious beauty to it,” Lannister said, full of wonder, his breath frosting in the cruel air.

Jon stared off into the dark distance, shivering, wondering how long this semblance of peace would hold up.

Yes, mysterious. And deathly.
The Nightfort’s ragged ruins stood scattered along the ridge of the hill, silent, forlorn and dormant under a thick layer of fresh snow and ice, like a horrific beast fallen in a state of hibernation, saving its energy for a spring which seemed to never come.

After two hundred years of abandonment and dereliction, the forest had claimed back the spaces once inhabited by man: weeds and thorny vines strangled the few walls and supporting columns still standing and, despite the cold, moss still thrived, tenaciously clinging like a pale green-brown dress to the rough, dented, naked stones.

The architectural elements made of wood had collapsed centuries ago and rust and ice had eaten everything else. A part of the keep had seemingly sunk back into the ground, succumbing to the snow, and black holes cracked open were once stood door frames and double-arched windows; gaping mouths forever trapped in a soundless scream still smelling of blood and vengeance and meat pies.

All that was left was only the spectral structure of pillars supporting abraded architraves, damaged buttresses pushing their weights against the void where once there were walls and ramparts, and heaps of splintered rocks where once stood tall watchtowers and turrets.

The castle had now become the dominion of rats, dust and shadows.

“The perfect location for ghost stories,” Bronn said, leaning over the deep stone well concealing the entrance of the Black Gate, and moved his burning torch left and right. From the bottom came the faint echo of pebbles rippling down against frozen ground and the rustling of mice.

Nymeria growled at the darkness.

“I wouldn’t joke about it, if I were you, m’lord,” Frostfinger admonished. “This is a cursed place for the Night’s Watch.”

Edd’s prediction had proven all too true: no Crow had agreed to take part voluntarily to the mission, except Denner. Jon could not complain: Frostfinger was a skilled ranger, an experienced fighter, and knew the western borders of the forest fairly well.

“What are you keeping down there? Ice spiders?” Podrick asked, his eyes darting apprehensively from the torch he was trying to light up to the well’s black ring.

“What have you ever heard of the Rat Cook, young Payne?”

Pod shook his head.

“Then remind me to tell you all about it, once we’re safe back to Castle Black,” the recruit trainer winked at him and flung his legs across the well’s edge.

The torches’ fire was just enough to light up the way under their feet as they descended the dank, slippery steps half-hidden in the dark stones of the inner wall.

Cold darkness pressed on their eyes.

Frostfinger led them down, until they reached a huge white weirwood door built into the stone, with a face carved in it.

It wasn’t at all like Sam had described it to him, and for a moment Jon feared they were in the wrong place. In front of them there wasn’t an old, wrinkled man, but rather the face of a boy, sad and wise, frowning in his heavy sleep, his features suspended in precarious balance between the
innocence of childhood and the heavy burden of adulthood. It was a young face, and old at the same time.

*It looks a bit like Bran.* Or what Bran would look like, had he survived all along.

Under the closed eyes, there were deep grooves, like patterns of centuries-old tears. Brienne stepped up and put a naked hand over the wood; when she retracted it, her fingertips were stained with sap, sticky and red as blood.

The door screeched as though it were shaking on its invisible hinges and the face woke up from its slumber. Jon moved closer.

“Who are you?” it asked in a voice that belonged neither to man nor to child.

Frostfinger turned to him and tipped the point of his torch to the weirwood.

*He wants me to say the words.*

Jon took two steps back and swallowed hard.

“You will have to do it,” he said to the black brother. “I can’t.”

The realisation hurt him; the Watch had been the only place where he felt like he truly belonged. Until he didn’t. The loss would always feel like a hole in his chest.

Ghost padded next to him and pressed his muzzle into his hand. A gentle, silent comfort. Jon could do nothing but watch Frostfinger move forward and speak the words in his stead.

“I am the sword in the darkness,” the ranger recited with a steady, strong voice; Jon closed his eyes and said the oath in his head anyway. “I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men.”

“Then pass,” the voice said and the face’s mouth stretched out, wider and wider, until the hollow cavity was broad enough for them to pass through.

The tunnel twisted and curved into the inky darkness, running for more than five hundred feet beneath the ice.

Every now and then, frozen tears dropped over their heads from the tips of icicles as large as Valyrian greatswords and just as sharp.

They were halfway through the passage when it happened: his heart started to race as though he had run for miles into the deep snow. With each step, his chest hurt more, the biting pain spreading from the spot where the blunt handle of the White Walker’s spear had hit him in Hardhome.

He gasped for air like he was drowning.

Something was horribly wrong.

Ahead of him, Frostfinger’s torch swayed before his eyes, as a strange dizziness clouded his vision. The ground spun from under his wobbly legs: he staggered and slammed his shoulder hard into the ice wall.

“Your Grace?”
Spots of light danced before him, a sound like a high-pitched scream of a dying animal filling his head. Sickness overcame him.

“Jon?”

He felt more than heard Brienne’s unwavering presence beside him, her strong hands grabbing him before he could fall. A warm wetness was trickling over his upper lips. He raised a hand to his face: his nose was bleeding.

“’m fine,” he panted, shaking his head, and struggled to his feet.

“Perhaps we should turn back,” the warrior lady said.

“No! We go ahead.”

He ignored the alarmed looks Brienne and Tormund were exchanging and reeled to the head of the group, but couldn’t help but notice Beric Dondarrion staring at him, his eyes piercing and gleaming in the dark with growing awareness.

Beyond the Wall, the landscape was completely changed into a monotone, white plate which smoothed over the ground’s irregular harshness and its natural contours and shapes. A thick layer of fresh, deep snow covered all the known hiking trails and slowed them down, despite the triangular-shaped snowshoes made of hardwood tied on their feet, which efficiently avoided sinking in it.

On the edge of the woods, where sentinel and weirwood trees mutely bowed under the weight of ice, the direwolves raised their muzzles to sniff at the air, their bodies stiff and taut, and went in opposite directions, Nymeria north, Ghost east.

The party carried on, treading with caution under a light sleet, hoods raised against the wind, breeches already half-soaked and their breaths dampening the scarves wrapped around their faces.

The uneasy weakness Jon had felt going through the Gate hadn’t abated once they reached the haunted forest, but grew stronger and more overwhelming as they ventured deeper north.

He remembered the hearth stories Old Nan used to tell him and Robb: there was powerful magic woven into the Wall… the long-forgotten magic of the Children which kept the monsters at bay. The dead could not pass, as long as the Wall stood strong, that’s what she always said. That’s what this was about? Was the Wall trying to keep him from crossing over?

It knows, he realised as cold panic crept in his lungs and cut off his breath. It sensed what happened to me. What if I can’t get back?

He constantly felt Beric’s eye on him, following his every step as though he expected him to break down and crumble into dust at any moment, like the walking corpse he was.

The sun was already setting when they reached Whitetree: the village was just as empty and shattered as he recalled. The shadows cast by the branches of the enormous weirwood tree stretched across the sheepfold and blended with theirs, as they moved around the tumbledown houses to set up a perimeter for the camp.

“You feel it too, don’t you?” Beric muttered, when they were out of earshot. Jon stole a rapid glance at the others, sharing strips of dried meat and hot, boiled water as they warmed themselves
up by the fire, the mishap in the tunnel seemingly forgotten.

He shut his eyes, trying to clear his head: “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Beric grasped his arm, wrenching it so hard Jon almost cried out in pain.

“The pull!” he snarled. Rage and frustration strained and twisted beyond recognition the already splintered lines of his face in a distorted grimace of agony. Jon recoiled. “That loud swarming in your head, like hundreds of angry wasps smothering everything else, even your thoughts. And the further north we go, the louder it becomes…the voice… It’s getting harder and harder to ignore it.”

His fevered eye burned mad as it darted to the rest of their company. “They don’t understand. They only see what they want to see. We walk among them, we talk to them, but we’re not like them. Not anymore.”

His heart turned to stone. It wasn’t a simple fleeting illness, a premonition of impending doom suppurating only in his mind. This was affecting Dondarrion too. He clenched his jaw and glanced at the group gathered around the fire: was their mere presence unwittingly putting everyone else in danger?

Tormund’s coarse laughter rose above the crackling flames in answer to one of Bronn’s japes, but Jon couldn’t partake in their unity. He felt cold and sickened. Melisandre, what did you do to me? What am I turning into?

Resolving to take first watch, he stood up, but he had not taken but a few steps in the direction of the forest when he stopped abruptly. A shadow shifted through the trees.

Instinctively his hand reached for Longclaw.

“Quiet!” Frostfinger hissed, shooting to his feet, and moved beside him, swift as a cat, sword at the ready. Lannister mirrored him and sped to Jon’s right, Widow’s Wail gleaming in the darkness as though it was coated in fresh blood.

Heavy snowbanks fell from the weirwood’s white branches; Jon noticed ravens perched on the tree… five, then a dozen, then hundreds of them, a cloud of wings blacker than the night.

And they all started to shriek at once.

Brienne gaped at him appalled, Oathkeeper raised firmly in front of her.

“Lord of Light, defend us,” Thoros of Myr invoked.

Next to him, Beric drew the edge of his sword over his left palm and the blade blazed with fire from point to crossguard.

The leather wrapped around Longclaw’s hilt grated under Jon’s tightening grip.

Then, as mysteriously as it started, the shrieking stopped.

Beyond the trees’ dark line some twigs snapped with a loud crack: Anguy drew the string of his bow to his ear and waited, holding his breath, until from the snowy bushes Nymeria blithely padded into the camp’s light.

Bronn snorted loudly: “The fuckin’ wolf.”

But the fucking wolf wasn’t alone: a tall man clad in the black of the Watch trailed after her, his
face and head completely covered by hood and scarf.

A ranger, this far from Castle Black? Was it possible?

“Not a step further, brother!” called Frostfinger. “State your name!”

The stranger ignored him and knelt in front of Arya’s direwolf. He wasn’t wearing gloves.

“Nymeria,” he said, his voice scraping for lack of use, and gently scratched the direwolf’s ear. “You were but a pup, the last time I saw you.”

Jon’s sword suddenly became very heavy.

The man raised his eyes to him, stood up and lowered his scarf. His face was thin and gaunt, and his aquiline nose stuck out even more prominently against the paleness. But Jon would recognise his eyes everywhere. Stark eyes. His father’s eyes.

“And so were you,” Benjen said with a small, sad smile.

Longclaw slipped from his grip as Jon took three long strides and hugged the long-lost man in dark furs.

“Uncle Benjen!”

A million questions were buzzing in his mind: what happened? Where did he go? How did he survive this long alone beyond the Wall? Why did he never come back?

“I thought you were dead!” he only said instead, his heart hammering madly.

“He is,” Thoros confirmed behind him.

Jon pulled out of the embrace wordlessly, letting his arms fall to his sides and took a step back, for the first time noticing the things he had overlooked in his surprise and joy.

Benjen’s skin was too unnaturally pale, his lips too much blue, his naked hands bloated and blackened almost like rotten flesh; there was no misty puffs of air coming from his mouth, no warmth from his body. No sign of life whatsoever.

But he was still his uncle; he recognised him, he could talk. His eyes were still the bright, laughing grey Jon had always loved.

“I might be dead, but I still fight for the living,” Benjen said and his intense stare shifted to look over Jon’s shoulders. “Same as you, Beric Dondarrion.”

The Lighting Lord put his flaming sword back into its scabbard and the world grew a little bit darker.

“What happened to you?” Jon asked shocked, the prickle in his eyes betraying a deep emotion.

“There will be time to explain later. But now, you must come with me. The Three-Eyed Raven awaits.”

“Three-Eyed Raven?” Tormund narrowed his blue eyes. “That’s children’s tale. The last greenseer died a long time ago.”

“Not dead, only asleep. Observing everything, waiting for his time. His magic, the same magic of
the Children, has awakened again and now flows in the blood of a crippled Stark boy.”

“Uncle…” he breathed out, bewildered, his hope rekindling.

Benjen Stark nodded and Jon felt like coming back to life again.

“We’re not far,” he said, laying a fatherly hand on his shoulder. “Come. I’ll take you to him.”

Chapter End Notes

When I decided I wanted to get Jon beyond the Wall to rescue Bran, the most troubling question I found myself asking was: how his resurrection will impact on the Wall’s magic? And this raised a lot more doubts: is there any substantial difference between Jon and Beric, apart from the fact that Dondarrion has been brought back for a considerably larger number of times? Would the Wall “block them” just as it does with Benjen, although the circumstances of their resurrections are obviously very different? And more importantly: would the Night King be able to control them to some degree? I’d like to hear what you think!

As you might know, Denner Frostfinger is a character from the Telltale Game Series: I know next to nothing about the video game’s storyline and I don’t think I will include other elements from it (is it even considered canon?), but I was searching for an authority figure in the Night’s Watch other than Dolorous Edd and since all the other strong characters are either dead or lost in the Land of Always Winter, I thought that Frostfinger could be perfect for my evil schemes!

Thank you for reading!
Bran I

Chapter Notes

This beast is almost 11k words long… I’m not even sorry anymore…*laughs hysterically*

A cavil on chronology (yes, I make those too, lol): I’m bending the alleged events chronology in Bran’s arc a bit for ease of reading and narrative plausibility. Since in A Wreath of Thorns several months pass between the Battle of the Bastards and Jon’s decision to go beyond the Wall to try and rescue Bran, I’m realigning the most recent events in Bran’s arc so that they’re more or less happening at the same time with JON I. In other words, this chapter begins only a few days after Bran’s last vision in ep. 6x10, as it would be a little bit far-fetched and ridiculous to think about poor Bran and Meera stuck for months under that weirwood tree, after Benjen has left!

Thanks to the ones who have left a comment/kudo/bookmark, and also to the ones who are reading without commenting: I feel your encouragement and I’m grateful and humbled by the support the story is receiving!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE RAVEN

The black, hooded shadow ran swiftly through the forest’s trees, leaping over thick roots jutting out from the sticky mud, only barely dodging the cutting kiss of the lower twigs of spruces and alders; he bolted, as nimble as a cat, across sharp-edged rocks covered with silver moss and small, gurgling streams, pushing further, further, paying no heed to the biting pain the thorny shrubs of purple barberries and night-blooming winter roses were leaving all over legs and hands and stopping only when a pained, strangled yelp rose to his back. The shadow whipped around and took a few steps in the direction of the noise, breathing heavily through the brown scarf which hid a good portion of his face.

Lying there with his hands clutching his left foot trapped in a protruding white root, there was another dark figure, a short young man with a heavy bundle wrapped around his shoulders.

“Don’t worry about me, keep going!” he shouted to the shadow, struggling to free himself. “They’re on our tails, you must reach the lake!”

The shadow’s grey eyes darted undecided from the small man, in fact only a little older than a boy, to the dark trail vanishing across the soldier pines: the torches’ light flickered through the trees’ trunks and even the voices and the barking of the dogs were closing in, now.

Perched atop the branches of a tall ash tree, the Raven watched the two fugitives with wise, golden
eyes. He had been following them ever since they fled from the large castle with the gigantic
curtain walls and the grim clouds of bats flying in circles around the tops of its burned towers, as
silent as ghosts. They had failed to throw the King’s hounds off their scent, and now the Raven
sensed the shadow’s dismay and rage at being hunted down like common criminals.

“No! No! Don’t help me! Run!” the young man on the ground pleaded hopelessly, as his
companion knelt and reached out to him. Despite the protection of the night, the Raven’s eyes
recognised the likeness to both Meera and Jojen Reed in the lad’s open, stubborn face.

“They’re chasing us like animals. I won’t leave you to their mercies,” the mysterious stranger
spoke in a breathless, iron voice, but his hands were gentle and careful when he helped the friend to
disentangle his injured foot from the treacherous root.

The ankle was definitely sprained, but didn’t look broken.

“You should leave me here, I will only slow you down,” the boy gritted his teeth, limping and
leaning heavily on the other’s shoulder, the round burden on his back hindering their movements
even more.

The hooded shadow tilted his head back and looked up to the ash tree where the Raven had taken
shelter, patiently watching the scene unfold without being seen, and asked in a resolved voice:
“Can you climb?”

The crannogman nodded.

One by one, they grabbed the ash’s lowest branches, their feet searching for cracks and sturdy
gnarls in the trunk for better leverage, and hoisted themselves up, until the tree’s thick canopy was
effectively hiding them from view just as, on the ground below, came running three men.

One was wearing a white cloak and armour, and to his hips was strapped a greatsword that, the
Raven knew, would be as bright and refulgent as a fallen star when unsheathed; two griffins danced
and battled over the breastplate of the second man, a proud, gruffly-looking fellow with red hair as
fiery as his appearance; but it was the third that caught the Raven’s full attention. He wore no
armour, only a blood-red cloak barely shielding him from the breezy night, but he had a regal look
to him, a bold, blazing fierceness curiously mixed with a melancholic solemnity that made him
stood out taller and more handsome than his companions.

“I don’t understand… They can’t have disappeared into thin air,” his red-haired friend stomped
around the small clearing, impatiently hitting with his sword the bushes of blue roses sprouting on
the path’s side.

The pensive man quietly looked around himself, a deep frown of disappointment troubling his
otherwise placid face. Moonbeams caught in his long hair, making it shine like molten quicksilver.
He skimmed a hand over the tree’s trunk, studying its texture and the spots here and there where
the bark had been freshly stripped away. Drops of fragrant, sticky resin poured slowly from the
wounds and cracks like liquid golden tears. He crouched down to get a better look at the disturbed
carpet of red and green leaves around the base of the tree.

“They can’t have gone far,” the white knight said approaching him. “Do you want me to call back
Ser Richard with the hounds?”

The silver man silently shook his head and stood up.

“My cousin Robert would be with him, and I don’t have the patience to deal with that boisterous,
Atop the ash, the two hidden figures held their breaths, flattening themselves against the rough, damp bark at their backs. The boy’s small frame fit perfectly into a fortuitous hollow carved on the side of the tree, but his friend was struggling to keep still; the Raven, roosted on their same branch only a few inches apart, saw his legs slipping on the dewy crust. In the attempt of gaining more footing, the hooded shadow shifted his weight, but realised a second too late that this was a very bad decision. A horribly loud creaking sound which seemed to hail directly from the deep heart of the tree made the branch shake and bend. The shadow was thrust forward, and his eyes met the Raven’s. The bird cocked his head. Can you see me?, he seemed to ask. But before the grey eyes – eyes of steel, wolf’s eyes, the Raven thought – could answer, the tree’s limb screeched and swung dangerously, snapping in half with a deafening crack and falling right on the silver head of the quiet man below.

In the chaos that followed, several things happened at once: the white knight caught the young crannogman by the scruff of the neck, and the heavy bundle he was protecting was dropped on the ground with a metallic thud. The shadow, who fell from the sky right into the man’s lap, promptly leapt up and would’ve certainly bolted back into the forest only to disappear again with the complicity of the night, if it weren’t for the red griffin, who efficiently blocked his retreat circling him tightly with his sturdy arms.

While the silver man gingerly rose again to his feet, a little stunned and disoriented for the blow to his head, perhaps, but very much alive and intrigued nonetheless, the shadow baulked and kicked like an untamed horse, rendered wilder still by the woeful cries of his friend, who was trying to fight off the iron grip of the taller and way stronger Kingsguard.

“Let me go! Let me go!”

The shadow savagely sank his teeth into the tender flesh of his captor’s hand and stomped down on the man’s right foot. Hard. The griffin let out a cry of surprised pain, followed right away by an exceptionally gross string of swear words. The stranger pressed his momentary advantage to wiggle out of the man’s loosened grip and seize the handle of the short dagger dangling from his belt. But as he spun around, the griffin grabbed the scarf and cloak which hid his face and body and tore them off.

Lavish dark-brown hair cascaded down over the stranger’s shoulders and back, framing a long face, full red lips and high cheekbones, flushed in equal measure for the running, the fight and the indignation.

It was most definitely not a shadow; it was a very real, very angry she-wolf, dishevelled and dirty, but not lacking a certain stormy, raw beauty.

If he had had a mouth, the Raven would have indubitably smiled at the three men’s shocked reaction.

The silver lord was the most astonished of all. His lips parted and closed a couple of times, as though he wanted to say something, but not word came out. He stifled an awkward laugh and addressed the griffin instead, his purple eyes never leaving the wild young woman in front of him.

“My dear Jon, you’ve just let a girl disarm you!”

“A girl?!” cried out the griffin, holding out his bleeding hand. “More like a rabid beast!”

She set her jaw in a headstrong expression the Raven had observed a million times before on his drunken fool just now.”
sister Arya’s face, and answered by raising the dagger to the man’s chin.

“Drop the blade, lass,” the Kingsguard warned at her back. “That’s the Crown Prince you’re threatening.”

“Prince or not, if you or one of your men lay even a finger on me, my brothers will end you.”

The griffin moved to unsheathe his sword, but Rhaegar Targaryen held out a hand with an almost imperceptible shake of his head. He approached her warily, like he would do with a frightened deer.

“And pray tell, who are your brothers, my lady? Despite the present appearances, you don’t sound lowborn.” He raked his eyes over her, furrowing his brows, his interest definitely piqued. “You look oddly familiar… Have we met?… What’s your name?”

The girl blushed, but kept her ground, her eyes burning proud and fearless.

“My friend did nothing wrong. Unhand him, at once!” she commanded, and the prince’s eyes came alive with amusement and admiration.

“Sorry, I can’t do that. My father the King ordered me to find the mysterious horseman people are calling the Knight of the Laughing Tree. That – he pointed a finger some feet from her, to the dented shield which had popped out of its sack in the fall – looks like a laughing tree to me.”

The unexpected turn of events rendered her speechless for a moment. The point of the dagger she was holding shook.

“You think he is the Knight of the Laughing Tree?” she scowled, her voice thick with incredulity.

“My lady, no!” Howland Reed implored from behind her.

“I am the Knight of the Laughing Tree!” Lyanna Stark declared, and the vision flickered and twirled in a blur and the Raven took flight again.

He flew, across space and time, as the seasons turned and the days followed the nights thousands of times, year after year, and the lands below changed from snowy white, to lush green, to golden fields burnt by the sun, to sand and sea, and back again, over and over, until he was home and could finally rest his wings on a branch of the heart tree in Winterfell’s godswood: below him, Sansa was bathing in the dark pond, a mysterious smile tugging at her lips as she thought about him, wondering if he was still alive, and he was almost tempted to shout I’m here! I’m flying back home, sister!, but he flapped his wings once more and soared across the training yard, where Arya was sparring with a dark, scarred man he remembered from another life, when he could still walk, when he could still climb.

Well, I’m flying, now, he though, smug and exhilarated, and I can see everything.

And he saw with a mix of delight and brotherly jealousy his sister blush, distracted from her sparring by a young burly man intent on his work at the nearby forge, and when the lad raised his blue eyes to her, smiling with a little wave, she was promptly kicked on the floor.

“Get your fuckin’ eyes back on your enemy’s sword, girl, and not on the pretty lad in the smithy, or next time I will use the edge instead of the flat!”

The vision changed again, and now the Raven was in the middle of an immense expanse of ice, and a gigantic woman circled around herself, her striking blue eyes searching for unknown enemies
lurking in the night, and her sword was a wonder of burning red ripples, the only warmth in the dark winter…

But there were other swords forming in his mind, hundreds of them, twisted, deformed, bent and melted together by a breathing fire, their edges still razor-sharp… and the Mad King stabbed himself on their pointy ends, again and again, and pointed a bloodstained finger against a knight not much older than the Raven himself, as he spat words of hate and death: “Your father is at gates! What are you doing still here? You have your orders. Bring me his head, you bloody traitor, or burn with the rest of them!”

The knight unsheathed his sword: golden was his hair, and golden his armour, but his eyes were as hard and cruel as wildfire... And then he found himself back at the feet of the Broken Tower in Winterfell, and Summer was next to him, a pup still, watching with unfathomable amber eyes, and his legs were pushing him up, spurring him on, saying “Climb! Climb!” , but his heart was screaming to stop and run away.

But up he went.

Like the squirrel his lady mother always dubbed him to be.

_I never fall._

And, this time, he didn’t.

He hoisted himself up, across the windowsill and he was in another tower, in another time, and his aunt Lyanna was dead in a bed of blood and dried out blue roses, and his father was screaming and sobbing like a wounded animal, holding her as though his own warmth and love and tears could bring her back. Other hands, gentle, trembling hands were trying to disentangle him from the cold embrace.

“Ned, come on! Let her go. You can’t help her anymore! We need to leave.”

Keen like a knife, dawn pierced through the open windows and flooded the small room and the lifeless body lying on the bed; under the golden light, her face beamed, gaining in death a peaceful softness which she probably never had in life. The hurt and fear and pain were gone, and Bran realised that her still serenity was a last token of love, a silent absolution for the sins of the world, for the lies honourable men would have to say on her behalf. He averted his eyes, feeling like somehow intruding on a moment too private and intimate to share. Something else caught his attention: the wood-and-iron shield hung on the stone wall opposite to the windows, and the sunrays were illuminating the chipped paint of the blazon, a heart tree with a face carved on it, smiling mysteriously.

The sound of weeping, from both man and child, filled the tower. His father had slumped down on the wooden floorboards, crushed under the weight of a pain too big to feel anything else.

In the arms of the midwife, the baby was fussing, wanting his mother’s breast, and Bran was reminded of those pups his brother found in the wolfswood, a lifetime ago, their soft muzzles pressing against their mother’s empty womb, their mouths hopelessly latching to her cold udders.

The small man’s hands shook as he reached out for the baby and there were tears in his eyes and his voice when he spoke again.

“Ned…get up. Get up and look at him. Look at him. She left us with a gift. We must protect him.”

His father raised his reddened eyes on Howland Reed, the baby in his arms now cooing peacefully.
Bran could hear the faint echo of another voice, a woman’s, calling out to him, pleading with him… *Bran! Bran, wake up! Please! Please, wake up!* and other voices, a thousand voices, joined her… the Children, singing their sad, forgotten songs, and the earth had a voice, and the rocks had a voice, and another voice had the trees and the sunburnt bushes, but he ignored them. There was somewhere else he needed to be, so the Raven spread his wings and let his thousand eyes guide him deep into the North again… the weirwood tree below him was almost identical to the one waiting for him in Winterfell’s godswood, except for the spiral pattern of stones scattered around like an enormous sleeping three-headed beast, the weirwood at the centre of it like a warm, beating heart… and right into the heart of winter he was floating now, across a brutal land beaten by the wind, past the white curtain of the mountains and the merciless expanses of ice, beyond a frozen waterfall all the way to an altar of ice surrounded by high crystal-like pillars half-buried in the snow…and over the altar a baby had been lain down, a child screaming for cold and fear, and his eyes turned blue, and Jon was that child…

His real eyes opened again and stared up at the red canopy of the weirwood tree where uncle Benjen had left them five days ago. Meera’s face swum into view as he adjusted to the dim light of the campfire, her warm brown eyes wide and worried.

“You’ve been gone for so long, I thought…” she trailed off, pursing her chapped lips as she checked his furs absent-mindedly, tucking him close as a mother would do. The thought annoyed him. He pushed away her hand as politely as he could.

Her eyes hardened. He watched as she grabbed the pile of intertwined twigs and sticks she was crafting in replacement for the sledge they had to leave in the forest, when they were attacked by the wights, and resumed her work. In a few days – she would say with a steadfast glint in her eyes – a new handmade sledge would be ready, and they would be able to reach Castle Black on their own. The Wall wasn’t that far: three miles, maybe four as the crows fly. And, if her calculations were right, the Castle was right in front of them. Bran had told her more than once to run alone to the gate and come back with help, but Meera was adamant: there was no way she would ever leave him behind. They would reach the Castle together or they wouldn’t reach it at all. After a while, Bran dropped the issue altogether. It wouldn’t do to squabble against each other. They needed to save their strength, if they wanted to survive a little longer.

Since the cave, the woods had grown awfully quiet, almost too quiet, as though the trees were collectively holding their breath, waiting for something to happen. The dead hadn’t bothered them again, but Bran felt restless.

They survived drinking melted ice and eating weirwood paste mixed with smashed acorns, moss and the mushrooms Meera had retrieved from the cave; at night they would light fires all around the makeshift hut made of moss, leaves and twigs, and Meera would snuggle up against him under the furs, propriety long forgotten, and he would often fall into a mercifully dreamless slumber with her breath on his face and her warmth shielding him from his nightmares, but it was a small consolation.

She was tired beyond words and hurt, Bran didn’t need the greensight to realise it. He couldn’t find the right words to comfort her, though. They both had lost so much during their journey. The Three-Eyed Raven was gone, and so were the Children… and Jojen and Summer and Hodor… the wound in his heart was still fresh and bleeding, and his mind struggled to make sense of it: he went a hundred of times back into that cave, the memories overwhelming and threatening to push him over the brink of sanity… Meera’s desperate cries for help, the confusion on Wylis’ mild face as he got trapped between the overlapping layers of past and future time, bending, crumpling like autumn
leaves, folding back on themselves like the dark ripples of a Valyrian steel under the strong hammer of the most skilful master armourer.... Did he know he was going to die? Did he experience his future self’s pain? And in his adult life, did he recognise Meera’s voice, when they met the Reeds for the first time, on the road to Castle Black? Bran’s soul ached and grieved at the possibility: if it were so, then Hodor chose willingly to protect him and follow him north of the Wall, knowing all along he was also going to meet his very end.

That single word, repeated for all of Hodor’s life, almost like an incantation, a grim premonition of his own death, was now a stark reminder of the costs of knowledge and of Bran’s own impulsive stupidity.

The past couldn’t be tampered with, those were the Three-Eyed Raven’s teachings. *The past remains the past. We can learn from it, but we cannot change it.*

*The ink is dry.*

Then how had it been possible? What was the meaning of this? What of his other visions?

In some tiny, deep part of his heart, Bran deluded himself into thinking that maybe, *maybe*, Summer and Hodor had survived, somehow. Wounded, perhaps. Lost, like him and Meera. But still alive, or living a good imitation of life, just like his uncle Benjen was, against all odds. He had tried countless times to slip into Summer’s skin, forcing himself to dream wolf’s dreams when he closed his eyes, but every time his mind painfully smashed against an insurmountable barrier of coldness, numbing and bitter, like a bird against a glass wall, and all he could do was to give up: there was nothing there; only shivery darkness.

*I never wanted this. I never wanted anyone to die for me. I just wanted to learn to fly.*

*It’s not your fault, Bran,* Meera had said, afterwards, *he fought bravely and died to save us.*

But she didn’t know.

He couldn’t confess any of this to her. The burden must be his, and his alone to carry.

“You shouldn’t do that after sunset.”

Roused from his thoughts, he gave a little start at the sound of her voice; she was perched on a log a few feet from him, weaving relentlessly. After three days her deft hands wore all the signs of near exhaustion: the fingers and palms were swollen with blisters and bleeding cuts for the effort.

“Using your powers, I mean…” she murmured, then added with an edgy sigh: “Sometimes I fear you might not wake up anymore…”

“I’m sorry. I lose track of time when I’m away, you know that.”

Meera’s eyes silently rose to meet his, her scowl all too telling: *you never go away, not really,* it reproached him. His body was still confined here, under the tree, laying on the frozen ground, unable to move, exposed to frostbites, starvation and their enemies.

But Meera wouldn’t understand: his soul was *free*, though, soaring up, on the wings of time, still learning with a thousand eyes, a hundred skins, and the longer he stayed inside the weirwood, the less he felt like belonging to the outer world. The Three-Eyed Raved had warned him: *it is beautiful beneath the sea, but if you’ll stay too long you’ll drown.* But in spite of the risks, the visions were coming to him more easily, now; they were not like the blurred memories of a long-forgotten dream anymore, but they felt more real than reality, their details more vivid and long-
lasting, to the point that sometimes it seemed to him he could even taste the smells or feel the sun’s warmth on his face. His powers were growing stronger with each passing day, as though the harrowing experience in the cave had unlocked some previously hidden ability, but what good would it make if he weren’t able to control them, to choose what to see, or when? This vexed him; Bran felt himself teetering, grasping at invisible tendrils of smoke, groping uselessly in the dark, when instead his eyes should be finally wide open and all-knowing.

It was frustrating to realise he still didn’t know enough: the pieces of the puzzle were scattered in front of him, but there were too many still missing for him to get a clear understanding of the greater picture.

“What did you see?” Meera asked softly.

“I’m not sure,” Bran frowned, self-conscious all at once. “It was a vision from the past.”

His reticence had nothing to do with Meera. He trusted her more than he did himself, but the revelations brought forth by his weirwood dreams puzzled him still.

The baby Aunt Lyanna gave birth to… that baby could only be Jon…. And that could only mean one thing: the father was Rhaegar Targaryen.

_Jon is the bastard son, the only surviving son, of the last dragon…_ turning the phrase in his mind again and again wasn’t making the truth of it sound less disturbingly absurd.

How could it be?

At Winterfell he had heard the stories about the start of Robert’s Rebellion, even if Lord Stark had forbidden the household to ever speak about it… but every now and then Maester Luwin or Old Nan would let something slip, lamenting the heart-wrenching fate of their young, dearest Lyanna with words full of sorrow and regret whispered at their bedsides, when they thought the children were already fast asleep… the abduction, the rape…

Was Jon truly born from such a violence? Sired by the monstrous man everyone believed Rhaegar to be? The cruel, resentful Prince mad with lust who spirited away Winterfell’s most beautiful winter rose from the love and safety of her family and her intrepid betrothed… Somehow the more colourful, accepted version of the facts wasn’t so compelling anymore.

From the brief glimpses he got of the silver prince, Rhaegar Targaryen didn’t strike him as the kind of man who would force himself on a woman.

But looks and first impressions could be deceiving.

He suddenly remembered one afternoon spent in the godswood, near the pond… Rickon wasn’t even born yet… Robb and Jon re-enacted the Battle of the Trident for their little brother’s own amusement, and Jon had wanted to play Rhaegar’s part. When the stag had pushed the dragon in the pool, Bran had thrown into the water ripe raspberries in place of the Prince’s rubies: how they all laughed at that!

_Targaryen princes, in our sparring games_, Bran reminisced. The daring Young Dragon, conqueror of Dorne, Aemon the Dragonknight wielding Dark Sister to guard kings way less worthy than him… and Robb would then pull at his curly black hair, teasing him: ‘You’d never pass for a Targaryen, Snow! You have Stark colours!’

None of us could have had the slightest inkling.
Everything he and his siblings thought they knew about their family turned out to be a deception, and he honestly didn’t know how he felt about it.

The shock following the discovery of Jon’s true identity and lineage was only matched by the filial relief he had felt in learning that his father had never been unfaithful to his lady mother, and that, ’til his dying day, he had kept up an elaborate ruse with the only purpose of protecting this innocent child’s life. A lie that had tarnished his honour and must have brought undoubtable strain over his marriage, but a lie said for love nonetheless. Bran didn’t know if he felt more jarred for his father’s reputation, besmirched without cause, or proud for the courage and toughness of spirit he had shown for the best part of his adult life.

But for all the doubts and confusion muddling Bran’s mind, one thing was clear: Jon must needs know, as soon as possible.

The weirwood dreams had showed him as he clashed against a White Walker in a bloody battle fought on a steep, frozen cliff and a grey, snowy shore, where hundreds of wildlings had risen again to do the Others’ bidding. Was it a vision of the past or the future? Was his brother – his cousin – even still alive?

Bran couldn’t say.

We need to reach Castle Black, as fast as we can.

His fists clenched powerlessly over his broken legs. He felt weak and helpless: what was the point of knowing all these secrets if he was unable to act upon them?

Meera laid aside her intertwined twigs to put on the fire a copper cup full of fresh snow, red berries and moss; she looked sad and deep in thought, and Bran instinctively knew she was thinking of home.

“I also saw your father,” he blurted out, trying to distract himself, and her, from his growing agitation and her fears.

Meera’s whole face lit up in surprised wonder and curiosity. The flames made the specks in her hazel eyes shine green and golden.

“You did?”

He nodded with a small smile, relieved. That much he could tell her, at least. “He went to the Tourney at Harrenhal, the year of the false spring.”

Meera tilted her head back, a bout of delighted laughter escaping her lips and getting lost through the rustling of the wind. It was good to hear that.

“Oh, that bloody tourney… He wouldn’t stop prattling about it… Jojen loved to listen to the story of the Knight of the Laughing Tree… did you know our fathers met there for the first time and befriended one another right away?”

“I do now,” he hissed, sounding more harsh and exasperated than he meant.

Her forehead crinkled into a perplexed frown.

“You father never told you?…”

“Harrenhal was a sour topic,” Bran admitted, but, detecting her disappointment, he added without
hesitation: “But he did tell me that Howland Reed was his staunchest friend. At the Tower of Joy Arthur Dayne would’ve killed my father, if it weren’t for him.”

Meera winced as she gulped down a sip of the hot concoction before handing the cup to him. He did the same. The taste was a disgusting mix of sickly sweetness and muddy sourness, but the warmth spreading to his chest and extremities was a welcoming shield against the night.

“I’ve heard that tale too, but Father didn’t like to talk about that fight,” she contemplated further and put another log in the fire. “It made him bitter, for some reason. He only said that the Sword of the Morning and the White Bull were the finest knights of their generation, and that they didn’t deserve to die the way they did.”

He wasn’t surprised to hear that: Arthur Dayne and Gerold Hightower had pledged themselves to Rhaegar till the end, protecting the secrets of their liege with their lives, despite being outnumbered three to one. The circumstances of their demise were less than fair and he didn’t want to stain Howland’s honour, or the idea she, his only daughter, might have of him, by telling her how he had stabbed Arthur Dayne in the back before his own father finished him off.

“Did Lord Reed ever talk about my aunt?”

She furrowed her brows. “Lady Lyanna? Not really. He told us he was with her when she died. I believe it pained him greatly to think about her, so we never urged him for details. Why?”

She looked up at him over the rim of the cup with an expression so openly innocent and trustworthy that for a moment Bran was tempted to tell her everything, right then and there. But the secret was not his to reveal, not until he informed Jon first, anyway.

“I can’t tell you yet,” he said gravely, looking down at his hands. The log crackled deafeningly in the silence stretching between them. She stood and cuddled up next to him on the furs. Her eyes held an unwavering tenderness that reminded Bran acutely of Lyanna.

“Then I won’t ask.”

An overwhelming surge of gratitude and affection swept over him like a warm tidal wave. He closed his arms about her waist and pulled her closer. Her fingers curled around his of their own accord.

“How’s your arm?” she inquired after a while.

“Fine,” Bran mumbled, soon half-asleep, but her body was already leaving the comfortable nest of his arms to sit back.

“Let me see,” she fumbled with his sleeve, ignoring his surly protestations, and inspected his skin.

“Does it still hurt?”

He lied and shook his head.

She had dressed the wound as best as she could with the red moss growing on the bark of the weirwood tree and he found that the plant provided a good amount of relief from the pain, which had subsided from searing to a dull, throbbing ache, a mild discomfort slowly creeping from his hand to his shoulders and chest.

The Night King’s mark was still there, though, clearly visible: the blistered bruise stood out against his pale skin, like a cold burn, the sign of the five bony claws slashing his forearm like the stripes
left by a whip of ice. The area around it was numb, swollen and purple in the spot where blood had clotted and congealed: it looked like a frostbite, but they both knew it was more than that.

“What do you think it means?” Meera mused aloud, while she changed the dressing. But Bran knew her real question was: ‘Do you think this will also affect the Wall’s magic?’

His heart gave a wrench: if the Night King could see and touch him through his visions, if he could make the thousand-years-old cave’s wards crumble down like a snow castle, where would that leave him, Bran wondered? Was he becoming a liability? A puppet controlled by a force more powerful and darker than even the Three-Eyed Raven had envisaged?

I am the Raven, now, he wanted to scream, shouldn’t I simply know this?

He raised his eyes to the red canopy above his head, listening to the chilly wind murmuring through the leaves, and sent a silent prayer for guidance.

Give me a sign.

And, as though on cue, a murder of crows took flight all at once.

Meera had already jerked to her feet before he could realise that the crows hadn’t been scared off by his prayers, but by the menacing rustling coming from the hawthorn bushes a few feet from their campfire, where the trees grew thicker and darker.

She grabbed her net and stepped in front of him, spear raised and pointing at the trees, expecting blue-eyed enemies and not a cloud of white, soft fur, perfectly camouflaged in the snow. Except for two red eyes glowing in the dark like embers.

“Ghost!” he cried out, astonished. “Meera, it’s Ghost! It’s Jon’s direwolf!”

The albino wolf padded warily to her; when Meera stuck her spear into the frozen ground and slowly fell on her knees, raising a hand, Ghost gave her a trusting sniff and licked her fingers.

Bran let out a burst of hoarse guffaws and patted his legs.

“Ghost! To me, boy!”

The direwolf raised his ears and eagerly jumped on top of him, laving his face, silent as usual but for the tail whipping madly against the ground and raising frozen snowflakes in the air.

Bran grabbed the smooth, slightly moist fur around his neck and fixed his eyes into his red ones: “Ghost, is Jon here? Go! Bring him to me!”

But Ghost did not leave them; instead, he raised his muzzle to the dark, moonless sky and did something Bran never heard him do: he let out a long, mournful AHHOOO. The howl carried through the woods, its echo lingering in the biting air, until, after a few seconds, another one answered, just as fierce and high-pitched.

“It doesn’t sound very far,” Meera breathed out, her sharp eyes darting across the front line of the sentinel trees. Bran’s heart jumped in his throat when, a few moments later, they saw the torches’ light blinking hopeful through the snow. A direwolf with golden eyes who could only be Nymeria leapt out from the bushes, then Uncle Benjen was there, and then, right behind him, Jon.

The small clearing suddenly teemed with other people, black wraiths moving like blurs through Bran’s clouded vision, and he could faintly hear Meera shaking his arm and talking to him in rather
excited tones… He wasn’t paying attention to any of this: was it a dream? Was his mind playing cruel tricks on him? But then Jon crashed into him and pulled him into a fierce embrace, and he knew it was real.

“I found you. Gods, I found you!” he kept repeating, his voice hitching on a sob, as though he didn’t quite believe it himself.

Bran burrowed his own tears into the crook of his neck, feeling more relieved and tired than he ever did. Jon smelled of leather, sweat and fire. He smelled like home.

When they broke apart to look at each other, Jon cracked a small laugh through the tears, poking at Bran’s long hair, clutching his shoulders and arms, checking his face for signs of injury.

Bran gently touched his bearded chin; there were a lot more scars on his face too; he recognised the marks where the eagle had attacked him at Queenscrown, when he had watched from afar, safe inside Summer’s skin. Other, more invisible, scars, he could feel them too, but there would be time to talk about those later.

For some reason, he wasn’t dressed in the black of the Night’s Watch: Bran found it odd, but he pushed back his concerns. The simple grey fur-and-leather cloak with the direwolf sigil sewn in the crossed straps was a familiar sight, and his wild curls, tied down in the same way Father used to do, gave him a powerful air of gravity which made him look older.

To the untrained eye, it was no wonder he could pass as Ned Stark’s bastard son; he bore such a striking resemblance to Father it was almost physically painful to stare at him, but now that Bran knew where to look, the likeness to aunt Lyanna was so obvious that it was a small miracle the elders among the household had never noticed or inquired about it.

Her same iron-willed eyes. Her same lips and hair. Her same assertive way to set the jaw.

Now he understood why Father had been so eager to send him away to the Wall, at the end of the world, where nobody would pry with troublesome questions.

His eyes shifted to their uncle, talking in hushed tones with Meera, and a doubt arose in his mind.

Did he know, when he agreed to take Jon with him?

“You all right?” Jon asked.

Bran lifted his eyes back to him and just nodded, not trusting his voice.

“There are so many things I have to tell you, little brother!”

Brother.

The word was a knife twisting in his gut.

“There’s things I must tell you, too. Jon, listen…”

He made a move to grab his cousin’s cloak, but Jon was already standing up, heedless of the urgency in his voice, and marched briskly to the small group carrying the torches.

“Plenty ‘o time for you to chitchat once we’ll all be on the right side o’ the Wall, little lord,” said a bulky man with a mane of red hair who crouched down next to him. A wildling, by the state of his furs.
“We need to move, now. Me name is Tormund, anyway,” he said genially, showing a chipped tooth behind his cheerful smile.

“Where’s Hodor?” Jon suddenly asked, looking around.

Nymeria seemed to frantically search for her brother, too, sniffing the trees’ trunks in pursuit of a trace, letting out sorrowful, little whines as she grew more and more restless.

“I’m sorry, Nymeria…”

*Summer is gone too*, he wanted to say, but the thick lump stuck in his throat choked his words.

Meera talked for him.

“We were attacked by the Walkers, a few days ago. I’ve killed one with a dragonglass-pointed spear, but there were too many wights. The Children of the Forest covered our retreat, but Hodor and Summer…”

Words failed her. She shut her eyes, grief-stricken.

“Meera lost her brother Jojen, too,” uncle Benjen said. “She showed exceptional courage where more seasoned men, more seasoned *knights* would have run in terror. Bran is alive because of her.”

*I’m alive because she was strong and brave, and because better people gave up their lives for mine*, Bran thought. He felt Jon’s stare on him, but could not meet his eyes.

*He’d know. One look at me and he’d know it’s my fault.*

But Jon went completely still and quiet, and there, in the snow surrounded by darkness, he knelt before Meera.

“Lady Reed,” he started and Bran saw her fidgeting a little, as though she was no longer accustomed to her own title. “Your brother’s sacrifice won’t be forgotten. You protected Bran when I couldn’t. My family owes you an immense debt which I fear I won’t ever be able to repay in full. For now, I beg you to accept my gratitude: Winterfell will be your home, too, for as long as you wish.”

Her eyes shone with tears.

“There’s no debt, my lord,” she assured matter-of-factly, smiling fondly down at him. “He’s my Prince.”

Jon gave her a curt nod and rose again.

“Tormund will be carrying you,” he said to him, as the rowdy wildling wrapped around his dead legs and torso a harness of ropes and leather belts which Bran supposed would help to fasten him on his back.

“Don’t worry, lad, I won’t let you fall: His Grace here would ‘ave me hide!” he said cocking his head in Jon’s direction. Bran’s jaw slacked.

Next to him, Meera drew in a sharp, astonished breath: “You’re King…”

Jon let out a heavy sigh and threw a dirty look at his oblivious wildling friend.

“That means Robb is dead, isn’t he?” Bran said blankly.
“Bran…”

“Isn’t he? And my mother too.”

His cousin furrowed his brow in consternation. “How do you…”

He had seen them… his mother’s throat, slit from ear to ear, the tears on her hollow cheeks mixing with blood, and Robb, stabbed in the heart, falling on the floor, his eyes dead and void. Deep down he had hoped it was a dream, or a vision still to come, but now that he gazed into Jon’s eyes, he knew it to be true. It had already happened.

*The ink is dry.*

He gritted his teeth.

“Who else?”

“This is not the right time, neither the right place to discuss this. Once we’ll be back home, I promise –

“Who else?”

Jon swallowed.

“Rickon.”

A strangled whimper ripped through him from within.

*No, not Rickon… please, Gods, not my baby brother!*

“He had sought shelter to the Last Hearth with some wildling girl,” Jon was saying. “The Umbers betrayed us. They killed Shaggy and sold him to the Boltons.”

His lungs, his mind, his very soul were on fire. He needed to fly away. He wished to shrink and cower into the frozen ground, to shed his own skin and forget all of this, to dream and never wake up again, so he grabbed hold of one of the weirwood’s white roots and pushed, pushed, inside the tree… but the tree fended him off.

Why, oh why did the weirwood want him to feel such unbearable heartbreak?

He tried to go away inside his own head, to hold on to the bittersweet memory of that last embrace, Rickon’s big blue eyes pleading with him, the feel of his blonde curls under his caress… ‘I won’t leave you. I have to protect you’, but even that was starting to fade… he failed him, he failed each and every one of them: Hodor and Summer, Jojen, the Three-Eyed Raven, Osha, Leaf and the Children… all of these deaths came crashing on him, all at once, and he broke down, wailing and writhing.

“It’s my fault!” he choked, helplessly bashing his head again and again on the tree’s white bark at his back. “I told him he would be safe with the Umbers, I sent him there!”

Jon went to him in an instant, holding him, trying to breach through his sobs.

“Bran… Bran, listen to me,” he firmly cradled his nape in his hands, whispering in his ear, his voice raw and cracking with tears. “You mustn’t blame yourself for this. The Boltons and the Umbers have all been wiped off the face of the earth. I saw to that. For Robb, for Rickon. I promise you…”
He turned to face him, and the steel of the wolf blended into the fire of the dragon.

“No one will tear this family apart ever again. Not while I live.”

His words drowned out Bran’s cries and when he dropped a kiss on his forehead, the echo of a memory came back to him: a broken boy, lying still in a big bed of furs, dreaming away the last bits of summer, while his brother dared him to a walk beyond the Wall – ‘if you’re not afraid’ – before bidding him goodbye.

“Let us go home,” Jon said in earnest, hope and devotion in his voice.

Bran nodded and wiped his tears away with the heel of his hand, feeling a little ashamed that strangers had to witness this. But nobody said a word of jape or scolding, and when the imposing woman in the blue armour approached him, he saw that there were teardrops in her blue eyes, too.

“My Lord, Lady Meera,” she addressed them, kneeling down, “I’m Brienne of Tarth, Lady Sansa’s sworn sword.”

Bran had recognised her straight away: the strong, knightly warrior-lady who in his visions was bravely fighting against the Others with a sword of fire.

She wasn’t a beauty, for sure, but her eyes had such a breath-taking innocence to them that Bran knew he could trust her implicitly.

“Your sisters, both of them, are safe, back home, waiting for you. Sansa was so sure you were still alive that she asked me to give you this.”

She produced a small bundle from inside her cloak. His spirit lifted when he saw its content.

“My father’s gloves.”

They were rather loose-fitting: his father had such big, strong hands, while Bran’s had always been scrawny and nimble, more suited for climbing than swordplay. But they were warm and comfortable like one of his father’s hugs.

“Thank you, my lady.”

The sapphires in her eyes shimmered when she smiled; his attention was diverted to the golden lion-shaped hilt of her blade.

“The sword… can I see it?”

The lady knight hesitated only for a breath’s space, then unsheathed her weapon for him.

Yes, it was definitely the same sword he saw in his vision: a wonderful work of craftsmanship, with incredible ripples and colours. A strange warmth came off from the steel; his fingertips had barely touched it that the mark on his right arm tingled and stung painfully. He flinched and retracted his hand.

“This is not a sword like any other, isn’t it?”

He met her eyes.

Truly beautiful eyes. Soulful and gentle.

“It’s called Oathkeeper. But it was Ice when your lord father wielded it.”
Her thick lips curved into a knowing smirk at his surprised reaction.

“A part of Ice, anyway. The other part…”

She turned her head around and Bran felt himself spin and fall.

The frightful man, the golden man who had plagued his sleep all these years, was there…only he wasn’t that golden anymore: he was grey, and scarred, and hurt, and older. Bran barely recognised him, if not for his green eyes… the dream he had dreamt thousands times before came back to him in a rush, only it wasn’t a dream any longer… He was once again perched outside the Broken Tower, his ten-years-old hands grasping onto vines’ roots and dented stones…and then the moans, the wet slapping of body against body, the golden curls cascading down the woman’s shoulders and breast…‘he saw us, he saw us!’… a remorseless voice whispering in the recesses of his mind…

The things I do for love.

He forced air in his lungs again and he was back in the forest, the weirwood tree a solid, reassuring presence at his back.

“I remember… I remember,” he gasped.

Jaime Lannister was staring at him with wide, haunted eyes full of pain and shame, the only golden thing on him the fake appendance where once was the hand that pushed him through a window.

Dread and uneasiness gnawed at him. Why was he here? Was he following Jon? Why would he want to help him?

Bran didn’t understand: he tried to catch Jon’s eyes and tell him that he couldn’t be trusted, but Tormund’s hands were already lifting him up and, before he knew it, he found himself tied to the wildling’s back, ready to set off.

“I shall follow you as far as the Wall’s magic will allow, then I’ll leave you,” uncle Benjen said as he checked the straps and knots around his legs. “Don’t worry about me, dear nephew,” he added with a sad smile. “What has to happen, will happen. All of us have got a part to play, and it’s time for you to get back to the land of the living.”

It turned out Meera was, more or less, right: Castle Black was a mere five miles south-east from where they stood. Lady Brienne’s squire, an awkward, shy young man named Podrick, was confident they would reach the gates before dawn. In the meantime, Meera was gathering as much information as she could about the events which took place on Westeros while they were lost north of the Wall.

From the former members of the Brotherhood Without Banners and Ser Bronn, a sellsword turned knight now at the service of Jaime Lannister, they learned about the end of the War of the Five Kings and the dire circumstances of the new Queen’s coronation.

“There’s another one,” Bran pointedly said. “She has dragons with her.”

Jon cast him a disconcerted look, but didn’t ask him how he knew. The Red Priest’s eyes, on the other side, peered at him with prudent interest and suspicion.

“We don’t know if the talking of dragons is real, my lord,” Beric Dondarrion panted his way
through the deep snow.

Denner Frostfinger brought them up to date with news from the Wall, next, but didn’t elaborate on how Jon came to break his oaths to the Watch and to be crowned King in the North.

“Do you have news of my father?” Meera asked his cousin.

“Not of late, my lady. He wrote a letter to my sister Sansa several months ago, to reaffirm his pledge to House Stark, after we took Winterfell back from the Boltons. I’m sure he’s fine, and eager to have you back home.”

Bran was only half-listening; to his left side, the Kingslayer would throw, every now and then, fleeting, anguished glances racked by guilt at his useless legs.

_Yes, take a good look at your outstanding work_, he would’ve wanted to remark, but somehow his own resentment seemed pointless and hollow, right now.

_He has a role to play, same as me_, Bran realised with sudden clarity. _The visions wanted me to see him as he slew his King_. There was something there, nagging him. But he couldn’t put his finger on it.

He was about to ask him what had happened to his sword hand, when the air around them grew colder.

Meera halted abruptly, her breath freezing before her. The torch she was holding wobbled and gutted out. Her frightened eyes found his.

The direwolves started to growl ferociously at the dark trees ahead, their bodies flat and ready to lunge. Jon drew his longsword from its scabbard and moved beside them.

“What is it?” Tormund asked edgily.

Bran’s hand snatched his arm, the sound of his own breathing loud in his ears: “They’re here.”

The iced ground under their feet shook, cracked and split open. A rotten hand shattered the frozen surface and gripped Tormund’s ankle. The world swayed before Bran’s eyes, as the wildling struggled to keep his balance; he felt the ropes around his chest tightening and snapping and they fell to the ground.

All hell broke loose, then.

Meera yelped in pain as she sank in the snow, and two wights were instantly on top of her, their rusted blades and daggers gleaming in the night. Bran watched helplessly as Nymeria leapt to her defence: her jaws opened and closed on rotten flesh and black bones, tearing and breaking and mangling their already mutilated bodies.

He saw Brienne and the Kingslayer unsheathing their swords and charging at the horde of ghostly blue-eyed corpses rushing at them from the woods. He saw Podrick appearing at their back and smashing to smithereens a wight that most certainly would have plunged a dirk between the Kingslayer’s shoulders.

A shower of fire-arrows found their targets and the wights burst into flames, but for one that fell three more rose, vomited out by the earth itself or appearing from the depth of the trees, silent and fast as death itself.
And soon the snow was turning dark with blood.

*The dead don’t bleed*, Bran thought, stricken with horror.

In the blurred haze of the battle, Bran soon lost sight of Jon; he darted frantic glances around himself, searching for his cousin, terrified he might find the Night King and his generals instead, but it seemed the White Walkers hadn’t joined the fray, yet: the forest spat up every kind of reanimated things… wildlings, still wearing their seals and bear pelts over their hollow ribcages, skeletons of ancient soldiers in iron scale armours, their flesh sloughed off their bones a long time ago, at the time of the first Long Night perhaps, riders on dead horses with their muzzles half-liquefied into a grey pulp, even children with hair matted with dried blood and mud, teeth and hands as their only weapons…

And then he saw them: two shadows, man and wolf united in death as they were in life, lunged at Podrick and Tormund… the sweet giant was missing an arm and half his face had been eaten up, to the point that the white skull within was showing. His clothes had been torn to pieces, too: Bran could see the still open wounds where daggers had sunk on his chest, again and again, and merciless claws and fingers had scratched through skin and muscles.

Here and there, chunks of flesh were missing.

“Hodor! *Hodor*!” Bran let out an anguished cry, hoping against hope to appeal to some deep part of his gentle soul that still remained and remembered.

Hodor turned, and his icy blue eyes were unfeeling pits of frozen hatred and they seemed to curse him: *‘look! look what you did to me!’*

Uncle Benjen was suddenly standing in front of him, shielding his view.

“I’m sorry, old friend!”

The flaming chain swung and swirled and Hodor was consumed by the flames. Benjen took a few steps toward him, but Summer dived and knocked him down: the direwolf snarled and his jaws snapped and closed unto his uncle’s arm.

Blood, darker than Bran had ever seen, oozed from the gash, and just when Summer’s teeth were about to close on Benjen’s throat too, Nymeria and Ghost slammed on their brother’s right side and shoved him away. Bran watched petrified as the wolves savagely wrestled on the snow, yelped, grunted, growled, sibling against sibling, tearing at each other’s flesh, until only Summer’s dismembered body parts lay on the ground. His jaws kept trying to gnaw at him.

Bran’s stomach churned over with one violent contraction and he retched into the snow, his throat burning and throbbing.

*I’m sorry! Gods, I’m so sorry!*

His stinging eyes moved to Beric Dondarrion, his sword alight as it hacked through a small mob of wights, to Bronn, limping ostensibly from a leg wound, to Jon and Frostfinger, panting and cutting their ways through a group of dead children…

*We’re not going to make it.*

“THEY’RE TOO MANY!” Anguy screamed, pulling back as he nocked another arrow and let fly once again.
Oathkeeper and its sister sword slashed and parried and thrust relentlessly, casting red sparkles like flint against steel, and Benjen’s flaming chain smashed in one single neat spiral the skulls of three wights, but it was no use: the dead were closing in, until they were surrounded on every side.

In the dark, Meera’s hand found his and Bran closed his eyes, waiting for the end.

The air sizzled and rumbled around him: he felt something strangely alike to a hot caress on his face, but when he ventured a look, an enormous white cloud, glittering golden in the night, swooped down on them.

_No, not a white cloud…_

The golden dragon thudded into the ground and spat a high column of blazing fire all over the place; the wights burned fast, like charred torches soaked in tar. The flames licked the forest and the nearest trees shrunk to crisp, burned-out cinders.

Wights were attacking its flanks, trying to climb it as if it were a hill, but their weapons seemed to barely tickle it. Its tail whipped sideways, striking with brutal force dead things and trees alike.

Next to Bran, his cousin burst to his feet, his face picturing his same overwhelming, terrified awe.

_“The fuck you’re doing?!”_ Tormund bellowed.

The creature’s head turned, puffs of blistering smoke coming from its nostrils, and seemed to freeze on the spot as it saw Jon, standing there, still as stone, his shallow, rapid breaths a steaming cloud before him.

Time seemed to stretch endlessly.

Man and dragon studied each other, baffled and intrigued, then Jon’s hand was rising and its muzzle was ever oh so slightly bending toward him.

Bran held his breath.

The dragon roused and lunged forward with an ear-piercing roar. Jon and Meera stumbled down and Bran shielded his head when the scaly body leapt over the three of them, spitting fire onto the enemies at their backs.

Its right wing wrapped itself around them and for a moment they were engulfed in a burning darkness, while outside the crackling noise of fire eating everything in its wake rose and thundered like a storm approaching.

_He’s protecting us_, Bran marvelled, catching Jon’s equally stunned eyes. _The dragon recognised him._

The beast caught a handful of wights in its jaws and tore them apart with a flick of its neck.

_“What are you waiting for, a written invitation?”_ yelled the man straddling the beast. _“GET THE BOY UP HERE AND RUN TO THE WALL!”_

_Tyrion Lannister? Tyrion Lannister_ was riding a bloody dragon?

Before he could recover from the shock, someone’s hands lifted him up and tossed him sideways on the dragon’s neck, like a sack of corn. The dragon’s back was scorching. His legs were a dead weight under him and he skidded to his side when the animal moved his neck. There was nothing
to cling onto.

“What the hells are you doing?” he heard the Imp shout in surprise.

“He’ll slip down if I don’t hold him!” Jon howled above the dragon’s roars and hastily positioned himself behind him. “Don’t worry, brother, I’ve got you!”

He bent down and clasped the dragon’s protruding spikes on Bran’s sides, securing his hold as firmly as he could; they both lurched forward when the beast finally beat its wings and took off.

“GO!” Jon yelled to the people on the ground.

Its back to the Wall, the dragon hovered in the air, covering their retreat with destructive trails of fire. Wrapped up in flames, the wights blew to pieces as though hit by incendiary stones. What little remained of flesh and clothes was melted away: bones crackled and split, but the wights didn’t utter a sound.

Bran dared a look underneath him: the landscape had completely changed in those few minutes.

The haunted forest was a blazing inferno, and the shattered throng of people ran toward the gates like a line of ants digging through the thawing snow.

He saw a man in black, his uncle, stop and turn around to face the few wights who hadn’t been destroyed by the fire, and Beric Dondarrion bravely joined him for their last stand, heedless of his friends’ shouts, his sword burning brighter.

The dragon soared higher and pivoted: the Wall, their salvation, was right there, half a league ahead.

“Hold on, we’re almost there!” the Imp yelled, and Bran couldn’t say if he was addressing him or Jon.

He could feel the air bending in blurred ripples, opening for them when they flew across the Wall’s magical wards, but not a heartbeat later the mark on his arm burned white-hot, like thousands burning pokers piercing through his bones and skull.

He clutched his arm and screamed.

“What is it? Bran, what’s going on?” Jon yelled.

“No! We need to turn around!” he tried to warn, but his voice sounded frail and far away even to his own ears.

The pain was blinding and burning. And then the cold came… a cold so bitter and cruel and wrathful as he never felt before…

The dragon swayed and bucked from under him, as though he wanted to throw them off.

“VISERION, NO! What’s got into you!!?”

The Imp pulled at his locks and gears, trying to steer and regain a direction, but the ground was getting closer and the beast spiralled down, completely out of control.

We’ll crash down!, Bran panicked and shut his eyes.

Fly! FLY! A voice that sounded like the Raven screamed in his head and flooded his senses, until
his eyes weren’t his eyes anymore, and his heart was a roaring thunder beating against his enormous ribcage, pushing blood hot as fire throughout him, but despite this, his body, so huge, so powerful, so whole, was shivering, and his mind was a tumult of numb, shrieking agony.

No! NO! It’s cold! Soo cold... Get him off me, PLEASE!, he cried, but only a booming roar full of pain echoed in the night. Muñus! Valonqis! Can you hear me?! The zoklītsos is hurting me! Āeksios Kēlios, I beg of you, let me go home! I’m so cold!

The Wall drew nearer, but they were flying too low.

Higher, HIGHER!, the boy’s mind called, but the dragon’s wings flailed and thrashed, as though they had forgotten how to fly altogether, and his body swivelled and spun in the air and then they were smashing hard into the ice, while the little humans in black were scuttling away from the edge, frightened like sheep, and the other humans on his back were also screaming, even the zaldrīzo ānogar. A wide, thick sheet of ice tore away from the Wall’s face and exploded into his muzzle.

He rammed his claws into the sleek ice and tried to shun the bodies that fell screeching from the brink: a gaping crevasse opened from top to bottom and branched in spirals like a cobweb.

The first layers of the smooth surface were rapidly liquefying at the contact of his belly’s warmth and his grip slipped with each push he tried to make.

The Wall was weakening and so was he.

He wouldn’t hold out any longer with these frozen shards shoved into his mind.

With a prodigious effort, he threw his weight on the top and tumbled down on the other side, plummeting, scared, confused, cold, so cold, his wings useless at his sides... his claws scraped at the Wall’s surface, trying to slow the fall, dragging down with him other big lumps of ice.

The Wall seemed to melt away, piece by piece, under him. Down, down, until, finally, the ground met them and the plummeting stopped into the snow and mud of the courtyard below.

The dragon snarled and snapped his jaws as he angrily pushed him out and Bran slipped back into his own scaleless skin: his limp body glided down the beast’s neck, and gentle hands were laying him on the ground. He felt more than saw the dragon’s rage, as he took flight again, this time alone and free of his chains.

Everyone was screaming, but the voices, for a change, weren’t in his head any longer.

The Imp screamed for his dragon to come back, the men of the Night’s Watch screamed to open the gates, his cousin screamed at him.

“Bran! BRAN! Answer me!!”

But Bran couldn’t scream back, nor open his eyes.

He was exhausted and his arm hurt so much that he found himself begging for someone to just cut the damn thing off and be done with it.

The cold was spreading from the mark to his heart and his throat, and he wanted to cry, but he found he didn’t have enough strength even for that.

He desperately clung to the sweet memories of his childhood, to Winterfell and Father and
Mother… to Jon…

He wondered feebly what would his sisters say when they would report to them he had flown with a dragon for a while.

* Arya will be seething with envy, he thought. 

And then darkness claimed him.

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Chapter End Notes

This is the first time I write a full, action-packed fighting sequence, and, although I’ve loved writing every bit of it, I’m also pretty nervous about the outcome: I’ve found out it’s really difficult to keep the balance between the emotional aspects and the tension/suspense of the battle. I hope I succeeded! Let me know in the comments!

I’ve left for you a hidden clue in one of Bran’s visions… something important concerning the White Walkers that, oddly enough, I haven’t seen being addressed in any theory, yet, and that I hope will also come to fruition in the show: I’ll expand on this bit of information in the following chapters, but it was crucial for me to mention it already in this chapter, before the start of Season 7, because I wanted to have a head start on the TV-show, in case they really mean to go there with the storyline. The only thing I can say is: it’s all connected!
Let’s see if you find it!

I apologise for Hodor and Summer: this was uncharacteristically cruel even for me.

Yes, Bran is the Night King’s secret horcrux! C’mon, that particular crossover is practically writing itself, right? *evil grins*
Will the Wall fall down or not?

Keep reading!

**Translations from High Valyrian:**
Muñus = vocative declined form of muña (mother)
Valonqis = vocative plural of valonqar (I don’t think I have to translate this, XD);
zoklītisos = little wolf
āeksios kēlios = vocative of āeksio kēlio (lord lion)
zaldrīzo ānogar = blood of the dragon
Jaime IV

Chapter Notes

I’m so very sorry for the lateness of this chapter! I planned to have this published before the start of Season Seven, but life happened in the most unpleasant way, unfortunately.
I hope the extra-length and the content will make up for my awfully slow writing!
Thank you for your patience and the comments/kudos!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JAIME

“Move aside! Move, ya bloody crows!” Tormund bellowed as he shoved out of the way the throng of armed men in black cloaks who had gathered across the yard, drawn by the screaming and the frightful creaking noises coming from the Wall. The boy lay, limp and unconscious, in Jon Snow’s arms: a pale, frail thing, with withered broken legs and scrawny arms as thin as reeds, looking a lot younger than he probably was.

How old was he, again? Ten-and-six? Ten-and-seven?

He must be of an age with Tommen, Jaime thought, suddenly remembering that sunlit afternoon when Bran Stark threw his youngest cub in the dirt of Winterfell’s training yard, during a particularly hard-fought bout with wooden swords. They were both so full of life and energy and childish enthusiasm, so ridiculous in their sparring pads, so eager to show their bravery, their green battle skills to the whole household, maybe dreaming about the glorious day when they would finally be granted to take part to their very first joust…But now…

Tommen is dead, Jaime’s mind reminded him, and the boy…

Jon rushed into the Great Hall and he followed in a haze, never pulling off his eyes from the lifeless body. His blood was rushing, too, singing in his veins with a surging pulse, like the drums of war. The thrilling fever of the battle, he knew. Primitive and elemental. But, while not long ago he would’ve basked in the familiar feeling, welcoming it with a pleased, lust-filled laughter, now his heart stung and pounded heavily in his ears, emptying his mind except from the rasping sound of his sharp and broken breathing. Inside his mind the voices, real and imaginary alike, mingled together in an anarchy of noises, but it seemed to Jaime that he could still single out Ned and Catelyn Stark’s contemptuous tones, haunting him, blaming him.

This is your doing, Kingslayer, they whispered, and another voice joined them, a voice of fire and steel, uttering cruel words of truth… I left my children in your hands…

His stomach churned and twisted with the same foreboding, paralysing dread and horror he had felt, when he had stepped into Maegor’s Keep after months of siege, only to find Cersei sitting on that damn, blood-dripping throne.
“What have you done? Where is Tommen?”

He felt himself slipping into a dreamlike state, as though he had drunk a full cup of that blue poison the people of Qarth called ‘shade of the evening’. His heightened senses tricked him: one moment he thought he saw the unconscious boy’s blue-grey eyes snapping open, silently staring at him, full of disappointed condemnation, and the next, it was Tommen’s delicate face, Tommen’s green eyes, so charming, so much like his, boring into him, broken-hearted and filled with regret.

_They said he fell without a sound._

_Just like Bran did._

The room swayed before him and he shut his eyes, trying to block the images conjured up by his mind.

All around him, arose a frenzied cacophony of voices and shuffling of feet: the few men of the Watch still assembled in the Hall for breakfast moved out of the way; plates, bowls and mugs flew on the floor, as Tormund efficiently cleared the Lord Commander’s table with a brusque sweep of his arm.

Jon lay his brother gently on the broad oaken surface.

“Bran! Can you hear me? Come on, brother, wake up!”

Frostfinger put a hand over the boy’s sweaty forehead. “He’s a block of ice,” he said.

Bran was shaking violently and his lips were blue, thin and stretched over rattling teeth gritting for the pain.

“Bring some blankets, and boiled wine for Ser Bronn’s wound!” Edd Tollett ordered, and only now Jaime seemed to notice that, next to him, Bronn was limping and copiously bleeding, as he leant against Anguy’s slender shoulders.

The sellsword fell over the bench, grunting and stifling a groan.

“No need to fret, it’s just a fuckin’ scratch, but _do_ bring the wine: my throat is sore,” he turned a grimace into a wink and shrugged, apparently unconcerned.

The men left snickering and shaking their heads, but when his right leg was bared, Jaime saw that there was a chunk of flesh missing, where the calf should have been, as though it had been chewed away and spat out.

“You’ll need stitches, m’lord,” Pod said and aptly tied a belt around his tight to stop the bleeding.

“Don’t be ridiculous, lad, I’ve had worse,” Bronn rebutted, but when clear water was poured over the wound to rinse it, he swore loudly and pounded the table with his fist, again and again.

Suddenly panicking, Jaime took a quick look around; although he seemed to have gotten the worse of it, Bronn wasn’t the only one sporting open wounds: fresh blood oozed from a deep cut over Jon’s hairline into his right eye, which was also bruised and almost completely closed; Tormund’s left shoulder was bleeding, too, and his bear pelt had been clawed and torn to pieces; Jaime drew a relieved breath when he spotted the wench, battered and with her hair matted with mud and sweat, but looking mostly unscathed.

There was no sign of Benjen Stark and Beric Dondarrion.
They never made it to the gates, he realised.

Over the table, Bran let out a loud moan and started whimpering.

“‘The boy’s in pain, don’t you see? Fetch your maester!’” a familiar, impertinent voice below his waist instructed, in a perfect impression of Tywin’s commanding tone. Frowning in dismay, Jaime lowered his head and squinted his eyes, until, between the sea of legs bustling about and black cloaks swirling, he caught sight of him.

In the commotion, he had completely forgotten about him. Tyrion was there… his baby brother, who apparently had just ridden a bloody dragon across the Wall to their rescue…

And now he stood in the middle of the room, clad in simple black and red travelling clothes, doing his best to ignore him, a little bit bruised from the fall, but looking fine nevertheless… actually, looking absolutely great, almost imposing, despite the appearances, and Jaime didn’t know whether to laugh or latch his only hand around his squat neck and squeeze.

“We don’t have a maester, m’lord,” a young steward with sticky-out ears answered, somewhat apologetically. “Not since Maester Aemon died, and Sam, Samwell Tarly, went to the Citadel…”

“Then give him some milk of the poppy, at least!” Tyrion burst out tartly, and Jaime recognised the tetchy, clipped voice which meant he was at the very end of his patience.

“M’lord, I’m sorry, but… the poppy is rationed.”

His brother’s black eye flashed malevolently. The Crow faltered.

“There are wounded men in the yard, too. Men of the Watch you and your fuckin’ dragon almost killed in your fall!” spat another man, a stout fellow with repugnant brown scabs peppered all over the left side of his face. “We can’t waste milk of the poppy on a boy who’ll probably be dead by morning regardless.”

The man suddenly found himself rammed into the stone wall at his back. Brienne grabbed him by the front of his leather jerkin and growled, towering over him: “You will bring Lord Stark a full cup of the damned milk of the poppy, or I’ll see to it that you will need a generous amount of it too.”

The Crow glared, but didn’t dare to counter back; she was almost twice his size. His piggish eyes darted across the room, searching for the Lord Commander, on the other side of the hall. Tollett gave him a curt nod; he grumpily extricated himself from the wench’s iron grip and left to follow the order.

Brienne’s eyes trailed after him briefly and when she turned them on him, they were a blue flame burning fierce and tempestuous against the whiteness of her skin. Jaime breathlessly gaped at her, and almost took a step ahead, set on kissing her into oblivion.

“Lord Commander! The Wall!” came a terrified scream from outside.

They all hurried to the threshold, just in time to see a massive chunk of ice tearing off the top and smashing into the winch that miraculously was still undamaged after the golden dragon – my brother’s dragon, Jaime thought – had crashed down: now splinters of crystal ice and wood were flying in all directions as though the frozen barrier had just been blasted by a trebuchet. Like the body of a giant struck to death, the Wall shrieked and groaned in pain, a loud rumbling sound which made even the ground shake and stretch open under their feet.
“THE WALL IS FALLING DOWN!” someone screamed in horror and stricken panic from one of the turrets.

It was like a dam breaking: all at once, the men in the yard scuttled away untidily, like frightened headless chickens. Some of them rushed to the south gate, toward the Gift’s open lands, some others took advantage of the chaos to sneak into the vaults and pillage as many food supplies as they could.

The precarious balance which kept together such ill-assorted, badly equipped bunch of men unravelled and slip apart, their fragile unity thawing just like snow under the sun in the hour of danger.

Jaime had seen it happen dozens of times before on the battlefield, for fear or cowardice, even to the most trained and skilled troops; but these are not cravens, he pondered. These are children, and old men with white beard and broken bones, and green boys who never wielded a sword in their lives... Jaime couldn’t really blame them for trying to save their own skins.

There were other men, though, the ones with the black cloaks of the Watch, the more seasoned among the Crows, who probably had taken their vows years ago and still believed in them, or the wildlings, recognisable by their pelts, who didn’t back off from duty and honour and were helping Dolorous Edd and Frostfinger to rally the comrades and give out weapons.

Anguy grabbed quiver and arrows and sprinted toward the tunnel beneath the Wall. Tormund was about to do the same, but Jon seized his upper arm: “Gather the clans in the Gift. As many men as you can. Light all the fires.”

The Wall was still cracking alarmingly; the fissure hacking it from top to bottom widened before their very eyes, but the order was given in a firm and steadfast voice and Jaime was surprised to recognise something of himself in this young man called upon to play a role in the game far too gigantic to bear. An unimaginable feat. In spite of the very likely possibility of the Wall crumbling down on them at any moment, there was no fear in him. He could see him think fast for a new strategy, like a true commander would do, his eyes unyielding and shining with a silent, unflappable audacity and something oddly akin to dignified nobility.

A bastard, looking more regal than a prince of the blood, he almost smirked to himself. He’s been getting ready for this, for years.

But for all his growing admiration for the boy and his nerves of steel, they both knew that the scattered lines of defence in the Gift wouldn’t be enough.

If the Wall falls now, we are all done for.

“YOUR GRACE!” Meera yelled from the hall.

In just a few moments, Bran’s conditions had worsened: he was writhing and thrashing in pain over the table, his muscles taut and twitching uncontrollably. Pink foam dribbled from his clenched mouth, and the hollows under his eyes had deepened. His hand was unconsciously clutching his right forearm, as the girl held his head up for fear he might swallow his own tongue.

“Help me lay him on his side!”

While Jon went to assist the crannogwoman, Thoros tore at Bran’s sleeve, exposing the skin.

Jon drew a sharp, shocked breath.
The arm was swollen and pale, hard as leather, except for the spot where the sign of four fingers stood out, blue and blistering like the brand of a hot poker left on cattle.

“What is this?”

Meera’s eyes darted mutely from Snow to Bran’s arm as though she could not believe the sight in front of her.

Jon grabbed the girl by the shoulders and shook her.

“Meera, talk to me! What happened?”

“The Night King touched him! He was in one of his visions… and… and, I don’t know!” she let out an anguished, strangled sob. “We were attacked, but he was fine! It was never like Jojen, it was never like this!”

“The boy is tainted!”

They all turned their heads to Thoros, who stood there, harsh and impassive, his red eyes wide and burning holes into the boy’s arm.


“The mark of the Others is on him. The Wall is weakening because of it.”

He locked eyes with Jon. “We need to sever the connection. The arm must be cut off, lest we want all to die.”

Jaime didn’t know what possessed him, then: his golden hand was suddenly pressed on Thoros’ windpipe and, unsheathed at his side, Widow’s Wail was flashing dangerously to the torches’ light: “Just try to get near this boy with a blade in your hand, and I’ll cut off something you’re going to sorely miss. You drunken fool!”

“I don’t wish to do it, either, Kingslayer,” the Myrish priest retorted. “But the boy has been touched by ice. Look at him! The power of the dead is freezing his blood! He dies, the Wall’s magic dies with him.”

“Take that damn priest out of my sight!” Jon shouted, his voice trembling with barely contained anger and loathing.

Jaime shoved him away and approached the table; Bran’s face had lost the little colour it had. The Stranger is upon him.

Jaime faintly remembered what Qyburn had done, when he had healed his festering stump, saving his arm in the process. And afterwards, he had made good use of the heavy leather-bound books he found in the Red Keep’s library, where he read many an interesting thing about stab wounds, infections and amputations, things any soldier ought to know, but now… for all the pathetic ravings of the Red Priest, he was right about one thing: this wasn’t a simple frostbite, and Jaime feared that, without a real maester to tend expertly to the wound, the boy wouldn’t last long.

Gripped tightly in his hand, Widow’s Wail seemed to throb with energy, the hilt and golden guard engraved with rubies still warm to the touch; Jaime looked down at it, baffled. His mind struggled to understand what had transpired in the woods; he only knew that, in the middle of the fight against the wights, the sword had started to react strangely, for lack of a better term.
He observed carefully the blade still radiating heat, its deep-red ripples glowing as they captured the light... it had grown so hot, in battle, that it looked as though it might burst into flames at any moment...

Touched by Ice, Thoros had said...

A sudden, crazy thought seized him.

There was no time for reflection: he pushed Jon aside and grabbed Bran’s naked arm.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

*I don’t know*, he wanted to answer; instead, he raised Widow’s Wail and, before Jon or Meera could stop him, pressed its flat side right on the blue mark.

The boy screamed.

He screamed and screamed... and Jaime shut his eyes and pressed the blade harder against the skin until he heard the sickening sizzling of burned flesh. It was like thrusting his own arm into a furnace, into the scorching breath of a dragon, and the taste and smell of charred human meat on his tongue and nostrils triggered memories he had tried to smother and bury between Cersei’s thighs a long time ago. Memories of men cooked alive in their armours, and sons watching their fathers die in a screaming agony, while he stood in his pristine, white cloak, still and blind and deaf and mute.

He tried to do now what he did then.

*Go away inside.*

But this time the trick didn’t work.

Thrumming and quivering, the sword seemed to weigh a ton and Jaime’s arm shuddered under the strain. On contact with the icy-cold dead skin, the steel quite visibly smouldered. It smoked, and so did the boy’s flesh. A wave of nausea rose at the back of his throat, burning and sour, but he swallowed and forced himself to watch, just as he watched the boy’s grandfather being eaten by the flames, unheeded to the roar of enraged voices behind him, calling him Kingslayer, murderer, oathbreaker, sister-fucker, until blisters burst on the boy’s raw-boned arm and the skin peeled off, black and purple.

Hands were gripping his shoulders and arms, now, trying to pull him away.

“Jon, wait! Look. Look!” he heard Brienne speak beside him. And he did look, too.

The mark was blurring, fading, slowly but surely, melting back into the skin, almost as though the blade had absorbed its poison; now a pale scar shone under the red burning left by the Valyrian steel. Although Bran’s breathing was still shallow and laboured, the shaking fit had subdued.

He took two steps back to give the brothers some space.

A knobby hand reached over to pass a mug to Jon.

“Here, have him drink this,” Tyrion’s voice said.

Meera held the boy’s head as he accosted the rim to his blue lips.

Bran stirred and groused, mumbling some intelligible words; then his shrunken eyes fluttered open
and Jaime let out a shaky breath he hadn’t even noticed he was holding.

“Jon… dragon…”

“The dragon flew away, Bran,” the king brushed back a lock of brown-reddish hair from his damp forehead, talking in soft, soothing tones as he would to a child who had just woken up from a nightmare. “Rest, now. We’re safe.”

“No!” Bran grabbed weakly his half-brother’s wrist. “The dragon…you…”

Jon and Jaime exchanged a confused look over the table. The boy wasn’t making any sense. He started weeping quietly, until exhaustion swallowed him whole and he drifted away into merciful sleep.

Silence fell on the hall and in the yard outside.

Then, as though on cue, everyone turned their heads and looked at him.

The room felt hot and crowded and he was sweating, despite the cold wind tasting of rotting flesh which swept from the open double doors.

*They all glare at me as though I’d murdered Aerys a second time.*

He should have grown used to it, by now, Jaime considered sneeringly. The revulsion, the shame, the trembling terror mixed with doubt. Yet, for some reason, he could not stand the judgement now. He staggered, retreating to the doors without encountering any opposition, and, once outside, he marched on, his head heavy and clouded, until he reached the covered bridge that connected the common hall with the armoury and the Commander’s tower. His throat was burning as though he had screamed too, along with the boy; struggling to take a breath, he grabbed a handful of snow from the wooden handrail and shoved it into his mouth, hoping for some relief. His arm and shoulder now hurt madly. In the courtyard below a strained peace filled with a nervous energy was gradually returning: armed men were industriously removing ice blocks and debris from the ground with the help of horses and mules. He spotted Dolorous Edd checking the damages to the winch and arranging the work of the stewards and builders. *How will they patrol the Wall, if they can’t even reach its top?*, he wondered offhandedly.

“How did you know about the sword?”

Brienne’s breathless voice startled him from his musings.

“I didn’t. I just –

Jaime turned and stopped, only now truly seeing her close enough to spot physical harm.

“You’re hurt!”

She frowned uncomprehendingly and looked down at herself in confusion: her cloak, and the blue armour beneath, were drenched with blood.

“Not mine.” Her voice was small and a little dazed, almost guilty in discovering it wasn’t hers.

*Tormund’s blood, perhaps, or Bronn’s, more likely.*

A deep cut shone angrily on her right cheek. His hand gently cupped her chin and angled her face sideways to have a better view: the wound had already stopped bleeding, but it would doubtlessly
leave a scar. His fingertips trembled against her skin, her warmth seeping through his leather-and-wool glove. “It’s just a scratch,” she flushed and lowered her eyes, perhaps worried he might read too much into them, but to Jaime, it seemed like she was leaning into his touch.

He knew what she was thinking.

*We almost died, tonight.*

Only a few months ago he would have brushed off the tales of White Walkers and Night Kings as the deranged ramblings of a bunch of drunken muggers who had spent too much time at the world’s end without female companionship.

He was shocked beyond words. Shocked and appalled for their – his and Cersei’s – shortsightedness.

His head pounded so hard that he didn’t even notice the small man scampering to him and Brienne, until he was standing in front of them, a hopeful, crooked little smile twitching over his marred face.

The brother who saved them all, riding a dragon.

The brother he swore to kill, if he ever saw him again.

And the fucking cunt was actually smiling.

He didn’t even give him the time to open his mouth, either to apologise or defend himself, not even the space of a breath to understand what was going on: Jaime lunged at him, planted a foot on his chest and pressed hard. Pinned to the ground, Tyrion let out a loud, wordless groan of pain, his hands scraping against the leather boot crushing his ribcage. Jaime ignored his attempts to free himself and raised Widow’s Wail high above his head.

“M’lord, *no!*” Podrick jumped between the two of them, shielding his brother’s small body with his own.

**Stupid lad.**

“The brother who saved them all, riding a dragon.

He could not kill his own brother in front of her. She would chide me to no end.

The notion almost brought a scathing laughter to his mouth, but his throat was closed in anger and he could do nothing but swallow his resentment.
As Pod helped the Imp back on his feet, Jaime felt all the rage disappear; in its stead came such exhaustion like he had never felt. Not even in captivity, not even in the sleepless nights after Cersei’s coronation, when misgivings and distrust weighted like lead in his heart and mind, keeping him alert and guarded. Now, he wanted nothing more than bury his face into Brienne’s white neck, let her cradle him like she did in Harrenhal, and cry. He wanted to kiss her pretty blonde lashes, her eyelids, brush his lips against the faint shower of freckles speckled across the bridge of her nose and see how many different blushes and sighs he could draw out from her.

Tyrion glared up at him: there were such resentful hostility and indignation in his black eye that Jaime almost picked up his sword again. But the green eye was filled with sorrow and regret and hurt, as though Tyrion couldn’t quite believe his own brother, the brother who had always loved him, had attacked him, intending to kill him. That look sobered Jaime up, as the reality of their strained relationship came crashing down on him. He couldn’t deal with Tyrion, now. He needed to clear his head, so he pushed past Brienne and marched toward the south gate, and then he kept walking.

No one stopped him when he passed through one of the many wildling campsites scattered around the Gift: shaggy wooden barracks and tents of hide and furs flickered in and out the pale mist, stretching as far as the eye could see. Jaime crossed children milking goats, old women fletching arrows and sharpening the bone points of spears against whet stones, babies wailing and sucking at their mothers’ breasts, young girls with Tormund’s same copper hair running with their arms full of blades and makeshift pieces of armour, men in wools and boiled leather stacking withered tree branches and twigs in a straight line which cut across the camp for its whole length... They mean to set the trees ablaze, if the time comes. This is their only defence, Jaime realised. No barricades, no trenches, no Valyrian steel. Only fire.

Torches and fires were burning incessantly at Castle Black, too, he saw, when his feet brought him back to the courtyard. The place was lit up as though it were the middle of the day; the sun should be up, by now, he pondered. But to the east, the sky was just as black and moonless as if they were still engulfed in an endless hour of the wolf.

Is this it? The dreaded Long Night the maesters warned about? He only half-listened to Septa Sybella’s tales, sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed he shared with Cersei when they were children: the legends about the First Men coming from Essos and the mythical heroes wielding magical swords against enemies made of ice held no interest for a boy like him, whose inspiration had been the great swordsmen of more recent history.

I never believed those stories. And now I live inside one of them.

He settled on a stool next to one of the braziers in the courtyard, the warmth coming from the glowing embers a limited resistance from the biting cold. A consistent snowfall was painting the world around him in a soft, deathly whiteness, making it difficult for the brothers in black to tend to the destroyed winch. Jaime’s eyes trained to the Wall. The builders were working relentlessly with hammers and stakes to secure the construction as fast as they could; some of them hung from hempen ropes, swinging precariously against the ice surface every time the wind rose in sharp gusts. It would take days, maybe weeks, to repair the breach, and in the meantime the Wall would be open to attack.

Two thousand men, maybe more, he resolved. I’ll write to Strongboar after I have talked to the King.

A solitary black raven was perched on a half rotten log next to him, tilting its head curiously at him and then back at the Wall. He’s checking the damages, too.
“Cold!” the raven croaked, staring at him with golden eyes. *You and me both, my friend.*

He saw Tormund stomping down the Tower of Guards, a waterskin slung beneath one arm and his bear cloak already half soaked for the snow.

“Still holdin’ up?” he asked when he reached him, flicking his head toward the frozen structure, but Jaime wondered if perhaps the question was also addressed to him.

“For now,” Jaime breathed out.

The wildling shook the raven off with his boot.

The bird flapped its wings and took off with an indignant squawk, perhaps annoyed by the rude intrusion.

Tormund flopped on the log with a sigh, and rubbed a weary hand over his forehead. Jaime frowned. It was unusual to see the redhead wildling looking so tired and vulnerable. *I probably look even worse.*

“I spoke to Jon. He was looking for you. Seems like the little lord will pull through. Tough kid. Surviving for so long beyond that Wall…” he shook his head, incredulous. “The cold changes a man. I’ve seen men thrice his age – skilled warriors, mind you – give up to it a lot faster. They moved him to the Lord Commander’s quarters, if you want to see him.”

He fidgeted nervously on the stool. Tormund was studying him with an unnerving, pointed stare, as though trying to elicit a reaction out of him.

“You shoved him from a tower, when he was just ten,” he pressed on, stubborn like a dog with a bone. “And now you save his life. Why d’you care?”

Jaime closed himself up in an obstinate silence. He did not want to explain that it was a debt he had owed for a long time now, a debt which, in all likelihood, he would never be able to pay back completely. He did not fancy having Tormund, of all people, seeing his shame for what he did to Bran mixing in his eyes with the guilt and regret for what happened to Tommen while he was away.

“Do you have children?” he abruptly asked instead.

Tormund’s thick auburn eyebrows knitted together, mystified by this seeming change of topic.

“Aye…” he gave him a guarded look, but soon enough there was a big, dreamy smile brightening all of his ruddy face. “Two girls, both kissed by fire. They’re in the Gift, now. The eldest just whelped a big baby boy with strong hands and lungs: even the black brothers hear him at night! Ev’ry time one o’ them crows whines about being kept awake, I say: that’s me grandson, ya better watch out for him too! Har!”

He slapped his meaty thigh, and Jaime couldn’t help the grin tugging at his lips. But then the wildling’s shoulders slouched and his eyes gleamed distant and pained.

“Had a boy too,” he uttered. “He died in Hardhome. Couldn’t go back to look for the body. Jon said… he said… ain’t nothing to get back. But I still dream o’ him, me little boy, coming back, searching for me on the battlefield, and I have to kill him again.”

Tormund pulled the cork from his waterskin, took a long swig and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.
The frozen snowflakes silently trapped into his luscious beard caught the torches’ light and glimmered as his chin wobbled.

The revelation troubled Jaime more than he cared to admit. Setting aside the animosity and rivalry to win the wench’s favour, Jaime found himself wanting to bring some comfort to the man.

But he wasn’t Brienne, and words failed him.

“That dwarf… on the golden dragon…” Tormund spoke again, after a while, “is he truly yer little brother?”

Jaime nodded.

“I heard he slew one o’ the kings sitting on that sword throne of yours, and your own father, too. Some say he changed his skin into a rat’s and fled to the Free Cities with sorcery.”

Not sorcery, only the cunning deceptions of a cockless man and my own foolish brotherly love.

Beneath the golden hand, the stump itched painfully.

“It’s… complicated.”

Tormund cocked his head and snorted. Then he offered up his waterskin.

“Here.”

“No, thank you.”

“Drink!”

He forcefully pushed the uncorked skin to Jaime’s chest. The mead spilt all over his cloak. Tormund chuckled quietly when he coughed, his throat unaccustomed to the strong taste.

“You fought hard and well, out there… good enough, for a southron pretty boy with only one hand.”

Jaime hunched over, leaning his elbows on his knees.

“I still can’t believe what I’ve seen.”

The wildling nodded and hummed in agreement. “Hearing the tales is one thing, but seeing with your own eyes? Quite another story, eh? I’ve already fought ‘em twice: I still don’t believe it.”

Jaime took another sip, and this time the fire spread pleasantly to his limbs.

“Whatever happened with your brother, get over it.”

He almost sputtered his mead.

“Get over it?” he spat angrily. “He murdered my father!”

“Aye, and that silver princess of his got dragons. Real, fire-breathing dragons. He’s riding one, for fuck’s sake! We need them on our side, or we’re not going to stand a chance. So suck it up!”

Without waiting for a reply, Tormund stomped his boots on the ground and bounced up, stretching his arms above his head like a lazy cat and patting his belly.
“I smell dawn coming,” he said, checking the sky. Jaime knitted his eyebrows. He smelled only snow. “Get your strength back, pretty boy. Sleep. We are not done for, yet.”

Just as the boisterous wildling had predicted, sunrise broke through the curtain of frozen mist not long after; but it was a wan, grey morning which cast little light and even less warmth. No one noticed the difference when the sun set again; the torches kept burning both in the Castle and in the Gift. While Bran rested, the waking and sleeping hours melted together for the ones who waited, not knowing if the Wall would stand. Sleep evaded each and every one of them.

Wildlings, builders, stewards, rangers taking turns in patrolling the structure all gathered in the warm common hall for a silent meal: no one felt like talking.

The Lord Commander showed up two, maybe three times.

Jon even less. He and the Reed girl never left the boy’s bedside.

Tyrion shut himself off into the King’s Tower, where Dolorous Edd had the stewards prepare a room.

Despite Tormund’s clever words, and the glances full of gentle reproach Brienne threw him every now and then from the other side of the table, Jaime had avoided a confrontation with his brother, except for a few bad glares when Tyrion had to explain briefly in front of the whole brotherhood what he was doing at the Wall, with a dragon, on top of that.

His brother had simply showed his Hand brooch to Jon, saying he was following Queen Daenerys’ orders and that her intentions were nothing but noble and straightforward.

They all had agreed to let the matter drop, for the time being; Tyrion retired to his room with quill and parchment, muttering curses under his breath and wondering: “How do you write a mother you’ve accidentally lost one of her children?”

“You should talk to him. Hear what he has to say in his defence.” Brienne said for the umpteenth time while they were breaking fast with oat bread and hard-cooked eggs on the third day. Jaime let out an exasperated sigh. The argument was turning stale, by now, and he didn’t fancy arguing with her first thing in the morning.

But before he could give her one of his sharp replies, Podrick rushed to their table.

“M’lord, m’lady! I’m sorry to interrupt…”

“What is it, Podrick?”

“Ser Jaime, His Grace sent me to fetch you,” he breathlessly said. “Lord Stark is awake.”

He hastened to the Lord Commander’s Tower, crossing paths with Jon, as he climbed up the stairs.

“He barely spoke to me,” the king said and, from the tired tone of his voice, he sounded quite annoyed. “He says he needs to see you first.”

He braced himself, and climbed the tower.

The room was small and poorly furnished – only a bed, a stool and a little table with an oil-lamp on it – but almost unbearably warm, thanks to the fire which crackled and spat jolly sparks in the stone
hearth to his right.

Leaning against the headboard, the boy lay comfortably under the furs, his right arm bandaged up and the hollows under his eyes far less noticeable now that a healthy pinkish complexion had returned on his face.

Nymeria was dozing off with her muzzle over his broken legs, but as she heard Jaime approaching the bed, she lazily opened one golden eye to check the intruder; then, in recognising him, she let out a reassured yawn and relaxed back, stretching a protective paw over Bran’s hip.

Unlike his sister’s direwolf, Bran took no notice of his presence. He seemed lost in thought, his eyes fixed on the stained glass window: the yells and grunts of the young recruits training in the yard below filled the silence in the room.

Meera Reed was staring at him with a wary look; she set her chapped lips into a thin line when her green eyes paused over Widow’s Wail.

“Leave us, Meera. If you please,” the boy spoke, at last, his voice a gentle, barely-there whisper, but firm and carrying at the same time.

Lady Reed hesitated for the space of a heartbeat; her hand slid nervously across the leather strap of the quiver swung across her shoulder, as she shot suspicious glares to him and Bran both.

“All right,” she agreed in the end, sounding dubious still. “I’ll be right outside.”

“Fierce woman,” Jaime said once she had closed the door behind her.

Bran smiled a little, and yet, he didn’t look at him.

“She means well. She only fears you might want to finish the job.”

Only then, he turned his eyes on him, and it was like a punch in his face.

He had changed so much. His hair were already long and unruly, when they first met, but now they easily flowed past his shoulders; a thick, auburn curtain framing a harsh, hollow-cheeked face which had forgone all the sweetness of childhood. His blue eyes bore into him, and Jaime was strikingly reminded of Arya’s steel grey eyes, when, hidden in the Rock’s underground caves, she demanded his penance and forced the truth out of him. But Bran’s eyes didn’t hold any resentment, nor burning hatred; they were clear and warm and wide open, and Jaime had the distinct impression they could see far beyond the surface of things.

“You meant to kill me,” the boy struck hard and quick.

It wasn’t an accusation. He was just stating a plain fact.

Jaime’s hand closed in a stiff fist at his side. *I owe him the truth, at least.*

“Yes.”

Bran didn’t flinch, didn’t show any emotion, except for his hand grabbing the soft fur around Nymeria’s neck perhaps a little bit more harshly than necessary. It was just a passing weakness, though; the hand relaxed almost immediately into a gentle caress against the wolf’s head, but Jaime understood that the boy was just as edgy and unsettled by this meeting as he was.

The young lord took his time, to ponder about the right words, weighing them in his mind.
“For years,” he started, “I’ve dreamed the same dream, every time I closed my eyes… I didn’t realise what it meant until I saw you again, back in the forest.”

Jaime squared his shoulders and took a steady breath; now that the reckoning had come, an odd peace had settled into his heart; he felt tense and light at the same time, strangely relieved as though he had just unburdened again all his secrets into the dark pool of Harrenhal’s baths.

He only hoped Bran would be merciful enough to give him time to settle his affairs first. He ought to leave specific instruction with his cousin Daven, and give the last orders to the brave men who were loyal enough to follow him north. And say a proper, thorough farewell to the wench. What a craven way to tell her, he bitterly berated himself, mere hours before being executed. She would never forgive him.

“I’ve promised both your sisters and the King that I would’ve put myself before your judgment, my lord, without ruse, nor lies,” he said resolutely. “I did what I did for love and I didn’t care about the consequences, at the time. I take full responsibility for my actions. Send for your brother: I’ll face whatever punishment you’ll deem fit.”

Bran considered him carefully.

“Should I sentence you to death?” he goaded him. “Ask Jon to cut your head, just as your family, the family you were trying to protect, did to my father?”

His Tully blue eyes paused on Jaime’s golden hand and he stiffened.

“It’s not easy, to have someone else’s life and destiny in your hands. My father always said the man who passes the sentence should also swing the sword, but…” Bran helplessly gestured to his wrecked legs.

“I’m sure that Ned’s ghost would forgive you this minor breach in tradition,” Jaime said, his lips quirking in a nasty grimace.

It was the conundrum every man and woman of power ought to face, at least once in their lifetime: how to rule, how to rise above everyone else, and still keep one’s humanity? In his experience, power corrupted even the most well-intentioned, innocent and honourable soul.

His father’s teachings came easily to his mind: power, justice and strength would mean nothing without wisdom and knowledge to balance it all. A good monarch is a juggler, Tywin would say: with his bare hands he must learn to effortlessly toss into the air and catch a crown made of thorns, again and again, heedless of the stinging pain he feels.

He briefly wondered if his sister had ever listened to any of this.

“Do you know what a greenseer is?” Bran asked again.

Jaime furrowed his eyebrows, trying to remember stories heard many years past, at the Rock and in the Riverlands. “Someone who has green dreams… visions, from the trees… I apologise, my lord, my knowledge of northern myths and beliefs is sketchy, at best.”

“I have visions, yes… It’s like flipping through the torn pages of a mummer’s play, without knowing which scene comes first, only being able to guess the myriad of connections between the missing parts. The past, the future… sometimes I don’t even recognise which is which.”

“Your uncle Benjen said you are the Three-Eyed Raven…”
“The Three-Eyed Raven…” he scoffed, “such a mysterious title… he is supposed to be the greatest among the greenseers… all-powerful, all-knowing… ‘tis funny how I don’t feel either. I just feel like a boy with a broken back who stumbled into a story far greater and more dangerous than he’d ever imagined.”

He sounded tired. It was hard to believe a boy so young could wield such a great, albeit confusing, power in his hands, but Jaime didn’t put into question the sincerity of his words: his eyes didn’t lie.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like that,” he went on, almost talking to himself. “Robb should’ve become Lord of Winterfell after Father, and my sisters… a Queen and a Lady of a great castle, even though how would they have managed to sway Arya to it is still beyond me… do you know what I wanted to be?”

Jaime didn’t even need to think about it. The reply came fast to his lips. After all, it was the same answer he gave, to his father, to Cersei and Tyrion, to his uncles, to whoever had bothered to ask when he was a boy of ten; it was the only future he could see, a future made of clashing swords and battle cries and blazing glory…

“You wanted to be a knight.”

“Not just any knight…” Bran smiled sadly, regret colouring his voice. “That morning, when you rode inside Winterfell’s courtyard with your white cloak billowing in the wind, so proud and tall and handsome… I couldn’t look away. I wanted to be you.”

His jaw went slack with shock. He had expected Bran to cry and yell at him, to curse him to the Seventh Hell and ask for his head; somehow hearing the disillusionment in his voice was worse than any other punishment. Jaime did not understand: why would this boy, any boy, take him, a Kingslayer and oathbreaker, as inspiration?

“I don’t know if I should hate you, for what you did to me, or be grateful.”

“What?”

“If you hadn’t hurled me through the Broken Tower’s window, I would’ve never become what I meant to be.”

The boy was speaking with such an unnerving calmness, as though they were conversing about the weather, that Jaime felt a speechless fury reaching a boiling point in his veins.

“I almost killed you! I made you a cripple!”

Why aren’t you angry?

“Aye. You stole my legs… and gave me a thousand eyes in return.”

“What do you see in those visions of yours?” he breathed out, dreading the answer without really knowing why.

Bran’s stare hardened; he looked older, transfixed.

“I saw you. Slaying the Mad King.”

No.

Gods, anything, but not this.
Blood pounded in his ears and the room blurred before his eyes.

“You were wearing your golden armour, not the white one. He ordered you to bring him your father’s head. He threatened to burn the city to the ground with wildfire. And you killed him. You saved the city.”

He saw. He truly saw.

Jaime wished to flee, and yet, his feet were rooted to the spot.

His eyes dropped to his right arm and he frowned as though he weren’t really expecting to find a fake golden appendage instead of a real hand made of flesh. The hand that pushed you out of that window doesn’t exist anymore, he would’ve wanted to say. And neither does that man. And for the first time, the words Brienne spoke more than a month past, the words he was quick to dismiss back then, now rang true. I’m not that man anymore, just as he isn’t the same boy.

The realisation overwhelmed him more than anything else.

“You’re not going to die today, Ser Jaime,” Bran said. “Not yet. You’re going to help me.”

“How?” he managed a dry, shell-shocked croak.

“Maester Luwin always said that knowledge is an armour. You must needs help me understand how we can win this war.”

And so, at Bran’s request, he revisited those fateful days, just as he did with Brienne, and word after word, he felt the burden on his shoulders lifting, becoming lighter, as though the boy was helping him carry it.

He told him about the sack of King’s Landing, and the children’s bodies wrapped in Lannister crimson deposited at Robert’s feet, and how he killed the pyromancers one by one; and then Bran started asking him curious questions, about the wildfire still stacked under the city, and his sword and Oathkeeper, how they had been re-forged, and about facts even further back, about Rhaegar and Lyanna Stark’s kidnapping, and about what Jaime remembered of the tourney in Harrenhal.

He wanted to ask what it was all about, but thought better of it.

“Jon trusts you,” Bran said in the end. “And you have half of my Father’s sword. We must learn to work together, if we want to survive.”

Jaime gave a curt nod of assent; he understood that this was his real punishment: to atone, day by day, and prove to himself that he could be that kind of man. The kind of knight children would take inspiration from.

Just as he was about to leave, he paused and turned around again.

“About Aerys…” his tongue was tied up. “About the vision. Don’t tell your brother. Don’t tell anyone.”

Please.

Bran’s forehead crinkled in bewilderment; for a moment, it seemed like he wanted to object, but then he leaned back against the cushions.

“As you wish,” he said and returned his attention to the window.
And suddenly, he was smiling. A broad, warm, genuinely happy smile, which made his whole face glow.

“Why are you smiling?”

A beacon of light pierced through the windowpanes and wrapped the room in a soft, golden gleam. His right hand was shimmering.

Bran’s eyes brightened up as he looked up at him.

“The dragon is back.”

Viserion’s return managed to lift, albeit minimally, the Watchers’ dark moods. Tyrion profusely apologised for the damages to the Wall and swore up and down that the dragon didn’t constitute a danger for them. Quite the opposite, in fact. He bade whoever wished to come and meet him. Jon and Brandon were fascinated by him. Especially Jon. The scaly beast seemingly adored him.

A few days later, Bran had regained enough strength to travel again, so they started to make preparations.

If he had to be honest with himself, Jaime was eager to get back to Winterfell, as far away from the Wall and what lay beyond as possible.

The builders had done their best to stabilise the structure and repair the winch, even though the fracture disfiguring the Wall from top to bottom was still visible. Despite the fact that the collapsing had stopped, Jaime didn’t feel safe: as the days went by, the tons of ice looming over them were becoming more and more of a menace, instead of a shield. He threw one troubled look at the immense frozen expanse, his hand tightening as he absent-mindedly slid an oilcloth down the edge of his sword.

Next to him, Bronn cocked his head toward the training yard, where Brienne was mercilessly pummelling two crows with a blunted sword.

“She got good moves,” he said with interest, chewing on a strip of salted beef.

Jaime followed her dance with a rapt grin: she gracefully dodged a blow on the head and parried an attack to her left, then moved around with a quick sidestep, easily disarmed one opponent and pushed her boot flat against the breastplate of the other. The lad fell hard on the ground and stayed there, holding his chest with a moan.

“You should ask the lady to give you a nice pounding.”

Jaime’s hand stopped on the blade. He raised an annoyed eyebrow at his second-in-command.

“Sparring,” Bronn elaborated, flashing him an innocent smile. “With swords. You should keep training your left arm. At least until I’ll be able to put weight again on this fuckin’ useless leg.”

The wound on his right calf had been tended to and was healing well, but, although he could walk and ride, he would probably be left with a limp.

“Why? That would be an excellent way to counterbalance our bouts. You with a lame leg, and I with a maimed arm.”
“The sellsword snorted: “I’d still win.”

“Pod, what do you think?” he consulted the wench’s squire, who was putting away the blunt swords and the padded surcoats. “Who’d win in a fight, between him and me?”

The boy reflected for a moment, then said with a slight blush: “Lady Brienne could beat you both.”

This caused the two of them to burst out in hearty laughter.

“Very good, Pod,” Bronn snickered. “Excellent answer! You’re finally becoming smart!”

Jaime caught Pod following his movements, as he honed Widow’s Wail; the boy looked mesmerized by the blade’s dark ripples, so he put the oilcloth away and beckoned him closer.

“It’s a beauty, isn’t it?”

“I like this better than my lady’s blade, if you don’t mind me saying so, m’lord.”

“How so?”

“Well, Oathkeeper is a truly magnificent sword, worthy of a king, but… it’s a little bit… flashy.”

“Podrick,” Bronn started, a mocking glint in his eyes, “are you insinuating that the Lannisters are a bunch of pretentious, tasteless cunts?”

“I-I never… No! M’lord!” he pleaded.

“Stop tormenting the boy, Bronn. Here.”

Jaime balanced the sword over his forearm and extended the golden hilt to Pod with an encouraging nod.

The squire looked as though his nameday had come earlier.

“Feel its lightness. As if it’s nothing but a natural extension of your arm. Don’t hold it like it were a mutton’s chop…relax your wrist and shoulder…aye, like this… the grip must be strong, but the hand must always stay supple and free.”

He corrected the boy’s grip advancing the position of the thumb and bringing it closer to the forefinger; he smiled to himself remembering the times Ser Benedict did the same with him, back at Casterly, again and again, until he’d learned. “If you grip the sword too firmly when taking the stance or parrying, you won’t be as quick as you should in countering an attack. Do not bend your elbow too much.”

He took a step back, and crossed his arms over his chest, watching carefully as Podrick tried some thrust-and-parry steps: high, left, left, down, right and high again, the Valyrian steel cut through the frozen air with a hiss. The boy was reasonably talented, Jaime thought. Good footwork and strength, even though he should still work on his agility.

“Lady Brienne never lets me wield Oathkeeper,” Pod said with a wistful sigh, when he approached him again. “I can only polish it with oilcloth, every now and then…when she’s in a good mood…”

He sulked a little, gazing reverently at the edge’s sharp, elegant line.

“Don’t hold it against her, Pod,” Bronn consoled him. “All knights become nervous when another person touches their swords.”
I wouldn’t call it nervousness, m’lord. She’s bloody jealous of it!” he blurted out, before he caught himself.

Bronn howled with unrestrained laughter.

“I mean… I-I…” the lad stuttered, red as a beet, his eyes darting alarmingly from the sellsword to him.

“Don’t worry, Pod,” Jaime chuckled. “She won’t hear it from me.”

His eyes instinctively searched for her across the training yard; still flushed for the sparring, she was in deep talk with Frostfinger and Anguy, Oathkeeper tucked safely under one arm; when she felt his gaze on her, she turned her head, a frown creasing between her eyes.

He grinned.

Ugly, stubborn wench.

“Come along!” Jaime patted the squire on the arm and motioned him to the middle of the yard; he took one of the blunted swords for himself.

“Lady Brienne has been training you, hasn’t she?”

Pod eagerly nodded. Jaime drew the sword up and took a stance.

“Show me.”

The boy wasn’t shy or cowed by his reputation, for sure. He certainly had enthusiasm and youth working for him, if not the most refined technique. But considering he had started to train in earnest only in the last couple of years, he had already reached a more than acceptable level of swordsmanship.

“Not bad…” he paused with a grin, his feet drawing a narrow circle into the snow-covered ground. “I can see the master’s brushstroke…but you’re merely copying her style, Payne! Derivative work. Give me something with your personality!”

Podrick gripped the hilt with both hands and tried to catch him unawares with a sideswing, his teeth clenching together in annoyance.

*By the Gods, he took all of his teacher’s worst flaws.*

Jaime almost laughed aloud.

“Don’t grimace before you lunge!”

Pod answered by hitting his forehead with the sword’s pommel. Hard.

He staggered backwards and glared.

That definitely wasn’t Brienne’s style.

*More like Bronn’s.*

“Come on, Pod! Move your feet!” Brienne’s voice rose to his left. He parried a well-executed downcut to his right and threw a quick glance to the spot where a small group of crows had gathered to watch the sparring. The wench was there, observing keenly and exchanging tips with
Bronn.

Pod gave him a non-committal shrug, smirking knowingly, in his brown eyes a look of pure elation.

“M’lady is fond of me.”

_Cocky little cunt._

He lunged at him with all his strength, slamming the blunted edge against the boy’s padded forearm; the swords clashed and Pod retreated toward the armoury, almost losing his footing. He found his balance again and lunged back, locking the blades at their cross-guards.

“Ten copper stars on the boy!” Brienne spoke behind him, loud enough for Jaime to hear.

“I’m in!” Bronn approved.

His head snapped around in outrage.

_Treason, treason everywhere!_

The distraction cost him. Pod hooked the foot around his ankle and pulled. Jaime’s legs went out from under him.

His sword slipped from his grip.

The crowd whooped and clapped their hands, and even the wench was laughing cheerfully.

Podrick looked terrified.

“I’m truly sorry, m’lord…I-I…” he faltered and offered the hilt of the Valyrian sword back to him with a shaking hand.

Jaime studied him with a scowl.

“How old are you, Podrick?”

“Ten—ten and nine, I think, m’lord.”

“Ser Bronn is right,” he pushed himself to his feet with a grunt and put a fatherly hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You’re definitely too old to be a squire.”

Pod’s face fell, and Jaime had to hold back a laugh. Instead, he said, as serious as he could: “Kneel down.”

It took Podrick a few seconds to really grasp his intentions. But then, his mouth dropped to his chin and all colour drained from his face. He shot a hesitant look in Brienne’s direction, as though asking for permission.

“Go ahead, Pod,” he snapped impatiently. “We don’t have ’till the next spring!”

The boy took a sharp breath and dropped to one knee.

“Do you remember the words?” Jaime asked softly. He didn’t want to embarrass the lad, after all. But Podrick nodded so hard Jaime feared his neck might break.
He smiled and raised his voice, so that the whole courtyard could bear witness.

“Podrick, of House Payne, do you swear before the eyes of gods and men to defend those who cannot defend themselves, to obey your liege lord, or lady, to be wise and virtuous, and give your honest counsel whenever required, to fight bravely when needed and do such other tasks as are laid upon you, however hard or humble or dangerous they may be?”

“I swear before the eyes of gods and men that I will honour my vows, that I will use my sword only to protect and never to do harm, and that I will never bring shame to the knighthood, in words or deeds.”

I will never bring shame to the knighthood… He had recited those very words too, when Arthur Dayne touched his shoulders with Dawn’s bloodstained tip over the Kingswood’s muddy battlefield, and there was the same purpose, the same incredulous pride burning in his eyes as he could see in Podrick’s, now. He believes the words, just as I did.

He swallowed hard and forced the words out.

“In the name of the Warrior I charge you to be brave,” he touched his right shoulder with the flat of his sword. “In the name of the Father I charge you to be just.” Then the left. “In the name of the Mother I charge you to defend the young and innocent. In the name of the Maid I charge you to protect all women.”

He touched again his right shoulder and solemnly said: “Arise, Ser Podrick of Mole Town.”

As he rose, he was immediately surrounded by the youngest among the recruits who wanted to congratulate him.

“Now the only thing missing is a good, true Valyrian sword. The ladies would love it,” Jaime said, putting Widow’s Wail back into its cherry scabbard.

Even though, from what Bronn had told him, the lad certainly didn’t need any additional help in that field of expertise.

“Aye, m’lord, thank you, m’lord!”

It had been so long since he saw a boy’s eyes shining with heartfelt gratitude for something he did in an utterly selfless way. It was a strange feeling, one he wasn’t really accustomed to.

From across the yard, Brienne stood still, staring at him like he was made of gold, a hand over her mouth and tears in her sapphire eyes; when Podrick ran to her, she squeezed his shoulders with one arm, over her face the bright smile of a proud big sister.

The gravelled top of the Wall was a quiet, cold reprieve from the hot, smoke-filled confusion of the common hall, where they had gathered for the last meal before hitting the road again.

With the complicity of the wildlings’ strong mead, soon supper had turned into a small, loud celebration in honour of Podrick’s knighting. At his brother’s third toast to the lad’s vigour, Jaime decided he had enough and followed Brienne’s steps to the barrier of ice.

The sun was sinking beyond the crest of the Frostfangs, and only a faint thread of silver light lingered above the haunted forest; the hoar-covered tops of the trees glittered like embers in shades of orange, purple and dark blue.
He walked toward the ruins of Oakenshield, where the Wall bent slightly to follow the slope of the hill to the little pond near Woodswatch, until he found her: she stood upon the edge, bathed in the last light, peering toward the horizon with steely, clear eyes, still, pale and unblinking. An ivory woollen cloak shielded her body from head to toe, almost disguising her into the pearly whiteness of the Wall, and if it weren’t for the warm steam leaving her lips every now and then, Jaime would’ve thought she was one of the marble statues which once towered at the entrance of the Great Sept.

_She looks like a bride. Or a Snow Queen._

“By the Gods, wench, you look absolutely frozen!”

The statue shook winter off herself and came alive again.

He moved closer; no, she wasn’t a statue sculptured in ice. Her body was warm and her eyes seemed to have a life of their own, as they pierced through him, gleaming with amused mischief.

“Come back downstairs,” he said, “I need you to defend my pride and honour against Bronn’s cruel japes.”

“You had it coming. Am I supposed to thank you, by the way?” she sounded peeved, and for a moment Jaime believed he had somehow offended her with his actions.

He frowned, put off.

“Podrick was already too popular for his own good, before. Now shaking girls off him would be nearly impossible,” the wench scolded him with a huff and he relaxed into a teasing grin.

“Careful, my lady: jealousy doesn’t become you.”

She rolled her eyes, trying to play the stern, inflexible maid warrior, but the smile tugging at her lips betrayed her.

“The lad saved the lives of two Lannisters in two different instances. He showed attitude and courage on the battlefield, and has protected you on your journey to find the Stark girls. He did protect you, am I right, my lady?” he added, as an afterthought, mock concern etched in his voice and a funnily dour frown over his face to express doubt.

Although they both knew the opposite had been more likely, Brienne laughed softly and nodded.

“He was beside himself with joy,” she said, with a tenderness he seldom heard in her voice.

“He deserved it, and it was about time, too. I’d knight you too, right here and now, if you weren’t so damn stubborn.”

Under his stare, a deep red blush spread all over her cheeks.

He had told her many times, already, as a joke at first, only to prod her pride and hot temper, when she wrongly thought she was being mocked, and see how wroth he could make her, but now what started as something said in jest had almost become a battle of wills between the two of them.

“I don’t care about titles. I only want –

“Respect,” Jaime finished for her and she nodded again, her eyes beaming in gratitude. He understood her with perfect clarity; after all, it was what he had always wanted, too, beyond duty
and glory.

He drew his cloak around him as his eyes drifted to the horizon. The trees’ shadows were stretching quickly, now, licking the Wall’s foundation like dark flames; soon, a new obsidian night would fall over Castle Black.

“Tomorrow we’ll be riding on the Kingsroad again,” Jaime let out a deep breath. “I can’t really say I’ll miss this place.”

“We’ll be back soon enough,” she said, her face clouded. “Every time I watch the sun setting now, I wonder if it’s perhaps the last time we see it…”

She fixed her eyes on him. “What happened to our swords out there?”

“Yours too?”

“I thought it was just my mind, playing tricks on me, but then you used Widow’s Wail to heal Bran, and I… What was that?”

He pursed his lips and flexed his fingers around the sword’s hilt. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen steel acting that way before, it was as though the sword was –

“On fire.”

So she had felt it, too. It wasn’t a common deception, like the one used by Thoros of Myr, who coated the blade in wildfire, and was forced to change sword at any tourney. It wasn’t like Beric’s sword, either.

“Stannis wielded a flaming sword. The Red Woman said it was a gift from the Lord of Light, but that blade was cold to the touch, or so Ser Davos has told me. Oathkeeper…” Her hand caressed the golden lion carved into the sword’s pommel. “It was like holding a torch to my face. Jaime, the wights feared it,” the wench whispered then, and her sapphire eyes were filled in equal measure with astonishment and hope.

Jaime didn’t know what to make of it. They would surely need to tell Jon. The two swords belonged to the North and they were meant to be wielded together against a common enemy, that much was a given, but how many swords from myth and legend did he know that could claim to have such almost magical qualities?

Just Maid, Galladon of Morne’s unyielding weapon, used only three times; Calybourn, strapped with its diamond-studded hilt to the hip of Florian the Fool; Nightsbane, the lethal companion of Ser Davos the Dragonslayer, during his travels across the Reach; the indestructible Dragonbreath, forged by Serwyn of the Mirror Shield himself, tempered with the searing blood of the dying Urrax… None of them could burst into flame, though. None of them had faced the Others. None, except…

“There are mysterious forces at work, here,” Brienne remarked, “forces that I don’t understand. We don’t know enough about this Winter, we still don’t have a strategy to fight against the White Walkers, and… I’m scared.”

“That’s an outrageous lie! You don’t have a single scared bone in all your body. I’m sure of it; I’ve checked.”

“I’m scared all the time, Jaime!” her voice trembled and cracked, and the jape died on his lips. “I’m scared for my people on Tarth! I should’ve never left them to provide for winter on their own.
I’m worried about Sansa and Jon. There are so many people who wish them ill, even people close to them, and I… I’m trying to protect them, but I don’t know how! I’m terrified something might happen to them, or Pod, or Tormund, or to you!”

She awkwardly turned her head to the side, as the confession painted on her face a fiery sunset more lively and dearer to him than the bleak one currently dying beyond the mountains’ peaks.

Her shoulders dropped in despair. “Not all of us will see the next spring.”

She sounded alarmingly close to tears.

Jaime had never realised how guilty she truly felt about leaving Tarth to follow the Starks; her good heart would compel her to keep all her vows, even the mutually contradictory ones, but he wondered how many nights she had spent fighting against her wish to leave the north and ride back to her sapphire isle.

*She’s fond of the Starks, but Tarth still means home and family, to her.*

Unwilling, his thoughts veered to his sister, sitting on that blasted iron chair: Cersei was so keen on waging war against warm foes made of flesh and bone, that she had completely closed her eyes and ears to the real enemy; would the hundreds of leagues separating her from the Wall be enough to keep her safe? His phantom fingers twitched. He rued the fact that his heart still felt the old, annoying impulse to run to her rescue, whenever she found herself alone and in trouble, as though he was still her golden knight and she his damsel in distress.

But now she had chosen a path where he couldn’t follow.

*I can’t protect her any longer.*

Brienne was a quiet, solid presence at his side, and he was comforted by the thought that whatever battle would rage in their near future, she would be fighting next to him.

She had to survive this winter, or else it would’ve been all for naught.

“Bran and Meera are alive and well and in a few days we’ll all be safe in Winterfell,” he said, pushing Cersei out of his mind. “We have plenty of mead to keep warm our otherwise empty bellies, Podrick gave me a nice beating and has just been knighted for it, we saw a dragon and the Wall still stands. All things considered, I’d call that a rather good week, won’t you agree?”

He gently nudged her with his shoulder, until her big mouth twisted into a grudging smirk.

“I’ve liked the dragon bit.”

*Armies would follow your lead in battle. Men would die for you, and you don’t even realise it. You stupid, blind, annoyingly brave woman.*

He held out his left hand to her. “Come, my lady. Don’t make me carry you: you’re heavy and I’m getting old.”

Chapter End Notes
This one has been a nightmare to edit: I had to cut a whole section with Jaime and Tyrion discussing their present situation, because of the absurd length, but don’t worry, that particular conversation will be included in one of the following chapters. But so many things still to ponder over: Podrick earning his spurs, Bran being his wise self, Tormund and Jaime bonding over lost children, our two idiots too proud to admit they would gladly rip each other’s clothes off, and a bit of sword lore… If you’ve enjoyed it, let me know in the comments ;) 

Next stop: the library…
Surprise! If you’re wondering how I managed to update so quickly, don’t get too much excited: this chapter was mostly already written since… JANUARY! Lol! I’ll bore you with the details in the end notes… for now, a heartfelt thank you for your constant support, and all the kudos and comments!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The scented candle's flame wavered and fluttered under the cold drafts from the corridors and the cracks of the clerestories, casting dancing shadows all over the high shelves of the Citadel's Library. Samwell cupped a hand in front of the copper stick, carefully avoiding with the sleeve of his novice's robe the drops of hot wax sliding on it, like milky white tears. It wouldn't do if he were to drizzle wax drops all over thousand-years-old pages, risking to set fire to the whole History section.

During the day, the Library was always buzzing with people: in silent reverence, maesters, apprentices and scholars worked unrelentingly to copy the rarest manuscripts and scrolls for future reference or correct past mistakes on annotated editions; but as the sun set, the world around them would change to an almost magical atmosphere, where every book seemed to whisper with one another, in an endless, secret conversation lasting through the centuries. Books, Sam knew, had a power of their own, a soul and a beating heart. This sensation was stronger at night, when the Citadel slept, and he was the only one meandering its labyrinthine corridors, searching for answers.

He didn't really have time for this, during the day: the lessons with the archmaesters and his work as assistant curator to Archmaester Agrivane, the responsible of the potions and herbs inventory who by now was so old that he practically couldn't tell apart poison from cure, took up all his time and most of his waking hours. Nights were the only moment of peace Sam could use to peruse the texts on the most hidden sections. The sections where no one bothered to go, because the books kept in there held a disputable reputation, with some of them even smelling of sorcery and other practices of an illicit nature, or because their topics were looked upon in the same way as fantasy works and horror stories told to get the children to behave.

Although those books weren't forbidden, the access to them was strictly regulated and bound to a special, written authorization by one of the archmaesters, to be submitted for authentication to the Seneschal, and not all of them were willing to write one down.

He glanced at the table full of papers and index cards: the piece of parchment with the nervous, spidery handwriting of Archmaester Marwyn seemed to make fun of him and his attempts. Marwyn gave him the creeps, with his rat-like face and the tufts of hair coming out from his nose and ears, and glassy purple eyes always opened wide, staring at something only he apparently could see, but he was also the only one willing to help him in his research, even if the words of warning he aimed
at him just this evening were disquieting, to say the least.

*Give it up, young Tarly, there's only madness and destruction at the end of this road!* And the whole time, he had laughed maniacally, spitting blood-stained saliva all over his Valyrian steel chain. At this point, Sam didn't know if the old maester truly wanted to help him because he wished him to succeed or because he was more entertained by the idea of leading Sam on the fast track to become a madman like he was.

Sam rubbed his eyes, his yawn echoing across the great octagonal hall: he was absolutely exhausted. Just yesterday, he had fallen asleep during Vinegar Vaellyn's astronomy lesson, and later in the morning, an anatomy lesson with Archmaester Ebrose awaited him, right after breaking fast. Ebrose hated him... maybe because he had puked all over the first body on which he had performed an autopsy, on his very first lesson. But to Sam's defence, he wasn't the only one who got sick and fainted when the man had opened with an incision the corpse's torso from jugular notch to crotch.

He looked at the big seven-faced astronomical clock that marked the passing time even without daylight, and let out a discomfited, long sigh; another night of fruitless research. On their own volition, his fingers found the short links he always carried within his pockets: in a little more than a year, five of them had already been forged. Copper for History, black iron for Ravenry, red gold for Heraldry and the study of bestiaries and lapidaries, bronze for Astronomy and pewter for Herblore. But the metals that were of most interest to Sam, silver, iron and of course Valyrian steel, those were still a long way to go.

He was learning, though. It was what Maester Aemon had wanted for him. His training normally would have required years to complete, but time was of essence and was growing rather short. He had read and studied any dusty book he could lay his hands on; he had consulted more scrolls about dragonlore than he ever thought possible, and it still wasn't enough. The only arts that would have been useful to understand how to fight and beat back the White Walkers were forbidden at the Citadel. But in the taverns of Oldtown, if one asked with discretion and were willing to pay good money, information could be attained about people teaching the magical arts forgotten or prohibited by the Conclave, people who knew the secret connection between the coming of the Long Night and the new dragon-egg hatching.

Just a fortnight past, Sam had met with one of those people, a mage from Yin, a short man with long black hair bound in an elegant knot over his head, who didn’t even divulge his own name for fear of being dragged in front of both the Conclave and the Old Man of the Hightower to be tried and burnt at the stake.

Sam had let out a nervous little laugh and proceeded to explain that neither the Archmaesters nor House Hightower were followers of R’hllor, the Lord of Light, and it wasn’t in their custom to burn anyone, alive or dead.

‘They should start to,’ the mage had replied mysteriously, his round golden-rimmed jade eyes bulging in a mad stare. ‘Fire is the only thing that will stop them. Fire and a dragon made of ice.’

Suddenly uneasy, and wondering why he had agreed to meet him without the backup of his friends, Sam had wanted to flee, only then noticing that the man had led him into one of the dark alleys behind Ragpycker's Wynd, a place renowned for its scavengers, muggers and cutthroats. But the strange Yitish man had grabbed his arm, his hands rough and peppered with age spots and ink stains.

‘The Dragon has three heads!’ he had exclaimed, sounding maniacally insistent and scared in equal measure, and then had tucked a folded, old piece of parchment into one of the pockets of Sam’s
acolyte robe with a queer, crooked smile which had Sam shudder all the way back to the Citadel.

The mage didn’t want his money, and the young man had soon discovered why, once in the safety of his lodgings: on the parchment, there was nothing to read, not in the common sense of the word, anyway. There only was the mysterious drawing of a spiral, its curved arms expanding and winding around a single fixed point. Sam didn’t understand: what was he supposed to do with it? And yet, he had mused inspecting the document, there was something obscure and familiar at the same time, in that circular symbol, which made him recognise its relevance and value, even if its correct interpretation eluded him. For this reason, Sam didn’t trust to leave the scrap of parchment unattended in the acolytes quarters, where anyone could walk in, and carried it on his person all the time, hoping that one of the Library’s books would somehow help and point him in the right direction to shed some light on this further mystery.

*It looks like I haven’t been doing anything but trying to solve riddle after riddle, since I came here,* he thought a little discouraged.

Samwell felt as though he had only just begun to unravel the Library’s innermost secrets; the building itself was a true labyrinth, extending on different storeys: the most hidden and inaccessible ones were located below the ground level, where a complex system of vaults, locked cellars and storage rooms protected and withheld from the eye of the commoner and the unworthy the rarest books and scrolls, the most lethal and arcane brews and venoms and the queerest of treasures and exotic specimens.

His friend Leo had sworn up and down that one of those vaults still contained the bones of Meraxes, the she-dragon ridden by Rhaenys who fell in battle with her rider during the First Dornish War. 'Meraxes is in King's Landing, everybody knows that!' Armen had disputed, one night at the *Quill and Tankard* on the Honeywine's east bank. 'Her skull now rests on a cellar deep down the Red Keep, aye,' Leo had conceded with an easy-going smirk, 'but her body was carried to Oldtown by the Tyrells, after it was found in the crypts of the Hellhot.'

Dragons... Sam couldn't think about anything else, even since news of Daenerys Stormborn and her three fire-breathing pets landing on Westeros broke in Oldtown. Leo got some reliable information from his own father, who was Lord Commander of the City Guard, and when they got wind of the allegiance struck between Highgarden and the Queen from across the Narrow Sea, Leo had cheekily bought ale and cider for all the *Quill* patrons, daring them to make a toast and celebrate the upcoming end to the reign of terror of *Bloodthirsty Cersei*. Sam, Alleras and Armen had to bodily remove their merry, slightly intoxicated friend from the inn, before the situation got out of hands. Spies from King’s Landing were rumoured to be everywhere, even in a free and open city like Oldtown, and they ought to be careful. But from that night, dragons had been constantly in his mind: from the moment he woke up in the morning, to the moment where he would lay to sleep, and even beyond the curtain of wakefulness, in his dreams, Sam would imagine huge, scaly winged bodies sweeping over the Seven Kingdoms' valleys, mountains and seas, cascading fire down on the Wall, ending the Long Night with one roaring, scorching appearance.

Even now, a dragon with three heads was staring back at him, the six gems set in lieu of eyes – red, green and blue – sparkling pricelessly from the black leather cover of Archmaester Vaegon's *Marvels, Monsters and Miracles*. It was one of the five tomes written by the Targaryen Prince called the Dragonless which shaped the rich canon of the *Histories of the Time of the Old King*, the long, detailed account of the private life and travels of King Jaehaerys I, his Good Queen Alysanne and their children. With Septon Barth's books either destroyed or largely incomplete, the writings of the King's son were, for the historians, the only trustworthy reference source about the Age of Jaehaerys the Conciliator, and, to the customary scholar, an entertaining narration full of witty remarks and deep reflections on his time and the events he had witnessed first-hand.
For a man who never had the chance to ride his own dragon, Archmaester Vaegon had a true fascination for those animals, to the point that he devoted to the topic an entire book, focusing especially on the six dragons which belonged to his parents and close relatives: the voyage of the royal couple to Winterfell was well documented, and Sam had the chance to read about it even in the poorly supplied library at Castle Black, but the detailed account included in the priceless book in front of him now was unprecedented and unconventionally straightforward. The flight of Vermithor and Silverwing over the Wall, the night skies turned black, golden and red by the flames of Balerion and Caraxes as they hunted in the Haunted Forest and up to Skirling Pass, and Vhagar’s huge form casting a shadow on the New Gift as she gracefully danced with Meleys the Red Queen in a swirl of green, scarlet and pink….

It was the first and only time the Brothers of the Night’s Watch witnessed dragons singing.

A song that melted the Wall’s frozen edge and made it shake, like a giant under a blanket of snow waking up after the longest winter to watch a dawn heralding one of the most prosperous and thriving springs Westeros had ever seen.

Perhaps, Sam thought, one day we shall hear it again.

If we’re lucky.

Cautiously moving the chain out of the way, Sam opened the book with extreme care: the spine cracked and moaned, yielding under the strain, as the mouldy tang assaulted his nostrils; he gently leafed through the stiff, fading pages, marvelling at the elegant series of miniatures in bold red and gold

He skipped the considerations about the sex of dragons and reached the paragraph on the dispute between the King and the Starks, concerning the concession of the rights of jurisdiction over the New Gift to the Night’s Watch.

The decree nearly triggered the rebellion of all the North against the Crown, Vaegon had written. A diplomatic incident was only just avoided when, during a tumultuous council, called to reach a pacific reconciliation over the question, Lord Edric of Winterfell and his son Ellard took their complaints directly to my Father: both of them were under the assumption that the King had granted those lands to the Night’s Watch as insult and punishment to the Starks, after some of their drunken soldiers took liberties with some of the Queen’s handmaidens and had spread the vile rumour of an illicit affair between the Queen herself and Lord Commander Loren Hill, a bastard son of Lyman Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock. I was there, when the Stark faction and the Queensguard almost came to blows, and only the King’s conciliatory intervention ended the quarrel; although my Father was justly angered about the allegations, he chose to betroth my then ten-years-old sister Daella to Lord Edric’s younger son as an act of good-will and to donate to the Starks one of the eggs previously laid by Silverwing, while she was staying with my Mother at the holdfast later named Queenscrown.

The gift had a purely symbolic meaning, of course, since no dragon egg would allegedly hatch in such dire weather, but Lord Edric tried for years, maybe persuaded that with a living, fire-breathing dragon he at least might have a chance against my Father, and died half-mad, within six months after the premature death of his younger son.

With my sister’s betrothal broken, the hopes of House Stark to forge an alliance with House Targaryen were shattered, but it was around that time that the legend of the Ice Dragon had been rekindled.
I never saw that egg again, but some said that Lord Edric, in a fit of anger, threw it across the Wall, where it was later retrieved by the Children of the Forest; some other said he gave it as an offer to the Others in exchange for a short winter; some said the egg, against all odds, had hatched thanks to the hot springs running under Winterfell, and the dragon was now sleeping, buried under the snow, until a battle cry will awaken him again to fight against the enemies of the Targaryens; some other said the so-called Ice Dragon is not a dragon at all, but a legendary Prince, who will rise again in a time of great need to bring forth the downfall of House Stark...

Sam stopped reading, rubbed his eyes and stared at the written page without really seeing it: dragons, Children of the Forest, White Walkers... It was all connected, but he couldn't see yet the threads keeping it all together.

The letters were dancing before his tired eyes.

There's nothing about dragonglass or the White Walkers, only stupid legends which probably any child of the North would know.

He had sent letters to all the lords and ladies of the Seven Kingdoms, and to all nine regions, asking for their support on behalf of the Night's Watch, and beseeching them to dispatch men and dragonglass against the creatures beyond the Wall; he signed the papers as Samwell Tarly, Maester of the Night's Watch, improperly, since he wasn't but an acolyte, but he had to try, in the conviction that a Maester's voice would be better heard and listened to.

He was wrong.

Only a handful of high lords had reported back: some of those letters, the kindest ones, ended with the admonition to forget about dragons, Night Kings, ghouls and monsters beyond the Wall and focus on becoming a good maester to at least serve the Brothers in black at the best of his abilities.

But the majority of the replies scoffed and jeered at his requests, reminding him what an awful failure he was in his father's eyes, a well-respected and formidable man forced to bear the bane of a witless son ill-suited for command, unfit for war and whose favourite past-time apparently had turned out to be the fabrication of convoluted tales and far-fetched theories inspired by the reading of forbidden books at the Citadel.

Sam had patiently endured the insults; that wasn’t the worse part, anyway. The worse part was the chilling realisation he was letting Jon down, after he had given him his trust and a purpose, and that he truly was the useless fool everyone thought he was.

I'm sorry Jon. I’ve tried, but they all just laughed at me.

On his text list there still were three titles Sam had meant to consult before he called it a night. He made a move to rise from the bench, when something caught his attention.

He tilted his head and listened.

A scratching sound could be heard from the Old Languages sector.

Rats, I hate rats.

But the hair over his arms raised.

Shadows shifted and stretched, lurking around each corner; Sam held out his candle lamp to light
up the maze of the many hallways twisting around the main aisle of the History section. He reached the end of the bookcases lining against the wall and peeked around the corner; no trace of anyone.

“Who goes there?” he tried to sound confident and dauntless, but the hand holding the lamp shook.

The Library was the safest place in the world, as far as Sam was concerned, the only place where he truly felt to belong, but even he had to admit that, at night, it could become spooky and spine-chilling, with its never-ending shelves and twirling corridors unexpectedly leading to a dead end, which would disorientate even the most seasoned among the maesters; in addition to that, spending hours reading about mythical creatures buried into the depths of the Land of Always Winter didn’t exactly contribute to ease Sam’s naturally fearful soul.

I’ve killed a White Walker and a Thenn, for fuck’s sake! It’s probably just a little mouse, more scared than I am.

Another noise, this time coming from the Heraldry section, had him so startled that he almost dropped the lamp.

Two mice, maybe, then.

His heart in his throat and all his senses alert, he warily crept up to the corner between the Music, Mathematics and Religion sectors and held again the candle in front of him; this time, a light which wasn’t there mere minutes ago was glinting eerily at the farther end of the corridor.

I’m pretty sure mice can’t do that.

He took half a step in the direction of the entrance, meaning to ask for help, then reconsidered his options. If there was a thief, by the time he would be back with the Seneschal and armed backup, the thug would have all the time to take what he wanted, and leave undisturbed. And he didn’t even have a weapon on him. Except for the five links chained together, not long enough yet to be worn around the neck and decidedly not very heavy, but they would have to do. He set his jaw and, with the links in one hand and the lamp high in the other, moved closer to the candle burning at the corner.

“I’m armed. Come out and no harm will come to you,” he commanded with false bravado.

A sudden movement to his back made him turn.

In front of him, there were three caped figures, their faces hidden, except for the eyes: ice blue, glittering in the dark.

Fear froze his blood and gripped his bowels, but he didn’t run, or baulk back.

_I am a Watcher on the Wall_, he chanted inside his head and raised his links, ready to strike.

“Wait! WAIT!”

Sam halted his arm; _the Others don’t speak._

One after the other, the dark capes dropped, showing the cheerful, very much alive, faces of Lazy Leo, Alleras the Sphinx and Armen the Acolyte.

They all had blue gemstones, placed in their eye sockets like lens, so that the refraction would make them gleam even in the almost absence of light as though made of ice.
Alleras was holding his belly, doubling up with laughter, and pointed a finger at him: “Your face!”

Sam stared with narrowed eyes, incredulously annoyed more with himself than with the lot of them for having fallen victim of their tricks. How come he, the most serious and diligent among the acolytes at the Citadel, ended up befriending the three most insubordinate rebels and jesters of Oldtown, always seeking trouble in some tavern or gambling house and never bothering to open a book, not even under the pressure of impending examination, *that* was a true mystery.

“So?” Leo waved his hand, irreverently crushing parchments and books under his ass as he sat on the table, carefree and cocky. “I told you we’d find him here. The Bookworm Crow.”

Sam huffed indignantly, struggling to salvage at least the parchment with his notes.

“How in the Mother’s holy name did you get in?”

In reply, Leo unsheathed his bravo’s dagger and started to clean his nails with it, an amused, impudent smirk playing on his lips.

“You think you’re the only one who can get special authorizations from the Seneschal?” he sassèd back, wiggling his eyebrows. The others sniggered; Sam just rolled his eyes. It was no use to argue with Leo: he came from the second wealthiest family of the realm and had no personal qualms whatsoever to use his money and influence as leverage to get what he wanted any time he wanted. He was a funny, clever lad, the leader of their little band, but Sam doubted he would make a good maester: he liked too much messing around, and almost got himself expelled last semester for undisclosed business concerning Archmaester Perestan’s accidental almost poisoning; a much dire case, involving flax seeds, porridge and a corrupt cook, which was only fixed by the reassuring intervention of Lord Commander Tyrell and a generous donation to the Citadel’s History section.

“Seneschal Theobald is a slimy, debauched leech who likes blond, curly-haired pretty boys...” Alleras jibed in his Dornish drawl and, to Sam’s horror, put out from his robe a tin flask which, by the strong smell of fermented apples, could only contain cider. “I heard they found him with his scraggy, little hands deep inside old Lorcas’ breeches, once. And Leo is waaaay prettier and younger,” he added in a jolly singsong voice, pinching his friend’s rosy cheeks. “What did he have you do with those pouty lips of yours, I wonder?”

“The way you’re talking about my pouty lips, it seems as though *you* would like to find out,” Leo hinted, all suggestive amber eyes and easy smile. Armen snickered uncontrollably behind his hand, as Alleras sputtered his cider through the nose.

“I-I... I don’t... I like girls! Ask anyone at Tilly’s Tits!”

“Yes, yes, your prowess is well known on all the brothels of the Seven Kingdoms and beyond, Alleras. Let’s not talk about whoring in front of Sam. He’s a solid pillar of faithfulness to his Gilly flower!”

“A pillar, alright! *Sam the Slayer!”* Armen boomed, making a move to grab his crotch. Sam backed down, blushing like a maiden and protecting his nether regions with both hands.

“Keep your voice down! And don’t spill your drink all over the books!”

“What is it, tonight?” Armen asked with a snigger, his attention diverted to the table and the chaotic array of manuscripts and scrolls on it. “*The Mirror of Nature? The Physiologus* by Archmaester Clemens? *The Codex of Splendours and Other Wonders*?”

Leo too reached out a hand over the books, closing the front cover of Vaegon’s work; when he read
the title, his lips thinned in a worried line and he cast him a reproachful, concerned look. Sam knew that, beyond the jests and the good-natured teasing, Leo and the others had his best interests at heart: they had been watching him getting more and more consumed into this fruitless research, without being able to assist him, except for the feeble, unheeded attempts to get him to loosen a bit and forget for a while about the impending winter.

But they did not understand. How could they?

Suddenly exasperated, Sam grabbed *Marvels, Monsters and Miracles*, clutching it protectively on his chest, as far as the chain permitted: “If you don’t mean to help me, you all can get lost! I have no need for distractions!”

“Come on, Sam! You can’t spend every godsdamn night here studying the mysteries like a madman! In less than a month, exams will be upon us and you haven’t even started to write your essay on the treatment of amputations as described in Archmaester Ambroise’s *Treatise on Surgery*!”

“Indeed! How do we cheat, if he hasn’t written a single line yet?”

“Maybe, for once, you could actually study, instead of copying from me!”

Alleras and Armen circled him, an arm on each side of him and a sly, mischievous grin on their faces.

“Samwell, if we were gone, you’d miss us…you love us, you big, cheesy fat ass. You’d be bored to death without us driving you up the wall and rescuing you from the occasional beating by thugs and patrons at the *Tankard*.”

“I can perfectly hold my own, thank you, I’ve killed –

“A White Walker and a Thenn,” all three of them chorused and Sam succumbed to their good mood with a roll of eyes and a chuckle.

“So, where do we start?” Alleras suddenly asked, rubbing his hands together. Then noticing Sam’s stunned look he added: “What? You really thought you’d find something of interest and make a breakthrough all alone?”

“It would require *years*, time which currently the realms of men don’t have, according to you. And frankly, we’ve had enough of your constant, desperate whining.”

Sam smiled at them warmly and grateful, a sudden rush of affection surging deep and earnest inside of him.

“Well,” he sheepishly said, “I was about to raid the Warcraft section for info about the War Across the Water…”

“Uhmf, boring and worthless, I can already tell you…” Armen huffed, heading straight for the stairs connecting the Copper Level to the Iron one. But he had just put his left foot on the stairs’ first step when in the empty Library echoed the sharp sound of the ancient bells of the Hightower. Soon other bells, the ones of the Starry Sept, then the Lord’s Sept and the Seven Shrines joined in, in a loud cacophony of bronze and tin which made the painted glasses of the clerestory windows shake and rattle in their rods.
The young men froze where they were standing, their faces reflecting the same bewildered thoughts: the last time the population of Oldtown heard the sound of the Hightower bells had been centuries ago, when Gyles the Woe sacked the city.

It could mean only one thing: enemies approaching.

Leo sprinted to the stairs joining the upper stories, and the others followed. When they reached the top floor, Alleras helped Leo to unlock and open one of the windows on the east side of the building: the noise bounced loudly back and forth between all the towns scattered over the Whispering Sound, alerting them to raise their defences.

A reddish glinting could be spotted over the line of the horizon; it wasn't very different from one of the many sunrises Sam had witnessed from one of those same windows, after another sleepless night bent over scrolls and manuscripts.

Except it was still too early for dawn.

“The wharves are on fire!” Leo exhaled.

“And not only those!” Armen pointed a finger toward the heart of Oldtown, the great, covered market which extended from Spice Alley to the Merchants’ Guildhall. A column of black smoke strongly smelling of sandalwood, cinnamon and saffron rose to the sky, almost entirely covering the northern part of the town.

All around the city, from the bakers’ quarter to the textile neighbourhood, from the tanners’ and jewellers’ shops to the slums, in almost each district, had erupted dozens of fires.

“Fuck!” Leo screamed and they ducked instinctively as a huge burning pitch ball flew from the darkness surrounding the shores and slammed into the motherhouse next to the Lord’s Sept, a few yards from the dome of the Citadel.

Sam watched transfixed: his head snapped and craned to the southern side of the building, toward the sea: the light of the beacon burning on top of the Hightower flooded the harbour, where dozens of ships were crowding the river’s mouth, in battle formation. The Honeywine literally glittered with the gold of the Kraken.

Next to him, Leo tensed up and marched purposefully down the stairs. He grabbed his arm.

“Where do you think you're going?”

“My father is out there, leading the City Watch. I must reach the Blackcrown Wynd and help them!”

“Are you out of your mind? You'll burn even before reaching the bridge to the Quill and Tankard!” Armen choked.

He was right. The stone had fallen not very far from the tavern, and now the whole neighbourhood was flaring up. Sam suddenly thought about Gilly and little Sam, sheltered in a nice, little room on the south bank, next to the dyers’ quarters. The area was still free from the fire. For now.

*I need to get to them.*

But before he could act of the thought – “GET DOWN!” Alleras yelled in warning, just in time for them to jump out of the way.
An incendiary stone smashed into the nearby building housing the acolytes’ sleeping quarters.

The windows of the library exploded in a shower of shards as sharp as Valyrian steel. The force of the impact sent them flying some feet apart, as the world around them collapsed and engulfed them in darkness.

There was a loud ringing in his ears, when, several moments later, Sam gingerly came back to his senses; the room swayed before his eyes. He was covered with debris and shards, but at least he couldn’t feel broken bones.

“Lads! Are you all right?”

He waited for a few terrifying seconds, before someone replied with a groan and a cough.

“I’m fine!” wheezed Leo, re-emerging from under the upturned walnut table where he ducked. The strong wood had somewhat cushioned the impact, probably saving his life.

“HELP ME! I can’t get out!”

Both he and Leo followed Alleras’s panicked voice, until they found him completely buried under the entire collection – 74 tomes – of the *Annals of Mathematics*.

“I’ve always thought fucking books would be the death of me!” he swore, after they had managed to pull him out.

“Where’s Armen?”

A hushed moan from the other side of the aisle alerted them on the location of their missing friend. The blast had trapped him between one of the granite columns and a fallen bookshelf.

“I think I broke my arm!” he cried, holding his left wrist close to his chest. It was swelling and rotating to an unnatural angle. Efficiently, Alleras realigned the bone with a loud snap, ignoring Armen’s screams of pain, insults to his mother and menaces of death, then proceeded to assemble a makeshift sling with a piece of his torn robe and a splinter from a broken shelf.

“I knew I should have stayed in bed, sleeping!”

“If you’d stayed in the dorm rooms, you’d probably be dead right now!” Leo snapped angrily. Sam didn’t want to think about the acolytes’ lodgings, which were located right next to the Library and had taken a direct hit.

“Stop whining, you’ll survive,” said Alleras, finishing up bandaging Armen’s arm; then he turned to Sam: “You’re bleeding.”

Sam half-consciously raised a hand on his forehead: a gash where he had smacked his forehead against the sharp edge of a shelf, throbbed painfully. He had worse.

Apart from that, and some minor cuts, he seemed mostly unscathed.

The same could not be said for the Library.

For one glorious, perfectly peaceful moment, he thought that the wreckage would be limited only to structural damages to wood, glass and marble; then, a horrible crackling sound erupted in the silence, and the Library’s Hall became illuminated by hundreds of little, evanescent flames, sparkling on several different places, timidly at first, then increasingly louder and bolder, until, to
Sam’s horror, the embers lifted to the upper shelves by the light breeze, which now seeped in from the shattered windowpanes, swirled in the air and attacked anything they could reach: the scrolls, brittle and dry, were the first to catch fire, flaring up faster than wildfire and just as destructively. The oil spilt from the lamps acted as a tinder, a fuse which rapidly brought the blazing pyre to its final target: the circular hall where all the library sections meet.

“Sam! We must get out of here, now!”

Leo’s voice was disembodied and far-away, half-removed from the world: Sam could not hear nor move, horror and gut-wrenching fear getting the better of him.

The fire was alive, greedy and hungry.

Touched by the flames, paper changed its colour and shape, blackening, crumpling and shrivelling up like a dying autumnal leaf.

White Walkers, Thenns, Wildlings, war and disease; those were nothing.

_This_, this was worse than anything he had ever lived through.

In a span of seconds, the situation had evolved from critical to disastrous and completely out of control.

Black, thick wisps of smoke soon filled the space. Sam looked down from the balustrade to the table where he was working mere minutes ago: the flames hadn’t reached yet most of the books he left there. He stopped thinking and rushed down the only stair still practicable.

He needed to act swiftly, but what to do?

There were too many books... Which one to save? Sam stared helplessly at the table, his dumbfounded face red and sweaty for the heat, his eyes tearing up both for the smoke and the monumental tragedy that was unfolding before him, without a chance for him to do anything to halt it.

He couldn’t even physically carry the books out of the Library, for they were all chained up to their shelves.

With a pointless act of desperation, he reasoned he would at least salvage the little he could: he frantically opened at random Vaegon’s book and tore all the pages he could hide inside his robe. Then he moved to another manuscript, then another, then another, until his fingers had turned black for the soot and the burns, until he heard again his friends calling his name, yelling at him to let go and get out.

His robe had caught fire, too; Leo grabbed the hem of the dress and extinguished the flames. Sam barely noticed; he clutched to his chest as many scrolls and parchments as he could, tucking burned torn pages inside his garments and pockets.

“Sam, what in the Seven Hells are you doing?!”

There were other hands now, holding him, pulling him back, back, far away from the charred books and closer to the entrance.

“NO!” he shouted, “NO! Save the books! Save the books!”

“I'm trying to save you!” Leo bellowed back.
The Library was suddenly very populated: acolytes and maesters were disorderly rushing inside it, constantly bumping into each other and falling on the stairs; all of them were carrying heavy buckets of water, full to the brim.

It was hopeless. The Library was lost.

Before he could fully contemplate the thought, Armen and Alleras carried him on the stairs leading to the Seneschal’s Court. Halfway through the steps, they clashed against another caped man, who was hurrying down from the maesters lodgings, his arms equally full of books and scrolls.

Alleras squinted his eyes.

“Archmaester Marwyn?”

The old Archmaester weighed them up with a quick glance, then nodded in the direction of the Weeping Dock.

“Not this way. Follow me.”

He led them to a little boat anchored to a bank on the western side of the Library and with it they reached the Bloody Isle. Sam didn’t understand; what good would it make to send ravens, now? The birds wouldn’t probably even be able to fly, among all this smoke and fire.

But Marwyn’s feet didn’t take them to the Ravenry; the Archmaester stopped in front of an elm tree, looked around to make sure they hadn’t been followed, then unlocked a hidden trapdoor dug in the moist ground.

“Quick!” he urged, pushing them inside. “We must hurry!”

Sam nearly toppled down the slimy steps, Alleras’s body standing in front of him the only thing avoiding him to fall on his knees.

Down there, farther away from the fire, it was a lot colder, damp and dark; he heard Marwyn fumbling about with flint and steel until a torch was lit before him. A long tunnel, dug up into the living rock, unravelled for miles and miles, as far as Sam could see.

Without a word, the old man sprang forward, marching in the darkness with the energy and purpose of a man in his prime. Or a madman, Sam mused.

The more they proceeded the more the space around them narrowed and shrunk, to the point that Armen, who was nearly five feet and nine, had to bow down, and they could only walk through one at a time, in a tight line.

After what seemed hours, the tunnel unexpectedly widened into a heptagonal room; on each side, except the one from where they had entered, there was a vault locked with Valyrian steel doors.

“Where are we?” Sam asked in awe.

“Under the Hightower. Over there.”

The Archmaester dropped the books he was carrying into Alleras’s unprepared arms and headed toward the side facing them.

“I thought the only vaults were under the Library,” said Leo, looking around.

“The Library has many secrets. I have been serving as a knight of the mind for the last fifty years,
and even I don’t presume to know all of them. Why would you?” the Mage’s eyes twinkled maliciously.

Spellbound, they watched as Marwyn raised one of his chain’s links and gave it a firm twist and pull. The two metal halves yielded and parted: there was a warded key hidden inside the link. The Archmaester put it inside the concave indentation of the steel door and gave a sharp turn.

The locker clicked and the door latches screamed on their hinges as the vault opened.

“Tyrell, hold the torch. Tarly, help me.”

Inside, the vault widened into a small space with shelves not dissimilar from the ones in the Library; the only difference was that, here, there were also all sorts of strange relics and artefacts: black glass candles, dusty suits of armours, strange beasts preserved in jars full of salt and fluids, manticores, birds with bronze feathers, beaks and talons, wyverns, a unicorn’s horn three feet long, pieces of what looked suspiciously like a hatched dragon’s egg, ancient swords with their bone- and-iron hilts exquisitely engraved, huge sphinxes’ statue heads still half-covered in gold leaves.

The books and the smaller antiquities were kept inside glass boxes. Sam read titles of unknown and obscure texts: The House of Light; The Golden Art; The Oracles of Wymar the Mad; Wisdom of the Hidden Shadows, but there wasn’t time to get all of them: Marwyn threw a bag at him and opened one of the boxes with the same key. Inside it, there was a small casket of Valyrian steel, finely decorated with black onyxes, pearls, golden beryls and sapphires.

“Maester Marwyn, what is this –

“No time. Hurry!”

He carefully put the casket inside the satchel, along with the other books and papers he had previously been carrying, and swung it across his shoulders.

“Now let’s get out of the city.”

The route back to the entrance was covered in a swift blur. They must have been gone only for half an hour, but now Oldtown was a sea of flames: from the Bloody Isle, they could see the slums and the harbour, where the wood warehouses and barracks packed with people had been the first to feed the fire. Sam’s lungs burned up: the smoke coming from the Citadel wrapped up the whole city in a monstrous cloud, like grey sails filled by the wind.

It was a sight both terrible and stunning to behold.

The distraction cost them.

Neither of them saw the Ironborn reaver brandishing the sword until it was too late and Archmaester Marwyn fell on the ground with a cry of pain, holding his left side. The soldier was young and seemed as surprised to find them here as they were.

With a roar, Leo unsheathed his bravo’s knife and plunged it into the boy’s eye socket.

Armen and Alleras crouched down to help the Archmaester. “We need to get him to the Citadel!”

“Leave me, boys,” Marwyn wheezed, his foul breath gurgling with blood, as Alleras was trying to stop the bleeding. “You’re still acolytes of the Citadel,” he said with great effort, his face almost devoid of colour. “You must defend these written words as your life depended on it. It might very well be so. Take it. Take it.”
He pulled the chain off his neck and pushed it in Sam’s shaking hands.

“Find the Ice Dragon, Samwell Tarly, do you hear me? Time is running out. Daenerys must be warned… The dragon has three heads.”

His body gave a last shudder and the hand that was raised to Sam’s face fell slack to his side.

The sound of another explosion of fire coming from the Citadel acted as a wake-up call.

Sam gathered the satchel, put the links around his neck and sprang to his feet.

“I must go to Gilly!”

“Alright! Alleras,” said Leo, giving out the weapons he found on the reaver’s body, “take Armen and head to the Brightwater Gate. We’ll meet with you two miles out of the city!”

Even many days later, Sam couldn’t tell how he and Leo had managed to run across half the town without getting killed either by fire or armed enemies. By sheer luck, he guessed.

The house was still standing, although the fire had reached the buildings next to it.

Sam launched himself through the threshold and was greeted by Heartsbane, flung at his head. He avoided being cut in half only by inches.

“SAM!”

Gilly stood there, Valyrian sword shaking in her hands and a stunned expression on her soot-soiled face: her eyes were round and wide with fear, but she seemed unharmed.

He crushed her in an embrace and for the first time after hours he felt like breathing again.

“I thought you were one of them!” she sniffled against his neck.

Only now, Sam noticed the corpse lying behind the door with a ghastly slash which split his face from ear to ear.

“Remind me never to make her angry,” Leo said and took the sword and the dagger still sheathed on the man’s belt.

The child was crying in the corner next to the bed, but stopped immediately when Sam picked him up.

“It’s alright, we’re leaving right now.”

The road leading to Honeyholt swarmed with the wounded and the dying, people evacuating the city in a hurry, and many women and children with burns all over their bodies.

A few miles outside the city’s borders, they finally found Alleras.

Armen wasn’t with him.

The five of them hitched a ride to Highgarden thanks to a Dornish mummer’s company that had just left the city.
Their wagon wasn’t very spacious, but at least Gilly and the baby got to eat and sleep regularly on the three-day journey across the Reach. Many displaced people were travelling with them, in the hope to escape the Ironborns raids by migrating to the uplands and mountains of Dorne or seeking refuge and protection in the inland cities east of the Mander. Leo had announced that shelter would be found in Highgarden for anyone who’d asked; he didn’t speak much more for the rest of the trip. His father was still alive when they had run from the city walls; rumour was that there were still pockets of resistance fighting from Blackcrown to Three Towers.

Tears had streaked Sam’s soot-soiled cheeks for days, as the carriage put miles and miles between them and the sounds of the siege: for thousands of years, the Citadel and its Library had stood free and far away from the clashes and wars which had ripped the Kingdoms apart, like a beacon of knowledge for humanity, lighting the path toward a better future. And now an inconceivable feeling of loss and loneliness had wrapped around Sam’s heart, as he wept the end of an era, and his dreams with it.

_I still have Gilly and the baby_. The thought comforted him, but also made him sad.

Archmaester Marwyn’s chain weighed almost unbearably about his neck.

The sun was setting on the third day, when they finally reached the tiered walls of the castle. Leo took immediate charge and made sure that his uncle the Lord Seneschal got their guests settled in.

When she was informed her nephew had returned, Lady Olenna Tyrell insisted on talking to them right away.

They were admitted in the solar, a large circular hall with a beautiful patio overlooking the inner gardens.

Sam gingerly followed Leo, feeling daunted: he had faint recollections of the formidable lady from the trip he did with his Lord Father to the Arbor, when he was just a boy of nine. The longest three months of his life. While Lord Randyll was trying to convince Lord Paxter to take him as his ward and betroth his younger daughter, Desmera, to him, Horror and Slobber had concocted new ways to shame and beat him every day, in and out of the training yard.

Lady Olenna had only been the icing on the bloody cake: she was there too, visiting her daughter and her old family seat, and it only took one wordless, judgmental, steely look from her to have him cowering in terror and burst into tears, there and then.

That was the last straw. The next day, his father had pushed him back on the deck of the Arbor Queen, and that was it.

Surrounded by the maester, the young cupbearer, a few knights and a flock of women intent on their needlework, Lady Olenna sat on a padded couch, surveying the gardens with a hawk’s stare.

Facing the doors, on each side of the couch stood two incredibly tall twins with auburn hair.

“Arryk and Erryk Crane,” Leo nudged him, “my aunt’s personal guards and distant cousins, but they’re so used to be called Left and Right that they have probably forgotten their real names.”

All the members of the household were dressed in the black of mourning.

“All the members of the household were dressed in the black of mourning.

“Leo!” Olenna’s voice was hoarse and wheezy, but it still carried through the spacious room, staunch and commanding. “Come closer, boy. Let me have a look at you. Well? All those years locked up into that women-fearing temple of knowledge smelling of old books and man’s piss had you forget your manners? Come and give a kiss to you aunt!”
When Leo didn’t move, she tapped impatiently her skinny fingers on the armrest. Sam understood that Leo’s sudden, silent hesitancy was caused by the stunned realisation of his aunt’s conditions. The wrinkled old lady was ailing: her bones seemed to have shrunk on themselves, and her yellow skin sagged in loose flabby, wizened lumps from under her eyes and chin, as often happened to people, men and women alike, who lost too much weight in too short a time.

The mourning dress did nothing but bring out even more the unhealthy thinness of her face.

Nevertheless, Leo went to give her a small peck, with a tenderness which Sam didn’t deem him quite capable of.

“I see no metal link around your neck, you boorish fool of a nephew!” Lady Olenna went on in a chastising tone, giving him a couple of light slaps on the cheek. “I bet you’ve spent the last five years drinking Arbor Gold and losing money on silly gambles and even sillier tavern wenches.”

Sam grinned despite the situation; her body might be failing, but her mind was still as sharp and cutting as ever. And she was also right.

“What news from the Citadel?”

“The Citadel has fallen, aunt. The Library burned down.”

“The reports are true, then. Was it the Kraken?”

Leo nodded gravely. She let out an aggrieved whimper.

“I’ve told her... I’ve tried to warn Tyrion that Crow’s Eye isn’t the kind of man we would want as an enemy! And now I’m stuck here, waiting to die, weak like a damn cut flower, and not even a thorn left… Your father?”

“Alive, the last I’ve heard of him. He stayed behind with his men. We managed to escape the fire with Archmaester Marwyn’s help and a lot of luck.”

“We?”

Leo turned around and beckoned him with a tilt of his head.

“Aunt, this is Samwell Tarly of Horn Hill.”

Lady Olenna squinted her eyes at him.

“Randyll's eldest... you were what, ten?, the last I saw you? You don't look like your father at all, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Randyll is a brainless brute.”

The corners of Sam’s mouth twitched.

“Samwell is a sworn Brother of the Night's Watch, now, aunt. He was apprentice to Maester Aemon, there.”

“Ah, Aemon Targaryen... I remember him dearly. Beautiful purple eyes. He would’ve made a marvellous king were it not for his too gentle heart. Why aren't you at the Wall, Samwell Tarly?”

“I can't go back,” Sam answered lamely. “I haven't finished forging my chain yet.”

“Training's over. It’s time to fight in the real world, now. Go to Dragonstone.”
“My lady, I—I’m a sworn Brother of the Night’s Watch. The Wall...”

“The Wall will stand for a little longer, even without your help... You must go to Dragonstone. To Daenerys Stormborn. She will need your counsel and expertise more than anyone else. You must make her listen! That crown she seeks is not a garland made of roses; it’s a wreath of thorns that won’t bring her any joy: she will bleed in wearing it, she will have to sacrifice everything she holds dear if she wants to keep it over her head!”

A violent coughing fit shook her so hard that Sam feared her spine might snap in two. She pressed a silk, golden handkerchief to her mouth, pushing away the cup the maester was holding out for her. When the fit subsided, Sam saw that the tissue was clotted with blood.

He exchanged a worried look with his friend.

“My lady, if I may… there are herbs that could alleviate… a nettle decoction, maybe… I’m sure your maester...”

“To what end, boy? Prolong the agony? To die is a nasty business, and if I could do without, I would: don’t listen to what everyone says, that there’s dignity in death. There isn’t any dignity in body fluids coming out from one end or the other, I guarantee you. You stink and you’re cold all the time, and everyone loathes you, because you’re taking too much time to die and you’re becoming a nuisance and that’s the awful truth of it; oh, to be born a man, and die on the battlefield! That’s a cleaner way to go. But I guess...old age is a battle on its own. A losing battle, at that.”

Another coughing fit had her crouch over and grasp the armchair. One of the ladies-in-waiting, a pretty girl with light-brown hair and striking green eyes, dropped her needlework and went to help her.

“Stop fussing all over me and bring me some wine!” she ordered harshly. “My father’s private stock of vintage Arbor Red, not this watered-down rubbish only fit for foppish pansy flowers! Get out, all of you.”

Sam watched as they all scrambled about and vacated the solar.

Lady Olenna laughed softly, looking deeply amused despite her obvious weakness.

“Look at them... summer children, all of them... They’re all waiting with bated breath the moment I’ll kick the bucket... the girls will claw each other’s eyes out to have my pretty pearls and rings, and the boys will butt heads to get a seat on Highgarden’s High Council.”

“Uncle Garth is supposed to rule after you, aunt Olenna,” Leo frowned.

“Garth is an excellent Lord Seneschal, but he doesn’t have the balls, neither the wits to lead the family. House Tyrell needs a strong, firm hand, or it will be swept away at the first gust of the cold winds.”

The old lady gave the nephew a sullen, penetrating look and patted the spot next to her.

“Come here, Leo, sit with me... You have your father’s same smug, weasel face. Moryn’s always been Luthor’s favourite brother, even though he never cared much for family business. At ten-and-six he gallivanted to Oldtown to serve in Lord Leyton’s City Watch and returned to Highgarden only once, to pay his respects to Luthor when the oaf rode off that bloody cliff to his death. Are you like your father, too, Leo Tyrell? Have you come back only to pay me your respects?”
She fixed her unblinking gaze on the nephew, stern and keen as it seemed to search for something in his face, and Sam realised right away where the conversation was heading.

“You’ve always been the smartest among your cousins. Good sense, mixed with a hint of healthy ruthlessness which my dear, poor Loras and Margaery unfortunately lacked. A bit of ruthlessness is precisely what we need, right now. The Citadel has never been your destiny: it’s time for you to take your place here.”

Leo looked appalled. “Aunt, I’m a son of a fourth son!”

“And? Aegon was the fourth son of a fourth son, and he still became King. I don’t see why you shouldn’t become Lord of Highgarden after me.”

“My Lord Uncle will never accept it.”

“Your Lord Uncle will do as I tell him! Daenerys will legitimise and knight both your Flowers cousins: that should be compensation enough. Garth might be full of farts but he is reasonably intelligent: he will understand the reasons behind my choice and will serve you loyally, just as he served Mance and my husband before him. Should Euron, or Cersei, choose to attack us, you’ll have to work together to keep the Reach and its people out of harm’s way. Will you promise me to do that?”

A solemn silence fell in the solar. Sam held his breath while his friend weighed the old lady’s words long and hard. Then, Leo trained his hazel eyes into her blue ones and gave her a curt nod.

Assuaged, Olenna’s face perked up; as the deep grooves on her forehead smoothed out, she rested her head on the cushions at her back and closed her tired eyes.

“A long winter awaits, and I won’t be able to see its end,” she sighed, and, for the first time, Sam heard her voice breaking with melancholy and regret. “All of you will have to make difficult choices, when the time comes. I pray you’ll have the courage to do what’s right, instead of what’s easy.”

From the covered belvedere overlooking the second terrace of the Rose Garden, Sam watched as little Sam cheerfully chased his mother through the patches planted with winter roses, pansies, amaryllis, carnations, hellebores, every now and then stopping to raise his little hands and catch the soft flakes which had started to fall conspicuously in the afternoon.

“There hasn't been snow in Highgarden since... I don't even fucking know since when...” Leo plopped down next to him on the bench with an elegant sweep of his dark green cloak. Sam smirked. It was odd to see him clothed again in Tyrell colours and sigil, after so many months spent wearing plain acolyte robes.

“Do you think it’s snowing in Dorne too?”

Sam let out a sigh: “Probably. Yes.”

“My aunt is right. You must go to Dragonstone. There’s obsidian, there. Lots of it. You’ve always told me that this is the only thing which kills a White Walker.”

Sam nodded, his eyes fixed over the woman and child laughing across the freezing little pond. Little Sam had grown so much, in these last months. He was becoming a bright, curious child, with a penchant for hiding in narrow spaces and playing tricks on his mother. A prankster in the
He will learn to write and read soon, and I won’t be with him, he thought.

“Dragonstone is no place for children, Sam,” Leo read his mind, his hand steady and comforting over his shoulder. “Don’t worry: I shall keep them safe.”

Sam gave him a pained, grateful smile: he knew Leo was right, but his heart still ached with guilt at the thought he’d have to leave them behind.

“Will you manage to be serious long enough to rule over the Reach without starting a new war?”

“As long as the Dornish behave. For now, I have Alleras’ allegiance.”

He chuckled at the ridiculous picture: Leo and Alleras usually bickered over anything, from the great philosophical systems to which wine was better between a Dornish and an Arbor red.

“Once I’ll have full authority over the Reach,” Leo went on more seriously, “I will send as many men as I can to the Wall.”

Sam’s head snapped up to him, in shocked surprise. His friend shook the light-brown curls and grinned bashfully.

“Only because I’ve always japed about it doesn’t mean I wasn’t listening.”

“Highgarden is loyal to the Dragon Queen, now! How will you explain to her you’re sending men to the North, instead of Dragonstone?”

“If Daenerys is as smart as my aunt thinks she is,” Leo answered, “she will realise that the Wall takes precedence over any other petty dispute between Houses to win a stupid throne. I have no doubt you shall convince her of this.”

Cold winds were rising: Sam wrapped his cloak tighter around him. “What will happen to Leo the Lazy, once you’ll become Lord of Highgarden?”

Leo took a deep breath and gazed at the bleak clouds full of snow above their head.

“Everyone must grow up, sooner or later,” he wisely said, and Sam realised with a lump in his throat that this was their own farewell to youth.

In the stillness of the night, snow had turned into a frozen drizzle which kept Sam awake with its incessant ticking against the windowpanes. While Gilly and the baby rested in the big, feathered bed at his back, he perused through the books Archmaester Marwyn had entrusted him. Among bad attempts at poetry and scraps of papers that looked suspiciously like pie recipes and parchments written in an obscure, chaotic blend of dialects which reminded Sam of Ghiscari, Summer and Old Tongue, all at once, he couldn’t find anything of particular significance, at least at first glance.

The horn was another problem altogether: he found it when he had opened the locked casket using another small key which was hidden inside one of Marwyn’s Valyrian steel links. It looked pretty much like an ordinary, inconspicuous, black as jet hunting horn, but, Sam pondered, if it was kept in the vaults under the Hightower, it must certainly have great value. As he carefully studied it, the memory of other horns from legend came to his mind: magic horns to summon krakens from the
depth of the seas, and horns to bind dragons to one’s will, horns-of-plenty which had the power to
grant prosperity, peace and fortune to their owner… even Horn Hill owed its name to the mythical
horn of Herndon and Harlon, twin sons of Garth Greenhand, which had been gifted to them by the
benevolent woods witch they took as their wife.

Sam touched the curved bone’s smooth surface and shivered as another far more dangerous Horn
swam in his mind: and Joramun blew the Horn and giants rose from the earth...

Was it the fabled Horn of Winter, meant to bring the Wall down with a single blast?

He pulled his hand back nervously, as though burned, and closed the lid of the box when he heard
shuffling of feet behind him; Gilly had slipped out of bed and was quietly padding to the table.

“Come to bed,” her lips touched his temple. She was soft and smelled of nutmeg and carnations,
and Sam didn’t want anything else than lay down with her and let her chase away the winter with
the warmth of her body. Instead, he pulled her on the chair next to him. She skimmed through the
papers with a curious frown on her forehead and picked up the parchment with the spiral drawing
the Yitish mage had given him.

“I’ve already seen this.”

His heart skipped a beat. “Where?”

Gilly bit her lip and shrugged.

“I don’t know. Around. Everywhere. In the forest around Craster's keep... sometimes we’d find it
carved into stones and trees, or drawn on the ground with pebbles. If you stare hard enough at the
stars or into the whorl of a flower’s petals, you’ll see it too,” she said matter-of-factly, tracing a
finger across the convolutions with a dreamy smile on her face. “It looks a bit like the seashell you
showed me, that afternoon on the beach, in Oldtown.”

Sam remembered that glorious afternoon very well: it was one of the last warm days they’ve got
and he indulged her wish to see the sea. With their feet in the water, he had laid the seashell to her
ear and, whilst she wondered how was it possible that the sea got trapped into such a tiny bone, he
had whispered into the other ear that he loved her.

“Do you know what it means?”

Gilly shook her head.

“Maybe the writings could tell you.”

“What writings?”

He narrowed his eyes and snatched the worn parchment from her hands. Writings? What kind of
gibberish was she prattling about? There weren’t any writings on it!

“Here!” Gilly pointed to the arms and body of the spiral. “These look like tiny letters to me.”

Sam brought the paper closer to the light of the oil lamp, raising a lens to his right eye to help him
read. Verily, there was more than met the eye into those inkblots bending and curling like a
serpent’s coils.

He could see it now: the drawing itself was made out entirely of words, small enough that the
naked eye could barely catch them.
“By the Gods, you’re right!” Sam breathed out in wonder; he quickly grabbed quill and paper and scribbled down the few words he managed to recognise, hidden inside one of the seven branches into which the spiral split and sprouted out.

“That’s High Valyrian!”

“Can you read it?”

“They came from the lands where the sun sleeps… they came with songs, and winged beasts… They brought summer and taught the words and ways of fire and carved their symbols in the trees… and they were called… Riñarza Kastossi…”

“What does it mean?”

Mouth agape in astonishment, Sam stared, without really seeing, at the flame of the lamp, swaying under invisible gusts of wind: “The Green Children…"

He read the passage twice, then again a third time, for fear he might have misinterpreted the translation. For weeks, he had kept the drawing hidden in his robe’s pockets, not knowing what it really was, wondering if perhaps it wasn’t all a jape at his expense. He had always believed that dragons came from the east, from the Shadow Lands beyond Asshai, but this… this looked like the story of a migration in reverse, from Westeros… Winged beasts… did the Children truly bring dragons with them to Essos? No maester had ever drawn a connection between the Children of the Forest and the existence of dragons, before… If that was at least part truth, if other sources could corroborate it, then all ancient history had to be rewritten…

There was more to translate, but before Sam could set himself to it, a long blast from the sentries’ horns resounded across gardens and halls, loud enough to stir the whole castle from sleep.

AAAAHOOO AAAHOOO AAAHOOOOOO… Almost as a reflex, by now, every time he heard the sound of a horn, Sam quickly leapt to his feet and peeked from the window: despite the light rain, the gardens and the maze below swarmed with the torches’ lights, but he couldn’t tell if they were enemies or Tyrell guards.

Hide your fears, Jon had commanded him, a lifetime ago.

He straightened up, set his shoulders and spoke to Gilly as bravely as he could, although he read in her eyes his same panic and fright.

“Stay here and bar the door behind me.”

He shoved a dagger into her hands, took Heartsbane for himself and bolted down the stairs.

The hallways were bristling with soldiers and knights wearing full armour and gilded ringmail and lithe bowmen calling the muster: “TO THE GATES, TO THE GATES!”

Sam grabbed a young squire by the arm: “What’s going on? Where’s Lady Olenna?”

“I don’t know, m’lord! They said there’s Ironborns in the godswood!”

Without thinking, he ran to the maze bordering the inner curtain wall and bumped into Alleras, who was coming down from the east tower, sword in hand.

“Have you seen Leo?”
Alleras shook his head: “Lord Garth is reportedly dead!”

The noises and cries were louder toward the Keep; at the entrance of Lady Olenna’s private chambers they came to a halt: a crowd had gathered and was blocking the alley. But the doors were thrown wide open and Sam saw. The bodies of the twins, Left and Right, were sprawled in the middle of the passage, dead in a pool of their own blood. Maester Lomys was lying just a few feet ahead, his head almost neatly severed from his neck by what looked like an axe blow.

Kneeling next to the corpse and surrounded by armed men, Leo looked livid as he listened to his commander of the guards.

“They got in from the Mander, my lord… probably sailed upriver and to–”

“I don’t care how they got in, you bloody idiots!” Leo stood up. He was pale as a ghost, except for the splatters of blood on his face and all over his forest-green jerkin.

“Gather the men, block all the escape routes toward the sea, spread the search to the mountains… they can’t have gone far…”

“What happened?” Sam asked when Leo reached them.

He silently handed him his aunt’s bloodstained handkerchief with the Highgarden rose embroidered in gold and green, and uttered with a dour grimace: “They took her.”

Chapter End Notes

So… this chapter and the next were originally chapter 9 and 10, before the story underwent a huge narrative restyling which made me discard some plotlines in favour of others (I’ll tell you more in the next chapter’s end notes).

Olenna was supposed to die of old age (and heartbreak) in this chapter, but I chose to have Euron kidnap her instead, so that she could have an expanded role to play in chapter 16. If you're wondering about the similarities between Olenna's kidnapping and Ellaria's kidnapping in Season 7 ep. 2, those were completely unintentional: I always believed at least one between Olenna or Ellaria would end up kidnapped by Euron at some point... it is an understandable narrative choice and probably not even a truly original one… all the same, I was laughing my ass off when I saw that! Way to steal my thunder, D&D XD!

Anyway, the thing you should concentrate on is NOT Olenna’s kidnapping, but the parchment Sam is translating… I did hint you to that symbol before, and with what it might be connected, or, as dear Jim Moriarty would say, I did tell you... but did you listen? *cough*CH.13*cough*

The mystery is not solved yet, we still have miles to go… so, there’s plenty of time for you to inquire away and throw some of your best, craziest theories at me!

Also, the horn… mmhh, fascinating, but.. which horn is it?

As a book lover, I absolutely loathed the thought of the Library burning up; but it had to be done, to move the narrative forward. With Sam now on his way to Dragonstone, almost all our main characters are in place.

I've got my inspiration from two well-known fires: the Great Fire of Rome as depicted in Henryk Sienkiewicz’s Quo Vadis and the fire of the labyrinthine library in Umberto Eco's The Name of The Rose (which is, in turn, based on the historical burning of the
Library of Alexandria). *The Name of The Rose* is one of my favourite books, and also an excellent movie by French director Jean-Jacques Annaud with Sean Connery, a young Christian Slater and the great F. Murray Abraham, so check it out, if you have the chance!

This was a dense chapter... as usual, let me know what you think of it in the comments! ;)

I’m still reeling and shaking after ep. 4. That was a hell of a cliffhanger, lads, and I’m soo happy that I’m keeping myself well away from spoilers and leaks and hacked episodes; I wouldn’t be enjoying it so much, otherwise! (but the cave scene? With the spiral patterns?? I made a little dance of joy when I saw that! *wink wink*)

As I was saying in the last chapter, originally this was chapter 10. I suppose it can be read as my personal version of “The Queen’s Justice”, but I won’t even try to top Cersei’s brilliance in that ep. She was absolutely great, no discussion (and so was Olenna: this chapter is a tribute to her, too).

Thank you for the kudos/comments/bookmarks! Keep ‘em coming!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CERSEI

The Iron Throne was hurting her again.

She pressed the handkerchief Qyburn had offered her over the cut the jagged edges had inflicted on her palm, and shifted on the cursed seat, trying to find a more comfortable position which wouldn’t cause more damage to her flesh.

The injury was an ugly, irregular gash that would surely leave a scar: Cersei mentally counted how many cuts of the same kind, on her hands, her arms, her legs, her back, she had sustained since her coronation.

In a while, I will have even more than the Scab King.

She knew very well the legends surrounding this chair made of steel and blood: the tragic fate of Maegor the Cruel, who bled to death while sitting on it, was a cautionary tale Septa Sybella would oft tell the children, back at the Rock.

Jaime loved all the gore.

‘The Throne will rebel against anyone who’d sit on it without having a rightful claim. It’s Aegon’s soul, still living inside it, fighting the unworthy, tearing at their flesh like a wild beast with claws and teeth of its own,’ she could still hear Sybella’s voice, low, threatening and full of foreboding premonitions.

But her mind was more sceptical and would never believe such nonsense. She had scoffed at Jaime, rolling her eyes in annoyance when, one afternoon in the Stone Garden, her brother had presented her with a makeshift Iron Throne: shrubs, maidenheads and twigs instead of spiked razor
edges and twisted metal. Then he proceeded to battle their cousin Daven and a bunch of Marbrand, Hoare and Frey lads fostered by her father; a childish, playful version of a mêlée with blunt swords and padded surcoats for her and their younger brother’s amusement. She remembered a three-years-old Tyrion, stupidly clapping his stubby hands, when Jaime tossed in the dirt his last opponent and turned to them, mirth and fire dancing all over his face.

Her breath had hitched in anticipation, then, believing he would reach out to her hand and gallantly help her to ascend to the throne, as his Queen of Love and Beauty. Instead, Jaime had spun Tyrion high, in circles over his head, pretending to make him fly like a dragon and then, among the laughter and the boisterous cheers of the other boys, he had gently lowered him on the throne, crowning him with a wreath of twisted twigs and vines.

Cersei had marched back inside the ringfort, tears of humiliation stinging in her eyes.

‘Why didn’t you crown me?’ she had demanded later, hurt and scorned.

Jaime had shrugged off her remonstrations with an easy grin: ‘Because girls can’t sit on the Iron Throne.’

Seething rage had boiled in her heart for weeks after that, searching for an outlet on which unleash its fury and frustration.

It was the summer of Maggy’s prophecy.

The summer when Melara died.

Cersei gingerly stroked the side of one of the many twisted blades, almost indiscernible from the hundred others; in her first days as Queen, after her marriage to Robert, she would spend hours wondering how many swords it took to make, but she always lost count around two thousand. Hopeless like trying to keep a tally of the stars in the sky.

There isn’t any curse upon it, she repeated again inside her head. Everything else was just ridiculous tales and superstitions, spread to instil a proper fear in people and strengthen and perpetuate the Targaryen legend. Aegon’s chair was a monstrosity that needed to be mastered, controlled like a stubborn horse, but it was just a seat, made of iron and steel.

And, in spite of what her brother and the other men in her life had always believed, she, a woman, was now ruling the Seven Kingdoms from it.

The swollen hand was pulsing, red and inflamed; Qyburn warned her that it might require some stitching to close, but she couldn’t leave the Throne Room, right now, while holding court.

The Great Hall was packed with people for the weekly audience, and, according to her Hand, it was necessary for her to sit through it, however excruciatingly boring that could be.

She suppressed a grimace and tried to concentrate on the matters at hand instead.

Currently, a cheese maker and a farmer were fighting over the ownership of a cow: the first maintained that the animal, his only livelihood after all his other livestock had either died for the cold or been taken away as payment for the new taxes levied by the Crown, had been stolen under false pretences; the latter affirmed that he rightfully owned the beast, as attested by the provided legal documentation.

The bone of contention was actively participating in the heated debate and would show its dissatisfaction by letting out gadfly lows and taking an outstanding shit on the Great Hall’s marble
Her marble floor.

Cersei pursed her lips, craving more than anything else a full cup of Arbor red.

“Your Grace,” the cheese maker was saying, “I only ‘ave this cow! I’m begging you! Me children are already starving as it is! Without it, how am I gonna make me cheese? The babes won’t survive! And with winter coming –

“The law is on my side, my Queen! He sold me this cow and I paid one hundred and fifty silver stags for it! I have this contract that proves it!”

“It don’t prove nothing! Only that you are a lying, thieving crook, who should be hanged for forgery!”

Cersei raised her uninjured hand to her temple: she could feel a headache building behind her eyelids.

“He is the one who’s lying, Your Grace!” the farmer rebutted. “He’s just trying to make you feel sorry for him! Everyone knows you have a merciful heart and that you wouldn’t let –

“That’s enough!”

Her own voice boomed in the room, and they fell silent; to her right, she could feel Tywnlys shifting uncomfortably on his feet.

Unperturbed, the cow ruminated placidly, shat on the floor and stared at her with its stupidly gentle brown eyes, and Cersei believed to read amusement in them.

*Perfect. Even the cow laughs at me, now.*

“Ser Gregor, cut that bloody cow in two.”

Both her petitioners looked aghast.

“What?...”

“Your Grace, no, please!”

“Each one of you will receive half of it. It’s fine meat, and the cold weather will help with its preservation.”

She curtly nodded to the Mountain, who unsheathed his greatsword and executed her orders with his usual silent efficiency, under the horrific stares of the two men and the shocked gasps of the ladies of the court.

She was reminded of the Hand’s Tourney in honour of Eddard Stark, where Clegane killed his own stallion after the beast had unhorsed him, distracted by Ser Loras’ mare in heat.

Or so they had recounted her.

*I’ve excused myself to the King and left for the Red Keep earlier. Robert was stinking of wine and sex, and the mere sight of him was making my stomach churn.*

A smell even more sickening and vile than the one emanating right now from the dead cow’s body,
with blood, entrails and faeces mixing on the floor.

The beast’s previous owner knelt on all fours, his eyes bulging in desperation, unfazed by the filth staining his simple tabard.

“Your Grace, I’m a cheese maker! I know next to nothing about meat preservation!”

He was shaking and on the verge of tears, both from the shock and the prospect of getting back home empty-handed. But Cersei simply didn’t have the patience in her to feel sympathetic about the situation.

“We’re living in difficult times, my friend; everyone must learn new ways to survive. Salted meat is a delicacy, or so I’ve heard. I’m sure that, with a little luck, you and your family will pull through.”

Whom am I trying to fool… They will be dead before the turn of the year.

She focused her attention to the farmer: he was staring at her with thin, pale lips and hardened eyes full of silent defiance. An annoyed wisp of air escaped from her nose. “And you? You’ve got something to say too?”

His eyes skidded to the Mountain, whose greatsword still dripped scarlet, and the muscles of his throat strained as he gulped anxiously.

“No, Your Grace. Thank you, Your Grace,” he managed to croak out, like a little toad about to be eaten by a snake.

The other man was still on his knees, quivering and sobbing.

Stupid halfwit. He should be grateful to be still alive.

“Take your half and begone.”

The farmer grabbed the cheese maker by the tunic’s collar and pulled him up with a little stern shake, as though urging him to regain some control over his shattered emotions; their previous animosity seemed completely forgotten.

A couple of City Guards helped them hoist the cow’s cut halves over a wool blanket and together, slowly, they dragged the heavy quarters of meat out of the Great Hall’s gilded double door. The highborn lords and ladies shied away as they passed through, pressing perfumed, exquisitely embroidered silk handkerchiefs over their noses, while the floor was painted with two straight Lannister red lines.

“Clean up that mess,” she ordered to the servants assembled at the feet of the Throne. Qyburn approached her on the dais.

“I must advise caution, Your Grace. It would be wise not to anger the smallfolk. Your ties with them are strained as it is: the city is on the brink of rebellion, they’re lamenting the tax increase and the shortage of food, and the voices supporting the Targaryen resurgence are becoming stronger by the minute.”

She was painfully aware of that. Pockets of resistance were being reported by Qyburn’s little birds almost daily: hiding in the backrooms of masons and charcoal makers’ shops or in the chaos and disorder of the many taverns and brothels in Flea Bottom, men and women arranged secret meetings and fomented armed revolts against her. Targaryen supporters, followers of the Faith and
Tyrell lovers who still wept for the Highgarden whore’s premature demise.

‘The only true Queen’, ‘The cut Rose of King’s Landing’, Margaery was called.

Cersei couldn’t bear to deal with it.

The past week, she had dispatched the Gold Cloaks to close several shops in Pigrun Alley, where it was said secret societies were rallying fast consensus among the poorest and the helpless: seventeen men, the leader conspirators according to her spies, had been hung up in iron cages outside each of the seven city gates and left at the mercy of starvation, cold and carrion-crows. A gloomy warning to travellers and locals alike.

Empty bellies brought dissent; dissent brought violence, and violence brought more anger and hatred.

It was a vicious circle that Cersei was powerless to break, try as she might.

She had already sent a multitude of ravens to Daven, urging him to deliver food provisions to the capital at once, but she already knew it would be a battle against time; frost had killed more than half of the late-harvest crops in the Crownlands and all that remained wasn’t nearly enough to fill up the barns and granaries of the city. Supplies were dwindling, and if she couldn’t find a way to break the sea blockade the Greyjoys had laid to the waters across Estermont and the Stepstones, she would be forced to shut the gates, locking herself in like she did during Stannis’ siege, to avoid a full-scale exodus of the population. Or worse. If hard-pressed, she herself would be made to flee. Forsake the Throne.

The mere thought was making her stomach roil.

The only small consolation she could find resided in the knowledge that the Targaryen bitch wasn’t faring any better, on that blasted black island of hers.

But she only has half a million to feed, and she’s got the help of the Reach and Dorne; I’ve got the weight of all the Seven Kingdoms on my shoulders, and when famine will strike, they will all blame me.

‘If pushed to the extremes, even the most loyal dog sooner or later will bite the hand that feeds it,’ Qyburn had wisely told her in the first days after her coronation. And almost on cue, Jaime had left her shortly after, stealing away with almost half of their Lannister army. Her army.

Riding north to the Starks, as Daven had written between the lines.

Half of the noble houses at court, especially the ones sworn to the Rock, had kin in that army of deserters and traitors. It would be easy for her to make an example out of them and hang in retaliation the few nobles who shared their blood, or at least strip them of their wealth and power. A Lannister always pays her debts, after all.

Her eyes raked through the rows of courtiers waiting upon her, crowding the hall, their number slimming with each passing day.

She recognised gold spears on a black field, lambs holding golden cups, white shells on the sand, an orange burning tree, green peacocks, purple unicorns, red chevronels and black pepperpots.

Here they were, her valiant bannermen!

Their idle chatter nagged her; she watched as they spoke softly to each other, exchanging quips and
barbed comments with their hands covering their mouths, and those obvious, vitriolic looks of reproach thrown in her direction.

Ragamuffins, sycophants and beggars, all of them. She was surrounded by useless, impoverished houses whose only real concern was securing a position at court for their sons and daughters, but in truth they held no love for her, they never did, not even when she was Robert’s Queen. They had envied her for her wealth and beauty, back then, and had begrudgingly respected her, out of fear for her father, but now they secretly wished to tie a rope around her neck and leave her body dangling in the middle of the Throne Room.

*But I can’t slay them. If I do, there will be no one left supporting me.*

*I need them, to Hells with them all!*

Her hand was sending ripples of blistering pain to her arm and shoulder. The bleeding wouldn’t stop.

It irked her; she was supposed to be perfect and untouchable, whereas now everybody, from the nobility gathered to ask for favours to the smallfolk begging for mercy and justice, could see that she was still a woman, a frail human being made of blood and meat. She could still be hurt. She could still be killed.

*A Queen must not feel pain,* she mused ruefully, as the blood soaked the handkerchief and seeped through the woven cloth.

She was tired and her back must have bruises, too, by now.

“How many still?” she groused to her herald, a young boy from House Marbrand with comely black curls and a shrilly, awful voice whose name she did not recall. The boy unrolled his parchment and counted with a quick glance the names still on the order of business; Cersei’s mouth curved into a half-smile, as she noticed his lips trembling and moving while he computed. *Tommen used to do so, too.*

“How about sixty, Your Grace. There’s the matter of that contended mill on the road between Hayford Castle and Brindlewood… Tobho Mott’s apprentice, here to deliver the new silver plates you’ve ordered for your dress… a merchant from Lys… Wisdom Hallyne from the Guild for the usual weekly update…. a few peasants complaining about new brigand attacks on their farms at the edge of the Kingswood, down to Bronzegate and Haystack Hill… Lord Jonos Bracken, to ask you a reprieve from the payment of the tenth on last year’s profits, a-and...” he paused, stumbling over his words a little; his eyes met hers nervously. She raised an eyebrow and nodded for him to continue.

“…two emissaries of the Iron Bank.”

Her nails dug deep into her palm. *Damn bloodsuckers; they would’ve never dared, had my father still been alive.*

She took a steady breath.

“I will see Hallyne privately in my solar, later this afternoon. Tell Lord Jonos not to dare to show his crooked nose at court again, until Stokeworth and Stone Hedge have paid their dues to the Crown, or I will personally see that a new stay would be arranged for him inside one of the black cells.”

The lad bowed and backed up deferentially.
“Wait!” she held out a hand as an afterthought. “Send in the merchant.”

He nodded and swiftly disappeared behind the doors to call in the next petitioner.

Tension slowly ebbed in her body, as a tentative smile crept across her face: usually, Lyseni traders would try to get in her good graces with beautiful silks and laces, exotic perfumes, and funny, salacious accounts of their travels.

But the man who made his entrance didn’t have with him trunks full of goods nor colourful silks draped around his body. A demure black travelling cloak hid his figure from head to toe, and when he approached the Throne dais, gingerly sidestepping the wide crimson stain on the floor, he didn’t even lower the hood in sign of respect.

She squared her shoulders and gave an apprehensive nod to her left; the Mountain swiftly moved closer. Just in case. She couldn’t take chances, these days.

“You stand before Her Grace, Queen Cersei, first of Her Name, Queen of the Andals and the First Men: state your business,” shrieked the Marbrand boy.

“I’ve come from Lys the Lovely, bearing gifts for our blessed Queen and the greetings of the magisters.”

His voice had a very pleasant drawl she couldn’t quite place.

“You don’t sound Lysene.”

“I’ve been travelling a lot, Your Grace. I’ve traded my accent many moons ago for some invaluable knowledge I think you might find…quite engaging.”

“I’ve never known a Lyseni to sell anything he couldn’t touch, taste or fuck.”

A smirk glinted from under the hood, and then his cape and tunic were puddling on the floor, showing muscular arms under it, and a lean body strapped in boiled leather and light iron armour. In front of her, there wasn’t the pale skin and silver hair of a descendant of Old Valyria, but a tall, bearded man, with a strong, aquiline nose and an angular face burnt by salt and sun. The left eye was covered by a leather patch as black as his hair, but the other eye was an alluring shade of sky-blue and was smiling impudently at her.

“If you want something to touch, taste and fuck,” he said with a leer, hooking his thumb into his belt, from where a crown made of driftwood was dangling, “that can be easily arranged, too.”

Cersei rose, shaking with anger and indignation, just as her new Queensguard moved in unison and circled the Iron Throne, swords at the ready, as though reading her mind.

The man in front of her seemed as relaxed and untroubled like he had just been invited to have a glass of wine alone with her in her solar. Her fists clenched.

They had never met before, but she heard enough from both Robert and Jaime about the Greyjoy’s Rebellion – the storming of Seagard, the siege of Pyke, the burning of her father’s fleet at Lannisport – to recognise him.

Crow’s Eye.

“Order your men to stand back, Cersei. I haven’t come here to brawl.”
Nervous murmurs and mutterings rippled across the Throne Room, as Qyburn talked in hushed tones to Ser Boros. The Queensguard positioned himself in front of the door, blocking the entrance.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Euron Greyjoy said, amusedly looking around himself, as though noticing only now where he stood. “I’m not quite accustomed to the funny formalities of you southern rulers: should I bow?”

“It would be more advisable,” she icily replied, “since I could have you quartered and your head put up on a spike.”

Euron laughed in her face.

“You can do that. And then who would stop my men from burning this sorry city to the ground? I judged you smarter than that.”

“How did you sail past the blockade?”

“My dear niece and nephew are good lads, and I adore them, I truly do; they’re so full of good intentions, but they’re still so very young. They haven’t learned all the tricks of the trade yet.”

He moved closer.

“I saw your so-called fleet, anchored at the harbour. What’s that? Ten galleys? That’s…really sad!”

*I’d have a lot more, if I had more golden dragons.*

“Tread carefully, my lord,” Qyburn chimed in. “You’re speaking to the Queen.”

“I’m not a lord, do pay attention. There’s a crown on my head too: maybe you should be the one kneeling in front of me.”

“I don’t recognise your crown or your salt throne, nor any claim you and your barbaric people are bringing forth. You’re just fishermen, stinking of weeds and rotting fish. And I will crush you, as everyone you rebelled against did before me, for hundreds of years. You’ve never won a single war since Aegon’s Conquest. You’re laughing stock for the whole North. Rebels and scum. Nothing more than that.”

Euron turned his attention to Qyburn and with the same careless, brazen grin he tilted his head in her direction.

“I like this one, she’s cocky.”

She almost, *almost* rolled her eyes. A stiffness was spreading from the muscles at the base of her nape to her shoulders and arms. Her head was pounding, now, and her patience was definitely over.

“Everybody, OUT!”

Her guards hastened to get all the lords and ladies still in the aisle and in the galleries out of the Throne Room. She wouldn’t be ridiculed by this filthy pirate, while the nobility of Westeros bore witness of her annoyance.

*I won’t give you the satisfaction, you vermin*, she thought as she watched them quickly scuttle away behind the great oaken doors.
Only the Queensguard remained to her sides, still and deathly quiet like granite statues.

Once the Room was empty and silent again, she carefully sat back on the throne and addressed Euron, her voice carrying across the columns and the empty space around her.

“Enough with the pleasantries, what do you want?”

Crow’s Eye took a few steps toward the dais, confident and full of brashness.

“Tell me, Your Grace, is ruling of your liking? Do you feel rejuvenated? Is it everything like you expected it to be?”

She fidgeted in the chair, suddenly uncomfortable.

“What is your point, you filthy bastard?

“I’ve got a bit of a conundrum for you: is it you who gives that chair its power, just by sitting on it, or is it the other way around?”

Fine, let’s play.

“You can melt down this throne and I’ll still be Queen. Power doesn’t reside in a chair or a crown. Power is power. It belongs to the ones who know how to seize it, and keep it.”

And it’s repulsed by weakness, or stupidity, she added as a mental note to herself. Her father’s words to Joff were etched in her mind: *Any man who must say ‘I am the king’ is no true king.*

“Aye, ’tis true, but it’s never that easy, isn’t it? You’re the most powerful woman in the world, sitting on the ugliest chair I’ve ever seen, the embodiment of the supreme authority over the Seven Kingdoms and beyond, *yet,* you feel your grasp on power slipping, and you don’t know why.”

“Something tells me you’re going to fill me in,” she sharply retorted with an exasperated sigh.

“For all your life, you’ve watched from the sidelines, biding your time, while other people ruled, commanded armies, made kings rise and fall like pieces on a *cyvasse* board. You thought you’ve learned from their mistakes, but now that you’re up there, you find yourself with your hands tied up.”

Who was this man to come here, in her home, insulting her and giving unsolicited advice about ruling?

Cersei entertained the fleeting thought of calling forth the Mountain, and get it over with. He was too annoying, too self-righteous, and definitely too audacious and insolent for her to let him leave this room all in one piece.

And yet…

“Must be frustrating,” he went on, shielding himself behind that foolish, cheeky smirk of his. “No matter what you decide, it’s probably going to be the wrong choice. When you took the throne, you’ve factored in the dangers, the expenses, even the fear and the sacrifices. What you weren’t prepared for was the simple struggle of getting by, day after day. Surviving the boredom of just listening to the death throes of a realm in agony, without being able to do anything to stop it.”

*He is right, the Seven Hells take him!* Her teeth sank into the smooth flesh of her inner bottom lip, until she could taste blood, warm and sweet.

*He is right, and so was my father: winning and ruling are not the same thing.*
Now she could understand why Robert lost himself in wine and whores and had attended to only three Small Council meetings in seventeen years.

But I’m not Robert, nor Joffrey, no matter how bad they all like to paint me; but I can’t be like Tommen, either. They would tear me apart.

“And you’re planning to save me from all this ‘boredom’ how, exactly?”

He prowled toward her, step by step, climbing the dais until they were so close his feet touched the hem of her dress. Cersei didn’t budge, her glowering eyes never leaving his. She raised a silent hand to stop the Mountain from intervening.

“You have a problem. I have a problem. We should join together our strengths and smash these pestering beetles before they become more than a nuisance.”

It was her turn to snicker.

“You want to strike a bargain with the Iron Throne?”

The gall of him.

“You have the power, but lack the resources. I am all you’ve got!”

“I have allies in the West and in the Crownlands, still!”


Her indignant comeback was somewhat lost when his gloved hands fearlessly grabbed Aegon’s chair on each side of her, heedless of the deathly iron edges, and he leaned over her, smooth and dangerous.

“Your brother, the tall one, has stolen your army and is currently in the North, fighting for the White Wolf. And the Imp, the one you planned to execute after he murdered your firstborn, is Hand to Daenerys Stormborn! Deserted and betrayed by your own blood,” he tutted. “I sympathise. Must be truly lonely, for you.”

Her skin crawled in irritation at his words, but she defiantly held his gaze. His breath smelled of cloves, nutmeg and rum and was like a caress over her face and neck.

“I may not be a merchant from Lys, but I did bring some gifts with me.”

Euron pulled back and stepped down the dais; she realised she had been holding her breath. “My men are waiting for us at the harbour, if you’d like to join me.”

Everything recommended her to exercise caution, as far as Euron Greyjoy was concerned. But Cersei craved something different from cow shit, weekly audiences, cautionary tales about the coming of winter and the prospect of rebellion and famine.

A trip to the wharves on the Blackwater Rush was quickly arranged.

Qyburn and her Queensguards were following them by foot or horse, while they travelled to the Mud Gate in a comfortable, closed litter.

As she swayed, lulled by the rhythmic oscillations of the palanquin, Cersei studied attentively the
man sitting across her, his dark worn-out dirty leather surcoat brushing negligently over silky crimson cushions and luxurious laces and velvets with the crowned Golden Lion embroidered in them.

Crow’s Eye was ridiculously out of place, there, yet he didn’t seem particularly put off by it: there was a dangerous sensuality in his stance, a decadent wildness in his smug eye which reminded her of Oberyn Martell, but in a less polished, refined manner.

Cersei still didn’t know what to think of him; in a way, Euron reminded her of Jaime: they were both men of action, who played above the rules and defied any common definition of honour. They shared the same overt belligerence and contempt for authority – unless they were the ones executing it – and they loved to use sharp-edged quips and sardonic cynicism to unmask the hypocrisies of the world.

Only, Jaime usually used that to cover up his own insecurities, too; she wasn’t so sure Euron had weaknesses of his own.

Usually, she was fairly good at reading others; but Euron disarmed her. There was a hunger in his eye which went beyond his pursuit of power and pleasure. She couldn’t tell what he truly wanted, besides the obvious.

It both unnerved and thrilled her in equal measure.

In Fishmonger’s Square, not far away from the Mud Gate and the docks, Euron jumped off the litter without warning, pulled the curtains open and offered her his hand.

As soon as Cersei stuck her head out, her nostrils were assaulted by the disgusting, stifling waft coming from the Hook and the harbour. She choked back a cough and pulled up the hood of the heavy, grey cloak she wore over her dress, trying to cover her mouth and nose with it, feeling faint all of a sudden.

_Curse this city!_

_I’d gladly raze it to the ground, burn it along with its population; fire would surely cleanse the air from this intolerable, putrid smell of carrion and festering wounds._

The Square was almost desert; only a few women, vigorously scrubbing the cobbled floor, washing away blood and fish guts, while some children with swollen bellies and dirty tattered clothes, not nearly enough to shelter them from the cold, chased a black cat armed with wooden sticks.

None of them paid any attention to her.

She wrapped the plain cloak more tightly around herself and clung to Euron.

He had removed his gloves and his hand was cold and rugged against hers. Covered with cuts and calluses, but of a very different kind from the ones found on the hands of a man accustomed to sword-fighting. Euron’s wore all the signs of hard work on a ship’s deck: palms rusted by water and salt, quenched by the bitter hardness of the soaked stays. Cersei marvelled at their texture and, as he, very deliberately, brushed his thumb against her wrist, she wondered how his touch would feel against the nakedness of her own skin.

She ventured a fleeting glance in his direction: his body exuded a barely-contained energy, a nervous tension crackling on the surface, very much like a cat contracting his muscles and sinews before a jump. Alert and resolute.
He led her across the dock, as though they were leisurely taking a romantic stroll on the beach just before supper; sailors, merchants coming and going through the Mud Gate and wharf workers busy with cargo loading spared them a curious look, but nothing more.

Were they among the filthy scum who spat at her, screaming obscenities, flinging rotten eggs, horse manure, semen and dead cats as her bloody feet limped through mud, slime and piss, toward Aegon’s Hill?

_Probably. The whole city was there, that day._

Since then, she had never set foot outside the Red Keep again. _They have seen my shame, but they have not beaten me. I am still Queen. I am still a lioness. And sooner or later I will pay my debts with them, too._

Then, Euron came to a halt.

Anchored to the pier in front of her, the galley stood proud and frightening with her high single mast, dark red hull and the maiden made of iron at the prow, pointing her silent finger toward the horizon, darkly setting the route. Cersei could still hear in her mind the whispers of the eldest amongst the Lannisport sailors, the survivors of the Greyjoy’s Rebellion: ‘when men see Silence’s sails, they pray’. Her infamous black sails were tightly furled to the yard with their gaskets, now, but that didn’t make her less imposing.

Euron was staring at the prow with his glittering eye, beaming proudly like a father watching his firstborn on the day of his first tourney.

_He doesn’t love anything. But he finds pleasure in this. His ship. The sea._

On the main deck, seamen, mongrels and soldiers alike were working on the stays, skilled and organised, but in absolute silence.

They exchanged orders and instructions only by gesturing at each other.

_So it’s true what they say: he cuts off the tongues of the men who serve him, and yet they stay completely loyal._

It was beautiful and impressive, Cersei had to give him that; any inch the legendary ship that was said to be the bane and terror of any port town from Lordsport to Asshai, but the queen could not let Euron notice her own interest and surprise.

“You’ve got me to adjourn my audience for the day and walk all the way to the harbour, in the mud, only to show me your _boat_ and your crew of retarded mutes?”

As silent as his ship, the pirate just held out a hand and beckoned to the gangplank, that maddening half-smile which seemed to strip her of all her defences dancing on his lips. She went first, her chin up, followed by Qyburn and her guards.

“Welcome to the Silence, Your Grace,” he pleasantly said once they were all on board, then snapped his fingers to his second mate who disappeared at once inside the cargo hold, followed by five oarsmen.

Euron clenched his hands behind his back and started to pace on the deck, confidence and steel tenacity radiating from each step he took. He was in his element, and Cersei had to regretfully admit she felt as awed and self-conscious as she did when she was a little girl and watched her father addressing the Lannister army mounted on his white courser.
“Back in the Throne Room – he finally spoke – you called me a rebel: you were quick to judge me and my Ironborn as little more than bit of shits stuck on your pretty doeskin slippers, but let’s take a look at the facts: I have led five hundred war ships down the Sunset Sea, undisturbed. Had I wished to, I could have put the Westerlands to fire and sword and burnt down Lannisport’s fleet just for old time’s sake. Pay the iron price, as it is my people’s custom. Instead, I’ve stormed Westeros’ wealthiest city and I’ve brought its treasures to King’s Landing, as a peace offering, to you.”

The mate and the sailors were back, and each one of them lowered a pretty heavy wood chest to her feet. Euron pried open the lid of one of them with the tip of his boot: golden and silver coins spilt on the crimson floorboards. Hundreds of them.

“There’s more in the hold,” he whispered in her ear, hot and eager like a lover. “Along with sacks full of wheat and rye, onions, dried figs, oranges, smoked pork, cheese, honey and wine.Courtesy of Lord Hightower.”

So that’s what he’s doing: he’s seducing me.

Her heartbeat spiked up. She had to keep herself from plunging both her hands inside the chests to the elbows and let the cascade of dragons and stags glide through her fingers.

_I could shake the Iron Bank off my back, at least for a while. To breathe a little. And provide for winter._

Euron’s soft, impertinent snickering snapped her back to reality; he made a point to purposefully ignore the flush of red – part excitement, part annoyance – creeping all over her cheeks, and stalked her with deliberate laziness.

“When Daenerys Stormborn will assault the capital with her dragons, what will you do?”

“I’ll fight fire with fire.”

“Wildfire, as its name suggests, is wild,” he spoke to her as though he were explaining something very simple to a dim-witted child. “You can delude yourself into thinking you can control it, but the other way around is more likely. Is it true that you have the city’s underground tunnels packed with it?”

_And the cellars of the Red Keep and Rhaenys’ Hill and gates and squares… miles and miles covered with thousands of jars of green substance._

Defiance hardened her emerald eyes, as she faced him, ruthless and unyielding, her voice cold as ice.

“When I’m forced to leave the city, should King’s Landing fall into Targaryen hands, I’d blow everyone up without a single thought.”

_He is a reaver and a rapist and he cannot be trusted_, Cersei reminded herself, but she had enough of games and lies and secrets, and there was a certain liberating thrill in coming clean.

But Crow’s Eye didn’t look particularly impressed.

“And then you’ll be Queen over a fistful of ashes. Excellent plan! Only, you won’t be victorious, once the smoke clears. They’re already calling you the Mad Queen, Cersei the Filicide, Cersei the Bloody. How do you think they will start calling you after you’ve blown up the entire city and all its inhabitants in your fervour to crush your enemies?”
Cersei glanced away impatiently and stepped across the deck to the ship’s side. Goosebumps erupted over her arms as she leant against the rail. A bank of rumbling low clouds weighed down the ships at anchor, harbinger of a storm fast approaching. She stared at the bay, wistfully wondering about Pentos and Myr, with their songs and laces, the lush fields of the Flatlands and the stony Hills of Norvos, which she had always pictured in her mind like the mountains surrounding the Rock, and the lands farther east that she will never visit. Euron went there. He saw places I never will. Angry waves crashed to starboard, whipping frozen drops of mucky water on her face. The air smelled of snow.

“I don’t care what they all think of me,” she whispered, to herself, more than him. Her eyes stung for the salt.

A lioness doesn’t concern herself with the opinions of the sheep.

“Oh, but you will.”

She felt Euron’s warmth shifting behind her, shielding her from the northern winds. “When an angry mob will tear down your front door, rape you with their spears, rip off your tits and then saw your cunt open until you won’t have any more screams left in your lungs, you will. Don’t fool yourself, Cersei: if you lose King’s Landing, the rest of the Seven Kingdoms will follow. The little support you’re still barely harvesting in the Crownlands and among your father’s old bannermen won’t save you. They will all be racing each other for the pleasure of striking that first blow.”

She turned around, only to find herself trapped between Euron’s body and the galley’s side, and crossed her arms, miffed.

“What do you suggest?”

“Severe the heads of the dragon. Cut off all of Daenerys’ allies. Oldtown has fallen, and so have the other ancient towns scattered across the Honeywine’s mouth. My men hold the Arbor and the Shield Islands, and they’re ready to ravage the Dornish coast, from Starfall to Wyl, at my command. At your command. I’ll personally bring you the head of that serpent’s whore currently hiding in Sunspear, and then I will founder my niece’s fleet at Storm’s End. And after that… Dragonstone.”

He spoke with such fierce intensity and conviction that shivers of arousal ran down her spine. His energy and self-confidence were contagious and heady like a cup of strongwine.

“Not bad for… how did you call me? A rebel!”

“What about Highgarden?”

The Ironborn smiled mysteriously and nodded to his henchmen. A few moments later, from the cargo hold emerged a hunched, barefoot woman in chains, clothed only in a ripped sleeping shift. It took Cersei a few more seconds to recognise her, beyond the tuft of white mucky hair laying dishevelled across the shoulders and the blood smearing her wrinkled face.

Her mind reeling, she shot a stunned look to Euron, unable to speak.

In the end, it was the pirate who broke the silence to ask her cheekily: “Do I have your attention, now?”

The food supplies Euron had brought from the Reach were readily carried to the Red Keep’s
warehouses; by the Queen’s command, a hundred sacks of rye, onions and beans were delivered in Flea Bottom, in the hope to keep the smallfolk quiet for a little longer.

As for her distinguished “guest”, Cersei ordered that she be scrubbed clean, given some refreshment and clothes in accordance with her rank, and be admitted to the solar.

Red wine and lemon cakes were already on display over the lavishly decked table; she heard they were her favourites.

“I regret how roughly you’ve been manhandled, my lady,” she started, her back to the door as she poured wine in both chalices. “The Ironborns are savages. I expect the voyage to King’s Landing has been less than pleasant, for an old woman such as yourself.”

Flanked by Ser Gregor and a couple of her Queensguards, Lady Olenna was ushered into the chamber, and despite the Mountain’s fearsome, towering frame, she stood proudly, as tall as her withering bones allowed, tilting her head at her in curiosity, derision and scorn flickering in her eyes.

Cersei ignored the silent jibe and gestured to the table.

“Please, do sit down. I wouldn’t want for you to overexert yourself, when we still have so many things to talk about.”

A scathing, slightly wheezy laugh fell from her chafed lips.

“You’re a truly marvellous piece of work. You’re enjoying yourself immensely, aren’t you? A lioness playing with her prey before eating it. All right,” she eased with a groan of discomfort into the chair across hers. “I’ll indulge you in this mummer’s farce. A last bout before taking the bow.”

Cersei’s mouth pinched into a tight smile. “In spite of what you think, lady Olenna, my concern is sincere: you’re the last great lady of Westeros, and you’ve been a formidable opponent. I’m glad that I get to pay my last respects to you in person,” she remarked and pushed the glass of wine toward her. Olenna’s eyes darkened, even though her smirk didn’t falter.

“Don’t worry, it’s not poisoned. It’s actually one of yours. Arbor Red. I thought the occasion required… something with an edge.”

To prove her point, she raised her own cup in a silent toast and took a generous sip.

The Queen of Thorns snorted in contempt.

“Look at you. All proud of yourself. Do you think that only because you’re sitting on the Iron Throne you’ve won the game? The game never ends. There’s always another move to make, and another after that, and another. You’ll live the rest of your sorry life fearing that somebody might be coming to take away everything you have worked so hard to conquer.”

A cold whisper swept under her skin, and she was thrown back inside the witch’s tent; an eleven-years-old girl glimpsing at her own future.

Queen you shall be, until there comes another... Maggy’s evil yellow eyes swam before her, the blood still warm over her poisonous lips.

But all the younger and more beautiful women who could pose a threat to her were either gone or too far away and incapacitated to frighten her. Margaery’s beauty couldn’t withstand fire and that northern murdering whore was hopefully freezing to her death, together with her bastard half-
brother and all their retinue of wildlings, grumkins and ice shadows… All gone, except for one.

*No matter. I shall welcome any threat to my rule in the same way.*

“Remember the last time we’ve met?” she countered with a proud tilt of her chin. “You said that I was surrounded by thousands of enemies. Wondered if I was going to kill them all by myself. You were so confident in your opinion that I had lost, that you didn’t stop to think about the lengths I would go to see their utter destruction.”

Olenna nodded and hummed in agreement.

“I underestimated you, that’s true. Tommen did too. Poor boy. There wasn’t a single drop of malice in his heart, and he didn’t know how to recognise it in others. Not even in his own mother.”

“Don’t talk about my son,” she warned with a stiff, dead smile. Her hand was clenching the cup of wine so tight that her knuckles were turning white.

The cantankerous crone ignored her.

“He loved his wife, he sought comfort in the Faith. You’ve wiped out both, with merely a brush of your hand, as though they were an annoying fly floating in your wine, without a single thought about what it would do to him.”

“Tommen’s suicide has been a terrible mistake,” Cersei cut her off sharply.

*I should’ve ordered the Mountain to stay with him, I should have had someone to keep watch, until I could come over.*

“But it happened. There’s no point in looking back, now. I will make sure his sacrifice won’t be for naught for my family’s sake.”

The old hag had the nerve to laugh in her face. “What family? You’re alone, Cersei! Even that foolish brother of yours who used to fuck you has deserted you. He’d rather have the cold north winter as his bedfellow than you.”

On her hand, the slash covered by the dressing itched.

“I already took action to ensure he’d be punished for his… lapse in judgement.”

Ravens carrying her orders had already been sent to those concerned. *If even that won’t be enough, I’ll make certain he gets the message by other means.*

“Jaime will come back to me, when he’ll see the error in his ways.”

But Olenna just shook her head in disbelief, bitter amusement blotching her otherwise bloodless cheeks, and Cersei had to marvel at the power of spite.

*She looks half dead already; I could wait out a few more days, a fortnight at most, and she would probably be gone even without my helping hand. And yet, she’s still as indomitable and relentless as she were at the height of her power.*

Hatred is what had kept her alive so far, Cersei realised. She rested against the chair’s backrest, and studied her with a half grin on her face and a long look filled with both open admiration and loathing. “You think I’m crazy.”

“Crazy? No. Aerys was crazy. Aerion Brightflame was crazy. You… you’re something else
altogether. The realm hasn’t seen the likes of you since the times of Maegor the Cruel. And you’ll be remembered accordingly.” Olenna leaned her elbows on the table, hands clasped in front of her and an eager, pleased expression on her wrinkled face. The bruises left by the ropes she had been bound with showed on her wrists, angry and purple. “Do you know what the best thing about a tyranny is? The desire for freedom stirs within every soul, even the ones who always kept silence, either for fear or habit. You’re incapable of learning from your past mistakes, Cersei, and that will ultimately prove to be your undoing. You’ve handed the city over to that army of religious fanatics and now you’re doing the same with Euron Greyjoy. How stupid can you be, really? There will be no spring for you, my dear. If Euron won’t kill you first, your own people will see to that.”

She grabbed the cup of wine with firm hands and gulped down its content in one take, smacking soundly her lips together with satisfaction, for good measure.

Cersei rose.

“I believe I’ve heard enough.”

“Yes. Let’s get it over and done with. This place stinks, and you know how much I abhor foul smells.”

The pyre had been erected over the ruins of the Sept of Baelor. Over the ashes of Mace, Loras and Margaery. Euron pronounced it to be fittingly poetic; Cersei had no use whatsoever for poetry; she only wanted everyone to watch the old whore burn.

Common fire, she had ordered. So that it would last longer.

Smallfolk had silently gathered over Visenya’s Hill by the hundreds; scattered like ants across the borders of the hole dug by the explosion, they were all anxiously looking at the bottom, where Lady Olenna was being stripped naked and tied to one of the broken marble columns which once supported the crystal dome.

She threw a quick look around the perimeter established by the Gold Cloaks: Euron and the sailors of the Silence stood to one side, apart from the other lords and ladies of the court she had chosen to bear witness.

A Lannister lioness fascinated with fire; how curious, the Ironborn had leered at her with an interested brow raise.

Her voice roared across the pit, now, resounding imposing and powerful against the hollow stone. “Let this be a lesson for everyone who thinks they can threaten my kingdom and my people with impunity. Let the people see how the Crown rewards treason.”

Olenna glared at her with a nasty little smile that unsettled her. Cersei nodded to the guards and moved closer.

“I am sincerely sorry it had to come to that, but you didn’t leave me any other choice,” she addressed the old woman, while the soldiers readied the wood at her feet and brushed black tar over her sagging body.

“I don’t hold it against you, Cersei; you’re just following your nature, after all. The snake that eats a bird’s egg does not shed a tear afterwards.”

Cersei smirked, savouring the moment. Let her have the last word; she’ll be nothing but a charred
stick, soon. The dead can’t hurt you.

“Goodbye, Olenna.”

But she hadn’t taken two steps toward her Queensguards before Olenna called after her again.

“It’s only fair, I suppose. Now we’re even.”

Cersei froze and turned around, a frown of confusion etched on her face.

“What are you raving about, old woman?”

Olenna’s smile stretched over her yellow teeth; a radiant smile, filled with unrestrained delight, as though she had just found the perfect opening for her killing blow.

A cold, sick fear settled in her stomach.

“Watching your bastard choke to death is still one of my fondest memories.”

Cersei went still as a corpse. As blood left completely her face and extremities, she felt her heart explode in her chest. The pyre, Olenna, Euron and her guards, all became an indistinct blurred black smudge at the corner of her eyes.

“Why are you looking so surprised?” the murdering whore snarled. “Did you really think I would’ve let that monstrous abortion lay even a finger over my Margaery’s body?”

Olenna’s face snapped back into focus. “Yes, I did it, with a little help from your brothels keeper. He provided me with the poison. I was assured that it would be extremely painful. And while you were crying your eyes out, I had my cupbearer open a fifty-years-old casket of wine: no Arbor red has ever tasted so good!”

An icy numbness pounded in her head and gripped at her insides.

She murdered my son. She, and Littlefinger. That bastard turncoat who has declared for the Starks.

Her hand had started bleeding again and she realised she had been tightening her fist so hard that the cut had reopened. She wanted to seize the Mountain’s greatsword and cut her down to pieces, she wanted to chop both her hands and make her eat her own cooked flesh. She wanted to skin her alive.

But every painful torture she might concoct would be too fast, too merciful and, in the end, it wouldn’t give her any lasting joy.

Joffrey’s terrified, sunken eyes loomed in her mind, pleading her with the little strength he had left, as the last light wavered and waned and then slipped away.

Her clammy hands snatched the burning torch from one of the soldiers and, with a last ashen look, she set the woman’s body on fire herself.

Chapter End Notes
And farewell to the Queen of Thorns: she’ll be sorely missed. The opening scene is very blatantly Cersei’s own twisted version of the Judgement of Solomon. That was fun to write. Although I love Pilou Asbæk as Euron in the series, for A Wreath of Thorns I’m following more his description in the books, which imo oozes a lot more danger, violence and sex.

Back in January, this chapter’s second half looked a lot different, mostly because, in the first draft, I had Euron bring to King’s Landing more than spoils of war and Olenna Tyrell. Originally, I had intended to introduce in the ‘verse the use of gunpowder and rudimental artillery, as a way to counterbalance dragonfire, but I discarded my plans as soon as I realised that I would have probably veered too far away from the tropes of a fantasy series which didn’t really need modern weaponry. What do you think? Did I make the right call?

Comments are like ice-cream on a sunny summer day!

Enjoy the three final episodes of Season 7: A Wreath of Thorns will be back in September! See ya all then!
Hello, dear readers, and sorry for the very long wait: after the summer holidays, getting back to my usual writing schedule was a little bit harder than anticipated! A heartfelt thank you to the many people who have started reading this story (perhaps partly to cope with the frustration generated by Season 7 LOL), and in particular to the ones who left thoughtful comments, kudos and bookmarks. I love you, and I thank you for your patience in waiting for this last instalment! I hope you’ll enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**DAENERYS**

“... nothing but a savage girl, playing at a game too big for her to understand. Highgarden will fall. Dorne will fall. You shall soon realise what a terrible mistake was to leave the desolate grasslands of the Dothraki Sea, where you belong, and threaten the peace of my kingdom with your flying lizards. Enjoy the gift I’ve sent you: this is the treatment you and your untrustworthy accomplices shall receive from now on. I will burn down your dragons and cut off the head of that murderous dwarf that stands beside you as your Hand. Death hastens to meet you. I won’t rest until every last traitor to my Crown will be rotting away and the Targaryen line will be wiped out once and for all.’ Signed Cersei, First of her name, rightful Queen of the Andals and the First Men, true Protector of the Seven Kingdoms.”

In the silence of Dragonstone’s throne room, Cersei’s words of warning dropped deathly poisonous and heavy as lead from Varys’ honeyed lips and filled the space between her and her allies with uneasiness, discontent and misgiving.

The large, richly decorated trunk currently open at her feet didn’t help to appease her qualms or rage; quite the opposite, in fact.

She had been staring at the gilded rampant lion adorning the lid, its ruby eyes gleaming derisive and baleful, for the last ten minutes, seemingly unable to take her eyes from the box’s content.

The awful, almost unbearable smell of death and corruption, of burned, still putrefying flesh and charred bones lingered in the salty air, its pungent, sickening sweetness sticking to her dress and hands to the point that it was making her feel ill and unclean.

Strange, Daenerys thought, I should be used to the reek of human flesh consumed by fire, by now.

She still remembered the wild look of that goatherd, back in Meereen: a weeping father, petrified with shock and grief as he lay at her feet the bundle with his own little girl’s remains. Zalla, her name was. A tragic reminder that a dragon’s nature could not be tamed or contained, not even by their own mother, try as she might.
But this wasn’t the work of a dragon, bound by instinct and hunger. 

*Cersei is mocking me*, Dany realised. *She’s deliberately using fire to send me a message. My own weapon, the mark of the Targaryen power, turned against me.* Her fists closed in frustration around the obsidian arm-rests of her seat. *I bet she’s enjoying it.*

She could almost picture her, sneering and savouring each word, while her quill flew fast and steady over the bare parchment.

*Wasn’t that what my father did, too? Taking pleasure in burning people alive, just as my Lord Hand and my gentle, strong, white-bearded Lord Commander often warned me?*

Next to her, even the usually unperturbed Missandei shifted in worry, as she tried to hide her own horror and disquiet averting her eyes and covering her mouth and nose with a hand, in the futile attempt to shield herself from the foul smell.

Lady Olenna was the last survivor of a glorious age; in the few weeks she had spent in Dragonstone, her counsels have always been true to her character. Frank, firm, even chastising, on occasion. Unyielding. She had no fear of her, or of her dragons, and always spoke her mind, even when it would’ve been in her best interests to hold her tongue, for a change.

Dany had respected her for it.

‘I’m too old to be scared of anything, my dear’, she had told her one morning, while they leisurely sat in Aegon’s Garden, to cool off their anger and exasperation at each other after a heated exchange about the feasibility of a siege to the capital. Dany had threatened her with dragon fire, when Olenna took the liberty to gainsay her in front of her council. ‘You could very well feed me to your Drogon. It’s within your rights, princess, as it is in mine to tell you when you’re making a mistake, and why, without beating around the bush or pretending to care about the wound those words might inflict on your prideful, young heart. There’s a certain quite liberating recklessness in old age, very similar to the one children experience in their innocence. You’ll find out, if you’re lucky enough to grow into a bitter hag such as myself.’

And with that, the animosity was gone.

Her support might have grown out from vengeance, at first, but Dany knew that, despite their many disagreements, Olenna saw something in her. *She would refuse to call me queen, but she believed I could make a worthy ruler and had wished to see me on the Iron Throne, in the end.*

The old woman had been good to her and deserved a better death than this.

Daenerys considered sending her properly-arranged bones to Highgarden for the last rites, so that she could be justly revered as the great lady she truly was. But she ignored the funeral customs followed by the Westerosi; she tried to remember if there was a prayer to the Seven, to expressly recite, under these circumstances. No solemn word rose in her mind, though.

*She died wrapped up in fire, like a Targaryen,* Dany mused. Or a Dothraki blood-rider, journeying the starry sky toward the Night Lands, her soul finally free to join with her beloved, lost ones.

Somehow, Dany believed that the suggestion would’ve elicited a pleased, ironic smirk from the old matriarch: she would’ve enjoyed the similarities far better than any long-forgotten prayer to the Mother or the Stranger Dany could raise to honour her.

Her eyes were prickling, but there was no use in tears, now: before this war would come to an end, many others would fall. *I have no time to weep for them all,* she thought, willing her heart to
harden despite the harsh memory of the many she had already lost on the way. Viserys, Rhaego, Drogo, Ser Barristan. Her fierce, black bear... What had become of him? Was he waiting for madness and death along the foggy banks of the Smoking Sea?

She pursed her lips, wanting to scream instead. *I can’t look back. If I look back I am lost.*

Flanked by Grey Worm’s Unsullied, her advisors surrounded the Obsidian Throne, waiting for her to speak, to show weakness. Waiting for her to fail.

Theon Greyjoy’s haunted blue eyes skidded to and fro restlessly, as though he expected his uncle, armed to the teeth, to peer from the front door or jump out from behind the banners and tapestries, holding a sword to her throat at any moment. Droplets of rain mixed with sweat ran down his mousy hair. He was literally shaking, but Dany couldn’t say if it was for the drenched surcoat which adhered to his sallow skin and offered close to no protection against the cold weather, or for the anger and horror of looking at a burned body put on display in such a disrespectful way. To her dismay, she realised that the fear she was witnessing over his gaunt face was the same fear Viserys’ eyes held, when Drogo bestowed a golden crown upon his stupid, eager head.

Next to him, the Sand Snakes looked even worse. There was no trembling terror in their eyes and limbs, but they stared at her in mute hostility with red, venomous looks ready to strike anytime now.

Daenerys trained her eyes back on the open trunk. *They blame me for this.*

“Take that away,” she briskly ordered with a flick of her head. Qhono pushed the trunk’s golden lid close with the tip of his boot and beckoned for his men to move the trunk out of her sight.

Clenching her hands in front of herself, Dany stood up and marched back inside the Chamber of the Painted Table. Her Small Council followed, somewhat reluctantly.

On the map, the Lannisters’ sigil marked its dominion over King’s Landing and the Crownlands; a small portion of the Seven Kingdom, growing smaller still, and yet the wooden lion stood proud and fearless, its jaws open in a silent roar and its claws at the ready, as though taunting her and her well-laid plans.

She put both her hands on the table and let out a tired sigh. Her purple eyes found Varys.

“How bad is it?”

The sleeve of the eunuch’s robe swept elegantly over towns, mountains and rivers. “The whole south-west, from Old Oak to the Arbor, has plunged into chaos and anarchy, after Euron’s attacks. Recent reports indicate that the new young Lord of Highgarden is massing a host on the Rose Road, toward Bitterbridge.”

“A mobilisation?” her voice rose heatedly. “I never gave them leave for that!”

She turned to Grey Worm, who was standing still as stone to her right: “Why wasn’t I informed?”

“I’ve got word of it just now, myself, Your Grace,” Varys interceded, his voice soft and soothing. “Leo Tyrell is moving fast, acting on his own, and he has the support of the Reach’s oldest and staunchest bannermen. Houses Tarly, Redwyne, Merryweather, Fossoway, among others, have already answered the call,” he stressed each name by adding a striding huntsman, a grape cluster, a horn-of-plenty and an apple to the area on the map where the Dornish Marches, the Reach and the Stormlands met.
“How many?”

“A little over ten thousand. The number will increase substantially, once Moryn Tyrell will press further with Oldtown’s City Watch – or what remains of it – to join with his son’s army,” the eunuch said, pushing a white tower along the banks of the Mander.

Daenerys attentively listened to the words the Spider was telling her, as well as the ones he wasn’t saying out loud.

This was to be expected.

Lady Olenna was very popular and well-loved on every corner of the Reach, by smallfolk and nobility alike, and had powerful family ties with the wealthiest houses of the realm. The insult was simply too great for Highgarden to pass over in silence, and she had been a fool not to have a contingency plan to execute, if such a case arose.

Her alliance was already faltering, and was in danger of disintegrating even before making a real difference in the fight. And now Leo Tyrell had opened another front in the war she would’ve gladly done without.

How can I make everyone follow my lead, if they would gladly forsake me and go their separate ways at the first chance? Should I start burning my own allies, too, just to make a point?

Her mouth went dry. She grasped one of the wooden black-and-red dragons demarcating the lands around Crackclaw Point and The Gullet and ran her fingers on its outstretched wings. Tension coiled in icy knots inside her stomach.

“What news about Lord Leyton?”

In the past few days, she had heard so many reports from so many different sources concerning House Hightower that her head was spinning: some said Lord Leyton died during the Sack of Oldtown, gone out in a blaze of glory fiercely fighting alone against forty, fifty opponents, wielding Vigilance, his famed Valyrian sword, to cut down as many enemies as he could; some others swore far and wide that, after a daring escape through the flames, he had disappeared into the myriad of underground tunnels connecting the city to Honeyholt, and, from there, to the mountains’ passes; some sailors from Pentos claimed that he’d bent the knee to Euron, when the Citadel burned down and the Hightower collapsed under the Kraken’s blows, its light, which stood for hundreds of years as a wondrous beacon to guide sails safely into the harbour, extinguished forever.

“He’s still alive,” Varys confirmed, “and regrouping in the Red Mountains, my little birds have informed me. Ellaria Sand granted them shelter within the Dornish borders.”

Daenerys gave a curt nod and pushed Oldtown’s white tower next to the Tyrells’ golden rose: “The separate parties will reunite with the bulk of the army to bring a concerted attack to Cersei’s doorsteps, with or without my aid, or permission.”

“I’m no strategist, Your Grace, but that would be my guess, too.”

And they would fail. Cersei was shrewder than they all thought; they wouldn’t surprise her. This will likely turn out into a useless bloodbath.

None of this would have ever happened, if Euron Greyjoy hadn’t kidnapped Olenna.

Her jaw set in aggravation as she locked eyes with Theon Greyjoy. He seemed to shrink under her gaze, shrivelling and twitching like a landed fish slowly drowning in the air.
The armour clung to his slouching shoulders as though he had the weight of the whole world upon him. *He looks weak and broken, a snivelling babe who had just woken up from a night terror.*

Tyrion had told her what he knew about Theon’s role in the taking of Winterfell during the War of the Five Kings, and his following imprisonment and torture by the hands of the Bolton Bastard. But it was Yara who had explained the full extent of it, filling her in on the most sordid details with her usual bluntness and practicality. His own men called him Theon Turncloak and Reek and the Cockless Prince to his face while they sneered at him, but Yara was convinced her little brother was still there, somewhere. Dany didn’t know what to make of it. A part of her pitied him. Both of them. Another part of her, a greater part of her, presently itched to hit him, not to hurt him, but to rouse him, wake him up.

“Care to explain to me how did Euron Greyjoy’s fleet set sail on the Narrow Sea without you noticing and land safely at the mouth of the Backwater Rush?”

Theon jerked his head and blinked in fear as though she had threatened to whip him.

“Not the whole fleet, Your Grace; just one fast ship. That’s all it took.”

His voice was barely there, a little more than a whisper, and his eyes never rose to meet hers; it was clear that the situation was putting him ill at ease, but he carried on his explanation, somewhat obstinately.

“Euron knows every single sandbank, cave and inlet of the Stepstones; he has spent his youth rubbing shoulders with Tyroshi and Lyseni pirates. He could have led the Silence through the reefs even blindfolded. The blockade was most certainly broken here,” he pointed at a small and narrow stretch of water between Bloodstone and Torturer’s Deep, “where the mists are thicker at night and the shoals would sink heavier galleys. He followed a detour, toward Essos’ coastlines, to elude our surveillance, and then, with the coast clear, he steered to King’s Landing, by way of Pentos.”

“Lady Yara is supposed to be in charge of the blockade on the Stepstones. I was under the impression that your sister knew those pirates’ dens fairly well herself. She told me she would strike a bargain with them!”

“She did!” he retorted, his eyes, only moments ago clouded and dazed, flashing surprisingly bright and sharp. “But pirate’s words aren’t exactly trustworthy, when it comes to gold and best offers. On your orders, Yara has taken Storm’s End single-handedly, and now she’s there, defending the Stormlands for you, alone, with our fleet moored in Shipbreaker Bay, despite the high chance of a surprise attack.”

He rebutted the charges against Yara’s incompetency with such invigorated fierceness that Dany was left bewildered. Standing up for his sister seemed to have stirred the iron buried deep within him. A glimpse of the old Theon, perhaps.

*He loves his sister and is completely devoted to her,* she realised with a twinge of jealousy.

“We have sentinel ships patrolling the islands, new galleys are being built with timber from the Rainwood, but it’s not remotely enough! Euron has at least twice as many. For how long do you think we could stave off his forces, without any help? We need the dragons!”

“Lord Greyjoy is right,” Obara whispered through gritted teeth before Dany could answer. Her form was half-concealed by the late-afternoon shadows stretching through the high windows, but when she stepped up into the torches’ light, Daenerys saw that her face was screwed up into a nasty scowl, her close-set eyes dark and rabid.
“We’re left fending for ourselves while you play at war hiding on this fucking piece of black rock, waiting for us to be slaughtered one by one. You’ve brought eight thousand Unsullied and two hundred thousand Dothrakis from Essos. Your army alone counts more than twice our forces combined, yet, so far, only Westerosi soldiers have bled for you and your cause! Why didn’t you send the Unsullied to hold the Reach, when you’ve got word that Euron was on the move? Why do you keep our ships stuck in your port, when we should sail for Sunspear now and lead an attack from there?”

“So you’ve suddenly become an expert in military strategy?” Daenerys shot back, her voice thick with sarcasm. The naked tip of Obara’s spear gleamed sinisterly behind her back when she spun around, stomping her feet to get in her face, as close as Grey Worm allowed.

“At least I’d do something, instead of warming my butt while I cosily sit on the wrong throne, twiddling my thumbs.”

Missandei sucked in a shocked gasp next to her.

White-hot rage blinded her for a moment, as her fingers curled tightly around the wooden dragon she had picked from the table, wanting more than anything to ram the bitch’s pudgy nose back inside her skull with it. Childish, perhaps, but surely rewarding. And it would definitely be an improvement on Obara’s pig face.

Tyene stepped between them, a hand on Obara’s breastplate: “Sister, please –” she warned.

“No!” Obara snapped, wrenching her arm away. “I’ve been quiet for far too long! It’s in our right to defend ourselves. Dorne is growing sick and tired of your indolence and won’t bear it any longer. Are you waiting to have Ellaria’s bones in a box, too?”

“Perhaps, to have Ellaria’s bones in a box is exactly what she and her Lannister Hand are planning from the start,” Nymeria intervened in a soft, lethal voice, as though Dany weren’t even there. “Then again, perhaps she’s simply not so fit to rule as she deems herself to be.”

Her nails dug into her palms, as a destructive, seething fury screeched inside her brain like a wounded dragon and obliterated any other sound or thought, except for a voice screaming above everything else…

You don’t want to wake the dragon, do you?

“Perhaps you should bring your complaints to one of my children,” Dany uttered scornfully, and knew it was the wrong thing to say as soon as the words left her lips.

Nymeria let out a bout of strained laughter, her hand gripping the whip’s handle on her right side.

“Yes. That’s your favourite opening line, isn’t it? Casually mentioning your winged wonders to watch everyone shrivel in fear. So far, your dragons have been completely useless! We could’ve ended this war months ago, in a single night. You’ve promised Ellaria fire and blood. You’ve promised justice for our father’s death, for Elia and the children! Your own nephew and niece! Is this what your word is worth for?”

Wrath and indignation flared upon her face. “You’re not seeking justice, Nymeria, you want vengeance. You want a hecatomb. If I ride my dragons to the Red Keep, innocent people would die in the thousands.”

“Innocent people are dying in the thousands as we speak!” Obara bit back. “Open your eyes! Look what happened to Oldtown. The city stormed and sacked, the Citadel razed to the ground. Is this
what we must expect too, in Dorne?"

She didn’t wait for an answer and whirled around to face Theon. “We should just leave. All of us. Join up with Highgarden’s army. At least Leo Tyrell seems to know what to do.”

That’s enough.

“Tread very carefully, Obara,” her voice rose over the clatter of the wind and the restless groans of the waves crashing against the cliffs and boomed across the chamber, as clear as lightning. “I can be patient and merciful, and I’ve always encouraged you to speak your mind and tell me the truth, as uncomfortable as it may be. But don’t presume you or your sisters can take liberties when you address to me. I shall not tolerate insubordination of any kind, nor alliances behind my back. And this goes for everyone. No one here is a prisoner, but as long as you’re a guest in my house, you will remember your place and obey your orders. You wish to leave? That’s the door. Just be warned: I will conquer the Iron Throne, with or without you, and once I do, it would be in your best interests to be on my good side.”

Obara stubbornly ground her teeth, while her sister’s hand hovered over the arakh she had made a habit of wearing on the other side of her whip, her eyes full of silent provocation.

You don’t want to wake the dragon, do you?, the voice whispered cruelly; Daenerys wrenched her eyes shut and tried to quell the scorching fire burning just under her skin, before the heated quarrel might turn into something else entirely.

“The council is adjourned,” she breathed out.

Obara let out an empty, incredulous chuckle, then, with a lingering last look and a shake of her head, she turned upon her heels and marched outside, followed by her sisters.

“Varys, stay,” Dany bade him. When even Missandei and Grey Worm had left the room, the Spider closed the double doors behind them.

She paced nervously in front of the windows. Outside, the last light of day was painting the shore and the foreboding, rumbling mountain in dull shades of grey. A lone white gull cried loudly above the palace’s turrets, swirling against the windowpanes, perhaps trying to find cover from the raging, freezing gale.

The sea was troubled.

“Dorne threatens to become an even bigger problem than I previously envisioned, if I don’t take action,” Dany muttered, looking out in the distance.

She wasn’t exactly fibbing when she told Obara they weren’t her prisoners, but the Sand Snakes were the only leverage she had against Ellaria and whatever foolish plan she might be plotting from the dry expanse of the lands around the Water Gardens. As long as they were fostered in Dragonstone, Ellaria wouldn’t dare to try anything.

“I can forgive their haughtiness, for the time being, but I can’t ignore that they have conspired against their lawful Prince and have murdered him, when he refused to satisfy their thirst for blood. Am I to expect the same?”

“The Sand Snakes certainly have a hot temper, Your Grace, but they won’t forsake the alliance,” Varys assured her. “Ellaria knows it wouldn’t benefit them, in the long term.”

Dany shook her head, not fully convinced. In moments like this, she wondered if Tyrion might
have been right in asking for Ellaria’s head just after the landing, on account of his niece’s assassination.

“You’ve vouched for Ellaria, when you’ve brokered this alliance, Varys. You will answer for it, if they become a serious threat.”

The eunuch bowed graciously.

“As is my queen’s wish. A word of advice, though.” She tilted her head to the side, listening. “Don’t play Cersei’s game. Don’t let her put fear and suspicion in your mind. She knows that divided you are vulnerable, and she will try to create a rift between you and your councillors, to weaken and isolate you. Dorne is the perfect scapegoat for this scheme. They don’t play well with others, they never have. You know very well there have always been hard feelings, between your families, long before your brother Rhaegar started a war when he discarded Elia Martell for the Stark girl.”

Would that she could forget.

The stories about the Dornish Wars Ser Willem used to read to her were among her favourites, as a child, especially the deeds of the Young Dragon: she could spend hours imagining him, handsome and daring in his gold and black armour, while he led his armies through the goat passes of the Boneway, taking the Dornish completely by surprise.

He was four-and-ten, when he conquered Dorne. A victory that lasted a fortnight and tragically ended in blood, with Daeron murdered by deception under a peace banner.

What this the Dornish’s true nature? Deceit and betrayal?

What kind of help might she get from a woman devious enough to murder an innocent girl, only because she shared her blood with the wrong people? How was Ellaria any different from Cersei? Or Robert the Usurper, who had wanted her dead ever since she was still in the crib?

The Snakes’ words had maybe stung deeper than she thought at first. There was no hiding her despondency. She sank down on the high chair positioned right were Dragonstone should be, feeling utterly lost and missing Tyrion shamelessly.

He would know what to do.

A twirling of wool and silks and Varys was sitting at her side, despite the fact that she didn’t give him leave. "War makes strange bedfellows, indeed,” he said and his eyes were warm and sympathetic. “Centuries of mistrust and grudges for past insults can’t be simply wiped away only in a few moon’s turns, with a few promises and pacifying words. Euron is spreading panic like wildfire. You must show yourself as a unified front. Send Ellaria some help, prove her you’re willing to defend Sunspear against whoever will threaten its integrity. Live up to your name: after all, was is not a Daenerys to finally bring peace to Dorne and the Seven Kingdoms?”

She couldn’t help the small, grateful smile tugging at her lips, then. The Spider shared with Tyrion the almost eerie gift of saying the right words at precisely the right time. This is how they both stayed alive for so long, after all, she considered, and even if she knew very well the kind of role he played in the Usurper’s small council, Daenerys admired his resilience and had come to rely upon him, as imprudent as it might be, just about as much as she trusted her Hand.

“Anything yet from Winterfell?”

Varys shook his bald head.

A harrowing moan of complaint escaped her lips. “It’s been too long. He has Viserion with him.”
“It might mean nothing, Your Grace. In the present weather conditions, correspondence with the North is becoming increasingly difficult.”

She pressed her lips together and circled around the Painted Table, feeling powerless against her deepest fears. Her mind conjured up in vivid details a long string of horrific incidents: Viserion shot down and killed, his rider’s head put over Winterfell’s battlements, man and dragon slowly dying of cold and starvation, Tyrion captured and Viserion on the run, lost in a harsh, hostile land, calling for her help…

No… I would know if something happened. A mother would feel it, surely… and yet…

Cersei’s letter was still spread open over the table; rage at her own weakness mounted in her blood, as she read the closing lines again.

“She sounds awfully overconfident.”

“With Euron supporting her, she might become bolder and even more unpredictable, but Lannisters do tend to overestimate themselves and their strengths.”

“Does she?” she asked Varys with a quiver; her doubts, for the first time laid bare, seemed to cripple even her own voice. “You served under her and her bastard son. You know her better than anyone here. Tell me: should I just unleash Drogon over King’s Landing and be done with it?”

The Spider stared at her with piercing eyes for a long minute, in deep contemplation, as though assessing her, his face as inscrutable as a closed book. Then he took the wooden dragon from her hand and knocked down with it the rampant lion which marked the capital. “The thought is tempting. But sometimes, Your Grace, cunning and wisdom are better than brute strength. Ride the dragons into battle, burn down the city, and you’ll become exactly what the people fear the most.”

_A foreign invader. A mad woman. My father’s daughter._

_Tyrion had warned me._

Dany leant against the table.

“What do you suggest I do, then?”

Varys picked up the dragon again and flew him past King’s Landing and the Kingswood, just to drop it off near the Rose sigil of the Tyrells. “Highgarden must be your foremost priority, right now. Lady Olenna was the central point of our alliance: if we lose the Reach, come winter we’ll be short of food supplies. And not even the Unsullied can march on an empty stomach.”

She nodded in agreement, without raising her eyes from the armies deployed over the table.

“Thank you, Varys.”

Sensing the dismissal, the eunuch silently bowed and turned to leave.

Back in her chambers, Dany quickly changed her too light coat for a dark red wool one and put on her high black boots of hard leather and matching gloves, while in her mind clashed contrasting thoughts: the Highgarden army at Bitterbridge… the oppressed population in King’s Landing, tricked and trapped into the lies and horrors of Cersei’s tyranny… How to persuade Leo Tyrell to see reason?

Dany knew what Tyrion would say: the best way to seal an alliance is with marriage. But she
didn’t have all of her options on the table, yet: if Tyrion could make Lord Snow pledge the North to House Targaryen, this would change the game back in her favour, without forcing her to sell herself like a broodmare.

She realised that Cersei was trying to force her hand into acting foolishly, but she wondered what would befall her when a real show of strength would finally become inevitable.

“I’m going for a walk down the beach. I need some time to think,” she brusquely announced to Missandei. The Naathi scribe looked out the windows, her forehead creased in worry.

“A storm is coming. Do you want me to send for one of the blood-riders, or Grey Worm?”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” she shrugged, fastening a fur-trimmed cloak around her shoulders. “You know how Grey Worm gets: he’d frown his disapproval at my poor life choices, fearing I might simply drown, washed away by the strong tide, or lose my footing over the slippery, sharp rocks and break my skull.”

They both shared a fond smile at the expenses of the Astapori captain’s brooding nature.

“Don’t tell him,” she kissed her lightly on the cheek. “I’ll be careful.”

Instead of taking the main west gate, her feet drove her toward the steep hidden passage which led to the eastern side of the castle, where the Dragonmont sloped vertiginously and dived into the stormy sea; for thousands of years, wind and water had shaped from the black rock hundreds of wonderful natural clefts and caves: immense temples of stone arching as high as the sky and running for miles deep into the belly of the mountain. Some of them were so large that even her dragons would easily fit.

_Dragons did fit,_ she amended, raising her torch to light up the tunnel ahead._A hundred years before Aegon’s Conquest, when the Targaryens were still Lords and Ladies of Dragonstone, this was home to our dragons._

Her steps echoed on the timeless stone of the Dragon’s Nest, where it was said that Balerion the Black Dread rested his wings and Vhagar and Meraxes laid their eggs, starting a dynasty that lasted for centuries.

Of the whole island, this was her favourite spot. Where she was closer to her blood, to her mother. Closer to home, perhaps.

Here in this cave, Dany was part of something greater than herself; she felt she had a place in this uninterrupted line that connected her to each and every Targaryen woman whose footsteps she was retracing now. Sometimes their blurred faces would suddenly appear in her dreams, too… clear, blue eyes, or purple ones and hair of silver just like her own, styled in long braids or high, severe buns, framing defiant smiles and stern frowns… queens and princesses and warriors… the blood of the dragon, singing through her… _I am the only one. I am the last._ ‘I am the first’, Daenys the Dreamer would answer her sometimes, in the empty silence of her lonely nights, and Daenerys felt as though she were both.

Around her, the huge obsidian pillars gleamed under the torch’s trembling light, their shadows dancing on the cave’s walls like fantastic beasts. The fishermen in the village below the mountain believed that the astonishing black-as-night sculptures of solidified lava were, in fact, the frozen flames of the dragons which in ancient times ruled Westeros, now trapped forever inside the rock.

Tyrion had laughed the stories off and had launched himself into a boring explanation about how
the basalt columns might have been produced by the sudden cooling of the incandescent molten rocks erupted from the Dragonmont. No dragons involved. But if she laid her hand over the jagged surface, Dany could almost swear to feel the hot stream of fire, fighting to break free of its stony prison.

Her boots sank for a few inches into the cold, muddy water; with the tide, the sea almost completely filled the Dragon’s Nest, making it easy for the imprudent and callow wanderer to get stuck between the rocks with no chance of escaping.

The torch in her hand dwindled under the gale, its light barely grazing the blanket of lava crunching under her feet. She groped her way until she found the hidden walkway, just above water level, which led to the cave’s entrance and the shore.

The same walkway old Ser Willem had used when, under the cover of night, he smuggled her and her brother out of Dragonstone, while the storm muffled her cries.

Even now, waves and wind roared and howled, battling for dominance, louder and louder as she stepped near the beach, and the whole mountain seemed to rumble in a ghostly cacophony of high-pitched screams and moans; in front of her, the cave widened into a large arched opening. Dany smiled: even the profile of the dark entrance looked like the giant head of a dragon. The sea was close, and she could already feel the briny taste of it upon her eyelids and lips.

Outside, the barren coastline was as unwelcoming as the first time she saw it, when her fleet had landed on this very spot, four moons ago, but the sight of the black wall of waves rising and falling, pounding and smashing against the razor-edged cliffs always left her breathless with awe.

The storm was calling out to her.

She ignored the strong wind dousing the torch and pushing off her hood; she ignored the chills running all over her arms and legs, despite the layers of leather and wool, and walked to the swelling sea, mesmerised.

Beyond the grey, angry waves, beyond the impetuous, cresting foam crackling upon the shoreline, there was Essos, and the green grass of the Dothraki Sea, and Meereen… were the cold winds of winter blowing over the Great Pyramid, too? She had received only one letter from Daario, since the landing; a sweet letter, in which, after some quick, dutiful assurances about the well-being and peaceful conditions of the cities across Dragon’s Bay, he had talked at length about her body, and the many things he would do to it, once they would be reunited again.

At her behest, Tyrion had answered with a short, perfunctory message, carrying her latest instructions and decrees for Meereen’s government and trade activities, and that was it.

She did not miss him. She didn’t even dream of him.

The thought made her sad, sometimes.

But now, her dreams were filled with snow, and blue rose petals over Dragonstone’s dark sand, under her bare, bleeding feet, and the singing of the storm, and a house with a red door. Always the house with the red door. Even though, in her mind, the memories were fading and the house in Braavos merged with other places she had come to call home: her sun-and-stars’ hot, red tent, where she was loved and protected and her womb had quickened with fire and power, and the dappled shade of the cherry orchard in the opulent, cheese-smelling manse in Pentos, where she would spend the best part of her afternoons hiding from the handmaidens’ gossip and her brother’s viciousness, weaving crowns made of pale jasmines and orchids as violet as her eyes, dreaming of
Westeros, fearing Westeros and the vast world beyond Magister Illyrio’s high walls.

Was she truly happy, there? Or in the small bedchamber with the lemon tree and the animal faces carved on the windows? I was loved, I remember. As young as I was, I thought that house was the whole world, but now that I’ve seen more of it for real, that memory seems faraway and empty like a dead shell.

Sorrow and exhaustion clenched her heart, and she was grateful for the sudden noise of footsteps behind her.

She sought loneliness, Dany realised, but she did not want to be alone.

“Did I ever tell you the story of my daring escape?” she asked without turning.

Missandei’s mellow voice rose above the storm.

“No, Your Grace.”

“I was still a wailing babe, of course, too young to remember, but Viserys didn’t let a day pass by without adding more and more monstrous and sickening details, so that I would never forget the unrelenting cruelty of our foes. The Usurper’s dogs. Bloodthirsty spies and soldiers sent even across the Narrow Sea to our pursue.”

Viserys always got so angry, when he spoke about it.

“For almost all my life, I lived in fear, feeling helpless and confused about my place in the world. Until my children came along.”

Thunders rolled in the distance. As the wind gained strength, Missandei’s glorious dark curls flew wildly into her eyes.

“Now I feel just as powerless. My hands are tied, Missandei. If I do nothing, if I stand back and let Cersei wallow in her madness, I’ll be viewed as weak, or even worse, cold and unconcerned for my own allies’ fate. I will lose both the Reach and Dorne. But if I act, if I ride Drogon over King’s Landing as everyone begs me to, I’ll become my father.”

The Naathi girl stared at her for a long time, acknowledging her struggle with thoughtful golden eyes full of compassion and a far greater wisdom than her young years might suggest. Then she gently tucked back a strand of her silvery hair and pulled up Dany’s hood, shielding her from the sea’s sprays. “Many different voices are whispering to your ear, my Queen,” she said, pinning the furs in place with a silver brooch. “All of them with valid reasons. They fight and bicker for the honour of having your undivided attention. But a ship with many masters fighting for her command, sooner or later will smash up against the rocks and sink. Remember what you did in Meereen.”

“I had the people’s support, in Meereen.”

“You had only that. And in the end, it wasn’t enough. Here, you have the support from some Houses, but the people don’t know you. I’ve spoken with the shepherds, the sailors coming from the Bay of Crabs, the fishermen, the millers and the farmers from down the village. Some of them still remember your father’s reign, and fear you might be the same. Some others… I’ve heard them comparing you to your brother Rhaegar, but what would they know? They have barely even seen you!”

It was like being struck by lightning.
Missandei was right, and so was Jorah. She remembered his words, when he spoke about the people’s true wishes, so many moons ago… They pray for rain, healthy children, and a summer that never ends… It is no matter to them if the high lords play their game of thrones, so long as they are left in peace… Words she hadn’t fully understood, until this very moment.

She had been so obsessed with battle plans and her power struggle against Cersei that she hadn’t given a single thought about what mattered the most.

*I’m going to break the wheel,* she had promised Tyrion, *but I would need much more than Dorne and the Reach, for that.*

A plan was slowly forming in her mind.

A blinding white lightning ripped the darkness, and was almost instantly followed by a rumbling that shook the ground. The storm was upon them, but she did not fear it. *I am the storm.*

“Fetch Grey Worm and Varys, and meet me on the Stone Drum presently.”

“You want to do what?” The shock in Varys’ voice couldn’t be completely smothered out, not even by the raging storm and the cold rain slamming against the windows in buckets and torrents.

“I want to meet them all,” Dany repeated, her own voice even. “Leo Tyrell, Leyton Hightower. All the high Lords from the Reach, the Riverlands and the Crownlands who haven’t declared for Cersei, yet.”

The Spider and Grey Worm exchanged wide-eyed looks.

“I don’t like the Sand Snakes,” she said with a twinge of impatience, “but they’re right about one thing: I can’t stay here indefinitely, out of sight and apart from the military operations on the continent, waiting for the situation to evolve in my favour. I won’t keep their loyalty for long, this way. They need to see me.”

“But why you go to them, ſũhus dārŷś? It is dangerous. Summon them here! Let they come to you.”

“I can’t, Torgo Nudho. I must make them understand I’m willing to take risks on their behalf. My own allies don’t know me; how can I ask them to fight for me, if they don’t even know what they’re fighting for?”

*They think I’m a child playing at war, that this is only a big game.* Whether it be she or Cersei, sitting on that chair, why would they care? One ruler or another, it wouldn’t make such a difference for them, in the end.

But Dany knew the stakes were higher than that.

*Break the wheel.*

Varys cast her a sceptical eye. “What makes you believe they’ll agree to a parley?”

“Oh, they will. Lord Tyrell might be young, yet from what you tell me he’s anything but stupid.
He’ll want to gauge my strength and hear what I have to say in person.”

*He won’t miss the chance to see Drogon.*

“And where are you planning to stage this… secret meeting?” Varys asked.

Dany considered the huge table in front of her. It would have to be about midway from Dragonstone and Sunspear, on neutral ground.

The solution presented itself easily, as though driven by an outer power. She took one of the wooden dragons and positioned it near the foothills of the Red Mountains, between Blackhaven and Grandview.

*Break the wheel.*

“The ruins of Summerhall.”

Where dragons died and another one was born.

The beginning of the end.

“This will be a three-headed plan,” she went on. “Whilst I go to the Dornish Marches, you, Grey Worm, will lead a host of your Unsullied west, to Oldtown. Skirmishes continue near the city between Euron’s men and the Tyrell’s bannermen. The smallfolk is caught in the middle: the Ironborns are burning their fields and homes. They rape their women, enslave the children. I did not break chains in Yunkai, Astapor and Meereen, only to have the same happening here, right under my nose.”

A gleam burned sharp and fast as lightning into the Unsullied’s onyx eyes. He lifted his chin proudly: “This one shall end the fighting and bring your protection to the innocents, so that they know Daenerys Stormborn hears their sufferings.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask what is the third head of the plan,” Varys said with a nervous twitch of his lips, but Dany could detect also a small hint of surprised admiration.

“The third head is the most dangerous,” she said. “I’ll never win this war only with the great houses’ support. I need a strategy to involve the common people, too. To let them know they have a better option.”

If there was something she had learned in her years as Queen in Slaver’s Bay was that, in the end, the people always made the difference, even people who in their lives had never known anything but violence and brutality. Slavery, by another name.

‘If you want them to know something else, you’ll have to show it to them,’ her stubborn Mormont bear had wisely admonished her, when he had tried to hold back her bad temper, in Meereen.

It was a bold move, and risky. But it had to be done.

“I will send someone in King’s Landing, to get in contact with the insurgent groups, and win their trust. This person shall listen to the people’s grievances and report back to me about their real conditions and about the wildfire. How much there really is, and where.”

Varys furrowed his brow. “We already have spies and informants in the city.”

“This is not the kind of job I can trust your little birds with, Varys. Their loyalty can be bought: you
yourself told me what happened to the Red Keep’s last Master of Whisperers, that same Pycelle who’s been my father’s Grand Maester and who had convinced him to open the gates to Tywin Lannister, against your better judgment.”

“I could go myself,” the eunuch proposed with a shrug.

Dany clasped her hands above her breast, as if in prayer, and started to pace.

“With Tyrion gone, I need you here, in my absence. I don’t trust the Snakes. You know how to speak to them, how to keep them in line. An alliance has been made in the first place because of you, after all. Besides, your face is too infamous: if Cersei finds out you’re in King’s Landing, she will have your head.”

And, considering the mad woman’s newfound love for fire, beheading would be the most merciful outcome.

*I won’t have Varys’ charred bones delivered in a trunk, too.*

“I need somebody who won’t attract unwanted attention, somebody above suspicion, who could blend in and be my eyes and ears. Somebody I trust as much as anyone.”

*Break the wheel.*

She stopped in front of Missandei, drew a deep breath, and plunged.

“Are you up for it, my friend?”

Out of the corner of her eyes, Grey Worm gave an almost imperceptible start, although his expression stayed as blank as ever.

Curious, how love could be found in the most unlikely of places.

*There’s no need to panic. She’ll be all right,* Dany would’ve wanted to reassure him. *Slavery couldn’t break her and neither will Cersei. She’s a survivor of a thousand battles. The same as me. She’ll be perfectly fine.* But she found her words were stuck in her throat, where a lump was tightly forming.

When Missandei kept staring without speaking, her lips slightly parted in confusion and consternation, Dany grasped both her hands: “I’m asking much of you, I know. You’ll be right into the lioness’ den, where I can’t protect you. The mission will be fraught with danger and my heart bleeds at the very idea to be parted from you.”

She blinked away the tears, as the sanest, most resolute part of her brain scolded her still: *don’t be such a ridiculous, silly girl; she’ll fare well.*

But another part of her baulked like a stubborn horse and begged: *Say no.*

*I won’t make you go, if you don’t want to.*

Missandei glanced down at their entwined hands, a deep frown etched in her brow, as though she was weighing her chances. And then she raised her eyes.

“Valar Morghulis.”

Dany let out a strangled sound, half a laugh, half a sob.
“But we’re not men,” her voice cracked as she choked on the same words she had spoken to her the first time they met.

“No, Your Grace. We’re not,” Missandei smiled, brave and proud; Dany wrapped her arms around her and pulled her close, feeling the cold wetness of tears on Missandei’s cheeks mixing with her own.

She will be fine.

Outside, the winds of winter howled furiously.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter wasn’t exactly easy to write, for a lot of different reasons. Politics and scheming were never my forte, for sure, and the Sand Snakes are just as boring and annoying to write as I’ve always thought they’d be (I’ll take suggestions about the really painful ways I should kill them off with); the greatest problem with this chapter, however, was the character’s POV: Dany is a very tough, obstinate, contrary character to deal with, and I have contrasting feelings about her, most of the time. She’s surely a larger-than-life, predestined character, and arguably the ultimate hero on both show and books: it is easy to root for her, but I’ve always found it hard to empathise with her, and I’m not quite sure I’d take a wager about her sitting on the Iron Throne in the end. These doubts only increased with the airing of Season 7; as I watched her scenes unfold, I’ve more than once found myself screaming “What in the Seven Hells are you doing/saying?” at my TV screen, so when I started outlining this chapter, I’ve asked myself: on a political/strategic position, did I like Dany’s arc, this season?

The answer was: meh!

I can’t say I agreed with most of her choices, battle-wise, this time around, and ultimately her actions have cost her Viserion (granted, that was mostly Tyrion’s fault, because, let’s face it, that was a REALLY BAD plan, and I’m still quite shocked for how the whole thing was handled… but hey, on the other hand, it gave us some hilarious Tormund/Sandor bonding, so I’ll make my peace with it, eventually…). Therefore, for this chapter, which surely is the most political one I’ve written so far, I chose to make Dany do the opposite of what I’ve seen her do in the last Season, in the hope that she might turn out wiser and more sympathetic. The “burn people first, ask questions later” attitude is still there, mind you, but she’s finally learning to listen, just as Olenna hoped she would, to think more strategically, planning her moves in advance and at the same time never losing sight of the greater picture.

So… Dany in Summerhall, Grey Worm in Oldtown and Missandei in King’s Landing… what could go wrong, right?? As usual, I’ll eagerly wait for your opinions in the comment section!!

PS: The Dragon’s Nest was inspired by Fingal’s Cave and the Giant’s Causeway: I’m sincerely saddened by the fact that D&D didn’t shoot the Dragonstone scenes there, because they’re just the perfect location! (and if you have the chance, do listen to Mendelssohn’s Hebrides overture: it is very suggestive, and an excellent writing inspiration!)
Tyrion II

Chapter Notes

Why did it take me so long to update, you ask? Because this freakish monster is 13k words long! (also: new job and not enough hours per day).
BUT do not let this deter you: we have lots of angst, fluff and a bit of betrayal ahead, so… grab a warm blanket, put the kettle on, have some lemon cakes Sansa-style and enjoy the reading!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TYRION

For the past fortnight the small group of people below had pushed hard the horses along the Kingsroad, while he protected them from above, riding on Viserion’s back. The King’s party travelled at an excruciatingly slow pace, compared to him: the Night’s Watch had provided them with horses and supplies for the journey, including a heavy dray crossbreed pulling a cart, as a means to transport the young Lord Stark, which was making their progress through wind and snow fairly tiring and dull.

Tyrion and Viserion had preceded them for miles, every day, to clear the path from the thick layer of fresh snow and ice which had gathered in the past weeks; having a fire-breathing dragon with him definitely had its perks, but Viserion was still extremely skittish and sullen, after the harrowing experience at the Wall, and barely tolerated the presence of the other humans, especially Bran. At sunset, he would beat his golden wings and fly alone toward the mountains and the Bay of Ice, in search of food and, maybe, peace of mind; he always came back, thanks the Gods, just as the first light of day painted the road ahead and the tall, frost-covered tips of the sentinel trees around them in a glittering silver. Like a big dog deprived of his master’s friendship for too long, the dragon would unfailingly welcome Tyrion with a generous show of affection: an apology for leaving him on the hard, frozen ground every night to fight off alone the numbing stiffness of winter without his warm breath to keep him comfortably snug and safe.

Tyrion couldn’t hold it against him, though. The unlikely bond which tied him to Viserion had only strengthened during the past weeks spent together in such close quarters: as they learned to read their respective moods and emotions little by little, the trust between them grew, through silent conversations built on gentle, loving touches and amused glances. All in all, this was by far the most successful, stable relationship he had in years. This beast loves me more than any woman I’ve shared my bed with, he considered bitterly, after the fight against the wights. And in return, Tyrion had become quite protective of him, to the point of completely losing his temper, when, after much prodding, Bran had reluctantly confessed he had to slip inside the dragon’s skin to avoid a full collision with the Wall. Shock and horror had rendered him speechless: greenseer or not, Lord of Winterfell or not, the young Stark did not have any right to force himself into Viserion’s mind without his consent, no matter the circumstances. The lad had at least the grace to look properly
chastised, and promised he would never hurt Viserion again, but there was something hard and
inexorably implacable in his steely blue eyes that put Tyrion ill at ease.

Wargs, skinchangers, Three-Eyed Ravens… he used to believe these names belonged in books of
lore and upon the withered lips of old wet nurses. But if what Bran was saying, concerning his
abilities, were true, the boy was more powerful, and dangerous, than any of them could even begin
to fathom. The fact filled him with fear and a foreboding sense of agitation, which made his blood
run cold; and from the fleeting, tense glances Jon Snow and Thoros of Myr threw in the boy’s
direction, Tyrion gathered he wasn’t the only one. But he didn’t question him further: they were all
exhausted and in desperate need of recovery.

What had transpired in the haunted forest and at Castle Black went beyond his mind’s grasp and
understanding. He had never been familiar with Northern legends, except for some concise
excerpts he had read in passing on some or other tome stored deep inside the Rock’s library. The
tales of the Long Night were never part of the Westerlands’ traditions, and he never really had to
resort to books, or his own imagination, to picture the most gruesome horror stories: Casterly Rock
was already bursting with them. From the highest balconies down to its dark, filthy bowels, their
echo resounded through hallways and courtyards, worming their ways beyond closed rooms in
hushed whispers… tales of red lions raising their proud heads in a roar that soon enough turned into
screams of rage and agony and desperation, and water and flames eating everything in their way,
until nothing was left but ruins and silence; stories of ghosts still weeping their woes into empty
halls, constrained to regret forever their scorn and betrayal… this was more than enough to startle
from his deep slumber a four-year-old boy, ashamed because he soiled his bedding and afraid to
call for the loving touch of a white hand he had never known, but only dreamt about.

But now, what his own adult eyes had seen surpassed all his most terrifying childhood nightmares.

It was all true. What Mormont and Benjen Stark had talked about in concerned tones. The unheard
warnings that had reached Dragonstone on dark wings, during these past months. The pleas for
help… send us men, dragonglass and dragons… They had been fools, all of them. And Tyrion –
the most foolish of all. He had always prided himself to be a cunning man, a man who understood
how the game was played and could prevail even against the deadliest foe by the cleverness of his
strategies. Yet, despite the countless signs of alarm, he had completely overlooked the threat and
now was utterly out of his league. His wits would be of no use, if the Wall were to fall down.

I should’ve dragged Daenerys to Castle Black with me.

With his mind heavy, he had followed his dragon’s example and had mostly kept to himself during
the journey back to Winterfell, seeking peace and quiet to try to weave different plans of action, in
the futile attempt to foresee every possible outcome, even the most tragic ones. Curled up in his
travelling cloak next to Bronn and Podrick, who at the moment were the least inclined to murder
him in his sleep, Tyrion would spend the few hours of rest around the campfire drinking the
disgusting but effective fermented goat milk provided by the good-natured red-bearded wildling
who seemed to be the King’s right arm, and trying to brood as little as possible about the very
much concrete possibility that they would all be dead before the turn of the year. Even my own
brother, who still won’t talk to me. The sodding idiot.

Although he wasn’t really looking forward to that particular conversation, the silent treatment was
starting to get on his nerves, so it was with an odd mix of palpable relief and overwrought
eagerness that, one early afternoon, he finally glimpsed the sight of Winterfell’s grey turrets
emerging from the misty, gloomy hills.

Things went a lot smoother, this time around. At least, Tyrion thought, they’re not trying to shoot
us down with spears and arrows.

Jaime and Bronn split from the party and quickly led their mounts to the Lannisters camp which has risen at the east corner of the plain, just as the Stark guards stationed above the battlements gave the order to open the North Gate; the urgent sound of their horns blasted through the chilling twilight, calling out across the miles and up to the huge, dark snow-filled clouds. Viserion answered with a roar of his own and flew over the godswood, circling around the Keep before elegantly touching the ground in the courtyard, to thunderous clapping and booming shouts of cheer.

A hero’s welcome.

Only, it is not for us, Tyrion realised, when he saw a tall, slender figure running to the cart where Bran Stark lay under the furs, her auburn tresses whirling wildly over her back as she lunged herself across the wooden sideboards to embrace her brother.

They’re hailing their rightful Lord’s safe return.

A wistful smile tugged at his lips; he patted Viserion’s head, unfastened the locks and belts around his legs and midriff and eased himself on the muddy soil, as both sisters vied for Bran’s attention, hugs and kisses. The boy looked more lively than he had been during the whole journey. Bedewed with tears, his cheeks bloomed a healthy pink, and his Tully eyes shone in childlike glee as Arya teased him that he might have been on a dragon’s back but she still was the better marksman between the two.

“I knew you would bring him back home,” Sansa was saying to Jon, her voice muffled by the embrace.

“Don’t thank me, sister. None of us would’ve survived, beyond the Wall, had it not been for Lord Tyrion’s timely intervention.”

Four pairs of eyes turned on him, questioningly. A hush spread across the courtyard, the only sound the nervous snarling of the hounds, that angrily bayed and snapped their jaws against Viserion; the dragon just had to raise his snout and let a foul wisp of sizzling smoke escape from his bared black teeth to put them in their place again.

Sansa slipped from her brother’s arms and moved in front of him, her eyes wilful and focused, but less aloof than he had expected.

And then, she leaned down and without a flinch kissed the puckered flesh of his right cheek. Tyrion’s jaw dropped in shock. He wordlessly stared at her, his knees barely supporting him, trying to read something in her fair eyes, anything – empty courtesy, dutiful gratitude, fondness – but Sansa had already closed herself off, as he had seen her doing time and again, during the short weeks of their miserable wedlock, and turned to speak to Meera Reed.

Bran and Jon were watching him with probing eyes, but nobody dared to crack a joke, or snigger. This is not King’s Landing, after all. Sansa is in charge. They will respect me, as long and she does.

“And I must thank you too, my lady,” Sansa addressed the sullen Reed girl with a charming smile, grasping Meera’s blistered hands in hers. “Since we’ve received Jon’s message with the news of your safe rescuing, I’ve felt as though I’ve gained another sister.”

“What’s wrong with the one you already have?” Arya protested behind her back.
“From where to start…” Sansa bantered, loud enough for him and the siblings to hear and share a short giggle, and then pressed a small peck on Meera’s cheek, too.

“I hope we will come to love each other as such,” she said as the other girl curtsied awkwardly.

Next to her, Winterfell’s maester – Wolkan, he remembered – was fussing about Bran, while Tormund and Brienne helped to ease him into a practical chair with wheels.

The lad seemed distracted, though, and Tyrion noticed his eyes were following Jon as he was animatedly conversing in hushed tones with Ser Davos. The Onion Knight gave him a rolled message, and from the way the scowl over the young king’s face was deepening as he skimmed through it, Tyrion gathered it wasn’t good news.

*Dark wings, dark words.*

When Snow approached them again, his brother grabbed the hem of his cloak.

“Jon, I must speak with you, there’s –

“We’ll talk soon, brother, but not now.”

He put a firm hand on Bran’s shoulder and squeezed, then he turned to the maester and handed him the missive. “Summon the council: this must be dealt with straight away…”

Maester Wolkan bowed dutifully and retreated back inside the Keep.

“Jon! This is bloody serious! You have to listen to me!”

Blue eyes and brown ones blinked at him, astonished, and even Jon appeared startled, perhaps more for his brother’s forceful, imperative tone than for the unexpected use of the expletive.

“I’m sorry, Bran, our conversation will have to wait. This matter requires my full attention, now, but as Lord of Winterfell you’re more than welcome to take your rightful place in the council.”

“I could stand in for you, if you’re not up to it,” Sansa chimed in, hastily. “You and Meera must be tired beyond words. Why don’t you rest for a while? Have a warm bath, eat something not tasting of mud and mould. Every single one of Father’s bannermen, your bannermen, want to see and talk to you. At tonight’s banquet, you’ll be sitting on Father’s seat, next to me and Jon.”

Although clearly displeased, Bran did not press further his request, but his expression hardened.

Under the layers of leather and wool, Tyrion’s skin crawled with uneasiness. Despite Sansa’s appeasing words, the air was charged with an odd tension, a not entirely pleasant energy, which crackled like flames made of ice around the courtyard. All those present must have noticed the wary glances full of misgivings and unspoken questions exchanged between the elder siblings.

Tyrion frowned.

Was there a deeper disagreement between the King and Sansa?

Her joy at being reunited with the last living member of her family was certainly deep and heartfelt, but the issue remained: Sansa was the eldest amongst Ned and Catelyn Stark’s trueborn children, and she had proved herself to be an excellent guide for her people, during Bran’s long absence. The Northmen loved her, and she also had the support of the Eyrie and the Tullys, now that the Twins had fallen and the siege at Riverrun had been lifted. That in itself would be a force to be reckoned
with. A personal army within the King in the North’s larger one.

Was Jon covertly fearing her ambitions?

King he might be, but it was clear that Sansa was the one holding the North together, from the Wall to Moat Cailin.

But now, where did her brother’s unexpected return leave her?

“Lord Tyrion, I believe you should join us, too.”

Roused from his musings, he glanced back at Jon Snow. “If it pleases Your Grace,” he said, somehow puzzled by the offer.

Jon gave a curt nod: “I require it, in fact.”

His short legs were stiff for the flight, so he climbed the stairs to the King’s solar with painful slowness; when he entered the room, there already was a man, waiting with his palms folded over his belt and a smug, irritating smirk which the neatly-trimmed, elegant beard failed to hide.

The most repugnant leech of all Westeros, and beyond.

“My Lord of Lannister!” Petyr Baelish greeted him, with open arms and an unreadable expression in his eyes. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“Indeed. You’ll have to excuse me, Lord Baelish. I find myself at loss for… the right word to convey how great my astonishment is,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Oh, I’m sure words will fly back to you, once you overcome the emotion.”

Tyrion gave a short, tart chuckle. He hadn’t missed him, but he’d surely missed this. Littlefinger beckoned him to the heavy rosewood table, where a jug of cherry-red wine and a couple of goblets stood amongst unrolled maps, books and papers.

“When was the last time we met?” he asked, feigning ignorance, and quirked a surprised, vaguely derisive eyebrow when Tyrion turned down with a shake of the head the wine he had poured.

“I believe you were readying yourself to set off for the Eyrie. How inconvenient your eager bride died so early in the marriage.”

Baelish stared off into space and exhaled such a forlorn sigh that Tyrion almost clapped at the performance. “That was a true tragedy. In these harsh times, marriages seem to be quite ill-fated.”

“Yes, ’tis a pity you’ve missed Joffrey’s.”

Baelish lifted the cup to his lips, a brief show of teeth flashing impudently above the bronze rim.

_You shitty bastard, I suppose I ought to thank you for that, too._

“And how is faring our mutual Lysene friend? I’ve heard he’s charmed his way into Daenerys’ small council by bringing her little Snakes covered in Roses as a gift.”

_He’d gouge your beady eyes out with his bare hands if you called him ‘your friend’ to his face._

“He’s faring well. I’m sure he will be heartbroken to hear he’s missed this nice family reunion.”
“Does your Dragon Queen know that, not long ago, he was the one to strongly advocate her assassination?”

“Does the King know you’re the one to blame for Ned Stark’s imprisonment?” he retaliated, relishing the way Baelish’s skin suddenly turned to wax.

The Starks’ raised tones coming from the stairs made Littlefinger swallow whatever clever retort he had on the tip of his glib tongue.

“… to withhold information. When were you planning to tell me?”

The King marched inside, followed by his sister; Ser Davos closed the door behind their backs.

“I did not withhold anything, Jon! The letter was addressed to me. There was no point in alerting you while you already were on the road home!”

Jon glared at her, pale and furious. The answer clearly did not please him.

“What’s going on?” Tyrion tentatively asked, caught in the middle of a staring contest; he looked back and forth between the two of them, searching for an opening. Sansa was breathing heavily through her nose, as though she had just climbed the steps, three at the time; the vibrant ruby colouring her cheeks was a sharp contrast with the raw clearness of her eyes. Without even looking down at him, she passed him a wrinkled piece of parchment sealed with the leaping trout of the Tullys: “This came earlier this week, from my uncle at Riverrun.”

A tiny crease of worry and disquiet appeared between Tyrion’s brows: why would the Starks share their private correspondence with him? He fidgeted as he unrolled the short message and browsed through it.

Edmure reported news of Ironborn incursions all over the Reach’s coast towns… Oldtown, burned and sacked… Lord Hightower vanished, and Highgarden…

No.

The words danced and blurred over the paper. He read the line again, then re-read it a third time...

Lord Garth dead, and Olenna Tyrell… Oh, Cersei will be absolutely thrilled.

“I thought you should be informed,” Jon said.

“Yes. Thank you,” he uttered stupidly. His head pounded with barely-contained rage, and fear. The parchment crumpled in his shaking hands.

“Can anyone else confirm this?”

Ser Davos just shook his white head apologetically.

“We’ve been trying to reach the maesters at the Citadel, to no avail…”

Jon let out a troubled sigh and strode to the window, clenching and unclenching his right fist over the pommel of his Valyrian sword. His perpetual scowl had become by now a brooding grimace. Tyrion gathered he might have been anguished for one of the young acolytes’ fate, the same one who, several weeks past, had written grievous letters pleading for their help.

Tarly’s oldest. Jon had spoken highly of him, at Castle Black, with the fondness usually meant for brothers.
“We couldn’t even find out if lady Olenna is still alive,” Davos further admitted. Sansa leaned over the map spread open upon the table.

“If Euron brought her to Cersei,” she said, her eyes burning holes at the Lion of Lannister marking King’s Landing, “she’s as good as dead already.”

His throat went suddenly dry. He absent-mindedly reached for the cup of wine Baelish had previously filled and gulped it down, faster than if it were water tossed to a thirsty wanderer in the Dornish desert. _Would that I could get thoroughly drunk._ “I’ll have to return to Dragonstone sooner than expected.”

Did the news already reach the island? Was Daenerys plotting an assault? He must needs write right away, and beseech her not to take any rash decisions.

Olenna had foreseen this. Not her own death, but she knew Euron would’ve tried to lure Cersei in, by every possible means. Such a nice, sumptuously rich dowry he brought her! His sister wouldn’t impassively withstand the pursuit of a man who promised to satisfy her thirst for blood and vengeance.

“With all due respect, Your Grace,” Littlefinger cut in. “As saddened as I am to hear such dreadful news, the war in the South is not our concern, not when we have more pressing threats to fight against. Seal the borders from Cape Kraken to Widow’s Watch and let them brawl over the scraps of a once fertile land. Winter has come in the south, too, and soon they’ll be too cold, tired and hungry to think about moving war in the North.”

His voice was crisp and unfaltering, but Tyrion detected an unusual tautness in his countenance. _Are you afraid Olenna might have spilt some of your secrets to my sweet sister?_

The wicked smile on Tyrion’s lips didn’t reach his eyes. “As much as I admire your unsympathetic ruthlessness when it comes to letting half a continent starve to death, you’re deluded about the actual aftermath of a war in the South, Lord Baelish. This unfortunate turn of events will put the North into a position of even greater weakness. Do you want to know why?” He swiftly moved the wooden lion toward Highgarden, and spoke directly to Jon. “The alliance we’ve sealed with House Tyrell and the Sand Stakes kept Cersei’s ambitions under control; she would’ve never dared to extend her hold further than the Roseroad. But now, with Lady Olenna gone, political balance in the South has shattered. Make no mistake: Cersei hates you all. She still thinks you murdered Joffrey,” he pointed out to Sansa, and pushed one of the dragons to the entrance of the Neck. “Right now, Daenerys Stormborn is the only thing standing between my sister’s wrath and Winterfell. So yes, _this_ concerns you too.”

The King scrubbed his beard as he pondered his words. _Excellent. I have his attention._

Tyrion pressed on: “Ironically, this brings me to the real purpose of my trip. I did not believe the stories, the first time I went to the Wall. I’ve jeered at them, truth be told. I rue my own lack of concern when, back then, I would’ve had the power to make a real difference.”

“Will you help us, now?” Jon appealed to him in earnest. “Will you speak to your Queen, make her understand?”

Tyrion nodded. “I will. I shall make sure she sends enough dragonglass for you to forge into arrows, spears and swords. Persuading her into sending more men to wield those weapons will be a quite harder task, but not impossible.”

“What about the dragons?” Sansa enquired.
“The dragons are off the table.”

“We need the dragons, my lord!” Jon thumped the table with his closed fist, in shocked anger. “You saw what happened in the haunted forest! Without them, there’s no chance we’re going to survive an open-field battle, no matter how many dragonglass weapons we can swing at them!”

“If you don’t aid us, your silver-haired queen will be ruling over a garden of bones,” Sansa said with deathly calm. “We might need you, but you need us in return, or you wouldn’t even be here.”

“On that we can agree. But you won’t get the dragons,” he reiterated obstinately, “not unless you give something back.”

Jon stared at him hard, his expression suddenly closed and hostile. “You want the North.”

“I want an alliance. A new Pact of Ice and Fire, for the sake of all Westeros.”

“Alliances such as this are made through dynastic marriages,” said Davos. Tyrion snapped his fingers at him in agreement.

“Precisely.”

“You will speak on my behalf,” Daenerys had told him when she gave him leave to travel to Winterfell. She never mentioned a betrothal, in truth, but she authorised him to strike any bargain he might judge necessary. And after what he had seen, this was the right choice. The only choice.

“If His Grace will assent to a formal betrothal, the North will have all the support you’re asking, and more: your heirs will rule over a finally pacified kingdom. Granted, if we survive the Long Night.”

“Jon! You can’t seriously think that’s a reasonable option!” Sansa exclaimed, her eyes bulging with incredulity. “The Northmen will never accept a Targaryen as their Queen. Especially this one!”

“Blaming her for Aerys’ sins is unfair, at the very least. She’s not her father. Just as you’re not yours.”

_Thankfully so_, Tyrion added in his mind.

A frustrated sigh escaped Sansa’s nostrils. Her fingers closed around Jon’s arm and gave it a sharp tug. “Would you have the North surrender our army and fight for her in a senseless war for that rotten iron chair?!”

“Not long ago _you_ dreamt about sitting on that rotten iron chair,” her brother said, bluntly. Sansa reeled back as though he had slapped her, and even Tyrion was surprised to hear the acrimony in his voice.

“If you choose to marry the Targaryen girl, and yield to her requests, the whole North will rebel, just as they did with Robb,” Baelish said.

“Maybe not,” Davos interjected in a voice full of discernment, “if we give them something else in return.”

The wrinkles around his keen grey eyes levelled out as he drew the King’s attention back to Sansa. “Jon…” Her voice wavered, alarmed. “What did you do?”
Jon wetted his lips, and cautiously avoided her eyes.

The wooden floorboards yielded with a grating creak as she stamped to her brother, grabbed his face with both her hands and forced him to look at her.

“What did you do?”

“There have been…inquiries,” Jon Snow conceded. He took Sansa’s hands in his and rested them over his heart in a placating gesture. “I did not promise anything, Sansa, not without consulting you first.”

Sansa jerked free her hands and clasped them above her stomach. She was shaking.

“And you were accusing me just now of withholding information?”

Jon stared without speaking, his eyes grieved as they followed her erratic, nervous pacing.

“Inquiries by whom?” Sansa finally asked, her breath shallow.

The King cleared his throat. “Lord Glover, on behalf of his son Gawen. Lord Cley Cerwyn. And Wylis Manderly, heir to White Harbor.”

Baelish snorted back a cynical laughter: “Wylis Manderly? Can he still manage to get on his horse?”

“They’re some of the proudest, most ancient houses in the North, my lady,” Davos tried to soothe her. “They all have fresh levies and mounts, and well-provisioned castles. Their proposals are worthy of serious consideration.”

The suggestion achieved the opposite effect. Sansa seemed on the verge of spiralling out of control: her nails were leaving scarlet marks on the back of her hands, and beads of sweat were welling from her bow. “So you plan to marry me off to one between a green boy, a coward and a man almost as fat as his father?”

“Sansa, let’s not fight over –

“What about Arya?” she questioned him with a tight-lipped, scathing smile, repulsion coming in waves off her. “I’m sure you have some brilliant ideas concerning her future, too. Little Hoster, maybe? Or one of your wildlings?”

Tyrion cringed in discomfort. For what little he had seen of the youngest sister, she would be happier if married to a Dothraki.

Jon clenched his jaw and unwillingly capitulated.

“The Eyrie.”

Even Littlefinger couldn’t conceal his bafflement, nor his cool contempt.

“You want to send Arya to the Vale?” Sansa managed to croak at last. “Are you out of your mind? Robin is a sickly, weak boy, he’s not fit for ruling, never mind marriage!”

“I am a king, Sansa, and, despite Bran’s return, you are the head of House Stark! Our position doesn’t allow the luxury of choice in such matters: the unity and protection of the North must prevail above our own freedom and desires!”
“I understand what our position entails better than you do!” she fought back, her eyes bloodshot, as wild as a trapped animal. “You’re king, aye, and my brother, but don’t you dare lecture me about the burden of difficult choices and the welfare of the realm. If you believe Arya will abide meekly by whatever choice you’ve taken against her will, then you don’t know her at all. Arya is like to slit the throat of any wretched husband you will have picked for her on her wedding night! And I swear to the Old Gods, Jon, if you force me to marry again, I might just do the same.”

No one dared to doubt her intentions: there was a destructive desperation to her that Tyrion had only ever seen in people who had nothing to lose.

A wounded she-wolf surrounded by enemies, defending herself and her pack, was just as dangerous and lethal as an irate dragon.

His feet moved of their own accord.

“If I may, Your Grace, my lady, let us not come to such drastic measures,” he spoke. “There might be an easier solution, although you might not be entirely overjoyed by it. Lady Sansa needn’t marry again for political convenience, as she is, technically, still wed.”

Breathe.

“To me.”

His mismatched eyes found hers, and beyond the sudden shock at the startling revelation, beyond the wrath, faster than lightning, he peeked an uncertain flicker of hope.

Or maybe, it was just plain amusement.

Please, don’t turn this marriage into a joke more than it already is.

“That marriage has not been consummated.”

He screwed his eyes shut.

“Yes, Lord Baelish, thank you for pointing out such delicate issue, with your usual compelling diplomacy,” he said hotly, trying to keep what was left of his dignity still intact.

Sansa was still looking down at him as though he had grown horns and tail. Littlefinger approached him with a sly grin. “It is not my intention to be crude or disrespectful, especially in Lady Sansa’s presence, but lack of consummation is cause for annulment, my lord.”

“True. But if memory serves, a marriage contracted in the Light of the Seven can be annulled only by the High Septon or a Council of Faith, and exclusively under particular request by at least one of the spouses. And I don’t seem to recall either of us going to the High Septon to ask for the necessary legal procedures to be carried through, as you were promptly spirited away to the Eyrie, by the most loyal Lord Baelish himself, and I was enjoying the fresh air of the Red Keep’s dark cells, waiting to be sentenced to death for a crime I sadly did not commit.”

He saw Baelish’s fingers twitching over his belt. Next to him, Sansa had grown even paler.

“You mean… my marriage to Ramsay Bolton was illegitimate?”

To see the cold realisation dawning in her eyes was like a punch in the stomach. He’d rather spare her this humiliation, too, but not even in the Faith of the Old Gods a man could lawfully take a wife who was still married to another. Whatever she might have gone through during her marriage to the
Bolton bastard, it was all for nothing. He hated himself for the further pain he was willingly inflicting her now.

*It is still my duty to protect her, even if she doesn’t want me.*

“You’re still Lady Lannister, if only in name,” he said, as gently as he could.

“Forgive me, my lord, but I suspect the Lannister name might not be of worth much, now. Especially in the North,” Davos said. “Aye, a small part of your army is garrisoned at Winterfell, now, courtesy of Ser Jaime, but your cousin Daven still holds the Rock, and he’s loyal to your sister.”

“I may have been stripped of my lands and wealth, but I’m *not* powerless. I am Hand to Daenerys Targaryen, and she is the greatest military force on the continent, right now; should Sansa choose to stay married to me, I give you my word the North will have the leverage it needs in the upcoming war.”

“But only if the King bends the knee,” Littlefinger taunted. There was something sinisterly vicious and vindictive in his green-grey eyes that made him recoil.

*He wants her,* Tyrion realised with horror. *He wants Sansa just as he wanted her mother.* The thought enraged him and turned his blood to ice at the same time.

*What would he do now that I’ve stolen his sweet songbird from under his beak?*

“I shall speak with Lord Tyrion alone,” Jon said. The mortified flush on Sansa’s cheeks grew even more affronted. Flustered, she looked askance at him, pressing her palms together tightly as though restraining herself from hitting him, and then stormed off.

After even Littlefinger had retreated in silence, the King divested himself of his heavy, still-wet cloak, unfastened his sword belt and sat at the table, snatching one of the wooden dragons on the map with a weary sigh.

“What is she like?”

*Here we go.*

“A woman of surpassing beauty and grace. A bit short, perhaps,” he snorted humorously at Jon’s incredulous expression. “Yes, it sounds pretty ridiculous, coming from me, but height doesn’t really matter, when you’re on a dragon’s back.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

*No, you’re asking me if she’s as crazy as Aerys.*

He let out a loud exhale and scrambled up on the chair opposite Jon.

“She is… ah… She has her fine moments. Plenty of them, in fact! I’ve seen her rule with an iron fist and show no weakness when it was called for, and I’ve seen her forgive people who have betrayed her in the past and have mercy of the enemy, when she could have uttered a single word to her dragons and scorch them away. She’s fierce, but she’s not a monster, although I’ll admit she’s not easy to deal with.”

Jon arched a single eyebrow. “Mulish?”
“Strong-willed,” Tyrion rephrased. “The blood of the dragon can’t be tamed without a small effort, after all.”

“Yet, you deem her worthy. You really believe she could rule well? Bring peace to this country?”

Tyrion reached for the jug of wine and poured two generous cups, taking his time to carefully choose his next words.

“I believe she’s intelligent enough to surround herself with capable men and women who know how to counsel her and make her realise how far she can push her limits. In a way, you remind me of her. You both had learned fast and in the hard way how to play the game, how to listen to your advisors and sometimes even ignore them, how to overcome differences for the greater good and accept compromise when it’s unavoidable. That’s what strong rulers do.”

“I am bastard-born. She a princess of the blood. The marriage would be beneath her. Won’t she object to the alliance?”

“Legitimate sons from the noblest families are either too young to marry, crazy or, well, dead, so unless she’d rather marry one of my less smart cousins, or Gods forbid, Jaime, I daresay you’re still a more than satisfactory catch. You’re a king. The hero of the Battle of the Bastards. The saviour of the North. Your people love you.”

For once, there was no feigned adulation to his praise. He had witnessed the same devotion with Daenerys, too.

“They will love me a lot less, if I yield the North to her. They’d see it as a betrayal.”

Tyrion shrugged. “Whatever reluctance they might have will cave in and crumble when the Wall will.”

“Davos and I had already discussed the matter of my marriage in private,” Jon announced. “I was considering one of the ladies of the North as a bride. Alys Karstark. She alone can rally a force of almost ten thousand men-at-arms: a union with her would bring Karhold and Last Hearth back into the fold.”

The choice seemed odd to Tyrion.

“The Karstarks have defied your brother, and taken up arms against you.”

Jon nodded. “It was my hope that putting a crown over Alys’ head would heal old wounds. I’ve sent for her already. She should be in Winterfell in a few days. To negotiate.”

Although he didn’t look elated at the prospect, it was not a bad plan. Tyrion could see the strong reasoning behind it, and he commended both Jon and his Hand’s judgement and caution. But it wouldn’t be enough.

“At first glance, this might indeed seem the wisest choice. A northerner, through and through, by your side. But she wouldn’t be Queen for long, if you can’t defeat the Army of the Dead. And without the dragons…”

“I won’t bend the knee!” Jon snapped, exasperated. “I’ll lose the North, if I do.”

Stubborn dolt.

“You’ll lose it anyway, if you let your terribly misplaced sense of honour guide your actions.”
“This is not about honour! The North is not mine to give away. You’re not from here, Lord Tyrion, I don’t expect you to understand.”

Tyrion sighed, discontented.

“No, I don’t. I’ve always found this kind of pride rather stupid, actually,” he finished his wine and stomped down the chair, peevishly pulling on the hem of his jerkin to straighten it. “I admired your father. He was a good man who loved his family. Sadly, he thought his honour would’ve sufficed to shield him when he chose to play the game of thrones without realising there are no rules to it, except one.”

You win or you die.

“And Robb…” he went on with petty petulance. “Robb had everything to become one of the greatest leaders the North had seen in hundreds of years. He was young, charming, cherished and respected; he crushed Jaime and my own father on the battlefield, but in the end he turned out to be an even greater fool than Ned.”

Jon didn’t even try to counter his argument, to put up a fight for his father and brother’s sake. He wasn’t too blinded by love not to be well aware of their shortcomings.

Tyrion wobbled along the length of the table and put a squat hand over his arm, strangely moved.

“Don’t make their same mistakes, Jon,” he urged him. “I like you. It would distress me quite a lot to see your head removed from your body. Welcome Lady Karstark to Winterfell, and then meet Daenerys. See for yourself if I lied to you.”

He was already at the door, when the King called him back. Tyrion turned just as Snow got down on one knee.

“Thank you,” he said, offering his bare hand. “For saving us, back at the Wall.”

Tyrion considered him with a wry smile.

“A king kneeling in front of a dwarf. This is new, and utterly absurd.”

It’s not before me you should be kneeling, you honourable fool, he mused and gave to his hand a firm shake.

For the next couple of hours, he confined himself inside the comfortable chamber in the guest house which the servants had prepared on Lady Sansa’s orders. From the window, he could see the courtyard bursting with activity: soldiers getting ready for the first patrols of the evening, peasants carrying covered carts filled with food and heavy logs for the fires, children throwing snowballs at the younger recruits who were still training. Their pearly laughter bounced inside the room, blithe and tempting, and Tyrion had half a notion to join them – with his height he could very well pass for a child, after all – but he had work to do. Three letters would leave with Maester Wolkan’s ravens, before nightfall: one for Daenerys, one for Varys and, yes, one for Cersei, too. That one had been hell to write, but she needed to be informed, even if Tyrion strongly doubted she would believe a single comma. Cersei won’t trust anything I say, not even if I were to bring her the Night
When he finally sank on the bench next to Bronn, his hand was cramping and supper in the Great Hall was almost over. Up to the dais, Bran was sitting at the place of honour, while, every now and then, knights and soldiers from Hornwood, Cerwyn, Bear Island and Deepwood Motte rose from their places and went to pay their respects, a horn of ale in hand and a quick toast over their lips.

The boy seemed unimpressed by all the fuss, almost irked by it, actually. His troubled eyes would often drift toward his half-brother, who was too wrapped up in his brooding mood to touch his food. Neither Sansa nor Arya was speaking to him.

“You, riding a fucking dragon,” Bronn uttered as Tyrion tucked into his mutton stew and onions. “Of all the things I’ve hoped to see before dying, that was way down the list.”

“Especially because you dumped me to rot in Maegor’s cells!” he bit back, but there was no real resentment beyond his words.

Bronn shrugged. “I knew you’d find a way to scrape through. I relied on your monumental intellect.”

“My intellect could only bring me so far,” he sulked.

In a corner of the Lannisters table, his former squire was talking in soft tones to a short-haired blonde girl wearing men’s garbs and a lovely smile. Her eyes warmed up, shining with mirth when he leaned in to whisper sweet nothings into her ear.

Tyrion rolled his eyes, secretly envying them and feeling guilty about it at the same time.

“Pod!”

The boy jumped to his feet as though he had the whole army of the dead to his heels and hurried to his and Bronn’s table.

“Ser Pod.”

The squire bowed bashfully. “M’lord.”

“Do not "m’lord" me! You’re an anointed knight, now. Sit,” he beckoned him and filled a mug with mead, “have a drink with us. Tell me who your last conquest is: some wildling girl, maybe?”

Pod flushed and hid a naughty smirk beyond the mug.

“No wildling girls involved, yet. He only has eyes for the pretty shepherdess from Tarth,” Bronn tattled on.

“Lynn’s not a shepherdess. She’s the smithy’s granddaughter,” Podrick quibbled as he helped himself to some broth and bread. Even the tip of his ears had turned a Lannister crimson.

Bronn let out a crass chuckle.

“Either way, a pretty lass, indeed” Tyrion concurred and raised his own cup in a silent toast.

“Tarth girls are most popular, nowadays,” the sellsword nudged Pod and signalled to the front door; Tyrion craned his neck, just in time to see the Lady of Tarth coming in… with his brother right on her tail. Shaking off patches of snow from their cloaks and boots, they sat at one of the Stark tables as the servants returned with steaming pots of beef pies and dishes of pease and
roasted onions. Tyrion watched as Tormund walked up to them, leering at the woman as though he were a bear ogling a jar of dripping honey. Whatever the wildling said to her made Jaime leap ahead, swift as a cat, and for a few tense moments, Tyrion believed they would’ve come to blows. A quite heated confrontation followed, until Brienne had to bodily separate the two and freeze his brother in place with an icy stare of her absurdly gorgeous sapphire eyes.

She was the picture of annoyance, but she was also blushing. Profusely.

Tyrion’s eyebrows knitted in confusion.

“Help me out here, Bronn. What did I just bear witness to?”

“That,” the sellsword pointed his knife in Jaime’s general direction, “was your brother’s idiotic attempt at courtship.”

His neck snapped painfully as he did a double take and guffawed awkwardly, feeling shame and embarrassment on his brother’s behalf.

“No.”

“Yes,” said Bronn, his mouth full of mutton.

*He must be mocking me.*

He discreetly studied the cosy little scene which was unfolding in front of him. With the red-bearded wildling gone, Jaime was cheerfully chatting with the lady knight, now, a teasing grin brightening up his whole mien, making him look relaxed and strikingly young. Brienne kept her eyes firmly trained on her bowl, but Tyrion noticed her lips twitching into an amused, secret smile.

“No!” he repeated, scratching his head, feeling like a halfwit himself.

“Yes!” Bronn insisted, dropping the knife unto the plate and sucking the grease off his fingers with a disgusting slurping noise. “Look, this is getting out of hands. Everyone’s noticing. From the kennel master to the fucking King, and his sisters. Your brother is a hopeless, lovesick cunt!”

Tyrion’s mouth dropped. Jaime? *Lovesick?*

“What are… Are you saying that *my* brother is fucking the blue-eyed giantess?” he forced the words out, even if they didn’t make any sense.

*“Fucking?!” Ah, I wish! I’d be a richer man, if they stopped pining for each other, dropped all pretence and just went at it. D’you know there are bets making the rounds about them? You must talk some sense into him.”*  

“Talk to him? I can’t even get close without him giving me a death glare!”

Bonn dismissed his fears with a brusque flick of his wrist.

“You’re family, he won’t murder you, despite what he told me on a couple of occasions. But I might, if you don’t put an end to this mummer’s farce. Podrick and I have had enough.”

“‘Tis true, m’lord,” the lad agreed between spoonfuls of stew. “This is becoming exhausting.”

“If this is as serious as it looks, why haven’t you done anything?”

“What do you think I’ve been doing for the last four months of my life, uh?” Bronn barked at him.
“Scratch my ass? And Pod, the poor lad… It’s even worse for him, because Her Ladyship of the Bear Pit is the most honourable, uncorrupted, righteous, stubborn virgin this side of the Wall! Did I leave something out?”

Podrick gulped down the hot broth and wiped his mouth with the side of his sleeve. “Noble and pretty jealous of her Lannister sword. She even sleeps with it.”

Bronn snorted and threw his arms to the ceiling as if this settled the dispute.

Tyrion rubbed the scar over his nose with a worn-out groan. “Listen, I’ve learned a long time ago not to meddle in my dear brother’s love life. And even though we all can easily agree this is a big improvement from the last one, I have no wish to deal with it. Sort it out for yourself!”

He mopped up the gravy from the bottom of the plate with the bread, then flung his short, stiffened legs on the other side of the bench and rose, ignoring Bronn’s indignant cries following him to the double-entrance doors.

“Sort it out?! Tyrion?! You still owe me a castle, you fucking twat!”

A pot of strongly-scented mulled wine was boiling over the hearth’s still burning coals when, a few minutes later, someone knocked on his bedchamber's door.

*He’s like a dog with a bone*, Tyrion thought, cursing Bronn’s tenacity. But when he went to open the lock, he wasn’t met with the sellsword’s stubborn glare.

“Bonn said you wanted to talk to me?” Jaime said dispassionately, his flesh hand gripping the hilt of Joffrey’s sword. “It seemed urgent.”

Tyrion pursed his lips and breathed deeply through his nose, struggling to keep his temper in check. *I’m going to thrust a hot poker up to that sellsword ass.*

His brother too seemed to realise he was played around like a fool.

“You didn’t…”

Tyrion just shook his head. Jaime didn’t wait for him to say anything else: he spun around and stormed off, the red cloak lapping at his heels like flames.

It was a decision taken in a heartbeat: Tyrion toddled outside and called to his retreating form.

“How!…”

His brother halted in the middle of the shady alley. Tyrion could almost see the tension settling like a boulder upon his shoulders and neck. After what seemed like aeons, he turned, stiffly. Relieved, Tyrion beckoned him inside the warm room with a small nod.

“I will cut that son of a whore’s balls off…” Jaime muttered once the door was closed.

Tyrion wrapped a cloth around the handle of the pot, pulled it from the fire and poured some mulled wine in a goblet. The sweet scent of nutmeg, cinnamon and cloves made his nose prickle as it spread inside the room.

“I entirely sympathise with the impulse.”
He swallowed down a gulp of hot wine, hoping it would give him courage as well as warmth.

“If you want to kill me, too, do be kind and let me at least finish this mulled wine. It’s… disgusting beyond words, but it’s either this or the wildlings’ fermented goat milk, and even I have my limits.”

Jaime stared for a long time, almost as though he was making up his mind. His eyes glowed like wildfire, lively and sharp, but his voice was dead and scraping when he spoke.

“I don’t want to kill you.”

“No? I wouldn’t berate you if you did. It’s an itch most people find quite hard to rein in. Sometimes all it took is just one look at me. Father, for instance,” Tyrion spat the name as if it were poison. “Did he ever tell you? He wanted to drown me, the day I was born, but I’m sure he didn’t really mean it. He was mad with grief, at the time. After all, I had just murdered the woman he claimed to love.”

Jaime’s shoulders sagged. He looked like a worsened, weaker version of the proud knight who just an hour ago had enjoyed making his lady tenderly smile over her supper.

*Leave Mother out of this,* his eyes pleaded him. But how could he? It always came back to her. To the day when she traded her life for his and carved a hollow space inside their father’s chest, where once there must have been a beating heart.

What would she think of him, now?

He turned his back to Jaime, to hide his tears.

“Why are you doing this?”

*Because that’s what I’m good at,* he wanted to scream at him.

Hit first, hit hard.

He could not wield a sword. Barbed words were all he had.

But this was not an enemy. This was his beloved brother. His grinding teeth bit the inside of his cheeks so hard he tasted blood.

“I don’t know,” he confessed, bitter and miserable.

“He would’ve never executed you, Tyrion. I was his intended prey, from the very start. He wanted me to forsake my vows, give up the white cloak and take my seat as Lord of the Rock. My freedom in exchange for yours. That was the deal. And I would’ve gladly done it, for your sake.”

“Do you think I shot him dead because I was displeased he might sentence me to death or send me to the Wall?” Tyrion snorted with disdain. “You have no idea.”

He emptied his cup and refilled it again. *This is pointless.*

“Then tell me!” Jaime demanded. “Why did you do it?”

*He doesn’t understand.* How could he? Tywin’s Golden Son. How to explain to him that he was the unworthy, dark stain that blemished House Lannister’s perfect picture, eroded its authority, undermined its prestige?

“Because I had enough. Because a man, even a half-man, a little, useless, misshapen monster born
to be the bane of his father’s existence, can only stand so much before he breaks!”

_The only thing I’ve ever wanted was to be recognised. To belong. He would not grant me even that._

“I did everything he ordered for the family’s sake. I saved an entire city and I yielded that power back to him without grievance. I married a barely-flowered child whose family has been destroyed by ours! Nothing was ever enough for him. I did not want to crawl anymore under his table, begging for any crumbs of appreciation he’d throw at me.”

“What about the woman?”

His stomach lurched.

“But talk about her,” Tyrion raised a shaking finger in warning. He did not think about her. Ever. Because if he did, he could still see her, naked and beautiful, with her chestnut eyes, staring full-open without seeing, and a purplish bruise around her pale neck. The bruise he put there.

_My treacherous Lady of the Golden Hands._

“What about the woman?”

“_DO NOT TALK ABOUT HER_!”

He smashed his hand against the glass goblet; the shards scattered across the room and almost struck Jaime as they flew by the crackling fireplace and on the carpet.

Did she deserve it? Gods be good, he did not have an answer! He loved her. He loved her when she had let his hands roam all over her body, opening her like a flower soaked in dew, and he loved her when she clawed his face bloody, trying to beat him off her, and he loved her as he cried and twisted the chain and squeezed and squeezed and _squeezed_. And after it… he did not know what had become of that love, after. When he had no more tears left, and all that remained was just a pit of cold rage. Betrayal, pain, shame, revulsion, regret, and more loathing that he was able to stomach.

And her. Her. Her. Tyrion had tried to forgive, forget, let go, and when he realised it was a losing battle, he did his best to drink himself into an early grave. That too hadn’t worked well either.

He wished he could at least _dream_ of her.

Jaime stood there like an idiot, amongst the wreckage caused by his unhinged outburst, still failing to grasp what was all the fuss about, and Tyrion felt something break like a dam inside of him.

“Do you really want to share whore stories with me, Jaime?” he snarled like a feral beast, his muzzle contorted into a horrible sneer and his fists balled to his sides. “Let’s talk about _yours_, then! The Queen of harlots!”

Jaime blanched.

“Careful, Tyrion –

“You crazy fool! You still think you were the only one? Do you want the names, brother? Your stump was rotting away in the Riverlands and Cersei was opening her legs for cousin Lancel!”

Jaime took a step backwards, looking at him with wide eyes full of hurt and despair as though he was the Stranger himself come to get him: _did he really not know?_ What scant colour his face still
held drained, and Tyrion fought the old impulse to salvage what was left of his shattered heart, laying in ruins at their feet.

But the flood of rage was destructive, all-consuming, unstoppable, and he vomited it all out, mixing truths and lies, hoping that it would wash away this awful, bitter taste in his mouth.

“And after him, the Kettleblack brothers, all three of them, and the gods know who else!”

“Hold your tongue, brother, that’s enough!” Jaime bade, towering over him.

“The Mountain… that maester who’s not a maester… She’s probably fucking Euron Greyjoy as we speak!”

The cold hand Cersei had given him rose and fell upon his back-stabbing lips. Tyrion stumbled against the table. The pot toppled: black ink and wine as red as blood drenched letters and parchments, and his Hand brooch.

With his heart racing, he helplessly chased after the childhood memories he had of Jaime: the golden-haired boy, who made him fly in his arms like a dragon and shielded him against their sister’s wickedness, his playmate.

His hero in white.

Gone. Gone. Look at him. That burning, hard stare. The cold sentence of culpability in his tight, livid lips. He was the spitting image of their father.

Are you, too, blaming me for Mother’s death?

Fresh tears welled in his eyes.

“You’re lying,” Jaime said, his nostrils flaring. Tyrion just laughed. His right cheek throbbed madly and the room swayed under his feet.

“Why should I, when the truth is a hundred times funnier? Just her name spoken aloud is enough to put us at each other’s throats. Don’t you see? You’ve always believed she was the most beautiful woman in the world. The Maiden made flesh. She is nothing but a rotting corpse, hiding the blackest soul I’ve ever seen.”

A venomous monster, holding captive the hearts of the unfortunate souls who chose to love her, twisting, crushing, squeezing the life out of them, until there was nothing but an empty shell. She is Father’s true heir. And deep down, Jaime must have known this too, even if he had closed his eyes to it for so long.

“I hope someday you will forgive me the pain which I have caused you…” his voice cracked. “In the meantime, hate me, if you must. But do not ask me to show remorse for what I did.”

I love you, still, and I miss you, he should’ve added. But he could not will the words past the lump stuck in his throat.

There was really nothing left to say, anyway.

With one last look at him – it could’ve been disgust or disillusionment, or a bit of both – Jaime threw the door open, and stopped dead.

Past his brother’s lean body, Tyrion could see a flash of auburn hair.
Sansa.

Fuck. How much did she hear?

While his brother pushed past her without a word, Tyrion swallowed a groan; he tried to ignore the unavoidable heat of shameful irritation creeping on the back of his neck and held his chin up, barricading himself beyond the secure and familiar walls of his haughtiness.

But his lady still lingered at the door, twiddling her side braid almost as embarrassed as he was, and there was no trace of derision, nor pity, in her wide, startled eyes.

“I’m sorry, I... I’ll come back later,” she hesitated, her cheeks blushing a lovely pink, and moved to part. He ground his teeth, his emotions torn between the desire of slamming the door in her face, duck under the table and get really drunk, and the fear of being left alone.

“Sansa...”

Something in his tone must have made her stop. She gingerly stepped in, her eyes darting around the room to check the damage to the furniture, the broken pieces of glass on the floor and his general state of disarray. He was way past caring.

She gave a sharp nod at his right hand: “You’re bleeding.”

He frowned and looked down. Indeed, there was an oozing gash on his palm which was probably the consequence of his fit of rage.

Blood flowed thickly over the carpet as though he had nicked an artery, but Sansa was unfazed by it; with efficiency, she scooped the overturned chair up, sat, grabbed the wine-stained cloth and held out her own hand, gesturing him closer.

He winced when the cloth touched his injured skin; the wound stung, but her touch was gentle.

“I’m sorry you had to see this,” he apologised as she dabbed the cut clean.

Mercifully, Sansa chose to disregard him.

“I came to thank you, my lord. For what you said to Jon this afternoon. That was kind of you. I love my brother, but he’s...” she let out a distressed sigh. “He doesn't understand.”

A most common trait found in brothers, it seems, he sullenly contemplated.

The King worried about Winterfell’s fate, and reasonably believed Sansa was the key to the North. Just as Tywin did, once. But Jon, at least, was acting in good faith, although this didn’t make his perceived betrayal any less painful.

“He disappointed you,” Tyrion said. “It can't be helped, I'm afraid. I've realised that the more we love them, the more their words can hurt.”

Her Tully eyes locked with his; a curious, searching look that made him feel odd: the meek compliance with which she had acquiesced to stay married to him in spite of everything was a disturbing testament of how devastatingly appalling, both physically and mentally, her marriage to Ramsay must have been. A rush of blind fury made his blood boil; with urgency, he inspected the parts of her he could see for tangible signs of violence, while his mind conjured up in vivid detail any kind of unpleasant imagery. What did he do to you?, he wanted to ask, to crack open that cocoon of wariness and quiet remoteness which had always put him out. He wanted her to trust him
with her pain, her demons, her solitude, her scars, even the most hideous ones that were never meant for show, but he could not forsake the promise he had made her over their untainted marriage bed.

*She knows I would never lay a finger on her, unless she asks.*

And even if she never would, he still wanted her to feel safe around him.

Her warm hands were still cradling his; in the end, the cut was a little more than a scratch. It would mend itself.

“I’m not sure that being still married to me qualifies as an act of kindness, anyway. But it was sure worth it, if only to watch Littlefinger squirm.”

He meant it as a joke, to dispel the tension, but Sansa abruptly shot to her feet, her whole face darkening.

“Littlefinger warned me,” she revealed, wringing her hands. “He said that Jon would have tried to marry me off to secure the North’s allegiances.”

“That lecher doesn’t deserve your confidence, Sansa! Treachery comes easy to him. And murder, too.” She glanced back at him in panic. “Yes, I know he played a role in Joffrey’s assassination. And I’ve always found rather suspicious that Lysa Arryn died so tragically and so soon after their wedding.”

Her silence and the way her eyes skidded away from his were all the confirmation Tyrion needed.

Was there something else? He gave Ros to Joffrey, to teach her a lesson, and, according to Varys, he also paid the Gold Cloaks to betray Lord Eddard. But these were only the things Tyrion was aware of. He suspected him also of Bran’s attempted murder, but he did not have any incriminating evidence and deemed it wiser to keep his speculations to himself, for now. And of course, there still was that trivial business concerning him and his short, regrettable stay into the Eyrie’s sky cells. That was a debt Tyrion was set on paying, soon and thoroughly.

He observed the rigid cords forming on Sansa’s neck, how her body writhed and tautened with dread, her hands clutching the back of his chair, white-knuckled.

“Why are you protecting him? He sold you to Ramsay Bolton.”

Sansa flinched. “He swore he did not know.”

“And you believe him?”

She nervously tucked at her left sleeve, seizing harshly her forearm as though there was something there she was desperate to cover up.

“Sansa! Littlefinger does nothing without profit to himself. He's a hawk, preying on fledglings. Were you to hinder his plans, whether you realise it or not, he wouldn’t hesitate to get rid of you. Send him back to the Eyrie!” he begged.

“I can’t! I… I don’t trust him, but I need him here. He’s my only ally!” she cried out.

Tyrion clenched his fists, gutted.

The queer influence Baelish had over her troubled him, but he did not know how to remove the
menace without making things even worse.

His heart hammered with fear for her. *This is my fault, too. I wasn’t there when she needed someone to rely upon.*

“I’m sorry. It seems to me that so far I did a truly poor job as a husband sworn to protect his wife.”

“You did what you could under the circumstances,” she relented and took a calming breath. And then, a timid smile tugged at her lips. “Do you want to try and make up for it?”

The woods were dark and bloody cold, and the snow in their path almost reached to his stunted knees, making his progress fairly difficult. With each step he took, his aching joints angrily protested and Tyrion wondered once again what ungodly notion had driven him to agree to this.

“Are you sure that meeting Viserion is what you really want?” he raised his oil lamp up to Sansa, who strode next to him holding a lantern of her own, as graceful as ever. “He’s not a pet, my lady. He’s got teeth as long as me. I’ve seen him gobble down a whole goat without a hiccup, bones and horns, and burn men alive.”

“Are you trying to scare me off, my lord?” she smiled down at him. “I’ve been waiting to meet him properly since you landed in my courtyard a moon ago. Are you sure he’s in the Godswood?”

Tyrion sighed, resigned. “You have hot pools, here, if I’m not mistaken. Dragons poorly tolerate this icy weather. He’d rather sleep somewhere warm.”

He glared up at her. *Just as I would.*

During his very first visit at Winterfell, he had often enjoyed long walks alone in these woods: although Cersei and Jaime had frequently complained about its austerity, he had found great solace and a calm, hidden beauty lurking from the twisted branches of silvery sentinel trees, mighty gnarled oaks, and thorny black briers. Autumn had wrapped all their secrets in its rich, orange and dark-red colours, back then.

Now, the crisp sunset of autumn had made way for the shy, maidenly pallor of moonlit snow, and everything – from the rocks on the ground to the pine needles hanging from the trees like daggers – was sheathed in hoarfrost, glittering white and grey and cerulean blue.

Stark colours.

And Sansa, like a fairy queen full of mystery and magic, right in the middle of it all. Winter suited her.

They walked in comfortable silence through the milky mists, until they reached the heart tree and Tyrion stopped, pointing at the golden shadow a few feet ahead.

“There.”

Curling around the weirwood like a cat in front of a fireplace, Viserion was peacefully sleeping in the clearing next to the dark pool, with his wings tucked close to his body and his spiked tail flattening under its weight the nearest pines and bushes of wild blue roses.

Sansa gaped in awe, barely breathing. Tyrion propped the oil lamp against a stump only half covered in snow and trod ahead of her.
“Viserion!” he softly patted his right flank. “Wake up, boy, there’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

The golden dragon lazily opened one amber eye… and closed it right away.

“Come on, you big, fire-farting, lizard, stop being boorish!”

He pulled at his horns, pushed against his belly, prodded at his rear; Viserion did not even stir. His sole reaction was a puff of searing steam from his nostrils and a cross grunt.

“Viserion, I warn you! Your mother will hear of this.”

The air around him sizzled as the tail lashed sideways against the heart tree’s white trunk: the weirwood shuddered and a heap of red leaves and fresh snow fell off the lowest branches, right into Tyrion’s head.

Behind his back, a bright gale of laughter rose.

“You’re making me look really bad!” he hissed to him.

But Sansa’s merriment turned into a terrified gasp, when the dragon raised his enormous head and bared his obsidian teeth in a ferocious growl mere inches from Tyrion’s nose.

“Tyrion…”

Don’t fret, my lady, it’s just a game we enjoy playing.

He moved even closer, offering himself to his jaws, until he felt the heat washing over him.

“Oh, now what? You want to roast me?” he quipped. “I’ll have to remind you that, once you leave out the clothes, there isn’t much left to eat!”

Viserion stretched his neck and jabbed at his chest, fondly.

“Are we done? Very well. Now, behave.”

He turned to Sansa and held out a hand for her. For a moment, she seemed rooted to the spot, torn by a funny mix of indecision, excitement and fear.

“Come,” he beckoned with a shy grin, “do you trust me?”

Her eyes shifted from him to the growling dragon; then, she pulled out a glove and tentatively took his hand.

The woods around them hushed in a suspended state of pregnant anticipation; even the ravens perched over the limbs of the heart tree were watching them. Obsidian statues with ruby and golden gemstones set in place of eyes.

He guided her. Slowly, gently, with bated breath.

Her heartbeat sped up against his fingers wrapped around her wrist, but she did not waver, did not pull back, when he rested both their hands over Viserion’s warm snout. The dragon gave a relaxed hum and leaned into her touch. A smile blossomed over her lips.

“Scratch him, he loves that,” he encouraged her.

When she proceeded to tickle him just over his muzzle, as though he were a horse, Viserion
downright lost his wits about him. He let out a pleased raspy bark and rolled onto his side, exposing his belly to her.

Tyrion’s jaw went slack.

“He’s never acted like this before. With anyone!” he whined, completely jealous (of the dragon or the woman, he couldn’t say).

Sansa shifted between Viserion’s legs for better access and started to rake her nails across his scaly skin, quite vigorously.

Mischievous dimples showed at the corner of her mouth, when she smiled; how come he never noticed them?

*Perhaps because she never did, back then.* Not like she was doing now. Carefree and contented.

“Well, he must know, then,” she lifted her laughing eyes to him, and Tyrion forgot how to breathe altogether. “That I’m your wife.”

*Wife.* He would’ve never dared to dream that one day she would let him claim her as his. He remembered how she had looked, on their wedding night. Eyes demurely cast down. Hands shaking as they fiddled with her laces. The smooth paleness of her skin. Her troubled expression, haunted and vulnerable, when he made her stop.

*I won’t share your bed. Not until you want me to…*

He devoured her now with ravenous eyes, as she laid sprawled over the dragon’s hot belly, giggling as she rose up and down following the rhythm of Viserion’s breathing.

*She doesn’t look haunted, nor vulnerable, now,* Tyrion thought, feeling light-headed. There was a rough boldness to her that wasn’t there before which enticed him and left him shaking to his core.

*Seven save me, I had forgotten how beautiful she was.*

*My wolf wife.*

*The child bride.*

Only, she no longer was a child… The line of her long ivory neck hinting at the treasure of her breasts; the fierce profile of her high-arched nose; the high cheekbones, flushed for the chilly air and for the new emotion. The snowflakes trapped in her hair, glittering like diamonds on a sea of freshly spilled blood… Just the sight of her made his eyes hurt and stirred something within him he had kept hidden for too long.

It was not mere lust; it couldn’t be that simple.

Her palms skimmed across Viserion’s flank, the top of his head and back to his belly again, as gentle as though they were caressing human skin. Tyrion let out a ragged breath and placed his hand next to hers, close enough to fill his nose with the aromatic fragrance of lemons and pomegranates flowing from her.

“He’s magnificent!” she whispered, wonderstruck.

“He likes you,” he mumbled, spellbound. “This shouldn’t surprise me so. Ugly beasts have always had a tender spot for you.”
Her hand stilled and Tyrion wanted to cut his own stupid tongue out. But when she glanced at him her eyes were limpid and unperturbed like the depths of the Sunset Sea and revealed the indomitable pride of the lioness, behind the she-wolf’s skin. She was like tempered Valyrian steel and Tyrion understood there and then that nothing of what had happened to her had truly broken her.

_She’s brave, braver than I’ll ever be._

“I’ve seen ugly beasts in my life. And monsters. I assure you, my lord, you are neither.”

His eyes narrowed in contempt.

_Am I not, dear wife? What would you say if I told you how I disposed of that handmaiden you were so fond of? Have you ever wondered what became of her, after you sailed away?_

If only she could read his mind, right now. He was not a damn knight. He was a whoring drunkard, a stranded freak and a kinslayer. And yes, he did want her madly.

His frustration must have shown plainly upon his grotesque face, for Sansa straightened herself with haste and put back her fur mittens.

“I ought to leave. Lady Brienne is probably looking for me.”

She took the oil lamp neglected in the snow and stared at him expectantly, as though she wanted to add something, or maybe waiting for _him_ to speak.

He waited too long.

With one quick glance at Viserion, she turned around and disappeared beyond the tree line.

His dragon took issue with that: he shoved him, one, two, three times, _hard_ , until Tyrion snapped and whirled around.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I won’t run after her.”

“Why not? It might actually be a good idea,” a voice from behind the heart tree said, and he nearly jumped out of his skin. For a mad second, he thought it might have been Viserion himself. But then, the dragon lifted one of his wings, and from under it Bran Stark wheeled out, his eyes shining with amusement.

“Lord Stark, I… How long have you been there?”

The boy chirped sheepishly.

“For quite some time, lord Tyrion. I’m sorry, it certainly wasn’t my intention to… intrude upon you and my dear sister.”

_Eavesdrop, you mean._ Tyrion pinched his lips and glowered at the dragon. _You should’ve at least warned me, you traitor._

“I came here to speak with Viserion, you see. I still felt quite sick, during our journey back, and I didn’t have the chance to properly apologise for what happened at the Wall.” He brushed Viserion’s horned side. The dragon sniffed at him, but didn’t seem upset. “We’ve reached an agreement about a few things, didn’t we, my friend?”

He pushed his wheelchair closer to the weirwood tree. The eyes of the old carved face were
weeping tears of blood.

“My Father used to come here, when thoughts weighted heavy upon his heart; he would sit down there – he pointed to a moss-covered stone – cleaning Ice, praying for his children.”

Tyrion couldn’t help himself. “What do you see, now?”

“A great many things. Your Dragon Queen, screaming among smoke and salt, and Viserion’s brothers, flying across the Wall, the blast of horns and Sansa, mounted on a silver horse, overlooking a field swarming with soldiers ready to die, and a night without stars and swords gleaming in the darkness, and fire. I see a lot of fire. And you. I see you, too, walking alone on the battlements of the Red Keep.”

The Red Keep… the loud pounding of his heart drowned everything else out. Thoughts and questions jumbled messily inside his mind. Would King’s Landing fall after a siege? What of Cersei? Who would sit on the Iron Throne, then? When would the Wall fall down? Would he ride Viserion to war? Tell me, tell me, I need to know!

“Is that what’s going to happen?”

Bran’s face was a mask of sternness.

“I don’t know. I’ve never said that everything I see will happen for sure. I’m still learning. But all the futures that I’ve seen share one recurring element. It’s something I must tell Jon, something linked to his destiny, to the destiny of all Westeros. Yet, I’m stalling, for I am terrified.”

“Of what?”

“Of change. Of growing up. The moment those words will leave my lips, nothing will ever be the same. I’ll lose a brother. And now that I’m finally home, I’m struggling between my duty and the wish for things to stay as they are, forever.”

Tyrion nodded, in full understanding. He had lost count of the times he had wished he could turn back time.

His musings veered to his family’s recent history. To Jaime and Cersei.

“In my experience, truth, as ugly as it may be, is never wrong. Worse tragedies have been born from men’s desperate attempts to hide it. You’re living proof of that.”

Surely, whatever Bran must say to Jon wouldn’t be as catastrophic and lewd as the debauched tryst that destroyed the innocence of so many lives.

He looked up at the rustling vermilion leaves, wondering how would it feel like to learn beforehand what will come to pass.

“It is a tremendous gift. A terrible gift. Aren’t you afraid they won’t believe you?”

With his eyes closed the likeness between the young lord and the face upon the tree became eerily realistic.

“All the time. But we can’t succumb to fear, can we? Fear is the harbinger of death. And death is so terribly final, whereas life is full of possibilities, won’t you agree?” he smirked mysteriously, and a glacial shiver ran over Tyrion’s back.
I remember those words. I’ve said them to Jaime, while we sat in Winterfell’s great hall for breakfast, discussing cripples and broken things.

The Three-Eyed Raven glanced at him with those bottomless pools of blue which held all the dark secrets of the past and all the riddles of the future, and Tyrion felt as helpless as he did when he found himself on the wrong side of one of his father’s glares.

My own Night King.

“I can’t tell you what will happen, my lord of Lannister, but I have a message for you. From Viserion.”

Tyrion tilted his head to the side, his interest piqued.

“Oh?”

“You should start calling your dragon by a more fitting name: I reckon something like Viserra or Visenya would be better appreciated.”

“What do you mean?”

Brandon Stark smiled.

“Viserion is a girl.”

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know about you, but after Braime, Tyrion/Viserion (Viserra? Visenya?) is my headcanon OTP!
I’ve considered ending the chapter right after the private meeting with Jon, but I felt the chapter needed some light, too, to balance the angst; hence, the scene in the Great Hall was born. And after that, I found that I just couldn’t stop writing. The conversation between Tyrion and Jaime was long overdue (I’m sure the book readers among you have noticed the reference to ASOS Ch. 77) and I wanted to have some Sansa/Tyrion, too: the scene in the godswood is inspired by the scene in Coppola’s Dracula where Mina pets the white wolf (ah, the irony!), and there's also a funny Jurassic Park reference: let's see if you catch it!
I’m also preparing the ground for a few things: Sansa’s growing distrust as far as Jon is concerned, Bran’s revelation and the meeting with Dany…
I hope you’ve enjoyed the chapter: do leave a comment... please? Pretty please?? ;)

Next is Brienne!
The sweet, familiar song of castle-forged steels clashing against one another resounded crisp and fiery and Brienne’s heart luxuriated in each well-aimed blow with barely restrained impatience, as though she was in the middle of a battlefield, instead of Winterfell’s training yard.

With keen, eager eyes, she followed the two fighters, as they held their respective positions moving around the wide circular space, their breaths steaming into the cold afternoon air.

The young man took a defensive stance, trying to put some distance between him and his sparring partner, but judging by the slight resigned look and the exasperated frown between his brows, while he tried without succeeding to bind his opponent’s smart counter offence, Brienne already knew the skirmish was fast drawing to a close.

A timid sunbeam broke through the heavy, low clouds and shattered into a rainbow of colours when the blades rose and fell again, catching the light.

“Arya Stark burst into a gale of laughter and effortlessly skidded sideways, lifting a whirlwind of snowflakes as she swivelled around and came at Pod’s back, swift like a coiling snake, and just as lethal.

She was a joy to watch. A cat playing with a mouse. To try to keep up with her frenetic rhythm and outstanding footwork would be utterly useless. The more Podrick struggled to play at her own game, the more he was tiring.

“Find your footing, Pod! Let your surroundings do the work for you!”
Her former squire just barely deflected the blunt thrusts and withdrew to the western corner of the yard, so that Arya would be momentarily blinded by the setting sun.

*Good, take your time. Regroup.*

But the girl was just as unconcerned by the ruse as if she were fighting blindfolded. Neither sun nor ice seemed to bother her.

“She’s absurdly good at this,” said the short man with the red-golden beard perched on the fence to her right, echoing her same astonishment. “It’s hard to believe she’s the same little girl I remember scampering around this very yard, nearly tripping in her gowns as she carried a longbow taller than she was.”

Brienne snorted at the ridiculous picture. Between her, Bran and little Rickon, Lady Catelyn must have her hands full, back then.

Her eyes found the young lord of Winterfell sitting in his chair up in the covered passageway, patting absentmindedly Nymeria’s head, his stare inscrutable as he tracked his sister’s progression.

“Remind me never to make her angry,” Tyrion Lannister added with a grimace, after another particularly brutal exchange which reduced Podrick to a distressing retreat back to the armoury.

Despite the fact that the outcome of the bout was looking grim for her own pupil, Brienne had to smile. Arya’s stubborn confidence while fighting against stronger and sturdier opponents achingly reminded her of her own training, back on Tarth

*Wait and watch, girl, that was what old Ser Goodwin taught her. Men will always underestimate you.*

Sadly, Pod wasn’t the exception to the rule.

Tyrion craned his stout neck to the man sitting at the very end of the fence. “Is it true what I’ve heard, that she’s poisoned your and Bronn’s wine while you were at the Rock and hung you to the mines’ ceiling like two succulent dry-cured sausages?”

To Brienne’s left, the Hound barked a laugh, his dark eyes never leaving his young charge’s practised movements.

Jaime grunted his displeasure without elaborating further. The humiliation still stung, apparently. She caught Tyrion’s amused twinkle and returned his impish grin, noticing with relief and satisfaction that the burdensome tension which had strained the brothers’ kinship during the past days was relenting to a certain extent where they at least could pretend to be in friendly, although somewhat stiff and overly formal, relations. A small victory, but considering that only a couple of days before they were at each other’s throats, Brienne was more than willing to count it as a considerable improvement.

*Even if Clegane and I still have to sit between them, as a precaution.*

There was something different about this Jaime who had returned from the Wall, which made him both vulnerable and incredibly strong and unswerving. She had never believed in what she read in books about the sudden, almost divine light descending upon the knight when he found a fresh purpose, whether it be a quest to pursue, a lady to love, a house to protect and watch thrive and prosper, or a king to dutifully serve. Jaime Lannister wasn’t filled with light; quite the opposite, in fact. Beyond the casual quips, the barbed smiles and the proud, entitled attitude, a darkness loomed, which, she felt, weighted down on him with the force of new choices and responsibilities
and the clear awareness that the path he had come to choose, despite being the most dangerous, was also the right one.

His beard had somehow become the embodiment of this change. Grown nearly as luxuriant as Tormund’s unkempt auburn bush, it reminded her of him as he was when she first met him. A prisoner, but still Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, the Queen’s man, in every sense of the word, and one of the most fearsome and despised warriors in all Westeros. Now he was in all respects a reprobate, a traitor stripped of his power and wealth, but to her, he had never looked closer to the image of the dignified knight he had always aspired to become.

A familiar turmoil built in her chest and unwittingly tugged at her heart.

The beard truly became him.

By now, it hid the squared chin and the mocking twist of his lips, partially obscuring those high cheekbones he had in common with his twin, and Brienne caught herself staring enthralled at the generous sprinkle of silver blending with the gold into a new harder alloy which brought out the straight and commanding line of his nose and the golden speckles in his emerald eyes.

Far from making him look older or jaded, facial hair gave him an air of austere gravity which she found sinfully alluring.

A horrendous, hot blush rose from the base of her neck and blemished her face in red patches and she had to pry away her eyes, lest she did something she would regret later.

Bloody torture, it was. To put it mildly.

It was easier, when they had been apart, she reflected: when she left him in King’s Landing, her mind was completely absorbed by the task ahead. At the time, along the arduous road in the Riverlands up to Duskendale and Maidenpool, she didn’t have the time nor the energy to brood over anything else but finding the Stark girls.

Now, however, they were always together, not as prisoner and guardian, or hostages waiting to be ransomed, but as equals, allies earning their place each day, and each day putting their oaths and valour to the test, and every word, every look, every touch took a deeper meaning to her burning soul.

The way he sometimes said her name, as though it was a treat to be tasted and savoured to the full. The almost intolerable heaviness of his stare as he smugly watched her sparring against wildlings and soldiers alike. The trusting ease with which she had learned to fall for his contagious smiles, even when he teased her, especially when he teased her; how he would laugh with her, not at her. Here, at the end of the world, she would selfishly bask in the little things nobody would ever take away from her. His respect. His pride in her. And if her rebellious woman’s heart read something in it that in truth wasn’t there, if that made her a witless fool, his whore, even though he never touched her as a lover, and never would, so be it.

“She looks even better than the last time I’ve seen her fight.”

Jaime’s gruff voice almost made her jump out of her skin and it took Brienne a moment to realise he was referring to Arya.

Sensing Tyrion’s mismatched eyes observing her like a hawk, she tried to compose her face in the most neutral look she could muster and raised the fur-trimmed edge of her heavy cloak to her face hoping against hope to cover from his prying eyes the dark red blotches fast spreading all over her
cheeks.

“Her fighting style is like nothing I’ve ever seen,” Jaime went on, his appreciation unmistakable.

“Aye,” Clegane confirmed. “While you cunts were freezein’ your tits off waging war to dead things in the Land of Always Winter, she’s been training hard.”

Tyrion’s eyebrows shot up in confusion. “I was under the impression she already had sword training in Braavos? Water dancing?”

“There’s water dancing and then there’s... that. Whatever it is.” Brienne agreed with the former Kingsguard. To call what Arya was doing mere water dancing was an unfair understatement. It looked closer to a personal blend of Westerosi technique mixed with more exotic ones.

“Water dancing suits her, but sometimes she gets carried away. Too smug about her own skills, that girl is. And on the battlefield, while you’re surrounded by shitting horses, greatswords and men thrice your weight coated from head to toe in fucking mail hauberk and steel armour, smugness makes you sloppy and gets you killed, nine times out of ten.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Jaime nodded in confirmation.

“The battlefield is where we’re all going to end, sooner or later. She’d better get used to the idea.”

“And that’s the reason why I had her learn to fight with a heavier and longer sword, to hone her arm strength and endurance as well as her speed,” Sandor stated.

Only now Brienne noticed that the girl brought her blows more with her arm than with her wrist, like a proper Braavosi training would require.

“That’s a very good point,” Brienne admitted, impressed by the consideration Clegane was putting into her education. “Had I been here, I would’ve had her do the same.”

His burned cheek quirked with amused haughtiness.

“I know.”

“You do have a soft spot on her!” she teased, nudging him with her elbow. The Hound gave a dismissive, noncommittal shrug. The black curtain of his greasy hair hid his expression, but his voice was surprisingly guileless and open.

“Girl’s a tough little weasel. And I respect people who can handle themselves even in the direst circumstances.”

“This doesn’t mean she won’t need protection,” Brienne remarked.

“No, it doesn’t,” the Hound muttered darkly.

She returned her attention on the training ground just in time to see Podrick lose his balance and fall flat on his back, his sword flying from his hand. Impassively, Arya pressed a muddy boot over his sternum, to keep him down.

“Do you yield?” she said, towering small and victorious over him, with her own blade pressed against his cheek.

“I yield, I yield!” he cried out, raising both his arms in surrender.
As Arya helped the young knight-in-training back to his feet, Brienne joined in the brief round of applause and hopped down the fence.

“Well, now I feel bad for the lad,” Tyrion said. “You know, Jaime, I think you should ask Arya to spar with you.”

“What? Why?”

“She’s left-handed,” his brother explained matter-of-factly. “And Widow’s Wail is more suited to water dancing than any other greatsword you previously used. Arya’s unpredictability might actually help you sharpen a different set of skills.”

“What about Bronn? He’d feel rejected if I ditch him. I don’t want to hurt his feelings.”

“Your brother is right,” Brienne coaxed, unimpressed by his attempts to hide his insecurities behind his sarcasm. “As accomplished as Bronn is, sparring just with him can only get you so far. You need to diversify your opponents if you want to re-educate your instincts, and improve your agility.”

A frown appeared over his forehead and she could see he was at least considering the suggestion.

“Maybe I could – wait...” he abruptly turned to her, a hurt expression painting over his face. “Did you just imply that I am slow?”

Tyrion burst into a jolly laugher: “I think she did!”

Her face flared up. “I... That’s not what I meant,” she breathed out, slightly exasperated, but this only bolstered the younger brother’s buoyancy. 

Jaime sulked. “If you’re that concerned about my swordplay, why won’t you spar with me?”

“Because I don’t fancy spending the little free time I have watching you mope after I’d beat you again and again.”

She bumped affectionately his shoulder as they walked to where Arya was showing Pod how to counter a particular assault to his left, where his guard was always lacking in precision.

“When I was her age I would’ve killed to have a real Braavosi master-at-arms to teach me the secrets of the technique,” Brienne said. “Once I even tried to flee to Essos.”

“You did?” he blurted out, his green eyes blazing up with interest and surprise.

“I had just turned ten-and-six,” she confessed, whispering excitedly as though it was a secret she no longer could keep. “I stole a fisherman’s boat from Morne’s north cove and rowed for eight hours straight before Ser Germont’s men were able to reach me. By then, my hands were covered in blisters and I had ventured almost as far as Parchments. Father was furious.”

The reminiscence brought a light, crisp laugh on her lips and a dull ache in her chest. She knew her father’s wrath had only disguised a deeper fear. He was terrified that the Narrow Sea’s treacherous waters and strong current would take her away from him, just as they did with Galladon.

Jaime chuckled. “Did he punish you?”

She shrugged, infected by his mirth.

“He grounded me for a moon’s turn and put guards on my door. In the end, I was so desperate to
have my freedom back that I swore to him I would never try to run away again.”

In truth, she would’ve never sailed away in the first place, had she not discovered about Lord Selwyn’s betrothal plans concerning old Humfrey Wagstaff. Brienne could still feel Roelle’s malicious glare as she brought her the news of her impending marriage: ‘He’s exactly what you deserve: thrice your age, not particularly bold in war, or in bed, if gossip from Grandview is to be believed,’ she had sneered one afternoon during an awful needlework lesson, ‘he’s not very pleasing on the eye, but, then again, neither are you. One could almost say you’re perfect for each other. You must thank the gods to be a wealthy girl from an honourable House or else nobody would even look at you, after that outrageous affair with young Connington. My word! Your lord father has endured you with the patience and clemency of Baelor the Blessed: do try at least to be less insufferably disagreeable than usual, on your wedding night, so that your lord husband could do his duty and put a healthy heir to Tarth in your womb!’

Mercifully, Brienne had put an end to this nonsense in Evenfall Hall’s training yard less than a month later, showing to House Grandison’s castellan that a wife could very well chastise her own husband too, if the whim arose.

_I had no need for sleeping lions, back then, no more than I have now._ She cast a pointed look to her very awake Lion, keeping pace next to her, and smiled to herself.

Jaime cocked his head to the side.

“What?”

“I’m reconsidering your offer to train you.”

His eyebrows shot to his hairline, his whole face lighting up in playful challenge.

“I’m game if you are, wench.”

While the squires and the young recruits cleared the training yard for the next sword training sessions, the two of them approached the young lady Stark and Podrick: the lad had an apology for his poor show of mastery written in his kind eyes.

“Don’t be ashamed, Pod,” Jaime intervened, clapping him lightly on the shoulder. “More gifted knights have fallen for her tricks.”

As Pod took his leave, the young woman slid her sword on its scabbard and turned to her and Jaime.

“Pod is truly a fine lad, but he’s all thumbs! He makes a mess out of even the easiest counter.”

Be grateful you did not have the pleasure of his company when he used to cook rabbits without skinning them first.

“I’m quite surprised he had managed to beat you, Lannister. Cripple or not,” Arya said in a slightly patronising tone. Jaime crossed his arms against his puffed chest, on the defensive.

“Sheer luck. He was wielding a Valyrian blade and I slipped.”

“Did you? Really?” Brienne’s voice was innocent, but her narrowed blue eyes mocked him ruthlessly.

It was such a rare occurrence to find him lacking in some way, that when it happened she enjoyed
teasing him a little bit, just as he would have, had the roles been reversed, without feeling too much guilty for it.

The sound of horns announcing the arrival of guests at the gates blasted through the courtyard and drowned out whatever clever retort Jaime might have on the tip of his tongue.

“Who’s coming?” Arya called to the Stark sentries patrolling the battlements.

“Black bears on a green wood, my lady!”

Her spirit lifting considerably, Brienne marched to the Hunter’s Gate and was among the firsts to greet the Little Bear, when she rode inside the inner courtyard with her small retinue of men-at-arms.

“Lady Brienne!” Lyanna Mormont greeted as she dismounted swiftly. “I’m so pleased and relieved to see you well.”

“And I you, my lady. I trust the passage through the bay and the Wolfswood has been smooth and uneventful.”

“You mean beside the freezing gale and the blizzards?” she shook the snow off her cape and cloak with an irked jerk. “We had to wait out the storm in bloody Deepwood. Three days holed up with pious Lady Sybelle, can you imagine? And the roads were a muddy nightmare. My palfrey nearly broke her leg tripping over the ice. How fares the King?”

The girl struggled to sound polite and casual, but the nervous way with which she fumbled with her dark tress in the attempt to make herself presentable, and a slight blush as her eyes darted to the solar’s windows, trying to catch a glimpse of those familiar black curls and sullen brown eyes, gave her away.

Brienne smiled reassuringly. “The King fares well. I’m sure he will be very happy to have you back.”

Her teasing tone earned her a slightly disgruntled scowl of warning before the lady turned her attention to the man in front of her: in his black, nondescript wool cloak hiding the red-and-gold breastplate beneath, Jaime stood still, bearing the scrutiny with graceful composure, but when finally the young girl’s eyes settled upon his golden hand, Brienne tensed up, feeling suddenly sheepish.

“This, my lady, is Ser Jaime Lannister.”

She almost held her breath, fearing rebuke or disapproval, but the glowering lady Mormont only let out a dour, laconic Ah. Not very encouraging. **Her mother and sister died at the Red Wedding. What did you expect? A blessing?**

Jaime seemed mostly unfazed by the cold acknowledgement and broke into his most charming smile.

“Lady Mormont…” he bowed gallantly, “I’ve heard a great many things about you.”

“So have I,” the small, black-haired lady replied, deadpan. “I thought you’d be taller. The way Brienne constantly praises you, it would seem that you were a seven-feet-tall, golden half-god.”
Brienne’s eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets; she audibly sucked in a breath, gaping at the girl in shock, simply too mortified to even care about the deep blush currently blooming over her pale cheeks.

Jaime shifted closer to her, and her heart skipped a beat: she didn’t even need to look at him to know that his characteristic conceited grin was gracing his face once again. Lyanna was smirking, too. The impudent, crafty little viper. She glowered down at her, somewhat ineffectively. Her fists balled tightly to her sides. *I should turn you around over my knees and give you a good, well-deserved spanking.*

“Welcome to Winterfell, Lady Mormont,” Bran Stark’s soft voice chimed in from their backs. Despite the new short haircut and the fresh shave revealing the still smooth features of the lost child he once was underneath, every day new lines and crinkles seemed to appear upon his pale face, similar to the stern ruggedness of an old tree bark. Sometimes, Brienne considered with dismay, he looked more ageless sylvan creature than human being. Not now, though. His eyes, usually far away, lost in an unfocused vision of some distant past or unfathomable future, were now wakeful and completely absorbed by the blunt, young lady of the bears in front of him.

“My lord. Bear Island rejoices for your safe return.”

Dimples appeared out of the corner of Bran’s lips. “I thank you, Lady Lyanna. I was waiting for you.”

Lyanna curtsied, quite gracefully.

“This is my sister Arya,” he nodded to his left. “I reckon you’ll get along perfectly well.”

The two girls clasped each other’s forearms in warm greeting.

“I’ve heard you killed old Walder Frey and his two eldest sons,” Lyanna said appreciatively.

“Among other things,” the younger lady Stark beckoned with a wolfish grin. “I’ll tell you all about it over a meat pie. Come, you and your men must be starving.”

While Arya and her brother escorted lady Lyanna in the Great Hall, Brienne was still rooted on the spot. The heat radiating from Jaime’s body close to hers – both a taunt and a tease – was almost unbearable.

Silently lifting up a prayer to the Gods for the earth to open and swallow her whole, she struggled to ignore his stare and tried to flee. But Jaime’s left hand seized her fur cloak and made her turn.

“A golden half-god, wench?” he gasped in fake consternation, his eyes twinkling a vibrant emerald green full of mischief and delighted vanity.

Shame and anger battled for dominance upon her reddened face.

“Shut. Your. Mouth!” she wrenched the hem of her coat from his hand, seething as she stormed off with long strides.

“Don’t be upset, my lady!” he jeered after her. “If you want to hack me to pieces and punish me for my ungodly beauty, I suggest we retrieve our swords first!”

Luckily, her blushes would go unnoticed where they were headed. Whether it was day or night, the forge was one of the most crowded spots on the castle’s premises; its warmth was a most welcome reprieve from the winds of winter howling over the battlements, drawing in even people who had
no business whatsoever in the blacksmith’s shop.

The hearth’s fiery breath hit her face as soon as she barged across the threshold, with a still laughing Jaime not far behind. The small benches aligned against the walls were bursting with young squires, waiting for the smiths to patch up their lieges’ armours or to shape new shoes for the horses, soldiers dressed in grey, orange, green, red colours, sharing saucy stories over a horn of mulled wine, and old, tired farmers from the village wrapped up in tattered clothes, not at all bothered by the rhythmic pounding of the sledgehammers against the large anvils. Some wildlings were nestled half-asleep near the bricks at the base of the hearth, close enough to share in its invigorating heat, but not too much to be singed by the sparks crackling every now and then over the floor. All around, the Southern drawls mixed with the sharp accents of the Northern regions in an almost comical cacophony of drunken slurs, gross laughter and shrill cheers.

Brienne and Jaime made their way across the sizzling vapours which rose from the slack tub each time cool water was poured to quench the hot metals; near the fire pot, under master Clem’s stern look, a group of excited children took turns at the bellows to pump cold air right into the burning coals, erupting in high laughter as they pretended it to be a dragon’s gullet, scorching red hot, ready to char their enemies to a crisp.

Tongs in one hand and fuller in the other, Gendry Waters’ slim silhouette appeared out of the acrid, grey mist, intent to his craft.

Brienne smiled proudly: among soot and sweat, the young smith definitely was in his element. Wearing a more practical apron of brown boiled leather, instead of the Lannister armour which had concealed him so well from the Queen’s wrath and had brought him to Winterfell unharmed, Gendry struck and folded the metal with unremitting blows, focused and tenacious as the Smith himself.

When his blue eyes caught Brienne’s, he laid his tools over the bench to his side, wiped the sweat from his brows and greeted them with a shy grin.

“Master Gendry!” Jaime’s voice boomed over the loud noises. “I see you’ve perfectly settled into your new position.”

The boy snorted and shot a deathly glare at Winterfell’s master armourer.

“Old Clem hates me. He says I’m stealing all the business, but it’s not my fault if I’m faster and better.”

And humble too, Brienne mentally added, fairly amused. She could not be sure, but she had an inkling it might have been a personality trait he shared with his late father.

“What have you got for us?” she asked.

Gendry went to the nearby wall where swords, hammers and pieces of armour hung waiting to be tended to, and grabbed the two familiar ornate scabbards.

“Here,” he gave her the crimson one, then pointedly added when Jaime lifted a sceptical eyebrow: “Returned to its rightful owner. Not even a scratch on it.”

Brienne had to smother a giggle recalling how the knight had threatened the young smith with bodily harm just two days prior if only he’d damaged her sword in any way.

“Thank you, Gendry,” she said and unsheathed the steel by half of its length. Just to make sure everything was as she had left it. It was not that she did not trust Gendry, but to be parted with
Oathkeeper, even for a small amount of time, had been downright agony. She had watched with a mix of shivering horror and inquisitiveness as Gendry had started his examination by separating the blade from the gilded hilt with a well-struck blow of his hammer and afterwards she all but fled from the building, her heart faltering, for she could not stand to watch, no more than if Gendry were a maester performing a difficult surgery on the body of a loved one.

But looking at it now, her fears were quickly melting away: Oathkeeper seemed even more beautiful than she remembered: dark red and black as night the ripples gleamed by the auburn embers of the fire like living flames, and again heat spread from the hilt to her fingers, diffusing to her arm and chest, as though she held a pulsing heart into her hands.

*It truly is a sword fit for a hero,* she considered, carefully caressing the sharp edge.

“What did you find out?” Jaime enquired.

“Not much, I’m afraid, m’lord,” Gendry said, giving Widow’s Wail back to him. “I’ve tested them, their weight, their balance and grip, their resistance to fire... as far as the swords’ craftsmanship is concerned, there’s nothing odd with them. I think your concerns should be addressed to a Maester rather than a common smith.”

“He’s right, you won’t find answers in the blacksmith’s shop,” Arya appeared from the smoke as stealthy as a wraith, a chicken leg in one hand and a small trencher loaded with cheese, crusty bread and a slice of lamprey pie on the other. As soon as he caught sight of her, Gendry straightened his back, and vigorously rubbed a dirty cloth all over his hands and face to try to clean himself from the soot. Brienne stifled a laughter, noticing that the lad had, if anything, made things worse, but Arya seemed not to mind in the least: eyes sparkling with delight, she placed the plate on the bench, humming softly in answer to his ‘thank you’, then sat and ravenously sank her teeth into her chicken in a very unladylike way.

“Ice was forged five hundred years ago, at the time when dragons still ruled over the skies, during a winter that lasted for almost ten years,” she explained with her mouth full. “A blade forged from winter, to fight winter, Old Nan used to say. Its shape may have been altered, but ancient spells and dark magic are still embedded into it. Who knows what kind of power truly lies in it.”

She rubbed the grease from her mouth with the back of her sleeve, in a gesture which strongly reminded Brienne of the Hound, and plainly glared at the lion on Oathkeeper’s hilt.

“Have you spoken about it with Bran?”

“Briefly,” Jaime quickly replied in her stead. “He didn’t have much to say. Nothing of great import, anyway.”

Next to him, Brienne stilled, baffled.

Why was he lying?

A shiver of apprehension ran down her neck as she exchanged a wary look with the knight. Ever since their brush with the wights beyond the Wall, she had been wondering about Oathkeeper’s strange reaction, and after Jaime had revealed that his sword too had acted queerly in the forest, anxiety and misgiving had rooted and festered in her soul like a disease. Everyone at Castle Black had witnessed how Widow’s Wail had apparently healed Bran’s arm, so when, upon their arrival at Winterfell, the Three-Eyed Raven had demanded to see both of them in private, Brienne had been relieved, believing that all their doubts and qualms would soon be dispelled.
But instead of giving them answers, Bran’s words had been a knife twisting in her guts and had plunged her heart in a state of constant horror and alarm.

‘Everyone of us will be called to great sacrifices,’ he had begun without preambles. ‘Brothers will clash against brothers. Lovers will be torn apart. Everywhere I turn, every time I close my eyes... I see fire. Even now. Even here.’

‘What about the swords?’ Jaime had prompted.

The boy’s eyes were so much like her dear Lady Catelyn’s, sad and full of long-suffering strength, that she had recoiled, when he had turned them on her.

‘I saw you,’ he had said, pale as a corpse, ‘floating in a sea of red, and your sword, broken at your side, drinking up the life of the lion.’

She had felt the room sway under her feet, but the Three-Eyed Raven had cloaked himself into a stubborn, heavy silence, which neither Jaime’s urgent demands to know more, nor her terrified pleas had been able to lift.

‘It is not time yet,’ he had whispered, and that was all.

The matter hadn’t been brought up anymore, between them, but it was impossible not to make the connection... A sword as hot as fire, tempered into the lion’s blood...

Her fear had a name, now. A name she had been repeating in her mind incessantly for the past two days.

Lightbringer.

The Red Sword of Heroes that shone like a star against the black canopy of the open skies and held within itself the same life-giving warmth of an undying flame.

Was it truly possible?

From Westeros to Asshai, from the Shivering Sea to Yi Ti, anywhere in the known world legends sprang about the Long Night and the valiant hero who fought against it... Azor Ahai, Eldric Shadowchaser, Neferion... the names and wording might change from place to place, but in the end, all the tales sounded the same... The safe pressure of Galladon’s hand as he guided her across Tarth’s eastern pier in search of sailors willing to share their tales with two children was a still fresh memory in her mind, and so was the thick Qartheen accent of the oarsman who, for the first time, had recounted the marvels of that sword of fire and how it came to be such a portentous weapon...

... And so for seven days and seven nights, through forests and deserts, the Son of Fire hunted down the beast. The noblest, the bravest of the creatures. The lion, mighty in strength. But for all the traps he built, for all the pits he dug, the lion was free and wise, and could not be lured out of his den by deception. Only a maiden’s touch could tame him. So Azor Ahai followed a young girl deep into the woods, to the lion’s secret hiding place. Beast and man fought a whole day, and eventually, when they were both bloody and hurt and exhausted beyond words, the Son of Fire plunged his sword into the lion’s heart... The steel shone red hot, as it avidly drank and drank, and with his last roar, the beast yielded his pride and his honour so that the sword could be tempered... and yet, in the end, it still broke, for even that sacrifice had not been enough...

She was only five years old, back then, but she had cried warm tears for the beast’s unfair fate, for his death had seemed far too cruel and completely useless, even if Galladon had tried to comfort her by telling her it was just a story.
But now, was the legend doomed to become true?

Since their conversation with Bran, her nights had been restless and filled with horrible forebodings... A lion, tricked to his death, lying lifeless by her feet... And she, standing in a pool of scarlet blood...

Whose blood was it?

Cersei’s? Tyrion’s? Or...

Brienne did not dare articulate an answer, could not even bear to muse about her own role in it, the cold fear triggered by those revelations still too raw to be translated into rational thoughts.

She only half-listened to Arya as she offered to make some inquiries amongst the oldest of the village, whose deep knowledge of northern legends spread across continents and seasons, and when Jaime took his leave, Brienne immediately followed him outside.

The wind had risen again, so cold and merciless that her lungs actually hurt when she took a deep breath. A few steps ahead of her, Jaime walked as unperturbed as always, were it not for the stiffness at the base of his neck and the way his fingers twitched on the hilt of his son’s sword, little signs of distress she by now had learned to read. Her hand curled around Oathkeeper, as anguish gnawed at her heart.

“These swords belong to the Starks,” she called and Jaime halted. “Do you think...” her voice cracked and faltered and she had to wrench the words out. “Do you think we should return them to Jon, so that they could be reforged again into one?”

For now, neither Jon nor Sansa had formally bid them give the Valyrian blades back, but, although she felt it might be the right thing, the honourable thing, to do, a part of her bled at the mere thought of relinquishing Oathkeeper, of losing that familiar lightness in her hand, the audacious prowess the steel seemed to lend her in battle, the comfort of its weight at her side. Its reliable and safe nearness, while she slept.

Another part of her, the part closer to her fears, the part that whispered to her doubts and fed her insecurities in the night, hoped that without her sword, Bran’s vision wouldn’t come to pass.

Jaime’s jade eyes searched her face, hard and piercing, and glided over Oathkeeper’s pommel. His jaw clenched.

“The wolf king is more than welcome to have mine, if he wishes so,” he uttered. “But he won’t take Oathkeeper from you, lest he wants to start an argument he can’t win with me. I gave you that sword. No matter what happens, it’s yours. Till the end.”

Her heart stirred with a delicious flutter of elation and pride at this; the intensity in his voice moved her and at the same time burdened her soul with an unspeakable sadness which chilled her to the marrow, as though she would never were to see the light of day again. She lowered her head, unwilling to meet his stare.

In the courtyard, swords, spears and sticks still clanked and struck, scraping against shields and leathered armour plates. The last sparring of the day.

Above all the distracting noise, Jaime let out a harsh breath.

“Do you ever think about it? How our fight would’ve ended, if we hadn’t been interrupted?”
The sudden change of topic took her by surprise, and she blinked at him in confusion.

“The fight on the bridge, you mean?”

She could still hear his taunts as he rained down steel upon her, eager to end her life… ‘You’re good. Graceless, but good.’

“I need not think about it.” He lazily stretched his arms behind his head, on his lips that damn grin which made her want to either slap or kiss him senseless. “I know I would’ve won, in the end.”

Brienne scoffed. “Won? You and I have very different recollections of that fight.”

She would’ve won, for sure, but from time to time she had wistfully wondered… had he been in his prime, unchained and healthy, instead of weak and worn from captivity and travel, oh, what a wonderful fight that would’ve been!

“Please, even after all those months rotting inside Riverrun’s dungeons, I was still better than you,” he stood his ground. “Hadn’t my hands been tied up, that little quarrel would have ended at the first bout.”

Brienne laughed incredulously. “Keep telling yourself these pretty little tales, as long as it makes you feel better about yourself. Maybe someday a bard would write a song about the time when you almost beat the Maid of Tarth with your hands chained up.”

Jaime snickered.

“A couple of reprises more and a good attack on your left, where you always have a blind spot, and you’d have yielded,” he said, seemingly forgetting how his arms had grown tired and numb, weaker and slower, under her blows, and his breath had soon become shallow and fevered after only a few exchanges.

“I never yield!” she exclaimed, indignant, and in that moment realised with perfect clarity what he was doing.

He was goading her. Distracting her from visions of broken swords and dead lions and icy blue eyes staring at her from the dark. The realisation came too late: Jaime already had her exactly where he wanted her. Galled and ready to pick up a fight. He seized her up and circled to her right, in his eyes both a challenge and a lazy, easy mockery.

“I’d like to test that theory. Besides, I still haven’t forgiven you for betting against me, at Castle Black. I ask satisfaction for the insult.”

A thrill of expectation ran through her like lightning and her hand reflexively closed over Oathkeeper’s rampant lion’s head. She cast a glance to the yard: to the west corner, arrows hissed as they flew and hit their hay targets to the rhythmic sound of ‘Nock!’ ‘Mark!’ ‘Draw!’ ‘Loose!’, while old Hobb and Anguy corrected feet positions and fingers’ hooks on the bowstrings. The middle space was almost completely packed with wildlings, and small groups of Stark, Mormont and Lannister soldiers as Bronn and Thoros of Myr were engaging into a boisterous sparring against Tormund and his men before supper was called. Lady Lyanna was there too, following the fight only half-heartedly, engrossed as she was in something Bran Stark was telling her.

Brienne arched an eyebrow, nodding to the men grunting and sweating in the middle of the place.

“Those poor fellows?” Jaime shrugged. “Mere amateurs. What say you, my lady? Shall we teach them how this dance is truly done?”
His mouth curving into an irresistible, jeering smile, he held out his hand to her.

If Brienne were another kind of woman, a wiser and more prudent kind of woman, she would have said no. She should have said no. Because by now, she knew fairly well that what would have been a simple, innocent sparring between comrades-at-arms to everyone else, would take a whole different meaning, when it came to the two of them. And there would be nothing innocent about that.

For sure, it wouldn’t help to abate the rumours, if she were to ‘dance’ with him, here, in the open, where everyone could read her joy and desire written upon her plain face. History taught her that following Jaime Lannister into whatever stupid plan he might concoct without thinking about the consequences meant looking for trouble.

But stronger than her hesitancy and her well-laid precautions was the temptation to teach him a lesson, and, by the Gods, she loved this. Revelled in this. This… intimacy, this private joke between the two of them. It almost seemed that, were she to be granted to do this, just this, for the rest of her life, to be prodded by Jaime Lannister into a fight they both knew had no winners or losers, then she would have been truly, completely happy.

So, against her better judgement, although there were too many people watching, she surrendered with little to no resistance and let him lead her to the centre of the yard; the crowd parted, to thunderous clapping.

“Perhaps we should use blunted swords,” she suggested when Jaime unsheathed Widow’s Wail and tried its weight on his arm, as though getting acquainted with it from scratch.

“Afraid I might hurt you, wench? Don’t worry, it can sting a little, I’m told, but I will be gentle.”

Her ears flamed at the innuendo, but her eyes stayed fixed on his, calm and assertive. Don’t fall for his ruses.

Not even caring about hiding her flushed cheeks from him, she held her chin high, ignoring the jarring voice whispering into her head with disdainful sharpness ‘I’m strong enough’. 

“Alright, then,” she agreed, freeing Oathkeeper from its own scabbard. “Do not weep when I’ll knock you on the ground.”

Jaime took a stance and raised his sword, ready to greet hers with a kiss. “It’s been a while, since the last time; I’ve learned a trick or two that might surprise you.”

He didn’t even give her the time to raise her own sword that he was all over her with joyful abandon. Oathkeeper slashed the air with a crystalline whistle when it met its sister blade’s high blow and returned the kiss with the same fervid enthusiasm. All around them, the throng which had gathered to watch the Maid spar with the Kingslayer erupted into loud cheers, but Brienne was deaf and blind to anything else but him, whirling around her, stalking her, mirroring her steps, as their two swords sang in a sweet harmony of blood and steel. The most beautiful music she had ever danced to.

She did not give him a reprieve, either, and assaulted his unprotected right side… Jaime drew back and she followed, pressing, her sword sliding up and down, thrusting, lunging forward and blocking…overhand, backwards, low, low, side-stepping and attacking again. They fell into a brisk rhythm, to the point where it became increasingly difficult to say who was leading and who was following. With Oathkeeper, her reach was greater than Jaime’s, and yet Brienne could not touch him.
He had improved, she thought as she paused to catch her breath. It was unnerving, actually.

She brandished her sword with both hands, put all her weight on her right leg and went for his flesh wrist. He swerved to his left, deflecting just in time and swayed back with a surprised pant that soon turned to laughter.

“Careful, wench! I already lost a hand because of you!” he chided.

“You lost your hand because you’re an idiot who never knows when to shut up!” she scolded, but her eyes were warm just as his were amused and they went at it again, their Valyrian blades whirling in a silver blur... faster... faster...

“Getting tired, already?” she mocked him after another couple of countermoves, when he took a step back, letting the point of the sword fall to the ground.

“Tired? I’m just warming up.”

He retreated to the fence from where an hour past they had watched Pod take a beating, and pulled off his red cloak and the grey furs beneath, revealing the leathered crimson breastplate and the brown jerkin underneath.

Her heart suddenly in her throat, Brienne pressed her lips together and let out an irritated huff through her nose.

Bastard.

Beneath all the wool layers a man required if he wanted a chance to survive in this cold, she had almost forgotten how lean, taut and well-built he truly was.

A golden half-god, indeed.

Well, two can play this game, she mused sticking her sword’s point into the snow-covered, muddy soil. And then her hands moved without thought, rapidly unfastening the laces, and her coat, the coat Tormund had given her, was tossed unceremoniously into Bronn’s arms. Smiling in satisfaction like the cat who just licked all the cream, Jaime raked his glowing eyes all over her.

She shivered against the wind, against his smile, and their swords kissed again and again, ravenous and unceasing.

The crowd was cheering louder, now, attracting the curious eyes of the household and the other soldiers scattered around the castle’s perimeter. It didn’t take long for the men and women assembled to side with either of them, and soon tips and shouts of encouragement reached Brienne’s ears.

“C’mon, Ser Jaime! She’s almost done for!”

On the edge of her vision, Brienne recognised Ashlynn’s short, honey-blond hair, flowing wildly as she bounced up and down and excitedly grabbed Podrick’s arm.

“Looks like Tarth is rooting for the Lion of the Rock,” Jaime breathlessly exhaled with an easy grin, blocking a low blow to his left.

A yell of Evenstar! EVENSTAR! rose at her back. Lyanna. She locked the swords to their hilts and pushed forward, her hips almost colliding with his in the momentum. Neither of them was going to give in and admit defeat, and the feeling was exhilarating.
A laughter of freedom and contentment bubbled inside her and threatened to surface.

“I’ve got House Mormont,” she countered with soaring levity.

Jaime gritted his teeth and pushed back. The dark red leather about his broad shoulders strained under the effort.

“No wonder here, considering your fondness for bears.”

Harrenhal.

Don’t think about Harrenhal.

Don’t think about how he jumped into that damn pit, without a hand, without a sword, and stood between you and certain death.

He didn’t owe her anything, and yet, he came back, when he had no reason to, at all.

He came back then, just as he came to Winterfell, forgetting his own blood, his oaths to a woman he had been completely devoted to for the last twenty years, choosing instead the harshness of winter and the constant judgement and blame the others cast on him without knowing, without seeing. And for what?

‘Why do you think he came all the way up here? To enjoy the weather?’

Her gloved hand twisted and grated in frustration against Oathkeeper’s hilt. No, don’t go there.

Flustered, she grunted and bent the swords to her side, trying to free herself from the deadlock they trapped each other into. As they struggled, something changed, right there.

His eyes were a wildfire of conflicting emotions, his own thoughts clear as though spelled on paper for her to read, and she knew what he was about to say even before words flew from his lips.

As warm as sun’s kiss, his breath caressed her face.

“Do you remember the baths, wench?”

Nononono, do NOT go there. Focus.

“I remember them vividly. Every. Single. Detail.”

His eyes dropped to her flat chest, past their locked swords and lower, and she couldn’t hold back the shudder in her breath and the quiver in her arm muscles. For she too remembered every single detail of it. And if once she would’ve been ashamed, now she only felt pride and an odd sense of belonging, as though at least part of his boldness and raw honesty had become ingrained into her essence ever since.

He shared his sorrows and weaknesses, he let her scrub the mud away and when he rose again he was a completely different man and, to her, he had never looked more achingly beautiful.

That was it. The moment. The instant she held his head above the water as he reminded her, and himself, of who he really was – Jaime, my name’s Jaime – over and over, until exhaustion took him under, and her heart started to beat to a new tune.

“I should have let you drown in it!” she shouted and slammed her shoulder heavy into him. Their swords finally sprang apart and Jaime fell back, a pleased smirk for having thrown her off balance.
“For fuck’s sake! Just kiss already!” Bronn’s voice boomed from across the yard, and roaring laughter drowned out the rest of what Brienne gathered to be a lewd comment. They could all go to the seventh hell, for all she cared now. She only wanted to wipe that impertinent smirk off his face, so she charged again, cornering him under a brutal storm of blows, striving to hush her own confusion and the havoc his eyes and words were wreaking inside her head with the shattering uproar of steel against steel.

I’ve got him, Brienne silently exulted, when in his retreat Jaime’s back hit the fence and he seemed to realise he had nowhere else to run to. She steadied herself for her victory strike, just when someone called from the Great Hall’s open double doors: “Supper’s ready!”

As though everyone had been waiting for that signal, one after the other, the crowd of people scattered away, completely losing interest in the fight. Brienne stopped in mid-motion, clearly taken back and more than a little disappointed. Apparently, the lure of a steaming-hot meat broth was much more appealing than standing in the training yard stomping their feet for the cold and watching the two of them doing… whatever it was that they were doing.

She wasn’t exactly sure.

The yard cleared almost completely: near the armoury, only Tormund stayed behind, sulking and glowering at the both of them with his arms crossed tightly above his chest and his lips twisting into an expression that might have suggested either disgust or deep bowel cramps. As she watched him angrily stride off and disappear into the Great Hall, Brienne guiltily wondered how she must look: red in the face, breathless, her sweaty hair plastered on her forehead… She briefly peeked at Jaime, while he straightened and put back on his furs, and found him equally flushed. Her heart made a flip when he turned to her with a brazen smirk.

“Well?”

“Not bad,” she conceded, the echo of the words he had flung at her along with his sword a lifetime ago rumbling deep in her mind like the promise of a thunderstorm.

“For a cripple?”

He remembers, too.

She didn’t even try to fight her own grin: “For a hedge knight, say.”

He advanced toward her, all brash defiance and dangerous charm, sword in hand as though set on settling the score between them once and for all; she sheltered herself behind Oathkeeper’s raised point and let its tip gently graze his neck. Just the right amount of pressure to make him heedful, without leaving a red mark.

“An old one,” she further remarked.

At that, Jaime cracked into a snorting, belly-laugh, that had him soon grabbing his side, in stitches, and she was pretty sure she had never heard such an unrestrained sound coming from him before. It was ringing, rich, releasing. Oddly young-at-heart, too, with an unexpected twinge of teasing sarcasm which – Brienne wondered – was directed more at himself than at her.

It was also extremely contagious.

Teeth sunk hard into her bottom lip, as she managed to control her own giggling fits. Jaime sheathed Widow’s Wail, then carefully wrapped his hand around her sword’s edge, shifting the pointy end to his side, eyes the colour of molten spring, and, with the same tone someone else
would use to say words of endearment to another, prettier, woman, simply said: “I yield.”

His gaze lingered somewhere between her chapped lips and the exposed patch of skin on her neck, as though he was trying to peek at the scars left by the bear in Harrenhal. “My brother tells me that somewhere in the godswood there are hot natural pools,” he added. “Shall we try them out, for old time’s sake?”

Her face burned up. The gall of him.

Not trusting her own voice enough to refuse him – or to take him up on the offer – Brienne wordlessly turned around to retrieve her coat and kept walking until she was back inside the safety of the keep.

Regardless of the hot bath she had taken, alone, her muscles were still sore and stiff from their sparring, when, half an hour later, she came down for supper wearing clean warm clothes and a deep-blue cloak with Tarth’s pale crescents embroidered in silky silver threads – a thoughtful gift from Lady Sansa.

The Great Hall was bursting with people.

Alys Karstark was bound to reach Winterfell in the early hours of the morning, but her van was already here. A small garrison of young, loudmouthed soldiers, sentries and scouts mostly, with their house’s white sunburst proudly sewn over their tunics and their beards still coated in hoarfrost for their travel. Ale was flowing freely and, despite the fact that the banquet had just begun, they were already roaring drunk.

Brienne let out a groan; all the good seating places were already taken and she didn’t really feel like sharing a trencher with Tormund, tonight.

Normally she would’ve sat at the Mormont’s table, to have a quiet chat with the young lady whom she hadn’t seen in weeks, but Lyanna was up on the dais, caught up in deep conversation with Bran, and was utterly ignoring Jon Snow who was seated to her right. Pondering with a shake of the head about the fickleness of first loves, she made her way across the hall to the Stark table near the hearth and squeezed herself between Hallis Mollen, the good-natured, loose-tongued Captain of the Winterfell guards, and a smart, ginger orphan boy, one of Mollen’s young recruits, simply known as TomToo.

The serving girls had just put down on their table mugs of mead and trenchers with pork-and-barley stew, kidney pies and brown rye bread, when Brienne spotted Jaime walking in the hall like he owned the place. She shrank on the bench, striving to melt with the wooden furniture and disappear from view among the chaotic sea of white and grey cloaks and the hot mist coming from the near kitchen doors, but she recognized the precise moment when he noticed her, for his eyes seemed to absorb all the light from the torches. With the same silent elegance of a lion stalking its prey, he moved to her table, dodging the requests coming from the nearby Lannister table, from squires and grown men alike, who were inviting him to spend the evening with them, and threw a hostile glare at young TomToo, sitting to her left.
“Scuttle away,” he said, deadly. The poor lad picked up his stew bowl and tankard of ale and hurriedly found another seat far away from them. Barely acknowledging her presence, Jaime dropped on the bench, so close their elbows were practically brushing as he stretched over the table and reached for the pewter pot of stewed pork and turnips. Her hands’ skin tingled, clammy and feverish, as the clean smell of the lye soap he must have been using drifted into her nostrils.

There was something weird, in his glassy gaze, in his whole attitude, something not entirely pleasant… a nervous energy, which had him look both colder and heady.

Brienne squirmed, slightly uncomfortable.

What had brought forth this change?

She had left him, laughing and jesting in the training yard, only an hour ago. Did he and Tyrion bicker again? That would easily explain his disagreeable mood and the reluctance to speak to her. As far as she could see, the younger brother didn’t come down for supper, but that was hardly proof of anything.

She did not understand.

“Is everything all right?”

“Of course, wench,” Jaime snapped, bitingly. “Fine. Why wouldn’t it be so?”

To their left, the Karstark table shook with coarse laughter: ale tankards and trenchers thumped against hard wood as the men japed and cursed and lifted their slurred voices in bawdy songs, until someone launched himself into a wailing, completely out-of-tune rendition of *The Bear and the Maiden Fair*.

Next to her, Jaime tensed.

*It’s just a bloody song, doesn’t mean anything.* She took a calming breath. *The journey from Karhold is long, cold and hazardous. Let them entertain themselves for a while.* Stabbing the stew in her plate maybe a little more heatedly than usual, she tried to quell the searing suspicion coiling at the pit of her stomach suggesting that the worst was yet to come.

“Word is that the damn Maid o’ Tarth fought against some bear, in Bitterbridge,” one of the Karstark men, the one who appeared to be in charge of the small brigade, butted in. He talked with a slight lisp and a thick northern accent.

“Ye stupid twat, it weren’t Bridgetbitt al’right – spluttered another one above the snickers of his mates – *Bitterbridge… ev’ryone knows ‘twas Riverrun!’”

“Anyway,” the lisp resumed, “I tell ye, when the bear saw her stark nekkid an’ drippin’, ugly as sin, he done ran away, wrecked beast that she was!”

“Bear had ne’er seen that hairy a sow ‘fore!”

That triggered another shrieking bout of laughter. Her stew had suddenly turned into wet wool into her mouth. She chanced a look at Jaime. If his behaviour had seemed detached and harsh only moments ago, now there was an empty, wild darkness in his fixed stare, which Brienne believed she had never seen before.

“She sleepin’ with ‘em lions, nowadays,” the Karstark guard bellowed, loud enough for half the hall to hear. “The bloody Kingslayer an’ his whore!”
Jaime’s knife clinked against the trencher, as he raised from his seat, with deliberate slowness.

“Jaime, no!” she hissed and yanked his right forearm, trying to pull him down back on the bench.

They were drunk. They would’ve never dared to say any of this in from of him, or her, had they been sober. *Words are wind.*

His touch was gentle as he unclasped her trembling fingers from his jerkin, but his eyes were cold and ablaze with fury. She detected a stirring commotion at the Lannister board: Bronn had already risen up and was discreetly instructing his men to surround the table, one hand disappearing on his back, where Brienne knew he always concealed his dagger.

*This could spin out of control.*

At loss, she rose too and followed her companion. Lady Alys’ men were too engrossed into their drinking, to pay them the slightest attention.

“He must be truly desperate. Some courage it takes to go from the queen’s cunt to… *that!*”

“D’ye reckon his cock ‘as fallen off from sheer shock?”

“There!” the younger among them, a good-looking boy with striking ash-grey eyes and the shadow of a stubble on his chin, tipped his coppery head in their direction with an edged sneer, finally noticing Jaime. “Now ye can ask him.”

The others spluttered ale and stew from their mouths and noses, snorting and coughing through their hilarity, until their eyes were leaking tears.

She saw Jaime ground his teeth.

“Apologise to the lady.”

Without turning around, the Karstark soldier, the one with the lisp, quietly gulped down another mouthful of ale, wiped his whiskers with the hem of his cloak and got into Jaime’s face, his ink-black eyes gleaming with loathing.

“I’ll apologise to that mingin freak when ev’ry single little Lannister shite an’ their whores will hang from the highest branch tree.”

There was no warning.

Dishes, trenchers, bowls still half-full with broth and meat, cutlery and mugs flew out of the way and rattled to the stone floor, as Jaime hurled the man across the table. A flash of gold glittered sinisterly and all of a sudden the Northerner was writhing in pain, blood splattering from his mouth and nose.

The rest of Alys Karstark’s van jumped back, shouting insults and curses, and in a blink of an eye everyone, Lannisters, Starks, Karstarks, Mormonts, had their swords raised to someone’s else throat.

“*Drop your weapons, all of you!*” somebody yelled, and Brienne realised it was herself. She could not hear anything else, except the awful crunch and clatter of teeth shattering against the gold of Jaime’s hand, and Jaime’s own voice, lethally soft.

“She is the Lady Brienne, Evenstar of Tarth. Apologise, *now.*”
Eyes watering, the man emitted a muffled yowl and gagged against the metal, his laboured breath coming out in strangled gurgles and rasps.

“What? I didn't catch that.”

The soldier tried to fight him off and stand up, but Bronn thrust his head even harder against the wooden table.

“What’d you say? Should I cut the wanker’s tongue off?” And to underline the seriousness of his threat he unsheathed his dagger.

“What’s going on here, my good men?”

_Thank the Gods._

“Ser Davos,” Jaime greeted amiably, his ferocious eyes never leaving the body pinned under him, “I was teaching this disgusting little maggot some manners.”

Davos Seaworth placed a gloved hand over Bronn’s forearm.

“Put your dagger away, ser. You too, gentlemen! Unless you’d rather have the King to settle the matter himself.”

A thick, strained silence swelled on the hall. They all turned to see Jon Snow rising from his seat, one hand gripping the fur around Ghost’s scruff, the other lingering over Longclaw’s hilt.

“You’re all honoured guests, beneath this roof,” the Onion Knight pressed on. “You ate the King’s salt and bread. You better remember the sacredness of those laws, before you disgrace yourselves even further by sullying these tables with your acts. _All_ of you.”

One by one, they all put back their blades into their scabbards.

“Jaime…” Brienne pleaded.

Somewhat grudgingly, the knight released his iron grip on the soldier’s neck. The man staggered back and spat a chipped molar to the floor. His mouth was a grotesque mask of blood, broken bones and spit.

“Aye,” he hissed, “ev’ryone know ‘ow much respect the lions ‘ave for the bloody sacred guest rights. Or any other oath, for that matter.”

Her feet moved on their own accord. And so did her hand. Only when she saw the Karstark soldier sprawled on the floor, a hand cupping his left eye, where a purple bruise was rapidly forming to match the ones he was already sporting on the lower half of his maimed face, Brienne realised what she must have done.

Her gaze drifted from her knuckles, smeared with blood, to the stunned looks the others were exchanging, and she felt her knees go weak.

Even Jaime was gaping at her – half shock half awe –, despite the fact that it was all his fault.

It was as if he had ripped the blue armour off her and had fed her naked body to the greedy, merciless glares of the room.

She should have let it go, forget the whole thing… but to speak about broken oaths and _him_ in such a contemptuous way…
Stupid. Stupid and reckless.

The gossip would never end, now.

Rage, at him, at herself, pulsed loudly behind her clouded eyes and left her breathless and dizzy. The room’s walls were closing in: pushing her way through the crowd, Brienne dashed outside, before sickness got the better of her.

Night had fallen fast over Winterfell and, without much of a thought, her feet raced to the darkest part of the castle, where the light of torches and braziers struggled more to fight off the gloom of winter and the sounds were muffled by the high, pristine snowbanks piled up along the pathway and against the inner walls. Glistening in and out of focus through the silvery curtain of flakes cascading from the pitch-black sky, the Broken Tower loomed above her like a gaunt spectre, lonely and unforgiving, and she squeezed her eyes shut, trying to even her breathing and stop her head from spinning.

“What’s gotten into you, woman?”

He came after her. The idiot.

Fighting the stinging itch on her palms, she whirled around and shoved him, hard. “How dare you? How dare you!”

She was so infuriated that even the cold could not touch her.

Jaime reeled back, not even trying to defend himself, staring at her open-mouthed as though he didn’t understand what annoyed her thus.

“They were drunk!” she filled his charged silence. “They won't even remember what they said tomorrow morning.”

“Now they will.”

Look at him, all proud of himself like a green lad who just won his first brawl. His small grin only enraged her more.

“Oh, so you’re going to smash the teeth of anyone who would dare to speak ill of me?”

It was easier for her to unleash her frustration on him than to admit that she had practically done the same for him.

“What else should I have done? Sit quietly while they were insulting you?”

“You're calling me names even worse than that!”

“No, I’m not!”

No, you’re not, but that’s not the point, damn you!

Everyone saw. They saw! And my armour is gone.

Her eyes burned. “You insult me at every moment! You're insulting me even now!”

Even in the scarce light coming from the guards’ hall she could see him grow pale. His sullen eyes anxiously flickered to the bottom of the hollow tower and then, icy and hard, strayed back to where she stood, unflinching in the falling snow. In the same spot where Bran Stark lost his legs.
He curled his fist as though he wanted to smash it against the tower’s cracked stones. “Pray tell, my lady, how is my current behaviour untoward or shameful to you?”

“I can fight my own battles, ser, I’ve been fighting them since I’ve been old enough to hold a sword, and for way longer before you came along.”

There were always men like those, and Brienne had learned from a very small age to let them speak their minds, as insulting as it might be, and ignore their barbs, rather than react and retaliate on their same ground. Where words failed, her steel spoke for her.

She was no damsel in distress, why would he, of all people, try to make her into one?

“I don’t need you to rush in my defence every time someone is brazen enough to disrespect me.”

He closed the distance between them in two long strides, until their faces were mere inches apart and she could smell the wine in his breath. A cold fury simmered in his narrowed eyes. Brienne flinched, startled. She’d seen that look over his face before, but never directed to her.

His voice came out grating and ragged, more growl than whisper: “Next time they call you my whore, then, how about I’ll just confirm it?”

Blood drained from her cheeks.

“I’ll share a laugh and some juicy details with them, or even better, I could rip that ugly wildling pelt off you and fuck you right here in the snow until you’d be begging me for more. That’ll make it real enough for them, won’t you think?”

No. Stop. Why?, Brienne wanted to scream, but she was simply stunned into silence.

There was a violence in him, in his words, meant to hurt and tear apart, of which she’d never considered him capable; he had been spiteful and bitter, too, on the road to King’s Landing, but never cruel to the point of taking pleasure from someone else’s pain. Least of all, hers.

She stared at him, her own eyes wide and lost, and watched his face change from vindictive anger to something closer to frustration, as though he was trying to explain something crucial to her, but the words were coming out all wrong. His face screwed in disgust.

“Now, that was disrespectful, see the difference?” Jaime said with a despondent grimace, before turning around and leaving her there, alone and heartbroken.

As sharp as needles, tears prickled behind her eyelids, and she hated him. She hated her own body, and the jolts of pleasure his words had stirred into her belly, and for a short, mad second she was tempted to answer him in challenge: Do it! Show me how strong you think you are!

Shaking from wrath and want, Brienne felt herself crumple from the inside out, like a leaf thrown into the fire: small, cold, hopeless, split open just like when her septa would mock and demean her for the most inconsequential thing… she would not tolerate this, not from him.

First blood was drawn, and there was no coming back.

“Ser Jaime!”

A bit. A taut snap in his retreating back. Almost an afterthought. Then his stubborn boots moved again, sinking slightly into the deep snow.
“Kingslayer!”

That definitely got his attention.

He pivoted, and she unsheathed Oathkeeper. The sword seemed to soak up all the light which was twinkling feebly from the yard.

“All right,” Jaime sighed, and Widow’s Wail glimmered just as ghostly. “Have it your way.”

It was not like the sparring in the training yard. There was nothing safe, nor amusing, in the ghastly way the blades screamed through the night air, like fire-tempered glasses exploding in shards against a stony darkness. Elegance and gallantry had given way to a ruthless absence of rules: fast and angry and wordless, the swords bit and soon a heavy numbness descended upon her arm.

Oathkeeper’s hilt was warm into her sweaty hands, and the steel too: a slow pulsation, a thrumming similar to the one Brienne had felt beyond the Wall, but there was no time to wonder if Jaime was feeling it, too.

The pathway was slippery and clogged up with fresh snow. She stumbled a little, her sword missing its aim, and Jaime easily brushed the attack on her left side, trapping her between the Broken Tower and his own body. With the hard stones scraping at the back of her head, she struggled, twisted, tried to wrench herself free, and finally managed to bind his blade and deliver a blunt smack with the flat against his wrist. Window’s Wail sank into the snowdrift, but it was a short-lived victory. Her right wrist was caught in an iron vice that would surely leave bruises and was rammed against the granite rocks.

Once, twice, three times, harder and harder, until with a yelp she did what one skilled swordsman should never do, under no circumstance. Your sword is an extension of your arm, Goodwin always said, Lose it and you’ll lose a part of yourself with it.

Oathkeeper slipped from her throbbing fingers and went to join its sister on the ground; with an enraged shriek, Brienne elbowed his guts and barehanded tackled him to the ground. They rolled in the dirty snow and fought until their clothes were wet and mud-caked and she was straddling him.

Their breaths mixed in the heavy air; she forced his arms above his head and the sharp movement caused the upper half of her body to press flush against him.

That was when she felt it.

Him.

Swelling against her thigh.

Her own breath caught in a startled gasp as he went very still under her.

Even a maiden such as herself knew what that was.

She also knew that in the throes of fighting, pretty much like in the throes of passion, it often happened. Blood ran faster, when steel sang.

This has nothing to do with me, she mentally curbed herself. It was an involuntary reaction to a very strained situation, and she wouldn’t berate him for it, but still... liquid desire, more consuming than rage and modesty, pierced its way through her body and pooled, searing hot, at her core.
Like an answer to a primeval call, her hips experimentally rocked and pressed harder into him.

His jade eyes went wide with shock and fear and a tender vulnerability which aroused and astonished her at the same time.

Overcome, she loosened the grip on his arms and Jaime used that moment of incertitude to press his advantage: he flipped her over and she found herself pinned under his weight, both her arms crossed over her chest, immobilised.

“Yield!” Jaime commanded, the emerald of his irises completely devoured by a darker hunger.

“NO!”

“Yield, you stupid COW, or I’ll…”

Her forehead collided with his face with a force that sent him flying onto his backside.

Finally free, she shot to her feet as though the ice at her back had suddenly turned to fire.

“Seven Hells! What was that for?!” Jaime cried out, doubling over in pain. Blood was tainting his jerkin and the snow at his feet.

The lion’s blood.

She panicked right there and then, torn between her lust and the boiling certainty that, had she stayed longer, she would have broken a lot more than just his nose, and left without another word.

The sept was mercifully empty.

She shut the double doors behind her as though there was an entire army of dead things at her heels and stared into space, trying to catch her breath: the sad beauty of this half-wrecked place, wearing battle wounds of its own spoke to her in ways no other place in Winterfell did.

The Boltons had burned it down in contempt, when the castle was sacked, and the signs of the fire were still visible, like black and brown scars, over the original masonry, but Sansa had it rebuilt in memory of her lady mother right after the Battle of the Bastards, even though almost no one in Winterfell had worshipped the Faith, back then. Although Brienne couldn’t forget what this place originally was, a gift from a husband with a guilty conscience to his young, scorned wife, she often came here, to light a candle, to have a moment for herself without endless interruptions.

She tiredly collapsed over one of the benches closer to the altar where tallow candles were slowly burning scattered at the feet of seven small graven effigies, and raised a single prayer; not to the Maiden, whose gentle smiles taught birds to fly, or the Warrior, whose courage she had often tried to mirror, but to the Father, stern-looking, but inherently just, virtuous and wise. Quite like the father she had loved and cherished in life and whom now she missed with a yearning that brought tears in her eyes.

What would he think of her, now? Would he be still proud of her?

*In the end, what matters most is not honour. It’s love,* he had written to her. But what would he say of the man her heart had chosen, the man she desired more than summer itself?

The heat from their previous encounter still coursed wildly through her limbs, making her skin
tingle with aching need, and she brought her hands up to cover her flushed face.

“Bloody idiot!” she burst out against her palms.

“If you’re referring to my brother, I wholeheartedly concur.”

Nerves frayed in alarm, Brienne jumped up, her hand flying instinctively to the scabbard on her left side, only to find it empty.

Half-hidden in the semidarkness under one of the benches, Tyrion Lannister stared up at her with open curiosity, a goblet in one hand and a wineskin in the other.

“My lord!” she breathed out, heart leaping in her throat, “I thought… Am I interrupting your prayers?”

“No, my dear. As someone way wiser than me once told me, I don’t pray anymore. This is just the perfect place to hide and gather one’s thoughts for a while, won’t you agree?”

The knowing tweak on his scarred lips had her turn a darker shade of pink.

“You seem rather…” upset, Lady Brienne.”

His probing eyes wandered over her damp hair, her burning cheeks and the awful state of disarray of her clothing.

“Did I miss something interesting at supper?”

The irritating half-grin he wore now was so much alike his brother’s that Brienne had to resist the urge to smack him hard over his large head.

She slumped on the bench with a jaded sigh.

“I expect Ser Bronn is looking for you as we speak, to give you a detailed account of this evening’s events. I don’t want to spoil his fun.”

This elicited a short guffaw out of him. He wobbled out of his hiding place and offered her the still half-full cup of wine.

“You look like you need some of this, too.”

“I’d rather not. I don’t hold my liquor very well.”

The short man snorted and took a seat next to her. “Fancy that. Tall and strong, and doesn’t hold her liquor. It’s a joke! You’re putting up with not one, but two Lannister brothers. Believe me,” he pushed the cup into her hands and filled it to the brim, “you need the liquor.”

The wine tasted warm, if a bit sour, but at least seemed to soothe her restlessness.

“When was the last time we’ve met?” Tyrion asked, genuinely interested.

She took another sip.

“King Joffrey’s wedding, my lord.”

“Oh. The happiest of times. You must have made my sister’s acquaintance, then.”
I don’t serve your brother, Your Grace.

The Queen had been so beautiful, that day.

Beautiful and vicious.

All polite, edge-cutting smiles and mean green eyes that had shredded her to pieces with one single look.

One single, blunt remark.

But you love him.

The not-so-veiled slanders to her honour and loyalty were nothing to her: she could bear the insults disguised as praises with a gentle smile over her lips, just as she was taught to…

But you love him.

Jaime was right there, glorious and striking in his Kingsguard attire, and she could feel his worried stare, while his sister, the sister he loved and fucked, ripped her heart out, sneering at her ungainly body as if to say: What do you think you’re doing? He’s mine.

He’s always been mine.

Nothing had ever terrified her more.

And the fun part was that, had the Queen not prodded further in her desire to win and humiliate, Brienne would have been left blind and clueless to her own feelings for who knew how much longer.

The sept was freezing cold and she could not conceal a shudder.

“Yes,” Tyrion muttered, raising the wineskin in a bitter toast, “that’s the feeling my sweet sister usually inspires.”

Another long swallow.

“People put a great deal of energy into making us believe we would never be worth anything. Yet, despite their ill will we survived.”

“Maybe that’s what makes them even more resentful,” she pondered aloud, deadpan.

His shoulders shook so hard in merriment that he spewed some of the wine down on the front of his furry cloak.

“Let us raise a toast to that!” the Imp glowed up at her, his queer eyes crinkling. “May we always prove them wrong.”

Once again, he tipped the wineskin and Brienne drank with newfound eagerness.

“Is it true, what I heard? You’ll take your leave tomorrow?” she asked.

“I must, I’m afraid. I’ve been away from Dragonstone for far too long. I regret leaving before I could clear things up with my brother.”

“Jaime loves you. And I know for a fact that he wants nothing but your happiness.”
“Oh, as far as my happiness is concerned, I’ll wager I’ve dropped down a few notches in his list of priorities. Which makes me wonder about you.”

“Me, my lord?” Her eyebrows furrowed. “I don’t understand…?”

“No, of course you don’t. But that’s part of your charm, isn’t?” he considered her with an approving smile. “There’s a very obvious, very peculiar air of innocence, about you, my lady. It’s plain as day what he finds in you. My dumbass of a brother, I mean.”

She hid her blush behind another sip from her cup.

“Sansa spoke to me about you. She told me how you came into her service. You’re clearly not a woman who gives her loyalty away with an easy heart.”

That was an understatement.

“I’m definitely not.”

His gaze pierced through her as though she was made of glass: “Yet, you trusted Jaime.”

That was the bottom of it. It all came to that. Trust. Respect. An admiration born from deep aversion that soon turned into something quite different, truer and stronger. How could she explain that, to her, there were no men like him?

The answer was, after all, rather simple.

“There’s more honour in him than in any other knight I’ve ever met in my life.”

The wineskin Tyrion was bringing to his lips froze in mid-air; some shocking realisation seemed to dawn on his bulging eyes. He leaped down the bench, all trace of irony and playfulness gone from the marred face.

“He told you about Aerys.”

Her eyes dropped to her fidgeting hands. It was not shame that made her reticent. Those were not her secrets, and she felt an odd sense of possessiveness in how she defended them – Jaime’s heart – from prying hands, even if those were Tyrion’s.

The younger Lannister nervously shuffled his feet against the cobbled floor and cleared his throat. “Here’s the fact about Jaime. For all his life, he hasn’t known anything but Cersei. Cersei is the reason why he donned the white. Why he tossed a ten-year-old boy from a window. Every choice he took, for better or for worse…she was behind it, in one way or another. He hasn’t desired pretty much anything else since he was born clutching her ankle.”

Hands wringing at her cloak, Brienne nodded in understanding.

“So… imagine my surprise when I’ve heard that, instead of returning straight away to King’s Landing, after Roose Bolton had given him his freedom back, he rode back to Harrenhal, out of obligation to a woman who should’ve meant nothing to him.”

Her skin crawling in discomfort, Brienne blinked rapidly back at him: she did not like where the conversation was going.

But Tyrion was implacable. “And the rumours that reached me in Dragonstone? Even odder… the Lord Commander of the Lannister army leaving the queen’s side to ride up North, where, very
conveniently, that same homely woman from Tarth, the one who still should have meant nothing to him, had pledged her sword to the Lady of the castle.” Then he added, with a coy half-grin: “Only it wasn’t really her sword, wasn’t it?”

The allusion was more than clear. Brienne felt herself burn up in flames.

“He’s… I… He did not come to Winterfell for me!” she stuttered incoherently.

“Sure! And I’m the secret lovechild of a fair giantess and a grumkin with a penchant for wine and women! What I mean to say, my lady! – he hastily pulled the hem of her cloak, when she stood up and threatened to leave – A beaten dog will always come back to the master who struck him, if he hasn’t anything else to turn to. But what if there is something else? Something better, something worthier to fight for, something to give him new hope?”

Tyrion lightly touched the silver moons Sansa had stitched with thorough attentiveness over the garment.

“They call you the Evenstar… A light offering guidance to stranded travellers. I fear we’re going to need some of it soon: the nights are getting awfully long, and colder. Seems like an utter waste of valuable time to be spending them alone.”

She didn’t know how to respond to that.

With a flourish of his hand, he wrapped his cloak around his neck, bowed his head in a curt nod and took his leave.

His wineskin was forgotten on the bench, on purpose, Brienne suspected, and she caved in to the impulse.

Some liquid courage was exactly what she needed right now.

She retraced her steps back to the Broken Tower, but the only traces of Jaime were the red-brown drops of blood tainting the immaculate snow and his footsteps retreating to the Guest House. The swords were gone too.

*It matters not*, Brienne mused, and perhaps it was the wine that made her bold. *I know where to find him.*

A few minutes later, she was knocking at his chamber’s door, armed only with a cotton cloth and a basin of warm water: her own small offering of peace.

A sliver of golden light warmed her face and streaked into the hallway, when the door cracked open what little for her to catch a glimpse of the contused profile on the other side.

“Have you come to finish the job?”

“Let me in,” she beseeched him.

The chink widened as Jaime’s body took up all the space on the threshold.

“For someone so concerned about bloody honour, I’m rather appalled to find you here, wandering in the middle of the night around the men’s quarters, trying to sneak into the Kingslayer’s bedchamber. In case you haven’t noticed, people do tend to gossip,” he mocked fiercely.
She rolled her eyes.

“Truce, my lord!”

“Truce? Mhm, fascinating concept. I seem to recall a truly annoying, stubborn woman standing naked in front of me babbling about truces and how you can’t have them without trust!”

Before she could retort, he tried to shut the door back into her face. Instinctively Brienne shoved her boot into the small opening and forced her way in.

His room had the efficient, tidy austerity of a soldier at war: only a camp bed with a stray mattress covered in furs, a folding table with a chair and a small cabinet over which, discarded between a half-empty flagon of wine, a cup laying on its side, and some parchments, rested his golden hand. That was the only out-of-place thing which could indicate a degree of trouble.

“Your sword is on the bed. Take it and get out!”

She ignored his rude attitude and went to pick the Valyrian steel: not only had he retrieved it from the snow, but he had cleaned and wrapped it in a dry doeskin cloth, waiting for her to claim it back. In the end, his concerned actions spoke louder than the harshness in his words.

Her thumb lovingly stroked the rubies on the lion’s head, gleaming by the light of the small fireplace. His eyes burning, he stared at her as though she was undressing or doing something similarly improper and indecent, and she unsheathed the blade back in its scabbard, trying not to think about how he had felt against her under the Broken Tower.

Jaime clenched his mouth and silently turned his back to check his beaten-up face over the smooth surface of a bronze trencher.

“Don’t fret,” she baited him, busying herself with her basin of water, amused despite herself by his conceitedness. “You’re still prettier than me.”

Sulking, Jaime looked askance at her deformed reflection and snorted: “Small effort.”

He complied, although somewhat grumpily, when she beckoned him to the chair to better inspect his bruises. The thin skin around his nose had stretched and ruptured because of the swelling, and there was a small cut where her forehead had impacted, but the bone did not seem further injured. There would definitely be purple and yellow welts in the morning, though, but it was a small price to pay for his pride.

When her fingers pressed on each side of the bridge, maybe a little harder than necessary, he nearly jumped off his seat.

“Ouch!” his hand flew to grasp her wrist and still her movements. “You broke my nose, you bloody woman!”

“Stop fussing like a babe! It’s not broken.”

“Well, it hurts like if it were!”

Her lips twitched at his petulance. She dipped the cotton cloth into the basin and squeezed the water excess out, then gently cupped his chin and started dabbing at his wound. His gaze followed each small brush of her fingers and she tried to concentrate on the blood crusting his beard, instead of how close they were – so close that it would take her only a little drop of the head (and even less courage) for lips to meet lips – or how intimate the situation was.
I’ve already washed away dirt, blood, pus and vomit from this man’s body.

Jaime was so sick, back then, that he would fade in and out of consciousness at the slightest touch and probably still had no clear recollection of those days.

But he was fully awake, now, and her palm trembled and tickled against the thick roughness of his beard.

“I apologise for the way I’ve spoken to you,” Jaime said, soft as silk.

“I can take care of myself,” she replied, more tersely than she intended.

“I know. That’s not the reason why I’m apologising.”

Her eyes found his for one brief moment. She let out a bashful breath and relented.

“I shouldn’t have lost my temper as I did. That was foolish. I’m not used to people coming to my defence.”

The water turned pink when she scrubbed the cloth in it.

“Don’t worry,” he snapped to his feet, snatched the cloth from her hands and mopped off the last traces of blood from his lips. “It’s the first and last time I bother.”

She let him have the last word, even though they both knew it wasn’t the first time and certainly wouldn’t be the last, but Brienne couldn’t shake the feeling that something else, besides the obvious, must have provoked this anger.

Her eyes trailed after him as he stiffly poured some wine into his goblet and swallowed it in one gulp.

“Something happened.”

Jaime lifted his gaze to her, a strange mix of doubt, disillusionment and fondness, and gave her a sad, crooked smile.

“Your eyes are sharp as well as beautiful. A rider came, right before supper,” he handed her the crumpled parchment on the cabinet, his voice suddenly tense. “From King’s Landing.”

It was an official edict, emblazoned with the Queen’s personal sigil and coat-of-arms and inscribed with her Hand’s neat handwriting.

She skimmed through it quickly, but she had to go back to the first few lines, for fear she might have misread. She read them twice, then a third time, but the words still made no sense whatsoever. Her confusion must have shown plainly over her face, because Jaime impatiently grabbed the paper.

“Here – he obliged, livid – I’ll read it for you.

By Royal Decree, let it be known in all the Realm that Ser Jaime of House Lannister, our own beloved brother, has defected to the enemies of the Crown, leading a host of eight thousand men north of the Neck, and is henceforth denounced as a traitor and a false knight.

The Crown strips him and his accomplices of all rank and titles, of all lands and incomes and
holdings, and bids him return to the capital without any further delay, to answer to his charges.

A royal pardon will be granted to his generals and their families, provided that they cease at once any seditious activity to be reinstated into the Queen’s army.

Generous rewards will be given to those who will help to bring the rebels to justice.

Anyone else who will have given them shelter, food and assistance of any kind will be punished accordingly.

May the gods have mercy of their souls.

There! Signed and sealed… Cersei, First of her Name, Protector of the fucking Seven Kingdoms!”

Everything clicked together: his bloodshot eyes and the unmistakable smell of wine in his breath; his hot-tempered attitude; the maddening way he had moved and talked and felt…

His knighthood… gone…

How was it even possible?

“She can’t do that, can she?”

“She’s the fucking Queen,” he spat. “She does what she wants and she always wins, didn’t you know?”

Her mind was frozen in horror.

The knighthood was all he had left, the last vestiges of a shattered summer dream.

She had heard him say hundreds of times how the title didn’t mean anything to him anymore, how it was just another name people used to call him out of duty and habit, in the same way they would call him Kingslayer more often than not, but she knew him. She knew his heart. Deep down, stronger than disappointment, there was pride, that sense of belonging to something far greater than just him which any knight had felt at least once in his life. There was hope.

And to think it was his own sister who had crushed this dream to ash… Robbing him of his oaths was an unnecessary evil, just for her own amusement.

She couldn’t believe that Cersei would sink so low.

The small space of the chamber grew even smaller, while Jaime paced back and forth in a frenzy, muttering curses, savagely kicking the pieces of furniture as he went: “A bounty over my head, like a common criminal. She ordered to bring me back to King’s Landing alive, mind you, so that I will have to endure her scolding, too!”

He seized the golden hand on the cabinet beside him and threw it against the opposite wall. Brienne didn’t cringe away.

“A fine, gracious woman with a great sense of humour, my dear sister is,” he seethed, his shoulders stooping under the burden of betrayal and deceit. “I became one of Aerys’ Seven because she asked me to. And now she’s the one divesting me of my sacred oaths right when for once I’m doing exactly what I vowed to do the day Ser Arthur has anointed me.”
“What about your men?”

“I freed them from their pledges and gave them leave to go… Many of them have wives and children still living at court, and I can’t…” His hand closed into a tight fist in front of him, as though he meant to punch something with it. Possibly himself. “They won’t leave. They said they’d rather die fighting in the cold than do my sister’s bidding. I’m lucky,” he added with a scathing smile. “I command loyal, brave, incredibly stupid men.”

His impotence floored her.

_He’s trying. He’s been trying so hard._ Unshed tears stung in her eyes.

“There’s more,” Jaime said. He moved towards, close enough to touch her, and mutely passed into her hands another message.

It was a small note, smudged with purple stains of wine.

Only a line, hastily written, clearly addressed to him alone.

‘Come back to me. I need you. We’ll rule together. I love you, I love you, I love you!’

_Do you, Jaime? Do you still?_

She didn’t dare to ask. She didn’t dare to meet his eyes.

Quaking from head to toes, reeling in a haze of indignation and confused jealousy, Brienne crushed the parchment into her fist and swallowed the lump past her dry throat.

“Are you riding back?”

“I probably should. To avoid retaliation on Winterfell.”

His voice sounded distant… dejected, defeated, completely drained out, and she was pulled back to a quiet, fire-lit camp in the Riverlands… and him, laying there, crying and dying, and giving up…

_You coward… You sound like a bloody woman…_

He was just as battered… fragile and beautiful like she had never seen him before, and so exhausted, as though he had just lost a screaming match with a raging storm of broken illusions, that something deep inside her shifted out of control. The bubble which still barely contained her emotions burst open, as a devastating wave of wrath rippled and curled in the pit of her stomach, surged through her, mounting and mounting, until she was completely overpowered.

“You’re not going anywhere,” her voice shook.

He flinched.

“What?”

“You’re not going anywhere!” Brienne repeated fervently and marched to the table where he had dropped his sister’s decree.

“We’ll talk to Jon and Sansa, and your brother, too. We’ll face the consequences when the time comes. And this?” she brandished the piece of paper as if it were a knife. “This… is… utter folly!”

The parchment screeched when she ripped it into shreds, smaller and smaller, until there was
almost nothing left to throw into the fireplace.

She stared as the flames feasted on the last charred fragments, like flesh surrendering to a sacrificial pyre.

They were only words. Webs and lies.

“I hate this. I hate the power she still has over you. That she can still poison your mind wielding the love you bear for her like a weapon to torment and hurt. And I hate that some part of you still thinks she’s got the right of it, and that you deserve everything because you’re less than you were without your sword hand, when in fact you’re better!” she blurted out to his face, unbridled. Her natural restraint and common sense of decorum must have forsaken her completely and her heart throbbed on her sleeve, dancing dangerously close to the edge of the abyss.

Her lips parted in a staggering hitch as she realised a second too late how recklessly far her own candour had pushed her, beyond the familiar boundaries they both had built around themselves, for their own protection. And now they stood in front of one another, in an uncharted territory, equally shocked and raw and wanting, and Brienne just couldn’t bear it.

“I’m sorry…” she baulked. “I… I shouldn't have said any of this…”

Tears welled in her eyes. The door was right there, before her; she rushed past Jaime, grabbed the round handle and pulled it inward. Jaime’s hand shot up and slammed it shut again.

Brienne whipped around, and the fire in her belly sparked again.

Feral and terrified and demanding, his eyes were the only real thing in the world… a dark, hungry gaze which emboldened her and made her want to weep all at once.

_He’s had too much to drink. He has his sister in his mind._

_Come morning, he will regret this._

Still, she waited and hoped, as she tasted the wet, warm saltiness over her lips.

And then, something wavered and changed in Jaime’s look.

Maybe it was her tears, maybe some other thought which sobered him up.

The arm that was holding her captive against the door fell limply at his side and he took a step back, drawing a heavy breath through his nose.

She could’ve bridged the distance. Raise a hand and be brave for the both of them and guide him to bed, and quit wondering how it would be like to finally belong.

Instead, choking on an almost physical pain, Brienne opened the door.

Back in the cold loneliness of her chamber, she cried herself to sleep, realising that, in the end, he did not stop her.
There.
This is the sexiest it gets without them actually having sex.

In this chapter there are lots of references from both books and show that I couldn’t wait to include: from the letter burning to the golden bitch-slap (although, I must admit, I kinda miss that Red Ronnet douche), from Brienne and Jaime’s heated fight in the woods to the latter’s accidental boners… and Brienne has a nice “fuck loyalty!” moment, too!

And now, I’m exhausted! I truly hope you’ve enjoyed the reading. If so, let me know! There’s still a lot more to come: if you wish to discuss particular elements of the chapter or if you just want to point out how crazy you think I am for posting a chapter that’s +16.000 words-long, leave a comment!
JON

Darkness pressed on him, as he descended the narrow, slippery stairs crusted with glistening ice crystals.

The cold breath of the dead was a comforting kiss, a gentle flicker in the air which guided him without scaring him. It had never scared him. Darkness was a starless blanket under which he could hide, and pretend that the ones he had loved and lost were still with him.

Into darkness, he could still follow her.

He could easily make out the small, blurred shape skimming above the ground, for she seemed swathed in a darkness of her own, a shade or two blacker than the one bounding those vengeful souls to their eternal resting places.

Sharp and broken, his footsteps rang off the damp, empty stones, but she was as silent as a dream, drifting before him, leading him down, down, to the dark heart of Winterfell’s crypts.

He hastened his pace, the fear of losing sight of her a freezing stream overflowing in his veins.

She never let him get a glimpse of her face. Before he could even raise a hand to touch her, she always slipped from his fingers, no more tangible than a chill in the air, a slightly out of focus flutter of dark wings in the mist, or the scent of a rose, but perhaps this time… perhaps he would reach her, pull off the hood covering her head, look into her eyes and find the answers to the single question that had been plaguing him for so long…

Wait… wait! He tried to shout, but when he opened his mouth no sound came. The passageway suddenly widened and he recognised the vaulted chamber where the Kings of Winter lay to rest. But the place looked strikingly different, more spacious: gone were all the sepulchres and statues of the ancient Stark rulers of old, who glowered at the visitors with stiff stone eyes and were still protected against their enemies by their unsheathed swords and the direwolves sleeping at their feet… they all had gone to dust and disappeared, even his father’s tomb and Robb’s empty one, and the smaller one, which kept his brother Rickon’s bones…
Only a void, wide space was left, filled by the echo of the water wearing away the dead stone…

Snow! Snow!, called a lonely raven perched inside the small niche where his aunt Lyanna’s remains were buried.

The wraith paused between the stout columns, her face still hidden in the flickering shadows.

‘You don’t belong here,’ she finally said, and her voice was grating iron, as sharp as ice.

I am King, he answered without speaking, and this will be my place, as well.

King! King!, cawed the raven.

King of Ice, King of Songs, breathed in unison another hundred voices across the vaulted ceiling.

She lifted a pale hand and the hood fell over her shoulders.

Her heavy-lidded eyes were charcoal grey, so much like his own, and they were brimming with silver tears.

Do the dead cry?

Eyes full of woe, reproaching him.

‘You’ve forgotten me.’

I did not. How could he forget what he never knew?

He wished to comfort her, take her into his arms, and wonder at the same time how the opposite would have felt like… The warmth of her hands as she soothed off his childhood’s tears… the scent of her hair cascading all over him when she leaned in to place a goodnight kiss on his brow… But now the only smell which clung to the still air was the frowziness of decay and withered flowers.

You’re the one who went away.

The raven’s eyes gazed at him, and the stones underfoot became a carpet of rotten leaves, red as fire, as the burial chamber dissolved around him.

His white paws were leaving deep prints into the snow. He raised his muzzle and sniffed the air: his sister’s scent was close, mixing with other smells… damp bark and blood and ash. And, above all, death… Olly’s body dangled from the branches of the heart tree, his face blue and swollen, swinging and staring, and cursing him from beyond the grave.

‘Bastard… Oathbreaker…’ the wind swished through the silent woods. ‘Murderer.’

A wreath of thorns crowned the boy’s head… the twisted barbs and twigs drew deep grooves across his forehead, bloodied tears slicing and piercing into the festering flesh, like a stab to the heart…

‘You killed me.’

I had to, he growled. To let the man be born.

The rope creaked on the branch as Olly swayed, and in this twilight, he grotesquely looked half-prince, half-puppet.
The raven’s eyes were shattered obsidian shards blazing in the dark and when he stared into them, a dragon stared back, with glowing bronze eyes full of heat and scales gleaming in hues of moss, jade, and wildfire green… and the dragon called him brother. He called him son…

‘Fly to me! I’m waiting for you!’

So he did.

… He was standing atop a pile of rubble that once was the Wall, with his sword in his right hand and an almost guttered-out torch in his left, and all around the ice was dripping with the blood of the fallen… And ahead of him, he saw the Night King and his army, biding their time, waiting… waiting… and the Night King raised his arms, beckoning him, welcoming him…

*Burn! Burn!,* cried the raven.

Blood, hot and thick, seeped from his open chest wounds, through his fingers, on the hard ground. The scarlet stain turned even darker as it pooled at his feet, sizzling at the contact with the frozen air and spreading over the ice. The droplets seemed to paint a pattern there, arcs of ruby winding around a centre, their arms splayed out like petals on a flower’s whorl, twisting, swirling, curving, until the motion made him dizzy and he felt himself falling… falling…

Jon’s eyes snapped open and focused on a single point of the timbered ceiling, in the attempt to fight off the sickening spinning of the room, while his heart threatened to burst out of its cage.

It took him a few moments to get his bearings and remember where he was.

His room, at Winterfell.

The same old room he had shared with Robb for their whole childhood…

If he tipped his head to his left just so, he could still see his brother’s bed, identical to his own, and the chair where Old Nan would sit and rock, knitting wool gloves, wool scarves and wool capes even in the middle of a hot summer, because ‘not even your pretty smiles can thaw the snows when winter will come, my darling boys’… Robb’s bed and their chuckling whispers through the night were long gone now, and so was Old Nan’s chair rocking in time with her voice as she sang the refrain of *The Night That Ended* and told them tales of Brandon the Breaker and Joramun, of Aemon the Dragonknight, the Knight of Tears and the hundreds he slew for honour and love, and tales of Robert’s Rebellion and the Jon who built the Wolf’s Den, the first of his name to become King in the North…

What was left of those nights was the chamber of a King, a bit emptier and colder.

Jon let out a weary sigh as he gathered his thoughts. The night did not bring fresh rest, nor much-needed counsel for the challenging day ahead, but only more questions and a sense of dread and self-doubt which not even the first light of dawn was able to dissipate. Wakefulness was already pushing the vivid images from his dream out of his mind, but an odd, tingling sensation still lingered, like the echo of warmth that clung to the naked body after it had laid close to a flame for a long time. Before that stirring in his soul got completely lost into the mundane actions of the morning routine, he groped for a scrap of clean parchment from the small cabinet next to the bedpost and by impulse alone sketched what his fading memory was dictating him. He frowned as he considered in confusion the scribble, not really sure about the accuracy of what he had drawn: before his eyes, in black ink, there was a strange, circular symbol, similar to a spiral with long extending arms winding around a fixed point. There was something queer, here, familiar and foreign altogether, but Jon couldn’t put his finger on it. He was sure he had already seen that mark
before, somewhere, perhaps browsing through one of Maester Luwin’s dusty books as a child, or at
the Wall, an illustration scribbled over an old parchment in Maester Aemon’s spidery, shaky
handwriting, or in another half-forgotten dream… He couldn’t remember… the memory of it was
buried deep inside his still dozed mind, behind a locked door of which he didn’t have the key. The
fleeting moment evaporated before he could grasp its meaning and hold on it.

A grey, dull light filtered through the frosty window; blinking sleep out of his eyes, Jon threw the
fur blankets off the bed and went to open the shutters.

The beads of sweat which had gathered upon his temples and shoulders during his fitful slumber
instantly cooled when a gust of wintry air struck his bare skin.

His body was fully awake now. In the adjacent small chamber, which he frequently used as both
private study and dining room, his stewards’ brisk footsteps told him that the first meal of the day
would be served shortly. Jon held no hope to be able to break his fast in silent solitude, for Davos
and Maester Wolkan were most certainly already waiting for him, to discuss the morning’s
correspondence and give him some last-minute advice and admonishments before Lady Alys’
arrival.

Heart writhing in his chest, Jon stared at his own reflection in the open window.

*I’ve dreamed of her again.*

It must have been her, Jon was certain.

He had dreamed the same dream so often that, by now, her ghostly presence had become a habitual
part of his nights he somehow had grown accustomed to.

This did not make him miss her any less, though.

The absence of her had carved an empty, sunless space within him, moulded into her shape by
years of unanswered questions, grudging bitterness and heart-shattering yearning, but when he
thought of her in his waking hours he only saw a blurred face framed by long hair, now as black as
dragonglass, now silver like the shining rays of the moon. Sometimes she would look like a
highborn lady, as stern and merciless as Melisandre, or a fisherman’s wife, stooped under the
weight of a lifetime of lies, old and wrinkled like Nan, or a young wildling girl with Val’s regal
beauty and Ygritte’s impertinent mouth… other times, she was a common whore wearing Ros’
naughty smile and Lady Catelyn’s cruel eyes. Most of the time, she appeared like a mix of all of
them. A misshapen, hybrid creature of sorts, hewn out of all the women he had loved, loathed or
feared.

*Her eyes were grey, that at least I know,* but this realisation did nothing to reassure him, or qualm
his disquiet.

Shaking himself out of it, he resolved not to think of her today.*I have a kingdom to rule, a war
strategy to arrange and a prospective bride to greet.*

Breakfast was a grim, hurried-up affair.

Jon’s presence was almost immediately required in the Small Council, to discuss the latest news
from King’s Landing and the even direst dispatches from the Wall.

“She wrote the army generals would be pardoned, if you surrender,” he addressed Jaime Lannister,
while his eyes sifted through the copy of the Queen’s royal decree Ser Lyle Crakehall had submitted to him just now. It was the Imp who answered.

“Ignore what she wrote,” the short man paced up and down the room, bristling. “Cersei’s promises don’t carry more weight than sweet words of love on a whore’s lips,” he snarled, his rage causing him to temporarily overlook the ladies’ presence in the room. Neither Brienne nor Sansa seemed to mind much, anyway. Grumbling a colourful string of expletives, Tyrion stopped in front of his brother and Ser Lyle. “She’s only waiting for you to put the tip of your golden fingers into the city’s walls to have her guards escort you to the nearest free cell in Maegor’s. And have your captains’ heads on display all over the battlements, right next to their wives’ and children’s.”

The Kingslayer leant over the table, his hands on each side of the crumpled parchment and a tight crease of worry etched between his brows. He was sporting a purple bruise over his nose which Jon was sure wasn’t there, last night at supper.

“These are my people. As long as I’m here I can’t protect them.”

“You can’t protect them from inside the Red Keep’s black cells, either!” Tyrion snapped, his nostrils flaring as though dragonfire was about to burst forth. He was furious just as his older brother appeared resigned.

Shaken by a rush of powerless indignation, Jon clenched his fists; the misfortunes of those courtiers ensnared into the game of thrones like sheep trapped in quicksand should not be of any concern for him. They were far away from Winterfell, and most of them were House Stark’s former enemies: their sons, brothers and fathers had fought against Robb’s armies, some of them might’ve even been there, when Lord Eddard got wounded and captured and the Wolves got purged and annihilated during the first days of Joffrey’s reign, yet Lannister’s palpable uneasiness and compunction was making Jon uncomfortable too. These people did not fight in the war; they’re only women and children. I can’t turn my head to the side and will my qualms away.

That was not his father’s way. A quick glance back at Sansa and Bran told him that the thought troubled them too.

“Do you have close family in King’s Landing, Ser Lyle?” his sister enquired.

Jon had to wonder, not for the first time, if her current empathy was truly heartfelt, or rather a crafty act to propitiate even the most refractory among the audience. Her face gave nothing away.

I do, my lady,” he said, his regular sternness melting under the sweet, warm burden of remembrance. “Lenora, my wife. And my only daughter, Myra. She was heavy with her first child, last I heard from her.”

The knight almost choked on those words; to see this giant of a man, a seasoned soldier hardened by hundreds of battles, almost surrendering to his own emotions, to the point that his usually booming voice was reduced to a soft, tender whisper full of longing, was poignant and unexpected at once and gave Jon an odd sense of hope.

He seeks peace, he realised, but I can only give him a scant support.

“Daven Lannister still holds the Rock, yes?”
Jaime gave him a curt nod.

“As Warden of the West it is his duty to protect your bannermen, more than it’s yours,” Davos pointed out.

“Maybe he could intercede for those families and bring them back to the Westerlands, before Cersei acts on those threats?” Sansa pressed on.

Tyrion’s face twisted into a tight-lipped, sour wince.

“You, of all people, should know that leaving King’s Landing without the Queen’s assent it’s easier said than done, my lady.”

His sister cast a fleeting glance to the window, where Littlefinger stood, his hands clasped behind his back, overlooking the preparations in the courtyard below, with an air of bored indifference which suited him to perfection: “Daven Lannister is an able castellan and has a shrewd military mind, but he’s as far from politics as a sparrow is from a hawk,” he said. “He fears Cersei and will do nothing that could gainsay her authority, at least not through open rebellion. Cersei, on the other side, has always despised him and has left Casterly Rock unto his care only because she believes she can control him at ease.” His grey eyes glinted maliciously at the shorter Lannister when he turned around. “Am I wrong?”

Tyrion could do nothing but grit his teeth, his displeasure for the situation and repugnance for the man as clear as though he had voiced them aloud.

“Tarth!”

All pair of eyes shifted toward the tall warrior woman who spoke so unexpectedly, breaking the tension. Lady Brienne had turned up late to the war council, with her bulky frame covered from head to toe in blue armour and stiff wariness as though she had expected to find foes and fearful odds instead of friends and family, and had almost immediately retreated to the darkest side of a corner, sheathed in too deep a quietness, even for her standards. The outlandish behaviour was only enhanced by the signs of an exhausted, sleepless night clearly etched upon her homely, miserable face. Not even the reading of Cersei’s decree had managed to stir some emotion out of her, and although Jaime had constantly tried to meet her gaze, her sapphire eyes, usually so full of life, so eloquent even in her stubborn silences, had stayed firmly trained on the wooden floor.

With the attention of the whole room upon her, now, a mortified flush spread all over her cheeks, bringing out even more the freckles over her nose’s bridge, but her voice was steady when she approached Ser Crakehall.

“Your families can’t stay at court, where their safety can be traded for your loyalty, my lord. They must leave King’s Landing at once, and if the Queen won’t allow it, then it shall be done by stealth. Tarth has always offered shelter to anyone who sought it. We won’t turn a blind eye now. The island could be the perfect hideout: miles and miles of caves and underground passages have been built over the centuries. Even if Cersei sent troops in search of them, they would never be found.”

“She has the right of it,” Jaime confirmed. “I’ve seen those caves myself; they’re quite impenetrable.”

Tyrion rose on tiptoes to reach the map of Westeros that was rolled out over the table.

“And from Tarth, they could set sail for the Free Cities, as far from Cersei’s clutches as possible,”
he reflected, his fingers tracing an imaginary route to Pentos.

Littlefinger arched a single, sceptic eyebrow at the Maid: “And how do you plan to whisk away women and children from under Cersei’s nose, without the Queen noticing, if I may ask, my lady?”

Brienne didn’t rise to the bait, but paused to draw a deep breath, her eyes shut as though to gather all her courage. When she opened them again, she finally met Jaime’s gaze.

“The Lannister soldiers you left there for the island’s protection are still stationed at Evenfall Hall. Some of them were City Watch before they fled the capital and know their way around the Red Keep. They will help if you tell them to.”

The Kingslayer tensed under her probing.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, my lady,” he confessed bluntly.

Brienne cringed away as though dodging a punch, hurt and disappointment rising to the surface like a wave crashing against the seashore. But Lannister quirked his lips into a wry grin, his jade eyes sparkling like gemstones. “These are no longer my men,” he elaborated, closing the distance between them until they were only inches apart, his voice soft as though he had meant only her to hear this admission. “I left them on your land. Their swords belong to Tarth, now. They’re yours to command.”

Her chapped lips parted in a surprised, little gasp. A silent communication seemed to pass between them, then, so intense that Jon felt like intruding in something quite intimate. Suddenly self-conscious, he cleared his throat. Brienne stirred alive with newfound purpose.

“Ser Lyle, I’ll send word to my castellan and Captain of the Guards, Ser Germont Connington. He’s an extremely resourceful man who knows the coast from Sharp Point to Weeping Tower like the back of his own hand. I trust him with my life and I’m confident that he’ll manage the rescue mission without arousing more suspicion.”

“I’ll get Daenerys to send help, too,” Tyrion added, pushing a dragon-shaped token to the Straits. “The Greyjoy fleet is berthed not far from Shipbreaker Bay, and, if the need ever arose, we have sworn friends beyond the Narrow Sea who can’t wait to prove themselves to our gracious Dragon Queen. This time nobody will dare say that the Lannister brothers stood back and watched, while the innocent were being butchered in cold blood, out of spite.”

“Lady Brienne, that’s quite a generous offer. My men and I will owe you eternal thanks, but… you’ll expose the island to Cersei’s ire.”

The lady warrior gripped her sword’s gilded pommel, the light in her guileless eyes dimmed by grief, and Jon saw her struggling between contrasting emotions.

Her cerulean eyes thundered with dignified rage. “There’s nothing left that she hasn’t already marred or harmed in one way or another. I’m not afraid of her.”

Brienne’s nobility came to no surprise for Jon, but Ser Lyle was left speechless for a moment. Then unexpectedly he took the lady’s hand in both of his and bowed. “Your father was well-known for his clemency and strength of character. Now I see the daughter is just as brave and honourable.”

Baelish snorted.

“Lady Brienne’s got a kind, selfless heart hidden behind these… belligerent appearances. But the problem remains. Your Grace, Winterfell has more than done its duty. You went to great lengths to
ensure guest rights were extended to anyone in need. But generosity is a double-edged blade: past a certain point, it becomes dangerous to wield it, even for the most skilled swordsman. Your bannermen are growing restless, as last night’s events have amply demonstrated.”

“A brawl between drunkards doesn’t prove anything,” Davos said.

“Except that there’s discontent among the troops, at the very least. If you don’t address the issue soon, you’ll find yourself with a rebellion in your hands.”

“Jon is King, Lord Baelish, you better remember that,” Sansa warned coldly. “The Houses of the North have chosen him to rule.”

“And how long until they start questioning that decision?” he bit back.

“Lord Baelish’s got a point,” Jaime conceded. “The Lannister forces won’t tarry any longer at your doorsteps, Lady Stark. I promised you fresh levies, provisions and stone to strengthen the Wall’s defences and I intend to honour that pledge.”

He pulled out from under the pile of the other maps of the Seven Kingdoms a more detailed one depicting the Wall and the areas surrounding the New Gift and Last Hearth and flattened it with his golden hand. Jon looked over.

“Four thousand men, assigned to the six already garrisoned forts. Enough should be left to man at least two more. Westwatch-by-the-Bridge and the Nightfort would be my first choice, but I’ll let you and Commander Tollett have the last word on it.”

“Have you already picked the names?”

Jaime nodded.

“Ser Reymar Westerling, Lord Harlan Serrett and the Banefort cousins to Castle Black. A smaller host commanded by Lord Tytos Brax will join your men in Last Hearth. His brother will stay behind with the bulk of the army, in case you’ll need to send troops to the Dreadfort or Torrhen’s Square. And of course,” he concluded with a friendly pat over Ser Lyle’s brawny shoulder, “there’s Strongboar, too.”

“Aye,” the vigorous soldier promised with a delighted, boastful chortle. “Five hundred men will march to Queenscrown under my lead. It’ll be quite interesting to show those wildlings in the New Gift how a properly trained army goes to war!”

Jon’s fists slammed on the table. “This is not a laughing matter, my lord, or a petty competition between soldiers to settle who’s the best fighter!” he berated him. The prideful grin upon the captain’s face faltered and a shameful flush rose from his thick neck instead. They don’t see the danger, yet. But they soon will. “The Wall is merciless with the ones who underestimate the severity of the situation. If Commander Tollett’s last warnings are to be believed, we will need your battle skills sooner than we thought. So make your final preparations.”

And may the Gods be with you.

His throat working furiously, Strongboar glared at him as though he wanted to smack him for his insolence. After all, from his point of view, Jon probably wasn’t more than a boy with no real experience of the battlefield. He could understand his annoyance at being told off, but he would not excuse a flippant attitude when it came to the looming war.

The time for jokes is over.
Swallowing his ill-tempered haughtiness, Ser Lyle rose to his quite considerable full height and simply said in a forthright tone: “We’ll be ready to leave at first light.” Then, before he reached the door, he tipped his head to Jaime, just to make Jon sure who was the real leader of that army. “I’ll wait for your orders, my lord.”

Jon let out a breath he didn’t notice he was holding and bent over the table. His fingers tapping nervously against the map, he considered the bulk of the forces spread over the parchment.

Four thousand men. A small army.

His eyes flickered back to Jaime. Was it wise to trust the Kingslayer with the Wall’s defence? A man without honour, everyone always said. An Oathbreaker. He might have been all of this, and worse, but he certainly wasn’t a coward, and Jon would easily believe his men weren’t either.

They weren’t thieves, raiders, rapists or petty lawbreakers who had their crimes forgiven in exchange for a black cloak. Nor were they farmers and stonemasons, forced to take up arms to defend their small possessions, their crops and their women. These were seasoned men who had learned how to wield sword, spear and bow even before they had learned their letters. His father had often regaled him and Robb with tales about the armies of the South, and even though his intense dislike for Tywin Lannister wasn’t a secret for anyone, his admiration for the Westerlands army, for its discipline, shrewdness, and prowess on the battlefield, was just as incontrovertible.

*Lord Tywin may be a vile man, but he’s smart enough to surround himself with the best commanders and tacticians,* Lord Eddard used to say.

*The finest of the Realm.*

*And this man has brought them on my door, to fight by our side.*

*Would that I made the right call.*

“Arrangements have been made,” Davos reassured him. “All we can do now is wait.”

*And now my Watch begins.* The bitter thought almost made him laugh.

“Before long, I shall leave for the Wall, too,” Jon contemplated, darkly; his eyes rose from the map and met Jaime’s resolute ones.

“When you do, I’ll ride beside you.”

To his left, Brienne flinched as though she wanted to argue. Jaime carried on, but Jon felt his words were more directed to the lady than himself. “My place is with my men. I might not be as skilled with my left hand as I was with my right one, but, as someone once told me, I’m the Commander of the Lannister army. So, for lack of a better option, I’ll command. If it pleases His Grace, of course,” he added with a cocky grin that Jon could not help but reciprocate.

“The North will remember this, Ser Jaime.”

“Keep your gratitude. I don’t have a use for it. And do pay attention, Lord Snow,” he added with a sarcastic smile that could cut a stone, “I’m not a ser anymore.”

Once everyone, except his sibling and Davos, had left, Sansa flopped into a chair and rubbed tiredly a hand over her forehead.
“What did Eddison write, exactly?”

Jon handed her the short message the ravens had brought early that morning.

“The Wall weakens day after day. Structural collapses, cracks and small breaches are common occurrence now. The dead are getting bolder. They’re venturing closer to the border, with nothing to hinder their progression. And the white stormy mist moves with them.”

He watched her face gradually filling with horror as she skimmed through the text.

“The Wall’s magic is failing.”

“It’s my fault.”

They both turned to their crippled brother, half-hidden in the shadows of the window.

Bran had kept his quiet until that very moment; a meditative silence into which he seemed to slip more and more frequently. Jon had not gotten used to it, yet, and probably never would; for him, his little brother was still the playful, unruly boy who loved to climb because it gave him a different point of view on the world and the things he thought he knew. He wouldn’t shut up, as a child. There was always an avalanche of questions ready on his ever-smiling lips. His inquisitive mind craved for answers, back then. Where did the dragons go, Jon? How do you become a knight, Jon? Why your name is Snow and not Stark, Jon? What happened to the Seventy Nine Sentinels, Jon?... And now that he easily had the answers before he even knew what were the questions, he seemed to have lost his tongue altogether.

Jon desperately missed that pestiferous brat.

“I don’t see how that could be your fault, my lord?”

Bran pushed his chair around and faced them.

“Do you remember what Old Nan always said? The dead that walk can’t pass through the Wall.”

“So long as the Wall stands strong and the men of the Night’s Watch are true,” Jon recited. “I remember.”

His brother extended his right arm and peeled off layer after layer of leather, wool and linen, until the naked skin of his forearm was exposed.

“But what if I’ve brought the dead back with me?”

Jon examined the injured arm to the weak light filtering in through the stained window glass: the ugly purple burn left by Widow’s Wail still marred the raw skin, but over and around it, Jon could glimpse a blue halo, like thin, frozen tentacles growing to the palm of his hand, and up, toward the elbow. The Night King’s mark hadn’t completely resurfaced, not in his original form anyway, but had changed shape, adapting its nature to elude the magic of the Kingslayer’s sword, that once had been a part of Ice.

“Ser Jaime had delayed the inevitable, but only momentarily. It doesn’t hurt anymore, but it’s still there. I can feel it. Spreading.”

Dark shocked eyes met Bran’s wide, blue ones. Behind their apparent, calm remoteness, Jon perceived his little brother’s panic and guilt.
The deep scars on his chest prickled.

What if I’m the one to blame, instead?

He already knew what everyone – Bran, Sansa, Davos, Tormund – would say to him, if he came clean about his increasingly disturbing nightmares and the sickness which had crushed him while they went through the passage under the Nightfort and which had grown unbearably stronger as they fought against the wights, only to abate when the dragon came. They would try to appease his fears, telling him it was all in his head, but his many attempts to overcome those feelings of horror, to brush them aside, had been weak and hopeless. He simply could not forget Beric’s words…

‘We walk among them, we talk to them, but we’re not like them. Not anymore,’ the Lightning Lord had remarked, and Jon felt himself a little more lost, as he checked out Bran’s markings.

That pull… The voice in my head… What if the dead we brought back from the Wall was actually me?

“I’m sorry, Jon,” Bran murmured, his voice broken by a shame he surely didn’t deserve to feel. “You should have left me in the Haunted Forest.”

“Don’t even think that, not for one second! I would’ve brought you back even if you had come at us with blue dead eyes and a dagger in your hands.”

The sight of Bran’s mark – and the possibility that he could be the reason behind its recrudescence – positively turned his stomach. Jon angrily pulled at his brother’s sleeve and covered his arm up.

“Did you have any other vision that could help us?” Sansa asked.

“It wasn’t a vision, exactly. More like a wolf dream, like the ones I used to have when I warged into Summer. I saw many corpses covered in snow, and you – he said to Jon – standing over the frozen rubble of the Wall with a dwindling torch, looking into the darkness ahead. Looking for him.”

A shiver ran down his back.

That was his nightmare. Then he remembered. He pulled out from his jerkin the scrap of paper over which he had scribbled the odd spiral symbol and showed it to his brother.

“Have you ever seen this?”

Bran frowned.

“Yes. I flew there, once. There was a big heart tree, at the centre of it, and large, sharp stones erected in circles. This is the place where he was reborn. Where the Children created him.”

“The Night King?” Davos spoke.

Bran nodded sombrely.

“He was a living man, Jon, like you and me! He wasn’t innocent, by far, but he had dreams and ambitions, and weaknesses and fears. They took all away and left only darkness. I can still taste his terror.”

“Because he knew he would die,” Sansa said.

“Because he knew he wouldn’t,” their brother corrected her.
Bran had been somewhat skittish to reveal what had transpired in the months he, Hodor and Meera were alone in the cave, while he trained, for lack of a better term, to become what he was now, but Jon had managed to put together the gist of it: how, centuries past, while the war between the Children of the Forest and the First Men raged on, the creatures of the woods had kidnapped their enemy, tied him on the heart tree… how they tortured him by plunging a dragonglass shard in his heart, and the pain he had to endure while the transformation took place and winter descended on those lands which, until then, had thrived in an everlasting spring. Other things, Bran couldn’t, or wouldn’t, say… Who was that man, really? Did he ever have a family? Someone he cared for? A wife, children? Did something still remain of that life, in remembrance or actions, that drove him now and could explain his thirst for vengeance and annihilation? Or was he simply a sentient creature with no memory of his past existence, a demonic force which had rebelled against its own maker, just as sometimes a son would rebel against his father?

“Do you have some ideas as to where this place might be?” Davos asked again.

“Up north, I guess.” Bran bit his lips. “I’m not sure.”

Without being announced, Hallis Mollen entered the solar and bowed.

“Pardons, Your Grace. My lords, lady Sansa. Lady Karstark is here,” he announced.

Jon met Davos’ eyes and nodded. It was time.

*Off to battle, then.*

“Good gods!” Davos cursed under his breath, as Alys Karstark’s retinue flaunted inside the walls of Winterfell. Beneath his thin arched eyebrows, his silvery eyes went huge with consternation.

“Where are we quartering all these people?”

The whole of Winterfell and half the population of Winter Town had flocked to the northern gate, as excited as children at their first tourney, to see the long procession pass by.

At least one hundred strong, by the look of it.

Fierce-looking standard bearers, soldiers on foot with their polished helmets glinting in the pale light, knights proudly mounted on tall barded steeds, squires and servants, precariously hoisted on top of horse-drawn carriages overflowing with sacks of oat and rye, wicker baskets full of cheese, any kind of nuts, salted meat, dried beans, carrots and onions, barrels containing ale and, going by the strong whiffs of vinegar which made Jon’s nose instantly tingle, pickled eggs and cabbage, cages with partridges and the black-necked geese that could be hunted on the Last River’s muddy banks, goats tied up to the back of the wagons and fat pigs tidily kept in line by a whole host of larking children armed with short trees’ branches… Some of them, every now and then, broke the line to run and pull the tail of the patient mules which preceded them, slow and bent under the weight of more sacks and trunks… There were so many people that even the large entry arch appeared small and cramped.

Flanked by his sisters, Jon was champing at the bit, remembering with a little ache when a similar commotion had animated the castle’s courtyard, like a ripple expanding over a lake’s surface, as Robert Baratheon’s royal party made its thunderous entry and changed their lives forever. While the king was busy bestowing pleased praises and flattering remarks to his half-siblings, he had been banished in the second row, out of sight, in a clumsy attempt to make him disappear. It had pained him, back then, to think that Lord Eddard would be so ashamed of him to feel the need to hide him
from view, but now he understood: that was the right place for the Bastard of Winterfell, the
motherless child who held no more importance than his father’s ward who had stood at his side;
only now, he was in Ned Stark’s place. The King in the North, doing the honours with Sansa.

He dared a swift glance to his right: was she thinking of that day, too? But, except for a slight
tightening of her lips to express her irritation at the embarrassing scene in the courtyard, Sansa was
as impenetrable as ever. Arya, on the contrary, was a lot more vocal about that.

“She brought even her minstrels along!” she cried out, half incredulous half annoyed.

He hadn’t noticed until now, but there was, in fact, a group of quite loud jesters and singers
blending with the smallfolk who were erupting in cheerful songs, accompanied by drums and pipes.
Jon wasn’t really surprised – Karhold had never been an example of discretion, after all – but still,
he had to wonder if someone from Alys’ household, anyone at all, had stayed back to govern the
fortress in its lady’s absence.

“Who does she think she is?” Arya’s head snapped up to her sister. “Surely she’s not expecting to
hold court here?”

“She’s not queen, yet,” Sansa hissed. Her unblinking eyes fixed on the arched gatehouse through
which a few moments later, amidst the banners with the sun of winter flapping furiously under the
howling wind, Lady Alys herself cantered inside, straddling a magnificent black courser.

Jon’s hand fidgeted upon Longclaw’s pommel.

She was remarkably attractive, there was no point in denying the fact.

In his mind’s eye, he could still see the skinny tomboy from their childhood, who loved to hunt in
the woods, steal freshly-baked blueberry tarts from the kitchens, and play nasty tricks to Gage and
old Vayon Poole with his and Robb’s aid. Pretty much like Arya used to do.

And just like his sister, Alys liked to wear man’s clothing as well, much to her father’s dismay. As
she lithely vaulted off her horse, Jon was pleased to notice that particular habit hadn’t been
discarded with age, but the skinny tomboy was definitely gone, now. Underneath the wool travel
cloak, there was a full-grown, slender woman with long, tousled hair as black and shining as
polished obsidian, haunting almond-shaped grey eyes and an air of wildness about her, which
reminded him harshly of Ygritte, although in everything else the two of them couldn’t have
appeared more different.

“Well, at least, she’s a pretty lass,” Tormund rumbled behind him and nudged him in the ribs.
“Wide, strong hips. Excellent for whelping.”

Both he and Arya turned around at the same time to give him a disgruntled, slightly outraged look.
The wildling’s thick brows furrowed: “What?”

Holding his growing exasperation in check with a deep breath, he followed Sansa as she went to
greet their guest, an affected smile, indistinguishable from a real one, plastered upon her lips. The
girls kissed each other’s cheeks as long-lost friends would do, then Alys swept her long cloak aside
and knelt in front of him.

“Your Grace.”

He helped her back on her feet.

“Welcome to Winterfell, my lady.”
She graced him with a simper that was all dimples and gestured to her left, where two men stood, one wearing the unmistakable robe and chain of the Citadel and the other clad from head to toe in black leathered armour. He had marvellous side-whiskers, which reminded Jon of Rodrick Cassel, and a sour expression, as though being there was the last thing he wanted to do.

“This is Aethan, Maester of Karhold. You already know my cousin, Ser Edwyn Karstark, Commander of my Guard.”

The knight bowed his head with a stiff nod.

“They’re here to assist and advise me, until we reach an agreement,” Alys said innocently.

Jon exchanged a fleeting glance with Davos, who looked equally wary.

She brought Hand and Queensguard with her, it appears.

He forced a thin smile out: “Of course.”

This promises to be a gruelling negotiation.

Although, Jon knew, negotiations had already started from the moment Alys’ party had crossed the gates. How else could be described, this chaotic tumult of people and beasts squeezed into such a small space, if not as a show of power and prestige meant to impress and forewarn?

“The Lord of Winterfell is waiting inside,” he said, offering her his arm. “Shall we?”

The Great Hall was crammed: almost all his bannermen had wanted to attend, perhaps in the hopes that a royal marriage would follow shortly after. Or so garrulous Lady Dustin had cooed with a mischievous wink. Amidst the crowd, the absentees stood out even more: Glover, Manderly and Cerwyn had each sent a small delegation, but they didn’t make the journey themselves.

They’re cross with me because I haven’t replied to their marriage proposals, yet.

As he climbed to the dais and took his seat next to Bran, Lady Alys moved in the middle of the hall.

“My lords and ladies,” she addressed the room, in a ringing voice, “not six moons ago I stood here, as I am now, while you all bore witness as I swore fealty to our King. Now, I come forward to offer the same words, the same oaths, to you, Lord Brandon, my liege and kinsman. In earnest joy I freely give this pledge, for all hope of you being returned to the safe haven of your family had almost been lost forever. But it so happens the Gods still look upon us in mercy even through the harshest of winters. And so mercy I shall ask of this assembly, too.”

Ser Edwyn stepped up and handed her a longsword sheathed in a grey and black velvet scabbard. Alys drew it and held it on her outstretched palms.

“This was my father’s greatsword. Before war broke us apart, our fathers were more than allies. They were brothers. Their bond went well beyond blood ties or the vows which must unite a vassal to his lord. They loved and respected one another. And that love we once shared must not be forgotten, nor maimed by the memory of more tragic and desperate times, where hard choices have been taken on both sides. That love is still there. Its roots remain true and strong, the steady foundation over which a new tree shall be born that will protect the whole North from the winds of winter, and under the shadow of which we will rest, come spring.

My lord, the sole purpose of the arm that once wielded this sword had only ever been the protection of the North, and I intend to live and die by this truth, as well. By the grace of the Old
Gods, I bestow the future of House Karstark into your hands: may the Gods grant us to fight side by side, and find freedom and victory at the end of this night, or die together trying.”

Like a silver coin tinkling on the naked stone, her last words dropped into the absolute silence which was clutching the hall. Jon wrapped his cloak more tightly around himself, as frozen drafts hissed through the chinks in the timbered roof and against the rattling windows, but in the centre of the room Alys didn’t waver, her head high and proud. Fearless.

He had to admire that.

Davos leant in and whispered: “Spoken like a true queen.”

“We accept your pledge, lady Karstark,” his brother’s voice rose to his right, “and welcome you as honoured guest in Winterfell.” Bran beckoned to one of the servants and a tray of bread and salt was quickly placed on the table before him. One by one, they all ate some of it.

“By breaking this bread together we both made a holy oath. Harsh times are ahead: may spring find us alive and bound together in friendship, peace and prosperity, not only for the North’s sake, but for the sake of all of Westeros and its people.”

Fists suddenly were being pounded against tables and shields, as his bannermen rose from the benches, shouting his name, Alys’ name, roaring their approval.

How easily won over they are, Jon bitterly thought. A single victory on the battlefield… words dripping false hope and promises... That was all it took for their faith to be restored.

He couldn’t really blame them: they were all looking for a silver lining, and in truth Jon envied them.

After all, he didn’t have the same luxury.

“... and three thousand men to the Wall.”

“Three thousand? Boy, remove this pitcher of wine from Ser Davos’ reach!” Ser Edwyn Karstark instructed the page who had served them drinks and a light meal, his whiskers twitching as he sneered back at the Onion Knight who sat in front of him. “You must be either drunk or crazy if you think that Karhold will forfeit its right to defend itself!”

“The King’s men will be sent to Karhold to ensure its protection.”

“The King’s men? An occupying force of bloody Lannisters, more likely! Do you take me for a fool, ser? I saw their banners over the hills when we rode!”

Davos didn’t fall into the trap.

“There will be only Stark soldiers. And may I remind you, my lord, that once this marriage will take place, if it will take place, they will also be the Queen’s men?”

Negotiations had proven more taxing and exhausting than Jon had expected. For the past two hours, he had listened closely, without interruption, the heated exchange of views between his Hand and Ser Edwyn, while the two maesters sitting on each’s side silently recorded on their diaries everything that was being said or agreed upon, only participating in the discussion when there were legal precedents to illustrate, but now it seemed that the two knights had reached a
quandary.

Sloped in the chair next to his, her arms crossed over her chest, and an air of boredom about her which would have made even Arya proud, Alys huffed impatiently.

“They way they bicker over titles and lands, you’d say they were the ones about to get married,” she muttered.

Jon snorted and poured a generous measure of wine into both their cups.

“One thousand men,” said Ser Edwyn, yielding no inch of ground. “A fifth of the profits on Last Hearth and the Dreadfort.”

It was Davos’ turn to laugh.

“No a chance!”

“How come you’re under the impression that everything is due to Winterfell – men, resources, supplies – but Winterfell grants us nothing in return?”

“A crown and the lawful right to rule as equals over the whole North is not nothing! And given that seven moons ago you were fighting on the wrong side, you should be grateful that the King has chosen to forgive you, instead of beheading you for treason!”

The Karstark knight jumped to his feet, shoving maps, ancient marriage bills, parchments and the trencher of half chewed cheese on the side, his face white as chalk.

Jon cleared his throat and threw Davos a warning glare.

*I don’t like the man either, but it won’t do to start a scuffle while we’re discussing the terms of an alliance.*

The old man released a tense breath from his nose. “Two thousand men. And Last Hearth,” he said through gritted teeth. Glowering, Karstark fell back into his seat.

“You will use its resources exclusively to provide food and shelter to the smallfolk from the northern regions that will surely flee south seeking protection.”

“You mean the wildlings.”

The condescending tone colouring his voice sent Jon’s own blood dangerously close to boiling point.

“He means everyone,” he elucidated, forceful. “Free folk, clansmen from the Gift and the mountains, brothers of the Night’s Watch… we don’t make distinctions, my lord. Last Hearth has been put to the torch and is unused, now. You’ll need fit men to repair the damages and defend the castle when the time comes. If you can’t agree to those terms, then our discussion is over.”

Ser Edwyn’s amber eyes sought out his cousin’s for directions. Alys dropped her head in an almost imperceptible nod to both her knight and her maester. Aethan dipped his quill into the ink bottle and scribbled down a new paragraph to the treaty which was slowly taking shape.

“I’m really sorry this is taking so long,” Alys apologised in a low whisper, as the maester unrolled a detailed map of the Weeping Water’s upper region and launched himself in a zealous explanation on why House Karstark’s claim over the Dreadfort was most solid, and apparently supported by a
common ancestry that could be traced back to the Age of Heroes.

“Don’t be. Your cousin has your best interests at heart.”

She scoffed.

“He knows that if I become Queen he will be made castellan of Karhold and any other fief you might grant me... So, he truly has his best interests at heart.”

Like every other power-hungry fool in this godsdamned country, Jon mentally added. His bitter mood sank even further.

Alys leaned over the armchair of her seat, and he met her halfway, their foreheads close enough they were almost touching. Her eyes sparkled, full of fond reminiscence.

“Do you remember when our fathers would sit in this very room, grumbling about everything from the Crown’s levies to their sore bones?”

He broke into a wistful grin. “They worried about the coming winter and we silently mocked them as we played come-into-my-castle, right under this cherry table. You, me and Robb.”

He stretched a hand over the wood’s rough surface, willing his mind to go back to happier days. It was a very distant, almost fading memory… Robb always tried to bully him into playing the disgraced edge knight, come at the castle’s doors asking for either shelter or food on a stormy night, while he proudly pranced about in his best clothing, fancying himself the lord of the place, and Alys his lady.

They were ten, maybe eleven years old, and his brother had been smitten with her, back then.

Jon kind of was too, but never spoke a word about it, for fear of being rejected, or worse, laughed at.

“Say, do you still hunt?” he suddenly changed the topic. He remembered she enjoyed it very much, and even his father had often commended her for her tracking skills.

She beamed back. “Of course! From the Neck to the Wall there isn’t a better marksman than me.”

The vivid challenge into her grey eyes, and apparently his own willingness to please her, made it for a very easy, fast decision. His melancholy totally forgotten, Jon rose to his feet.

“My lords, I thank you for your time. There would be plenty of it for other consultations, too, but for now, I think we should call it a day. Lady Alys and I will go hunting.”

Davos jerked his bearded chin up to him. “What?” he said, with a morose countenance which suggested he was on the brink of bashing Jon’s head against the table.

A delighted laughter burst from Alys’ lips, as she stood too and put on her gloves, and Jon was all the more pleased in seeing the disconcerted disorientation painted over the Karstark men’s faces.

“Do you wish for a hunting party, my lady?” Ser Edwyn asked.

“It won’t be necessary, dear cousin. Surely the King will protect me,” she looked back at him, all mischief and practiced coyness and conspiratory whispers. “I’ll meet you in the courtyard presently.”

He watched as she slipped through the back door which led to the guest house, followed somewhat
reluctantly by maester and knight, and smiled to himself.

The moment they were gone, Davos besieged him.

“You want to go hunting? Now?” he exclaimed, scandalised.

Jon flung an arm around his Hand’s shoulders and squeezed, his spirits suddenly lighter.

“Look outside, Davos: sun’s up and shining, for a change. It would be a crying shame to be spending it shut inside the walls.”

The Onion knight followed him hurriedly down the stairs to the stables, more insistent than a hailstorm clattering against the windows, and just as bothersome.

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m trying to broker a marriage, here!”

“Me too,” Jon flashed a grin above his shoulders. “Only, you and I have a different approach to the matter.”

The footsteps at his back halted and he turned, bracing himself for a scolding.

“Oh, so that’s it, isn’t it? You want to take a walk in the woods alone with the girl? We don’t have time for proper courtship!”

“I have no intention of marrying a woman I barely know.”

“And a cosy afternoon of hunting will settle your doubts once and for all? If you think so, I have some sorely disappointing bad news. Thirty-four years I’ve been married to my dear Marya. We’ve been through the seven hells and back, together. She gave me four healthy sons, and I love her more today than in our wedding day, but I’d be an utter fool if I were to believe to know what truly lies in that woman’s silly head!”

Jon’s memory conjured up a rainy morning at the Wall when he and the boys were training, days before they all swore their lives to the brotherhood. With his serious, down-to-earth wisdom, Edd had said something similar to him: presuming to know all the secrets hidden in a woman’s heart is as foolish and dangerous as walking on thin ice. To which Grenn had promptly answered that she could keep her own damn secrets well locked inside her heart for all he cared, as long as her legs were open and her cunt warm and sopping wet. The solemnity of the moment was completely shattered, but they had a good laugh after that. The mere memory was enough to bring a short titter to his lips.

Davos was staring at him in stern disapprobation.

Jon took an audible breath, to convey just the right amount of exasperation and put both his hands upon the old knight’s shoulders.

“And a cozy afternoon of hunting will settle your doubts once and for all? If you think so, I have some sorely disappointing bad news. Thirty-four years I’ve been married to my dear Marya. We’ve been through the seven hells and back, together. She gave me four healthy sons, and I love her more today than in our wedding day, but I’d be an utter fool if I were to believe to know what truly lies in that woman’s silly head!”

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“An afternoon. It’s all I ask.”

*I must understand if it’s the king she wants, or the man.*

Ahead of him, Alys ran, sure-footed and wild as if she had just discarded her human skin to become a she-wolf again, racing through the woods with Ghost at her side, her mane as black as the cloak billowing around her quick ankles.
A small pack, of which Jon was part, too, but at the rear: by following her from a distance, he could observe better.

The sound of the barking hounds was growing thinner, muffled by snow and the thick evergreen foliage of the tall soldier pines that were closing in. With her quiver bouncing on her back, Alys pressed further into the deep woods, faster, without even looking where the trail was leading her, confident as though she remembered from another time every bend, every tree, every moss-covered stone, every frozen stream of muddy water, every root sprouting from the soil. He kept up as well as he could, chasing the fresh, crisp footprints in the snow and the blur of blackness flickering in and out the trees trunks.

“Keep up, you laggard! We’re gonna lose her!” she shouted and made a sharp turn, disappearing again behind a mound of blue roses bushes.

They had left the horses by the river half an hour past, when Alys had tracked the signs of a moose herd moving back into the forest; the rest of the party and the hounds simply hadn’t been able to keep their same pace.

Jon spotted her again crouched down in the grass, her back against a small hillock upwind that hid almost completely the visual of the clearing below. His breath steaming before him, he ducked next to the woman. In this proximity, her thick black eyebrows gave a new, different intensity to her face. Or maybe it was only the thrill of the hunt which painted her high cheekbones a deeper shade of warlike crimson and made her grey eyes shine transfixed, bloodthirsty and victorious, as though a fever was devouring her. She brought a finger to her smiling lips, silently nocked an arrow and realigned her body to have a clear shot. Jon copied her movements and peeked over.

There she was. A cow moose, grazing around, chewing twigs and tree bark, graceful and completely unaware of death holding her breath only a few feet away. Seconds later, a yearling bull caught up with her. The mother nuzzled his light brown furry neck and he greeted her back with a slight poke of his barely-there velvet prongs – the first hint of fast-growing antlers.

Alys drew her bow.

Unintentionally, his hand shot up into her line of vision and grabbed hers.

“Wait!”

Startled, both moose and yearling snapped their heads up in their direction and bounded away in panic into the thicket.

The glower Alys threw him was nothing short of murderous. He flinched.

Just a bit.

“Your master is an insufferable addle-plot!” she complained to Ghost, who was couched between them and mirrored her same chiding expression in his ruby eyes.

Jon had to laugh at that.

“She had the calf with her!” he apologised lamely as they both rose from their hideout, shaking off snow and damp leaves from their cloaks. Alys put a hand over her bosom in fake contrition: “Oh! Do you mistake me for a cruel, merciless maid? I would’ve never left it motherless!” She waved the steel arrowhead before his nose. “One of these straight to the heart would’ve been enough.”

Jon glanced back to the empty clearing with a frown: he did not know why, but the scene had
struck a chord within him.

*They’re already dead meat, anyway,* he thought, as he fell into step beside Alys. *If the hunters or some other predator won’t kill them, cold and starvation will take care of that.*

“For a former brother of the Night’s Watch turned King, you’re unexpectedly soft-hearted,” she said.

He couldn’t say if it was a jibe, or a praise.

They walked shoulder to shoulder in silence, Ghost trotting ahead of them, every now and then raising his snout to smell the coming night.

“It’s uncommon to see moose this far south,” Alys observed, after a while.

“They’re wintering. Searching for that which every living thing seeks.” He peered down at her. “Warmth.”

Her expression darkened.

“The rumours about the Wall are true, then. My old wet nurse used to say that the dead only fight against the shadows. ‘Beware of the living, they’re the ones who will hurt you’.” She clutched his arm and made him turn to face her. “How are we supposed to prevail against enemies that stand on both sides now?”

“There are no sides anymore, my lady. There’s just the dead against the living.”

It took her a few moments to let the dreadful reality of the situation really sink in.

“Is that the reason why there’s a Lannister army at your gates?”

*Here we go.*

He had been expecting this and had taken his own precautions.

By his orders, the lions weren’t there, when Alys rode through the castle’s main entrance, and wouldn’t attend the evening’s feast either. After last night’s near-confrontation, Jon had deemed it the most sensitive course of action, not to put two factions that were just looking for the slightest excuse to unsheathe their swords against each other into a crowded place with free-flowing ale. Jaime and Tyrion had wholeheartedly concurred, and Davos had complimented him for his prudence, but he felt as though he were shrinking from his guest duties all the same.

He had tried to avoid open conflict, but by the way Alys’ grip on his arm was hardening with barely contained hostility he wondered if perhaps his well-laid plans had been all for naught.

“The Kingslayer killed Harrion at the Whispering Woods,” she seethed. “He strangled Torrhen with a chain. Both my brothers are dead because of him!”

“And because of him mine is a cripple!” Jon countered harshly. Her hand released its hold as though he were burning in flames.

“The Lannisters have many crimes to atone for. But Jaime Lannister will lead his men to the Wall, and Lord Tyrion swore to me he will bring us the help of Daenerys Stormborn.”

“And you trust them?” her voice trembled with incredulity.
“No more than I trust you.”

He saw her shoulders stiffening. Her mouth curved into a sickened frown, as she took a step back, fists curled at her sides, as if she was fighting the urge to claw his eyes out.

_The world has truly gone mad, if I stand here, advocating the reasons of the Lannisters against the righteous wrath of my kin, my ally, and the woman I’m expected to make my queen._

Angry tears brimmed in her eyes, but he couldn’t even bring himself to offer her some small comfort. _I can’t show weakness. She must needs understand._

A grimace twisting her features, Alys let out a shaky breath: “It’s a sour bite to swallow. I’m not sure my men will agree to those terms.”

Jon stepped closer.

“They might not like it, but they will follow your lead. Regardless of the outcome of this alliance, we must put aside our personal grudges, if we ever hope to survive what’s coming.”

Alys’ head tilted upwards. In the fading light of the afternoon, her eyes took a darker hue, the rings around her irises almost as black as onyx.

“What do you want from this alliance, truly?”

_I should be asking you this question._

“I want peace.”

_I want to rest. I want to feel warm again._

“And yet,” she scathingly replied, “the Lords of the North are raising their banners to your call. Winterfell is getting ready for war.”

“Sometimes war is unavoidable, if you want peace.”

She glared as though pondering him and the worth of his intentions.

“Are you going to meet with the Targaryen woman?”

Her bluntness floored him. She was laying her cards on the table, and the game had suddenly become very serious.

Feeling almost as if he were committing a treachery of sorts, Jon dropped his eyes to his snow-covered boots. Alys took his silent avoidance as confirmation and pressed on, angrily.

“You say you want peace, but at the same time you’re willing to work out an alliance with a House that for three hundred years did nothing but wage war, crush rebellions, burn down its enemies! Massacres, rapes, abductions, betrayals. Since Aegon’s Conquest, generations have lived and died without knowing a single day of peace! The Targaryens have been the undoing of this country and you’re actually considering bending the knee to her?”

“She has three dragons,” he wearily said, as though this simple fact should close the matter.

“She’s also barren,” she spat.

Every muscle of his body froze. The surprise must have revealed upon his face for a flicker of
triumph twinkled in her eyes.

Her lips curled into a cutting, sardonic half-grin.

“The dwarf didn’t tell you? How very curious…”

When words failed him, she brushed past him.

“I have it from a very reliable source. A little bird told me she has borne a son to her first husband. Some Essosi horse lord. I’m not really privy to the details, you’ll have to ask her Lord Hand about it.”

Her voice was mocking and thick with venomous contempt, so different from the joyous, good-natured girl he had hitherto known, that Jon recoiled.

“Apparently the babe was stillborn and she hasn’t been able to conceive ever since,” she went on. “Not for lack of trying; I was assured she had a long string of lovers while she played queen for the people in Slaver’s Bay.”

She gave him a pointed look, and he felt anger mounting within him. At Tyrion for misleading him, and mostly at himself for having fallen for his tricks and letting Alys play on his insecurities and his lack of awareness.

Was she manipulating him too?

He gritted his teeth, feeling completely out of his depth.

*You are right again, Ygritte. I still know nothing.*

“Peace is not made through war, Jon Snow. Peace is made through this.”

She boldly grabbed his hand and placed it over her womb. And kept it there until Jon could feel her warmth spreading through leather and wool.

“Think about it, when Daenerys will bid you give the North to her.”

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It was strange to hear the rhythmic sound of tambourines, flutes, vielles and bagpipes booming in frenetic beats across the Great Hall of Winterfell once again. Couples were dancing to the tunes, laughing and swirling and kissing as though there weren’t an army of the dead at their doors and, while the melodious voices of the bards filled the space with bawdy and cheerful songs, Alys Karstark shone above the other highborn ladies, as silvery and fair as the winter sun that graced her coat-of-arms. She had chosen a grey gown more befitting the occasion, and had her handmaiden style her long, raven hair into a single thick side braid that fell to her waist.

There were small blue rosebuds threaded into it: *Lyanna Stark come again*, Jon had heard old and stern Donella Hornwood say. He wouldn’t know, but she certainly looked the part.
Lords, soldiers and squires alike vied for her attentions, revolving around her like moths to the flame, asking her to dance, fawning over her, praising her beauty and raising toasts to her health, as if she were already wearing a bronze circlet around her brows. Or perhaps their hesitancies were simply growing faint in front of the succulent feast she had arranged. When was the last time such a lavish dinner had been served at Winterfell? The last time *Wolves in the Hills*, *Iron Lances* and *Six Maids in a Pool* had resounded in the Great Hall?

Jon couldn’t remember.

All music had died at the Red Wedding.

Alys was never too far from the dais: her eyes seemed to constantly follow him, like a wolf’s with a prey, and he found himself unable to look away. The sight disquieted him and stirred something dark and primal within, in equal measure. And when the singers started to play the first few bars of *The Queen Took Off Her Sandal, the King Took Off His Crown* and Alys silently held out her hand, he let her lure him to the centre of the floor, without any prodding.

“I remember the last time we danced, in this very Hall,” she whispered, her fingers fiddling with the furry hem of his right sleeve.

Jon remembered too.

She was a barely flowered young woman, pretty in her forest-green dress and he was too sullen, too timid and too low born for the likes of her.

“I fear I haven’t improved much, ever since,” he admitted as they took position across from each other.

A coy, low-lidded glance. A small curtsy.

“Let me be the judge of that.”

They started slow, tentative.

Trying to get each other’s measure.

At first, he struggled to call to mind the right dance figures, but as soon as his feet started to follow hers, the endless, boring lessons inflicted upon him and Robb when they were children came back all at once.

A double-step forward on the left, a single step backward, a sideways skipping to the right and spin around, shoulder against shoulder, switch place and repeat…

*Gods, I must look like an idiot.*

Alys moved with determined clarity, flowing without effort like fresh spring water surfacing from somewhere obscure and hidden, her movements graceful as she raised her arm above her head into a semi-arc to meet his as they circled around each other, until their hands touched, palm to palm.

The music picked up speed and suddenly, *suddenly*, it wasn’t boring anymore… the drummers were beating over their stretched animal skins with newfound vigour and the more the rhythm throbbed and quickened the more the steps brought the dancers close together… a lingering brush of fingertips over a waist… a gentle, alluring nudge with the hip… the hall floor thundered with the sound of dozens stomping feet… a cavalry charge in a battle of another kind… Alys twirled around him with a laugh then put her hands upon his shoulders as he lifted her in the air.
“Not bad,” she teased, slightly breathless.

Hands rose in one single clap in unison with the beat and she glided away as they changed partner.

For a few agonizing moments, Jon was matched with plump lady Eddara Tallhart, who was even clumsier than him and had been trying to catch him alone for the whole evening, and then with lady Jonelle Cerwyn, who wouldn’t even meet his eyes. It was with a sigh of relief that he welcomed Sansa’s hand into his for the conclusive steps.

“I’ve heard word that you spent a pleasant afternoon in the woods,” his sister murmured. There was unmistakable disapproval in the creases of her mouth.

Jon clenched his jaw. “It was only a hunting excursion,” he grunted.

A few feet from them rung Alys’ laughter. He glanced over his shoulder: Tormund, the silly oaf, was ‘dancing’ with her, but as he clearly wasn’t accustomed with the steps, he was trying to create some new ones, bouncing awkwardly left and right like a great, ruddy, lumbering ape.

Alys didn’t seem offended in the least, if the laughing tears hanging like pearls from her eyelids were any indication.

Her mirth was contagious.

“Take heed, brother.”

The coldness in Sansa’s voice froze his smirk. He followed her sharp stare to a secluded corner of the main table, where Ser Edwyn Karstark was conversing in hushed tones with Littlefinger.

Before he could fathom what that snake was up to, Alys grabbed his elbow and steered him away from his sister.

“I need some air!” she took lungful breaths and, wiping her eyes, cast a meaningful look to the closed double-door. “Do you mind?”

The night was crisp and full of the luscious smells and sounds of the feast, and the godswood cocooned them under the white, frozen roof of tree branches stretching over their heads. Its soothing solitude called out to him.

Next to him, his companion seemed to be lost in thoughts, too: with her eyes cast down and a blue winter rose twiddling in her fingers, she seemed strangely shy and demurred.

“I have so many, sweet memories of this castle,” she broke the silence as they reached the heart tree by the pond. “A home far away from home. You have no idea how many times I’ve begged my lord father to be fostered here as a ward.”

“Weren’t you happy at Karhold?”

“Let’s just say I was a wayward child. My mother died when I was three, and my father never married again. I suppose I missed a woman’s presence to guide me as I grew up. My brothers were much older than me and didn’t really have time to play. As for the other boys… well, I used to beat them, before they started to look at me less like a wild animal with scratches on my hands and knees, and more like a girl and realised they wanted to play different games with me. This only made me beat them harder.”

Jon tried, with little success, to hide an uncourtly snort behind his hand.
“Yes, it’s all good laughing, now,” she chided him, although obviously amused. “Wasn’t that funny, back then. I used to spend more time in punishment than I did riding in the woods. Truth is... Karhold felt like a trap, sometimes.”

“Ah, so you wanted to flee here, because in Winterfell you were free to do as you liked, with no fear of the consequences.”

A merry chortle surged past her lips, crystalline like the sound of breaking ice. “In a way, yes. But I’m not lying to you when I say that some of my happiest memories are linked to this place.”

She rested one naked hand over the pale tree bark, running her fingers across it as though she were attempting to smooth out the knots and gashes, the rough valleys carved by old age and dried red tears. The face etched into the wood seemed frozen into a deep slumber, but Jon had the impression that its eyes, although shut, could still see all.

Alys seemed fascinated by it. She traced the outline of the ligneous lips and nose.

“What’s the old saying? ‘A kiss given by a heart tree is blessed by the Gods themselves.’”

Her eyes travelled to the top of the weirwood, in sad contemplation. “Robb stole my first kiss right here, under this tree... Did you know?”

Jon shook his head. The confession took him by surprise. Robb had never been shy with girls, or stingy with details about his latest trysts, or his occasional visits with the boys to the brothel in Winter Town. While Theon Greyjoy would bark crass laughter and would spur him on with lewd comments, Jon always kept his silence, his cheeks aflame, both embarrassed and shamefully engrossed in learning more, and secretly hating the effortless way girls flocked to his brother, with as little as a flick of the finger.

But Alys was different and not only because she was a highborn lady. Maybe the genuineness of Robb’s feelings for her had made him more prudent and close-mouthed.

“Such a charming, brave boy, your brother was,” her voice was thick with tenderness and regret, as she leant against the tree, almost hugging it. A solid anchor against the impalpable fragility of her own sorrows. “My father’s not-so-covert aspiration was that I be wedded to him. Karstark women had married Stark lords for centuries, now. It was almost expected of me to do the same. I probably would have, hadn’t the war broken out. Perhaps I would’ve been happy, too. Heavy with child at least once a year, no doubt. But my heart craved for someone else.”

She turned her grey eyes on him, soft and open and burning in the darkness, and his own heart skipped one, two beats.

He was rooted on the spot, trapped, but with no intention of struggling free. A willing prey. His prison were her lips, a temptation and a promise sketched upon them, her fierce self-assurance as she drew closer, like the rumbling of a coming snow blizzard. Her voice, unveiling truths as though she perfectly knew his fears. His desires.

“I liked the quiet, sweet younger brother everyone overlooked because of his low birth, the boy with the unruly black curls and big clumsy feet and the sad eyes... that stared and looked and searched... and now that boy has grown into a man, a king, and yet, he still has the same lost look, of someone who’s still searching, although he might not even know what.”

Her hand rested upon his cheek, just as minutes before it had rested over the tree bark, and with the same pensive fondness traced the plucked skin where Orell’s talons had left his scars. Jon couldn’t
do anything else but let her, regardless of the queer feeling of apprehension coiling at the base of his spine.

_What would she say if I were to show her my other scars? Would she think of me as an ungodly freak?_

He closed his eyes and dragged in a shattered breath when she cupped his face.

“What is it that you’re so desperately seeking, Jon?”

_A caped woman who smelled of iron and tears and dried flowers._

_Myself._

He did not know.

Alys’ hand was slightly chilly, against his burning cheek, and the feeling was comforting and disconcerting at the same time. He leaned into it.

Into her.

Her lips were even colder, but when his arms wrapped around her body and she pressed flush against him, whimpering, hot and demanding and savagely hungry, he felt his knees surrender to blinding lust.

Nails scraped the nape of his neck, dug unto his shoulders, pulled at his cloak and breeches, and he soon found himself backed against the tree, hard as a rock.

_What the hell are you doing?_ a small voice asked, in some clouded part of his brain. _This is wrong, don’t you see?_

‘Fire awaits!’ Another voice called to him, and this time it seemed to come from inside the weirwood. A voice that sounded like Bran’s.

He grabbed Alys’ hand.

“Did you hear that?”

She mercilessly nibbled at his ear: “I heard you groan.”

He tore himself away, eyes darting anxiously across the clearing.

But there was nobody else except the two of them, and the rustling of the wind.

_I must be losing my wits._

Alys was staring at him uncomprehendingly, turgid lips parted, red and inviting like a ripen fruit ready for the taking, and a lovely blush spread all over her heaving bosom.

“Jon?”

“Forgive me, I... I shouldn’t have...” He gulped down his guilt and hunger, feeling like an utter ass, and held out a hand. “Come. I’ll take you back to the castle.”

He realised that was the wrong thing to say a second too late: Alys’ face shifted from thrumming anticipation, to alarmed surprise, to icy, shuddering wrath in the space of a heartbeat.
Teeth sinking into her pinched lips, she straightened her dress and fastened her cloak with sharp, strained movements.

“Don’t bother,” she muttered. The cords in her neck stood out rigid like a taut bow-string about to loose. “I know the way, my lord.”

And with a last, stiff half-curtsy, she strode past him and disappeared into the grove.

It was almost the hour of the bat when Jon finally got back, too. He didn’t take the main pathway to the courtyard, but had opted for a walk over the wind-beaten southern battlements, in the hopes, perhaps, that the freezing gale would clear his mind. It had been no use. His body had calmed down from its rush of passion, but he was still as restless as a caged wolf.

Doubts gripped his heart, along with a strange, terrible sense of foreboding that he could not shake off.

Ghosts made of mist were moving up and down the crenellations and he addressed one of them.

“Evening, Rowyn.”

“Good evening, Your Grace,” the soldier greeted back in a stuffy, nasal voice and pointed his gloved fingers to the cold expanse beyond the castle’s walls. “All’s well.”

Other guards stood to attention by the braziers. Faceless shadows bundled up in darkness and layers of clothing. He had learned to recognize them by their eyes: often the only part of their body still distinguishable beyond all that wool.

Rowyn’s were rheumy and weary.

“I’m relieving you for a while, Rowyn. Go back inside. Warm yourself up a little.”

“Many thanks, Your Grace!” the aged sentry rasped. He set down his spear and trumpet, took a leather flask and with a sniffle he carried his rusty bones inside the comfort of the Bell Tower. Wrapping his cloak tighter against himself, Jon settled as best as he could into the small alcove left vacant, somehow missing the once boring, uncomplicated lives of the sentinels patrolling the Wall.

Boring, until the horns will blast three times.

For now the only blasting sounds he could hear were the jolly ones still coming from the Hall: music, singing and roaring laughter travelled across the night, but none of that warm companionship seemed to reach his heart.

His eyes scanned the hollow plain below, alight with the fires raised from the Lannister camp, and beyond it, across the White Knife, the gently-sloping hills that welcomed the traveller to the barrowlands. And even further… Moat Cailin, the Neck, and then, the South, where Cersei Lannister and Daenerys Stormborn were biding their time…

Had the snows already reached Dorne?

A big hand pounded him on the back, and when he turned he was met with Tormund’s rubicund face and ear-to-ear silly grin. He had ale foam tickling all over his matted beard and a half-empty horn in the other hand.

“You stole me dancing partner, back there, boy!”
Jon took the mead the wildling was offering and budged to make more room for him.

“I’ve rescued her. I dare not think what would have become of her feet, if I’d left her to your tender care.”

“Har! If me heart didn’t already belong to me glorious blue-eyed giantess, I’d give it a shot. You’re so busy brooding that you wouldn’t even notice if I were to steal her from under yer pudgy nose. Girl was eatin’ you up during the feast. Clearly wanted you in her. But then I saw her getting back from the godswood alone, lookin’ ready te slash someone’s throat with her nails.” He frowned at him. “Tell me, is there something wrong with yer cock?”

Jon snorted beer out of his nose. If the events of the evening were any indication, there was absolutely nothing wrong with his cock. Would I could say the same for my mind.

“There’s more to it than a tussle in a bed, Tormund.”

Or, as it appeared, in the snow.

“Then yer more stupid than you look. Never refuse a woman! They’re vengeful creatures. You could find yerself without an ear, or a finger, or without your balls and member if they think you’re turning them down!”

“Don’t free folk women usually try to geld you also when they’re not interested?”

Tormund Tall-talker cracked a gap-toothed smile.

“Aye. You never know what is what. Isn’t that exciting?”

Jon rolled his eyes, with increasing annoyance. “I like her, all right? She’s beautiful, and witty and… I’m not blind, for gods’ sake!”

“What’s the bloody problem, then? What else is holdin’ ye back?”

He let out an exasperated sigh. Tormund was scrutinizing him like if he were some kind of puzzling specimen.

“Is it Ygritte?” he suggested after a while, as tactful as a big bear like him could be.

He did not have an answer to that.

The yearning he felt and couldn’t explain with words went far beyond the simple truth of missing Ygritte.

We are only human, and the gods have fashioned us for love, Maester Aemon had said to him, once. That is our great glory, and our great tragedy. But he had forgotten to tell Jon how dangerous and frightening was to truly love somebody.

“I don’t know if I can trust her,” he admitted. “There are things I dread to tell her.”

“I understand,” Tormund said, with a solemn nod of the head, “but I promise I won’t tattle about how weeny yer pecker really is.”

The joke barely broke through his scowl, but he was grateful the big oaf was there. His natural talent to make light even of death itself in truth hid the gentlest, most trustworthy of hearts, and Jon answered with candour when Tormund asked knowingly: “Yer talkin’ about what the red witch did to you?”
“Not only that. I’m having nightmares. About the Night King.”

Tormund shrugged. “Everyone’s got nightmares about the fucker, after Hardhome.”

“This is different! You saw what happened at the Nightfort. What if... what if I came back wrong? What if I’m becoming...”

“A white shadow?”

Jon could not bear to see the horror into the wildling’s eyes. But before he could react, Tormund had stood up, grabbed his wrist and slashed his knife across his thumb’s fingertip, deep enough to draw blood. He squeezed the cut holding the hand in front of him.

“There! Red and warm.” The blood oozed in thick, bright drops down his sleeve. “Yer not dead. Yer eyes are not blue. D’you wanna kill yer little brother, yer sisters?”

“Of course not!”

“Then don’t! Listen, I’m not one of your maesters and I ain’t know nothing ‘bout them visions that young Brandon is gettin’... But one thing I know. Our future’s not set in stone! We are no puppets controlled by some godly force. I’m not here because the gods told me to, or for some wicked vision in the flames. I’m here ‘cause I made a choice. Same as you.”

It was a deep reasoning, for a man like Tormund.

If what he believed was true, then Jon would make a choice of his own, here and now. He gripped the wildling’s arm to have his full attention.

“If it comes a day when I’ll become a danger to my family, to the people I love and care about, promise me, Tormund... promise me you’ll kill me. Promise me you'll burn my body.”

“Aye, I’ll burn that flat, kingly ass o’ yours right now, if you don’t stop blabbering ‘bout killing family and friends!”

He angrily tore his arm away and snatched back his horn.

“You’re a warrior, Jon Snow. But you’re also a man. A good man. Stop torturing yourself for wanting the things everyone wants, and live a little, before that Wall o’ yours will mark the end of all of us!”

Jon didn’t stop him when he stomped off, but his bad temper wasn’t worrying in the least. Tormund wouldn’t hold him a grudge for more than a half-day. He was fond of him and Jon knew his intentions were nothing but good.

Perhaps he was even right.

Maybe he should go and find Alys and beg for her forgiveness, strip himself bare of all his secrets and ask her to do the same.

Love her, like deep down he knew she wanted him to. Like he wanted to.

*If we die, we die. But first we’ll live,* a thick, hoarse voice he still ached for whispered in his mind.

*First we’ll live.*

But for all his proclaimed inner resolve, when he marched back to the Keep, his craven feet led
him in front of Sansa’s chamber door, instead.

Regardless of the late hour, there was a light still glowing from under it.

He put his hand on the wooden panel: it was his father’s bedroom, once. Jon never felt welcomed there, as a child. Lady Catelyn had made sure of that; she wouldn’t even allow him to nestle in the big canopy bed, cuddling safely with their soothing warmth on either side of him, after he got shaken awake by some night terror or by the whistling, spectral voice of the wind between the wall crevices.

And even now, after he knocked and was granted free entry, he stepped in somewhat warily, perhaps expecting a rebuke, but the quiet figure with auburn hair sitting by the fire wasn’t Catelyn Stark, and she didn’t kick him out, nor did she even stir.

Bent over a black garment – cloak or quilt, Jon could not say – she was embroidering with red and golden threads, his sister was so intent to her needlework that she didn’t even acknowledge his presence. Jon didn’t take it as a slight: an empty armchair had been already drawn up close to hers, as if she had been waiting for him.

His direwolf was already there, anyways, dozing peacefully at her feet, over the pelts spread in front of the hearth. From time to time, he would crack open an eye in a slow blink and raise his muzzle to check on Kyra, that was nursing her three-weeks old newborns. There were three of them. One for each living Stark child, and Jon was reminded how, a long time ago, five direwolf pups had been snatched away from certain death and had been put under Lord Stark’s protection.

Five, and one besides.

Now, the pup which should have belonged to him had died a mere few hours after he had been born, but Jon didn’t feel too bad about it. The remaining three had soft, grey-white fur, and eyes a coppery bronze hue which flickered blood-red under the light of the fire, and it was impossible to mistake them for anything but offsprings of the same albino father.

Even the smallest of the lot was much bigger than the other pups born from the other litter, even though Willow had whelped a sennight earlier.

Under Ghost’s watchful gaze, Jon scooped up the bolder one, a furry ball of white who was trying to sneak out from his mother’s nuzzles to wander across the room, and sat down.

“Well?” his sister said at last, eyes still trained on her stitching. “Did she already take her clothes off?”

“Sansa!”

She ignored his prudish remonstrance altogether and raised a single eyebrow at him, deadpan; that was all it took for Jon to fall apart under the weight of his own embarrassment. Oh, hells. She knows. How the fuck does she do that?

He feigned innocence and put on a good show distracting himself with the little half-breed squirming in his lap and nibbling playfully at his fingers, but his cheeks and neck were burning up in flames.

“Look at yourself. A pretty girl makes eyes at you and you completely take leave of your senses. At least, tell me you weren’t so predictable and foolish as to fall into her ambush.”

Ambush?
“What do you mean?”

She dropped needle and thread on her lap and turned to him with an irritated sigh, as though it was something so plain and obvious that she shouldn’t even bother to explain it to him.

“Alys doesn’t care for you. She doesn’t care for the Wall, either.”

“And you know that how?”

“I observe.”

Jon pulled the whimpering pup close to his chest and lay back on the chair.

“Please, enlighten me.”

“Her arrival,” Sansa started to enumerate, “her speech to the high lords. Her dancing with you. All the smiles, the sultry looks, the fleeting touches. All of it! It’s a power play, Jon. I’ve met dozens of women like her, in King’s Landing. Ambitious, back-stabbing bitches who use their beauty, their sex, to get what they want! And the cleverest of them sits on the Iron Throne right now.”

Plotting, pressing the advantage, pursuing power at others’ expense… Is this the lesson you’ve learned from Cersei, too, dear sister?

“And what do you reckon Alys wants?”

“Apart from the obvious? I don’t know.” She hesitated. “I’m not sure she forgave Robb for making her father shorter by a head.”

The thought had crossed his mind as well. Was she out looking for vengeance? A pang of anguish pierced through his chest.

“You fear she might be deceiving us.”

“I have no reasonable proof of that,” she said prudently. “But I beg you, brother: be careful with her. She knows how to play on a man’s weaknesses and you are so horribly easy to read! Don’t promise her anything that could get you into deeper trouble.”

“Tormund thinks I should do the right opposite.”

“Yes, well, I like Tormund. But you'll have to admit that he's not the most reliable source, when it comes to bedding partners and politics.”

He chuckled in assent. His wildling friend wasn’t called Husband to Bears for nothing, after all.

Then suddenly her sister’s breath hitched and she looked at him, the spark of an idea gleaming into her eyes.

“Have Tormund marry her!”

Jon burst out laughing to her face. Sansa just stared at him, without even blinking…

“You’re serious!” he breathed, stunned.

“Think about it! If Tormund marries her, a new house would be pledged to you, the wildlings would gain a land to call their own and the Karstarks would think twice about betraying us.”
“I can’t tell Tormund to marry Alys, Sansa! He doesn’t follow my orders, at least not on such matters!”

_He’d laugh at me first, and then kick my balls from here to the Wall and back._

“Alys would take it as another slight. A further humiliation. And a pretty unnecessary one, besides.”

Sansa gave a shrug. “Still seems more logic to me than to reward her family’s betrayal with a crown!”

This was a stale argument and he had no wish to go over it again.

Jon glowered and she glowered back.

“Arya agrees with me.”

“Such an appropriate time you two chose to finally get along,” he groused.

“At least, before you give the Karstarks your word, send Tormund to Karhold. To keep an eye on her.”

_She’s better at the game than I will ever be._

He weighted his sister long and carefully with his eyes, then nodded.

“I’ll consider it.”

Sansa pressed her lips together. It seemed like she wanted to pursue the matter further, but a sharp rap on the door hampered her.

“Enter!” his sister called out.

Ghost trotted eagerly to Meera Reed as she got in. The crannogwoman let him lick her open palm, patted him affectionately on the back and then bowed to them.

“My lady. Your Grace.”

“Meera! What is it?”

“Bran sent me to fetch you. Both of you.” She looked at him. “He said you’d be here. He needs to talk to you.”

Jon wrinkled his brow.

“It’s late. Can it wait until morning?”

For a moment, a tiny, almost fond smile found its way past her usual impassiveness.

“He said you’d say that too. He’s asked me to tell you that it’s a matter of the utmost importance, and that it can’t wait any longer. If you please…”

She stepped aside and patiently waited at the door for them to follow her.

The crypts were not the place _he_ would’ve chosen for a meeting with his brother, but Jon climbed down the steps, shivering as a feeling of familiarity was making him slightly queasy and dazed.
It was just like his dream, except now he could perceive a flickering, faint light at the very end of the arched tunnel.

“This way,” Meera lifted her torch and beckoned them.

Bran was waiting beside their father’s statue, and he wasn’t alone.

“Finally!” Arya breathed out when she caught sight of him and Sansa. She glared back at Bran, tapping a foot against the wet stone. “Are we all here now?”

She looked chilled to the bone and Jon wondered how long they had to wait in the semi-darkness.

On the contrary, Tyrion Lannister appeared rather amused by their brother’s antics. “This is starting to look like a clandestine council,” he whispered, smirking up at Jaime and Ser Davos. “Are we conspiring against someone? Because I’m pretty good at that. Although, I’d rather you picked somewhere less humid.”

“My apologies, Lord Tyrion. It was a choice born of necessity.”

“Why did you have us meeting here, at night? Why all the secrecy?” asked Lady Brienne.

“Because the dead don’t talk. And because this is a family matter.”

His clear eyes drifted to the statue of their aunt Lyanna. A candle burned over the palm of her outstretched hand and someone had placed over her head a crown of the same blue winter roses Alys had chosen to weave into her hair for the feast.

“Then I don’t see the reason why my brother and I should even be here.”

“Because it concerns you, Ser Jaime. And Lady Brienne, as well.”

The Lannister brothers exchanged confused glances and he stepped up.

“We’re here, now, Bran. I’m listening.”

But Bran sat on his wheelchair and didn’t speak. Ashen-faced, he stared ahead of him, eyes sunken and tearful, struggling as though he did not know how or where to breach the subject.

Jon turned to Davos for help.

“My lord, I apologise for my bluntness, but if this is really as important as you say, you’d better get down to it, before we all freeze our bums and your brother starts to –

“He’s not my brother!” Bran blurted out harshly.

“Brandon!” both Sansa and Arya cried out in shock.

Jon simply gaped at him, speechless and unbelievably hurt. I must have heard him wrong. But the others were trading stunned looks as well, and even the Kingslayer seemed somewhat taken aback by the grudging anger in Bran’s voice. Jon didn’t understand. Bran had always loved him dearly. Jon couldn’t remember how many times he had run to his rooms seeking comfort after one of his lady mother’s scolding. What did he do, now, to deserve such vile, acrimonious treatment?

“Bran, apologise to him right away!” Arya bade him and it was so comical to see her act as the chastising older sister, all grown-up, speaking with the same tone which brokered no argument he had often heard from Lady Catelyn that Jon would have roared with laughter, had the situation not
been so charged.

“Father would be appalled,” Sansa hissed.

“Father lied to us!”

*Us us us us...* echoed gloomy in the vault overhead.

“He lied to Mother, he lied to everyone he’s met in the last twenty years of his life.” Bran balled his fists upon the armrests, as though he were in pain or bracing himself for an attack. “This entire family is built on a lie!”

Jon was sure he had never seen him so distressed and furious before.

His sisters searched his eyes for some sign of advice or direction, but he was as lost as them. Their brother wasn’t making any sense.

“Bran, what in the gods’ name are you talking about?”

“I’ve been trying to tell you ever since we came back, but I didn’t know how! I’m sorry, I was so scared!”

All the raw, frayed tension settled upon his shoulders up to that point flooded out from his eyes, all at once, and he started to weep in earnest, like a dam breaking.

Jon knelt beside him and seized his quaking hands.

“Whatever it is, just tell me.”

Tears spilt down his chin as he glanced at him, with a curious look Jon never saw before in his eyes.

A plea for forgiveness.

“I know who your mother is!”

The world **stopped**.

He felt his chest expand, the muscles stretching over tendons and bones, but no air came to his lungs. The crypts dissolved into an unfocused dark blur around him and he was reeling.

And then, something snapped inside of him.

He wanted to slap his brother. He wanted to shake him and scream curses at him. Because how did he **dare**? How could he be so cruel, knowing full well the sickening agony that still poisoned his heart at the mere thought of her, the **loss** of her? He wanted to stop listening, he didn’t even know **why**, but he wanted to stand and flee, but his knees were all wobbly and he had to grip harder the wheelchair’s armrest not to fall over.

“What did you just say?”

“At first, there were just snippets. Flashes of memories. I didn’t even know what I was watching. It didn’t really make sense, until after I became the Three-Eyed Raven... and then I saw it... the fight against the Sword of the Morning and Ser Gerold Hightower... I saw it all... The room in the tower...smelling of dried roses and blood... Father promising her to keep the baby safe, to raise him as his own, to hide him from the world and shield him from Robert’s wrath. Everyone believed
he had kidnapped and raped her, and then left her to die in a tower hidden in the mountains of Dorne, but I saw. I saw!”

No.

A tower in Dorne. The kidnapping. The raping.

Jon raised his eyes and she was there.

She’s always been there.

A highborn lady with eyes of steel, and a wreath of blue winter roses upon her head.

No.

“You’re not a wolf,” Brandon said, and his voice was full of heartbreak. “You’re a dragon.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, yes. I know. He IS a wolf AND a dragon.
I just thought it sounded better this way, especially as the chapter’s closing line!
Technicalities, I hope you’ll forgive me XD

So… Alys: friend or foe?

Thank you, thank you, thank you for the lovely comments on chapter 19 and for your patience in waiting for this latest update!
I hope this didn't disappoint and that you've enjoyed this new chapter as well!
Do leave a comment!
Jaime V

Chapter Notes

In which Jaime learns a few lessons. And Jon too.
Angst, angst everywhere! (and some cuteness, too)
Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JAIME

It was as though a monstrous creature had opened its mouth to swallow them all into a hollow, voiceless screech, deafening and numbing at the same time, and had spat them out again, to leave them writhing and dying on the frozen ground.

Shock’s jagged edges seeped through his skin, dug within, into his bones, deeper and deeper, to his very marrow, until all that remained was a void, broken shell engulfed in a trembling obscurity. Only one coherent thought rushed past the stupor which paralyzed his mind.

He’s Rhaegar’s son. He’s my prince’s son.

Jaime’s eyes pushed through the blurred lines of the dwindling torches and tried to focus over the dark, cloaked figure staring motionless in front of Lyanna Stark’s effigy. Had it been not for his chest, expanding and shrinking in frantic pants, as if the young man was barely managing to squeeze some air into his lungs, Jaime could’ve mistaken him for a statue among statues.

He knows. He knows Bran doesn’t lie.

Maybe, deep down, he’s always known.

“This doesn’t make any sense!” Brienne’s voice echoed as though from a distance. “Why would your father lie to Lady Catelyn, to you, about it? Robert Baratheon was Lord Eddard’s closest friend. Why did he believe he’d have to protect the babe from the King’s fury?”

“He hated the Targaryens.” His own voice came out croaked, unrecognisable.

He remembered that damn tourney when everything changed.

Only a day he had been in attendance, long enough to have the briefest glimpse of joy for his dream come true and hear the loud cheers of the crowd – Young Lion, they had roared, the same wretched hypocrites who, only two years later, would sneer and whisper Kingslayer behind his back – before Aerys’ had spitefully commanded him to make haste to King’s Landing with the Queen and the younger prince.

He’s mine now, not Tywin’s.
Only one day, but even that short amount of time had been enough. He had observed carefully.

The grudging, envious glares, the scorn masked behind a lewd smile and a horn of ale full to the brim. Robert had always been jealous of Rhaegar, long before Lyanna’s abduction. He had envied the prince’s effortless grace with which he wielded his royal power, the favour of the other high lords, the love of the smallfolk, the way they all looked up to him, with devotion shining in their eyes, eager to do his bidding. Robert had desperately wanted those same looks for himself, Jaime considered; he was just waiting for the right pretext to smash everything apart. He had loved the girl, ‘twas true, but he had loved himself infinitely more.

For twenty years, hate and jealousy had sprouted and grown like a persistent, noxious weed, festering each deed, each word, nurtured by resentment, wounded pride and the shadow of the grey-eyed woman he could never have and whose wraith he had always tried to evoke in all his lovers and paramours.

_My own sister included._

“Robert swore to kill them all. Wipe the Targaryen line forever. He never forgave Rhaegar for taking Lyanna away from him,” he said.

“He’s right,” Arya uttered. Her eyes, wide and eerily innocent, searched her sister’s blues. _She looks strikingly young._ Jaime realised. They both looked thus. Lost, small and so, so very young.

“Remember how angry Father was, when news reached the Council that Daenerys was with child?” Arya urgently recalled. “The King wanted to send killers, for her and the baby still in her womb.”

That day was impressed into Jaime’s memory, as well, with astounding clarity. It was the day the ravens carried the news of Tyrion’s capture. The day Eddard Stark fell from grace. He had almost felt sorry for the honourable, foolish clod. After all, Robert was not an easy piece of sweet-pie to swallow on his best days, but he would become savage and merciless, when wrath, bitterness and his deluded suspicions gnawed at his mind and heart.

_Dragonspawn_, was the word Robert liked to use, when referring to Daenerys and her brother.

Jaime had found himself pitying the girl, back then. Yes, she was Aerys’ daughter, and, in all likelihood, her father’s madness ran in her blood as well, but she was alone, without an army, without allies, without a shred of power to call her own, and there was a whole continent between her, her unborn child and Westeros.

He had deemed his good-brother’s fears premature, at the very least.

Wherever he was, the drunken fool was probably laughing his beer-swollen belly off, right now.

The princess was still alive, in Dragonstone. With an army of Dothraki and Unsullied, the allegiances of Highgarden and Dorne at her back, and three dragons. Unaware that one of her nephews still lived and ruled in the North.

For some reason, the thought filled him with guilt, and grief.

“Father was furious,” confirmed Sansa. “Perhaps he thought that, had he known the truth, Robert would put his head and Jon’s too on a pike, for high treason.”

“His name is not Jon.”
They all turned to Bran, stunned.

“What?”

“Jaehaerys. That’s the name aunt Lyanna chose, before she died.”

Named after his great-grandfather, who nearly started a war when he broke his arranged betrothal to the Tullys of Riverrun to marry his own sister out of love. Named after the Wise King. The Old King. The best monarch Westeros had ever had. Jaehaerys the First and his endless spring of peace.

And now, and endless winter of war awaited his descendant.

*What an awful irony.*

A dull clattering to his left startled him out of his musings. Jon had stumbled into the stout granite column at his back, and Jaime stared at him as though he were seeing him for the first time.

His face was a mask of pure, raging agony: pale flesh stretched into an ugly grimace over his lips, sunken empty eyes, tight fists shuddering at his sides… The only living thing on his person at that very moment seemed to be the two rubies shining bright over the wolf-shaped pommel of his Valyrian blade. The rest of him was dead.

Sansa took a tentative step ahead.

“Jon…”

But he pushed her outstretched hand aside and darted up the stairs, without a word. There simply weren’t any, to give or to hear, that would be soothing enough.

When Arya made a move to follow him, Davos put a firm hand over her shoulder and pulled her back, shaking silently his head.

She didn’t argue further, but started pacing in front of Ned’s statue, her face waxen and sickly even by the faint light of the torches; now and then, her eyes rose to the statue’s stern features, glowering with such outraged hostility that Jaime had to wonder if the bones inside the vault weren’t shrinking and turning to dust just by the force of it.

“He made our own mother believe that he had been unfaithful! What kind of man does that?” she flared up, horrified and angered in the way only a daughter who just saw her father’s myth crumbling before her eyes could be.

“I’m sure it wasn’t a choice taken with a light heart,” Tyrion chimed in, his voice barely a whisper. “The deception had to be convincing. The only way your father could pull it off without raising any suspicion was if you and your mother were to believe it completely, without a doubt. That was clever, and incredibly selfless of him.”

Jaime wouldn’t know anything about clever, selfless gestures. All he could think of was that honourable Ned Stark, the man he had disliked for so many years for his inflexible virtue and his unwillingness to lie, had taken to the grave a secret he couldn’t even share with the woman with whom he had shared everything else.

The warmth of a bed. Children. Sorrows.

That must have been terribly lonely.
Arya’s shoulders sloped in dejection: “What do we do now? What do we say to the other lords, to the Karstarks?”

For a loaded moment, nobody dared to speak, or to come up with a suggestion. Then the Onion Knight voiced out Jaime’s own thoughts.

“Nothing of what has transpired here in the last twenty minutes must leave this crypt.”

The sisters immediately mutinied.

“Ser Davos, have you completely taken leave of your wits?”

“We all lived in a lie for all these years and you want to keep hiding the truth?”

“My lady. Sansa. I might not be a northerner by blood or birth, but I’ve learned to understand your hearts. Should this revelation reach the other Houses of the North… I fear the King might lose his crown.”

“He’s still a Stark! He has Stark blood in his veins!” Arya objected.

“Aunt Lyanna was well-loved,” the red-haired woman remarked, “the whole North rose against the Iron Throne for her!”

“Aye! Against a Targaryen prince who was said to have kidnapped and raped her! This is the story that has been handed down, the tale the maesters have spun and written in their history books!”

“But what if the tale is wrong?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bran said in a flat, oddly glacial tone. “To change people’s minds about something they think they know is well-nigh impossible.”

The boy’s blue eyes bore into his, and the words took on a deeper meaning, only for him. Yes, Jaime would know. Whether it was a vile slander or a merely biased and incomplete account of the events, the people would always believe what they wanted to believe. In the North, Rhaegar will always be an abductor and rapist, just as I will be forever dubbed the Kingslayer.

“My lady, make no mistake,” Davos spoke again, and there was a hint of resigned desperation in his voice. “The North will never support the claim of the grandson of the man responsible for Rickard and Brandon Stark’s deaths.”

“He can’t be held accountable for the crimes of his deranged grandfather!”

Oh, wench, how innocent and gullible you still are!

Jaime gritted his teeth. “The crimes of the fathers will always fall down on the sons. And you Northerners,” he let out a bitter sneer, “how does the saying go? You remember everything, do you?”

“This doesn’t concern only the Houses of the North, I’m afraid,” his brother observed. He looked uncharacteristically subdued. “If Cersei hears about this, she will stop at nothing to bring him down, and there’s no telling what Daenerys would do.”

Brienne wrinkled her brow. “You think she would see him as a threat?”

Tyrion shrugged, perturbed. “Hard to say. She might take the news with elation. After all, he’s her only living family. Or,” a nervous titter rippled past his lips, “she might feed him to Drogon.
Bastard or not, she might convince herself that a direct male descendant is more legitimized to ascend on the Iron Throne than she ever will.”

“Wouldn’t a marriage settle the issue?” Meera mulled over.

“I don’t know,” he sighed and rubbed a weary hand over his beard. “For the first time in years, I don’t have a contingency plan.”

The fact that Tyrion, with all his wits and love for scheming, was as lost as them instilled in him a profound sense of dismay and dread for what was to come.

“It falls on us to try and protect him, now, as your father would have,” Davos said to Sansa.

The girl clasped her hands over her chest and searched for her siblings’ reassurance. The Starks had just lost a brother, only to unexpectedly acquire a paternal cousin, but stronger than shock there was a dignified composure in their mourning, which kept them somewhat tenacious and united into a deeper sense of belonging.

The same determined looks were exchanged across their ancestors’ graves.

“It’s up to you, sister,” Arya said.

Sansa moved in front of Lyanna’s statue, into the light, and for the first time Jaime recognised a glimpse of the Stark blood emerging into her southern features: the profile of her nose, the width of the shoulders, the stern thinness of her pursed lips…

There was something of her famous aunt in her, too, after all.

“Our father never talked about her. In the household, it was forbidden to speak about the tourney in Harrenhal. To speak her name aloud. I can’t say whether it was right or wrong of him to keep us in the dark. Nobody here is in the position to judge. What we can do now is carrying on his promise to her. No one will utter a word about what we heard here tonight. Jon will choose if and when to tell the truth. It’s his right. In the meantime, if need be, I’ll take his place in tomorrow’s small council, and I’ll offer his apologies to the high lords and lady Alys. We’ll adjourn in the solar first thing in the morning. Do we all agree?”

He gave a curt nod, and the others followed his cue.

“Brienne, would you be so kind as to see my brother safely to his chambers? Afterwards, meet me in my room: I require your counsel.”

Brienne bowed her head in assent, but her eyes trained on him, full of thoughtful consideration and something soft and roughly bare that seemed to whisper to him Later… Later…

They hadn’t shared a moment alone since their stormy brawl, the previous night. He had been half drunk on wine and half drunk on her, and totally enraged at Cersei. Now his mind had cleared, but the longing hadn’t deserted him, nor had it simmered down.

Jaime had never talked at length about Rhaegar with her, but somehow she simply knew. She understood his guilt and was aware of what this revelation meant for him. It was all in her eyes. And he wanted nothing more than rest his head upon her lap and let her soothe away his ghosts, but their duties – to Sansa, to Jon – seemed to constantly keep them apart. He would realise the abysmal magnitude of what had just come to pass in a few hours, when the first waves of shock would’ve waned off, Jaime was sure of it.
For now, he numbly climbed the stairs back to the lichyard and welcomed with a shuddering breath the harsh night air, burning upon his face.

“Are you all right?” Tyrion asked, wary and tactful in equal parts. Jaime didn’t answer. He wrapped his cloak tighter around himself and tramped alone to the godswood.

He heard him long before he caught sight of the dark figure across the pond.

The loud, grinding thuds of steel hitting damp bark and icy moss carried through the woods; Jaime only had to follow the sound and the rhythmic grunting that accompanied it until the old, big weirwood tree came into view.

No wonder the lad had run here. Apparently, this was Ned’s special place, or so the wench had told him on occasions.

He halted a few feet from where the young king was trying to tear down the large, white trunk only with the strength of his arms and gathered his thoughts.

The heart tree was bleeding. Deep gashes were ripping open where Longclaw’s sharp edge was hacking at its skin, again and again, and the carved face, with its eyes squeezed shut and mouth open in a soundless scream, seemed frozen into an expression of great suffering.

The scene left him perturbed and uncomfortable: if what the cantankerous old hags in Winter Town and the wildling spearwives used to say was true, that each weirwood tree still housed the dormant spirit of a Child of the Forest within, Jaime wondered if Jon, in that very moment, wasn’t perhaps committing a sacrilege.

Is he trying to punish the gods, or Ned?

“He’s good Valyrian steel, you’re wielding,” he called. “Considering the dire predicament we’re in, it might not be very sensible of you to ruin it against the bark of a tree.”

Jon stopped, but did not turn.

His frantic breathing steamed before him in heavy, tremulous puffs.

“If you came here to fight, then unsheathe your sword. I don’t have the patience for idle words, now, Kingslayer!”

The blade rose above his head again, but never struck down. Jon suddenly whipped around, flushed from exertion, his eyes wide and mad, and heatedly pointed the shaking tip of the weapon at him.

“You murdered my grandsire!”

The ground quaked beneath his feet.

Jaime’s mouth opened, closed and opened again, like a gaping fish, the full implications of the situation only now crashing down on him. Not only the fact that he had indeed executed Jon’s paternal grandfather, but also that Aerys himself was responsible for the gruesome death of the one on his maternal side.

Jon seemed to have realised it, as well: with a feral cry he hurled his sword at full force against the
tree.

“HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO TAKE ALL OF THIS?”

Snowflakes, dirt, sparks of steel and splinters of bark flew everywhere as he lashed out, until
Longclaw got lodged into the tree so deep that Jon couldn’t get it free.

His strength seemed to leave him all at once. He put both his hands on the trunk and bent over,
panting as though he was about to be sick.

“Why did Bran have to tell me?” he rasped. “Why now?”

Jaime drew nearer.

“It is not Bran you’re blaming. Not really. It’s Ned.”

He could understand the blind rage Jon felt against his putative father. The lie in itself was only
part of the problem. Ned had denied him the chance to properly mourn his mother, and had turned
his whole personal history into a fraud. No wonder the boy couldn’t cope.

“When he left Winterfell to ride to King’s Landing with the King, he told me we would talk about
my mother, once he’d returned.” His shoulders shook and he sounded alarmingly close to tears. “He
did nothing but lie. He lied and lied to me, to his children, to his own wife, for twenty years. How
can I forgive him?”

“Tell me, in these twenty years during which you’ve been raised as the Bastard of Winterfell do
you think Ned loved you? Has he taught you everything you’d need to survive? Honour, wisdom,
mercy, courage?”

“It’s not enough,” Jon retorted furiously.

“It never is! We’re all haunted by our names, our ambitions. By the shadow of our fathers, and by
that unattainable ideal they had wanted us to become.”

When Jaime saw he had his attention, he pressed on.

“When Cersei and I were born, our father already had all of our lives planned out. My sister was to
be queen. Whether she be wed to Rhaegar or another man, it was of no consequence, so long as
she’d wear the crown. And I was destined to inherit the Rock, marry, produce heirs to keep the
bloodline thriving. We never got a chance to choose. And neither did you. You joined the Night’s
Watch because you believed even a bastard could find glory in serving in such an ancient
institution. You became Lord Commander because other people appointed you to the task, only to
murder you less than a year later. You’ve been brought back by a red priestess, however
unbelievable that is. And then Ned Stark’s bannermen hailed you as their king, only because they
believed you his son.”

“Thank you for the summary, my lord,” Jon snarled, “but I was there for pretty much all of it!”

Jaime smirked. He was fighting back, that was good. “You were, but this is the moment, right now,
when you get to choose for real, for the first time. Who you are. What you want to become. You
can choose what to do with what you now know about yourself. You can choose to spend the rest
of your life brooding and bearing a grudge for what has been taken away from you. Groping in the
dark in search of your place in the world. Or, you can overcome your past, fight your own doubts
and start building your own future, so that your heart will hold no regrets when you’ll greet the
Stranger for the final stand.”
Jaime paused to consider how much the speech could also apply to himself.

His mind went to the still empty pages of the White Book forgotten inside the Round Room: in his first days in the Kingsguard, he had wanted to fill them with such valiant deeds that every child in the Seven Kingdom would have taken him as a paragon of virtue to admire and emulate.

Now he only wished he could fill those pages with the truth. He thought back to his desperation when he lost his hand, when he believed he would never be able to put together the wrecked fragments of his identity, to be whole again as a man and warrior, when the pain had still been too raw and overwhelming for him to realise that his maiming wasn’t the end, but the beginning.

It had set him free.

Brienne, with her fiery, innocent eyes, had seen it before he did, before everyone else did, and had tried to show him, but Jaime could not understand, back then.

But now, his own eyes were finally open.

Jon Snow was louring morosely at him, and although his grey eyes and black curls were all Stark, there was also a bit of Rhaegar’s melancholy about him. The downturned frown of his mouth, the small dimple upon his chin, the generous forehead...

_I was too busy to see Ned Stark, and only him, in his eyes. Just as everyone else always saw only Tywin in mine._

“Ned Stark was not a man without faults. He was prone to jump to the wrong conclusions, when he didn’t know all the facts, and enjoyed having the moral ground a bit too much, even though he was only scarcely better than the most of us. But in the end he _was_ honourable, and, although you might not feel that way now, he did right by you.”

“How can you say that? He left me with nothing!”

“He left you with your life,” Jaime replied. “Which is a great deal more than what you’d be left with, hadn’t he kept the secret as well as he did.”

“You really think Robert would’ve wanted me dead?” Jon asked, after a while. The answer was immediate.

“Without a doubt.”

The anger and resentment in his eyes faltered, making way for a small twinkle of hope. The secret wish, perhaps, to be able, one day, to fully believe Jaime’s words.

“Be angry. Embrace the pain. Mourn,” he continued. “Mourn for your name. Mourn for the parents you’ve never got to meet, and for the one you’ve lost. But do try not to judge Ned too harshly. Not until you’ll have children on your own and realise that sometimes a lie is necessary, when their lives are at stake.”

After all, wasn’t that what he did, as well?

_The things I did for love._

_The lies Ned Stark told, for the same reason…_

It was odd and somewhat amusing to discover, after so many years, that they shared much more
common ground than Jaime would have ever imagined. In their own ways, they both had been victims of the biased opinion of people.

Ned sacrificed his own honour, endured the slanders and the heartbreak he caused to his own wife, because slanders and heartbreak were precisely what supported the lie and helped him to conceal the truth; because he knew there was something greater than his good name to protect. Because he had made a promise he wasn’t willing to break. He had loved his sister unconditionally, and her boy, this man become king, was all that remained of her.

Is that what sibling love truly looks like?

Have I been completely blind, all along?

Love trumps honour, but not in the wicked way I’ve always thought.

Yes, now he understood.

Jon gripped his sword’s hilt and, pivoting the foot on the tree, wrenched it free. Red, thick sap gushed from the tear, and he rested a hand on it, caressing the injured bark, almost as though asking for an absolution.

“I dreamed of her for all my life, wondering where she was,” he muttered. “How could I have known her bones were resting only a few steps away from me?”

Steady and comforting, Jaime’s hand found his shoulder almost without a thought, just as a morning of so many years ago Rhaegar did with that seventeen-year-old boy who had wanted to follow him to battle.

“I never believed Robert’s version of the story. Your father, your real father, was a great prince. A great man. He would’ve made a worthy king, too.”

There were so many questions in his steel eyes, so many doubts, and Jaime realised that of all the knights who had known Rhaegar up close, he was the last: the Sword of the Morning, Prince Lewyn, Oswell Whent, Ser Jon Darry, the White Bull, Barristan the Bold… all the members of that glorious Kingsguard were long gone: the memory of them had grown into the stuff legends were made of, while their flesh had rotten away, food for the crows on the Trident or at the Tower of Joy or in some faraway barbaric city circled by the desert.

All gone. Except me.

“We don’t have to talk about him right now. But when you’ll wish to…”

Jon nodded, and a deep part of Jaime, the part closer to his knighthood dreams, to the boy he had been before the war, before Aerys, kept whispering Rhaegar’s son – my Prince’s son, urgent and unrelenting, until he almost convinced himself that perhaps all was not lost, yet.

Oh, how desperately he wanted to believe that!

His sister had stripped him of even the last thing he had left, but, all of a sudden, against all odds, destiny was giving something back.

He bundled up in his cloak and slumped down against the weirwood. “If you allow me, I’ll keep watch with you.”

Jon seemed to brood on that for a very long time, and Jaime feared he might be dismissed, but then,
the king tucked his own cloak tighter around him and silently sat next to him, at the feet of the pale tree, as snow started to fall...

A boot’s tip was annoyingly poking at his left side.

Roused awake, Jaime blinked his eyes open: Jon Snow stood before him, staring down with a curious expression. His face had the worn out appearance of somebody who had waged war against his worst nightmare, on the longest night of his life, but his eyes were a cloudless grey and held a shy gentleness which made him look wiser and resolute.

“It’s daybreak,” he simply said.

Hidden in the trees’ branches, blackcaps were joyfully chirping, welcoming the first light. Jaime rubbed sleep from his eyes and tried to clear his muddled mind, wondering with a hint of embarrassment when exactly he had fallen into a slumber. That was unusual for him. On the battlefield, during the war campaigns, he could go without sleep for days, the chaotic rush of the fight enough to raise his spirits and keep his mind sharp and ready.

_I must have gotten old, all in one day._

At some point in the middle of the night, weariness had prevailed and in his drowsiness he had even dreamed that winter was over, for the cold around him had seemed to recede and disappear completely.

Even now, in fact, the tree he was leaning against seemed to emanate a vibrant heat… almost like a pulsation… _how strange_… He touched the bark and jumped back, startled, when the surface swelled and rumbled and two bright golden eyes on a scaly head emerged from beyond the weirwood to look at him…

Behind him, Jon snickered mercilessly.

“The fucking dragon,” Jaime exhaled, heart in his throat.

“Don’t be rude!” his companion said, patting affectionately the beast’s snout. “He’s kept us warm for the whole night. You would have most certainly frozen to death, without him. You southerners are such delicate creatures.”

Despite the pleasant warmth coming from the dragon and the godswood’s hot springs, his joints still protested loudly when he tried to stand up.

“You’re the one to talk. Weren’t you born in _Dorne_?”

This time, Jon actually laughed. He looked more self-possessed, almost at peace, or maybe it was the dragon’s presence that soothed him.

“Should I fetch the lady Brienne to help you back on your feet, old man?”

Jaime glowered as he straightened up. “Careful, now, boy. You may have some scant drops of royal blood, somewhere within, that hasn’t completely frozen off in all this ice, yet, but that never prevented me from speaking harsh truths.”

“And I’d never wish for you to stop now on my behalf.” He tilted his head toward Viserion. “Come say hello.”
Jaime hesitated. In spite of his brother’s endeavours to introduce the dragon to him, swearing up and down that there was nothing to be afraid of, and that Viserion was, in fact, a lamb, he had never come closer to the big beast more than it was humanly reasonable. In his experience, Targaryen fire was never good news, no matter what form it took. But he wondered when the opportunity would arise again, so he used his teeth to pull off his glove and approached warily.

When his hand gently brushed the horned head, Viserion blinked slowly and cuddled like a big purring cat asking for some back-scratching.

“Viserion knew,” Jon said with a sad smile. “He knew before I did.”

Jaime watched him carefully. Yes, he realised now, the dragon had seen past the lie and recognised the Targaryen blood in him at first sight and he wondered, not without a shudder of worry, if Daenerys’ eyes too would be just as perceptive.

Arya was the first to throw herself at Jon, once they went back in the Keep. The morning was cloudy and light fought hard to filter through the solar’s windows: in the middle of the dimly-illuminated room, Jaime could hardly make out the words Jon was muttering to his cousin’s ear, but the girl’s spirited answer was strong and fiery.

“Listen to me,” she said, clutching tight the front of his black doublet. “I don’t care what your real name is, and you shouldn’t either. Stark, Targaryen, Blackfyre, Snow. It doesn’t matter, Jon. They’re just words! You have no idea how easy it is to discard one from another, or swap faces, disappear completely with a different, all made-up identity! People buy every lie you sell them, as long as their eyes tell them what to see. They want to be deceived. But it doesn’t change who you are, deep down. Not to us. Remember what Father always said? When the cold winds blow, the lone wolf dies…”

“The pack survives,” he completed.

“So, sorry, brother – she stressed the word with a sly half-grin – you’re still stuck with us.”

There was an unforeseen tenderness in her usually cold eyes which Jaime found surprisingly touching. The sight of them brought a tiny, fond smile even on Davos’ mouth.

Sansa, who, until now, had lingered to the side, raised a hand to cup Jon’s face and brought his forehead to her lips.

“Arya speaks true. You’re the King in the North, Jon. And you’re going to stay King. We shall stick together.”

“I’m afraid I cannot,” Jon said, an apology in his eyes. “I have to go, Sansa. I don’t doubt Bran’s words, but I must hear the story from someone who was there.”

“You mean my father,” Meera spoke. “He is the only living witness of the Tower of Joy.”

Jon nodded and turned to the table: a full map of Westeros was open upon it and his finger followed the Kingsroad south, to the Neck.

“I’ll go to Greywater Watch and, from there, I’ll ride on to Dragonstone.”

The sisters exchanged worried glances from across the table.
“Are you sure it’s wise?” Arya argued. “Bad things happen when Starks ride south.”

“But I’m not a Stark, am I?” The joke, though, didn’t reach his eyes. He closed his fist around the small wooden dragon marking the Targaryen seat and leant over the table with a sigh as though its weight was too much to carry. “You’re my family. Nothing will ever change that. But… She shares my blood, too. It’s difficult to explain, but it’s like as if she’s calling out to me.”

“How many men do you need?” Davos interjected.

“Not more than twenty. We’ll travel faster. No banners or coat-of-arms; I don’t want to draw unwanted attention upon us.”

He glanced up at the Onion Knight. “I will need your counsel, my friend, if you’re willing to put up with the hardships of the journey.”

Davos’ eyes twinkled. “I’m your Hand. My place is beside you, and I confess I’m quite curious to meet this Mother of Dragons.”

“Gather the party, then. Only soldiers you personally trust.”

“Meera will accompany you,” Bran abruptly said. There was something very odd, in the inevitable certitude of the demand which left them all baffled.

“You can’t use the causeway; it’s too open to assault,” the boy explained, but kept his eyes well trained on the hearth’s dwindling embers. “Without somebody who knows the way across the Neck’s swamps and bogs, you’ll never find the exact location of Greywater Watch.”

The objection was sound, but Lady Reed was clearly disconcerted.

“Do you agree, my lady?” the King asked.

“It will be nice to be home again, your grace,” she said with a tiny, cautious smile. “But afterwards, with your leave, I shall return to Winterfell.”

“No,” Bran cut in. His hands closed stiffly over the wheelchair’s armrests. “You fulfilled your duties to me, and House Stark. There’s no need for you to come back.”

Jaime did not understand. The young lord and Meera had been inseparable since they came back from the Wall: why the cold, ungrateful attitude, now?

“I –” Her voice broke.

“I thank you, lady Meera. My sisters and I won’t need your services anymore,” Bran insisted, his tone final and incontrovertible.

White as chalk, Meera gaped at him as though he had just hit her.

“As my lord commands.”

She swallowed hard and bowed her head obediently, but Jaime saw the deep hurt in her brown eyes as she brushed past him and almost ran out.

*She doesn’t want to leave him.* The thought was immediately followed by a similar realisation: *Just as I don’t like the idea of Jon going alone to Dragonstone.*

He turned to the King – *Rhaegar’s son. He’s my Prince’s son* – and the words were out before he
could stop to consider them.

“I will ride with you, as well.”

Brienne and his brother rioted simultaneously. “What?” “Absolutely not!”

He ignored them and fixed his eyes on the young man, waiting.

*Please, dear gods, don’t let him be headstrong like his father.*

Jon glanced thoughtfully at him then gave a small nod.

“We take to the road within a few hours.”

Once in the quiet of his room, Jaime removed in rapid succession his cloak and his sword belt and hung them on the two wall pegs near the fireplace and then proceeded to empty the walnut chest at his bed’s feet, picking the few things he would need for the journey.

The door opened and slammed shut again.

“Have you completely lost your mind?” the wench bellowed at his back. “Dragonstone is the first most dangerous place of all Westeros for you, and you want to ride straight into the dragon’s gullet?”

“I sort of hoped to avoid the dragons and their fire altogether, actually.”

She furiously yanked his arm and dragged him round to face her.

*Don’t jape!*

“I do not! Jon Snow, or whatever you want to call him now, is the only thing left of the prince I once had sworn to serve. A prince I admired and whom I would have gladly followed in battle. I failed him. I failed Aegon and Rhaenys. I can’t fail Jon, too. So, if you think I will let him get out of my sight ever again, you’re the one who has completely lost her mind!”

Jaime wrenched his arm out of her grasp and resumed his packing.

“Then I’ll go with you!”

Gripped by fear, his heart sank to his stomach.

“No, you won’t! You have your orders, Brienne. All things considered, Winterfell is still the safest place right now, and you’re to stay here, as far as possible from King’s Landing.”

Indignation tied her tongue for a moment, then she exclaimed in a fit of pique: “I don’t follow your orders, Jaime Lannister! So don’t treat me like one of your green squires!”

“Then don’t act like one!” he blurted, similarly aggravated. “I am a wanted man, have you forgotten? The roads will be swarming with cutthroats and sellswords on Cersei’s payroll, and the further we’ll ride south the higher the chances will be to find trouble along the way!”

“All the more reason why I should be there! Do you think you’re the only one wanting to protect him?”

Jaime let out an irritated sigh.
She did not understand.

_Thick as a castle’s wall. Why am I still surprised?_

His battering rams and trebuchets were just scraping her battlements; he needed to change tactics.

“What about Sansa?” Jaime asked, innocently. “Are you going to ditch her when she needs you the most?” Her face fell into a marvellous expression of dismay. He searched for the opening where to strike his killing blow. “Are you really forsaking your vow, and mine, to the woman you swore to protect no matter what? For all your talks about oaths and honour, that’s truly disheartening. Shame on you!”

Her eyes darkened from outrage to icy, calm fury. Quite a fearsome sight to behold, and had it been another moment entirely, he’d certainly have taken full advantage of it, to at least tease her.

“Oh, don’t you even dare!” Brienne hissed. Her gloved hand hovered over Oathkeeper’s hilt, as though she were only waiting for the slightest excuse to wipe the floor with him. “Sansa will be left in the best of cares. The Hound will stay with her, and her sister Arya, who, in case you haven’t noticed, is a great deal more lethal than you and I combined! You’ll need me in Dragonstone!”

“For what? Do you want to pose as my translator for the Dothrakis? I don’t need you to come to my rescue, wench!”

“You killed her father! Mad or not, do you think Daenerys will listen to you? She will have your dumb head the second you will open your mouth to explain!”

Her pretty eyes betrayed her as they flitted to his own lips. Despite the anger at her obstinacy boiling in his veins, he smirked. “You’ll have to admit, though, that sometimes what comes out of my mouth can be useful.”

The pale, thinner skin on her neck reddened.

_Are you thinking about sapphires, wench?

“Less and less so, as you grow older.”_

His leer only widened at this, and he watched with enormous satisfaction her flush spread to her cheeks and ears as he moved closer.

“I do wonder… Assuming we’ll reach that blasted island together, how do you plan to prevent me from saying anything stupid?”

She pressed her lips together, her nostrils flaring in rage.

“You can’t really talk if you’re unconscious, can you?”

He stepped into her face and growled: “I’d like to see you try.”

“It won’t be a hardship, believe me,” she sneered back. “All I’ve got to do is ask _Tormund_ to lend me his battle axe. There should be a scratch still, where that thick, ugly head of yours has chipped it the last time!”

Jaime narrowed his eyes. Ugly? That was utterly uncalled for.

Somewhere to his right, below his waist, someone cleared his throat. They both started and glared down, not expecting to see Tyrion.
How long had he been there, anyway?

“What?”

His brother rolled a shoulder; the wicked smile tugging at his twisted lips didn’t promise anything good.

“Nothing. Please, do carry on, don’t mind me… keep doing… whatever it is you think you’re doing…”

Brienne scowled, shook her head in exasperation and, spinning on her heels with an impatient huff, stomped out of the room, grumbling under her breath something suspiciously close to ‘Bloody Lannisters’.

He did not follow her. There was no use in talking to the woman while she behaved like a bear with a sore head.

Mulish wench.

Tyrion was still looking at him strangely, the stupid smirk now fast becoming a full-force, teasing grin.

Jaime felt his own face flush.

“What?” he repeated in a clipped tone, balling his fist.

But when his brother opened his mouth to answer, he cut in with a harsh “Do shut up, Tyrion!” and moved past him to his bed, where clothes and furs were lined up, and proceeded to tie everything in a tight roll, hoping without hope that, if ignored long enough, his brother would disappear.

“Ahhh, no.” No such luck, today. “That was a splendid lover’s quarrel, if I’ve ever seen one. Oh, to have a bard’s tongue and the musical talent in my fingers to write an ode to it!”

He let out a weary sigh as his brother helped himself to the flask of wine on the writing desk.

“What in the seven hells are you prattling about, Tyrion?”

“Now, don’t play coy with me, brother dear. I’ve seen you fawning all over Cersei for far too long to overlook the signs. The blonde giantess? The one whose backside you were so blatantly ogling as she stormed off just now?”

Was he?

“Don’t be ridiculous.” he scoffed.

“I’m being ridiculous? Me?? Jaime, don’t take this the wrong way: despite everything, I do love you still, but you’re a fucking idiot!”

“I don’t know what bawdy lies Bronn told you, but we’re not… she’s –

“The ugliest woman you’ve ever laid eyes upon? Definitely. Astonishing eyes, though. I shall make a toast to them, at the next royal banquet.” He raised his glass in mock exaggeration and cleared his throat as though rehearsing a performance. “To the most beautiful blue eyes this side of the Wall.”

“She’s also stubborn, humourless, unyielding,” Jaime listed sourly, punctuating each insult with a pull of the straps and belts which bundled up his stuff, “unreasonable, unworldly, peevish – what
“You!” Tyrion hooted, dabbing at his watering eyes. “You’re *hilarious*! She’s as different from Cersei as the moon to the sun. Or, a feathered bed next to a nest of vipers. Leave it to you to go from one extreme to the other!”

Jaime wouldn’t talk about *this* with his imp of a brother. His glower, luckily, silenced him. Tyrion sobered up what little for him to be able to drink his wine without spitting it all out in a snort of laughter, but his eyes kept smiling up at him, enjoying his embarrassed attempts at denial as if he had him all figured out.

*He’s even more irritating than I’d remembered…*

“You’re not giving the lady enough credit. Brienne may be stubborn and ugly, but I agree with her: going to Dragonstone is truly a terrible idea.”

One-handed, Jaime fastened the belts of the wrapped bundle, then placed it on the floor and sat on the cot, facing his brother.

“It’s time I meet her, Tyrion.”

He stared down at his hands, gold and flesh, past and present, and took a deep breath.

“I’ve been having that conversation inside my head for the better part of the last twenty years. I’m done hiding. And I won’t let Jon go alone.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “He’s Rhaegar’s son, Tyrion, do you have any idea of what it means to me? I wished to serve a man like him for all my life.”

“Brother –

“Did I ever tell you what were his last words to me, before he left for the Trident? *Protect my children.*”

“It’s not your fault if the children died, Jaime.”

His eyes burned. “Oh but, it was.” His voice tinged with a desperate undertone, bitter and full of self-loathing. “I knew how vengeful Robert could be and I knew Father would give the order. The children were his token of fealty to the new king. A wedding gift. A funny piece of work, Robert was; he wanted to be the conquering hero, but he did not want to soil his hands with the blood of the innocent. He’s always sent someone else to do the dirty work for him. And what better scapegoat than the Lannisters? Because… what difference would it make, one more death upon a Lannister’s soul?”

He didn’t notice how bad his arms were shaking, until Tyrion pressed another goblet of wine into his hand and he had to use his stump to hold it still and avoid spilling it on the floor. He emptied its content in one swallow.

“I’ve promised Rhaegar that I would’ve protected them. And a sennight later all I could do was picking their dead bodies up from beneath the Iron Throne… and burn them.”

He had never told the details of this particular horror story, before, not even to Brienne: he had set the small pyre on fire himself, just before he left Maegor’s to hunt Aerys’ last pyromancers, still scattered like rats across the city.

*I’ve stripped them of the red cloaks my father had used to hide his crime and I shrouded them with*
Pretty, ever-smiling Rhaenys and her laughter ringing across the Red Keep’s hallways as she ran after a cat as black as her hair… and the wailing babe with the purple eyes of Valyria, still attached to his mother’s breast… their faces were as clear in Jaime’s mind as the faces of his own children… Tommen, his sweet, golden baby boy… torn between the love for his mother and his own powerlessness… his dear Myrcella, so full of grace and forgiveness, so much unlike Cersei except for her stunning looks… her hair had still smelled of fresh tangerine and thyme long after the warm glow in her eyes had been snuffed out forever… And yes, even Joffrey… for all his madness and cruelty, he didn’t deserve such a horrible, painful death…

And gold their shrouds, the witch had said… I failed them, just as I failed Rhaegar, Elia and their babes…

A wave of sickness numbed his senses, and threatened to choke him up. He leaned forward, elbows over his knees, and rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger, as if trying to squeeze out all of that poisonous, unbearable shame from his body.

A small, barely-there pressure upon his shoulder, Tyrion’s hand, was all it took for something to break inside him and he toppled over the edge and kept falling, and falling and falling until Tyrion put his short arms around him, and Jaime was suddenly clinging and grasping as though that stunted dwarf of a brother, their father’s killer, was his only lifeline in a sea of grief.

“Fine, go to Dragonstone,” Tyrion said in a grating voice, after a while. He awkwardly disentangled himself and reached for Jaime’s cup to refill. “Protect Rhaegar’s son, fool that you are. Perhaps Daenerys won’t kill you at first sight, after all.”

Jaime frowned. His brother was looking suspiciously skittish. His green-and-black eyes culpably darted from him, to the flagon of wine, to his own feet.

“I… might have told her about Aerys and the wildfire.”

“You what?”

Tyrion recoiled. “I had to! She wanted to raze to the ground a whole city with fire and blood only because she could. Only because she has the means. I had to make her understand the difference between justice and vengeance!”

Despite the resentful glare he threw in his direction, Jaime could not really blame Tyrion for the angry bitterness he could taste at the back of his throat. If there was someone who deserved to know the truth, that was Daenerys. It was another one of his debts about to get paid in full.

But, by the gods, he had to know.

“Is she mad?”

Tyrion shot him a look then brought the cup to his lips, buying himself some time to choose the words.

“She covets the Iron Throne. Does that make her inherently mad? No. For now. I’ve served under too many mad kings and regents to know the difference.”

Jaime let out a harsh, slightly relieved, laugh. He should know better, too. His brother finished his wine, put the empty cup back over the desk and walked to the door.
“Jaime.” His hand stopped over the knob. “Once you set foot on the island, I can’t vouch for your immunity.”

“I’m not asking you to. I understand.”

At least one Lannister must keep his head.

“Well,” Tyrion sighed, “I better get going. I have preparations to make, as well. Viserion needs to get readied for the flight back home. I’ll see you in the courtyard in a little while.”

Once the door was closed behind Tyrion’s back, Jaime raised his own glass, in a silent toast to cripples, bastard kings and mended things.

His orders were carried out to the Lannister camp and his men. Strongboar very vocally advised him against his plan to meet with Daenerys Stormborn, as did most of his captains – except Bronn. Bronn, for some crazy reason which still eluded him, understood.

‘You’re going to get fookin’ killed,’ he had wisely said. But his eyes had gleamed like those of an excited wolf spotting a prey, when he asked, impatient: ‘When do we leave?’

Winterfell looked like a buzzing hive of angry wasps that had just been kicked by a complete halfwit. The main courtyard was a chaotic hell of barking dogs, whinnying and pissing horses, wagons and carts skidding into the muddy snow, bellowing wildlings as twice as obnoxious and loud, and one dragon who, in all that ruckus, was bound to get very annoyed, very soon.

The chaos was all on the outside, though.

Within himself, the tumultuous battle Jaime had fought these past few hours had quieted down. All that remained was a barren field where his emotions lay in disarray, still alive albeit a bit more scarred, but there was also a calm awareness across the ruins, a sense of certitude about his own choices he had seldom felt, not even when Cersei had been his sole anchor and refuge.

This was the right thing to do.

With each step he took across the yard, his anonymous iron-grey armour reflected the dull light of the late morning: it was a plain and unadorned set of plates half-covered in black boiled leather and patched up together from different pieces found in the armoury. But it was good steel, and Gendry had done a truly fine work in adapting it to him, especially on such short notice. With the black boots and black woollen hooded cloak he almost looked like a brother of the Night’s Watch. Or an old hedge knight, he smirked internally, remembering the wench’s words.

After their argument, Brienne had disappeared, but Bronn, who apparently had informants everywhere, had confirmed to him that she had, in fact, besought Sansa to let her go with the King, and that the Lady of the castle had given her her blessing.

Jaime didn’t know how he felt about it.

His eagerness to begin a voyage together, finally allies united in a common cause, a noble cause, was thwarted by a foreboding which clenched at his ribcage and made breathing extremely difficult.

From the covered bridge near the armoury Bran was silently surveying the preparations and didn’t rouse from his detached contemplation, not even when Jaime approached and greeted him with a
deferent ‘Lord Stark’.

The boy’s eyes, he noticed, were following Meera, who was talking with Arya a few feet from them, a bunch of heavy blankets fastened around her shoulder and a forlorn expression upon her face.

“Was it truly necessary to break the girl’s heart?” Jaime asked, genuinely curious.

“She would’ve never left.”

The poor lad sounded just as inconsolable, and Jaime realised he didn’t send the girl away out of ingratitude. Quite the opposite, in fact.

He felt bad for him. At seventeen or at forty, heartbreak looked pretty much the same.

“Are you at least going to say your farewells?”

Bran squirmed in his chair and averted his eyes. His hands wriggled the furs that covered his paralysed legs.

“You’ve never been a coward, Brandon,” Jaime gently admonished. Bran looked up at him, a little lost, and he offered him a small smile of encouragement. “Don’t start now.”

The boy went quiet for a while, then unexpectedly asked: “Why did you never tell my father about the wildfire?”

Jaime cringed inside. That was a conversation he wasn’t particularly looking forward to.

“Why, I assumed you already knew the answers!” he scathingly said, on the defensive.

Bran pushed his chair around and faced him with an annoyed roll of his blue eyes: “I have visions. I don’t read minds. And don’t deflect the question.”

*So small and yet pesky like a damn thorn in my paw.*

But something in that boy always managed to pull out even his most hidden secrets, the things he was loath to speak aloud.

“I thought that nothing of what I possibly had to share with him would have changed how he saw me,” Jaime admitted. “He had already sentenced me for murdering in cold blood the king I was supposed to protect. Perhaps he believed I did it to save my own ass and keep my place in the Kingsguard, once Robert was crowned… and soon the rumours were spreading and suddenly the whole city talked about it, and then the whole realm, and by that point I said to myself that the lion does not concern himself with the opinions of the sheep, and I kept repeating that until it sounded true to my ears, too. I was too young for all of this.” A disgruntled breath rushed past his lips. “It doesn’t matter now. It’s too late to change the people’s mind.”

“Perhaps,” Bran conceded. “But it’s not too late to change yours.”

There it was again. That unwavering force, beyond his stare, which bewildered and compelled him always to face even the most uncomfortable truths. Only another person had that same power over him; the gift to lead him out of the familiar road to follow a path which he believed was precluded forever.

Similar to Brienne’s, Bran’s Tully blue eyes showed a faith in him, a level of unprecedented
understanding that shook him to the core.

“What do you expect me to do?”

“What you do best. Serve the realm. Save the city.”

A knife twisted in his guts, as fear hammered all rational thought out of his brain.

Save the city.

Was he talking about King’s Landing?

Surely he couldn’t mean… not again… Devoured by a cold fire, his lungs hurt as though he dove into a frozen lake and couldn’t resurface anymore.

Bran had already warned them, before: ‘Everywhere I turn,’ he had told him and Brienne, ‘every time I close my eyes… I see fire.’

Is this how it ends?

In green flames and charred bones?

“Kingslayer!” a voice boomed in the courtyard below. Pulled from his musings, he glanced down and saw that insufferable red-bearded wildling stomping with the grace of a drunken mammoth toward them.

“You might want to save yourself first,” Bran said, deadpan.

“ Heard from Jon you’re finally gettin’ the hell out o’ here.” Tormund brayed as Jaime stepped down the bridge and approached him. “Finally grown tired o’ the North?”

“I’ve grown tired of the drinking company.”

Tormund’s chipped teeth flashed into a nasty smirk. “Brienne will be sad, but not for long, I promise you,” he gloated. “I’ll take good care o’ her. We’ll ride together to Karhold and then her strong hands will be so busy with everything else she’ll soon forget even what you look like.”

Surprise rendered him speechless for a moment. Then he started to snicker. This had to be just too good to be true.

“Oh, you don’t know? Lady Brienne is going to Greywater Watch. With me.”

Jaime relished with savage pleasure the sight of the stupid wildling’s grin wobbling and twisting into a grimace, as confusion replaced the anticipation in his beady eyes. His golden hand dusted off some of the snow that covered Tormund’s left shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Giantsbane,” he bragged in a rather condescending tone. “Have a safe trip. Don’t get too cold. I’m sure that somewhere, up, up north, there’s a bear waiting to console you.”

The blow was so fast and unexpected that Jaime’s ass hit the ground before he could think of an effective countermove. His split lip bled profusely, and yet his mouth turned up into a visceral sneer of victory. He bared his teeth and snarled: “I’ve been waiting for weeks for you to do that.”

Now he finally had a valid excuse to kill the man.

Jaime sprang to his feet and, without giving the red-bearded oaf the chance to regroup, tackled
him, head first, at full speed. In the momentum, they both crashed against the palisade of the training yard. The noise of cracking wood attracted the attention of the other wildlings and Karstark soldiers around the inner walls, but Jaime took no issue with that. He twisted Tormund’s wrist, blocking a punch to the left, and smashed his own elbow into his side.

With a beastly grunt, Tormund circled his bulky arms around his torso, lifted him off the ground and bashed his head against his knee. Starbursts exploded behind his eyes… a grey halo of fluctuating lines, bending the reality around him. As he staggered back cupping his throbbing nose, for a moment the sky and the ground seemed to switch places and Jaime didn’t know which was which.

The taste of blood in his mouth – and the sight of his opponent, roaring with laughter and with barely a scratch on him – enraged him. He charged again, slipping to the side, when Tormund came at him to his right, and struck a hard left jab to his jaw, confounding him just enough to land another quick blow to his eye, this time with his right hand.

A ghastly cut opened above Tormund’s left eyebrow and soon the side of his face and his unkempt beard were matted with sweat and blood.

By that point neither of them was even trying to dodge anymore; the only strategy was to hit as hard as they could.

It had been years since his last good, old-fashioned fistfight. He had been a lad of ten-and-three, maybe ten-and-four. Some Frey boy had thought he could abuse his brother without paying the consequences and left with two cracked ribs and a fractured cheekbone.

Tormund looked nothing like a Frey: he was a big, ugly, lump of muscles, strong as an aurochs, but Jaime was quicker. He danced around him and jumped on his back, fastening his arms around his neck to cut his air off. Tormund reeled and swayed, panting and gurgling insults as he struggled to dislodge him, his face as red as his beard now, but didn’t give up.

“Isn’t this how you thought to kill a bear?” Jaime spluttered through gritted teeth, arms shaking for the effort.

But the wildling lurched forward, grabbed him by the back of his jerkin and flew him ten feet away. Air left his lungs all at once when he hit the frozen ground, pain pounding and spreading to his limbs as though he got struck in the chest by a morningstar. Catching his breath, Jaime saw Tormund’s boot lowering upon his head like a hammer, just in time for him to dodge, roll over and kick his kneecap so hard he heard the joint snapping like a whip, as it rotated unnaturally. Tormund went down with a pained grunt. Jaime rammed him to the ground and slammed his golden hand full across his ruddy face, again and again, until his already injured left eye looked ready to pop out from its socket.

Tormund’s puffy hands closed on his throat, but even when his vision started to blur at the edges he kept raining punches on that stupid face.

"Stupid piggy eyes, stupid hawkish nose, stupid red beard, too! I could grow a beard just as lush, if I wanted to, so that the wen–"

“WHAT IN THE GODS' NAMES IS HAPPENING HERE?”

They both froze, him with his raised right arm and the wildling with his thumbs pressing on his windpipe, as their eyes darted up to the two figures in travel clothing. The man was clearly amused by the scene, but the woman in the blue armour was absolutely livid.
With some strain, they scrambled to their feet and avoided the lady’s glare as though it could incinerate them on the spot.

Maybe it really can, Jaime mused, feeling like a child waiting to be scolded.

Bronn took in their besmeared, bloodied aspect and beamed: “Oh, no! Don’t tell me that I’ve fuckin’ missed the face-off!”

Tormund pointed a bloody finger at him and hastily thundered: “He started it!”

This only made the sellsword double over, quaking into a breathless laughter.

Caught off guard, Jaime gaped at the wildling, then at Brienne, who looked ready to unsheathe Oathkeeper and whack off their heads.

She drew in a sharp breath through her nose and held it, as though she was gathering what little remained of her self-restraint… but instead of yelling at the two of them, she raised both her hands in surrender, as if they were not even worth the effort, and with a last, slightly nauseated look that made clear exactly what she might think of them idiots, spun around and marched back to the stables.

Bronn offered him a delighted, sympathetic glance: “I just wanted to tell you that we’re ready to go! It’ll be a funny trip!” and he strutted past them, jeering.

The moment they were gone, Jaime whipped around and snapped at Tormund. “He started it?”

That fucking moron broke into uncontrollable giggles.

“Now you’ll never hear the end o’ this!”

The mirth soon died in his throat. He hissed in pain and coiled over, hands on both knees, coughing violently.

A small consolation. Jaime wasn’t doing any better, after all. He tipped his head back and gingerly felt the bruises around the bridge of his nose with his fingers, wincing when he touched a particularly sore spot. What Brienne had started two days past, Tormund had finished now.

“You broke my nose…”

“Aw, poor princess, did I ruin yer pretty face?” He spat a clot of blood and a chipped tooth. “I’d say I only got it better! You’re welcome!”

The wildling hobbled to the fence and sagged to the ground like a sack of wet sand. Jaime joined him a few seconds later.

“You fight well, cripple,” Tormund wheezed.

“Likewise.” His own voice sounded absurd. “Not very elegant, but nifty.”

“You almost plucked me eye out. That golden hand of yours is a damn weapon. Should think ‘bout fixin’ a hook on it. Or a small dragonglass dirk, maybe. More useful in battle, less ridiculous elsewhere.”

Jaime gave a noncommittal grunt. He scooped up a fistful of snow and put it over his face to relieve
the swelling. Everything hurt. His head, his chest, even his fingers. Gods, what a pounding headache waited for him, tomorrow!

And the wench for sure wasn’t going to be sweet to him.

“Did she look mad to you?”

“She wasn’t impressed. But what do I care? You’re the one who’ll be hearin’ her complaints fer the next few weeks. Har!”

He groaned, hating the man with all his being.

Then Tormund pulled out a skin of mead from beneath his furs. Jaime had no idea how, but the oaf always carried one on him. He would probably keep even the Stranger himself waiting just to take a last sip on the battlefield. The wildling drank deep and handed it over to Jaime.

The mead was strong, and disgusting like horse’s piss.

Jaime definitely wasn’t going to miss that.

“So…” he croaked. “You’re going to Karhold.”

“Aye. Jon asked me to escort lady Alys home. And to stay there. She wasn’t happy.”

“No wonder. The girl thought she would become queen by the end of the week, and now the king tells her she has to leave because he’s riding off to meet another woman.”

He shook his head, despondent.

This feels like Rhaegar and Lyanna all over again.

Had Jon asked, Jaime would’ve advised him differently. Bronn reported that the king had apparently assured the proud lady of Karhold that they would meet again, once he got back, to close the matter, but Ser Edwyn plainly accused him of being just like his late brother: full of big talks about honour and loyalty and friendship, but when it was the time to act upon it, he’d rather follow his dick than keep his own word. It was dangerous to antagonize the Karstarks, Jaime contemplated: they were even haughtier than the Starks, and the slight wouldn’t be forgotten soon.

“She came here hoping to catch a king, and now she’s leaving with a fat bear-lover whose filthy hair has never seen a comb.”

“Better a bear-lover than a sister-fucker…”

Jaime aimed a deathly glare at him. Very few people could say that to his face and brag to be still alive. But Tormund seemed genuinely perplexed. “What devil possessed you that made you do that?”

Perhaps it was the way he had asked the question, perhaps it was the absurdity of it all – him, sitting with a wildling and amiably chatting about Cersei’s cunt… Jaime burst out laughing.

And he roared even louder when he saw the deep frown etched into the wildling’s face, his confusion and uneasiness palpable. “‘Tis no laughing matter,” Tormund cautioned with a sour pout. “You don’t bed your own sister, ever, or any of your kin! It’s bad luck upon the clan. The gods curse you for it. Turn your blood into black mud, and there’s sickness in your mind and body and you get weak ‘til your member falls off and –
“All right!” Jaime snickered. “I get the general picture.”

Bad luck upon the clan, eh? That was one way to put it.

But there’s been no demon involved.

That was all me.

Tormund considered him long and hard, his thick auburn brows knit together.

“You could’ve had any woman you wanted… why her?”

Jaime shrugged and fed him the same old line. “You don’t get to choose who you love.”

The sturdy man stared at him in stunned disbelief. “That is the single dumbest horseshit I’ve ever heard in all me life. Everyone’s got a choice. You just took the easy route.”

Did he? Have they really settled for the most convenient solution? For so long, it’s been only them against the world. Again and again, they had turned to each other seeking comfort and warmth and understanding when they believed they didn’t have anyone else. After their mother died. After Myrcella...

It wasn’t a choice, Jaime would tell himself. It was fate. As simple as that.

But now, even the memory of that golden girl with the soft skin and welcoming body he had clung to for all his life had turned stale in his mouth.

He rued her.

Not for the betrayals. Not even for his lost knighthood, which was, in a way, an even worse treachery than the one of the flesh.

That was her nature, and he had been a fool thinking he could change it.

He rued her the years wasted on an empty hope, waiting for her, for an acceptance that never came, and he rued himself and his own stubborn blindness and connivance, which made him just as culpable for the deaths of their children.

The realisation that there might’ve actually been some truth in Tormund’s words came as a brutally shocking epiphany, and his mind reeled in knowing that he had only himself to blame for letting Cersei change him into someone he’d come to loathe.

Distraught, he snatched back the waterskin from the wildling’s hands and gulped down a long mouthful.

“You think that sister o’ yours is the most beautiful woman in the world?” Tormund snorted. “You know nothing.”

He was gawking at something across the yard and Jaime followed his line of sight. His breath caught as he saw Brienne leading her black mare to the stables to get saddled. The crisp morning breeze flapped her hair wildly across her face, unflattering to her complexion, but in her full armour and furry cloak she was still a truly striking figure, confident and utterly unconcerned by the many looks the Karstark soldiers kept sending in her direction. Bitter looks, cruel looks, taunting looks… It didn’t matter: she rose above them all, untouched, her eyes a blue flame… coals of ice dripping from a thunder-shaken night sky. Jaime clenched his jaw, the mere sight of her
sparking a fire in his gut.

“She’s in love with you,” the wildling sulked, crestfallen. “Fuck me if I know why, but she is, I can tell. Couldn’t be only for your pretty face, or she would’ve been mine a long time ago.”

Jaime didn’t have a witty retort; he had often wondered the same thing. Brienne cared for him, to the point of sometimes being unreasonably reckless. From where had such poignant devotion sprung up was a mystery to him.

He had next to naught to offer her. Not a name to share with pride, nor a future into which look with hope. Only a tainted reputation, a battle-scarred soul and a heart very much the worse for wear.

Tormund and his brother were both right.

She was a beauty in all that mattered, and he was a fucking idiot.

“Next time we meet, it’ll probably be across a battlefield crammed with undead things,” Tormund said. “If I die in battle, chop me head off and burn me body, ’llright?”

Jaime cocked his head to the side. “You’ll do the same?”

“Har!” the wildling slapped him hard on the back. There was a new gap between his teeth. “Count on it!”

Jaime found himself grinning back. It was almost a pity they had to part ways now.

Just when he was finally starting to like him.

He found her in the stables a few minutes later, tightening the chinches under Obsydian’s belly. The wench glowered at him as she took bridle and harness off the wall and pulled the straps around the horse’s muzzle.

“Do you want to take a beating from me, too?” she briskly said.

“Your lovesick friend is looking worse,” he bickered back.

Her tempestuous eyes pierced him like spears made of ice and he held out his hand.

“Truce, my lady!”

That earned him a surprised glare, and for a mad second he believed she might even crack a smile.

“We’re making slow progress,” she mumbled instead, disapproval and irritation still carved upon her scowl, but Jaime could already see the angry tension set heavy across her shoulder blades easing up, even if minimally.

He gently brushed Obsydian’s neck while Brienne still worked around the stirrups.

“Are you really set on coming with us?”

“Tell me, my lord, do you know me for a woman who follows orders if they’re blatantly against her own principles?”
“No.”

“Then why should this be any different?”

A thousand answers came to the tip of his tongue.

Because I’m asking you to.

Because Winterfell is your place, now, where you’re respected and cherished, and your honour is held in higher regard than your sex.

Because Cersei is more of a danger than the Night King, right now, and I’m terrified something might befall you.

Because whatever happens to me, I don’t want to watch your stunning sky-blue eyes filling with disappointment or pain or heartbreak, should I choose honourable death over a life of regret.

Because there must be something better than this and you deserve to see the next spring.

In the end, the words got stuck in his throat like a maddening lump bottling up his emotions, and all he could do was staring up at her, with all the devotion and awe he could muster, hoping she wouldn’t need but his eyes to understand.

In the end, she was braver than him – but that, he already knew.

Her hand rose to check his split lip, his bloated nose, and rested like a gift upon his cheek.

“It is broken now,” she breathed out, flushing bright red when his own hand covered hers and kept it there.

He swallowed, a part of her courage seeping through him along with the warmth of her.

“It was worth it.”

Starlight shattered into a million fragments in her already moistening eyes; on her chapped lips peeped out a timid smile that tasted like a confession.

It tasted like victory.

But before he could really find out how her smiles tasted like, she looked past him, frowning, and hastily let her hand drop to her side.

“Podrick, what are you doing?”

Jaime turned around. Her former squire was tiptoeing around the place as discreetly as he could, an overstuffed canvas sack under his left arm, another bundle hanging across his shoulders and a smaller one precariously balanced on the other hand. When Brienne called him, he halted in his tracks like a caught thief and offered her a sheepish smile.

“Oh… I’m… I packed up your stuff…” he handed over the sack and the package wrapped in a cloth. Something in it smelled good. “I asked the cook to bake some of that cake of hulled wheat you like so much.”

She brightened up and tucked the cake safely into the saddlebag, while the lad hoisted a brown saddle over his bay palfrey.
“That is very sweet of you, Pod, but you’re an anointed knight, or have you already forgotten? Let stewards and stable boys fuss over the preparations.”

“Certainly, m’lady-ser. I only wanted to make sure everything was all set for when we leave.”

A sudden panic surged through her features.

“We? Wha- No! Podrick! You’re not coming!”

Podrick blinked, his brows furrowed in confusion.

“Did I do something to offend Your Ladyship?” he tentatively asked.

“Of course not, why would you think that?”

“You’re sending me to the Wall with the others, then?”

“I’m not sending you anywhere! You don’t have to follow me, or my orders, any longer!”

“But I do want to!” he protested. “This is what I’ve been training for!”

“No,” she clarified, stressing the letters, “you trained to be ready when the battle comes at you! Not to learn how to put yourself into more trouble!”

“I could be useful! To you. To the King! Lady Arya and the Hound have been teaching me well and hard… I’ve never been better at sword-fighting, even Ser Jaime and Ser Bronn said so!”

Brienne turned to him, her sapphire eyes pleading for help. Jaime folded his arms across his chest with a knowing, cocky grin and raised an eyebrow.

It’s not fun when it’s you on the bad end of this particular conversation, is it, wench?

“I am a knight, like you said,” Pod insisted. “Don’t knights swear their loyalties to a lord or a lady of their choosing, like you did with Lady Sansa, and her mother before her?”

“Yes, but –

The lad drew his blade from its scabbard and dropped to one knee.

“Then I choose to pledge my sword to you, m’lady.”

“I’m not a lady.”

“Yes, you are!” he retorted, hotly. “You’re one of the last great ladies of Westeros, whether you like it or not! The Evenstar, the Guardian of the East, Lady of Evenfall Hall, Watcher of the Da–”

“Podrick! Stop. Please.”

An endearing blush had spread all over her face, bringing out her freckles even more. Jaime sniggered softly. It must have been years since the last time Brienne had heard the full titles of the ancient rulers of Tarth.

“What I mean, my lady-ser… you’re a knight, but you’re also the truest and kindest woman I’ve ever met, and I will pledge myself to you, if you’ll have me.”

Jaime leaned over her and whispered: “Let him say the words, the lad means well.”
The wench was bringing devastation on her already chapped lips with her teeth. He could understand her fears and hesitancy, and the impulse to protect the boy from harm, but he also saw something in Pod that deserved to be acknowledged. His hand gently pulled her closer, coaxing her. “Brienne. Will you really deny this boy his genuine wish, only because your own stubborn pride won’t make concessions?”

“I don’t want anyone to die for me.”

Stubborn. Stubborn and innocent.

“That’s not your choice! Pod is fond of you and old enough to know and accept the risks.”

He watched her struggle for a moment, then she turned to Pod and, with a tip of the head, yielded.

“My lady Brienne,” the knight recited with a firm voice, holding out his sword to her, “I will shield your back, keep your counsel and give my life for you if need be, I swear it by the Old Gods and the New.”

“And I vow, Ser Podrick, that you shall always have a place in my home, and meat and mead at my table, and I pledge that I shall ask no service of you that might bring you dishonour. I swear it by the old Gods and the New.”

When Pod stood again, she cupped his face with both her hands, locking eyes with him.

“If you die, I’ll be very cross.”

And, to Jaime’s chagrin, she planted a kiss over the lad’s reddening cheek. Grinning from ear to ear, Pod wore such a dreamy, pleased look that for an instant a sharp pang of jealousy smouldered in Jaime’s blood.

“All right, Pod, thank you,” he grabbed his earlobe and dragged him as far away as possible from Brienne’s hands and kisses. “That’ll be enough. You can go.”

As the boy returned to his tasks, with a new spring in his steps and a dazed smirk on his lips, Jaime let out a breath.

“So... To Dragonstone?”

A playful glint coated in steel shimmered in her eyes. A challenge and a promise in them. She shook her head, amused despite her best intentions, and declared in a proud tone worthy of a Lioness of the Rock: “Hear me roar.”

“You have my and Viserion’s thanks for the hospitality, my lady. I shall speak to the Queen of your kindness,” Tyrion was saying to Sansa, as they approached the golden dragon, patiently curled in the yard, a black saddle secured on its back.

A tense energy rippled around the place: the Karstarks had just left with Tormund and his wildlings under less than peaceful circumstances. Ser Edwyn hadn’t cared much to save appearances and didn’t even try to hide his great indignation and disgust for the arrangement, while Lady Alys had politely, although coldly, said her farewells to the Stark siblings, but didn’t even dignify Jon with a look, spurring the horse to a fast canter before the rest of her large retinue was even ready.
Now inside the walls, under a heavy snow, Jaime waited until their small group was all mounted on their steeds.

“We’re going to ride up against a snowstorm,” Thoros of Myr fretted, looking at the angry, menacing clouds above. He and Anguy the Archer had joined the party, so that its number had risen to eighteen skilled warriors, plus Ghost.

While the king gave his latest recommendations to Arya and the Hound, Sansa pulled out of her cloak a neatly folded black cloth and presented it to Tyrion.

“This is for saving Bran and Jon, beyond the Wall.”

His brother unwrapped it; it was a heavy woollen cape, trimmed to his height, with splendid patterns of gold and crimson over the hem and a white-grey winter lion sewn on the back.

Visibly touched, Tyrion draped it with great care over his furry travelling clothes.

“Thank you, my lady. I shall wear it with pride.”

She held out a gloved hand, an unreadable expression in her eyes.

“Safe travel, my lord.”

“Farewell, lady wife,” he bowed, not daring to do or say more, and watched her walk away with such a desolate look that Jaime simply had to jeer at him. *Turnabout is fair play.*

“Oh, shut up, Jaime!” Tyrion’s embarrassed hiss only spur him on, but before his brother could dash away, as fast as his short legs would allow, Jaime grabbed his arm and knelt down so that they were of matching height.

“This is good-quality fabric,” he said, touching the hem of the cape, the fondness behind the teasing tone unmistakable. “Beautiful stitching work. Do try not to smear it with blood or ruin it by falling from three hundred feet high.”

And then in the space of a blink Tyrion was hugging him like he used to when they were children, wrapping both arms around his neck, his short body crushed into his, as though he’d never wanted to let go, as though Jaime was a shield against all of his worries, and the cruelty he had to endure every day of his life.

They had hugged each other like this, too, when they had parted in the darkness of the tunnels under the Red Keep, before everything went to hell, and Jaime couldn’t ignore the surge of affection filling his heart and closing his throat, now.

“This is goodbye, then,” Tyrion uttered. His lips pecked Jaime’s scruffy cheek, and he protectively squeezed him back, feeling that what had been irredeemably broken, that suppurating wound left open when Tywin died, somehow had miraculously started to heal.

“For now,” he brushed Tyrion’s wild curls and kissed his forehead, before standing up. “I’ll see you in Dragonstone, little brother.”

He hadn’t taken but a few steps toward his white courser that Sansa let out a scream.

“*JON*!”

Jaime turned in time to see the dragon rise on his hind legs with a mighty screech and aggressively
snap his jaws at Jon. The king stumbled unto his backside. The waterskin he was carrying slipped from his hands and spilt its contents on the ground. Chaos erupted: among the mad barking of the dogs, the growling of the direwolves and the horror-stricken screams of the household, Jaime and Brienne jumped between Viserion and Jon, their blades bared and gleaming in hues of black and red, and soon other soldiers armed to the teeth with spears and bows rushed in the yard.

“NO!” Jon raised a hand to the archers. “DON’T SHOOT!”

The beast gave another ear-splitting shriek. His spiked tail lashed and dropped in the dirty snow with such violence that the ground shook under their feet and the horses, already scared out of their wits, reared and bolted. Viserion was furious, but none of them could figure out what had set him off.

“What’s got into him?” Jaime cried out to his brother.

“I don’t know! He’s never behaved like this!”

Something was wrong.

“Tyrion!” Brienne yelled above the noises and the screams. “Get him out of here! GO!”

She didn’t have to ask twice. His brother crawled on the dragon’s back, whispered something into his neck, and the air around them sizzled, hot like a furnace, as the enormous golden wings unfolded and cracked like thunder.

The bowmen fell back, their crossbows loaded and aimed, until the dragon was out of their range.

Jaime glanced back at Jon. He did not understand. Viserion adored the man. Why did he charge at him?

Was the Targaryen madness running through the veins of their dragons, too?

Next to him, Brienne was lowering Oathkeeper. She looked shaken. “What was that?”

“LOOK!”

One of the Stark soldiers pointed to the ground. Beside the small pool of water leaked from Jon’s waterskin, one of Sansa’s bitches, the red one that had whelped only a fortnight past, was writhing in pain, her tongue, purple and swollen, jutted out in a desperate attempt to breathe, and her eyes wide and bloodshot. Her mouth suddenly filled with pink froth.

The Hound crouched down to pick up the empty skin, raised the cork to his nose and took a sniff. A terrible realisation dawned in his black eyes.

They all turned to Sansa.

Pale as death, the lady of Winterfell stumbled back, her eyes frozen wide open. She couldn’t stop staring, shocked and terrified, as her dog fought for every single gurgling mouthful of air.

She had handed the waterskin to Jon.

As silent as falling snow, Ghost approached the red bitch, nipping and licking her ears. Her eyeballs rolled back in their sockets, the legs gave another violent convulsion and then, with a last dry clacking noise, the body moved no more.
A few considerations about name choices…
The moment when the show disclosed Jon’s real name was, for me, one of the greatest wtf moments this past season has gifted me. I appreciate the fact that there is a strong mystique surrounding the name Aegon (especially if it turns out to be the last ruler of monarchic Westeros, as well as the first, you know the whole alpha and omega thing… the narrative coming full circle and so on and so forth…), but I can’t forget that, even in the show’s continuity, Aegon and Rhaenys still existed, and even if we all agree that Aegon was already dead when Jon was born (both series and books have more or less explicitly said that), to me is still too weird to think that Lyanna might have chosen the same name of Elia’s second-born for her own child.
So I just had to come up with another name for A Wreath of Thorns: there were two big contenders, from the very start. I liked very much the suggestion that Jon’s name might have been Aemon, because we all loved Maester Aemon very much, and if you think about the role the old man played in Jon’s personal growth it would have been extra sad and meaningful.
In the end, I chose Jaehaerys, mostly because of its symbolic weight: Jaehaerys the First was, after all, one of the best kings Westeros ever had.
What do you think? What name would GRRM choose in the books? (my money is definitely on Aemon. There’s too many Aegons already.)

The first Winterfell arc is finally done! I’m so happy! The next seven chapters are more or less planned out: now I only have to write them!
In the meantime, we’re past the 200k words, folks! I don’t even know how that happened. Your support has definitely played a huge role in inspiring me, so thank you for all the kudos/comments/bookmarks: I hope you’ve enjoyed this latest instalment as well…
If you want to discuss names, poisons, redemption arcs, brotherly love, wenches love, budding bromances or the general cuteness of Podrick Payne, you know what to do! ;)

An update, at last!!
Thank you thank you thank you for your wonderfully enthusiastic reactions to the previous chapter – and to this story in general: every kudo, every comment, hell, even the bookmarks always bring a smile on my face!
To the new readers: welcome to the madness!
To the old ones: your patience is amazing and deserves to be praised... a special shout-out to NessaLovegood and MSquared79... see? I told you I was going to post soon LOL!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

DAENERYS

The broken dragon loomed from the gloomy low clouds with dark, daunting eyes and its jaws wide open in a soundless roar, as though trying to swallow the sun and shroud the earth into a never-ending night, brightened only by the inexorable flames of the old Targaryen fire.

His huge body was taut and ready to jump and soar away, its muscles rippling and almost cracking through the cruel stone which restrained their form: he longed for the vastness of the empty sky, she knew. He belonged up in the air, where he could shake all of his burdening heaviness off himself, to gain that powerful gracefulness which had made him free, feared and revered like a god among sheep.

Those days were gone forever: now, Balerion the Black Dread stood perched upon the highest of the blackened towers, with his body and tail coiled around the crenellated walls, more grotesque lizard than dragon. He could not take flight: its wings laid shattered in bits at the feet of the great west gate.

Pieces of obsidian stone, half-covered with a greyish moss growing like a crust between the grains.

Under her, Drogon’s back twitched as he rumbled a nervous growl of disappointment.

*This scene is putting him ill at ease as well,* Dany thought.

She glided off him, offering a gentle pat upon his horned head and soothing words of encouragement, and addressed a few orders in Dothraki to the small Queensguard led by Qhono which had followed her to the Marches, more for show than for actual precaution. She didn’t really need her bloodriders, as long as Drogon watched over her: this was her place, and the ruins were calling out to her.
The Highgarden delegation was waiting for her, just on the other side of the hill: as Varys had predicted, the bulk of Leo Tyrell’s forces had stayed behind, massed between Bitterbridge and Longtable; only a part of the army had followed their liege lord here... Golden roses elegantly swayed in the wind, lined up, orderly and unswerving, next to their allies’ battalions: the crimson grapes of the Redwynes and the proud huntsman of the Tarlys were the largest force, among the bannermen, but she could also spot red apples and green ones, horns-of-plenty, tall white towers, brave centaurs, black thunderbolts, golden cranes and flaming arrows. Fewer than the number she had been envisaging, but Dany supposed it was to be expected: the Riverlands were currently controlled by the Tullys of Riverrun, whose kinship to the Starks of Winterfell would prevent them from raising their banners for anyone else. As for the Crownlands houses, the Rykkers, the lambs of Castle Stokeworth and the Rosbys, Dany wasn’t surprised in the least they hadn’t answered the call. The fear of Cersei was too great, and they too close to the capital.

_It matters not. I’ll make sure they get a full account on this day’s events._

Gathering her thoughts, Dany hiked alone across the ruins, trying to piece together all the huge chunks of wreckage littering the ground and imagining how the palace would have truly looked to the awed traveller who approached its gates for the first time.

As tragic and desolate the landscape was today, she still felt a pull to this place. Summerhall had always been a myth, to her. A bright vision of sunny beauty and laughter which filled the heart with wonder and hope.

She would dream of it almost as much as she dreamed the house with the red door and the Iron Throne.

Now that vision of summertide clashed with the terrible, dull reality.

Balerion’s remains were all that was left of the famed Stone Dragons of Summerhall. Once upon a time, there were nine of them, almost as big and majestic as their living counterparts, each guarding one of the main towers, and when the sun was low on the horizon and the light hit the precious gemstones and the thin foils of gold and silver which encased the sculptures, Dorne’s violet sky would explode in a rainbow of colours above their heads: here it was Meleys, the Red Queen, her scales and wings painted in scarlet and indigo hues, and next to her, the immense Vhagar, her forest-green belly scraping the outer walls of the south gate, and Sunfyre the Golden, the most beautiful, with his gleaming scales, which shone like beaten gold in the sunlight, and Dany could almost see the three of them as they shrieked, clashed and burned in the skies above Rook’s Rest… and there, over the tower on Balerion’s left, his sister Meraxes, Dany’s favourite since childhood, her immense silver gullet raised in the direction of Hellhot, her sad, golden eyes looking for her raider... and beyond her, there were old Silverwing and the Bronze Fury, Alysanne and Jaehaerys’s dearest and staunchest friends, resting on two adjacent towers, their tails lovingly bound forever in a tight embrace while their muzzles leaned across the empty space in an almost kiss, barely touching but not yet, and a little further on, overlooking the plain below with bright copper eyes, nimble Tessarion, the Blue Queen, sheathed in the dark cobalt of her wings, an arrow protruding from one of her sockets, and slender Moondancer, mysterious and proud, the pearly white of her horns and wingbones streaked with a slight grey translucent gloss which glittered under the stars…

A whimsical triumph of ivory, emeralds, sapphires, rubies, pearls, and vermillion, ochres, purple and deep lapis lazuli enamels… And everywhere, carved over the curtain walls and buttresses, upon columns and lintels, on doors and marble floors, the red-and-black spiral of the three-headed dragon watched over the Targaryens’ prosperity and power and guarded them against their enemies like a charm.
Nothing remained of such opulent boldness. Heat had melted the colourful pigments as well as stone, wood and bones.

But the stories of lost beauty she had heard from Viserys and Ser Willem as a little girl still filled her mind with wonder and sadness. Her brother’s pale lilac eyes always gleamed with a wild, feverish flame when he related to her the tales of Summerhall he had previously heard from their mother, but she could not partake in his same frenzy: more than once she had to conceal her tears, inconsolable over the many lives that had been lost, wondering if perhaps the choice to sculpt some of the dragons that had died during the Dance hadn’t been an ominous sign after all.

*That earned me a slap in the face, when I dared speak my mind to my brother.*

Now Daeron’s halls, built as a token of love for his Dornish wife to salute a hard-won peace, were a dark, wasted near-forgotten ruin, battered by the wind and shattered by sorrow and loneliness.

From the small hill where she had landed, the view was even more heart-breaking.

Soot had settled over human and natural elements alike, clinging to the stone like a shadow, an echo marking forever the passage of death. It had merged into the boulders, the once green pasture, the sloping hills, wrapping itself around the landscape until its very structure got reshaped into an unfamiliar, charred desert. From what Viserys had told her, there should’ve been a grove, once, surrounding the northern walls, with a small brook that went through it across all its length. From that escape path, Duncan the Tall had brought to safety Aerys and his young sister-bride as the birthing pains were ripping her womb apart, before plunging back into the sea of fire to never resurface again. Now the trees were all dead, the creek had dried up and the ground was covered in a thick layer of charcoal grime almost as dark as the sand of Dragonstone. There was nothing to salvage.

_Burn and burn, the palace did, for many days and nights, and the flames were so high that they could be seen as far as Blackhaven and Grandview, her old Ser Darry would recount the tale to her, and when the wildfire, finally sated in its deathly thirst, died down, there came scavengers and pillagers from all of Dorne and the Stormlands to despoil the place of what little riches it had left… for years people tried to unearth the last secrets of Summerhall, looking for the gold and the gemstones of the Nine Dragons that might have been preserved under the pall of still-warm embers, but they always came home empty-handed and with a ghost story or two to tell._

Dany wasn’t surprised: she seriously doubted that even that monstrous fortress which Harren the Black had built in the Riverlands, with its terrible repute of woe and destruction, could compete with this burdensome, unsettling mood.

The wildfire must have taken only seconds to spread and ravage everything in its wake: the air still smelled foul… a pungent stench which neither the many years, nor the heavy rains, nor the cold winds sweeping over the hills could completely dispel.

As she crossed what must have been the main gate, a timid beam of sunlight wormed its way through the eroded rocks, the naked inner walls only barely defying gravity and the crumbled masonry half-eaten by brownish weeds and shrubby lichens. A shiver ran down her spine: among these broken, lonely ruins, that precariously stood as a tragic admonition to the wanderer, Rhaegar once sat as well, his harp as his sole companion and the stars as silent witnesses. She could almost picture him, as he sang and wept, his sorrow like an armour blanketing his heart.

_Born in grief, Selmy had told her in Meereen, and Dany wondered how much of Rhaegar, of his same melancholy, she was carrying within herself. *I too was born in grief, and fire.*_
It was as though they shared a common destiny. His presence breathed between the ancient ruins, whispering to her louder and stronger here than it did in Dragonstone.

The thought comforted and made her sad in equal measure.

*I’ve promised myself I would never look back, and yet I always find myself reaching out to lost places and people I’ve never met…*

A rush of hot air swept up the courtyard and engulfed her in a cloud of sand and debris as Drogon flew past her, landed over the buttress next to Balerion’s remains and gave a piercing cry as though he could rouse his ancestor from his stony sleep.

A wistful smile curled Dany’s lips.

*There are no dragons answering us from their graves, dear heart. Only you and me.*

An odd play of light rippled across the battlements, like a mirror catching the pale sunbeams and reflecting them on the ground; she blinked away the tears that were welling up in her eyes and peered in the small gap between the ramparts, but as soon as she thought she must have imagined things, the glittering danced again; maybe the ruins were truly haunted.

She found the only stone staircase that hadn’t completely collapsed under the paired injury of time and fire and reached the upper walls. Summerhall didn’t have a barbican, but there was a large pathway for leisure walks that joined each of the nine main towers. The passage ended abruptly some fifty feet ahead, but a mere stone’s throw from the edge there was a small fire made of dry leaves, twigs and shredded bark, and across it, warming up, there was a woman.

At least Dany believed she was.

She was as small as a girl, but her hair was loose and white.

“Come closer, dragon child,” she called, and her voice, albeit barely a whisper, seemed to echo and bounce off from the depth of the stones.

Tendrils of tension coiled in the pit of her stomach. Dany shot a wary, fleeting look behind her shoulders, to the path whence she came, while her hand clutched the dragon-shaped hilt of the stiletto Grey Worm had given her before he left for Oldtown. Common sense told her it’d be more prudent to have one of her Dothraki close by, but, in the end, she moved forward.

“We still have some time to talk before you have to attend to your council of war.” She greeted her with the same amiable familiarity and warmth she would use to welcome an old friend, come to visit after a very long time. Feeling both intrigued and daunted, Dany approached. From up close, the woman had a truly distinctive face: neither young nor old, despite the many wrinkles, it seemed to change with the way the light from the fire swayed across it.

“Who are you?”

“I am a ghost.” Her eyes were abnormally huge and as red as bleeding stars. “Don’t be afraid. Ghosts won’t hurt you. The living will. Many years I’ve been dancing around a bonfire, waiting for you to come…”

Dany arched a sceptical eyebrow. “The flames spoke to you?”

The albino crone nodded to the logs crackling and popping with a toothless crooked grin. “These? No. There’s nothing in the flames, but screams and grief… I’ve dreamt of you, child.” As stunted
and white-haired as she was, this strange witch looked nothing like the mysterious Priestess from Volantis with the red floating robes Tyrion and Varys had enlisted back in Meereen, to win the people’s support and cut off the most radical fringe among the Sons of the Harpy. Kinvara claimed to see things yet to come in the flames. The Lord of Light spoke through her, the people believed, but the Spider had wisely advised her not to put her own destiny in shadowy voices whispering from the flames or into her dreams: ‘Religion and political expediency go beautifully hand in hand,’ he had said, ‘but, in the end, we are what our choices made us.’

She herself had been living by that assumption for so many years now, that she knew it to be inherently true; prophecies were made by words, and words were wind. *I was promised my son would mount the world, but Rhaego is gone, and so is my sun and stars. And my womb has turned to dust.* She had picked the path to follow, and the life she didn’t choose would be forever lost to her, but there was still a great part of her soul, the part that belonged to her children, the part that spoke with the languid, haunting voice of blue-lipped Pyat Pree as he guided her through the many doors of the House of the Undying, the part that shook her awake at night with memories of the pain and despair she had felt when Mirri Maz Duur had left her womb empty and withered, that could not deny there was power in flames and dreams.

Daenys the Dreamer’s blood ran through her veins, after all.

The strange woman’s eyes found Drogon as he swept in wide circles across the leaden sky.

“You’re surrounded by flames of your own…” she said. “Dark flames, golden flames, and green ones, the flames of life and death whence you were born, but they’re dwindling, and cold as ice to the touch.”

“My dragons’ fire is nothing but cold,” she warned, indignant. A raw gust of wind threatened to snuff out the red tongues which raised from the bivouac.

“Aye,” the dwarfish woman croaked a grim laughter that had the fine hairs on Dany’s nape rise ominously, “but another fire, a thousand times more searing, awaits you. Just like it did for my dear Jenny.”

Her eyebrows knitted together. The name triggered some distant memory buried deep inside her mind. She saw herself standing in the Throne Room of the Great Pyramid, discussing her marriage to Hizdahr zo Loraq with Ser Barristan, and her white knight speaking of Rhaegar and Elia, love, duty and the cold union between her parents that had thrown the realm into an almost never-ending nightmare.

’*Why did they wed if they did not love each other?’*

’*Your grandsire commanded it. A woods witch had told him that the prince that was promised would be born of their line.’*

Dany’s breath hitched in her throat as realisation hit her.

“You’re the woods witch,” she shuddered, “the one Jenny of Oldstones brought to court. You were here when Summerhall bur-

“AHHHHHH!!”

The sobbing wails ripped through the cantankerous old woman’s body unexpectedly, unrestrained, as though her sufferings had been awoken anew.

“*RUTHLESS CHILD, CHILD OF FIRE!*” she bawled, breaking down like a wounded animal
drained of all hope. “I WON’T REMEMBER! WHY D’YOU WANT ME TO REMEMBER?!!?” Whimpering, she slumped on the ground rocking to and fro, her sorrow almost too much to bear witness to. Dany watched in horror as she started scratching her gaunt cheeks with her long nails until she drew beads of blood.

“Stop that! You’ll hurt yourself!” Dany forced the witch’s wizened fingers away from her face, but the hag gave her a surprisingly strong push that nearly made her trip and turned her back to her, her hands now clamped over her ears so that she would not hear Dany’s pleas. A stubborn child of one hundred years.

“HIGH IN THE HALLS OF THE KINGS WHO ARE GONE, JENNY WOULD DANCE WITH HER GHOSTS, JENNY WITH THE FLOWERS IN HER HAIR AND A SECRET IN HER HEART!” Her red eyes squeezed closed, the witch sang, fast and loud enough to wake all the Nine Dragons, and Dany was fed up with her antics: she knelt next to her and pulled roughly at her bony wrists, shaking her, pressing her own hands over the thin skin until she feared she might leave a bruise.

“Enough, now! Tell me what happened!”

She felt that if she could find out the truth about that fateful night, a part of her, the part closer to Rhaegar, perhaps, would finally find a scant measure of peace. Was my father’s obsession for fire inherited from his grandsire?

“Did Aegon truly try to hatch dragon’s eggs?”

Her resistance seemed to drop all at once at these words. Dany could sense the fight leave her saggy body and the watery eyes, although still filled with misery, were glancing up at her with restored lucidity as if she were really seeing her for the first time.

“Seven eggs there were… aye, one for each of the New Gods… I saw them, held them in my hands,” the witch recalled, her voice still reflecting the amazement beyond belief from back then; she picked a round grey stone the size of a grapefruit from the ground and cradled it into her arms as though it were a nursing babe. “They were so pretty! Tiny scales shimmering green, and white and black! The King’s intentions were good, aye, but he was ill-advised… The pyromancers… the pyromancers were not to be trusted. Revenge lurked from the dark, long shadows and took the shape of a Laughing Storm. The Prince of Dragonflies paid for his slight, and so did my flesh and blood!”

Her voice broke into a sob and Dany’s fingers went slack against her raw-boned arms. “Lady Jenny was your daughter?”

The dwarf’s whole small frame shook with tremors, but her eyes remained dry.

I know what it feels like. I too don’t have any more tears to spare.

“How did you escape?” she asked after a while.

“The White Knight… Tall, and brave and handsome, like the ones from the songs… he saved many a life, that night. The young prince and princess, the maester, and that pesky freckled Storm girl who later became the lady of a whole island… Had I dreamt of it, I could have warned them, but the old gods are cruel and plagued me with dreams about dragons born amidst salt and smoke instead! Little did I know that the message I bore was dripping of tears and blood.”

“The prophecy about the prince that was promised.”
“I told nothing about a prince! I only told them what I saw: a dragon hatching from Jaehaerys’ line, and they all ravenously gorged on my words, like crows feasting over a rotting corpse. They heard only what they wanted to hear.”

“So the prophecy was wrong?”

“A prophecy holds truth and power only because we believe it does. Dreams are fickle creatures, child. ‘Tis not my place to translate their meaning. I only dream.”

“Of what?”

Dany’s voice quivered. A ball of tangled, conflicting emotions tightened in her chest; a funny mix of nervous, tingling anticipation and foreboding, rolling like waves against a cliff; she could not tell why, but she dreaded the answer and yet yearned for it at the same time.

The witch raised her wide eyes to the heavy dark-grey clouds gathered above, swollen with a brewing blizzard.

“Snow…” she breathed out, “and blue roses.”

Her heart pounding madly against her ribcage, Dany froze. Haunting fear and – strangely enough – something else akin hope blossomed and battled inside her: she too had been having the same dream… snow falling upon the Iron Throne and blue rose petals all over the black sands of Dragonstone…

What did it mean? Was this only a deception to mislead her?

Her mind flickered back to prince Daeron, who saw his uncle’s death in a dream and drank himself to an early grave for the burden of it, and Aerion Brightflame, who in his deranged ravings tried to awake the dragon within himself with wildfire, and her brother Rhaegar, who had been obsessed by some kind of prophecy read by chance in one of his long-forgotten scrolls, and even the false king, Stannis Baratheon… They said he burned at the stake even his heir, his own only daughter, because he put his faith into the visions in the flames and the bloody words of a red witch, who only led him to his demise on a snowy battlefield up North…

How many surrendered their sanity to a blind obsession for signs beyond their comprehension? How many lost their lives trying to fulfil a prophecy or make a dragon dream come true?

_Would I be consumed by their same madness too if I went down this path?_ She shook herself and rose to her feet. _No._ Only pain and death remained. Summerhall was testament to that, and she would not be distracted by some magic tricks. She had more pressing concerns at hand, now: _the war is real, that’s all that matters._

The woods witch curled up, wrapping tight the tattered wool shawl around her slouching shoulders. The fire had all but gone out. Only a tiny, soft red glow remained, fluttering like a child’s heartbeat against the rising gale.

“Begone, now,” she begged. “This is no place for the living. Grief is bitter on my tongue. My grief, the grief of the souls screaming from my dreams. Sometimes I can’t tell anymore which is which. Their deaths have become mine. Tears of blood etched into mothers’ faces as they watch their sons’ doom, just as I watched my Jenny burn… rats feasting over a wolf’s heart and a lion choking with a thorn stuck in the throat, and the sound of the little bells… oh, how that still haunts my nights! It’s time for me to rest my eyes. I only have a dream more to share. Just the one. And that would be my last.”
Unexpectedly, her hand shot out to grab Dany’s.

“Hear me, child of storm... You must make haste, aye, for the swords are already burning, and the ice is thawing.” Her voice had changed. Neither human nor divine, it had a singing quality to it, like a lullaby, resonant and low, where before it was dry and hollow. It was one voice and a thousand. Frightened all of a sudden, Dany wriggled, trying to jerk her arm free, but the old witch’s strength had seemingly increased by a tenfold. Her feverish eyes bore into her, a plea and a warning in them. “Soon comes a great silence to bind in chains that which is free, and after that, winter will fall and the dark heart with no face and a hundred will choke on her vengeance, and the lion’s blood will be spilled, as cruel as barbed edges, and another sun shall rise in the west. Child of Valyria... the raven has taken flight and the hourglass is emptying fast. Everything that has been shall be again. The past shall become the present, and the future shall become the past. The song... the song is already within you...”

This makes no sense at all.

“What song?”

The witch ignored her; she removed a twig from the dying embers and drew swift lines on the ground, until from the ashes emerged the stylized circle of the Targaryen sigil.

“The wheel is still turning,” she whispered, “and three heads has the dragon.”

The mare tapped her hooves to the ground, chewing nervously at the bit, as Dany watched the small Highgarden delegation approach across the field.

The Dothraki silently moved next to her, looking morose and fearsome in their heavy furs. Besides her, Qhono studied the sky, lines of worry creasing his high forehead; although it was near noon, the sun was unnaturally low on the horizon and struggled to climb higher than the Dornish mountains circling them.

“Kifindirgi shafka vos kaffi mra morea she yeri zhavorsa, zhey Khaleesi?” * he asked. An impish smirk curved at the corner of her lips: for the meeting she had traded Drogon with a more traditional steed to allow the dragon to stretch his wings, but she knew he wasn’t too much far off, waiting for his grand entrance.

“Because I want them to trust me, not to shit themselves into their armours.”

At her back, the other Dothraki sniggered.

The horse will do. For now, she thought and put her heels to her mare.

The golden rose of House Highgarden flapped atop the lance of the standard bearer who opened the row of the riders emerging from the camp; to its head, mounted on a brown palfrey, rode a helmless man, his sandy curls ruffled by the northern gale.

As he neared, she saw he was wearing a plain forest-green quilted doublet underneath the unadorned breastplate and the layers of boiled leather; by his clothing alone, he could have passed for a landed knight of some minor house, but his velvet cloak, an elegant deep emerald with golden threads trimmed on the edge and blossoming rosebuds scattered all around its back – the only concession to an otherwise soldierly attire – and the serious nobility of his mien betrayed his high birth.
“Lady Targaryen,” Leo Tyrell reined up and nodded in curt greeting. Dany clenched her jaw, her face taut. He was definitely audacious. Nobody had ever dared address her as such. She had been “Princess” and “Your Highness” to Ser Willem and magister Mopatis, and Khaleesi to everyone else, after her marriage to Drogo; and then, after her children had been born, titles had started to pile up one after the other, to the point that even Missandei sometimes had a hard time to list them all.

*Forget your titles, they mean nothing to them. They don’t know what you did in Essos, they don’t care. And why should they?*

She squared her shoulders and forced out a polite smile.

“My Lord Tyrell.”

“These are my commanders,” he beckoned to both his sides, where two stern-looking men-at-arms were stiffly glaring at her Dothraki as though they had never seen anything more disgusting. “Lord Randyll Tarly of Horn Hill and my cousin, Paxter Redwyne, Lord of the Arbor.”

Just as the young Tyrell was inconspicuously dressed, the two lords were wearing boiled leather, ringmail and full armour, as though they were expected to lead a charge into the thick of a battle at a moment’s notice.

She signalled to the bloodriders at her back; Qhono dismounted and presented the Warden of the South with a small, black chest. Dany had her blacksmiths adorn the lid with a single golden rose.

“I was fond of Lady Olenna: she had worked tirelessly for this alliance, and her wisdom and wits were unmatched among my advisors. I find myself missing her good counsels more and more every day,” she said.

Leo Tyrell nodded gravely.

“You have my thanks for returning her bones to her family, my lady. Highgarden will be her last resting place, as it should be.”

No further words were exchanged during the short ride to the camp, where a pavilion had been raised for supper. At the entrance, they were requested to surrender their weapons; Qhono glowered at the guard wrapped in the gaudy colours of the Fossoways of Cider Hall as though he was considering how best to gut him with his arakh.

Almost on cue, Drogon appeared from behind the hill’s peak; a black shadow announcing himself with the rumbling of a coming storm. Horror-struck eyes flew to the sky, and Dany saw with a mix of pride and triumph the numb tautness in the soldiers’ faces, as everyone held their breaths. Tarly’s mouth dropped open as though he could not really believe the sight above him; a glistening sheen of sweat beaded his bald head, despite the cold air. Leo Tyrell didn’t utter a single sound of alarm, but his fingers eloquently gripped his sword’s hilt.

Dany smiled in satisfaction.

“Don’t worry, my lords. He won’t strike. Unless you give him reason to,” she warned with a casual wave of her hand and then handed over her stiletto. The Dothraki did the same.

Inside, the pavilion was warm and spacious. Over a circular table had been assembled a fast meal of cheese, some boiled eggs and sausages. As Lord Paxter introduced her to Mathis Rowan, the stout and grey Lord of Goldengrove, and Ser Colin Florent, castellan of Brightwater Keep, Dany sat and thanked her host when he offered salt and bread, silently commending Varys for telling her
of this western custom.

*Guest rights didn’t keep the Freys and the Boltons from slaying the Starks under a false flag of friendship, anyway; she mulled the thought over in her mind, as a young cup bearer filled her glass with golden wine.*

From the other side of the table, Leo Tyrell seemed to be observing sharply her every move, perhaps searching for a sign of weakness or incertitude.

He was not much older than she, but the clean-shaved cheeks and the bright, slightly cocky hazel eyes made him look somewhat younger.

Dany raised the cup to her lips and took a sip; the wine was crisp and aromatic and helped to soothe her nerves.

“I was looking forward to meeting with Lord Hightower, as well, but I don’t see him with you.”

“Lord Leyton was severely wounded during the siege of Oldtown, my lady,” Lord Paxter answered as he took his seat to his cousin’s left, “and he’s currently recovering in Nightsong, but he sent his vanguard ahead. With a bit of luck, we’ll be reunited with the bulk of his army and with Leo’s father in a short amount of days.”

*Three thousand men strong, at the very least,* she brooded, nipping distractedly at the cheese.

“You must forgive me: this sparing meal is more suitable for a marching army than a woman of... your birth, but, regrettably, war and winter don’t agree with the pleasures of the table,” lord Tyrell remarked, perhaps mistaking her hesitation for disappointment, but his slightly patronising tone didn’t go amiss. The others were hiding smug grins behind their cups’ rims.

*Maybe they were expecting me to act as a Dothraki whore and eat raw horse meat with my hands.* Irritation threatened to flare upon her face, but she kept her voice firm and patient, as though she were explaining something very straightforward to a group of turbulent, stubborn children. “I spent the first half of my youth running away from Robert Baratheon’s rabid dogs, eating scraps of food where and when I could, and after that, I’ve led an entire khalasar across the Dothraki Sea and the Red Waste. I’ve survived thirst and hunger pangs, scorching heat and disease... Believe me, my lord,” an obliging smile danced over her lips, “I have no cause for complaint: this warrior’s meal more than meets my taste.”

She saw Rowan and Florent shrink and squirm on their seats, their discomfort growing at the mention of the Usurper. It was understandable. Rowan, Redwyne, Florent, Tarly... they all raised their banners for Aerys Targaryen, when the rebellion broke, but forgot about their pledges and her and her brother’s fate as soon as the dragons fell and a new stag king was hailed Lord of the Seven Kingdoms.

Lord Mathis finally met her eyes. “What happened to you was... brutal, my lady,” he admitted, his tone gruff but genuine. “No child should have to endure such harrowing experience.”

“Harrowing experiences made me what I am today. It’s both a curse and a blessing, I suppose.”

“It’s remarkable, in fact,” Randyll Tarly, who up to that point had watched her carefully without interruption, spoke at least, and there was something cutting and abrasive in his voice which made her skin crawl and prickle. “At such a young age, you’ve already seen so much of the known world. Many of us had ventured only as far as Braavos, and for far less noble activities than yours, I’m sure.” His words were greeted by a short round of snickers and knowing looks. The lord of Horn
Hill disregarded them and resumed, as austere and immovable as a bronze statue.

“But I wonder if perhaps these hardships you had suffered have stirred in you the fallacious notion that you can’t be beaten.”

A few discreet coughs on red, embarrassed faces were followed by a heavier silence. Dany let the not-so-veiled insult roll off her: to bear herself as graceful as she could appeared a better line of action than to bristle at his rudeness.

“You think I’m arrogant,” she took him on.

“Lord Tarly speaks his mind often too harshly.” Ser Colin cut in with a nervous titter, “but he means no disrespect, my lady. Hells, I’d be arrogant too, if I had three living dragons!”

The jape fell short. Nobody laughed and Leo Tyrell pinched his cheeks inwards in clear disapprobation. He seemed to be extremely interested in her answer.

She let out a soft breath and leant back in her chair, both hands upon the armrests as though sitting on a throne.

“I didn’t have what you might call a traditional education, lord Tarly, but I’ve read quite a lot on the history of Westeros, and I don’t recall a single conqueror who hasn’t been somewhat arrogant, as you put it. I believe it’s a necessary virtue required in ruling, one you might also call boldness.”

Tarly’s deep-set grey eyes hardened.

“Boldness I appreciate. Even in a woman. It’s foolishness that has me worried. We’re standing on the grounds of a spectacular battle, a battle the Targaryen forces lost. D’you know what brought victory to Robert’s side that day? Not the bigger army, nor the finest men. Robert struck first. Fast as lightning. He didn’t play for more time. He raced here before everyone else, and when those idiots your father sent to hold the Marches finally moved their asses to join forces, it was already too late. Exhausted from the forced march, with their supplies cut down by Baratheon scouts, they all capitulated one after the other, and before the sun had set on the field, the only sounds were the pawing of horses galloping over the dying, and the cawing of the crows.”

“You’ve returned the favour at Ashford,” Paxter Redwyne commented darkly and raised his cup in a toast.

“Aye, for all the good it did me.” His lips twisted into an awful imitation of a scathing sneer, and Dany wondered if he has ever learned how to smile properly.

“What is your point, my lord?”

“I have fought in many wars,” he went on, “and the same could be said of the others as old as I who are assembled around this table; we’re not green lads eager for a woman’s touch for the first time. We don’t seek the song of steel to satisfy a craving for blood or childish dreams of glory, nor because we find it profitable and without risks. If we choose to raise our banners, never let it be said that it’s with joy or with a light heart. You summoned us here, and we answered the call out of respect for Lady Olenna and the pact she had agreed upon, but do not presume we feel obligated to fulfil that oath even against our own interests! You’re young, and inexperienced in the politics of Westeros, no matter how many books you’ve read on the matter. You don’t know Cersei: people close to you might have talked about her, but you have no idea who you’re really dealing with. She hungers for power, and if the rumours are to be believed, some say she’s resorting even to black magic and necromancy to get it. She is unmerciful, resolute, while you hesitate and delay your
decisions in the attempt to make the right choice!"

“What lord Tarly is trying to say is that there might not be a right choice in this situation, my lady,” lord Mathis added. “While we’re all mustered here, making empty speeches and quarrelling among us, the realm bleeds.”

His voice carried a sense of deep discouragement and defeat within which soon spread out, affecting the other men as well as her. They all looked embittered, more than jaded: their isolation and her own helplessness weighed oppressive under the green pavilion.

Why should they salute her as their queen, and lay to her feet armies, riches and their own lives, if they feel as if they were left to fight alone?

Who’s more to blame, Dany mused: the one who reduces others to slavery or the one who has the power to prevent it, and yet looks carelessly on, although claiming to be the liberator and protector of all Westeros?

Anger and outrage at the unfairness of it all simmered on the surface, threatening to choke her up. The cheese and sausage were left almost untouched in her plate. She stood up and paced in silence, a new resolution stirring in her heart: if she hoped to be heard and understood, she ought to drop all pretence at scheming and strategies and lay her cards on the table.

*There’s always a choice, and I’ll break before I’ll be forced to bend my back.*

“My lords, I’m not blind and deaf to your cries for justice. Lord Redwyne, your two sons... they were killed during the storming of Highgarden, am I right?”

The lord’s face grew flushed and a blue vein throbbed alarmingly over his thick neck’s side.

“Butchered by ironborn scums!” He slammed his mailed fist against the table so hard that his cup of wine tipped over and spilled its content over the white cloth. Dany put both her hands over it and leaned over.

“I won’t stand in the way between a grieving father and his righteous demands for due punishment. Each one of you lost kin and friends to Cersei’s madness, and I share your same pain and rage about it! I know some of you think I am a fickle child, playing in a game much bigger than herself, or worse: you perhaps see my father in me. But, would my father also have had second thoughts about riding his dragons to recapture what he believed was his by right?

No. With three dragons, he would’ve never hesitated – he would have razed the city to the ground, without making a distinction between friend and foe.

How many people live within the capital’s boundaries, I ask you? Half a million? More, now that the smallfolk and peasants have flocked inside the gates to try and fend off certain starvation and the coming cold? If you move against King’s Landing now, you won’t avenge your loved ones. You’ll be the cause of more deaths. Thousands of them.”

Ser Florent frowned. “What nonsense is this?”

She set her eyes on the silver-haired knight, and pressed on. “Cersei has got hundreds, maybe thousands wildfire cashes stashed all around the city. And my sources tell me she’s making more.”

Appalled murmurs rose from the assembly. Shock, fear and wrath all mingled with the cold awareness that Cersei wasn’t planning on being captured alive, should King’s Landing fall, and that she wouldn’t have qualms in using the whole population as hostages, in the eventuality of a
frontal attack. One look to Leo Tyrell and Dany knew she held their destinies in her hands.

“The destruction of the Great Sept was not an isolated occurrence. It was a rehearsal.”

Chaos erupted upon the small gathering and suddenly they were all standing, bellowing curses and cries of outrage, demanding that Leo Tyrell make a choice. At her back, her Dothraki shifted closer, but she held out a hand. As Mathis Rowan tried to restore order and silence, her own voice raised above the ruckus.

“My lords! Hear me! I did not come here to either accept your full surrender or to sweep your armies away with my dragons’ help. I could have laid siege to your cities, starve your people, my people, pour down over your heads a rain of fire the likes of which has not been seen since the days of Aegon the Conqueror! I could’ve made orphans and widows of your children and wives, but I haven’t! I am not my father! I have no interest in taking by force your lives, your lands and titles. I didn’t sail to Westeros to bring more destruction and take away what scant you’ve been left with by almost fifty years of short-sighted, inconsiderate ruling, but to give you a legacy of peace! Something worthy to pass on your children, something that will endure long after we may be gone! And if you give me a chance, I will prove to you that the trust Lady Olenna had placed in me was well-deserved! I plead with you one last time: Dothraki, Unsullied, the armies of Essos, my own dragons will fight with you, for you, and King’s Landing will fall, but we shall take it without unnecessary bloodshed. I’m not my father,” she repeated. “Do not force me to turn into him.”

A tense silence fell on the table. Randyll Tarly was the first to stand. “You speak well, and wisely, Daenerys Stormborn,” he said, bitter. “But these are just words. And words don’t win wars.”

One by one, they all got up and left, and after the tent’s flap had closed behind their muttering backs, Leo Tyrell rose, as well.

“Lady Targaryen, a word in private, if it please you.”

Outside the pavilion, the weather had shifted for the worse. Dany raised her hood against the wind; the air reeked of snow, horse’s dung and putrefaction. All around them, amidst campfires and ordered rows of tents of heavy, faded canvas, blowing banners and armed soldier astir and about, the hard battlefield of Summerhall widened in a slight slope and flattened at the feet of the palace’s hill.

This dry, red earth had quenched its thirst with the blood of the hundreds who fell in the three battles which had raged in a single day’s span. If she closed her eyes, Dany could almost hear the thundering echo of horses’ hooves and steel clashing against steel, as the formidable cavalry charge shattered her father’s defence lines, savage like a storm beating down on an exposed sandy shore.

They trekked in silence toward the burned ruins, until the noises of the camp were doused by the low, rumbling ripples disrupting the sky from north-east and the sharp snapping of Drogon’s dark wings, as he dove, still as death, around the crest of the near mountains, smoke hissing from his nostrils.

Leo Tyrell couldn’t tear his eyes off him.

“You must excuse lord Tarly his impetuosity, my lady. He’s a seasoned soldier: usually his authority is not put into question by strong, wilful women.”

Dany rather thought him to be a dangerous man, who loathed to be criticised and who could make a particularly unpleasant enemy.
“He’s definitely got a big mouth,” she conceded; despite the tense situation, Tyrell let out a short, raspy laugh at this.

“I’m sure that during your travels you must have met other men like him.”

“I did. Prideful men who believed a woman’s place was anywhere but at the head of an army. Or upon a throne. They had this weird, funny notion that women should be taught who they are, how to talk, how to dress, what to think, simply how to be in this world, by the likes of them. They were small men, you see, and, in the end, their flesh burned just the same.”

She bit her tongue as soon as the words were out. The young Warden now glared at her with the same disquiet which he had previously saved only for her dragon. He halted and turned to face her, gravely weighing her expression with suspicious amber eyes. There was definitely something of his fierce aunt about him.

“What is the source of the rumours about the wildfire?”

Dany had anticipated the question. “My own Hand.”

“A Lannister.” He spat the name as if it were an insult.

“Lord Tyrion holds my utmost trust. Nobody is more committed to end Cersei’s reign than him, believe me.”

“And where is he, now, this short, stalwart Hand of yours?”

“Up in the North, working to bring about an alliance with the Bastard of Winterfell.”

He snorted. “Ned Stark’s by-blows. At the Citadel, my friend Samwell couldn’t stop talking about him. I suspect he might be a bit in love with the man.” A twinkle broke through his scowl, but she only took slight notice. The name had piqued her interest.

“Samwell? Maester Tarly?”

“Randyll’s eldest, yes. He should be in Dragonstone, by now. Olenna has sent him to you.”

As he read the surprise and confusion over her face, what scant warmth his eyes had held vanished all at once. “He never made it to the island,” Leo realised, troubled.

She shook her head.

“I never met him, but his letters have reached me... Something about a great menace moving against the realm of men. Death itself marching across the Wall, and a king made of ice that brings a perpetual night.”

“I know how it sounds,” he snapped brusquely. “Sam is many things, but a liar he’s not! He is one of the sharpest minds of the realm, and you'd better listen to him.”

“If it were true, why are you still here, dawdling about, wasting fresh levies, instead of heading north, as fast as you can, to bring help to the men of the Night’s Watch?”

“It’s what I intend to do, but Cersei needs to be dealt with! As long as she’ll be threatening the Kingdoms’ unity, nobody will be bothered with sending troops to another front. I only pray for the Wall to stand a while longer.”

Ghastly thoughts and questions she didn’t dare voicing aloud swarmed inside her mind like a nest
of angry wasps. The number of people believing these children’s horror tales grew with each passing day, and they sounded less and less like the ravings of a madman, or a case of collective delirium. Leo Tyrell himself, so solemn and thoughtful, looked like a man of science, a scholar, raised to become a future maester of the Citadel.

*What if there is some truth in these cries for help? Why hasn’t Tyrion reported back to me, yet?*

The young lord seemed lost in thought, his eyes unfocused on the sickly globe floating in and out of the clouds as though it were hanging by a thread. Her own eyes were on him.

“Sad, isn't it?” he said after a while. “How fire could wipe away every trace of life in a matter of a heartbeat. There are many ways to die, but I’ve always thought that burning alive was the most dreadful and dishonourable.”

“Dishonourable, my lord?”

“Well, it’s such an unfair fight, don't you think?”

The indirect accusation rekindled her exasperation. “Yet, you're asking me to ride my dragons over Westeros’ most populated city, and take all the blame for the consequences that might result.” Her fists balled to her sides. “You were there when Oldtown burned. You know first-hand the damage fire can do! Look around yourself, lord Tyrell. Take a deep breath. Do you smell it? Even after all these years, the reek still lingers.”

*And by the time we will have blown off King’s Landing, it will stay with us. It will mark our skin. Haunt our waking hours and nights.* His hands were shaking, whether for the cold or the long-lasting shock those memories still elicited Dany couldn’t tell, but she could see the revulsion worm its way in every part of his being.

*He’s not ready for this kind of guilt.*

*And neither am I.*

Somehow, the thought eased her soul.

“What do you have in mind, then?”

Dany knew what to do. She had discussed at length about the strategy to follow with Varys and Grey Worm, before leaving for the Marches.

“Stall her,” she bid. “Cersei is unassailable on the sea, as long as she’s got Euron Greyjoy’s ships. We must bring the fight on the mainland, where she’s exposed: move your armies over the banks of the Blackwater Rush, to her doorsteps. Now that the situation in Oldtown is more stable, I’ll send the Unsullied to you. The loyalty of the Houses in the Crownlands and Westerlands is just barely standing. All we need to do is give a small push. We’ll hit the weaker among them, first: swift, concerted raids to sap their will and cut supplies and communication with King’s Landing. She’ll get the message.” “And you think the prodding will get on her nerves?”

“I think it will make her rash.”

The lords of the Reach had berated her for not knowing her enemy, but they were wrong: she had seen it happen many times before... rulers mistaking their pride for actual power, who, in the end, were brought down by their vanity and presumption. A blunder which had cost Viserys his life and had almost thwarted her plans forever, in Qarth and Slaver’s Bay. She remembered Xaro Xhoan Daxos and his empty Valyrian vault that hid nothing but lies and betrayal, and Moro, khal of ashes,
weeping like a child as the fire melted his flesh, and greedy Kraznys mo Nakloz, his filthy mouth filling with screams and smoke... Gone, all of them, and she was still standing... Yes, maybe she was arrogant, but she had learned from the best: Ser Barristan, Jorah and Daario each taught her a different approach. When to be bold enough to attack even if outnumbered, and when to retreat, when to let prowess and ruthlessness be tempered with slyness and restraint, and how to mould even the worst circumstances to her advantage.

“It is a daring move, but one that cannot be sustained indefinitely. We don’t have enough men and provisions for a war of position.”

She would have to speed things up: her thoughts went to Missandei, alone in the lioness’s den, shrewdness and courage her only concealing charms against the enemy’s traps, and to Varys: would that the missives she had him sent to Braavos and Meereen had safely reached their addressees!

The wheel was still turning, the woods witch had said, but Dany would not baulk now.

“Give me a sennight for further mobilisation,” she said, “and another moon’s turn, two at the most, to secure King’s Landing and close the net around her. The more she will struggle, the more the chains will tighten around her throat. I promise you, my lord, that if we act together, following a common strategy, when Cersei will realise what’s going on, it will be too late.”

A stifled sound – half laugh, half groan – slip past the lord of Highgarden’s plush lips. The hollow smile of rebuke that cut through was nothing short of chilling.

“I see why Olenna liked you,” he confessed. “The last time I met her, she made pretty clear how much she admired your strength of character, but at the same time wondered if you truly knew what it means to rule.”

This gave her pause.

“What did she say?”

“That you won’t find any joy in wearing that crown you seek. That you will have to sacrifice everything, if you want to keep it over your pretty head... I don’t think she was fully convinced you could overcome all the obstacles in your path... and yet, she didn’t wish to break faith with House Targaryen. Out of respect to her memory, I won’t either. My loyalty lies with my people. As long as you’ll assist us in defending them, we’ll fulfil our oaths. But if you take us for granted, if you lied to me just now, about the wildfire and your own willingness to help, I promise you Cersei will be the last of your problems.”

Without leaving her room for a reply, he walked past her, toward the camp.

An icy blast of wind nearly made her lose her balance. As she adjusted her hood, a white flurry flake glittered on the back of her hand, and melted almost instantly. The second one, however, was thicker and didn’t thaw so fast. Dany surrendered her face to the sky: damp and numbing cold over her burning cheeks, feathery like a mother’s kiss on her eyelashes, they fell and fell and kept on falling... and she wanted to cry and laugh at the same time.

The snows had come to Dorne, at last.

“Send your Unsullied, princess, and the Dothraki too!” Leo Tyrell called from the bottom of the hill. “I’ll talk with my men. We don’t have time to spare: winter is upon us!”
* Kifindirgi shafka vos kaffi mra morea she yeri zhavorsa, zhey Khaleesi? = Why don’t you dive on them with your dragon, khaleesi?

Chapter End Notes

Like all the chapters which rely heavily on the political plot, this one hasn’t been easy to build; as I wrote in a few comments before, I like to think of it as a kind of prologue to the second part of the story: it has a lot of exposition, but it’s also littered with riddles, foreshadowing and references to the past (both the canonical history of Westeros and the headcanon continuity within A Wreath of Thorns): I adore Summerhall and the mystique surrounding it, and I’ve been waiting to write about it for a very long time. I hope I did it justice!

A special thanks goes to Thucydides and his Peloponnesian War, which is not only an extremely engaging war treaty/history commentary that, after two thousand years, still stands the test of time, but it’s also been an invaluable source of inspiration, without which this chapter would have taken a lot more to see the light.

Now, we’re definitely moving to the beefy parts, and I’m both daunted and excited by the prospect!

Want to know what happened to Sam the Slayer? Keep reading ;)

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Cersei III

Chapter Notes

Here we go!
Enjoy the sexy madness ahead!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CERSEI

An unforgiving storm roared across the city, pouring down the wrath of all the Seven Gods combined over the garrison of dark, faceless soldiers mustered in the inner courtyard. Wrapped in furs and deathly silence, she walked between the lines, reviewing the troops, only stopping every now and again when she had the impression to recognise a glimpse of the past life staring back at her. It was just a false perception, of course: beyond the helmets completely covering their anonymous faces, wide, bloodshot eyes peered, unblinking, but there was nothing in them. No remembrance, no resistance. No soul at all.

This was the last batch spawned from the laboratory buried into the dark bowels of Maegor’s Keep: once upon a time, they had been soldiers, merchants, farmers, or merely enemies of hers… now they had no names, these sons of steel birthed to a new existence not from a mother’s womb, but from the brilliant intellect of the same proud father. They had lost their impertinent voices as well, to become equally obedient and disciplined; their identical armours acted as one, with a single mind and purpose.

Qyburn strolled along beside her looking demure and eager like a priest in front of a whore, his hands hidden up in his robe’s sleeves and his hood lifted over his greying hair.

The dull tinkle of icy rain droplets as big as nuts over helmets and shields and pauldrons was growing more insistent above the howling wind; Cersei brushed a hand across a breastplate of polished iron and quench-hardened steel as black as obsidian. *Better get to the point, before I freeze to death.*

“Are they… reliable?” she asked to the chainless maester, her voice just barely raising above the downpour. Qyburn gave a small sideways tilt with the head, to let her know that he had understood the real meaning of the question; what had started as an experiment with one single body had become an extremely dangerous undertaking on a larger scale. There already was a small unit of these dark, unholy soldiers that patrolled the city’s streets day and night, with no need for sleep or food, in tireless pursuit of insurgents and agitators, to keep the Queen’s peace. The smallfolk feared and hated them in equal measure. It was understandable. They were a weapon of mighty power, and Qyburn alone held all the secrets of their restoration in his hands. If he failed to control even a
single one of them, that would be a disaster of unmitigated proportions. As much as she trusted Qyburn with her life, she had to admit that this incertitude made her dependent and vulnerable.

The maester schooled his face into a staid expression full of innocent precaution, and answered in a respectful tone: “Sound, unimpaired, and ready to follow Your Majesty’s orders.”

“Show me.”

With no hesitation, the old man beckoned for one of his creatures, standing still as stone on the forefront. As the dark-armoured soldier stepped forward, Qyburn turned to the Lannister men-at-arms gathered in their red-and-gold armours at his back. The troops, silent and orderly until that very moment, seemed to bestir themselves, their neat lines rippling like the clear surface of a lake hit by a pebble.

“Choose, Your Grace.”

She picked the sturdiest among them, the one whose eyes showed less fear, behind his helmet’s visor.

The Lannister soldier moved to the centre of the courtyard and pulled his sword from its scabbard with a swift and assured movement, which oddly reminded her of Jaime.

Qyburn’s puppet didn’t stir, didn’t unsheathe its own blade, didn’t even dodge when the blond-haired man used the tip of his weapon to poke it half-humorously on the chest, perhaps wondering why it showed no reaction whatsoever.

But Cersei wasn’t surprised: Qyburn had explained how it worked. These were just corpses. Empty sacks of rotten meat and frozen blood waiting for an order.

Protect the Queen.

Kill the enemy.

Eliminate the threat.

These were the only words they were built to understand and respond to. And she knew that once they had received a direct command from the living voice of their master, there was no stopping them until the task was done.

She could hear the other men’s nervous titters at her back, while the soldier kept prodding the creature, in a show of brashness truly worthy of her twin, until the sword rose and fell in a neat arc right where neck met shoulder. The blow cut through steel and flesh, producing a wound which, on a breathing body, would have been nothing but mortal, but, even then, the dark, faceless minion stood still, strong, tall and unruffled as though he had just been barely prickled by the warm caress of a gentle breeze.

The brazen grin over the soldier’s lips trembled and faltered as he took a wary step back, his sword still stuck where it landed.

No, Cersei amended, not even Jaime would be that stupid.

She silently nodded to her Hand.

With his usual dispassionate patience, Qyburn ambled to his man; the words he uttered got lost in the rain, but their effect was immediate.
A shiver ran behind Cersei’s back as she watched in rapture the creature rouse from its lethargy, pull the sword out of its neck without a sound and throw it across the yard. Clotted blood oozed from the cut, thick and black as scorpion’s venom, and suddenly all chuckle died down.

She was pleased to notice that the Lannister soldier didn’t completely lose his wits about him, despite his foe’s apparent invulnerability. As the dark wraith stalked toward him with a stiff but sure gait, he caught the sword which one of his companions tossed at him and parried just in time the blow that came crashing down over his head. The impact sent him reeling backwards into the slippery mud-covered passageway. Cersei saw him grit his teeth, his sword-arm shaking with the effort, while his opponent kept advancing, relentless, wielding his blade one-handed, raining slash after slash almost lazily.

The sounds of the combat filled the courtyard, matching for a short while the intensity of the screaming storm around them, until with a grunt, the red-and-gold soldier lost his footing and his arm raised in defence a second too late.

The creature’s heavy sword whistled and swung one last time, biting smoothly through the ringmail, right into the soldier’s neck. The man’s knees gave way and slammed with a hard thud on the rain-soaked ground. Bright blood bubbled from his mouth and flew from the open gash in a warm spray when the blade was snatched out.

The rain washed it all away in an instant, as though it had never happened.

“This is truly excellent work, my lord Hand,” she said, at last, staring at the soldier’s wide, sunken eyes as the last light waned in them, leaving behind nothing but a blank, veiled look, frozen before the finality of the grave.

Its job done, the deathly creature had meekly returned to its initial position among its other siblings, unbothered either by the cold rain or by its wound. They would stay put, until Qyburn would order them to do otherwise.

With Ser Gregor at her side, Cersei marched back into the Keep.

“I’m quite satisfied with the outcome. I think congratulations are in order,” she resumed. Qyburn kept pace with her, always a respectful step or two behind, but, even if she couldn’t see his face, the smug glee in his voice was unmistakable.

“Indeed, Your Grace. If I may say so, I didn’t quite expect such immediate success. The improvements have been rather astonishing, and the procedure is tried and true by now… However, I was wondering…”

She stopped and turned.

“Yes?”

“If Your Grace would grant permission, there are still some, ah, corrections I plan to make…” he approached with a little bow of the head, his greedy eyes shining in anticipation by the light of the braziers. He looks like a starving man ogling a lavish banquet just out of reach.

“I would need other bodies for my research. Younger ones.”

A chilly uneasiness crept within her, gnawing at her resolve.

“How much younger?” she hesitated.
The maester eloquently cast his eyes down.

The prospect didn’t appeal to her, not in the least, but what else could she do? She needed this army, for her own protection. And for the protection of the realm, of course.

A few children’s deaths would be a small price indeed, to ensure it. And surely Qyburn would only use disposable bodies... The ones too weak to survive the coming snows, the ones already ill... Her lips locked tight together, as she clung to the conviction that every choice she has taken since her coronation, even the hardest, the most painful, was justified by what she was trying to achieve. Inevitable. The price power demanded, for it to be wielded safely.

It was her burden to carry.

Inexplicably, her thoughts went to Bran Stark.

She hadn’t thought about the little wolfling in years, but his blue eyes, staring up at her, alarmed yet trusting, mere moments before Jaime heaved him out of that window, his eyes were still a clear memory in her mind.

It was not that she rued what happened – Jaime never showed any kind of remorse, why would she? – but the boy was still so very young.

Handsome, even in that terrible, heavy slumber so much akin to death.

And ashen-faced Cat, with her auburn hair cascading messily across her sagging shoulders and her sunken eyes, moist and fixed over the son’s inert body, willing it to breathe in and breathe out, to hold on a little longer... Grief had made her look like an old ragged doll, but, in spite of her worn-out appearance, Cersei had surprisingly felt a bond with the woman. Even in her vulnerability, even in their shared pain over the loss of a child, there had been a calm dignity that Cersei had envied, back then.

No, she didn’t regret what Jaime did; it was either their children or the Stark lad.

But she regretted the unnecessary pain the child had to go through. The carelessness of a hasty decision.

None of it matters, now; the boy is surely dead, anyway. Murdered by Ironborn, or the Bolton bastard, or lost in the Lands of Always Winter, as the story went.

Had he lived, he would have been of an age with Tommen.

Qyburn was still there, keenly pining for an answer.

Out of the corner of her eyes, the guards’ movements suggested that news has reached the Keep and called for her attention.

Her chest tightening, Cersei released a heavy, strained breath.

“Do what you must,” she bid the maester; then warned softly as one soldier approached, “but be discreet.”

“My Queen,” the guard announced, “the envoy from Winterfell is here and begs urgent audience.”

“Are you sure it was him and not someone else posing as him, to trick us?” she demanded,
wrapping her shawl more tightly about her.

Despite the fire crackling merrily into the great marble hearth, the council room was as cold as the seventh hell. With the setting of the sun, an unhealthy, thick fog had settled on Aegon’s Hill, and now bitter drafts hissed in between the small cracks in the walls; the blasts of humid air swept from the harbour and clung with the stench of the dead on clothes, curtains and tapestries alike. As she listened to the messenger’s report, Cersei stood by the window, her breathing breaking in puffs of condensation against the glass. Her pale, worn reflection stared back at her, unmerciful; a mocking reminder that beauty was all but a fading flower.

*Queen you shall be... until there comes another, younger and more beautiful...*

No, there was no time for dwelling on a witch’s cursed words... The news from the North was bothersome, to say the least.

Apparently, Cersei had been wrong in her previous estimations: Brandon Stark had survived cold, starvation and wild beasts in all these years he spent hiding the gods only knew where and had returned to his ancestral home, to the joy of his sisters, both of them, and his bastard half-brother.

And it would appear that Tyrion had played a big part in this happy reunion. Tyrion and... his dragon.

“I’ve talked with him, when I arrived at Winterfell, Your Grace,” ser Raynard Spicer confirmed. “He remembered me from the last time we went north. It was Bran Stark, without a doubt.”

Qyburn raised a dubious eyebrow from the heap of scrolls he was perusing.

“Are we supposed to believe that a young man who spent the better part of the last seven years in the wilderness, a cripple, is now ruling at Winterfell?”

“Oh, don’t be fooled, my lord. Bran Stark is Lord of Winterfell in name only.” She picked the pitcher of red wine on the nearby cabinet and poured herself a generous measure. Her face twisted into a sour grimace. “His whore sister holds the castle.”

With a mockingbird hiding under her gowns, secretly spilling honeyed words into her ear, instructing her in the fine arts of murder and betrayal.

*Plotting to overthrow me.*

Her hand gritted against the enamel decorated stem-cup. Qyburn voiced aloud her own concerns.

“The North might come out stronger and more united, now that Winterfell has been restored to Ned Stark’s trueborn children.”

“Not necessarily, my lord. While I was there, I’ve heard lots of conversations and gossip. There is dissent between Lady Sansa and her half-brother, and between him and some of his bannermen.”

The maester frowned. “Meaning?”

“The King –

“Do not call him thus in my presence!”

“The Bastard traitor, then...” the knight amended swiftly. “He seeks to strengthen his alliances in the North through dynastic marriage. He’s resolved to take a wife himself, one of the northern
ladies, as it appears."

"Who?"

"Alys Karstark was in Winterfell, to reach an agreement. His sisters didn’t look too happy about the prospect. To put more salt on wound, he tried to marry Lady Sansa off to one of his bannermen. The lady objected, quite vocally. And… Lord Tyrion took her side on the matter."

Cersei sneered: "Of course he did! The little monster still hopes that she’d open her legs for him."

"That’s not all…” Ser Raynard resumed, warily. “When I was already on the road to White Harbour, news reached me… There has been an attempted poisoning at Winterfell. The Bastard came out of it unscathed, but many think the lady herself might be behind it.”

Her cup of wine nearly dropped on the floor.

She read on Qyburn’s face her same surprise, as conflicting conjectures swarmed loudly into her mind, each one more preposterous than the last.

Would Sansa truly attempt to murder her bastard brother in their own home, in front of all his men?

Was it Littlefinger?

He would definitely have means, motive and opportunity, but would he gamble his position by acting alone, without Sansa’s leave? Perhaps he believed that if Sansa became queen in the North, he would be granted a place next to her, and into her bed… But he wouldn’t be so sloppy. If he had been behind it, Jon Snow would certainly be dead, right now.

Mayhaps… mayhaps someone else was to thank for this unexpected service… Tyrion? He had been secretly lusting after the North for ages… perhaps the whore from Essos instructed him to take out the competition in exchange for it, but, as much as Cersei hated him, even she had to admit that the solution lacked in finesse and it wasn’t really his style. Tyrion was not a catspaw. He had no personal reason, no real grudge against the lad.

No. The Imp was smarter than that: he would seek to strike an alliance through words and diplomacy, not blood. And he wouldn’t risk doing a favour to her, even inadvertently…

*Perhaps, Cersei mused, we have more friends in the North than we previously thought.*

The idea sparked a thrilling euphoria into her senses, a victorious tingle which spread right down to her bones; a knowing glance between the two of them was all it took for Qyburn to spring into action and take paper and quill; new orders for her spies in Torrhen’s Square and White Harbour would leave the Red Keep before the hour of the nightingale had come and gone.

There was only one last issue to handle.

“Have you talked with my brother Jaime? Did you explain to him the situation?”

“Yes, Your Grace. The edict you issued was read in front of the Lord Commander and his generals.”

“I don’t see them with you,” she shrugged, a low menace hiding in her voice behind the apparent calm. “Does that mean they refuse to abide by my biddings?”

Ser Raynard shifted awkwardly on his feet. Cersei took a step closer, and despite her shorter height,
the Spicer knight seemed to shrink and cower before her.

“Did you deliver the other message, as well?” she pressed on. “Right into his undeserving hand?”

He nodded.

“Well?” Cersei snapped at last, heat rising upon her cheeks. “No answer at all?”

The bob of his throat wavered up and down, but no word came out. He couldn’t even meet her eyes.

The shock must have read plainly upon her face, for the messenger was now bending the knee, spluttering a confused apology.

Cersei disregarded him.

What had started like a silly lover’s quarrel, like the ones she and Jaime had a million time over and that always got smothered away with heated kisses and arousing whispers in the dark, had changed into something quite different.

Her own brother, her dearest, was openly ignoring a direct order.

She could’ve forgiven everything: running away, stealing her army, asking sanctuary to her sworn enemies, pledging himself to the same boy he had tried to kill for her, seeking a gloriously stupid death on a battlefield far from home, fighting wrong-handed against wind and snow and fanciful threats…

She understood his anger. She really did.

After all, with one hand she had stripped him of his precious knighthood – that had been unpleasant, true, but necessary, to teach him a lesson – but the other hand, the other hand was open and outstretched and beckoning him into a caress… waiting for him to be in her arms again. To claim her as his! Come back to me! I love you, I love you, I love you!

Do not make idle threats. That was the first lesson they had learned from their Lord Father, as they walked together through the ruins of Castamere. Never let them see you as weak.

But Jaime knew her, better than anyone. He must have seen through her ruse.

She had humiliated herself, swallowed her dignity, begged him to come home.

A Queen, a Lannister, wasn’t supposed to beg.

Why was he forcing her hand, now? Didn’t he understand that he left her no choice but to act on those threats? And for what? His hurt pride? His damaged bloody honour?

Jaime had stayed at her side through storms way worse than this. Their father’s murder, the deaths of their children. The war which had spawned from their love.

Them, against the whole world.

That’s how it’s always been, for all our life.

Fuck prophecy. Fuck fate. Fuck everyone who isn’t us. He couldn’t have forgotten…

But clearer than Jaime’s words, Olenna’s sneers taunted her even from beyond the grave.
You’re alone, Cersei!

Angry, unbidden tears prickled under her shut eyelids.

No. She refused to believe that Jaime, her twin, the other half of herself, had simply set her aside.

We’ll rule together.

She made that promise with every intention to keep it. She as Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, and him as her consort and Commander of their whole army, and acknowledged father of the children she still could bear him. *Fuck prophecy*. What more could he possibly want?

Unless.

Unless.

But, no. That was so far-fetched she felt a laughter bubbling inside her chest.

He wouldn’t *dare*…

The hideous scar Aegon’s chair had left on her right palm stung unpleasantly. She scraped her nails over it. Scratched and clawed, until the skin became red and raw and burning and her fingertips got smeared with fresh, purple stains.

Her hands twitched and closed in a vice over her belly. The words grated painfully on her throat when she forced them out through gritted teeth.

“Was there perchance a woman following him around like a lost, lovesick puppy?” A scoff. “Woman might be somewhat a pretty generous term. She’s tall, and ugly, and has striking blue eyes. Wears only armours. Fancies herself a knight…”

“The Lady Brienne was there, aye,” Ser Raynard cautiously answered from his lowered position.

Her stomach clenched as bile surged bitter on her tongue. “And? Did you see him? With her?”

His eyes shifted nervously from her to Qyburn behind her shoulders, as if calling for assistance, and back to her again.

“I saw them… sparring together.”

“Sparring,” Cersei spat, disdainful. *This must be a joke*. Sparring. She could almost see them, him with his ridiculous stump and that… *thing* in steel and leather grunting with each thrust like the sow that she was…

A grotesque mummer’s farce.

“Yes, Your Grace… they…”

The knight hesitated again and she was at the end of her patience.

“Answer me before I have Ser Gregor rip off your tongue!”

Her dark shadow took a step ahead, his gloved hand hovering on the dagger he wore on his right hip, and that loosened the messenger’s tongue.

“They seemed to be enjoying each other’s company. Quite a lot.”
The implications written in the Spicer soldier’s pale eyes were obvious enough, and completely intolerable. That huge, shambling creature, who swapped her allegiances faster than a camp follower trading her cunt for money, first from Renly Baratheon to Catelyn Stark, then to her brother, then back to the Starks again, that cow was warming Jaime’s bed?

_I don’t serve your brother, Your Grace._

_But you love him._

Her vision became blurred at the edges, and she leaned both her hands over the council table to steady herself.

None of it made sense.

“Perhaps we should send a delegation of a different kind in Winterfell, Your Grace,” Qyburn, solicitous as ever, offered. “To… _steer_ your brother in the right direction?”

“They’re not in Winterfell anymore!” Ser Raynard interjected. “The Lord Commander left with the Stark bastard right after the attempted poisoning, and lady Brienne was with them.”

“Left? To go where?”

“I can’t say for certain, my lord. But travellers near the Kingsroad saw a small party without banners nor coat-of-arms riding toward Moat Cailin.”

“He’s heading south.”

Fighting the sudden nauseous dizziness, Cersei straightened up and fixed her eyes on the streaky rivulets of water running down the window and pooling on the sill, looking without seeing.

Her head throbbed with rage.

Jaime was out there.

Qyburn was talking again, enquiring about the whereabouts of her army… she barely registered it, above the ringing in her ears, but couldn’t concentrate on the meaning of the words….

Something about the Wall and the Night’s Watch… and trouble on the borders…

“Wildlings?” Qyburn was asking.

“Something else, my lord. Something worse. In Winterfell, they speak of little else, and even Lord Tyrion –

“That’s enough, Ser Raynard!” she interrupted. “I have no interest in hearing what other tales is spinning my dwarf traitor of a brother. You’ll be rewarded for your service. Tell Ser Boros I have need of him, on your way out.”

Sensing the dismissal, the soldier gave a sharp nod and withdrew.

Some of the wine splashed over the table, when she refilled her cup. Her hand was shaking. She felt Qyburn’s eyes watching her every move like a bird of prey. It didn’t matter. Her only thought was that Jaime would be soon crossing the Neck, and once he’d do that, he’ll be in her reach.

Him and his whore from Tarth.
The back door opened again and the scowling snout and ale-swollen belly of Boros Blount stepped into the fireplace’s light. His bald head and white armour glittered with raindrops as he bowed.

“Fetch me the Brave Companions,” she ordered without preamble, and Blount disappeared through the door that connected the council room with the lower floors just as hastily as he had turned up.

Cersei sat at the head of the table, the place whence she had seen her father carry out the king’s orders and plan their enemies’ demise hundreds of times, and an odd sense of accomplishment washed over her. The wine tasted like victory, now.

“What’s on Your Majesty’s mind?” asked Qyburn.

A satisfied smirk curled her lips. She took quill and parchment.

“If they’re coming south, I’ll make sure they will be received with full honours.”

But she had not yet started writing out her orders that from the Great Hall came an indistinct racket of laughter, yowls and shouts.

One Gold Cloak burst into the room and breathlessly said: “Your Grace... apologies... the Ironborn...”

She was already on her feet. At the bottom of the throne dais, Crow’s Eye and a bunch of his men were hooting and jeering at a pile of raggy clothes.

“What is the meaning of this?” she bellowed.

Euron twirled around with the same attitude of a naughty child caught pulling a prank on one of his house maesters. He tugged at his eye-patch and schooled his face into the soberest and most charming expression he could muster, while he bowed theatrically.

“My most gracious queen!”

Behind him, his men fell back into a disorderly line snickering and pointing mutely at the shapeless mass writhing at their feet; a wheezy groan came out from under the mucky, brown cloak. A young man, as hefty as a Pentoshi silk merchant, his face red and puffy under his beard, struggled to rise, slipped on the wet floor and fell heavily again.

Hissing tittering and jeers echoed once more in the Great Hall.

Greyjoy jolted up the rusted chain that fettered the man at wrist and ankle and pushed him forward. She recoiled, wrinkling her nose, as a whiff of stench reached her.

“I’ve caught this squealing pig while he was trying to book passage for Dragonstone. The lackwit threw himself into the canal when he saw us coming. Nearly drowned under the weight of all this!” Euron enthusiastically grabbed the captive’s lower abdomen, where the fat tumbled over in undulating ripples. “We had to fish him out!” he concluded with a sly grin.

That explained the smell.

“You and your crew of drunken mutes come into my throne room, dirty, soaking wet, and reeking as foul as sewer sludge only so that I can meet the last smuggler you’ve managed to capture on my river banks? Hang him with the rest!” Cersei said, marching back into the council room. She had no time for petty quarrels.
“Aren’t you even a little bit interested in what he was bringing with him?” Euron called from behind her back.

She halted and gave herself a moment of pause to indulge in her annoyance while her back was turned: his smugness galled her to no end, like a fly she couldn’t swat, but stronger than that was irritation toward her own self. Because, no matter how hard she tried to shake it off, there was always something about him, about his voice, his whole demeanour, that always succeeded in getting under her skin. He was an itch she couldn’t scratch.

Mouth set into a scowl and stiff shoulders, she faced him again.

He was presenting her with a greatsword.

On close inspection, the crossguard was beautifully carved with a bow-and-arrow motif, while the pommel resembled an arrow fletching. The blade rippled with a very distinctive orange gleam. *Valyrian steel,* she realised. Qyburn approached as well, touching the hilt somewhat reverentially.

“I recognise this design,” her Hand declared. “This sword belongs to House Tarly.”

“What’s your name, my young friend?” she asked the prisoner, her curiosity piqued.

The lad straightened his back with a heavy puff and stared at her, defiant and silent. A nod from the blue-eyed pirate and one of his squids rammed the knob of his two-edged axe into the prisoner’s gut. The man bent on his knees, his face twisting in pain only for a moment, before he pulled himself up again, as though nothing happened, and Cersei got the feeling it mustn’t have been the first time he had taken a beating.

“Sam… well… Tarly…” he wheezed.

Qyburn’s eyes shot up from the Valyrian heirloom to the man, his brows darting up to his receding hairline in surprise: “You’re Randyll Tarly’s eldest son?”

His silence was confirmation enough, and Euron’s enigmatic quirk of the lips told her he already knew the value of his hostage when he and his men fished him out of the bay.

“These rabid dogs are crammed all the way down the Mander, as we speak. Leo Tyrell is moving his troops east, to the Crownlands borders, and I’ve been told that your father is with them… Perhaps we should send him a gift.”

Her threat was unexpectedly met with a coarse laughter, thick with loathing.

“Good luck with that! My father hates me. Packed me off to the Night’s Watch seven years ago, in the hopes I would be killed. By cold, enemies or even my own brothers, it made no difference to him. But in that too I fell short of his expectations. Were you to cut my head off now with his own sword, the sword I’ve stolen from him, you’d be probably doing him a favour!”

His blue eye glittering with amusement, Euron chuckled. “I like the boy! Some backbone you have underneath all this flabby flesh!” He stuck his forefinger into the man’s rotund belly, as if to prove his point.

“We shall send your head to the Bastard of Winterfell, then,” Cersei changed tactics. “After all, he was your Lord Commander, before he deserted and betrayed the realm and the Crown.”

Tarly’s chubby face burned crimson with fury.
“Jon Snow is not a traitor to the realm! You are!”

The Mountain’s mailed fist rose and fell so fast that his hands, burdened by the shackles, didn’t manage to shield his face in time, before it collided with the Hall’s cold marble stones. His upper lip was broken and bleeding profusely on the floor, but his brown eyes lingered on her, undefeated, blazing with such hostility that for a moment Cersei reeled in bewilderment.

Hatred, she could bear. She had even learned to thrive in it – her enemies’ bitterness was her power, her strength. But this, she realised, went beyond it. He was physically revolted by her presence. A look of pure, unadulterated repugnance, as though she was the abomination smelling like shit.

Her nails bit into her palms.

The mob of King’s Landing had mocked and jeered and shouted and leered at her, too, as she paraded her sins and shame across the city’s streets, but she had never felt so degraded and filthy and ugly and exposed, not even when they were flinging horse’s piss, rotten eggs and cat’s entrails at her shorn and stripped body, as she did now, under this fat hog’s accusing glare.

I don’t have to tolerate the insult. A signal from her and Ser Gregor was ready to strike.

“Wait!” Qyburn halted his creature’s hand. Only then, Cersei noticed that the elderly man was crouching on the ground, sifting through a worn canvas sack. He produced from it a few half-burned books and scrolls, damp for the rain, and a small steel box, the lid finely decorated with runes and spiral symbols and covered with gems and precious stones worthy alone of a small ransom. Samwell Tarly shuffled to his feet and extended his hands as far as the chains allowed, struggling to reach his belongings. He wasn’t the only one. She saw Euron’s crew appraising the encased jewels with covetous looks and even Euron himself… his sky-blue eye glittered strangely as it set on the box. Then, without warning, he grabbed Tarly by the front of his robes and pulled him up.

“Where’s the key to it?” he growled.

Tiny droplets of sweat ran down his forehead, but the man set his mouth in a grim line and stared impassively back.

“Fine! Have it your way. Bring the girl in!” Crow’s Eye shouted to the guards, and a few instants later from the main door entered a girl dressed in man’s garbs, clutching to her breast a wailing child not older than three. Upon seeing her, Tarly’s eyes suddenly lost all the arrogance from before and melted into a pained, aghast expression.

The two knew one another, that much was a given, and he clearly hadn’t anticipated to meet her here.

“SAM, SAM!” screamed the girl. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” She tried to run to him, but the tussle with the two Ironborns who were dragging her by force in front of Cersei was pointless and short-lived. It only led to the child bawling harder.

“We found her this morning at an inn near Hayford Castle,” Crow’s Eye explained. “The innkeeper told us she was looking for some stout fellow, a maester, who might have stopped there on his way to Dragonstone. Finding him afterwards was a bit of a stroke of good fortune, actually. Feisty, this one is. Stabbed to death one of my men before we could tame her.” He grasped her chin and forced her to gaze up.
“Don’t touch her!” Tarly squawked; his fear only fuelled the Ironborns’ enjoyment.

With a soft chuckle, Euron wrapped a finger around a lock of her tousled dark-brown hair: “I do quite enjoy a woman who puts up a fight,” and yanked her head back.

The girl spat in his face.

Unconcerned, Euron wrested the toddler out of her arms, pushed her aside and, paying no heed to her screeches, strode to one of the great windows.

Cersei understood what he wanted to do a fraction of second before he threw it open and hung the child by the heel, dangling him in the void.

A drop of forty feet, right into the rugged cliffs of the bay.

Her heartbeat stopped.

Visions of Tommen, his beautiful face completely disfigured and mashed in, of Bran Stark’s broken body, crammed up behind her eyelids, as her ears filled with the screams of terror of both the mother and the man in chains, and the child’s high wails, and her own scared whisper, from a lifetime ago… He saw us… He saw us!…

She realised she had moved only when her own hand was already gripping Euron’s forearm.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Her voice trembled.

“I’m winning you this war.”

There was such a savage violence in his gaze and in the tone of his voice that she released his arm at once and swayed back, appalled.

“Where is the fuckin’ key?” he barked out to the Tarly lad, brutishly waggling the baby as though he were a puppet.

“The chain! It’s in the chain!” Tarly pointed desperately at the neglected bag. “The links! The Valyrian one! Please! Please, don’t hurt him.”

Euron stepped out from the window and, after carelessly discarding the toddler in the mother’s lap like a worn sack of rye, pulled out what Cersei believed was a Maester’s chain. She didn’t understand why this key and the box it apparently opened were of such import, but watched as Crow’s Eye gave the Valyrian link a strong twist and pull, until the steel yielded and into his hand tumbled a small warded key.

He chuckled. “Clever.” Then added to her: “Do feed them all to the dogs, now, for all I care.”

“Your Grace, may I suggest a different approach?” said Qyburn. He had picked up the forged links and was now thoroughly studying them. “These are the chains of a maester of the Citadel,” he stated, then asked to the young Tarly. “Have you stolen these as well?”

The lad shook his head.

“The shorter one is mine. The other is Archmaester Marwyn’s. He died during the siege.”

Qyburn’s face fell, a shadow veiling his eyes.

“I’m truly sorry to hear that. Marwyn was the wisest and cleverest amongst the Maesters.” His
grief sounded true enough in his voice, but Tarly’s stare, if possible, hardened even more. The old Hand addressed her instead.

“After the fire destroyed the Citadel it has become increasingly difficult to find skilled maesters. Even good acolytes, smart pupils with a genuine wish to serve and learn, are in short supply, now. For what I see, young Samwell here has already forged five links of his chain… granted, they’re not made from the most precious metals, but if he’s been under Marwyn’s tutelage, I have no doubts he’d be competent enough to assist me in my work. I could use another set of hands and eyes. This would make the tests run faster and smoother.”

“I will never work for you!” Tarly rebelled at once. “I’d rather die!”

That could be easily arranged, Cersei pondered, but maybe there was some more efficient way for her to make the best of this situation.

She contemplated the mother and her child.

He was a charming little boy, with florid, chubby cheeks, hair as blond as wheat in spring and startlingly blue eyes made even brighter by the tears still trapped in his lashes.

“Such a sweet darling,” she said, approaching with poise. “What’s his name?”

The girl pressed him tighter against herself, a hand raised to shield the crown of his head. She looked scared out of her wits.

“My dear, you mustn’t be afraid. I am a mother, too. What’s his name?” Cersei asked again, mellow.

“Sam.”

“Oh.” She cocked her head to the Tarly lad. “You must be very proud.”

The child didn’t exactly look like him, but, then, who was she to judge?

Despite the girl’s fearful pleas, she scooped the baby up, cooing soothing words into his ears and gently bouncing him up and down on her hip as he started to whine and squirm, his little hands outstretched behind her shoulders to the calls of ‘Mama! Mama!’.

To distract him, Cersei pointed ahead, to the barbed monstrosity of twisted swords up the dais. “Do you see it? That’s the Iron Throne. You want to have a closer look?”

So she ascended the stairs and seated herself down, cradling him into her lap, smoothing the soft hair upon his forehead, and started telling him the story with the same almost-forgotten tone her own mother used, Cersei realised, when she whispered tales of maidens and heroes upon her and Jaime’s drowsy eyes.

“Forged from the flames of Balerion the Black Dread, the greatest of dragons, many, many years ago. Only the true ruler of the Seven Kingdoms can sit here: death awaits anyone who seeks to seize it without having a rightful claim. Ever since Aegon the First, men have attempted to conquer it. Generation after generation. They raged endless wars against each other, killing and maiming, and dragons soared up in the skies, painting the heart below coal-black and burning red. Despite this, in the end, it was love that brought the kingdom down. A witless prince, who believed he could get anything he wanted without paying the price. But there’s always a price to pay in the game of thrones.”
Little Sam turned his head up to look at her, his fingers trying to reach the chains of her lion-shaped pauldrons, and eyes so trustful and curious she had to smile, for she was suddenly reminded of Tommen; her cub was plump as well, when he was that age. But his eyes were green like wildfire. Jaime’s eyes.

“You want to know something funny? Aegon was born a second son. As the eldest, his sister, Visenya, should’ve become queen in his stead. She was a dragonrider of formidable beauty and her name was only whispered in fear by her enemies, when she descended upon them on Vhagar, bringing death and fire. Her prowess on the battlefield was legendary and her ambition and cunning were second to none, yet, all that Visenya could ever aspire to become was a wife to a king, because, you see, she had been born a woman. Hence, Aegon ruled, and she bore him an heir. But history can change. And now, after more than three hundred years, a woman sits alone on the Iron Throne… And her legacy shall be carried on for centuries to come.”

It all came down to this. A Lioness taming the throne that had belonged to the dragons. How many had tried to hamper the course of destiny?


Nightmares of that dreadful night where the shrieks of agony of the dying swathed in swirling emerald flames had pierced the thick air, in counterpoint with the rhythmic blows shaking the very foundations of the Red Keep’s stone walls still visited, unbidden, Cersei’s dreams. She had sat on the Iron Throne, with Tommen shivering in her lap, his clammy hands in hers, as they waited and listened to the terrifying sounds of the siege.

*I was ready to kill my own cub, rather than watch him fall into enemy’s hands.*

She stared at the girl hunkered down on her hands and knees at the bottom of the dais, tears streaking her cheeks. Her helplessness made Cersei’s stomach churn.

*Any mother should find the courage to do the same.*

“What’s your name, sweetling?”


“Here’s what’s going to happen, Gilly. From now on, you and your adorable boy shall live at court, as honoured guests. You’ll have all the comforts befitting the heir of a great House of the Reach and his family. Nice, warm apartments within the Red Keep, three meals per day, and an armed escort. Your son will be free to roam and explore at will, while you will be serving me.”

Gilly gaped at her like a dullard, blinking back and forth in confusion from her to Qyburn.

“Your Grace, I beg of you… I ain’t know nothing ‘bout waiting on a lady. And a Queen, at that.”

The Queen, Cersei mentally chided her. She hid her scowl behind a syrupy smile.

“You’ll learn, I’m sure. You strike me as a very resourceful, clever young woman. We need to be, do we, if we want to survive. In the meantime, our Samwell here will work with Lord Qyburn on his little project, and he will perform his duty deftly and without complaint.”

The fierce look she aimed at young Tarly, green and golden daggers as sharp as glass shards, brooked no further argument.
The man’s double chin wobbled in silent desperation, his big, lost eyes darting to the other men assembled in the room. His face turned the colour of sour milk when he realised that he was trapped and help wasn’t coming, especially not from this band of lewd scums and insolent knaves who were feeding off his fears just as much as her.

“Life at court can be tedious, sometimes,” she went on, “but I’m confident you will adapt just fine, soon enough. And it will be wonderful to hear the sound of a child’s laughter filling these empty halls once again.”

Without waiting for a reply, she thrust the child into Qyburn’s waiting arms and stood up.

“See to it that they are comfortably settled. One of the chambers in the west wing will do for now. Food, fresh clothes, a hot bath. Anything the lady needs for the care of her son.”

“It shall be done, my queen,” said Qyburn with a small bow. As he vanished behind the door that led to the kitchens with the toddler and his two newly-acquired guests, the mute Ironborns flanking them like a muddy mockery of a guard of honour, Euron followed her back to the council room.

“That was a truly remarkable show of power.” He set down on the table the small carved box which still seemed to keep his interest, and pranced about the place jiggling the key in the palm of his hand, not a worry in his little world.

Tension coiled down her spine.

She couldn’t tell if he was talking about her, and the way she had dealt with the unexpected turn of events, or if he was, in truth, congratulating himself. His starkly brutal act in the throne room had made her blood run cold and had stirred something primeval inside her, in equal measure, and Cersei didn’t know what to make of that.

She studied him somewhat skittishly as he poured himself some of the Arbor Red he had brought back from the cellars of Highgarden, gulped it down in one take and refilled the cup at once, without pleasantries whatsoever.

“Why are you still here?” she asked, at last, her disquiet seeping into her voice. “Your terrible stench poisons my air.”

Euron glared at her over the brim of the cup, an amused grin at her slight discomfort playing over his cruel mouth.

“I’m sorry if I offend your… royal nostrils,” he sneered. “You must needs suffer me for a while longer, I’m afraid: there’s a question of the utmost import we shall discuss, while we’re alone, and undisturbed.”

This last word sounded so sinful to Cersei’s ears that she suddenly felt flushed despite the cold weather and the storm still raging outside, unabated.

Euron stalked her with deliberate laziness, taking his time to rake his eyes all over her, brazen and greedy.

“Why do you think I ransacked Oldtown and burned it to the ground?”

She locked eyes with him.

*He truly has an astonishing blue eye.*
“Because you find pleasure in plundering, raping and laying waste... and you wanted to have something to impress me with?”

Euron took another cup and offered it to her, his smiling eye twinkling with appreciation. “That, too.”

He *does want me*, Cersei realised as an unexpected jolt of liquid desire pooled low in her belly. She wetted her lips, the smooth, full-bodied aftertaste of the wine exploding exuberantly in her mouth.

“But the real reason is right here.” He tipped his head toward the box on the table and started pacing around it, as though his energy and anticipation could be barely contained, and Cersei found herself unwittingly admiring the straight line of his back, the way his jerkin strained against his broad shoulders, the firmness of his buttocks and the muscled calves wrapped in his knee-high soiled black boots.

“I’ve been looking for it everywhere. I’ve sailed further than any other freighter and merchant ship, farther beyond any land ever reached by conquerors and explorers alike. The Doom of Valyria, Qarth, Asshai and its shadows, the impenetrable white forests of Ulthos and the lands east of Carcosa which don’t even have a name yet. Since news of the hatching of three dragon’s eggs in the Dothraki Sea reached the Silence, I’ve lost my peace... I’ve journeyed to the end of the world and back... I’ve lived, and maimed and reaved but with one. Single. Thought. Then, in Leng Yi, there was this warlock... funny fellow, who claimed to have visions of the past and the future... we had a small disagreement over my cock...”

She raised a sardonic eyebrow.

“He wanted to cut it off and eat it,” Crow’s Eye elaborated. “I declined his suggestion and introduced him to the Drowned God, instead. He cried and begged and tried to bribe my oarsmen, and then he started to tell a very curious tale... he said that he knew what I was looking for, and that I would find it stashed away under a white ivory tower standing tall and strong as a beacon for the human race... So, naturally, I went to Oldtown, burned down the bloody tower... but there was nothing under it. Perhaps old Hightower had managed to carry it away with him... perhaps the warlock had lied... I’ve almost lost hope, to be honest.” He set his hands on both sides of the Valyrian box and inspected it as though it were some rare artefact, then put the key in the lock and turned it. “Until tonight.”

Excitement poured out of him in hot waves and infected her as well. Cersei craned her neck to see what was inside, but her curiosity soon got disappointed.

It was a black horn, worn and dusty, which, except for a thin silvery band spiralling around it for all its length like a serpent’s coils, didn’t look much different from the hundreds of horns she had seen Robert use both in war or during his hunting trips.

A discontented huff escaped through her nose.

“A hunting horn? That’s all?”

Euron glared at her as though he wanted to slap some sense into her.

“*This* is the single most valuable weapon you could ever wish to have in a battle against dragons. Armies of indestructible soldiers, caches of wildfire to fill a whole city, gold and gems to buy your enemies’ secrets and the silence of your allies... nothing can compare to that!”

He impatiently forged ahead with a determined stride, and halted mere inches from her nose, his
precious horn held high between them. From up-close, his face bore all the signs of long years spent battling the sea: his skin was burned and dry and peppered with shiny scars, but his parted lips were full and ripe, and hinting at a fount of secret delights.

“You see these glyphs over here?” He pointed a callous finger over the bands.

“You, madman! They’re just scratches in the metal! They mean nothing!”

He roughly seized her right hand, pressed down a dirty thumb on the barely healed cut, and squeezed hard until vivid crimson blood seeped through the space between the small stitches Qyburn had carefully sewn. Cersei yelped in pain, suddenly frightened. Her free hand cracked viciously across his face. A red welt blossomed on his cheek, but the vile ironborn kept smiling unperturbed, his grip only hardening. She was about to cry for help - Ser Gregor was right on the other side of the door - when Euron turned her hurt palm upside down and let a few drops of blood fall over the horn.

“Watch!”

And Cersei did.

Under her very eyes, the glyphs glowed and twisted, changing their appearance and becoming readable.

“It’s Valyrian!”

“Can you translate it?”

Her Valyrian was rusty, at best, but she still remembered the gist of it.

“It says: ‘Blood for fire, fire for blood’.” Her wide eyes shot up to his, realisation dawning in her mind and rendering her speechless.

“This is a dragonbinder!” she breathed out, astonished.

His grin stretched wide and victorious across his wicked face.

She brushed a hand across the engraved golden letters. The metal was slightly warm under her touch, but that might have been a trickery of the mind.

“That’s... impossible. Dragonbinders... they’re a myth!”

“Are they?” he goaded her, his Northern lilt caressing each syllable.

Another voice, similarly teasing, emerged from the depths of her childhood’s memories... a doting voice that loved to speak about Old Valyria and all those legendary relics... swords, hellhorns, dragon eggs turned to stone...

*The hills that split asunder,*
*And the black that ate the skies,*
*The flames that shot so high and hot,*
*That even dragons burned...*

She could still hear Gerion Lannister’s deep, solemn tone as he recited those woeful verses again and again...

Uncle Gerion, handsome like the Warrior and flippant and reckless like the filthiest of the pirates...
always with a quick joke or a wondrous tale upon his lips.

He often spoke about how the dragonlords would use magical horns and blood sorcery to hold their beasts’ obedience...

*The air sizzled and thrummed, searing hot, when the horn’s screams were unleashed, and no dragon could ever resist its call...* Cersei reminisced... Gerion liked calling her ‘his little Light of the West’, and she was half-enamoured of him back then, dreaming a million of times of setting sail with his crew across the Sunset Sea, unbeknownst to her lord father... she would cut her luxuriant golden curls and sneak aboard the Laughing Lion disguised as a ship’s boy, to a life of adventures in exotic lands with fragrant, dangerous names... but when he left to his quest for real, she couldn’t have followed, not even if she had wished it: the little Light of the West had become queen, in the meantime, and had grown sluggish and stout under the weight of her last pregnancy...

The mists of the Smoking Sea had choked Gerion’s laughter forever, and, with it, his dreams of glory...

Was it possible now that this wolf of the sea had succeeded where her dear uncle, a Lion of the Rock, had failed?

Perhaps, she mulled over, they were not so different.

Euron mocked like Gerion; he even moved and laughed like him, but with a sharp edge, a ruthlessness she had come to associate with Tywin, rather than his youngest brother.

His hand was still wrapped securely around her wrist, but Cersei didn’t feel the need to tear her eyes from him either. He glided closer still, the distance between them so scant now that even the foul stench of the city that had permeated his clothes before gave in to the scent of cloves and wine on his mouth, the strong smell of salt and wind and male sweat upon his skin.

“You want to try and capture a dragon alive?” she whispered, utterly entranced.

Euron shook his head, the sapphires on his eye completely devoured by a black, uncurbed hunger.

“All three of them.” His hips canted against hers, steering her backwards, almost like a dance, until she found herself pinned against the edge of the hard, wooden table, clinging to him. Her head thundered with the roar of her own hastening breaths.

His voice.

His voice was everywhere.

“I will bind them to my will, and then Targaryens, Starks, Martells, Tyrells will be but a faint memory, smelling of burning ashes.”

She grabbed his head and crushed her lips on his.

Scraping, licking, sucking, biting until she tasted blood, swallowing his low groans. Whimpering and writhing, frenzied, as she felt his hands tearing in one fluid motion at her undergarments, working their way up, up to her open tights. Demanding, rough, intoxicating...

A gentle cough behind her made her freeze.

“Beg you pardon... Your Grace...” the stupid voice of Boros Blount intruded.
They pulled apart just enough to let her catch a ragged breath. Heedless of the interruption, Euron’s fingers kept stroking her wet and needy.

“Yes?” Cersei panted out without turning.

“The Brave Companions are without,” Blount said.

She swatted his hand off, fastened the clasps and buttons that had come undone and stood up on wobbly legs, while Euron swiftly stowed his horn back into its box and left with a smouldering grin that meant the matter would be taken care of later.

Cersei tried to ignore the twitch of want in her cunt at that, and forced herself around, straightening her gowns. “What are you waiting for?” she prompted the Queensguard. “Let them in.”

The small group that gathered into the council room a few seconds later was what was left of the company sworn to Roose Bolton that had captured Jaime in the Riverlands. Their original leader, the man who had mutilated her twin, was dead, or so she had heard; the ones that now paraded in front of her were mostly Bolton deserters, who ran off south after their lord’s death or right before the Battle of the Bastards and had joined the scums and cutthroats that still ravaged the Riverlands.

Their captain bowed stiffly. He was a strapping, hairy man, who was known by the name of Steelshanks, because he always wore steel greaves over his legs. The others all had obscure names and even darker reputations: the Septon looked younger than he probably was, with a pudgy face and expressive, innocent brown eyes, but beyond his calm, childlike appearance he hid a passion for young septas with red hair. It was rumoured his mother had been one, before he gutted her alive and made a necklace with her bowels. The Piper was a trained archer who owed his name to his skills with flute and pipes and always sang sad songs as he gauged out the eyes of his foes. Togg Joth was a fierce-looking Ibbenese, with his face half eaten by warts, who made a name for himself in the dog and bear pit fighting in Flea Bottom.

The one they called Whipwreck was as tall and imposing as the Mountain. He had a greatsword strapped across his bulky back and an ugly, puckered scar that ran from his left missing ear to the other side of his neck.

The most disgusting one, though, was the Mad Dog: as big as an aurochs, bald, and maggoty, he was always smiling happily. But his teeth were yellow, and filed into sharp points.

As she sat at the head of the long table, Cersei smiled, too. They were exactly what she needed.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice, gentlemen,” she started. “I may have a job for you.”

Chapter End Notes

And here is where Cersei goes full scorned-and-vengeful-diva-on-a-mission...
The Brave Companions are a mix of both books and show. I kept the show’s general outline, with Locke being still dead, of course, but I put a couple of references to other members of the gang who appear in the books (notably, Togg Joth). And then, I needed someone to fill in the shoes of the late Biter, who found his death by the Hound’s hands back in Season 4... why did I need a replacement, you ask? I can’t tell you, yet (but the book readers can easily figure it out ...*wraps shock blanket around self*)
So, Cersei now has: a) wildfire, b) a growing army of the dead of her own, c) Euron’s ships (and, and I quote, “his big ***k”) and d) a freakin’ dragonbinder!!
Comments? Questions?

Next is Sansa and it will be a chapter where ABSOLUTELY NOTHING will happen (LOL)!
Thanks for reading!
Sansa II

Chapter Notes

The Lady of Winterfell plays the game.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

SANSA

“I WAS IN THE VANGUARD WHEN THE ARMY OF THE NORTH CHARGED AGAINST THE BOLTON USURPERS! WHERE WERE YOU, GLOVER? LOLLING HALF-DRUNK BY THE FIRE IN SOME PISSPOT WHOREHOUSE NEAR DEEPWOOD WHERE YOU WERE HIDING?”

“TAKE THAT BACK, HORNWOOD, OR YOU SHALL ANSWER FOR IT WITH YOUR BLOOD!”

It was Lord Tristan Tallhart’s fault, Sansa Stark contemplated as she sat upon the King’s seat at the top of Winterfell’s Great Hall, a headache threatening to split her skull, and watched the slightly nauseous sight in front of her with a mix of impatience and resignation.

The young lord of Torrhen’s Square had begun the uproar, when he started bellowing about turncoats and treason. Then everybody else followed suit, until the vaulted ceiling of the Hall was shaking under the deafening madness of shouts, swords and axes smashed against shields, fists pounding on the tables and shrieking insults: the Mormont and Karstark soldiers were cursing each other across the benches; Lord Roderick Dustin and his men were brandishing their weapons in the face of the Cerwyns, while they inanely argued about some disputed land on the banks of the White Knife; the Valemen were railing against the Manderlys for the new port taxes levied by White Harbor... And the voices of the Glovers and Hornwoods were the loudest of the lot.

“MY LORD! MY LORDS! WE ARE HERE TO DISCUSS THE KING'S POISONING, NOT TO FIGHT AMONG US!” Lord Mazin blustered ineffectively, raising both his hands for quiet, only for his efforts to be drowned out in the strident cacophony of exasperated yells and foul accusations.

The whole North was crammed inside and with too little space and too much ale at hand, the Hall was stinking of wet snow, soot, sweat and outrage.

It had been a sennight since Jon’s hasty departure: his attempted murder had left the North reeling, lost like a wanderer in the winter moors looking for a guiding star, and now it fell on Sansa to sew back together, by force or cunning, the frayed threads of the many, already ailing, alliances born out of necessity and convenience over the last couple of years.
So far, all her attempts had been met with a stubborn refusal to listen to any other advice but their own. Time was running short, and so was her patience.

“I will quit this gathering,” she broke in, standing, “if you don’t start behaving in a manner more befitting your names and this place! This is still my father’s Hall, or have you all forgotten? While I sit here, I won’t have any of you disrespect his memory with your trifling rows!”

They all turned their heads up to her, then: a savage beast with a hundred heads sharing only one brain, a seething mass with dirty, smudged faces, gaunt eyes, serious and angry ones, muttering curses, yelping and bellowing their dissent in fear and frustration, as their bodies pressed in, hungry and cold, protected by their boiled leather armours and an even thicker layer of mistrust.

“I won’t let you use the King’s near poisoning as a pretext for you to settle ancient grudges with one another. We are gathered here to -

“To do what, exactly, Lady Stark? To be locked all inside this castle until you have your culprit?”

“You will not interrupt while my sister is speaking, lord Tallhart,” her hand upon Needle’s pommel, Nymeria at her feet and contempt writ large on her face, Arya glowered.

Tallhart swelled up like an angry toad and took a step toward the dais.

“Apologies, my lady, but the trail has gone cold, and you still don’t have a name!”

“Lord Tristan has the right of it, Lady Sansa,” argued Wyman Manderly. With the help of two of his stewards, he shifted his enormous gout-swollen limbs around his bench and hoisted himself up, gritting his teeth for the pain. “In these last few days, we did everything you’ve asked of us. We gave you time to conduct your own investigations. It’s been a week already and your inquiries into the matter did not yield appreciable results. Lady Arya herself questioned all the guards, the servants, even the staunchest among us and found nothing of note. Our only lead, the wench who prepared the king’s waterskin that morning, has vanished into thin air!”

The crowd received the news with low murmurs of disappointment. Sansa couldn’t really blame them; in the chaos following those moments in the courtyard, the girl, Larra, went missing. Questioned about her, the other maidservants working in the kitchens told Sansa she never spoke about herself or her past, but that she was a modest woman who did what she was told without complaints; apparently, there was nothing disreputable or dishonest about her, but Sansa had learned not to let appearances fool her.

“What do you suggest, then, lord Manderly?” she addressed the stout man.

“To go home, to our wives and children, and wait for the king’s return. The days are getting shorter, and many of us are yet to finish stocking up their winter supplies!”

“Don’t fret, Wyman! Nobody will touch your lampreys while you’re gone!” young Roderick Dustin called from his table. Tense laughter rippled through the hall.

“Aye, mock me all you want. But there’s no point in dwelling here any longer. We might never know who tried to murder the king! The one thing we do know is that poison is a woman’s weapon!”

_Not always,_ Sansa thought.

She briefly intercepted Littlefinger’s smirking eyes. Lord Baelish had retreated into one of the room’s darkest corners almost as soon as the meeting started: hands folded upon his belt, he
carefully listened to everyone’s remonstrance and spoke to none, only sending her meaningful looks every now and then when something amused him or caught his attention, but Sansa knew him: while he quietly observed from the sidelines, he was fighting a whole battle into his mind, where everyone was a pawn. Even her.

To his right, Ser Edwyn Karstark, Alyss’ cousin and trusted advisor, sat with his arms crossed against his chest. “Seems to me, Lord Manderly, that you’re in quite a rush to be back at the Harbor,” he said morosely.

“I won’t have a bloody traitor cast doubts upon my honour!” Lord Manderly sputtered, his face beet-red with fury under the white of his whiskers. His shaking hands fumbled with his sword while he wrestled with the guards who were holding him back, squirming comically like one of those squishy eels his home-town was justly famous for.

“Hold your temper, Lord Wyman. Let us hear what Ser Edwyn has to say for himself.”

The Karstark Commander strode alone at the centre of the hall with the confidence of the seasoned warrior; the son of the youngest brother of the late Rickard Karstark, he was a rather handsome man in his fifties, with the bulky build and the strong aquiline nose common to all the males of his line. He wasn’t loved, and didn’t even try to show himself in a more favourable light: his alliance with the Boltons in the Battle of the Bastards had driven a wedge between him and the other lords, but his men were wholly devoted to his command, and he was shrewd enough to know how to put his influence to good use in the power struggle that plagued the North.

When Sansa requested he’d tarry in Winterfell after Jon took to the road, he graciously agreed and offered her both his counsel and sword to catch the responsible who attempted on the King’s life, on the condition that Lady Alys would be allowed to return to Karhold with the rest of her court.

Sansa had consented to the terms, but had sent Tormund with her.

She did not trust anyone, and the Karstarks even less; as she watched him come forward flanked by his trusted guards Sansa had never been more aware of how dangerous he could be.

Ser Edwyn bowed first to her, then to the still seething Wyman Manderly.

“Lady Stark, I apologize to Lord Manderly for my bluntness. I am a soldier and sometimes my courtesies are lacking. I simply meant to say that I don’t believe the culprit has escaped. If anything, he or she could still be here, hiding in plain sight.”

“Do you have proofs supporting your allegations?” she asked.

The man rubbed his left cheek, where a set of barely healed scratches was still visible under his grizzled side-whiskers. The gift of a too much ardent lover, he had explained when Arya had questioned him, although to Sansa they looked more like a grisly token of some remarkably huge and vicious cat.

“I have none to give,” he admitted. “But if I were you, I’d watch out for the people closest to you, the ones who are trying to undermine your authority from within by telling you what to do. Wolves in sheep’s clothing.”

“You’ve given this matter a lot of thought, Ser Edwyn,” rasped maliciously Robett Glover from his bench.

Karstark’s usual composure didn’t falter. He gave the Lord of Deepwood Motte a cool, contemptuous look.
“Leave your accusations to someone who really cares, Glover. Lady Alys is soon to be Queen. What reason would she have to try and murder the very man who’s supposed to put a crown upon her head? If it’s motive you’re looking for, half the people gathered here have more reasons to kill the king than the Karstarks do!”

Everybody began to shout at once again.

She sought her sister’s eyes and imperceptibly shook her head when she noticed Arya’s left hand closing around her sword’s hilt; it wouldn’t do to add her sister’s wrath to theirs.

“This is utterly unacceptable!” bellowed Denys Hornwood. “We won’t sit in this assembly while the Karstarks insult us!”

He and his men stood up and tramped to the Hall’s entrance. The Dustins were about to do the same, when Littlefinger came swiftly between them and the massive wood-and-iron double doors.

“My lords! I strongly advise you to rethink your positions.”

“Move aside, lord Baelish, this matter doesn’t concern you.”

Littlefinger cracked a half-smirk.

“Everything concerns me. You won’t be making a strong point by leaving. You’d only be insulting lady Stark, and she doesn’t deserve it. How many of you still have their heads upon your shoulders by the King’s grace?” he lectured the crowd, enjoying himself tremendously. “Ser Edwyn, you for one. This is how you’d repay him? Stirring doubts among ourselves is a dangerous, fruitless distraction. Call me foolish and deluded, but I refuse to believe that after what the North has endured there might be still traitors among us!”

The whole gathering looked chastised, but Sansa tensed, alert: Littlefinger thrived in chaos; he would never put himself on the front line, would never advocate another cause but his own, unless he was sure he could gain something in return. Why was he so accommodating, now?

“Lord Baelish may be right,” Lord Glover recognised. “We all know who the real enemy is! The same one we have fought against for years!”

Littlefinger frowned in a pretence of perplexity: “Cersei Lannister is a thousand leagues away, my lord. Are you suggesting that a catspaw might have attempted to murder the king on her orders?”

Sansa realised a second too late where the conversation was going; but before she could intervene, Wyman Manderly fell right into the trap.

“If not her, perhaps another lion. A smaller one.”

Sudden angry mutterings rustled through the crowd.

“Maester Wolkan said the same poison found in the king’s waterskin was also used to kill Joffrey the Illborn. Tyrion Lannister was tried and condemned for that murder!”

“Tyrion Lannister didn’t murder Joffrey,” she retorted hotly. “Not more than I did. Are you going to accuse me of my own brother’s attempted poisoning as well?”

“Of course not, but -

“Then what is your point, Lord Manderly?”
“My point is, Lady Stark, that you have opened your doors to murderers, monsters and oathbreakers. Is it really that surprising that one of them might have tried to assassinate the King?”

Fists bumped in approval against the wooden tables.

Just like this, the tide had turned.

Littlefinger had the whole assembly by its throat, and they didn’t even realise it. All it took was a little push in the right direction. Now, every clue magically seemed to nail Tyrion Lannister to the crime. And him being her husband was nothing less than an aggravating circumstance.

Littlefinger approached her at the feet of the dais, a grin stretching upon thin lips, and whispered icily: “You must admit as well, my lady, that the fact he took flight with his dragon right after the incident is at the very least suspicious.”

Her skin crawled. She let out a shallow breath, scowling at him, but now the damage was done.

Other faceless voices joined in: “The Imp did it!”, someone barked to her left. “He wants the North!”, another voice answered near the double doors. “The silver witch from Essos sent him to kill the King!” and before she knew it, the whole hall had finally found its perfect scapegoat.

Little Lyanna Mormont stiffly rose from her seat, with her jaw set and eyes a molten silver hue as sharp as frozen shards of ice. Her voice thundered above the rest: “Lord Manderly, your prejudices cloud your reason!”

The man, five times her age and size, literally shrunk under her rebuke, as though he had been slapped in the face by a much bigger opponent, just as he did many moons past, when the young lady had called him out on his shameful conduct in front of this same gathering, and, not for the first time, Sansa was swept by a sudden surge of affection, mingled with awe, for the small girl.

“I’m not fond of the Lannisters myself, as you very well know,” Lyanna went on, indifferent to the buzz of dissent which was soaring again at her back, “but if Tyrion Lannister had wished to murder the King, or anyone else amongst us, don’t you think he could’ve done a better job had he chosen to use his own dragon, instead of poison?”

“With all due respect, lady Lyanna,” Lord Glover spoke, “you’re still very young and can’t possibly remember all the unspeakable horrors the Lannisters have committed against both men and gods in the past twenty years. The Imp is shrewd enough to throw off suspicion and cast it on someone else close to him. A kinslayer and a kingslayer, just as depraved and godless as his brother and sister, and father! It’s in his blood! All he needed was means and opportunity.”

“All Lannisters are the same!” someone else shouted from the back, where the banners with the Cerwyns’ silver battleaxe were lifted higher, and curses, oaths of vengeance, obscene imprecations rumbled and echoed in response from all sides of the hall, punctuated every now and then by outcries of ‘Death to the Lannisters!’.

Sansa couldn’t help herself: the words were out before she could rein them in.

“If I were to judge solely on that premise, my lords, I would have to call all Manderlys and Glovers craven, and all Karstarks traitors.”

That was all it took for their rage to catch fire again, like flint scraped over dry kindling: the many-headed beast roused again, hissing and snapping its jaws like a great steel spring trap, furiously clawing at her words. Lusting for blood.
The hall quaked in outcry, and her voice was once again drowned out by the chaos.

*I’m losing them.*

The room was too loud, too hot, too tight and crowded, and it was all closing in on her.

Underneath all the layers of wool and cotton, the burns, welts and cuts that mapped all her body stirred and stretched, and Sansa grew acutely aware of each one of them. The pain was searing, unexpected, and left her weak, shivering and faint-headed, as waves of nausea made her stomach roil in revulsion.

Nobody seemed to notice.

And, as if summoned by her thoughts, there he was.

Leaning against one of the columns in the left corner, half-hidden in the shadow of the Stark banners, her dead husband leered at her, his pale eyes twinkling with sly malice, and that odd, lopsided smile... the smile which Grey Jeyne had wiped off forever was still branded deep in her memory. Every time he had burned, or beaten, or cut her, he had that wet smile. Glistening on his plump lips like a streak of freshly flayed meat...

She pressed her clenched fists over her bodice.

‘You can’t kill me... I’m part of you, now,’ he was whispering even now, and the candles and torches seemed to lose what little light and warmth they were casting over the gathering.

Feeling as though her lungs might burst, Sansa slammed her eyes shut and clutched the wooden surface in front of her, willing the room to stop rolling and swaying like a boat under a squall.

Loud, angry voices joined the malicious one already inhabiting her mind, and suddenly everything, the confusion of sounds, the smells, the sweating heat, were weaving a web around her tightening chest, crushing her into mute impotency.

*Shut up! Just, be quiet, only for a moment... please...*

Somewhere on her left, a mailed fist was pounding heavily on the table to demand the crowd’s attention and order.

“Silence! SILENCE!” barked a hoarse voice so different from the others droning on and on into her brain that she didn’t immediately recognise it. “Pipe down, you buggering shits, or I’ll come down there and rip your tongues off!”

Through her dazed glaze, two deep brown eyes came suddenly into focus, and the voices, *all* the voices, receded just enough for her to make out her own heartbeat again.

Slightly bent over her, alert and stalwart, his fist still on the table inches from her own writhing hands, the Hound was staring at her, cautiously inspecting her face as though he feared she might shatter at any moment.

His solid presence grounded her, and when she risked a glance to the Hall’s left corner again, she let out a shuddering gasp of relief: Ramsay was gone.

Her eyes sought Sandor again: there was something soothing, almost tender, in his look, behind the mask of the resentful man, that made it easier to breathe and find the courage to face the wrath of her bannermen. She gave him a nod, grateful that they could understand each other so perfectly
even without words. The burned side of his mouth twitched slightly - disparaging scowl or pleased smirk; she could not say - then the mask slipped back into place again and he was returning to his previous standing position next to Arya, his right hand closed over the pommel of his greatsword, silent and still as though he had never moved.

“How can you defend a Lannister, my lady?” Wyman Manderly struck again. “There is no honour in them! For years, they tried to pull apart the North: your own family had been nearly wiped out because of them!”

Her mind much clearer, she stood up, anger flaring up over her face.

_I am the lady of Winterfell. I won’t be cowed by any of them, or their impudent accusations._

“You don’t need to remind me, lord Manderly! I was standing right next Cersei Lannister and I was made to watch when her bastard son ordered my father’s head to be chopped off!”

Tears burned behind her eyelids, but she soldiered on, her own rage building up her strength.

“And Arya... Arya saw our brother’s hacked body sewn to the head of his own direwolf, as he was paraded in the Twins courtyard to a screaming, jesting crowd! As long as there is some life left in us, we will remember, and so will the North! But Tyrion Lannister is not his father! He’s not his sister, and he’s certainly not his nephew. And it would be unworthy of me, unworthy of anything Ned Stark taught us about honour, to think that the sins of the fathers should be laid upon the children! On more than one occasion, Tyrion Lannister has already proved with acts and words his deep regard for the King. His own dragon saved my brother’s life. Jon trusts him, and so do I. So, my lord, unless you have some shocking revelation that could shed light on this issue and give weight to your qualms, I must ask you not to pursue this line of thought any further.”

Murmurs rose again, but nobody dared interrupt her this time around.

“No one respects the king’s position more than I do. Rest assured, my friends, that any slight his person has suffered won’t be brushed off that easily. But for now, I beg all of you: the Long Night is at our doors, we don’t have time to lose in recriminations and childish squabbles! We must band together, or none of us will survive the coming winter and what the snowstorm brings with it.”

“Before you adjourn the meeting,” Tristan Tallhart rose from his bench, “there’s still the matter of your marriage to sort out, lady Sansa.”

She had expected the enquiry. _I have Jon to thank for this, as well. His absence had only made them bolder and more insistent in their pursuit._

_They’re like bloody hounds._

But she was no fearful doe, picked for slaughter.

“My marriage, lord Tallhart?”

“The king promised an alliance,” Lord Glover chimed in. “You, my lady, are to be married into one of our houses. The North will be stronger because of it.”

“I made no such promise.”

“You’d rather stay married to a turncoat, an invader from the South, a _dwarf_, instead of one of our own, with true northern blood, the blood of the First Men, flowing in his veins?”
“I was married to a true northerner, once, remember? The blood of the First Men might as well have turned into water in his veins, for all the good that union did to the North.”

Glover’s throat worked around the enormous knot of anger lodged there, but he thankfully didn’t press the matter further.

Cley Cerwyn stepped forward and stubbornly jutted out his cleft chin: “What about the lady Arya?”

“Yes, lord Cerwyn, what about the lady Arya?” her sister almost singsonged. Some of the men let out a nervous titter, misreading her haughty attitude for a quip, but her scathing grin sent a shiver of alarm down Sansa’s spine.

Young Cerwyn was clueless.

“I beg your pardon, my lady,” he persisted with a small bow, “but the days of your first flowering are long past, yet you remain unwed, despite the fact that you’ve blossomed into a fully-grown, quite pretty, young woman. It’s time you choose a husband. I’m sure your father would’ve agreed to the match. He would have wanted to see you happily settled.”

Arya swept down the dais to meet him, her head tilting in scrutiny, as though she were actually considering the man and his proposal.

“With a laughing babe bouncing on my knee, and another one kicking in my belly?”

“It is a pretty picture,” he agreed sheepishly. “Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to call you my wife.”

A timid smile brightened the serious contours of his face, and Sansa felt sorry for him.

Their was a long-standing friendship: the three of them had been children together, and the late lord Cerwyn was among the firsts to raise his banners, when Robb marched south. The bookish and timid lad who enjoyed the solitude of the rookery more than the bristling action of the practicing yard had grown into a stolid, pragmatic man with an eye for counting coppers and harvesting crops for winter. In any other circumstance, the match wouldn’t have been deemed unsatisfactory, Sansa pondered: he was closer to Arya’s age than hers, and his face was not unpleasant to look upon, either: a squared jaw barely sprinkled with a stubble the same golden-redish shade as his curly hair and heavy brow ridges that gave a captivating depth to his otherwise quite dull amber eyes... but Cley had a submissive softness about him that could not possibly bode well for her sister.

So Sansa was fairly surprised when Arya answered with a bashful smile of her own and a coy bob of the head.

“Very well, then. I accept. To one condition,” she hastily added, for the young lord had already made a step ahead, his arms enthusiastically reaching for her. “You’ll have to fight for that pleasure.”

If he was taken back by this strange request, he did not show.

“Fight? Of course! Against whom?”

“Why, me, obviously!”

His smile faltered and died. Arya went on, as innocent and meek as a dove.
“If you win, we shall get married straight away under the heart tree in my father’s godswood. If I win, I’ll cut your cock off.”

Sniggers and low murmurings thrummed around her. 

This ludicrous jape ends now.

She was already half-standing, when a gentle squeeze upon her shoulder hindered her intentions.

“Let her make her point,” Sandor grumbled in her ear. “That’ll teach ‘em a lesson.”

She wasn’t so sure that was the type of lesson the lords needed, right now. Many of them had already seen Arya fight in the yard. Training with Pod, or Brienne, even the Hound and Ser Bronn, but they only ever saw a girl whirling a sword.

They don’t realise how lethal she truly is, and how dangerous it is to underestimate her.

This little lark would only put to shame the man and, by extension, each one of them as well.

She has spent too much time with Lady Brienne, Sansa realised with dismay, watching Arya draw Needle from its scabbard and hiding it behind her back. Yet, as Cley confidently unsheathed his father’s sword and circled around her sister, Sansa couldn’t bring herself to care too much for the humiliation and derision that was sure to follow.

The fight was over almost as soon as it began.

Every time Cerwyn lunged, Arya deflected, swift as a cat, unpredictable like water, and slashed through his opening. Before long, his face was a bleeding map of small gashes, and his blows grew more careless the more frustrated he got, until his blade was cutting only air.

She was playing with him. Until she wasn’t anymore.

Sansa grabbed the arm of her chair as Arya danced to Cley’s left side and snatched a standard with the direwolf of the Starks dangling at the top from the hands of one of the standing guards. The stick was long enough for her to use as a weapon, and soon the young lord found himself with a lesser reach. She struck him once over the shoulder, hard enough to make him lose his balance, then the stick spun and cracked against the back of his right hand and off his sword went, clattering to the floor. An instant later the air whistled again and with a yelp Cley Cerwyn landed on his bottom, grabbing his shin in pain.

Arya swatted him over the head with a light thump.

“I win.”

In the deadly silence that followed only Cerwyn’s low groans could be heard.

“On your feet, now,” her sister ordered. “Take off your trousers.”

Sansa stood up.

“Arya! That’s enough.”

Her sister glowered up to her for a tense moment, then lowered the stick with a flourish.

“Get out of my sight,” she said to the man writhing on the ground.
With the aid of his squire and lord Mazin, Cerwyn limped back to his table, where he could quietly lick the wounds to his pride.

“Anyone else?” Arya goaded the other bannermen, eyes blazing with contempt.

No one else dared ask to compete for the honour of having one of them into their bed, after that.

The assembly broke up quite hastily, and Sansa didn’t linger behind to exchange courtesies with the other lords; instead, she followed Arya’s footsteps in the snow, to the crypts’ entrance, where Nymeria was dutifully standing guard.

The vaulted chamber was pitch black, except for a faint light guttering at the very end.

“You could have at least tried not to humiliate them further,” she lectured the angry shadow crouched in front of their father’s tomb.

The three tallow candles placed with devotion on the granite stone had burned down to stubs, and her sister’s silhouette, staring ahead in the dense darkness, was barely discernible.

“Say the word, and I will slay them all,” she snarled. Fingers pinching the bridge of her nose, Sansa released all the pent-up tension in a long, tired sigh.

“Tempting, but sadly not very practical, in the long run. We need them on our side.”

She busied herself with lighting more candles, as Arya jerked up and started pacing at her back.

“Half of them are spineless runts and halfwits who couldn’t find their own hairy arses with their hands if they tried!”

The accuracy of the portrait elicited a small chuckle from her.

“They have no idea how to play the game,” Arya went on, fuming. “How the hells did Father manage to put up with the lot without whipping them every now and then?”

Sansa turned around, sombre.

“Father didn’t know how to play the game either.”

Arya’s face fell.

It was a bitter truth to swallow. Sansa had loved her father dearly, and probably will never love any other man as much: through his eyes, she could see a picture of herself as she had always wanted to be. Loved and cherished and protected. Even in those horrible last weeks of his life, as aged, limping, tired for his imprisonment as he was, Sansa couldn’t remember him ever looking weak or frightened. He had always seemed invincible to her. Proud and strict with the others, but uncommonly soft with his two little girls... she wondered briefly if all fathers became a mushy mess when their daughters were concerned...

He had wished the best for her, she reminisced, a pang of regret twisting in her heart... someone who’s worthy of you, he had said. Someone who’s brave, and gentle, and strong...

That illusion had shattered too, a long time ago.

The fall from trustful, silly girl who hung on her father’s every word to disillusioned woman had been great and astonishingly swift, and the clash with reality left her hurting and filled with sorrow and shame, but, as hard as it might have been for her, she thought as she glanced down at Arya, for
her sister was perhaps even worse.

She resents him, for the secrets he kept, for the choices he made, for choosing honour and mercy over his very life. Over us.

Sansa would’ve sooner her sister gave vent to her frustration lashing out on her, or screaming and pounding her fists at the silent statue until her knuckles bled, instead of this bottomless pit of darkness Arya had chosen to retreat to.

It made her feel helpless.

“He lied for Jon,” Sansa said, seeking somehow to ease her sister’s bitterness. “He lied for us, too. To keep us safe, in King’s Landing. He’d gladly let everyone in Westeros believe he was a traitor, rather than put any of us into greater danger.”

‘Men of honour will do things for their children that they would never consider doing for themselves,’ Littlefinger had told Alayne a long time ago, when Alayne was still that stupid girl, the little bird in a cage singing songs about Florian and Jonquil, still learning the game of thrones.

“Father tried to do his best, Arya.”

“And look where that got him.”

They stood in silence under their father’s stony look, each alone in their grief.

“I shall leave Winterfell soon,” Arya murmured after a while.

“I know.”

Tears burned at the back of her throat, but she couldn’t hold her sister back. The thought pained her: she had spent all her childhood wishing that her lady mother had given her brat of a sister away to one of the many serving girls who worked in the castle, or, even better, simply left her into the woods. An insignificant, noisy offering to the grumkins of Winterfell, so that Sansa could finally be an only daughter. Only now that their paths were about to diverge again, and their future had become more unfathomable than ever, with their lives teetering on the edge of the precipice, did Sansa understand her father’s words: when the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.

I’m going to miss her, she realised with a heavy heart.

If this was one of the last moments of peace they were going to revel in, before all the seven hells broke loose, Sansa might as well come clean about a thing or two.

“I was jealous of you.”

Arya eyed her with an arched brow.

“The boys have always loved you best. Robb and Jon never did a thing without telling you first. ‘I’ve found six direwolf pups in the woods. Let’s ride back and tell Arya!’,” Sansa said, puffing up her chest and lowering her voice into a rumble, in a comical imitation of Jon’s gruff tone. ‘I had Mikken make this very special sword for my very special little sister!’, ‘Arya, do you want to play Monsters-and-Maidens with us? I’ll steal some flour from the kitchens for you, so you can scare silly Sansa off!’”

“I have that very special sword with me right now, and I’ll poke you with it, if you don’t stop, you
stupid goose!” her sister warned, but her eyes were gleaming with devilish delight. “You were the one always making fun of me. Arya Horseface?”

“That wasn’t me!” Sansa half-chuckled in protest. “It was Jeyne!”

“Aye! And you laughed and neighed along the rest, instead of smashing that bitch’s pretty white teeth in! You and your little pack of lickspittle, backstabbing friends! D’you know it was actually Beth Cassel who put sheep shit in your bed the night before we left for King’s Landing?”

“What?!! Why?”

“She was cross with you, because you chose Jeyne over her to travel with you. Guess who got punished for it? And for the record, Jon must have asked you to play with us at least a hundred times! You were horrified by the mere idea!”

Her eyes dropping on the ground in contrition, Sansa confessed the ignoble truth: “I was not. I wanted to come and play with you... I just didn’t want to get dirt on my pretty dresses.”

Arya gaped at her and let out a short snort of disbelief.

“What a damn hypocrite.”

Sansa tittered. That was not a ‘I love you’, but it was close enough.

The candles in front of Ned and Lyanna’s statues shone brighter.

“You’ve always been Father’s favourite,” Sansa conceded.

A stern tenderness flashed in her sister’s grey eyes, thawing for a brief moment the sharp harshness of her grudges.

“And you were Mother’s.”

Blinking away tears, she touched the side of Arya’s face. A soft caress filled with promises, lullabies and hope, a caress like the ones their mother would give at night, when she was tricked into believing they were both fast asleep.

An unspoken prayer.

“Your face doesn’t look like a horse’s.” Her voice choked a little, and for a mad instant she feared Arya would flinch away, spurning her attempt to reach her like she often did when they were children. But, to her surprise, her sister closed her eyes and leaned into it.

It was a pretty face, in fact. High, proud cheekbones, rosy lips, and even if her nose was perhaps a bit pudgy and her eyebrows were too thick and coarse, when she smiled, when she really smiled, a gentle dimple would appear on each side of her mouth that reminded Sansa of warmer days by the pond.

Overwhelmed, she reached out and crushed her into a hug, letting out a shaky breath full of tears when she felt Arya’s hands clutching the back of her cloak just as tightly.

“I’m sorry I didn’t stand up for you when you needed me,” she whispered against the crown of her head. “But I swear I will never let anyone else come between us. No one will hurt you ever again.”

“No one is welcome to try. Speaking of which, I have pressing business elsewhere.”
Sansa nodded, grateful. The plan they had set in motion a sennight past was finally shaping up.

“I’ll report back as soon as I can.”

Be careful. The words turned and turned in her mind, but Sansa couldn’t bring herself to say them. Arya wouldn’t listen to her, anyway.

When she resurfaced into the lichyard, Sandor Clegane was whetting his sword perched over a broken tombstone half-covered with snow, plainly waiting for her: she wasn’t really surprised. Since he came North with Arya, the Hound had become a second shadow to her and her sister, discreetly trailing their movements around the Keep. At first, she had been bothered by it; his presence made her inexplicably overwrought, not because she feared him (he had been extremely helpful in handling Arya’s moods and nothing but respectful and deferential to her, at times even too much) but because he seemed to distract her from her daily tasks. However, after Jon’s attempted poisoning, she found herself seeking the comfort of his intimidating company more often than not. Sandor always seemed to know when she didn’t want to be alone.

“What’s ailing the little wolf? She darted away like the Stranger was at her heels.”

The lie rolled off her tongue easily enough. “I sent her to apologise to Cley Cerwyn. I told her to make it sound heartfelt.”

The Hound snorted.

“Good luck with that.”

He fell in beside her as they made their way back into the courtyard.

Near the guards hall, surrounded by their men, the lords Manderly and Glover were still arguing in hushed tones with Lyanna Mormont trying to mediate between them; a few feet further, a group of wildlings was cracking bawdy jokes at some Cerwyn soldiers, openly mocking their lord for his poor show of combat skills. They all grumbled lukewarm greetings when she passed, but the tension filling the air was as thick as the winter mist shrouding the castle at night. Sansa fiddled nervously with the silver chains of her necklace: everywhere she turned, she felt everyone’s loaded glares on her.

Perhaps sensing her distress, Sandor moved closer.

“They’re a bunch of dickless cretins,” he offered. “You did well, back there.”

Her breath came out shaky and just a bit desperate: “The Hornwoods call the Glovers cowards, the Glovers call the Karstarks traitors, the Manderlys and the Valemen are at each other’s throats, the Cerwyns are becoming the laughing stock of the whole North and everyone wants Tyrion Lannister dead just to have a scapegoat! How am I supposed to rule while Jon’s away, and prepare them for what’s to come, if their only concern is settling scores between them?”

She halted in the middle of the courtyard, fuming, and turned to face him. “You don’t think Tyrion did it, do you?”

Sandor shrugged. “I told you a long time ago: everyone is a killer. That short husband of yours is no exception. Heard he shot his father dead with an arrow while he was taking a shit. Not very honourable, by your Stark code. But the little cunt is the only one in that whole family I wouldn’t
immediately hack down without asking questions. Him, on the other hand...”

He gave a little nod ahead of him, and Sansa followed his darkening glare.

At the entrance of the Guest House, Littlefinger was conferring with Ser Edwyn and lord Tallhart, hands clasped behind his back and an amiable smirk flitting upon his neatly trimmed goatee. To the untrained eye, there was nothing even remotely suspicious about it, but Sansa could see the power play behind his courtesies.

“He tried to put the high lords against you,” he snarled. “Why don’t you just get rid of him?”

Her options whirled in her mind. Should she tell him what she and Arya had discovered, and Bran confirmed? How Sansa knew that Littlefinger was the puppet master pulling the strings since her time at court, how he had had the Gold Cloaks on his payroll and was ultimately to blame for her father’s imprisonment? How Bran had stayed Arya’s vengeful hand, stating that Baelish still had a part to play; how they had been following his every move since, waiting for his conceit to lead him into making a mistake?

Her circumspect glance flickered near the kitchens, to the two scullion girls rubbing themselves all over a couple of Mazin bowmen, and up to the second floor of the library tower, to the carpenter who was only pretending to fix a window glass while he scouted the yard with sharp eyes, and to those larking lads in front of the stables, who were trying to persuade a mule to get inside with a bunch of carrots...

Sansa chose her next words with care.

“He’s up to something,” she answered, her voice casual as though they were chatting about the weather. “He’s got eyes and ears all over this place, but I do have eyes and ears on him. I know who he’s talking to, where he goes in the hour of the wolf. I know who he’s meeting with behind my back. He thinks he’s still leading the game; it’s easier for me to make him believe that, if he stays in the castle.”

Sandor’s lips thinned into a concerned grimace.

“Would be easier still, if you had him killed.”

“You talk like Arya.”

A proud, not entirely pleasant, grin cracked the burned side of his face: “She’s the one who talks like me.”

Despite the grim tone of the conversation, a breezy laughter broke free from her. For a long instant, Sandor regarded her with unfathomable dark eyes, until Sansa felt her cheeks flushing in spite of the cold.

She started awkwardly to the Keep’s entrance.

“I should...”

After the council with the lords, Bran was most certainly expecting a visit from her, and there was unfinished business with Yohn Royce to attend to. Yet, she stalled, heart in her throat, waiting for Sandor to speak. Or perhaps only needing a moment to gather her courage and find the right words to thank him. At her back, the jeering voices of the wildlings rose alarmingly louder; a few Stark soldiers strode closer, with the clear intention to restore a semblance of order even if it meant knocking some teeth out.
Sansa groaned in exasperation. A feud between the Free Folk and the Northmen was just what she needed.

“Go,” the Hound rumbled. “I’ll make sure no one of these fucking idiots gets stabbed in their guts.”

Still, she could feel his eyes following her long after she walked off.

The insistent knocking at her brother’s door went unanswered twice, before Sansa decided to let herself in with an irritated huff. His back to her, Bran was staring out the window, the bear furs he used to warm up his legs dumped unceremoniously on the floor, next to the wheels of his chair.

Of late, his behaviour bothered her; she had made her peace with the fact that her little brother would never go back to what he was before, but since Meera had left with Jon and his party, Bran had become more despondent and withdrawn, often brooding alone in his room or in the godswood for days on end, so absorbed into his own quest to become blind and deaf to the deceptions closer to them.

After Jon got nearly killed, she had hoped Bran could easily point them into the right direction and, with no hindrance, expose the culprit to the severest punishment, but the reality of their predicament has proven quite more difficult to handle: every time Bran tried to shed some light into the matter, his greensight pushed him back to the Wall, until he was so drained of energy that a wight would probably have looked livelier.

Sansa walked over to the hearth to put some dry logs on the fire Bran had almost let die out.

“It’s freezing in here.” Her breath puffed in cold clouds in front of her. “Why didn’t you ask Artos to start the fire anew?”

And maybe to clean up a little bit, while he’s at it, she mused, surveying the dirty mess of crumpled bedsheets, clothes discarded on the floor, papers speckled with raven droppings and last night dinner’s leftovers forgotten on a tray.

Bran didn’t answer.

Her irritation growing, Sansa approached him and wheeled the chair around.

Her brother’s eyes were rolled back so that only the whites were seen.

Meera had warned her this could happen, but being told about it was one thing. Seeing it was another entirely. Panicking, she reached over and shook him lightly on the shoulder.

“Bran? Brandon!”

What if he doesn’t wake up? What if he gets stuck into a vision?

Air caught in her lungs for a few interminable seconds; then his head lolled gently to one side, and a moment later his whole body roused from his unconscious state as though from a dream. When he noticed her standing there, barely breathing, Bran smiled sheepishly, his eyes, so much like her own, clear and innocent: “Have you been here long?”

Inexplicably, a dull rage grew within her, shaking her already frayed nerves.
“Your presence in the Great Hall would’ve been most welcomed,” she abruptly snapped, wringing her hands.

“But I was there!” he chirped petulantly. “I saw Arya mopping the floor with Cley’s ass.”

Sansa squeezed her eyes shut, her nostrils flaring. It felt they had the same argument over and over countless times, already, and she was at the end of her tether.

*It’s all Jon’s fault,* she thought not for the first time that day. *He left me to battle alone and bare-handed. He should never have ridden south.*

“Warging into a raven, or... or one of the dogs, or the gods know what else... it’s not the same, Bran! The Lords need to see you! I need you by my side, when I talk to them!”

He shrugged, unconcerned.

“You’re Jon’s regent.”

“You’re Lord of Winterfell! Whether you like or not! You cannot shirk your duties!”

Bran silently studied her for a time, his mouth tightening. Then his eyes dropped on his hands folded into his lap.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?”

“I’m sorry I can’t be of more help. I’m sorry I had to tell Jon who he really is. That’s the real reason why you’re so angry all the time. You blame me, and him as well. You fear the moment everyone else will find out, and yet you can hardly wait for that day to come. You almost hope for it. You stay awake, at night, wandering the battlements like a ghost, making plans. Weeping. Torturing yourself because you don’t know which part of you will prevail in the end: the doting sister, or -

“Don’t!” Sansa sank to her knees in front of him and clapped a hand over his mouth. “Just... *don’t!*”

With each word he spoke, an obscure terror, cold as ice, had settled in her bones, wreaking havoc on her courage; for everything he had said was true.

She stifled a sob. “I love Jon.”

That was also true. Whether he was a baseborn bastard or a prince. Jon was her brother. That was the *only* truth she knew, and she tried to hold on it like a lifeline.

“I know,” Bran reassured her in earnest. “That makes everything harder, doesn’t it?”

The sudden rush of sympathy and absolution in her brother’s eyes made her feel even guiltier. She cradled his gaunt face in her hands.

“You look tired.” Bran leaned in with a small sigh. With his eyes closed, the dark circles under them became even more pronounced.

“I haven’t been sleeping much,” he admitted. “Every day and every night, I’m flying.”

*He is still so very young, despite everything.*
Her initial annoyance caved to a greater worry. She remembered that, after a nightmare, their lady Mother would stroke their hair, gently coaxing them to tell her what they had dreamt about. So Sansa mirrored that memory.

“What do you see?”

“Visions of days past. I went back as far as I could, looking for clues. I saw the first Brandon, Sansa! I saw him building the Wall and Winterfell. I’ve heard the Children chanting their songs, and I’ve tasted the dragon blood spilled on stone and ice for their magic to work.” He paused wincing as though words were failing him, and rubbed his forehead, as though in pain. “Everything is spinning so fast! One moment I’m here, finally putting all the links together, and the next the visions are slipping away from me again. The future is changing as we speak. Different futures crashing inside one another, overlapping...”

“What’s the right one?”

“All of them. None. I don’t know! The visions are difficult to control. The more I try, the more something is pushing me out.”

Cringing, Bran clutched his right forearm. Sansa’s face clouded over. Was the icy scar left by the Night King hurting him?

“He’s getting stronger,” he only said. A partial answer which did nothing to quell her unspoken concern.

If the Night King was getting stronger, this only meant that Bran was slowly weakening in return. They were running out of time. She steeled herself against her fears.

“Tell me what needs to be done!”

His Tully blue eyes met hers.

“We must prepare for the rising tide. Listen to me. There are ancient tunnels spreading underneath the castle’s foundations. They were originally used to connect Winterfell with Winter Town, Castle Cerwyn and the old tumbledown tower in the Wolfswood, do you know which one?”

Sansa nodded. She had often raced their sister there and back.

Arya, the skilled rider that she was, always won.

“The tunnels have been sealed for centuries, now. We need to reopen them.”

Her face stiffened into a sullen frown. “An escape route?”

“And scorpions,” her brother added with finality. His glance turned back to the window, upward to the thick swirling clouds burdened with snow. “You must order old Clem and Gendry to start building scorpions.”

“You want us to return to the Eyrie?” Bronze Yohn Royce blurted out, taken aback.

The runes engraved in his massive armour came alive under the flickering light of dusk, as he
nervously paced in her solar.

“You and the Knights of the Vale, yes,” Sansa confirmed. “Lord Baelish will remain in Winterfell, for now.”

Royce’s thick, grey eyebrows crinkled. “I don’t understand, my lady. I was under the impression we were needed here.”

That’s what Littlefinger wants you to believe.

“Are you displeased with our service?”

“Of course not, my friend. You’ve helped my brother and me win our home back and I’ll be forever in your debt. But my dear cousin has been left to fend for himself for far too long. Apart from the counsel of old maesters who’s never put a foot outside the Bloody Gate and half-disgraced landed knights and sycophants who’d do literally anything to win his favour, he doesn’t have a firm hand to guide him.”

“But Lady Waynwood -

“Lady Waynwood is a good woman and a trusted ally, but she’s old and doesn’t have the strength to curb Robin’s fits and bad moods. The Vale must be prepared.”

“For what?”

She rigidly clasped her hands in front of her. “A probable evacuation.”

Surprise and alarm flashed into the knight’s silver eyes.

Sansa went on.

“The Eyrie is the most impenetrable fortress of the Seven Kingdoms: I need a safe shelter for the people in the North who can’t fight nor defend themselves. Children too young to hold a sword, the elderly, the people who are too weak or incapacitated. And my own brother, as well.”

She had given this a lot of thought: it was a heart-wrenching decision, but it was the right thing to do, and she was even more convinced now, after what Bran had told her. During the Dance, scorpions and spear-throwers were used to bring the Targaryen dragons down: if now Bran feared an attack from the sky might be imminent, it fell on her to keep her people safe, for as long as she could. And him, above all else. Her brother would never be able to wield a sword or draw a bow again, but it was clear to her he had a much more important role to play in the coming battle than her, or Arya, perhaps even Jon.

“My lady, the Eyrie couldn’t house much more than three, perhaps four hundred people!” Royce protested. “The goat trail through the waycastles is steep and treacherous in the summer, but during winter there’s no way to get that many people on top the Giant’s Lance! The pathway is sealed!”

“Then find a way to open it again!” she insisted in a tone that brooked no argument. “And make your peace with the Mountain Clans: the Gods know we’re going to need all the help we can get!”

Would that I had a dragon of my own. That would make things easier.

Royce’s fist hardened around the eagle decoration of his sword’s hilt. His square jaw worked silently, weighing his options. Sansa’s features softened in sympathy. Such indecision and grim
diffidence were unfamiliar in a man noted for his commitment and nerves of steel, yet she understood why the request might baffle him.

Standing, she circled around the table and took the knight’s hands in hers.

“Your own son lost his life ranging beyond the Wall, doing bravely his duty. His bones were never returned to Runestone, am I right?” His downcast eyes answered for him. Sansa pressed the advantage. “The Wall is growing weaker by the day. When it falls, thousands will suffer your son’s same death. Or worse. You’ve spoken with enough people to know these horrors are not a madman’s ravings. If Winterfell should fall into enemy’s hands, if... if the Night King should get past the Neck and its defence line, there would be nothing standing between him and the open lands of the South.”

“There’s still Lord Edmure.”

The objection was expected: Sansa sifted through the maps and parchments scattered across her desk, found the latest of her uncle’s letters, and handed it to the knight.

“Riverrun is ready to raise its banners and ride to our aid, should we ever be in dire need, but you and I know the Riverlands armies are scant in number and unfitted for a winter campaign,” she explained as Lord Yohn moved closer to the fireplace and skimmed the short message. “They still think the main enemy is in King’s Landing, right now. I need a second front from the Bite to Seagard, and I need you to hold it for me.”

“The King knows about these plans?”

She jutted her chin out defiantly. “The King is on a mission of his own and has left me in charge of Winterfell and the North. Everything I do is in his name, for his sake. And the sake of our people. Will I have your support, yours and the Valemen, when the time comes?”

Lord Royce considered her thoughtfully.

“The more I see of you, my lady, the more I believe the wrong woman sits on the Iron Throne,” he said. “Our swords are yours.”

She set to work immediately after Royce took his leave, with the promise to get the Eyrie ready, and when she was done the tall shadow of her candle had stretched up to the ceiling. Outside, a light snow blanketed the windowsill. The moon had risen.

There were more letters on her desk, sealed with the direwolf of the Starks: one for Sweetrobin, in which she called him her Winged Knight and exhorted him to be good and follow Lord Royce’s advice - an order disguised by mellow, condescending tones - and five more, addressed to each of the great lords of the Vale. They all had pledged a sacred vow to defend House Arryn and the Vale, but they must needs understand that this war went far beyond lands and houses.

Other messages were ready for the ravens, with no seal in case they might be intercepted. Little seeds Sansa had been planting on willing ears which were beginning to bear fruit.

She’s been wise and provident: a busy bee stocking honey for rainy days. While Jon learned how to be a King and secured the allegiances of the Northern lords, Sansa had turned her gaze South, to the lords of the Reach. And to the Westerlands. She was a Lannister by marriage, after all, and she’d be a damned fool not to take full advantage of it.
Crakehall, Brax, Marbrand and Banefort were among the names Cersei had denounced as traitors of the realm, when they refused to disobey the Kingslayer’s orders and marched north of Winterfell to defend the Wall, but there were many houses still whose loyalties to the Iron Throne were wavering, stretching under the strain of Cersei’s rule and her unexpected pact with Euron Greyjoy: the Presters of Feastfires, the Farmans of Fair Isle and the Westerlings of the Crag all hated the Ironborn and viewed the Queen's new alliances as a cynical betrayal of their own interests. Daven Lannister was still Cersei’s man, but, from what Tyrion had told her, he was not unreasonable: if Sansa could sway even one of his bannermen to her side, he would be left in a position of weakness. And if there was one thing a Lannister loathed more than anything...

She was just finishing a short missive to Lord Gawen Westerling, when Littlefinger stormed into the solar unannounced, and utterly livid.

“The Knights of the Vale are leaving in the morning! Without me! What is the meaning of this?”

Her quill flowed swiftly upon the parchment.

“I’ve ordered them to,” she said calmly, eyes trained on her writings.

“On which authority?”

“As Lady of Winterfell. As sister to the King, and his regent while he’s away.”

Littlefinger took four long strides and slammed his hands down the table. The ink pot swayed dangerously over her papers. Her indifference was clearly grating on his nerves.

“I am the Warden of the East!”

Sansa pinned him under her cold gaze.

“No, Lord Baelish. Robert Arryn is Warden of the East and Lord Defender of the Vale. And I, as his cousin by blood and eldest living relative, am his heir. You’re merely his keeper.”

Littlefinger was stunned into silence for a moment. Scarlet patches of rage blotched his usually impassive face. She had been counting on this.

His teeth ground together. “I was married to your aunt,” he growled in a lower voice.

“You murdered my aunt. Don’t think I forgot that.”

With no haste, Sansa finished her letter, folded neatly the parchment, dribbled hot wax on it and slipped it inside her gown. She could sense his eyes following her every movement. A snake waiting for the right moment to strike.

“I murdered her for you. Remember the trial? What would the lords of the Vale say, what would your cousin say, if they knew you lied for me?”

She stood abruptly.

“You murdered my aunt. Don’t think I forgot that.”

With no haste, Sansa finished her letter, folded neatly the parchment, dribbled hot wax on it and slipped it inside her gown. She could sense his eyes following her every movement. A snake waiting for the right moment to strike.

“I murdered her for you. Remember the trial? What would the lords of the Vale say, what would your cousin say, if they knew you lied for me?”

She stood abruptly.

“Let me make something very clear, my lord. The Knights of the Vale rode to Winterfell because of me. They raised their banners against the traitors of the North to whom you sold me because of me. They bled on the battlefield because of me. Should I choose to, I could have you arrested on the charges of treason and murder, and not a single great House in the Vale would oppose me: the Royces, the Waywoods, the Redforts and the Belmores. The Templetons. Whom do you think they’ll believe? Lysa Tully’s blood and kin, the sweet, fearful maid who was trying to escape a
loveless marriage, or you, the cunning man with Braavosi blood everyone either envies or despises? I am literally what stands between you and certain death. So tread very carefully.”

Anger simmered just under the surface and flashed briefly in his velvety grey eyes, before Littlefinger schooled his features back into an expression of hurt contrition. He drew closer, changing his tactics with ruthless speed.

“I see that my conduct during the council has displeased you. I was only trying to help. Ever since King’s Landing, I’ve always been on your side. There was a time when I was your only ally, your only friend!” She compelled herself not to shudder when his fingers brushed against her cheek. “I don’t deserve your contempt, Sansa! I love you.”

_ Play along, don’t fight him. _

But discomfort settled like a boulder over her ribcage. His breath smelled of fresh mint, and her stomach heaved in revulsion.

“I’ve wanted you for a very long time, and I’ve waited for you with a patience which surprised even me. I’ve been devoted to you, and you only, for far longer than you can imagine.”

And then, he cupped her face and kissed her.

She remembered the innocent farewell he gave in the crypts, the day he left her to Ramsay’s whims and perversions. And the eager press of his mouth on hers that warmed her solitude in the dawn-lit garden of the Eyrie.

_ This _ was something entirely different.

The impulse to slap him and break free from this unwelcome indiscretion was immediate, overwhelming, but her body was frozen inside an impenetrable block of ice.

His lips moved insistent to her neck, to the side of her face; Sansa tried hard to dispel the fog slowing her mind but it was as useless as trudging through a waist-high snowbank. Her eyes focused on the table: the knife she had used to open her letters was out of reach, and Sansa mentally chided herself for not having a weapon at the ready, like Arya had been constantly prodding her to do. Completely unaware, Littlefinger kept spilling honeyed words into her ears, as though their soothing purl could shape for her a bewitching fairytale out of his lies and cruelty. He as the knight in white armour and she as his queen of love and beauty.

“Marry me, Sansa. We could unite the North and the Vale, and with the support of Harrenhal and the rest of the Riverlands we’d be unstoppable.”

For the first time Petyr Baelish was straight out telling her what were his plans for her. Perhaps he believed he would catch her in a moment of need, weak and liable enough to accept his proposal.

His conceited confidence somewhat cleared her head.

_Hold on, Sansa _ prompted herself, _just for a little longer. Until I can see through his deception._

“You forget my brother. The King,” she laid the bait.

A bit. Just enough to perceive his annoyance. Then his hands circled possessively around her waist.

“The King is always on my mind,” Baelish breathed against her skin. “But he’s far away now, isn’t he, and the North stands divided without him.”
Her fists balled at her sides.

“He will be back soon, and will bring Daenerys’ dragons with him.”

Littlefinger chuckled as he looked up, but his smile never reached his eyes. “Your trust in him is remarkable and heart-warming. Such a dutiful sister.” He twirled a lock of auburn hair around his forefinger and tugged gently, so that his nose brushed against hers. “Your half-brother certainly likes to play the unsung hero, but is he truly what the realm needs?”

Sansa frowned. His eyes were teasing, even affectionate, but the half grin upon his wet lips had her petrified into a panic. It was the kind of victorious smirk he usually wore when he was proud of how well his schemes were coming together.

“We know that Tyrion Lannister is doing his utmost to broker a marriage between the King and the Targaryen girl. Did you never wonder why?”

“She wants the North’s loyalty. We need her dragons.”

“Yes, that’s the obvious reason. But the Imp forgot to mention a tiny detail. Daenerys is barren. If your brother marries her and joins forces with her to bring Cersei down, theirs will be a childless union. And who would he choose to be next in line for the throne?”

The pieces clicked together. Her heart hammered in her throat.

“Me.”

“Why do you think lord Tyrion so desperately wants to stay married to you?”

She glanced at Littlefinger; his knowing eyes stripped her bare, exposing the many chinks in her armour she had been trying to hide.

_He lies, the saner part of her screamed, he lies with the truth! Don’t fall for his tricks!_

But now the words had been said and her blood boiled with fury and humiliation: Tyrion had vehemently opposed Jon and his council on the matter of her wedding. Sansa believed he was defending her freedom of choice out of fondness, out of a sentiment of kinship which bonded them well beyond the sacred vows they had spoked under duress. Surprisingly enough, the thought he could have an ulterior motive never crossed her mind. She reproached herself for her own stupidity: Tyrion had always loved power, and the game, above all else.

The realisation filled her with a sense of confusion and a sadness she could not quite name.

_I should have known better._

_He is not different from Littlefinger, after all. At least, she bitterly mused, Littlefinger is making his intentions plain._

And yet, stronger than loathing and suspicion, there was pure admiration for a true master at work; the plan had a neat elegance, an enticing simplicity to it she could not deny.

It was a foolish and dangerous notion to follow through, Sansa knew very well, but in her mind Royce’s words were calling out to her like a siren’s song.

_The wrong woman sits on the Iron Throne._

Cold sweat ran down her back, as a heavy tautness crept over her shaky limbs. Bran knew this
would happen. Bran had warned her, yet her heart stormed with the violence of a battle. Power surged and sang in her blood, and Sansa felt alive with purpose and an absurd sense of hope that could be easily mistaken for madness. It was a dreadful emotion, and glorious at the same time. Exhilarating and unspeakably appalling. It made her both physically ill and invigorated with the same savage hunger she had felt when her eyes feasted on Ramsay’s bloody face as the Girls devoured him.

The coals of her shattered dreams and ambitions still burned under the ashes.

All it took were some well-placed taunts stirring the embers, for the fire to rekindle again. For her to yield to her own vanity.

*The wrong woman sits on the Iron Throne.*

How hard could it be, really, to take everything she had ever wanted? She wouldn’t even need to get blood on her hands. Only a few chosen words, spoken at the right time, and the North would land into her lap without a fight...

“I know you,” Petyr’s voice reached her, distant and so removed from reality that it almost sounded like her own, inside her head. “Better than anyone else. We still share the same dream, the same pretty picture, do we not? Winter won’t last forever. Everything changes. It is in the nature of things. Our time will come, and our children will rule over the greatest kingdom this wretched land has ever seen.”

Her mind stilled.

No.

*This is wrong*, Sansa recognised, suddenly guilty. *I cannot let him play on my weaknesses.*

She put a hand on his chest and pressed back when he leant for another kiss.

*He’s failing to see the greater picture.*

“There’s a fault in your game strategy, my lord.” Her mouth was made of wool and her voice sounded strange and strained to her ears. “None of it would matter, when the Army of the Dead marches south. And if Jon can’t defeat them, we’ll all be dead long before spring will bloom again.”

Littlefinger’s eyes glinted with a hint of approval. Hands resting over his belt, he strolled to the desk and studied the map of Westeros unrolled across the papers. “I’m aware of that. With the Long Night upon us, there are only two ways this could end: either your half-brother’s armies defeat this Night King, or he dies trying. And if he might tragically fall in battle... well, many among the wildlings believe wights can’t cross over open water and there’s a whole continent just across the Narrow Sea. But I’m a betting man and willing to take my chances. I am the staunchest ally Jon Snow could ever wish to have. I need him to win the Great War, and this simple fact should suffice to clear me of false accusations and vile slanders.”

He cocked his head to the side and made a back-and-forth gesture with his hand between them. “Because that’s what all this mummer’s show you’re putting up is about, isn’t it? You’re trying to figure out if you can implicate me in the king’s attempted poisoning.”

Blood curdled in her heart.

He slowly crept up on her, on the hunt, a baleful smile hardening the lines of his face.
“You won’t find proof, because there isn’t any. Do you take me for a simpering idiot? Why risk my position, everything I’ve built, my own life, when all I have to do is wait?”

The hostile derision in his tone chilled her to the bone, and infuriated her in equal measure.

Her nails dug in her palms.

_He is still a step ahead of me._

Walking away would have been the most sensible thing to do, under the circumstances, but Sansa forbade herself to crumble in front of him.

“‘Sometimes the best way to baffle your foes is to make moves that have no purpose, or even seem to work against you. Because a man without motive is a man no one suspects.’ You taught me that, remember?” Sansa said with cool courtesy, struggling to keep her composure. But when she brushed past him, Littlefinger yanked her arm and pulled her tight against him. The mischief and the lust were gone from his eyes.

“I said this once to your husband, and I tell you now: I don’t appreciate being made a fool of!” he threatened, his face dark and ravening. “You are dancing on a very thin rope in a raging storm. The fall could prove fatal. So you tread carefully. My love.”

“Is there a problem?”

His head snapped to the door.

Over the threshold, Arya was staring at the scene, looking murderous. Her thumb fidgeted over Needle’s hilt.

Heart drumming in her ears, Sansa wrenched her arm free.

“No,” she said bluntly, her throat dry as though she had just screamed her lungs out. “Lord Baelish was just leaving.”

Littlefinger hesitated for half a second, then the grinning mask of the courteous schemer was back. He straightened the mockingbird that fastened his high fur collar, sketched a bow to her and headed to the door paying no heed to Nymeria’s growls.

The moment he was out of the solar, Arya dashed at her side.

“Are you all right?”

Sansa raked the back of her hand across her lips and leant back against the table, catching her breath. “Yes. Yes,” she repeated, more to convince herself than her sister.

“Did you at least get what you needed?”

“He didn’t poison the waterskin.”

“Are you -

“I’m sure!”

_Please, don’t ask me anything else._

Her sister eyed her with an unconvinced quirk of her brows.
“Doesn’t necessarily make him innocent,” she remarked.

Sansa gave a tired, humourless laugh.

“Littlefinger is as far from innocent as a Frey to a wedding feast.”

There were countless ways he could still be involved. Guiding the hand of the murderer so that the blame would entirely fall on House Karstark, twisting the facts to his own advantage, stirring the muddy waters of mistrust, putting sibling against sibling...

**No. This, Arya must not know.**

“What did you find out?”

Arya sauntered to her desk and flopped on her chair with her legs dangling over the armrest.

“A thing or two we did not know yesterday.” She picked the dagger from the table and started twirling it deftly between her fingers. “The girl Larra was born and raised in Karhold, before she came to Winterfell after the battle. She was the baker’s daughter, there. Not a very bright girl, but she loved her big brother to bits. He was Edwyn Karstark’s squire and was killed in the charge of the Knights of the Vale. When I last spoke to Ser Edwyn, he said he did not know her.”

“This only proves he is a liar, not a traitor,” Sansa pointed out, displeased. “And without a confession... The girl was our only clue and she disappeared!”

“Oh, she didn’t disappear,” Arya gloated. “I know where she is. Near the pond in the godswood, where the ground is softer thanks to the hot springs. Fresh snow has buried the footprints, but Nymeria was very good at tracking.”

Surprise cut Sansa’s breath off. The news was unexpected progress that could change the game in their favour. She paced back and forth, picking at her nails, her mind buzzing with a world of possibilities. *If the living won’t talk,* she thought, *we can get the dead to spill their secrets.*

And Arya could get the dead to talk like anyone else.

Her sister seemed to be bent on springing straight into action. She rammed the dagger hard into the table and stood up.

“Give me leave to settle the matter in my own way.”

“Not yet. If Edwyn Karstark were to be found dead while he’s under our roof, protected by guest rights, Karhold would raise in rebellion, and half the North would follow shortly after. We need to ascertain how many are involved, and if Alys herself gave the order.”

They must needs keep their wits about them, now, and be patient. At least until they got word from Tormund.

“What are we going to do while we bide our time?” her sister asked.

“What Father would have done. Protect the family. Bran must have a sworn sword at his side, night and day.”

“He won’t like it,” Arya argued.

“I don’t care,” she countered. “I’ll make sure he’s got a food taster as well.”
“What about us?”

Sansa scoffed cynically. “We’re girls, little sister. In their eyes, we only count as broodmares.”

Arya smirked as she headed to the door, childlike glee and excitement mingling in her grey eyes with the cold-blooded ferocity of the killer. “I won’t get Ser Edwyn out of my sight.”

“Arya!” she called back. “Once we’ll have our answers, we shall abide by the rules of the North.”

Her sister’s shoulders sloped slightly in disappointment. “A trial?”

Sansa gave a curt nod.

“You’re going to need irrefutable evidence for that.”

“Then find me some.”

It was only when her bedchamber’s wood-and-iron door was bolted and latched at her back that Sansa felt like she could safely breathe again. She had made her way up to the flight of stairs connecting the solar to her chambers almost in a run, startling the Girls out of their slumber when she got it; Grey Jeyne raised her muzzle, blinked sleepily at her then, with a bored yawn, stretched out over the pelts in front of the crackling fireplace.

Red Jeyne and Maud, however, bounced down the bed to greet her, their tails wagging madly. Her mind still reeling, she brushed past them without so much as a pat over their heads and flopped down on the rocking chair closest to the fire.

At her feet, three flurry snowflakes yelped for her attention, crawling through the furs on unsteady legs. Kyra’s orphaned pups. After their mother got accidentally poisoned, they had taken up sleeping with her and Sansa didn’t have the heart to shoo them away. In truth, she felt safer at night, with the hounds watching over her fitful sleep.

The kennels are too cold for newborn pups, she had justified herself to Abe the kennel master, but in truth, she felt safer at night, with the hounds watching over her fitful sleep.

She seized the smallest of the pack by his scruff and held him to her face.

“And you? What secret conspiracy are you and your brothers unravelling?”

The crushing weight which had settled upon her heart partially lifted when the pup licked her nose in response. Chuckling, Sansa fetched a clean linen cloth and dipped a corner into a clay bowl full of goat milk her chambermaid had set near the fireplace. The pup sucked on it avidly with soft grunting noises of satisfaction. She laid back with a sigh of relief: Willow already had her own litter of five to feed. Without a little help, these three wouldn’t stand a chance. With a pang of wistfulness, her mind went to a warmer night in that very chamber when, under her father’s amused look, she took a wriggling Lady into her arms and nursed her like a doting mother would have. The first time of many, until the small direwolf pup had been properly weaned.

A harsh rap had her jump out of her musings. The dogs dashed to the door, barking excitedly, but she scurried to the bed and rummaged between the pillows. Then, dagger in hand, she went to open the latches. Sandor eyed the weapon first, then blinked back at her, clueless.

“Expecting someone else?”

Her nerves fraying, Sansa struggled to take a calming breath.
“Come in and bar the door.”

She staggered back a step to let him in, then dropped the dagger on the chest at the foot of her bed and anxiously paced to the cabinet, where a pitcher of strong red wine was blessedly waiting for her.

“Where’s my sister?”

“With the wolfling,” Sandor answered as he crouched down to give a vigorous scratch to the bitches’ backs. “She sent me to stand guard at your door tonight.”

Her cup wavered mere inches to her mouth, hiding a surprised smirk.

*Arya’s worried about me, even if she won’t admit it.*

“Pour yourself some wine, then” Sansa said, pushing an empty cup toward him.

The Hound did not budge. His eyes darted from the door to the bed, then back to her, standing with her own cup next to the table, a few feet from the flames dangerously curling and swaying in the hearth.

*I’m too close to the fire,* Sansa realised.

She filled his cup to the brim, strode to the centre of the room and held it out for him with a solicitous nod.

At his hesitancy, an impatient huff escaped from her lips.

“Drink with me, Sandor. Your lady commands it.”

He gingerly took the cup from her hands and perfunctorily gulped it down in a single swallow. His dark eyes roamed over her face, fierce and cutting.

“You’re shaking. What happened?”

She paused, considered him long and hard and finally spelled the truth aloud: “There’s a traitor among us.”

After that, the words poured helplessly out of her like a rising torrent, rocky at first, then gaining strength... She explained how Arya’s suspicions had focused on the sly and sullen cousin of Alys Karstark almost from the beginning, after he had contradicted himself during one of her questionings; how they had tricked everyone into believing their search for a culprit had been fruitless, so as not to raise alarum and put Ser Edwyn on his guard; she told him about the body her sister found in the godswood and about Littlefinger, his past deceptions and his plans for her and lamented the sensitivity of her position, which demanded she gain conclusive proof, before any accusation could be brought forth.

“We still don’t know if Ser Edwyn has acted alone, nor what he stood to gain from Jon’s death. Arya and I are setting up a trap to find out. If Alys Karstark were to be found guilty as well... this would be a blow from which I fear the North might not recover. Especially with our brother currently far from home.”

Sandor had listened without interruption and was now pondering her with wary eyes, troubled and impressed at the same time.
She sighed.

“You don’t approve of my methods.”

“You’re the Lady of Winterfell. It is not my place to judge.”

“And yet, here I am, asking for your opinion.”

“I don’t like all this secrecy. It tastes... *cheap*. Sordid. It’s how things are dealt in the South.”

The veiled accusation cut her deeper than she’d cared to admit.

“I’m not Cersei.”

“Then don’t act like her!”

Her mouth dropped in shock.

“I’m sorry, I...” Sandor spluttered, “I don’t know how to speak to a proper lady. I’m not drunk enough for this...”

And almost as if he wanted to remedy this specific shortcoming, he grabbed the pitcher and poured himself another cup.

“You and Arya... You two enjoy the game a bit too much...” he tried to explain. “Play with fire and sooner or later you’ll get burned.”

Her pique slowly ebbed. Behind his clumsy reproach, and his even clumsier attempt at an apology, there was that deep-rooted instinct to keep both her and Arya out of harm’s way Sansa had learned to discern in his actions and had come to treasure like an unexpected gift.

Urgent like a rising tide, soared within her a need to reaffirm her own freedom, to prove herself to him. To make him understand.

“This was my parents’ bedchamber, did you know?”

Sandor looked around, disoriented, ridiculously out of place, and Sansa realised it was the first time a man outside her family’s closest circle had been invited into her private chambers.

The fireplace flashed whimsical, blood-red reflections over his face and upon the misted windows. Outside, an other-worldly, ivory hush had descended over the keep.

The room was warm, almost unbearably so: the wine’s robust flavour, combined with the cosy glow of the golden flames and the heat of the water flowing in the hollow spaces between stones and wood planks, was making her cheeks blaze a bright pink.

“When Roose Bolton became Lord of Winterfell he settled here and used it as his private room,” she recalled. “Here he bedded his Frey wife, and here she gave birth to his only trueborn son. In that very bed. After our victory, after Ramsay died, I came here. And I wanted to burn the whole thing down. I couldn’t stomach the idea of laying down, sleeping into the same bed, the same room where the traitor who murdered my brother rested at night without his conscience bothering his dreams.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because this was still the same bed where Arya and I, and Bran and Rickon have been conceived
and born. The same bed where each one of us, sooner or later, has taken shelter against a thunderstorm or after a row. We would sneak in, looking for a kiss or a cuddle. This bed always meant safety, protection, love. And I couldn’t let my mother and father’s memory to be tainted by the beasts who had betrayed everything they believed in. So I started knitting.”

Sandor’s brows furrowed in confusion.

“What?”

Her lips curled up in a small smile. She went to the bed and picked up the quilt spread over it.

“I knit and knit, day and night. For more than a fortnight after the Battle, until my fingers got sore and bleeding, and my eyes burned with tiredness. I would wander the castle asking the maidservants, even the wildling girls who were flocking to Winterfell from the Gift, for any yarn of cotton I could use. They probably thought I was losing my mind. But in the end, the work was finished.”

She held it out for his inspection. It was a quilt padded with wool and embroidered with the symbols and colours of House Stark; not her best needlework, by far - here and there, the stitches were a bit crooked and messy over the edges and one could tell they’ve been unravelled more than once, when urgency made her second-guess her resolve - but she loved every inch of it: each pattern was a testament that her family had endured through the hardest of times. At the centre of it, her father’s heart tree stood strong, its leaves falling like tears of blood, and the blood became a river of red hair, Tully hair, that turned into a silvery trout... and the trout leaped into a starry sky and changed into a whirlwind of snowflakes... and the winter snows fell and fell, over a direwolf that looked like Lady. She had broken the chains that bound her and was feasting upon the remains of a flayed man...

Sandor’s callous fingers tentatively brushed the fabric.

“I’m no expert, but... seems pretty,” he uttered, the word awkward and foreign upon his chapped lips.

Her eyes shone in secret amusement. Most likely, the Hound had never used the word pretty to describe something in his whole life.

“It’s warm,” Sansa chuckled. “That’s the only thing that matters, in winter.”

She sat on the edge of the bed, absent-mindedly stroking the quilt in her lap.

“There are enemies everywhere. Even among those who claim to be our friends. Especially those. And everyone wants a piece of me. They’re all trying to make me feel worthless. A prisoner in my own home. My father’s bannermen, Littlefinger, even my own brothers. A pawn they can move to their liking. And I’m sick of it! If I want to break free I have to be better than them at playing the game, don’t you understand?”

Her eyes rose to Sandor, searching for what, she didn’t exactly know. The burned side of his face shone ghastly by the light of the fireplace, but his own eyes were on her, waiting, open and, for once, unguarded. There was an unexpected sadness in them, buried under the rage, the fear, the bloodlust... and she knew, right there, she could trust him.

He was the only one who never asked anything of her.

Except a song, she recalled.
Someday, perhaps, I shall sing for him.

“You, too, must know what it means to feel trapped into a life you didn’t choose.”

He didn’t seem to have a proper answer to give, so she bridged the empty space dividing them and stepped up to him.

But when her hand reached up to touch his face, he roughly caught her wrist, a warning written onto the flexing of his muscles. Under the strain, his leathered glove grated against her skin; Sansa swallowed a yelp and held his glower in a silent battle of wills, not allowing him the respite of a hiding place.

“I’m not going to hurt you.”

As delicately as though his face were made of some fine porcelain, she pulled aside the sparse dishevelled clump of black hair that barely covered the ruinous, deformed mass of red, sharp flesh. He jerked back, just slightly, averting his eyes when her fingertips brushed the scars, but he did not push her away.

“You brother did this?”

“Arya told you?” Sandor snarled, fury and shame colouring his voice.

She shook her head and, somewhat fascinated, traced the gnarls and lumps, up to his missing ear, and back to the scruffy line of his beard.

Littlefinger did. To scare me. To have me believe everyone was a monster. Everyone but him.

“How old were you when you left home?”

Sandor pulled away as though her words had burned him, and retreated to the darkest corner of the room, as far away as possible from the red-hot logs crackling in the fireplace, and from her.

“What matters?” he snapped. “I’ve just traded one prison for another.”

“But you’ve set yourself free.”

In the dim light, Sansa could barely make out his hunched shoulders, but she heard his bitter laugh.

“I’ll never be free, little bird,” he muttered, sourly.

“I’m not a bird,” she bit back. “I’m a wolf.”

“Aye.”

His brown eyes seemed to soak up all the light in the room; their searing intensity, that once would’ve made her feel small and helpless, now made her tremble despite the fire at her back and the wine in her veins.

“Does it still hurt?” she asked after a while, suddenly awkward.

“Sometimes,” he confessed. A curtain of black hair hid his bowed face, but Sansa sensed the deep anguish in his voice. “If I stare at the flames for too long.”

Sansa wondered what he saw in the fire. His brother? The little sister they said the Mountain had raped and beaten to death? The people he himself had murdered to follow the orders of unworthy
rulers? The ones he couldn’t save?

His fortitude was astonishing.

“How can you stand it?”

“You get used to it. People fall in love with their pain. You -” he hesitated, took a tentative step in her direction, warring with himself to find the right words. “You keep it close to you, because in the end that’s all you have, and losing that too, well, death would be more merciful, innit?”

Bitter rage flickered upon his face, and she hated it, for it reminded her of her own. She hated how it twisted his features until nothing remained of the warm soul she had come to rely upon and had sought more than once in her loneliness. She hated his resigned surrender, his unwillingness to fight the pain, because how could she find the strength to defy her monsters, if he didn’t lead the way, showing her how to be just as brave?

The tears came unexpected and split her asunder.

“It will never stop, then,” she broke off into a sob. “It’s like I have this... this wreath of thorns wrapped all around my heart, tearing me apart. I’ll never be free.”

And without warning, his hands were clutching her, squeezing her arms so hard her skin stung, shaking her, urging her to open her eyes. His warm breath washed over her face. Wine, melted snow and the smell of burned ashes.

“You think the game will set you free, in the end. The game is the trap! You play and play, and the more you do the more caught in it you become. You want to set yourself free? Your scars, the scars you’re hiding, will set you free! Don’t fool yourself: Ramsay will never go away. You take him with you, always, written all over your body. But you’re stronger than that. You’re stronger than anyone I know. Look at me.” He grabbed her chin, cupped gracelessly her wet cheek, and hissed through gritted teeth. “Look at me, girl! You’re stronger than your fears. He’s dead. You’re not. You won.”

You won. It was what Sansa told herself a hundred times over... when she turned her back to the kennels’ door, her husband’s screams a sweet music to her ears; when Arya and Bran returned home, unharmed except for the scars she couldn’t really see; every time her spies reported that Cersei’s enemies were growing in number and becoming stronger each passing day...

I won.

But it was only a summer tale, an empty prayer to some deaf god that always left a bitter taste of decay upon her lips, when she chanted it in the cold solitude of her nights, to help her sleep.

Why would she dare believe it, now?

Tears streaking down her face, Sansa glanced up to Sandor and what she saw in his eyes gave her pause. The rage had faded away. In its place, there was only reverence and heat and gratitude, and a sense of wonder that surpassed everything she thought she knew about this harsh, scarred man.

All for her.

The last of her defences shattered.

Her eyes pleaded with him.
“Why didn’t you take me away with you, the night the Blackwater burned?”

Why didn’t you kiss me?

Sandor’s breath hitched in surprise. His hands immediately released their grip on her. He took a step back, then another, and then he was stomping to the door with heavy, angry steps as though he had suddenly remembered who he was and who was she.

At this apparent brusque rejection, panic and disappointment welled in her voice.

“I didn’t give you leave to go, ser!” she called him back.

He spun around and bared his teeth into a snarl. “I’m not a fucking knight, how many times do I have to remind you, silly girl?”

They stood in front of one another, both seething, and panting and exhausted and sick of games. Sick of hiding.

The moment stretched as their gazes held and Sansa knew there was only one way this silent argument could end.

She had lost so many things which she would forever miss and regret: her innocence, her faith in the world, the ability to see the grace of the Gods even within the most inconsequential thing. Her childish conviction that she could separate with absolute, unwavering certainty true from false, good from evil.

She wouldn’t lose this, too.

This choice belonged to her, and her alone.

I won’t be ruled by fear.

Not here. Not tonight.

Gone were the thoughts of conspiracies, betrayals, and murders. The game of thrones, and her in the center of it. Littlefinger, Edwyn Karstark, Jon, Cersei Lannister, Daenerys Stormborn and her bloody dragons, Bran and the crumbling Wall...

None of them mattered, now.

Her hands reached the laces and buttons at the back of her dress and silently started to undo them.

Sandor stared, frozen. A barely breathing shadow, still as the falling snow outside her windowpane.

Shivering, her eyes on him, Sansa slid her right arm from the sleeve, then the other, and the grey gown was soon pooling on the carpet; the bodice, the soft linen shift and woollen hose followed next.

Gooseprickles rose along her exposed skin, and she felt dizzy, and brave, and strong.

Scars and all.

She remembered the shame of having Meryn Trant stripping her nearly bare in front of the whole court, and Joffrey’s sneering, lascivious stares, and the warm softness of Sandor’s white cloak upon her shoulders, shielding her from the roughness of the world.
She remembered their meeting in the godswood, how his eyes had nervously dropped on the ground in embarrassed modesty, when she rose naked as her nameday from the pond’s muddy waters.

He wasn’t looking away, this time.

Fists clenched hard at his sides, he took it all in: the welts left by the lash upon her legs and shoulders, the cuts and burns that peppered her pale arms. The hideous, purple gash on her left breast.

Battle wounds of her own.

They were ugly, and yet all he saw was the beauty within.

Her emptiness. Her loneliness.

He saw her and didn’t look away.

So Sansa didn’t, either.

She looked, she truly looked, and in a wonderful, perfect moment of clarity, she understood.

*When you’re old enough I will make you a match with someone who’s worthy of you, someone brave and gentle and strong...*

Wasn’t that a bit ironic?

“The fuck you doing?” Sandor managed to croak, at last, when even her smallclothes were discarded.

Swallowing the last of her insecurities, Sansa grasped one roughened hand into both of hers, took off his gauntlet and placed it just under the swell of her maimed breast.

“Make them disappear.”

At the contact, Sandor shut his eyes and let out a ragged breath that seemed to shake him to the core.

His whole body was quaking with need and fear.

A strange mix of tenderness and desire quickened inside her and made her want to weep: she was standing naked and vulnerable to his eyes and hands, but he was the one shaking.

*He is more terrified than me.*

Her heart swelled for him.

For this gruff, gentle man who was more at ease in the company of horses and dogs than people, this sullen, brave man who saved her from the angry mob in King’s Landing and stood by her side, always true and candid even in his outbursts of rage... this dear, strong man who had desired her when she was a little more than a deluded child playing with the barbed edges of a throne, thinking she could be left unscathed... this dark man with broad shoulders and kind eyes who desired her now even more, not despite her wounds, but because of them.

She boldly raised his fingertips to her lips, to the little scar that would forever blemish the right side of her mouth, where Meryn Trant had struck her, then guided them over her battered skin,
brushing the hollow of her neck, tracing the sensitive line of her ribs, letting him learn the shape of her, the shape of the battle wounds scattered across her back, waist and hips.

The scars were all that remained. All that she had to give.

And she gave them freely, for she knew that he would never judge...

Later, as they laid spent and sated, arms and legs tangled and breaths mixing together, she wrapped herself closer against him, cocooned into the warmth of their shared intimacy.

*I haven’t won, yet.*

The world was not a song, and their scars ran deeper than their skins.

*I haven’t won, but I can have at least this. This small comfort.*

Sandor’s soft snores lulled her into a light slumber, and she allowed herself a thankful smile.

*He won’t hurt me.*

Her heart fluttered against his big hand.

For one night, the demons slept.

Chapter End Notes

I love Sansa. I do.
She’s one of my favourite POV to write and read.
But this chapter got me with an endless headache and a bleeding nose for the last four months.
I didn’t get a writer’s block, not exactly: I had to rewrite the first part (the meeting with the lords) at least five times, because I couldn’t get it right. I’m not sure I like it even now. It’s absurdly long and a bit of a mess, but I’m too tired to try and fix it, so I can only hope it’s not too bad XD! Let me know in the comments!
As for the main voice of the chapter, I think it’s safe to say that Sansa’s biggest enemy is herself: She knows she can’t trust Littlefinger, yet she listens to him. It can’t be helped. I wanted to show how much she’s torn between what she feels she must do as head of the family and her own ambitions, and how much the revelation about Jon’s true parentage did, in fact, shake her own certainties and convictions. Yet, despite her past trauma and her flaws (her fear, her loneliness), Sansa is actively choosing to fight back, which, I hope, also shows how complex and strong her character is. Other redeeming things I like about this chapter: the foreshadowing (but that’s for me to know and for you to find out), the sisters bonding in the crypts, and Sandor.
I love Sandor more than I love Sansa. And that’s all I can say on the matter, for now. The whole Karstark plot will get its closure (and much needed explanation) when we get back to Winterfell... For now that’s all behind us, for better or for worse!
Next, we’re going to follow our King In Da Norf to Greywater Watch and further (and Jaime and Brienne both will have POV chapters soon *thumbs up*).
I do apologise for the long wait... and a big thank you to the ones who sent their love during the hiatus between chapters (MSquared, I see you!).
*One month to S8. #ForTheThrone*
"Remember when I told you there couldn’t possibly be a shittier place than Castle Black in winter?" Ser Bronn of the Blackwater hissed through gritted teeth as they ploughed their way through a thick layer of mud. "Well, I was wrong."

Jon couldn’t really argue with that.

He raised again Longclaw to open a passage through the low, rotten trees branches and paused to peek around.

The lands of the Neck were truly one of the most viciously dangerous territories he had the misfortune to travel through. He knew dark and cold. He went beyond the Wall more than once, but here, the windy winter he was accustomed to turned into a dank, heavy shroud stinking of mildew and putrefaction which withered muscle and bone and shattered the resolve of even the toughest among them, making their progress twice as slow and fraught with danger.

His breath frosting in loud pants of fatigue before him, he glanced over at the Kingslayer, and read his same worry and powerless exhaustion in his green eyes.

The last outpost of human life, a deserted inn just past Moat Cailin, where at least they managed to take cover from a snowstorm that had nearly caught them unawares, had long disappeared beyond the misty hills. After leaving what little safety the chartered paths along the Kingsroad had to offer, Jon’s small party had pushed forward, into the most gruelling and inaccessible area of the Marshes. Here, the vegetation of evergreen soldier pines, sentinel trees and the small patches of hammocks and fens which had greeted them through the Barrowlands had given way to a desolate, grey wetland where eerie, misshapen trees sprouted from the bogs, their bare twigs sinisterly clawing at their faces like bony fingers, while the higher branches sagged limply under the weight of pale moss, hanging like widow’s weeds from their extremities. In some parts, the mud reached their waists, and they had to trudge with their arms stretched above their heads, grabbing any knob or tree protuberance that might help to keep them afloat. In others, the soil had frozen into hard and thick layers of ice just as dangerous for both men and horses.
They couldn’t stop.

*If we stop, we die,* Meera Reed had warned them when they entered the swamp, two days past. Or was it three, perhaps? He couldn’t really tell the passing of time. Was it day still, or another night had already fallen on the Marshes? Above their heads, the canopy of mud-covered trees was so dense that nothing seemed to cut through it. Not wind, nor snow, nor light. Since a few hours, their last torch had burned to a crisp and the logs and chunks of wood surrounding them were so damp and rotten that no fire would catch.

With the weak winter beams unable to creep through the thicket during the day and no star from which to learn their position at night, the young crannogwoman was their sole guiding force through murk and mire.

*The blood of the Children runs in her veins,* Jon couldn’t help musing as he watched her lithe form hopping nimbly from bog to bog, skimming almost magically above the muddy land as though there was a trail just below water level only she could see.

Now, he could barely make her small frame out, through the shadows, the strong rope that tied him to her waist snapping taut or loosening in turn, when her steps either gathered speed or slowed down, as she bumped against some invisible obstacle.

They were all bound to each other that way. An odd navel string joining at the hip each one of them with his or her closest companion, turning them into some bizarre twins caked in muck from tip to toe.

That was Meera’s idea, as well. *So that you won’t get lost in the meadow.*

Aside from that small incident with Quent, one of his Stark soldiers, who got his left ear amputated after a spider the size of a fist had bitten him while he rested against a tree, so far they suffered no casualties and no one got lost into that gloomy labyrinth as black as tar, although two horses got swallowed into the quicksand and a third, his own, had to be finished off after it broke a leg over an ice sheet.

Jon had secretly thanked the gods Ghost wasn’t with them, then, but had prudently chosen to cross the Neck farther east, closer to the Bite’s coastline. The thing didn’t trouble him in the least: he knew the direwolf would find them again, once in the Riverlands, just like he did at Craster’s Keep.

By now, they almost did not stop to catch their breaths, resting on their feet, back to back, and only for a few minutes at a time, for fear of being attacked by some other nasty, wild creature. Leeches that could suck a whole horse dry. Swarms of reddish-black ants that could literally strip a man to bare bones in less than a night. Lizard lions and shadow cats that ambushed their victims without a sound. Apparently harmless, small flies whose bite could lead to a bloody flux that could claim a man within a week, if the gods were merciful... Meera had made a point of enumerating them all, describing their preying habits in vivid, gruesome detail, with the same haunting voice Old Nan would use to tell him and Robb and Bran about ice spiders and ghouls and the dead that walked...

Jon suspected that the veracity of at least half of those tales had been *vastly* exaggerated, and Meera sometimes seemed to gloat a bit too much at their own discomfort, if the smug smirk he occasionally caught on her face was any indication, but did not feel like questioning her, in their present predicament. They were deep within the territory of the lost Children of the Forest, and he could feel in his marrow that their magic still breathed, strong and lasting, between the trees of this centuries-old woodland.

He had seen too many things, *lived* through too many things, to not respect that kind of power, at
the very least.

“Greywater is not much further!” Meera croaked in front of him, her voice thick with annoyance and pride. “And I must remind you, Ser Bronn, that it’s thanks to this ‘shitty place’ if the North fended off all the pathetic attempts of invasion you southerns have started through the years. Take a good look under your feet: you’re treading over the thousands of corpses your armies left behind on their retreats.”

Jon awkwardly struggled without success to shuffle his boots out of the mud, suddenly aware of the exact nature of the things scraping against his legs.

“I meant no offence, my lady,” Bronn apologised in between curses. “Quite the opposite, actually. People that for hundreds of years managed to thrive into such a waste land enough to make it their home, have all my utmost trust and sincere admiration.” Then he warned to his closest companion in a gravelly tone: “But if, at the end of the war, you Lannister cunts think about repaying your debts with a keep in one of these swamps, I’ll fuck both your arses with a spear.”

“And how should look like, this castle of yours?” Davos’ voice prompted, a few feet behind him, a tease unmistakable in his Flea Bottom accent.

Jaime groaned. “For the love of the gods, do not egg him on!”

To his left, Jon heard someone’s gruff snickering. Lady Brienne, perhaps. Or Podrick, more likely.

“Warm, to start with,” Bronn easily answered, his cocksure smirk colouring his words. “Thick walls, a very large master chamber and a balcony overlooking the sea.”

“We have many old strongholds that look like this, on Tarth and Morne,” Brienne replied, and Jon could almost see in his mind the amused twinkle in her sky-blue eyes. “If you don’t mind some restoration work, lightning storms almost every evening in the summer and Lysene and Myrish pirate ships cramming the Straits at least twice a year, I’d be glad to have you as neighbour, once the war is over.”

“That’d be my pleasure, my lady.”

To his right, Jaime Lannister merely huffed.

_In the summer. Once the war is over._

It had such a sweet ring to it! He couldn’t really blame his men for their trifling chatter. They all dreamed of summer, as their teeth clashed for the cold and their feet blistered and limped inside their cracked, mouldy boots. With morale at its lowest, any thought that could bring small comfort to mind and body was more than welcome.

And Jon needed the distraction more than any of them.

He had tried to steer his own thoughts as far away as he could from everything that had transpired at Winterfell, but the fear and guilt he felt in leaving Sansa to deal alone with murderers and betayers in their own home had only heightened with each mile he put between him and his siblings.

_Cousins. They’re my cousins, now._

_And my name is Jaehaerys._
The word still sounded horribly wrong, foreign and unfitting, no matter how many times he turned it around his head, forcing himself to adapt to it.

It did not belong with him.

And that wasn’t even the worst of it. What was worse was that even his own name, the bastard name he had learned to don with pride, the name Ygritte breathed upon his lips when she came apart, warm and sweet, above him, urging him on, the name his bannermen had cheered as they put a crown on his brow, that name had become hateful to his own ears as well.

A sham. A lie.

He wasn’t Jon Snow anymore, and he did not know how to be Jaehaerys either. He was stuck somewhere in the middle, flinching every time someone spoke his name aloud as though he had just been welted across the face.

Before leaving Winterfell, Arya told him that a name is not what makes a person who they are. There was unquestionable wisdom in her words, Jon had to recognise; the kind of common sense she had obviously acquired from experience, while she learned to survive, fight and gods knew what else in the crowded streets of Braavos. Arya used names as a disguise, to swap at will just like she would change clothes. He, on the other hand, felt as stark naked and helpless as a newborn babe, without it.

‘Never forget what you are...’ Tyrion Lannister had bid him the very first time they met, ‘Make it your strength. Then it can never be your weakness. Armour yourself in it, and it will never be used to hurt you.’

But what should he do, now that the armour was gone?

He felt a coldness that had nothing to do with the gloom of the swamp pass right through him.

*I can’t dwell on it any longer. I will go mad.*

He raised his sword high above his head one more time and plodded ahead.

Another half-day went by before they came to a halt; this time, Meera put a hand on his right shoulder and commanded them to be quiet, as she held her breath and searched with fleeting eyes the darkness ahead.

Into the still distance, the wailing sobs of an owl shivered between the dead branches.

Fast as lightning, the girl untied the rope around her waist and scrambled up the closest tree.

“*Don’t move!*” she uttered tensely, perched on the edge, and answered the hooting with a similar call.

Suddenly the whole swamp, from every bog, hidden shrub and ghostly tree, seemed to stir and wake up, screeching with a thousand cry and one. Spooked, the horses neighed madly, baulking and writhing in the mud.

Without a second thought, Longclaw was at the ready; even in the almost complete obscurity, Jon could see Brienne and Jaime’s twin blades glowing red and golden like fluttering embers stirred in a fire.

“*Defend the King!*” Davos hollered above the cacophony and Jon sensed arrows swiftly being
pulled off from quivers and nocked on bowstrings with a whooshing sound, while the others moved as fast as the wetland allowed, closing their ranks around him.

**TU-WHUUU, TU-WHUUU**

Somewhere above their heads, Meera hooted again.

And then everything fell silent.

His sword held high before his face, Jon pivoted around, bracing himself for an attack. The rush of his own heartbeat pounded savagely in his ears, and he almost jumped out of his skin when Meera unexpectedly popped down in front of him.

“'We’re here!'” she declared and pointed a finger toward the tangled trees.

“I ain’t seeing nothing!” Anguy cried out.

The thick, grey foliage shuddered and shook apart like a giant rousing from a heavy slumber, and the muddy darkness unfolded before their very eyes: hundreds of lights emerged from the cold fog, an entire hidden city, like a beacon tearing up the night of the swamp.

There were stilt houses and smaller huts and buildings erected upon crannogs, above the trees, *inside* the trees, on the sturdy branches, leaning on stockades made of oak, reeds and bark as far as the eye could see.

Jon’s jaw dropped.

Meera’s green-brown eyes smiled up at him: “Welcome to Greywater Watch.”

“Thank the *fucking* Gods!” Bronn proclaimed without ceremony and shouldered his way to the narrow, dry causeway mere feet from where they stood that - Jon now could see it very well - drew a serpentine path throughout the meadow.

The stale air soon filled with the men’s whoops of joy and disbelief, and Jon joined in with a shaky laugh of relief of his own, before following in Bronn’s squelching steps.

The seat of House Reed wasn’t larger, nor more opulent, than the buildings around it, but it rose about three feet above water level, on a wide moving island, and its foundations rested upon the stump and roots of the most colossal weirwood tree Jon had ever seen. While everything else was tinged in hues of grey and green, the keep was a striking, moonlight-glittering white.

At the entrance, wrapped in moss-green leather, stood a short man with a long copper beard streaked with silver and hair a tangle of brown and gold that wouldn’t have cut a poor figure upon the head of a wildling.

Meera sprinted ahead to meet him and threw her arms around his neck.

In between sobs, Jon could grasp only broken words, but he caught Bran’s name, and Jojen’s, the youngest Reed who died beyond the Wall helping his brother in his quest. And then Meera turned to him.

“I’ve brought him, Father,” she sniffled. “Like I promised.”

“Lord Reed,” Jon greeted with a curt nod.

Howland Reed wordlessly stared at him with glazed eyes, transfixing, a shaky hand raised to Jon’s
face as though he meant to make certain he wasn’t a ghost. He seemed torn between the impulse to hug him like he did just moments ago with his own daughter, and the formality of duty, which demanded he kneel to his King. In the end, he settled for seizing his shoulder in a somewhat stronger hold than Jon would have guessed, for such a small man.

“Good,” Lord Howland muttered to himself, deeply moved. “Very good.” His deep-green eyes flickered behind Jon’s back, and only then he seemed to realise there were other people, beside him and Meera.

“Come inside, friends,” he gesticulated hurriedly, as his guards opened a portcullis made of birch wood to let them in. “You’ll find dry clothes, warm beds and fine food and drinks. Rest for a while,” he added to him, a hand over his forearm, “then come and find me.”

Jon lost sight of the rest of the group as soon as they crossed Greywater’s main gate: his lodgings were situated right next to Meera’s rooms, in the inner part of the wooden keep, where the crannog’s uneven ground gently rose, following the twists and coils of the swollen roots below, as they forced their way across the earth. A monstrous snake stretching its whole length just under their feet, alive and growing still.

The room, although frugal and bare, was cosy and welcoming, and had a solemn mood lingering to it Jon couldn’t quite place. Almost the entirety of the space was taken up by a bed carved from the convoluted shape of the ancient weirwood, the timber just as white as the heart tree in Winterfell’s godswood.

Men’s craftsmanship had fashioned the limb’s irregularities into a smooth surface fit to peaceful sleep, yet, as he laid a careful hand over it, a thought struck him with sudden certainty.

*This is Jojen’s room.*

The greenseer who put Bran on the path to become what he was now and who died in the cold lands beyond the Wall by his own sister’s hands.

Did he dream about their fate in this very bed, before setting on his journey?

‘Trees dream, too,’ Bran told him once. ‘And when they do, they whisper their songs of leaf and earth into the ears of the ones lonely enough to listen.’

*Will I dream of her, that black-haired young girl crowned with a wreath of blue roses, if I lay down on it?,* Jon wondered, retracting his hand as though burned.

*Will I dream of past lives and sins, of future glories and deaths?*

*Will I see a glimpse of my own, just as Jojen must have, as well?*

Truths and memories. Blood and grief.

The scars on his chest tingled disturbingly.

He was tired beyond words, but couldn’t rest. Not now, when a constant uproar of doubts and fears was laying a furious siege upon his mind: the unshakeable conviction he felt when he took to the road was dwindling like light at the end of the day. Faces, both known and unknown, swam behind his closed eyelids. His father’s pained expression as he said farewell to him with a promise he would never fulfil; Alys Karstark, looking lovely in Stark colours, her grey eyes smiling up at him as they danced; a woman risen from the fire, with purple eyes and silken hair the shade of a molten moon; and the clearest of all, Sansa’s smart, resourceful face, crumpling under the weight of a
sudden revelation... Dread twisted deep within Jon like a hundred blades... he had seen the emptiness in her eyes, the mute shock in the tightening of her lips when Bran told them...

He should have never left Winterfell.

He should have simply asked his brother to tell him everything about what had happened during the Rebellion. Begged him to make him understand through his visions. But even that, Jon knew, wouldn’t have been enough.

He needed to hear the story from the living voice of someone who was there, who had heard her laughter, seen her tears. Held her dead body.

And yet, the idea of confronting the actual reality of his birth troubled him more than he cared to admit and brought about a scorching, irrational fury he didn’t quite know how to quell.

His own reflection stared back at him from the basin of hot water prepared for his arrival, dirty, miserable and aching. Hollow.

Jon had looked and felt the same, after the Battle at Winterfell, and for many days after it, even when his bannermen, Ned Stark’s bannermen, had acclaimed him King in the North. He had done his duty, ruled at the best of his abilities, tried to keep his people together, juggling his way through betrayals, recriminations, suspicions and quarrels, but there was always something gnawing at his heart, a sense of dissatisfaction, a craving, an ineffable disconnection between words and actions and feelings which baffled and left him wanting.

But now that the missing piece was, at last, within easy reach, he found himself cowering away, unwilling to take that final step.

There was a very peculiar kind of merciless horror to be found in the truth.

_Are you that much of a craven, bastard?_, a voice that sounded suspiciously like Tyrion’s taunted him, and Jon was pushed back to a frank exchange of words across the fire, on the harsh road to the Wall. A talk about dragons, honour and the power of knowledge... _Most men would rather deny a hard truth than face it_...

And Jaime... only a few weeks past, Jaime had urged him to move on, to take charge of his own life, and choose, for the first time, a path...

Back in Jojen’s room, Jon snorted: the irony of having not one, but two Lannisters giving him life advice wasn’t completely lost on him.

And the fact that they both had the right of it just added more salt on wounds.

There was no escaping this.

He plunged a cotton cloth into the lukewarm water and angrily scrubbed the dried mud and sweat off his face, then changed into clean boots and clothes, and went to face his demons.

Greywater Watch was as much a labyrinth as the swamp surrounding it was. Jon wouldn’t be able to draw up a map of its inner areas if he tried: like the threads of a web, spreading across the meadow, there were wooden bridges connecting each part of the structure with the other buildings, and some of the passageways were cramped and so low Jon had to crouch a little not to bump his head.
Every now and then, the faces of crannogmen and women would flash in and out of the side passages, their eyes looking back at him with queer curiosity... green eyes, red eyes, and black ones and ones of molten gold...

After a while, he had the distinct feeling to be wandering in circles, and soon enough he came to a brusque halt in front of a blind spot.

“Are you lost, boy?”

He turned around, his grip on Longclaw’s hilt, but it was just Howland Reed. The crannogman wasn’t there a second ago. Jon frowned and did a double-take in the direction he was heading, his skin crawling.

“No, I...” His shoulders deflated slightly as a resigned sigh left his lips. “Perhaps a bit.”

Lord Reed’s thin mouth tilted up at the corner as he nudged his head to the side.

“Come. Follow me.”

Jon complied. They reached a small, circular room with shadowcat pelts scattered on the floor and weaponry and shields hung on the wall; there was no hearth, but three braziers kept the mouldy cold from outside at bay. Lord Howland sent the guards away and gestured for him to sit at the carved wooden table, while he poured into a glass a generous fill of a drink so clear that Jon mistook it for water, at first.

It was not water.

Bowels liquefying, Jon succumbed to a magnificently unkingly fit of wheezing coughs while Lord Reed’s rough, dappled face faded in and out of his watery vision.

“One of our best aged meads, made with herbs and bark,” the old lizard-lion explained as way of apology. He quaffed down the contents of his own cup without so much as a pleased smack of his lips. “I bet it would put to shame even the fermented goat milk the wildlings are justly famous for.”

“If I don’t die of heartburn, I’ll let them know,” Jon croaked, glowering.

The strange man took a seat before him, his piercing eyes twinkling with something akin affection. But the more he stared at him the more the warmth in his expression turned into a green storm of anguish and woe, until his gaze wavered and dropped skittishly to his shaking hands.

“You must forgive me, but... You look astonishingly like her.”

Nothing more than a whisper, pained and wobbly.

Jon swallowed hard, his throat suddenly gritty. He did not know how to counter that. Howland stood up nervously to refill his own cup.

“I knew you’d come, sooner or later. I’ve been getting ready for this conversation all my life, and yet I feel utterly out of my depth. You must have questions.”

“Only one. Why?”

It came out more resentful than he had intended, but, at this point, Jon no longer cared for pleasantries.
“After my father…” his breath caught in his throat. He swallowed again. Bile, spite and hollow pain. “After Lord Eddard died, why didn’t you write me? Why not say something, then?”

Reed contemplated him long and hard, choosing his next words with care.

“Because some truths did not bear saying, and some lies are necessary. Ned tried to protect you by sending you to the edge of the world, but the Wall was still an unforgiving, dangerous place; there were still many people who remembered the Rebellion, people who might have tried to hurt you, perhaps even kill you, had they known.”

Jon couldn’t help the bitter laugh that escaped him. If Lord Stark had meant to send him to the Wall to keep him from harm, well, that plan blew up in their faces in a rather spectacular way.

Pain from Olly’s stabbing wound seared white-hot through him, and for a moment he was back at Castle Black, laying flat in the dirty snow, while his lungs filled with blood and darkness and cold.

“I had the right to know,” he curtly said, sick and sullen.

“Aye, and don’t think for a moment that the silence hasn’t cost me,” Howland retorted, colour rising to his cheeks. “It pained Ned as well, to lie to everyone, especially to you. I didn’t agree with many of his choices, but I was loyal to him. He was my liege, and my best friend besides and I understood him, better than anyone. I think... I think a part of him believed he could still keep her alive in his mind, as long as nobody uttered a word about her, or the way she died.”

For all his reluctance, this, at least, Jon didn’t find difficult to believe. He remembered how sometimes his father’s brow would cloud over while watching him; Jon always thought it was shame, for being reminded daily of that one past sin, festering on his honour like black mould upon a tree’s root, but in truth it was a heartbreak so profound it could find relief nor absolution in nothing else but silence.

Cloaked in his loneliness, Ned Stark had grieved for his beloved sister all his life, while he ignored, or didn’t want to see, that there was a child next to him, always a respectful step behind, who worshipped the very ground he walked on, and who missed her just as much as he did. A little boy who would have drunk in each and every word he would have spoken about her.

Jon had craved to hear stories about her for all his life and now he grieved for those memories only her brother could have shared, the memories that now were lost forever.

His eyes stung.

“We could’ve mourned her together,” he rasped, and the grief he felt for her blended in his heart with the grief he still bore, despite everything, for the man he had called father for all his life.

“Oh, my dear boy,” Howland Reed shook his head. “Ned wasn’t the kind of man to let anyone share in his sorrow and weakness. He used honour as a shield, and when even that failed him, he drew the needed strength to do what he believed was right from his pain, and the love he felt for you. He wouldn’t have wanted to burden you with that, as well.”

He blinked back at him, blankly.

“Burden me?... Burden me?”

The fire he had bridled and curbed until that very moment snarled and bit like a savage beast and he soon found himself springing to his feet, his whole body shaking with fury.
“He let me believe my mother was some common girl he fucked and ditched! I thought she was a
table wench he met somewhere in Dorne! Or worse.”

How many times did he get into brawls with the lads at Winterfell, and later, with his fellow
brothers in the Night’s Watch, just for a jape, or a snigger, or a crude half-comment his ears picked
over supper? A whore, they would call her, and Jon did believe them; how could he not? His father
didn’t provide him with any evidence, any weapon that could have helped him fight off the
slanders.

“I didn’t even know if she was still alive. He wouldn’t even speak her name!”

His breath was coming out in shallow pants now, as though he had run a mile in the deep snow.

Howland patiently waited for his rage to subside.

“I haven’t either,” he then confessed softly. “For the past twenty-four years. Not once, since these
arms held you for the first and only time. I swore an oath that day. An oath I’m going to break
now. Lyanna...” His green eyes squeezed shut, those mere syllables acid tears dribbling over an
open wound. “Lyanna Stark is your mother. You were born at the Tower of Joy, and she only had
enough strength in her to give you a name and rock you to sleep for a short while, before dying.”

She has held me.

Jon hopelessly dug deeper into his memory, hunting for a scent - withered roses and dried blood -
for the ghost of that long-forgotten caress, but the trail of her warmth upon his skin was gone and
he couldn’t bring it back, not even as an echo in his own imagination.

His empty hands balled into fists.

He had nothing.

“Did she suffer?”

The words were wrenched from between clenched teeth and hung there, horrific and inconceivable,
suspended in the anguished space connecting their heartbreaks.

Sickness burned right through him, unrestrained.

Jon didn’t really want to know, but like a child scratching a scab that wouldn’t stop itching, he
could not stop himself from asking.

“I think... I think she took great comfort in knowing you would live to become the man you are
today,” the crannogman conceded cautiously.

That wasn’t even remotely enough.

His mind tortured him with morbid images of her, in that small tower, stifling under the scorching
Dornish sun, fighting a losing battle in the birthing bed, her body broken, the pale face screwed up
in pain, cold sweat and blood soaking the sheets... the smell of life and death filling the air around
her... Was she scared? Was she alone? Why was she alone? Why wasn’t there a maester, a midwife,
to help her out?

Why nobody helped her?

He realised he must have said that last bit aloud for Howland Reed had grasped his shoulders and
was talking to him; his lips were moving, but, through the haze of his own agony, it took Jon some time to focus back on the words’ meaning.

“Jon, listen to me. *Listen!* There was nothing we could do. Your mother was brave right up to the end. Her last thoughts were for you. Everything we did after, all the lies and secrets, we did it out of love, to protect you. You were the only thing left of her we had.” His voice came apart at the seams, splitting into a half-sob.

Something raw and blazing ripped its way to the surface, floating in Howland’s moss-green eyes as though beseeching him to understand.

His breath hitching in shock, Jon paused and frowned down at him, realisation dawning in his mind.

“You were in love with her...”

Howland’s arms went slack to his sides.

His head and shoulders shrunk in as though he was either trying to take up even less space than he already was, or bracing himself, expecting Jon to take offence at the temerity and hit him, as absurd as it might have seemed. When he spoke again, in shy, hushed murmurs, he sounded genuinely lost, almost ashamed by the admission.

“It was difficult not to. Lyanna was... she was a dream of spring. She was the dream of many. Hard and rare as Valyrian steel. Spirited and funny and forgiving. She was free and stubborn, wild and brisk like a mountain creek. Fierce like a storm... Every time she entered a room, I just couldn’t look away.”

There were so much longing and adoration in his tone, his eyes, that Jon bowed his head, suddenly self-conscious, his wrath thawing into a dull bone-deep ache.

“In the end, we were all out of her league... none of us could have kept her. Not me, nor Robert, and certainly not that silver prince of hers.”

He spat the last words like it were an insult.

“What happened at Harrenhal?” Jon asked after a while.

“She saved my life.”

Howland moved past him, to the wall where all the nondescript shields hung, dusty and neglected, and removed the shabbiest one, a pine-and-leather round shield banded with iron around the edges. Time and disuse had left the paint cracking and mostly fading on the sigil, but Jon could still guess the outline of a weirwood tree, white on black, and the sea of crimson leaves that seemed to be stirred by an invisible wind.

Something in its blazon nudged oddly at his memory... there were carvings on the tree’s bark, a crease almost like a laughing mouth...

“The Knight of the Laughing Tree... This was his shield!” he whispered, enthralled.

Reed arched an eyebrow, in mild surprise. “You know the story?”

Jon nodded vigorously.
Of course he did.

In his childhood’s fervid dreams of glory, the Harrenhal mystery knight stood valiant and strong right next to other equally celebrated champions of the people... the Knight of Tears, one of his favourites, who named sad and beautiful Naerys his Queen of Love and Beauty... Barristan the Bold, at the time a green lad of ten, who jousted against the Prince of Dragonflies at the tourney of Blackhaven... Baelon Targaryen, the Silver Fool, still a squire himself, who unhorsed in a row a golden tree, a red apple, a white sun upon an orange sky and three oak leaves, and won his spurs the same day...

Yet, to a lad of seven, the Knight of the Laughing Tree surpassed in his legend everyone else, for his true identity was never discovered, to the point that many people in the North believed him to be a myth. When they were young, both he and Robb thought the knight had been Ned Stark himself, only to be harshly scolded when they questioned him about it.

But now the evidence of his existence was right in front of him, and Jon felt as giddy and starstruck as his seven-year-old self.

He raised the shield to the light of the braziers, perusing each and every chink where the lances must have shattered in the effort to drive its owner from his saddle, in his ears the vibrant clangour of horse hooves launched forward into a wild gallop, and the warlike cheering of the crowd.

“Harrenhal’s mystery knight.”

“Not a knight at all, I’m afraid.”

As engrossed as Jon was with the relic in his hands it took him a while to really grasp the implications of his host’s remark, but when the actual meaning of the words hit him, he nearly dropped the shield to the floor. Shock and astonishment won over his rage and grief, and rendered him speechless for a moment.

He looked at the shield. Then at Howland Reed.

“It was her?” he blurted out, gaping. His eyes must have been as wide as saucers, comically so, because for the first time the room resounded with Lord Reed’s hearty laughter.

“What you must understand about your mother is that she couldn’t stand any form of injustice,” he told him, after Jon took his seat back at the table, his hands still clutching the shield as though it were some precious heirloom.

“When I went to Harrenhal I was quite inexperienced. Far away from home for the very first time... of course I was bound to get into trouble the moment I put my boots on the castle’s grounds. So when she caught some squires beating me, she stepped up in my defence. Three against one. You should have seen their faces when she knocked all of them into the dust without breaking a sweat. A skinny slip of a girl of barely five and ten!”

His eyes crinkled at the corner at the reminiscence and Jon joined in with a small awed chuckle of his own. He could almost see her, wearing jerkin and breeches, her tousled black hair loosely tied up and cheeks flaming red from indignation. In his mind, she looked less like the woeful woman he often dreamed of, and much more like Arya.

“She introduced me to her brothers and father straight away and invited me to sit with her family at the feast, that same evening.” Howland’s wrinkled face darkened into a scowl of deep aversion. “And that’s where she met him.”
If at first Jon thought he might have imagined the bitter venom twisting his voice at the mere mention of Rhaegar Targaryen, now jealousy and hostility were as plain as day.

_He wouldn’t even call him by his name._

His eyes unfocused and lost in some faraway memory, the lizard-lion raised again the glass to his lips and gulped down half its content, then crooked his head to the side like an owl and considered him coldly.

“Do you sing?”

Jon shook his head, slightly confused by the sudden change of topic.

“Not really.”

Back in the day, the girls in Winter Town would roar with laughter at his dismal attempts, and even Robb and Theon couldn’t carry a tune to save their own life, to Septa Mordane’s great dismay and to Arya’s greatest amusement. Sansa was the nightingale of the household.

“Well,” Howland clicked his tongue, a loathing as cold as death seeping in each word, “the Prince of Dragonstone was exceptionally good at it. Some say he should have been born a bard, instead of heir to the Iron Throne. Would have spared a lot of misery to the realm.” Another long swallow. “I don’t remember what he sang. _Jenny of Oldstones_ , perhaps, or _Alysanne_ , or something equally mournful and depressing. Lyanna wept. And got really angry when your uncle Benjen mocked her for it. And that was it. Nothing would have come out of it, were it not for what happened later that same night. It was her idea, although Ben helped. It started innocently enough. They had seen the three squires serving their lords at dinner and Lyanna wanted to give them a lesson they wouldn’t forget. So after dark we sneaked into Lord Whent’s armoury and nicked different bits and pieces of armour. No one was really using them anyway. And like that, the Knight of the Laughing Tree was born.”

He fondly stroked the round, battered shield. A caress that sailed across the wide seas of time to reach her.

“We were young and stupid, and Lyanna was... it was nigh impossible to make her change her mind, once she was set on something. She had no real training in jousts or combat and could have hurt herself, but the old gods must have been watching, because by the end of the day the three knights had been defeated in the list and their horses and armour had changed their ownership... and the crowd... gods, the crowd! The commons went mad for her!”

His enthusiasm was contagious and Jon’s heart was briefly swept off by a wave of pride at the thought of her, victorious and inexorably devoted to her principles to the point of foolishness, and with a jolt of the sweetest, most perfect contentment, he realised there was something of himself in her, too, after all.

“Lyanna became a hero to the smallfolk, that day,” Howland went on. “But the king saw treason and enemies everywhere, so naturally when the mystery knight didn’t come up to collect his winnings, he became suspicious. He feared the knight had been sent by his enemies to gain the people’s favour and stir them against him, so he ordered the prince to bring him to justice. In the middle of the night, a hunting expedition was arranged, but instead of boars or stags, they unknowingly chased a stupid boy and a reckless girl who were only trying to put back in the armoury an old shield and some shabby armour pieces without being seen.”

“But the knight’s identity remained a secret! How did you run away?”
“We didn’t,” Lord Reed pointed out. “The prince caught us. We tried to cross the lake and get to the Isle of Faces, so that the hounds might lose our scent, but I was injured and Lyanna wouldn’t leave me behind. We clambered on an old ash tree, out of sight. But the branch over which Lyanna was poised snapped. She quite literally fell from the sky, right into his arms. When he realised who she really was, he let us go with the promise he wouldn’t turn her over to the King. He kept the shield. I have no idea what lies he fed to his father, but Aerys seemed appeased and didn’t pursue us any further.” His head dropped to his chest in hopelessness. “By then, the damage was already done. For the following five days, Lyanna behaved queerly: she would sneak out for hours, making up excuses to go riding on the lake road, but she wouldn’t take anyone with her. No one seemed to pay heed. They all had their own business to mind. Ned was completely smitten with Ashara Dayne. Brandon was competing in the joust and would spend the better part of the day loitering around, drinking with Robert Baratheon and Ser Richard Lonmouth and the better part of the nights bedding handmaidens and serving girls alike. But I was worried. So on the sixth day, I followed her.”

The green eyes lingered, painfully haunted, over the shield. His lips pressed into a bloodless, unwilling line, as though forbidding him to say more. A sense of decency, perhaps. Or maybe just mortification at remembering his own heartbreak.

Jon reached for the pitcher next to him and filled Howland’s cup afresh.

“They were just talking,” the old man resumed, after taking a mouthful. “Strolling around the lake’s shores like two friends who haven’t seen each other in ages. There was absolutely nothing untoward about it, but... I knew. The next day... You know what happened then.”

_The moment when all the smiles died._

“He rode past his pregnant wife and put a crown of blue winter roses in Lyanna’s lap,” Jon finished for him.

Five days.

Five days to fall in love and tear a kingdom asunder.

_Took us even less than that_, Ygritte’s husky voice quipped. _The heart wants what the heart wants, and some things are out of our hands, Jon Snow._

He shut his eyes and when he reopened them, Lord Reed was slouched over, with his elbows upon his knees and both his hands grabbing his head in despair.

“Your grandfather was... raving mad,” he quavered, his fists tearing at his hair. “Everybody in the castle and the camp outside heard the shouts that night. Brandon wanted satisfaction for the insult, but he was blaming her in truth. Accused her of bringing dishonour to the Starks and Baratheons by leading on the prince. Started calling her foul names... while Robert... Robert kept drinking with that chilling smile on his _stupid_ face and did not say a single word... she stormed off, and next day we took our leave from the king and left Harrenhal in a hurry.”

A desolate, strangled sob heaved his tiny body as he stared vacantly at the loose strands of brown-grey hair in his fists.

“I was meant to return home, but Lord Rickard requested my presence at Winterfell for the next few months, until Brandon’s marriage. I believe he’d hoped I could keep Lyanna distracted long enough for her to forget about Harrenhal and peacefully come to terms with her own already arranged future, and for a while the plan worked.”
Howland smiled, wistful, through his tears.

“We were thick as peas in a pod. Lyanna, Ben, fiery Maege Mormont, and me. From dawn to dust we would roam over the castle grounds, around the Wolfswood. Sometimes we’d spar together. Lyanna was vicious, and quite the sore loser. She taught me how to ride and I taught her and Ben how to make nets and three-pronged spears to catch frogs and fish. We were the terror of the household! In the evenings Lord Stark would meet us in his solar, where Vayon Poole lectured us, threatening to send Maege back to Bear Island and me to Greywater unless we’d behaved ourselves, and so we showed our best contrite faces and apologised in earnest.”

Jon didn’t have a hard time imagining that. After all, it was not that long ago he stood in Howland’s shoes, being scolded himself. Stealing treats from the kitchen... hiding harmless grass snakes under Septa Mordane’s bedcovers... dumping snow unto the guardsmen passing through the gate... locking Jeyne Poole up inside a huge iron chest after he coated her in honey and flour, because she neighed in Arya’s face during supper - and there was that one time when he, Robb and Theon, perched just out of sight on the worn gargoyles of the First Keep, pissed on the heads of three Umber cutns who had been rude to Hodor the evening before... Every nasty little prank you could think of, he probably did that too.

“And next day you were at it again,” Jon said with a knowing smirk.

“Worse than the day before!” Howland avowed, cackling like a proud crow. “Old Nan absolutely loathed me. She was convinced I was some kind of bog devil sent to Winterfell to be the bane of her existence and corrupt the soul of her perfect, darling girl. But it was all worth it. Every day, I made Lya laugh. She had a laugh... that could rouse the dead.”

The sparkling grin quivered on his lips, faltering into a grimace. He paused, eyes closed, and Jon held his breath with him, straining his ear, but the only sounds in the room were the red-hot coals crackling and snapping into the braziers and his own heart, thundering against his ribcage.

Reed clenched his jaw, struggling, as fresh tears brimmed his eyes.

“She wasn’t happy, not really. I knew she didn’t want to marry Robert. She had begged her father to call off the marriage, but a Stark never takes back a given word. It sickened me. I didn’t know how to help her. We often stayed up late, at night, talking, imagining a different future. She wanted to flee to Essos. Found her own mummers’ troupe and travel through the Free Cities with it. ‘I already have who’s going to write me beautiful songs,’ she would say, and I was so stupidly smitten with her I couldn’t even realise who she was talking about. They had been writing to each other in secret, for months.”

The chair scraped against the hardwood floor as Howland rose and started pacing, his steps urgent and rushed, and Jon leaned forward, on the edge of his seat, his sweating hands clutching protectively his mother’s shield on his lap.

“And then spring finally came, and we took to the Kingsroad again. Brandon was to be married to Catelyn Tully in Riverrun and from there we were expected to ride the rest of the way to Storm’s End, where Robert Baratheon would drape a black-and-golden cloak around Lya’s shoulders.

As one of your grandfather’s most loyal bannermen, and still unmarried myself, I was part of the wedding party. Your uncle was already in Riverrun, but he rode up the River Road to meet us. Ned and Robert were travelling down from the Eyrie with old Lord Arryn, and were supposed to join the group at the Crossroads Inn a few days later.

We were maybe a two days’ ride from Harrenhal, when Lyanna suddenly disappeared. We didn’t
fret, at first. It wasn’t uncommon for her to ride away when she wanted to be alone. But the night went by and when by midday she was still missing, Lord Rickard sent a searching party… We followed her trail almost to the Antlers and stopped to a tavern on the road. There, one of the serving wenches mentioned a girl matching Lyanna’s description. It had struck her as odd, a young woman travelling alone with seven men. One for each of the Gods, she japed. They were all dressed in black and grey capes and were clearly trying not to raise unwanted attention, but the wench told us that they carried themselves like knights, and paid her quite generously. She couldn’t say in which direction they rode afterwards, but what we heard was enough.”

Jon was appalled. “She arranged the whole thing? And the others still believed she has been abducted?”

“No one really did. But Brandon was a prideful man. He’d sooner delude himself with a lie, as uncomfortable as it might have been, than face an uglier truth where his own little sister, by all accounts an honest, virtuous woman, the gem of the family, hoodwinked them all and eloped on her own accord with a married man, and the crown prince at that.”

Howland Reed fell silent, then, and Jon didn’t really need to press him for more. He could easily fill in the blanks by himself... His uncle storming inside the Red Keep in a bloodthirsty rage, shouting for the Prince’s head, Aerys arresting him and his companions on charges of treason - a trap, really, to lure in their lord fathers and execute them all in cold blood... Rickard Stark cooked inside his own armour, while his first-born strangled himself to death in the futile attempt to save him... in the deathly stillness of the rest of the court and of the two Kingsguards who stood and watched and did nothing to put an end to the torture.

Only young Ethan Glover was spared, to make a witness out of him.

The witness talked, and the Rebellion caught fire.

That was a horror story even he knew. Not from Lord Stark himself, or Lady Catelyn, of course, but from whispers and gossip caught on his trips in Winter Town or from the Glovers and the Cerwyn lads, who shared their childhood summers with him and Robb and Theon. From Barbrey Dustin, who was rumoured to have been secretly in love with Brandon and still held a grudge to the Starks for her husband’s death, or Ser Rodrick Cassel, who had mourned his brother till his dying breath; Jon even heard Denys Mallister, commander of the Shadow Tower, speaking ruefully of the nephew he lost to Aerys’ madness... But that was about it. To the eyes of a green boy of four and ten these tales were nothing more than sad reminiscences of old people grieving for their lost youth. Jon never made a great deal out of it. Why would he? It didn’t touch him. It wasn’t his story... After all, he had been spared nearly all the pain of such losses: his own father had returned from the war, with some deep scars that would never heal, sure, but still alive nonetheless, and his mother... whether she was a whore or a highborn lady, how could he miss what he never had?


When had this conviction stopped being enough?, Jon wondered now, while he stared into Howland Reed’s bloodshot, hollow eyes and tried to make sense of everything he learned.

*I still know nothing, Ygritte, but a little less than yesterday.*

One remaining thing didn’t add up with the rest of the story, however.

“How did you know where to find her?”
What little blood was on Howland’s face drained away as he stilled. If the cold sweat glistened upon his gaunt features were any indication, the crannogman clearly did not expect the question, and seemed troubled, afraid to speak, even.

But now that the veil of deception had been lifted, Jon was determined to get to the bottom of it.

“Lord Reed.” Thankfully his voice didn’t waver and Jon recognised in it the same clement authority he often heard in Ned Stark’s voice whenever he imparted orders. “Answer me.”

Their eyes met.

“Because she wrote me.”

Heart thrumming in his throat, Jon watched as the lizard-lion drew out a worn folded piece of parchment from his jerkin and placed it on the table, mere inches from his fingers.

He stared at it, frozen.

The paper was dry and yellowed, and when he attempted to smooth it out - gentle, gentle - the crisp bits at the corners and along the edges crumbled into a grainy powder, like brittle bones giving way to age and decay.

It was nothing more than a draft, dotted with ink blots, as though she didn’t have the time to write a fairer, more legible copy. The handwriting was a bit angular and cramped, shaken, and here and there words and entire phrases had been hurriedly crossed out with thick, angry strokes, where her tempestuous thoughts had brusquely faltered or changed direction altogether; in a few places, the quill had rammed into the paper so furiously it had torn it.

None of it mattered. This letter belonged to Lyanna Stark. These were her words, her thoughts, her hopes and fears, and Jon tenderly cupped it in his hands as if it were her very beating heart.

My dearest Howl,

He skimmed through it, once, twice, then with a frustrated groan started all over again, willing the blurred black signs to stop whirling before his eyes and take a shape and a pattern he could concentrate over...

My dearest Howl,

I have to be quick about it, I’m not supposed to write to anyone. It’s not safe. But I fear it might be my only chance to say goodbye.

You must not tell a living soul what you’re about to read, not even to my brothers. Ben is still so very young, and Ned... honour compels him to stand by Robert and avenge Brandon and Father. They wouldn’t understand. But you will. You were with me when everything began.

I am somewhere in Dorne.

Locked in a half-tumbledown tower hidden deep in the mountains like one of those princesses Maege and I always made jokes about! How the tides have turned!

I know what you’re thinking in that thick head of yours, but I am NOT in need of saving.

I chose this.
Know that I am in the best of hands and my prince has done everything in his power to ensure my safety and well-being, should things take a turn for the worse.

Rhaegar left for King’s Landing a sennight ago; we know a reckoning is near. He wants to make some big changes, as soon as the war is won. His confidence both comforts and terrifies me. Since he went away, my nights have been plagued with horrible nightmares.

I’m trying to be brave, but I feel so terribly alone, and I miss you all so much my heart bleeds!

I long for Winterfell.

The peace of the godswood. Nan’s tales and Maege’s adorable pig-like laughter. Our games by the pond. Even Poole’s toady face and Gage’s curses when he chased us throughout the courtyard with his big wooden spoon, after we stole from the kitchen the blackberry-and-cheese pastries you’re so fond of.

I miss it all.

I hope I will be allowed to come back home someday.

As far away and detached from everything as I am now, I feel the world crumbling around me. And before this is over I fear our folly will demand for other sacrifices to be made.

More and more each day, my thoughts and prayers are with the Princess of Dragonstone, whom I realise we have wronged beyond forgiveness, and those two innocent children who aren’t supposed to pay for our wrongdoings.

I regret the hurt that I caused but, gods have mercy, I don’t regret this.

I can’t.

I am about to become a mother, too.

Mayhaps that’s the real reason why I’m reaching out to you.

Rhaegar hopes for a girl. Silly man. He even has the name ready. Some foolish line he read on a parchment somewhere, talking about a three-headed dragon. I guess he’s going to be in for a bit of a disappointment, because I saw him in my dreams.

My beautiful boy. With hair as black as a raven’s wing, and the heart in his gentle eyes.

He will be king one day.

I’m not sure what to make of it.

As I’m writing this, he’s pounding on my belly. Wants to make his presence known. Stubborn, like a true Stark.

I know you’re there, my love. I can’t wait to meet you and tell you how much wanted and loved you were, from the very start.

Please, Howl, please, if I won’t be there to remind him, make sure he knows. Every day of his life.

I love you.

I’m sorry.
His thumb traced the contours of her signature, that dear name he had overlooked for all his life, and pictured her fingers, smudged with ink, slender yet calloused due to riding and archery drills, resting in the same spot where now his own did.

He was already with her, loved and wanted, when her hand had scribbled out this note, and her wonder and joy, the heart-pounding trepidation that slowly swelled in tune with her body, were a balmy kiss upon his wounds. But he could taste her fear, too... that gloomy premonition of death, like a rotten fruit in her mouth...

“I’ve betrayed her,” Howland sobbed somewhere to his left. “I’ve betrayed her and I lied to Ned. I told him I’ve got the information from a greenseer of the bogs, and he was so distraught by that point that he didn’t even question me. We reached her just in time.”

Jon flinched. A sudden annoyance at the other man’s presence crawled under his skin and he had to fight off the impulse to scream at him to just shut up. Every word grated on his nerves, on his thoughts. Having someone else’s pain intruding into his own was unbearable.

He wanted to be alone with her.

To have her for himself, for awhile longer.

“I’m sorry, Jon. I’m sorry I couldn’t keep her last wish. I’ve begged Ned to leave you with me. After all, he was newlywed, with a babe on the way, and I... I had nothing. No ties, no family yet. I knew Cat would never find it in her heart to love you like one of her own, so I swore to him that I would have instead. I would have raised you with all the love I could never give to Lya. But he said that Stark blood ran through your veins, and that your rightful place was at Winterfell. So he took you. And I took the shield. And so the lie began.”

Jon stared back at his mother’s spidery handwriting, as he slowly began to understand that, in the end, it wasn’t a forbidden love, or the labours of a difficult childbirth that truly killed Lyanna Stark.

Honour did.

That same honour Jon had valued above everything else and held into the palm of his hands like something precious and easily breakable that needed constant tending through deeds and words, to grow and thrive.

A distorted perception of it, where the only thing that truly mattered was not duty, or loyalty to oaths and family, but reputation; a hollow skeleton being fed to the greedy hypocrisy of an entire realm like a putrescent corpse of a once-valiant king feasted upon by crows.

Honour and reputation had become a prison which still trapped his mother, long after her death. Nothing good came out from her attempt of being true to her heart; that kind of reckless courage couldn’t be rewarded if not with shame and humiliation.

And his father, Ned Stark... he had become the conniving accomplice in the destruction of his sister’s memory and true character, when he let Robert Baratheon sacrifice the she-wolf’s fierceness on the altar of his own arrogance and scorn.
Lyanna had become the sorrowful maiden kidnapped and raped by the evil tyrant, the trite and vapid heroine in one of those tragic tales Sansa avidly devoured as a child. The spirited woman made of flesh and blood, the free woman who chose her own destiny had died twice, so that he, Jon, could live.

The fingers that still gripped the parchment had gone numb. His mind was numb as well, and everything hurt.

But his eyes remained mercillessly dry.

A sense of loss deeper than anything he had ever felt before had swallowed any other emotion.

The whole ordeal had left him drained and physically ill.

He was sickened by his father-turned-uncle, by Robert Baratheon and his conceit, by Rhaegar Targaryen for getting himself killed. And yes, some part of him resented Lyanna, too, as abominable the very idea might have been.

And this broken man, this old, tired man in front of him, with pain, and guilt, and the weight of lies and secrets engraved on his worn face, weeping and weeping and weeping and begging him, and her, to forgive him (and how dared he, when Jon couldn’t shed a single tear), this ragged lord who must have been about the same age as Ned Stark but looked ten times older... Jon despised and pitied him in equal measure.

*She would have forgiven him.*

The realisation came to him naturally, like waking up after a full night of much-needed, refreshing sleep.

Yet, his lips remained stubbornly sealed, and Jon was stunned to find in himself such unexpected, petty cruelty.

Where did it come from? Why torture a man whose conscience and memories were clearly punishment enough?

*He saved your life. Forgive him!*, a voice of steel demanded from within.

A few well-chosen words would have been enough to ease his soul.

Tension knotted at the pit of his stomach.

*I can’t. Not now.*

Carefully Jon folded his mother’s letter and tucked it in his grey doublet, instead of giving it back to Reed. Then he rose to his feet in deathly silence, purposefully ignoring the man’s despairing expression.

“I thank you for your hospitality, my lord. My men and I will leave at first light. A long and tiring journey awaits us. Make sure our steeds are well-rested and our supplies set to go,” he instructed stiffly, then gave a sharp nod toward the table.

“I’ll take my mother’s shield with me.”

Howland Reed blenched in shock, his face disfigured as though Jon had gutted him on the spot.

‘*Don’t do this, sweetling. You’re leaving him with nothing*’, the same voice pleaded with him,
softer now.

Burdened with sadness.

Jon ignored that, too, and strode to the door.

Despite the small, cramped space booming with cheers and chants and laughter, the feast was a somewhat gloomy affair.

Jon had put on a polite smile, broken bread with the crannogmen, shared their salt and mead, and nodded in acknowledgement when mugs and tankards were raised to his health. He did everything a good liege was supposed to do and couldn’t really resent these people’s joyful merrymaking: after all, it was not every day Greywater Watch got to house a king under its moving roof.

But, next to him, Howland Reed ate and drank as though everything he put in his mouth were poison. He went through dinner like a wraith haunting a graveyard, and Jon felt a stab of guilt each time he met his blank eyes, uncomfortably aware of how they seemed to linger, as though drawn by an invisible force, at the spot under his coat where his mother’s letter was pressed against his heart, heavy as lead.

Soon food turned stale in his mouth, as well.

He tarried only long enough to express his gratitude to House Reed for the generous and warm welcome, then, in the middle of second courses, he claimed tiredness and excused himself from the table.

Jaime’s eyes, vigilant and silent, followed him to the door, just like they did throughout the whole evening; a stern protectiveness tinged with an anxious energy that put Jon ill at ease. He wasn’t ready to have that particular conversation with him and didn’t need his sympathy. Not tonight.

The mist covered his tracks well enough as he wandered over almost to the edge of the village, stopping on one of the many retractable wooden bridges overlooking the marsh.

On the muddy waters, slender boats of light timber soundlessly slid in and out the fog, the sole hint of their eerie presence the small light of the oil lamps on the prow, glittering like fireflies.

Jon knew that, as soon as his party left this swamp, the keep’s position would change again: the wooden decks anchoring building to building and crannog to crannog would be raised and Greywater Watch would float away like a dream at the edge of sunrise and disappear once again before friends and foes alike could grasp it.

Bronn was wrong. There was an elusive, melancholic beauty in it, Jon mused, and a soothing stillness in hues of green and grey that helped quieten his mind.

“Is dinner not to your taste?”

He turned, startled, a resigned smirk replacing his frown as Meera Reed joined him on the parapet.

“Quite the opposite,” he joked. “I never thought there could be so many succulent ways to cook frogs!”

“And you still haven’t tried our smoked lizard-lion. Secret recipe. Worthy of a King.”
Jon leaned heavily on the wooden rail with a weary sigh. “Please, drop the title. We’re way past it, don’t you think?”

“You’re right, I reckon,” Meera shrugged. “Did you know we are milk siblings?”

Her wild curls bobbed up and down enthusiastically at his arched eyebrows.

“A wet nurse from Dorne,” she elaborated, beaming. “Lord Stark took her in his service when you were born. Ten months later she was sent here to look after me, and then my brother. Her name was Wylla.”

Wylla. The name had a dimly familiar ring to it. Where did he hear it? Winterfell, presumably. Did she choose to leave on her own, or did Lord Stark want her gone, like every other memory that tied him to that thrice-damned tower in the mountains?

His gaze searched through the descending mist, as if expecting to see her shade emerging from the bogs.

The gentle pressure of Meera’s hand upon his arm, so real and comforting, nearly undid him and Jon knew what she was about to say before the words were out.

“She died. Many years ago. The same Greywater fever that nearly took Jojen too. I’m sorry.”

As ludicrous as it was to mourn the absence of someone he didn’t even know existed until now, with each new revelation another bleeding gash opened on his already crippled soul. An empty, sunken space soaking up all the light.

Another missing piece to his own story Jon would never get back.

The injustice of it all tasted like bile, sour milk and tears.

“Did she know who I really was?”

Her brown eyes became impossibly soft.

“I couldn’t tell. She often talked about you, though. Mostly to draw unfair comparisons with our apparently deranged infancy. ‘De most peaceful babe I ’ave everrr seen! ’e slept an’ sucklet. Slept an’ sucklet. Not at all like you two wee monsterrrs, keeping me up all night!’ You were a hard act to follow. I grew up hating you, to be quite honest!”

Her imitation of the Dornish drawl was so silly and amusing that he found himself quietly sniggering, despite his morose mood.

“There.” She pointed at his face, with a triumphant gleam in her eyes. “That’s what was missing through supper.”

An embarrassed flush crept up his neck, past the furry collar of his cloak. The girl disregarded it and stared him down, impassive. “I know you’re angry with my father.”

“Meera, I...”

She briskly held up both her hands, palms forward.

“I don’t blame you! I probably would be too. It’s quite a lot to take in. I always suspected there was something he wouldn’t say. A daughter learns to read her father’s silences. Learns to cope with his weaknesses, eventually. Sometimes it’s painful when you realise they’re humans, after all. That
they can make mistakes even when they think they’re protecting us. And some things, well... some things will always be hard as hell to understand. Maybe they aren’t meant to be. Or perhaps they can only once we become parents in turn.”

Her sad little smile, so open in the complete acceptance of circumstances that were as far from ideal as anything, for her as well, made him want to crawl into a hole and hide forever in shame. She must have realised her father was in love with Lyanna Stark when he married her mother, and that he was still in love with her after all this time. And yet, there was no trace of bitterness, nothing resembling the blinding anger that threatened to choke him up with every breath he took.

Meera wasn’t asking him to forgive her father, and her words were the only thing in the devastating wreckage of the last eighteen days that actually made perfect sense.

He envied her wisdom. The self-assurance that made her rise above all this. Above all the tragedies his family more or less indirectly had caused hers.

She didn’t let grief or disappointment for an unexpected truth steer her away from her good nature, from that unbelievable sense of duty she felt toward the ones she loved.

There was a lesson to be had, here, Jon thought.

Meera was younger than him when she left the safety of her own home and put her destiny in Bran’s hands.

Her steadfast trust never wavered. Not when Bran’s dreams led them across the dangerous uncharted lands beyond the Wall. Not even when Jojen died to follow those dreams.

Anyone else would hold a grudge, at the very least.

Not her.

Nor to him or his brother. Not against her father just now.

She must have been the most selfless, most forgiving person Jon had ever met.

He had no idea how she managed that.

“Bran didn’t send you away out of ingratitude,” Jon blurted out, in an awkward attempt to perhaps give back a small portion of the comfort she offered him so bountifully. “I hope you know that. He only wants to protect you.”

“Funny,” Meera scoffed. “It’s usually the other way around.” Her gaze got lost in the misty marshland, her lips twitching as she chased some reminiscence from another time. But when she raised her eyes back to him, jaw set in a hard, determined line, the hair on his nape prickled in alarm.

“My father’s men will escort you safely through the final stretch of the swamp, but the worst of it is behind us. You don’t need me to follow you to Dragonstone. I must go where I’m truly needed. My place is at Winterfell,” she said with a finality that brooked no argument.

Jon immediately baulked at the prospect. She wouldn’t be persuaded otherwise, not with the way her expression had hardened into one of obstinate boldness. He had seen that same look of steel hundred of times, wielded like a sharp blade by his sisters, to know the struggle would probably just leave his pride bruised and battered.
But he feared for her.

If Bran had bid her away despite the depth of his feelings and more so at the cost of hurting her, it could only mean the alternative did not even bear thinking about.

“My brother would never forgive me if I gave you leave to go.”

“It’s not for you to decide! And it’s not up to him either!” Meera bristled. “Sometimes the walker chooses the path. Some other time, it’s the other way around.”

“What?”

“It’s something Jojen said to me, the morning we left Greywater Watch.” She tutted at his bewildered look, grabbed his elbow and made him turn his attention back to the swamp. “Look at those wooden bridges and walking planks. Our destiny is bound with the destinies of others. Hundreds of connected paths, just like these crannogs. This is the whole point. I made a choice when I left. And I kept making that choice every time doubts weakened my mind and body along the way. When we went beyond the Wall, when the Night King found us, when we lost Jojen, and Hodor and Summer! With each step I took, I swore to protect Bran, and no matter how far I am, my choices will always bring me back. He is the crannog I’m bound to.”

It took Jon a second or two to really come to terms with the staggering fact that he couldn’t do anything to stop her, and that neither was his place. Meera had every right to decide for herself, and he wouldn’t belittle and demean her courage, by doing the same exact thing other men had done to his mother.

In another lifetime we might have been raised as brother and sister.

The thought, for some reason, brought a smile to his face.

“This is the path you choose, then?” he asked, overwhelmed and impossibly proud of her.

“It is. And this goes for you, as well. Each one of us has a path to follow, Jon Snow. Even when it’s winding and strange and fraught with unspeakable dangers, even when it looks like a snake coiling in itself, so that the end looks pretty much like the beginning, and you feel like you haven’t moved at all, there are no wrong turnings. The only thing that matters in the end is to keep walking.”

A gloomy morning welcomed them with a frost and a quick flurry of snow that soon turned into an irksome sleet by the time Jon and the others had gathered in front of the keep’s main gate. The others were only half surprised to know that Meera wouldn’t travel with them to the Crownlands. Despite the fact that the girl had more experience at raw survival than all of them combined and had oft proved that she definitely was more than capable of looking after herself, Brienne and Davos both took turns in recommending her caution, clucking like two mother hens with their stray duckling, and even Bronn, in his usual surly way full of cursing and profanities, couldn’t keep his most overly protective side hidden for long and bade her take care and stay safe. A good ten minutes later, after much huffing and eyes-rolling, her patience finally snapped and she told him to piss off, least he wish to leave with a black eye and fewer teeth.

“I pity my brother. Between you and the girls, he’s going to have his hands full of stubborn, disobedient women,” Jon quipped when he finally got to say his farewell.

Under her father’s tear-softened eyes, Meera fiercely wrapped him in a hug and kissed his cheek.
He clung to her, grateful, and blinked back the sudden rush of emotion that clenched his throat. What good would it do, after all, if he started fussing over her as well, beside earn him a well-deserved, annoyed kick to the shin? Whatever fear and reservation he had, Jon bit it down, but secretly sent a prayer to his father’s gods that she’d be safe with his siblings behind Winterfell’s high walls.

Over the turbid waters, two large rafts had been prepared for them and their horses. Howland Reed escorted him wordlessly on the passageway; once away from prying ears, the old Lord handed over the shield of the Knight of the Laughing Tree, bundled up in a thick shadowcat pelt.

“You’re really going to Dragonstone.” He sounded as though he had never known defeat until that very moment. Jon couldn’t meet his eyes, not even when Howland’s hands clamped around his upper arms, shuddering in fear and urgency, the fingers digging so hard into the cloak’s fabric Jon was sure there would soon be a bruise.

“You won’t find your father, there, Jon. There’s nothing on that blasted island for you, except fire, and blood. And heartbreak! Lyanna rode south and died. Ned rode south and died. I don’t want you to share their same fate!”

Will I? Am I headed to my own downfall?

Jon remembered his dreams, the green dragon’s bronze eyes calling out to him, and the dark depths of Winterfell’s crypts where he willingly followed his ghosts; he thought about Lady Catelyn and all the times her glare and words made him feel like he did not belong; he thought about Sansa’s ashen face as Bran revealed the truth...

Howland glanced up, his huge eyes frisking over his face as if trying to commit each detail to memory, beseeching him, and Jon believed he could see a glimpse of that young man, loyal and desperate, as he was forced to give up the squalling baby in his arms to pursue a higher purpose.

‘Are you lost, boy?’

I am. But now I finally know what I was looking for.

He drew in a breath and gently unclasped the fingers gripping his jerkin. “I must go,” he said and his blood rushed faster in his veins.

Hotter.

He only hoped Howland would understand and forgive him.

“I’ve been a Stark for all my life. Perhaps it’s time I become something else.”

Chapter End Notes

As you probably realised by the long hiatus, this wasn’t easy to write for many reasons, the most relevant being: Season 8 sucked. There’s no other way to put it and I don’t want to add anything to this profound concept, except that Jon was definitely among the characters that suffered the most from the lack of consistency in the “writing”, and that, in turn, negatively influenced my approach to this chapter.
It was difficult. Am I satisfied with the outcome? Yes and no, depends on the days, but then again I’m never completely satisfied with my stuff.

I wanted to write a chapter that dealt with Lyanna and that had Howland and Meera Reed at its core: I struggled, at first, because one of the rules in writing is “show, don’t tell” and this is nothing but 20 pages of pure TELL, but I really wanted Howland to have his moment to shine and I couldn’t do that if I chose to take all this exposition and turn it into, let’s say, a vision from Bran?

So here you have the story as told by the sole witness, and Jon’s reaction to it.

He didn’t take it very well, poor darling, and, to be honest, he was quite brutal with Lord Reed, but he will come around. Eventually. His identity quest is not even remotely done: a big role will be played by Jaime in the next chapter, so expect some more talking, about Rhaegar for a change.

As for Meera, this was me flipping the bird in D&D’s general direction for having completely forgotten about her in the finale... I mean, I don’t know, perhaps she might have liked to be there for Bran’s acclamation, since she’s the reason why he’s alive? And sorry if I am bitter, but she was a f***ing badass hero beyond the Wall and deserved some recognition!

So, this is my vengeance, for the way they treated her. I gave her a scene at the beginning where she basically saves everybody’s ass, and I gave her another sweet scene at the end, because Jon deserves a sister who isn’t a trained assassin or an ambitious bitch. And yes, they are milk siblings because I loved the idea and Edric Dayne isn’t even in my story, anyway.

If you want a visual imagery for the Neck’s swamp, think about the Swamp of Sadness from The Neverending Story: that was a big inspiration. (Another pretty obvious one was Harry Potter, of course, and the letter he finds at 12 Grimmauld Place.)

Don’t worry about the lack of Braime in this chapter: in hindsight, it was truly for the best. I didn’t want to write any shipping material, while I still seethed with rage, but Chapters 26-27 will be huge ones for Jaime and Brienne, both individually and as a couple.

After this intermission, our usual Braime transmission will resume shortly, so stay tuned!
Hello, my lovelies!
As some of you know, the start of the new year hasn’t been very nice to me.
A long string of bad news and losses struck my family through both January and
February. To keep me sane, I’ve tried to have small moments only for myself, to focus
on my writing.
Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it did not.
Sometimes I just had to stop because my mind was just blank. It’s been a really harsh
couple of months and I’m still a bit... off, to put it mildly. But I’m recovering.
I’m sure you will forgive me for my erratic updating schedule.

Chapter 26 is finally here, and it’s got the long-overdue Jon/Jaime conversation, some
fine Braime moments and a reckoning at the very end.
See you on the other side...

JAIME

We should’ve taken the road north.

The thought had become more and more insistent and tinged with a sense of anguished foreboding,
a dull rumble in his veins that growled of desperation and catastrophe, as they rode farther south,
through the wrecked land that once was the loveliest, most fertile part of the Riverlands.

Their initial plan had been quite different.

From Greywater Watch their party was supposed to travel to the nearest coastal town, and from
there sail to the Three Sisters. In different weather conditions, it would have been the most sensible
course of action. By boat, the journey to Dragonstone was shorter and less hazardous than riding
their way through half the continent to Rook’s Rest, but during winter the waters of the Shivering
Sea were always shattered by violent squalls and hailstorms, and nobody with a sound mind in
Sisterton, sailor, merchant or pirate might he be, would be stupid enough to risk both ship and life
to circumnavigate the Fingers, no matter how absurdly obscene the reward was.

There was no alternative, but the prospect didn’t really sit well with him.

The two crannogmen scouts Howland Reed had kindly provided to escort them safely out of the
southernmost border of the Neck’s swamp had silently nodded their goodbyes and left them to their
own devices, disappearing back into the grey thicket five days past; the slight relief Jaime might
have felt at seeing the sun again, despite the fact that its bleak beams didn’t do much to warm him,
was short-lived, as an oppressive atmosphere had started to weigh on them almost immediately.
That same night, the Twins came into view.
The ancient seat of House Frey, the two identical stone castles which had overlooked the crossing of the Green Fork for hundreds of years, impervious and disdainful, had become a twisted, forsaken carcass of blackened stone and half-rotten timberwood covered in ice looming across the river, its blurry reflection stretching on the muddy waters below. Nobody dared utter a word as they crossed the open portcullis: as he spurred his mount to keep up with Jon Snow’s garron, Jaime couldn’t suppress a shudder. Everything was deadly still and quiet, as though frozen in time. Not a crow circling around the castles’ spires. Not a soul to greet them.

A spectral silence walked with them all the way to the great hall. Only the sound of their boots, muffled by ash and dust, echoed in the empty, familiar place. Jaime could still see that same room decorated and tidied up - as tidied up as a Frey could be - for the feast to celebrate the end of the siege at Riverrun.

Nothing remained of the Freys’ derelict opulence. What the fire set by Arya Stark didn’t manage to mangle and pulverize had been pillaged by peasants and smallfolk, angry and desperate in equal measure: timber, stone, windowpanes, iron rods, brass chandeliers, copper and silver cutlery, even the dust-gathering ragged tapestry which had dangled morosely from the damp walls, frayed at the seams and already half-eaten by bugs... anything that could be made use of in masonry work, or burned to heat up a house, or sold to buy food and supplies, or trimmed and resewn into rags of warmer clothing... All gone.

Only the heavy chair of black oak with the two towers carved into its back had been spared: it was still there, overthrown, at the top of the stone dais whence the Lord of the Crossing would sneer down at his guests before killing them. A lonely mockery of a throne, with a rusty axe rammed into one of the armrests and a tangle of frosted cobwebs billowing in the dank drafts that moaned through the rafters.

The rest of the place looked and felt like an abandoned graveyard of unburied dead... Rubble, rats’ droppings since long turned to dust, charred bones half-chewed by rabid dogs, uninviting ivy slithering through the cracks of the stone floor caked in grime and, everywhere, the unmistakable foul stench of burned bodies and spilled blood.

Jaime had heard the tales. And Arya pretty much confirmed the gist of it, in Winterfell.

Fire and poisoned wine. The same kind Joffrey drank at his wedding.

‘I chose it intentionally,’ the sullen girl had admitted, with a sweet, little smirk that had chilled him to the bone. ‘I had half a mind to use it on you as well, when I was serving you at the feast.’

Jaime vaguely remembered a pretty lass with long, brown hair and a dimpling smile who made doe eyes at him and Bronn. She didn’t look at all like Arya Stark, and he stopped long ago to try to understand how that was even possible.

He stood now in the same spot, with the weight of the blame for that bloody massacre pinning him down: the idea of spending the night there positively turned his stomach.

We should’ve taken the road north.

While Anguy and Podrick put the axe to good use and set out a perimeter to start a fire for the night, next to Jaime Brienne looked like she was going to be sick as well. Her pale face frozen in muted grief under the heavy, furry hood, she inspected the hall with round eyes brimming with tears of wrath. He knew she was thinking of her lady. How she had died a most ignoble death, by the hands of the very people who were bound to her and her family by sacred oath. Jaime ground his teeth, feeling pathetically powerless. That thrice-damned place had reopened the old wound:
was she feeling guilty she didn’t die with Cat? *She wasn’t with her because she was with me, at the time,* Jaime sulked. *To fulfill the vow she took when Lady Stark gave her leave.*

Had Brienne been there, she would have certainly been murdered with the lot. Would have gladly given a purpose to that huge, fierce body of hers, which she still believed was only worth for battle and blood, by offering it up to the traitors’ blades.

He remembered how the news of the Red Wedding had reached them in Brindlewood. A fat knight from House Beesbury, excited to be the first to announce to Tywin Lannister’s son that the king would soon be presented with a coat made of a magnificent direwolf pelt.

They came to know the details, and the true extent of the ignominy, only when he was finally granted audience with his lord father.

With a stony indifference in his glacial eyes and the same tone he would have used had he been reading an excerpt from the most boring page of the *Seven-Pointed Star,* Tywin had recounted how Roose Bolton’s men had fed Catelyn’s naked and abused corpse to the fish, while in the courtyard the Freys cheered and toasted to a King with a man’s body and a direwolf’s head.

Jaime hadn’t been impressed.

Brienne didn’t cry, when he told her, nor did she crumble. Not in front of him, anyway. For many days afterward, her body had simply inhabited the room inside the Red Keep she had been assigned to, barely breathing, eating even less, dull and detached, trying her utmost to slip through the cracks of Cersei’s scrutiny... but Jaime had kept a close eye on her. Back then, her stolidity had addled and vexed him in equal measure, grating on his nerves without him realising why, until now.

*I would have rather had her in tears, raging against me and my family, punching me in the face,* he understood now, feeling a not small amount of shame at his own selfishness. Had she shown some vulnerability as she did in Harrenhal it would have been easy to unburden his soul. To tell her that no, he had nothing to do with that disgraceful butchering. It had seemed important at that time to get this point through her thick skull. To make her understand. And then it would have been easier still to cradle her in his arms, discarding her protests like a difficult child, and let her weep over his shoulder. To let him be the strong one, for once.

But she would never be like this, his Lady of Tarth.

Brienne was merciless in her private grief. Impenetrable and completely out of reach, and Jaime couldn’t intrude into her thoughts then, not more than he could now.

*The only thing I could do was sending her as far away from Cersei as humanly possible, with a new purpose...* A clumsy yet loyal squire, an armour that matched her eyes, a sword to defend the innocent and the broken pieces of his own tattered honour, hoping she would know what to do with it better than he did.

“There’s still light outside,” he offered, gently, now.

Brienne started like a spooked deer and frowned at him as though she weren’t really expecting to see him there.

“I’ll tell the King we can ride another couple of miles farther south. We’ll find somewhere else to make camp.”

At his awkward attempt to comfort her, a recognition, a glimpse of unexpected tenderness Jaime by
now had learned to distinguish, softened the dour expression in her blue eyes, and then, as fast as it came, it was gone again and the walls were back up.

“Don’t be absurd,” she glowered, parading her best pig-headed self. “The horses need rest. It’s just for the night.”

There was no point in arguing with her.

Later, when he volunteered to take the first watch with Thoros, the drunken priest merely shrugged: “It’s not like any of us could sleep, in a place like this,” and he shifted over to make him some space near the fire.

Wrapped up in his layers of wool and furs, Jaime shivered and waited, as the shadows around them danced on the discoloured walls. Rapt and unblinking, Thoros stared cross-legged at the flames as though they held all the answers to the mysteries of life and death.

“Do you see it?” he found himself asking. “The Red Wedding?”

“I don’t choose what to see, Kingslayer. And if I could, I wouldn’t want to witness even a second of it. I see only what scant, blurry vision the Lord of Light in his infinite wisdom grants me, the stupid, drunken fool that I am. As of late,” he dropped his voice to a whisper, “I see him quite often.” Jaime followed the sharp nod of the man’s red-haired head to the black shadow of Jon Snow, stretched out over the bedroll across the fire, his back on them. Jaime could tell by the tension between his shoulder blades that he wasn’t sleeping.

No wonder he can’t find peace in this place, either: the floor is drenched in Stark blood.

“And sometimes - Thoros spoke again - I see you.”

His eyebrows shot up.

“Me?”

“You were there, weren’t you, couple of nights before the Twins fell? What did you two possibly talk about, you and the old fart?”

Jaime’s mouth twisted into a grimace.

He remembered how the sweet Arbor Red had suddenly turned rotten, burning in his guts when Walder Frey had sat next to him, all sneering contempt and taunting smugness.

He couldn’t even pretend to ignore the miserable sod and go away inside, just like he used to do when reality became simply too much, and the only thing in his mind was Cersei, Cersei, Cersei - how long has it been since the memory of her brought him anything but poisonous resentment and cold fury? He had to bite his own tongue, swallow a far less diplomatic retort that might have started a new war, and bear with his usual Lannister grace the drinking and toasting and the amiable chat about family and reputation, and how the two of them were not so different, after all.

‘Here we are now. Two Kingslayers. We don’t mind, do we?’

Even now, his stomach coiled into tight knots at the mere recollection.

“We shared kingslaying stories,” Jaime lashed out with a defiant sneer and angrily threw another piece of wood into the fire. Thoros burst into quiet sniggers, unimpressed. “Oh, you truly are a wonderful piece of work. But you’re not fooling anyone.” His glassy eyes burned into his, as
crimson as the fire licking at their boots. Challenging. “I was there, when your father brought the Targaryen children before the Iron Throne. I saw your face. You were a little more than a child yourself, playing in a game way bigger than you.”

_I was already fucking my sister. I had just killed a king and helped make another_, Jaime wanted to retort, but something telling in the priest’s eyes gave him pause.

**What does he know?**

Thoros ignored his scowl and stoked the fire with the tip of his dagger. “Sometimes I think it’s all my fault,” he said after a while. “I was sent to the king to convert him to the Lord’s Light. Perhaps if I had been able to sweet-talk Mad Aerys into devoting himself to another kind of fire... But a dragon can’t be tamed, can it? A dragon recognizes no law but its own... and when the dragon wakes, a whole kingdom weeps.”

His red eyes settled over Jon again, grievous and troubled. Jaime’s hand twitched upon his sword’s hilt, as panic, undefined yet deep-rooted, gnarled and twisted like a knife in his stomach.

He didn’t like that look.

“Hard days lie ahead,” Thoros said morosely. “I don’t envy him the choices he will be called to make. He’ll need wise counsel. Trusted allies. A strong hand to guide him.”

“He’s already got a strong Hand,” Jaime muttered.

The priest’s eyes gleamed up at him, condescending and patient like a maester teaching a particularly slow pupil. “You’ve done terrible deeds for love, Jaime Lannister. You’ve also done great things, out of duty. And yet, you still believe duty and love are two conflicting forces. Ice and fire. But is it really so? You don’t understand yet. But you will.” His expression turned sombre as he stared ahead of him, at something beyond Jaime’s shoulders.

He turned.

Brienne lay a few paces from them, her face’s skin taut and almost translucent in the fire’s faint light.

“You’ll see,” warned the priest.

There was no more talking after that; Thoros quaffed down half the content of his goatskin and glared at the flames, every now and then waving a hand in front of him, batting the frosty air as though it were an irksome fly bothering him, until his hooded eyes fluttered close and his head lolled over his chest, and Jaime was left to wonder if it really was a god who spoke to him through the fire, who gave his words such unfaltering conviction, or perhaps the wine filling his belly and loosening his tongue.

Podrick came to relieve him an hour later, but Jaime knew he wouldn’t be able to rest. Every time he shut his eyes, he saw ghosts dancing through these halls... Old Walder and his sons, the Young Wolf, his bride and his unborn child, Lady Catelyn and the many who paid with their lives the price of Tywin Lannister’s ruthlessness... the price of his and Cersei’s folly... _So many debts we still need to pay_...

Down the hall, in the still of the moonless night, he thought he heard the clear, sad sound of jingle bells.
For a sennight, they followed the Green Fork south, braving snow and treacherous ice and the occasional wild beast turned rabid from hunger and cold; by unspoken agreement, Jaime and Thoros had taken charge of their small group. After all, the red priest, with his controversial past as one of the leaders of the Brotherhood without banners, and he with his even more infamous experience as Commander of the Riverrun military campaign, were the ones who better knew the pattern of those hills, and forests and hidden caves around the Twins, Oldstones and Fairmarket.

The landscape had sensibly changed from the last time Jaime was there with Arya Stark. War and winter brought with them famine, disease and a terror too deep to even speak its name aloud.

Any small cottage, inn, tavern, shack, cove they encountered along the way were either barred or raided and despoiled. War had turned the smallfolk into untamed, terrified creatures ready to sink their teeth and claws into anyone who was perceived as a threat. The many horrors the Riverlands had suffered were the work of different masters, but the grieving smallfolk seeking revenge had no preference: Frey, Lannister, even Stark... they all looked the same after a week swinging from a tree.

The truth of it caught up with them just past Seagard, when the bodies started to drop: at the beginning only a few, scattered on the route or washed ashore like ghoulish leftovers of a retreating army, then dangling from pines and elms, their faces and extremities swollen where the ropes had bitten their flesh, and their skin black and blue, but otherwise perfectly preserved by the cold. And there weren’t only men and soldiers.

In the deserted backyard of a farm, a whole family of six was swaying from the burned branches of an oak tree.

_They served the Freys_, read the carved sign nailed on the boy’s chest. He must have been no older than ten, eleven perhaps. It was difficult to tell, with his skull bashed in. And Jaime was suddenly reminded of other hanged corpses. The three tavern girls he and Brienne found near Stone Hedge, when she was still his sullen protector and he her brash, loudmouthed tormentor.

_They lay with Lions._

The wench was staring up at the disfigured bodies with the same outraged look Jaime remembered from back then, when her righteousness, her strength had left him speechless and overwhelmed for the first time. He dismounted at the same moment she did, his body moving instinctively, as though in a haze, without needing to ask her what she meant to do, but before any of them could step in, Jon Snow had already unsheathed Longclaw and was silently cutting them down.

“Help me,” he said to no one in particular and he sounded so lost that, unbidden, Jaime’s heart gave a tug.

_He won a single battle, but he has no idea of what it means being truly at war_, Jaime thought as he watched him digging a grave through the hard frozen ground, sweat drops trailing down his cheeks like tears. The young king had been beyond the Wall, had fought wildlings and wights, had died and been brought back, but he had never travelled south of the Neck. He wasn’t prepared for what lay ahead.

Despite everything, there still was an innocence about Jon Jaime wished to protect.

He worried for him. As they rode, they barely talked, and only of practical matters. Troops movements in the Crownlands and how many food supplies King’s Landing had stored for winter (not enough). His answers were always considerate and wise, just as one should expect from a good leader, if not a bit hollow. But Jaime had been watching him. He felt like he had done well-nigh
nothing else, since Greywater Watch.

There was no mistaking the sadness that seemed to plague him, that bone-deep grief which burdened his brow, cutting deep lines across his sallow face. Many a time, during the journey’s short pauses, Jaime’s eyes had caught his hand lingering upon the bundle of leather and rags strapped on his saddle’s side which Howland Reed had given him the morning they left the swamp...

He didn’t know what to make of it. He rode beside him, as stalwart as a shadow. He watched and worried, but kept his concerns to himself. In Winterfell’s godwood he had offered to talk about Rhaegar, when Jon would be ready, but now even the confidence he felt while making that promise was shattering against his own guilt.

With what right could he speak about Rhaegar with Rhaegar’s only son? He was terrible at comforting. He had never learned how, with his children.

So Jaime rode, and watched and worried and hesitated, trying to ignore the constant whispering in his head that sounded like Cersei’s voice, calling him craven.

After a week of unceasing sleets, a bright and clear morning finally welcomed them at the Trident. Ahead of them, the ruby ford glistened pale under a thick layer of frost, its banks a slick, greyish sludge giving way to the brown and ruddy earth underneath.

The surprisingly good weather was only a small reprieve, everyone knew. Compacted snow still crunched and crackled under the horses’ hooves, but at least the crisp breeze had cleansed the air of that overwhelming stench of decay that seemed to stick on their clothes ever since they entered the Riverlands. They carefully led the horses on the other side of the ford in a point where the waters were only partially frozen; a few paces from him, Brienne’s mare swayed gently and with each movement the sun danced and quivered on Oathkeeper’s hilt, playing tricks on his eyes.

The Dragon and the Stag had come together, locked in combat, there, and their ghosts had followed him here: on the river’s banks, floating above the ice, the souls of the fallen wandered across the battlefield, still hungry for blood. Were they hearing still, even in death, the Warrior’s screams inside their heads? that thundering song each soldier learned to listen to and trust in times of war which muffled and overcame everything else around them? The soft, mumbled prayers and the fearful wailing of the dying, calling their mothers, cursing the gods, yearning for home... the frenzied tumult of hundreds of hooves pounding at the ground... the blazing bellows of horns and trumpets and drums leading the charge... the wonderful, terrifying clash of steel against steel... the brittle sound of broken bones and flesh yielding to the kiss of a sword’s edge... in his mind, Jaime could perfectly picture the battle along the crossing. And then, he saw them... one by one... Ser Lyn Corbray making his stand with Lady Forlorn, alone against Prince Lewyn’s Dornish cavalry, and Barristan the Bold, still rallying the Targaryen forces for a last desperate attack, with one of his greaves pierced by an arrow from side to side, and his white armour streaked crimson by the spear wound on his left shoulder... Jonothor Darry cutting his way through warhorses, water, and a storm of shafts to reach his prince...

And above everything else, he heard Robert’s booming voice, resounding like the Stranger’s itself, calling Rhaegar in the shallows, calling him to his doom...

Next to him, Jon pulled his horse’s reins to a halt and swung down off his saddle, his gaze scanning the bed of the river as if searching for something.

*Does he see them, too?*
Jaime didn’t try to stop him. He saw him marching, lost in thought, on the spot where his father found his fate and kneel as though in prayer before an altar, his brow wrinkling in concentration as he stared intently at the icy water under his feet.

Davos Seaworth trotted beside them.

“What is he up to?”

Jaime caught Brienne’s eyes. She shrugged and gave a slight shake of her head, just as baffled as he was.

He tossed the reins to the old knight and followed the king to the frozen stream.

“Is something wrong?”

Jon narrowed his eyes.

“I’m not sure.”

He removed one of his gloves and drew out his sword. The layer of ice was thinner there, and shattered easily when Jon struck it with Longclaw’s wolf-shaped pommel; and then he was plunging his naked hand in the Trident, almost to the elbow, and Jaime held his breath. When the hand surfaced, among small pebbles, brown weed and mud trickling through his fingers, glittering in his open palm like a drop of blood in the sun, Jon Snow held a ruby.

They rode hard, that day, pressing on through the lands that once belonged to House Darry: a desolate string of open, fallow fields interspersed with enclosed forests of sombre soldier pines and rocky hills lashed by roaring winds and angry downpours that soon sloped down toward the Gods Eye.

Harrenhal was near.

Once they reached the shorelines of the great lake, with the moon a pale sickle already risen high in the sky, Jon commanded them to make camp, and soon Jaime found himself tucked between Brienne and Davos, ravenously chowing down the delicious roasted tench Thoros and Quent had caught in the muddy waters and listening to the men enumerate the things they loved about summer.

It was a familiar game, by now, which they played especially when they happened to sleep in the open, to keep the cold and the nightmares at bay.

But when Pod started prattling with his mouth half-full about the many virtues of pretty Ashlynn of Tarth, Jaime stifled a burst of laughter behind his wineskin and caught even Brienne rolling her eyes in fond annoyance. Abiding by the Evenstar’s orders, the girl had reluctantly stayed in Winterfell, in attendance to Lady Sansa, and Pod had been inconsolable ever since: like an ardent lover who believed his beloved made the sun rise everyday, the young knight had been unremitting in singing her praises since they took to the road. They all had enough, to be quite honest, but no one had the heart to tell him.

“...And come spring I promised her to bring her back to Tarth. She said she would love to show me the meadows.” He halted abruptly, a blush creeping up behind his ears, when he caught the wench’s eyes, and hurriedly added: “If it please m’lady, of course.”
Oathkeeper laid out across her lap and oilcloth in hand, she spared a moment to give the boy a fleeting smile, half consent half amused exasperation.

“Of course,” parroted Bronn, screwing up his face in exaggerated disgust. “Look at you. You’ve turned soft! You were a legend in King’s Landing! A true legend! I’m not even joking; there are songs about his fuckin’ cock, allright?” he insisted when the others started snickering. “And now all you do is blathering on and on about the pretty, lush mounds of Tarth! Wasted talent if ever I’ve seen one!”

“The boy’s in love, Bronn. Leave him be!” Davos said, patting a paternal hand on Pod’s reddening cheek.

Bronn scoffed.

“In love. Bugger that.” He pointed an accusatory finger at Brienne. “This is on you!”

Her head popped up at this. “Me? What do I have to with it?” she protested with a scandalized chuckle.

“This would’ve never happened, had he stayed with me in the capital, after Tyrion got arrested!”

“Certainly not,” the wench conceded, innocently, her chin high and her eyes a vibrant flame burning blue and bold. “If he stayed with you, he would’ve learned all the best ways to catch the pox while frolicking around, and die happily from it.”

Anguy snorted wine through his nose at this, and even Jon, who was sitting on a stump on the far side of the fire nibbling at his fish without much conviction and hadn’t said three sentences in the whole evening, had to laugh out loud.

Despite Pod’s heated protestations, Bronn sent him to chop some other wood for the campfire deeper in the grove of sentinel trees which surrounded the edge of the lake, while the others set up the small tents and bedrolls for the night.

The wind brought the echo of wolves howling in the far distance.

Could it be Ghost? *No, that white beast never makes a sound*, Jaime mulled as he helped Davos unsaddle and water the horses. Another pack, then. But many times, these past few nights, he had the strangest feeling of being watched and followed. Jon had heard the calling, too, and slipped off past the sentries into the woods, quiet as a shadow.

“You should go after him,” Davos chided. Jaime pursed his lips and removed bridle and bit from his gelding’s head, wishing the old man would take the hint and not pursue the argument any further.

“It is not my place,” he replied curtly.

The Onion Knight snatched the harness from his hand. The small pouch he always wore about his neck swung from its leather thong.

“Listen to me. That man... he’s been betrayed, stabbed to death and resurrected... I’ve seen him faltering and failing and trying again, better and harder. He set aside his own wishes I don’t know how many times, to follow a greater good. But I’ve never seen him so lost, not even after the bloody Red Woman brought him back... Even then, he found a purpose. He kept himself alive! But now...” He let out a sigh. “I’m just an old smuggler who’s been lucky once or twice on the battlefield and I don’t have the answers he’s seeking!”
“And I do?” Jaime retorted through gritted teeth, his own distress simmering in the tone of his voice. “What am I supposed to tell him, uhm? How I slew his grandsire?”

*How I couldn’t keep his half-brother and sister safe?*

“Would that make him feel better?”

“That’s beside the point,” Davos pressed on, stubborn as an aurochs, and loyal to a fault. He grabbed Jaime’s arm and stared pointedly at his golden hand. “You know how it feels to lose yourself, for a moment. You know how to get back on your feet.”

*I don’t*, he wanted to answer. *Brienne did that.*

But Davos’ steel grey eyes did not relent. “Go to him.”

That was not an argument he could win, Jaime realised. *The Others take you, bloody fool!* Glaring daggers at him, he jerked his arm free, vaguely entertained by the notion that an onion smuggler turned landed knight could have the nerve to push around a Lion of the Rock and former Commander of the Kingsguard, and followed the king into the grove.

He found him on the steep bluff overlooking the lake, huddled against a pine, with his elbows resting on his knees and shoulders slightly slumped over, so deep in thought that he didn’t even hear him coming to sit next to him.

In his palm, Rhaegar’s ruby twinkled like a dragon’s eye; Jaime held out his own hand, in silent, reverent request.

The gemstone looked like an oversized teardrop of blood and when he turned it around his fingers, its many facets cast a dancing glow upon his face: over time, the incessant workings of sand and water had smoothed the precious ornament, rounding its edges, slightly altering its original shape, but Jaime would have recognised that particular cut everywhere. He had been staring at Lannister rubies for all his life.

They were his mother’s favourites.

Very few still remembered that the rubies which had adorned the breastplate of Rhaegar’s armour came from the mines under Casterly Rock. The gift of the new, young Hand to his friend the king, for his crowning day. The hope of many years of peace and prosperity to come.

Jon’s gruff voice broke the silence. “When we were children, Robb and I often dreamed of running away from home to go looking for Rhaegar Targaryen’s cursed rubies. A treasure hunt. We used to reenact the Battle of the Trident near the pond in the godswood.”

“Who played Rhaegar?”

“I did,” Jon admitted with a wistful smile, his gaze lost in the distance. “Robb would always poke fun of me, because I lacked the *look.*”

A rueful grin played on Jaime’s lips. The king certainly favoured his mother’s colours, but he had a bit of Rhaegar about himself, as well. If one knew where to look. He handed the ruby back and with a low exhale leaned against the pine bark, staring at the waters below, black as maester’s ink, and up at the canopy of stars that blinked wanly between the tree branches.

The Isle of Faces stood at the centre of the Gods Eye, imperturbable and mysterious like its secrets. The smallfolk believed it rose on the sacred ground where the Children had sought refuge during
the war against the First Men and that their oldest descendants still lived there, or so it was
rumoured. For all Jaime knew, the island was inhabited only by weirwood trees and the ghosts of
the two thousand westermen who died in the Fishfeed.

*Or perhaps only Daemon Targaryen haunts these shores alone, waiting to be reunited with his
dragon for a proper burial.*

Across the lake, the immense fortress glimpsed at Jaime through the foliage, the grotesque towers
a shade darker and grimmer than the night they were wrapped in. King Harren had built them so
that they could tickle the gods’ feet, soaring higher than any other tower in the Seven Kingdoms.
But stone and weirwood melted all the same like a lopsided candle, when the Black Dread
descended upon them.

“It’s odd. To be back here,” he said.

“I suppose this place doesn’t hold many good memories for you. Or Lady Brienne.”

Jaime chuckled. “I was thinking about Lord Whent’s great tourney, actually.”

Jon cocked his head at him.

“You were there?”

“For a short while,” he nodded. “Just long enough for me to kneel in front of the King and the
cheering crowd, as Gerold Hightower put a snowy cloak upon my shoulders for the first time. The
greatest honour of my life.”

If he closed his eyes, he could still smell the dewy grass under his knees. Feel the wonderful
weight of the clean cloak about him. Taste the rightness of the oath blossoming alive in his heart.
But Jon must needs understand.

He locked eyes with him.

“It was also a trap.”

Even after all those years, the memory still ate away at him. As the harsh truth sank uncomfortable
between their silences, Jon’s face clouded into a by now familiar frown, so much like Rhaegar’s
that his breath caught in his throat for a moment.

“It’s only for life,” he gravely recited the words Jaime had said to him, a lifetime ago.

A warning. A regret.

The hairs at his nape prickled.

“This place changed both our lives.”

*And changed mine again, forever, when I saved a not-so-fair maiden from a bear.*

“Did you... did you meet them?” Jon asked again after a while. Jaime didn’t need to ask who he
was talking about.

“Not exactly, I...” His mouth went dry. Gods, this was harder than he thought. “The king ordered
me back to King’s Landing with the Queen and Viserys, just after the starting feast. I briefly
glimpsed your mother. Pretty lass. Wild little thing.”
Jon was watching him with round, liquid eyes, hanging on his every word, and Jaime dug deeper into his recollections of that night, to find an image of Lyanna Stark that the lad could relate to. That he could hide in his heart and cherish in secret. Just like he did with Joanna.

“Think... Arya, but with longer hair and a bit more grace. Just barely,” he granted with affected annoyance and added: “She danced well.” Jon’s eyes crinkled at the edges, glistening with a genuine twinkle of gratitude.

“As for Rhaegar... I might’ve been a few days shy of my sixth nameday when I first met him. We travelled to the capital, Cersei and I, for the celebrations in honour of Aerys’ tenth year of reign. The young heir didn’t exactly leave a lasting impression.”

“Why?”

Jaime shrugged.

“Well, he was a nice-looking boy, tall for his age, very well-behaved and very serious, but at the time he was more interested in music and books than in swords and girls, much to Cersei’s chagrin.”

The memory elicited a smirk. Despite their very young age, his sweet sister had been utterly smitten with him from the start, and had soon lost her already short temper, when she realised that Rhaegar didn’t even know she existed.

“For my part, I deemed him rather boring, to be honest,” Jaime went on. The more he talked the more the words seemed to come easily, as though a dam inside him had burst. “We didn’t have much to talk about, and I was too much younger than him to raise an interest which went beyond the formal politeness required by the circumstances.”

In all fairness, he had spent most of his free time badgering Ser Barristan until he agreed to give him some pointers on how to improve his footwork, or staring from afar, mouth agape and eyes brimming with admiration, at Ser Arthur Dayne while he trained his recruits during the morning drills, dreaming to be worthy one day of that same honour.

“It took another tourney to change my mind. A few years later, Rhaegar came to Lannisport. My father staged a month of festivities in honour of Prince Viserys’ birth. When I saw the Prince, riding his black stallion, tall and majestic and powerful, with his red-and-black armour and those rubies gleaming in the sun... He was the Warrior come again, and I was completely awestruck.”

“My father immediately saw an opportunity to secure his position, and House Lannister’s influence, and sought to betroth Cersei to Rhaegar on such a happy occasion. Aerys spurned his request.”

‘A man does not marry his heir to his servant's daughter’, the King had said, very nearly sneering in Tywin’s face. Cersei’s desperate cries, later that night, were still etched vividly in his mind. With tears of rage streaking her flushed cheeks, she had kicked and screamed at their aunt Genna, calling her a liar, cursing her only because she wasn’t their mother, and had only calmed when Jaime had lain down next to her and held her close until she fell asleep. But there was no quelling the quiet storm that brewed in Tywin’s cold eyes from that day on.

“Everything went to the seventh hell after that.”

“And you were caught in the middle,” said Jon and if Jaime detected an undertone of pity in his voice he deliberately chose not to dwell on it.
“Worse than that. I was their pawn. Tossed back and forth between the two of them like a weapon.” Resentment still burned like acrid poison in his throat, smothering his shame and the heartbreak for his lost dreams. “I was young and foolish, couldn’t care less about politics. The only thing I wanted was to become a knight. I understood the price far too late.”

“And Rhaegar didn’t attempt to mediate between his father and yours?”

“I don’t think he realised how deep Aerys’ madness ran. How much his delusions had poisoned his heart against old friends and family alike.” He grimaced. “Children oft choose to turn a blind eye when confronted with their fathers’ folly.”

Wasn’t that what Jaime did, too, to fight shy of Tywin’s ferocity? To cling to his life’s hopes? To survive a loveless childhood, after his mother died?

And didn’t he admittedly keep doing that even with Cersei, for most of his adult life, protecting her, enabling her, out of the love he bore for her?

*Close your eyes and go away inside.*

And then, unbidden, his thoughts flew to a ship sailing from the sands of Dorne... to Myrcella, floating like a golden butterfly into the last, soft rays of summer... how brave and beautiful she was in her last moments, how forgiving, when she had held his flesh hand in hers, with none of her mother’s artifice, asking nothing in return. She had openly looked the truth in the eye and when the truth stared back, she didn’t baulk away.

She had embraced it.

That kind of strength, forged and tempered from mercy, and faith and the purest innocence, bestowed upon him like a gift, like a promise of better things to come, had warmed him only once, before. When Brienne had similarly held his head above the water, after he had unburdened his sins on her naked skin.

“Is it true the tourney was just a pretext?” Jon inquired, jarring him back to the present. “That Rhaegar had wanted all the major houses gathered together in one place to plot against the king?”

Jaime hesitated. “It’s possible.” He truly didn’t know. ‘*Changes will be made,*’ Rhaegar had promised him when he left for the Trident, but, beside that, the prince didn’t elaborate further.

“Rhaegar didn’t make me privy of his plans, but at Harrenhal there was tension between him and the king.”

Hushed gossip concerning the existence of a plan to depose Aerys had started making the rounds almost immediately after the tourney. Not at court, where dread and mistrust shadowed every corner and sealed lips and ears. But Jaime watched and listened. He had heard many a version of that particular story: some painted Rhaegar as the unsuspecting scapegoat too much busy pursuing the young Lady Stark to notice the snakes in the grass and Varys, who had helped organize the whole thing, as the real power pulling all the strings; some others whispered that Ser Oswell Whent, on Rhaegar’s orders, had convinced his older brother to host the tournament as a decoy, so as to not arouse Aerys’ suspicions. The most ludicrous tale Jaime had run across during the years he stood as one of Robert’s Seven was the version reporting that Tywin himself, and his gold, were behind the Great Conspiracy of Harrenhal.

*‘If I had wanted to get rid of Aerys I wouldn’t have even bothered raising an army, when he spent six months as honoured guest inside Lord Darklyn’s dungeons,’* his father had bluntly dismissed
the whispers, and no one dared mention the matter again.

“Any diplomatic solution, if ever there was one, was cast aside the moment Rhaegar disappeared in the Red Mountains of Dorne with Lyanna.”

“What did you think about it?”

“I was surprised,” Jaime admitted. “Troubled, even. Rhaegar was by all accounts a clever man, and this was ill-advised, and very poorly executed, to put it mildly. It was clear it wasn’t a whim that needed to be satisfied. There were brothels for that, and Rhaegar has never been that kind of man. I think... I felt sorry for Princess Elia. You know how it is with political matches: it is very rare to fall in love with your intended, and their marriage was not different. But there was mutual respect. And he adored the children. Especially the little girl. The only times I’ve seen him truly at peace were when Rhaenys was in his arms.”

The little princess always had a bright smile for him upon her plump lips, he remembered; except the evening after Aerys burned Rickard Stark to a crisp. Jaime had found her on the steps leading to the nursery, scared and lonely, petting the black cat Rhaegar had gifted her for her third nameday and that she named Balerion. Anguished sobs wracked her body as she turned her wide eyes to him.  

‘Where’s my papa? Why the angry man was screaming so loud? Ser Jaime, when is papa returning home?’

He had no answer to give that wouldn’t turn into a cruel lie, so he picked her up, a gloved hand drawing soothing circles on her back, and carried her up the stairs. Halfway to her room, she had already fallen asleep, her brown curls gently tickling against his cheek and her little hands clasped around his neck as though he were the only buoy in the middle of the stormy sea.

Her tears had soaked the collar of his white cloak, and he did not understand how the prince he admired from afar could hurt his own baby girl so much.

*Jon needs not know that*, Jaime resolved.

And there was no need either for him to know how Aerys publicly blamed Princess Elia for his son’s antics. How, in front of Queen Rhaella, Prince Lewyn and the whole court he had insulted the Martells and put her to shame by saying she couldn’t even keep her husband into her own bed.  

‘I was under the impression a Dornish woman would know how to pleasure her man. Do your mothers not teach you these wiles from a very young age?’

Elia, although still weak and barely standing after Aegon’s birth, had taken it all in stride, in dignified silence, chin high and proud, and the bloodshot eyes of a woman who had been crying herself to sleep for the last sennight, and Jaime didn’t understand any of this.

*I do now. I know how love and desire can bring a man to his knees and a realm to ashes.*

He observed the man in front of him: his haunted grey eyes and the rigid tension of his shoulders belied his pain, the fire beneath the ice, better than any word.

*He is still so very young, despite the crown upon his head.*

“You have every right to be angry.”

Jon lowered at him.

“Do I?” he seethed, grinding his teeth. No. Anger and pain were just on the surface. Underneath it
all, a deeper anguish seeped quietly through the cracks.

“We had a maester in the Night’s Watch. An old man, and blind. The wisest person I’ve ever met. Before he took the black, he had been Aemon Targaryen.”

Jaime’s head snapped up in surprise. He wasn’t aware there had been a dragon among the crows.

“I’ve been thinking much about him, of late. I’m more and more convinced he knew who I really was. I have no idea how. He just did. Once he told me that love is the death of duty. Is that what happened to my father?” Jon asked, broken. “He forsook everything... wife, two children, the whole realm, for love?”

Was it love? Jaime was at loss. Love and madness looked like two sides of the same coin to him.

How many times had he witnessed it shaping the fates of their world? Rhaegar had only been one of many. It had possessed Robert as well. And before them, Aegon the Unworthy with his thirteen bastards, Daemon Targaryen and his niece, and the Prince of Dragonflies who chose to crown Jenny of Oldstones his queen of love and beauty instead of Jocelyn Baratheon... the tally was boringly long.

_The very same madness has consumed me as I lifted Cersei up onto the Mother’s altar and thrust into her again and again, next to our son’s rotting corpse. And I was still calling it love._

“I’m probably not the best man to pass judgement on that.”

Jon scoffed at that. Jaime carried on.

“All I know about love and duty is that there’s no middle ground between them. They both demand your utmost devotion, your blood. Your life. They suck you dry until in their wake nothing remains but ashes. Whichever you pick, you always end up sacrificing a part of yourself you will never get back. Not the way it was, in any case. I pray you’ll never have to make that choice.”

“I already did,” Jon blurted out in a whisper and immediately seemed to rue it, as though he had exposed too much of himself already.

“There was a girl. Ygritte. She has been raised to hate everything I stood for. We were two worlds apart. Enemies... until we weren’t. I wanted...” he stuttered to a stop and took a laboured breath, his fist closing tightly around Rhaegar’s ruby. The raw sorrow in his tone gave Jaime pause. From the doleful way Jon talked about her, it was plain that things didn’t end well. He could only suppose the girl was dead. Ygritte... it didn’t sound like a northern name... a wildling, maybe? He kept a cautious, respectful silence, waiting for the king to sort out his emotions. When he finally spoke again, his words were still rough, but his eyes were clear.

“I loved her. I would’ve done anything to be with her. But when the moment came to choose between her and my duty, I rode back to my brothers at Castle Black. That was the hardest thing I had to do.”

“Do you regret it?”

“With each damn breath I take,” Jon rattled and Jaime understood that the admission made him feel ashamed, as though he feared to uncover in some deep part of his soul the same weakness which led to his father’s downfall.

Jon didn’t realise he already was a better man than Rhaegar. _Far, far better than me, anyway._
“You kept your oaths,” Jaime pointed out, kindly. Jon let out a distressed half-laugh.

“Was it even worth it? I wish I could say I’d still do what’s right, if I were to choose again. I don’t have that clarity anymore.”

Jaime dropped his head back against the tree with a sigh. He knew all too well the feeling.

“Only two things used to give me that kind of clarity. Holding a sword in my right hand and fucking my sister.”

Everything was sharper, more focused, in bed and into the battlefield. His body, the blood rushing in his veins just took over, and he could soar, free and glorious, guided only by pure instinct and a higher sense of purpose.

He glared at the young man in prideful provocation, almost daring him to take objection, to condemn his sins, but when he saw none of the judgement he expected, he raised his gilded hand to his face.

“You know, when they cut it off, I thought it would’ve been more merciful to let me die. I’ve often prayed for it. It was not just the hand I had lost.”

“You lost yourself.”

“I lost everything. Lord Commander of the Kingsguard. What a sad joke! I couldn’t defend my King, couldn’t love my sister. I was a shell of a man. Yet I’ve played the part, donned my white armour until even that was stripped away. I only wanted to keep my family safe. Nothing else mattered. But then the children died, and I couldn’t see the point anymore.”

Jon considered him, a frown creasing his forehead.

“But you still came to Winterfell. You chose a side, even if it meant going against your blood.”

“Blood isn’t everything, and I had some debts to pay.”

The ghost of the little boy lying on the ground, his back and legs shattered beyond repair was always there between them, reminding Jaime of his penance. Calling him to his duty.

‘Serve the realm. Save the city.’

“In the end, a choice is all we have,” he said. “There is no turning back. We all must learn to live with the consequences. Rhaegar wasn’t perhaps the perfect prince I used to worship in my youth. But I did believe in him. I believed he could become a great king. I would’ve followed him to the Trident, hadn’t he ordered me otherwise. I will follow you, if you let me.”

“Why? Only because you discovered I’m my father’s son?”

“No. Because I’ve been watching you. Because I’ve seen my fair share of unworthy monarchs through the years and I need to believe in something better.”

He didn’t know when or where, but that seed he thought withered and dead forever, burnt a million times over - upon the same pyre where he had laid to rest the butchered bodies of Aegon and Rhaenys, or buried under the smoking ruins of the Sept of Baelor where his baby boy’s ashes had been scattered - that seed had taken root again, insistent, hopeful to the point of foolishness, timidly budding to a new life.
Perhaps it had begun when for the first and only time he had allowed himself to hold Myrcella like a father.

Or perhaps when he yelled *sapphires* to save a maiden with a knight’s heart from a fate worse than death.

Perhaps when he rode through Winterfell’s gates with his army at his back, the cold winter air clearing his head, finally his own man.

Perhaps when he started to see in this jaded man, this young king, resilient like Valyrian steel yet vulnerable in his own way, something of himself... there was darkness and despair in Jon as well, and maybe, *maybe* if he could help him fight it, help him shape from the shadows those dreams of spring into something just and worthy, it would be like saving a part of himself. Then maybe he could lay down his sword and rest.

Every knight is bound by their vows, and a Kingsguard more than most. Jaime had no more oaths to swear, not with words. Words had failed and betrayed him. Words could not help Jon, now, but maybe his sword could.

Perhaps that was just another kind of madness, like love was, but he was foolish enough to try. He was not a coward, after all.

Jon pulled his cloak tighter around himself, almost as if trying to blend in with the grayish canopy of grass, bark and rock.

“I might not be the man you think I am,” he muttered.

Jaime smirked, oddly unconcerned. He put his hand on the lad’s shoulder and squeezed. “Maybe. But it’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

And then Jon was intently searching his face for something missing, the eyes of Lyanna and Ned Stark staring at him from beyond the grave, until he finally said: “Why did you kill Aerys?”

His smirk wavered and died.

For a moment everything stopped and Jaime was turned inside out and upside down. All those years caught up with him at once, and he suddenly felt very old and tired.

He felt seventeen again.

Reeling between sickness and disbelief. Crumbling.

He wanted to scream.

He wanted to laugh.

His mouth opened and closed twice before Jaime found his voice again. “More than twenty years... and you’re the first person who asked me.”

His lungs burned as though he had been held underwater for too long, and now he didn’t remember how to draw breath anymore. Does this boy realise what it means to me?

He had rehearsed his answer day after day, for weeks, for months, each time with a hundred different cadences: witty, scornful, cavalier, boastful, gloomy, proud... but never honest or true, because he knew nobody would care about it. Not Robert, who had sat on his throne, stuffed with
wine and arrogance, and merrily waggled a finger in front of him telling him not to make his
kingslaying a habit; nor Ned Stark, so prone to pass judgement by only one look. And most
certainly not Cersei.

‘Don’t you want to know why I killed the king?’ He had asked her the night of the coronation feast
while her deft hands made quick work of his white cloak, pulling him unto the bed with her.

‘Why should I care? Aerys is nothing but ashes. Robert is king, now. And I am his queen.’

Twenty years... oh, how many times had he imagined this? Someone stepping up to him with a
simple question: Why did you do it? It didn’t matter who... One of his sworn brothers, or one of the
squires... a serving girl... a perfect stranger casually bumping into his horse on the city’s streets...
Why did you do it?

No one ever came.

And now that finally there was someone asking, his tongue was wet wool stuck to the roof of his
mouth and the words he had carefully woven in his head had dried up in his throat for lack of use.

“There was wildfire under the city streets,” Jaime managed to croak out. “All over it. The king
gave the order.”

His stomach churned. He shut his eyes. Burn them all! Burn them all!

“And while I was watching him bleed to death, on the other side of the Red Keep the Mountain
and Amory Lorch were murdering Elia and her babies. On my father’s orders.”

Silence fell like lead. Jaime’s eyes dropped to the ground. He could not bear the commiseration
and the disappointment he might glimpse in the boy’s look. He didn’t know which he feared more.

Just outside the groove, the sounds of the camp reached him muffled and indistinct. The crackling
of the fire, the crunching of the snow under leather boots, snippets of conversation, laughter every
now and then... Impossible to concentrating on any of this. Blood was rushing in his ears.

“You saved the whole city...” the voice next to him uttered, shocked and horrified at once.

I did.

It wasn’t enough.

He couldn’t bring himself to say more.

Jon pushed himself to his feet and inched closer to the bluff edge, staring into the darkness ahead.

“You don’t regret slaying your king,” he spoke, as solemn as a sentence, “but you blame yourself
for the death of the children.”

There.

That was the truth Jaime had tried to run from for half his life.

It wasn’t the children he often dreamed about. It was Rhaegar, riding to him through the mist of his
nightmares, his purple eyes ablaze...

I left my wife and children in your hands.
He would have killed Aerys a thousand times more, to hell with his reputation and bloody honour, but the children... Gods, the children...

“Rhaegar...” Jon broke off, let out a heavy sigh and resumed again. “My father made many questionable choices. He has wronged his wife, but perhaps an even greater injustice has been done to you, my lord. He knew what Aerys was, yet he left you, the youngest among the Kingsguard, to deal alone with a nearly impossible situation.” He turned around and faced him. “You’re not an easy man. I still don’t know if I can trust you. Bran will never be able to walk again because of you, I can’t forget that. But, for what it’s worth, Rhaenys and Aegon’s blood is not on your hands.”

In stunned silence, Jaime gaped stupidly at him, then stared down at his hands, the flesh and the golden one, as though he didn’t really expect to have them still attached to his arms. They were not dripping blood.

They were just... empty.

Seconds stretched and Jon’s words still did not seem to make sense. Perhaps sensing his bafflement, the lad offered his left hand and yanked him up.

“You were an ass the first time we met,” Snow said, the ghost of a smile playing on his lips. The hand still holding his gave a stiff shake. “But I get that now.”

Long after the king returned to the camp, Jaime still stood on the cliff, lost in the tangled solitude of his own emotions. His mind rioted with a hundred disjointed thoughts and possibilities, acutely aware of the momentousness of what had transpired. Something had shifted within, yet he still was unsure and wary of what this unlikely comradery, this blunt sort of respect might mean for him. How it would change him.

*He does not trust me, not yet. Perhaps he never will, after what I did to Bran.*

*But he has faith in me.*

The thought filled him with a quiet fulfilment, a sense of belonging which was a balm on his wounds.

Killing Aerys had been like setting a broken bone in the wrong way. It had crippled him forever and in more devastating ways than even losing his hand had, and each time he turned to Cersei for comfort, in the attempt to fix what was maimed, he only made it worse.

*She couldn’t heal me. The grief, the guilt, the shame. She couldn’t understand.*

And now this young man, this dragon in wolf’s clothes, was telling him that there wasn’t really anything to fix, after all.

Could it be so simple?

*Hope is sweet,* he ruminated, *and treacherous.*

The fresh snow crunched under the heavy steps coming from the camp. Driven from his thoughts, Jaime smiled without turning. He would recognise her ungainly pace even blindfolded.

“Are you all right?” Brienne asked tentatively as she walked up to him.

“I am,” he said, sincere, and oddly confused about it.
The wench cocked an eyebrow.

“You sound surprised.”

“You sound like you’re... not?”

She snorted. “After Harrenhal nothing of what you say or do can possibly surprise me anymore, Jaime Lannister.”

He heartily laughed. “That’s... actually quite a disheartening notion.”

Her eyes scanned the lake and the black fortress overlooking it. “So many good memories...”

Jaime hummed in sardonic agreement. “You trying to kill Bolton with a table knife.”

“You fainting in the bathtub,” she viciously retaliated without missing a beat.

“You wearing that hideous pink dress.”

Another laugh bubbled up again at her gaping mouth and the absolute outrage colouring her cheeks.

“Really?” she quarrelled. “That’s what got your attention?”

His lips twitched anew as he allowed his eyes to wander playfully over the length of her. He could’ve easily named a few other things that had gotten his attention, but that would’ve been untoward.

Besides, in that dress she had said her farewell to him, and that small, almost insignificant moment was seared on his mind forever. The gown was truly appalling, but she was bathed in moonlight, and his eyes had been helplessly drawn to the creamy length of her neck, the sharp line of her still unblemished collarbone, and he had no business whatsoever wondering how her skin would taste there, not when it was Cersei he wanted, yet his head had swum with a panicked sort of bewilderment at the mere suggestion. It’s the fever, he had excused himself, more vexed than he cared to admit, the poison in my blood. But then the wench had started rambling like a fool about rescuing little girls and promises still to be fulfilled, and her already startling eyes had looked so fearless and determined against the very high chance she wouldn’t be allowed to keep her maidenhead for much longer, so calm and so, so very blue when she urged him to do the honourable thing and carry out their oath where she couldn’t follow, calling him a name which had entirely lost its meaning and worth after what he did, that Jaime could only swallow the lump in his throat and comply without question.

Any bidding of hers, I would’ve gladly done it. He would have taken her away from Harrenhal at once, ransoming her weight in gold, sapphires, rubies, whatever, had she asked. But she was too brave and stubborn for her own good.

All it took was a dream to stir him into action and Jaime shuddered now at the thought of what might have happened, had he reached the bear pit only a few minutes later.

He wondered if she knew she had saved him just as much.

Brienne beckoned him with a curt toss of the head and started back toward the camp.

“Come. I fear what Bronn might do, if Pod weaves some more bad poetry about Lynn again.”
“Did you really mean it?” he called. “What you said about my hand in Winterfell?”

She frowned in confusion. This was hardly the right place for this particular conversation, but Jaime had to know. He crossed the distance dividing them in two strides. “Were you telling me the truth, when you said you think I’m better without it?”

Brienne’s chapped lips parted into a soundless intake of breath. She held his gaze, unswerving even as heat rushed to her face. The bittersweet memory of that night in Winterfell took shape and stood between them in all its glorious, blazing details.

How she had lashed out at him at the foot of the Broken Tower, full of wrath and something raw and dizzying and unfathomable he didn’t dare call desire; how he had wanted to cut her open and bleeding with his words just as she had him, because it was all too much and that was what he had learned to do with Cersei. Because he didn’t know how to make that mulish wench understand. How he had tried to apologise after, inside the solitude of his room, but he could only gawk at her, as drunk and astonished as he was, as she crushed Cersei’s lies in her fist like a dead autumn leaf.

She had been so unguarded in her passion, so righteous while defending him that Jaime had nearly forgotten everything else.

His selfishness had hungered for her innocence.

If I had brought her down in the mud with me, I would have never forgiven myself, a part of his soul was reproaching him now. We should have never left that room, another part was rebelling, cursing and crying.

There was something wondrous and tenderly maddening about her now, too, as her eyes lighted up and pulled him even closer.

“I don’t lie, ser,” she reminded him, as soft as summer breeze.

“Sooner or later, you should learn to. Might even save your life, one day.”

“I have my sword, the sword you gave me, to save my life with.”

A warm wave of pride surged within him at the words. His eyes flitted to her thumb caressing Oathkeeper’s studded hilt, then shifted to his right arm. The golden hand had lost all its shine and appeared dull and worn in all its elegant futility. A dead weight. He lifted it to Brienne’s face.

“Cersei had this made, did I ever tell you? My stump positively repulsed her,” Jaime recalled, surprised to hear his voice sound so dispassionate about it, as though he were relating some kitchen gossip about another, lesser, man.

He still distinctly remembered how his sister had recoiled from it, how she refused again and again to be touched, even to be near him, unless he had it tucked away and out of her sight... the heartbreak had been excruciating in its sharpness, unbearable like losing his sword hand afresh. Desperate to put back together the broken pieces, he had stubbornly closed his eyes and refused to mourn this rotting thing covered in maggots laying at their feet. Misery and humiliation and accusatory silence soon had filled their days and nights to the brim, until Jaime could not cope with it any longer.

The pain had become a dull ebb, distant like an almost forgotten dream. Brienne’s blue eyes bound him to the here and now.

“We weren’t mirror images anymore and she could not stand it,” Jaime said. “She hated the empty
Her head tilted to the side, Brienne studied the metallic appendage with a slight frown. "It looks terribly uncomfortable."

"Feels even worse, I promise you that."

He could see another question forming on her lips: Why don't you just take it off, then?

Why, indeed.

She stared back at him, and stared and stared, her eyes a sea of tranquillity, honest and revealing, strong just like that night in Harrenhal, waiting for him to figure out the truth, and he peered down at his hand, grinding his teeth. Loathing his own weakness. I can't let it go. Not yet. When Brienne’s gloved hands reached for his right wrist, Jaime froze. Her touch was impossibly gentle, just as he remembered it from their journey together. Through the haze of pain and fever, her hands holding him, big and comforting, scrubbing him clean, salvaging what was left of his dignity, were the only anchor mooring him to life.

His world had shrunk to the solid reality of her.

Her body. Her voice.

And now, as her fingers brushed the straps which bound the golden contraption to the stump, his skin tingled in nervous anticipation, yearning for freedom, and dreading it. But she didn’t release him. Instead she cast her eyes down and murmured, with a strange intensity that made her words tremble: “We don’t get to choose whom we love.”

Hearing his own line tossed back at him was like a slap in his face. Like being doused awake by the Trident’s frozen waters.

Was it an absolution?

Or a confession?

“It’s a lie,” Jaime blurted out before he could make up his mind.

‘Everyone’s got a choice,’ Tormund’s wise words rang clear and true like the first time he had heard them in Winterfell’s courtyard. ‘You just took the easy route.’

Seven save me, that fucking wildling was right.

The hand. Cersei. The love he thought they shared like a common destiny. “It’s all a lie,” he repeated and grabbed her right hand with his left. “My lady, I -

The high-pitched neighing of frightened horses split the silence of the night. They both turned their heads, startled. Before he could stop her, Brienne was barging back into the clearing, Oathkeeper unsheathed and ready, but abruptly halted at the edge of the groove: a few feet from them, Quent lay gurgling on the ground with an arrow stuck in his throat. Around the dwindling fire, half a dozen crossbows were aimed at Jon and the others, while another dozen foot soldiers crept closer across the line of the trees. There was no point in reaching for their swords: they were surrounded and outnumbered almost three to one. Overall, a fair fight, Jaime mused coldly. If I still had two
The man who supposedly was in charge had his back to the two of them, but Brienne gasped in recognition, and he noticed her grow pale. When the man turned around he understood why.

_We should’ve taken the road north._

His phantom fingers clenched in pain.

“Steelshanks!”

The captain barked an exaggerated happy laugh in greeting.

“Kingslayer! Fancy meeting you here!”

Jaime schooled his expression as to give no sign of discomfiture and darted a quick look around him. If the Bloody Mummers had been the scum of the kingdom, this group of outlaws and mercenaries was even worse. Vermin vomited by the deepest hell. A sturdy Ibbenese with warts peppering the spots on his face that were not covered by a coarse bush of black hair; a red-headed lad who could not have been older than twenty, wearing a tattered mud-grey cloak with the Seven-Pointed Star stitched on it. Jaime could be wrong, but he didn’t look particularly pious, if that necklace of seemingly human entrails were any indication.

Another one was as ugly as Sandor Clegane, missing ear and puckered scars included, but stank considerably more.

One of the archers, whose shaft was currently holding both Anguy and Thoros on a standstill, had a shock of shaggy brown hair and sunken, hollow eyes that wouldn’t have cut a poor figure on a cadaver. To his belt was strapped a bone flute as thin as he was.

Although they all wore nondescript black clothes and armour, he recognised Gold Cloaks, as well, and a few Frey and Westerlands soldiers who served under him in the Riverrun campaign.

No, these weren’t simply the leftovers of the Bloody Mummers, Jaime realised with a chill.

These were something else.

“New friends?”

“A man must make do with what he’s got,” Steelshanks replied with casual insolence. “Besides you’ve got your handful of champions yourself. There’s Ser Bronn, hero of the Blackwater, and Anguy the Archer and... I don’t know who these four are,” he pointed his thumb at Davos and the three remaining Stark men, “but they surely look fearsome, and... fuck me with a spear if this isn’t Thoros of Myr! Old mad sot! I thought you dead in a ditch somewhere in the Riverlands!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jaime perceived a movement in the foliage to his left.

Podrick.

The lad was there, frozen behind the bushes by Jon’s garron, just out of sight, with his arms full of twigs and logs for the fire, his sheathed sword and a small axe strapped on either sides of his belt.

With an almost invisible shake of the head, Jaime signalled him to stay put.

Neither Steelshanks nor his men seemed aware of his presence, but the Red Priest inconspicuously shifted his weight just enough to block the former Bolton soldier’s line of vision.
“These are the Riverlands, you utter idiot.”

Steelshanks’ brown teeth flashed into a nasty grin.

“There’s still time for that ditch, then. The night is dark, after all, and full of terrors. And what else have we got here?” he tipped his head to one side, his gaze sharpening with interest when he spotted Jon. Jaime tensed. “Isn’t that the Bastard of Winterfell? I’ve met your father, once or twice. You’re a chip off the old block.”

“What do you want, Walton?” Jaime snarled, trying to draw the sellsword’s attention away from the king and onto himself.

Steelshanks turned to him, holding up both hands. “I want no trouble. Just give me what I’m here for and my men and I will leave.”

“What is?”

“You, my lord. I’ve come to escort you back to the capital. Queen Cersei’s orders.”

Of course. She has sent her best knights to beat this mangy old lion into submission.

He stepped up, determined not to give her the satisfaction of coming meekly.

“And if I refuse?”

Sunken Eyes squealed with a maniacal shrilly laughter. The others joined in with brays and jeers of their own. Steelshanks closed in on him.

“You didn’t grow back your hand, but I see your sense of humour has greatly improved. Did I give you the impression you had a choice?”

“Ser Jaime is not given leave to go,” Jon said. Jaime shot him a warning glare. Don’t. Stop right there.

“Tell his sister his sword belongs to me now.” Walton’s eyebrows quirked up to his hairline and Jaime suppressed the urge to yell at Snow. Surprised gratitude and annoyance and panic mixed together in the stiffening of his shoulders, the clenching of his jaw.

“Very touching,” Steelshanks said, clearly amused. “Very, very stupid, too. Speakin’ of which... Lady Brienne!” he addressed her for the first time and a blind, paralysing terror nearly knocked the air out of him. “Still donning mail and leather. I see that time and circumstances have made you none the wiser.”

The soldier looked her over, gave a stern shake of the head as though disappointed, and added: “I have a message for you. From the Queen.”

Her face was a mask, but Jaime knew the storm in her eyes.

She is furious, not afraid.

“What is the message?”

From the bushes behind them came a rustling. A twig snapped. The darkness moulded itself around a moving shape, growing bigger and bigger as it crawled closer. The light of the fire danced on the maggoty, misshapen face, over the bald head.
Cersei’s last gift.

The aurochs smiled at Brienne. His teeth were sharp like a beast’s fangs.

“Me.”

But hardly had he taken a step forward when his spine arched backwards and the savage sneer twisted into a surprised grimace of pain. His enormous hands flailed blindly behind his back and pulled off the axe lodged in his shoulder.

Podrick’s axe.

The rest all happened in a heartbeat.

As Jon and Thoros launched themselves at the Gold Cloaks, still baffled for the surprise attack, Podrick came rushing from the thicket screaming TARTH! TARTH! at the top of his lungs, his sword neatly severing the arm of a slender man with the weak chin and the weasel face of a Frey.

The aurochs was not dead, but the wound had definitely pissed him off. Mad as a dog foaming at the mouth, he whirled the axe red and dripping in his hand and charged at Brienne.

The wench was ready, and so was Jaime. He quickly moved to her right and slid Widow’s Wail across the neck of the closest westerman. Dennis, his name was. He was a Plumm, or a Lydden, Jaime couldn’t recall. He finished him off quickly, while around him the night erupted into a chaos of screams and steel clashing. Jon’s garron screamed and reared, pulling madly at his rope, when an arrow took him in the rump. More arrows hissed past Jaime’s head, clattering off the rocks, sticking into the tree barks.

Brienne’s gigantic opponent was raining blow after blow over her. He didn’t look like he would be tiring soon, but Jaime recognised her moves. It was the same trick she used against him, as well. Let him come at you, wench. Jaime saw her sliding away from him and backing into the groove and realised she was trying to separate the giant from the group and bring him on the rough terrain of the cliff, where her swift footwork would be an advantage. Jaime ground his teeth and blocked one of Walton’s attacks to his right side. He could not follow her.

To his left, Bronn was fighting against the uglier and stinkier version of Sandor Clegane with a sword in each hand.

Under his boots, the snow was turning into a slick, reddish pulp. There were other bodies on the ground. Jaime didn’t stop to look.

“The Queen paid me a good deal of money to bring you back alive,” Steelshanks hissed as he parried a cut to his head. “But she didn’t say into how many pieces.” His greatsword skidded down the Valyrian steel to the hilt. The sellsword was strong, stronger than him with just one hand, but slower and dumber. Jaime swivelled and slashed at Walton’s legs. Window’s Wail bit through his left greave. Walton went to one knee, wincing. Jaime raised his blade, ready for the killing blow. Somewhere to his right, someone was singing The Rains of Castamere. The sound unnerved him. He chanced a look and saw Sunken Eyes drawing his bow, the barbed point of the nocked arrow aimed at Jon.

All thought fled from Jaime’s mind.

He shot ahead, hacking his way past faceless enemies, and rammed his shoulder into the king, shoving him out of harm’s way. The arrow pierced his flesh between pauldron and breastplate, through the mail and leather beneath. He barely noticed. Jon lurched back to his garron, grabbed
the mysterious round bundle strapped to the horse’s side and raised it just as other arrows flew at
them.

*A battered shield.*

But before he could wonder why Howland Reed would give Jon such a poor gift, Jaime saw Davos
on the ground, groaning half-unconscious with his fingers pressed to his open belly. The small
redhead dressed like a septon was looming over him, with a crazed smile on his lips and a dagger
dripping blood in his hand. Thoros’ red cloak swirled in Jaime’s line of vision, a blurred angry
shape as the Myrish priest darted across the camp and slammed the cutthroat on the ground. At
least five arrows were sticking out of his body at odd angles. He ripped one off his left side and
stabbed the Septon in the face, again and again, shrieking curses... The burly Ibbenese was
screaming too, his hands batting at his eyes, trying to shelter them from the scorching embers Jon
had just thrown at him. The revolting smell of burning flesh soon filled the air.

The Ibbenese suddenly toppled face forward, the hot iron skewer they had used to cook the fish
jutting from the back of his head. By the time he fell, both Jon and Jaime were fighting someone
else.

“There’s too many of them!” the king cried out.

Jaime surveyed the camp. Bronn was still standing, exchanging blows with Walton, and Anguy
was still loosing arrow after arrow using the trees and the horses as cover, but the bodies of the
Stark soldiers were carpeting the ground like fallen leaves, and with Davos and Thoros either
wounded or dead...

Podrick... where the hell was that wretched boy?

A bloodcurdling shriek rose from the groove.

*Brienne...*

His feet moved on their own... and then a fire of pain split his skull apart and the ground rose to
meet him.

He tasted blood and bile and pine needles. Hot needles were thrust into his brain. His head was
ringing. Spinning. The whole world had turned on his axis and was spiralling out of control.

He faintly heard his own name and someone yelling at him to get up and fight.

It was Bronn’s voice, and Brienne’s voice and his brother’s. And Brandon Stark was there, too.

*Get up.*

*She needs you.*

*Your king needs you.*

“He’s the fucking King in the North, don’t kill him! He will make a nice gift for the Queen,” he
heard Walton shout.

His limbs weren’t complying.

Through the blood trickling into his half-opened eyes, he perceived a ripple in the air above him, a
rustling of leaves, a fluttering of... *wings?* Blurry black lines coming from out the thicket... by the
dozens... by the thousands... were the trees moving?... A jolt of sickness spiked through his body when he tried to roll over, groping blindly about him in search of his sword with the wrong hand...

_Brienne_...

The voices were screaming, now, but they weren’t inside his head anymore. 

Men were scattering in the woods. A tangle of legs and hands swatting away something at their faces. Their eyes were crying crimson tears.

Steamshanks was calling for a retreat and, in his head, Jaime was roaring with laughter. 

_No man can fight a bear with his bare hands, Steamsheeks! Has nobody ever told you?_

The snow at his back was cold, and welcoming. Jaime sucked in a raspy breath, wishing they would let him curl into his cloak and rest for a while, until spring, perhaps, but rough hands were grabbing him, dragging him away and he felt himself falling and falling and falling, until the fluttering stilled and his eyes could only see darkness ahead.

**Chapter End Notes**

Sooo... let’s start from the bottom...

You might remember that in CERSEI III, I introduced Steamsheeks and his merry band of outlaws with the purpose of them being the most imminent threat to Jaime and the others. For the book readers, the fighting at the end is heavily indebted to AFFC, BRIENNE VII, of course, but I also wanted to make things a bit different, so I chose to keep my focus on Jaime, and have Brienne fight off screen (but don’t worry: you’ll know what has become of our girl in the next chapter). Anyway, fighting scenes are hard, so if you’ve enjoyed it, do let me know.

The heart of the chapter is, obviously, the talk between Jon and Jaime: when I was still in the early stages of development, one thing was clear to me: I had to make this conversation actually more important to _Jaime_ than it was for Jon! It might seem crazy, considering that it’s Jon who’s currently having his identity crisis, but there were so many unresolved things about Jaime, and his grief and trauma, the clash between love and duty, and what it meant for him killing Aerys and not being able to save Aegon and Rhaenys... all of this just resounded with me. So I shaped the conversation around it, and I think that having Jon forgive him at the end, for something Jaime didn’t even do, but he always carried it within himself like a sort of original sin, is kind of ironic, but it’s also a very powerful image, and the first brick (sorry Show!Jaime, no pun intended) on which to rebuild Jaime’s sense of self and honour. 

Because, the way I see him, Jon, with all his flaws, is like this. A kindred spirit. And he’s better than Rhaegar, and he’s _definitely_ better than Ned, too. If you want to further discuss this, you know what to do! ;)

I’ve always thought about this chapter as a slow descent to hell, where the sense of foreboding grows heavier and heavier as we progress: first the Twins, then the Trident, then Harrenhal, with all its symbolic meaning for both our leading men, and even the small moments of peace and light (Jon finding Rhaegar’s ruby, Jaime’s atonement, Brienne forcing him to come to terms with his feelings) all of it still got an
undercurrent of uneasiness, an anxious edge to it I wanted to bring forth, up till the final showdown. I truly hope I’ve managed to get all this through my writing. Because, in the end, Cersei is always there, and there could not be a redemption arc and a happy ending without going through a bit of hell first. (And I’m not implying A Wreath of Thorns will have a happy ending...)

PS: “No man can fight a bear with his bare hands” is the actual line Steelshanks says to Jaime at the end of ASOS JAIME VI. I thought it funny to reference it here.

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